

SLAVERY AND THE OLD SOUTH

SECONDARY SOURCE

BRENDA STEVENSON, “DISTRESS AND DISCORD
IN VIRGINIA SLAVE FAMILIES, 1830-1860

Often essential for one’s physical, emotional, and economic well-being, the family played a crucial role in the antebellum South. Slaves, however, faced great difficulties in protecting and sustaining family ties. Focusing on Virginia slaves, historian Brenda Stevenson explores some of the pressures slaves encountered as children, parents, and spouses.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. Why was the threat of sale so terrifying to slaves?
2. How did slave families respond to sale and separation?
3. Why did masters place such importance on the role of slave mothers? How were slave fathers affected by these views?
4. What were some of the difficulties that slave parents encountered when rearing their children?
5. How did slaves respond to racially mixed people?
6. What were some of the ways that slaves attempted to preserve their marital and parental relationships?
7. What roles did masters play in selecting slaves’ marriage partners?
8. What do you think were some of slavery’s long-term effects on families?

The family was an institution that was by all measures vitally important to every faction of the population of antebellum Virginia, white and black, slave and free. Moreover, the family was important to these various Southerners for quite similar reasons. They believed that a positive family life was necessary to both individual and group survival—emotional, physical, cultural, economic, and social. For many, its existence implied an assurance of comfort in a world that more often than not proved to be harsh, unpredictable, and violent. Regardless of one’s racial or cultural identity, political status, social class, or religious beliefs, “family” was an ideal and a reality that antebellum Southerners prodigiously sought and fought to protect. Family was for them the most natural of institutions, and within its confines the most fundamental human events—birth, life, marriage, and death—took on a legitimacy that guaranteed one’s humanity and immortality. The family institutions that antebellum Southerners erected provided organization and structure to their lives and resources.¹

Notes

¹ Several important works are available which are discussions of the general life styles as well as family and marriage problems of antebellum Southerners. For free blacks in antebellum Virginia, see Luther P. Jackson,

Yet, for many residents of pre-Civil War Virginia, the opportunity to live, act, and take comfort within the physical and emotional boundaries of one's family were privileges that were often elusive, if not impossible to obtain. No group of early nineteenth-century Virginians found it more difficult to create and maintain stable marriages and families than did slaves. This essay is an examination of Virginia slave families during the latter half of the antebellum era. Of primary concern are the problems that adult slaves encountered within their families, particularly as marital partners and parents.

Blacks suffered greatly from the constant pressures attendant to living and working within a slave society. Ideologies of race differences and hierarchy were so popular that few whites, even those who did not benefit directly from the slave system, could conceive of any roles for blacks in their communities other than as exploited, dehumanized workers—and producers of workers. As members of a numerical minority defined by racial difference, they were the targets of profound sociocultural, political, and economic oppression that was meant to create and maintain the financial success and social prestige of elite whites in antebellum society. Moreover, white Virginians tried to impose their authority on every aspect of slave life, including the family in order to fulfill their need to control the labor of their human chattel. It was not unusual for slave masters to choose their slaves' marital partners, to separate those couples they had united, to force extramarital sexual partners on them, and even to sell off their children when it became economically advantageous, promoted discipline in the quarters, or helped to secure their own. The negative implications of such actions for slaves who were trying to maintain functional family groups were, of course, substantial. An acutely detrimental phenomenon was the forced outmigration of slaves from Virginia in the antebellum period to other parts of the South as part of the lucrative domestic slave trade. This mandatory and often indiscriminate exodus which separated husband from wife, and mother from child, stripped many slaves of the kin- and community-based networks that they had managed to construct over generations of residence in Virginia. Slave owners sold and shipped literally hundreds of thousands of slave men, women, and children representing all age groups with various family and marriage commitments out of the state. Richard Sutch conservatively estimates that during the decade from 1850 to 1860 alone, slaveholders and traders exported almost sixty-eight thousand Virginia slaves to the lower South and Southwest.² More often than not, masters sold their slaves without regard to family groups or marital status. Even those slaveholders who wanted to keep slave families united had little control over their future unity once the slave family was purchased by someone else. Donald Sweig's survey of the marital histories of slaves in northern Virginia, for example, indicates that as many as 74 percent of those exported left the state without accompanying family members.³ Moreover, one can reasonably surmise that since most of the slaves

Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830-1860 (New York Athenaeum, 1969 [c 1942]; reprint ed., 1986). See also: "Free Women of Color" in Suzanne Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 87-111. For a general discussion of free blacks in the antebellum lower South, see Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 174.

Concerning the slave family, the most impressive, scholarly treatments are in John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), and particularly Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

For the most thoughtful descriptions of antebellum white familial relations, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1988); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982); Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970); and Lebsack, *Free Women of Petersburg*.

² Richard Sutch. "The Breeding of Slaves for Sale and the Westward Expansion of Slavery, 1850-1860," in Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene Genovese, eds. *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), Appendix, Table 4, p. 207.

³ Donald M. Sweig, "Northern Virginia Slavery: A Statistical and Demographic Investigation" (Ph.D. dissertation, College of William and Mary. 1982), 206.

exported were between twenty and forty-nine years old,⁴ many of them were spouses and parents at the time of their departure. Regional studies substantiate this generalization. When Jo Ann Manfra and Robert Dykstra reviewed a survey of late antebellum slave marriages in southern Virginia, for example, they found that at least one-third of those couples who separated did so as a result of slaveholder demands.⁵ Manfra and Dykstra's analysis also documents that mandatory division was the predominant reason young married slave couples separated.⁶ Separated slave couples and the breakup of families also produced orphans. The disruption of family ties and its consequences (such as orphaned children) were especially serious problems for Virginia bondsmen and women during the latter half of the antebellum period.

Other information descriptive of Virginia slave life in the last decades before the Civil War also documents these phenomena. When one considers the recollections of ex-slaves, many of which record the personal histories of the last generation of slave children, adolescents, and young adults, the scope of these problems is obvious. Charles Perdue, Thomas Barden, Robert Phillips provide the largest collection of published Virginia narratives in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews of Virginia Ex-Slaves* (1976). Of the 142 autobiographical statements found in this compilation, 87 include both impressionistic and detailed statistical information that ex-slaves provided about their parents. Among this group of former slaves, fully 18 percent suggested that neither their mothers nor their fathers contributed significantly to their rearing.⁷ While some of these children lived with other kin, such as grandparents and aunts, others were less fortunate. The details they offer of their lives elucidates the painful consequences of orphan status in a society where individual slave survival was almost synonymous with family and community support. Consider the personal history of Armaci Adams, a slave born at the very end of the antebellum era who suffered parental loss.

"I was bawn in Gates County, North Carolina but I ain't stayed down dere long," Adams began her account of her life. The ex-slave inferred in her statement that as an infant she lived with both of her parents in a domestic unit that was similar in structure and function to a nuclear family. Hunter, "an ole Methodist preacher," owned Armaci and her parents. When she was only three years old, two catastrophic events drastically changed Armaci's family situation and tore her away from the nurturing world of her parents' home forever: in the same year that her mother died of an unspecified cause, Isaac Hunter decided to sell most of his other slaves South. Among the first group to leave was, Armaci's father. The Reverend Mr. and Mrs. Hunter then moved their much-reduced agricultural unit, including Armaci, to a farm in Huntersville, Virginia. Instead of placing the child in a slave home for rearing, however, the Hunters kept Armaci in their house and raised her themselves. Within a few months, Armaci had suffered the loss of both of her parents and most of her slave community.⁸

In addition to having to cope with what must have been a tremendous loss, displacement, and abandonment, the young child found herself in the precarious position of having to rely solely on her white owners for care and guidance. Unfortunately, it was not a situation that Armaci or her new caretakers appreciated or adjusted to well. The Hunters never developed a close or affectionate attachment to their small ward. They obviously doubted that Armaci, a young child growing up during the era of a civil war that might well mean an end to slavery, would ever be worth the minimal material support they supplied her. At one point, their uneasiness about gaining a financial return on their investment even prompted them to try to sell her. Yet, they were unable to do so because the potential buyer thought her physically handicapped—much of Armaci's body was covered with extensive burn scars that she

⁴ Sutch, "The Breeding of Slaves for Sale," Appendix, Tables 4 and 5, pp. 207, 209.

