The expansion of slavery in the new American nation was remarkable if not unprecedented. In 1784 five American states could be characterized as slave states, and all clung close to the Atlantic coast. By 1815, the United States had become an enormous empire for slavery stretching from the Chesapeake to Florida, from the Atlantic to the Missouri, and from the Gulf of Mexico north to St. Louis and the Illinois Country. Why did the United States fail to contain slavery’s expansion between the 1780s and the Missouri Controversy? William Freehling has ascribed it to the founders’ “conditional antislavery” mentality which inhibited their ability to act against slavery. Don Fehrenbacher points to a policy of “silent sanction” that allowed for the uncontrolled growth of slavery outside of the Northwest. Paul Finkelman dispenses with niceties, pointing to the rank hypocrisy of slaveholding founders who proclaimed liberty while encouraging the expansion of slavery. More recently and more subtly, Adam Rothman argues that slavery was “deeply woven into a national fabric” from its founding; the United States thus naturally, perhaps inevitably, created a “slave country” as it expanded west.\(^1\)

Too frequently, historians of slavery expansion focus on the interests of slaveholders from the Atlantic states and their ability to manipulate domestic politics to explain the growth of slavery in the early American West. Yet doing so isolates the expansion of American slavery from the larger forces shaping slavery’s growth in both the Atlantic world and the interior of the North American continent.\(^2\) These interpretations also focus on change over continuity, emphasizing how American
expansion led to the transformation of the early American West from a region largely
untouched by slavery prior to American possession – a “virgin West” - to a thriving
western “empire for slavery” under American rule. This, however, overlooks the presence
and persistence of slavery in the West prior to American possession, along with the
continuities that characterized slavery’s growth in the West between 1760 and 1815.
Finally, these interpretations tend to read the causes of antebellum slavery expansion
backwards into the early national period rather than reading the history of slavery in the
contested imperial borderlands of North America forward into the early republic. Doing
so conflates two separate phenomena with two different sets of causes: the establishment
and growth of slavery in the West prior to American sovereignty, and the expansion of
slavery from the Atlantic states into the old Southwest and Missouri after 1815.³

Because of time constraints, I will limit my analysis to the Mississippi Valley.
Rather than asking “Why did the United States permit slavery’s expansion in the
Mississippi Valley?” I want to ask “What caused the growth of slavery in the contested
borderlands of the Mississippi Valley during a period of intense imperial conflict and the
expansion of trans-Atlantic commerce between 1760 and 1815?” My answer: Neither the
federal government nor the interests and actions of slaveholders from the United States
had much bearing on the growth of slavery in the Mississippi Territory and the Louisiana
Purchase through 1815. If the United States had become an enormous empire for slavery
by 1815, it was not merely because an ill-defined group of founding fathers permitted
slaveholders from the Atlantic states to plant their institution in the early American West.

Instead, slavery’s expansion in the Mississippi Valley should be situated in a
period, between 1760 and 1815, that witnessed the great expansion of the Atlantic
plantation complex in response to imperial rivalries and an exponential increase in European demand for slave-produced commodities such as cotton, sugar, and coffee. In the 1760s, imperial rivalries led to the expansion of Caribbean slavery into the contested imperial borderlands of the lower Mississippi Valley. The establishment of plantation economies in the lower Mississippi Valley led to the growth of slavery upriver in the Missouri and Illinois countries as farmers and merchants sought to supply the plantations downriver with food and stores. The Mississippi Valley thus possessed a long history of slavery, French, British, and Spanish settlement, imperial rivalries, and non-American governance that predated American possession of the region. In 1795 and in 1803 the United States gained titular sovereignty over the Mississippi Valley, but a weak American nation-state could not halt, let alone reverse, the deeply entrenched colonial processes and imperial rivalries that had long shaped patterns of settlement, economy, and sovereignty in the Mississippi Valley. Even after American acquisition, it was not so much American slavery that expanded into the Mississippi Valley through 1815. Instead, what grew and expanded was Caribbean slavery, fed by the international slave trade (both legal and illegal), into the post-colonial, borderlands of France, Spain, Britain, and the United States. In sum, before 1815, a region’s colonial and imperial past largely determined the place of slavery in that region once it became a territorial possession of the United States.

