

Slave Women's Lives

- Three areas of concern
 - work,
 - family life, and
 - resistance.



Frontispiece used for Lydia Maria Child's *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833)

- Remember also:
 - slaves live in two worlds
 - the master's world (public)
 - and the slave community (private)

Slave Cabin and Occupants Near Eufala, Barbour County, Alabama (Library of Congress)



I – Work

- Slave system defined Africans as chattel
- Women, like men, were viewed as profitable "units of labor"
 - So as workers, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned.
 - "The slave woman was first a full-time worker for her master, and only incidentally wife, mother, homemaker."



Work

- Common assumption that the typical female slave was a house servant (cook, maid, "mammy"), but this is wrong.
- Majority of slave women, like slave men, were agricultural workers.
- Around mid-19th century, 7 out of 8 slaves, male and female alike, were field workers.



Women carrying cotton in the fields

GANG OF 25 SEA ISLAND COTTON AND RICE NEGROES.

By LOUIS D. DE SAUSSURE.

On THURSDAY the 25th Sept., 1852, at 11 o'clock, A.M., will be sold at RYAN'S MARKET, in Chalmers Street, in the City of Charleston,

A prime gang of 25 Negroes, accustomed to the culture of Sea Island Cotton and Rice.

CONDITIONS.—One-half Cash, balance by Bond, bearing interest from day of sale, payable in one and two years, to be secured by a mortgage of the negroes and approved personal security. Purchasers to pay for papers.

No.	Age	Capacity	No.	Age	Capacity
1	Albion	22 Carpenter	24	Hannah	40 Cook
2	Mary Ann	18 Field hand, prime	25	Calypso	22 Prime field hand,
3	London	16	3-18 Nancy	20 Prime field hand, also	
4	Almon	25 Prime field hand			
5	Jack	24 Prime field hand	19	Hannah	14 Prime field hand.
6	Caroline	18	20	James	13 Slight defect in knee
7	Simon	17	21	Richard	9 From a broken leg.
8	Stephen	Infant	22	Thomas	6
			23	John	5
9	David	45 Field hand, and prime	1-21	Agnes	49 Prime field hand.
10	Philo	32 Field hand			
11	WILL	9	1-25	Thomas	29 Prime field hand.
12	David	4			
13	Margaret	4			
14	Delia	2			
15-18	Hannah	2 infants.			

Note the occupation/skills listed on this slave auction sheet

Field Workers

- Field workers worked from "can to can" – when they could see the sun to when they could no longer.
- They rose before dawn to prepare meals, feed livestock, and get to the field before the blowing of the horn.



Field Work

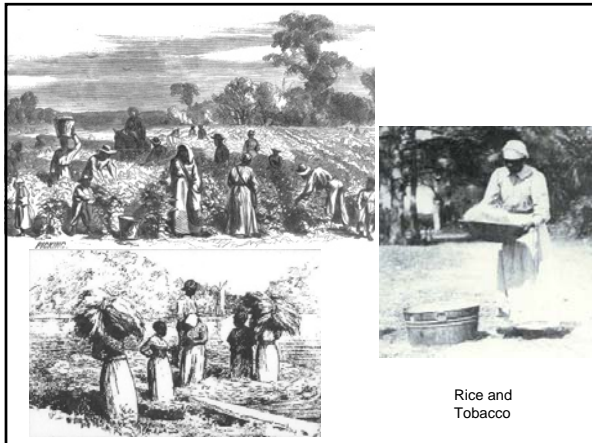
- Depending on the season or crop, laborers would
 - grub and hoe the field
 - pick worms off plants
 - build fences
 - cut down trees
 - construct dikes
 - pull fodder
 - clear new land
 - plant rice, sugar, tobacco, cotton, or corn,
 - then harvest it.



Rice -- Carolinas



Cotton



Rice and Tobacco

After Can't

- After sunset, slaves again cared for livestock, put away tools, cooked meals and did what had to be done in their own homes and community before the horn sounded bedtime.
- During cotton picking season, laborers often ginned cotton until 9 or so at night, and on sugar plantations, they boiled sugar cane until late, often working 18 hours a day during harvest.



Household Slaves

- Household slaves served as
 - personal servants of master and mistress,
 - as domestic help,
 - as producers of the soap, clothes, and food used by everyone on the plantation,
 - as nursemaids, and "mammies."



Household Slaves

- House slaves were the elite, chosen for manners and looks, and were often the children of the master or his sons.



