

## Slavery in America

When southerners referred to slavery as the "peculiar institution" they did not have in mind that it was odd or unusual. Slavery in the middle of the nineteenth century was indeed unusual, but what southerners meant was that slavery was the institution that identified them. It was what set them apart from other Americans. Generally, they were proud of that distinction. After all, in the end they went to war to defend their peculiar institution.

In 1850 slavery existed in the New World only in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Brazil, and the United States. But if slavery was unusual, it had not always been so. For over 300 years it had been a principal form of labor. Soon after the Spanish came to South America they enslaved the Indians, especially those in Mexico and Peru where the settled, urban civilizations of the Aztecs and the Incas made this easy and profitable. In time, however, enslavement of Indians was outlawed for religious reasons by the Spanish Crown. In place of Indian labor, the Spanish and the Portuguese in Brazil imported black people from Africa in ever-increasing numbers.

By the time the first English colonies were settled in North America in the early seventeenth century, black slavery was widespread throughout the Spanish and Portuguese possessions in the New World. It is not surprising, therefore, that the English colonists soon followed their example. The first slaves in Virginia and New England, as in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies, were Indians. But the importation of Africans did not lag far behind. In fact, the first Negroes were imported into Virginia in 1619, a year before the *Mayflower* dropped anchor in Massachusetts Bay. The large-scale importation and use of black slaves in the English colonies, however, did not occur until late in the seventeenth century. By then Indians were no longer held in slavery. When the Revolution broke out each of the thirteen colonies, though proclaiming their independence in the name of freedom, permitted slavery in law. They also counted slaves among their populations. Some colonies, it is true—Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia—made greater use of slave labor than the more northern ones. Indeed, in South Carolina slaves outnumbered the free white population. It was not until after the Revolution, however, that slavery began to wane in any of the English colonies. By the close of the eighteenth century the states north of Delaware had ended slavery, either at one stroke, as in Massachusetts, or gradually, as in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

This outline of the history of slavery before 1800 raises two questions. First, why was slavery introduced into the New World on such a wide scale when it was virtually extinct in the Europe from which the settlers came? The answer is that the newness of the land and the sparseness

of the Indian population meant that the labor needed to make a quick and substantial profit from the land was lacking. For if a planter (or a company) brought free people with him to work his land in America, these workers would not stay with him when they could quite easily obtain land for themselves. Land was cheap compared with labor. If a landowner was to work his acres he needed a supply of labor that could not desert him for independent employment. The answer arrived at by the English, as by the Spanish and Portuguese before them, was the enslavement of non-Europeans. It would have been difficult to enslave Spaniards or Portuguese or Englishmen. After all they were not slaves at home—and their freedom was protected by law. But it was not difficult to enslave strangers like Indians or Africans, who were also physically distinct from whites. By the same token, as the New World populations grew through emigration from Europe, the need for slave labor in some places fell or failed to grow. Thus in New England and New York, where agriculture was not as well suited to large-scale plantations as in Virginia and Maryland, slave labor was not widely employed. As a result, when anti-slavery sentiment arose after the Revolution, it was fairly easy to abolish slavery in those places where it was not important to the economy.

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### *Why Slavery Lingered On*

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The second question about the beginnings of slavery arises from the answer to the first. Why did slavery persist in the South while it was being abolished in the North? The answer involves more than the fact that tobacco made good use of slaves, though that is part of the answer. For by the end of the eighteenth century tobacco was no longer a highly profitable crop. Its market was stagnant and its return low. Indeed, many planters in Virginia and Maryland were already abandoning tobacco growing for wheat. Slaves, however, were not well suited to growing wheat. Grain crops did not have a long growing season, nor did they require the kind of close, if tedious, labor that made tobacco well suited to slavery—a form of labor that must have employment all year round if it is to be profitable. The fundamental reason why slavery persisted in the South into the nineteenth century was the development of a new crop that was more profitable and better suited to slave labor than tobacco.

That new crop was cotton. Its expansion in the South was the result not only of the presence of slaves, but of distant as well as local events. Cotton had been grown in America before 1800, but only in small amounts and in the coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia. Until the last quarter of the eighteenth century there was little demand for the white fiber. Then a series of mechanical

inventions in England made it possible to speed up and cheapen the cost of manufacturing cotton thread and textiles. The demand for raw cotton skyrocketed to such an extent that southerners raced to grow more cotton. There was one great difficulty, however. The only kind of cotton that could be grown in the inland or upland areas of the South was one in which the fiber clung tenaciously to the seeds. The separation process was time consuming and therefore costly. Even with slave labor, the American crop could not compete in price with some foreign sources of cotton which did not have this drawback. It was to meet this competition that Eli Whitney, a visiting Yankee, was begged by Georgia planters to put his brains to work to construct a machine that would cheaply remove the seeds from the fiber of upland cotton. In 1793 he produced a workable cotton gin and the cotton kingdom was born. Within thirty years cotton, the plantation, and black slavery had spread from the seaboard over the Appalachian Mountains, across the Mississippi River, and as far west as Texas.

Cotton, of course, was not the only crop cultivated by slave labor. Tobacco continued to be raised by slaves, as did rice, which had been grown in southern coastal areas even before the Revolution. When Louisiana was added to the Union in 1803, a sugar-growing industry developed there, making extensive use of slaves. And there were many other tasks to which slaves were put in the South. But the important thing is that it was the gin, cotton, and the English textile industry that made slavery the important institution in the South that it was by 1830.

The very fact that slavery was abolished in the North and in most of the remainder of the New World before 1850 suggests that it was not necessarily a profitable, much less a desirable, institution. Many men in the nineteenth century, as well as many historians since, have argued that slavery had become quite unprofitable and ought to have been abolished for economic as well as for moral reasons. Indeed, some historians have argued that because it was uneconomical, slavery would have died out naturally, without the intervention of the Civil War. The question of whether slavery was a profitable form of labor is thus most important in thinking about the significance of the conflict. For if slavery was unprofitable and therefore on the way to extinction, then the war must be viewed as an event without need or purpose and its loss of life and expenditure of treasure an unjustifiable calamity. It is worth looking then at slavery, first as an economic institution and a little later as a social institution.

Perhaps the single most important fact about southern slave society is that most white people did not own slaves. Moreover, slaves constituted no more than one-third of the total population of the region. Only about one-quarter of whites in the South owned slaves or were members of slave-owning families. This meant that most of the work was performed by white people. In some areas of the South, particularly in the Deep South, slaves outnumbered whites, but this was more the exception than the rule for the region as a whole. Only three states in 1860, for example, counted a slave majority and in none of those was the proportion above 60 per cent.