The Atlantic plantation complex began its greatest period of growth after 1760, peaking between 1780 and the 1810s when, in each decade, over 700,000 Africans were forced into Atlantic slavery. The Seven Years War, the American War for Independence,
and the wars of the French Revolution occasionally disrupted trans-Atlantic commerce in slaves and commodities, but they failed to reverse the greater trend of more slaves producing more cash-crops, in places that were once marginal to the Atlantic plantation complex. While the wave of rebellions that struck the Caribbean beginning in the 1790s led to the rapid decline of slavery in Saint-Domingue, growing demand for slave-produced staples merely shifted the Caribbean plantation complex from its eighteenth-century core in places such as Saint-Domingue and Jamaica to once peripheral places such as Cuba, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, and Louisiana. Thirty years before that, the expansion of the Caribbean plantation complex would greatly affect the future of slavery in the interior of the North American continent. The great expansion of the Caribbean plantation complex reached the lower Mississippi Valley in the 1760s, establishing the foundations of a renewed plantation economy long before American expansion into the region.4

Imperial rivalries in North America and the growth in European demand for slave produced commodities led imperial officials to encourage settlements and plantation slavery in places that were of minor importance to European powers in the first half of the eighteenth century, including Florida, the Gulf Coast, and the lower Mississippi Valley. After France ceded its North American possessions in 1763, both Britain and Spain sought to establish settlements to secure their new possessions. To do so, they encouraged the importation of slaves and the production of slave-produced commodities in Spanish Louisiana and British West Florida, which extended north to the former Spanish outpost at Natchez. Though the Mississippi Valley remained far outside of the main trade circuits of Atlantic commerce, in the 1760s New Orleans merchants began
purchasing newly imported African slaves in British Caribbean ports for re-export to Louisiana. The approximately 8,500 slaves who arrived in New Orleans via the Caribbean re-export trade between 1770 and 1790 represented a tiny proportion of the overall slave trade to the Caribbean, but their presence would have an outsized effect on the region’s future. Similarly, the British resettlement of Loyalists in the Natchez District of British West Florida created a small but significant settlement that included perhaps five thousand Loyalists and 1,200 slaves by 1783. The Natchez Country reverted back to Spanish control in 1783, and Spanish officials actively encouraged settlement by disaffected and displaced British subjects from the Florida’s, Georgia, and the Carolinas to thwart American expansion into the Mississippi Valley. Spanish officials also used slavery to encourage settlement and economic development through bounties for the production of commodities such as tobacco and indigo, the declaration of free trade in Caribbean markets which had a demand for staples and stores such as barrel staves, and the elimination of duties on slave imports. By 1790, Spanish and British rule had transformed Louisiana and the Natchez Country into small but thriving plantation societies that were integrated into the larger Caribbean and Atlantic Worlds.5

