

BORN IN BONDAGE

Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South



MARIE JENKINS SCHWARTZ

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the Antebellum South*



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Plantation Street or Settlement, by Alice R. H. Smith, ca. 1930-1947. Watercolor on paper (37.09.02). Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association.

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Former slaves Laura Clark (1937) and Ben Horry (ca. 1938), United States Works Progress Administration. Photographs. Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division.

EDITORIAL NOTE

QUOTATIONS have been reproduced verbatim from sources—including any unusual spellings—without employing the notation “*sic.*” Readers should be aware that people who interviewed former slaves, often decades after the end of slavery, frequently and deliberately inserted misspellings into slave narratives such as those published under the editorship of George P. Rawick as *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Consequently, the presence of unusual spelling in quotations attributed to many former slaves and to a limited number of former owners should not be taken to reflect the inability of slaves or slaveholders to spell by modern standards.

Throughout this book I refer to children in second references by their first names, in contrast to adults, who are referred to in second references by surnames. Exceptions occur only when the practice would create confusion, as in the case of spouses using the same surname, or when surnames do not appear in the sources. Thus when I refer to adult slaves in second references by first names only, I do not mean to imply that the slaves had no surnames.

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INTRODUCTION

“**L**ORD, I done been threw somepin’,” marveled Caroline Hunter of Virginia, as she related her experiences under slavery to an agent of the United States government collecting memories from former slaves in 1937. Though seventy-two years had passed since the Civil War had brought about the end of slavery, tears filled Hunter’s eyes as she recalled a childhood of hardships endured. “During slavery it seemed lak yo’ chillun b’long to ev’ybody but you,” she lamented.¹ Mothers and fathers alike found their roles circumscribed by owners who considered it their right—even their duty—to oversee a slave child’s upbringing.

Slaveholders interjected themselves between parent and child by interfering in all aspects of family life. Owners disciplined children, forcibly separated them from families, and dictated the type of work they should perform, according to Hunter. “Many a day my ole mama has stood by an’ watched massa beat her chillun ’till dey bled an’ she couldn’ open her mouf,” she recalled. Her father had been driven from his family by the owner’s lash. A free man, he had left the area to join the army rather than

endure beatings imposed by his wife's owner. Hunter's brothers fared no better. All three were badly battered, then sold following their recovery. The abuse Hunter bore included the trauma of watching her mother strapped "to a bench or box an' beat . . . wid a wooden paddle while she was naked." Before she reached maturity, Hunter "was put out in de fiel's to wuk all day" at exacting tasks. She dreamed of escape and learned to interpret everyday sights and sounds as signs of trouble to come: a turtledove's whistle was thought to warn of an impending beating. Hunter knew her childhood experiences would shock her interlocutor from the government's Works Progress Administration, who had no firsthand knowledge of slavery. "It's hard to believe dat dese things did happen, but dey did," she attested.

Once freed, some former slaves recalled a point in time—"a traumatic moment" in the words of the historian Willie Lee Rose—when they became subject to their owners' discipline and realized they belonged to someone other than their parents. For Jacob Stroyer, this moment of perception occurred while he was learning to ride his owner's racing horses. The instructor's reliance on corporal punishment as a training tactic prompted the would-be jockey to seek help from his parents. To the boy's astonishment, neither could protect him from the capriciousness of his teacher. Indeed, his father merely advised Jacob to "be a good boy." The moment stood apart in Stroyer's memory, and he later recorded the incident and his reaction in writing. Many other former slaves did the same, although none so vividly perhaps as Stroyer.²

One can sympathize with young Jacob, who had stepped beyond a circle of family and friends to confront the slaveholder's power to punish at will—exercised in this case through the riding instructor. But in truth Jacob fared better than many slave children, who endured slavery as a series of traumatic moments from birth. Caroline Hunter recalled no happy time before she realized the fact of her enslavement. Neither did Ishrael Massie, who throughout childhood witnessed and endured firsthand many horrors, including the forced parting of families and punishments so harsh they left men unable to stand—or worse. Members of Massie's own family were sold to different planters, and he once saw a man burned alive. Yet Massie and Hunter were fortunate in one sense: both escaped an untimely death—the ultimate horror of a childhood in slavery. Many of the boys and girls born in bondage never grew to adulthood, because infant and child mortality rates among slaves in the antebellum South were high. This demographic

fact alone confirms Massie's judgment that antebellum slavery days were "terrible, terrible times."³

By law, slaveholders determined the conditions under which bonded children grew to adulthood. Slave parents as a result of their servitude forfeited the right to shape their sons' and daughters' lives. Slaveowners considered themselves the rightful heads of plantation households, responsible for directing the lives of all members whether black or white. But the owners were unwilling to carry out the work of child rearing themselves and left these tasks to the slaves, content to fulfill the role of supervisor. And neither masters nor mistresses could be everywhere at once, which placed slaves in charge of children to a greater or lesser degree depending in part on the individual owner's level of interest.

