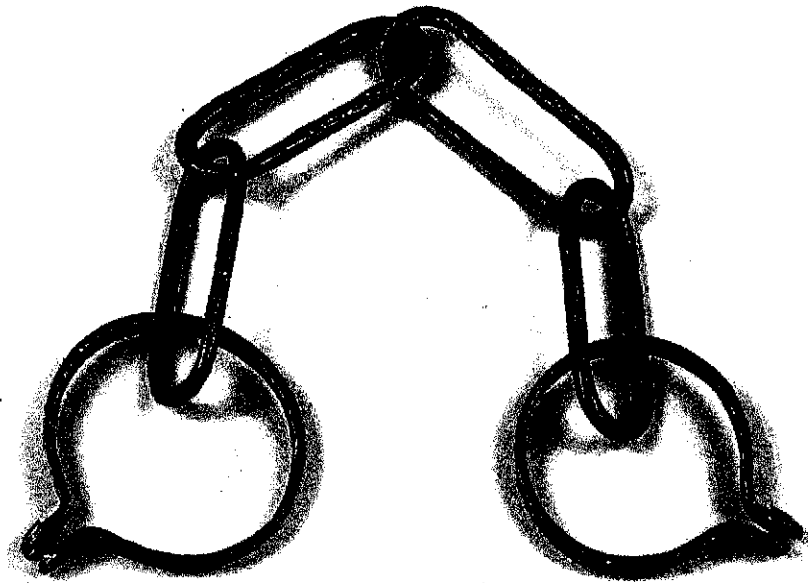


10TH-ANNIVERSARY EDITION, WITH A NEW PREFACE AND AFTERWORD

AMERICAN SLAVERY

1619-1877



"A miraculous achievement." —*The New Yorker*

PETER KOLCHIN

Hill and Wang

A division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux
19 Union Square West, New York 10003

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Distributed in Canada by Douglas & McIntyre Ltd.

Printed in the United States of America

First edition published in 1993 by Hill and Wang

First revised edition, 2003

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Kolchin, Peter.

American slavery, 1619-1877 / Peter Kolchin.— Rev., 10th
anniversary ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8090-1630-3

ISBN-10: 0-8090-1630-3 (pbk.)

1. Slavery—United States—History. 2. African Americans—
History—To 1863. I. Title.

E441.K64 2003

306.3'62'0973—dc21

2003049980

Designed by Fritz Metsch

www.fsgbooks.com

9 11 13 15 16 14 12 10 8

ferment, both physical and intellectual, forced them to grapple with the question of slavery's morality and utility and, after a brief period of uncertainty, left them far more committed to the peculiar institution than they had previously been. With emancipation in the North, slavery became ever more deeply identified with the South, Southern interests, and the Southern way of life. The next time Southern whites fought for their "liberty," it would be explicitly for their rights as slave owners.

4

Antebellum Slavery: Organization, Control, Paternalism

I

DURING THE THREE-QUARTERS of a century following the War for Independence, American slavery, although increasingly confined to the South, underwent massive expansion. The 697,897 slaves counted by the first federal census in 1790 increased by more than 70 percent, to 1,191,354, by 1810, two years after the end of legal importation of slaves; during the next fifty years the slave population more than tripled, reaching 3,953,760 in 1860 (see table 3). Geographic expansion was equally striking. Before the Revolution, American slavery, like the non-Indian population, was confined to a string of colonies along the Eastern Seaboard; by 1860, it had spread to nine new states and reached more than halfway across the American continent, into Texas. Because the growth of a vast Southern empire based on slave labor coincided with the gradual emancipation of the North's relatively few remaining slaves, the fate of the South became increasingly associated, both in people's minds and in fact, with that of slavery. In 1750, slavery existed in all the American colonies, and in most of the New World; a century later, the "slave South" stood increasingly alone, joined in the Western Hemisphere only by Brazil and the Spanish islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico. Slavery had become the South's "peculiar institution."

As slavery in the South became more and more distinctively Southern, it underwent further changes, some of which represented continuations of trends previously evident and others of which were new developments. Patterns of behavior that had been tentative became more firmly entrenched as people who were increasingly third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation slaves and masters confronted one another. Masters expressed growing concern for the well-being of their "people," and the material treatment of most slaves improved. At the same time, slave owners renewed their efforts to promote slave dependence and docility, sharply curtailed manumissions, and imposed new restrictions on the actions of both slaves and free blacks. These two trends, although apparently contradictory, were in fact closely linked, for as Southern whites grew increasingly committed to their peculiar institution and took measures to defend it, they also sought to demonstrate, both to themselves and to outside critics, its basic humaneness (and hence its defensibility). Antebellum Southern slavery became both more rigid and more paternalistic; in the process, it also became increasingly distinctive.

II

EXPECTATIONS THAT ENDING the African slave trade would put slavery on the road to gradual extinction proved radically wide of the mark. During the half century after the legal end of slave importation, the slave population of the United States surpassed not only that of any other country in the New World, but, after abolition of slavery in the British colonies in the 1830s, that of all of them combined. This growth was entirely the result of natural increase, for the small number of slaves smuggled into the United States was probably exceeded by the number who escaped from slavery. What is more, although slavery disappeared from the Northern states and seemed well on the road to extinction in Delaware and parts of Maryland, in the South as a whole it showed no sign of retreat: in 1860, as in 1790, slaves constituted about one-third of the Southern population.

The peculiar institution owed much of its persistence in antebellum years to cotton, a crop grown only in very limited quantities in the colonial period. The widespread introduction of steam power

in British industry in the late eighteenth century sharply lowered the cost of spinning cotton into yarn and weaving that yarn into fabric, and created a burgeoning demand for American cotton; similar mechanization, although based primarily at first on waterpower, occurred in the Northeastern United States. Prompted by this new demand, planters along the coast of Georgia and South Carolina increased the cultivation of cotton during the post-Revolutionary years. The long-staple cotton raised in the low country, however, could not flourish inland, and substantial production of short-staple cotton, which could, was for years blocked by the time and expense needed to separate its seeds—which clung far more tenaciously to the cotton than did those of the long-staple variety—from the fiber. Given the heightened demand for cotton, invention of an improved cotton gin in 1793 was not entirely fortuitous; had Eli Whitney not come up with a device capable of efficiently separating the seeds from the fiber of short-staple cotton, someone else surely would have. In an immediate sense, however, the invention made possible the emergence of the cotton South.

It is almost impossible to overemphasize the importance of cotton to the antebellum Southern (and indeed American) economy. Annual cotton production rose from about 3,000 bales in 1790 to 178,000 in 1810, and then surged more than twentyfold during the next half century, surpassing 4 million bales on the eve of the Civil War. About three-quarters of this cotton was exported, principally to Britain, and throughout most of the antebellum period, cotton not only constituted the United States' leading export but exceeded in dollar value all other exports combined. Cotton provided the basis for the first significant growth of the factory system in New England and thus played a leading role in that section's industrialization. But for our purposes, cotton was most important because of its close association with slavery. Like tobacco in the colonial Chesapeake region and rice on the South Carolina and Georgia coast, cotton created a seemingly insatiable demand for slave labor.

Cotton cultivation, which required a growing season of at least two hundred frostless days, was confined primarily to the deep South. At the turn of the nineteenth century, this meant Georgia, South Carolina, and the southeast corner of North Carolina, but as Southerners moved west, so, too, did cotton; although the seaboard states continued to grow the crop, as did newly settled states such as Arkansas, Florida, and Texas, production was increasingly

concentrated in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. As early as 1834, those three states grew more than half the nation's cotton, and by 1859, together with Georgia, they produced 79 percent. The share produced by the Carolinas, by contrast, fell from 60 percent in 1801 to 10 percent in 1859.

Nevertheless, cotton boosted the economy of all the slave states, cotton-producing or not. Because cotton created an intense demand for slave labor, it led—in conjunction with the closing of the African slave trade—to a rise in slave prices (and hence in the value of slave owners' property), a rise that accelerated from the middle of the 1840s. The cotton boom also enabled slave owners in the non-cotton-producing states to profit from a commodity they did have in abundance: slaves. During the half century preceding the Civil War, slave owners moved hundreds of thousands of "surplus" slaves west, mostly from non-cotton-producing to cotton-producing states. This long-distance migration represented a major new development: American slaves had been subjected to sale in the colonial era, but relatively few had been removed far from their existing homes. By breaking up existing families and forcing slaves to relocate far from everyone and everything they knew, the long-distance domestic slave trade, which reached significant dimensions just when the international slave trade to America was coming to an end, not only replaced that international trade but also replicated (if on a reduced level) many of its horrors.

While precise statistics are lacking, about one million slaves (or almost twice as many as had crossed the Atlantic from Africa to America) moved west between 1790 and 1860. Most of the departures were from Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas; the main importing states were at first Kentucky and Tennessee, but after 1810, when the transfer of slaves to the West accelerated, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas received the most. Although the westward movement fluctuated with the economy—peaking during the 1830s, slowing during the depression of the early 1840s, and surging again during the fifteen years before the Civil War—every decade between 1810 and 1860 saw more than 100,000 slave migrants.

Historians disagree over how most slaves moved. The majority of early migrants from the Chesapeake to Kentucky and Tennessee accompanied masters who left home in search of more lucrative opportunities, took their entire work force with them, and resumed

operations in a new locale. This transfer of farms and plantations continued during subsequent decades, although its share in the overall westward movement of slaves declined; in their controversial book *Time on the Cross*, econometricians Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman maintained that "about 84 percent of the slaves engaged in the westward movement migrated with their owners." Most other scholars assign far greater weight than do Fogel and Engerman to slave sales. In the most recent book on the domestic slave trade, Michael Tadman has estimated that sales accounted for 60 to 70 percent of interregional slave movements, and that "for slave children living in the Upper South in 1820, the cumulative chance of being sold South by 1860 might have been something like 30 percent."¹

Throughout the antebellum years, professional slave traders scoured the rural areas of the seaboard states, buying up surplus slaves who were then sent west—usually in overland "coffles" but sometimes by boat—where they were eagerly snapped up both in the countryside and in markets of cities such as New Orleans, Natchez, and Montgomery. For enterprising speculators, the slave trade could be a big business; between 1828 and 1836, partners Isaac Franklin and John Armfield, headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, purchased and resold more than one thousand slaves annually. A disproportionate number of slaves sold west were youths and young adults aged fifteen to twenty-five, but with the exception of those sent to New Orleans, where the demand was for strong young men capable of working in the sugar fields, traders shipped approximately even numbers of males and females; in this respect, the domestic slave trade differed markedly from the transatlantic trade.

Slaves found the westward movement traumatic, whether they accompanied their owners or traders. Sale of any sort was one of the most dreaded events in the life of a slave, but sale to the Southwest meant being permanently separated from home, friends, and often family members, as well as adjusting to a new owner in a new environment. Narratives of former slaves are filled with heartrending recollections of the slave trade. When young Laura Clark was shipped from North Carolina to Alabama in a wagon with nine other children, she was given candy to keep her quiet and did not understand why her mother was so upset; "I knows now," she added sadly, "and I never seed her no mo' in dis life." Most slaves, however, were well aware of what was going on, and later recalled details

of their sale with anguish and bitterness. Anne Maddox, sent at age thirteen from Virginia to Alabama, remembered the horror of the auction: "White peoples were dere from everywhere; de face of de earth was covered by dem." Those left behind suffered as well. Virginian Carol Anna Randall described the sale of her sister as "de saddes' thing dat ever happen to me." Slaves in the upper South heard rumors of a far more brutal slavery in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, and being "sold down the [Mississippi] river" was both a prevalent fear and a threat that masters used to keep their hands in line.²

Although the slave trade was extremely lucrative—Tadman estimated that the traders' average annual rate of profit exceeded 30 percent until the 1840s and after then ranged from 15 to 30 percent—it was never entirely respectable. "Polite" sentiment in the South bemoaned the forced separation of family members and looked down on traders as coarse, crude, and mercenary, "Yankee" traits unbecoming a Southern gentleman. Throughout the antebellum years, thoughtful defenders of slavery gave increasing attention to proposals that would impose restrictions on the slave trade, attention that was not entirely fruitless (see below, section VII). Widespread discomfort with the slave trade—upon which all slave property was ultimately based—highlighted a troubling if usually unarticulated contradiction in the thought of slavery's most eloquent defenders: if buying and selling human beings was wrong, it was hard to avoid questioning the legitimacy of owning them.

