

CHAPTER 8

That Peculiar Institution

■ Scope and Extent

Plantation slavery, as it developed in the cotton kingdom, was something of an anomaly on the American frontier. Although slavery was almost as old as the permanent settlements in America, not until the nineteenth century did it occupy so much of the attention and energy of the settlers as to threaten other forms of labor. The frontier had been a place where one could make or lose a fortune largely by one's own labors. The emergence of the great cotton plantation introduced a kind of exploitation of human and natural resources and fostered a type of discipline in rural areas that created what could at best be called a peculiar situation. Indeed, every aspect of agricultural life in the Southern United States underwent a complete transformation as a result of the new economic and social forces let loose by the Industrial Revolution. And what the Industrial Revolution did to the capitalistic system, new lands and the prospect of wealth from cotton culture did to the system of slavery. Large-scale operations were the order of the day. The farm became a plantation, which in turn became a rural factory with the impersonality of a large-scale economic organization. The face of the Southern frontier had been changed. Cotton and slavery were the great transforming forces.

One of the most rapidly growing elements in the population was the slaves. In 1790 there had been less than 700,000 slaves. By 1830 there were

more than 2 million. The South Atlantic states, from Delaware to Florida, were still ahead in numbers, with 1,300,000, while the states of the lower South, none of which had been in the Union in 1790, now had 604,000 slaves. By the last census before the Civil War, the slave population had grown to 3,953,760! The states of the cotton kingdom had taken the lead, with 1,998,000 slaves within their borders. Virginia was still ahead in the number of slaves in a single state, but Alabama and Mississippi were rapidly gaining ground. As a matter of fact, the slave population of all the states of the lower South was increasing rapidly, while that of the upper South was either increasing very slowly or, as in the case of Maryland, was actually declining. The increase in the slave population to virtually 4 million by 1860 is an eloquent testimony to the extent to which slavery had become entrenched in the Southern states.

The impression should not be conveyed that the whites of the South, numbering about 8 million in 1860, generally enjoyed the fruits of slave labor. There was a remarkable concentration of the slave population in the hands of a relative few. In 1860 there were only 384,884 slave owners. Thus, fully three-fourths of the white people of the South had neither slaves nor an immediate economic interest in the maintenance of slavery or the plantation system. And yet, the institution came to dominate the political and economic thinking of the entire South and to shape its social pattern for two principal reasons. The great majority of the staple crops were produced on plantations employing slave labor, thus giving the owners an influence out of proportion to their number. Then, there was the hope on the part of most nonslaveholders that they would some day become owners of slaves. Consequently, they took on the habits and patterns of thought of slaveholders before they actually joined that select class.

While slaves were concentrated in areas where the staple crops were produced on a large scale, the bulk of the slave owners were small farmers. It is not too generally known that more than 200,000 owners in 1860 had five slaves or less. Fully 338,000 owners, or 88 percent of all the owners of slaves in 1860, held less than twenty slaves. (One must not be misled by these figures, however, for over one-half of the slaves were employed as field workers on plantations with holdings of more than twenty slaves, and at least 25 percent of the slave community lived on plantations where the number of slaves was in excess of fifty.) It is fairly generally conceded that from thirty to sixty slaves constituted the most profitable agricultural unit. If that is true, there were fewer plantations in the South that had what might be considered a satisfactory working force than has been generally believed. The concentration of 88 percent of all slaveholders in the small slave-owning group is significant for several important reasons. In the first place, it emphasizes the fact that the influence of large owners must have been enormous, since they have been successful in impressing posterity with the erroneous conception that plantations on which there were large numbers of slaves were typical. In the second place, it brings out the fact that the

majority of slaveholding was carried on by yeomen rather than gentry. Finally, in a study of the institution of slavery, there is a rather strong indication that some distinction should be made between the possession of one or two slaves and the possession of, say, fifty or more.

But it was the tremendous productivity of the large plantations that placed the large slaveholder in a position of great influence. By 1860 Southern states were producing 5,387,000 bales of cotton annually. Four states, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and Georgia, produced more than 3,500,000 bales of this crop. It is no mere accident that these same states were also at the top of the list in the number of large slaveholders. Of the states having slaveholders with more than twenty slaves, Mississippi led, just as it did in productivity of cotton, followed by Alabama, Louisiana, and Georgia.

■ The Slave Codes

After the colonies secured their independence and established their own governments, they did not neglect the matter of slavery in the laws that they enacted. Where slavery was growing, as in the lower South in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, new and more stringent laws were enacted. All over the South, however, there emerged a body of laws generally regarded as the Slave Codes, which covered every aspect of the life of the slave. There were variations from state to state, but the general point of view expressed in most of them was the same: slaves are not people but property; laws should protect the ownership of such property and should also protect whites against any dangers that might arise from the presence of large numbers of slaves. It was also felt that slaves should be maintained in a position of due subordination in order that the optimum of discipline and work could be achieved.

The regulatory statutes were frankly repressive, and whites made no apologies for them. The laws represented merely the reduction to legal phraseology of the philosophy of the South with regard to the institution of slavery. Slaves had no standing in the courts: they could not be a party to a law suit; they could not offer testimony, except against another slave or a free black; and their irresponsibility meant that their oaths were not binding. Thus, they could make no contracts. The ownership of property was generally forbidden them, though some states permitted slaves to have certain types of personal property. A slave could not strike a white person, even in self-defense; but the killing of a slave, however malicious the act, was rarely regarded as murder. The rape of a female slave was regarded as a crime but only because it involved trespassing.

The greater portion of the Slave Codes involved the many restrictions placed on slaves to ensure the maximum protection of the white population and to maintain discipline among slaves. These rules were primarily negative. Slaves could not leave the plantation without authorization, and

any white person finding them outside without permission could capture them and turn them over to public officials. They could not possess firearms, and in Mississippi they could not beat drums or blow horns. They could not hire themselves out without permission or in any other way conduct themselves as free people. They could not buy or sell goods. Their relationships with whites and free blacks were to be kept at a minimum. They could not visit the homes of whites or free blacks, and they could not entertain such individuals in their quarters. They were never to assemble unless a white person was present, and they were never to receive, possess, or transmit any incendiary literature calculated to incite insurrections.

Whenever there was an insurrection, or even rumors of one, it was usually the occasion for the enactment of even more stringent laws to control the activities and movements of slaves. For example, after the Vesey insurrection of 1822, South Carolina enacted a law requiring the imprisonment of all black seamen during the stay of their vessel in port. The Nat Turner insurrection of 1831 and the simultaneous drive of abolitionists against slavery brought forth the enactment of many new repressive measures in other parts of the South as well as in Virginia and neighboring states. Long before the end of the slave period the Slave Codes in all the Southern states had become so elaborate that there was hardly need for modification even when new threats arose to shake the foundations of the institution.

Ample machinery was set up to provide for effective enforcement and execution of the Slave Codes. In some states, slaves were tried in regular courts for infractions of the law. In other states, specially constituted slave tribunals had the responsibility of examining evidence and judging the guilt or innocence of slaves. Some states required trials by juries composed of slaveholders, while others merely required the cognizance of one, two, or three justices of the peace. Most petty offenses were punishable by whipping, while more serious ones were punishable by branding, imprisonment, or death. Arson, rape of a white woman, and conspiracy to rebel were capital crimes in all the slaveholding states. There was considerable reluctance to imprison a slave for a long period or to inflict the death penalty for the obvious reason that the slave represented an investment, and to deprive the owner of the slave's labor or life was to deprive the state of just that much wealth. Slaveholders were, therefore, extremely cautious about judging a slave offender hastily because of the danger of losing one of their own slaves through such a process at some later date. This is not to say that slaves enjoyed anything resembling due process of law or justice in any sense in which the term is applied to free persons. Since slaves were always regarded with suspicion and since some crimes were viewed as threats to the social order, they were frequently punished for crimes they did not commit and were helpless before a panic-stricken group of slaveholders who saw in the rumor of an insurrection the slow but certain undermining of their entire system.

