

THE STATUS OF SLAVE WOMEN IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

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THE SLAVE'S DREAM

Beside the ungathered rice she lay,
Her sickle in her hand;
Her breast was bare, her matted hair
was buried in the sand.
Again, in the mist and shadow of sleep,
She saw her Native Land.
She saw once more her dark-eyed queen
Among her children stand;
They clasped her neck, they
kissed her cheeks.
Thy held her by the Land!
A tear burst from the sleeper's lids
And fell into the sand.
She did not feel that the driver's whip,
Nor the burning beat of day;
For Death had illumined the Land of Sleep,
And her lifeless body lay
A worm-out and thrown away.¹

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—

There is a famous Chinese proverb which says "a good man never fights with a woman." From the viewpoint of Chinese custom, it is always respect the women. During the era of the antebellum South, black women were described as "quick," and "enduring," terms which were usually used to describe attributes of males. They were not expected to be charming, gentle, or sweet. A study of original sources from eighteenth and nineteenth century American South shows black women's work was not defined as female-work on the plantation since there was no firm and fixed work assignment based solely on gender. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide an insight into the work and family life of black women in the era of the antebellum South.

Before the Civil War, the South grew dramatically. Agriculture and slavery dominated southern development. Since the cotton boom caused non-mechanized, slave-based agriculture to remain highly profitable in the South, sustaining the plantation economy. Thus, the antebellum South became primarily a cotton South, slavery became the key roles. Black males and females performed work in equal measure without regard to gender on all the plantations. In fact, black women played very important roles throughout the entire period of American slavery, doing double-duty and multiple tasks. Yet, black women did so much work, they were treated harshly and had many justifiable grievances. Their blood and tears were shed throughout the period of the slave economy.

The division of labor on the plantation, which was the economic unit in the South was as important as it is in any industrial plant today. The three main divisions into which slaves were divided were: household servants, field hands, and factory workers.

Household service involved traditional "female jobs" on the plantation, since occupations absorbed a considerable portion of female labor. There were washer women, cooks, maids, seamstresses and gardeners. Household servants played very important roles throughout the period of slavery and were fixtures in the plantation economy. They also did the work of fetching wood and water, preparing the family meals daily over a smoky fireplace, pressing damp clothes with a hot iron, peeling potatoes, building a fire, or carrying heavy loads of laundry. Household servants did not have easy lives, and endured many cruelties from their masters and mistresses. Linda Brent, a former slave mentioned that her master Dr. Flint was an epicure: "the cook never sent a dinner to his table without fear and trembling; for if there happened to be whipped, or compel her to eat every mouthful of it in his presence, the poor hungry creature might not have cram it down her throat till she choked."² Another slave related in a narrative: "Work, work, work",³ she said, has consumed all her days (from dawn until midnight) and all her years. "I have been so exhausted working, I was like an inch worm crawling along a roof. I worked till I thought another lick will kill me."⁴

Furthermore, the master's house offered no shelter from the most brutal manifestations of slavery. Only two meals a day were allowed, the first came at twelve o'clock noon and the other came very late in the day. They were often kept from their meals as a way of punishment.⁵ Women servants often had to snatch a bite to eat whenever they could while they remained standing in the presence of Whites. Slaves were never allowed to sit around a table to partake of any meal. Each one took a tin pan and iron spoon and ate standing up. As the general rule, they were provided no lights of any kind, no towels, basins, or soap, no tables and chairs.⁶ They must sleep on the floor near their mistress' bed.⁷ In addition, in the famous investigation of 1790-91, no plan-

tation was found where a slave received more than nine pints of corn and one pound of salt per week. Fish of the least desirable grades were imported from the New England colonies for them to eat.⁸

House work involved hard, steady, often strenuous labor as women juggled the demands made by the mistress and other members of the master's family. Mingo White of Alabama never forgot that his mother had shouldered a workload too heavy for any one person. She served as personal maid to the master's daughter, worked for all the hands on the plantation, carded cotton, spun a daily quota of thread, wove and dyed cloth. Every Wednesday she carried the white family laundry three quarters of a mile to a creek, where she beat each garment with a wooden paddle. Ironing consumed the rest of her day. Like the lowliest field hand, she felt the lash if any tasks went undone.⁹

Although black women were the predominant household workers, there were as few as five percent of all antebellum adult slaves who served in the elite corps of house servants trained for specific duties.¹⁰ The majority worked in the field. During the harvest season all slaves, including those in the house, went to the field to work. Harvesting season on plantations found men and women gathering the group in sex-integrated gangs, but at other times women often worked exclusively or predominantly in female gangs.