⁵ JoAnn Manfra and Robert R. Dykstra. "Serial Marriage and the Origins of the Black Stepfamily: The Rowanty Evidence," *Journal of American History* 72 (June 1985): 32. These authors state that 35.3 percent of slave marriages terminated in their sample from Dinwiddie County, Virginia was due to involuntary separation. Comparatively, Blassingame in his compilation of causes of slave marriage termination records that 39 percent in Mississippi, 26.8 percent in Tennessee and 29.2 percent in Louisiana ended as a result of forced separation. Blassingame, *Slave Community*, Table 2. p. 90.

⁶ Manfra and Dykstra, "Serial Marriage," p. 36.

⁷ The slave narratives which comprise this sample were the 142 included in Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden. and Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1976).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

received while trying to cook her food in a fireplace without adult supervision. “De...man wouldn’ buy me ‘cause he ‘fraid I won’ be no good on account o’ de burn scars,” she explained.⁹

When the Civil War ended, the Hunters refused to free Armaci. By that time, she had become an important domestic laborer in their household and the only one of their slaves who remained with them. Armaci was only seven years old at war’s end and did not know that she was free. Her master and mistress continued to hold and treat her as a slave for six more years. They even conspired to discourage her father’s attempts to find and to take the young girl home with him. Skillfully employing well-honed techniques of psychological and physical intimidation, they were able to gain and maintain control of Armaci. They developed an emotional hold over her even though they treated her harshly. (Years later Adams did not hesitate to characterize both Mr. and Mrs. Hunter as “hell cats,” yet it was difficult for her to leave them.)¹⁰

Without the presence of her own black family or fictive kin, Armaci became the kind of slave Mr. and Mrs. Hunter wanted. She was passive, submissive, and hardworking. Acting out of a profound belief that she had no other alternative, Armaci met the Hunters’ demands for hard work, accepted their meager material aid, and submitted to the beatings that she received from them for any mistake or misunderstanding. Over the years, her emotional dependency became acute. For example, when her father arrived at the Hunters’ home some time after the end of the war to take Armaci back to his new family, Armaci was confused as to whether or not she should leave and eventually was convinced to stay with her owners. Mrs. Hunter told the child stories about her stepmother, and Armaci was afraid to leave with her father. Mrs. Hunter’s lies apparently held more credibility for the frightened Armaci than her father’s obvious desire to have her reunited with his family. She understandably feared life away from the small plantation which had defined her worldview for most of her life. “When paw come ter git me,” she noted, “dey wouldn’ let ‘im see me so he went on ‘way.” It was not until she was a young adolescent that Armaci realized that she was “free” and finally was able to break the bonds she had with Mr. and Mrs. Hunter.¹¹

Slave kin groups and communities on large holdings ideally provided alternate means for slaves to exchange and share emotional and economic support with loved ones in spite of the potentially destructive power of the owners to separate slave families. Regardless of the many Virginia slave family groups that had some characteristics of a nuclear structure, extended and stepfamilies persisted in slave communities as innovative sources of socialization, social intercourse, material aid, and cultural expression.

Within the arena of the slave community, child rearing was a shared responsibility. In the absence of a parent, other nuclear and extended family members and sometimes fictive kin took on the major responsibility or rearing children. Adult female siblings or maternal female kin were the first choices as surrogate primary care-givers. When Robert Bruce constructed a list of slaves located on his plantation in Charlotte County, Virginia during the late 1830s, he noted that three maternal grandmothers served as the primary care-givers of small children whose mothers were either dead or had been sold away.¹² Hannah Valentine, a domestic servant to Governor David Campbell of Abingdon, Virginia, took on the care and rearing of her grandchildren when her daughter, Eliza, accompanied the governor’s family to Richmond. Writing to her in 1838, the surrogate mother noted reassuringly: “Your Children are all...doing very well and never suffered from sickness one moment since you Left here. [T]hey talk some little about you but do not appear to miss you a great deal.”¹³

The importance of any one person’s particular contribution to the rearing of children within slave families was determined by a number of variables. Generally, physical proximity to the child, the closeness of the consanguinal tie, and gender implied one’s responsibility in this familial matter. Another important variable was the size of the slave child’s nuclear extended family. Slave children who were members of large families slave communities, for example, were surrounded by a number of kin could serve as child rearers. Other considerations which affected this decision were the age of possible care-givers and the status of these nurturers’ physical and mental health, the other domestic responsibilities of these rearers, and, relatedly, their willingness to accept the responsibility for helping to raise the youngsters. Ideally, adult slave kin and friends embraced these additional commitments of time, energy,

⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 1,3.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

¹² “Slave List,” Bruce Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, hereafter referred to as VHS.

¹³ Robert S. Starobin, ed., *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves* (reprinted, New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1988), 72.

and material resources if it were necessary to do so. Yet, there certainly were some slaves who were reluctant to cooperate. The opinions of other family members and the larger slave community also helped to assess how child-rearing tasks were to be distributed. Slave owners, however, ultimately decided who would assume such responsibilities, and slaves, in general, had to act accordingly.

Slave masters insisted on the importance of the slave mother in the slave family, particularly in regard to child rearing. In so doing, they helped to sustain both African and European cultural traditions that slaves drew upon when deciding how to order their social world. Accordingly, slave took on the most significant long-term obligations of child care. Virginia slave owners promoted matrifocal and matrilocal families among their slaves in several ways.¹⁴ First, a Virginia law dated 1662 stipulated that black children take the status of their mothers.¹⁵ This legal association between slave mother and child reinforced, within the slaveholder's perception of an ordered domestic world, the cultural dictates of their society concerning gender differentiated responsibility. Masters believed that slave mothers, like white women, had a natural bond with their children and that therefore it was their responsibility—more so than that of slave fathers—to care for their offspring. Consequently, young slave children routinely lived with their mothers or female maternal kin, thus establishing the matrilocality of slave families. Moreover, masters compiling lists of their human property routinely identified the female parent of slave children but only sometimes indicated paternity. Also, when prompted to sell a group of slaves which might include parents and their children, owners sometimes tried to sell a mother with her small children as a single unit but rarely afforded slave fathers this same consideration.

At the same time that slaveholders promoted a strong bond between slave mothers and their children, they denied to slave fathers their paternal rights of ownership and authority, as well as denying them their right to contribute to the material support of their offspring. Undoubtedly, slave masters felt that if it became necessary for them to challenge the power that slave parents had in the lives of their children, it would be much easier to do so if the parent with whom the child most readily identified as an authority figure was a female rather than a male. Slaveholders' insistence on the importance of the slave mother by identifying her as the head of the slave family and primary care-giver of the children, along with the derivation of the slave child's status from that of the mother, firmly established the matrifocality of most slave families. Thus, while slave fathers had a significant presence in the consciousness of their children, mothers obviously were much more physically and psychologically present in the children's lives.

