

Dan Gediman: This is the Reckoning, I'm Dan Gediman. So much of the history of this country has been hidden from its citizens, hidden behind layers of euphemism, misdirection, and sometimes outright lies. But if you know what you are looking for, much of our history is lying in plain sight. Case in point, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1851<sup>27</sup>, it was a bestseller in its day, but now it's one of those books that many people have heard of, but far fewer have actually read. The story takes place in Kentucky and begins with a conversation between a slave trader and a farmer about selling off two enslaved people, Tom and a young child named Harry, to pay off the farmer's debts<sup>28</sup>.

**Farmer:** "I am sorry to part with Tom, I must say. You ought to let him cover the whole balance of the debt; and you would, Haley, if you had any conscience."

**Slave Trader:** "Well, I've got just as much conscience as any man in business can afford to keep, — just a little, you know, to swear by, as 't were," said the trader, jocularly; "and, then, I'm ready to do anything in reason to 'blige friends; but this yer, you see, is a leetle too hard on a fellow — a leetle too hard." The trader sighed contemplatively, and poured out some more brandy.

**Farmer:** "Well, then, Haley, how will you trade?" said Mr. Shelby, after an uneasy interval of silence.

**Slave Trader:** "Well, haven't you a boy or gal that you could throw in with Tom?"

**Farmer:** "Hmmm. None that I could well spare to tell the truth. It's only hard necessity makes me willing to sell at all. I don't like parting with any of my hands. That's fact."

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<sup>27</sup> <http://bit.ly/2S3ihxs>

<sup>28</sup> Stowe, Harriet Beecher, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Dan Gediman: The whole idea that there were people who made their living buying and selling human beings is one of those things that most of us didn't learn about in school. But type "Kentucky slave trader" into Google, and you'll find a New York Times article on the subject, that mentions a slave trader named Stephen Chenoweth<sup>29</sup>.

In Louisville, that's a familiar name. There is a Chenoweth Lane<sup>30</sup>, and a Chenoweth School<sup>31</sup>. So it was intriguing that there was also a slave trader named Chenoweth. It took digging through rolls of microfilm, and reading through many archival documents to trace his lineage to the present day. And when I did, I saw that he was related to someone I had met, an art therapist named Chenoweth Stites Allen<sup>32</sup>.

I didn't know if she had ever heard of Stephen Chenoweth, but I contacted her, saying that I had stumbled on some information about one of her ancestors, and asking if she'd be interested in seeing what I had found. She wrote back, suggesting that we meet at her parents' home, thinking they might want to hear this as well.

We met in their living room, a comfortable, well-appointed space with lots of light, and cookies and water on the coffee table between us. After a brief chat, I began to tell Chenoweth, her father Bodley, and her mother Virginia exactly how the Stites family is related to this slave trader, Stephen Chenoweth.

**Dan Gediman: Start from scratch... So, the first settlers in Louisville are John and Mary Chenoweth. They have a son named Absolum Chenoweth. He has a son named Absolum Chenoweth, Junior. Absolum Junior has a son, his eldest son, Stephen Ross Chenoweth. And that's the fellow we're talking about today<sup>33</sup>.**

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/06/us/in-a-barn-a-piece-of-slavery-s-hidden-past.html>

<sup>30</sup> <http://mapq.st/2ObKO2P>;

<sup>31</sup> <http://bit.ly/31dURJM>

<sup>32</sup> <http://bit.ly/2OgJviS>;

<sup>33</sup> <https://ancestry.me/392oAbE> ; <https://ancestry.me/2u8Hfn2>

Dan Gediman: I tell them he was born in 1796 in what is now West Virginia, to a prominent family with ties to British aristocracy<sup>34</sup>. As a boy he traveled to Louisville with his parents, where several other family members had already settled<sup>35</sup>.