Picking cotton was a specific job for black women. It was generally believed that one Negro was required for the successful cultivation of three acres of cotton. The planting, cultivation, and picking of the cotton required little skill, but a great deal of time.¹¹ Also, black women were required to be in the cotton fields as soon as there was light in the morning. Except for ten to fifteen minutes for them to swallow their cold bacon at noon, they were not permitted to be idle for a moment. Everyone was expected to pick cotton as fast as possible.¹² When the day's work was over in the field, everyone carried her baskets of cotton to the gin-house for weighing. A slave always approached the gin-house with her cotton with fear.¹³ She had to bring in the same weight each night. If she had exceeded it by ten or twenty pounds, in all probability her master would measure the next day's work, and if it fell short of the amount of day before, she received a whipping. Still, when a new hand went for the first time to the field, she had to try her best to pick cotton quickly. If an appropriate amount was not brought in at night, the slave was whipped, and the number of pounds lacking was added to the next day's job; this course was often repeated from day to day.

Black women also labored on the sugar plantation where they had no idle season in the whole year. After the harvesting of the sugar crop of the preceding year had

been completed, the ground for the new cane crop was thoroughly plowed. "Deep furrows were dug six feet apart, and the cane seeds were placed length-wise in them and covered with several inches of soil".¹⁴ In March all hands were set to work plowing and hoeing to keep it free from grass and weeds and to loosen the soil so as to encourage the rapid growth of the cane. These processes were usually repeated five or more times, and then the cane was laid up by later in the summer.¹⁵

The master had plenty of other work to keep his slaves busy when the cane crop did not need attention. In April, he had slaves plant the first crop of corn. After the first was matured and laid up by in July, a second crop of peas was planted. During the intervals of cane cultivation, black women performed many kinds of work, such as weeding the corn and peas, chopping weeds in the pastures and in other places on the plantation, bending corn when it was mature enough..., such work could be performed at any time when there was nothing more pressing to be done.¹⁶ The first cane was cut in October. During the frantic weeks from then until December, most of the black women worked at the cane and stripping the leaves from the stalks, loading it into carts, and hauling it to the sugar house, they worked from sixteen to eighteen hours a day, seven days a week.¹⁷ When the last soup was boiled, usually around Christmas, it was almost time to begin planting the next crop.¹⁸

Another crop that slave women cultivated was rice. It was an arduous job. Between March and May the seed was sown and the field were flooded and left covered until the seed sprouted. From time to time, the field were drained in order for weeds to be destroyed and the ground worked. Black women worked barefoot in rice fields. During summer, temperatures range from 90 to 100 degree. Standing at times in water up to their knees, their driver stood on the bank with his whip, directing their work to keep them moving at a steady pace.¹⁹ The men rolled up their pants to keep them dry while women pulled their shirts above their knees, using a cord around the waists or hips to hold up the slack.

The terse plantation records of the year-round routine of growing cotton, rice, tobacco, sugarcane and hemp, were usually run on a similar time schedule every year.²⁰ Each of the staples required special techniques in planting, cultivating and preparing for market. Often, the operations of one growing cycle overlapped those of the next. There was no standing, no leisure, no long sleeping season for field hands.²¹

