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Richard S. Dunn

"Dreadful Idlers" in the Cane Fields: The Slave Labor Pattern on a Jamaican Sugar Estate, 1762–1831

Ever since Curtin published his seminal study of *The Atlantic Slave Trade,* in which he pointed out the glaring disparity between the massive traffic to the Caribbean and the marginal traffic to North America, historians have been trying to explain the sharp demographic contrast between the two regions. Why did the slaves imported to the West Indian sugar islands die faster than they propagated, while the slaves imported to North America experienced marked natural increase? Four features of the Caribbean slave system are now commonly emphasized: the lethal disease environment, the high proportion of African-born slaves with low fertility, the inadequate slave diet, and the brutal and exploitive labor regimen.[1]

This essay focuses on the last of these factors, and discusses the impact of the Caribbean labor routine upon the enslaved cane workers. My framework was established by Higman, who has used the British slave registration records of 1813 to 1834 to analyze the overall labor pattern in the British West Indian sugar islands during the closing generation of Caribbean slavery, and my methodology is borrowed from Craton, who has used the detailed plantation records at Worthy Park estate in Jamaica to present the first microcosmic account of a Caribbean slave gang in action. Like Craton, I have been scrutinizing the records of a particularly well-documented Jamaican sugar plantation: Mesopotamia estate in the western parish of Westmoreland. The Meso-

Richard S. Dunn is the Roy F. and Jeannette P. Nichols Professor of American History at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the coeditor of *The Papers of William Penn* (Philadelphia, 1981–1987), 4v.

1 Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969), 86–93. Kenneth F. Kiple discusses the first three factors in *The Caribbean Slave: A Biological History* (Cambridge, 1984). Barry W. Higman stresses the labor factor in his two books: *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica, 1807–1834* (Cambridge, 1976); *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean 1807–1834* (Baltimore, 1984).

potamian records enable me to reconstruct the individual life history of every single Afro-American who lived and worked on this plantation during the final seventy years of Caribbean slavery. Studied collectively, these life histories demonstrate conclusively that the labor system employed at Mesopotamia had a large and quantifiable impact upon the slaves' health and life expectancy.[2]

The absentee proprietors of Mesopotamia, Joseph Foster Barham and his son, Joseph Foster Barham II, made a systematic practice of cataloging their Jamaican slave gang annually from 1751 to 1831: eighty-five inventories of the Mesopotamia slave force survive among the Barham family papers in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. From 1751 onward the Mesopotamian lists identify each man, woman, and child by name and place of origin. From 1762 onward the inventories supply three especially useful further items of annual information: the age, occupation, and physical condition of each slave. From 1774 on they also identify the mothers of all children born on the estate.[3]

As a data bank for labor historians, these records are particularly informative for the period 1762 to 1831. By correlating the inventories for these years, I have been able to distinguish each of the recorded 1,103 slaves who lived at Mesopotamia during this seventy-year span, and to trace year by year the work experiences of these people individually and collectively. So far as I know, this is the only British Caribbean sugar estate yet discovered where one can trace *all* of the individual workers year by year over a long time span. This rich biographical information documents the impact of demography, of miscegenation, of sex roles, of health conditions, and of patterns of employment upon each and every Mesopotamian slave. And it shows in concrete detail the effect of the ending of the African slave trade upon this particular community of slave workers.[4]

2 See, in particular, *idem, Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica,* 1–17, 121–124, 212–226; *idem., Slave Populations of the British Caribbean,* 158–199, 324–329, 332–336. Michael Craton, *Searching for the Invisible Man: Slaves and Plantation Life in Jamaica* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978).

3 The 85 Mesopotamian inventories are scattered through 5 boxes of the Barham Papers (hereafter identified as Barham): B34-B38, Clarendon Manuscript Deposit, Bodleian Library, Oxford. The earliest inventory is dated 1736. I wish to thank the Earl of Clarendon for permitting me to use these Mesopotamian records.

4 The Mesopotamian inventories are both more numerous and more continuous than at Worthy Park, where Craton drew upon 35 inventories for the years 1783–1796, 1811–

Mesopotamia was situated on the Cabarita River in the Westmoreland plain (still the chief sugar growing district in Jamaica), five miles inland from Savanna la Mar, the local port. The estate was laid out about 1700 and was operated by the Barhams from 1728 to 1834, throughout the peak period of slave-based sugar production in Jamaica. Between 1762 and 1831 the slave population at Mesopotamia fluctuated from a low of 238 in 1769 to a peak of 421 in 1820. It was never self-sustaining. As Table 1 shows, nearly twice as many deaths as births were recorded between 1762 and 1831. In order to maintain a viable work force at Mesopotamia (as also at Worthy Park and most other Jamaican sugar estates), the owners had to purchase a great many new slaves. Between 1762 and 1831 the Barhams bought 138 people from the African slave ships and 285 from other Jamaican estates. The elder Barham, who operated Mesopotamia from 1746 until his death in 1789, bought almost all of his new slaves from African ships until 1786, when he purchased forty slaves from Three Mile River estate, a local plantation. His son was repelled by the African trade and stopped buying from the slave ships in 1793, fifteen years before Parliament closed the trade. Instead, he ac-

Table 1 Slave Population Changes at Mesopotamia, 1762–1831

	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Population on 31 Dec. 1761	152	118	270
Increase:			
Recorded Live Births	204	206	410
Purchased from Africa	96	42	138
Purchased in Jamaica	147	138	285
	447	386	833
Decrease:			
Recorded Deaths	429	320	749
Manumitted	4	11	15
Escaped	5	2	7
Sold	4	0	4
	442	333	775
Population on 31 Dec. 1831	157	171	328

1817, 1820–1824, and 1830–1838. However, Craton was able to document the transition from slave to wage labor during the period 1834–1846 at Worthy Park (Craton, *Searching for the Invisible Man,* 275–315), which I cannot do because the Mesopotamian workers disappear from view in 1832 on the eve of emancipation.

quired the new workers he needed from neighboring estates that were closing down or retrenching: 60 from Southfield estate in 1791, 56 from Cairncurran in 1814, and 112 from Springfield in 1820. This policy change by the Barhams was certainly not typical of Jamaican estate management. The African trade to Jamaica reached its peak volume between the years 1790 and 1807. But the fact that the Barhams voluntarily stopped importing from Africa fifteen years before their fellow planters were forced to do so in 1808 means that the effects of this cessation can be measured more fully at Mesopotamia than elsewhere.

