Dismantling of paternalism: Southern white slaveholding women's and slaves' responses to slavery during the Civil War

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The Dismantling of Paternalism:
Southern White Slaveholding Women's
and
Slaves' Responses to Slavery
During the Civil War

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The Dismantling of Paternalism: Southern Slaveholding Women's and Slaves' Responses to Slavery During the Civil War

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This paper examines the responses of southern slaveholding women's and ex-slaves' reactions to paternalism during the Civil War. Paternalism held that both women and slaves were the dependents of southern white men. In this dependent role southern mistresses and slaves were expected to defer to the authority of white men. When the Civil War broke out in 1861 southern paternalist ideals were put to their greatest test. The absence of white men, many of whom fought in Confederate armies, created new opportunities for southern white slaveholding women. Southern white women found themselves in new positions of power within the home and without. For many this meant assuming the role of master on the family plantation. By assuming the position of master over their slaves the diaries and letters of the mistresses included in this study show that slaveholding women upheld paternalist ideals.

Southern blacks, however, chose to challenge paternalism directly. The war allowed slaves the opportunity to more openly voice their displeasure with southern institutions. Indeed, blacks residing in areas close to the conflict reported overt acts of defiance, such as running away or violence against whites as frequent occurrences during the conflict. Slaves residing in areas far removed from the conflict, however, reported fewer overt acts of defiance against whites, theirs was a more subtle and covert form of resistance. This pattern suggests that the war gave southern blacks a medium in which to express their disenchantment with paternalist ideals, a disenchantment southern mistresses' chose not express.
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Introduction

By 1861, paternalism defined the South’s internal structure, and was used as a justification for its social stratification. Paternalism placed southern white males at the head of the southern family, serving as its protectors, providers, and punishers. The patriarch’s family included both the slaveholders’ biological family and slave members; indeed, slaves were considered part of the slaveholder’s extended family.

Within the context of the extended family, paternalism served a dual purpose. First, it relegated women to a subordinate status in relation to white men. In a series of convincing essays, several historians have delineated the essence of this justification. The southern mistress was defined as pious, subordinate, meek, and fragile. White women’s proper place was in the home raising and caring for the master’s children. In return white males were responsible for maintaining the economic and social status and integrity of southern mistresses.¹

Second, paternalism justified the institution of slavery. Slaves, according to paternalism’s adherents, were child-like and incapable of providing for themselves. Paternalists believed, therefore, that slavery conjoined master and slave in a mutually beneficial economic arrangement; slaves provided a labor force, while masters assumed responsibility for slave care and maintenance. Viewing slaves as children also allowed

southern white men to escape moral responsibility for the ownership of other humans.

According to this view, slaves needed the oversight of benevolent masters to ensure their proper care because they could not care for themselves. "Uncivilized" and "child-like" blacks also justified the use of punishment to curb unwanted behaviors. It was believed that slaves understood and adhered to these definitions. Indeed, whites believed slaves loved their owners.²

This paper examines how the Civil War affected both southern mistresses' and slaves’ relation to paternalist ideals; and it is divided into two sections. The first part examines how the war changed southern mistresses’ roles within plantation society. The absence of white males, many of whom fought in Confederate armies, created new opportunities for southern white slaveholding women. Southern white women found themselves in new positions of power, both within the home and outside of it. The patriarchs’ absence left some mistresses in charge of family plantations. Mistresses were suddenly expected to maintain the plantations’ day to day operations until the men returned. Others chose to leave the home’s protection to join the Confederate nursing corps. These new opportunities also changed mistresses’ relations with their slaves. Southern slaveholding women had to assume the paternalists’ role of punisher and provider for their slaves, albeit with varying degrees of success. In these new roles and expectations mistresses had the opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with paternalism. They did not. Instead, by attempting to fulfill the masters’ function, mistresses inadvertently upheld

paternalist ideals. The war did not enhance nor incite mistresses' hatred of paternalism, it only changed their relations within it.

The second part of this paper examines how the Civil War irrevocably changed the relations of master and slave. Using the WPA slave narratives, this paper will argue that the war offered slaves the opportunity to challenge paternalism directly, particularly in regions closer to the conflict. Slaves residing in the Upper South states of Virginia and Maryland recalled open acts of defiance, such as violence against whites and running away, as common occurrences during the war. The frequency of slave flight contrasted sharply with white southerners' belief that slaves loved and were loyal to their owners. Slaves residing in South Carolina, a state that was relatively undisturbed for a majority of the war, complained less about slavery and recalled fewer instances of slave flight. Distance from the conflict necessitated other forms of defiance for these slaves. Yet the South Carolina ex-slaves' recollections also suggest that the climate of fear and repression in that state during the 1930s contributed to their more neutral statements regarding slavery.

In the end, however, paternalism was only partly dismantled by the war. After the war's conclusion, southern paternalist ideals would resurface and become an important factor in shaping the post-war South.
Part I

Mistress as Master:
Slaveholding Women's Attitudes Towards Slavery
During the Civil War

When South Carolina's militia units fired on Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor early in 1861, southern paternalism was put to the ultimate test. As southern men left their homes in great numbers to fight for the Confederacy, southern white women's roles changed dramatically. Women who remained at home assumed the responsibility of providing for their households. Still others left their homes to enter Confederate hospitals as nurses. White women's increased occupational choices and their new positions of authority over their households allow historians to examine different theories regarding slaveholding southern white women's devotion to the institution of slavery and slaves. Some recent historical studies have suggested that southern white women held no great affinity for slavery and privately criticized the institution, while others contend that southern white women were completely invested in slavery and its preservation.  

What did happen when southern mistresses assumed the role of master? And how did these women respond to their new positions of authority? This chapter will examine these questions with an emphasis on southern white women's responses to blacks and

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3 See Anne Firor Scott's chapter entitled "Women's Perspective on the Patriarchy in the 1850s" in *Making the Invisible Woman Visible*, (University of Illinois Press, 1984), 175-189; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); and LeeAnn Whites, "The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender," in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, (Oxford University Press, N.Y., 1992), 3-21, for a discussion of these differing views.
slavery during the Civil War. The main body of this chapter will examine six southern white women's responses to blacks and slavery, focusing on areas of slave work, disobedience, and white women's racial attitudes. The diaries and letters in this study suggest that slaveholding southern white women experienced great difficulty in trying to assume the position of master toward their slaves. Despite their difficulties, however, these women attempted to preserve the institution of slavery by maintaining a social and racial distance between themselves and their slaves.

The women in this study represent diverse sections within the South. Madge Preston, the wife a moderately wealthy merchant, resided in urban Maryland. Cornelia Peake McDonald lived in the town of Winchester in northern Virginia and was left to oversee the family estate while her husband, a former lawyer, enlisted in the Confederate armed forces. Ada W. Bacot, a widow from South Carolina, traveled to Virginia to volunteer as a nurse. Tryphenia Blanche Holder Fox, a northern-born woman, married a wealthy southern doctor and moved to his estate in Louisiana. Phoebe Yates Pember, an upper class, single, southern women, worked as a nurse in Richmond. Finally, Mary Boykin Chesnut, the wife of a Confederate legislator, resided in Richmond and other Confederate cities during the war.

These sources represent a varied cross-section of southern slaveholding society. The diaries and letters were composed by southern white slaveholding women from the Upper, Lower, and Border South, living in urban southern cities and rural plantations. No frontier women are represented in this study, but the geographic and regional diversity of the sources chosen suggests the pervasiveness of southern white slaveholding women's
need to maintain slavery. Southern mistresses’ attempt to perserve slavery also helped paternalism survive.

