

Doc Chat Episode Twenty-One Transcript

Slavery and Capitalism in the Archives (March 25, 2021)

JULIE GOLIA: Hi everybody. Welcome to Doc Chat. We'll just start in a few moments as we let people come into the Zoom room. All right. I think we're ready to get started. Hi everybody. Welcome back to Doc Chat. I am Julie Golia, the Curator of History, Social Sciences and Government Information at the New York Public Library. Doc Chat is a weekly program series from NYPL Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections and highlights ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. So, in this episode, Matt Knutzen, the Linda May Uris Director of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Divisions at the New York Public Library is joined by Thomas Augst, the Associate Professor of English at New York University and the author of *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America*. So Matt and Tom will be exploring the archives of the financial firm Brown Brothers and Company and discussing ways of locating the deep ties between northern bankers and the slave-owning South. Our guests today will speak for about 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program, you can feel free to use the chat function, to share general comments, and I'm going to be using it to share links and resources with you. Do make sure that you change your chat mode to panelists and attendees so that everybody is included in the conversation. And then once we begin the question-and-answer segment, please use Zoom's question and answer function rather than the chat function to pose your questions. If you wish to remain anonymous, please click that option before submitting your question. So as we do each episode, we want to know a little bit more about you. So I'm going to launch a poll right now and I would like you all as we always do to fill it out. And then in the meantime, while that goes up, I'm happy to throw it to Matt.

MATT KNUTZEN: Hi, thank you, Julie, and thanks, everybody. It's so good to see so many people here today. So we thought we'd start out with showing you a single page from this 1844 financial ledger, which was created by the Brown Brothers, a prominent financial firm. So if you could start out, just tell us, and if you could please use the chat function to do this, what strikes you about this image? What are some of the attributes you see on the page?

JULIE GOLIA: We've got some good answers. I'll just come in here and say, we've somebody who says handwriting. Handwritten, not printed. It looks like a ledger. We've got some smart people in the audience here. Several people have noticed that it's a ledger.

TOM AUGST: Indeed. And so Matt, maybe you could tell us, who are the Brown Brothers? What is this firm?

MATT KNUTZEN: So the Brown Brothers is a firm that actually still exists today. Sometimes it's referred to as the largest bank that nobody has ever heard about. But it was founded way back in the early 19th Century. It's a multi-generational firm by a guy named Alexander Brown, who was a linen merchant from Northern Ireland who immigrated to Baltimore with his four sons and began trading in dry goods and linens. So eventually through the 19th Century, the firm grew and opened up four additional offices run by the sons, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Liverpool. So as they grew, they diversified into all kinds of areas which helped them provide a competitive advantage in their now global trade. And this included shipbuilding, control of import trade routes. Most relevant today, the finance, insurance, and the management of import and export of cotton and gold. So the open and reliable movement of these commodities really provided the kind of stability to the rapidly growing speculative and really volatile cotton economy in the South. And this is a stability that few others could provide in times of crisis.

TOM AUGST: So what's the collection that this page is part of and how did NYPL acquire it?

MATT KNUTZEN: So as people noted, this particular page is a ledger, but the collection also includes a really a vast array of different kinds of business records which are described pretty extensively on the finding aid. So the firm had kept what they considered to be the most important records of their New York business. And when they merged with the Harriman Brothers in the 1930s, the collection was deposited at the library. So this is one of just 115,000 pages that have been digitized. It's the entirety of the collection, this Brown Brothers collection.

TOM AUGST: That's huge. So why did the library decide to digitize this collection?

MATT KNUTZEN: Well, okay. For a variety of reasons. So for one it's unwieldy, you can't really see it here, but these are huge ledger books that are big unwieldy, heavy, there's 176 of them. And those are stored underneath Bryant Park. They're very hard to use. People noted handwriting. Handwriting is oftentimes very, very small. Sometimes it's difficult to read. And generally, sort of, generally speaking, we digitize to open access to collections that have the greatest potential for future use by the broadest possible audiences. So specifically, also here, this collection has great potential as a digital asset.