The two Barhams took a far greater interest in the physical and spiritual welfare of their black workers than most Caribbean planters. Though they lived (very comfortably) in England, they each visited Mesopotamia as young men, and from the 1760s onward they supported a program of religious instruction on the estate that was conducted by Moravian missionaries. In order to keep close track of conditions at Mesopotamia, they required their business agents in Jamaica to send frequent reports on the slaves. Joseph I instituted the annual inventories. Joseph II voted in Parliament in the 1790s to abolish the slave trade. When he became owner of Mesopotamia on his father's death, he quickly bought many new slaves with the idea that three people could do the work of two in the past, which would "ease the labor of my slaves and make their task light." In another letter to his attorneys, Joseph II remarked: "I carry my ideas a little farther than many on this subject, and think myself obliged to consult not only [the slaves'] health but their happiness." In 1801 he told a new attorney that the slaves' "well-being and happiness is by far the chief object of my concern."[5]

As he looked over the annual slave inventories sent from Mesopotamia, Joseph II frequently complained about the large number of deaths and the small number of births. He asked his attorneys why so many deaths were caused by debility and the flux, and he directed them to give the slaves more rest on the weekends, with special care for pregnant women. Barham's agents responded by sending him statistics from the Westmoreland parish rolls to show that the slaves on neighboring estates

5 Joseph Foster Barham II (hereafter identified as JFB II) to James Wedderburn and John Graham, 16 Oct. 1790; JFB II to Wedderburn and Graham, 8 Sept. 1789; JFB II to Samuel Jeffries, 26 June 1801, Barham C428.

were also decreasing. "No Negroes in the Parish of Westmoreland," they insisted, were "more indulged, better fed or better clothed." Pregnant women were assigned light work recommended by the doctors as positively conducive to their health. The attorneys predicted that as the elderly Africans on the estate died, the Mesopotamian-born creoles would breed and increase. But they warned that problems would continue, because the estate was situated too close to the market town of Savanna la Mar. The slaves were always rambling about and holding balls on Saturday nights, and consequently neglecting their subsistence provision grounds.[6]

Barham's agents were correct in stating that the demographic problems at Mesopotamia were common among the other sugar estates of Westmoreland parish. Inspection of the parish records for the years 1807 to 1834 shows a general pattern of shrinkage within the slave labor force and retrenchment among the Westmoreland plantation owners during this period following the closing of the slave trade. Between 1807 and 1834, the number of estates in Westmoreland with labor gangs of 200 or more slaves fell from thirty-nine to twenty-four, and the number with 100 or more slaves fell from seventy-one to fifty-three. As Higman has pointed out, the sugar planters experienced a greater population loss than the ranchers, who operated livestock pens. The seven large Westmoreland holdings identifiable as livestock pens reported 448 slave births and 419 deaths in the triennial slave registration returns of 1817 to 1832, and claimed compensation in 1834—the year of emancipation—for a collective work force almost the same size as in 1817. But the forty-four identifiable Westmoreland sugar estates reported 3,254 births and 5,334 deaths between 1817 and 1832. Nearly half of these sugar planters made up their losses as the Barhams did at Mesopotamia—by acquiring blocs of replacement workers. But in 1834 they filed compensation claims with the British government for 2,000 fewer slaves than they had registered in 1817—a loss of approximately 18 percent in seventeen years.[7]

6 JFB II to Henry W. Plummer, 6 July 1799; JFB II to James Colquhoun Grant and John Blyth, 6 June 1810; JFB II to Grant and Blyth, 29 July 1815, Barham C428. Grant and Blyth to JFB II, 3 Jan. 1809, 19 Oct. 1812, 13 Oct. 1817; Blyth to JFB II, 9 July 1823, Barham C358.

7 This paragraph is based upon analysis of the following 9 sets of records: the West-

Grim as these parish figures are, the slave population at Mesopotamia was declining faster than on most neighboring estates during the closing years of slavery. Management at Mesopotamia reported 54 slave births for every 100 slave deaths in the triennial returns for 1817 to 1832, as against 65 births to 100 deaths on the ten other sugar estates in the parish of closest equivalent size. Pondering this dismal situation, Joseph II came to believe that the slaves themselves must be responsible for their demographic failure. All of his efforts to increase births and check deaths at Mesopotamia had been frustrated by the slaves' profound moral deficiencies. Accepting the arguments of his Jamaican attorneys, he judged his laborers to be naturally "dissolute" and "dreadful idlers." In 1823, Joseph II published a pamphlet in which he argued that emancipation was a noble objective, but a pointless one until the slaves were morally transformed through a massive program of religious and educational instruction—a program entirely beyond the resources of the Caribbean slaveholders. Therefore Barham called upon the British government to assume the management of all private estates in the sugar islands, compensate the slaveholders for their lost property, and provide the blacks with moral training so that they learn the responsibilities of freedom and the duty of honest labor. Essentially, Barham was abandoning the position he had started with in 1789. As a slaveholder he no longer felt responsibility for his black workers' health and happiness. And he was also expressing disdain for the quality of work performed by several generations of slaves on his estate. "The Negro race," he asserted, "is so averse to labour, that without force we have hardly anywhere been able to obtain it, even from those who had been trained to work."[8]

But Barham's own records supply much evidence to support alternate explanations for the problems at Mesopotamia. The long sequence of slave inventories taken on this estate, designed with the purpose of keeping an annual running check on the status of every man, woman, and child who lived and worked there, pro-

moreland parish tax lists for 1807 and 1814 (Barham B34); the Westmoreland slave registration returns for 1817, 1820, 1823, 1826, 1829, and 1832 (T 71/178–189, Public Record Office, London); and the Westmoreland slave compensation return of 1834 (T 71/723, PRO).

8 JFB II, memorandum on the Negroes at Mesopotamia, n.d., Barham C375; *idem, Considerations on the Abolition of Negro Slavery* (London, 1823), 2–4, 7–10, 14–18, 23, 35.

vides a precisely detailed record of the Caribbean slave labor system in action. By correlating these inventories one can trace the health history and occupational experience of each slave worker, and demonstrate that these two variables were intimately related.

How trustworthy are these Mesopotamian data? In particular, how reliable are the annual age statements for each slave, of crucial importance when correlating one census with another and when interpreting the slaves' individual careers? The ages of all persons recorded as born on the estate between 1751 and 1831 can be verified precisely. The ages of many persons who were imported into the estate can also be verified to some degree. Nearly all of the slaves who were purchased directly from African slave traders were reported as being youthful: 90 percent were listed in the first census after arrival as between ten and twenty-four years old; 50 percent were listed as between ten and fourteen years old. Perhaps the Mesopotamian bookkeepers who entered this information persistently underestimated the ages of these incoming Africans. But teenagers can be tracked with some accuracy by the presence or absence of pubertal developments—the height spurt, voice change in boys, breast development in girls—that even a bookkeeper might notice. African pre-adolescents might also be missing the body scars or country marks that were commonly administered to boys and girls during pubertal initiation rites.[9]

The Mesopotamian bookkeepers often revised their age statements for African boys or girls up or down on subsequent lists to correct apparent mistakes. Undoubtedly, the slaves imported from other Jamaican estates possess the most dubious age statements. These people were acquired in large blocs, and arrived at Mesopotamia in family groups. They ranged in age from extreme

9 The Barhams' bookkeepers, employed on modest annual wages, were transients who seldom worked at Mesopotamia for more than two or three years. In preparing new slave lists they seem to have worked from old ones, updating, adding, and deleting entries as needed. Each annual inventory contained a birth and death register. On the question of African tribal scars, when Thomas Thistlewood, a Jamaican planter who lived a few miles from Mesopotamia, bought 10 slaves from an African ship in 1765, he described each of them in his diary by name, sex, tribe, age, height, and country marks. Eight of them, ranging in age from 20 to 13, had country marks, including a Coromante man. The two youngest and shortest children, both Coromantes, were a 10-year-old boy and a 12-year-old girl who had no tribal scars; they had evidently not yet experienced the adolescent initiation rite. Journal of Thomas Thistlewood, 19 June 1765, Monson Manuscript Deposit, 31/16, Lincolnshire Archives, Lincoln.

youth to extreme old age. Their stated ages were supplied by previous owners, who had probably kept less careful records than the Barhams. Yet when the initial age statements in the Mesopotamian inventories for these new Jamaican slaves are studied collectively, they show no detectable distortion, except that too many of the older men and women are heaped at ages thirty-five, forty, forty-five, fifty, and fifty-five. I conclude that the Mesopotamian age statements are defective for the older imported slaves, but are otherwise as accurate as such data can ever be.