If slaveholders were willing to leave some child-rearing tasks in the hands of parents, slaves gladly accepted the responsibility. Indeed, they resented any usurpation of parental rights by slaveholders, and they advanced their rights in ways that were subtle but determined. The willingness of slaves to protest conditions of servitude that deprived them of parenting roles influenced owners to allow women and men time for their families. Owners relied on slaves to cooperate at the work site and worried that they might rebel against working in the conventional manner if provoked. Slaveholders held the power to force slaves to work through the use (or the threat) of harsh punishment, but in fact slaves did not always react to brutality by working harder at assigned tasks. Resentful slaves sometimes became truants, slowed the pace of work, or performed tasks poorly. Their actions could result in financial disaster for plantation owners, especially if they affected planting or harvesting of crops intended for market. If miserable and desperate enough, slaves might strike back for perceived wrongs by destroying property or inflicting harm on members of the owning class. Consequently, slaveowners hesitated to roil relations in the slave quarter by refusing parents of young children—particularly mothers, who were thought more suited to the task of child rearing than fathers—time for their youngsters.

Allowing parents to attend to slave children, even at the expense of the marketable crop, held additional advantages for owners, who could increase their wealth and ensure the perpetuation of the southern slave system through the reproduction of the labor force. Well-nurtured children were more likely to survive to adulthood and become working hands than neglected ones. But the decision whether to allocate the work of slaves—par-

ticularly that of women—to crop or child posed a dilemma. On the one hand, owners wanted as many slaves as possible working in the field or at other productive labor. On the other, they wanted to see their wealth increase as slave populations expanded. One strategy promised immediate profits; the other assured long-term gain. Many owners held conflicting opinions about the best course of action, and slaves seized on such indecision to gain opportunities to care for their children according to their own notions of proper parenting.

Slaves struggled to secure time for their families with varying degrees of success. They were seldom able to overcome the constraints imposed by enslavement; the long hours consumed by their owners' work left them little opportunity for nurturing children and completing household tasks. That many slaves failed to achieve independence in family matters or even to keep their families together should not obscure the successes they experienced, however. Even the enslaved parents of Caroline Hunter and Ishrael Massie managed to create some form of family life for their children, even if it was truncated and fraught with tension. Through their attempts to shape childhood according to their own ideals, slaves created a world of their own making and refuted the slaveholder's belief that the babies slave women bore in bondage belonged to no one but the owners.

The expansion of the nation in its early years and a congressional prohibition effective in 1808 against participation in the international slave trade persuaded slaveholders to pay increased attention to nurturing slave children. By the 1820s, cotton planting had become profitable in a wide stretch of the South previously unavailable for settlement. Planters and would-be planters moved westward in large numbers to grow the fiber for sale in Europe and New England, where the textile industry was burgeoning. This extension of the Cotton Kingdom called for new laborers. Following the ban on slave importation, some smuggling of slaves occurred, but never in numbers sufficient to meet labor needs. The only practical way to increase the pool of slave laborers was through the birth of children. Without children born in bondage, the South could not continue as a slave society.

Well before Congress voted to end the international slave trade, slave women had been giving birth to enough children to increase the slave population. As early as 1720, the number of children born began exceeding the number of slaves who died in the Chesapeake (colonial Virginia and Maryland); by the 1750s, the same could be said for coastal South Carolina.⁴ Indeed, the demography of slavery made possible the ending of the international slave trade as of 1808 without major protest from the slave states

because the population trend helped to ease the minds of slaveholders about the future profitability of southern agriculture and the continuation of slavery through subsequent generations.