House Slaves

- House work physically easier than field work
- But they were on call 24 hours a day
- Worked under direct eye of master or mistress
- Lacked support of their community
 - Usually didn't live in slave quarters
- This made them more vulnerable
- Some slaves spoke of preferring field work to house work for this reason.



Other Slave Labor

- Beyond the Field and House...
 - Slaves also were source of industrial labor when South tried to industrialize
 - By 1860, some 5,000 slaves worked in cotton and woolen mills, the majority of them women.
- Slave women worked in heavy industry
 - sugar refining, rice milling, lumbering, tobacco processing.
 - They worked in founderies, at saltworks, and mines.
 - Substituted as beasts of burden in southern mines, pulling carts, putting ore into crushers and furnaces.
 - Women helped build levees in Louisiana, lay track for southern railroads, and were 50% of the workers who dug the North Carolina Santee Canal.

Slave Women in Industry

- A traveler observing a slave crew in Mississippi described the group as including "forty of the largest and strongest women I ever saw together; they were all in a simple uniform dress of bluish check stuff; their legs and feet were bare; they carried themselves loftily, each having a hoe over the shoulder, and walking with a free, powerful swing like *chasseurs* on the march."



Industrial Slaves

- Industrial slaves worked 6 days a week, and 7 was not uncommon.
- They worked 12-16 hours a day.
- Food was more of a problem than it was for agricultural workers. Such slaves had no small gardens, no table scraps, little opportunity to hunt or fish, no possibility of stealing food from kitchen or storehouse.
- Clothing, housing, and medical care were poor.
- Many died from pneumonia, typhus, tuberculosis, scarlet fever, diphtheria, dysentery, and childbirth – not so much from giving birth as from being on wards with these other illnesses.

Industrial Slavery

- The one advantage of such servitude was the system of "overwork" or "overtime"
- If a slave finished the days assignment, she could earn a small amount by continued production.
- Industrial slaves used "overtime" and "overwork" wages to purchase their freedom and the freedom of their families
- Thus industrial work could be made attractive to slaves.

- The majority of the urban slave population was female.
- They worked as chambermaids, laundresses, seamstresses, hairdressers, nursemaids, and vendors under contracts paid directly to their masters.

Urban Slavery

**10 LIKELY and VALUABLE
SLAVES
AT AUCTION.**

**On THURSDAY the 24th inst.
WE WILL SELL,**
*In front of our Office, without any kind of bid or reserve for cash,
AT 11 O'CLOCK,*

10 AS LIKELY NEGROES
As any ever offered in this market; among them is a man who is a superior Cook and House Servant, and a girl about 17 years old, a first rate House Servant, and an excellent seamstress.

BROOKE & HUBBARD,
Auctioneers.

Wednesday, July 23, 1853.

II – Family Life

- Historians have created perception that slave families were matriarchal
- Birth records on many plantations omitted the names of fathers, listing only children's mothers.
 - Because slaveholders kept records in ledgers which were accounts of property
 - and throughout the South, state legislatures adopted the principal of *partus sequitur ventrem* – the child follows the condition of the mother.
 - If mother was slave, so were children.
 - But fathers' names often recorded in family Bibles as members of families and as heads of families.

Slave Family Values

- Despite the forcible disruption of the family through masters' sale of family members, historians have uncovered evidence of thriving slave family life during slavery.
- Among slaves, the bonds of love and affection, the cultural norms governing family relations, and the overpowering desire to remain together survived even the most violent disruptions.

Slave Family Structures

- Slave family characterized by the active involvement of wife, husband, children, and frequently other relatives as well.



Slave Family, Beaufort, South Carolina, 1862

Slave Monogamy

- Slavery as a system made slave monogamy difficult
- Masters refused to respect the boundaries of marriage
 - And assert their rights to "increase the stock of slaves" by whatever means they chose
- This meant that masters often forced marriages between slaves but also included rape by male masters.
- Slaves had their own ideas of marital monogamy



THE BROOKSTICK WEDDING.

Serial Monogamy

- Sale and death of spouses might result in the end of a marriage
- 1 in 3 women had children by different fathers.
- Of these, some showed a pattern suggesting that
 - a second union was established after the first was broken
 - by the death of husband
 - or sale of the husband.
- Of that 1/3, most demonstrated a pattern where
 - a woman had a single child by one man,
 - several years passed,
 - and then all her other children were by a second man.
- This pattern suggests that the first relationship did not work out (or was forced upon her by the master), but that a second (and permanent) union followed.
- Most women had all their children by one father.