The remaining categories of data appear to be consistently and reliably reported. The inventories supply precise exit dates for all slaves who died, were sold, were manumitted, or ran away between 1751 and 1831. I have found no reason to challenge the annual occupational descriptions and health statements—no reason to suspect that the bookkeepers identified carpenters as field workers or vice versa, or that they labelled invalids as able bodied or vice versa.

The following discussion focuses upon those Mesopotamian slaves living on the estate between 1762 and 1831 whose "adult" careers on the estate can be reconstructed completely. I define as "adult" all slaves aged sixteen or older, because young people were customarily assigned to the jobs they would hold during their prime working years at about age sixteen, and bookkeepers generally promoted "boys" to "men" and "girls" to "women" on their lists at age sixteen. But the sixteen-year-old adults at Mesopotamia were definitely not yet adult in a physical sense. Recent research into the stature of Caribbean blacks in the early nineteenth century, as revealed by the slave registration returns, indicates that teenagers began their adolescent growth spurts noticeably later than in modern Western black populations: girls at about age thirteen and boys at about age fifteen. By age sixteen males and females were both approximately the same height, on average just about five feet tall. The girls would grow another inch or so to achieve mature stature, and the boys would grow a median four inches by the time they reached age twenty-two.[10]

10 Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean*, 280–292, 534–535, 542–546; *idem.*, "Growth in Afro-Caribbean Slave Populations," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, I (1979), 377–382; Gerald C. Friedman, "The Heights of Slaves in Trinidad," *Social Science History*, VI (1982), 493–501. The data analyzed by Higman and Friedman are from the registration records in Trinidad, St. Lucia, and Berbice. See also Robert W. Fogel et al.,

By restricting attention to these Mesopotamian slaves whose adult careers on the estate can be traced in full, I have excluded from analysis half of the 1,103 slaves who are recorded as living at Mesopotamia between 1762 and 1831: the 137 children who died before they reached age sixteen; the 100 men and women who turned sixteen before 1751 when systematic annual inventory keeping began; and the 328 people who were still alive in 1831 when the last inventory was taken. This leaves a cohort of 538 men and women—49 percent of the total recorded population—whose adult careers at Mesopotamia began after 1751 and ended by 1831. Of these, 322 or 60 percent were men, and 216 were women; 186 or 35 percent were born at Mesopotamia; 182 or 34 percent were imported directly from Africa; 170 or 31 percent were purchased from other Jamaican estates; and 17 or 3 percent were mulattoes.[11]

Each of these 538 adult slaves was annually listed within one of eight broad occupational categories: (1) the drivers who supervised the several gangs of field laborers; (2) the craft workers, such as carpenters, coopers, blacksmiths, masons, boilers, and distillers; (3) the stockkeepers and transport workers, such as penkeepers, stable hands, mulemen, and carters; (4) the prime field hands, who performed the chief agricultural labor and who were subdivided into two work units, the first gang and the second gang; (5) the domestics who attended the white overseers, bookkeepers, artisans, and missionaries; (6) the marginal workers who held a variety of peripheral jobs, such as grass cutters, dung carriers, jobbers, hog herders, sheep herders, gardeners, fishermen, rat catchers, doctors, midwives, field cooks, fowl keepers, and water carriers; (7) the watchmen and nurses who were always elderly and in broken health; and (8) the nonworkers who were too old or sick for any employment whatsoever.[12]

"Secular Changes in American and British Stature and Nutrition," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XIV (1983), 445–481. Regrettably, neither the Jamaican slave registration returns nor the Mesopotamian inventories supply any information on slave stature.

11 Twelve of these mulattoes were among the 186 Mesopotamian-born slaves, and 5 were among the 170 imported from other Jamaican estates.

12 Unfortunately, the Mesopotamian inventories only start to distinguish between the two field gangs of category (4) in 1801. Before this date, all laborers in this category were simply identified as field workers. Jobbers in category (6) are not to be confused with jobbing laborers who were hired out by jobbers—i.e., by slaveholders who contracted their workers out to perform especially arduous work (such as cane hole digging) on other

The Mesopotamian slaves were routed through this occupational system via a well-established tracking network. Boys and girls were put to work very early, some at age five and on average at age seven. Those who began as field laborers, cutting grass or carrying dung, almost always continued on as field workers when they became adults. Those who began as cattle boys or hog herders generally continued on as stockkeepers. Boys who started work as domestics were usually converted to apprentice craft workers in their early teens, whereas most girl domestics became field workers. Adults were generally kept in the same line of employment until they became too sick or old for prime labor, when they were switched to lighter tasks. The only people who were promoted to higher job categories in mid-career were the drivers, who usually started out as field workers. For example, Cuffee Tippo was an African who came to Mesopotamia at about age ten; he worked for his first six years with the grass gang, then continued as an adult field laborer for thirty-five years before he was promoted to driver at age fifty-one. By this time Cuffee was listed as "infirm," but he served as driver for sixteen years and spent his last three years in retirement as an invalid; he died at age seventy—a ripe old age for a Mesopotamian slave.

The slaves in categories (1), (2), (3), and (4) were valued much more highly by the Barhams and their attorneys and overseers than those in categories (5), (6), (7), and (8). This relative worth is demonstrated by the prices paid for slaves who had already been assigned to adult occupations on other Jamaican estates before they entered the Mesopotamian work force. Among the 156 slaves acquired from Three Mile River, Southfield, and Cairncurran estates, drivers, craft workers, stockkeepers, and field workers consistently fetched the best prices. Drivers exercised the

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estates. No Mesopotamian slaves were employed in this way, although the Barhams' attorneys hired gangs of jobbing laborers to work at Mesopotamia when the estate labor force was particularly short-handed. The slaves listed as "jobbers" in the Mesopotamian inventories were men in ailing health, retired from field work, who could no longer perform strenuous physical labor.

My classification system agrees with Higman's in *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean,* 158–179, and also with Craton's more elaborate system of 20 categories (*Searching for the Invisible Man,* 141), except that Craton ranks the nurses among the elite workers, whereas at Mesopotamia I find them to be semi-invalids who took on this work late in life after being shifted from more "valuable" jobs. Likewise, the female doctors and midwives at Mesopotamia had generally started out as field workeres.

greatest responsibility, since they kept the field laborers working in unison and on schedule; however, they were not by any means the strongest or healthiest members of the work force, being usually middle-aged or elderly. The craft workers received considerable job training and possessed the most critical skills: boilers and distillers had to know how to brew acceptable sugar and rum; coopers had to construct leak-proof hogsheads and puncheons; and carpenters, masons, and smiths had to keep the plantation buildings and machinery in working order. The stockkeepers and transport workers enjoyed more independence and lighter physical labor than the craft workers.[13]

The prime field hands in category (4), especially the members of the first gang, were the key workers in this system. They performed the hardest physical labor by far, digging the deep square cane holes in which to plant new shoots, and cutting the ripe cane stalks at harvest time. They executed this strenuous manual work in regimented lock step, so that each member of the gang was forced to keep pace with the work of the others. The Barhams paid good prices for field workers: the fifty-nine prime hands acquired from Three Mile River, Southfield, and Cairncurran cost almost as much as the other ninety-seven new slaves. The critical issue was that field workers had to be in sound health. Once they became identified in the annual inventories as "weak," "sickly," or "diseased," they were shifted to easier and less productive work in categories (5), (6), or (7). Thus the managers at Mesopotamia needed to recruit new field hands continuously in order to keep the first and second gangs at strength.

