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978-0-521-81276-4 - The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation

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Excerpt

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Introduction

We just prayed for strength to endure to the end. We didn't expect anything but to have to go on in bondage till we died.

– Delia Garlic, northern Alabama ex-slave

When Amelia Jones told her story to a WPA interviewer in the 1930s, she described her former eastern Kentucky owner as a man who routinely traded black laborers. “Master White didn’t hesitate to sell any of his slaves. He said, ‘You all belong to me and if you don’t like it, I’ll put you in my pocket.’” When Jim Threat described his experiences as a northern Alabama slave, he focused on the danger of permanent separation. “We lived in constant fear,” Jim said, “that we would be sold away from our families.” In her story, Maggie Pinkard gave us some clue how often black families were disrupted. “When the slaves got a feeling there was going to be an auction, they would pray. The night before the sale they would pray in their cabins. You could hear the hum of voices in all the cabins down the row.” Other enslaved women focused more sharply on the mother’s perspective. Several of them lamented that they had “no name” to give their children because they must use their masters’ surnames, not those of their husbands. “I haven’t never had a nine months child,” Josephine Bacchus told the WPA interviewer. “I ain’ never been safe in de family way.” This former slave went on to say that she experienced chronic hunger, sexual exploitation from white males, and quick return to the fields after childbirth. As a result, all her babies, except one, were still-born. Katie Johnson captured the vulnerability of parents when she said: “During slavery, it seemed lak yo’ chillun b’long to ev’ybody but you.”¹

These voices recount experiences that are representative of a majority of slaves of the Mountain South, a region characterized by a low black population density and small plantations. What they have to say is startling because they are reporting a past that contradicts the dominant paradigm. The conventional wisdom is that owners rarely broke up slave families; that slaves were adequately fed, clothed, and sheltered; and that slave health or death risks were no greater than those experienced

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by white adults. Why have so many investigations come to these optimistic conclusions? U.S. slavery studies have been handicapped by four fundamental weaknesses:

- a flawed view of the slave family,
- scholarly neglect of small plantations,
- limited analysis of Upper South enslavement,
- academic exaggeration of slave agency.

The Flawed View of the Slave Family

U.S. slavery studies have been dominated by the view that it was not economically rational for masters to break up black families. According to Fogel and Engerman, households were the units through which work was organized and through which the rations of basic survival needs were distributed. By discouraging runaways, families also rooted slaves to owners. Gutman's work established the view that slave families were organized as stable, nuclear, single-residence households grounded in long-term marriages. After thirty years of research, Fogel is still convinced that two-thirds of all U.S. slaves lived in two-parent households. Recent studies, like those of Berlin and Rowland, are grounded in and celebrate these optimistic generalizations about the African-American slave family.²

None of these writers believes that U.S. slave owners interfered in the construction or continuation of black families. Fogel argues that such intervention would have worked against the economic interests of the owners, while Gutman focuses on the abilities of slaves to engage in day-to-day resistance to keep their households intact. Fogel and most scholars argue that sexual exploitation of slave women did not happen very often. Moreover, the conventional wisdom has been that slaveholders discouraged high fertility because female laborers were used in the fields to a greater extent than male workers. Consequently, the predominant view is that most slave women did not have their first child until about age twenty-one and that teenage pregnancies were rare. To permit women to return to work as quickly as possible, owners protected children by providing collectivized child care.³

Scholarly Neglect of Small Plantations

Those who have supported the dominant paradigm neglected small slaveholdings, the second methodological blunder of U.S. slave studies. Gutman acknowledged this inadequacy of his own work when he commented in passing that "little is yet known about the domestic arrangements and kin networks as well as the communities that developed among

slaves living on farms and in towns and cities.” Fogel stressed that “failure to take adequate account of the differences between slave experiences and culture on large and small plantations” has been a fundamental blunder by slavery specialists. Because findings have been derived from analysis of plantations that owned more than fifty slaves, generalizations about family stability have been derived from institutional arrangements that represented the life experiences of a small minority of the enslaved population. In reality, more than 88 percent of U.S. slaves resided at locations where there were fewer than fifty slaves.⁴