A review of the slave narratives can elucidate further these issues of slave family structure and membership. If one considers the sample Perdue provides in his compilation, it is clear that the large majority of Virginia ex-slaves identified their mothers as the primary providers of care and socialization during their childhood. Significantly, 82 percent spoke of the physical presence of their mothers during most of their childhood years, while only 42 percent recalled continuous contact with their fathers. Moreover, fully one-third of those who did make mention of the presence of their fathers during their childhood indicated that these men did not live with them but only visited on their days off.¹⁶

The absence of slave fathers was not a problem which was restricted to the latter part of the antebellum period. Since the colonial period, young male slaves were the primary targets of intrastate and interstate trading in Virginia. As such, removal from wives and children always was a source of difficulty plaguing slave families. Of course, the numbers of young male slaves exported increased over time. Their continual decline on some farms and plantations

¹⁴ Anthropologist Nancy Tanner offers one of the most viable definitions for matrifocality. She describes the term in part as (1) "kinship systems in which (a) the role of the mother is structurally, culturally, and affectively central and (b) this multidimensional centrality is legitimate; and (2) the societies in which these features coexist, where (a) the relationship between the sexes is relatively egalitarian and (b) both women and men are important actors in the economic and ritual spheres." Matrilocal families are those in which the majority of the functional members reside in the home of the mother. Nancy Tanner, "Matrifocality in Indonesia and Africa and Among Black Americans," in Michele Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 131.

¹⁵ William Waller Hennings, ed., *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia*, vol. 2 (Richmond: Samuel Pleasants, 1832), 170.

¹⁶ Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, passim. See, for example, Frank Bell's description of his Uncle Moses Bell's relationship with his family, p. 26.

in Virginia meant a decrease in the number of slave families with both parents present. (Significantly, only 42 percent of the ex-slaves interviewed as part of the Virginia Federal Writers' Project suggested in their autobiographical accounts that they had close physical contact with both of their parents.)¹⁷ Moreover, the removal of adult male slaves from their Virginia kin networks robbed even slave families that were matrifocal, since they, too, had benefited significantly from material and emotional resources that fathers, husbands, and other male relatives who lived close by routinely provided. Many Virginia slave children born in last decades before the Civil War, therefore, grew up without fathers or black male role models and nurturers, while women bore and reared children without the comfort and support of their husbands or other male kin.

Virginia Bell, an ex-slave from Louisiana, recalled her parents' personal histories. "Both of them was from Virginny, but from diff'rent places, and was brought to Louisiana by nigger traders and sold to Massa Lewis. I know my pappy was lots older than my mother and he had a wife and five chillun back in Virginny and had been sold away from them out there.... I don't know what become of his family back in Virginny, 'cause when he was freed he stayed with us."¹⁸ Katie Blackwell Johnson was a Virginia ex-slave who never had the privilege of living with her father. As an adult, Johnson recalled very little about her male parent. "I only remember seeing him once," she stated. "He was stretched on the floor. He took me in his arms and I went to sleep. My mother said he was a great gambler and he never came to see us without a jug of liquor."¹⁹

Although many of the ex-slaves interviewed obviously knew and lived with their mothers, some slaves also grew up without their mothers. This was particularly so for the last generations of Virginia slaves who were born and reared between 1830 and 1860 when masters increasingly were selling women to traders who took them out of the state. Information descriptive of the slave exports from the state documents this activity. Richard Sutch estimates that by 1850, slaveholders were selling equal numbers of adult women and men and actually more adolescent and young adult females than males within those broad age cohorts.²⁰ Because the average age at first birth for Virginia slave women was between nineteen and twenty years,²¹ large numbers exported were probably young mothers, many of whom were forced to leave without their young. Liza McCoy recalled that her Aunt Charlotte, a slave who lived in Matthews County, "was sold to Georgia away from her baby when de chile wont no more three months."²² Ex-slave Fannie Berry included in her autobiographical account of life in late antebellum Virginia a tragic scene of slave mothers separated from their infants. She described the incident in part as:

Dar was a great crying and carrying on 'mongst the staves who had been sold. Two or three of dem gals had young babies taking with 'em. Poor little things. As soon as dey got on de train dis ol' new master had de train stopped an' made dem poor gal mothers take babies off and laid dem precious things on de groun' and left dem behind to live or die...[the] master who bought de mothers didn't want gals to be bothered wid dese chillun 'cause he had his cotton fields fer new slaves to work.²³

¹⁷ Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, passim.

¹⁸ Norman Yetman, ed., *Voices from Slavery* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 26.

¹⁹ Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 161.

²⁰ Sutch, "Breeding of Slaves for Sale," Appendix, Table 5, p. 209.

²¹ Information for computation of the average age of Virginia slave mothers at first birth, 19.71 years, was compiled from slave lists dated during the period 1800-1865, located in the William H. Gray Farm Book, Gray Family Papers, VHS; Ledger of George Saunders, Saunders Family Papers, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia. Ledger of William Gatewood and Samuel Vance Gatewood, Gatewood Family Papers, VHS; Stringfellow Family Bible, Stringfellow Family Papers, VHS; Allen T. Caperton Family Papers, VHS; Slave Lists, John Young Mason Papers, VHS; Slave Lists, William Bolling Papers, VHS; Slave List, Baskerville Family Papers, VHS.

Trussel and Steckel estimate that the mean age of first birth for slave mothers throughout the antebellum South was 20.6 years. James Trussel and Richard Steckel, "The Age of Slaves at Menarche and Their First Birth" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 8 (Winter 1978): 492.

²² Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 199.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Berry went on to explain the fate of the abandoned infants that “some po’ white man would take dem an’ raise dem up as his slaves and make ‘em work on his plantation and if he wanted to, would sell ‘em.”²⁴

Unfortunately, the socialization of slave youth was a difficult task for slaves regardless of the composition of their individual families. Slave child rearers faced obstacles to success that most whites did not. The most important deterrent was a legal one which had negative implications for all aspects of the relationship between rearer and child. Simply, slave parents were not the legal guardians of their children—white owners were. Moreover, since slaveholders were quite willing to share their authority with persons other than slave kin, particularly nurses, overseers, drivers, and other whites residing on their property, slave family members had many threats to their influence over the lives of their youngsters. Slave children were confronted with a variety of authority figures, white and black, each with his or her own priorities, demands, and contributions to their upbringing. These youths had to learn to assess the power and value of each of these adults as well as to appease their demands, often simultaneously.