One of the devices set up to enforce the Slave Codes and thereby maintain the institution of slavery was the patrol, which has been aptly

described as an adaptation of the militia. Counties were usually divided into "beats," or areas of patrol, and free white men were called upon to serve for a stated period of time, one, three, or six months. These patrols were to apprehend slaves out of place and return them to their masters or commit them to jail, to visit slave quarters and search for various kinds of weapons that might be used in an uprising, and to visit assemblies of slaves where disorder might develop or where conspiracy might be planned. This system proved so inconvenient to some citizens that they regularly paid the fines that were imposed for dereliction of duty. A corrupted form of the patrol system was the vigilance committee, which came into existence during the emergencies created by uprisings or rumors of them. At such times, it was not unusual for the committee to disregard all caution and prudence and kill any blacks whom they encountered in their search. Committees like these frequently ended up engaging in nothing except a lynching party.

Despite the elaborateness of the Slave Codes both in the number of statutes and in the machinery of enforcement, there were innumerable infractions that went unpunished altogether. When times were quiet, there was an inclination to disregard the laws and to permit slaves to conduct themselves in a manner that would be regarded as highly offensive during an emergency. There was the desire, moreover, on the part of all masters to take all matters involving their slaves into their own hands and to mete out justice in their own way. The strong individualism that was bred on the frontier plantation and the planter's self-conception as the source of law and justice had the effect of discouraging conformity to statutes even when they were passed in the interest of the plantation system. Slaveholders always had the feeling that they could handle their own slaves, if only something could be done about those on the neighboring plantation. Such a point of view was not conducive to the effective enforcement of the Slave Codes.

■ Plantation Scene

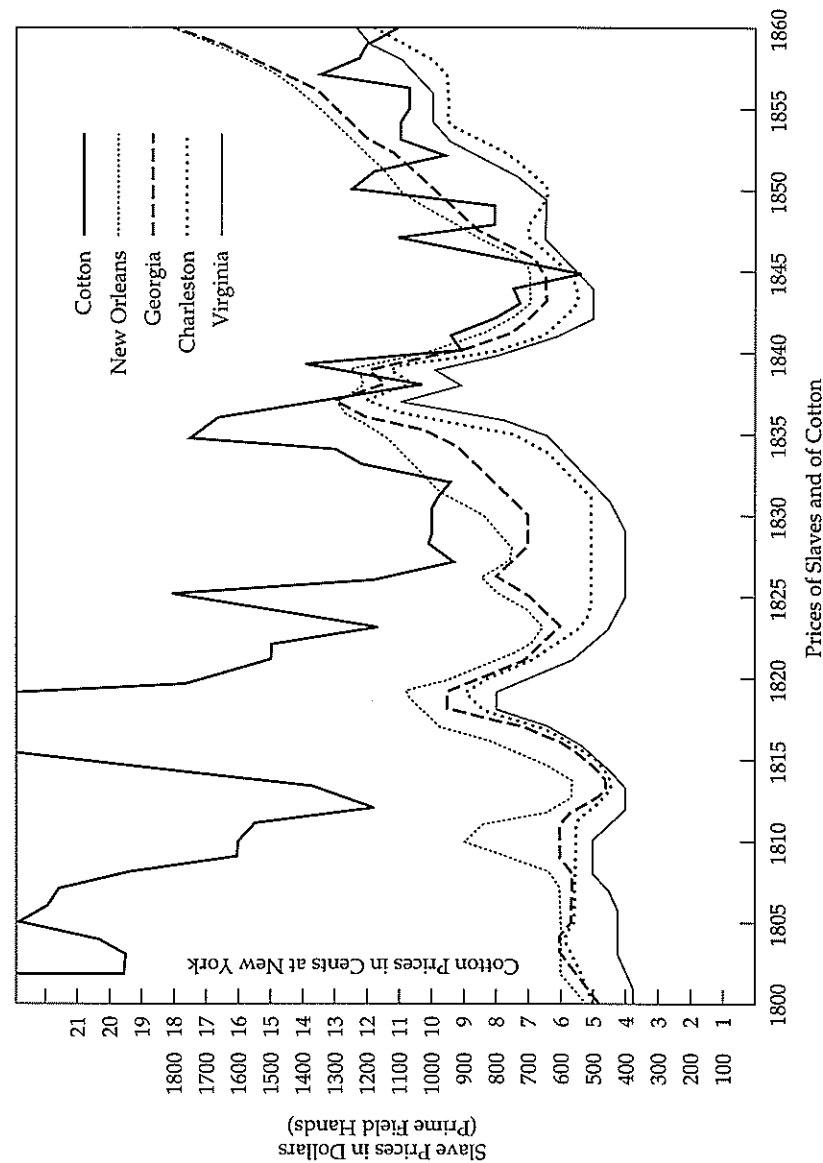
The fact should not be ignored that the primary concern of owners was to get work out of their slaves. And the work of slaves was primarily agricultural. It is estimated that only 400,000 slaves lived in towns and cities in 1850. This left approximately 2.8 million to do the work on farms and plantations. The great bulk of them, 1.8 million, were to be found on cotton plantations, while the remainder were primarily engaged in the cultivation of tobacco, rice, and sugarcane. The cotton farm or plantation was, therefore, the typical locale of the slave. It must be recalled that when a farmer owned a few slaves, as was the case in a vast majority of instances, slaves and owners worked together in the fields and were compelled to engage in a variety of common tasks. On larger plantations, where the organization was so elaborate as to resemble a modern factory, there was extensive supervision by the owner or the overseer or both, and there was considerable division

of labor among slaves. A large plantation always had at least two distinct groups of workers, house servants and field hands. The former cared for the house, the yards, and the gardens, cooked the meals, drove the carriages, and performed the other tasks expected of personal servants. The favored ones frequently traveled with their owners and enjoyed other advantages in the way of food, clothing, and education or experience.

Unfortunately, there are few records of the activities of slaves on smaller units. Therefore, a great deal has been made of the existence of a large force of house servants because a considerable number of large slaveholders kept diaries, journals, and other records that have given a clear picture of their activities. In some of these instances there were more house servants than necessary. If a planter could display a considerable number of house servants, he or she could convey the impression, frequently inaccurate, of having great affluence and living in a state bordering on luxury. The house servant group, moreover, tended to perpetuate and even to increase itself. Once a slave had served in a home, the prospect of working in the field was frowned upon and resisted with every available resource. House servants were even anxious to "work" their children into the more desirable situation and to marry them off to the children of other house servants. The result was that the group increased in numbers beyond the point necessary to maintain the average planter's home.

What may be termed the productive work was done in the fields by a force that constituted the principal group of slaves. Where there were not enough slaves to have house servants as well as field hands, agricultural activities seldom suffered. In such instances slaves found it necessary to do the chores around and in the house at times that ordinarily would have been their own time. The cultivation of a crop was a demanding undertaking, and the entire future of both slaves and owners depended on the success with which it was handled. Except on rice plantations, where slaves were given a specific assignment or task each day, the gang system was used. Literally, gangs of slaves were taken to the fields and put to work under the supervision of the owner or the overseer. The leader instructed them about when to begin work, when to eat, and when to quit. Slaves under this system were wholly without responsibility and had little opportunity to develop initiative. Consequently, the claim of some recent writers that owners could have made slavery more bearable to slaves by paying them for their work seems highly unlikely.