In Table 2 the 538 men and women whose adult careers at Mesopotamia can be traced in full are categorized by primary occupation. A number of male workers held two primary jobs simultaneously. Thus Robin, born on the estate in 1784, had childhood training both in the grass gang and as a cattle boy, and was employed in his late teens as a combined carter/field hand. By his early twenties Robin had become a rebel; he was described

13 The price list of Three Mile River slaves is in Barham B33; the Southfield list is in Barham B36; the Cairncurran list is in Barham B34. Unfortunately I have found no parallel list for the 112 slaves purchased from Springfield estate in 1820. The domestics in category (5) were the favorites of the white managerial staff, and had the least strenuous employment of all the able-bodied laborers, but they fetched lower prices than the craft or stock workers because their jobs were considered more marginal.

Table 2 The Primary Occupations of 538 Adult Mesopotamian Slaves by Gender, 1762–1831

OCCUPATION	MALES	% M	FEMALES	% F	TOTAL	% OF WORKERS
1. Drivers	13	81	3	19	16	3.0
2. Craft Workers	42	100		0	42	7.8
2.5 Craft + Stock	11	100		0	11	2.0
3. Stock Keepers	16	100		0	16	3.0
3.5 Stock + Field	22	100		0	22	4.1
4. Field Workers	177	49	182	51	359	66.7
5. Domestics	3	33	6	67	9	1.7
6. Marginal Workers	26	67	13	33	39	7.2
8. Nonworkers	12	50	12	50	24	4.5
TOTALS	322	60	216	40	538	100.0

in the inventories as a "notorious thief and runaway," and the overseers decided that he was no longer suitable for transport work. From age twenty-one onward Robin worked solely in the second field gang until he died of pleurisy at age twenty-eight. There were twenty-one other Mesopotamian slaves who, like Robin, combined field with livestock work, and eleven who combined craft with stock or transport work. I have placed these people in categories (2.5) and (3.5) in order to distinguish them from the full-scale craft, stock, and field laborers.

Table 2 points up three significant features of the Mesopotamian labor pattern. First and most obvious, the number of privileged workers was small and the number of field workers was large. The chance of becoming a driver was 1 in 33, whereas the chance of becoming a field hand was 2 in 3. Second, relatively few slaves beyond the age of sixteen escaped employment of some kind. Less than 5 percent of these 538 adults did no work at all at Mesopotamia; most slaves in this category were unwanted elderly or incapacitated people who came to Mesopotamia in job lots from other Jamaican estates. Third, the female workers were especially discriminated against at Mesopotamia. Women had very little chance of escaping field labor: 84 percent of the adult females became prime field hands, as against 55 percent of the adult males. Women were excluded from craft work, transport, and all stock work except for fowl keeping. They could be drivers, but only of the grass gang. Even the marginal jobs in category (6) went mainly to the males, who served when they were in

failing health as jobbers, gardeners, fishermen, rat catchers, and watchmen. For women of equivalent feebleness, the only job assignments available beyond field work were as domestics, doctors (just one female black doctor was employed on the estate at any given time), midwives, nurses, field cooks, fowl keepers, and water carriers. The female water carriers were always cripples who had lost an arm or a hand in sugar mill accidents; presumably they carried water containers on their heads. Table 2 shows that, whereas males constituted 60 percent of this total group, more than half of the field workers were female. To be sure, the women in the West African societies from where these slaves came were accustomed to doing most of the agricultural work. But they were certainly not accustomed to the gang labor system practiced at Mesopotamia.

Table 3 considers the significance of origin and color in determining the employment pattern at Mesopotamia. As one might expect, the most privileged workers were the locally born slaves of mixed color; the least privileged slaves were African-born immigrants. But this stereotype does not tell the full story. Between 1762 and 1831, there were forty-six mulattoes and six quadroons—sired by the overseers, craft supervisors, and bookkeepers from the white managerial staff—who lived at Mesopotamia, constituting about 5 percent of the total slave population. Of these, nine were manumitted as children, ten died before age sixteen, and another sixteen were still alive in 1831, leaving sev-

Table 3 The Primary Occupations of 538 Adult Mesopotamian Slaves by Origin and Color, 1762–1831

	MESOPOTAMIAN-BORN BLACKS		JAMAICAN BLACKS		AFRICAN BLACKS		MULATTOES	
OCCUPATION	NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%
1. Drivers	7	4	4	3	5	3	0	
2. Craft Workers	12	7	10	6	8	4	12	70
2.5 Craft + Stock	6	4	2	1	2	1	1	6
3. Stock Keepers	14	8	2	1	0		0	
3.5 Stock + Field	16	9	3	2	3	2	0	
4. Field Workers	105	60	99	60	155	85	0	
5. Domestics	4	2	2	1	1	1	2	12
6. Marginal Workers	8	5	27	16	4	2	0	
8. Invalids	2	1	16	10	4	2	2	12
TOTALS	174	100	165	100	182	100	17	100

enteen mulattoes in our cohort of adult workers. They were employed exclusively as craft workers or as domestics. Over the years, the proportion of mulattoes in the Mesopotamian population increased significantly. In 1762, only two mulattoes were members of the adult work force: a mason named John and a carpenter named William. But, by 1831 (when the records close), there were thirteen slaves of mixed color who held adult craft or domestic jobs—leaving just eighteen additional job slots in these categories for the 218 blacks in the adult employment pool. Since privileged positions were in very short supply at Mesopotamia, the mulatto employment pattern must have been noticed and resented by the blacks. Several of the more serious recorded fights among the Mesopotamian slaves were between mulattoes and blacks. In 1806 a black fourteen-year-old apprentice cooper named Tamerlane was kicked in the intestines and killed by an unidentified mulatto boy. In 1826 cooper Robert McAlpine (a mulatto, the son of a white Mesopotamia bookkeeper) maimed distiller Peter (a black) with a handsaw when Peter failed to pay him a debt of "two bits."[14]

In strong contrast to the mulattoes, only eleven of the 182 slaves in our cohort who were purchased directly from the African slave ships became craft workers or domestics; 85 percent were put into the field gangs. But as a group these African newcomers were also the most functional laborers on the estate: 66 percent of them were male, 96 percent of them were assigned to primary jobs, and only 2 percent had to be channeled directly into marginal work, with another 2 percent being nonworking invalids. In all of these respects the Africans compare very favorably with the 165 black slaves who were acquired from other Jamaican estates. Among the Jamaican imports, 53 percent were male and only 74 percent could be assigned to primary jobs. Since many were old and sick on arrival, 16 percent had to be channeled directly into marginal work, and 10 percent did no work at all for the Barhams. The 174 Mesopotamian-born Negroes show still another occupational pattern. Compared with both groups of imported slaves,

14 McAlpine could also have been Tamerlane's assailant in 1806; he was a 13-year-old boy at that time. In punishment for his attack on Peter (who died a few months later), McAlpine was flogged and put into the workhouse for a month. William Ridgard to JFB II, 4 Aug. 1826, Barham C359.

they clearly had easier access to the more responsible and interesting jobs. Table 3 shows that 34 percent of them became supervisors, domestics, craft workers, or stock workers. In particular, they had a virtual monopoly on the stock and transport jobs.