Prior to the Civil War, southern slaveholding society had created a patriarchal social structure that placed white males at the head of the family. This structure held that the patriarch was the sole provider for his family. He was responsible for the maintenance and preservation of the southern household, which included his wife, children and slaves, all subordinate to his authority. Married southern white women were expected to remain in the home; they were responsible for childbearing and rearing; and they were supposed to be loyal, pious and subordinate to the patriarch.  

The outbreak of the Civil War altered these ideals as women were thrust into new roles and positions within the southern family and society. Several essays in the recent collection entitled Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War, following the lead of Anne Firor Scott’s pathbreaking The Southern Lady, discuss this radical change in female roles and identity within southern society. The war forced a reconstitution of southern white social norms. As southern men left their homes to fight in Confederate armies, women were left to assume roles formerly performed by the southern white male patriarch.

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Many women expressed deep-seated anxiety at this sudden transition. Cornelia McDonald noted that with the departure of Winchester’s male population prior to the first northern invasion of southern soil, “the rest of the night was spent in violent fits of weeping at the thought of being left.” When she awoke in the morning and found that the town was not overrun by the Yankee army she expressed her relief: “I felt so thankful that we were still free and a hope dawned that our men would come back.” McDonald’s entry suggests she felt strong misgivings in the absence of white men. Her passage also reflects a sense of abandonment: she felt “left” and continued to express “hope” that the men would return. Drew Gilpin Faust traces similar feelings and expressions of abandonment among elite southern women following the departure of white males.6

Yet the war also allowed women to challenge male authority in new ways. George Rable notes that women in New Orleans directly chastised southern white males who did not fight for Confederate armies.7 Joan Cashin also finds evidence of females pushing the boundaries prescribed for their sex in her discussion of Kate McClure, a slaveowning women from South Carolina who assumed responsibility for running her family plantation. She challenged the paternalist ideal by refusing to accept white male assistance; instead she ran the plantation with the help of a male slave.8 Other women sought to assist the Confederacy in non-traditional ways. Ada W. Bacot, supported by her father, appealed directly to the Reverend Barnwell, head of South Carolina’s Hospital

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Association, for his assistance in giving her passage to Virginia to work as a nurse after her feeble attempts to secure private funding failed.9

Southern white women, however, did not divest themselves of pre-war ideals completely.10 In Louisiana, Tryphenia Blanch Holder Fox upheld the ideal of the southern lady when she wrote to her mother, stating, “the new servant Elizabeth does the cooking and housework and does all so well and quietly that I know very little about it anyhow-so don’t you see I am having an easy time?11

Although southern white women assumed new roles and positions of authority within white society, their expectations of slaves remained intact. Initially, the war did little to change the lives of the South’s black population. Southern slaves’ primary responsibilities remained in service to the white population. Southern white women attempted to assume the role formerly performed by their male counterparts. Mistresses’ new responsibilities included assuring slaves’ compliance while providing for their well-being. By maintaining the services of their slaves, white southern women could continue to follow the roles prescribed for their sex while assuming the role of master.

Mistresses assumed the master’s right to total control over their slaves. A poignant reminder of this attitude can be seen in one of Cornelia McDonald’s diary entries. During a battle between Confederate and Union forces, she recalled: “The battle raged all day in sight of town, shells screaming through the air so constantly that for some time we dared not go out.” In spite of the danger, McDonald “sent the servant girl Nannie, to town on

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10 Scott, *Southern Lady*, 4-21.
an errand and as she came near the gate a shell burst in front of her."12 Despite the danger to her family, McDonald expressed no concern for Nannie’s safety. Madge Preston likewise established authority over her family’s slaves during the war. Her husband was often away from home during the war, leaving her to tend to their slaves and free black servants. “I went out this morning to overlook the men at their work and found them scattered in various ways....I soon put them in order.”13 Elizabeth Fox-Genovese points out that mistresses hardly garnered the obedience of slaves that the master commanded. Preston’s discovery that the men were not performing their tasks, therefore, may not have been such an unusual occurrence.14 The passage, however, demonstrates Preston’s belief that her authority was necessary to ensure her slaves’ and servants’ compliance.

Responsibility for their slaves also encompassed selling slaves. Mistresses mentioned their need to sell slaves to prevent their capture but also as a means of establishing control over recalcitrant slaves. McDonald cited numerous incidents of other slaveholders selling their slaves to prevent their capture by northern armies. Bacot also mentioned the removal of slaves to safer locations.15 Other women entertained the prospect of selling their chattel when they became overly unruly: “Savary has been giving me trouble,” Bacot stated. “I fear I will have to sell her, she could not stand the test [of moving back to South Carolina].”16 Bacot’s easy assumption that she could sell any slave who had

12 Gwin, A Woman’s Civil War, 155.
14 Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 97, 112, 206.
15 See McDonald’s lengthy discussion of her struggle to maintain the services of a slave sold to prevent her capture. Gwin, ed., Woman’s Civil War, 82-84. See also Berlin, ed., Confederate Nurse, 58.
16 Berlin, ed., Confederate Nurse, 158.
become unruly shows that mistresses understood their new positions of power over their slaves.

The War required mistresses to assume the role of punisher for insubordinate slaves as well. Bacot recalled an incident when she slapped a disobedient slave who had neglected to follow her orders, leading to an unpleasant confrontation with the boy’s mother. Fox often punished her slaves for misbehavior, prompting one to run away. She concluded that this incident was based on the slave’s misbehavior, and not on her mistreatment. “It is not pleasant to have such a character around one [referring to the runaway slave], though most of these mulatresses are such and it is impossible to make anything different of them.” She qualified this negative characterization of slave behavior, however, by stating: “after five years experience in housekeeping with black people I have found that I must give up my notions of a very nice and orderly house or scold and watch and oversee all the time, not only ruining my temper but making the servants really dissatisfied and the more careless from being looked after.” Apparently Fox understood the limits of her disciplinary abilities. As Fox-Genovese suggests, mistresses lacked the authority of masters, even when they were forced to take charge.

Other mistresses also struggled to exercise authority over their slaves in wartime. Preston assumed responsibility for the obedience of her slaves, although the context of her surroundings, in Union-controlled Maryland, necessitated the inclusion of her husband and other male authorities. Bacot perhaps most adequately expressed the position southern white women had to assume in relation to their slaves for the duration

17 Ibid., 62.
18 King, ed., *Northern Woman*, 129.
19 Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household.*
of the war when she stated, “I hope I may be able to make them understand without much
trouble that I am mistress and will be obeyed.” 20 Despite her admonitions, Bacot
struggled to maintain her authoritative position in relation to her slaves. 21 Upon her
arrival in Virginia she soon discovered that slaves there were more openly disobedient
that in South Carolina. “It has been almost impossible to get a servant to do anything
today,” she complained. “Virginia negroes are not near so servile as those of South
Carolina.” 22 At one point Bacot intimated her desire to return home because the slaves
were so unruly.