Under Spanish rule in the 1790s, the Natchez District and Louisiana would undergo full-scale plantation revolutions due to slave revolts in the Caribbean and the further integration of the region into the Atlantic World of commerce and slavery. In 1794, the Natchez District had produced a little over 36,000 pounds of cotton. In 1795, a version of the cotton gin appeared; by 1797 - the last year of Spanish rule in Natchez - cotton production was approaching 1,000,000 pounds per year. Cotton cultivation quickly spread downriver to Louisiana where it met an even greater expansion of sugar
plantations. The slave revolt on Saint Domingue shifted parts of the growing Caribbean plantation complex to the southern-most stretch of the Mississippi Valley, and in the decade prior to the Louisiana Purchase, Spanish officials, Louisiana planters, and refugee planters from Saint Domingue guided Louisiana through a remarkable plantation. The plantation revolution that struck the lower Mississippi Valley in the 1790s also caused changes in the small societies with slaves upriver. Native American and African slavery had long existed in the mixed-agriculture and fur-trading settlements in Missouri. In the 1790s, Missouri merchants and farmers increasingly shifted their economy to the production of stores and food for plantations downriver. The shift led to a growth in slavery, as did the migration of French slaveholders who crossed the Mississippi River to flee from the Northwest Ordinance’s Article VI. By 1804, slaves accounted for a quarter of Missouri’s non-Indian population, and nearly one-third of the population around the main settlements of St. Louis and St. Genevieve. For the white inhabitants of the Mississippi Valley slavery had become ubiquitous, indispensible, and expansive independent of American sovereignty over the region.

The plantation revolutions that transformed the Mississippi Valley between the 1760s and the 1790s were colonial processes fed by imperial rivalries and growing European demand for slave-produced commodities. Imperial rivalries in the Mississippi Valley led Spanish and British officials to encourage colonization via the establishment of plantations in once-marginalized regions of the North American continent in the 1760s. These plantation societies quickly became integrated into an expanding Atlantic commercial world, first as suppliers of staples and stores for more lucrative plantation colonies in the Caribbean, and then, in the 1790s, as producers of commodities such as
sugar and cotton in their own right. The demands of the trans-Atlantic economy and imperial rivalries that stretched from Europe to the Caribbean to the North American continent sparked these plantation revolutions in the Mississippi Valley. Neither the demands of the Atlantic economy nor the imperial rivalries would end simply because the United States gained titular sovereignty in the vast, strategic Mississippi Valley: nor would the growth of slavery.

In 1798, 1804, 1811, and 1812, Congress considered placing restrictions on slavery’s growth and expansion in the Mississippi Valley. But in the end, the post-Revolutionary promise of halting slavery’s growth in the West would have to contend with the post-colonial realities and imperial rivalries that had long shaped the place of slavery in the Mississippi Valley. Policy-makers in the East believed that the entire trans-Appalachian West would remain in the American Union only if the lower Mississippi Valley and New Orleans were securely in American hands. American officials feared that Britain or France would soon challenge American sovereignty in the Mississippi Valley, a region in which non-Indian dominion had switched hands five times in forty years. Adding to these geo-political concerns, white settlers in the Mississippi Valley demonstrated little in the way of loyalty or attachment to the United States. In the 1790s and the 1800s, the white inhabitants of the Mississippi Valley were a seemingly untrustworthy lot of land speculators, merchants, and slaveholders, ancient French planters, Saint Domingue refugees, British Loyalists, Spanish officials, Irish Catholics in the Service of Spain, expatriated Americans who had sworn an oath of allegiance to the Spanish King, and “men of no country.” They were loyal – not to the United States – but to any imperial power that promised secure land titles, security for their property in
slaves, and access to more. As they repeatedly made clear to American policymakers, their peaceful and permanent inclusion in the American Union required protections for their “system of slavery.” So long as the Mississippi Valley remained a contested borderland inhabited by European Americans with loose attachments to the American Union but strong attachments to slavery, American policymakers and territorial officials believed that the federal government had to protect slavery, just as their French, British, and Spanish predecessors had.¹⁰

That’s precisely what the federal government did. However, though American sovereignty in the Mississippi Valley saw a steady growth in slavery, it did not result in an immediate expansion of American slavery from the Atlantic states via planter migration and a domestic slave trade. Indeed, it was not until 1815 that merchants developed a regular domestic slave trade from the Chesapeake to the Mississippi Valley, and that planters from the Atlantic states began settling in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Missouri in significant numbers.¹¹ Until then, what grew and expanded was the slavery that had been established prior to American possession, in response to the same forces that had led to its expansion in the 1790s, and drawing slaves mainly from the Caribbean and Atlantic slave trades. In addition, while American officials used state power to protect and promote the interests of planters – for example, by instituting more stringent slave codes and recognizing the legality of dubious grants to large tracts of lands - these actions were continuations of policies and trends that began under Spanish rule, and they were done so at the bequest of local planters.¹²