Table 4 considers the impact of occupational assignment upon the health and longevity of the Mesopotamian black workers. This tabulation omits the seventeen mulattoes—who were all either craft or domestic workers, and whose inclusion would skew the findings for these two job categories—and aggregates the amount of time spent in primary and secondary occupations by each of the 521 adult black slaves in our cohort. The distinction between primary and secondary occupations is important, since most workers at Mesopotamia were shifted to employment in categories (5), (6), and (7) only when they became too sick or weak to continue productive labor. As we have already seen in Table 3, sixty-one of these people never held primary jobs at Mesopotamia, and twenty-two did not work at all. To illustrate how the system ordinarily operated, a man named Strephon, imported from Africa at age nineteen, worked as a field hand through age thirty-one, by which time he suffered so badly from

Table 4 The Longevity of 521 Mesopotamian Adult Black Slave Workers by Occupation

	NO.	MEAN YEARS PRIME OCC.	SECOND OCC.	TOTAL OCC.	HEALTH IN % ABLE	SICK	INVALID	MEAN AGE AT DEATH
MALES:								
Drivers	13	15.1	16.0	31.1	65	29	7	56.1
Craftworkers	40	19.0	3.5	22.5	55	37	8	44.6
Stockkeepers	38	20.7	3.8	24.5	59	35	6	43.8
Fieldworkers	177	13.2	7.2	20.4	47	48	5	42.2
Domestics	3	5.7	9.3	15.0	56	34	10	38.3
Marginal	26		10.8	10.8	3	75	22	48.4
Nonworkers	11						100	28.5
TOTALS	308	13.4	6.7	20.1	48	45	7	43.4
FEMALES:								
Drivers	3	14.3	16.3	30.6	29	47	24	59.3
Fieldworkers	182	15.6	5.3	20.9	43	42	15	45.3
Domestics	3	29.3	2.7	32.0	47	51	2	52.0
Marginal	13		10.6	10.6	5	66	29	57.3
Nonworkers	12						100	45.6
TOTALS	213	14.0	5.4	19.4	41	43	16	46.4

internal ruptures that he was made a watchman and fisherman. He continued in this secondary line of employment through age sixty-six, was an invalid for two years, and died at sixty-eight. In Table 4 Strephon is one of the 177 male field workers and is credited with twelve years of primary labor and thirty-five years of secondary labor. Pooling the employment data for all the male field workers from age sixteen onward, Table 4 shows that they averaged 13.2 recorded years in the field gangs and 7.2 years in a variety of secondary occupations, for a total 20.4 years of adult employment. This table also aggregates the annual health reports for each of these workers. Again to use the example of Strephon, during his career at Mesopotamia he was listed as in sound or "able" health in six inventories, as "ruptured," "badly ruptured," or "weak" in forty-one inventories, and as a nonworking invalid in two inventories. Collectively the 177 male field workers were able bodied 47 percent of the time, sickly 48 percent of the time, and nonworking invalids 5 percent of the time. They died at a mean age of 42.2.

The male and female slaves at Mesopotamia experienced somewhat differing patterns of health and life expectancy. Among the black men, the drivers had the longest careers and died at the most advanced ages, which is not surprising since they were elevated to this post in middle life, having been selected at least in part because of their proven durability. The stockkeepers worked longer and stayed healthier than the craft workers, but both groups had long careers by Mesopotamian standards, and two thirds of them stayed in the same line of adult work until they died or retired, without ever switching to secondary employment. A pen keeper named Neptune and a carter named Joe both held their jobs for forty-six years until they were sixty-two years old, and eleven other stock or craft workers served in their prime adult occupations for thirty years or more. The few adult males in domestic service were probably not robust enough for hard manual labor; this frailty would explain their short careers and early deaths. Collectively, the ninety-four comparatively privileged males in Table 4 served as adult workers at Mesopotamia for 24.1 recorded years on average—3.7 more years than the field hands—and died at the age of 44.8—2.6 years later than the field hands. More important from the sugar planter's point of view, the average field worker lasted only 13.2 years in the field

gangs—7.5 fewer years of primary labor than the average stockkeeper. Almost all of the field workers were described in the inventories as "able" when they first entered into adult gang labor, but their health broke down rapidly, which surely suggests the deleterious effect of cane planting, weeding, and harvesting upon the strength and health of these slave laborers. The most durable male field worker was an African named Cromwell who toiled in the first or second gang for thirty-four years before being switched to watchman for the final fifteen years of his employment. Only four other males worked in the field gangs for as long as thirty years.

Among the black women, there were only six privileged job holders: three drivers and three domestics. These privileged women had long careers, but so too did a number of the 182 female field workers. Fifteen women toiled for thirty years or more in the fields, a record matched by only five men. Three of them—Bathsheba, Eve, and Priscilla—worked in the cane fields for forty years, a record matched by none of the men. Overall, it appears that the women at Mesopotamia who performed the same gang tasks as the men were tougher than the males and better survived the trauma of sugar field labor. Table 4 indicates that they outlived the men by three years. And among the field hands, the average woman put in 2.4 more years of prime gang labor than the average man. One might suppose that the female field workers were assigned to the second gang while the men performed the heavier tasks in the first gang, but such was not the case at Mesopotamia. From 1801 onward, when the inventories on this estate differentiate between membership in the two prime field gangs, there were always more females than males in the first gang.

The work that these women did in the cane fields clearly affected their health and probably damaged their reproductive capability. As Table 4 demonstrates, both men and women were generally reported to be in poor physical shape; they were sickly or incapacitated for more than half of their adult careers. But the women fared worse than the men, being sick or invalids 59 percent of the time. And although they lived longer, they spent more time in retirement, so that their average working careers were actually shorter than the men's. Fertility was very low among these women. The 504 females who lived at Mesopotamia

between 1762 and 1831 produced only 410 recorded live births. Nearly half of the adult women had no recorded live births, and it would appear that gang labor was a contributing factor. The most prolific mother among the six privileged females in our cohort was a Mesopotamian-born seamstress and housekeeper named Minny, who had fourteen children. The most prolific mother among the 182 field workers was another Mesopotamian-born woman named Sally, who had ten children, and she was excused from field labor after the birth of her sixth baby when she was thirty years old, and spent the remainder of her life tending her children. Only five of the other field workers had big families of seven or more recorded children.[15]

Between 1762 and 1831 the labor force at Mesopotamia changed from a male to a female majority. In 1762 the male workers were clearly dominant; the sex ratio among the prime working slaves was 153/100. The managers of the estate did their best to sustain this ratio by introducing new young male laborers via the African trade, and by 1781 the sex ratio among the prime working slaves had climbed to 172/100. But when Joseph II began to recruit his new workers in Jamaica rather than from Africa, the male majority quickly eroded. By 1801 the sex ratio among the prime workers was down to 109/100, and from 1810 onward the female workers outnumbered the males. When the British government took a final slave census in Jamaica in August 1834, the sex ratio among the 316 slaves at Mesopotamia was 88/100 and among the prime workers was 87/100. This shift from male to female was by no means peculiar to Mesopotamia. In Jamaica as a whole the sex ratio changed from 100/100 to 95/100 between 1817 and 1832, and on the other big sugar plantations in Westmoreland parish the ratio changed from 88/100 to 82/100 between 1817 and 1834. Furthermore, by 1834 only one of the field gangs on the twenty-one largest Westmoreland sugar estates had a male majority.[16]

By way of summarizing our findings, Table 5 compares the overall work experience of the 186 slaves who were born on the

15 Some of these childless women may have produced babies who died within a few days of birth; such short-lived infants were generally not reported in the Mesopotamia birth and death registers.