Slave kin and white owners held the most important positions of power in the lives of slave children. Yet, as the balance of power was both a delicate and complex phenomenon that could shift quite suddenly, slave kin had to work diligently to retain some control in the face of unsolicited interference from others. White owners balked at attempts by slave kin to gain control over the lives or allegiances of black children in opposition to their authority as masters. They understood that such challenges to their authority showed that their slaves did not accept their assigned inferior status and were teaching their slave children to resist as well. Masters met such trials with extreme hostility and often open brutality. Also, since most antebellum Virginia slaveholders were white and male and most slave child care-givers were bondswomen; masters, especially, were incensed at the notion that their authority and power might be questioned by someone they viewed as three times their inferior—that is, black, female, and slave. A slave mother’s successful defiance of an owner’s authority would have meant a weakening of the control that the slaveholder hoped to exert over his other slaves—a situation few Virginia masters would tolerate.²⁵

Matilda Carter was an ex-slave who lived on a farm near Newport News. She recalled that her master, John Wynder, even refused to allow his wife to interfere with his command over his slaves. “My sister Sally was a favorite of my mistress,” Carter noted. “She didn’ have to wuk in de fields. She ain’t had nottin’ to do ‘ceptin play wid de chillun all day. But de Marser he try to make lil sis wuk. So my mistress she jes’ hide her when she think Marser goin git her.” Wynder was determined to end his wife’s attempts to undermine his decision-making power with regard to his property. He remedied the situation by selling his wife’s favored slave to the Deep South. “Mother never did get over dis ack of sellin’ her baby to dem slave drivers down New Orleans,” Carter concluded.²⁶

Caroline Hunter’s recollections about her life as a child with her slave mother and three brothers on a small farm near Suffolk, Virginia, at the end of the antebellum era include a telling example of the frustration that slave kin felt in response to the intrusion of white authority in the lives of their children. The scene she describes also suggests important questions about the slave child’s general perception of black adult authority:

During slavery it seemed tak yo’ chillun b’long to ev’ybody but you. Many a day my ole mama has stood by an’ watched massa beat her chillun ‘till dey bled an’ she couldn’ open her mouf. Dey

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Eugene Genovese also argues, and rightfully so, that “inherent” in the “paternalism” of slave owners, “were dangerously deceptive ideas of ‘gratitude,’ ‘loyalty,’ and ‘family.’ Inherent also was an intimacy that turned every act of impudence and insubordination—every act of unsanctioned self-assertion—into an act of treason and disloyalty, for by repudiating the principle of submission it struck at the heart of the master’s moral self-justification and therefore at his self-esteem.” Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 91.

For more detailed discussions of these issues, see Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865* (New York: W.W.Norton, 1978), 63-79, passim; and Brenda Stevenson, “‘Seemed Like Your Children Belonged to Everyone But You’: The Rearing of Slave Children in Antebellum Virginia,” presented at the annual conference of the Organization of American Historians, Apr. 12, 1987, Reno, Nevada.

²⁶ Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 68.

didn't only beat us, but dey useta strap my mama to a bench or box an' beat her wid a wooden paddle while she was naked.²⁷

Stripped naked and beaten before her daughter, other family members, and the slave community, Caroline Hunter's mother must have known that such an example of her obvious helplessness in the face of slaveholder power would jeopardize her authority within her own domestic sphere— authority that she needed in order to rear Caroline and her other children. Nevertheless, the owner's demonstration of control did not destroy the bond between child and parent or the respect that Caroline had for her mother. On the contrary, the experience seemed to have deepened the young girl's appreciation for her mother's plight and helped to further instill in the daughter a profound hatred for their cruel owner. Yet, these expressions of white dominion and control that slave youth repeatedly witnessed had some impact on the ways in which slaves differentially identified and related to white and black authority.

Ex-slave Nancy Williams of Yanceville, Virginia, recounted an experience which demonstrates the influence that owners could have on a slave child's perspective of parental authority. Williams explained that as a young child, she was a favorite of her master who, consequently, did not beat her and frowned on the strict disciplinary policy of her parents. Her parents probably believed that their master was spoiling Nancy and resented his intrusion in their domestic affairs. It was clear to slave parents that children reared in such a manner eventually would face harsh confrontations with whites and also risk alienation from their slave peers. As such, slave child rearers like the Williams's had to fight a war of wits with their owners to gain the authority to properly socialize their own children.

Not surprisingly, slave children did not always cooperate with their parents' efforts. Nancy Williams sometimes tried to manipulate her master's "benevolence" in order to avoid the stinging punishments that her parents often inflicted. The ex-slave recalled that on one such occasion, she had refused to do a task that her mother had assigned her. Nancy was fleeing from her parent and the inevitable beating she was to receive when she decided that the best place to hide was between her owner's legs. Nancy, mindful of her master's fondness for her, knew that her mother would not whip her in his presence. "I run up de stairs nt 'tween marsa's legs," Williams remembered, "an ask him for 10 [cents]. She couldn't ketch me den." Mrs. Williams, however, was not about to let her child get away with this obvious act of disrespect or her original offense. Years later, the errant daughter noted her mother's eventual triumph: "[W]hen she did [catch me,] she beat de debil outa me."²⁸

One can expect that with the decline of the viability of the extended slave family and the nonrelated surrogate kin network in the wake of increased exportation of slaves, the overall socialization of many slave youth suffered. One must also concede, however, that even under optimum conditions for success, slave kin rarely were able to rear children that were not affected to some degree by the actions and ideologies of whites who held so much power over their physical, psychological, and intellectual developments. Obviously, slaves sometimes internalized prevalent racist views which created tension within their families and communities. Color stratification was a problem which posed particularly negative consequences for those slaves touched by it, because of the explosive issues of force, sex, female purity, and marital sanctity that it evoked. Color consciousness and stratification among blacks resulted from a combination of factors, such as a consistently high rate of miscegenation and, relatedly, a large biracial population among slaves and free blacks, as well as the popularity of racist ideologies concerning race difference and hierarchy and their practical application in antebellum Virginia society.

Much of the interracial sexual activity that resulted in the state's biracial population involved white-male coercion and rape of black females. Consequently, the children born of these assaults were potent symbols of the immense power that whites held over the most intimate spheres of black life. They were a constant reminder to their mothers and her kin of their powerlessness in the face of white male domination and violence. "My mama said that in dem times a nigger 'oman couldn't help herself," May Satterfield recalled, "fo she had to do what de marster say.... she had to go."²⁹ Consequently, the presence of racially mixed children in homes of slaves sometimes engendered feelings of shame, humiliation, and anger.

Slave families and communities usually attached an even deeper stigma to those children conceived as a result of voluntary sexual relations between black women and white men. Although slaves were very empathetic to those

²⁷ Ibid., p. 150.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 317.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 245.

women who were the victims of coercion, they often ostracized slave women who openly consorted with white men. Many bondswomen and men viewed these concubines as promiscuous and disloyal. Their children shared, to a certain extent, the dishonor of their mothers.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many racially mixed children felt shame and confusion about their white parentage. Patience Richardson Avery, for example, immediately rejected the notion that Thomas Hatcher, Jr., a white resident of some prominence in Chesterfield County, was her father. When her mother first introduced Mr. Hatcher to their small daughter, Patience remembered that she screamed: "I ain't got no father;... He no father o' mine! He white!"³⁰ Although she was only a few years old at the time, Patience profoundly understood the socio-political distinction between "black" and "white" and was horrified that she might be related to a white man. So, too, were some of her kin. Their rejection of Patience cause of her racially mixed heritage caused her a great deal of physical and emotional pain as she grew older. Moreover, her account of her extended family's response remains as an important illustration of the kinds of conflict miscegenation brought to slave families. It also demonstrates the failures of some extended families to fully embrace those persons who were born outside of the nuclear core.