This pattern of population distribution was in marked contrast with that in other slave societies in the New World. In Brazil, Cuba, and Jamaica, for example, slaves outnumbered whites. The United States also differed from those other slave societies in that the number of slaves held by individual planters were, on the average, considerably smaller. In fact, in 1850 over half the slaveholders owned fewer than five slaves. Less than 1 per cent of slaveholders possessed 100 or more slaves. The romantic picture of an antebellum South in which there were dozens of plantations with thousands of slaves on them was simply not true. Fewer than half a dozen slave-owners held as many as a thousand slaves at the height of southern slave society.

Put in such terms, the distribution of slaveholdings seems to make slavery of minor importance to the economy of the South. But to draw that conclusion would be quite wrong. For if most slaveowners were only small holders, most of the slaves were actually held in groups more than adequate for plantation agriculture. More than half of all slaves were held in groups of twenty or more, a number well suited to a good-sized plantation. It was on the plantations, moreover, that the bulk of the cotton, rice, and sugar was grown, and these were the crops that earned the southern economy its profits and accumulated its capital.

Despite the acknowledged economic importance of the plantation, a sizable proportion of slaves was employed outside the plantation. Many were used on small farms just like a hired man on a northern farm, often working side by side with the master in the fields, planting tobacco or a little cotton as well as corn, potatoes, and other vegetables. These small farms with a few slaves were to be found all over the South, but particularly in areas where cotton was not easily grown, such as in parts of North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Arkansas. On such farms slaves performed a variety of tasks and sometimes ate with, as well as worked with, their owners.

Slaves were not confined to farming or unskilled work by any means. The large plantations, for example, often had highly skilled slaves to maintain the farm and other equipment, to make casks, construct houses, lay bricks, to carpenter and to perform the myriad of other jobs a large economic enterprise demanded. In the cities and towns of the South skilled slaves were common. They could be found in virtually every trade and craft, some very highly skilled. Slaves, for example, not only constructed the railroad lines in the South; they were also well represented among the engineers who drove the trains when the lines were completed. Richmond's flourishing tobacco manufacturing industry, the biggest in the nation, was largely manned by slaves. Similarly, the largest iron works in the South, the Tredegar Works (also in Richmond), was staffed by slaves. In coal mines and textile factories slaves were sometimes found working side by side with white workers. Occasionally a trusted slave would have free white workers under his command, as happened at one rather exceptional plantation in Mississippi, where the master's business was lumbering.

## Was Slavery Profitable?

The variety of occupations filled by slaves shows not only the importance of slavery in the southern economy. It helps to answer the question raised earlier, namely, was slavery a paying proposition? The traditional conception of slavery is that it was inefficient, mainly because it was coerced labor. In the nineteenth century that was the most common argument raised against it. Yet, as already mentioned, slave labor was quite capable of being used in a variety of tasks in competition with free white labor. Moreover, even on a plantation and in agricultural work there were ways of persuading the slave to work without always having recourse to the whip. Setting tasks for slaves on the understanding that when the job was completed the remaining time was their own, introduced an incentive into the system. Other rewards, too, were at the disposal of the overseer or master to induce slaves to work without resorting to physical punishment.

Another common argument against the efficiency of slavery was that it was inflexible. Once a master bought a slave the costs of maintenance became a drain on resources unless the master could find sufficient work for him to do the year round. Slaves could not be laid off, as a free worker might be, when the work slackened. Chronically poor workers or recalcitrant slaves could be sold, of course, but probably only at a loss. Actually, though, slavery was more flexible in practice than in theory. Slave-hiring was an important way by which slaveowners could receive a monetary return from a temporarily redundant slave without the costs of maintenance. At the same time, a man who wanted the labor of a slave for a limited period but did not want to use his capital to buy a slave—a young, strong field hand cost between \$1,500 and \$2,000—could hire another man's slave for six months or a year. Maintenance was then a charge against the hirer and not the owner, while the owner received a payment of \$100 or so as a return on his capital invested in the slave. Many of the railroads of the South were constructed by hired slaves, rented by the railroad companies from the planters along the right of way. Most of the slaves who worked in the Richmond tobacco factories were hired slaves.

The costs of maintaining less-productive slaves like children and old people ought not to be seen as an economic burden on the economy of the South. In the North, employers supported the young and the old, too, but only indirectly—by paying their workers sufficient wages to support their parents and children.

Although it is possible to show that slavery was more flexible in practice than it might seem in theory, that fact does not quite answer the question of whether slavery was profitable to the planters or the southern economy in general. It is still necessary to know whether the planters made sufficiently careful use of the slaves to gain a cash return commensurate with what they would have received if they had invested their capital in forms of economic activity other than the slave plantation. Some of

the most informed historians on slavery have contended that slaveowners were not realizing an adequate return. The evidence was that on the eve of the Civil War the price of slaves was so high compared with the price of cotton that a planter could not expect to make a profit. It was this argument, or variants of it, that made popular the view that the Civil War was an unnecessary blood-letting. If the North had simply waited and not agitated against slavery, so the argument ran, slavery would have simply ended of its own accord, killed off by its lack of profits.

More recently, however, other historians have advanced new evidence to suggest that the returns on slave labor were much better. For example, one historian calculated that the value of property in the South doubled between 1850 and 1860 while general prices remained about the same. Obviously, if slavery was not producing a profit it would be difficult to account for the doubling of land values in so short a period. Nor should the rising price of slaves be interpreted as a measure of the difficulty of producing a profit by using slaves to grow cotton, when cotton prices were failing to rise as rapidly. The high price of slaves was, rather, a measure of planters' expectations that if they bought more slaves they would be able to make even more money in the future. For if they did not expect to make a profit from slave labor they would not have bid up the price for slaves; without that demand for slaves the price would fall. Indeed, it has been shown that the return to the average planter in the South was about what he would have received on his capital if he had bought bonds in northern railroads or some other nonsouthern enterprise. One important element that was introduced into the discussion was the gain the planters obtained from the slaves' reproducing themselves. As every planter or slaveholder knew, slave children were worth \$100 at birth and each year increased their value. The cost of rearing slaves to maturity was relatively small.