16 For the overall Jamaican pattern, see Higman, *Slave Population and Economy*, 72. I have tabulated the sex ratios on 21 Westmoreland estates with 200 or more slaves in 1817 and 1834 from T 71/178; T 71/723, PRO.

Table 5 The Longevity of 538 Mesopotamian Adult Slave Workers by Gender, Origin, and Color

	NO.	ENTRY AGE	MEAN YRS PRIME JOB	SECONDARY JOB	TOTAL WORK	MEAN AGE AT DEATH
1. All males	322	21.7	13.4	6.5	19.9	43.0
All females	216	23.2	13.9	5.4	19.3	46.3
	538	22.3	13.6	6.0	19.6	44.4
2. Males born at Mesopotamia	110	16.0	17.1	5.7	22.8	40.9
Females born at Mesopotamia	76	16.0	16.9	5.7	22.6	42.4
	186	16.0	17.0	5.7	22.7	41.5
3. Males imported from Africa	121	19.1	14.7	8.7	23.4	43.8
Females imported from Africa	61	18.4	18.5	6.8	25.3	48.2
	182	18.8	16.0	8.1	24.1	45.3
4. Males from other Jamaican estates	91	31.9	7.0	4.3	11.3	44.6
Females from other Jamaican estates	79	34.0	7.4	3.9	11.3	48.7
	170	32.9	7.2	4.1	11.3	46.5
5. Mulatto Males	14	19.4	13.6	0.3	13.9	35.2
Mulatto Females	3	30.3	11.0	—	11.0	45.7
	17	21.4	13.2	0.2	13.4	37.1

estate with the 182 who were imported directly from Africa, and with the 170 who were purchased from other Jamaican estates. Here the seventeen mulatto laborers, who were excluded from Table 4 because of their skewed occupational distribution, are combined with the black workers (twelve mulattoes are among the Mesopotamian-born slaves and five are among the slaves imported from other Jamaican estates) and are also considered separately as a distinctive subgroup. In Table 5, the base point for analysis is the entry age of each group of slaves into the adult work force. Those born on the estate, as well as those imported to Mesopotamia before the age of sixteen, have entry ages of sixteen; those imported after the age of sixteen have the entry age listed in the first inventory after arrival. The slaves imported from Africa have a collective entry age only 2.8 years greater than the

slaves born at Mesopotamia, because they arrived young, the majority as teenagers. But the slaves purchased from other Jamaican estates were collectively more than twice the age of the Mesopotamian-born slaves on entry into adult work; 28 percent of them were listed as age forty or above and 11 percent were listed as age fifty or above. As noted earlier, the stated ages of these older imported slaves must be treated with suspicion, being often rounded and probably inflated; hence both the mean entry age and the mean exit age for the 170 imported Jamaican slaves may well be several years too high. But the length of adult employment for these slaves, as for all the others, can be calculated with precision.

One striking feature of Table 5 is that the seventeen mulattoes, despite their privileged job status, had much shorter adult careers than the black slaves. They worked for only 13.4 years and died at the very early mean age of 37.1. The oldest of these mulattoes was Betty from Southfield, who was blind when she arrived at age fifty-nine and had to be tended to by one of the young children; after eleven years as an invalid she died at age seventy. Only one other mulatto in this group, a carpenter named William, lived to old age; he worked as an adult for forty-three years, was retired for another seven years, and died at age sixty-six. But the mulattoes collectively contributed very little to the Mesopotamian production system.

Table 5 also demonstrates that the 186 Mesopotamian-born slaves and the 182 slaves imported directly from Africa played a far more significant role in the Barhams' work force than the 170 slaves introduced from other Jamaican estates. The Jamaican imports put in only 11.3 adult years of work for the Barhams on average—less than half as much as their Mesopotamian and African counterparts—and they were invalids for 2.3 years before dying at a mean age of 45.3 The other two groups of slaves performed at an almost equal level: Mesopotamian-born workers served longer at their primary jobs, whereas Africans had the longer total employment. Mesopotamian-born workers had the handicap of being exposed to the local disease environment, poor nutrition, and regimented labor throughout childhood before starting adult employment. These people, having spent about ten years apiece as child laborers for the Barhams, worked a mean 22.7 years as adults, were invalids for 2.8 years, and died at age

41.5. The Africans may have been in better physical shape than the creoles when they entered the adult work force, but they had suffered the shock of captivity and compulsory adjustment to a strange and hostile new environment. It is noticeable that the African males lasted in their primary jobs a mean 2.4 years less than the Mesopotamian males. The African men may have lost their health more quickly because 79 percent of them were field hands as compared with 35 percent of the Mesopotamian men. Or they may have lost their spirit more quickly because of the degradation of being forced to perform women's work in the cane fields. In any case, the Africans collectively entered the adult work force at Mesopotamia at a median age of 18.8, labored for a median 24.1 years, were invalids for 2.4 years, and died at age 45.3.

The evidence from Mesopotamia suggests that first generation slaves, imported directly from Africa, endured the plantation work regimen at least as well as the second generation slaves who were born into the system. In particular, African female workers were more durable than the locally born women. On average they put 2.7 more years into adult labor and they died 5.8 years later. However, these African working women produced very few children at Mesopotamia. Evidence on this point is lacking before 1774, when the Mesopotamian inventories begin to identify the mothers of newborn infants, but between 1774 and 1831 the sixty-one African female workers in Table 5 produced only twenty-nine recorded live births; the seventy-six Mesopotamian-born women produced 117 recorded live births. Only twelve of the African women had children during this span, averaging 2.4 births each, whereas twenty-eight of the creole women had children, averaging 4.2 births each. Obviously neither of these records is impressive, but the crude birth rate at Mesopotamia did begin to rise after the Barhams stopped buying slaves directly from Africa. Thus comparison between the African and local workers suggests—from management's point of view—a no-win situation. The Africans tolerated the labor regimen at Mesopotamia well but did not breed, whereas the local slaves did breed but showed less tolerance for the labor system.