These examples are not all of the work for black women. They even did a variety of heavy and dirty labor which was also done by men. During the winter or spring, black women cut down trees to clear land for cultivation, and hauled logs in leather straps attached to their shoulders. They plowed using mule and ox teams and hoes,

sometimes with the heaviest implements available.²² They dug ditches, spread manure, and piled coarse fodder with their bare hands. They built and cleaned southern roads and helped construct southern railroads. From the testimonies indicate that the blacks considered certain jobs uncharacteristic of bondwomen. Louise Terrell recalled her days on a farm near Jackson, Mississippi: "The women had to split rails all day long, just like the men."²³ Mary Frances Webb declared of her slave grandmother, "In the winter, she sawed and cut lord wood just like a man. She said it did not hurt her as she was strong as an ox."²⁴ In 1850, Frederick Olmsted saw South Carolina slaves of both sexes carting manure on their hands between the ridges in which cotton was planted. In Fayetteville North Carolina, he noticed that women not only hoed and shovelled but they also cut down trees.²⁵ In short, black women who did out door work were used as poorly as men. "A case was pointed out that most common differentiation where men plowed and women hoed."²⁶

Obviously, black women were treated with no less severity than their men. And when their master needed a field hand, black women were forced to alongside their menfolk. At the same time, the master believed that most forms of domestic service required the attention of a female, reinforcing the traditional role of women as household workers. Thus, black women have made significant contributions to agricultural development through hard work, thrift and industry.

To some extent, black female slave labor was used in southern industries related to plantations. According to the primary materials, a number of black women were extensively employed in southern cotton mills, tobacco factories, bagging factories, iron furnaces previous to the Civil War.²⁷ In Alabama, one coarse cotton mill employed one hundred slaves, three-fourths of whom were women.²⁸

In South Carolina, a small cotton mill of David R. Williams, depending on slave labor, utilized five young women to spin and wind in 1792, Williams demanded additional women for this manufacturing industry in the following year.²⁹ Although conclusive data are not readily available, it appears that at least black women were widely placed in textile industry, and quite frequently they worked side by side with black males.³⁰

The story of black women in the American slave work has generally been one of hard work, adaptability, and survival. Black women showed a great deal of strength and courage in their roles, not only in the field and factories, but also at home. As slavery involved family elements for there was no legal marriage, no legal family and no legal control over the child by its parents.³¹ Slave families faced severe dangers. Considering the absense of legal marriage, the family's minor social and economic

significance, and the father's limited role, it is hardly surprising to find that slave families were highly unstable. Lacking both outer pressures and inner pull, they were also exposed to the threat of forced separations through sales.

Some of the problems that troubled slaves families were uniquely a part of life in bondage. A poignant example was the scene that transpired when an overseer tied and whipped a slave mother in the presence of her children. The frightened children pelted the overseer with stones, and one of them ran up and bit him in the leg. During this episode, the cries of the mother were mingled with the screams of the children. "Let my mommy go.... Let my mommy go."³² Lacking authority, the slave family could not offer the child shelter or security from the frightening creatures in the outside world.

That prohibition made black women suffer more than the women in other countries. Because they did not derive traditional benefits for slaves and the basic needs like food, clothing and shelter were not provided by slave men during the era of antebellum South. The cumulative effects of slavery had left the black family in disarray. Fathers were sometimes unknown, and countless numbers of black children had white slave masters as unacknowledged fathers. Due to these factors, black women were faced with unilateral responsibility for the care of their children and families as K. M. Stamp mentioned: "... in the life of the slave, the family had nothing like the social significance that it held in the life of the white men. ... parents frequently had little to do with the raising of their children--- the husband--- was not the head of the family, the provider or protector--- the male slave's only crucial function within the family was that of siring offspring."³³ Considering the absence of legal marriages, the family's minor social and economic significance, and the father's limited role, it is hardly surprising to find that slave families were highly unstable. Lacking both outer pressures and inner pull, they were also exposed to the threat of forced separations through sales.