**Dan Gediman: Stephen Chenoweth marries a woman named Frances Stuckey Frederick. They have two children, a daughter named Elizabeth...and your great grandfather...Henry Chenoweth, and he was a medical doctor...**<sup>36</sup>

Dan Gediman: Chenoweth and her parents appear quite interested, but as I talk it becomes clear they know very little about this part of their family. I plow on, filling them in on more details about Stephen Chenoweth. He was a veteran of the War of 1812, and served in several capacities for Jefferson County, where Louisville is located. First he was a constable, then a tax commissioner, and finally the county jailer. While a county official, it appears that he was simultaneously working in the slave trade, based on sales receipts found in archives<sup>37</sup>. And there seemed to be an unscrupulous side to Stephen Chenoweth in his business dealings. His firm was accused of selling enslaved people they knew to be sick, or had run away. And in at least one case, sold a black man who was, in fact, free<sup>38</sup>. When he died a wealthy man in 1857, his obituary read, "He was one of our boldest and best citizens, and his death will leave a void in the community, not to be filled<sup>39</sup>."

**Dan Gediman: I've been doing a lot of talking, giving you a massive amount of information. I would like to hear what's going through your head? Based on all this stuff I've been telling you.**

**Bodley Stites: My initial reaction is to be on the defensive. And I don't know how to resolve that....but I think it's interesting that we never heard of**

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<sup>34</sup>His direct ancestor is Charles Calvert, 3rd Lord Baltimore, among others: <https://ancestry.me/3aPDBiL>; Calvert was an aristocrat, not royalty

<sup>35</sup> Much of what I know about this man came from research done by archivist Pen Bogart, which I found here: <https://bit.ly/2Gnuw2s>. He can be reached at (502) 275-9165 or [bogert@bardstowncable.net](mailto:bogert@bardstowncable.net); <https://ancestry.me/2uVvgt0>

<sup>36</sup><https://ancestry.me/2u8Hfn2>; <https://ancestry.me/392oAbE>

<sup>37</sup>List of slaves in Stephen Chenoweth's estate settlement (found in fact-checking folder)

<sup>38</sup>9-26-51 C.M Rutherford deposition and S.R. Chenoweth deposition from "Case 7867 Rutherford v Chenoweth." The "unsound" slaves are Ben and Madison, the free man was Wilkinson, the runaway slaves are not named. These can be found in the "Stephen Chenoweth Legal Cases" folder, plus others.

<sup>39</sup> <https://ancestry.me/36TVA72>

**Stephen Chenoweth. We go to Henry, who is a doctor...and then, nobody has looked into, or talked about the family before that.**

Dan Gediman: I don't know how well you heard it, but he said "I think it's interesting that we never heard of Stephen Chenoweth. We go to Henry, who is a doctor." At the time, this seemed odd to me, that a family wouldn't know about such a wealthy and prominent ancestor. But the more I thought about it, I realized that in the decades I've lived in Louisville, I can't recall a single conversation about what slavery was like in this city. And I certainly had no inkling that Louisville was a hub for the nation's slave trade, and that people here were making fortunes in this business.

And the slave trade was very profitable. Take a look at the life of Stephen Chenoweth. In 1836, a few years into his career as a slave trader, he owned a modest farm of 55 acres, with 8 slaves, and an estate that would be valued around 135 thousand dollar today. Flash forward about 15 years. He's added county jailer to his resume and now has a 5 hundred acre plantation with a luxurious mansion house, 31 slaves, and an estate that would be valued today at nearly 700 thousand dollars.<sup>40</sup> Not the richest person in the county, but both respectable and wealthy enough, that his son Henry would marry into a very wealthy family — the Bullitts of Oxmoor. And this all came from buying and selling enslaved people. University of Kentucky History Professor Vanessa Holden.

**Vanessa Holden: Kentucky supplies the internal slave trade with hundreds and thousands of enslaved people. The center of the state was the center of a really important node of the internal slave trade that from which enslaved people were sent down the Ohio river down the Mississippi all the way to New Orleans, to be sold into the we would call the deep south or the cotton south. So in many ways all over the South that comes readily to mind when people think of large scale plantation slavery. There were Kentuckians in those fields. There is a true Kentucky diaspora all over the deep south as a result of this internal slave trade.**

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<sup>40</sup>See 1836 Jefferson County Tax Roll and 1850 census and slave schedule, plus online inflation calculator <http://bit.ly/2vyowlb>

Dan Gediman: This idea of an internal slave trade is probably not the first thing most Americans associate with slavery. In school we are usually taught about the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, where people were captured in Africa, crammed into the hulls of slave ships, taken across the ocean, and sold at markets on the American coast. After the Revolutionary War, the Northern and Southern states disagreed on the role of slavery in the new republic, so they compromised. Joshua Rothman is a professor of history at the University of Alabama.