It was generally believed that one slave was required for the successful cultivation of three acres of cotton. The planting, cultivation, and picking of cotton required little skill, but a great deal of time. Men, women, and children could be used, though it is to be doubted if the very young and the very old were of any real value to the plantation. Aside from duties in connection with raising the crop, there were other things to do, such as clearing land, burning underbrush, rolling logs, splitting rails, carrying water, mending fences, spreading fertilizer, breaking soil, and the like. Small wonder that



PRICES OF SLAVES AND OF COTTON. As the price of cotton fluctuated on the New York market and the price of slaves fluctuated on the principal slave markets of the South, one can see a clear correlation between the price of cotton and of slaves. (Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery, New York, 1966*, p. 371.)

many slaves worked not merely from sunrise to sunset but frequently long after dark. During harvest time the hours were longest since the planter was anxious to harvest the crop before it could be seriously damaged by inclement weather. Under such circumstances slaves were driven almost mercilessly. In 1830, for example, fourteen Mississippi slaves each picked an average of 323 pounds of cotton in one day. It was conceded that if an adult slave picked 150 pounds in one day it was a satisfactory performance. On Louisiana sugarcane plantations it was not unusual for slaves to work eighteen and twenty hours each day during the harvest season.

When there was no watchful supervision, little was accomplished in a slave system. Slaves felt no compulsion to extend themselves in their work unless the planter or overseer forced them. Their benefits would be the same, except on a few plantations where systems of rewards and bounties were developed, whether they worked conscientiously or whether they shirked at every opportunity. There was a great deal of complaining about the idleness and laziness of slaves, but this was inherent in a system of forced labor. On one occasion George Washington said that his slave carpenters were notorious piddlers and not even one of his house servants was worthy of trust. If slaves felt overworked, they frequently feigned illness or simply walked off for a day or so or, perhaps forever. The consistent evasion of work on the part of slaves was one of the reasons why planters always felt in need of more slaves to increase the productivity of their plantations.

In the effort to get work out of slaves the lash was frequently used. There was the general belief, born of a naive or sinister racial justification for the institution of slavery, that Africans were a childlike race and should be punished just as children were punished. Some planters went so far as to specify the size and type of lash to be used and the number of lashes to be given for certain offenses. Almost none disclaimed whipping as an effective form of punishment, and the excessive use of the lash was one of the most flagrant abuses of the institution. Many slaves fled because of brutal beatings by their owner or overseer. Unfortunately, the instances where one can determine the nature and extent of punishment are so few, if they exist at all, that efforts at statistical computation of whippings are pointless if not ridiculous.

The great majority of the plantations were managed by the planters themselves. An overseer was not needed unless there were more than twenty slaves or unless the planter was an absentee landlord. In many instances, moreover, planters worked in the fields and shared the experiences of their slaves. Under such conditions, there was likely to be less brutality on the part of management and more work on the part of the laboring force than under other circumstances. Southern planters were at the center of the economic, social, and political life of their community and naturally had the feeling that they should dominate the lives of their black property completely. If they were inclined to be benevolent and understanding, the slaves were fortunate indeed. If they were inclined to enjoy the exercise of authority

and the cruelty that authority frequently fostered, then the slaves probably looked forward to either running away or being sold to a better owner.

It was on plantations where there were overseers that the greatest amount of cruelty and brutality existed. Since overseers came from a nonslaveholding and frequently landless group, they had no interest other than a temporary concern in the institution. Too frequently they hated the system and directed especial contempt toward slaves because they were of the opinion that slavery was responsible for their own unfortunate economic plight. They had the job of managing the entire plantation in the absence of the planter, or if it was too large for the planter to handle alone, the overseer was delegated a considerable portion of the responsibility. In any event, this authority over the slaves was almost unlimited. The owners demanded that the overseers get work out of the slaves and produce a superior crop. With such a mandate overseers were ruthless and excessively cruel in their treatment of slaves. Frequently, fights grew out of attempts of overseers to punish slaves, and in several instances overseers were run off the plantation by irate slaves. Before the planter had the opportunity to reprimand the overseer for his bestiality, he had often done irreparable damage. It must be remembered, moreover, that unless his cruelty bordered on the sensational, many planters were not concerned about it. On some plantations a slave called the driver was selected to assist the owner or overseer in getting work out of the slaves. The other slaves frequently resented this delegation of authority to one among them, and the driver was sometimes viewed as a traitor, especially if he took his duties seriously.

The responsibility of providing the necessities of life for slaves was a major one. The preoccupation with raising the staple crops was so great everywhere that insufficient attention was given to the very important matter of growing food. Charles S. Sydnor has observed that few Mississippi planters raised enough food to supply their needs. Consequently, many plantations were compelled to purchase foodstuffs and other supplies not only for the family of the planter but for the slaves as well. Whether grown on the plantation or brought in from other sections of the country, the fare was not a particularly exciting one, the principal items being meal and meat. On some of the larger plantations there was a central kitchen where the food was prepared, but on the average plantation each slave was responsible for the preparation of his or her own food. Each received a daily or weekly ration of meal and salt pork. For adult persons the weekly ration was about a peck of meal and three to four pounds of meat. This was at times supplemented with sweet potatoes, peas, rice, syrup, and fruit. Some slaves had their own gardens and chickens, but there was always the possibility of incurring the disfavor of the owner or overseer by spending too much time in this pursuit. A further supplement to one's diet could be made by hunting and fishing whenever possible.

It would be too much to suppose that slaves always resisted the temptation to take food from the owner's larder if the opportunity presented itself. The difficulty was that such supplies were locked up, and except for a few house servants, no slaves had access to them. But the house servants,

who usually ate the same food as the whites whether they were permitted to do so or not, were perhaps not inclined to take food unless some kind of cabal had been formed for the systematic depletion of the owner's food supply. The break in the monotony of the unattractive fare came on holidays like Christmas when the owner sometimes provided items such as cheese, coffee, and candy as a contribution to the festive spirit.

The filching of perishable items like food was simple when compared with any efforts on the part of slaves to augment their supply of clothing. Some house servants were favored with the castoff garments of their owners, but the average slave wore what was generally described as "Negro clothes." They consisted of jeans, linseys, kerseys, and osnaburgs for the men and calico and homespun fabrics for the women. On some plantations slave women spun and wove the cloth out of which they made their dresses. Shoes, called "Negro brogans," were not provided except for the winter months. No more clothing was furnished than was absolutely necessary. Planters reasoned that slaves perhaps needed ample food in order to work efficiently, but they saw little connection between clothing and work. In a system as harshly materialistic as plantation slavery there was little or no inclination to indulge in any expenditures for slaves that were viewed as unnecessary for increased productivity.

Housing for slaves was especially poor. The small, rude huts were usually inadequate as well as uncomfortable. Windows and floors were almost unheard of. Frederick Olmsted was shocked when he viewed the slave cabins on some of the plantations he visited. They were small and dilapidated with no windows, unchinked walls, and practically no furnishings. One of the better ones had a bed, a chest, a wooden stool, some earthenware, and cooking vessels. Many cabins were wholly without beds, and slaves were compelled to sleep on quilts or blankets with only some straw or shucks between them and the earth. The inadequacy of space was, if possible, even worse than the absence of comforts and conveniences. One Mississippi planter had twenty-four huts, each measuring sixteen by fourteen feet, for his 150 slaves. Ulrich B. Phillips and others have defended the frightfully inadequate housing of slaves on the grounds that, first, the plantation was so close to the frontier that few planters could boast of entirely satisfactory living accommodations and, second, slaves were out of their cabins most of the time and, therefore, did not have a real need for greatly improved housing. In all fairness, these apologists could have added that these unfortunate living conditions go far to explain the crime, delinquency, and aversion to the "civilizing" tendencies of the plantation of which they so loudly accused slaves.