From a business point of view, it is clear that Joseph II made a mistake when he stopped buying slaves from Africa and voted in Parliament to abolish the slave trade. Like all the other Jamaican

sugar planters he had to have replacement slaves, and—as Tables 3 and 5 have demonstrated—the most functional and durable replacement slaves at Mesopotamia came from Africa, not Jamaica. Had Barham followed the practice of his fellow planters between 1789, when he acquired the estate, and 1807, when the slave trade ended, he would have selected his replacement slaves from the African traders and thereby bolstered his work force as needed with prime young adult males, while largely avoiding the nuisance and expense of maintaining nonproductive children. But Barham broke away from this practice of his fellow planters for moral reasons. He not only rejected the slave trade but he expanded the size of his work force so as to lighten the labor of his slaves. Ironically, Barham's new policy contributed directly to the demographic problems at Mesopotamia that discouraged him so deeply by the 1810s and 1820s. When he added large numbers of overaged and unhealthy slaves from neighboring Jamaican estates to his work force, he unwittingly pushed the death rate at Mesopotamia above the median level for sugar estates in Westmoreland parish.[17]

The Barhams were certainly not solely motivated by altruism. Like any other sugar planters they wanted productivity and profit. In seventy-one crop seasons at Mesopotamia, from 1761 to 1831, their slave laborers produced 14,012 hogsheads of sugar and about 8,100 puncheons of rum shipped to Britain. This sugar and rum grossed approximately £595,000 Jamaican currency. Unfortunately, it is not possible to calculate the Barhams' running expenses during these years nor to reckon their net earnings, because the Mesopotamian accounts are much too incomplete. But it is clear that slave labor costs consumed a modest part of the Barhams' annual budget. Between 1762 and 1831, father and son paid a total of about £33,500 Jamaican currency to purchase 423 new slaves; the surviving accounts indicate that they expended an additional £30,000 to £35,000 in food, clothing, and medical care for the slaves during this period—in all, something like 10 to 12 percent of the gross income that they received from Mes-

17 A great many of the replacement slaves that JFB II bought from Jamaican estates had originally come from Africa. The first Jamaican slave registration in 1817 identified each slave by place of birth; according to this registration, 45% of the slaves that JFB II purchased from local estates had been born in Africa.

opotamia. Such figures suggest the rather modest limits of the Barhams' benevolence.[18]

Figure 1 charts productivity and profit at Mesopotamia against the changing size of the Barhams' slave force during the years 1761 to 1831. There were sharp swings in sugar and rum production from year to year, as there were in the market value of the crop. But the correlation between the size and value of the crop was generally close. There was much less correlation, however, between the size of the crop and the size of the slave gang.[19]

Looking at this productivity chart decade by decade, it can be seen that the boom period for output and profits at Mesopotamia was from 1782 to 1816. Thus the performance of this estate very poorly fits Williams' proposition that the British West Indian sugar industry reached its peak in the years before 1783, but fits very well with Drescher's argument that the peak period was from 1783 to 1807. Figure 1 also dramatizes the generational change at Mesopotamia: the elder Joseph in the years 1761 to 1789 operated on a decidedly smaller scale than his son in the years 1789 to 1831. The father had a labor pool averaging 261 men, women, and children; the son had a pool averaging 340.[20]

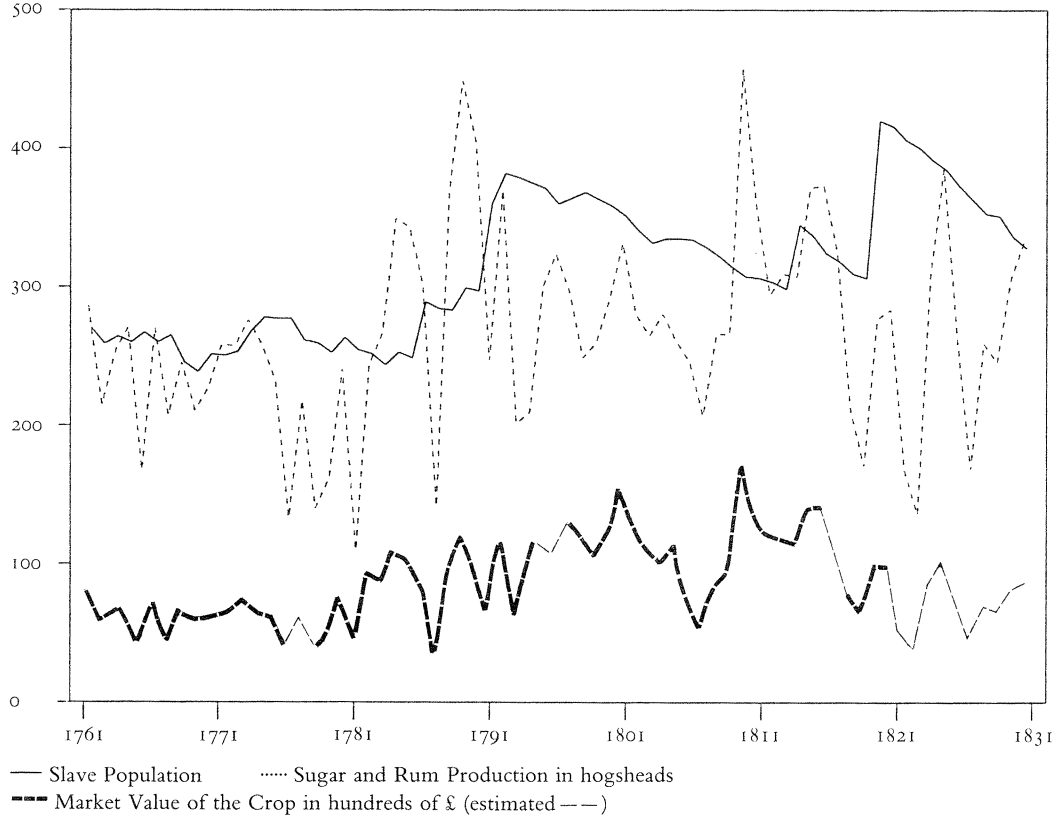
During the fifteen years before the American Revolution the estate grossed £5,800 annually, which was about the same figure as in the 1740s. The revolutionary war years, 1775 to 1781, constituted a depressed period at Mesopotamia. With the French contesting for naval control of the Caribbean, supplies were reduced and little sugar was exported. But the sale price per hogshead began to rise steeply in the late 1770s, ushering in an era of

18 The rum and sugar crop totals and valuations are compiled from several lists in Barham B34 and B37. The series of annual sugar totals is complete for these years, but one year of rum production (1777) is missing, and crop valuations are missing for 13 years (1777, 1796, 1817, and 1822–1831). I have supplied estimates for these missing years by extrapolating from the data in the Barham Papers and in Higman, *Slave Population and Economy*. Partial expense accounts for the estate can be reconstructed for the following years: 1770–1789, 1795, 1806, 1813–1820, 1830–1831. These accounts are scattered in Barham B33-37, C360, C389, and C428. The prices paid for 390 of the 423 slaves purchased in 1763–1820 can be traced in Barham B33, B36, and B37; I have estimated the cost of the remaining 33.

19 The productivity line in Figure 1 combines the annual totals for sugar and rum exports, reckoning each puncheon of rum as equivalent to ⅓ of a hogshead of sugar. See Barham B34; C389, bundle 8; Higman, *Slave Population and Economy*, 235–236.

20 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (New York, 1966; orig. pub. 1944), 120–127; Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh, 1977), 16–25, 65–91.