The inclusion of the value of slave children as a gain to the planters was important in calculating profitability. It helped to explain why slavery was profitable even in areas that were declining in agricultural fertility, such as Virginia and South Carolina. At the time and since, many commentators noted that the new lands of Mississippi and Texas could produce cotton at less cost than the worn-out lands of the old seaboard states. In fact, a good part of the income of slaveholders in Virginia and Maryland came from selling slaves to the new states of the Deep South, where cotton production was expanding and flourishing. All the states of the South reared slaves to maturity, but because the upper South had a surplus the internal trade in slaves ran principally from those states to the Deep South. This movement of slaves within the South was a vital part of the system. It permitted the peculiar institution to survive, for after 1808 no more slaves could legally be imported from outside the United States. This dependence upon an *internal* supply of slaves for an expanding economy was unique among slave societies in the New World. As a result, the ending of importa-

ions did not threaten the continuation of slavery in the United States as it did in Brazil and Cuba. Slavery in the United States flourished, as never before, after the African slave trade was halted.

It may be thought that dependence upon rearing young slaves on the plantations would result in systematic breeding of slaves for the market. The facts, however, seem to be otherwise. Planters might point out, as some did when selling a female slave, that she had borne children, but there was a general reluctance on the part of planters to sell children away from their mother. It happened, to be sure, but the typical practice was for mothers to be sold with their children. Stories of slave-breeding plantations on which women far outnumbered men, who acted as studs, much as would occur on a stock-breeding ranch, have little basis in fact. The standard practice, instead, was to allow the slaves to pair off and live together as man and wife and simply await the natural consequences. Both the practice and the results were succinctly stated by a Virginia planter at the time. "No man is so inhuman as to breed and raise slaves, to sell off a certain proportion regularly, as a western drover does with his herds of cattle," he wrote. "But sooner or later the general result is the same. Sales may be made voluntarily, or by the sheriff—they may be made by the first owner, or delayed until the succession of heirs—or the misfortunes of being sold may fall on one parcel of slaves, instead of another: but all of these are but different ways of arriving at the same general and inevitable result. With plenty of wholesome though coarse food, and under such mild treatment as our slaves usually experience, they have every inducement and facility to increase their numbers with all possible rapidity, without any opposing check, either prudential, moral, or physical."

When all elements are considered, it seems clear that slavery was producing profits for slaveowners. Moreover, it also seems evident that the southern economy as a whole, so dependent upon slave labor, was an expanding one. Profits from cotton were being steadily plowed back into more slaves and more land, not because that was simply the old habit of southerners, but because that was the best use that could be made of their capital and profits. Indeed, it was this prosperous character that caused non-slaveholders to support the institution, even in the middle of the nineteenth century when world morality was shifting away from bondage as a way of exacting labor from men and women. To look at slavery only as an economic institution is not enough. It was always much more than that. It shaped the lives of white people, whether they owned slaves or not, just as it controlled and ordered the lives of black people.

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## *Slaves and the Law*

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Slavery was indisputably a matter of economics, but it was equally a relationship between human beings. This was particularly true in the antebellum South where virtually all slaves were native born and in daily personal contact with masters and their families. But the way slavery functioned as a social relationship often came into conflict with its economic aspect.

Perhaps this was most evident in the law. A slave was defined in law as chattel property, which meant personal property as distinguished from real estate or land. (Chairs, tables, horses, and clothing are examples of chattels under the law.) Those abolitionists who charged southerners with considering a black slave as merely a piece of property certainly had that part of the law to support them. But in both the law and in everyday practice, slaves were also viewed as human beings. They were held responsible for any crimes they might commit. They were tried in courts and punished for crimes like robbery, assault, and murder. Obviously no other kind of chattel property was held legally responsible for its acts. In their trials slaves were entitled to certain protections of the law, including the right to be represented by counsel in capital cases. In at least one case in Georgia, the conviction of a slave for murder was rejected by the appeal court because the slave's owner had not provided the slave with the services of a defense attorney.

Courts of the southern states clearly recognized that in law the slave was at once a person and a piece of property. As a court in Tennessee pointed out in 1846, "a slave is not in the condition of a horse or an ox. His liberty is restrained, it is true, and his owner controls his actions and claims his services. But he is made after the image of the Creator. He has mental capacities, and an immortal principle in his nature that constitutes him equal to his owner but for the accidental position in which fortune has placed him. The owner has acquired conventional rights to him, but the laws under which he is held as a slave have not and cannot extinguish his high-born nature nor deprive him of many rights which are inherent in man."

A Mississippi court went even further in emphasizing that slaves were human beings. In a case in 1821, in which a white defendant contended that killing a slave was not murder, the judge asserted that the life of a slave could not be taken with impunity. He may lack freedom, the judge conceded, but he is "still a human being and possesses all those rights, of which he is not deprived by the positive provisions of the law. By the provisions of our law, a slave may commit murder, and be punished with death," the judge pointed out. "Why then is it not murder to kill a slave? Can a mere chattel commit murder and be subjected to punishment?" he rhetorically asked. "Is not the slave a reasonable creature, is he not a human being, [and since] even the killing of a lunatic, an idiot,

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or even a child unborn, is murder, as much as the killing of a philosopher, . . . has not the slave as much reason as a lunatic, an idiot, or an unborn child?" The judge then answered his question in the affirmative, sentencing the white slayer of the black slave to death.

As these quotations from court decisions suggest, southern courts constantly wrestled with a contradiction: how to reconcile the slave's recognized humanity with his being at the same time the property of another. In fact, the more slavery came under attack from the North and from the spirit of the age, the more many southern jurists became concerned to ensure that the law protected black people from the enormous power of the master. In the eighteenth century the law had done little to hedge the slave about with the legal protections that have just been quoted. Laws requiring masters to feed their slaves properly, to house and clothe them adequately, and to refrain from brutal or cruel punishments were nineteenth century innovations. The growth of legal protections for slaves in the nineteenth century reflected the South's effort to keep slavery and yet make it fit the age's standard of humane behavior.

Southern appeal courts were anxious, too, that no Negro be held in slavery if there was any doubt about the legality of his or her status. It is true that the law presumed that a black was a slave unless proof in court or personal documents established his or her freedom. Yet hundreds of cases were brought before southern courts by Negro slaves protesting their illegal enslavement. Of the 675 such cases that reached the courts of appeal,

most half of the appellants were later declared to be legally free. (These cases highlighted a tendency for blacks to be pushed into slavery, for those slaves declared free by the courts must have been unjustly enslaved in the first place.)

Since in 1850 there were about 3.2 million slaves, the few hundred who won their freedom as a result of suits for freedom were insignificant. Generally the opportunities for a slave to escape his bondage through legal means were meager indeed. Some thousands did, of course. Each year, for example, hundreds of slaves were freed by their masters, for one reason or another. Sometimes it was because of a meritorious act, such as reporting a slave insurrection or for faithful service of a distinguished kind. Or sometimes simply because the master did not believe in slavery. Not infrequently a master might have an intensely personal reason to free a slave. The fact that there were more mulattoes proportionately among the free Negroes in the South than among the slaves suggests strongly that many planters were freeing their own offspring among the slaves, for under the law a child of a slave mother, regardless of the status of the father, was also a slave.

