

From the book: *The Cotton Kingdom – A Traveller’s Observations On Cotton And Slavery In The American Slave States* by Frederick Law Olmsted.

(1854)

Excerpt from chapter VII, “The South-West,” (Mobile, AL)

Mobile, in its central, business part, is very compactly built, dirty, and noisy, with little elegance, or evidence of taste or public spirit, in its people. A small, central, open square—the only public ground that I saw—was used as a horse and hog pasture, and clothes drying-yard. Out of the busier quarter, there is a good deal of the appearance of a thriving New England village—almost all the dwelling-houses having plots of ground enclosed around them, planted with trees and shrubs. The finest trees are the magnolia and live oak; and the most valuable shrub is the Cherokee rose, which is much used for hedges and screens. It is evergreen, and its leaves are glossy and beautiful at all seasons, and in March it blooms profusely. There is an abundance, also, of the Cape jessamine. It is as beautiful as a camelia; and, when in blossom, scents the whole air with a most delicate and delicious fragrance. At a market-garden, near the town which I visited, I found most of the best Northern and Belgian pears fruiting well, and apparently healthy, and well suited in climate, on quincestocks. Figs are abundant, and bananas and oranges are said to be grown with some care, and slight winter protection.

The Battle House, kept by Boston men, with Irish servants, I found an excellent hotel; but with higher charge than I had ever paid before. Prices, generally, in Mobile, range very high. There are large numbers of foreign merchants in the population; but a great deficiency of tradesmen and mechanics.

While I was at Montgomery, my hat was one day taken from the dining-room, at dinner-time, by some one who left in its place for me a very battered and greasy substitute, which I could not wear, if I had chosen to. I asked the landlord what I should do. “Be before him, to-morrow.” Following this cool advice, and, in the mean time, wearing a cap, I obtained my hat the next day; but so ill used, that I should not have known it, but for the maker’s name, stamped within it. Not succeeding in fitting myself with a new hat, I desired to have my old one pressed, when in Mobile; but I could not find a working hatter in the place, though it has a population of thirty thousand souls. Finally, a hat-dealer, a German Jew, I think he was, with whom I had left it while looking further, returned it to me, with a charge of one dollar, for brushing it—the benefit of which brushing I was unable, in the least, to perceive. A friend informed me that he found it cheaper to have all his furniture and clothing made for him, in New York, to order, when he needed any, and sent on by express, than to get it in Mobile.

The great abundance of the best timber for the purpose, in the United States, growing in the vicinity of the town, has lately induced some persons to attempt ship-building at Mobile. The mechanics employed are all from the North.

The great business of the town is the transfer of cotton, from the producer to the manufacturer, from the waggon and the steamboat to the sea-going ship. Like all the other cotton-ports, Mobile labours under the disadvantage of a shallow harbour. At the wharves, there were only a few small craft and steamboats. All large sea-going vessels lie some thirty miles below, and their freights are transhipped in lighters.

There appears to be a good deal of wealth and luxury, as well as senseless extravagance in the town. English merchants affect the character of the society, considerably; some very favourably—some, very much otherwise. Many of them own slaves, and, probably, all employ them; but Slavery seems to be of more value to them from the amusement it affords, than in any other way. “So-and-so advertises ‘a valuable drayman, and a good blacksmith and horse-shoer, for sale, on reasonable terms;’ an acclimated double-entry book-keeper, kind in harness, is what I want,” said one; “those Virginia patriarchs haven’t any enterprise, or they’d send on a stock of such goods every spring, to be kept over through the fever, so they could warrant them.”

“I don’t know where you’ll find one,” replied another; “but if you are wanting a private chaplain, there’s one I have heard, in street, several times, that could probably be bought for a fair price; and I will warrant him sound enough in wind, if not in doctrine.”

“I wouldn’t care for his doctrine, if I bought him; I don’t care how black he is; feed him right, and in a month he will be as orthodox as an archbishop.”