In part for this reason and in part because of economic imperatives, distaste for the slave trade was never translated into effective action within the South to abolish or even curtail it; indeed, during the 1850s, powerful voices were raised on behalf of pushing pro-slavery policy to its logical conclusion by reopening the African trade. Throughout the antebellum years, sale of slaves from East to West continued to play a vital role in the flourishing of Southern slavery. The trade not only helped spread slavery westward but also contributed to the economic revival of once depressed seaboard states as money poured in from slave sales and as demand for still more slaves in the West put upward pressure on slave prices. During the years preceding the Civil War, slavery, and the Southern economy that was based on it, seemed to be thriving as never before, and expectations that the peculiar institution would wither away had

themselves largely withered away. On the eve of the war, it seemed as if Southern slavery would survive for a long time.

III

ANTEBELLUM SLAVERY was a heterogeneous institution, and the slaves faced a wide diversity of conditions. Some lived on large plantations and toiled under the watchful eyes of overseers and drivers, while others, on small farms, worked beside their owners; some had resident masters with whom they came in frequent contact, while others labored for absentee proprietors whom they rarely saw. Small numbers of slaves, especially in South Carolina and Louisiana, belonged to free blacks, and others even had Indian masters: during the antebellum period, leaders of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Creek nations consciously appropriated the culture of white Americans—including the ownership of black slaves. Slaves served as preachers, carpenters, blacksmiths, house servants, drivers, and agricultural laborers, and grew a wide variety of crops, including cotton, sugar, rice, tobacco, wheat, corn, and hemp. They faced variations in region and climate as well as in treatment and in owner disposition; some lived on isolated rural holdings, others were able to visit neighboring farms and plantations, and still others resided in urban areas and enjoyed considerable freedom of local movement and association. Such diversity has contributed to sharp disagreement among historians over the nature of Southern slavery, about which virtually every assertion can be challenged with counter-examples.

Still, although there was no *one* slavery that encompassed the experiences of all slaves and masters, one can outline certain dominant patterns even while recognizing the existence of widespread variation. These dominant patterns and variations existed both among slaveholdings, and thus affected the slaves collectively (the subject of this section), and within slaveholdings, differentiating some slaves' conditions from those of their neighbors (the subject of section IV).

Antebellum slaveholdings, like those in the colonial period, differed from one another in numerous respects, from location and size to crops grown and methods of slave management. Life on a large

cotton plantation in Mississippi, where slaves worked in gangs under the watchful eyes of an overseer and drivers, was very different from that on a small hemp-producing farm in Kentucky, where the master personally directed and toiled alongside his hands, and both were far removed from the slavery experienced by blacks in Baltimore or New Orleans. If anything, the range of variations increased over time, with territorial expansion, the emergence of new crops, increased socioeconomic stratification among Southern whites, and the growth of a significant (although still small by Northern standards) urban population.

Nevertheless, in general, Southern slaves continued to live in a distinctive environment that accentuated close contact between master and slave. Most basic was the ratio of slave to free and black to white, a ratio that served to differentiate the South from Caribbean societies such as Jamaica and Saint Domingue, where slaves formed a huge numerical majority of the population, as well as from such nominally slaveholding regions as colonial Mexico or Massachusetts, where slaves never represented more than 3 percent of the population. In the South as a whole, slaves formed about one-third of the population.

The proportion of slaves varied considerably from state to state, ranging in 1860 from 1.6 percent in Delaware to 57.2 percent in South Carolina. With the exception of the border states of Delaware, Maryland, and Missouri, however, where slavery was in sharp retreat in the late antebellum years, slaves constituted about half the population in the deep South and from one-fifth to one-third in the upper South (see table 3). In some areas—especially along the lower banks of the Mississippi River and in the low country of South Carolina and Georgia—the great majority of the population was slave, and in most of the South, slaves were numerous enough to constitute the heart of the laboring class. But like their colonial forebears, antebellum Southern slaves did not generally live in the kind of overwhelmingly black world that prevailed in much of the Caribbean. In Jamaica, on the eve of emancipation, there were about ten blacks for every white; in the American South, there were about two whites for every black.

This population mix permitted the emergence of some very large plantations but guaranteed that most holdings would be of modest size. There were far fewer economies of scale associated with cotton than with sugar and rice; like tobacco, cotton could be profitably

grown on small as well as on large holdings. Cotton plantations were on average somewhat larger than those for tobacco, but the dominance of cotton in the deep South, like that of tobacco in the upper South, meant that most antebellum slaves would not live on huge, Caribbean-style estates. In 1860, only 2.7 percent of Southern slaveholders owned 50 or more slaves, and only one-quarter of the slaves lived on such holdings. Very large plantations were a rarity: a mere 0.1 percent of slave owners held estates of 200 or more slaves, and such estates contained only 2.4 percent of the slaves. By contrast, in Jamaica on the eve of emancipation, one-third of the slaves lived on holdings of 200 or more and three-quarters lived on holdings of at least 50. (Holdings of serfs in Russia were even more concentrated: four-fifths of all serfs belonged to masters who possessed more than 200 bondspeople.)

Regional variations qualify but do not negate the generalization that most Southern slaves lived on holdings of modest size. Exceptions were most likely to be in the deep South, especially along the lower banks of the Mississippi River and in the coastal low country of South Carolina and Georgia; as earlier, the largest plantations were usually those devoted to growing sugar and rice. In sugar-dominated Ascension Parish, Louisiana, half of all slaves lived on plantations containing 175 or more slaves. Such a figure, although noteworthy, was highly atypical even for the deep South, where half the slaves lived on holdings of more than 32; in the South as a whole, the median figure was 23. In rough terms, about one-quarter of Southern slaves lived on very small holdings of 1 to 9, one half lived on middle-range holdings of 10 to 49, and one-quarter lived on large estates of 50 or more (see tables 4 and 5).

Most Southern slaves not only lived on modest holdings but also lived with resident masters. Once again, exceptions prove the rule. The small number of wealthy planters who owned multiple holdings were of necessity absentee proprietors to many of their slaves, and other masters chose to spend much or all of their time away from their slaveholdings, either because of other obligations, such as political office or legal practice, or because of personal inclination. Low-country planters often avoided their estates during the malarial summer months, and elsewhere, too, some very wealthy slave owners, craving the company of fashionable society, kept houses in nearby towns. But far more often than most Caribbean slave owners or Russian serf holders, American masters lived on their rural holdings

and considered those holdings home. This resident mentality, which, as we have seen, was already well established in the eighteenth century, became still more entrenched in the nineteenth as political independence and the spread of democratic government reinforced local attachments among the white gentry. As Louisiana planter Bennet H. Barrow put it succinctly, in explaining the need for personal supervision by a planter of his slave property, "if a master exhibits no extraordinary interest in the proceedings on his plantation, it is hardly to be expected that any other feelings but apathy, and perfect indifference could exist with his negroes."³ Southern slave owners typically felt strong ties to place, which included their governments, communities, landholdings, and slaves.

Because most slaveholdings were relatively small and most masters took a lively interest in running their own estates, slave management usually required little in the way of administrative hierarchy. On farms and small plantations with fewer than thirty slaves—which constituted more than nine-tenths of rural slaveholdings and contained a majority of the slaves—resident masters usually supervised operations personally. They knew the slaves and their capabilities and directed their work informally, with a minimum of record keeping and regimentation of labor. On farms with fewer than ten slaves, which contained a quarter of the slaves but a majority of the owners, masters could typically be found in the field, toiling alongside their slaves while bossing them and casually interacting with them.

Larger estates required more organization. Many planters kept record books in which they listed their slaves and livestock, recorded expenditures and sales, and kept track of agricultural operations, usually through brief daily or weekly entries. Such record keeping became so routine among planters that a number of published record books, complete with spaces for making entries under the proper headings, appeared during the late antebellum period. The most widely used of these, composed by Thomas Affleck, went through several editions in the 1840s and 1850s and offered a number of versions; in addition to *The Cotton Plantation Record and Account Book, No. 1. Suitable for a Force of 40 Hands or Under*, there were cotton plantation books designed for planters with forty to eighty hands and for those with over eighty hands, and two sugar plantation books as well.

Many planters, although by no means all, hired overseers. They

came from a variety of backgrounds: some were non-slaveholding whites who lived in the vicinity, while others were planters' sons who fulfilled overseeing duties temporarily, until they could establish themselves as landed proprietors. Increasingly, however, they belonged to a professional group who made their careers managing plantations and boasted of their skill in handling slave labor. On estates with absentee owners, overseers wielded great authority, representing the masters' will; on plantations with resident masters, however, overseers frequently served essentially as administrative assistants, carrying out daily policies set by their watchful employers.

Slaves on large plantations usually worked in gangs, often headed by a slave driver appointed from among the male slaves for his strength, intelligence, loyalty, and managerial ability. The driver functioned as an assistant to the overseer or master, directly supervising agricultural labor. Plantations with more than fifty slaves generally had two or more gangs. A typical arrangement was to divide slaves into plow-hands, who usually consisted primarily of able-bodied men but sometimes included women, and hoe-hands, less fit for strenuous endeavor; on some plantations, lighter work still—for example, weeding and yard cleaning—was assigned to members of a "trash gang" made up of children and others incapable of heavy labor. Very large plantations sometimes exhibited more complex administrative hierarchies that approached those typical of big sugar plantations in the Caribbean (although not the military-like organization of huge serf-holding estates in Russia). In low-country South Carolina and Georgia, absentee planters continued to use the task system, placing their large rice and cotton plantations under the control of "stewards," super-overseers who exercised general authority over two or more estates and in turn ceded day-to-day plantation management to black drivers.

Being an overseer could be a thankless task, for he was likely to be blamed for any of the countless things that could go wrong on a plantation. New overseers often received written instructions from their employers, detailing what was expected of them and warning them to perform their duties diligently or face dismissal. Planters urged overseers to be hardworking, sober, and responsible, to exercise firm control over the slaves but at the same time avoid excessive severity. Equally important, overseers were expected to put their employers' welfare above their own, giving up the temptation to have any sort of social life that would interfere with their re-

sponsibilities; as one instruction noted succinctly, "subordination to the master is the first of an overseer's duties."⁴ Resident masters instinctively distrusted their hired agents and ceded authority to them grudgingly, constantly checking on and interfering with their plantation management and making sure that everyone knew who was really in charge. Many planters encouraged slaves to report on the misdeeds of their overseers.

It is not surprising, therefore, that dissatisfaction with the performance of overseers was rampant among slave owners. The expressions of confidence that typically accompanied the hiring of a new overseer usually changed within a matter of months to concern and then outrage as the employee's "true" character was revealed; with boring repetitiveness, planters reviled their overseers for being greedy, dishonest, and lazy, mishandling the slaves, and showing a lack of proper respect for their employers. When Haller Nutt returned to his Araby plantation in Madison Parish, Louisiana, after a prolonged absence due to bad health, he heard "most terrible accounts of the severity, cruelty & bad management" of his overseer; although Nutt suspected that some of these accounts were "exaggerated," he soon determined that "far too much has been true," a conclusion strengthened by his discovery that the overseer had overreported the amount of cotton harvested. Noting that "even until [I] the last my overseer would lie & deceive me," Nutt dismissed him, but conditions remained unsatisfactory; three days later "an examination found the negroes in very bad order for business [,] the mules in worse order than the negroes[,], and the overseer not much better."⁵

Although an occasional lucky slave owner found someone who met his expectations and stuck with him for decades, many more engaged in a never-ending search for the perfect overseer who would work contentedly for a modest salary. Others tired of the search and decided to do without overseers, either temporarily or permanently, exercising managerial responsibilities personally, sometimes with the help of trusted slaves. On some estates, slaves served in the place of overseers, although the term "overseer" was usually reserved for whites.