Revisionist researchers provide ample evidence that slave family stability varied with size of the slaveholding. Analyzing sixty-six slave societies around the world in several historical eras, Patterson found that slavery was most brutal and most exploitative in those societies characterized by smallholdings. Contrary to the dominant paradigm, Patterson found that family separations, slave trading, sexual exploitation, and physical abuse occurred much more often in societies where the masters owned small numbers of slaves. There were several factors that were more likely to destabilize family life on small plantations than on large ones. According to Patterson, small slaveholdings allowed “far more contact with (and manipulation of) the owner” and “greater exposure to sexual exploitation.” Compared to large plantations, slave families on small plantations were more often disrupted by masters, and black households on small plantations were much more frequently headed by one parent. Stephen Crawford showed that slave women on small plantations had their first child at an earlier age and were pregnant more frequently than black females on large plantations. Steckel argued that hunger and malnutrition were worse on small plantations, causing higher mortality among the infants, children, and pregnant women held there.⁵

Scholarly Neglect of the Upper South

In addition to their neglect of small plantations, scholars who support the dominant paradigm have directed inadequate attention to enslavement in the Upper South. Instead, much of what is accepted as conventional wisdom is grounded in the political economy and the culture of the Lower South. Why is it so important to study the Upper South? In the United States, world demand for cotton triggered the largest domestic slave trade in the history of the world. Between 1790 and 1860, the Lower South slave population nearly quadrupled because the Upper South exported nearly one million black laborers. In a fifty-year period, two-fifths of the African-Americans who were enslaved in the Upper South were forced to migrate to the cotton economy; the vast majority were sold through

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interstate transactions, and about 15 percent were removed in relocations with owners.⁶

Because of that vast interregional forced migration, Upper South slaves experienced family histories that contradict the accepted wisdom in U.S. slave studies. Though their arguments still have not altered the dominant paradigm, revisionist researchers offer evidence that slave family stability varied with southern subregion. Tadman contends that, after the international slave trade closed in 1808, the Upper South operated like a “stock-raising system” where “a proportion of the natural increase of its slaves was regularly sold off.” As a result, the chances of an Upper South slave falling into the hands of interstate traders were quite high. Between 1820 and 1860, one-tenth of all Upper South slaves were relocated to the Lower South each decade. Nearly one of every three slave children living in the Upper South in 1820 was gone by 1860. Among Mississippi slaves who had been removed from the Upper South, nearly half the males and two-fifths of the females had been separated from spouses with whom they had lived at least five years. Stevenson contends that Virginia slave families were disproportionately matrifocal because of the slave trading and labor strategies of Upper South masters. Clearly, the fifty-year forced labor migration of slaves must be taken into account in scholarly assessments of family stability and of household living conditions.⁷

Scholarly Preoccupation with Slave Agency

The fourth weakness in U.S. slavery studies has been a preoccupation with slave agency. As Kolchin has observed, most scholars “have abandoned the victimization model in favor of an emphasis on the slaves’ resiliency and autonomy.” Like a number of other scholars, I have grown increasingly concerned that too many recent studies have the effect of whitewashing from slavery the worst structural constraints. Because so much priority has been placed on these research directions, there has been inadequate attention directed toward threats to slave family maintenance. Notions like “windows of autonomy within slavery” or an “independent slave economy” seriously overstate the degree to which slaves had control over their own lives, and they trivialize the brutalities and the inequities of enslavement. Patterson is scathing in his criticism of the excesses of studies that assign too much autonomy to slaves.

