"DON'T LET DE PADDLE ROLLERS CATCH YOU":
PUNISHMENT, CONTROL, AND RESISTANCE IN THE SLAVE SOUTH

by

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(ABSTRACT)

This thesis explores the nature of white-slave relations in the U.S. South during the thirty-year period that preceded the Civil War. It asks one central question: How did slaveowners, overseers, patrollers, and nonslaveowners attempt to physically and psychologically punish slaves and control their behavior? An analysis of the Virginia ex-slave narratives serves as a case study of the ways white agents of authority treated slaves, and state slave codes and state supreme court cases provide information on the legal aspects of slave treatment and limits on white behavior. Additional sources that shed light on antebellum race relations include fugitive slave accounts, slave autobiographies, articles in Southern agricultural journals by owners and overseers, and white travelers' accounts. An examination of these sources shows that slave treatment was fundamentally coercive; that the threat of violence by whites against slaves was an inseparable element of all white-slave interactions; that slave punishment and abuse was frequent and ritualized; that white and slave perceptions of slave punishment differed significantly; and that slaves influenced white behavior, refused to legitimize white authority, and actively resisted abuse.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

An image long associated with the mid-nineteenth-century American South is one of large, stately homes surrounded by shade trees, a tranquil scene that recalls some of the virtues of a Southern way of life: warmth, hospitality, repose. The widespread representation of the Old South as a place of charming simplicity and leisure has its roots in the white middle class, and stands in contrast to the experiences of marginalized groups in Southern society, especially blacks, the majority of whom were enslaved and defined as the property of whites. For most slaves the South was a violent, fearful place they longed to escape, and whites were an ugly and immediate menace.

The historian Eugene Genovese suggested that slave treatment encompassed three elements, or tiers: the first described slaves' physical condition, material provision, and punishment; the second included slave culture and community life; and the third layer was access to freedom and citizenship. This thesis will contribute to the historical discussion on slavery and Southern society by providing a detailed study of Genovese's first criterion, the physical and psychological punishment and abuse of slaves by slaveowners, slave managers and supervisors, and nonslaveowners. The legal aspects of slave treatment and limits on white behavior will also be investigated, and white and slave perceptions of slave treatment, and slavery itself, are juxtaposed.

The primary focus of exploration is how whites punished slaves and attempted to control their behavior through the use of violence and the threat of physical harm. This study will engage the historical debate over the nature of slave punishment; specifically, why and how often did whites punish and abuse slaves? Did whites rely more on incentives or
punishments to motivate and control slaves? And, did the monetary value of slaves discourage slaveowners from abusing their bondspeople?

Although slaves were victims of white brutality they were not passive or defenseless, and in fact they often actively resisted abuse. The master-slave relationship was imposed by whites but its parameters were defined by both parties; slaves influenced white behavior, and the balance of power between slaveowners and bondspeople constantly shifted. Slaves refused to legitimize white authority, had many reasons to challenge it, and taught their children to do the same. White treatment of slaves depended at least in part on how slaves behaved, and thus a record of extensive mistreatment would serve as evidence of the strength and perseverance of slaves' struggle against bondage.

**Literature Review**

The historiography of American slavery is of much value and interest as a chronicle of scholars' changing attitudes towards issues of race. A notable early twentieth-century work that addressed slavery was Ulrich B. Phillips' *American Negro Slavery* (1918). Phillips' perceptions of slavery combined elements of denial and outright distortion of the historical record with the fervor of an apologist. For example, he characterized the slave regime as one of mutual loyalty, and rejected evidence of widespread abuse of slaves by whites: The planter "refrained from the use of fetters not so much because they would have hampered slaves in their work as because the general use of them never crossed his mind. And since chains and bolts were out of the question, the whole system of control must be moderate; slaves must be impelled as little as possible by fear, and as much as might be by loyalty, pride, and the prospect of reward." ¹

Phillips' pro-slavery interpretations of life in the antebellum South were not seriously
challenged for several decades, until the publication of Kenneth M. Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution* (1956) and Stanley M. Elkins’ *Slavery* (1959). Both of these authors, however, equivocated on issues of physical and psychological abuse of slaves by whites. The 1960s witnessed the beginnings of a new era in Southern historiography, as historians focused more on slaves’ experiences of slavery and relied more on slave sources to interpret life in the pre-Civil War South. Important early works include Winthrop D. Jordan’s *White Over Black* (1969), John W. Blassingame’s *The Slave Community* (1972), and Eugene D. Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1974).

By the mid-1970s, many historians were readily identifying the inherently cruel, violent, and exploitative nature of slavery, and the study of slave culture had become a legitimate endeavor. Significant works include Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman’s book, *Time on the Cross* (1974), and Herbert G. Gutman’s devastating rejoinder, *Slavery and the Numbers Game* (1975). The second half of the decade saw the publication of Paul D. Escott’s *Slavery Remembered* (1979) and William Van Deburg’s *The Slave Drivers* (1979), both of which reconstruct Southern history from the perspectives of slaves.

During the 1980s there were valuable but sporadic attempts by historians to assert the importance of slaves’ experiences, such as Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), Charles Joyner’s *Down by the Riverside* (1984), and Philip Schwarz’s *Twice Condemned* (1988). More recent works that successfully address slaves’ perceptions of Southern society include Norrece T. Jones’ *Born a Child of Freedom, Yet a Slave* (1990), and James Oakes’ *Slavery and Freedom* (1990).

Of particular interest and importance to Southern historiography was the addition of slave-based primary sources such as the Federal Writers’ Projects ex-slave narratives (1936-37). These became widely available with the publication of George Rawick’s *The
American Slave (1972) and Charles L. Perdue’s Weevils in the Wheat (1976).

There has been a widespread belief among historians of the slave South that slaveowners’ economic interests generally dictated a policy of restraint when punishing slaves. Kenneth Stampp, for example, described harsh physical punishment of slaves by their masters as a potentially "costly indulgence," and especially if a slaveowner injured a productive field hand. Similarly, John Blassingame assumed that the monetary value of a slave was the ultimate determinant of "the amount of cruelty to which a slave was subjected." And Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman described the behavior of slaveowners as rational and motivated solely by economic considerations: "The main thrust of the economic incentives generated by the American slave system operated against ... abuse." In contrast with the assumption that planters behaved in ways consistent with their pecuniary interests, some historians recognized that human behavior cannot always be predicted by economic factors. James Oakes, for instance, noted that abuse and negligence were practiced by profit-conscious slaveholders. Moreover, he pointed out that market pressures often worked against the interests of slaves.

The historiography of American slavery became more rigorous and inclusive with the addition of evidence gleaned from slave-based sources. Even when contemporary scholars use these sources, however, they sometimes differ over their interpretation and meaning. An example of this is the debate over what method was most frequently used to motivate and control slaves, incentives or punishment. Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman suggested that many slaveowners employed "a flexible and exceedingly effective incentive system" to achieve maximum productivity from their enslaved work force, whereas Herbert Gutman argued that Fogel and Engerman misinterpreted the evidence and, as a result, grossly underestimated the prevalence of punishment in relation to positive labor
incentives.\textsuperscript{7}

Related to historians' assumptions about the use of incentives versus punishments are their perceptions of the frequency of abuse of slaves by whites. According to later scholars, Ulrich Phillips, Kenneth Stampp, and Stanley Elkins consistently underestimated the occurrence of specific forms of discipline, such as whipping. Eugene Genovese believed that the "typical master went to his whip often--much more often than he himself would usually have preferred."\textsuperscript{8} And Paul Escott agreed that whipping and other forms of physical cruelty were commonly used to punish slaves; in fact, he estimated that fewer than one in twenty slaves escaped whipping or other physical abuse.\textsuperscript{9}

\textbf{Evaluation of Sources}

The major primary sources that will provide evidence for this work are ex-slave narratives, fugitive slave accounts, slave autobiographies, articles in Southern agricultural journals by slaveowners and overseers, white travelers' accounts, state supreme court cases, and state slave codes. The first three sources, in particular, are quoted extensively and are critical to a definitive understanding of United States history.