The overseer problem was very real for wealthy planters, but it must be kept in perspective. The modest size of most slaveholdings and the resident character of most slave owners precluded the emergence of a pervasive managerial crisis in the antebellum South. The

majority of slaves did not have overseers, and of those who did, the majority had masters who themselves took the dominant role in establishing and supervising the routine of plantation life. As a consequence, interaction between masters and bondpeople assumed a salience unknown in much of the slaveholding Caribbean and in self-holding Russia. The intense relationship between slaves and slave owners was at the heart of the distinctive slave society of the antebellum South.

IV

AS EARLIER, slaves in the antebellum period engaged in a broad range of endeavors. They cultivated the South's major crops, cleared land, dug ditches, put up fences, built and maintained houses, unloaded boats, and worked as mill hands. They served their masters in managerial capacities, as drivers and overseers, and cared for their comfort, as cooks, grooms, gardeners, and personal servants. They also attended to the needs of fellow slaves, working as preachers, conjurers, child carers, and "doctors"; as one white physician wrote of the area around Columbia, South Carolina, "On every plantation the sick nurse, or doctor woman, is usually the most intelligent female on the place; and she has full authority under the physician, over the sick."⁶

Widely scattered evidence suggests that in general about three-quarters of the adult slaves worked as field laborers while one-quarter had other duties, but there were many variations on this pattern. There was more specialization of labor on large plantations and in cities than on smaller plantations and farms. Women performed a narrower range of occupations than men, with house service the main alternative to field labor. Occupations that catered to the masters' personal comfort—house servants, grooms, coachmen—were relatively scarce on absentee-held estates. In the deep South, where demand for cotton produced an intense shortage of labor, especially during the 1850s, a higher proportion of slaves was pressed into field labor than in the upper South. And throughout the South, increased importation of manufactured goods from the North and pressure from white artisans who resented the competition acted to reduce the number of slaves (and free blacks) working in skilled crafts, especially from the 1840s.

Field work was arduous but far from constant. The "sunup to sundown" that constituted the basic workday varied with the seasons: not only were there more hours of daylight in the summer than in the winter but there was more work that needed to be done. (During the hottest months, this work was commonly interrupted by a two-hour siesta following the midday meal.) At harvesttime, the pace of work accelerated and slaves often toiled fourteen or more hours per day. Regional variations were also significant: Louisiana sugar planters drove their slaves more relentlessly than most, especially at harvesttime, when many hands worked far into the night; low-country slaves, who were able to control the pace of their own work, often completed their tasks in eight hours or less.

Despite these seasonal and regional variations, the basic pattern of field work was one of long hours of work at a less-than-frantic pace, punctuated by short bursts of intense activity and relieved by opportunities throughout the year for rest and revelry. Although the hours of daylight defined the workday for most Americans who worked the land, whether slave or free, there can be no doubt that the compulsion of the lash enabled slave owners to extract extra work from their laborers. Scholars differ on precisely how this occurred. According to calculations by econometricians Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, free blacks in the deep South worked 28 to 37 percent fewer hours per year in 1879 than slaves had in 1859. By contrast, Robert W. Fogel and economist John F. Olson recently argued that although the gang system enabled masters to drive slaves at a more intensive pace per hour, they actually worked 10 percent fewer hours per year than Northern free farmers; in other words, slaves worked harder, not longer.

Even under gang labor, slaves, like many other preindustrial workers, typically resisted the efforts of their masters and overseers to impose a factory-like work routine, forcing a more relaxed pace through behavior that contemporary whites typically blamed on innate laziness and that more recent scholars have attributed either to a deliberate effort to undermine authority or to a pre-industrial, "peasant" sense of work and time. As Eugene D. Genovese has argued, slaves expected to work at breakneck speed on particular occasions—for example, at corn shuckings and hog killings—but they resisted the attempt to turn them into metaphorical clock punchers and forced their masters to accept a compromise schedule that included elements of industrial discipline (being summoned to

work by the sound of a horn, for example) but that also included a lackadaisical work pace and time off for themselves. Unlike house servants, who had to be at the constant beck and call of their masters, field workers almost always had Sundays to themselves, whether to pray, to play, to rest, or to work on their garden plots and attend to other chores. Although masters occasionally forced hands to work on Sundays, especially at harvesttime, it was universally understood that this violation of the slaves' customary right—and throughout the antebellum South, state law—was justified only by exceptional circumstances. Indeed, many masters required of their slaves only half a day's work on Saturday, while others paid their hands for Sunday field work.

There has been some scholarly disagreement over the status of slaves who had occupations other than basic agricultural labor, and their relationship with the "ordinary" slaves who toiled in the fields. Slave owners—and visitors to the South—often saw house servants and craftsmen as members of a slave "aristocracy," an elite distinguished from the mass by superior training, manners, and "intelligence." Frances Kemble, an Englishwoman who despite spending a year on her husband's rice plantation never became reconciled either to slavery or to life in low-country Georgia, found the field hands "the more stupid and brutish of the tribe"; the skilled craftsmen, however, showed "a greater general activity of intellect, which must necessarily result from even a partial degree of cultivation," and the head driver was intelligent, kept a clean house, and held himself "a good deal aloof from the rest."⁷ Historians, too, have traditionally stressed the divisions between elite and common slaves, maintaining that the former took pride in their superior status and sometimes identified more with their masters than with their fellow bondsmen.

There is considerable evidence pointing to the existence of tensions resulting from such stratification among slaves. Resentment of drivers, often seen as brutal agents of planter rule, was common, and black oral tradition as well as autobiographies left by former slaves reveal very real hostility to house servants who acted as spies on the slave community. "Domestic slaves are often found to be traitors to their own people," asserted autobiographer Henry Bibb; Austin Steward agreed that typically servants were either "greatly envied" or "bitterly hated." Former servants sometimes had a different perspective; as one pointedly remarked, "Honey, I wan't no

common eve'day slave, I hoped [helped] de white folks in de big house."⁸

Historians have become increasingly aware, however, of the ambiguities connected with "elite" slave status. As in the colonial period, "privileged" occupations usually brought slaves disadvantages as well as very real benefits. House servants, and most other slaves whose jobs involved promoting the masters' comfort rather than their profit, typically ate and dressed better than field hands and were spared the worst rigors of backbreaking labor, but they also faced far more galling supervision and often lived isolated from the slave community. Their unusually intense relationships with whites brought both ties of affection and constant meddling in their personal lives. Frederick Douglass recalled the incessant punishment inflicted on "old Barney" and "young Barney," father and son who served as grooms to his owner, "for in nothing was Colonel Lloyd more particular than in the management of his horses." Stressing the different worlds of field hand and house slave, Northern traveler Frederick Law Olmsted argued that "slaves brought up to house-work dread to be employed at field-labour; and those accustomed to the comparatively unconstrained life of the negro-settlement, detest the close control and careful movements required of the house-servants." Although he exaggerated the gulf separating the two worlds, Olmsted understood that house service was no unmixed blessing to slaves.⁹

Indeed, historian John W. Blassingame has suggested that far from regarding house servants and drivers as slave aristocrats, most slaves placed them near the bottom of the social hierarchy. Viewing those who served whites as members of the elite, he argued, represented the perspective of the masters; the slaves, by contrast, awarded highest status to those who served the black community: preachers, conjurers, folk doctors, midwives, entertainers, the literate rebels. Such an interpretation has the virtue of underlining the subjective nature of status—the slaves' view of social stratification was not necessarily the same as their owners'—and the caution with which one must approach the subject of inter-group attitudes among slaves. At the same time, however, I believe that it continues to overemphasize the social divisions among slaves, which, although real, remained limited.

Despite occupational diversity among slaves, there were at least four factors that restricted both social stratification among slaves and

attendant group tensions. First, most slaveholdings were too small to allow for much specialization of labor. A plantation with twenty slaves, for example, was likely to have only ten to twelve able-bodied adult workers, half male and half female; such an estate would not have its labor force divided into different groups and could not spare slaves to work exclusively as carpenters, blacksmiths, gardeners, nurses, or preachers. Slaves possessing these skills would perform them when needed, in addition to engaging in other endeavors, including field work. Planters owning more than thirty slaves needed to pay greater attention to labor organization, but only those with well over fifty slaves were likely to have formal division between house and field workers, or large staffs with specialized occupations. The modest size of most slaveholdings stipulated relatively homogeneous conditions for the majority of slaves.

Equally important, those slaves lacked the kind of economic base—ownership of property, inheritance of wealth—that spurred stratification among free people. They cultivated their owners' land, lived in cabins put up under their owners' direction, and received food from their owners as well. Although many slaves were allotted garden plots on which they could grow vegetables and raise chickens, and some were able to sell these products or barter them for small luxuries, these plots and goods were privileges that could be granted or removed at a master's discretion rather than property to be passed from generation to generation; as a result, conditions did not allow for the kind of property inequality among slaves that typically existed among peasants under serfdom, or even (with the partial exception of coastal South Carolina and Georgia) the more limited kind that existed in parts of the Caribbean, where slaves had greater access to primitive market conditions. The enforced dependence of Southern slaves (elaborated in greater detail in sections V and VI below) produced a general economic equality among them; indeed, there were usually greater differences in material well-being from plantation to plantation than among slaves on any given plantation.

Two kinds of job mobility also reduced the degree of entrenched stratification based on occupation and status. The first resulted from the prevalence of both slave sales and slave hiring. Slave hiring was a widespread practice in much of the antebellum South, one that facilitated the meshing of supply and demand for slave labor, enabling masters to profit from surplus slaves while persons with short-term labor needs could fill them relatively inexpensively. Unlike

self-hire, which was limited to a small number of trusted slaves with special skills (and, because of the independence it allowed slaves, was illegal in most of the South), the rental of slaves by owners to hirers was common and touched a wide range of slaves; according to estimates made by Fogel and Engerman, 6 percent of rural slaves and 31 percent of urban slaves were on hire in 1860 (with a far greater percentage experiencing hire over a protracted period of time). Being hired out was not necessarily advantageous to slaves. On the one hand, it reduced their isolation and provided them with differing experiences, but on the other, it often took them away from friends and family and placed them under the authority of someone who lacked the owner's incentive to treat them decently; the hirer-slave relationship was far more fundamentally utilitarian than that between master and slave.

Together with slave sales, however, hiring did tend to reduce permanent status differences among slaves, by increasing the likelihood that any particular condition under which a slave lived was temporary. Most slaves experienced one or more changes in status during their lifetime: as the accounts of virtually all ex-slave autobiographers reveal, they were sold, inherited, hired out, moved from one region to another, taken from countryside to city and back again, assigned new occupations. Under such circumstances, it made little sense to pull rank or discriminate sharply on the basis of occupation or status, for who knew where they would live and what they would do tomorrow? The diversity of conditions that individual slaves typically experienced thus prevented the emergence of sharp social divisions among them.

Life-cycle mobility strongly reinforced this diversity. Many slave occupations were highly age-specific. Few able-bodied males between fifteen and forty years of age, for example, served as house slaves; domestic servants were overwhelmingly composed of boys, old men, and women. (Even among female servants, the young and old prevailed.) Except on a small number of unusually large estates, and in sophisticated cities such as Charleston and New Orleans, house servants therefore constituted less an elite stratum than a contingent of slaves at a particular stage of their life cycle. Boys and girls were often taken into the "big house" to serve their masters, but few of them spent their whole lives as domestics. The great majority of males, and many of the females as well, were sent to the fields when they came of age, and stayed there until they were

no longer able to perform heavy labor. Then they might be "retired" to jobs requiring less strenuous exertion, such as housework, gardening, cooking, and looking after children. Such mobility also existed, although to a somewhat lesser extent, in craft work, which masters frequently assigned to men with physical disabilities that precluded their participation in gang labor.