Forced to live with a maternal uncle (Robert Richardson) and his wife and children after the death of both her mother and maternal grandmother, Patience Richardson was the victim of discrimination and ill-treatment at uncle's home. Mrs. Richardson's attitude toward the girl was especially cruel. She not only assigned Patience excessively heavy work loads and blamed her for things beyond her control but also viciously beat her when displeased with her performance or overall behavior. The manner in which aunt chose to discipline Patience is clearly indicative of her disdain for the child. Also, Mrs. Richardson's beatings acutely resembled the type of punishment that slaveholders inflicted on blacks in their attempts to humiliate and "break" them. Surely her intent was similar to that of a slave master. "Ev'ry time dat ole 'oman would whip me she would strip me an' cut me wid a strip 'till I was whelped all over, an' de blood blister was everywhere," Mrs. Avery remembered. "I couldn' walk, neither set down," she added.³¹

Patience Avery emphatically believed that the lack of consideration and harsh beatings her aunt gave her were due to her white paternity. Obviously, Mrs. Richardson resented Patience's parentage and presence in her home. Recalling the time when she lived with her uncle's family, the ex-slave noted: "Four years I stayed wid a mean 'oman, an' she was de meanes'... 'oman I ever saw. Mean an' cruel. You see, I was treated cruelly 'cause I was dis white man's chile."³² Eventually, Patience sought refuge from Mrs. Richardson's violent beatings and assaults with a neighboring white farmer and his wife who provided the girl with minimal material support for her domestic labor. Rejected and brutalized by her black kin, Patience Avery ironically found greater acceptance in the homes of those whites toward whom she initially felt so much hostility.

Mothers and other family members were sensitive to the kinds of teasing, insults, and rough treatment that their mulatto children might receive at the hands of blacks and whites. They often lied to them about their paternity or taught them to avoid the issue when questioned about it. "Who's yo' pappy?" was the question that slaves often asked Candis Goodwin, the illegitimate daughter of a neighboring slave owner and a slave woman. Goodwin often quipped back at those teasing her: "Tuckey buzzard lay me an' de sun hatch me," but she secretly knew her "pappy" was "Massa Williams."³³

Despite the obvious hostility with which many slaves responded to miscegenation, the reaction in the slave quarters to racially mixed children often was a complex and contradictory one. While many felt uneasy with the presence of these children and a few openly rejected them, unresolved feelings of black inferiority caused some to treat racially mixed and generally light-skinned children as superior to their darker peers. Many slaves also respected the operative class system in antebellum Southern society. The combination of color and class stratification caused some slaves to afford the mulatto offspring of elite whites a particularly elevated status. Biracial slaves sometimes also held themselves aloof from other blacks. Consider the personal history and behavior of Ary, an octoroon woman who came to work for the missionaries at Craney Island, Virginia, in 1863.

Ary was the proud daughter of a Virginia planter and a mulatto house servant. By young adulthood, she had become the concubine of her young master, who also was her first cousin. She eventually bore him a child who died

³⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 16-17.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 108.

during the Civil War. Convinced that she was the favorite child of her wealthy father and that her young master's feelings of affection were genuine, Ary believed that she was superior to her darker peers. While on Craney Island, she often boasted of her elite white parentage and insisted that she was better than the other "contraband."³⁴ Remembering her lover's pronouncement that she was to have nothing to do with "colored men" because they "weren't good enough" for her, Ary was determined not to associate too closely with any blacks. Yet even before she had told her story, her physical appearance, especially her long, straight hair, had gained her a measure of status even among those "contraband" who resented her air of superiority.³⁵

Certainly, many male and female slaves viewed African-Americans with light skin and eye color, straight hair and noses, and thin lips as exceedingly attractive. When the mulatto Candis Goodwin was a young woman living on the Eastern Shore, she was considered "de purties" girl in the area.³⁶ Virginia Haynes Shepard of Chuchland was the daughter of a domestic slave and a white doctor. Although she was embarrassed when asked about her paternity, Mrs. Shepherd was quite forthcoming with her impressions of black feminine beauty. Describing one slave woman of local acclaim, Shepherd noted: "Diana was a black beauty if there ever was one. She had this thin silk skin, a sharp nose, thin lips, a perfect set of white teeth and beautiful long coal-black hair."³⁷

Thus, while Patience Avery and other mulattoes were uncomfortable with an ancestry that was partially white, other racially mixed African-Americans, like Ary, were proud of it, considered themselves superior to blacks, and believed they were the elite within their families and their communities. Many blacks must have accepted these notions of entitlement that some light-skinned slaves promoted—few racially mixed slaves could have afforded to prolong such pretensions of superiority otherwise.

Of course, other problems related to the flaws in the antebellum South also haunted the families of bondsmen and women. Reared in a society that was extremely violent, even by standards of the nineteenth century, slaves sometimes also chose brutal force as a means of control of their families and among their peers. (Recall the description of the beatings that Patricia Avery stated her Aunt Richardson gave her.) Privy to some of these events, whites from the South and North did not hesitate to comment on what they perceived as violent behavior that some slave child rearers exhibited when they punished their children.

Indeed, the stories regarding widespread violence of slaves toward each other were prevalent enough to warrant discussions of this issue in nineteenth-century guides outlining appropriate measures of treatment and control of slave property. Authors writing on the subject of slave management, on the one hand, routinely advised masters to carefully scrutinize the domestic relations of their slaves in order to prevent physical abuse within the quarters.³⁸ Slaves, on the other hand, drew on both West African and European cultural dictates concerning the issue of corporal punishment. Most believed that, "a few licks now and then, does em good," and whippings in response to numerous offenses were an important part of their children's socialization.³⁹

The violence and brutality that whites imposed on their slaves undoubtedly influenced the ways in which bondsmen and bondswomen treated their own children and other dependents. The ability to beat someone, to hold that kind of physical control over another human, was a sadistic expression of power that blacks learned repeatedly from their interaction with and observation of white authority figures. This expression of control was meant to impress children with their parents' ability to command some power over their offspring's behavior. Also, adult

³⁴ In late May 1861, General Benjamin F. Butler of the United States Army, then commander of Fortress Monroe at Old Point Comfort, Virginia, decided to accept slaves escaping from Confederate owners as "contraband" of the Civil War, that is, property which belonged to the enemy that could have been used against the Union in the war effort. His decision set an important precedent in the war, and before its end, thousands of slaves escaped and sought protection in Union-held camps and forts as "contraband." See, for example, Robert Francis Eng's *Freedom's First Generation: Black Hampton, Virginia, 1861-1890* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 18-22.

³⁵ Henry Swint, ed., *Dear Ones At Home: Letters from Contraband Camps* (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1966), 39, 55-56, 73.

³⁶ Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, pp. 108-9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 255-57.

³⁸ James O. Breeden, ed., *Advice to Masters: The Ideal in Slave Management in the Old South* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), 282.

³⁹ Swint, ed., *Dear Ones at Home*, p. 161.

slave kin wanted to demonstrate to whites, who often tried to usurp or demean slave parental authority, that they claimed a right to control and chastise their own children regardless of the legal guardianship that white owners possessed.

Perhaps it was this demonstration of black slave power within their own domestic sphere rather than the concern for the actual physical pain the children endured that really offended whites.