In my opinion, in the black family, the mother's role was very important. They did double duty, a man's share in the field, and a women's at home. They did any kind of field work, even plowing, and at home they did the cooking, washing, milking and gardening after working on the plantation all day. Black women became exhausted mothers at home where they were busy doing house work into the night. As a slave said: "... Finally, at a late hour, they reach the quarters, sleep and are overcome by the long day's toil. Then a fire must be kindled in the cabin the corn ground in the small hand-mill, and supper, and dinner prepared for the next day in the field."³⁴

John Curry, a former slave who grew up in North Carolina, recalled that "My mother's labor was very hard." Then he went on to outline her daily responsibilities in

the cow pen (she milked fourteen cows), in addition to caring for the children of mothers who worked in the fields. She also cooked for the slaves on the plantation and did all the ironing and washing for the master's household as well as for her own husband and seven children. At night, she would find one boy with his knee out, a patch wanted here, and a stitch there, and she would sit down by her lightwood fire, and sew and sleep alternately....³⁵

Narratives and interviews reflected the slave mother's fierce devotion to her own offspring. The bonds of affection between mother and children were generally developed in the slave cabin where the black mother nurtured her blood after laboring from sun-rise to sun-set. Moreover, when the black father was sold or separated from his family, the slave mother became the authority in the household. They assumed primary responsibility for child care and for operations involved in daily household maintenance ... cooking, clearing, tending fires, sewing and patching clothes.³⁶ Wives and mothers completed these tasks either very early in the morning before the start of the "regular" work day on the plantation, or at night, after other family members had gone to sleep.

Black women had the additional task and accompanying burdens of childbearing. Since the termination of the African trade compelled the masters to pay greater attention to the reproduction of their labor force during the era of antebellum South. Then, black women in agriculture were valuable property, not only because their labor was capital, but also because they were used as breeders of slaves who were later sold by slaveholders for profitable sums of money. In addition, black women had often been referred forced to bear children every twelve months.³⁷ Later these children were taken from their masters, many of whom fathered the children. Sometimes, the children were used as hostages to prevent the mother from running away. Early in the nineteenth century, fertility years among slave women spanned the age of eighteen to forty-five.³⁸ According to this time, black women might nurse one child after another. During these periods, the work and punishment was hardly reduced for black women, In some cases, they were given only a few weeks' reprieve prior to and immediately after childbrith. Some women were forced to work until the time of delivery. Later they were allowed to take four weeks after the birth of a child. Then, they took the child into the field with them and nursed it at intervals during the day.³⁹

Black mothers fastened their small children in a knapsack upon their backs while they continued to work. The slaveholder had no hesitation about putting black women in the field gangs. Again, no season of the year guaranteed a noticeable increase in special treatment for pregnant slaves. When they finished preparing the cotton fields, they hoed and plowed corn. when they completed the hoeing and plowing of cotton,

they tended the potatoes, peas, or rice or plowed the young corn, and so on.⁴⁰ A slave described the nursing mothers in his narrative:

"As we went out in the morning, A observed several women, who carried their young children in their arms to the field. These mothers laid their children at the side of the fence, or under the shade of the cotton plants, whilst they were at work; and when the rest of us went to get water, they would go to nurse their children, requesting to carry to the field with them. One young woman did not leave her child at the end of the row, like the others, but had contrived a sort of rude knapsack, made of a piece of coarse linen cloth, in which she fastened her child, which was very young, upon her back; and in this way carried it all day, and performed her task at the hoe with the other people".⁴¹

Sometimes, the overseers beat the black women with rawhide,"....so that the blood and milk flow mingled from their breast."⁴²

In conclusion, black women's life under slavery was in every respect more arduous, difficult and restricted than that of the men. Their work and duties were the same as that of the men, while childbearing and rearing felt upon them as an added burden. Punishment was meted out to them regardless of motherhood, pregnancy or physical infirmity. Their children could always be held as hostages in case of the mother's attempted escape. The chances of escape for female slaves were fewer than those for males. "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women."⁴³ Indeed, it was slavery that caused the form of black womanhood in America. She has moved silently through the mythological roles forced upon her-- from chaste to Mammy to Matriarch. She has solaced and fortified the entire South of the United States, black and white, male and female, a South which reverses and heeds her in secret, which confides in her and trusts her to rear its children, black and white, yet which-- like the rest of America-- has never asked her to speak, to reveal her private history, her knowledge, her imaginings, never asked her participation in anything but maintenance of humanity by way of the back door. Not only on the plantation, but also in the family, black women played a very great role in the era of the antebellum America. --- This because she is woman and black.