In short, although there was an extraordinary variety of slave experiences, the slave population was relatively undifferentiated in terms of economic and social status. Slaves performed numerous occupations under widely varying conditions, but except on atypically large estates those conditions did not encourage the emergence of sharp social divisions among them. The dependent status they shared, together with the limited opportunity for specialization of labor and the substantial degree of occupational mobility, meant that antebellum Southern slaves formed a population that paradoxically was marked by great uniformity even as it exhibited great diversity. Despite the multiplicity of different slave experiences, much more united the slaves than divided them.

V

ANTEBELLUM SLAVE RELATIONS were marked by a dualism inherent in slavery: slaves were at the same time both objects and subjects, human property held for the purpose of enriching the masters and individuals with lives of their own. But this dualism was especially pronounced in the antebellum South because conditions there accentuated personal relations between master and slave to an extent rarely seen in other slave-owning societies. Slavery served mercenary goals in the South, as it did elsewhere, but it did far more than that; to most masters, slavery represented a civilization or way of life that ordered their very existence.

The distinctive way in which Southern slave owners looked upon and dealt with their slaves has recently been characterized by the term "paternalism." This concept is useful, but it is important to specify what it does and does not mean, for it has generated widespread confusion. Slave-owner paternalism involved not a good, painless, or benign slavery—all contradictions in terms—but a slavery in which masters took personal interest in the lives of their slaves. The typical Southern slave owner knew his or her slaves by name

and interacted with them on a frequent basis, not only directing their labor but also looking after their welfare and interfering in their lives. Masters saw their slaves not just as their laborers but also as their "people," inferior members of their extended households from whom they expected work and obedience but to whom they owed guidance and protection. Not all masters took their paternalistic responsibilities seriously, but the small size of slaveholdings and the resident character—and mentality—of slaveholders produced unusually close contact between master and slave and fostered among many slave owners a strong paternalistic self-image. They spoke frequently of their "love" for their slaves, and although such assertions contained considerable hyperbole, they also expressed the very real conviction that there was more to slavery than profit and loss. If the seeds of this paternalism were already widely sown in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake, with the simultaneous emergence of a largely resident planter class and a predominantly creole slave population, its full blossoming occurred throughout much of the South during the half century before the Civil War.

Antebellum Southern publicists increasingly bombarded the reading public with admonitions to take good care of their people, looking after their physical needs, spiritual welfare, and general happiness. As Presbyterian minister (and Georgia slave owner) Charles C. Jones argued in *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes* (1842), blacks "were placed under our control . . . not exclusively for our benefit but theirs also," so they could receive moral and religious uplift; "we cannot disregard this obligation thus divinely imposed, without forfeiting our humanity, our gratitude, our consistency, and our claim to the spirit of christianity itself." Although there was a strong propagandistic element to such public discourse—defenders of slavery were eager to prove to the outside world the humane nature of the slave regime—the profusion of essays, speeches, and sermons on the "Christian responsibilities" of slave owners inevitably influenced the general consciousness and behavior of Southern whites at large. What is more, similar themes are evident in the private correspondence of slave owners, including their instructions to overseers. As rice planter P. C. Weston informed his overseer, "his first object is to be, under all circumstances, the care and well being of the negroes. The Proprietor is always ready to excuse such errors as may proceed from want of judgment; but he never can or will excuse any cruelty, severity, or want of care towards the negroes."¹⁰

Although not all masters followed exhortations to take good care of their people, the actual material condition of antebellum slaves was in general superior to that of their colonial forebears. An abundant supply of food enabled masters to provide their slaves with a plentiful if not nutritionally balanced diet, and the periodic famines that afflicted the poor in much of the world were unknown in the South; as Frederick Douglass grudgingly noted, "not to give a slave enough to eat, is regarded as the most aggravated development of meanness even among slaveholders."¹¹ The peck (eight quarts) of cornmeal and two and a half to four pounds of pork or bacon per week that became the widely accepted standard ration for healthy adult field hands were supplemented by numerous items that varied according to season and region, many of which—including chickens, vegetables, fruit, opossum, fish, and shellfish—slaves grew on their garden plots or hunted and gathered from the forests and waterways. Some masters dispensed small luxuries such as sugar, coffee, and even whiskey to their people, or allowed them to trade the products of their garden plots for such items.

The abundance of food that most slaves received helped sustain them in comparatively healthy condition. True, seasonal variations and the prevailing ignorance of elementary principles of nutrition produced a slave diet that by today's standards lacked balance and was at times deficient in basic vitamins; the nutritional composition of food given to young children was especially inadequate and contributed to a high rate of infant mortality. But such dietary deficiency was more a function of the state of antebellum medical knowledge than the nature of antebellum slavery; no one had yet heard of vitamins, and most Southerners, white and black, consumed nutritionally unbalanced diets.

Recent research on height, historically closely related to nutrition, suggests that for their time, Southern slaves were relatively healthy; scholars associated with Robert W. Fogel have estimated that although adult antebellum slaves were on the average an inch shorter than Northern whites, they were three inches taller than newly imported Africans, two inches taller than Trinidad-born slaves, and one inch taller than Englishmen in the nineteenth-century British Royal Marines. The crude death rate among antebellum slaves averaged about 30 per 1,000, a figure somewhat higher than that of white Southerners (primarily because of the higher infant mortality rate among slaves) but similar to the rate of many Western Europeans

and substantially lower than that of Caribbean slaves. (In general, the least healthy slaves were those in the swampy low country of South Carolina and Georgia and in the sugar-producing parishes of southern Louisiana.) Protected by the sickle-cell trait, black Southerners suffered much less than whites from malaria but succumbed more often than whites to cholera, tetanus, and sudden infant deaths that contemporaries frequently blamed on "smothering."

Slave housing and clothing were generally crude but functional. Spurred on in part by the proliferating slave-management literature, which contained frequent appeals to provide slaves with clean, dry cabins, antebellum slave owners in fact paid considerably more attention to slaves' housing than their colonial precursors, who had often left them to find sleeping spaces for themselves in barns, sheds, lofts, or, weather permitting, out of doors. During the decades preceding the Civil War, it became standard to provide each slave family with a small wooden cabin, typically sixteen by eighteen feet, and, in part because of concern for slave health, to insist that it be regularly cleaned. Field hands typically received four coarse suits of clothes per year—pants and shirts for the men, dresses for the women, and long shirts for the children—that were usually "homespun" by the slave women or sewn by them from rough "Negro cloth" that Northern textile mills manufactured expressly for sale to Southern slave owners. (During the late antebellum years, however, an increasing proportion of slave owners purchased ready-made clothes for their slaves.) Slave women also used their spare time to sew dressy clothes for use on Sundays and special occasions. Shoes, although regularly distributed, fit so poorly and were so uncomfortable that many slaves chose to go barefoot much of the time.

Unlike slaves' housing and clothing, which were primitive even by contemporary standards, their medical care exceeded that of Southern whites, most of whom rarely if ever saw physicians. Like other antebellum Americans, slave owners lacked knowledge of how to deal effectively with most diseases, but they worried a good deal about the health of their people—who represented valuable investments—and took whatever action they thought necessary to maintain it. Although they realized that slaves sometimes shammed illness in order to escape work, masters (and less often overseers) paid considerable attention to slaves' medical complaints, prescribing rest and a wide range of home remedies. On one of George Noble Jones's two absentee-held plantations in central Florida, all but one of thirty-

one working hands missed some work because of illness in 1841, and the majority missed ten or more days. Thirteen years later, the overseer on Jones's other plantation plaintively begged his employer to "pleas send me Webersters Medical Dictionary as I cant git one hear."¹²

In cases of serious illness, slave owners frequently sent for doctors. Slaves living on large plantations, some of which contained "hospitals" of their own, were especially likely to be treated by specialists, and the records of some planters reveal considerable expenditures for medical care; in 1853, the doctor's bill for numerous visits to Robert F. W. Allston's Waverly estate in South Carolina came to \$390.21. "We have had upwards of 50 cases of measles," read a typical diary entry of Louisiana planter Leonidas Pendleton Spyker, who frequently summoned a doctor to his Morehouse Parish plantation. "On yesterday we had 16 grown negroes lying up—today 14."¹³ The treatment doctors provided usually included liberal bleeding and administration of "vomits," and often did not differ appreciably from the kind of treatment administered by masters themselves; it is not surprising, therefore, that some masters found patients reluctant to submit to their prescribed treatment, or "stubbornly" preferring their own home remedies. The medical care that slave owners provided did not significantly improve the health of their slaves, but it did reflect the widespread concern of masters for the well-being of those slaves.

Such concern was evident in numerous other endeavors, for the lives of the masters were intimately bound with those of the slaves. Slave owners followed the major events in the life history of their people—births, marriages, deaths—but they also often paid attention to more mundane events and interacted with their slaves on a daily basis, reading the Bible to them, providing small favors, nursing the sick. "I walked over to the quarters this morning before breakfast, to see a sick woman, found her quite sick," Mississippian Eliza L. Magruder recorded in her diary in January 1846; five days later she noted that "Aunt Olivia went . . . to the quarters, found one of the negroes very sick; Elizabeth had a baby this afternoon." Slave owners held parties, barbecues, and dances for their slaves, to celebrate seasonal events such as completion of the harvest, to mark local occurrences such as weddings, or simply to provide a break in the normal work routine; throughout the South, it became a common practice to allow slaves a weeklong holiday between Christmas and

New Year's (a time when most holdings had little essential work to do). Although Frederick Douglass ascribed the prevalence of Christmas revelry to a cynical effort on the part of slave owners to provide "safety valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity," he and other slaves looked forward eagerly to holiday festivities, and kept fond memories of them.¹⁴

One of the most noteworthy signs of the spread of paternalism among antebellum slave owners was their growing interest in their slaves' religious lives. A number of factors combined to foster this interest, including the wave of evangelical revivals known as the Second Great Awakening that swept much of the country during the first half of the nineteenth century, the increased receptivity of creole slaves to Protestant proselytizing, and the conviction of some white Southerners that religion would be a stabilizing force among the slave population. Most basically, however, the effort to bring Christianity to the slaves was a function of the intense interaction that existed between resident masters and slaves. Slave owners who strove to order virtually every aspect of slave life paid particular, and increasing, attention to their religious behavior.

This attention was expressed in both organized and unorganized form. A "mission to the slaves," spearheaded by the major Protestant denominations, gained momentum from the 1830s, and saw the formal enlistment of growing numbers of bondsmen and -women in white-controlled churches, especially Baptist and Methodist; on the eve of the Civil War, half a million slaves were officially church members, and most of the remainder received at least some exposure to Christian worship. As historian John Boles has recently argued, antebellum blacks received a warmer welcome from churches than from any other major white organization in the South (which no doubt in part explains their increasing receptivity to Christianity). Fearing that literacy would promote excessive independence among slaves, most (although not all) slave owners opposed teaching their people to read or allowing them to attend Sunday school, thereby subverting the central Protestant tenet that each individual must be able to read the Bible. Instead, many masters read the Bible to their slaves, prayed with them, encouraged them to attend church, and arranged special services for them. Like many other former slaves, Solomon Northup, a free man who spent twelve years in bondage in Louisiana after being kidnapped in Washington in 1841, recalled

how his master "would gather all his slaves about him, and read and expound the Scriptures."¹⁵

The close contact between master and slave that underlay slave-owner paternalism was pervasively shaped by the intimacy of childhood comradeship. White and black children on farms and plantations commonly played together, a source of some anxiety for planters who worried that their children's deportment and pronunciation would be corrupted by excessive contact with young slaves, and of amazement to many visitors to the South, who marveled at the close and easy relationships they saw between white and black. "I am struck with the close cohabitation and association of black and white," wrote Frederick Law Olmsted from Virginia; "negro women are carrying black and white babies together in their arms; black and white children are playing together . . . ; black and white faces are constantly thrust together out of doors, to see the train go by." On the train near Olmsted sat a white woman and her daughter together with a black woman and her daughter, all of whom "talked and laughed together; and the girls munched confectionary out of the same paper, with a familiarity and closeness of intimacy that would have been noticed with astonishment, if not with manifest displeasure, in almost any chance company at the North."¹⁶

Although youthful friendships almost always yielded to the reality of class power as children reached their teens, growing up together and continuing to live together inevitably shaped the attitudes of masters and slaves and set the stage for the continuing relationship between them. Blacks and whites often lived in different worlds, but they were by no means strangers to one another, and intense personal ties persisted among adults. Most owners had personal favorites among their slaves—a former playmate, a serving girl who grew up with (and shared secrets with) her mistress, a trusted assistant who helped run the plantation—in whose lives they took special interest. But many masters took interest in the lives of *all* their slaves. "I have no overseer, and do not manage so scientifically as those who are able to lay down [written] rules," wrote a small planter in the influential *DeBow's Review*; "yet I endeavor to manage so that myself, family and negroes take pleasure and delight in our relations."¹⁷ This planter might have been surprised to learn that his slaves did not fully share his pleasure and delight, but his outlook was typical of that held by large numbers of antebellum slave owners,

who looked upon their slaves as far more than a source of income, and who thought that those slaves looked upon them as far more than exploiters of labor.