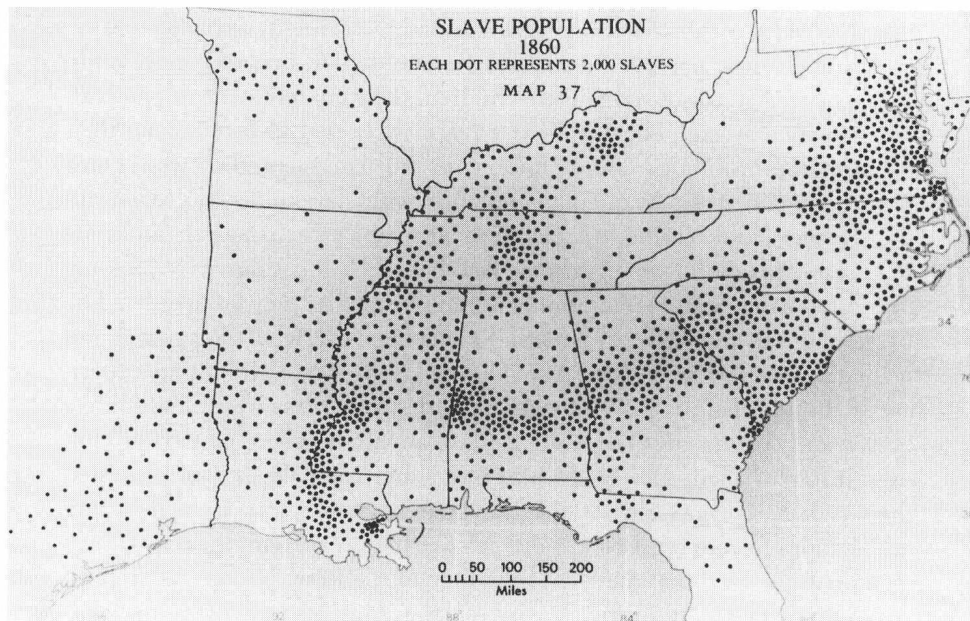
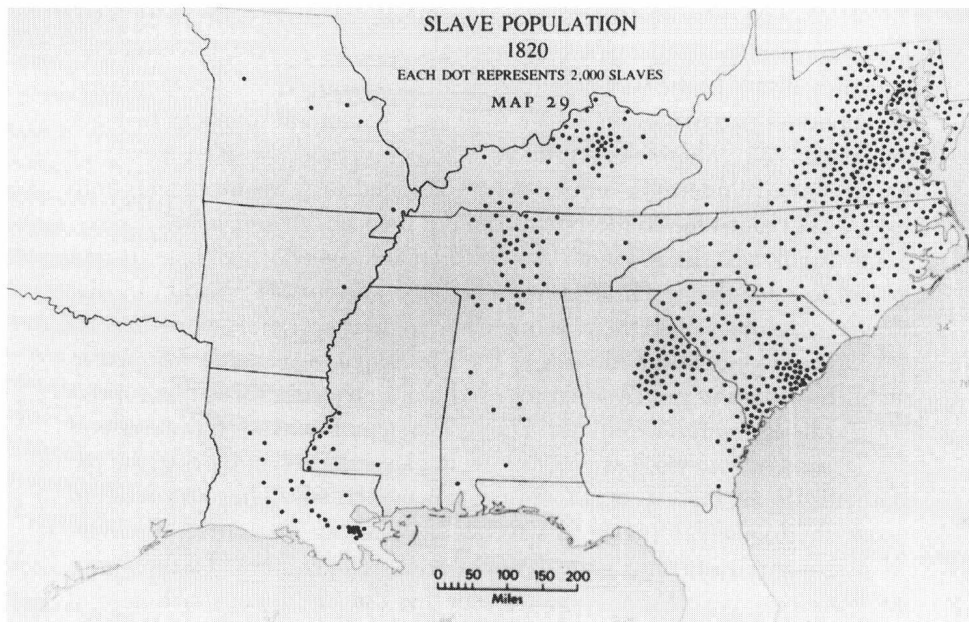
The same developments that reassured slaveholders heightened anxiety among slaves, who feared the dissolution of family ties. The planters' inability to import "salt-water" slaves, coupled with a demand for more laborers in the cotton-producing South, threatened slave families, whose members could be bought and sold from one area of the country to another. By relocating slaves from areas where their labor was not needed to regions where the economy was booming, planters could make plantation slavery more efficient—but at the price of human misery. The matter was of grave consequence for slaves. Slave parents loved their children and despaired at their loss. Moreover, the family served as an important locus of resistance to the dehumanization that slavery entailed. The presence of sons and daughters on the plantation or farm affirmed the slaves' humanity, and caring for children offered welcome respite from the harsh realities of slave life. Creating and nurturing families ensured the continuation of a people who shared a sense of identity grounded in a common past and in the everyday experience of enslavement. When they joined together to raise children, slaves brought profit to their owners, who watched their slaveholdings multiply, but they also benefited themselves by creating a cultural space apart from that inhabited by the owning class. Through families, children learned to judge bondage, and the men and women who enslaved them, in terms other than those employed to justify the institution. By wielding superior power, slaveholders might force slaves to accommodate their desire for services, but they could not compel slaves to accept slavery as a morally and ethically legitimate institution. As long as slaves maintained parental prerogatives, they held an effective means of countering their owners' attempts to impose upon slave children their ideas of a proper social order. When owners bought, sold, or relocated slaves, they scattered slaves and broke kinship ties, threatening the source of the slave's power to resist psychological domination. Slaves responded by developing strategies to avoid family separations or—when that proved impossible—to postpone them or at least to ensure that their children developed caring relationships and received the material goods necessary for survival in their parents' absence.