As “contraband of war,” for example, Virginia slaves who took refuge behind Union lines and went to reside in the federal army and freedmen aid-society camps quickly claimed their freedom which they, in part, defined as a right to make vital decisions regarding their own children. It is obvious that they were no more receptive to the judgments that Northern teachers and missionaries made about their methods of child discipline and rearing than they were of their former owners’ “interference.” One Northern white teacher of the “contraband” in Virginia’s southern coastal area wrote in 1864, “we have our sympathies called out, almost every day, for the innocent children who are harshly beaten by their willful enemies[,] their harsh mammas.... close by us lives a black woman who lashes her little boy with a rawhide. We have remonstrated repeatedly, but she ‘Reckons I shall beat my boy just as much as I please’...and she does beat him till his cries wring the anguish from our hearts.”⁴⁰

Ex-slave Nancy Williams recalled that both of her parents gave her severe beatings when they thought that her behavior warranted it. Williams’s mother sometimes feared that her husband was too harsh when he punished the mischievous girl. Nancy remembered one incident in which her father became particularly incensed with one of her pranks. After her father detected that she had stolen money from him and had then tried to disguise her crime with a lie, he exploded. Placing her in an old guano bag, Williams hung his daughter up on a rack in the meat house and began to “smoke” her. He hoped that this type of torture would induce the child to tell the truth. Instead, the odor and smoke from the burnt tobacco along with her physical discomfort made Nancy “drunk.” Angered even more by his failure to get her to confess, Mr. Williams then dumped the disoriented child onto the floor and began to beat her “somepin awful,” all the while demanding that she recant her lie. The combination of pain, fear, and the smoke caused Nancy to faint briefly. When she regained consciousness, she fled her father’s whipping, calling on members of her family and community to intervene.⁴¹

Certainly, the severity of the physical abuse that Nancy Williams’s father inflicted on his child was probably unusual among slaves. Most ex-slaves recalling relationships with their parents spoke of receiving much more moderate discipline. One must not discount, however, the tremendous emotional stress under which adult slaves lived that definitely affected their relationships with each other, sometimes even to the point of gross maltreatment. Yet, one must also note that while Nancy’s father’s response was undoubtedly severe, he thought that his actions, regardless of their obvious harshness, would help his daughter to become a more responsible adult. Moreover, Mr. Williams believed that it was his duty and right as a Christian father to insure that he reared his children with strong moral character, and therefore, he felt that he had acted appropriately. “Father said he’d rather die an’ go to hell an’ burn den to live agin in heaven roun’ Christ robe an’ leave a passel o’ tongue tied niggers to steal,” Nancy Williams explained.⁴² Still, Mr. Williams’s behavior on that occasion indicated that he sometimes could lose control and that his anger and frustration could expose his family to acts which would hurt and humiliate as much as teach and protect.

Abuse in slave families was not limited to children alone. Spousal ill-treatment was another serious problem. Relationships between husbands and wives suffered from slaveholders’ usurpation of control in slave marriages even more profoundly than those relationships between parents and children. Verbal and physical abuse among married partners were some responses to complex issues of discord within slave marriages. This prevalence of mistreatment among some antebellum blacks toward their spouses prompted one ex-slave to comment that “some good masters would punish slaves who mistreated womenfolk and some didn’t.”⁴³

Unfounded in Virginia law, slave marriages were tenuous relationships in which couples struggled to survive among the immense and divisive pressures of slave life. Slaveholders had the final say as to which slaves would marry and whom they could marry and when and, therefore, exercised immense dominion over this most intimate of

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 123.

⁴¹ Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 317.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 161.

decisions affecting adult slaves. Because they controlled vital aspects of slave marriage, owners' actions often meant the success or failure of these relationships.

Concerned with economic and logistic issues that slaves were not privy to, masters sometimes imposed marriage partners on slaves whom the individual bondswoman or man might not have chosen if given the opportunity to decide otherwise. Charles Grandy, an ex-slave from Norfolk recalled that on the farm where he resided:

Marsa used to sometimes pick our wives fo us If he didn' have on his place enough women for the men, he would wait on de side of de road till a big wagon loaded with slaves come by. Den Marsa would stop de ole nigger-trader and buy you a woman. Wasn't no use tryin' to pick one, cause Marsa wasn't gonna pay but so much for her. All he wanted was a young healthy one who looked like she could have children, whether she was purty or ugly as sin.⁴⁴

Although Grandy spoke specifically of the lack of choice male slaves had in acquiring wives, it is evident from his description of the process that the women involved—young women recently sold away from families and perhaps husbands—had absolutely no choice in the matter whatsoever. Apparently, the sexist perspectives of many male owners persuaded them to be more solicitous of the desires of male slaves in the matter than those of female slaves. Ex-slave Katie Blackwell Johnson explained that the slave women she knew “had no choice in the matter as to whom they would marry. If a man saw a girl he liked he would ask his master's permission to ask the master of the girl for her. If his master consented and her master consented, then they came together.”⁴⁵ The emotional and sexual exploitation of some women slaves forced to marry men whom they did not love undoubtedly increased their resentment toward their masters and their husbands, which then sparked marital discord. Likewise, those males forced to marry women they did not know or even think physically appealing hindered the development of a loving, respectful marital relationship.

On some rare occasions, the preferential treatment that white male owners allowed bondsmen with regard to their choice of marriage partners (along with other salient variables such as the depletion of the young male slave population in some areas and an emphasis on slave breeding) contributed to polygamous marital relations among slaves. Israel Massie of Emporia, Virginia, noted that he knew of a few male slaves who were each married to several women simultaneously. Usually, these wives lived on different farms, yet Massie also recalled a polygamous marital situation where the husband and his wives lived on the same plantation. “When Tom died dar wuz Ginny, Sarah, Nancy, an' Patience,” the Reverend Mr. Massie explained. “All four dar at de grave crying over dat one man. Do ya kno' chile, dem women never fou't, fuss, an' quarrel over dem men folks? Dey seemed to understood each other.”⁴⁶

Massie's description of polygamous marriages among Virginia slaves provides important documentation of the existence of alternative and, perhaps, competitive marriage forms in Virginia at the end of the antebellum era. (“Competitive” because it is obvious that many slaves embraced monogamy rather than polygamy as the appropriate manner to orient their marriages.) Given the paucity of information regarding the persistence of polygamy as a viable form of marital organization, however, it is difficult to discern whether it existed throughout the era or emerged as a response to slaveholder-engineered breeding schemes. Yet, the cooperation of the women married to the slave Tom that Massie describes suggests that there were sociocultural and, perhaps, historical bases for the continual manifestation of polygamy among slaves.

Clearly, the marital forms and relationships of slaves were related in part to their owners' desires to increase their slave holdings. Many antebellum Virginia slaveholders insisted that their slaves exercise their procreative powers to the fullest extent and encouraged various forms of marriage or sociosexual bonding between male and female slaves to insure high rates of birth. Slave breeding in Virginia is well documented through child-to-woman ratios, the personal papers of owners, and the testimonies of slaves. As one ex-slave noted: “The masters were very careful about a good breedin' woman. If she had five or six children she was rarely sold.”⁴⁷ A comparison of white

⁴⁴ Quoted in *The Negro in Virginia*. Compiled by the Virginia Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration in the state of Virginia (New York: Hastings Publishers, 1940), 83-84.

⁴⁵ Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 161.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

and slave child-to-woman ratios from the period 1820 to 1860 as an indicator of fertility, for example, documents that slave women began having children at an earlier age than white females, although Anglo-American women eventually did bear more children than black slave women.... An analysis of several slave lists from Virginia, which include information descriptive of the age at first birth of slave mothers, further substantiates these findings. The average age at first birth for Virginia slaves was approximately twenty years. White women, on the other hand, began to have children later, at about twenty-two.⁴⁸ Moreover, while white child-to-woman ratios for both the considered age cohorts 0-14 years (child):15-49 years (mother) and 0-9 years:10-49 years declined over the antebellum era, child-to-woman ratios for slave women considered in the cohorts 0-14 years (child):15-49 years (mother) increased noticeably during the same time period.⁴⁹ This evidence along with a review of the changes in demographic patterns among slaves over time documents that slave breeding was, in some cases, an important priority among Virginia slaveowners.... (See Tables A and B in notes.)