VI

SOUTHERN SLAVES suffered an extraordinary amount of interference in their daily lives. Of course, such interference was rooted in the very existence of slavery, for masters everywhere assumed the right to direct and control their slave property. But the unusually close contact that existed between masters and slaves in the antebellum South meant that whites there impinged to an unusual degree on slave life. White influence did not destroy slave autonomy—as we shall see in the next chapter, slaves strove mightily to protect their families and communities from outside interference—but for most slaves, such autonomy was sharply circumscribed. The pervasive presence of white Southerners shaped the everyday lives of the slaves.

Slaves could hardly turn around without being told what to do. They lived by rules, sometimes carefully constructed and formally spelled out and sometimes haphazardly conceived and erratically imposed. Rules told them when to rise in the morning, when to go to the fields, when to break for meals, how long and how much to work, and when to go to bed; rules also dictated a broad range of activities that were forbidden without special permission, from leaving home to getting married; and rules allowed or did not allow a host of privileges, including the right to raise vegetables on garden plots, trade for small luxuries, hunt, and visit neighbors. Of course, all societies impose rules on their inhabitants in the form of laws, but the rules that bound slaves were unusually detailed, covered matters normally untouched by law, and were arbitrarily imposed and enforced, not by an abstract entity that (at least in theory) represented their interests, but by their owners. Slaves lived with their government.

This closely governed nature of slave life represented a central feature of slave-owner paternalism, as masters who cared for their slaves in a variety of ways also strove to shape virtually every aspect of their lives, treating them as permanent children who needed constant direction as well as constant protection. The slave owner's

"design for mastery" was to a considerable extent a function of the close master-slave contact that pervaded the antebellum South: given the arbitrary power they enjoyed over their slaves and convinced that they knew what was best for those slaves, few masters could resist the temptation to meddle in their lives. Some slave owners were quite explicit about what was at stake; as Barrow succinctly noted, it was important to make the slave "as comfortable at Home as possible, affording him What is essentially necessary for his happiness—you must provide for him Your self and by that means creat[e] in him a habit of perfect dependence on you."¹⁸ Over and over, slave owners returned to the metaphor of slaves as children, stressing that they needed loving and firm but above all consistent management if they were not to be spoiled.

Slave owners adopted a wide variety of measures, including suppressing independent religious activities, limiting contact with slaves on neighboring holdings, and interfering with the naming of children, in order to undercut slave autonomy. Although custom dictated that slaves be allowed garden plots for their personal use, many masters agreed with Barrow that this privilege fostered "a spirit of traffic[k]ing" and therefore either forbade slaves to sell and barter produce raised on their plots or banned such plots altogether, giving slaves cash handouts instead. Routine preparation of meals provided even greater risk for masters who would be truly dominant, and produced considerable debate among them over optimum policy. Whereas slaves preferred a system that allowed them maximum control over the cooking and consumption of their food, owners typically worried that the slaves would, "like children," quarrel over food supplies or consume too much at once; in any case, one planter explained, "there are always some negroes on every place who are too careless and indolent to cook their food in a proper manner." One widely touted solution was frequent dispensation of food—although weekly distribution of rations was common, some anxious masters insisted on daily handouts—combined with careful supervision of its preparation, or better yet, use of a plantation cook.¹⁹

The efforts of paternalistic masters to destroy every vestige of slave independence, and the limitations of those efforts, are evident in the administration of James Henry Hammond, who in 1831 acquired Silver Bluff, a South Carolina estate with 147 slaves. Disturbed by the degree of autonomy he found among his slaves, as well as by their poor work habits and health, Hammond took en-

ergetic measures designed to impose his order on Silver Bluff, measures detailed in the careful "instructions" he later composed for the estate's overseer. He shifted his work force from the task to the gang system, hired itinerant white ministers to preach to his people in place of the independent black services they were accustomed to holding, banned his slaves from trading with or visiting neighbors, placed all children younger than eleven under the care of a nurse, and insisted on naming some babies himself. Although he strove to encourage family life among his slaves, and refrained from separating family members, he also pervasively interfered with their families, requiring couples to secure his permission before marrying, forbidding off-plantation marriages, and punishing sexual infidelity. (Hammond was something of an expert on infidelity: a prolonged affair with two of his slaves put serious strains on his marriage, and his "intimacy" with four of his own nieces blew up in a scandal that derailed his political career and led to his ostracism by polite society.) Divorce was allowed, but Hammond imposed a penalty of up to one hundred lashes on separating couples, and forbade either spouse to remarry for three years.

Hammond's "design for absolute control" was not entirely successful. Like other slaves, those at Silver Bluff were never reduced to the childlike, subservient beings their master sought to create; as Hammond's biographer Drew Gilpin Faust wrote, "they retained, in a manner only partially visible to Hammond, essential aspects of black communal life and autonomy." Nevertheless, Hammond did succeed in putting his stamp on life at Silver Bluff and forcing the slaves to confront the reality of close supervision of their activities. His kind of paternalism profoundly influenced, but did not totally shape, slave life and culture.²⁰

Amid the myriad ways in which slave owners interfered in the lives of their slaves, two created particular resentment. Most basic was punishment, and slaves used this criterion above all others in rating their owners: a "good" master was one who rarely or never subjected his people to corporal punishment, while a "bad" master was one who did so incessantly, cruelly, and for trifling or non-existent offenses. Slave owners spanned the full range from gentle humanitarians who abjured use of the lash and whose fortunate charges were sometimes termed "free" by neighboring slaves to sadistic psychopaths like Hoover, the North Carolinian who beat his pregnant slave Mira "with clubs, iron chains, and other deadly

weapons" over a period of four months, during which he also overworked, starved, and "burnt her" until she died.²¹

The vast majority of slave owners fell between these extremes: convinced that their slaves were like children, these masters took it for granted that maintaining orderly behavior required the threat and at least the occasional application of "correction." At the same time, like proverbial parents, they gave lip service—and sometimes more than that—to the need to avoid excessive severity and to make sure that slaves understood under what circumstances they would be punished. "Much whipping indicates a bad tempered, or inattentive manager, & will not be allowed," declared Hammond in a typical instruction. "The Overseer must never on any occasion—unless in self defence—kick a negro, or strike with his hand, or a stick, or the butt-end of his whip."²² Throughout the South, publicists denounced as un-Christian masters who mistreated those placed under their authority, and stressed the need for "moderate," predictable punishment for offenses that were clearly spelled out. Such guidelines were dictated not simply by the much-vaunted "love" that masters felt for their slaves, but also by intensely practical considerations: observant slave owners learned by experience that continual, random, or extreme punishment was likely to be counterproductive, producing confusion and seething resentment rather than cheerful and orderly deportment.

Nevertheless, almost all masters punished, most more than they would have been willing to admit. By far the most common punishment was whipping, and it was a rare slave who totally escaped the lash. A whipping could be a formal occasion—a public, ritualized display in which a sentence was carried out in front of an assembled throng—or a casual affair in which an owner, overseer, or hirer impulsively chastised an "unruly" slave. Either way, the prevalence of whipping was such a stark reminder of slave dependence that to the bondpeople (and abolitionists) the lash came to symbolize the essence of slavery.

Many owners resorted to additional methods to inflict pain and maintain order, methods that included stocks, private jails, and public humiliations, as well as fines and deprivation of privileges, and that less commonly embraced harsher physical tortures. Bennet H. Barrow, who denounced his neighbor as "the most cruel Master I ever knew of" for castrating three of his slaves, devised numerous measures to keep his own people in line, including confinement in

stocks, "whipping frolics" in which all his slaves were subjected to the lash, and humiliating men by making them wear women's clothing or exhibiting them "during Christmas on a scaffold in the middle of the Quarter & with a red Flannel cap on." Slave patrols (or "paddyrollers"), which whites formed to maintain local order, aroused particular fear among blacks, because these groups lacked any incentive to avoid unnecessary cruelty and often in fact engaged in erratic acts of violence against defenseless slaves. "Paddyrollers was mean ez dogs," recalled one ex-slave pointedly.²³

Despite the widespread expressions of repugnance for arbitrary and excessive punishment, on a day-to-day basis flesh-and-blood masters—and overseers—were rarely able to adhere to the kind of rational and restrained punitive system that their most articulate spokesmen advocated; the despotic power of master over slave that inhered in slavery, together with the close contact between master and slave that inhered in *American* slavery, undercut the evenhanded application of rules and regulations in slave punishment. It was simply too easy for whites to react to the innumerable annoyances that slave relations produced by striking out at those in their power, and slave narratives are filled with accounts of "unjustified" punishment, administered haphazardly or without cause. On this question, as on so many, a huge gap in perception separated the slaves and the masters: few slaves recognized the order and regularity that their masters sought and saw in their system of discipline; what to the masters was the prudent application of moderate chastisement for the well-being of the slaves themselves to the bondspeople often appeared as arbitrary and unpredictable.

Next to punishment, interference in the family lives of slaves stood as the starkest reminder of their dependent status. Legally, slave families were nonexistent: no Southern state recognized marriage between slave men and women, and legal authority over slave children rested not with their parents but with their masters. In practice, slaves lived in families, whether recognized by law or not, and historians have recently devoted considerable attention to exploring how those families shielded their members from the worst rigors of bondage (see chapter 5, section III). Still, slave-owner paternalism combined with the slave family's lack of legal standing to render that family subject to unwanted intervention at every stage of the life cycle, as masters convinced that they knew what was best for their people strove to regulate their families as well. Not all slave

owners took advantage of every opportunity to interfere in the family lives of their slaves, and some made special efforts to avoid such interference, but few could entirely resist the temptation to meddle.

Slave marriage, although unrecognized in law, received considerable attention from slave owners. In an effort to promote "morality," stability, and a rapidly expanding slave population, virtually all masters endeavored, sometimes with the aid of financial bounties or other material incentives, to encourage early and long-lasting marriages among their slaves. They differed, however, in their regulatory zeal. Although a few chose mates for young slaves and forced them to live together, most masters expected men and women to find their own spouses and secure their permission (usually readily granted) before marrying. Some slave owners, like Hammond, punished slaves who engaged in extramarital sex or sought to divorce, or even forbade divorces entirely. Others avoided, or abandoned as useless, all efforts to regulate their slaves' marital behavior; "I attempted it for many years by preaching virtue and decency, encouraging marriages, and by punishing, with some severity, departures from marital obligations," explained one Mississippi planter, "but it was all in vain."²⁴

One kind of slave marriage that particularly troubled most owners was marriage "abroad," that is, to someone with a different owner. Made necessary by the prevalence of small and medium-sized holdings with a paucity of eligible mates, the practice was common throughout the South; typically, husbands would receive weekend passes to visit their wives and children, leaving home after a half day of work on Saturday and returning on Monday morning. Virtually all slave owners professed to deplore off-plantation marriage, because it gave (usually male) slaves a ready opportunity to be away from their masters, but their policy toward it was by no means uniform. Owners of small farms often had little choice but to allow it. Large planters had more options: some adopted a hands-off policy, others discouraged marriage abroad without actually prohibiting it, and still others, like Barrow, flatly ruled it out because "it creates a feeling of independence, from being, of right, out of the control of the masters for a time."²⁵ Still, the practice continued, a clear reminder to slave owners of the limits to their ability totally to control the lives of their slaves.