The significance of children was shown by their numbers in the antebellum years, defined in this study as the period from 1820 to 1860. More than two-fifths of antebellum slaves were younger than age fifteen; one-third were younger than age ten. The large numbers of slave children living

within the South's borders contrasted with trends in other parts of the Americas. In Latin American and Caribbean slave societies, slave deaths generally exceeded births, and planters continued to enslave and import Africans to sustain their slave systems until late in the development of the plantation regime. In contrast, the slave population in the United States was largely native-born. Only in America did large numbers of slaves learn from birth to endure the conditions of oppression associated with chattel bondage. By 1860, the United States had achieved the dubious distinction of becoming the largest slaveholding nation in the world, with more than four million slaves.⁵

The phenomenal growth of an indigenous slave population in the United States appears to have resulted from many factors, some beyond human control. A greater proportion of women in the population helped ensure a large number of births, and a relatively healthy climate and the absence of tropical disease helped children survive. Work regimens associated with crops grown in the United States appear to have been less demanding than those for crops cultivated in other parts of the Americas. In addition, more limited opportunities for slaves to achieve freedom in the United States, the closing of the international slave trade, and the ability of southern planters to sell "home-grown" slaves for profit played a role. Nevertheless, masters and mistresses preferred to interpret the numbers as evidence that United States slaveholders treated slaves better than owners elsewhere. At a time when abolitionists in the North portrayed slaveholders as cruel and despotic, slaveholders convinced themselves that they were the benefactors of slaves, caretakers who assumed the burden of providing for an inferior people. Aware of abolitionism's growing appeal throughout the Atlantic world, antebellum southern slaveowners were eager to demonstrate that the form of slavery they imposed on people of African descent benefited the enslaved as well as the enslaver. They bragged of their own slaves' supposed contentedness and argued that bondage in the United States was more humane, less cruel, than it was on the sugar, coffee, and cocoa plantations of Latin America and the Caribbean, where bonded children did not thrive. Indeed, they believed that southern slaves were better fed, clothed, and housed than many free laborers in the North.⁶

Slave parents were determined that their children would endure and a people persist. When southern planters boasted that they treated their slaves better than any other working people, free or slave, slaves demanded that they live up to the claim. To ensure their children's survival, slaves enlisted the sympathies of those they feared, calling upon owners to act on the



Slave population in 1820 and 1860. Reprinted by permission of Louisiana State University Press from *Atlas of Antebellum Southern Agriculture* by Sam Bowers Hilliard. Copyright © 1984 by Louisiana State University Press.

human impulse to care for children too young to survive on their own. Slaveowners responded to parents' appeals, but not consistently and certainly not always in the way parents hoped. Consequently, slaves employed time-honored patterns of resistance to change plantation practices that put children at risk. They feigned illness or incompetence, worked slowly or not at all, and undertook other actions designed to pressure owners into making provisions for children that ensured their health and safety.

This book tells the story of slave children and the efforts of parents and owners to raise them. The children occupied an unusual position in that two sets of adults valued them, laying claim to their economic worth and attaching an emotional significance to their presence. Slaveholders hoped to establish plantation policies that fostered children's survival without interfering with agricultural routines. They took steps to ensure that boys and girls learned how to work as well as how to play subservient parts in the paternalistic drama that passed for southern race relations. They also acted to secure children's faithfulness to slaveowning families. Of course, the owners' personal relationships with slave children were tempered by their concern for crops, but their attention to securing the emotional attachment of the youths cannot be discounted. Owners disciplined children and insisted that they learn to labor, but they also courted their fidelity and affection.

Although slave parents encouraged slaveholders to behave benevolently, even paternalistically, toward their children, their commitment to paternalism was incomplete. There existed a real danger that in recognizing their owners' responsibilities toward their sons and daughters, they would surrender their own. Consequently, they vied with slaveholders to retain authority over child rearing, even as they pleaded for their masters and mistresses to provide for the children's well-being. Negotiations were ongoing because the needs and abilities of children changed as they grew older. The bargaining was not between equals. The owners' overwhelming power and willingness to use force gave them the ability to shape childhood experiences through fiat, direct intervention, and subtle pressures. Slaveholders by law and custom could separate families at will by selling parents or children if they wished; they could beat into submission slaves who protested their orders. Owners also could grant parents time away from field and other duties to care for their families, or they could keep mothers or fathers so long in the field that they had little time to spend with their children. In addition, owners could provide children special treats and favors that parents could not replicate.