**Joshua Rothman: The framers of the Constitution put in a provision that says that Congress actually can't do anything about the transatlantic trade for 20 years after ratification. Most people at the time knew that when those 20 years were up the transatlantic slave trade would probably be banned. And it was in 1808.**

Dan Gediman: But between the writing of the constitution and 1808, something really big happened. Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, a device that made it radically easier and faster to separate the valuable fibers from the cotton plant<sup>41</sup>. You'd think this would lessen the need for enslaved labor, but this coincided with a worldwide mania for cotton clothing,

**Joshua Rothman: Now, the issue for people who are looking for enslaved laborers then becomes where do we continue to get slave laborers from, and the only place that you could get more people after 1808 was domestically, you had to have people who were already in the boundaries of the United States if you were going to do it legally.**

Dan Gediman: This problem served as a great business opportunity for states like Kentucky that had more enslaved people than they needed to raise cash crops like hemp. And ambitious young men like Stephen Chenoweth, went into the big business of slave trading.

**Joshua Rothman: As places like Lexington and Louisville come into their own as cities, they become centers of the slave trade. And so you get people who are moving, enslaved people directly over to the Mississippi River., put them on flat boats and other kinds of vessels, send them down the river to Natchez and New**

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<sup>41</sup> <http://bit.ly/31grzdC>; <http://bit.ly/3b3Awyq>; <http://bit.ly/36N71ux>



**Orleans. And of course, that's famously where you get the expression sold down the river.**

Dan Gediman: What drove this increasingly popular trade in enslaved people, was their constantly rising value. Between 1800 and 1860, the average price for an enslaved person at the New Orleans slave market more than tripled in value, from 500 to 1,800 dollars. That's the equivalent of 55 thousand today<sup>42</sup>. There was hardly anything back then that gave people that kind of return on their investment. It was sort of like investing in Apple or Google today. But as lucrative as this business was, by the 20th century, slave trading had been relegated to another backwater in Kentucky's memory banks. And when slave traders were mentioned at all in history books, it was often as some kind of low-class villain.

**Joshua Rothman: The idea that slave traders were seen as low lifes, seen as kind of carrying out a business that was too dirty for so-called decent people to get involved in, most of that is propaganda.**

Dan Gediman: Again, Joshua Rothman.

**Joshua Rothman: These were people who had regular storefronts, they ran regular businesses, they were considered very respectable and trustworthy businessmen. And you can see their associates are lawyers, planters, merchants, bankers, all the people who compose supposedly respectable society. So the idea that, that slave traders were sort of the kind of moral degenerates, it really is a way for, for people who are most invested in slavery to try to pretend that the really sort of dirtiest, nastiest, most violent elements of slavery, it's a way for them to displace that onto a different class of people.**

Dan Gediman: Nowadays, when slavery is depicted in movies and television, there's often a big plantation with hundreds of field hands, and a group of house servants attending to the family's daily needs. But especially in Kentucky, slavery looked very different. Yes, slave traders sold field hands and domestic servants; but they also advertised skilled artisans,

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<sup>42</sup>Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*, p. 56 (<http://bit.ly/2yvAAUj>) with inflation calculation using this website: <http://bit.ly/2RLTHIP>

like masons, blacksmiths, and seamstresses<sup>43</sup>. And for female slaves, they were often described as being (quote) good breeding stock.<sup>44</sup>

**Vanessa Holden: One of the considerations that all enslavers had in mind was female enslaved person's ability to procreate.**

Dan Gediman: Especially in slave exporting states like Kentucky, every new enslaved child was like money in the bank. For even small children were valuable assets that could be used as collateral for a loan, or sold for cash to pay off a debt, like in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. So slave traders would highlight the number of children a woman had birthed, as evidence of fertility. Again, Vanessa Holden.