The close contact that existed between masters and slaves worked special hardship on slave women, who were vulnerable to sexual as

well as labor exploitation. Southerners, both white and black, were sensitive on the subject; pro-slavery polemicists typically greeted abolitionist portrayals of the South as a hotbed of license and debauchery with either stony silence or outraged denial, while blacks who reminisced in autobiographies or interviews were reluctant to reveal family skeletons in an era of prudish standards. Still, those who dealt at all frankly with the subject noted—albeit from very different perspectives—the prevalence of interracial sex. South Carolina ideologue William Harper turned it into a virtue, insisting that it helped account for the absence of Southern prostitution and the purity of white women. Patrician diarist Mary Boykin Chesnut, by contrast, countered that in fact “we live surrounded by prostitutes . . . Like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives and concubines, and the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children.” Chesnut’s resentment was directed at the wrongs she saw committed against *white* women made to suffer in silence their husbands’ barely concealed dalliances with slaves, but to the equally bitter ex-slave autobiographer Harriet Jacobs, the victims were *black* women forced to endure the shameful indignities “inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men.” As Chesnut and Jacobs recognized, and Harper implicitly conceded, no slave woman was safe from unwanted sexual advances.²⁶

Of course, not all advances were entirely unwanted. There were slave women who maintained long-term relations with white men that came close to common-law marriages (on rare occasions, slave men had such relations with white women), and others who voluntarily formed liaisons of more limited duration. Over several years, James Henry Hammond carried on affairs with two of his slaves, refusing to break them off even when they were discovered by his wife; these affairs, like others that took place within the context of the ever-present power that planters wielded over their “people,” were based on more than overt use of physical force even if from the slaves’ perspective they represented less than fully consenting relationships. Like many (but not all) masters in such relations, Hammond was especially solicitous of his slave lovers and children, warning his white son Harry to take good care of them and never sell “any of my children or possible children.”²⁷

Far more often, however, slaves who had sex with whites did so against their will, whether the victims of outright rape or of the powerlessness that made resistance to advances futile and the use

of force in such advances unnecessary. (It should be noted that slave women were also easy targets of *black* sexual aggression. Although a slave’s rape of a white woman was a capital offense, his rape of a slave woman was ignored both by state laws and in most cases by slave owners; the disapproval of other slaves—and fear of retribution at their hands—constituted the main deterrent to sexual abuse of slave women by slave men.) Sex between white men and black women was a routine feature of life on many, perhaps most, slaveholdings, as masters, their teenage sons, and on large holdings their overseers took advantage of the situation to engage in the kind of casual, emotionless sex on demand unavailable from white women. What was routine and casual to white men caused anguish to black women, anguish graphically described by Harriet Jacobs in her searing autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. “I cannot tell how much I suffered in the presence of these wrongs,” she wrote, “nor how I am still pained by the retrospect.”²⁸

The ultimate and most dreaded form of interference in slave family life was the forced separation of family members. Although many slave owners strove to keep families together, separation remained a pervasive feature of the slave South. Good intentions alone proved insufficient to protect slaves against the dictates of economic interest, anger, or plain thoughtlessness; there were simply too many instances when it “made sense” or was “necessary” for masters with the best of intentions to separate their slaves. Most slave owners may have disliked the idea of separating their people—and some refused to do so under normal circumstances—but when push came to shove, few put their slaves’ happiness above their own self-interest.

There were numerous occasions, by no means all involving sale, in which slaves were forcibly removed, either temporarily or permanently, from their loved ones. Children were taken from their parents and sent to serve in the “big house”; children and adults were hired out to employers who lived far enough away to make home visits difficult or impossible; slaves who belonged to wealthy masters were moved from one plantation to another, and those with owners in financial straits were “loaned” to creditors. Slaves who married abroad faced likely separation from their spouses if one of the owners moved.

Sale, however, produced the most wrenching—and permanent—disruption of families. Historian Michael Tadman has estimated that

in the upper South about one first marriage in three was broken by forced separation and close to half of all children were separated from at least one parent. (Families in the lower South, which was a net importer rather than exporter of slaves, were torn apart much less often.) The interregional slave trade was the largest single producer of these separations, but slaves found themselves on the market on a variety of occasions. One of the most common of these was the death of a slave owner, with the attendant division of his or her estate among heirs and creditors. Although some slaves were truly attached to their owners and grieved at their deaths, much of the proverbial distress at their masters' passing reflected anxiety over their *own* fate rather than sadness over that of their owners.

Whatever its cause, the forced separation of men, women, and children from their relatives and friends constituted the most devastating experience of bondage for the slaves, and the most embarrassing for the masters. It also indicated the fragility and elasticity of their paternalistic pretensions. Slaveholder paternalism encompassed behavior with sharply divergent implications: the paternalistic master dispensed supervision and punishment together with love and protection, and could easily cross the line from benevolent patriarch to despot (and back again). So long as their authority was unquestioned, most slave owners could accentuate their "soft" side, represented by honor, duty, and noblesse oblige. But even under the best of circumstances, paternalism was often indistinguishable from petty tyranny; the same master who nursed the sick, read the Bible to his "people," and expressed real affection for a childhood chum or a beloved "nanny" could also drive, whip, and sell with steely determination. If absolute power proved essential to the paternalist's sense of duty, the loss of that power threatened to turn benevolent paternalists into domineering bullies.

Articulate defenders of slavery resorted to a variety of stratagems to come to grips with the horror of breaking up families. They denied its prevalence, maintaining that they and most of their friends never engaged in it; they insisted that victims of the slave trade suffered only briefly, because blacks lacked whites' capacity for forming deep, long-lasting relationships; and they derided traders as coarse, crude, and unfeeling, Yankees at heart rather than true Southerners. These responses testified to the contradictions of an intrusive slave-owner paternalism under which infliction of pain and humiliation was integrally linked with the slaves' care and supervision. So, too,

did the assertion of Anna Harris some three-quarters of a century after the end of slavery that she had never allowed a white person to enter her house. "Dey sole my sister Kate," she explained. "I saw it wid dese here eyes. Sole her in 1860, and I ain't seed nor heard of her since. Folks say white folks is all right dese days. Maybe dey is, maybe dey isn't. But I can't stand to see 'em. Not on my place."²⁹

VII

SLAVE-OWNER PATERNALISM accentuated a dualism already present in slavery: slaves were both persons and property. During the antebellum years, this dualism, and the tensions that accompanied it, became more pronounced, as slave owners strove both to protect their property interests and to create an order that conformed to their notions of morality and benevolence. As a result, as the passage and application of laws relating to slavery reveal, Southern slavery became more restrictive at the same time that it became more protective.

Law must be approached with considerable caution as an indication of actual slave treatment or conditions. The absence of legal recognition for slave families hardly meant that those families did not exist, nor did the inability of slaves legally to own property prohibit many masters from recognizing slaves' possessions as their "own." Neither laws protecting nor laws restricting slaves were always enforced, and the vast majority of crimes committed by and against slaves were handled informally on farms and plantations, without resort to the judicial system. Nevertheless, the character and conduct of slave law can provide important insights into the thinking of the master class, for if laws do not always indicate how slavery actually functioned, they do indicate how authorities *wanted* it to function.

Over the course of the antebellum period, Southern lawmakers passed a great deal of legislation designed to secure the subordination of slaves—and also of free blacks—to white authority. Although such legislation (and its enforcement) varied from state to state, and tended to be more draconian in the deep than in the upper South, the overall trend was clear: legislators sought to strengthen slavery by plugging existing loopholes that threatened the orderly working

of the system. Thus the states imposed increasingly severe limits on slave movement and assembly—usually slaves were forbidden to preach or even assemble away from home except in the presence of a white, and planters were required to make sure that their holdings were at all times supervised by competent white personnel—and paid increasing attention to buttressing the slave patrols that would enforce these limits. They passed laws to prevent slaves from trading, hiring themselves out without white supervision, and possessing liquor or unauthorized weapons; most imposed severe restrictions on teaching slaves to read or write. These laws were aimed at combatting any sign of independence on the part of the slaves, at ensuring that slaves would remain totally under the control of their masters and white society at large.

This effort received its clearest manifestation in new laws directed at those slaves who sought to become free. Unlike Cuba and Brazil, where the proportion of blacks who were free soared in the nineteenth century, the Southern United States (with the exceptions of Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri) made it increasingly difficult for slaves to become free, and most required those who were freed to leave their borders. Most of the deep-South states forbade manumission except by specific legislative act taken to reward individuals for "meritorious service"; an 1852 Louisiana law requiring emancipated slaves to leave the United States within twelve months was superseded in 1857 by a complete prohibition on manumissions. Courts differed in their treatment of slave owners' wills that directed the manumission of slaves, but the trend was in the direction of overturning them. As the chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court ruled in 1838, there was a "want of authority to confer freedom by will" because doing so constituted a transfer of property (themselves) to the slaves, whereas slaves lacked "the capacity to take property."³⁰ Freedom, even if only for a small number of blacks, represented a potent threat to the concept of total slave dependence.

Much of this restrictive legislation, however, was haphazard, inconsistent, and sporadically enforced. Freed blacks were usually able to evade laws requiring them to leave their state, and slaves continued, often with the support of their masters and other whites, to trade and to hire themselves out without supervision. As Janet Duitsman Cornelius has recently noted, white Southerners were divided over attempts to prevent slave literacy, for "restrictions ran counter to the centuries-old tradition that the word of God should be ac-

cessible to all people and that Bible literacy would promote order, decorum, and morality."³¹ Most states passed laws designed to keep slaves illiterate, but these laws were surprisingly vague, inconsistent, and ineffective, and were poorly enforced. Only four states—Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia—had laws on the books throughout the last thirty years of slavery totally prohibiting teaching slaves to read and write; other states had such laws for briefer periods or banned the teaching of *assembled* slaves but not individuals.

Even as Southern authorities moved to strengthen slavery by ensuring total slave subservience, they also sought to strengthen slavery by making it more humane. The notion that slave owners could do whatever they wanted with their slaves, that slaves had no rights that masters were bound to respect, was anathema to many Southern whites convinced that theirs was a just—and good—society. Because slaves were to be kept dependent, they were vulnerable and needed special protection. Reformers were not successful in securing all the legal guarantees for slaves that they sought—efforts to legalize slave marriage and to prevent the splitting of families by sale came to naught—but the law did increasingly reflect the perceived need to protect slaves as well as regulate them.

The slave trade, widely recognized as the most embarrassing component of slavery, received considerable attention from state lawmakers. Even before the federal prohibition on the African slave trade, most individual colonies and states, motivated primarily by racial fears and economic concerns but in the Revolutionary era also by ethical qualms, had at least temporarily banned the importation of new slaves. Such action persisted in the antebellum period. Despite their intense demand for slave labor, many states of the deep South passed laws designed to curtail the operations of professional slave traders; Georgia banned the commercial importation of slaves from 1817 to 1853, and Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana imposed similar bans for much briefer periods. Upper-South states, too, passed laws against the importation of slaves from other states, although only Delaware prohibited exporting slaves to those states. Ethical concerns also spurred efforts to regulate the slave trade. Several states discouraged the separation of families, and in 1829 Louisiana forbade the sale of children under the age of eleven apart from their mothers.

As such measures suggest, antebellum legislation gave consider-

ably more attention than had colonial-era slave laws to regulating the masters as well as the slaves. The Alabama slave code of 1852 typified the trend. Although much of the lengthy code consisted of provisions designed to ensure the slaves' subordination, it also contained measures setting guidelines for their treatment and limits to their mistreatment. "The master must treat his slave with humanity, and must not inflict upon him any cruel punishment," the document intoned; "he must provide him with a sufficiency of healthy food and necessary clothing[,] cause him to be properly attended during sickness, and provide for his necessary wants in old age." The lawmakers urged that slaves should, "if practicable," be sold only in families, and flatly prohibited sale of children under five apart from their mothers.