During the 1970s, a revisionist literature emerged in reaction to the earlier scholarship on slavery that had emphasized the destructive impact of the institution on Afro-American life. In their laudable attempts to demonstrate that slaves, in spite of their condition, did exercise some agency and did develop their own unique patterns of culture and social organization, the revisionists went to the

opposite extreme, creating what Peter Parish calls a “historiographical hornet’s nest,” which came “dangerously close to writing the slaveholder out of the story completely.”⁸

In their haste to celebrate the resilience and the dignity of slaves, scholars have underestimated the degree to which slaveholders placed families at risk. Taken to its extreme, the search for individual agency shifts to the oppressed the blame for the horrors and inequalities of the institutions that enslaved them. If, for example, we push to its rhetorical endpoint the claim of Berlin and Rowland that slaves “manipulated to their own benefit the slaveowners’ belief that regular family relations made for good business,” then we would arrive at the inaccurate conclusion (as some have) that the half of the U.S. slave population who resided in single-parent households did so as an expression of their African-derived cultural preferences, not because of any structural interference by owners. If we push to its rhetorical endpoint the claim that there was an independent slave economy, then we must ultimately believe that a hungry household was just not exerting enough personal agency at “independent” food cultivation opportunities. Such views are simply not supported by the narratives of those who experienced enslavement. Nowhere in the 600 slave narratives that I have analyzed (within and outside the Mountain South) have I found a single slave who celebrated moments of independence or autonomy in the manner that many academics do. Some slaves did resist, but ex-slaves voiced comprehension that their dangerous, often costly acts of civil disobedience resulted in no long-term systemic change.⁹

The Target Area for This Study

In sharp contrast to previous studies, I will test the dominant paradigm of the slave family against findings about a slaveholding region that was *typical* of the circumstances in which a majority of U.S. slaves were held. That is, I will examine enslavement in a region that was *not* characterized by large plantations and that did *not* specialize in cotton production. Even though more than half of all U.S. slaves lived where there were fewer than four slave families, there is very little research about family life in areas with low black population densities. Despite Crawford’s groundbreaking finding that plantation size was the most significant determinant of quality of slave life, this is the first study of a multistate region of the United States that was characterized by small plantations.¹⁰

This study breaks new ground by investigating the slave family in a slaveholding region that has been ignored by scholars. I will explore the complexities of the Mountain South where slavery flourished amidst a

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Map 1. Where is the Mountain South?

nonslaveholding majority and a large surplus of poor white landless laborers. In geographic and geological terms, the Mountain South (also known as Southern Appalachia) makes up that part of the U.S. Southeast that rose from the floor of the ocean to form the Appalachian Mountain chain 10,000 years ago (see Map 1). In a previous book, I documented the historical integration of this region into the capitalist world system. The incorporation of Southern Appalachia entailed nearly one hundred fifty years of ecological, politico-economic, and cultural change. Beginning in the early 1700s, Southern Appalachia was incorporated as a peripheral fringe of the European colonies located along the southeastern coasts of North America. During the early eighteenth century, the peripheries of the world economy included eastern and southern Europe, Hispanic America, and “the extended Caribbean,” which stretched from

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the Atlantic colonies of North America to northeastern Brazil. As the geographical space for several wars, the Mountain South became one of the major frontier arenas in which England, France, and Spain played out their imperialistic rivalry. Within two decades, the region's indigenous people were integrated into the commodity chains of the world economy to supply slaves to New World plantations and to produce deerskins to fuel western Europe's emergent leather manufacturing. After the American Revolution, Southern Appalachia formed the first western frontier of the new nation, so it was quickly resettled by Euroamericans.¹¹

On a world scale, Southern Appalachia's role was not that different from many other peripheral fringes at the time, including inland mountain sections of several Caribbean islands, Brazil, the West Indies, and central Europe. Incorporation into the capitalist world economy triggered within Southern Appalachia agricultural, livestock, and extractive ventures that were adapted to the region's terrain and ecological peculiarities. Yet those new production regimes paralleled activities that were occurring in other sectors of the New World that had been colonized by western Europe. Fundamentally, the Mountain South was a *provisioning zone*, which supplied raw materials to other agricultural or industrial regions of the world economy.¹²

On the one hand, this inland region exported foodstuffs to other peripheries and semiperipheries of the western hemisphere, those areas that specialized in cash crops for export. The demand for flour, meal, and grain liquors was high in plantation economies (like the North American South and most of Latin America), where labor was budgeted toward the production of staple crops. So it was not accidental that the region's surplus producers concentrated their land and labor resources into the generation of wheat and corn, often in terrain where such production was ecologically unsound. Nor was it a chance occurrence that the Southern Appalachians specialized in the production of livestock, as did inland mountainous sections of other zones of the New World. There was high demand for work animals, meat, animal by-products, and leather in those peripheries and semiperipheries that did not allocate land to less-profitable livestock production.

