An interview with historian and author Caitlin Rosenthal on how accounting practices on plantations continues to influence today's economy. Find out how she used ProQuest History Vault in researching her book, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management*. 

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In a recent interview with historian and author Caitlin Rosenthal, she described her research on quantitative management practices on West Indian and Southern plantations, her book *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management*, and using ProQuest History Vault in research and teaching.

**Tell us about your book, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management***

My work on the business history of slavery began the first time I looked at a plantation account book. I was surprised by the complexity of the accounting and the diligence with which the overseer tracked output. This went against most of what I had learned from canonical business histories: Economic historian Alfred Chandler described plantations as an “ancient” mode of production.

But looking at the records, the violence of slavery seemed not to be a barrier to the emergence of innovative managerial practices — to the contrary, planters’ control over enslaved people sometimes made data particularly useful. Where contemporary factories had to recruit and retain workers, slaveholders simply reallocated enslaved people to new tasks. Their domination over enslaved people enabled them to use small incentives as well as the threat of punishment to monitor and accelerate the pace of work.

As I continued to research plantation management practices, I found numerous instances when plantations used data in sophisticated ways. *Accounting for Slavery’s* chapters are arranged around some of these milestones. I began the British West Indies, where late 18th century sugar planters built complex organizations akin to the hierarchies that would later emerge in factories. On these plantations, enslaved people occupied many different positions, both skilled and unskilled, even serving as managers. Planters used both data and violence to monitor and manage these massive operations, which sometimes included dozens of properties worked by thousands of enslaved people. They required their free staff to keep detailed accounts and even to fill out pre-printed forms that synthesized this data.

![Daily Record of Passenger Events](image)

From here, *Accounting for Slavery* turns to the antebellum American South where I describe the records of cotton planters who assiduously tracked enslaved people, both as labor and as capital. Although these plantations were smaller in scale, some of the records they kept were even more complex than those maintained in the West Indies. For example, overseers recorded the amount of cotton picked by each person each day, and inventories measured the appreciation of children as they grew up and the depreciation of the ill and the elderly. Planters summed up these appraisals to track the evolving value of entire communities.
Briefly explain why studying the business practices of 18th and 19th century southern plantations is relevant for 21st century students.

Fundamentally, the book is a study of the intersection of violence and innovation. Too often modern businesses assume that sophisticated technologies go hand in hand with the expansion of human freedoms — that capitalism can only thrive on the backs of free laborers. These records show that the opposite can be true. Planters treated enslaved people as if they were cogs in a giant machine, exploiting their production and reproduction to earn massive fortunes. Recovering this history is a cautionary tale about what capitalism can look like when everything, including lives, is up for sale.

We’re living in a world where data is more important to businesses than ever, and quantitative management poses distinctive ethical challenges. Reducing people to numbers can offer crucial insights, but it also erases context and can make it harder to see biases. My research offers an opportunity to study a setting where business people used quantitative records to strengthen a horrifying and exploitative system. Moreover, some slave-owners did this from a distance—they consulted accounting records to make decisions about profitability without ever having to really encounter the brutality of slavery.

“We’re living in a world where data is more important to businesses than ever, and quantitative management poses distinctive ethical challenges.”
Describe how you used ProQuest History Vault in your research.

Huge numbers of account books survive from slave plantations, and the challenge I faced while writing this book was sorting from this massive pile. When I started the project, the best way to get a sense of the range of southern account books was to use the *Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations* (usually called RASP), a huge microfilm collection edited by Kenneth Stampp and others. Now large parts of that collection are online at ProQuest History Vault and searching them helped me to turn up materials I would never have found otherwise.

One set of records that I would not have consulted without access to ProQuest History Vault is the DeSaussure Family Papers, which are held at the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina. In 1850, John McPherson DeSaussure used a system of fractional hands to estimate the amount of work that the enslaved people laboring on his plantation could be expected to perform. By rating men, women, and children as \( \frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{2}, \frac{3}{4} \) or a full hand, they made it possible to sum up their labor power: The 146 people he owned could be expected to do the work of 120 prime hands.

History Vault allowed me to trace these practices forward to see what happened after the Civil War. In 1866, after emancipation, this fractional system was still in use but had been adapted to figure out a system for paying the freedpeople a share of the profits. These calculations did not work out in favor of the freedpeople: the year-end accounts showed that they were in debt to DeSaussure after a year of work. The old math of fractional hands had turned into a way for DeSaussure to extract their labor at a wage that left them in debt.

The same record also revealed that after emancipation fewer children worked under the surveillance of the overseer: compared to records kept under slavery, the new inventories included very few quarter or half hands.

History Vault also helped me to look at more records more quickly and thus to get a sense of what was typical and what was exceptional. Though *Accounting for Slavery* is not a history of average practices—it follows the lead of many business histories in writing about the most advanced businesspeople, I did need to be able to contextualize these practices and understand which were used on many plantations and which were exceptional. Surveying many account books also helped me to find collections covering long periods of time. As I read from year-to-year, I could see how practices changed and also trace how they shaped the lives of individual enslaved people.
How have you encouraged your students to use History Vault for research and learning?

Helping students understand the cultural impact of slavery is a central goal of my teaching, especially since I offer classes in areas where many students do not realize that slavery had important consequences.

I use plantation records from History Vault in an economic history lecture course titled the “History of American Capitalism” as well as a class on the history of data called “Calculating Americans.” In both classes, I send students to seek out primary sources to analyze, and ProQuest History Vault is the best starting place for those who are interested in understanding slaveholders’ business practices.

I encourage them to find records and to pair them with slave narratives from UNC’s amazing online collection of North American Slave Narratives. ProQuest History Vault also offers a terrific opportunity for undergraduate students to get a taste of research. Some of the collections I originally worked with in person are now available digitally, and as I was completing my manuscript, I worked with several undergraduate researchers to analyze plantation records.
About Southern Life and African American History, 1775-1915, Plantation Records from ProQuest History Vault

The Southern plantation was at once a farm, business, home, prison, cornerstone of Southern culture, political power base and crucible of African American tradition. The Southern Plantation Records in History Vault document the impact of plantations on the American South and on the nation as a whole.

Many planters kept journals, crop books, overseers’ journals and account books in remarkable detail. Family members kept personal diaries and exchanged correspondence with relatives and friends.

Southern Plantation Records illuminate business operations and labor routines, family affairs, roles of women, racial attitudes, relations between masters and slaves, social and cultural life, shared values, and tensions and anxieties that were inseparable from a slave society. All are revealed with a fullness and candor unmatched by any of the other available sources.

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About Caitlin Rosenthal

Caitlin Rosenthal is assistant professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley, where her research and teaching explore the history of capitalism, the emergence of modern data practices, and the legacy of American slavery. Before beginning her career as a historian, Rosenthal worked as a business analyst and management consultant at McKinsey & Company, and she still seeks to reach a broad audience of business and labor professionals. Her interviews and essays about data, history, and ethics have appeared in *Harvard Business Review*, *Boston Review*, *TIME.com*, *Washington Post*, *Bloomberg* and the *McKinsey Quarterly*. Her research has been awarded the Simkins prize of the Southern Historical Association and the Krooss prize of the Business History Conference.