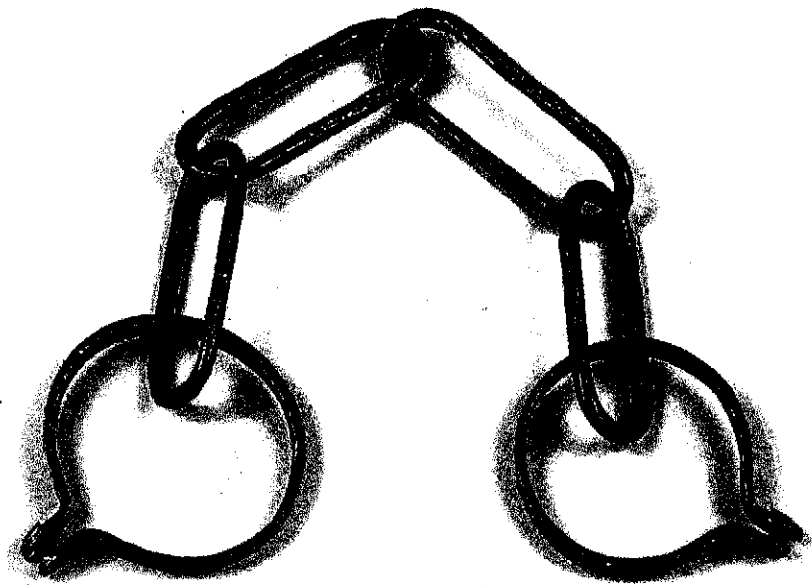


10TH-ANNIVERSARY EDITION, WITH A NEW PREFACE AND AFTERWORD

# AMERICAN SLAVERY

1619-1877



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

PETER KOLCHIN

Hill and Wang

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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."<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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 bondpeople.)

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."<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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 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."<sup>5</sup>

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 serf-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."<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup>

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 un-mixed blessing to slaves.<sup>9</sup>

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