On the other hand, the Mountain South supplied raw materials to emergent industrial centers in the American Northeast and western Europe. The appetite for Appalachian minerals, timber, cotton, and wool was great in those industrial arenas. In addition, regional exports of manufactured tobacco, grain liquors, and foodstuffs provisioned those sectors of the world economy where industry and towns had displaced farms. By the 1840s, the northeastern United States was specializing in manufacturing and international shipping, and that region's growing

trade/production centers were experiencing food deficits. Consequently, much of the Appalachian surplus received in Southern ports was reexported to the urban-industrial centers of the American Northeast and to foreign plantation zones of the world economy. In return for raw ores and agricultural products, Southern markets – including the mountain counties – consumed nearly one-quarter of the transportable manufacturing output of the North and received a sizeable segment of the redistributed international imports (e.g., coffee, tea) handled by Northeastern capitalists.

Beginning in the 1820s, Great Britain lowered tariffs and eliminated trade barriers to foreign grains. Subsequently, European and colonial markets were opened to North American commodities. Little wonder, then, that flour and processed meats were the country's major nineteenth-century exports, or that more than two-thirds of those exports went to England and France. Outside the country, then, Appalachian commodities flowed to the manufacturing centers of Europe, to the West Indies, to the Caribbean, and to South America. Through far-reaching commodity flows, Appalachian raw materials – in the form of agricultural, livestock, or extractive resources – were exchanged for core manufactures and tropical imports.¹³

Slavery in the American Mountain South

Peripheral capitalism unfolded in Southern Appalachia as a mode of production that combined several forms of land tenure and labor. Because control over land – the primary factor of production – was denied to them, the unpropertied majority of the free population was transformed into an impoverished *semiproletariat*. However, articulation with the world economy did not trigger only the appearance of free wage labor or white tenancy. Capitalist dynamics in the Mountain South also generated a variety of unfree labor mechanisms. To use the words of Phillips, “the process of incorporation . . . involved the subordination of the labor force to the dictates of export-oriented commodity production, and thus occasioned increased coercion of the labor force as commodity production became generalized.” As a result, the region's landholders combined *free* laborers from the ranks of the landless tenants, croppers, waged workers, and poor women with *unfree* laborers from four sources. Legally restricted from free movement in the marketplace, the region's free blacks, Cherokee households, and indentured paupers contributed coerced labor to the region's farms. However, Southern Appalachia's largest group of unfree laborers were nearly three hundred thousand slaves who made up about 15 percent of the region's 1860 population. About three of every ten adults