Bacot’s writing suggest her uncertainty regarding her capacity to assume the role of
master. This mistress’s frustration at the impertinence of Virginia slaves culminated in
her slapping a slave boy who had neglected to follow her orders. Bacot’s actions did not
have the effect she had intended, however, as the boy ran crying to his mother, Old
Willie, who immediately confronted Bacot. A verbal battle resulted, causing the eventual
intervention of Dr. McIntosh, who was boarding Bacot in his house. “I never heard such
a row as ensued,” Bacot recalled, “William yelling as if he was being murdered, and Old
Willie abusing and threatening Dr. Mac with all her might.” 23 When Willie refused to
calm down, the doctor had Willie removed from the residence. Willie’s reaction towards
Bacot’s attempt to establish her authority suggests she did not respect Bacot’s presumed
authority. The confrontation also suggests Bacot’s uncertainty regarding her capacity to
assume the role of master. The doctor’s intervention also suggests mistresses continued

20 Berlin, ed., Confederate Nurse, 27.
21 See Fox-Genovese’s Within the Plantation Household, for a discussion of the difficulties mistresses
experienced in punishing insubordinate slaves.
22 Berlin, ed., Confederate Nurse, 68.
23 Ibid., 145.
to defer to white male authority, especially when confrontations between master and slave included harsh physical punishment.

Although these women's diaries clearly demonstrate their association with southern white authority, their notations also suggest an apprehension or misgiving about their newly assumed caretaker roles. Bacot's lamentations and ambivalence regarding the row with Old Nellie suggest her difficulty. When she stated, "I am always doing something or offending someone without intending it," she expressed her own ambivalence about her unaccustomed role as master. There was a limit to how far Bacot would assume the punisher role. For example, she left the physical act of whipping to Dr. McIntosh. Bacot even attempted to intervene on Willie's behalf, whom she regretted seeing whipped. "I begged Dr. McIntosh not to whip Old Willie as she was generally such a good negro." Bacot's attempted intervention on Willie's behalf also suggests a close identification with her as a female. Suzanne Lebsock discusses similar instances of southern mistresses' close identification with certain female slaves, while Eugene Genovese notes that white women may have played a mediating role between masters and slaves. Bacot may have been playing this dual role of friend and mediator in her response to Willie's whipping.

White southern women slaveholders also believed they commanded more control over their female property than over black males. Mary Boykin Chesnut noted a conversation with a friend in which her friend stated that she did not fear being killed by her female slave because she thought her easily controlled. Similarly, Preston meted out punishment

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24 Ibid., 145-146.
on her female slaves. This pattern suggests that Preston was confident she could control her female slaves and slave children, but was uncertain of her authoritative position in relation to male slaves. Furthermore, Fox, McDonald, Chesnut, and Bacot never mentioned the punishment of black men in their recollections, which suggests both a close identification with white women's responsibilities in the pre-war household- which included responsibility for slave women and children- and their apprehension of confronting black males.26

Slaveholding women's ambivalent feelings towards their female slaves can be seen in their close identification with certain black females. McDonald related the story of Catherine, a former family slave, who had fled north with the retreating Union army, only to be found wandering the roadside with her two children. McDonald, hearing of Catherine's plight and recalling her loyal service, sent to have her found and returned to the family estate. McDonald often expressed admiration for her female slaves. In another instance of kindness, she was even willing to defy the owner of Lethea, a slave loaned to McDonald, from selling her farther south to prevent her capture. She noted, "I have refused to give her up, but am not sure I have the right to do it." She convinced herself that she was in the right: "I cannot bear the thought of her grief: to be torn from her husband and perhaps her children." McDonald's defiance of Lethea's owner was short lived, however, as he eventually persuaded her that Lethea's sale was necessary. Lethea's loss caused McDonald to grieve deeply. "Her image will be always associated with that of my baby. She held her in her arms when she was first born, she fed and cared

for her, and my darling loved her....To me it seems as if all the flowers of life are withered and nothing left but the bare, bitter, thorny stems.” She marveled, “I would not have believed that the image of a poor servant and her departure would have made me so sad.”27 As Lebsock suggests, southern slaveholdng women experienced conflicting emotions in relation to their slaves, and some held individual slaves in high regard. This passage demonstrates clearly McDonald’s close association with Lethea as a female for whom she cared deeply.

As Fox-Genovese suggests, however, the remorse these women expressed sometimes resulted from a fear of having to perform unaccustomed tasks. Slave labor, argues Fox-Genovese, allowed white women to maintain their social standing, and the absence of slaves causes great distress.28 McDonald’s reaction to the departure of trusted slaves left her to assume unfamiliar tasks, certainly and instance of poetic justice for slaves. She lamented the loss of her slaves because of her need to perform tasks traditionally assigned to slaves: “Besides increased anxiety and responsibility, with the burden to bear alone, there are un accustomed tasks to be performed. Such tasks as formerly fell to the lot of servants; but they are gone and we have to make the best of a very unpleasant state of affairs.”29

As McDonald’s close association with Lethea suggests, some southern women closely identified their experience as females in a male-dominated society with the plight of slaves in a white world ruled by whites. When viewing a slave auction, Mary Boykin

27 Gwin, ed., Woman’s Civil War, 82.
28 Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 366.
Chesnut clearly identified with female slaves in her famous passage: “I tried to reason--this is not worse than the willing sale most women make of themselves in marriage--nor can the consequence be worse,” she continued; “the Bible authorizes marriage and slavery--Poor women! Poor slaves!” Yet in the same instance she allowed a glimpse of her contradictory feelings concerning female slaves when she noted that a nice looking mulatto woman being sold “looked coy and pleased at the bidder,” suggesting the slave woman was enjoying her sale. Chesnut’s contradictory response suggests that white females, as Fox-Genovese has pointed out, were painfully aware of white masters; sexual exploitation of black women. This awareness caused friction between white and black women as white women held black females partly, or even wholly, responsible for white men’s behavior.

The white southern women in this study believed that their slaves loved them dearly. Their diaries and letters describe the enthusiastic reactions of slaves to their mistresses’ return home. After her return home from Virginia, Bacot noted, “I met with a most hearty welcom [sic], the servants flocked around me.” Likewise, Preston stated that her slave and black servant were “greatly delighted to see me.” Just as slaves welcomed their owners’ return, they lamented the whites’ departure, according to McDonald’s description of her house servants’ reaction when she departed from her estate prior to Yankee occupation. She painted a scene of open weeping and genuine sadness exhibited by her slaves at the family’s departure; two slaves “wept abundantly.” Preston related similar

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30 Woodward and Muhlenfeld, eds., Private Mary Chesnut, 21.
31 Ibid., 21.
32 Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 292.
34 Gwin, ed., Woman’s Civil War, 164.
scenes regarding her daughter May’s departure for school and May’s intermittent returns home. In almost every letter sent to her daughter, Preston made some reference to the slaves’ missing May and asking for her return. Yet white slaveholding women seldom reciprocated those feelings. Preston’s daughter rarely expressed concern for her personal slave, Kitty, indicating that she spent little time worrying about how the family’s black slaves and servants were doing. Southern slaveholding women needed to convince themselves of their slaves’ admiration for them while maintaining an emotional and social distance from those same slaves. This may have been partly a reaction against the uncomfortable notion that their slaves did not admire them as much as they had hoped.