Perhaps no source captures the experiences of slaves in the antebellum South as vividly and effectively as do ex-slave narratives. And, of the subjects addressed by ex-slaves, none was mentioned more frequently or with more feeling than the punishment and abuse they endured at the hands of owners, overseers, patrollers, and other whites. The physical and psychological violence perpetrated by whites is evidence of the extreme lengths to which they would go to maintain slavery and its accompanying race-based privileges. As a result of the Civil War, some of these privileges came under attack and ultimately were destroyed. Yet the ex-slave narratives are testimony that the culture of
white supremacy survived the war and flourished well into the twentieth century.

In 1936-37, twenty Federal Writers' Project (FWP) workers interviewed 157 ex-slaves from Virginia. The purpose of the interviews was twofold: to provide employment for educated blacks and whites on relief, and to document aspects of black life in North America during slavery. The collection of narratives is especially valuable because it provides the "slave's own view of slavery"\textsuperscript{10} and a wealth of information about daily life in antebellum Virginia. There are, however, a number of potential methodological and interpretive limitations inherent in the interviews. For example, a small percentage of informants were never enslaved; their knowledge of slavery was limited to observation or hearsay, not direct personal experience. And, of the informants who were enslaved, approximately one in three experienced less than a decade in bondage. Only one in three informants reached adulthood as a slave, and about the same percentage of slaves were age six or younger when the Civil War began.

Related to the age of slaves upon emancipation is the age at which they were interviewed for the FWP. In 1936-37, the age of the informants ranged from seventy-one to \textsuperscript{110}, which raises questions regarding the reliability of long-term memory. Another limitation of the narratives is geographical. A full 10 percent of informants grew up outside Virginia, and the majority of native Virginians who were interviewed lived in the Piedmont and Tidewater areas of the state.

Lastly, several methodological shortcomings relate to gender and race. The sex ratio of the informants was skewed: females constituted 60 percent of the Virginia ex-slave sample. And the interracial make-up of many interviews (seven of the twenty FWP workers were white) influenced the tone and content of the interviews. Ex-slaves were more guarded in their responses to white FWP workers, and less likely to condemn whites and
slavery. Thus the same topics were not covered in similar ways in each interview.

Despite considerable limitations, the interviews with Virginia ex-slaves provide invaluable information regarding slavery and racial dynamics in the pre-Civil War South. In particular, a content analysis of the narratives should shed light on the ways whites treated, and mistreated, slaves.

Like slave narratives, fugitive slave accounts and slave autobiographies must be read with care, as many were heavily edited by abolitionists. Furthermore, these sources are criticized for not being representative of most slaves; perhaps only the most ill-treated slaves ran away (or slaves who lived in the upper South and had easier access to the North), and only the most dedicated and talented wrote autobiographies. Other potential shortcomings include contradictions, errors of historical fact, exaggeration, and self-flattery.

Articles in Southern agricultural journals by slaveowners and overseers represent the ideal of slave management, and it is difficult to determine if whites followed their own advice or the advice of their peers. Additionally, it is unclear if these periodicals were widely read. White travelers’ accounts are another valuable source of information about slavery and the nature of Southern race relations. Beginning in the 1820s, large numbers of tourists from the Northern U.S., Europe, and England visited the American South, and some of these travelers wrote books about their journeys. Between 1836 and 1852, for example, over 250 visitors published their observations on the South.11 White travelers’ accounts, like slave autobiographies, were often written from memory, and sometimes considerably altered by over-zealous editors.

State supreme court cases and state slave codes are useful tools with which to reconstruct the history of white-slave relations. Court cases provide documented evidence of physical abuse of slaves by whites, though they may represent only the most extreme
forms of abuse. They also illustrate the tenuous legal limits on white behavior towards slaves. State slave codes defined what slaves could and could not do, and suggest what slaves, and their owners and managers, were doing frequently enough to warrant legislation. No state, though, had a comprehensive slave code, and only a small percentage of slaves had contact with official law enforcement and the judicial system.
CHAPTER TWO
PUNISHMENT AND ABUSE

The ritual punishment and abuse of slaves by whites served several functions, perhaps the most obvious of which was simply to make slaves work. Physical punishment (or the threat of it) was one of the few options available to slaveowners, who lacked such traditional incentives of a legitimate employer as wage reductions. Henry Banks, a slave for thirty years in Stafford County, Virginia, attested to the effectiveness of abuse as an instrument of labor discipline: "I always tried to do the work faithfully that was assigned me,-not because I felt it a duty, but because I was afraid not to do it."¹²

Slaveholders also punished bondspeople for presumed transgressions, and punishment served as an example, and deterrent, to other slaves. Masters understood the impact of a public whipping on the slaves who witnessed it, or heard about it afterward. Frederick Douglass, from Talbot County, Maryland, spent twenty-one years as a slave before he escaped. He described his reaction when, as a child, he observed the whipping of a slave woman: "The shock was tremendous. I was terrified, hushed, stunned, and bewildered."¹³

Whites relied on physical violence to restrain slaves' behavior and to maintain control over many aspects of slaves' lives. Public punishment in particular was used to establish and enforce white domination, and slaves were aware of the threat of violence, whether or not violence actually occurred. Both slaveowners and bondspeople recognized that physical coercion was needed to assure obedience and deference to white authority. A. T. Goodloe, a planter, believed that the use of the lash was necessary to "keep up [the] subjection"¹⁴ of his slaves. And Henry Bibb, a slave, concluded that "the object of [being
flogged] was to degrade me and keep me in subordination."15 Whites attempted to humiliate and dishonor slaves by physically abusing them, and slaves readily identified whites' motives and goals. John Holmes, a slave in Hanover County, Virginia, remembered what his master used to say: "A man must be whipped, else he wouldn't know he was a nigger."16

The punishment and abuse of slaves by their owners was influenced by white public sentiment and peer pressure. A number of historians have suggested that slaveholders wished to avoid reputations for "savagery"17 and "inordinate cruelty"18 and thus practiced moderation when punishing slaves. Some white travelers' accounts verify this. In the 1850s, Frederick Law Olmsted, a visitor from the North, observed that "public sentiment condemned the man who treated his slaves with cruelty."19

Undoubtedly, there were slaveowners who cared little about their reputations and peer criticism, so community censure of slaveowners was of limited effectiveness. Occasionally a slaveholder would intervene directly when a peer's behavior was seen as especially vicious or sadistic, but this did not occur often. If one questioned a master's right to complete domination over his or her slaves, the concept of slavery itself would lose its meaning.

Religion also operated as a form of moral pressure against the cruel treatment of slaves. Some ministers, for example, preached that excessive abuse was barbarous and unChristian, and led to Divine Censure.20 Religion, however, was also used to justify slavery and white rule over blacks. Ultimately, public sentiment and peer pressure did not prevent much white-on-black violence, and cruelty to slaves was only recognized by most whites in its extreme forms, such as torture and murder.

The physical and psychological punishment of slaves by whites was so consistent
that it can accurately be described as ritualized. Regardless of the age or sex of the slave, or often even the nature of the offense, punishment was assured. Slaves perceived punishment as swift, harsh, and excessive, the price of asserting their wills in an ongoing struggle with whites. Slaves were often immobilized before being whipped, and tying up a slave emphasized his or her helplessness and submission to the will of the slaveowner. Immobilization took many forms: whites tied slaves to trees, strapped them across boxes, benches, barrels, and logs, and hung them from hooks in the ceiling.

Sometimes slaves were "horsed up," or raised up on the shoulders of another slave and whipped. Slave children were often simply held by their owner and whipped, like William Lee of Richmond, Virginia, whose mistress clamped his head between her knees and whipped his backside. Some slaveowners built permanent whipping posts, like the one on the Moore plantation in Southampton County, Virginia, where John Brown was enslaved. According to Brown, the whipping post consisted of "two solid [wooden] uprights, some ten feet high, with a cross-beam at the top, forming a kind of gallows. Along the cross-beam were three or four massive iron cleats, to which pulleys were fixed," over which a cord rested, and the cord was tied tightly around the slave's wrists. Whippings were commonly preceded by stripping slaves, both male and female, of some or all of their clothing. This reinforced the slave's subordination to the owner and was a form of public or private humiliation for the slave.