Slaves also obtained their freedom by purchase. What records exist on this means of escape indicate that perhaps several thousand black people obtained their freedom in this way. Denmark Vesey, who gave his name to one of the important slave conspiracies of the nineteenth century, purchased his freedom after winning a large sum of money in a lottery. Technically, under the law, all money acquired by a slave, whether earned or won, was the property of his owner. But most owners did not deprive their slaves of money they may have acquired. And many owners were prepared even to set a freedom price if the slaves could scrape it together. There are cases, too, of masters who set a price for freedom, took the money when the slave had accumulated it, only to refuse to live up to the agreement. Against this cruelty the slave had no recourse in the law.

Thousands of slaves may have managed to use the law in one fashion or another to escape from slavery. But on the whole the law and white society did not look favorably upon manumission. In fact, as the antebellum years wore on, southern states narrowed more and more the opportunities for freedom, usually out of fear that freed Negroes incited the slaves to revolt. The restrictions on manumission usually meant that masters could not free their slaves without an act of the legislature or under special circumstances. And even when manumission was finally accomplished the freed Negro was usually required to leave the state. Under such circumstances some slaves may well have preferred not to be freed, since it would mean leaving behind wife and children as well as friends and familiar surroundings. Considering the general unfriendliness of the law toward freedom, it is not surprising that in 1860, after over two centuries of slavery, there were only a quarter of a million free blacks in the South as against 4 million slaves. On the other hand, in Brazil, which began as a society in which slaves outnumbered whites, the number of free blacks in 1870 was about twice the number of slaves. Brazilian law and social attitudes were much more hospitable to freedom for blacks. Manumission was easy to achieve if the master desired to bestow it; few legal obstacles stood in his way as many often did in the United States.

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### *How Slavery Worked*

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The law of slavery, however, constituted only the bare "skeleton" of the system. The "flesh" on the institution was the day-to-day activities of masters and slaves. And here the character of the master could be controlling, whatever the law might say. The law might prohibit

excessive whipping or prescribe a minimum diet for slaves, but there were no government officers to police legal infractions. The isolation of the plantation, if nothing else, made such policing unrealistic. Consequently the lot of individual slaves varied greatly, depending upon the region in which they worked, or the crop, the season of the year, and the kind of master. Wealthy masters in established planting areas usually treated their slaves better than those who were opening new lands in Louisiana or Texas. For in virgin areas the slaves were often driven to get the land cleared, buildings constructed, crops planted, and profits made as soon as possible. Similarly, a master whose crop had failed the year before would not be able to feed and clothe his slaves as well as one whose crop had been sold at a good price. Other kinds of care, like medical service, would also vary according to the planter's disposition, income, or size of his slaveholding.

The degree of severity of labor required from slaves depended not only upon a particular master, or the newness of the land, but upon the crop as well. Slaves who worked in the rice areas of coastal Georgia and South Carolina, for example, undoubtedly worked harder at certain times of the year than slaves on cotton plantations in the same states. Growing rice involved heavy work, clearing the swampy land and keeping the draining ditches open. Moreover, the rice region was unhealthy for both blacks and whites because of malaria and yellow fever. Similarly, slaves working on the sugar plantations of Louisiana were regularly subjected to brutally long hours of hard work during the grinding season. At this time, the operation of the sugar mill could not be interrupted and the crushing of the cane and the boiling of the juice required constant attention. It also subjected the slaves to discomfort from the heat of the fires.

The character of the slaves' labor may have varied in different circumstances and places, but in the end it was always and everywhere the same. The purpose of a slave was work and no matter where or when a slave lived, his or her life was primarily taken up with labor. In the nineteenth century the standard work day for a free white worker in a northern city was between ten and twelve hours in a working week of six days. Most slaves worked twelve hours a day most of the year, with a somewhat longer day in the summer. It was not uncommon, however, for a master to give his slaves half a day off on Saturday as well as the whole day on Sunday. The half day on Saturday was largely consumed in taking care of the small plots that planters often provided their slaves for growing vegetables and other table items for themselves. Sometimes particularly enlightened planters would purchase their own slaves' produce for the table in the big house. Southern planters, it is worth noting, did not expect

their slaves to grow their own food, as the more demanding slave masters in Jamaica did. Both the law and the common practice of the South expected the master to feed, clothe, and house his slaves. Whatever the slave grew on his own was supplementary, not basic to his diet.

Generally masters were careful to instruct their overseers or managers to see that slaves were properly cared for. "The manager will frequently inspect the meals as they are brought by the cook," wrote one planter to his overseer in Louisiana, "to see that they have been properly prepared, and that vegetables be at all times served with the meat and bread. The manager will, every Sunday morning after breakfast, visit and inspect every quarter to see that the house and yards are kept clean and in order, and that families are dressed in clean clothes."

The clothes and food, as well as the housing provided for the slaves, were usually, even on the most favored plantations, of a simple or crude kind. Slaves might well be provided with meat, but it would be of poor quality, though they often supplemented it with game they trapped or shot, and with fish they caught on their own. Similarly, the corn meal or sweet potatoes and other vegetables supplied by the master would be varied by food from the slaves' gardens. Clothes were of the coarsest wool or cotton. Indeed, textile manufacturers in the North specialized in producing cheap "Negro cloth." Cheap shoes were also specially produced in the North for the slaves. The houses of slaves could vary from simple wooden shacks without anything but the ground for a floor and without windows, to rather comfortable, if small, cabins with windows, but no glass, and a wooden floor and fireplace. They were generally not large enough to have more than two rooms. Slave quarters were usually set in rows, behind the big house.

Although all slaves were alike in the eyes of the law, in practice they differed greatly, as masters quickly recognized. On the large plantation the most obvious division was between house slaves and field hands. But on most farms the number of slaves was rarely large enough to make that a significant distinction. Some were recognized for special skills, or for their high intelligence, or easy deference. Where there were house servants, they usually enjoyed a somewhat better standard of living than the field hands if only because their close association with the whites demanded that they present a more attractive appearance. They were also in a position to help themselves or simply steal some of the food and other supplies of the masters. They brought back to the slave quarters, too, stories of life among the whites and of activities beyond the plantation. Masters often gave the impression to visitors that their black servants understood nothing and were without resentments or feelings. But the more intelligent masters knew full well that their every activity was witnessed by impassive eyes and almost their every word overheard by the ever-present servants.

