

To Make Them Stand in Fear

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A realistic Arkansas slaveholder once addressed himself to the great problem of his class, "the management of Negroes," and bluntly concluded: "Now, I speak what I know, when I say it is like 'casting pearls before swine' to try to *persuade* a negro to work. He must be *made* to work, and should always be given to understand that if he fails to perform his duty he will be punished for it." Having tested the "*persuasion doctrine*" when he began planting, he warned all beginners that if they tried it they would surely fail.¹

Most masters preferred the "*persuasion doctrine*" nevertheless. They would have been gratified if their slaves had willingly shown proper subordination and wholeheartedly responded to the incentives offered for efficient labor. They found, however, that some did not respond at all, and that others responded only intermittently. As a result, slaveholders were obliged to supplement the lure of rewards for good behavior with the threat of punishment for bad. One Virginian always assumed that slaves would "not labor at all except to avoid punishment," and would "never do more than just enough to save themselves from being punished." Fortunately, said a Georgian, punishment did not make the Negro revengeful as it did members of other races. Rather, it tended "to win his attachment and promote his happiness and well being."²

Without the power to punish, which the state conferred upon the master, bondage could not have existed. By comparison, all other techniques of control were of secondary importance. Jefferson Davis and a few others gave their bondsmen a hand in the chastisement of culprits. On Davis's Mississippi estate trusted slaves tried, convicted, and punished the violators of plantation law.³ But this was an eccentric arrangement. Normally the master alone judged the seriousness of an offense and fixed the kind and amount of punishment to be administered.

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Slaveholders devised a great variety of penalties. They demoted unfaithful domestics, foremen, and drivers to field labor. They denied passes to incorrigibles, or excluded them from participating in Saturday night dances. An Arkansas planter gave his bondsmen a dinner every Sunday and required those on the "punishment list" to wait on the others without getting any of the food themselves. Masters forced malingers to work on Sundays and holidays and at night after the others had finished. They penalized them by confiscating the crops in their "truck patches," or by reducing the sums due them. They put them on short rations for a period of time, usually depriving them of their meat allowances. And they sold them away from their families and friends.

Some of the penalties were ingenious. A Maryland tobacco grower forced a hand to eat the worms he failed to pick off the tobacco leaves. A Mississippian gave a runaway a wretched time by requiring him to sit at the table and eat his evening meal with the white family. A Louisiana planter humiliated disobedient male field-hands by giving them "women's work" such as washing clothes, by dressing them in women's clothing, and by exhibiting them on a scaffold wearing a red flannel cap.⁴

A few slaveholders built private jails on their premises. They knew that close confinement during a working day was a punishment of dubious value, but they believed that it was effective during leisure hours. "Negroes are gregarious," explained a small planter, "they dread solitariness, and to be deprived from the little weekly dances and chit-chat. They will work to death rather than be shut up." Accordingly, a Louisianian locked runaways in his jail from Saturday night until Monday morning. When he caught a cotton picker with a ten pound rock in his basket, he jailed him every night and holiday for five months.⁵

Others made use of public jails, paying the jailer a fee for the service. One South Carolinian put a runaway in solitary confinement in the Charleston workhouse; another had a slave "shut in a darkcell" in the same institution. A Georgia planter advised his overseer to take a disobedient slave "down to the Savannah jail, and give him prison discipline and by all means solitary confinement for 3 weeks, when he will be glad to get home again."⁶

The stocks were still a familiar piece of equipment on the plantations of the ante-bellum South. . . .

"Chains and irons," James H. Hammond correctly explained, were used chiefly to control and discipline runaways. "You will admit," he argued logically enough, "that if we pretend to own slaves, they must not be permitted to abscond whenever they see fit; and that if nothing

else will prevent it these means must be resorted to.”⁷ Three entries in Hammond’s diary, in 1844, indicated that he practiced what he preached. July 17: “Alonzo runaway with his irons on.” July 30: “Alonzo came in with his irons off.” July 31: “. . . re-ironed Alonzo.”