Whippings, by far the most common form of abuse, were administered by male and female slaveholders, who used a variety of implements to punish slaves. Small tree branches, or switches, of hickory, birch, cherry, and white oak were favored by whites for their ability to inflict pain without leaving extensive scars. A special type of switch, however, the "chinkey-pen," was roasted to toughen it, and it caused considerable scratching and
tearing of the skin.

Leather whips, including horse, bull, and "nigger" whips, left disfiguring scars on slaves' backs and legs. Cornelia Carney described her father's back as "a sight" and "scarred up an' brittle fum shoulder to shoulder 25 from whippings. Charles Crawley, a slave in Lunenburg County, Virginia, recalled that whites used a leather "strop" called a "cat [of] nine tails 26 that was as wide as a hand and cut in strips, with a knot tied at the end of each strip. And the slave Charles Grandy, of Norfolk, Virginia, remembered a popular whipping technique called "checking": the owner whipped the slave's back "straight up and down, 27 and then perpendicular to the first blows, so the slave's back was cut up in squares.

That whites often reacted impulsively to slaves' transgressions is evident in the array of household and farm implements they used to punish slaves. These included brooms, saws, chairs, hoes, pestles, and according to the slave Elizabeth Sparks, "anything [whites] could get their hands on. 28 Paddles were also frequently used to discipline slaves. Henry Bibb stated that the paddle on his Kentucky farm was "a piece of hickory timber, about one inch thick, three inches in width, and about eighteen inches in length. The part which is applied to the flesh is bored full of quater inch auger holes 29 so the skin would be sucked through the holes and form blisters. It was common for whites to pour salt water or brine (often called "pickling") on slaves after they had been whipped, which temporarily increased slaves' suffering and was thought to disinfect the wounds.

Many whites designated a specific area of the farm where slaves were to be whipped, such as the barn, stable, granary, or carriage house. Occasionally slaves were punished in the yard of the "big house" or in the smokehouse, icehouse, or behind slave quarters. And the woods at the edge of the farm served the purpose as well. Bondswoman
Alice Marshall remembered that slaves on her Nottoway County, Virginia, plantation were taken "down de branch" and chained to a tree, "where switches [were] everywhere."30

Variations of Physical Abuse

The most common and widespread forms of abuse were whippings and beatings, probably because they could be administered swiftly, with little forethought or planning, and with a minimum of provisions. Many former slaves described being "knocked and beaten" by whites, who slapped, punched, kicked, or spit at them. Slaveowners also twisted the ears of bondspeople they thought were eavesdropping.

More elaborate sorts of punishment involved confinement and incarceration, which required considerably more preparation and supplies than flogging and beating. Some masters forced slaves to spend time in a "nigger box," a small cell with a few holes for air and just enough room for a slight change of position.31 On estates with large numbers of slaves there was often a small jail built specifically to hold errant blacks. Sometimes slaves spent time in public jails, which could be as unpleasant and arduous as any punishment devised by the slaveowner and administered on the plantation. Henry Bibb described a public jail in Louisville, Kentucky, where he was confined, as filthy and infested with fleas, lice, and mosquitoes. There were no furnishings so he slept on the floor, and the food was scant and unappetizing.32

Slaveholders possessed a mindboggling array of stocks and fetters with which they confined slaves, such as ankle rings, balls and chains, and the "stiff knee," which consisted of shackles on the slave’s ankles with a rod to the waist that prevented the subject from bending the knees to run. John Brown’s punishment for running away was to wear a head halter with bells:
A circle of iron, having a hinge behind, with a staple and padlock before, which hangs under the chin, is fastened round the neck. Another circle of iron fits quite close round the crown of the head. The two are held together in this position by three rods of iron, which are fixed in each circle. These rods, or horns, stick out three feet above the head, and have a bell attached to each. The bells and horns do not weigh less than from twelve to fourteen pounds . . . . I wore the bells and horns, day and night, for three months . . . . Let alone that their weight made my head and neck ache dreadfully . . . at night I could not lie down to rest . . . so I was obliged to sleep crouching.33

A number of slaveowners burned or branded slaves in order to punish them. Arthur Greene of Nottoway County, Virginia, recalled that his owner placed a switch in hot ashes and then held it to slaves’ skin.34 And William Brown, a slave in Kentucky, said that when his master wanted to chastise him, he tied him up in the smokehouse, lit tobacco stems, and "smoked" him, a practice that induced a severe allergic reaction and fits of coughing and sneezing. An exceptionally sadistic slaveowner might even set fire to a slave as a method of torture or execution. Harriet Martineau from England, who spent two years (1834-36) traveling through the U.S. South, noted “the death[s] of four [male slaves] by summary burning alive”36 in the first thirteen months of her visit.

Other forms of physical punishment that whites used to discipline and terrorize slaves included ear cropping, tarring and feathering, and "cat hauling": dragging a frightened or angry cat, with claws extended, across a slave’s back. Slaveowners also sheared the heads of male and female slaves, and occasionally castrated a male slave, as if the slave was an animal who could be emasculated and thus subdued.37

Slaves were sometimes subjected to considerable pain and suffering for reasons other than punishment. John Brown, for example, survived an especially horrifying ordeal at the hands of Dr. Thomas Hamilton, who saved the life of Brown’s master. Out of gratitude, Brown’s owner “loaned” him to the physician so he could experiment on Brown in his search
for a remedy for sun stroke. Brown was placed in a pit in the earth that was heated by burning dried red oak bark, with only his head above ground. Hamilton administered a "medicine" and observed how long Brown stayed conscious, taking note of the temperature in the pit when Brown passed out. This was repeated five or six times at three-day intervals; Hamilton's object was to determine which medicine allowed Brown to withstand the greatest degree of heat. Hamilton also used Brown in other experiments, one of which involved fasting and bloodletting, and another that caused blisters on Brown's hands, legs, and feet. These activities continued for a period of about nine months, at the end of which Brown was so weak he was unable to work.

Death was also a form of punishment for certain offenses committed by slaves, and it was occasionally the unintended result of excessive violence by slaveowners. Sometimes a slave was put to death in private by the owner on his (or less likely her) plantation. Bondsman Horace Muse remembered that the severe abuse of a female slave led to her death: her owner tied her to the thrashing drum of a wheat thrasher and she was hit with the fan until she died.

Slave transgressions that warranted death were deemed serious enough by whites that the loss of the accused slave's labor was justified. Michael Hindus' study of criminal prosecution in South Carolina showed that, between 1800 and 1855, 296 blacks were executed for committing murder (85), insurrection (61), burglary (41), assault (37), rape (28), arson (23), or poisoning (23). Lynching was yet another form of summary punishment that whites used to eliminate troublesome slaves and to frighten others into submission. The execution of a slave was sometimes followed by a gruesome spectacle: the head or body of the dead slave was publicly displayed as a warning to the local slave community.

In some states slaves who were sentenced to death did not hang; instead they
were transported out of the country, usually to Liberia or another part of Africa. After 1801 in Virginia, for example, the law allowed for any slave under sentence of death to be sold in a public auction to the highest bidder, who was then required to "carry out of the United States" the reprieved convict. If the transported slave returned to Virginia, the original sentence of capital punishment was reinstated. Owners of transported slaves received compensation from the state, which reimbursed the owner with money collected at the slave’s auction. The state benefited economically from transportation when the proceeds of the sale exceeded the market value of the slave.