Some domestics were integral parts of the master's household. This was especially true of black women who might act as wet nurses of white children at birth and then continue to rear them in subsequent years. The warmth of intimate human contact over the years could not help but forge a connection that, at times at least, transcended the barriers of status and color. One Alabama mistress wrote at the death of a black slave who had been her children's nurse, "when I saw that Death had the mastery, I laid my hands over her eyes, and in tears and fervor prayed that God would cause us to meet in happiness in another world. I knew, at that solemn moment, that Color made no difference, but that her life would have been as precious, if I could have saved it, as if she had been white as snow." But relations of such warmth could be encountered side by side with the coldness usually associated with the relationship between master and slave. James H. Hammond, a large planter in South Carolina, could mourn the death of his black gardener as a "patriarch" and "one of the best of men," but the deaths of two other slaves in the same year brought forth the comment: "Neither a serious loss. One valuable mule has also died."

Among the white and black children in particular it was possible for the human side to override the economic—at least for a while. Frederick Douglass, who was not only a runaway slave, but a major figure in the antislavery movement, wrote that as a child "it was a long time before I knew myself to be a slave. . . . The first seven or eight years of a slave-boy's life," he went on, "are about as full of sweet content as those of the most favored and petted white children of the slaveholder. . . ." But the awakening could be abrupt and cruel. Another slave narrative described the moment of truth. "When I began to work, I discovered the difference between myself and my master's white children," wrote Lunsford Lane. "They began to order me about, and were told to do so by my master and mistress. . . . Indeed all things now made me feel, what I had before known only in words, that *I was a slave.*"

Northerners were often struck by the intimacy between blacks and whites under slavery. Frederick L. Olmsted, a northern traveler in the antebellum South, tells of being both surprised and disgusted to see a master's son, returning home from college, being greeted with a kiss from a black domestic as he stepped off the steamboat. Northerners generally lacked that intimate association and familiarity with blacks that made it possible for southern whites to see them as living human beings as well as slaves. It is not without significance, either, that most masters preferred to refer to their slaves as "Negroes" or "our people." Sometimes a slave could play upon this intimacy between slave and master to secure a favor or prevent his family from being broken up.

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## A System Based on Force

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For all the potential and actual paternalism in slavery, however, at bottom it was a system of power. At its root lay force. The most common form that coercion took was whipping. It was usually done by either white overseer or black driver, using a three-foot-long piece of rawhide, one inch thick at the butt and tapering to a point. (In Brazil a wooden paddle with holes drilled through the surface was often used, too; the holes increased the sting and with enough application could draw blood.) Planters often specified the maximum number of permissible lashes, twenty to thirty being usual and fifty not rare. Some planters tried to avoid whipping their slaves, but few succeeded, if only because an overseer often demanded it to maintain his authority. "Had to whip my Man Willis for insolence to the overseer," wrote one Tennessee slaveowner. "This I done [sic] with much regret as he was never whipped before." For those slaveowners too squeamish to whip their own slaves, or who did not have an overseer or driver to do it for them, the town might provide a public whipping place—a measure in itself of the importance the society placed upon the proper subordination of slaves. "Slavebreakers" were also available. They were men whose job it was to subdue recalcitrant slaves by main force. In his autobiography Douglass tells of his encounter with a slavebreaker. In this case the breaker failed, but Douglass was no more a typical slave than he was a typical man. Whippings were usually carried out in the presence of the other slaves, for the purpose was not only to punish a particular slave, but to deter others from the same behavior. The system could not function if force had to be applied continuously so the aim was always to instill the master's will in the slaves.

Whipping may have been the most common form of punishment, but it was certainly not the only form nor the most severe. Theodore Weld compiled an abolitionist tract, *Slavery As It Is*, in which were reprinted over a thousand examples of extreme violence against slaves. Extraordinary as the instances of deliberate malnutrition, hanging, maiming, mutilation, and torture may have been, their validity is hardly in question for they were all copied from southern newspapers.

At the time and since, the argument has been made that examples of burning slaves, of burying them alive, or starving them could not have been other than rare because slaves were, after all, valuable property. And to a certain extent that check on the violence of the master or the overseer was effective. But even in modern society it has been necessary to enact laws against the abuse by parents of their own children and against the abuse of animals by their owners. Slavery, after all, was a system wherein the power of the master was almost unlimited, at least in moments of excitement or passion, regardless of the controls that the law or public opinion sought to impose. In fact, the very existence of laws limiting the kinds and degree of punishments that could be inflicted on a slave suggests that masters were in the habit of exceeding

reasonable limits. "To manage negroes without the exercise of too much passion," wrote one master to his sons, "is next to an impossibility. I would therefore put you on your guard, lest their provocations should on such occasions transport you beyond the limits of decency and Christian morality." Even a kindhearted mistress could lose control. "I feel badly," wrote a woman in her diary, "got very angry and whipped Lavinia. O! for government over my temper." In the end, the principal check on the master was the opinion of his neighbors and friends, which usually frowned on mistreatment, but public opinion rarely did more than that to protect the mistreated slave. Fortunately, brutality and cruelty were not the rule.

Although slavery was hardly a moral institution, the masters did have an interest in the existence of the slave family. From the pairing off of the sexes came new slaves. Slaves themselves were well aware of the advantages that accrued to the master. Fanny Kemble, the English actress who was married to a Georgia planter, tells of Negroes pointing to slave children and exclaiming: "Look missus! little niggers for you and massa; plenty little niggers for you and little missus." Some masters even went so far as to impose their morality on their slaves. One planter instructed his overseer that "stealing, lying, adultery, fornication, profane language, fighting and quarrelling must be invariably punished." Another master tried to regulate the marital life of his slaves by holding divorce and marriage courts. "Had a trial of Divorce and Adultery cases," wrote a planter in his diary in 1840. "Flogged Joe Goodwyn and ordered him to go back to his wife. Ditto Gabriel and Molly and ordered them to come together again. Separated Moses and Anny finally and flogged Tom Kollock . . . [for] interfering with Maggy Campbell, Sullivan's wife." From this pairing off of the sexes, masters obtained more than merely the salving of their Christian consciences. Marriage between slaves and the subsequent offspring gave the male slave a stake in the plantation. He was less likely to run away or even to resist the system since he had given hostages to docility by taking a wife and producing children. It is not accidental that runaway slaves were most often male—that is, less attached to children than a mother would be—and usually young—not yet paired off with a woman or the father of children.

Since the relationship of master to slave was between a person with power and one without, it is not surprising that sexual exploitation of slave women by white men was a recognized abuse under slavery. Neither the black husband nor the woman herself could effectively stand against a determined planter, his son, or an overseer who sought her sexual favors. That the census of 1860 counted half a million mulattoes in the South was a concrete measure of the sexual liaisons that slavery permitted without actually encouraging.