Slaves countered this power through subtle influences, prolonged nego-

tiations, and direct confrontation. For slaves, more was at stake than simply winning the children's affection, although this too was a matter of considerable importance. Slave children contributed to the welfare of their families and communities through work, as did most other nineteenth-century children, and slave parents hoped to keep slaveholders from appropriating this work for their own benefit. Parents also hoped to keep children from tattling, since slaves relied on one another to remain silent about what went on in the slave living quarters or at least to be discreet in their everyday encounters with whites.

As they grew, children found themselves torn between the demands of owners and those of parents. There was a world in which the lines of authority were murky. They needed to please owners; a wrong deed, word, or look could bring harsh consequences. But they also needed to please parents and other slaves upon whom they depended for survival. Children under these circumstances could find themselves in a precarious position, needing to understand and to separate the requirements of owners and parents. Mattie Gilmore's experience illustrates the slave child's dilemma. Her mistress, who suspected theft of household goods by other slaves, held the young Alabama girl responsible for watching any slaves who entered the owner's home (or "big house," as it was sometimes called) and reporting any acts of theft that she witnessed. Mattie understood the consequence of not following her mistress's order: a whipping by the mistress. Unfortunately for Mattie, her stepmother expected the child to remain silent if she saw slaves appropriating the property of her owners. When Mattie conformed to her mistress's order and tattled, the stepmother whipped the child herself. Lewis Jenkins as a young boy confronted a situation even more ambiguous than Mattie's. When he was seven or eight, his owning family appointed him to the position of "watchman," which entailed spying among the slaves. The cook put an end to his sleuthing by threatening violence should he report her activities. Jenkins later maintained that he could "see nothin', tell nothin'" after receiving the warning. The boy, whose situation was complicated by his mixed race, lived an unusual and especially perilous existence.⁷ The stories of Mattie Gilmore and Lewis Jenkins—and those of Carolyn Hunter, Ishrael Massie, Jacob Stroyer, and other children—reveal much about how people experienced enslavement.

ONLY since the civil rights era have historians focused on the everyday experiences of the enslaved. During the first half of the twentieth century,

studies of slavery in antebellum America tended to ignore the slave's humanity and to focus on how slaves were treated and whether slavery was profitable. The ideas of U. B. Phillips (*American Negro Slavery*, 1918) dominated thinking about slavery and slave life into the 1950s. Phillips saw southern slaves as a racially inferior people who benefited from being part of a patriarchal system and whose labor was neither profitable nor efficient. As the civil rights movement gained ground in the 1950s and 1960s, historians began to explore the nation's past in an effort to explain the origins of contemporary racial problems and the persistence of poverty among African Americans. Enslavement seemed a possible explanation for both, and scholars soon discovered flaws in Phillips's analysis. Slaves had been victims, not beneficiaries, of a labor system that profited owners but not workers. This idea influenced the thinking behind proposed changes in public policy intended to eradicate modern social ills, especially poverty. As Assistant Secretary of Labor in the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, Daniel Patrick Moynihan issued a report (*The Negro Family*, 1965) that purported to explain the plight of the nation's poor black families, alleging that African American families were entangled in a cultural pathology born of past enslavement.⁸

Among scholars, the debate shifted to consider how enslavement had affected the men and women who experienced it. Stanley M. Elkins (*Slavery*, 1959) believed that half of all plantation slaves were infantile "Sambos," a caricature with which southern slaveholders would have felt comfortable. His influential work painted adult slaves as childlike, docile, dependent, and irresponsible—the psychological victims of repression. The slave personality had succumbed to the oppression of chattel bondage, he concluded. Other historians soon called into question his characterization of slaves, but out of Elkins's work, the slave emerged as a historical actor. According to scholars such as John W. Blassingame (*The Slave Community*, 1972), Eugene D. Genovese (*Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 1974), George P. Rawick (*From Sundown to Sunup*, 1972), and Herbert G. Gutman (*The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 1976), slaves were not merely objects of benevolence or victims of oppression but helped to shape life in the South. Local studies, such as Charles Joyner's investigation of slave life along the Waccamaw River in South Carolina (*Down by the Riverside*, 1984), confirmed the participation of slaves in the creation of southern culture.⁹

Although a new generation of scholars agreed that slaves had been actors on the southern stage, they disputed the nature of power and the ability of slaves to resist the cultural domination that enslavement implied. For some