The punishment and abuse of slaves by whites sometimes incorporated elements of sexual cruelty. Rape, or the threat of rape, and other types of sexualized violence were directed at all slaves, regardless of gender, but because of the taboo surrounding sexuality, the evidence for such abuse is scarce. Ex-slaves rarely spoke of sexual cruelty, and whites hesitated to accuse their slaveowning peers of sex crimes. Sometimes criminal proceedings recorded cases that involved sexual abuse, such as Humphreys v. Utz (1856). The Humphreys, absentee owners of a large plantation in Louisiana, sought civil damages of $5,000 from their overseer, Henry Utz, because he "inflicted cruel treatment of an unusual inhuman and outrageous nature . . . upon two of the negroes placed under his care," one of whom subsequently died. Utz killed the slave "by nailing the privates of [the slave] to the bedstead and then inflicting blows upon him until [the slave] pulled loose from the post to which he had been pinned by driving an iron tack or nail through his penis." The Humphreys also accused Utz of abusing another slave in a similar manner. Utz denied the allegations, but eventually the supreme court of Louisiana ruled in favor of the Humphreys.

Two other Louisiana cases allude to cruelty of a sexual nature committed by whites against slaves, but cannot be substantiated, as both of the trial court records are missing. In
Hendricks v. Phillips (1848), an overseer was accused of "revolting" and "utterly indefensible" behavior with a slave woman, and in Dwyer v. Cane (1851), an overseer was accused of "grossly and openly immoral" conduct with female slaves.

Psychological Abuse

The psychological abuse of slaves by whites was an integral part of slavery, and as common and injurious as physical violence. Slaveholders resorted to various forms of psychological punishment for some of the same reasons that they physically abused slaves: to maintain order and control of their plantations, to make slaves work, and to enforce white domination over blacks.

Slaveowners' attempts to control their bondspeople were evidenced by a strong emphasis on rules and strict obedience to white authority. By rigidly enforcing rules and harshly disciplining wayward slaves, whites sought to impress upon slaves a sense of obligation and duty. Any breach of plantation order by slaves was perceived by whites as a challenge to the slave system and was punished accordingly.

Some slaveholders prided themselves on their ability to control slaves and exact obedience without resorting to physical violence or overt psychological coercion, and sincerely seemed to believe that threatening and browbeating slaves could be as harmful and counterproductive as corporal punishment. A plantation owner in Alabama wrote that "nothing more completely cowards and prostrates [slaves'] spirits as taunting them with gibes, sneers, and scoffs. Scolding . . . . has the effect of making [some slaves] hardened, perverse, stubborn scoundrels; others again will be rendered stupid and foolish by it. And it always has the inevitable tendency to make them less valuable."50 This slaveowner simultaneously professed an awareness and concern for his slaves' emotional well-being,
yet kept them in bondage, stripped of virtually all their rights.

On an abstract level, slaveowners understood that their ability to verbally and psychologically threaten and otherwise abuse slaves helped to perpetuate white supremacy, but whites also employed various forms of psychological coercion simply to achieve immediate practical results. In order to discourage slaves from being out after dark, visiting neighboring plantations, for example, whites tried to frighten slaves with stories of the supernatural and evil spirits who lurked in the woods and along footpaths and roads.\textsuperscript{51}

Whites lied to slaves to get them to submit to white authority. During the Civil War, Caroline Hunter's mistress told her that if she ran away from her Suffolk, Virginia plantation to join Union troops, the Yankees would bore holes in her arms, put wagon staves through the holes, and make Hunter pull the wagon like a horse.\textsuperscript{52} And, as a warning to all slaves not to flee their owners when Union troops were nearby, or to assist Yankees in any way, a Suffolk, Virginia, slave who violated these rules was forced to preach at his own funeral and dig the grave before he was hanged.\textsuperscript{53}

Perhaps one of the most effective forms of psychological coercion was threatening to divide and sell members of slave families. Herbert Gutman suggested that the break up of a single slave family had a "geometric social meaning" among slaves: the break up affected the particular family and their kin, slave neighbors, and those who met the individuals who were sold, so slave awareness of the effects of sales spread geographically and across time.

Gutman estimated that between 1820 and 1860, about two million\textsuperscript{55} slaves were sold in local, interstate, and interregional markets. Assuming that slave sales did not occur on Sundays and holidays and that selling went on for ten hours on work days, he calculated that a slave was sold somewhere in the United States on average every 3.6 minutes.\textsuperscript{56}
It seems likely that the threat of sale was a powerful long-term technique of controlling slaves and may have replaced physical violence as the preferred method of slave punishment on some plantations. The Virginia slave Cornelius Garner described the "bigges' punishment" as the threat of being sold down south to Georgia, which was "wersen a lickin". And on weekends if slaves were loud and disturbed whites, the master would choose the slave family with the most children and threaten to sell them all. Garner observed that "ev'ybody sho' keep quiet arter dat".58

**Behaviors Punished**

Slaveowners punished and abused slaves for myriad transgressions and violations of plantation rules. The majority of slave behaviors that were punished by whites fit into three broad categories and are related to slave families and personal conduct, defiance of and insolence towards whites, and absenteeism.

Some masters recognized that stable slave marriages and families meant a more productive, and perhaps docile, work force. Consequently, they encouraged the formation of slave families and punished slave behavior they perceived to be anti-family. Adultery was frowned upon by some planters, like one who wrote that "no slave shall be allowed to cohabit with two or more wives or husbands at the same time, doing so shall subject them to a strict trial and severe punishment."59

In the 1850s, the slaveowner Richard Eppes, of Charles City County, Virginia, developed a Code of Laws in which the "seventh commandment" was, "You [slaves] shall not commit adultery."60 The penalty for the first offense for an adulterous male was twenty stripes on his bare back, to be administered by his companion's husband; the slave woman who committed adultery received fifteen stripes "from her seducer."61
Fighting amongst slaves was often discouraged by the threat of punishment. According to Eppes’ Code of Laws, slaves who quarreled or fought with each other were "stripped naked placed in a closed room each with a cowhide and made to whip each other until . . . commanded to stop." Slaves were also punished for uncleanliness, such as wearing dirty clothes, and not keeping their quarters reasonably tidy, as noted by one overseer: "Once or twice in the month, I made it my business to visit each negro house; I examined every thing therein; saw that the negroes permitted no dirt or filth to be collected about them, and as invariably punished them where I found they had done so." Some slaveowners whipped slaves for drunkenness, and even forbade slaves to drink at all, like one Mississippi planter: "I permit no spirits to be brought on the plantation, or used by any negro, if I can prevent it; and a violation of this rule . . . is always followed by a whipping."

Work was one area in which slaves’ misbehavior had great potential to exasperate masters and hinder the economic productivity of their estates. Slaveowners and overseers threatened with a whipping slaves who dawdled or worked slowly, like Allen Crawford, who was whipped by his "missus" when he was a child because he took too long to gather firewood. Elizabeth Sparks recalled that the black seamstress on her farm was sometimes forced to work standing up, to prevent her from dozing off. If the seamstress became sleepy, the owner hit her hand with a switch. Some planters employed a work quota system to motivate slaves to work efficiently, and when a slave failed to reach the quota, he or she was likely to be punished. Bondsman Rev. W. P. Jacobs said that slaves on his Roanoke-area, Virginia, farm were whipped if they failed to cut and finish one hundred wooden rails per day.

Overseers often abused slaves for damaging crops, even when the damage was
accidental. Solomon Northup noted that a slave was lashed twenty times if a dry leaf or piece of boll was found in the cotton, or if a branch was broken while picking cotton in the field. Matilda Henry Perry, a slave from Danville, Virginia, recalled that slaves received a lashing if they cut tobacco leaves before they were ripe: "Us black people had to look arter dat 'baccy lak it was gold," and slaves "better not do nothin' to dem 'baccy leaves." And the overseer on Jordan Johnson's plantation beat and screamed at a slave for chopping down a young tobacco shoot. Some overseers reserved an especially revolting punishment for slaves who overlooked worms on tobacco plants. Tobacco flies produced caterpillars, or grubs, "as big as a man's little finger;" Simon Stokes of Guinea, Virginia, was forced to eat the grubs he failed to pick off the tobacco leaves. So was Nancy Williams of Yanceville, Virginia.