It would not be accurate to see all sexual relations between black slaves and free whites as the result of

violence and coercion. Not all of these relationships across the color line were between white men and black women. A white man's divorce petition in Virginia in 1835, for example, complained that his wife had "lived for the last six or seven years and continues to live in open adultery with a negro man." Moreover, there are too many examples in court records of white men leaving money or other property to beloved black women to describe the relationships as always violent or coercive. Furthermore, as often happens outside slavery, and unrelated to the question of blacks and whites, some slave women undoubtedly found sexual relations with the master a means of improving status or self-esteem. Power, in short, corrupts not only its wielders, but those who lack it as well.

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### *Comparisons With Harsher Regimes*

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The sexual exploitation of slave women was a favorite indictment of slavery by abolitionists, and raises the question of the harshness of American slavery compared with other slave systems. On one level, of course, it is fatuous to talk about different degrees of harshness. All slavery was harsh, subjecting people to the almost unlimited power of others. Yet it is worth making comparisons between slave practices in the United States and other areas of the New World if only because contemporaries and more recent historians have done so. Moreover, it provides a historical measure of the character of slavery in the United States. One comparison has already been made in looking at the opportunities for manumission.

In comparing the physical burden of slavery it is perhaps worth noting that some forms of ill-treatment in Brazil were very rare or entirely absent in the United States. It was a common practice for masters in Brazil to turn out old and sick slaves to fend for themselves since they were incapable of working any longer. This practice, against which laws were passed and complaints were lodged, was almost unknown in the United States. Even the abolitionists, who understandably sought out every evil that slavery produced, did not levy this charge against southerners. Brazilian slaveholders also widely used slave women as prostitutes. This was not simply the sexual exploitation of a female slave by a master or another white man; rather it was the deliberate employment by an owner of a female slave as a full-time prostitute. It was a means of obtaining income from her. Again, there is only a rare case or two of this in the United States. Finally, the third class of cruel practice in Brazilian slavery for which there is no evidence of comparable behavior among southern slaveholders, is that of requiring slaves to wear metallic masks to keep them from drinking liquor or eating clay. Pictures of slaves wearing masks appeared commonly in travel accounts of Brazil.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence that the physical treatment of slaves in the United States was the mildest in the New World is that only in the United States was it possible to maintain and augment the slave population by natural increase. In all the other areas of the New World, fresh importations from Africa were necessary to keep up, much less increase, the slave population. In the United States, as noted already, the slave trade from Africa was closed quite effectively in 1808. The very fact that Brazilian and other slave societies could not maintain their slave populations by natural increase suggests that they were subjecting them to more rigorous and harsh conditions than slave masters in the United States. Brazilians, for example, thought that Africans simply did not reproduce in captivity, so low was the birth rate among slaves in Brazil. Probably the principal reason southern slaveholders treated their slaves less harshly than Brazilians or Jamaicans did is not that they were more moral, but because they had to do so if the slaves were to reproduce themselves and thus provide a sufficient number to keep the system going.

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### *Native Culture Destroyed*

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The psychological and social impact of slavery upon black people began early; it began in Africa with the destruction of the slaves' African culture. There was nothing necessarily deliberate about that destruction, but that did not make it any less shattering. Nor should it be forgotten that the enslavement of millions of Africans was a product of African as well as European cupidity. White men had little direct access to potential slaves in Africa. It was always necessary for them to trade with Africans for the slaves that the New World's exploitation required. Once the economic relationship between European and African had been established, African traders were wedded to the nefarious practice by their increasing dependence upon goods from Europe. Hence they continued to seek out in wars and raids their fellow Africans to satisfy the unending demand for labor in the New World. The most recent estimates place the number of Africans ripped from their homeland and transplanted to the New World at around 9.5 million. Most of this number went to Brazil and the Caribbean; less than 5 per cent were actually imported into the continental English colonies that became the United States. (Today about 31 per cent of the colored people in the Western Hemisphere live in the United States.)

The great majority of the slaves that were carried to the English colonies in North America came from West Africa. Yet despite the limited area of Africa from which they came, their culture and character differed greatly. Thus the erosion of the Africans' native culture began as soon as they were placed in the hold of the slave ship that

would take them to the New World. For the slave was thrown among a great variety of other Africans who neither spoke his language nor knew his customs. This mixing of Africans continued once the ship landed, sometimes by deliberate design of masters who sought to prevent conspiracies by making it difficult for slaves to communicate with one another.

The mixing of African nations, however, was a relatively minor cause for the slaves' loss of their native culture. More important was the fact that the society into which the blacks came was overwhelmingly European. The English colonies, unlike those in Brazil or the Caribbean islands, were relatively thickly settled by white families. Thus when the slaves were introduced they found themselves surrounded by English culture, and under the compulsion of slavery they had no choice but to learn the new language, abandon their old customs, and take up the white Englishman's ways. This submersion of Africans in a sea of white Europeans did not occur in Brazil, Jamaica, Cuba, or the other important slave societies in the New World. There blacks usually outnumbered the whites, thus permitting Africans to continue in some fashion their African culture. This difference was reinforced by the fact that importations from Africa were stopped in the United States in 1808 while in Brazil and Cuba Africans continued to arrive until the middle of the century. In short, Africans, fresh from their homeland, came into Brazil and Cuba not only in greater proportion than into English America—they also continued to come for a longer time. It is not surprising, therefore, that in Brazil, Cuba, and Jamaica (the last of which was also an English colony) African dances, songs, religious customs, and even African languages persisted much longer than in the United States. It is true that modern scholars have discovered by diligent searches in the coastal areas of South Carolina, where slaves made up as much as 80 per cent of the antebellum population, African words and certain burial and artistic customs that seem to be indisputably African in origin. But in Brazil the search does not have to be diligent at all. Even inexperienced visitors can detect the institutional, artistic, and linguistic Africanisms still present in the life of black Brazilians, particularly in the northeast, where the slaves were concentrated. Indeed, black people moved across the South Atlantic between Bahia in Brazil and West Africa in both directions as late as the early twentieth century, some twenty years after the abolition of Brazilian slavery.