■ Nonagricultural Pursuits

In 1850 there were 400,000 slaves living in urban communities. It may be assumed that a majority were engaged in nonagricultural pursuits and that

their number was augmented by plantation slaves whose owners hired them out to townspeople. There is no way of knowing how many such slaves were hired out, but there must have been thousands, especially in the period between the harvest and the new planting. It was in nonagricultural pursuits that slaves displayed the greatest variety of talent and training. Many plantations had slave carpenters, masons, and mechanics, but skilled slaves were to be most frequently found in towns. Indeed, a large number of town slaves possessed some kind of skill. In the Charleston census of 1848, for example, there were more slave carpenters than there were free black and white carpenters. The same was true of slave coopers. In addition, there were slave tailors, shoemakers, cabinetmakers, painters, plasterers, seamstresses, and the like. Many owners realized the wisdom of training their slaves in the trades, for their earning power would be greatly enhanced; and if the slaves were ever offered for sale they would perhaps bring twice as much as field hands of a similar age would bring.

White artisans were violently opposed, for the most part, to the teaching of trades to blacks. One white skilled worker in Mississippi, for example, said that he would starve before he taught a slave his trade. Most of the planters and proslavery leaders advocated training slaves in special skills, not only because it increased their value but because if slave labor were more extensively used, there would be wider and more enthusiastic support of the system. If towns as well as plantations became completely dependent on slave labor, whatever indifference there was to the institution would be transformed into warm advocacy.

Only the most demagogic of the Negrophobes contended that it was not possible to train blacks in artisanry. There were too many examples that belied such a contention. No state and few communities were without highly skilled slaves or slaves employed other than on a plantation. To be sure, the majority of slaves in nonagricultural pursuits found work as domestic servants, porters, or common laborers in towns. But there was a sufficient number of slave artisans to make it clear that they had the capacity to acquire skills. Frequently advertisements for a slave for sale or a runaway slave described him as a "first rate boot and shoe maker," an "experienced weaver and chair spinner," or an "excellent carpenter." In Virginia they were used in mills, iron furnaces, and tobacco factories. The Saluda textile factory in South Carolina at one time employed 98 slave operatives. They were also in the textile mills of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia. In Kentucky they were employed in the saltworks of Clay County and in the iron and lead mines of Caldwell and Crittenden counties. The Southern railroads also employed a considerable number for construction work. It is reported that in 1838 a corporation purchased 140 slaves at a cost of \$159,000 to work on the construction of a railroad between Jackson and Brandon, Mississippi. For ten years a slave was the engineer on the West Feliciana Railroad, one of the oldest in the Southern United States. Finally, slaves were frequently employed in river transportation and at docks. Despite Olmsted's observation

that Irish workers were employed to unload boats on the Mississippi River because slaves were too valuable, slaves were extensively used in such work. They worked on the docks at New Orleans, Savannah, Charleston, Norfolk, and other Southern ports.

There were even slave inventors. In 1835 and 1836 Henry Blair, designated in the records as a "colored man" of Maryland, received patents for two corn harvesters he had developed. By 1858, however, the attorney general had ruled that since a slave was not a citizen, the government could not enter into an agreement with him by granting him a patent, nor could the slave assign the invention to his owner. Benjamin Montgomery, a slave owned by Jefferson Davis, invented a boat propeller toward the end of the slave period. Davis made an attempt to have it patented, but failed. This perhaps accounts for the passage of a law by the Confederate Congress in 1861 providing that if the owner took an oath that his or her slave had actually invented a device, the patent would be issued to the owner. It was not until after the Civil War that blacks were able to secure patents for their inventions without any difficulty.

■ Social Considerations

It has been assumed too frequently that slavery provided an idyllic existence not only for owners but for slaves as well. The fact is, however, that even for the planter life was not always pleasant. There was little in the way of recreation and other diversions to foster a zest for living either on the plantation or in the Southern towns. Life was so barren generally that it can hardly be described as "the good life" even under the most favorable circumstances. The plantation, with its inherent isolation and consequent social and cultural self-sufficiency, frequently bordering on stagnancy, tended to perpetuate the barrenness. For slaves there was little in the way of enjoyment and satisfaction during the moments or hours they were off the job. It must be remembered that for the most part slaves had no time they could call their own, and not infrequently they worked such long hours that periods of free time necessarily had to be used for rest. Even if there was no work and even if an opportunity for diversion presented itself, slaves could never escape the fact that they were slaves and that their movements as well as their other activities were almost always under the most careful surveillance. If they found it possible to enjoy the periods when they were not on the job, they either possessed a remarkable capacity for accommodation or were totally ignorant of the depth of their degraded position.

Most slave children had the run of the plantation and played with the white children in and out of the "big house," in and out of the cabins, and through the yards without any inhibitions. When blacks reached the useful age, which was very early, much of the playing was over. When they reached the social age, interracial playing was over altogether, and they settled down

to the existence that was the inevitable lot of a slave. There was almost nothing of a day-to-day nature for slaves to do in the way of recreation. If the plantation was near a stream it might be possible for them to make it through the woods and spend an hour or so fishing, but not infrequently this was for the specific purpose of supplementing their food supply instead of for recreation. When whites went hunting at night they usually took some slave men, but on a large plantation there were many who never got this opportunity. Races, fairs, militia muster, and election days were occasions for the relaxation of rules on the plantation. Some slaves were favored by being given permission to attend these events. Even if they did not go, there was an opportunity for them to sing, dance, and visit because of the festive spirit that such occasions brought to the plantation.

There were two periods to which slaves could look forward as periods of recreation and relaxation: the summer lay-by and Christmas. At the end of the cultivation period, there was a considerable reduction of duties, which gave slaves an opportunity either to work for themselves or to engage in some kind of recreation. The Christmas season brought a complete suspension of work, except the bare essentials such as cooking and washing, and for one week both town and plantation slaves had a period of merrymaking. On the Atlantic seaboard much of the festivities centered around the John Canoe celebration, a custom practiced in the Caribbean and perhaps in Africa in which slaves engaged in singing, dancing, drinking, and visiting the whites and asking for Christmas presents. Weddings, anniversaries, and the like, whether of whites or blacks, were other opportunities for merrymaking. Some planters even gave dances for their slaves. Doubtless these were exceptions. Few of the 4 million slaves in 1860 led anything except the most barren existence in which their only moments of pleasure were in singing a plaintive melody, strumming a banjo, telling a tale, or playing a game.

As long as proper precautions were taken there was little opposition to some form of religious activity among slaves. Owners had reason to be suspicious if the emphasis was on instruction or if there were slave leaders. Otherwise there was either support of a religious program for slaves or passive indifference. There were some black congregations on the larger plantations and in the towns. Richmond, Charleston, and Lexington, Kentucky, are examples of cities in which churches for slaves were located. One Mississippi planter erected a small Gothic church and paid a clergyman \$1,500 to preach to him and his slaves. The number of black preachers was always considerable, and few plantations were without at least one.

