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The Washington Monthly / By [Douglas A. Blackmon](#) ^[1]



The South's Shocking Hidden History: Thousands of Blacks Forced Into Slavery Until WW2

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On July 31, 1903, a letter addressed to President Theodore Roosevelt arrived at the White House. It had been mailed from the town of Bainbridge, Georgia, the prosperous seat of a cotton county perched on the Florida state line.

The sender was a barely literate African American woman named Carrie Kinsey. With little punctuation and few capital letters, she penned the bare facts of the abduction of her fourteen-year-old brother, James Robinson, who a year earlier had been sold into involuntary servitude.

Kinsey had already asked for help from the powerful white people in her world. She knew where her brother had been taken—a vast plantation not far away called Kinderlou. There, hundreds of black men and boys were held in chains and forced to labor in the fields or in one of several factories owned by the McRee family, one of the wealthiest and most powerful in Georgia. No white official in this corner of the state would take an interest in the abduction and enslavement of a black teenager.

Confronted with a world of indifferent white people, Mrs. Kinsey did the only remaining thing she could think of. Newspapers across the country had recently reported on a speech by Roosevelt promising a “square deal” for black Americans. Mrs. Kinsey decided that her only remaining hope was to beg the president of the United States to help her brother.

“Mr. Prassident,” she wrote. “They wont let me have him.... He hase not don nothing for them to have him in chanes so I rite to you for your help.”

Considered more than a century later, her letter courses with desperation and submerged outrage. Yet when received at the White House, it was slipped into a small rectangular folder and forwarded to the Department of Justice. There, it was tagged with a reference number, 12007, and filed away. Teddy Roosevelt never saw it. No action was taken. Her words lie still at the

National Archives just outside Washington, D.C.

As dumbfounding as the story told by the Carrie Kinsey letter is, far more remarkable is what surrounds that letter at the National Archives. In the same box that holds her grief-stricken missive are at least half a dozen other pieces of correspondence recounting other stories of kidnapping, perversion of the courts, or human trafficking—as horrifying as, or worse than, Carrie Kinsey's tale. It is the same in the next box on the shelf. And the one before. And the ones on either side of those. And the next and the next. And on and on. Thousands and thousands of plaintive letters and grimly bureaucratic responses—altogether at least 30,000 pages of original material—chronicle cases of forced labor and involuntary servitude in the South decades after the end of the Civil War.

“i have a little girl that has been kidnapped from me ... and i cant get her out,” wrote Reverend L. R. Farmer, pastor of a black Baptist church in Morganton, North Carolina. “i want ask you is it law for people to whip (col) people and keep them and not allow them to leave without a pass.”

A farmer near Pine Apple, Alabama, named J. R. Adams, writing of terrible abuses by the dominant landowning family in the county, was one of the astonishingly few white southerners who also complained to the Department of Justice. “They have held negroes ... for years,” Adams wrote. “It is a very rare thing that a negro escapes.”

A similar body of material rests in the files of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the one institution that undertook any sustained effort to address at least the most terrible cases. Dwarfing everything at those repositories are the still largely unexamined collections of local records in courthouses across the South. In dank basements, abandoned buildings, and local archives, seemingly endless numbers of files contain hundreds of thousands of handwritten entries documenting in monotonous granularity the details of an immense, metastasizing horror that stretched well into the twentieth century.

By the first years after 1900, tens of thousands of African American men and boys, along with a smaller number of women, had been sold by southern state governments. An exponentially larger number, of whom surviving records are painfully incomplete, had been forced into labor through county and local courts, backwoods justices of the peace, and outright kidnapping and trafficking. The total number of those re-enslaved in the seventy-five years between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War II can't be precisely determined, but based on the records that do survive, we can safely say it happened to hundreds of thousands. How many more African Americans circumscribed their lives in dramatic ways, or abandoned all to flee the South entirely, to avoid that fate or mob violence? It is impossible to know. Millions. Generations.