**Vanessa Holden: The slavery that becomes American slavery makes enslavement a heritable status, and makes it inheritable through the maternal line. So, enslaved women are expected to perform physical labor and reproductive labor. So in that sense, all enslaved women are expected to do some sort of sex work and reproductive labor.**

Dan Gediman: And there was yet another way some slave traders marketed younger women. Again, Joshua Rothman.

**Joshua Rothman: But of course probably the most notorious category of enslaved girls and women who were sold were people who were advertised as being fancy girls. And sometimes it's something that you didn't even really have to advertise, right? It's something that could be done with sort of a nod and a wink. And of course, these are women who are being sold into sex slavery.**

Dan Gediman: Kentucky combined two of its most lucrative activities during horse racing season, when every spring, wealthy men from around the country would descend upon Kentucky to bet on the races. Certain slave-traders figured out they could

<sup>43</sup>Woolfolk, "Taxes and Slavery in the Ante Bellum South", *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 26, No. 2 pp. 184-185

<sup>44</sup>Fitzpatrick, *Negroes for Sale: The Slave Trade in Antebellum Kentucky* (dissertation) plus Pittsburgh Gazette 8-26-38 reprinting slave ad from Charleston Mercury

make serious money by using this as an opportunity to showcase their prettiest young Black women. One of these was Lewis Robards, who constructed a special annex of his Lexington slave jail just to house these young women<sup>45</sup>. In 1854, a U.S. Senator from Illinois named Orville Browning visited Robards' jail and wrote about it in his diary.

**Orville Browning:** After dinner [I] visited a negro jail — a very large brick building...where negroes are kept for sale. In several of the rooms, I found very handsome mulatto women, of fine persons and easy genteel manners, sitting at their needle work, awaiting a purchaser. The proprietor made them get up and turn around to show to advantage their finely developed and graceful forms. This, I must confess, rather shocked my gallantry. I enquired the price of one girl, which was 1,600 dollars<sup>46</sup>.

Dan Gediman: Every couple of weeks in Louisville, an auction is held at the Jefferson County courthouse<sup>47</sup>. County officials sell off homes and property related to loan foreclosures. Auctions at this courthouse have gone on regularly since at least 1842<sup>48</sup>. Then and now, the assets are sold to satisfy creditors. In slavery-era Kentucky, these auctions happened once a month. Officials would put property on the auction block after a judge ruled on a court case, and start the bidding<sup>49</sup>.

**Sharon Murphy:** Yeah, so the whole purpose of an auction by definition is to get the highest price.

Dan Gediman: Providence College History Professor Sharon Murphy. She says that for enslaved people, the auctions often had painful consequences, because there was no financial incentive to keep families together.

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<sup>45</sup> Coleman, J. Winston, Jr. "Lexington's Slave Dealers and Their Southern Trade" pp.11-12

<sup>46</sup> *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning*, 1926, p 140 (found on [archive.org](http://archive.org))

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.jeffcomm.org> (due to COVID, sales have moved to Slugger Field)

<sup>48</sup> <https://louisvilleky.gov/government/mayor-greg-fischer/history-metro-hall-building> and <https://sah-archipedia.org/buildings/KY-01-111-0036>

<sup>49</sup> Ireland, Robert *The County in Kentucky History*, p 20 (<http://bit.ly/3aX0hxn>) and Clark, "the Slave Trade Between Kentucky and the Cotton Kingdom" p 340



**Sharon Murphy:** There might be more value in breaking off the most valuable slaves, the prime male field hands, who were your, you know, 18 to 20 year old, strong males; or your blacksmith, your artisans, your carpenters who also got a lot of value. There may be a benefit to breaking off of those slaves away from the older slaves or the younger slaves that haven't developed yet and that often dictated breaking up these groups of slaves.