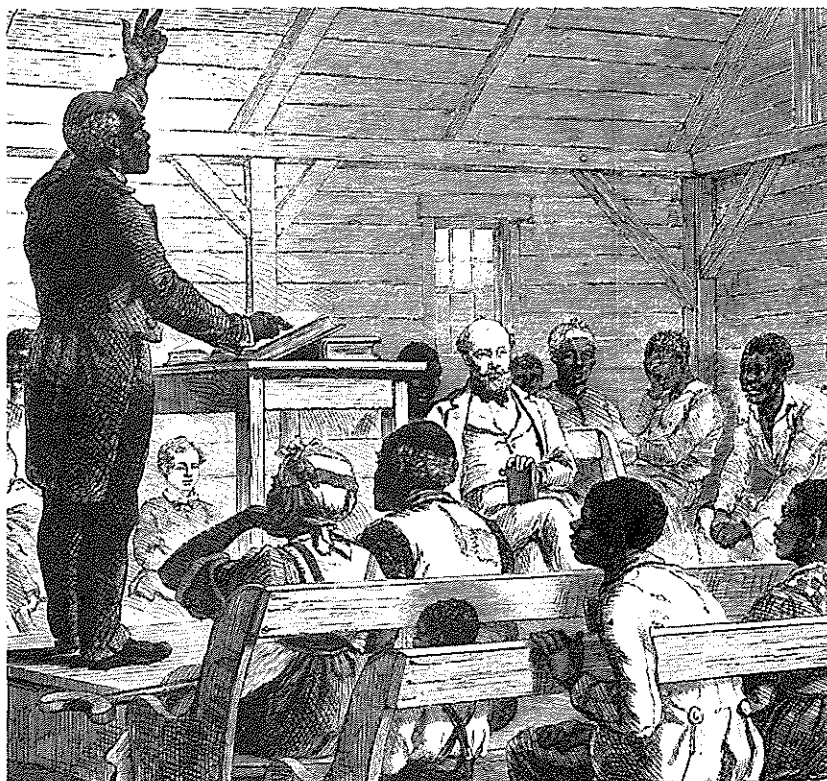
When the abolitionists began their crusade against slavery, planters became more cautious regarding religious activities among slaves and undertook to control them more effectively. In most states black preachers were outlawed between 1830 and 1835, and thereafter slave religious services were presided over by a white person. More and more, however, slaves were required to attend the churches of their masters. This ambivalent attitude toward autonomous religious activity reflected whites' fears that it would

be difficult, if not impossible, to control and monitor the beliefs and practices of slaves who were devout Christians. Such fears proved accurate, for many of the most pious and influential slaves had a keen understanding of the difference between the gospel of proslavery preachers and the Christian scriptures' message of divine punishment for oppressors and liberation for the faithful. Albert Raboteau has traced some of the numerous ways in which slaves blended their African religious culture with selected aspects of Christianity to produce a sustaining, and at times defiant, religious community—"the invisible institution in the ante-bellum South."

The invitation to slaves to attend white churches, which bordered on compulsion, did not represent a movement in the direction of increased fellowship. Rather, it was the method that whites employed to keep a closer eye on their slaves. It was believed that too many conspiracies had been planned at religious gatherings and that such groups gave abolitionists an opportunity to distribute incendiary ideas and literature. When Bishop Atkinson of North Carolina raised the question "Where are our Negroes," he not only implied that they were in churches other than the Episcopal church but that they were beyond the restraining influence of the conservative element of white society. When slaves attended the churches of planters, they usually sat either in the gallery or in a special section. The earliest examples of racial segregation could be found in churches. In one instance the white congregation constructed a partition several feet high to separate the masters from the slaves.

In the states of the lower South the Baptist and Methodist denominations had the greatest influence on plantation slaves. These were evangelical churches that moved with the population and adjusted their program to the needs of the people. The Methodist camp meetings and the Baptist "protracted" meetings were opportunities not only for religious refreshing but for social intercourse as well. They were the most effective means of releasing the pent-up emotions that the monotonous life of the rural South created. Thus, whites attended in large numbers, and, as Gilbert Seldes has pointed out, they were "times of refreshing." Under such circumstances, whites and Negroes sang together, shouted together, and spent themselves emotionally together. It was the nearest thing to interracial religious fellowship that the South produced.

Once planters were convinced that conversion did not have the effect of emancipating their slaves, they sought to use the church as an agency for maintaining the institution of slavery. Ministers were encouraged to instruct slaves along the lines of obedience and subservience. Bishops and other high church officials were not above owning slaves and fostering the continuation of slavery. In Louisiana the Episcopal Bishop Polk owned 400 slaves, and although he regularly gave them religious instruction, there is no indication that he attempted to set them free. The Presbyterians and Quakers seemed to have been the most liberal in their attitude toward blacks, but they were not the large slaveholders. The latter were to be found in the Episcopal church



FAMILY WORSHIP ON A SOUTH CAROLINA PLANTATION. This drawing from the *Illustrated London News* for December 5, 1863, was made by an English artist while visiting a plantation near Port Royal, South Carolina. The "state of almost patriarchal simplicity" that characterizes the planter's position reflects the sympathetic attitude that many Englishmen had toward the Confederacy during the Civil War.

on the Atlantic seaboard and in the Baptist and Methodist churches in the cotton kingdom. In the last three decades before the Civil War the church became one of the strongest allies of the proslavery element. Slaves who had found refuge and solace in the religious instructions of the white clergy had reason to believe that they were now trapped by an enemy who had once befriended them.

Despite legal restrictions and despite contentions on the part of Southerners like John Calhoun that Africans could not absorb educative experiences, slaves were receiving education in various parts of the South. It is remarkable how generally the laws against the teaching of slaves were disregarded. Planters became excited over the distribution of abolition literature in the South, but they gave little attention to preventing the training of slaves to read, which would have rendered abolition literature ineffective

to a large extent. Indeed, some masters themselves taught their slaves. William Pease of Hardman County, Tennessee, was taught by his owners. There was one strange case in which a planter taught his slaves to spell and read but not to write. One planter in northern Mississippi boasted that all twenty of his slaves could read and that they purchased their own books. The case of Frederick Douglass having been taught by his mistress is perhaps the best-known instance of an owner teaching a slave. In some cases, even when masters were opposed to their slaves receiving instruction, the children of masters would teach slaves to read and write. There are records of hirers and even overseers giving instruction to slaves.

The instruction of one or two slaves, though a violation of the law, was not regarded as serious, and there was hardly any danger of prosecution. But the instruction of slaves in schools was another thing. Even this was undertaken in various parts of the South. Naturally, more care had to be exercised in the selection of students and in the dissemination of information concerning the schools, but there were blacks and whites who were willing to run the risk of legal prosecution and social disapprobation in order to teach slaves. Schools for blacks are known to have existed in Savannah, Georgia; Charleston, South Carolina; Fayetteville, New Bern, and Raleigh, North Carolina; Lexington and Louisville, Kentucky; Fredericksburg and Norfolk, Virginia; and various other cities in Florida, Tennessee, and Louisiana. Francis Cardozo attended school in Charleston until he was twelve years of age. After searching for some time, Frederika Bremer, a European visitor, finally found one of the schools in Charleston and visited it. In 1847 there was a school in Louisville, Kentucky, which slaves were allowed to attend upon presenting permits from their masters.