Slaves were also corrected for breaking tools or simply using a tool that happened to give out due to age and wear. Jermain Wesley, a slave in Tennessee, was hoeing when his master witnessed the hoe handle come loose from the iron wedge. He "leaped on [Wesley], and held him down . . . and . . . crowded the [hoe] wedge in [Wesley's mouth], until it reached the roof of his mouth, before he could stop it with his teeth. He now began to pound it in with his heavy fist . . . the wedge was driven into the roof of his mouth, and mangled it frightfully." At least a few slaves flatly refused to do dangerous or exceptionally unpleasant work. The slave William Johnson, Jr., remembered that the overseer on his Albemarle County, Virginia, farm whipped slaves who refused to go out in a storm to retrieve cattle. Illness or pregnancy was often used effectively by slaves to avoid work, but sometimes slaves were punished for being (or feigning) sick. Bondswoman Henrietta King said that even pregnant slaves who had morning sickness faced possible punishment if they did not
show up for work in the fields.76

Unlike field slaves, house slaves usually answered to their owners, not overseers, but they too encountered white violence as a result of unsatisfactory job performance. Cooks were certainly vulnerable to abuse; Liza Brown of Sussex County, Virginia, recalled that when her mother burned the bread or biscuits, the "missus" beat her with a strap with prongs on it.77 Likewise, Lorenzo Ivy said that his grandmother, a cook on a Pittsylvania County, Virginia, farm was beaten if whites did not like what she fixed to eat.78

In addition to being punished for work-related offenses, many slaves were whipped, beaten, or threatened for stealing from their owners or other whites. The high incidence of food theft suggests that some slaves were forced to steal to survive. The rations they received were often inadequate, sometimes woefully so, and slaves sought to supplement their diets with chickens and hogs from the master’s storehouse. Katie Blackwell Johnson remembered that her "uncle" Lewis was caught stealing hogs and chickens so often that "when he went to Gawd he didn’t have the skin he was born with."79 And Marrinda Jane Singleton noted that after she was whipped for stealing a pig, if she saw a pig "a mile off" she felt like running from it.80

Slaveowners devised clever methods of curtailing theft, like punishing all slaves until the guilty party confessed or was turned in by others. Richard Eppes had a policy that "should we loose [sic] hogs sheep corn or other things . . . and the rogue cannot be detected . . . then the whole plantation must suffer, a day for a hog or sheep or barrel of corn, of your Christmas hollodays [sic] will be taken off until we have taken the whole [then] we will find out some other punishment."81

Not all food theft, however, was intended to supplement a meager diet. When Henrietta King was eight or nine years old she stole a stick of candy from her owner and
was severely punished for it. As a result of the beating she became permanently disfigured.\textsuperscript{82} And when John Brown and his younger brother stole a watermelon from their master’s garden, Brown was flogged with the cowhide until he "could scarcely move."\textsuperscript{83}

Perhaps of even greater concern to whites than theft was slaves’ irrepressible determination to learn to read and write. A few literate slaves could work to the master’s advantage, but widespread slave literacy clearly threatened whites’ ability to control their bondspeople. The slave Ellis Bennett described a generalized white reaction to blacks who possessed books: “White man stan on poarch. See nigguh walking by wif buk in ‘is ‘and. White man call, ‘Nig-gu-h nigguh, God dam! Come heah!’ Nigguh come, white man snatch buk. Say ‘Buk no fo’ nigguh; buk for’ wite man.’ Kick nigguh in slack o’ pants say, ‘Git long wuk you son of a bitch.’”\textsuperscript{84} Albert Jones of Southampton County, Virginia, stated bluntly that his master beat him if he caught him with a book or paper.\textsuperscript{85} And Horace Muse said that "ef anybody try to read an’ write, [the master] say he was longin’ to go to dat ‘great free country.’ Dat mean [the master] was aimin’ to kill"\textsuperscript{86} the slave who attempted to become literate.

Slaves risked severe punishment and went to great lengths in order to learn to read and write. Several states banned whites from teaching slaves, and just obtaining the necessary supplies was difficult, as one slave attested: "I was in slavery nine years, and always watchful and on the alert, before I [obtained] a sheet of paper," and "after various experiments I succeeded in making ink, by boiling white maple bark, and with a feather . . . manufactured a pen."\textsuperscript{87}

Owners were aware of the connection between literacy and slave mobility, and some forbade slaves to attend church or read the bible because they feared slaves would use religious instruction to become literate. And some states incorporated laws against
slave literacy in their slave codes, because literate slaves forged passes and other documents that granted freedom of movement, if only for a limited time and to a specific destination. Slaves faced harsh penalties for forging documents. The Alabama slave code of 1852, for example, stated that "any slave who writes for, or furnishes any other slave with any pass or free paper, on conviction before any justice of the peace, must receive one hundred lashes on his bare back."88

Slaves often defied whites and behaved in ways contrary to the wishes of their owners. Sometimes slave resistance took the form of insolence, which was punishable on Richard Eppes' plantation by reducing the slave's allowance. For repeat offenders the penalty increased to ten stripes for the second occurrence and twenty-five stripes for the third.89 Lying to owners or overseers also frequently warranted corporal punishment in the form of a whipping or beating. And one planter interpreted slaves' complaints about an overseer as impertinent and punished his slaves accordingly: "It has always been a rule with me to whip any negro that tries to tell me anything about the overseer. I think I can find out without their assistance whether he is a gentleman or not."90

Slaves' opposition to white tyranny was manifested verbally, through lying and impudence, and many slaves physically resisted white domination by refusing to be whipped, or by assaulting and sometimes killing their owners and managers. Slaves who refused to be whipped risked being sold or put to death at the hands of vengeful whites who often administered an especially brutal beating after finally subduing the rebellious slave. The slave who dared to physically attack any white was severely punished, and many were executed. Richard Eppes' Code of Laws set forth the punishment for striking or otherwise injuring an overseer: "Penalty--first blow, 150 stripes. 2nd blow--200 stripes. 3rd blow--300 stripes." If the act was extreme, the slave "will be given up to the laws of his country and
hung.”91 There was even less tolerance for a slave who harmed his or her master; Eppes specified one penalty of five hundred stripes in five days, or for an especially bad act, death by hanging.92

Organized slave rebellions were usually followed by mass executions of the participants and a renewed commitment on the part of whites to regulate and control slave behavior. In August 1831, for example, bondsman Nat Turner of Southampton County, Virginia, led an uprising of sixty slaves that lasted for two days and resulted in the deaths of fifty-eight whites. Eventually, fifty-three slaves were brought to trial for the massacre, many of whom were executed or transported out of the state. In response to the rebellion, the Virginia General Assembly enacted “black laws” that restricted the freedom of all blacks to assemble, attend religious services, and carry firearms. Similar laws were passed in other slave states.93

Slaveowners frequently punished slaves for various forms of absenteeism, such as failure to show up for the nightly horn blow, or the weekly roll call, which often took place on Sundays at sunset. A more serious violation of plantation rules occurred when a slave left the plantation without the owner’s or overseer’s written permission. In the 1840s, Gov. James Henry Hammond of South Carolina designed a Manual of Rules to be used on his estate to assist overseers in meting out punishments for slaves. Hammond recommended fifteen to twenty lashes 94 for the slave who left the plantation without permission. South Carolina’s slave code called for summary execution for any slave off the plantation who refused to submit to an investigation.95 Another state slave code read that “if any slave go upon the plantation, or enter the house or out house of any person, without permission in writing from his master or overseer . . . the owner or overseer of such plantation . . . may give, or order such slave to be given ten lashes on his bare back.”96
Fugitive slaves were especially troublesome and irritating to slaveowners, who usually punished runaways with whippings, confinement, shackles, or a combination of the three. Some owners devised punishments that discouraged running away by making all slaves suffer for the actions of a fugitive. Christopher Nicholls, a slave in Virginia, noted that all the slaves on his plantation "were put on half allowance" until the runaway returned. Nicholls' owner probably assumed that a slave would be less likely to flee if his or her actions directly affected other slaves. And fugitives often received food and assistance from their peers, so this method of punishment was designed to discourage all slaves from disobeying white rules.