Fragile Families

- Some slave families were fragile, because masters could sell children away from parents, and wives away from husbands
- Slaves saw this as worse than death
- Historian Orlando Patterson has termed this “Social Death”



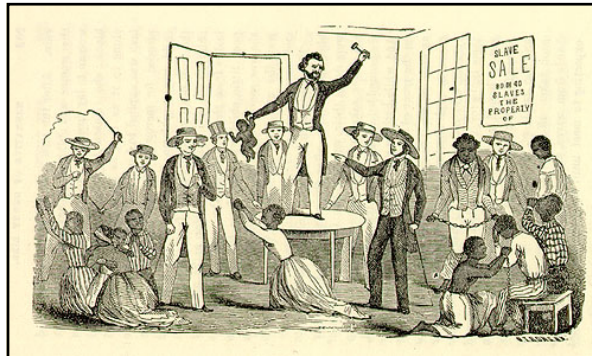
1838.] JUNE—SIXTH MONTH. [30 days.



Ev'n her babes, so dear, so young,
And so treasured in her heart,
That the cords which round them clung,
Seemed its life, its dearest part;

These, ev'n these, were torn away!
These, that, when all else were gone,
Cheered the heart with one bright ray,
That still made its pulse beat on!

Abolitionists found this breaking of family bonds a powerful argument against the institution of slavery.



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Slave Men and Their Families

- Austin Steward's narrative recounted the first time he saw a white man beat his sister:
 - “The God of heaven only knows the conflict of feeling I then endured; He alone witnessed the tumult of my heart, at this outrage of manhood and kindred affection. God knows that my will was good enough to have wrung his neck; or to have drained from his heartless system its last drop of blood! And yet I was obliged to turn a deaf ear to her cries for assistance, which to this day ring in my ears. Strong & athletic as I was, no hand of mine could be raised in her defence, but at the peril of both our lives.”

Gender and Slave Families

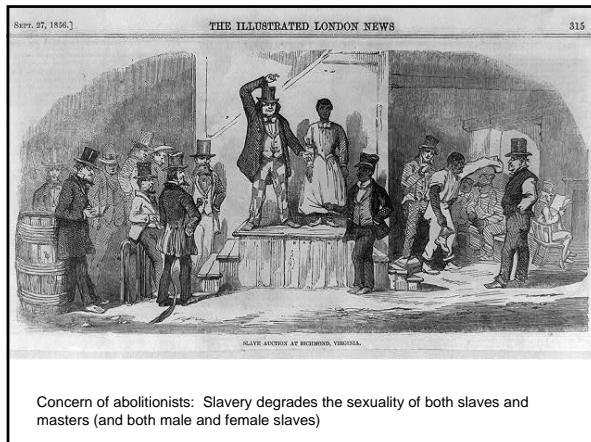
- Mary Boykin Chesnut, *Diary from Dixie*, entry of 18 March 1861:
- “...[L]ike the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives & their concubines, & the Mulattos one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children- & every lady tells you who is the father of all the Mulatto children in everybody's household, but those in her own, she seems to think drop from the clouds or pretends so to think-.”



Mary Boykin Chesnut

Gender and Slave Families

- Slave mothers who accept children fathered by masters are constructed as “loose” by masters (although not by other slaves)
- And this justifies new assaults on them as “fallen women.”
- Fathers who cannot act to prevent their wives from being assaulted or their children from being sold or beaten are constructed as “weak” and “unmanly”
- Patriarchy justifies slavery, as master is the “better man”



Slavery “disrupts male role”

- Historians have emphasized the impact of this as a “disruption of the male role”:
 - The mother's role “loomed far larger for the slave child than did that of the father. She controlled those few activities – household care, preparation of food and rearing of children – that were left to the slave family.”
 - “The typical slave family was matriarchal in form, for the mother's role was far more important than the father's. In so far as the family did have significance, it involved responsibilities which traditionally belonged to women, such as cleaning house, preparing food, making clothes, and raising children. The husband was at most his wife's assistant, her companion and her sex partner. He was often thought of as her possession (Mary's Tom), as was the cabin in which they lived.”

But Slave families were African families, too...

- Many of the cultures from which slaves were stolen were matrilinear and matrifocal
- Women had a more equal status in these cultures that looked like superiority to patriarchal Europeans (masters).
 - “What has usually been viewed as a debilitating female supremacy was in fact a closer approximation to a healthy sexual equality than was possible for whites and perhaps even for postbellum blacks.”
- Male slaves were devoted to their families, and were still co-heads of their families
 - Even though masters did their best to “culturally emasculate” slave men

Why do slave women look so powerful to masters?