There is no way of knowing the extent to which blacks attended white schools. In 1840 they were permitted to attend school with white children in Wilmington, Delaware. There is the interesting account, though perhaps fictional, of Julius Melbourn who was sent to a white academy near Raleigh, North Carolina, by his mistress and supposedly remained there until it was discovered that he was not white. Other mulattoes may well have had more success than Melbourn. Nor is there any way of ascertaining with any degree of accuracy the extent of education among slaves. Some Southern whites said that blacks did not have the capacity to learn. Some Northern abolitionists said conditions in the South were so bad that almost no blacks had the opportunity to learn. Amos Dresser believed that 1 out of every 50 slaves in the Southwest could read and write. C. G. Parsons estimated that 5,000 of Georgia's 400,000 slaves were literate. Whatever the number, it represented a clear-cut step in the direction of Americanization and made, at least for some, the process of adjustment to freedom somewhat less difficult.

The slave family experienced great difficulty in maintaining itself on a stable basis in a system where so little opportunity for expression was possible. Too seldom did the owner recognize the slave family as an institution worthy of respect, and frequently the blind forces inherent in the

Harriet Jacobs Remembers Her Life as a Young Slave Girl

But I now entered on my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt. The master's age, my extreme youth, and the fear that his conduct would be reported to my grandmother, made him bear this treatment for many months. He was a crafty man, and resorted to many means to accomplish his purposes. Sometimes he had stormy, terrific ways, that made his victims tremble; sometimes he assumed a gentleness that he thought must surely subdue. Of the two, I preferred his stormy moods, although they left me trembling. He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage.

Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written By Herself*. (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 27–28.

system operated to destroy it. Courtship and the normal relationships preliminary to marriage seldom existed. Only when owners manifested some real interest in the religious and moral development of their slaves was there an effort to establish slave families on a stable basis. There are instances where planters insisted on religious ceremonies to unite slave couples, and there is one case of a mistress insisting upon "passing" on all the suitors of her female slaves. One thing that distressed almost all slaveholders was the desire of slaves to marry slaves on other plantations. Such a union, planters knew, would involve one or the other of the slaves being away from his or her own plantation at various times and reduced efficiency as a worker. Slaves were, therefore, encouraged to marry on the plantation if at all possible, and when this was not possible masters sought either to purchase the spouse of their slave or sell their slave to the owner of the spouse.

The permanency of a slave marriage depended on the extent to which the couple had an opportunity to work and live together so that through

common experiences they could be drawn closer together. There are numerous examples of the emergence of a stable slave family, especially where there were children to strengthen the bond and where they were not divided through sale. It has been well said by E. Franklin Frazier that the economic interests of the masters were often inimical to the family life of the slaves, but John Blassingame and Herbert Gutman have shown that the slave family was frequently a viable institution.

The bearing of children was often extremely hard for the slave women. Lack of adequate medical care had a particularly negative impact on the health of slave women during pregnancies, childbirths, and the period immediately thereafter, and the high death rate of slave infants in many ways was a reflection of this. Although having learned, by observing the white family unit, certain elements of so-called decency and self-respect, the slave woman was frequently forced into cohabitation and pregnancy by her master. Obviously in such cases the family was established on a very tenuous basis. She may have learned to care for her husband, who had been forced upon her, but the likelihood was not very great. Nor did she have much opportunity to develop any real attachment for her children. Little time off was given for childbearing, and child rearing was of course a haphazard arrangement in which the mother, just like everyone else, was relieved of any responsibility. Nevertheless, the slave mother did what she could to stabilize her family and to keep it together. Division by sale was fiercely resisted. J. W. Loguen's mother, for example, had to be tied to a loom when her children were taken from her to be sold, and Josiah Henson's mother looked on "in an agony of grief" as she saw her children sold one by one.

Sir Charles Lyell said that "one of the most serious evils of slavery is its tendency to blight domestic happiness; and the anxiety of parents for their sons, and constant fear of licentious intercourse with slaves is painfully great." This "evil" not only blighted the happiness of the white family but was one of the powerful forces operating to weaken the slave family altogether. The extensive miscegenation that went on was largely the result of people living and working together at common tasks and the subjection of slave women to the whims and desires of white men. There was some race mixture that resulted from the association of black men and white women, but this was only a small percent of the total. Despite all the laws against the intermingling of the races, the practice continued, and its persistence is another example of the refusal of the members of the dominant group to abide by the laws that they themselves created.

In cities like Charleston, Mobile, and New Orleans there was widespread intermixture. In New Orleans the practice of young white men maintaining young black women in a state of concubinage became so common as almost to gain social acceptability. Some relationships were the result of physical compulsion on the part of the white man, and if resistance was offered it was frequently beaten back in the most vicious manner. Many slave women carried to their graves scars that had been inflicted by their owners or other

whites when resistance was offered to their advances. Other slave women did not resist, either because of futility, the prestige that such a relationship could bring, or because of the material advantages that might accrue from it. Children born of such unions were slaves, and the result of such extensive mixing was that by 1850 there were 246,000 mulatto slaves out of a total slave population of 3.2 million. By 1860 there were 411,000 mulatto slaves out of a total slave population of 3.9 million. The number may well have been greater, for census takers counted as mulattoes only those who appeared to be of mixed parentage, but there were many mulattoes who did not appear to be.

The reactions of white fathers to their black progeny were varied. Some had no feeling for them at all and sold them when the opportunity presented itself, just as they would sell any other slave. Not infrequently they were encouraged to do this by their wives, who resented the presence of slave children who had been fathered by their husbands. Other men, however, developed a great fondness for their slave children and emancipated them and provided for them. Frequently, old, repentant men atoned for their youthful waywardness by freeing their mulatto children and giving them land and money. Few, however, bestowed as much as John Stewart of Petersburg, who left to his "natural colored daughter" a house, a lot, and all of his money, which amounted to \$19,500.

■ The Slave's Reaction to Bondage

Owners of slaves almost always sought to convey the impression that their human chattel were docile, tractable, and happy. This effort became a part of their defense of the institution, and they went to the extreme in this representation. Frequently, also, the antislavery forces contended that slaves were easily controlled and that was the explanation for their exploitation by their owners. Each group in its own way, therefore, was inclined to overstate the case and to refuse to make a realistic appraisal of a slave's true reaction to his or her status. There is no reason to conclude that the personality of a slave was permanently impaired by engaging in duplicity in the slave-master relationship. It must be remembered that some of the actions of slaves were superficial and were for the purpose of misleading their owners regarding their true feelings. In the process of adjustment innumerable techniques to escape work as well as punishment were developed and in many instances were successful. Any understanding of reactions to slave status must be approached with the realization that the slave at times was possessed of a dual personality and could be one person at one time and quite a different person at another time.

It cannot be denied that as old as the institution of slavery was, human beings had not, by the nineteenth century, brought themselves to the point where they could be subjected to it without protest and resistance. Resistance could be found wherever slavery existed, and slavery in the United States

was no exception. Too frequently, misunderstanding, suspicion, and hatred were mutually shared by master and slave. Indeed, they were natural enemies, and on many occasions they conducted themselves as such. There are, of course, numerous examples of kindness and understanding on the part of owners as well as docility—which may be more accurately described as accommodation—and tractability on the part of slaves. But this was an unnatural relationship and was not, by the nature of things, inherent in the system.

The brutality that apparently was indigenous in a system of human exploitation existed in every community where slavery was established. The wastefulness and extravagance of the plantation system made no exception of human resources. Slaves were for economic gain, and if beating them would increase their efficiency—and this was generally believed—then the rod and lash should not be spared. Far from being a civilizing force, moreover, the plantation bred indecency in human relations, and the slave was the immediate victim of the barbarity of a system that commonly exploited the sex of the women and the work of everyone. Finally, the psychological situation that was created by the master-slave relationship stimulated terrorism and brutality because masters felt secure in their position and interpreted their role as calling for that type of conduct. Many masters as well as slaves got the reputation of being "bad," and this did nothing to relieve the tension that seemed to be mounting everywhere as the institution developed.