Hammond was but one of many masters who gave critics of the peculiar institution a poignant symbol—the fettered slave. A Mississippian had his runaway Maria “Ironed with a shackle on each leg connected with a chain.” When he caught Albert he “had an iron collar put on his neck”; on Woodson, a habitual runaway, he “put the ball and chain.” A Kentuckian recalled seeing slaves in his state wearing iron collars, some of them with bells attached. The fetters, however, did not always accomplish their purpose, for numerous advertisements stated that fugitives wore these encumbrances when they escaped. For example, Peter, a Louisiana runaway, “Had on each foot when leaving, an iron ring, with a small chain attached to it.”⁸

But the whip was the most common instrument of punishment—indeed, it was the emblem of the master’s authority. Nearly every slaveholder used it, and few grown slaves escaped it entirely. Defenders of the institution conceded that corporal punishment was essential in certain situations; some were convinced that it was better than any other remedy. If slavery were right, argued an Arkansas planter, means had to be found to keep slaves in subjugation, “and my opinion is, the lash—not used murderously, as would-be philanthropists assert, is the most effectual.” A Virginian agreed: “A great deal of whipping is not necessary; *some is.*”⁹

The majority seemed to think that the certainty, and not the severity, of physical “correction” was what made it effective. While no offense could go unpunished, the number of lashes should be in proportion to the nature of the offense and the character of the offender. The master should control his temper. “Never inflict punishment when in a passion,” advised a Louisiana slaveholder, “but wait until perfectly cool, and until it can be done rather in sorrow than in anger.” Many urged, therefore, that time be permitted to elapse between the misdeed and the flogging. A Georgian required his driver to do the whipping so that his bondsmen would not think that it was “for the pleasure of punishing, rather than for the purpose of enforcing obedience.”¹⁰

Planters who employed overseers often fixed the number of stripes they could inflict for each specific offense, or a maximum number whatever the offense. On Pierce Butler’s Georgia plantation each driver could administer twelve lashes, the head driver thirty-six, and the

overseer fifty. A South Carolinian instructed his overseer to ask permission before going beyond fifteen. “The highest punishment must not exceed 100 lashes in one day and to that extent only in extreme cases,” wrote James H. Hammond. “In general 15 to 20 lashes will be a sufficient flogging.”¹¹

The significance of these numbers depended in part upon the kind of whip that was used. The “rawhide,” or “cowskin,” was a savage instrument requiring only a few strokes to provide a chastisement that a slave would not soon forget. A former bondsman remembered that it was made of about three feet of untanned ox hide, an inch thick at the butt end, and tapering to a point which made it “quite elastic and springy.”¹²

Many slaveholders would not use the rawhide because it lacerated the skin. One recommended, instead, a leather strap, eighteen inches long and two and a half inches wide, fastened to a wooden handle. In Mississippi, according to a visitor, the whip in general use consisted of a “stout flexible stalk” covered with a tapering leather plait, about three and a half feet in length, which formed the lash. “To the end of the lash is attached a soft, dry, buckskin cracker, about three eighths of an inch wide and ten or twelve inches long, which is the only part allowed to strike, in whipping on the bare skin. . . . When it is used by an experienced hand it makes a very loud report, and stings, or ‘burns’ the skin smartly, but does not bruise it.”¹³

How frequently a master resorted to the whip depended upon his temperament and his methods of management. On some establishments long periods of time elapsed with relatively few whippings—until, as a rice planter explained, it seemed “as if the devil had got into” the hands, and for a time there was “a good deal of it.” Or, occasionally, a normally amiable slave got out of hand and had to be flogged. “Had to whip my Man Willis for insolence to the overseer,” wrote a Tennessean. “This I done with much regret as he was never whipped before.”¹⁴

On other establishments the whip was in constant use. The size of the estate may have had some relationship to the amount of whipping, but the disposition of the proprietor was decidedly more crucial. Small farmers, as well as large planters, often relied upon corporal punishment as their chief method of enforcing discipline. Southern women were sometimes equally prone to use the lash upon errant domestics.

Some overseers, upon assuming control, thought it wise to whip every hand on the plantation to let them know who was in command. Some masters used the lash as a form of incentive by flogging the last