Dan Gediman: The legal historian Thomas Russell has concluded that enslaved families were three times more likely to be separated at county auctions than in private sales. The reason is the buyer might think that by keeping enslaved families intact, it would decrease the likelihood that a member of that family would try to escape<sup>50</sup>. But at least in Kentucky, state law stipulated that each individual piece of property had to generate the greatest profit at auction. And, by the way, it would also increase the commission made on the sale — for the sheriff, the county, and the state. So, this meant that not only were younger men sold separately, but that mothers were often separated from their children.

**Sharon Murphy:** Technically, some states had laws that forbade you from separating young children from their mothers. But that often was ignored in private sales, and even at the courthouse. It's unclear how much those laws were enforced. And so the family separations were very real, very horrific and everybody kind of pretended 'Well, it's not my fault that's out of my control. I can't do anything about it.' So it was a very easy excuse to blame the courts, or blame the sheriff, or blame the system.

Dan Gediman: Another county official who often got involved in the slave trade was the jailer. Since these county auctions only happened once a month in Kentucky, the jail was a perfect place to hold enslaved people prior to an auction. But there were other reasons that they might end up in a county jail.

**Patrick Lewis:** In general, county jailers are an important hub of the of the domestic slave trade.

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<sup>50</sup> Russell, Thomas, "Articles Sell Best Singly: The Disruption of Slave Families at Court Sales"

Dan Gediman: Patrick Lewis is a Scholar in Residence at Louisville's Filson Historical Society

**Patrick Lewis:** Because as you move enslaved people from, you know, the rural places in the interior of the state, to market centers like Louisville or Lexington, you know, that's just overland travel. Right. And so you can at best, I don't know maybe you make 20 or 30 miles a day.-and you've got to stop somewhere you've got to feed those people they have to be housed.

Dan Gediman: In the early 19th century, county employees like the jailer weren't paid a salary in Kentucky. Their compensation came in the form of fees that they would charge for housing inmates in their care, not unlike today's private prisons. In the case of Black inmates, they would get paid by the county court after they were auctioned off to their next enslaver. Stephen Chenoweth, you may remember, was simultaneously a slave trader and county jailer. Historian Joshua Rothman says that probably wasn't a fluke.

**Joshua Rothman:** And so for someone like Chenoweth to decide, you know, I've been working in the slave trade for a while. I think that if, you know, I've been using jails in some capacity or another for some time, but what if I'm actually the jailer? What if it's my job to oversee the movement of black people in and out of in and out of imprisonment, and in and out of, in and out of my custody, I'm going to have access to all of these people who I can then flip and turn around for profit through my public position. It's not at all surprising to see somebody do that.

Dan Gediman: Jailers had other ways they could make money from slavery. Because of fugitive slave laws, there was a steady group of black people being locked up in jails across Kentucky. Usually it was because they had been stopped by a slave patrol and didn't have the right papers, or maybe some white person had encountered an unfamiliar Black face and informed the authorities. Kentucky law stipulated that they were to be jailed for six months, while ads were put in area newspapers to give slaveholders a chance to retrieve, what they viewed, as their runaway property.

***On the 17th day of May, 1860, a Negro Man calling himself James***

***Wood, was committed to the Jefferson County jail as a runaway slave. He is almost 21 years of age, brown skin, 5 feet 9 inches high, weighing a 135 pounds. Bad teeth, slender form, a little stoop-shouldered....Claims to be free, and says he was born and raised in Carlisle, Cumberland County, State of Pennsylvania. The owner can come forward, prove property, pay charges, or he will be dealt with as the law requires.***

Dan Gediman: If no one showed up to claim Mr. Wood, he was supposed to be auctioned off to the highest bidder, with the proceeds going to the state. But if someone were an unscrupulous jailer, as we know Stephen Chenoweth to be<sup>51</sup>, they might sell him in a private sale and keep the money for themselves. And you may have noticed that James Wood said he was a free man, which means he was most likely kidnapped, like Solomon Northup in the movie *12 Years a Slave*. Kidnapping, says Joshua Rothman, happened all the time.