This is not an easy story for Americans to receive, much less accept. The idea that not just civil rights but basic freedom itself was denied to an enormous population of African Americans until the middle of the twentieth century fits nowhere in the triumphalist, steady-progress, greatest-generations accounts we prefer for our national narrative. That the thrilling events depicted in Steven Spielberg's recent film *Lincoln*—the heroic, frenzied campaign by Abraham Lincoln leading to passage of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery—were in fact later trumped not just by discrimination and segregation but by the resurrection of a full-blown derivative of slavery itself.

This story of re-enslavement is irrefutably true, however. Indeed, even as Spielberg's film conveys the euphoria felt by African Americans and all opposed to slavery upon passage of the

amendment in 1865, it also unintentionally foreshadows the demise of that brighter future. On the night of the amendment's passage in the film, the African American housekeeper and, as presented in the film, secret lover of the abolitionist Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, played by the actress S. Epatha Merkerson, reads the amendment aloud. First, the sweeping banishment of slavery. And then, an often overlooked but powerful prepositional phrase: "except as a punishment for crime."

It began with Reconstruction. Faced with empty government coffers, a paralyzing intellectual inability to contemplate equitable labor arrangements with former chattel, profound resentment against the emancipated freedmen, and a desperate economic need to force black workers back into the fields, white landowners and government officials began using the South's criminal courts to compel African Americans back into slavery.

In the first years after the Civil War, even as former slaves optimistically swarmed into new schools and lined up at courthouses at every whisper of a hope of economic independence, the Southern states began enacting an array of interlocking laws that would make all African Americans criminals, regardless of their conduct, and thereby making it legal to force them into chain gangs, labor camps, and other forms of involuntarily servitude. By the end of 1865, every Southern state except Arkansas and Tennessee had passed laws outlawing vagrancy and defining it so vaguely that virtually any freed slave not under the protection of a white man could be arrested for the crime. An 1865 Mississippi statute required black workers to enter into labor contracts with white farmers by January 1 of every year or risk arrest. Four other states legislated that African Americans could not legally be hired for work without a discharge paper from their previous employer—effectively preventing them from leaving the plantation of the white man they worked for.

After the return of nearly complete white political control in 1877, the passage of those laws accelerated. Some, particularly those that explicitly said they applied only to African Americans, were struck down in court appeals or through federal interventions, but new statutes embracing the same strictures on black life quickly replaced them. Most of the new laws were written as if they applied to everyone, but in reality they were overwhelmingly enforced only against African Americans.

In the 1880s, Alabama, North Carolina, and Florida passed laws making it a crime for a black man to change employers without permission. It was a crime for a black man to speak loudly in the company of a white woman, a crime to have a gun in his pocket, and a crime to sell the proceeds of his farm to anyone other than the man he rented land from. It was a crime to walk beside a railroad line, a crime to fail to yield a sidewalk to white people, a crime to sit among whites on a train, and it was most certainly a crime to engage in sexual relations with—or, God forbid, to show true love and affection for—a white girl.

And that's how it happened. Within a few years of the passage of these laws, tens of thousands of black men and boys, and a smaller number of black women, were being arrested and sold into forced labor camps by state officials, local judges, and sheriffs. During this time, some actual criminals were sold into slavery, and a small percentage of them were white. But the vast majority were black men accused of trivial or trumped-up crimes. Compelling evidence indicates that huge numbers had in fact committed no offense whatsoever. As the system grew, countless white farmers and businessmen jostled to "lease" as many black "criminals" as they could. Soon, huge numbers of other African Americans were simply being kidnapped and sold into slavery.

The forced labor camps they found themselves in were islands of squalor and brutality. Thousands died of disease, malnourishment, and abuse. Mortality rates in some years exceeded 40 percent. At the same time, this new slavery trade generated millions of dollars for state and local governments—for many years it was the single largest source of income for the state of Alabama. As these laws and practices expanded across the South, they became the primary means to terrorize African Americans, and to coerce them into going along with other exploitative labor arrangements, like sharecropping, that are more familiar to twenty-first-century Americans.