⁴⁸ For information on sources consulted in the computation of the average age of Virginia slave mothers at first birth, see note 21 above; James Trussell and Richard Steckel estimate that the mean age at first birth for antebellum Southern white women was “about two years” later than the projected 20.6 years they estimated for age at first birth for slave mothers in the antebellum South. Trussell and Steckel, “The Age of Slaves at Menarche and Their First Birth,” p. 492.

⁴⁹ Consider, for example, the child:woman ratios for slaves and whites in Virginia when distributed in the age cohorts 1—14 years (children) and 14/15-49 years (women) represented in Table A.

TABLE A

Census Year	Slave	White
1820	1.916678	2.499881
1830	1.818838	1.358570*
1840	1.960139	2.172618
1850	2.057590	2.162029
1860	2.012159	2.191168

* The unusually low ratio produced from census information available for 1830 is probably indicative of a substantial undercount of white children aged 0-14 years old. This error also is reflected in the white child:woman ratio for 1830 descriptive of the age cohorts 0-9 years (children) and 10-49 years (women), and to a lesser extent for blacks during this census year in both categories of compilation.

Table B includes child:woman ratio for slaves and whites in Virginia distributed in the age cohorts 0-9 years (children) and 10-49 years (women).

TABLE B

Census Year	Slave	White
1820	-	1.237707
1830	1.311458	.950202*
1840	1.346319	1.226515
1850	1.079547	1.3326
1860	1.047343	1.015537

* This ratio probably reflects an undercount of children aged 0-9 years during this census year.

Sources: *Census for 1820* (Washington, D.C.: G504. 512. 518, Gales and Seaton, 1821), 23-26; *Fifth Census or Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States*, 1830 (Washington, D.C.: Duff Green, 1832). 87. 89; *Compendium of the Enueneration of the Inhabitants of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior, 1841), 32-33, 36-38; J.D.B. DeBow, *Statistical View of the United States.... Being a Compendium of the Seventh Census...*(Washington, D.C.: A.O.P. Nicholson, 1854), 215, 253-55, 257; Joseph G. Kennedy, *Population of the United States in 1860, Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864). 507-8, 512.

The slave register of William Bolling and his heirs of Goochland County, Virginia, for example, offers just such information for analysis.⁵⁰ William Bolling's register is a particularly valuable document because of the long time period it details (1752 to 1860) and the numbers of mothers whose children's birth dates were recorded. The Bolling list includes 103 mothers who had 493 children (an additional six were reported as stillborn) born to during this 108-year period. Careful scrutiny of this document indicates that although the age at the mother's first birth did not change significantly, the time between the live births of slave children declined significantly. For the period 1800 to 1820, for example, the average time between slave births on the Bolling plantations was about thirty-three months. By the decade beginning in 1850, however, slave mothers were giving birth to live child approximately every twenty-two months. In other words, the average time between live births had decreased by one-third from 1820 to 1860.

While the information is less conclusive regarding the change in the average number of live children these women bore, it is clear that women in the last years of the antebellum era were having more children than those in the earlier decades. Within the ten-year period from 1850 to 1860 alone, the slave mothers on the Bolling plantations bore an average of four children. Significantly, this figure conservatively represents only one of the childbearing years of these mothers. When one analyzes the numbers of children that Bolling slave women had during the period 1820 to 1850 (which represents a more complete childbearing cycle), an average of five live births is calculated. Clearly, those slave women who were beginning to bear children at the end of the antebellum era demonstrated a greater potential for natural increase than those of earlier generations. That this demographic change came at a time when slave marriages and families were so threatened by substantial exportations of adult slaves of childbearing age speaks to the resolve of owners to encourage procreation among their slaves. In order to promote the rapid birth of slave children, slave masters not only offered material incentives and may have threatened those slaves who refused to cooperate, but they also usurped the slaves' decision as to whether or not to participate in monogamous marital relationships. Thus, some slaveholders forced slave women and men to have several sexual partners outside of their marriage. Elige Davisson of Richmond, for example, stated that he was married once before he became free, but his owner still brought "some more women to see" him. Davisson insisted that his master would not let him have "just one woman" but mandated that the young male slave have sexual relations with several other female slaves so that they would bear children.⁵¹ Such demands to participate in their owner's breeding schemes brought a great deal of pain and anger to the individual slaves and to the couples involved.

Undoubtedly, slave marriages varied in terms of quality, length, and ideals even in the most supportive environment. Most slaves wanted long-standing, loving, affectionate, monogamous relationships with their spouses. Yet, they could not expect that their partners would be able to protect them from some of the most violent and abusive aspects of slave life. Most could only hope that their spouses would understand the lack of choices they had with regard to labor, attention to domestic responsibilities, and to their relationships with whites. The inability of slave wives and husbands to actualize their ideals of gender differentiated behavior, even those which were obviously unrealistic given their positions as slaves, often was the source of marital discord.

Slave women with "abroad marriages" usually had no alternative but to take on the role of the central authority figure within their immediate families, especially as child rearers, while their husbands lived on separate plantations. In doing so, however, they challenged Western tradition concerning gender specific behavior and power in nineteenth-century households that slaves often respected. Consequently, matrifocal families were common among late antebellum Virginia slaves but were not always acceptable to the couples who comprised them. Since many slave women and men hoped to function in their families according to the proposed ideal of the larger Southern society, their inability to do so engendered resentment, frustration, and anger.

Thomas Harper, for example, a slave blacksmith in Alexandria, Virginia, decided to escape to Canada because he was not allowed to support his family. It was, he explained too "hard to see them in want and abused when he was not at liberty to aid or protect them."⁵² Another Virginia slave confessed that he traded stolen goods in order to provide material support for his wife and children. "There were, in our vicinity," he noted, "plenty of 'poor white folks,' as we contemptuously called them, whom we cordially despised, but with whom we carried on a regular

⁵⁰ William Bolling Slave Register, 1752-1865, Bolling Family Papers, VHS.

⁵¹ *Voices from Slavery*, p. 92.

⁵² William Still, ed., *Underground Railroad* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 411.

traffic at our master's expense."⁵³ Dangerfield Newby became so frustrated in his attempts to secure his family's freedom that he helped plan and execute the raid of John Brown on Harpers Ferry in 1859. His need to offer his wife and children the security of freedom was enhanced by his wife's constant appeal. "I want you to buy me as soon as possible," she wrote to him in August 1859. "I want you to buy me as soon as possible, for if you do not get me somebody else will.... Do all you can for me, which I have no doubt you will," she begged.⁵⁴ The blacksmith's desire to "protect" and "support" his family as well as Mr. and Mrs. Newby's feelings about his duty to provide the security of freedom to his family suggest that some slaves held ideals of manhood also popular in some European and African cultures.

Slave husbands sometimes imposed nearly impossible ideals of womanhood on their wives as well. Some were reluctant to commit themselves to women who did not meet their standards of beauty. Charles Grandy stated that slave men resented slaveholders who chose wives for them that were "ugly" instead of "purty." Ralph, a slave from Richmond, commented that when he first met his future wife (a free black), he thought that she "was one of the most beautiful of women." According to the Richmond bondsman, her beauty was one of the principal reasons that he "soon became madly in love."⁵⁵ Of course, no one wanted to marry someone as "ugly as sin," and certainly many slave women were physically attractive. Nevertheless, their harsh work routines, nutritionally deficient diets, poor material support, and limited access to medical attention robbed many slave women of their vitality and beauty when they were still young. Moreover, white men often reserved the most attractive slave women for themselves, refusing to let them marry slaves, or violated slave marriages whenever they chose to do so. Not surprisingly, ideals concerning female purity and marital chastity presented extreme challenges to slave couples.