Some slaves fled their owners as a result of excessive punishment, or ran away for other reasons only to return home to vindictive whites. Ex-slaves Cornelia Carney, Samuel Chilton, and William Brooks described beatings that were so severe they prompted slaves to flee to the woods or neighboring plantations for refuge. A few whites failed to comprehend that ill treatment often forced slaves to run away. Dr. Cartwright of the University of Louisiana believed that some slaves suffered from drapetomania, an irresistible propensity to run away. To cure this disease or prevent it from occurring Cartwright recommended "whipping slaves out of it" and "whipping the devil out of them."

A point of consensus among ex-slaves was that upon returning home a runaway could expect immediate retribution. Katie Blackwell Johnson speculated that fugitive slaves got "the worst. [Whites] used to put them in the stocks and whip their bare backs until they were as raw as a piece of beef," and then rub the wounds with salt and pepper. Elizabeth Sparks recalled that "plenty of slaves ran away. If [whites] ketch 'em, they beat 'em near to death." And William Brooks said that sometimes the owner of a fugitive slave would pass word in the slave quarters that it was safe for the slave to return, only to beat the slave
"worse'n ever"\textsuperscript{102} when the slave finally came home.

Many slaveholders viewed fugitive slaves as a special threat and punished them harshly. Governor Hammond placed running away first on his list of offenses, not only because of the loss of the absent slave's labor but because running away was perhaps the ultimate form of defiance; the fugitive slave was at least temporarily, free and unsupervised by whites. And as long as a slave survived as a fugitive, other slaves would certainly consider running away a viable option, although the prospect of being hunted and possibly mangled by dogs and then whipped no doubt deterred many slaves from attempting to escape.
Slaves were accountable to, and often abused and exploited by, whites of virtually every description, the most prominent of which were slaveowners and their children, "middle management" overseers, and working class patrollers. On rare occasions free blacks owned slaves, and undoubtedly some black masters treated slaves in much the same ways as did their white counterparts. Despite the threat of punishment, slaves waged a continuous struggle to assert autonomy and resist the will of white authority figures.

**Overseers**

If many slaves were ambivalent about their owners, they reserved unmitigated hatred for overseers (also called stewards or "nigger drivers"), who watched over slaves and directed their work. Some masters delegated to overseers the responsibility of punishing slaves, and overseers became a potent symbol of unlimited and arbitrary white and vicious figures on the plantations.

Overseers had myriad responsibilities that involved managing slaves and supervising their labor, so slaveowners were spared some of the more tiresome and unpleasant aspects of slave ownership. Most overseers were delegated the task of getting field hands to work in the mornings, like the overseer on William Brown's farm who blew a horn at half past four for roll call, and whipped any tardy slave ten times with his "negro-whip." During the day overseers directed slaves' work schedule, dealt with equipment problems, and distributed slaves' food and clothing rations. Sometimes at the end of the day an overseer was responsible for yet another roll call to make sure that no slaves were
missing. Overseers usually lived on the plantations where they were employed. Slaveowners expected them to be on call twenty-four hours a day for any problems that involved slaves and the production of goods on the farm, so overseers were in close contact with slaves for most of each work day, six days a week.

Ex-slave narratives are filled with accounts of brutality perpetuated by overseers. Minnie Folkes of Chesterfield County, Virginia, said her mother suffered misery at the hands of the overseer, who tied her up naked and beat her with a horse whip "'til the blood ran down her back to her heels."\textsuperscript{104} Allen Wilson remembered that the overseer on his Brunswick County, Virginia, farm harassed and beat his mother mercilessly.\textsuperscript{105} Georgina Gibbs noted that her overseer often yelled and cursed at slaves and lashed them with cowhide.\textsuperscript{106} And William Lee said his overseer strapped him naked across a barrel and used a paddle with holes in it that sucked up the skin through the holes and made blisters. Then the overseer would "strick down hard on dese blisters [until] dey bust. When dem dar blisters bust, [the overseer] got a bucket of salt water [and] 'nints [annoints] you."\textsuperscript{107} If most overseers were as sadistic as these it was no wonder that, as Frederick Douglass said, the "very presence [of the overseer] was fearful, and [slaves] shunned him as [they] would have shunned a rattle snake."\textsuperscript{108}

In contrast to slaves' descriptions of overseers as tyrants who were "insensible to the claims of humanity"\textsuperscript{109} were owners' somewhat contradictory attitudes. On one hand, slaveowners delegated considerable authority to their overseers and relied on them to be dependable and trustworthy, and to balance the owner's economic interests with the well-being of slaves. One planter stated, "The manners of an overseer... should be kind. Kindness, and even gentleness, is not inconsistent with firmness and inexorable discipline. If they require a whipping, then whip them, and be done with it. If they require a reprimand,
give it privately, and in a low tone of voice." 

On the other hand, many slaveowners and nonslaveowning whites in general had little respect for the class of men hired to manage slaves. Frederick Law Olmsted observed that overseers were often "coarse, brutal, and licentious," and one planter was openly scornful of his employee:

When [slaves] have been treated with injustice and falsehood, and a deaf ear turned to their complaints, the master knowing nothing except through the medium of an overseer, probably as trifling and contemptible as the negroes, the worst consequences must be anticipated . . . . Nothing is more common or more pernicious than to invest your overseer with discretionary powers in inflicting punishment. Passions, prejudice, or ignorance often makes him grossly abuse it . . . . The negro . . . must quietly submit to the despotic will of one but little his superior.

A large segment of the public, as well as slaves, held in disrepute overseers who, without property of their own, were often socially isolated, underpaid, and had little opportunity to move up the career ladder.

The use of overseers by owners varied according to the size of the farm and its geographical location. Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman suggested that among moderate-sized holdings (sixteen to fifty slaves), about one out of six plantations had an overseer; on slaveholdings with over fifty slaves, one out of four owners used an overseer. The use of overseers was nearly universal in the rice and sugar-producing regions, and almost as popular in the cotton belt, but the number of overseers diminished in the Upper South where smaller farms produced tobacco and grain. Some states with large slave populations had statutory provisions that required the use of overseers. In 1806, Louisiana mandated the use of an overseer on every plantation; South Carolina also made the presence of an overseer mandatory.

Overseers had to maintain a careful balance between the demands of the
slaveowner and the well-being of the slaves. This required a certain amount of diplomacy, and effective overseers had to constantly supervise slaves to insure that they were working diligently. Many overseers used slave drivers (who were slaves themselves) to help achieve production goals and to facilitate white-slave interactions, and slaves often looked to drivers for a more humane leadership.

Slaves and slaveowners alike exercised power over overseers. Overseers were in an especially stressful position in relation to slaveowners, who employed them, and slaves, who made plantations productive and profitable. Overseers answered to owners, followed their work orders, and owed them their livelihoods. They risked being fired if they did not meet their employer's expectations. It was slaves, however, whose labor supported owners and overseers, and overseers were responsible for making slaves work and achieve production goals. If an overseer used excessive force with slaves, he incurred their wrath, and they often resisted by sabotaging farm supplies or failing to meet work quotas. Some slaves expressed resentment towards their overseers by verbally or physically attacking them.

Harsh treatment of slaves by an overseer might also anger the slaveowner, who did not want his or her slaves harmed because it could hamper their productivity. One planter specifically forbade his overseer from using inordinate force when punishing slaves: "The overseer should never in correcting a slave, on any occasion, unless in self-defence, kick or strike him with his hand, or a stick, or the butt end of his whip." Another planter wrote "it is the duty of the overseer to enforce discipline and subordination, and with as little and as mild punishment as possible. The overseer whose constant and only resort is to the lash, and who expects to remedy by that all the mal-practices which he should by his foresight and attention have prevented, is a brute, and deserves the penitentiary." And one planter
clearly stated the connection between the ill-treatment of slaves by overseers and slaves’ economic productivity: "An overseer [should not] ever fret at negroes. It injures their capacity for work. If they are working wrong show them how to work right, have patience and they will soon learn; or if they are too stupid put them at something else. We have seen negroes injured in value for being fretted at and terrified when young." ¹¹⁹

On some plantations there were sometimes several drivers who, like overseers, supervised slaves’ work, and mediated between slaves and the overseer. Drivers usually received special treatment in the form of food or clothing bonuses and they often had greater freedom to move about the plantation and interact with whites. Slaves and whites accorded drivers more respect than they did other slaves, and overseers in particular supported the authority of drivers and punished them less frequently than field hands.