TOM AUGST: Well, yeah, so I wanted to mention that I've been doing work on this collection as part of a research project I'm doing with graduate students and faculty at New York University in collaboration with the NYPL. And I'm also using it as part of an undergraduate course I'm teaching this semester on the connections between slavery and capitalism in 19th Century United States. Now in his recent book, *The Empire of Cotton*, Sven Beckert highlights the central role that the Brown Brothers played in getting cotton that was produced by Southern slave plantations to industrial mills in Britain. So between the 1820s and 1850s, the Brown Brothers offered cotton growers in the South advances on their crops, it arranged shipping to Liverpool and indeed the Browns themselves owned a number of ships and provided insurance on the cotton that was in transit. So it sold huge quantities of cotton on commission and brokered sales. So I think a question that we can then sort of ask is what kind of information can

we get from this page? And I think archival materials like this offer a great opportunity to introduce students to a research process that begins with carefully describing artifacts from the past and identifying questions that are raised by them.

MATT KNUTZEN: So I went -- sorry to interrupt Tom, but I'm curious, what exactly are we looking at on this particular page?

TOM AUGST: Well, so this is a page from a ledger of daily transactions that came through the Brown Brothers office in New Orleans in February of 1844. You can see the particular days there, the 21st, the 23rd. And it's recording basically every transaction that is coming through. And so what we're really looking at, right, when your eye is looking at this, it's like, what are you drawn to? And I wanted to zero in here for us on this particular set of transactions, which as we can see here are for the Bellevue plantation. So these are a bunch of transactions. So first of all, this is a huge question. Why is the Bellevue plantation, right, in this ledger kept by a Wall Street bank? And it really highlights, right, the key role that credit extended by Wall Street to Southern planters played, right, in the development of the cotton economy. And credit enabled the purchase of more land, more slaves, more cotton to feed the manufacturers, and the modern cotton machinery that led the development of the modern industrial economy. And so the credit that was extended to plantations was secured by the future delivery of commodities that were grown by slaves. And also, it was secured by the value of the slaves themselves who were of course assets. And so when planters couldn't pay, repay these advances, the Brown Brothers themselves came into ownership of apparently at least 13 cotton plantations in the South, along with hundreds of slaves.

MATT KNUTZEN: So this is kind of an outcome of the panic of 1837. So the Brown Brothers had a strong relationship with the Bank of England, the sovereign wealth of the Bank of England, which enabled them to survive the panic of 1837. So Brown was already trading a ton of cotton with brokers and middlemen down in New Orleans when this panic came. So many of the banks that were supporting this wildly speculative growth of the plantations literally by printing money of their own, their own banknotes, all of this came crashing down. And the Brown Brothers were one of a handful of reliable sources of stable capital that was available to anybody in the South.

TOM AUGST: Yeah. And one of the fascinating things about this firm was that it was truly an Anglo-American bank and they had an office in Liverpool, right, where an American named William Shipley actually negotiated an unprecedented 2 million pound loan from the Bank of England that enabled this firm to get through that panic. And Brown differed from other merchant banks by opening branch offices and hiring their own managers in the ports of not only New Orleans as we see here, but also Mobile, Savannah, Charleston, and Galveston, which allowed them to consolidate information. It allowed them to move capital more quickly among different branches and also between pound sterling and United States dollar currencies. So this innovative branch structure was really crucial to the leading role that Brown Brothers came to play in moving cotton from the South across the Atlantic to the Liverpool office of Brown

Brothers, which brokered the sale of the Southern cotton to the spinning mills in England. And I think, just looking at this, it's useful to ask the kind of, what if question like an opportunity really, to think about sort of alternative histories that might've been enfolded. Like what if Brown Brothers and Wall Street finance had not been able to step in, right, to keep the cotton economy going during these panics. And you know, one of the fascinating things about this bank as well, right, is that because of this arrangement with their branch in Liverpool and New Orleans, they were actually purchasing the cotton in New Orleans with pound sterling. So in this ledger and other places in this ledger, you see a lot of English currency being recorded in this ledger. And this turned out, currency exchange turned out to be the most profitable part of their business. And that by 1850, there were the largest negotiators of currency in the United States at that time.