- Masters assume that all domestic work is women's work
- Masters assume “separate spheres” – that domestic concerns are all controlled by women.
- And for slaves, domestic life took on an exaggerated importance in the social lives of the slave community
 - it provided them with the only space where they could truly experience themselves as human beings.

Slave Domesticity

- In the slave quarters, slaves could choose their own ways to work
 - And accommodate elderly or frail
- And this economy was a family economy
- Women cooked and sewed, men did gardening and hunting.
- Both men and women grew food crops and took care of children
 - Who must have been very dear indeed.
- Neither gender's work was an inferior kind of labor, as both were necessary for survival

III – Resistance and Rebellion

- Slave women were very resistant to the control of masters
- They took advantage of masters' “chivalry” and greed (women slaves were more costly) to find room for this resistance, both indirectly and directly
- And because slave men risked more in direct action, women were more likely to act directly on behalf of their family and community than men could

Beginnings

- Masters learned early that women were most likely to run away
- Perhaps because of the double indignity of servitude and sexual vulnerability
- So women were routinely branded upon arrival in the US

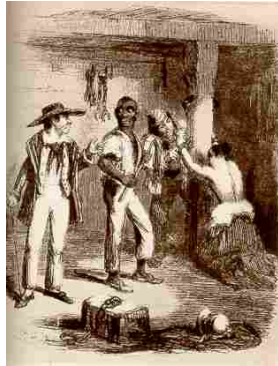


Women's Resistance

- Slave women aggressively challenged the institution of slavery.
- They not only resisted the sexual assaults of white men and defended their families,
- they also participated in work stoppages and revolts.
- They poisoned their masters,
- committed acts of sabotage,
- joined maroon communities,
- and fled northward.

Frederick Douglass's Accounts

- Reflecting on his childhood, recalled the floggings and torture of many rebellious women.
- His cousin was horribly beaten as she unsuccessfully resisted an overseer's sexual attack.



- One of Douglass' most vivid descriptions of the ruthless punishments reserved for such slaves involved that of a young woman named Nellie, who was whipped for the offense of "impudence":

"There were times when she seemed likely to get the better of the brute, but he finally overpowered her and succeeded in getting her arms tied to the tree towards which he had been dragging her. The victim was now at the mercy of his merciless lash. . . .The cries of the now helpless woman, while undergoing the terrible infliction, were mingled with the hoarse curses of the overseer and the wild cries of her distracted children. When the poor woman was untied, her back was covered with blood. She was whipped, terribly whipped, but she was not subdued and continued to denounce the overseer and to pour upon him every vile epithet of which she could think."



THE FLOGGING OF FEMALES.
"What!—the whip on Women's shivering flesh!"

— The overseer never attempted to whip Nellie again.

Women used violence and ran away

- One Kentucky planter described his slave Sarah as the "biggest devil that ever lived.... Having poisoned a studhorse and set a stable on fire, (she) also burned General R. Williams stable and stock yard with 7 horses and other property to the value



Effects of Punishment, by Burning by Mistress, Richmond, Virginia.
"Handcuffed and not

Maroonage

- In maroon communities, women fought on equal terms with men.
- They were in the Florida fort which housed 300 escaped slaves, and when attacked, fought in the ten day battle which killed 250 of them.
- In Mobile, Alabama, in 1827, they fought too, "like Spartans."

Escape

- Many families set out to escape together



Escapes

- Numerous women fled slavery for the North.
- Many were successful, though many more were captured.
- One of the most dramatic escapes:
 - Ann Wood, young slave woman, directed a wagonload of armed boys and girls as they ran for freedom.
 - They set out on Christmas eve, 1855, and engaged in a shoot-out with slave catchers.
 - Two were killed, but the rest made their way North.



Illustration from William Still, *The Underground Rail Road* (1872)

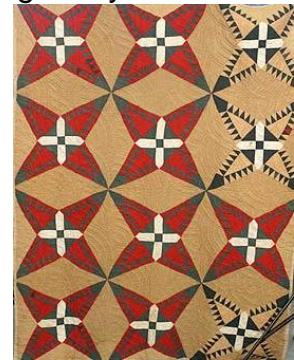
Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad

- The “Black Moses”
- Led over 300 slaves to freedom.
- Field hand in Maryland – Her father taught her to chop wood and split rails, and other lessons for survival in the woods.
- Made 19 trips back and forth between North and South to lead slaves to freedom.



Running Away

- Running was also hard because you rarely were able to get away as an intact family
- And the family left behind might bear the punishment
- Or you could lose contact with them
- Slave women exchanged quilt squares as memorials – to be re sewn once the family was reunited.