More striking evidence of the slaves' African influence on America can be seen in the ways in which Negroes have affected American culture. Jazz music is well recognized as not only one of the Negro's contributions to American culture, but as being also of African derivation. Musicologists generally agree that jazz goes back to Africa for its rhythm and syncopation. The food of the southern states also seems to have been strongly influenced

by African slaves. The emphasis upon frying and the use of okra, yams, and rice all point to the influence of African cooks on the cuisine of Englishmen in America. At least one Brazilian scholar has commented on the similarity between the cuisine of northeastern Brazil, where black slaves predominated, and that of South Carolina, where the predominance of blacks stretches back to the colonial era. Yet when measured against the African survivals in places like Brazil or Jamaica, the Africanisms still to be found in the United States pale into insignificance. That insignificance is testimony once again to the basic fact that in the United States the first measure of the impact of slavery upon Negroes was that they were effectively stripped of their African culture.

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### *Black Community Life*

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Africans may have lost their cultural heritage under American slavery, but that did not mean they failed to develop their own communities. Some historians, it is true, have argued that one of the consequences of slavery in North America was that blacks became irresponsible, even infantile "Sambos," and that this development was perhaps the most striking and devastating consequence of chattel slavery in the United States. And it is true that some slaves often identified with the will of the master, as the master intended. It was not unusual, for example, for slaves in speaking to other slaves to take pride in their master's wealth and status, or even more grotesque, to take pride in the fact that one slave commanded a higher price than another. Slaves spoke, too, of "po' white trash" or "po' buckra" in referring to nonslaveholding whites, thus taking pride in being part of their master's property. Perhaps the most dramatic example of slaves' adopting the sanctions of slavery was when a slave revealed to his master the plot of a revolt or warned a mistress of another slave's plan to run away. In fact, a significant number of slave revolts were nipped in the bud because faithful slaves gave them away. At least one slave, after he had escaped to freedom, revealed how much his thinking had been conditioned by his status. After describing how he decided to run away, he went on to tell how he looked back from afar toward the plantation; he saw his mistress calling after him. "I hid in the woods, I could not realize it," he recollected. "I sat down on a stump and said to myself, 'isn't this a dream?' I could not realize that I had done such a thing as to run away—it seemed so low. I—that had always been trusted, and had served faithfully—to be a runaway at last."

Masters may have sought to instill their interests in the slave, but the great majority of slaves were far from incomplete human beings or compliant creatures of their masters, whatever they might have seemed to be when playing their assigned roles in the presence of white people. Even the slave who was astonished that he could finally run away, did in fact make the break. Outside the

orbit of the master, slaves could be themselves and create for themselves a community life that, among other things, enabled them to survive. It was the endurance of the Negro people under the weight of slavery that is the central achievement.

The slave community on a large plantation was a complex system of relationships. It was made up of a variety of black folk, young and old, wise and foolish, reckless and cautious, active and somnolent, just like any other community. There were natural leaders like the conjure woman, who could work cures for illness or break up

love affairs through magic. There was the preacher, who knew his Bible and could use it to soften the rigors of slavery for his flock, or, as in the case of the preacher and rebel Nat Turner, use it to arouse his people to discontent and rebellion. The cook in the big house often served as the figure who linked white and black and thus stood as a preeminent adviser on all kinds of matters in the community of the slave quarters. Then there were the special occasions around which much black life surged: Christmas, New Year, funerals, and weddings. On these occasions presents were often dispensed by the master and the slaves carried on their own celebrations with music, dancing, gambling, and games. Along with fishing, hunting served as recreation as well as a way of supplementing diet. Marriages might not be binding in law, but on many plantations the marriage of slaves called for a celebration by both slaves and white folks.

Probably no aspect of slave life, however, was more fundamental to the black community than religion. Technically Christian, the religion of the slaves was suffused with their own purposes and with touches from Africa. The "ring shout"—a form of singing, clapping, and dancing that was an integral part of worship on many plantations—seems to have had strong connections with West African customs. The reminiscences of former slaves, long after emancipation, also make evident that their religion was their own and a community-building thing as well as a way of worshipping God. "Us niggers used to have a prayin' ground down in the hollow," recalled one former slave, "and sometimes we come out of the field, between eleven and twelve at night, scorchin' and burnin' up with nothin' to eat, and we wants to ask the good Lawd to have mercy. We put grease in a snuff pan or bottle and make a lamp. We takes a pine torch, too, and goes down to the hollow to pray. Some gits so joyous they starts to holler loud and we has to stop up they mouth. I see niggers get so full of the Lawd and so happy they draps unconscious."

The life of the slave, in short, was not limited to labor or to being under the watchful eye of whites. In fact, one can surmise that it was the opportunity to escape the white eye that made it possible for Negroes to endure. For in the quarters they could be themselves, make fun of the whites, construct their own lives and relationships, worship in their own ways, and replenish their sense of humor and zest for life.

Perhaps the best witness to the truth that slavery did not make Sambos or dependent people out of slaves is to observe the independent and often self-confident way as behaved once the legal bonds of slavery were opened. Such a historic moment can be glimpsed in an excerpt from the diary of a Mississippian who commented on his father's slaves as they made the transition to freedom. At the end of 1865, soon after slavery was ended by the Union Army, the Reverend Samuel Agnew wrote in his diary of the arrangements that his father tried to make

with his former slaves. The elder Agnew was trying to sign them up to work on his plantation for the coming year. The equality of the bargaining between black and white is noteworthy. On Christmas Day, Agnew wrote, "the negroes came up this morning for their annual settlement. Pa paid them their part of the tenth of the proceeds of the cotton . . . The negroes talked of the plans for another year. Pa told them whoever he hired would have to work the whole year and do whatever he told them. The negroes were willing to work in the crop, but no more. They are disinclined to hire their whole time at all—and went away without making a trade. They have exalted ideas," Agnew concluded. By the beginning of January, his father had failed to make any arrangements that were mutually satisfactory to former owner and former slaves. "Time changes plans and opinions," commented the son. "Our negroes are all gone now. The negro yard is silent and dark."

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### *The Disastrous Effects of the System*

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To point out that few slaves were Sambos is not the same as saying that slavery had no effect upon blacks. The effect was particularly noticeable after emancipation, for the peculiar institution had provided no preparation for life in freedom. Moreover it was a severe handicap in that the association between race and slavery made an indelible impression on whites. Accustomed to seeing blacks only as slaves, and often as fawning and irresponsible dependents at that, whites continued to view Negroes after emancipation in the same way and with the same low expectations for them. Whatever the deep historical and psychological causes for racial prejudice may be, surely they were reinforced by the simple but portentous fact that only Negroes were held in the degraded status of slaves.