MATT KNUTZEN: That's totally fascinating. So if you were going to use this document in the classroom, how would that look?

TOM AUGST: Well, the first thing I would do is to recognize the strangeness of this object and engage students in discovering in a sense, the mystery of the past that it poses for us. And I'd ask students to read and to transcribe the document, and in order to produce a spreadsheet, right, that would look something like this. So this is a transcription of this page, right? You can see the columns. You can see the dates. You can see the different accounts. And so an immediate question, right, is what is the different kinds of information that we find on this and what kind of questions emerge from the process of, in a sense deciphering, right, the handwriting that's on this. And so this ledger, right, we can see here, it offers us a chance to learn about the management of plantations in extraordinary detail, right, and to really see the texture of how chattel slavery operated as a business. So for instance you see here that John Demeut is being paid \$800 for his salary as an overseer, right? And we can imagine, right, that actually the decision to hire this person as an overseer was being made in New York City by this bank because the bank was actually the owner of the plantation. What else do we see here, right? We see this extraordinary notation that lawyers were paid -- that essentially, they're paying the overseer to defend himself against a suit that was brought by H. Crawley against him for punishing said, Crawley for abusing one of the Negroes. Now, we're used to thinking of overseers on plantations as the prime agents of violence against Black bodies on plantations. So what does it mean, right, that the overseer is actually going after H. Crawley and punishing him because Crawley has been abusing one of these Negroes, right? It really -- this is a moment when we see sort of the violence of the slave economy really erupt in this otherwise banal document, right? So I'm really drawn to these words, abuse. What exactly was the nature of this abuse, right? I'm also struck by this word punishing, right? How was Crawley punished for abusing this Negro? And of course, we don't have the Negro's name here. We simply have the evidence of this violence being perpetrated upon him, right? And so this is a kind of a really hunting and violent -- and a moment where we kind of reckon with a kind of violence that is otherwise really being kept off the books, right? And each of these kinds of information, right, ask us to really, you know, open up different kinds of questions. So Matt, I have a question for you. Are there things on this page that are notable or interesting to you? What do you see?

MATT KNUTZEN: Yeah, the thing that really jumped out to me on this, just when I first glanced at this page, at this transcription is that you see here that there is an enslaved person being paid for what's being called extra work. So what does that even mean in this, you know, in this context of enslaved work of -- it's wild. I don't understand it, but with many things in this collection, it serves as a really prime sort of jumping-off point for much further research, and there's so many of those in here.

TOM AUGST: That's right. And there's a lot more to learn. And we also see on this, right, the detail about various supplies. There are repairs being made on a cotton gin. There's money being spent on 16 water buckets. There's expenses to a landing, which is probably where cotton was being stored before being shipped. And of course, there are taxes, right? So all of these little pieces of information are really clues, right, that suggest questions for further research. Like, could we find out more about, for instance, this lawsuit that was brought against the overseer? Can we learn more about these individuals who are named here, right? And the particular nature of the conflict that was at stake here. And of course, these little details about them, you know, these small amounts of money that are being spent on behalf of the plantation really also underscore the role that the South played as a market, right, for northern and European produced industrial goods. And so there are many other things, right, that we could start to do with this in a classroom, starting with Google searches, for instance, on some of these names, like Bellevue plantation. What happened to Bellevue plantation, where is it?

MATT KNUTZEN: So another place to look is the internet archive is a trove of data about different people and places which appear in these documents. So I did a quick glance search and found a current, relatively new Department of Defense document, which was about levy enlargement at the Angola State Prison. But there's a whole bunch of history background on this plantation, including this, you know, the owner of this is a guy named Isaac Franklin. Who at one point he was the biggest and wealthiest slave trader in the United States. So just many different opportunities for the research out there on the web.