The code went on to list, and detail punishment for, a variety of specific offenses against slaves. Anyone killing a slave "with malice aforethought" was guilty of "murder in the first degree," while someone inadvertently killing a slave through excessive punishment "is guilty of murder in the second degree, and may be guilty of murder in the first degree." A slave owner or his subordinate who imposed "cruel punishment" or "treats [a slave] in any other way with inhumanity"—it was up to the jury to decide what these terms meant—was to be fined between twenty-five and one thousand dollars. Anyone compelling a slave to perform field labor on Sunday was subject to a ten-dollar fine.³²

The practical consequences of such provisions were mixed. Because no slave state allowed slaves to testify against whites, the vast majority of whites who committed non-capital offenses against slaves escaped detection, let alone punishment; where such whites were brought to trial, it was usually because other whites sought their prosecution, as, for example, with an overseer who mistreated his employer's slaves. Laws forbidding the slave trade were easily evaded, and the buying and selling of slaves continued unabated. Still, efforts to regulate the trade were not totally without effect. Before passage of Louisiana's 1829 law prohibiting sale of children under age eleven apart from their mothers, 13.3 percent of the slaves shipped to New Orleans by Virginia-based traders Franklin and Armfield consisted of such children; after 1829, Franklin and Armfield abruptly halted these sales. Throughout the South, public sentiment reinforced legislation to discourage the separate sale of very young children. Similarly, although most crimes committed against

slaves went unpunished, whites were occasionally tried, convicted, and punished—typically with ten-year jail sentences—for murdering slaves. Laws prohibiting cruelty to slaves were easy to evade, but the very existence of these laws was indicative of the kind of community sentiment that acted to curtail although by no means eliminate the worst abuses against them.

Equally significant was the care with which courts deliberated the fate of slaves accused of crimes against whites. Of course, most infractions committed by slaves never reached court, and in times of widespread public anxiety, such as following a slave insurrection, trials sometimes resulted in the hysterical meting out of vengeance upon anyone suspected of guilt. But as legal historians such as Mark V. Tushnet, Daniel J. Flanagan, and Edward L. Ayers have recently stressed, slaves charged with killing or physically assaulting whites often received serious trials. "Blacks accused of major offenses could expect procedural fairness," noted Ayers; "once slaves entered the higher levels of the judicial machinery, in particular, they were treated much like whites." Like whites, guilty blacks were sometimes acquitted on technicalities; in 1857, for example, the conviction of a Louisiana slave for stabbing a white man was overturned on appeal, because the law in effect at the time of the offense had since been repealed.³³

Thoughtful Southern jurists were well aware of the dualism of antebellum Southern law, as an agency of both repression and protection of slaves. Repression inevitably came first: as Georgian Thomas R. R. Cobb noted in his 1858 book, *An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery in the United States of America*, "the right of personal liberty in the slave is utterly inconsistent with the idea of slavery," and the law's preeminent obligation was to secure the slave's subordination. At the same time, however, Cobb observed that precisely "on account of the perfectly unprotected and helpless position of the slave, . . . the courts should, and do, feel themselves to be his guardian and protector." Like many other Southern spokesmen, he worried that the slaves' utter dependence, essential though it was, left them vulnerable to abuse, and he favored broadening their legal protection by, among other things, making the rape of a slave woman an indictable offense. He blithely asserted, however, that "the occurrence of such an offence is almost unheard of[,] and the known lasciviousness of the negro, renders the possibility of its occurrence very remote."³⁴

These comments reveal much about the nature—and limits—of slave-owner paternalism. To men like Cobb, it was the slaves' very powerlessness that accentuated the need to look after them; protection represented the flip side of total slave dependence. Even as they sought to promote that dependence, many pro-slavery ideologues were troubled by the arbitrary power of master over slave that it entailed, for as good republicans they well knew the potential for abuse that lay in such power. But for most of them, it was the potential rather than the actual misuse of power that was problematic; they were convinced that the system—and most slave owners—was good, and that abuses under it were rare.

The slaves' view was very different. If the *possibility* of arbitrary treatment of slaves proved troubling to articulate defenders of slavery, it was the incessant *reality* of such treatment that impressed the slaves. The slaves were profoundly influenced by slave-owner paternalism, and as we shall see in the next chapter, they expressed toward the masters some of the same ambivalent feelings the masters held toward them. Ultimately, however, the slaves had a very different perspective on master-slave relations from that of their owners. That difference underlay much of daily life in the slave quarters.

5

Antebellum Slavery: Slave Life

I

MASTERS NEVER ACHIEVED the total domination they sought over their slaves. Despite the efforts of slave owners to regulate all their activities, the slaves lived in a world that was influenced but by no means totally controlled by the slaveholders' regime. Because paternalistic Southern masters interfered in the daily lives of their "people" more than masters typically did in the Caribbean, Brazil, or Russia, the independence of slave life was unusually restricted in the antebellum South. Nevertheless, the slaves managed to develop their own semi-autonomous way of life, to interact with one another on a basis that reflected shared values and customs. Slaves at work were closely regulated, but away from work, they lived and loved, played and prayed, in a world largely unknown to the masters.

Until recently, it was also a world largely unknown to historians. During the past two decades, however, as historians in general have abandoned an almost exclusive focus on the rich, famous, and powerful to pay attention to the lives of ordinary Americans—women, blacks, immigrants, laborers, farmers, families—students of slavery have probed with increasing sophistication the world of the slaves. Considering slaves as subjects in their own right rather than merely as objects of white action, historians have striven to reconstruct their

"internal" lives, including their families, religion, social organization, folkways, values, and resistance to oppression, and have in the process dramatically revised our understanding of the peculiar institution.

II

A BRIEF AND SIMPLIFIED historiographical survey provides a useful introduction to this development. Until fairly recently, most historians of slavery paid far more attention to the behavior of the masters than to that of the slaves; slaves, the vast majority of whom were illiterate and therefore left no written records, appeared in their works primarily as objects of white action. Scholars differed in many of their evaluations of slavery—some portrayed it as benign, whereas others depicted it as harshly exploitative—but with the partial exception of a tiny number of black and Marxist scholars, they focused far more on what slavery did to the slaves than what the slaves did themselves.

During the first half of the twentieth century, a major component of this approach was often simple racism, manifest in the belief that blacks were, at best, imitative of whites. Thus Ulrich B. Phillips, the era's most celebrated and influential expert on slavery, combined a sophisticated portrait of the white planters' life and behavior with crude passing generalizations about the life and behavior of their black slaves. Noting that "the planters had a saying . . . that a negro was what a white man made him," Phillips portrayed the plantation as a "school constantly training and controlling pupils who were in a backward state of civilization"; through this educational process the slaves "became largely standardized into the predominant plantation type." He proceeded to list "the traits which prevailed" as "an eagerness for society, music and merriment, a fondness for display . . . , a not flagrant sensuality, a receptiveness toward any religion whose exercises were exhilarating, a proneness to superstition, a courteous acceptance of subordination, an avidity for praise, a readiness for loyalty of a feudal sort, and last but not least, a healthy human repugnance toward overwork." Content with asserting such traits rather than demonstrating them, Phillips devoted most of his attention to the way planters managed their slaves, not to the slaves themselves.¹

Although such overt expressions of racism became less prevalent in the 1930s and 1940s and downright unfashionable in the 1950s, the tendency to treat slaves as objects persisted. As this persistence reveals, commitment to racial equality could be just as compatible with objectifying the slaves as was belief in white superiority. Indeed, because stressing the cruelties of slavery usually led to focusing on the injuries done to slaves, it could easily reinforce rather than subvert a historical model in which white slave owners and their agents acted and black slaves were acted upon. Thus, although Kenneth M. Stampp's "neo-abolitionist" book *The Peculiar Institution* (1956) differed sharply from Ulrich B. Phillips's *American Negro Slavery* (1918) in its overall evaluation of slavery, its main subject remained the treatment—now the *mistreatment*—of slaves. Stampp took the slaves far more seriously than did Phillips, but the sources that Stampp relied upon—plantation records, letters and diaries of slave owners, travel accounts written by Northern and European visitors who almost invariably stayed with white hosts—revealed more about the behavior and thought of the masters than of the slaves, whom he portrayed as "culturally rootless people."²

The depiction of antebellum slaves as victims reached its peak in Stanley M. Elkins's 1959 volume, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, one of those rare historical works that not only arouse intense controversy but also promote sharp reversals of historical interpretation. Noting the absence of slave rebellions in the American South equal in size or duration to those in Brazil and the Caribbean islands, Elkins argued that the unusually harsh conditions faced by Southern slaves produced a "closed" environment that stripped them of their native African culture, prevented the emergence among them of any meaningful social relations, and turned them into childlike "Sambos" who almost completely internalized the values of their masters. Unlike the monarchy and the established Church in Latin America, both of which supposedly protected slaves from the worst abuses of bondage, nothing came between master and slave in the South; slavery there was, like the Nazi concentration camp, a "total" institution that rendered its victims psychologically defenseless. The Southern slave who, "for his very psychic security, had to picture his master in some way as the 'good father,'" was transformed into an emasculated, docile Sambo who came to identify with that very master.³

Despite its ingenuity, the Elkins thesis soon came under withering

attack from critics who blasted it as contrived, illogical, and unsupported by empirical evidence. Historians of Latin American slavery disputed the notion that the Church and Crown always mitigated the severity of slavery, and comparative historians pointed to the superior health and unique natural population growth of American slaves to rebut the argument that the conditions they endured were far harsher than those in the rest of the Americas. Other scholars disputed the utility of Elkins's concentration-camp analogy, suggested that apparent Sambo-like behavior was explicable without recourse to theories of slave infantilization (as a result of role-playing, for example), and noted that after the Civil War the actions of emancipated blacks were hardly childish or docile. Research by scholars seeking to test the Elkins thesis provided increasing evidence that antebellum slaves lived not in a totally closed environment but rather in one that permitted the emergence of enormous variety and allowed slaves to pursue important relationships with persons other than their masters, including those to be found in their families, churches, and communities. By the 1970s, although historians such as Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman had borrowed Elkins's idea that the slaves internalized their owners' ideals (the Protestant work ethic, according to Fogel and Engerman), the Sambo thesis lay in tatters.

Ironically, however, that thesis—and the controversy it provoked—played a major role in redirecting historical scholarship on slavery. As historians sought to rebut Elkins's assertion of slave docility, they found it necessary to focus far more than they previously had on the slaves as subjects in their own right rather than as objects of white treatment. The effort to test the Sambo thesis thus combined with the new historical interest in the lives of ordinary people to bring the slaves themselves to center stage in the drama of slavery. This new focus came to full fruition during the 1970s, as historians produced an avalanche of works seeking to rediscover the slave experience. For the first time, that experience became the major (although by no means the only) focus of historical research on antebellum Southern slavery.

As the focus of historical attention shifted increasingly to the slaves, historians found themselves forced to exploit "new" kinds of historical sources, which had previously been little used, to shed light on the slaves' world. Scholars probed archaeological remains, analyzed black folklore, and toiled over statistical data culled from

census reports and plantation records, but in their efforts to explore slave thought and behavior they found two kinds of sources especially useful: autobiographies of former slaves (some written after escape to the North and some after emancipation) and interviews with former slaves, the most extensive collection of which was taken under the auspices of the Federal Writers' Project during the 1930s. It is largely on the basis of these sources that historians have redirected their attention to the slaves, a redirection that has been more productive for the antebellum South than anywhere else because historical records that illuminate slavery from the slaves' vantage point are far more abundant for the slave South than for any other slave society.