The laws that were for the purpose of protecting slaves were few and were seldom enforced. It was almost impossible to secure the conviction of a master who mistreated a slave. Knowing that, the owner was inclined to take the law into his or her own hands. Overseers were generally notorious for their brutality, and the accounts of abuse and mistreatment on their part as well as on the part of hirers are numerous. Masters and mistresses were perhaps almost as guilty. In 1827 a Georgia grand jury brought in a true bill of manslaughter against a slave owner for beating his slave to death, but he was acquitted. Several years later Thomas Sorrell of the same state was found guilty of killing one of his slaves with an axe, but the jury recommended him to the mercy of the court. In Kentucky a Mrs. Maxwell had a wide reputation for beating her slaves, both men and women, on the face as well as the body. There is also the shocking account of Mrs. Alpheus Lewis, who burned her slave girl around the neck with hot tongs. Drunken masters had little regard for their slaves, the most sensational example of which is a Kentucky man who dismembered his slave and threw him piece by piece into the fire. One Mississippi master dragged from the bed a slave whom he suspected of theft and inflicted over 1,000 lashes. Repeated descriptions of runaways contained phrases such as "large scar on hip," "no marks except those on his back," "much scarred with the whip," and "will no doubt show the marks of a recent whipping." They suggest a type of brutality that doubtless contributed toward the slave's decision to abscond.

To the demonstrations of brutality as well as to the very institution of

slavery itself, slaves reacted in various ways. Thanks to the religion of their masters they could be philosophical about the whole thing and escape through ritual and song. The emphasis on otherworldliness in slave songs certainly suggested grim dissatisfaction with their worldly status. "Dere's a Great Camp Meetin' in de Promised Land," "Look Away in de Heaven, Lord," "Fo' My Soul's Goin' to Heaven Jes' Sho's You Born," and "Heaven, Heaven, Everybody Talkin' Bout Heaven Ain't Goin' There" are only a few of the songs that slaves sang in the hope that their burdens would be relieved in the next world. As long as they were in this world they had to make the most of a bad situation by loafing on the job, feigning illness in the fields and on the auction block, and engaging in an elaborate program of sabotage. Slaves were so hard on farming tools that special ones were developed for them. They drove the animals with a cruelty that suggested revenge, and they could be so ruthless in destruction of the fields that the most careful supervision was necessary to ensure survival of the crops until harvest time. Forests, barns, and homes were burned to the extent that members of the patrol were frequently fearful of leaving home lest they be visited with revenge in the form of destruction of their property by fire.

Self-mutilation and suicide were popular forms of resistance to slavery. Slaves cut off their toes and hands and mutilated themselves in other ways so as to render themselves ineffective as workers. One Kentucky slave carpenter, for example, cut off one of his hands and the fingers of the other when he learned that he was to be sold down the river. There were several instances of slaves having shot themselves in the hand or foot, especially upon being recovered from running away. The number of suicides seems relatively high, and certainly the practice was widespread. Slaves fresh from Africa committed suicide in great numbers. In 1807 two boatloads of Africans newly arrived in Charleston starved themselves to death. When his slave woman was found dead by her own hanging in 1829, a Georgia planter was amazed since he saw no reason why she should want to take her own life. When two Louisiana slaves were returned to their master after having been stolen in 1858, they drowned themselves in the bayou. One of the South's wealthiest planters, Charles Manigault, lost a slave by a similar act when the overseer threatened him with punishment. Sometimes slave mothers killed their own children to prevent them from growing up in slavery.

Much more disturbing to the South were the numerous instances of slaves doing violence to the master class. Poisoning was always feared, and perhaps some planters felt a real need for an official taster. As early as 1761 the *Charleston Gazette* remarked that the "Negroes have begun the hellish act of poisoning." Arsenic and other similar compounds were used. Where they were not available, slaves are known to have resorted to mixing ground glass in the gravy for their masters' tables. Numerous slaves were convicted of murdering their masters and overseers, but some escaped. In 1797 a Screven County, Georgia, planter was killed by his newly imported African slave. Another Georgia master was killed by a slave who stabbed him sixteen times.

The slave was later burned alive. The slave of William Pearce of Florida killed his master with an axe when Pearce sought to punish him. Carolina Turner of Kentucky was choked to death by a slave whom she was flogging. Though the citizenry had long complained of the woman's merciless brutality in dealing with her slaves, her killer was summarily hanged for his deed. The times that overseers and masters were killed by slaves in the woods or fields were exceedingly numerous, as the careful reading of almost any Southern newspaper will reveal.

Every Southern community raised its annual crop of runaway slaves. There was both federal and state legislation to aid in their recovery, but many slaves escaped forever. The practice of running away became so widespread that every state sought to strengthen its patrol and other safeguards, but to little avail. Hardly a newspaper went to press without several advertisements listing runaways, and sometimes there were several columns of such advertisements. The following is typical:

Absconded from the Forest Plantation of the late William Dunbar, on Sunday the 7th instant, a very handsome Mulattress called Harriet, about 13 years old, with straight dark hair and dark eyes. This girl was lately in New Orleans, and is known to have seen there a man whom she claims as her father and who does now or did lately live on the Mississippi, a little above the mouth of the Caffalaya. It is highly probable some plan has been concocted for the girl's escape.

Long before the Underground Railroad was an effective antislavery device (see Chapter 10) slaves were running away: men, women, and children, singly, in pairs, or in groups. At times they went so far as to organize themselves into groups called Maroons and to live in communities, on the order of Palmares in Brazil. The forests, mountains, and swamps of the Southern states were their favorite locations, and they proved to be troublesome to the masters who sought to maintain strict order on their plantations.

Some slaves disguised themselves or armed themselves with free passes in their effort to escape. Others simply walked off, apparently hoping that fate would be kind and assist in their permanent escape. Some were inveterate runaways such as the North Carolina woman who fled from her master's plantation no less than sixteen times. Others were not as daring and gave up after one unsuccessful attempt. While there is no way of even approximating the number of runaways, it is obvious that fleeing from the institution was one of the slaves' most effective means of resistance. It represented the continuous fight that slaves carried on against their masters.

The most sensational and desperate reaction of slaves to their status was the conspiracy to revolt. To those who could summon the nerve to strike for their freedom in a group, it was what might be termed "carrying the fight to the enemy" in the hope that it would end, once and for all, the degradation of human enslavement. To whites it was a mad, sinister act of

Henry Bibb Writes to His Former Master—1844

You may perhaps think hard of us for running away from slavery, but as to myself, I have but one apology to make for it, which is this: I have only to regret that I did not start at an earlier period. I might have been free long before I was. But you had it in your power to have kept me there much longer than you did. I think it is very probable that I should have been a toiling slave on your property to-day, if you had treated me differently.

To be compelled to stand by and see you whip and slash my wife without mercy, when I could afford her no protection, not even by offering myself to suffer the lash in her place, was more than I felt it to be the duty of a slave husband to endure, while the way was open to Canada. My infant child was also frequently flogged by Mrs. Gatewood, for crying, until its skin was bruised literally purple. This kind of treatment was what drove me from home and family, to seek a better home for them. But I am willing to forget the past. I should be pleased to hear from you again, on the reception of this, and should also be very happy to correspond with you often, if it should be agreeable to yourself. I subscribe myself a friend to the oppressed, and Liberty forever.

Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, in Gilbert Osofsky, ed., Puttin' on Ole Massa (New York, 1969), pp. 155–156.

desperate savages, in league with the devil, who could not appreciate the benign influences of the institution and who would dare shed the blood of their benefactors. Inherent in revolts was bloodshed on both sides. Blacks accepted this as the price of liberty, while whites were panic-stricken at the very thought of it. Even rumors of insurrections struck terror in the hearts of slaveholders and called forth the most vigorous efforts to guard against the dreaded eventuality.

Revolts, or conspiracies to revolt, persisted down to 1865. They began with the institution and did not end until slavery was abolished. It can, therefore, be said that they were a part of the institution, a kind of bitterness that whites had to take along with the sweetness of slavery. As the country was turning to Jeffersonian Republicanism at the beginning of the nineteenth century, many people believed that a new day had arrived for the common person. Some blacks, however, felt that they would have to force their new day by breaking away from slavery. In Henrico County, Virginia, they resolved to revolt against the institution under the leadership of Gabriel Prosser and Jack Bowler. For months they planned the desperate move, gathering clubs, swords, and the like for the appointed day. On August 30, 1800, over 1,000 slaves met six miles outside of Richmond and began to

march on the city, but a violent storm almost routed the insurgents. Two slaves had already informed the whites, and Governor Monroe, acting promptly, called out more than 600 troops and notified every militia commander in the state. In due time scores of slaves were arrested, and 35 were executed. Gabriel Prosser was captured in late September, and after he refused to talk to anyone he too was executed.

Whites speculated extravagantly over the number of slaves involved in this major uprising. The estimates ran all the way from 2,000 to 50,000. The large numbers, together with the total disregard slaves seemed to have for their own lives, caused the whites to shudder. The "high ground" that slaves took in maintaining silence added to the stark terror of the whole situation. When one was asked what he had to say, he calmly replied:

I have nothing more to offer than what General Washington would have had to offer, had he been taken by the British officers and put to trial by them. I have ventured my life in endeavouring to obtain the liberty of my countrymen, and am a willing sacrifice to their cause; and I beg, as a favour, that I may be immediately led to execution. I know that you have predetermined to shed my blood, why then all this mockery of a trial?

The unrest among slaves, even in Virginia, continued into the following year, and plots were reported in Petersburg and Norfolk and in various places in North Carolina. The latter state became so excited that many slaves were lashed, branded, and cropped, and at least 15 were hanged for alleged implication in conspiracies. In the following years before the war with England there were reports of insurrection up and down the Atlantic seaboard. Conspiracy had crossed the mountains, for in 1810 a plot was uncovered in Lexington, Kentucky. The following year, more than 400 rebellious slaves in Louisiana had to be put down by federal and state troops. At least 75 slaves lost their lives in the encounter and in the trials that ensued. There was another uprising in New Orleans in the following year.

Following the War of 1812 the efforts of slaves to revolt continued. In Virginia in 1815 a white man, George Boxley, decided to attempt to free the slaves. He made elaborate plans, but a slave woman betrayed him and his conspirators. Although Boxley himself escaped, six slaves were hanged and another six were banished. When the revolutions of Latin America and Europe broke out, Americans could not restrain themselves in their praise and support of the fighters for liberty. The South joined in the loud hosannas, while slaves watched the movements for the emancipation of the slaves in Latin America and the Caribbean. Perhaps all these developments had something to do with what was the most elaborate, though not the most effective, conspiracy of the period: the Denmark Vesey insurrection.

Vesey had purchased his freedom in 1800 and for a score of years had made a respectable living as a carpenter in Charleston, South Carolina. He was a sensitive, liberty-loving person and was not satisfied in the enjoyment of his



NAT TURNER EXHORTING HIS FOLLOWERS. The 1831 revolt of Nat Turner and his followers in Virginia resulted in the deaths of his master and numerous other whites. Once the revolt was crushed, dazed whites strengthened slave codes and redoubled vigilance. The artist's depiction reflects whites' fears of the consequences of blacks meeting without the supervision of their masters. (Culver Pictures.)

own relatively comfortable existence. He believed in equality for everyone and resolved to do something for his slave brothers and sisters. Over a period of several years he carefully plotted his revolt and chose his assistants. Together they made and collected their weapons: 250 pike heads and bayonets and 300 daggers. Vesey also sought assistance from Haiti. He set the second Sunday in July 1822 for the day of the revolt; and when the word leaked out, he moved it up one month, but his assistants, who were scattered for miles around Charleston, did not all get the word. Meanwhile, the whites were well aware of what was going on and began to round up suspects. At least 139 blacks were arrested, 47 of whom were condemned. Even 4 white men were fined and imprisoned for encouraging them in their work. Estimates of the number of blacks involved in the plot ran as high as 9,000.

The following decade saw the entire South apprehensive over possible uprisings. The revival of the antislavery movement and the publication of such incendiary material as David Walker's *Appeal* put the South's nerves on edge. Several revolts were reported on Louisiana plantations in 1829, and in 1830 a number of citizens of North Carolina asked their legislature for aid because their slaves had become "almost uncountrouable." The panic of the 1820s culminated in 1831 with the insurrection of Nat Turner. This slave from Southampton County, Virginia, was a mystical, rebellious person who

had on one occasion run away and then decided to return to his master. Perhaps he had already begun to feel that he had been selected by some divine power to deliver his people from slavery.

Upon the occasion of the solar eclipse in February 1831, Turner decided that the time had come for him to lead his people out of bondage. He selected the Fourth of July as the day, but when he became ill he postponed the revolt until he saw another sign. On August 13, when the sun turned a "peculiar greenish blue," he called the revolt for August 21. He and his followers began by killing Turner's master, Joseph Travis, and his family. In rapid succession other families fell before the blows of the blacks. Within twenty-four hours 60 whites had been killed. The revolt was spreading rapidly when the main group of blacks was met and overpowered by state and federal troops. More than 100 slaves were killed in the encounter, and 13 slaves and 3 free Negroes were immediately hanged. Turner was captured on October 30, and in less than two weeks, on November 11, he was executed.

The South was completely dazed by the Southampton uprising. The situation was grossly exaggerated in many communities. Some reports were that whites had been murdered by the hundreds in Virginia. Small wonder that several states felt it necessary to call special sessions of the legislature to consider the emergency. Most states strengthened their Slave Codes, and citizens literally remained awake nights waiting for slaves to make another break. The uprisings continued. In 1835 several slaves in Monroe County, Georgia, were hanged or whipped to death because of implication in a conspiracy. In the following decade there were several uprisings in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. In 1853 a serious revolt in New Orleans involving 2,500 slaves was aborted by the informing of a free black. In 1856 the Maroons in Bladen and Robeson counties, North Carolina, "went on the warpath" and terrorized the countryside. Up until and throughout the Civil War, slaves demonstrated their violent antipathy for slavery by continuing to rise against it.

One little-known sidelight of slave revolts is the encouragement and assistance that whites gave to blacks. Two Frenchmen were said to have been involved in Gabriel Prosser's plot. In 1802 a Virginia slave confessed that some white men had promised to help him secure arms and ammunition for an uprising. It will be recalled that four white men were convicted for encouraging Denmark Vesey's uprising. In Mississippi in 1835, twenty-one "bleached and unbleached" conspirators were hanged. In the same year white men in Georgia were involved in a plot, and two whites were hanged in Louisiana for helping to plan an uprising. There were always reports that whites, whose names were most difficult to obtain, were assisting in some way with slave plots. It is not at all strange that some whites sought to encourage the revolts. When consideration is given to the large number of whites in the South who could have traced their economic and social plight directly to slavery, it is surprising to find that there was not a larger number involved in attempts to wipe out the institution of slavery.