Southern mistresses’ belief that slaves loved their white families was an essential aspect of the southern myth. The mass exodus of slaves from the society which had enslaved them struck deeply at the southern psyche. Runaway slaves’ actions contradicted southern whites’ belief in slave contentment. Rebelliousness of other kinds also undermined the myth of the happy slave. As the war progressed, blacks who remained in the South became more and more unruly. This sudden change in slave behavior angered many southern mistresses, who clung to the idea that their slaves owned them some sort of gratitude. Chesnut wrote, “Aunt Betsy and Mrs. Reynolds both are horror stricken by the evident exultation they perceive in their servants at the approach of Yankees.” She then expressed her own disbelief at their slaves’ behavior toward “two people who have been so kind to their servants.” Preston noticed a dramatic change in

35 See Preston’s letters of correspondence to her daughter during May’s private schooling. Beauchamp, ed., Private War, 8-9, 11, 15-16, 52-53.
36 May’s one letter mentions Kitty only in passing during her first term at school. See Beauchamp, ed., Private War, 10.
37 Woodward and Muhlenfeld, eds., The Private Mary Chesnut, 199.
her slave Jim and servant Lizzy who, as the war progressed, became “dreadfully impertinent.” When Preston discovered her money was being stolen, she immediately suspected Lizzy. When Preston’s husband confronted Jim and Lizzy regarding the stolen money, they committed the ultimate act of non-violent defiance and ran away. Preston clearly echoed the sentiments of many southern slave owners when she wrote in her diary that Jim and Lizzy’s “ingratitude is so shameful.” Preston never interpreted Jim and Lizzy’s act of defiance as an attack on the institution of slavery, although the connections were certainly obvious to the astute observer. Jim regularly attended abolitionist meetings, which probably led him to question the system under which he labored.

Further, the decisive battle of Gettysburg had recently been fought, which was a resounding defeat for the Confederacy. The fact that Jim and Lizzy left at this point may have been more than coincidental. The southern mistresses included in this study, however, viewed themselves as benevolent protectors of their property and expressed disbelief that slaves acted with such ingratitude. Mary Elizabeth Glade’s research, comparing the diarists of the Civil War and post-war periods, traces similar expressions of betrayal at the flight of blacks.

To reconcile southern paternalism with their awareness that slaves would choose to flee when northern occupation offered the opportunity, slaveholding women elaborated justifications of their own action and criticized Union soldiers. McDonald made numerous references to slaves who fled north following retreating Union armies. “On the approach of Jackson [T.J. “Stonewall” Jackson] the negroes, who had, many of them left

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38 Beauchamp, ed., Private War, 69, 73.
39 Ibid., xxiv.
40 Glade, “Reconstruction of Memory,” 2.
their homes and were living in town, began a flight that was only equaled in speed and madness by the Yankees themselves.\footnote{Gwin, ed., \textit{Woman's Civil War}, 64.} She qualified this knowledge, however, by retreating into the southern ideal of the paternalistic slaveowner. This ideal held that slaveowners knew best how to serve their chattel through the masters’ ability to provide for slaves’ well-being. Concomitant with this ideology, it was believed that slaves could not care for themselves and therefore needed the oversight of a paternalistic figure. McDonald made numerous reference to both of these views when she related the story of a woman who fled with the retreating Union army. She stated that the slave was found wandering the roadside with her two children, emaciated and starving, causing McDonald to lament, “the Federals had induced them to fly but could not succor them in their distress,” intimating that white southerners understood how best to care for black slaves.\footnote{Ibid., 65.}

Other women asserted the superiority of southern willpower and the certainty of Confederate victory. In a letter to her mother, Fox remarked, “the Northern people know nothing of this war- there would be peace if they did; peace & consent to let us alone; how do they hope to conquer a people who will give up every thing even to life rather than be conquered?”\footnote{King, ed., \textit{Northern Woman in the Plantation South}, 130.} Fox made this statement near the end of the war when most of her slaves had departed. McDonald also chose to focus on northern resolve to distance herself from the uncomfortable notion that slaves’ flight represented a direct challenge to the southern myth of harmony between masters and slaves. Her preoccupation with the idea of northern opposition to a war to free the slaves and the weight she gave to the

\footnote{Gwin, ed., \textit{Woman's Civil War}, 64.}
\footnote{Ibid., 65.}
\footnote{King, ed., \textit{Northern Woman in the Plantation South}, 130.}
rantings of a few Union soldiers demonstrated her refusal to acknowledge the possibility that slavery was a doomed institution. "There seems no doubt now that the Yankee army is disgusted with the war...now that the real object of it has been made manifest [by Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation], and many go so far as to say that they will fight no longer if the fight is for the freedom of the negroes."\(^44\) Chesnut also noted with glee a Union General’s statement that "they [Union officers] are beginning to find out they cannot trust the black men—not as they expected, everyone an enemy of their masters—but nearly all spies."\(^45\) Chesnut and McDonald consciously persuaded themselves that both the Union army and the South’s black population were unwilling to destroy the southern slave system.

Southern mistresses argued that slavery was a reciprocal relationship, benefiting both slaves and slaveholders. In her letters, Fox emphasized only what white people considered slavery’s ameliorative qualities; she never questioned or recognized the injustices of that institution. Using a common proslavery argument, Fox hinted that slaves were far better off than wage earners in the North because slave owners cared for their workers’ every need. Citing an example from Christmas, she stated, “the abolitionists talk about the ‘poor negro’—I dare say not one white person in ten throughout the North had such a dinner for Christmas as did mine yesterday & probably all the others throughout the Southland.”\(^46\)

Southern white women’s proslavery views prevented their understanding of slaves’ desire for freedom. When Bacot discussed the refusal of several thousand South Carolina

\(^{44}\) Gwin, ed., *Woman’s Civil War*, 83.
\(^{45}\) Woodward and Muhlenfeld, eds., *Private Mary Chesnut*, 132.
\(^{46}\) King, ed., *Northern Woman in the Plantation South*, 129.
slaves to leave with their masters, she stated, “I really feel sorry for the poor wretches they have an idea they are free now & will not be obliged to work any more.” Bacot was unable to view slave behavior from the slaves’ perspective. Slaves did not flee southern plantations to avoid work; they fled to escape enslavement. Mary Elizabeth Glade suggests a similar inability on the part of Virginia mistresses to accept the true causes of slave flight.

Stangely commingled with southern white women’s hope that their slaves’ admired and loved them was the pervasive fear of ultimate slave insurrection: open, violent, rebellion. Bacot was preoccupied with the possibility of her own death at the hands of her slaves, while maintaining the hope that her slaves cared for her well being. When relaying the story of the death of a plantation master, thought to have been killed by his servants, Bacot noted, “we none of us know when we are safe. I have some about me that I fear twould take very little to make them put me out of the way. I don’t mean any of the house servants for I think they are fond of me.” Fox also spoke with mild alarm at the possibility of being killed by her slaves. When writing to her mother, she noted, “you speak of danger from the negroes; nothing has occurred yet to alarm any one in this vicinity, still every one acknowledges that it is far better & wiser, to be on our guard, than to rest in perfect sloth & tranquillity until the negroes have every possible means of meeting, forming, & putting into execution the most terrible plans for murder & bloodshed.” Chesnut relayed her fears when she wrote, “I always felt I had never injured any

47 Berlin, ed., Confederate Nurse, 55-56.
49 Berlin, Confederate Nurse, 51.
50 King, ed., Northern Women in the Plantation South, 131.
one black especially and therefore feared nothing from them—but now...I sleep and wake
with the horrid vision before my eyes of those vile black hands—smothering her."51 In her
discussion of the sacking and burning of Jacksonville, an act performed by black soldiers,
McDonald wrote: "That such can and do take place here in our country, and our people
the victims is beyond belief...if we did not know how savage really good people can
become when they are abolitionists and fanatics."52

Southern mistresses' commitment to slavery prevented them from questioning the
conditions that brought about the possibility of violent slave insurrection. Fox-Genovese
suggests southern mistresses were wholly invested in the institutions of slavery.53 As a
result, southern white women could not envision slavery itself as the primary cause of
slave insurrection. Bacot, McDonald, Fox, and Chesnut never identified the institution of
slavery as the cause of their fears. When relaying the story of masters killed by their
slaves, Chesnut expressed horror that those who were so kind to and spoiled their slaves
were the ones murdered.54 Fox stated that slaves needed to be prevented from gathering
for fear of an uprising, and McDonald labeled the burners of Jacksonville "fanatics."