Using slave sources to explore the slaves' "consciousness"—their thought, ideology, values, and identification—is a task of enormous difficulty, because these sources, although highly revealing, are also often highly problematical. Because most of them illustrate the late antebellum period, they encourage scholars either to focus on that period or to generalize from it about earlier times, in the process losing sight of significant changes that occurred over time. Equally serious are problems associated with interpreting autobiographies that were often written as deliberate acts of abolitionist propaganda and interpreting recollections of very old men and women about their youth three-quarters of a century earlier, especially when most of those recollections were elicited in interviews conducted by white Southerners in an era of black racial subordination. Historians have at times been too eager to take slave autobiographies and interviews at face value—an inappropriate approach with any historical document—and to construct on their basis an idealized version of slave behavior.

Nevertheless, when used with proper caution and sensitivity, and supplemented with additional evidence (including inferences drawn from actual behavior), autobiographies and interviews constitute an extremely important window on the minds of the slaves and have enabled scholars of the 1970s and 1980s to revise radically our understanding of American slavery. Although these scholars do not agree with one another in all particulars, the great majority of them have abandoned the victimization model in favor of an emphasis on the slaves' resiliency and autonomy. As I suggest below, I believe that some of these arguments for slave autonomy have been overstated and eventually will be modified on the basis of future evi-

dence. It is clear, however, that whatever such modifications may occur, we have in a relatively short time learned an enormous amount about the lives of those who were for too long ignored in the study of slavery: the slaves. Those lives are the subject of this chapter.

III

HISTORIANS EXAMINING the lives and behavior of antebellum slaves have disagreed on numerous points, but they have been virtually unanimous in finding that Elkins erred in depicting a world in which slaves had no "meaningful others" aside from their masters. Of course, slaves lived under widely varying conditions, and some may have experienced the totally controlled, "closed" system described by Elkins. For the vast majority, however, slavery never provided such a hermetically sealed environment; beings who were in theory totally dependent on their masters were able in practice to forge a semi-autonomous world, based on a multiplicity of social relationships, which accentuated their own distinctive customs and values. In this endeavor, they looked for support most of all to their families and their religion.

Families provided a crucial if fragile buffer, shielding slaves from the worst rigors of slavery. Although the transatlantic slave trade, exceptionally high mortality rates, and the excess of men over women among newly imported slaves decimated African families, the emergence of a predominantly creole slave population created the basic preconditions for family re-creation. A new African-American family structure took root in the eighteenth century and spread throughout the South, along with slavery, in the nineteenth. Those families were not, of course, untouched by slavery. Even under the best of circumstances, slave families lacked the institutional and legal support enjoyed by those that were free, and in extreme cases masters could not only hinder but prevent the development of normal family relations; Frederick Douglass, taken from his mother as an infant, recalled it as "a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age."⁴ But historians now know that in the South as a whole, separation of young children from their mothers was relatively unusual. Antebellum slaves lived in families, legally recognized or not, and the majority of slave children grew

up with their mothers and—somewhat less often—their fathers.

Slave owners were usually aware of, and considered themselves strong supporters of, slave families. Motivated by both a paternalistic concern for the well-being of their "people" and a calculating regard for their own economic interest, slave owners paid increasing attention to the family lives of their slaves. Antebellum masters usually assigned one slave family (much less often two) to a cabin, grouped slaves according to families in plantation censuses, and promoted "family morality" among their people in a variety of ways, including punishing adultery and divorce, insisting on early marriage, allowing (or not allowing) marriage "abroad," and less often purchasing spouses of favored servants. The actions of the masters were in many ways contradictory: they not only supported slave families but also disrupted them, through forced separations and forced sex. Still, their actions as supporters served to some extent to limit the impact of their actions as disrupters, and to make possible, despite the hostile environment, a family life among slaves that was vital if constantly at risk. Indeed, historians Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman have gone so far as to attribute the strength of antebellum slave families primarily to the support they received from slave owners.

Most other historians have stressed the actions of the slaves themselves in building and defending their families, often against overwhelming odds. As a result of research by Herbert G. Gutman and other scholars, we now know a great deal about the structure of slave families. Like most other Americans and Western Europeans (but unlike many Eastern Europeans, Asians, and Africans), Southern slaves usually lived in nuclear (or "simple") households: father, mother, and children. In the most recent study of slave families, Ann Patton Malone, who examined a sample of 19,329 slaves in Louisiana between 1810 and 1864, found that 73 percent of these slaves lived in simple households composed either of married couples with or without children or of single parents with children, and an additional 18.3 percent lived alone; only 8.7 percent of the slaves lived in more complex "multiple," "extended," or "non-nuclear" households. Throughout the South, families were large, with the average woman giving birth to about seven children over the course of her childbearing years and the typical slave cabin containing four to seven residents at any given time. Marriages, unless broken by sale, were usually long-lasting. Families constituted a fundamental

survival mechanism, enabling the slaves to resist the kind of dehumanization that Elkins believed they underwent. Slaves may have owed their masters instantaneous and unquestioned obedience, but in the bosoms of their families they loved, laughed, quarreled, schemed, sang, and endured, much as free people did.

Slave families exhibited a number of features that differentiated them from prevailing norms among white Southerners and revealed the degree to which those families were created by the slaves themselves. Slaves used naming practices to solidify family ties threatened with rupture, naming children after fathers and grandfathers especially frequently because male relatives were more likely than female to be sold away. Although whites did not acknowledge (or often even know of) the practice, many slaves took surnames, for the sake of family unity as well as family dignity; as former slave Robert Smalls testified in 1863, although "among themselves they use their titles [surnames] . . . before their masters they do not speak of their titles at all."⁵

The slaves' marital standards differed in significant ways from those of their owners. Although slaves expected each other to be faithful in marriage, they did not put much stock in the prevailing Victorian notion of premarital sexual abstinence; sexual experimentation before marriage (not always with the ultimate spouse) was widespread and aroused little stigma among them. Unlike Southern planters, however, slaves strictly adhered to marital exogamy, shunning marriage with first cousins. As this practice indicates, living in nuclear families did not preclude the existence of extended kinship networks among slaves, who often exhibited impressive awareness of and attachments to more distant familial relations.

The role and status of women in slave families were also distinctive. Recent research has dispelled the once common stereotype of a prevalent slave "matriarchy," predicated on weak ties of affection between slave men and their families. Still, for at least two reasons, slave families were less male-dominated than free families typically were in the nineteenth century. First, slave men lacked the legal authority over their wives that free men possessed. When free women married, they lost a variety of rights, including the right to own and dispose of property, and became legally subordinated to their husbands. Because slave families lacked legal status, however, women who married were not automatically subjected to legal debasement; slave husbands had no more property rights than did their

wives, who maintained "equal or near equal status with their husbands."⁶ Second, slave women were more likely than their husbands to be "home." They ran away, were sold off, and were hired out far less often than men; in marriages abroad, it was the husbands rather than the wives who typically traveled to visit their families on weekends. For these reasons, mother-headed households, although not the norm, were relatively common; Malone found that about one-third of the nuclear households in Louisiana were headed by a single parent, in the vast majority of cases the mother. In short, slave women provided basic continuity to families—and communities—faced with disruption.

Children growing up as slaves faced contradictory experiences that reveal both the importance and the fragility of family life under slavery. Young children often enjoyed substantially greater freedom than their elders. Although very large plantations sometimes had nurseries, most children received relatively little supervision; with their parents and older siblings at work, they spent much of their time playing among themselves—and often with local white children. "The first seven or eight years of the slave-boy's life are about as full of sweet content as those of the most favored and petted white children of the slaveholder," recalled Frederick Douglass; noting that "he literally runs wild," Douglass portrayed the "slave-boy" as "a spirited, joyous, uproarious, and happy boy, upon whom troubles fall only like water on a duck's back."⁷ Some black autobiographers and interviewees later remembered that as children they were literally unaware of being slaves. (The relative freedom afforded many slave children is one reason that the Federal Writers' Project interviews must be used with extreme caution in reconstructing the lives of adults; two-thirds of those interviewed were born after 1850 and were thus ten years old or younger at the outbreak of the Civil War.)

Still, children were hardly untouched by slavery. In a variety of ways, masters interfered extensively in their lives, bringing some to the "big house" to serve as domestics and assigning others "light" chores that became increasingly onerous until they were put to regular field work, usually between the ages of eight and twelve. Slave owners insisted on naming some slave children, against the wishes of (and sometimes competing with names awarded by) their parents, and exposed children to their version of Christianity. Slave owners also sometimes taught household "pets" how to read and write:

about 5 percent of slaves (two-thirds of them male) interviewed by the Federal Writers' Project recollected being taught to read under slavery, most often by sympathetic whites. (Other slaves, however, learned to read on their own or with the help of other blacks, *in spite of* the strenuous efforts of their owners to keep them illiterate.)

Slave children learned at an early age that they had to conform to the wishes of two sets of authorities—their parents and their owners—both of whom were involved in their upbringing. Such competing claims on their loyalty could be confusing. Evidence of the masters' authority was readily apparent in their dealings with adult slaves; children who saw their parents verbally or physically abused without resisting could not fail to draw the appropriate lesson about where real power lay. At the same time, parents struggled to provide their children with love and attention and passed on family lore as well as customs and values. With the help of friends and relatives, parents sang to their children, told them stories, exposed them to their version of Christianity, and brought them up to be extremely careful of what they said in front of whites. As children aged, they became increasingly aware of their unfree status, sometimes gradually through incremental discoveries, sometimes at once through a traumatic event—a whipping, a comment by a white playmate, sale of a loved one—that brought home the reality of their situation.

Although families provided slaves with a basic refuge from the horrors of slavery, this refuge was always insecure. Masters who preached the importance of family life subverted their own message by constantly interfering with their people's families: they sold, raped, and whipped, and even under the best of circumstances they insisted on their right, as paternalistic guardians, to direct the upbringing of children. Slaves struggled valiantly to lead "normal" lives, and in doing so they relied most heavily on their families, but their lack of power vis-à-vis their masters rendered those families extremely vulnerable. Although we have learned a great deal about the structure of slave families, we have learned much less about their inner dynamics—how slaves actually interacted with one another at home—and it is a mistake to assume, on the basis of widespread stereotypical assertions in slave narratives, that those families were always loving. Pointing to "overzealousness in revising earlier misconceptions concerning the compositions of the slave family and community," Ann Malone has recently warned against the current

scholarly tendency to see the slave family as "the cozy American family unit of mom, dad, and the kids."¹⁸ Her warning is pertinent. Slaves had their own households, in which they were husbands, wives, parents, children, friends, and lovers, but as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has forcefully argued in her recent book *Within the Plantation Household*, those same slaves were also members of their masters' households and could never totally escape their dependence on their masters. Slave families thus reflected simultaneously both the determined efforts of their members to achieve a measure of autonomy and the fragility of that autonomy.

IV

LIKE SLAVE FAMILIES, slave religion exhibited fragile autonomy and evolution over time. During most of the colonial period, white efforts to proselytize among blacks were sporadic, and first- or second-generation African-Americans were at best indifferent to the Christian message; the second half of the eighteenth century saw widespread conversion of blacks to Christianity, a process that accelerated in the religious revivals of the early nineteenth century; by the late antebellum period, evangelical Christianity had emerged throughout the South as a central feature of slave life. The slaves' exposure to Christianity was uneven: some lived in isolated areas without ready access to religious services, and others were subject to the arbitrary whim of masters who prevented them from attending church. But antebellum slaves increasingly experienced a number of overlapping—sometimes competing—religious influences, from paternalistic masters who prayed and read the Bible with their "people," from white religious denominations that mounted a "mission to the slaves," and from the "invisible church" that operated quasi-secretly among the slaves themselves. Most mid-nineteenth-century slaves, unlike their ancestors a century earlier, were devoutly Christian.

Like slave families, the "invisible church" possessed a number of distinctive features that reveal how blacks adapted white forms to their own needs. Slaves who assembled in the quarters, in open-air "hush arbors," and in space sometimes provided by white churches spurned the lectures they received elsewhere on obedience to authority as a central tenet of Christianity in favor of a religion of the oppressed that promised them deliverance from their earthly