In the Mississippi Territory, through 1815, the growth of slavery followed paths established under British and then Spanish rule. Though appointed American officials
staffed the courts and land offices of the territory, British loyalists and expatriated Americans remained the dominant social and economic figures in the non-Indian settlements that remained confined to the Natchez District. Furthermore, the region remained closely tied to Spanish West Florida and New Orleans, which served as the Natchez Country’s main commercial centers for both the sale of slave-produced commodities and the purchase of slaves through the illegal international slave trade and smuggling. Similarly, the Louisiana Purchase failed to change significantly the patterns of slavery’s growth that had been established in Louisiana and Missouri. Francophone planters continued to dominate the plantation economy in Louisiana, and American sovereignty hardly interrupted the international slave trade or the continued migration of refugee Saint Domingue planters and their slaves. In both Natchez and Louisiana, the enslaved population remained decidedly non-African American, instead composed of native creole slaves, along with slaves from the Caribbean, African-born slaves, and the immediate descendents of slaves imported from Africa. In Missouri, slavery continued its slow but steady growth as merchants and farmers expanded production of foodstuffs and stores such as hemp for sale downriver. They continued to acquire slaves in the haphazard way they had for the previous forty years: through exchange with merchants in New Orleans, through the migration of French slaveholders from Indiana and Illinois, by the occasional acquisition of Indian slaves, by the occasional purchase of slaves from Americans, and through natural increase. Through 1815, then, the growth of slavery in the Mississippi Valley after American possession represented not a sharp break from the past but a significant continuity that stretched back to the 1760s.
Now, some concluding points.

I have argued that, in the Mississippi Valley, growing trans-Atlantic demand for slave-produced commodities, the centrality of slavery to the region’s colonial past, and continuing imperial rivalries for dominion over the interior of the North American continent determined that slavery would be continued under American rule. More broadly, I could argue that a region’s colonial past determined the place of slavery in that region once it became part of the American Union.

How does this point change our understanding of the politics of slavery and slavery expansion in the early republic, through 1815? For one, it forces historians to look “beyond the founders” in their efforts to explain the massive growth of slavery in the United States between the Revolution and the Missouri Controversy. Once heralded as the author of an empire for liberty, over the past few decades, Thomas Jefferson has been excoriated as the tribune of an “empire for slavery.” Even Garry Wills has gotten in on the act. But a significant historical development such as the creation of an empire for slavery in the early American West was bigger and more complex than Jefferson or any group of founding fathers. In focusing narrowly on founders such as Jefferson – and even in focusing on institutions such as Congress, or on sectional and party politics to explain slavery’s expansion - historians have both overstated the power of the federal government to prevent slavery’s growth in the West and overlooked other causes of slavery’s expansion.

Since the 1760s, imperial powers in the Mississippi Valley had used slavery as an instrument of empire-building. When the United States began expanding into the contested borderlands of the Mississippi Valley in the 1790s, American policymakers
believed that the federal government had to do the same. Importantly, this belief transcended party and sectional lines, as the actions of Timothy Pickering – a stout New England Federalist and longtime foe of slavery and planters who was in many ways the antithesis of Thomas Jefferson - demonstrates. When the United States organized the Natchez Country into the Mississippi Territory in 1798, Secretary of State Pickering - who was responsible for organizing and governing federal territories - emerged as the most ardent supporter of slavery in that territory. In 1804, now in the Senate, Pickering asserted that the United States should permit the international slave trade to Louisiana, and voted against numerous restrictions on slavery that made it into the 1804 Act creating a territorial government for Louisiana. Pickering’s actions were neither hypocritical, nor do they suggest that Pickering secretly harbored pro-slavery sentiments. Instead, Pickering – like Jefferson and so many other American policymakers - understood that neither a revolutionary promise of an empire for liberty nor a weak, overextended republic could overcome the post-colonial realities of white settlers clamoring for more slaves, geo-political conflicts that encouraged European powers to bid for those white settlers’ loyalties, and growing trans-Atlantic demand for slave-produced commodities that forged an empire for slavery in the Mississippi Valley.