Certainly on some level these women must have realized slavery's central role in all of
this. Yet slavery was supposed to benefit both masters and slaves, so to question the
institution itself would have led to a questioning of southern society, something they were
unable or unwilling to do.

51 Woodward and Muhlenfeld, eds., Private Mary Chesnut, 164.
52 Gwin, ed., Woman's Civil War, 138.
53 Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 370.
54 When relaying the story of a friend's mother-in-law, murdered by her slaves, she expressed disbelief that
they murdered someone who "has pampered and spoiled and done everything for." Woodward and
Muhlenfeld, eds., Private Mary Chesnut, 162.
Southern slaveholding women attempted to maintain a social and racial distance between themselves and their slaves. The maintenance of this distance occurred in a variety of ways, but for the purposes of this study what they wrote and how they wrote—their discourse—offers the most illuminating view of southern white slaveholding women’s view of blacks. These women’s diaries and letters suggest that they continued to view blacks as inferior beings.

Although some mistresses acknowledged, perhaps unconsciously, common ground with individual female slaves, they viewed blacks as racially inferior humans or even beasts. Discussing the child of a black family servant, Preston remarked, “for you know I love a child about the house even if it is a black one....She is the nicest, prettiest, little child I think I ever saw of that color.” Phoebe Yates Pember, a nurse for the Confederacy, likened a slave working for her to a “horse” she had owned. She continued by further stating that the slave in question be given “honor to whom honor is due. He gave me many hints which my higher intelligence had overlooked, comprehended by him more through instinct than reason.” Even when praising her slaves, Pember immediately qualified that praise by reasserting her dominance, in this case her “higher intelligence” compared to her slave’s “instinct,” a word with animalistic connotations.

One way that mistresses maintained social and racial barriers between whites and blacks was by holding low expectations for their slaves. Bacot, admonishing a slave for stealing, wrote, “I really believe the black race can’t help stealing it seems to belong to

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55 Beauchamp, ed., Private War, 96.
them," hinting at a separation of moral virtues between whites and blacks.\textsuperscript{57} When recalling a slave she had trained but had to sell because she continually ran away, Fox stated regret over the need to sell her because the slave "suited me very well indeed-as well as any black person I ever expected to find."\textsuperscript{58} Fox's praise was qualified; the slave was the finest she ever "expected" to find, suggesting that slaves were incapable of completely satisfying her needs.

White slaveholding women also practiced a more subtle form of white racial dominance. In every instance, whether it was the deep South, the upper South or the border South, the southern mistresses in this study referred to their slaves on a first-name basis only. It was as if southern blacks had no ancestral last name, at least no acknowledged last name, and therefore no identity outside their relation to the white community.\textsuperscript{59} The only time these women referred to any one, besides their slaves, on a first name basis was either family relations, such as a brother or sister, or when discussing their animals. In cases where white and black individuals appeared in the same sentence, Preston identified whites with a formal title as Mr. or Mrs., while blacks continued to be addressed by their first names.\textsuperscript{60} This pattern suggests that blacks had no identity outside their relation to whites. Whether the connotations were the more benevolent hints of childlike dependence or the overtly racist overtones of bestiality, this pattern also showed that mistresses thought of their slaves as their social inferiors.

\textsuperscript{57} Berlin, ed., \textit{Confederate Nurse}, 38.
\textsuperscript{58} King, ed., \textit{Northern Woman in the Plantation South}, 115.
\textsuperscript{60} Beauchamp, ed., \textit{Private War}, 59.
Southern white women's racist opinions manifested themselves in many ways, but they can be viewed most clearly in instances where black slaves challenged white female authority. Southern women's reaction to such challenges almost universally involved the use of punishment, verbal or physical, to enforce compliance. This punishment occurred with the full knowledge that the black offender could never fight back against the oppressor without having to bear the wrath of a society which universally condemned black retaliation. When Bacot described her altercation with Old Willie, she stated that Willie was sent away after being whipped for her insubordination. Preston's use of punishment to control her slaves Jim and Kitty, the former so disgusted with his life that he ran away, increased as Jim became increasingly unmanageable. Although there was a range of reactions to slave insubordination, these women used punishment as a device to assert their social and racial dominance much the same way a parent controls his/her child. Both Bacot and Fox openly discussed selling slaves whom they could not manage. Fox placed a monetary value on her human property. When relating the story of a disobedient slave who ran away, Fox coolly stated, "if we had not paid $1500 for her, I should not care picayune if we never say her again." Fox and Bacot's constant assertions that they could sell their slaves in an instant reflects their racial attitudes. Slaves were property, and this harsh fact allowed southern white women to escape emotional responsibility for their racial attitudes or emotional responses to slaves. The southern white slaveholding women in this study each used her racial perceptions to

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maintain a social, physical, and psychological separation between themselves and their property.

These southern mistresses' letters and diaries show that rather than exposing cracks in the southern myth, the war pressured—perhaps forced—southern white slaveholding women to identify closely with that society. These women embraced the institution of slavery. Despite individual variations, each woman in this study viewed blacks as inferior beings. While these women expressed compassion for individual slaves at certain times, they never challenged the institution itself. Rather, they defended slavery and ignored the injustice of the system so obviously exposed by the mass exodus of slaves.

Bacot's statement that "I hear eight negroes deserted last night" must have clashed with these women's view of the slave system. The curious absence of the contradiction between myth and reality in the diaries and letters of these women, certainly educated, leaves open the question of why. Why did these women refuse to acknowledge the oppression of slavery? Certainly racism played a central role in these women's responses, but the changing responsibilities and expectations of southern mistresses were equally important. As Fox-Genovese suggests, the maintenance of social standing within southern society remained of paramount importance to these women. Preston, Fox, Pember, Bacot, Chesnut and McDonald were obviously so completely invested in the South's "peculiar institution," that to overtly challenge it was unthinkable. Yet mistresses were also forced by circumstance to play an active role in protecting slavery. The absence of male masters forced some southern mistresses to assume the masters' role, if

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64 Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 370.
only temporarily, effectively preventing these women from expressing the full measure of their devotion or non-devotion to southern institutions.
Part II

The Dissolution of Paternalism

Black Responses to Slavery

During the Civil War

In order to gain a complete picture of how the war affected relations between white masters and mistresses and their slaves, and slaves reactions to paternalism, an examination of African-American primary sources is necessary. The WPA slave narratives, collected in the mid-1930s, is one such source. The interviews were conducted between 1936 and 1938 in several of the former slave states. All of the respondents were in their mid-seventies and older, with a few more than a century old. These elderly former slaves had been children at the beginning of the Civil War. The interviews were usually conducted by white interviewers who visited the homes of former slaves and asked questions ranging from their slave experiences before, during and after the war, to their views on freedom and religion. The sources offer compelling evidence that slaves did challenge the institution of slavery and were not merely the "Samboes" Stanley Elkins portrayed them to be.65 Sambo was a term applied to blacks which labeled them as docile, subservient, loyal, and child-like. Samboes were unable to care for themselves, incapable of challenging white authority, and dependent on his or her white masters. This stereotype fit nicely into the paternalists' view of their world. According to Elkins, Samboism typified how slavery adversely affected blacks' psychological

development, causing slaves to become shiftless, lazy, and unable to care for themselves. Historians have since laid Elkins's thesis to rest by citing numerous incidents where slaves expressed their distaste for slavery and established a modicum of control over their lives. The WPA records suggest that the war exacerbated the incidence of slave defiance, especially in the upper South.