The instances of white male sexual aggression toward married slave women created a great deal of tension and discord in the marital relationships of slaves. Although slave husbands theoretically understood the inability of their wives to protect themselves against the sexual overtures and attacks of white men, they resented and were angered by such occurrences. Their reactions were in response equally to their own sense of powerlessness to defend their wives and to a recognition of the physical and psychological pain their spouses experienced. When slave husbands did intervene, they suffered harsh retaliation—severe beatings, sometimes permanent separation from their family, or even murder. Many probably felt, as did Charles Grandy, who spoke of the murder of a male slave who tried to protect his wife from the advances of their overseer, that a "Nigger ain't got no chance."⁵⁶

Consequently, some slave husbands targeted their helpless wives to be recipients of their frustration, pain, guilt, and rage rather than the white men who attacked them. Regardless of whom the slaves struck out at, however, their responses had little effect on modifying the behavior of those white men who raped female slaves. "Marsters an' overseers use to make slaves dat wuz wid deir husbands git up, [and] do as they say," Israel Massie noted. "Send husbands out on de farm, milkin' cows or cuttin' wood. Den he gits in bed wid slave himself. Some women would fight an tussel. Others would be 'umble—feared of dat beatin.' What we saw, couldn't do nothing 'bout it.... My blood is bilin' now [at the] thoughts of dem times. Ef dey told dey husbands he wuz powerless."⁵⁷

Many slave women were ashamed that they had been victimized by their white masters and were afraid of the consequences for themselves, their families, and the children they might have conceived. They tried to conceal the sexual assault from their husbands. "When babies came," Massie went on to explain, "dey [white fathers] ain't exknowledge 'em. Treat dat baby like 'tothers—nuthing to him. Mother feard to tell 'cause she know'd what she'd git. Dat wuz de concealed part."⁵⁸ Some slave wives went to great lengths to keep the truth from their husbands, claiming that mulatto children actually belonged to their spouses. "Ole man,...stop stedin' [studying] so much foolishness," responded one frightened slave wife when her husband noted that their youngest child was very physically distinct from their other children.⁵⁹ She was able to end her husband's open suspicions by constructing a story, but few could hide the obvious.

⁵³ "A Slave's Story," *Putnam Monthly Magazine* 9 (June 1957): 617.

⁵⁴ John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1977), 118.

⁵⁵ *Negro in Virginia*, p. 84; "A Slave's Story," p. 617.

⁵⁶ Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 117

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Faced with such overwhelming problems, some slave couples responded in ways that further augmented the destruction of their marriages and families. Alcoholism, domestic violence, jealousy, and adultery were internal problems which sometimes plagued these relationships. More than a few slave couples voluntarily separated. Manfra and Dykstra's review of a survey of late antebellum slave couples who resided in the south of Virginia, for example, indicates that of those marriages terminated before general emancipation, 10.1 percent ended as a result of mutual consent and ~another 10.8 percent because of the desertion of a spouse.⁶⁰

Given the degradation of monogamous marriage relations among slaves, it is not surprising that some slaves had limited respect for the institution. Ralph (mentioned earlier) noted that when he first met his future wife, he realized that she was married and a mother but persisted in his pursuit of her. Explaining his behavior, he noted: And how can the slave be expected to observe the marriage vows? In most cases they make none—plight no troth—have a sort of understanding that their agreement shall continue until one or both choose to form some other tie. And even if wishing to continue faithful unto death, they know their master deems their vows null and void, if he chooses to separate them; and he often does without scruple, by selling one or both. When their superiors disregard their slaves' obligations, the slaves will think lightly of them, too; and this utter contempt of the whites for the sacredness of marriage amongst slaves has done more to demoralize and brutalize the slave than all the personal wrongs he suffers.... The *sentiment* that should exist in marriage is excluded or crushed by the necessity of their condition; and the tie becomes a mere *liaison*, founded upon the instinct of the brute.⁶¹

Perhaps Ralph's impressively erudite critique of slave marriages derived principally from his attempt to justify his own adulterous actions. Yet, his analysis of the marital commitment between slaves is suggestive of the demoralizing effect that slavery must have had on some couples. Ralph did not hesitate to ignore the bounds of propriety when he sought and succeeded in winning another man's wife as his own. "For a good while," the slave noted, "she might be said to have two husbands: but finally her first husband went...and Sally became my acknowledged wife."⁶²

Most slaves certainly respected the institution and believed that to interfere with the relations between a husband and a wife was wrong. Even Ralph felt that he was morally wrong in so doing. His inevitable guilt regarding the matter surfaced several years later. Trying to comprehend the reason for his wife's untimely death, the mourning slave concluded that he "deserved to lose her" because of the immoral way he had won her—"a just retribution and requital of her first husband's wrongs."⁶³

The forced separation of slave couples, of course, had the most devastating impact on slave marriages. Large numbers of loving commitments ended in this manner. When slaveholders separated husbands and wives by long distances, it was almost impossible for these couples to retain close ties to one another. The difficulty was a result of the emotional and sociosexual needs of adult slaves as well as of the insistence of their owners that they remain sexually active and thus naturally reproductive. Some masters expected these separated couples to form new relationships as soon as possible. Many did eventually remarry, but the pain and sense of loss that they felt must have been a source of continual anguish for them and their children, who had to adjust to the authority of stepparents and to their inclusion in stepfamilies.

When one Virginia "contraband" woman found her first husband in a refugee camp in 1864, she testified that the two, "threw [them]selves into each others arms and cried." The husband as well as the woman, however, had remarried since their forced separation. While his new wife looked on the touching scene of reunion with obvious jealousy, the older wife was disturbed for other reasons. Although she described her present husband as "very kind" and she was determined not to leave him, she had to admit that she could not be happy after seeing her first husband. The thought of the source of their permanent separation still angered and frustrated her, even though she claimed she was pleased with her present spouse. "White folk's a heap to answer for the way they've done to colored folks! So much they wont never *pray* it away!" she concluded in disgust.⁶⁴

The voice of this one ex-slave in condemning of those who purposefully destroyed slave marriages and families is no doubt representative of the voices of many who were similarly hurt. Their personal testimonies as well as the

⁶⁰ Manfra and Dykstra, "Serial Marriage," p. 32.

⁶¹ "A Slave's Story," p. 617.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid, pp. 617-18.

⁶⁴ Swint, ed. *Dear Ones at Home*, pp. 123-24.

plantation records of their owners document the destruction that came to many Virginia slave families during the last decades of the antebellum era. Involuntary separation and the dispersal of husbands and wives from the rest of their families, sexual abuse, material deprivation, and forced marriages were some of the tremendous problems faced by slave families. Domestic violence, color stratification, spousal abandonment, and adultery were some of the manifestations of the internal strife within black slave families and marriages which were caused in large measure by their oppressive living conditions.

Late antebellum Southern society was indeed a harsh environment within which slaves tried to establish and maintain successful families. Many were able to do so, yet others failed in sustain viable slave marriages and kin networks. The lives of Virginia slaves were too precarious to guarantee the complete and the constant success of any social institution, including marriage and the family. Consequently, the slave family emerged in the postbellum South as a viable but battered institution, threatened by new forms of economic and social oppression as well as the internal strife inherited from the previous era.

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