White southerners in the nineteenth century and some historians since have called slavery a school for conditioning Africans to American civilization. If it was a school it was one from which few slaves graduated and none as a matter of course. Therefore, from the standpoint of Negroes as free people in American society, slavery was

activity were measures of a true American, slavery inculcated the very opposite values in Negroes. They were expected to be docile, dependent, unaggressive, and satisfied with routine and established ways of doing things. Some planters may have tried to create families in the Victorian model among their slaves, but the majority did little about it. The sanctity of the family, so highly prized by white Victorians, received no support from slavery. Slave families could be, and were, disrupted by the sale of one or more partners. Marriage between slaves had no legal basis, though if sanctified by a minister or priest it was viewed as a fully Christian marriage—as a marriage between whites would have been. Most slaves, however, were not married by any religious ceremony. As one slave recalled many years later, "When I got married I jumped a broomstick. To git unmarried, all you had to do was to jump backwards over the same broomstick."

Although the whole thrust of slavery was contrary to the values that white Americans identified with, slaves managed to overcome this drawback to an amazing degree. Among slaves, the family was more firmly rooted than the weak supports from the system would lead one to expect. For when slavery ended, the ties of family caused many a slave to seek out relatives who had been sold away or who had been separated by the war. Many years after emancipation old slaves could still clearly recall the network of relationships and kin during slavery. Thousands of slave couples came to the Freedman's Bureau after the Civil War for marriage certificates, testifying that their relationship within slavery may have been without legal sanction, but it was nonetheless enduring. Certainly the slave family was more common in the American South than it was in Brazil. There, most slaves had no mates at all because a disproportionate number of males were brought in each year, leaving the majority of them without mates. To that extent, at least, the slave family was more firmly based in the United States than in Brazil. But even with that qualification, it is fair to say that the American slave family was a fragile institution. It made no place for the father at all, since the institutional father was the master, who provided housing and food, not the black man who was the biological father of the slave children and the mate of the black mother. What is remarkable about the slave family is that it persisted even though the system failed to acknowledge the father as breadwinner. When newly freed blacks signed contracts for work with their former masters, it was the father who signed for the whole family, it being recognized that he was the head.

*Slave Attitudes to Slavery*

implicit in what has been said up to now is that blacks endured slavery, but were hardly content with it. Certainly this is the conclusion that emerges from the few sources from blacks themselves, principally the narratives written by runaway slaves or the reminiscences of Negroes many years after emancipation. But the response during slavery of the majority of slaves to their lot is not easy to ascertain if only because slaves necessarily leave few records. Nor do the number of runaways or slave revolts reveal much about their feelings towards slavery. It is true that the white South was very anxious about the encouragement to running away given by the so called Underground Railroad and the agitation of northern abolitionists. But the truth of the matter is that very few slaves actually ran away. The highest number estimated is about 60,000 over a period of thirty years. But this number must be seen against a total of 4 million slaves in 1860. In that context the figure is small indeed. The same point can be made about slave revolts, the number of which has been placed at 250 in the course of two centuries. The area of the South however, is enormous and the definition of a revolt is only ten slaves. Moreover, many of these so-called revolts were no more than plots that never matured into outbreaks. Indeed, of the three best-known slave revolts in the nineteenth century, that of Gabriel Prosser in 1800, Denmark Vesey in 1822, and Nat Turner in 1831, only the last was an actual revolt. The other two were plots that never came to a head. The Stono revolt of 1739 in colonial South Carolina was no more successful than Turner's, for it, too, was suppressed with much bloodshed.

Neither runaways nor uprisings are an adequate measure of how blacks felt about slavery. For one thing, successfully running away or organizing an uprising was extremely difficult to accomplish in the United States. In places like Jamaica or Brazil the number of successful runaways was much greater, it is true. In Jamaica, for example, escaped slaves established themselves permanently as a separate community, signing a treaty with the British and promising, in return, to send back any new fugitive slaves that might reach them in the future. In Brazil the most famous *quilombo* or community of escaped slaves was that of Palmares. It endured for two generations in the depths of the Pernambuco country and at its height contained 20,000 inhabitants, all escaped slaves or the descendants of such. It is significant, however, that both Brazil and Jamaica are semi-tropical in climate, a fact that permitted escaped slaves to live more easily off the country and to escape detection. In North America it was difficult to survive in the woods, undetected, through winters, even in Alabama or Georgia. Moreover, in the United States white settlement was much denser, and the possibility of being able to find a hideaway without running into whites or coming under attack from them was much more difficult.

Some historians have emphasized the greater number of slave revolts that occurred in Brazil compared with the United States. But a close comparison shows that the number of revolts in Brazil was not much more significant than it was in the United States. For one thing, what is often spoken of as slave rebellions in Brazil turn out to be *quilombos* like that of Palmares. And even the series of quite large slave rebellions that broke out in the city of Bahia between 1800 and 1835 were quite unusual. There is no other such series of revolts in the almost 400-year history of slavery in Brazil. Those revolts, instead, seem to be closely related to rather special circumstances. In Bahia during those thirty-five years there seems to have been a concentration of slaves from warlike, aggressive African nations like the Yoruba and Hausa. These Africans were not only aggressive; they had leaders who were exceptional in that they were united by a common religion, Islam, and were able to communicate since they were literate. The spectacular revolts in Bahia were the product of circumstances that had not occurred before and would not again. They do not support the contention that in other slave societies revolts were characteristically more frequent than in the United States.

What is learned from the paucity of slave rebellions is not how the blacks felt about slavery, but rather how whites have felt about it. Liberal historians have sought out examples of rebellion and runaways in order to show that blacks were opposed to their enslavement. One reason they have felt compelled to do so is because historians who argued that slavery was in fact benign have used the absence of slave revolts as a measure of black contentment under slavery. Both interpretations of the facts miss the main point. Slave revolts everywhere, whether in nineteenth-century United States with black slaves or in ancient Rome with white slaves, were rare. And one reason they were rare is that they were everywhere repressed, usually with violence and bloodshed. (Only in Haiti were the slaves able to rise up and overthrow their white rulers.) Given the nature of American society in the nineteenth century, with a predominantly white population fortified with enormous military power, a slave uprising came close to mass suicide. And in fact that is what virtually every revolt turned out to be. It is highly unrealistic and romantic to seek out revolts among slaves as a measure of black discontent. Rather, such revolts reflect the foolhardiness of the rebels, hardly the characteristic of a people who managed to survive the rigors of three centuries of slavery.

The force of the argument that slave revolts, or even runaways, are not a good measure of Negro reaction to slavery is brought home when consideration is given to what slaves did when resistance to the system was no longer fraught with impossible odds. During the Civil War, as the Union armies penetrated the southern states, slaves flocked to the Union lines, seeking their freedom. Before the war was over, almost 200,000 former slaves had enlisted in the armed forces to help end slavery.