Despite the usefulness of these sources, caution must be exercised in over-generalizing their validity as historical relics. First, the interviews were conducted many years after emancipation, and a majority of the interviewees were young children during the war. Secondly, and especially in South Carolina, the interviews were mostly conducted by local whites, which may have made the respondents uneasy about challenging white authority for fear of retribution. Third, the records were not verbatim accounts; interviewers would often return home to write their summaries, a tactic fraught with editorial bias. In spite of these problems, the sources remain useful artifacts, as general trends in the responses are easily identified. The WPA interviews reveal that the war allowed slaves to express openly their dissatisfaction with slavery, especially in the upper South. Slaves residing in the Lower South, while resisting slavery in more subtle ways, appeared less willing to challenge slavery overtly.

The most striking difference among the narratives was the regional disparity in how the interviewees recalled their experiences of slavery. Ex-slaves who resided in the upper

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South states of Virginia and Maryland more openly challenged the institution, while ex-slaves residing in South Carolina, as a group, recalled slavery more favorably. Of course there were individual interviewees who contradicted this regional disparity in both sections, but as a whole these trends were apparent.

The Virginia and Maryland narratives tell quite a different story from that of the South Carolina interviews. The narratives by upper South slaves are less heavily laden with slang than the South Carolina interviews and many of the Maryland respondents mentioned some form of education following emancipation. Virginia and Maryland respondents recalled fleeing white masters and mistresses with greater frequency; they expressed more hatred towards white Americans and they appeared to rejoice more at the advent of freedom. In addition, the interviewees also had more contact with larger free black populations, including intermarriage. More importantly, the war offered many upper southern slaves the opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with slavery, not by rising in armed revolt, but by moving their feet. South Carolina slaves, in contrast, were far removed from the war, and many recalled not even being aware that the war was happening until General William T. Sherman's armies marched through the South Carolina countryside in 1865. This is not to suggest that South Carolina slaves did not challenge slavery or find other outlets to express their dissatisfaction, but that their distance from the conflict necessitated other forms of resistance.


Initially, the war did little to change the lives of South Carolina's slave population. Most South Carolina slaves resided in areas far removed from Yankee occupation zones and expressed sentiments towards slavery quite different from those of their counterparts in regions closer to the conflict. Many, seemingly unaware of the war's progress, remembered slavery as a time when they enjoyed more comfort and piece of mind. Richard Mark, a 104-year-old slave, remarked, "I loved dem days, I loved dem people. We lived better—we had no money—we had nothing to worry about—just do your task." Another ex-slave put it more simply, "I was better off den dan I am now." Still others lamented that freedom was a negative event in their lives. Cordelia Anderson Jackson stated, "I got a heap mo' in slavery dan I does now; was sorry when freedom got here." Although these statements appear to suggest that these ex-slaves regarded slavery more positively than freedom, their present living conditions—in the lower South during the Great Depression—may have led them to closely identify with slavery. The plantation undoubtedly provided these ex-slaves with everyday necessities, such as food and clothing, that were harder to come by during the Depression.

The South Carolina interviewees also viewed their masters and mistresses in a more positive light than those interviewed in Virginia and Maryland. The interviewees often remarked on the kindness and generosity of their former masters and mistresses.

Jimmie Johnson recalled, his dead master: "I loved him dearly and I know he loved

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70 Ibid., 152.
71 Ibid., 19.
72 Ibid., 5.
73 Ibid., 87, 116, 119, 150; Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*, xv.
74 Ibid., 105, 112-113, 118, 143.
me....I grieve about my master to this day. He was a kind gentleman.” Agnes James
recalled: “My white folks, dey had a right smart of colored people dey own en far as I can
reckon, dey spend mighty good treatment to dem all de time.”75 One respondent,
recalling an incident where a slave had informed Yankee soldiers where the master had
hidden his valuables, likened the informant to Judas.76

The Virginia and Maryland interviewees, in contrast, were more vocal about their
distaste for slavery. For some this also meant hatred for whites. Recalling slavery’s
brutality helped many to vocalize this hatred. Minnie Fulkes, describing the beating her
mother suffered at the hands of an overseer, cried: “Lord! Lord! I hate white people and
de flood waters gwine drown some mo.”77 The Reverend Silas Jackson and Mary Jones
also connected masters’ and overseers’ brutality with the high incidence of runaways,
Jones exclaimed “I have heard it said that the Randolph’s [reputed to be the region’s
harshest overseers] lost more slaves by running away than anyone in the country.”78
Charles Crawley recalled slaves so fed up with their treatment that they began to kill
overseers in the fields.79

The South Carolina interviewees also recalled unfavorable experiences as slaves. A
few ex-slaves remembered harsh physical treatment at the hands of punitive masters and
uncompromising overseers, many of whom were black.80 Bill McNeil stated, “I
‘members old Tim True [the plantation overseer] beating me often for little or nothing.”

75 Ibid., 54, 8.
76 Ibid., 26.
77 Ibid., 11.
78 Ibid., vol. 18, 30-1, 39.
79 Ibid., vol. 17, 10.
80 See Genovese’s Roll, Jordan, Roll, 365-388, for a discussion of the roles performed by black drivers on
the plantation.
Giving full expression to his anger, he related, "I sticks out to de end wid de party dat freed me [the Republican party]."\(^8\) Jake McLeod mentioned the story of a woman he saw hanged for attempting to poison her white owners on account of their harsh treatment. Still others, noting how their masters were not unkind, recalled other masters who they had heard treated their slaves poorly.\(^8\) These accounts may suggest that these interviewees were indirectly giving voice to their personal experiences during slavery. As David Thomas Bailey has shown, many of the interviewees, especially in the Deep South, may have feared white retribution if they gave full voice—even in the 1930s—to their treatment at the hands of whites. John W. Blassingame also mentions that the WPA respondents may have been concealing their true feelings. He cites the lynching of seventy blacks between the years of 1931-1935 as evidence that the interviewees were perhaps reluctant to express the full range of their slave experiences.\(^8\)

Fear of white retribution did not prevent all the South Carolina ex-slaves from expressing their distaste for slavery, however. Many recognized the dehumanizing aspects of the institution and comprehended the psychological domination whites tried to impose over blacks. Genia Woodbury, remembering her mother’s sale, noted that the buyer examined her mother’s teeth and body. She stated, "wanna know effen dey wuz sound [her teeth] ‘fore he buy her. Dat dey way dey sell horses."\(^8\) Victoria Perry put it more succinctly when she noted "I sure was scared of my master, he treated us niggers just like we was dogs."\(^8\) Rueben Rosborogh was perhaps unaware of the implications of

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\(^8\) Ibid., 158.
\(^8\) Bailey, "Divided Prism," 403; Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves," 482.
\(^8\) Ibid., 262.
his statement when he noted, “My marster was a kind and tender man to slaves. You see a man love hosses and animals? Well dat’s de way he loves us, though maybe in bigger portion.”86

Upper South ex-slaves also recognized southern white attempts to control their lives, and this realization led to subtle and not so subtle attempts to reassert their autonomy. James V. Deane remembered seeing only one slave sold, his aunt, who was sold because she had struck her mistress after being slapped. In a moving account, Deane noted that during the night Maryland slaves would meet along the banks of the Potomac and “sing across the river to the slaves in Virginia and they would sing back to us.”87 This covert defiance of white authority suggests a camaraderie among slaves and a knowledge of similar experiences of oppression. Richard Macks recalled the story of a mulatto slave who fought off the advances of her slave trader by grabbing a knife and “sterilizing him.” Whether or not the story was true, Macks took pride in the story, suggesting that slaves told these stories in an effort to gain back a sense of control over their own lives.