TOM AUGST: That's right. Especially in a moment, right, when these kinds of searches can produce seemingly instant results to our answers, right? What you learn, right, if you did do a search on this Bellevue plantation, is there actually at least two that we can find. There was one that was in St. James Parish on Bellevue Plantation Road. And then there's one, two hours north that was part of a complex of seven plantations that became part of the Angola State Prison, which of course is -- or another way to think about the continuities of the slave economy in our own present prison system. And I think that it's just an example itself, right? That archival objects like this really invite us to slow down our attention and to reflect on the practices of reading and writing that have themselves really become somewhat unfamiliar.

JULIE GOLIA: Well, this seems like a good time for us to open up to some of the great questions that are coming in. And I think one theme throughout has been sort of the, almost as Tom said, the banality of the document, and also maybe the inaccessibility of the cursive. And

so I wonder -- I guess both of you with your sort of educators hat on, how would you make something like this engaging to students?

MATT KNUTZEN: I'll let Tom talk.

JULIE GOLIA: And actually if I can just add to this and I'm going to combine questions because somebody asks, and can students even read cursive, which I'll just give a spoiler alert. Yes, they can, but I'll let you answer that in more detail.

TOM AUGST: Well, I think the, you know, the banality of the document is part of the lesson here, right? That a ledger like this is a tool for information management and it was a tool for managing this enterprise, right? This bank has to keep track of its money. And the specific question about handwriting, right, my impression is that handwriting is not taught as much as it was when I was in school in elementary school. So that in itself is an opportunity to help students think about the different tools and skills that are used for literacy instruction, both in the 19th Century and then now. So I think even involving students in a transcription process where they have to take the time to decipher the handwriting can really open up reflection on these kinds of technologies of writing and how technological change, right, changes what we read and how we read and write. And I'd say too, it also opens up opportunities to develop students' skills in thinking critically about data and the kinds of stories we can tell about it. You know, so one of the paradoxes of historical change here is that the penmanship that was valued -- penmanship skills, right, in this business hand, in which these ledgers are written, was valued because of its speed and its clarity and its consistency, right, for recording and reckoning, this kind of endless stream of financial transactions, but it's become less legible to us right, now in the 20th Century. And so, you know, even looking at this combination of letters and words and numbers is an opportunity to think about, right, the history and the formats of data.

MATT KNUTZEN: Yeah. That's right. That's right. And thinking about sort of financial literacy and skills in terms of using spreadsheets and numbers and words being mixed together, I think these are all sort of really important sort of the teaching opportunities within this.

TOM AUGST: Yeah.

JULIE GOLIA: I'm going to keep us moving because we have quite a few questions if you don't mind. But we have a question here about Brown. Did Brown own spinning mills in England? So likely they did not own them, but it raises a larger question of, in what ways was the firm involved in both the United States economy and the British economy?

MATT KNUTZEN: As far as I understand, they did not -- they were not directly involved in spinning cotton in the UK, but they were supplying a huge amount of cotton to the mills. And then re-exporting all of the clothes and the cloth to markets in, you know, of course in New York, right? First in New York and then throughout the United States. So it was kind of a cycle there.

But as far as I'm concerned, they were not directly involved in the weaving of textiles or in the mills.

TOM AUGST: Yeah. And we've seen scholarship that suggests they had opportunities for these kinds of investments, but they really were somewhat conservative and wanted to really keep their role confined to what they were doing in these various kinds of financial transactions.

JULIE GOLIA: Well, actually this leads to a related, but I think wider lens question by another attendee, who asks about the international impact of the Brown Brothers empire. So even if they weren't engaged in spinning in the UK specifically, would you describe them as having an international impact on the global economy?