FOOTNOTES

1. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps ed., The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1970. New York: Doubleday, 1970, 459-460.
2. Lina Brent. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Michigan: Negro History Press, 1861, 22.
3. Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the

- Family. From Slavery to the Present, New York, 1982, 13.
4. Ibid., 14.
 5. Genda Lerner, Black Women in White America, 19.
 6. Gatherine Clinton, The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South, New York: Panteon Books, 1982, 223.
 7. Ibid., 234.
 8. John Hope Frankline, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans, Virginia: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961, 65.
John Solomon Otto, Cannon's Point Plantation, 1794-1860: Living Conditions and Status Patterns in the Old South, Academic Press, 1984, 57.
 9. Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, 23.
 10. Ibid., 22.
 11. John Hope Frankline, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro American, 65.
 12. Ralph W. Haskins, "Planter and Cotton Factor in the Old South: Some Areas of Friction," Agricultural History, 29:1-14, 1955.
 13. John Couper, "On the Prigin of Sea-Island Cotton," Southern Agriculturist, 4: 243-244, 1981.
 14. Ralph B. Flanders, Plantation Slavery in Georgia, University of North Carolina Press, 1933, 213.
 15. J. Carlyle Sitterson, Sugar Country: The Cane Sugar Industry in the South, 1753-1950, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1953, 101-112.
 16. Walter Prichard, "Pourine on a Sugar Plantation," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 14:168-169, September, 1927.
 17. Jordan, White Over Black, 318.
 18. Anonymus, "On the Management of Slaves," Southern Agriculturist, 6:284, 1833.
 19. Joan Rezner Gunersen, "The Double Bonds of Race and Sex:Black and White Women in a Colonial," Journal of Southern History, 52:351-72, August, 1986.
 20. James C. Bonner, A History of Georgia Agriculture, 1732-1860, In writing of Georgia Press, 1964, 45.
 21. James C. Conner, Plantation and Farm: The Agricultural South, In writing Southern History-Essays in Honor and Rembert W. Patrick, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1965, 72.
 22. John Couper, "On the Employmeny of Exen As Substitutes for horses in Agricultural Operations," Southern Agriculturist, 5:286-290, 1832.
 23. American Slavery As it Is, Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses Arno Press and the New York, New York, 1968, 12.
 24. Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, 11.
 25. James H. Couper, Letter To James Couper, 31 October, On Microfilm, Jone Couper Collection (1775-1963), University of Georgia Library at Athens, 1860.
 26. Flanders, The Peculiar Institution, 48.
 27. Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The world The Slaves Made, New York: Pantheon Books, 1974, 23.
 28. Deborah Gary White, "The Lives of Slave Women," Southern Exposure, 12:Nov.-Dec., 1984, 33.

29. Gemovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The world The Slaves Made, 21.
30. Ernest M., Jr. Lander, "Slave Labor in South Carolina," Journal of Negro History, 38:161-167, 1953.
31. Flanders, The Peculiar Institution, 225.
32. American Slavery As It Is. Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses Arno Press and the New York Times, New York, 1968, 34.
33. Flanders, The Peculiar Institution, 343-344.
34. Gerda Lerner, Black Women in White America, 16.
35. American Slavery As It Is. Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses Arno Press and the New York Times, New York, 1968, 24.
36. Winthrop D. Jordan, White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward The Negro, 1550-1812, Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 1968, 557.
37. Ibid., 562.
38. Herbert G. Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925, New York: Pantheon Books, 1976, 112.
39. Testimony of Angelina Grimke' Weld, in [Theodore D. Weld], American Slavery As It Is. Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses, New York, American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839, 42-45.
40. Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, 35.
41. American Slavery As It Is. Testimony of a Thousand witnesses Arno Press and the New York Times, 48.
42. Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, 36.
43. Charles Ball, Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball. A Black Man. Lewiston, pennsylvania: J.W. Shugert, 1836, 150-151.

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