Historians have shown that slaves’ desire to establish a modicum of control over their environment is in conflict with Elkins’s theory that black slaves had become “samboized” by the cruelties of their world.88

Slave flight was another clear expression of slaves’ dissatisfaction with the institution of slavery. Although there were many factors which prevented South Carolina slaves from running away, such as the long distance to Union lines, a few interviewees mentioned fleeing. Maria Jenkins noted that her father headed for New Orleans as soon

86 Ibid., 45.
87 Ibid., vol. 18, 8.
88 Ibid., 53.
as the war commenced. Sam Mitchell described his mother’s decision to let him and his father flee when the plantation they were laboring on was threatened by the Yankee army. “My mother say, ‘You ain’t gonna row no boat to Charleston, you go out dat door and keep a-going.’”89 Her decision to let her son and husband leave was hardly an easy one, as slaves often established strong kinship ties.90 Gabe Lance mentioned that “some my people run away from Sandy Island...gone out to join with the Yankees.”91 Sabe Rutledge noted his master’s disbelief when many of his slaves opted for the freedom of Union gunboats instead of the benevolent love of their master.92 Gable Locklier stated that despite his master’s kindness some slaves “run away cause dey get tired of workin...sell um [slaves] if dey didn’ do like dey tell em to do.”93 This passage demonstrates another tactic used by masters to exert control over their chattel. Fear of the physical disruption and psychological humiliation of being sold must have kept some slaves laboring under even the harshest conditions, especially if they had a spouse or children on the same or an adjoining plantation.94

A majority of the respondents, however, did not report running away themselves or hearing about other runaways. Even slaves who stated that they were aware of the war’s progression refused to leave their plantations.95 Many South Carolina plantations were far removed from access to Union lines or information about the war’s progression. The Reverend James E. Johnson recalled, “we did not hear about President Lincoln’s

89 Ibid., 27, 203.
90 Herbert H. Gutman, The Black Family, 264-266.
92 Ibid., part 4, 61.
93 Ibid., part 3, 113.
proclamation in 1863, but the status quo of slavery kept right on as it had been until
Sherman's army came through." South Carolina's distance from the free states
presented a natural barrier to slave flight, as masters would have more time and resources
to capture runaways. Many former slaves also mentioned the patrollers, bands of armed
white men who rode the countryside searching for slaves traveling without passes from
their masters. If caught, these unfortunate slaves were subjected to severe whippings.
These factors may have prevented many slaves from even attempting to run away.
Indeed, many masters in the upper South deliberately sold their slaves farther south to
stem the tide of runaway slaves in their own dwellings.

Proximity to Union lines undoubtedly contributed to the frequency with which the
Maryland and Virginia interviewees mentioned running away. Albert Jones recalled that
he "for twenty years stayed wif master, and didn't try to run away. When I wuz twenty-
one, me and one of my brothers run away to fight wif the Yankees." Jones also
mentioned that many of the slave women left with the men, in stark contrast to the South
Carolina narratives, which failed to mention any women slaves running away. Richard
Macks of Maryland noted that slaves would run away whenever an opportunity presented
itself. Even ex-slaves who mentioned how kind their masters were stated that they ran
away when they had the chance. Another difference between the narratives was that
many of the male interviewees from Virginia and Maryland proudly spoke of their

96 Ibid., 45.
97 Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, 651-653.
99 Ibid., vol. 17, 42.
100 See Gutman, Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 267-9, for a discussion of the high incidence of
    family groups running away in the Upper South during the Civil War.
running away, whereas few of the South Carolina ex-slaves ever recalled wanting to flee the plantation. Perhaps the presence of black interviewers in Virginia- the only state to allow this- alleviated some of the interviewees' fears of white suppression. Running away was not without its dangers, however. If caught, many slaves were sold farther south, to places such as South Carolina. Elizabeth Sparks noted that “they sent some of the slaves to South Carolina when the Yankees came near to keep the Yankees from gettin’ ‘em.” Yet this fear did not prevent slaves from fleeing their white masters. Fanny Berry, recalling a popular slave song, clearly demonstrates slaves’ mindset:

“A col’ frosty morning the Negroes might good

Take your ax upon your shoulder

Nigger talk to de woods.”

The war also left many plantations master-less. In the paternalists absence, southern mistresses were forced to assume the master’s role. Particularly interesting were the South Carolina narrative accounts which mentioned the masters’ absence and the slaves’ reactions to the mistress left in charge. Henry D. Jenkins noted: “My master, Joe Howell, went off to de old war. His niggers was so well trained, dat they carried on for him whilst he was gone and dere was no trouble....Ours was a fine body of slaves and loyal to the mistress and her children.” Alfred Sligh recalled slaves being aware of their emancipation but stated that the workers refused to leave the mistress until her husband

104 Ibid., 3.
105 Ibid., 25.
returned from the war. Sarah Poindexter remembered, “de slaves work some all durin’
de war, sometimes I now ‘specs it was for the misuss. All of us loved her, ‘cause she
was so kind and good to us.” Poindexter and Sligh’s recollections suggest that
mistresses in the lower South may have commanded more respect from their slaves
throughout the war than mistresses residing in areas near the fighting. Again, distance
from the conflict most likely contributed to this continued deference to white authority as
many slaves’ remained unaware of the war’s progress.

Yet not all the South Carolina interviewees recollected pleasurable experiences with
their mistress in charge. Mack Taylor remembered his mistress’s harsh treatment after
her husband died in the war. One interviewee remembered with amusement how her
mistress reacted when her white family had to inform their slaves of emancipation.
“When freedom come old man Kennedy took it well and said we was all free, but his wife
just cursed us and said ‘damn you, you are free now’”

Throughout most of the war, South Carolina was not subjected to the massive
upheaval common in the upper South and Union-occupied areas. Despite Gabe Lance’s
comment that he knew of slaves near the coast who ran away to join the Yankee army,
most of the interviewees scarcely mentioned the war. By 1864, however, Sherman’s
invading armies brought the war to inland South Carolina, yet the presence of Yankee
soldiers did not elicit the ex-slaves’ adulation. Many saw the Union soldiers as nothing
more than thieves in uniform, and remembered scenes of stealing, robbing, and

106 Ibid., vol. 3, part 4, 93.
108 Ibid., vol. 3, part 4; part, 278.
burning.\textsuperscript{109} Ed McCorney remarked, “yas sa, Yankees took all they could carry away.” Ishaih Jeffries noted: “I remembers the patter-rollers [patrollers], de ku klux and de Yankees. Niggers dreaded all three.”\textsuperscript{110} The fact that Jeffries included the Yankee soldiers alongside the Ku Klux Klan and patrollers suggests the legacy Union armies left in the eyes of South Carolina’s ex-slaves. The invading Yankee army destroyed the South Carolina countryside and left many slaves wondering exactly what freedom meant for blacks.