This was the terrifying trap into which Carrie Kinsey's young brother had been drawn. After a trip through the counties near Kinsey's home, W. E. B. Du Bois, who was then teaching at Atlanta's Morehouse College, described in 1905 one such convict farm. "It is a depressing place—bare, unshaded, with no charm of past association, only a memory of forced human toil—now, then, and before the war," he wrote. He described black farmworkers who never saw wages because charges for rent and food always exceeded any compensation. "A dismal place it still remains, with rows of ugly huts filled with surly ignorant tenants," Du Bois wrote. "And now and then it blazes forth in veiled but hot anger."

Du Bois could easily have been describing Kinderlou, where Kinsey's brother was taken. Encompassing 22,000 acres, it was an enterprise that dwarfed any antebellum definition of the word "plantation." Owned by state Representative Edward McRee and his brothers, Kinderlou was an unparalleled center of economic and political power in Georgia. By 1900, the siblings had inherited the enterprise from their father, a noted Confederate officer named George McRee. Each lived in a lavish mansion within a square mile of the center of the plantation, basking in the subtropical warmth of the Gulf Coast.

Between them, an empire bustled with enslaved laborers. Consuming the bulk of an entire county, Kinderlou included thousands of acres of lushly fertile sandy loam, and thousands more of dense pine and hardwood. On a private spur of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad thrust into the center of the plantation, dozens of boxcars waited at all times for the hundreds of thousands of bushels of tomatoes, watermelons, cantaloupes, corn, tobacco, and cotton. The McRees owned their own cotton gins, compresses to make bales, and warehouses to store enormous quantities of lint. A five-horsepower steam engine ground the plantation's sugarcane to make syrup. Five eighty-foot-long barns were built to cure tobacco, and a factory produced thousands of pallets, wooden crates, and baskets for shipping produce. Deep in the forests, McRee turpentine camps collected rosin for their naval stores distillery.

Initially, the McRees hired only free black labor, but beginning in the 1890s they routinely leased a hundred or more convicts from the state of Georgia to perform the grueling work of clearing land, removing stumps, ditching fields, and constructing roads. Other prisoners hoed, plowed, and weeded the crops. Over the course of fifteen years, thousands of men and women were forced to Kinderlou and held in stockades under the watch of armed guards. After the turn of the century, the brothers began to arrange for even more forced laborers through the sheriffs of nearby counties in Georgia and Florida—fueling what eventually grew into a sprawling traffic in humans.

A black worker in 1904 described to a journalist how he arrived at the farm at age ten as a free laborer. A few years later, he attempted to leave to work at another plantation. Before sundown on the day of his departure, one of the McRees and "some kind of law officer" tracked him down. The new employer apologized to the McRees for hiring the young worker, saying he would never have done so if he had known "this nigger was bound out to you."

“So I was carried back to the Captain’s,” the man said later. “That night he made me strip off my clothing down to my waist, had me tied to a tree in his backyard, ordered his foreman to gave me thirty lashes with a buggy whip across my bare back, and stood by until it was done.”

When his labor contract finally expired after a decade, the man was told he could leave Kinderlou, so long as he could pay his accumulated debt at the plantation commissary—\$165, the rough equivalent of two years’ labor for a free farmer. Unable to do so, of course, he was compelled to sign a contract promising to work on the farm until the debt was paid, but now as a convict.

He and other “prison laborers” slept each night in the same clothes they wore in the fields, on rotting mattresses infested with pests. Many were chained to their beds. Food was crude and minimal. The disobedient were tied to a log lying on their backs, while a guard spanked their bare feet with a plank of wood. After a slave was untied, if he could not return to work on his blistered feet, he was strapped to the log again, this time facedown, and lashed with a leather whip. Women prisoners were held across a barrel and whipped on their bare bottoms.

In the summer of 1903, the assistant U.S. attorney in Macon, Georgia, began a brief investigation into Kinderlou’s army of black laborers held against their will. He discovered that the brothers had arrangements with sheriffs and other officers in at least six other Georgia counties. These law enforcement officials would seize blacks on the grounds that they were “committing crimes,” often specious and sometimes altogether made up, and then sell them to the McRees and other businessmen, without ever going through the regular processes of the criminal courts. When the McRees learned of the investigation, they hastily freed the workers being held involuntarily. At least forty fled immediately.