While most overseers were white, some were black, and the race of the overseer did not necessarily influence the punishment that slaves received. Marrinda Jane Singleton remembered that the "colored" overseer stripped slaves "stark naked" and beat them with little provocation. ¹²⁰ And Charles Grandy knew of a "colored" overseer who whipped slaves while he was on horseback. ¹²¹ Rev. W. P. Jacobs said a mulatto "nigger driver" whipped his own half-brother. ¹²²

Sometimes, however, a black overseer resisted punishing slaves. West Turner said that on his farm in Nansemond County, Virginia, the owner delegated whipping to a black steward who pretended to whip slaves when the master was not around to witness the punishment. ¹²³ And, of course, occasionally whites whipped their black overseers like they whipped common field hands.

Although overseers wielded considerable power on most plantations it was not unlimited, and slaves often influenced the behavior of their overseers and set the boundaries
of acceptable slave-overseer interactions. Slaves offered resistance to what they perceived as especially vicious and excessive mistreatment by overseers. Bondswoman Julia Frazier recalled that the slaves on her farm in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, retaliated against a cruel overseer: "Slaves got 'ol' him once an' slung him real good an' they didn' have any mo' trouble out of him."123 And slaves like William Grimes were quick to threaten an overseer that they would tell the owner of transgressions committed by the overseer: "I was one day at work on the plantation . . . when [the overseer] came to me, threatening to whip me, and caught hold of me for that purpose. I clinched him and told him that if he struck me, I would inform my master about his riding a favorite horse without my masters [sic] consent [and] the fear of detection induced him to let me go."125

Most overseers did not want their employers to hear complaints from slaves about their treatment, and slaves repeatedly used this to their advantage when dealing with overseers. Frederick Douglass commented that

when a slave had nerve enough to go straight to his master with a well-founded complaint against an overseer, though he might be repelled and have even that of which at the time he complained repeated, and though he might be beaten by his master, as well as by the overseer, for his temerity, the policy of complaining was, in the end, generally vindicated by the relaxed rigor of the overseer's treatment. The latter became more careful and less disposed to use the lash upon such slaves thereafter.126

**Patrollers**

Many slaves feared and despised patrollers as much as they did overseers. The stated function of slave patrols was security; they traveled from farm to farm, observed slave activity, and punished slaves who violated white rules. From the perspective of slaves, patrollers were lawless gangs of whites who rode through the countryside on horseback terrorizing hapless blacks. Any slave caught off the owner's property without a
pass, or remit, was whipped, sometimes severely. Arthur Greene reported that if patrollers found a slave without a pass "dey would nigh beat him to death."  

That the patrol system was effective in intimidating slaves is evident in the narratives. The threat of patrollers prevented some slaves from attending parties, dances, and religious gatherings. Ishrael Massie said that when patrollers broke up an unauthorized slave worship service they were "mostly after the preacher 'cause he wuz de leader of de meetin' an' ef dey caught 'im, he knowd dar wuz a beatin' fer 'im." Other slaves, like Sis Shackleford of Lunenburg County, Virginia, overcame their fear of patrols and attended slave events "patterollers or no patterollers."  

And the slave Robert Williams remembered a song he sang at dances on his Lynchburg, Virginia, plantation: "Run nigger run, run nigger run! Don't let de paddle rollers catch you! Run nigger run."  

The composition of patrols varied from state to state and even from area to area within a state. In Virginia, for example, patrols were loosely connected to the state militia, and each county was empowered to appoint patrols for a term not to exceed three months. Virginia patrols were instructed to visit slave quarters and other slave spaces to insure that slaves were not having "unlawful assemblies," stockpiling guns or other weapons, or traveling without permission. PatROLS often consisted of a captain and three others, usually armed and accompanied with dogs, who worked the roads and checked plantation quarters every few weeks or as often as indicated.  

In some areas, patrollers were compensated for their time directly by slaveowners, who paid an amount proportionate to the size of their enslaved work force. Other localities paid patrollers through revenues from a tax levied on slaves, which slaveowners paid to the county treasury. And according to one slave, at least some patrollers "made a business of whipping slaves for a fee . . . [they] would ride about informing persons who kept no
overseers that if there was a slave to be whipped . . . they would be available when called, for a fee of half a dollar . . . widows and other females got their slaves whipped in this manner.”

Some states with large slave populations made patrol duty mandatory. Alabama, for example, required that “all white male owners of slaves, below the age of sixty years, and all other free white [male] persons, between the ages of eighteen and forty-five years, who are not disabled by sickness of bodily infirmity, except commissioned officers in the militia and persons exempt by law from the performance of militia duty, are subject to perform patrol duty.” These patrols consisted of four to six members, one of whom was the leader, and they served two to three weeks per year. A member of a patrol had the option of sending a substitute or paying the precinct a ten dollar fine if they failed to perform patrol duty or send someone in their stead.

Like overseers, patrollers could be merciless, and they had even less incentive than overseers to treat slaves with reserve. Overseers usually lived where they worked and were subordinate to and supervised by slaveowners. Patrollers, however, were frequently slaveowners and peers and thus less accountable to their fellow planters than were hired managers. Occasionally, patrollers beat overseers.

Among slaves, patrollers were notorious for harsh and arbitrary punishment, sometimes in flagrant violation of their state’s slave code. Indeed, patrollers’ reputation for abuse apparently concerned some planters so much that they forbade patrollers from physically punishing their slaves. Charles Crawley said that his master did not allow patrollers to whip his slaves, and Candis Goodwin recollected that her owner prohibited patrollers on his farm because they were “trechous.”

Some planters were openly critical of the nature and activities of slave patrols, and
there was an element of class conflict between well-to-do planters and nonslaveowning whites who, in some areas, made up the majority of slave patrois.\textsuperscript{140} When poor whites were relegated the task of patrol duty they occasionally used it as an opportunity to retaliate against their wealthy neighbors by mistreating slaves or encouraging slaves to break the law.

Unscrupulous patrollers often seized for their own use any provisions found on a slave caught without a pass. Francis Henderson was born a slave in 1822, and in 1841 he escaped from his owners in Washington, D.C. His description of the activities of slave patrols would certainly make any planter’s blood boil: ‘The patrols are poor white men, who live by plundering and stealing, getting rewards for runaways, and setting up little shops on the public roads. They will take whatever the slaves steal, paying in money, whiskey, or whatever the slaves want. They take pigs, sheep, wheat, corn—any thing that’s raised they encourage the slaves to steal: these they take to market next day.’\textsuperscript{141}

Planters frequently distrusted patrols and viewed them with disdain. They described them as irresponsible roughnecks who made a sport of their patrol duties. One slaveowner believed that “our Patrol laws are seldom enforced, and even where there is a mock observance of them, it is by a parcel of boys or idle men, the height of whose ambition is to ‘ketch a nigger.’ It becomes, then, the duty of every planter to patrol his own premises.”\textsuperscript{142}

Although slave patrois were more organized and effective in some areas than in others, all patrols exercised extensive powers and had innumerable advantages over slaves that enabled them to supervise and control slaves’ activities. Yet many slaves circumvented patrollers’ surveillance techniques and the rules regarding the use of passes. Slaves warned each other of approaching patrols and of the plans of patrollers. Sometimes
they discovered which patrollers were illiterate and presented them with a document disguised as a pass. Other times, literate slaves forged passes. Many slaves simply disregarded the pass requirement and traveled late at night or early in the morning. And some slaves responded to the actions of patrols with direct and aggressive tactics, like tying a rope from tree to tree across a road at night, so when a patrol came through on horseback they were in for a painful surprise. West Turner remembered when a group of patrollers rode into a "great line of grape vines" that slaves stretched across the road, the "vines tripped up de horses an' threwed de ole paddyrollers off in de bushes. An' some done landed mighty hard."143

**Nonslaveowners and Slaveowning Women and Children**

Nonslaveowning whites, like overseers and patrollers, appeared frequently in the ex-slave narratives. Poor whites, those who did not own slaves or land and worked for other, more affluent whites, sometimes antagonized blacks mercilessly. Mollie Booker, for example, said that poor whites "use to ketch us an' whup us unti dey make us call dem marser an' have us drapin' curtseys to dem."144

Slaveowning women, like their male counterparts and overseers, were actively involved in slave management and figured prominently in the white struggle to maintain slavery. The white female slaveowner, or mistress, usually supervised all domestic operations on the plantation, from preparing food and entertaining guests to making clothes and taking care of anyone who was sick. As a result, most Southern slaveowning women were in close contact with house slaves (and probably some field hands) and relied upon them extensively.