**Joshua Rothman: Particularly in border states, people could go over into Pennsylvania, places like Delaware, places like Indiana, places like Ohio, and simply literally kidnap free black people and send them into slavery. My guess is that it probably happens hundreds if not thousands of times, throughout the 19th century.**

Dan Gediman: In addition to the revenue that individual counties and the state took in from selling enslaved people, there was one more way that governments made money from slavery — taxes. When the Atlantic slave trade was still legal, port cities like Richmond and Charleston charged a customs duty on the slaves imported from Africa<sup>52</sup>. Many governments also charged slave holders an annual per unit tax on each person they enslaved. Then, as the cotton boom took hold, most governments switched to a property tax system, and charged owners a certain amount for every hundred dollars the people they enslaved were worth. Boston University Law Professor Kevin Outterson says figuring out how much an enslaved person was worth worked a lot like assessing property taxes on a house.

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<sup>51</sup>9-26-51 C.M Rutherford deposition and S.R. Chenoweth deposition from “Case 7867 Rutherford v Chenoweth.” The “unsound” slaves are Ben and Madison, the free man was Wilkinson, the runaway slaves are not named. These can be found in the “Stephen Chenoweth Legal Cases” folder, plus others.

<sup>52</sup>Per interview with Kevin Outterson at 3:12 in transcript

**Kevin Outterson:** Today when your house gets reassessed by your county tax administration, their best data is the last dozen sales of houses like yours near yours. And so, for slaves, there was ample data on exactly what different types of slaves were being sold for, in public and private markets. So unfortunately, that's where the data came from — slave sales.

Dan Gediman: Over the years, the state legislature kept increasing that tax rate, until at the dawn of the Civil War, it was 22 cents per \$100. And given that by 1860, Kentucky had about a quarter of a million enslaved people, all those pennies added up<sup>53</sup>.

**Kevin Outterson:** We can think about how slavery was long time ago and and, and nobody alive today, you know, directly benefited from slavery. Nobody alive today owned slaves. But I was struck by the way that for many US states, a significant portion of their government revenue in those years, derived directly or indirectly from the slave trade.

Dan Gediman: By 1860, taxes on slaves brought in about 20 percent of the tax revenue for both Louisville and the state of Kentucky<sup>54</sup>. This fact was stressed in a December 1861 editorial, published in the Louisville Courier, urging Kentuckians to support the Confederacy, on economic grounds.

**The success of the North, in the war they are now waging against the South, would be followed by the absolute and unconditional emancipation of the slaves...There are 250 thousand slaves in Kentucky, worth more than 100 million dollars. To emancipate these Negroes would be to destroy at one blow more than one-fifth of all the taxable property of the state...Her revenue from present taxes would be reduced twenty percent. Additional taxes would have to be imposed on land, houses, and personal property. Many of the best and most loyal citizens of the Commonwealth would be reduced from affluence and luxury, to ruin and beggary!**<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup><http://bit.ly/316qsgH>

<sup>54</sup> I have compiled all available data about this in this spreadsheet: <http://bit.ly/316qsgH>

<sup>55</sup> Editorial in Louisville Courier, December 11, 1861

Dan Gediman: One thing that is clear from reading Kentucky's antebellum era newspapers, is that slavery and the white supremacy that enabled it, were deeply woven into the economic and social fabric of the entire state. Even those who were not slaveholders benefitted from the institution, in terms of a solid tax base that helped build Kentucky institutions, lower taxes on individuals, and the ability to feel superior to another group of people, even if your own place in the social pecking order was modest<sup>56</sup>.

For families like the Bullitts and the Chenoweths, their fortunes came directly from slavery, both in terms of the value of the people they enslaved, and the labor they provided. And the Bullitts and Chenoweths were able to carry that wealth forward to future generations, while enslaved families like the Sanders had to make their way in a system that didn't even see them as fully human. The Civil War and the ensuing emancipation would start to change that dynamic, but not easily or quickly.

On the next episode of The Reckoning, with so much money involved, and so many different parts of Kentucky's economy tied to enslaved labor, it became progressively more urgent for white Kentuckians to control enslaved people — to keep them productive, obedient, and above all, to make sure they didn't run away. That's next time on The Reckoning.

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<sup>56</sup>Andrews and Fenton "Archaeology and the Invisible Man"