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**The Poor Always with You:  
Poverty in an Age of Emancipation, 1833-1865**

Thanks to the generous support of the History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking, I was able to conduct archival research not only in the United States but also in Ireland. This research proved invaluable as I completed my dissertation project, which explores the interconnected histories of slavery and poverty across the Anglo-American world. Today, we grant that poverty and slavery are monumental problems – but we generally assume that they are separate problems. In the mid-nineteenth century, however, Americans and Britons struggled to keep their conceptions of these problems from spilling over into one another. Consider the words of Nassau Senior, an intellectual architect of the New Poor Law in Britain. In 1831, Senior alleged that Britain needed to amend its poor laws because they “are an attempt to unite the irreconcilable advantages of freedom and servitude. The labourer is to be a free agent, but without the hazards of free agency; to be free from the coercion, but to enjoy the assured subsistence of the slave.” Or consider the words of La Roy Sunderland, an abolitionist from Rhode Island, who cited Bible verses “against *defrauding the poor* of his right” to make the case for freeing slaves who were themselves “kept *poor* and *needy* by the bondage which they are violently compelled to endure!” Along with many of their contemporaries, Senior and Sunderland could not think about poverty without thinking about slavery. They imagined that the boundaries between these two modes of social existence were blurred.

My dissertation, *The Poor Always with You: Poverty in an Age of Emancipation, 1833-1879*, examines how the problem of poverty haunted the period that began with slave emancipation in the British West Indies and ended with the Civil War era in the American South.

Drawing on archival and print sources from the United States, Britain, India, Ireland, and the Caribbean, I trace how mutable assumptions about poor and enslaved people cohered in disputes over economic status, personal liberty, and racial identity. As Americans and Britons amended poor laws, debated temperance reform, encouraged cotton production, and oversaw slave emancipation, they created new ideas and practices that linked the conditions of poverty and slavery. I consider how policymakers negotiated – and poor people contested – these linkages in struggles over labor and livelihood. Throughout, the key question my project addresses is: how did poverty and slavery, as political categories and social conditions, entangle with one another across the United States and the British Empire?

My dissertation strives to enlarge our understanding of slavery, emancipation, and global capitalism. In the first place, my dissertation explores an underappreciated but essential point of confluence: that of the histories of slavery and poverty. Chattel slaves, after all, were among the poorest people in the Atlantic World. Yet historians of slavery rarely write about poverty, nor do historians of poverty often write about slaves. My research adds a new dimension to the social histories of slavery and poverty by underlining that enslaved people were themselves poor people. My dissertation also complicates the intellectual history of these entangled social conditions. To date, the scholarly consensus holds that most Americans and Britons sharply delineated the problems of slavery and poverty. My research affords a new perspective on the economic imagination, illuminating how an array of transnational operatives argued that the problem of slavery intersected with the problem of global poverty. In addition, by focusing on the problem of poverty, I interrogate the history of slave emancipation in light of an understudied continuity. Most accounts of the mid-nineteenth century trace how free labor supplanted slave labor as the engine of the global economy. My research challenges this narrative of transition by

emphasizing how practices used to manage enslaved laborers were also used to mobilize destitute free laborers, both before and after the abolition of chattel slavery. My central argument, in sum, is that connections between slavery and poverty, in ideology as well as experience, unsettle the historical and historiographical boundaries of slavery and freedom. By bringing these connections to the fore, we see that the leading question on the minds of many across the United States and the British Empire was not simply whether to make chattel slaves free – it was how to make the working poor, enslaved and free, more productive.

The funding I received from the History Project and the INET enabled me to ground my analysis in archival materials gathered from across the Anglo-American world. I first traveled to Dublin to examine collections housed at the National Archives of Ireland. The Irish Famine Relief Commission Papers, a collection that includes a range of unpublished letters and reports, proved to be of particular value, helping me to trace itineraries of charitable giving to the poor in Ireland from both the American South and the British West Indies. Upon my return to the United States, a trip to the New Hampshire Historical Society in Concord allowed me to examine a series of town records pertaining to the history of pauper auctions, the practice of auctioning off poor people for a term that was increasingly associated with the auctioning of chattel slaves. Finally, I traveled to the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C., where I able to pull files from the U.S. Colored Troops Pension File Collection. Reading these files provided me with essential insights into African Americans' experiences of impoverishment, as I was able to consider how black soldiers and their relatives petitioned the federal government for support after the American Civil War. My examination of these diverse sources opened a number of avenues of inquiry while I was writing my dissertation. The letters I examined in Ireland, along with the pension files I examined in Washington, permitted me to

begin to consider how poor people understood their own poverty, as well as how they strategically supplicated to escape it. The records of New Hampshire pauper auctions raised another series of questions, as I began to ponder the portability of the auction block. I ultimately concluded that auctions were one of many regimes of labor management that circulated expansively across the Anglo-American world, set in motion by policymakers who assumed that enslaved and poor people alike offered up a reservoir of potential labor that could only be tapped through extra-economic means. Taken together, my travels from Dublin to Concord to Washington were vital to the completion of my dissertation. I was able to gather sources from multiple collections and from places far afield, and, in doing so, I was able to appreciate more fully how the problems of slavery and poverty were bound up with one another during an era of slave emancipation.