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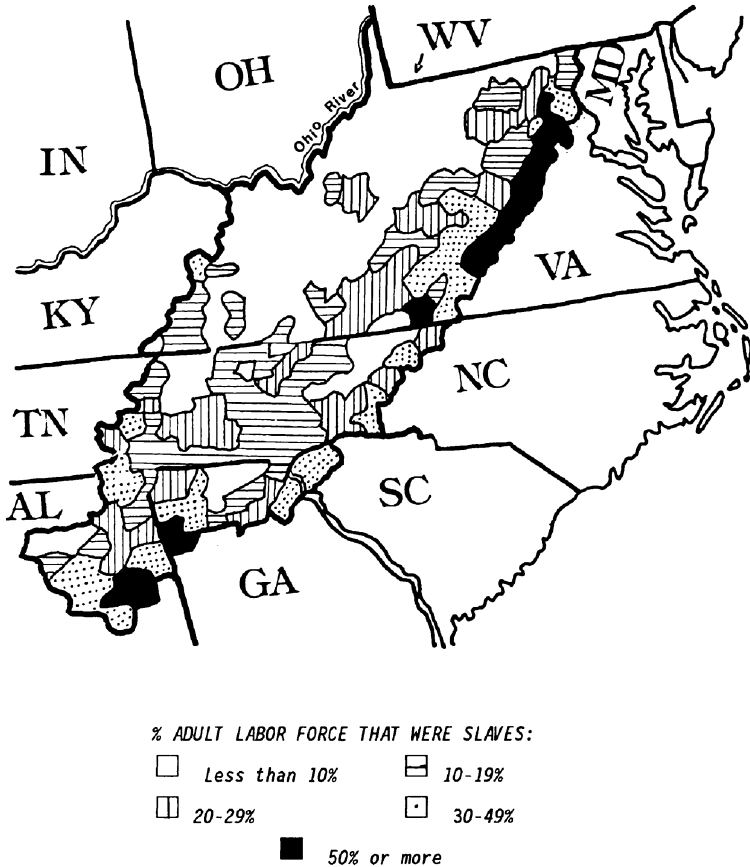
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Map 2. Slaves in the Appalachian labor force, 1860. *Source:* Aggregated from NA, 1860 Census of Population.

in the region's labor force were enslaved (see Map 2). In the Appalachian zones of Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Virginia, enslaved and free blacks made up one-fifth to one-quarter of the population. In the Appalachian zones of Maryland, North Carolina, and Tennessee, blacks accounted for only slightly more than one-tenth of the population. West Virginia and eastern Kentucky had the smallest percentage of blacks in their communities. The lowest incidence of slavery occurred in the *mountainous* Appalachian counties where 1 of every 6.4 laborers was enslaved. At the other end of the spectrum, the *ridge-valley* counties utilized unfree laborers more than twice as often as they were used in the zones with the most rugged terrain.¹⁴

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Consisting of 215 mountainous and hilly counties in nine states, this large land area was characterized in the antebellum period by nonslaveholding farms and enterprises, a large landless white labor force, small plantations, mixed farming, and extractive industry. Berlin's conceptualization of a *slave society* caused us to predict that slavery did not dominate the Mountain South because there were not large numbers of plantations or slaves. I contested that assumption in a previous book. A region was not buffered from the political, economic, and social impacts of enslavement simply because it was characterized by low black population density and small slaveholdings. On the one hand, a Lower South farm owner was twelve times more likely to run a large plantation than his Appalachian counterpart. On the other hand, Mountain slaveholders monopolized a much higher proportion of their communities' land and wealth than did Lower South planters. This region was linked by rivers and roads to the coastal trade centers of the Tidewater and the Lower South, and it lay at the geographical heart of antebellum trade routes that connected the South to the North and the Upper South to the Lower South. Consequently, two major slave-trading networks cut directly through the region and became major conduits for overland and river transport of slave coffles (see Map 3 in Chapter 1). No wonder, then that the political economies of all Mountain South counties were in the grip of slavery. Even in counties with the smallest slave populations (including those in Kentucky and West Virginia), slaveholders owned a disproportionate share of wealth and land, held a majority of important state and county offices, and championed proslavery agendas rather than the social and economic interests of the nonslaveholders in their own communities. Moreover, public policies were enacted by state legislatures controlled and manipulated by slaveholders. In addition, every Appalachian county and every white citizen benefited in certain ways and/or was damaged by enslavement, even when there were few black laborers in the county and even when the individual citizen owned no slaves. For example, slaves were disproportionately represented among hired laborers in the public services and transportation systems that benefited whites of all Appalachian counties, including those with small slave populations. Furthermore, the lives of poor white Appalachians were made more miserable because slaveholders restricted economic diversification, fostered ideological demeaning of the poor, expanded tenancy and sharecropping, and prevented emergence of free public education. Moreover, this region was more politically divided over slavery than any other section of the South. Black and poor white Appalachians were disproportionately represented among the soldiers and military laborers for the Union Army. The Civil War tore apart Appalachian communities, so that the Mountain