MATT KNUTZEN: Oh, absolutely. I mean, you know, we didn't even get into some of the other activities that this company was engaged in. They held the concession for the Isthmus of Panama, so that the railroads before the canal, railroads would go across. And on their books are most of the gold that comes for about 10 years from California before the transcontinental railroad into the markets of New York. So yes. So in order to secure a place like Panama, one has to have the backing of the military. Well, it probably helped that they were also one of the major ship engine builders in New York, which supplied many of the engines for civil war era battleships. So, you know, it's a very much an integrated whole, and they were thinking about this as a global enterprise. I understand, they were also in the Far East at some point. They were in China and East Asia; I think in late -- in the 1870s as well. So, I mean, that's another time when the sort of global imperialism was sort of well underway in that part of the world too.

JULIE GOLIA: We have a number of questions here that I actually would say might make really interesting research questions for students were they looking at a document like this. One of them is, is \$800 a year salary considered normal for that era? I would guess that maybe neither of you know the answer to this off of the top of your head, but that strikes me as a great thing for a student to go on and research. And similarly, is there any record of plantation overseers being contractually indemnified by Brown as the owners of a plantation or managers of plantation against charges of abuse against "Negroes." This could certainly affect their behavior. Another really interesting question.

TOM AUGST: Indeed.

MATT KNUTZEN: Yeah. I mean, maybe there are other records which are less sort of banal record-keeping in terms of, you know, cash flow and understanding money, but there is a whole collection of letters in the archives of the New-York Historical Society that are letters from all the people doing business with the Brown Brothers. So that's another source of a great deep source of information, which give you a sense of not the how it's being done, but why, and what they're thinking about with the strategies behind building this global empire are.

JULIE GOLIA: And I would point people, I included in one of the works of Sven Beckert, who is a historian that Tom mentioned in the chat. And I think you may find a lot of the answers for questions like this in the work that he and others like him are doing. So I think we have time for one more question. It's a really interesting one that brings us forward in time a little bit. I'm just going to read it here from Jamie. BBH, Brown Brothers Harriman today, according to its annual report offers services in addition to banking that include consultants who can help clients improve their operational efficiency and oversight and control. If I hear you correctly, Brown Brothers had some influence over the conditions of the lives of enslaved people on plantations in the South, for example, the hiring of overseers. I think, you know, the short answer is yes. He, she heard you correctly. But talk a little bit about how this might make us rethink the nature of banking today?

TOM AUGST: Really interesting question, right? But obviously, the role that they're playing today, right, is sort of is kind of managerial expertise that they were honing in the management of slave plantations in the 19th century. And, you know, given the extraordinary breadth of this collection, right, and how hard it is in that sense to digest. It's what it would take for someone to sit down and really master what's in these, right? This, I think, highlights the need, right, for really finding ways to open further access to this beyond putting digital images online. And so that's what I'm really pleased that to be able to partner with the New York Public Library, right, in this research project, where we're spending, basically, trying to move to the next stage of dissertation of this archival record, which involves trying to teach computer algorithms, how to read handwriting on this document. And we're actually now in the phase of creating training data, which needs a transcription of a set of pages, which will rely on human eyes to read a sample and basically enter information structured into a form. And so I want to just warmly invite any folks who might be interested in participating in this research project to please join us. I think Julie is going to add a link to our description of this research project. Thank you.

MATT KNUTZEN: Oh, you're on mute.

JULIE GOLIA: Thank you. I usually don't do that. This is a great place for us to wrap up. This is such a wonderful talk. Tom and Matt, thank you so, so much. So links to today's featured collection items and other resources along with a video and transcript of the episode will be published shortly in a post on the NYPL blog, which we will email out to all of you who registered. And when you go on our blog, you will also be able to find videos and posts for past episodes as well, so you can catch up on any episodes that you might have missed. The easiest way to find blog posts is by subscribing to the research at NYPL channel of the NYPL blog. Follow us on social media. I just popped all that info into the chat for those of you who don't have it yet. Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30. Our next episode has NYPL's Gregory Stall and author Fran Leadon, analyzing maps, manuscripts, and menus that reveal the multi-layered history of Broadway, one of New York's most iconic thoroughfares. Thank you so much everybody for coming. Thank you, Matt. Thank you, Tom. And we will see you all next week.

TOM AUGST: Bye.

MATT KNUTZEN: Thanks. Bye.