2 For the importance of joining the history of the interior of the North American continent to Atlantic history, especially in the period between 1754 and 1815, see François Furstenberg, “The Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier in Atlantic History,” American Historical Review 113 (June 2008), 647-677; Thomas Bender, A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History, (New York, 2006), 61-115; Peter H. Wood, “From Atlantic History to a Continental Approach” in Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan, eds., Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal (New York, 2009), 279-298.

3 For the importance of colonial continuities in shaping the early national history of the United States, see the forum led by Jack P. Greene, “Colonial History and National History: Reflections on a Continuing Problem,” William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series, 64 (April 2007), 235 – 250. Furstenberg, “Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier” also stresses continuity over change in the trans-Appalachian West during the period between 1754 and 1815, which he has labeled “the Long War for the West.” For the persistence of European settlers’ institutions, practices, and cultures after the transfer of sovereignty from one imperial power to another, see Jack P. Greene, “The Cultural Dimensions of Political Transfers: An Aspect of the European Occupation of the Americas,” Early American Studies (2008), 1-26. For the distinctions between the expansion of slavery from the Atlantic states after 1815 and the growth of slavery that had been established in the colonial Mississippi Valley under European rule, see John Craig Hammond, “‘Uncontrollable Necessity:’ The Local Politics, Geo-Politics, and Sectional Politics of Slavery Expansion,” in John Craig Hammond and Matthew Mason eds., Contesting Slavery: The Politics of Freedom and Bondage in the New American Nation (Charlottesville, 2011), forthcoming.

Nineteenth-Century South and the Atlantic World,” *Journal of Southern History*, 75 (August 2009), 627-650.


8 Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion*, 13-54. The interests of planters from the Atlantic states had minimal bearing on Congress’s decision to permit slavery in the Mississippi Territory and the Louisiana Purchase. For the most part, the “west” envisioned by southern planters through the War of 1812 did not extend beyond the Carolina Upcountry, the Georgia interior, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Except for a few visionaries such as Thomas Jefferson, in 1798 and 1804, southern planters did not imagine the far-off plantations of Missouri, Louisiana, and the Natchez Country as a destination for either themselves or their burgeoning slave population. Indeed, six southern Republican senators voted to prohibit the domestic slave trade to the Louisiana Purchase under the 1804 Territorial Act for Orleans and Upper Louisiana. Only after 1815 did planters from the Atlantic states forge significant ties between the well-being of slavery in the Atlantic states and its continued expansion into the west. See Hammond, “Uncontrollable Necessity.”


10 Daniel Clark Sr., to Andrew Ellicott, Mar. 18, 1798, Andrew Ellicott Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; “Memorial to Congress by Permanent Committee of the Natchez District,” Oct. 23, 1797 in Clarence E. Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, 28 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1934-1975), 5: 9-11. For the persistence of European settlers’ institutions, practices, and cultures after the transfer of sovereignty from one imperial power to another, see Greene, “The Cultural Dimensions of Political Transfers.” For the loose and often shifting loyalties and attachments of white settlers in the Louisiana, and the ways in which this challenged American efforts to establish effective, rather than mere titular sovereignty in an age where notions of nationhood and citizenship had little binding influence over individuals, see Kastor, *Nation’s Crucible*. For the ways in which imperial rivalries strengthened the bargaining positions of settlers in borderlands, see Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *American Historical Review*, 104 (June 1999), 814-841. For the ways in which this allowed white westerners to gain protections for slavery, see Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion*. For the ways in which white settlers in Spanish West Florida traded protection for local interests – mainly access to cheap or free
land, low taxes, and a degree of stability - for loyalty to the Spanish crown, see McMichael, *Atlantic Loyalties*.