Dangers of Plotting

- Slave women urged speed in plotting to run away, because the risks were great.
- One slave woman in Virginia, 1812: “We could not rise too soon for me as I had rather be in hell than where I was.”
- Women found support on the road from sympathetic women and men (whom we will discuss later under abolitionism) – Free Blacks and whites.
- But the dangers were very great and runaways were often killed, maimed, or disfigured.

The Desperation of the Runaway

- Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave, trapped near Cincinnati, killed her own daughter and tried to kill herself.
- “She rejoiced that the girl was dead – ‘now she would never know what a woman suffers as a slave’ – and pleaded to be tried for murder. ‘I will go singing to the gallows rather than be returned to slavery.’”
- Source for Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* and her opera, *Margaret Garner*



THE DESPERATION OF A MOTHER.



Murder as Resistance

- Both masters and overseers were targets.
 - Mary Chesnut's diary gives a case of poisoning from within her own family, and tells of the implications as they struck her and her friends.
- "September, 1861. [Reading a letter] from Mary Witherspoon, and I broke down; horror and amazement was too much for me. Poor cousin Betsey Witherspoon was murdered! She did not die peacefully in her bed, as we supposed, but was murdered by her own people, her Negroes. . . . Horrible beyond words! . . . The men who went to Society Hill (the Witherspoon home) have come again with nothing very definite. William and Cousin Betsey's old maid, Rhody, are in jail; strong suspicion but as yet no proof of their guilt. The neighborhood is in a ferment. Evans and Wallace say these Negroes ought to be burnt. Lynching proposed! . . . Hitherto I have never thought of being afraid of Negroes. I had never injured any of them; why should they want to hurt me? Two thirds of my religion consists in trying to be good to Negroes, because they are so in our power, and it would be so easy to be the other thing. Somehow today I feel that the ground is cut away from under my feet. Why should they treat me any better than they have done Cousin Betsy Witherspoon?" – Mary Chesnut

Education

- It was illegal to teach a slave to read and write
- So learning to do so was an important form of resistance.
- A literate slave could more easily escape and – god forbid – document what slavery was like.
- Slaves (and some mistresses) established "midnight schools"
- Slaves would be taught to read and write, do arithmetic, and some other subjects.



"MRS. AULD TEACHING HIM TO READ," illustration from Frederick Douglass's *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Written by Himself, p. 95.

Education and Resistance

- For some daughters of masters, teaching slaves was a form of rebellion
- Sarah Grimke writes of her own thwarted desire for education, and of her hatred for slavery.
 - She taught her personal maid how to read, describing how in the evening they would turn out the lights, put a towel under the door, lay on their stomachs before the fire, and together "defy the laws of South Carolina."

More Subtle Resistance

- Slaves pretended illness,
- stole food,
- sabotaged implements,
- broke tools,
- abused livestock,
- committed arson.
 - Arson, next to theft, most common slave crime/form of resistance.

IV – Gender and Slaves’ Lives

- Much in slave experience that men and women shared.
 - No legal ability to control conditions of their lives,
 - both men and women labored according to their masters’ demands,
 - both were vulnerable to brutal punishment and separation of families,
 - both had marginal food and clothing,
 - both were part of the productive system of the master’s economy.

But women slaves could also make more slaves

- Slave trade outlawed in 1807
- How will we get more slaves?
- Masters set out to manipulate slave women’s procreation
- This comes to overshadow women slaves’ experiences.
- See, for example of the impact of this, Linda Brent/Harriet Brent Jacobs’s autobiography

Conclusions on Colonial Women, taking into account the impact of slavery (1 of 3)

- Marriage in all colonies was critically important for purposes of procreation.
- In all colonies, marriage answered family as well as individual considerations, and had social and economic significance.

Conclusions (2 of 3)

- In Puritan colonies, marriage was deemed a civil and not a religious institution.
- Civil concerns for peace in the household and community prevailed.
- As a result, the community intervened in the family to enforce peace – in part by making divorce and remarriage possible.

Conclusions (3 of 3)

- Marriage differed in British colonies north and south, largely as a result of the institution of slavery.
 - (While there was slavery in the North, it did not predominate as a social form.)
- In South, where slavery resulted in creation of significant peoples of mixed race and numbers of illegitimate children, control of white, landed or upper class women’s sexuality (fertility) became very important.
- Male privilege was protected in South by civil law which forbade divorce for male adultery (although did allow for separation in certain circumstances).