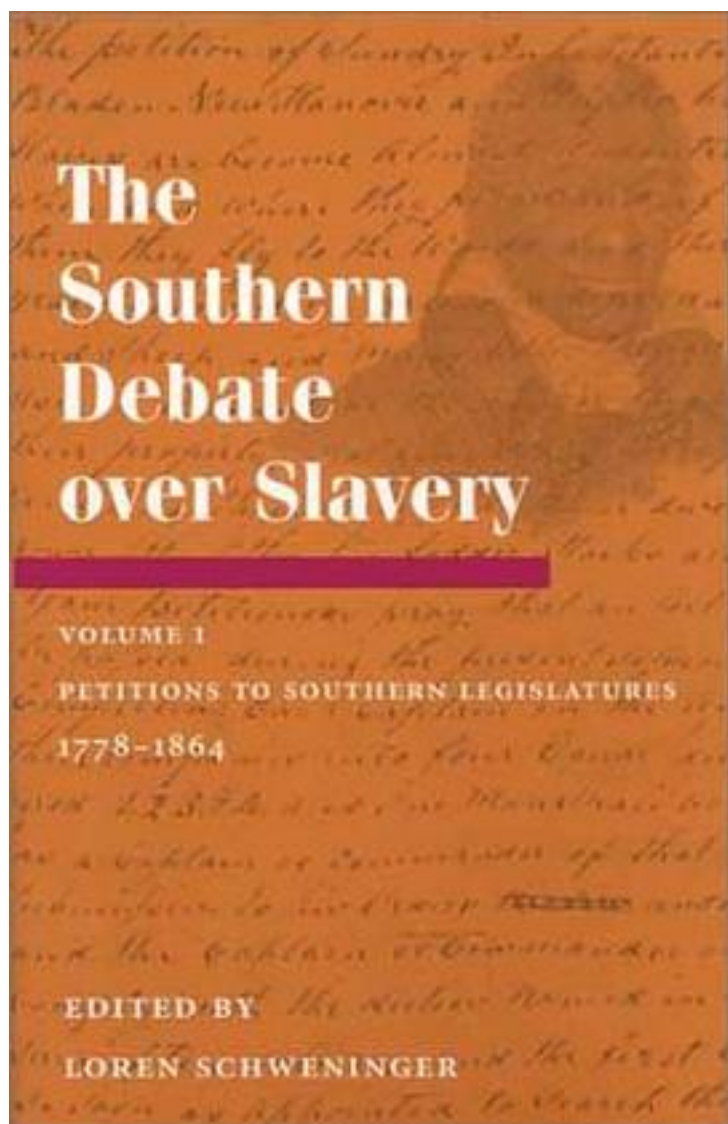


# Southern Debate Over Slavery



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An incomparably rich source of period information, "The Southern Debate over Slavery" offers a representative sampling of the thousands of petitions about issues of race and slavery that southerners submitted to their state legislatures between the American Revolution and the Civil War. These petitions, filed by slaveholders and non-slaveholders, slaves and free blacks, women and men, abolitionists and staunch defenders of slavery, constitute a uniquely important primary source. Petitioners were compelled to present the most accurate and fully documented case they could, since their claims would be subject to public scrutiny and legal verification. Unlike the many reminiscences and autobiographies of the period, these petitions record with great immediacy and minute detail the dynamics, common understandings, and legal restrictions and parameters that shaped southern society during this period. Arranged chronologically, with their original spelling and idiosyncratic phraseology intact, these documents reveal the grim and brutal nature of human bondage, the fears of whites who lived among large concentrations of blacks, and the workings of the complicated legal system designed to control blacks. They tell about the yearning of bondspeople to gain their freedom, the attitudes of freed blacks who were forced to leave the South, and the efforts of African Americans to overcome harsh and restrictive laws. They also underscore the unique situation of free women of color and the reliance of manumitted (formally freed) blacks on their former owners for protection, travel passes, guardianship papers, and reference letters. Astonishingly intimate and frank, "The Southern Debate over Slavery" illuminates how slavery penetrated nearly every aspect of southern life and how various groups of southerners responded to the difficulties they confronted as a result of living in a slave society.

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