A significant minority of the South Carolina respondents expressed their disappointment that their expectations for freedom went unrealized when the Yankees finally did arrive. Henry D. Jenkins commented, “when the Yankees come, what they do? They did them things they ought not to have done and they left undone de things they ought to have done.”\textsuperscript{111} Many interviewees were largely disappointed after Sherman’s marauding armies had moved on, because Union soldiers left little for the remaining inhabitants. The Union soldiers took most of the livestock and foodstuffs for themselves, leaving many slaves worse off than before. As Bailey points out, many of the respondents were young children when Sherman’s army occupied portions of South Carolina. The disruption of the world to which these children had grown accustomed may have left a bitter impression that endured long after the invaders returned home.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., vol. 3, part 3, 102, 103, 115, 131, 136, 144.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 146, 19.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 26.
With Sherman’s army came freedom—and for many black slaves—the first realization that they had in fact been emancipated long before. Andy Marion’s statement that he “was free 3 years before I knewed it,” must have resonated throughout the Deep South in the war’s final year. Yet there were ex-slaves who continued to defer to white authority. Amie Lumpkin recalled the joy one slave expressed upon hearing of his freedom. He immediately suppressed his emotions in his mistress’s presence: “Missus, I so happy to be free, that I forgets myself but I not go ‘til you say so. I not leave you when you needs a hand, ‘less de master and all de white folks gets home to look after you.” Many former slaves remained on southern plantations following the end of the war.

Freedom drew similar responses from the Virginia and Maryland respondents. Unfortunately the insufficient number of interviews does not allow for a complete examination of how freedom was viewed by upper southern slaves. A common theme among a couple of respondents was the white population’s inability to cope with African-American freedom. Minnie Fulkes, recalling her mistress’s deceiving her mother about emancipation, angrily stated: “yes dat ‘ol wench, a ‘ol heifer, oh child, it make my blood bile when I think ‘bout it. Yes she kept my muma igrunt. Didn’t tell her nuthin ‘bout being free ‘til den in May.” Claude Anderson remarked that whites could not envision the end of slavery. Fanny Berry perhaps best expressed the mixed response many slaves felt toward freedom when she noted that the slaves who left with the Yankees may have

\[113\text{Rawick, ed.,}\ American\ Slave,\ vol.\ 3,\ part\ 3,\ 170.\]
\[114\text{Ibid.},\ 146.\]
\[115\text{Ibid.,}\ vol.\ 17,\ 13.\]
\[116\text{Ibid.},\ vol.\ 17,\ 13.\]
been freed, but they really had no place to go after freedom. Yet she also remarked on the rejoicing slaves expressed upon hearing of their freedom: "Glory! Glory! yes, child the negroes are free an' when they knew day dey were free day oh! baby! began to sing!"\textsuperscript{117}

Although the WPA records are not the most reliable means of exploring slaves view of their world, certain common expressions are readily discernible. The narratives help identify similarities and differences between individual and regional recollections of life in the antebellum South from slaves' own viewpoints. South Carolina slaves, as a group, remarked that masters were mostly kind to them and stated that slavery was a positive experience for most. Virginia and Maryland respondents, on the other hand, viewed slavery less favorably and appeared more candid in their reactions to questions about the institution. Few mentioned kind and benevolent masters, and many described beatings and whippings as common experiences. In contrast, the South Carolina interviewees rarely mentioned the harshest aspects of slavery. Perhaps the most striking contrast between the two were their recollections of runaway behavior. South Carolina interviewees barely mentioned slaves running away, while Virginia and Maryland slaves almost all recalled someone who had run away, many of them stating that they themselves had run away at some point, many of the men to join Union forces.\textsuperscript{118} This pattern suggests that slaves in the upper South challenged the southern paternalist ideal more openly than slaves residing in the lower South. Virginia and Maryland slaves' proximity to the free states and Union lines undoubtedly played an important role in their defiance.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 4.
Upper South slaves had easier routes of escape and sympathetic whites to help them cross from slave state to free state. The lower South slaves, however, faced innumerable difficulties if they attempted to escape.

The differences between the upper and lower South are also useful in understanding southern white mistresses’ responses to slaves during the war. The diaries of white southern women, when used in conjunction with the slave narratives, helps complete the one-sided puzzle. Southern white mistresses residing in the upper South experienced more difficulty in controlling their slaves throughout the war, while those mistresses who remained in the lower South, away from Union forces, felt the exercised more authority over their slaves. The frustration and disbelief mistresses who resided in the upper South expressed when slaves began to challenge white authority resulted not only from their assumption of the masters’ position, but also from their geographic location. The war gave upper southern slaves the opportunity to challenge paternalism directly and they simply chose to express their dissatisfaction openly. The fact that slaves residing in the lower South were more reluctant to express openly their dissatisfaction with slavery does not suggest their contentment, however. One South Carolina interviewee, when asked what he thought of slavery, bravely stated: “What do I t’ink ob slavery? I t’ink slavery is jest a murderin’ of de people. I t’ink freedom a great gift. I lak my Maussa and I guess he was as good to his slaves as he could be, but I ruther be free.”

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Conclusion

The Civil War confronted southern paternalism by temporarily striking down its core ideas. Southern women were not the weak and dependent creatures paternalism made them out to be and slaves showed they were unwilling participants in the southern system.

Although the war offered paternalists' dependents the opportunity to voice their dissatisfaction with paternalists ideals, only southern blacks chose to openly confront paternalism. Southern white slaveholding women, despite their redefinition of women's place within white society, chose not to challenge white male dominance. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has shown, southern mistresses had more to lose by openly challenging paternalism; if mistresses did so they risked sacrificing their social and economic status. Racism also played a large role in this, for to fight paternalism meant elite white southern women would have to side with southern blacks, something they were unwilling to do. Yet mistresses were also trapped. By assuming the role of master, southern slaveholding women were forced to defend southern institutions.

Some southern blacks, in contrast, had little to lose and much to gain by expressing their hatred for slavery. The mass exodus of slaves fleeing the upper South suggests that the war exacerbated incidences of overt defiance. As Herbert H. Gutman has shown, the pattern of young, male runaways, common before the war, was not the norm during the conflict; slave families fled plantations with as much frequency. This dramatic shift suggests the war's impact on slave behavior in the upper South. In Virginia and

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Maryland, the war allowed southern blacks to participate in slavery's destruction overtly. South Carolina slaves, in contrast, were geographically isolated from the conflict. Distance from Union lines prevented many of these slaves from being active participants in their own emancipation. Theirs was a more subtle and covert form of resistance, which ultimately may have been as effective in striking down slavery. Nevertheless, few of the interviewees recalled directly challenging slavery either by running away or reacting violently against whites. Many of the South Carolina ex-slaves spoke glowingly of their experiences during slavery commenting that they were better off as slaves than as free citizens. Fear of white retaliation in the 1930s may account for this close identification with the antebellum South. The South Carolina interviewees may have deliberately flowered their recollections to appease an unforgiving white population. Yet their responses also suggest a more chilling possibility, the knowledge that paternalism did not share slavery's fate.

Slavery died with Lee's surrender at Appomatox, but paternalist ideals did not. The dark period known as Reconstruction proved that paternalism was only wounded. It would begin to grow and take shape again after 1877.
Bibliography