12 In *Slave Country*, Rothman especially emphasizes how American officials promoted the interests of planters. However, through 1815, these policies were continuations of policies and trends that began under Spanish rule. For example, the 1806 Black Codes for Louisiana are often portrayed as the imposition of American racial norms on to the more fluid racial categories of Louisiana. In actuality, the 1806 codes were the culmination of a long series of reforms that Spanish officials and French planters had adopted to more closely regulate the free and enslaved black population in response to the great expansion of the plantation economy in the 1790s. Indeed, the 1806 Code was not imposed by the federal government but adopted by the territorial legislature, which consisted entirely of native Louisiana planters. Similarly, American officials created a slave code for Upper Louisiana that mirrored the regulations of Kentucky and Virginia, but they did so at the direct bequest of the leading residents of St. Louis. And while American land policy in the Mississippi Territory and Missouri favored slaveholding planters over slaveless farmers, this largely reflected the necessity of recognizing the enormous land claims that British and Spanish officials and the Georgia legislature had granted from the 1760s through the 1790s. For greater restrictions on free and enslaved blacks prior to American possession see Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*; Kastor, *Nation’s Crucible*, 81-84; Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*; Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 181-237. For St. Louis elites’ request the United States immediately adopt a set of slave codes, see Rankin to Amos Stoddard, August 4, 1804, Amos Stoddard Papers, Missouri Historical Society. For the federal land policies that favored planters who lived in the Natchez district prior to American possession, see Robert V. Haynes, “Territorial Mississippi, 1798 – 1817,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 64 (2002), 283 – 305. The Spanish were especially adept at using land grants to gain and reward the loyalties of leading local men. See Aron, *American Confluence* and McMichael, *Atlantic Loyalties*. And of course, the Spanish never threatened to prohibit slavery in any of its colonial possessions.

13 In post-acquisition Mississippi, settlement outside of the Natchez Country remained blocked by Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws, who still claimed and controlled the vast majority of the Territory. Furthermore, American settlement in the Natchez District remained stagnant, as land titles remained confused and contested because of overlapping Spanish, British, and American claims. It was not until 1809 that the federal government began offering public lands for sale in the Mississippi Territory, but by then, the Embargo had slowed American settlement to a trickle. See Robert V. Haynes, “Territorial Mississippi, 1798 – 1817,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 64 (2002), 283 – 305.
For slavery in the Natchez District, see Daniel H. Usner Jr., “American Indians on the Cotton Frontier: Changing Economic Relations with Citizens and Slaves in the Mississippi Territory,” *Journal of American History*, 72 (Sep., 1985), 297-317; Rothman, *Slave Country*, 37-70; Libby, *Slavery and Frontier*, 13-45. For slavery in Louisiana, see Kastor, *Nation’s Crucible*, 62-66, 80-85, 210-212; Rothman, *Slave Country*, 73-117. For slavery in Missouri, see Aron, *American Confluence*; Faragher, “‘More Motley than Mackinaw,’” Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion*, 57-64; Turner, “From Savagery to Slavery.” Rothman, *Slave Country*, is the best analysis of the growth of slavery in the Mississippi Territory and Louisiana. However, he overemphasizes the immediate changes in slavery that followed American possession while overlooking the important continuities that characterized the growth of slavery under both Spanish and American rule. Furthermore, Rothman tends to conflate the expansion of slavery from the Atlantic states after 1815 and the growth of slavery that had existed under American rule prior to the War of 1812.

For Pickering’s support for slavery in the Mississippi Territory and the Louisiana Purchase, see Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion*.