Fig. 1 Slave Population, Sugar Production, and Sugar Profits at Mesopotamia, 1761–1831



large exports and high sales averaging nearly £9,000 per annum through Joseph I's final years in the 1780s. It was against this background that young Joseph II augmented his labor force by buying eighty-nine new slaves in 1791/92. Although Joseph II claimed to be lightening the workload of his slaves, a more cynical interpretation of the evidence in Figure 1 (such as Williams might have arrived at) would conclude that he was mainly hoping for bigger crops. With the exception of four bad years, production and profits continued at a high level from 1789 through 1816. During this long period, which was marked by extended naval war in the West Indies between Britain and France, Mesopotamia's sugar and rum exports were valued at nearly £11,000 per annum. In 1810 the estate produced its peak crop—361 hogsheads of sugar and 164 puncheons of rum valued at £16,957. However, the Mesopotamian slave gang was not at peak strength in 1810; with no reinforcements since 1793, the number of prime workers had dwindled from 188 to 146. Joseph II's attorneys unctuously assured him that the bumper crop of 1810 was produced without any extra exertion by the Mesopotamian slaves, who "work well, and go cheerfully, and contentedly through their work."[21]

By this time the African slave trade had closed and Joseph II was in an optimistic mood, looking for reformed management practices by his attorneys, more births and fewer deaths from his slaves, and continuing profits for himself. The attorneys had been nagging him for years to let them buy some additional laborers for Mesopotamia, and in 1814 he approved the purchase of fifty-six new slaves from Cairncurran estate, a coffee plantation in the mountain district of Westmoreland. Immediately after the Cairncurran slaves arrived, the estate produced two more large and profitable crops in 1815/16, which seem to have prompted Joseph II to take an especially bold step in 1819. Without consulting his attorneys, he bought a newly established sugar estate called Springfield in an isolated mountain district of neighboring Hanover parish, and ordered that the entire gang of 112 slaves on this property be removed to Mesopotamia as soon as practicable.[22]

But the Springfield transfer worked out very poorly. This estate was situated only about six miles north of Mesopotamia as

21 Grant and Blyth to JFB II, 11 Aug. 1810, Barham C358.

22 Grant and Blyth to JFB II, 7 Feb. 1814, 28 Jan. 1819, Barham C358; JFB II to Grant and Blyth, 11 July 1814, 9 Dec. 1818, 4 Aug. 1819, Barham C428.

the crow flies, but it was some twelve miles distant by foot via tortuous trails impassable for vehicular traffic. The Springfield slaves did not want to leave their old neighborhood, and when the attorneys ordered them to move to Mesopotamia in 1820 fully half of the gang "skulked in the bushes for a week." They kept returning home on weekends—or absconding for longer periods—to visit family and friends back in Hanover. On hearing about this, Barham complained: "I think it very ungrateful in them towards me to act thus."[23]

Although the Cairncurran and Springfield purchases swelled the Mesopotamian slave population to 420 in 1820, sugar production on the estate was actually lower during the next decade than it had been in the 1810s, and, because sugar prices also fell, Joseph II grossed little more than his father had done in the 1760s. As Figure 1 shows, the Mesopotamian population declined precipitously during this final decade, largely because the Springfield slaves died off quickly. By 1831—just twelve years after their purchase—fifty-three of these people were dead, two had run away, six were nonworking invalids, and twenty-three were in secondary jobs, leaving only twenty-eight Springfield slaves as members of the prime work force.

Between 1805 and 1825, Plummer & Co., Joseph II's sugar broker, deposited £47,583 sterling into his bank account. Receipts for Joseph II's final years are missing, but he cannot have extracted much further income from Mesopotamia. By 1823, after two years of very poor returns, he was becoming openly disgusted with black slave labor. It was in this year that he published his pamphlet calling for the nationalization of the West Indian sugar industry and characterizing the slave workers as "dreadful idlers." By 1829 he was advising his attorneys to warn the Mesopotamian slaves that they had one last chance to reform. Unless they started to produce more children, he would punish them by reducing their food supplies. Or he would form the women who had miscarriages or abortions into a jobbing gang, and hire them out to labor on other estates.[24]

23 Grant and Blyth to JFB II, 24 April, 12 June, 3 July, 27 Aug. 1820, Barham C358; JFB II to Grant and Blyth, 7 Dec. 1820, Barham C428. As late as 1826, the Springfield slaves were still absconding to Hanover. William Ridgard to JFB II, 4 March 1824, Barham C358; same to same, 2 May 1826, Barham C359.

24 JFB II's bank books for 1805–1825 are in Barham C389. Some of the deposits from

But if Joseph II lost faith in his workers, they did not lose faith in him. In 1831/32, when a massive slave rebellion broke out in western Jamaica, the Mesopotamian slaves displayed conspicuous loyalty to their absentee master. This rebellion was known as the Baptist War because it was fomented by slave converts to Christianity who were inspired by the Bible to strike for freedom. It started in St. James parish, near Montego Bay, on December 27, 1831, just as our final Mesopotamian inventory was being recorded, and it spread rapidly to Hanover, Westmoreland, and St. Elizabeth parishes. Over 200 plantations were destroyed or damaged, including several within a few miles of Mesopotamia. As the rebellion spread, very few slave gangs refused to join in. But when two rebel agents came to Mesopotamia, Barham's slaves seized them and brought them as prisoners to the militia guardhouse at Savanna la Mar. In early January 1832, when the entire white managerial staff on the estate—the attorneys, overseer, and bookkeepers—were all out on patrol against the rebels, the Mesopotamian slaves started up the sugar mill on their own and during the next month produced fifty-five hogsheads of sugar and ten puncheons of rum.

Moravian missionaries reported to Barham that the Mesopotamian slaves "conducted themselves throughout [the rebellion] in the most exemplary manner," and even Barham's attorneys acknowledged that "at Mesopotamia the Negroes have behaved remarkably well"—although they complained that the rum produced during the rebellion "will be found clowdy it being taken off under the management of the Negroes when all the white people were on militia duty." The two chief loyalist leaders among the Mesopotamian slaves were Samuel Williams, a thirty-four-year-old driver who had spent all his life on the estate, and Richard Gilpin, a thirty-five-year-old mason who had been purchased in 1820 from Springfield. Both of these men were congregants at the Moravian chapel sponsored at Mesopotamia since the 1760s by the Barhams.[25]

Plummer & Co. represent earnings from another Jamaican plantation owned by JFB II—Island estate in St. Elizabeth parish. JFB II to Duncan Robertson and Ridgard, 2 Sept. 1829, Barham C428.

25 Ridgard and Robertson to JFB II, 10 Feb., 16 March 1832, Barham C389; John H. Buchner, *The Moravians in Jamaica, 1754–1854* (London, 1854), 86–88; Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787–1834* (Urbana, Ill., 1982),

Contrary to Williams' argument that the West Indian blacks rebelled at the first opportunity of freedom, the Mesopotamian slaves refused to torch their master's property when they had the chance in 1831/32. Contrary to Joseph II's allegation that they had to be forced to work, the Mesopotamian slaves voluntarily started up the strenuous sugar harvesting process on their own. And contrary to my contention that they were brutally exploited, the Mesopotamian slaves behaved toward their owners and managers with touching loyalty. No doubt the two Moravian missionaries who stayed on the plantation throughout the six week rebellion did their best to school the slaves in passive obedience. Yet surely the Mesopotamian people acted as they did in 1831/32 because they felt well treated, and because they believed that the Barhams were good masters, more benevolent and humane than most other Jamaican slaveholders. Such a conclusion gives our story a final ironic twist, for, however well intentioned the Barhams may have been, the evidence from their estate records plainly demonstrates that the labor system practiced at Mesopotamia sentenced the slave workers to broken health and early death.

148–178; Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, 1982), 291–321; Ridgard and Robertson to John Barham, 31 Jan. 1833, Barham C360. Barham sent Gilpin a watch as a reward, but the attorneys were afraid that the other Mesopotamian slaves would be jealous of Gilpin, so the watch went to the head driver at Barham's Island estate in St. Elizabeth parish who had risked his life to stop the rebels from firing the Island sugar works.