James Robinson, the brother of Carrie Kinsey, may have been one of them, though federal officials never connected her allegations to the Kinderlou investigation. Even if Kinsey’s brother’s case had been investigated, her letter misspelled the name of the plantation.

In November 1903, a grand jury indicted the McRee brothers on thirteen specific counts of holding African American men and women illegally. Many of those enslaved had never been charged or tried in any fashion. Several public officials were indicted for conspiring to buy and sell blacks arrested on trivial or fabricated charges and then turning them over to the McRees. Sheriff Thomas J. McClellan, resorting to an audacious legal defense employed repeatedly in the handful of slavery cases brought by federal officials in the early twentieth century, argued that since no federal law specifically made slavery a crime, he could not be guilty of violating it. In effect, he claimed slavery was not illegal in the United States.

A member of the U.S. Congress submitted a legal brief in support of the sheriff, and prominent state officials sat at the defendants’ table during a hearing on a challenge to their charges. Across Georgia, operators of lumber camps, where thousands of other men were being held under similarly dubious circumstances, watched the proceedings closely. Appearing with his brothers before a Savannah courtroom, Edward McRee assured the judge that while his family had held many African Americans in the four decades since slavery’s abolition, they had never intended to enslave anyone or break the law. “Though we are probably technically guilty we did not know it,” he told the court. “This custom has been [in] existence ever since the war... We never knew that we were doing anything wrong.”

The judge, hoping to avoid inflaming the anger of local whites, dispensed symbolic punishments.

The McRees were allowed to plead guilty and pay a token fine of \$1,000. In the wake of that trial and other failed prosecutions in the first years of the century, the U.S. Department of Justice turned a blind eye to such practices for the next forty years. Only the advent of World War II, a declining need for low-skill laborers, and a new era of federal prosecution would finally bring a true end to American slavery.

More than 100 years after Carrie wrote her letter, I received an unexpected call from a man who identified himself as Bernard Kinsey. He believed he was one of Carrie's cousins.

Her letter had haunted me through years of research for the book I wrote on re-enslavement. What those few lines conveyed—the seizure of a teenage boy and his sale to a powerful businessman, the abject refusal of authorities to assist her, the brutalization of thousands of other blacks on the same plantation, the heroism of Carrie in seeking the aid of President Roosevelt, and, finally, the futility of her letter—captured the entire epic tragedy of black life in the rural South in the time between the Civil War and World War II. Even to this day, I find myself turning back to her story, resifting census records and cemetery records, looking for the fate of her brother. Did he escape? Did he die at Kinderlou? The answer still eludes me.

Bernard Kinsey represented the counter story. He told me that the Kinsey family fled to Florida not long after the McRee trial of 1903. Bernard's father opened one grocery store. Then more. Bernard graduated from Florida A&M University in 1967, and a few years later he became one of the first black employees of Xerox Corp. Twenty years later, he retired as a senior executive, one of more than 10,000 African Americans at the company. He then became a major civic leader in Los Angeles, a successful entrepreneur and philanthropist, and one of the leading collectors of African American art and artifacts in the U.S.

Here was the valiance of African Americans who persevered against immeasurable odds. Here was the miracle that American society survived its sweeping betrayal of its own values, its collective dishonoring and debasement of Lincoln's achievement, the euphoric crowds of 1865 and all those who had died in the Civil War. Ultimately, it is only in a full revelation of all three narratives—of Lincoln and the Thirteenth Amendment, of re-enslavement and the failure of American character, and of the slow ongoing resurrection of our values through the struggle of citizens such as Bernard Kinsey—that we can begin to understand the progress we have made, and the progress we have yet to achieve.

A few weeks after the publication of my book, the great-great-granddaughter of a white industrialist and enslaver of thousands in Atlanta wrote me to describe her pain at discovering a personal connection to these events—and the importance of not looking away from them. "We did not know of any of this before," she wrote. "But I believe that the ghosts of slavery and racism and the terrorism inflicted within our own country must not be hidden away but brought out into the open.... Without the whole truth, we live only in illusions."

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