When mistresses could not physically manage a slave, simply chose not to, or
feared for their safety if they attempted to punish a slave, they called on their spouse or the overseer or driver. Although the mistress wielded considerable power, slaves understood that the master was the ultimate authority on the plantation and the threat of male intervention was probably a strong incentive for house slaves to obey the mistress.

As an intermediary between slaves and masters, the mistress bypassed the rule of the overseer and slaves used this to their advantage. Yet, regardless of any sympathy mistress felt for the plight of slaves, she was an authority figure and a slave manager and, like white males, she coerced, threatened, and attacked slaves to get them to bend to her will. Since most house slaves were women and children, many mistresses were probably able to physically control and punish them with minimal assistance from men, and with reduced fear for the mistresses' safety. As a child, John Brown had a mistress, Betty Moore, who "was an old, big woman, about seventy, who wore spectacles and took snuff [and] . . . always carried [a cow hide] dangling at her side, like ladies . . . wear their scissors. It was painted blue, and we used to call it the 'blue lizard.' " And Mattie J. Jackson recalled that her mistress "was constantly pulling our ears, snapping us with her thimble, [and] rapping us on the head and sides of it. It appeared impossible to please her." Historians have portrayed the role of the mistress as a complex one. On one hand, white women served as intermediaries between masters and slaves and between overseers and slaves. They sometimes intervened when a slave was to be punished and slaves knew to appeal to the planter's wife or daughter if they hoped for leniency from the master. On the other hand, mistresses could be verbally and physically abusive towards slaves. Moreover, they called on their husbands, brothers, or sons to control and discipline bondpeople when they doubted their own ability to punish a slave effectively.
The children of slaveowners followed the examples of their parents and other white adults and attempted to control slaves' behavior through coercion and physical abuse. Many planter children grew up thinking that slaves were manageable only by using physical force. Henrietta King remembered that her mistress would hold her while her daughter whipped King. In this respect, white slaveowning parents served as role models for their offspring. Phillip Ward witnessed his master’s young son whip a slave boy, and Armaci Adams said that her master’s son would jump on her and beat her "somepin turrible fer nuffin. Ef I walked by 'im, he'd slap me." Slaves like Solomon Northup were acutely aware of the influence white parents had on their soon-to-be slaveowning children:

The effect of these exhibitions of brutality on the household of the slaveholder, is apparent. Epps' [Northup's owner] oldest son is an intelligent lad of ten or twelve years of age. It is pitiable... to see he chastising, for instance, the venerable Uncle Abram. He will call the old man to account, and if in his childish judgment it is necessary, sentence him to a certain number of lashes, which he proceeds to inflict with much gravity and deliberation. Mounted on his pony, he often rides into the field with his whip, playing the overseer, greatly to his father's delight. Without discrimination, at such times, he applies the rawhide, urging the slaves forward with shouts... while the old man laughs and commends him as a thorough-going boy.

Most abuse perpetrated by white children seems to have been directed at their black peers but occasionally a white child, like Epps' son, threatened a black adult. The overseer's boy on Mrs. Bird Walton's farm harassed her father in the presence of the overseer and the owner. In these situations the traditional relations between white parent and child were altered, and the master or mistress encouraged the child to humiliate the adult slave with physical abuse; thus the white child was made the superior of the slave. This was perhaps the ultimate symbol of the degradation of slavery: a child whipping a powerless adult.
Drivers

Slaves sometimes achieved positions of authority in the white hierarchy, and one of the most powerful positions a slave could attain, in the opinion of whites, was that of slave driver. The driver (also referred to as a boss, straw boss, whipping boss, crew leader, foreman, head man, leading man, over- or underdriver, and overseer) was almost always a man, and he possessed supervisory or police authority over other slaves. When a woman served as a driver it was as the leader of the "trash gang," a group that consisted of children, the elderly, and females in advanced stages of pregnancy. Male drivers supervised all-female field labor crews.

Drivers, like overseers, had innumerable responsibilities that revolved around crop production and the material needs of slaves. Frequently drivers and overseers performed similar, complementary roles; for example, both might be in charge of assembling slaves in the morning and leading them to the fields. The driver assigned tasks, called break times, directed the feeding of field hands and draft animals, surveyed the condition of plows, and noted if any equipment needed to be repaired.

Drivers were sometimes held accountable for the condition of tools used by field hands and for the satisfactory performance of labor gangs. They also kept track of the number of calves branded, fluctuations in livestock holdings, and quantities of farm products gathered by slaves. Drivers weighed crops at harvest time and distributed weekly rations to slave families. Literate drivers dealt with merchants, suppliers, and traders. They also policed slave quarters, checked slave cabins at night, and reported missing slaves to the overseer or owner.

Regardless of the extent of a driver's responsibilities on the farm, most owners kept a close watch on their drivers and expected them to follow their instructions explicitly. One
planter stated that, "whatever other privileges I allow the driver, he is not suffered to send any negro off the plantation, unless he sends him to me . . . for as his transactions are confined solely to the plantation, there rarely could exist a necessity to communicate elsewhere than with me."\textsuperscript{157}

Not all plantations used drivers, and some owners assigned the job on a seasonal basis, so drivers who supervised agricultural laborers during planting and harvesting might serve as artisans, carriage drivers, house servants, or wagoners at other times of the year. Masters also randomly selected slaves to capture and punish fugitives and other wayward bondspeople. It was possible, then, for almost any slave man to exercise the authority of a driver, if only for a short time.\textsuperscript{158}

Certainly a considerable amount of a driver's time was spent dealing with recalcitrant slaves, and some owners empowered their drivers to administer corporal punishment. Some drivers carried whips, while others were provided with bundles of small, thin wands or switches. The racial dynamics and implications of a slave whipping or otherwise abusing another slave for the benefit of a master placed drivers in a unique and precarious position. The driver was trusted and relied upon by his owner and overseer and enjoyed an elevated status and certain privileges and perquisites as a result. In Richard Eppes' Code of Laws, for example, the fourteenth "commandment" instructed slaves to defer to the driver: "You [slaves] shall obey your foreman because he is responsible to the overseer or master for your work."\textsuperscript{159} The penalty for disobeying the driver was five stripes for the first offense, ten for the second, and fifteen stripes for the third offense.\textsuperscript{160}

In order to maintain his position the driver had to assert his authority and demand a high level of discipline and performance from slaves,\textsuperscript{161} among whom he probably earned a degree of respect. Undoubtedly, though, many slaves viewed drivers with hostility and
resentment because drivers chose to inflict cruelty on other slaves instead of foregoing the advantages they received from their positions. There is evidence that some drivers attempted to juggle the demands of the owner and overseer with the welfare of slaves. Solomon Northup, for example, was a driver for eight years and during that time he "learned to handle the whip with marvelous dexterity and precision, throwing the lash within a hair's breadth of the back, the ear, the nose, without, however, touching either of them."162

As slaves, drivers knew that no matter how expertly they performed their duties they would remain in bondage, and as long as they were enslaved whites could threaten, beat, or sell them and their family members. And some masters, like Richard Eppes, determined that drivers who violated a plantation law should receive "double"163 the punishment of other slaves because of their visibility and status as favored slaves.

Slaves were expected to obey all whites, but first and foremost their owners, who slaves perceived as somewhat more humane than overseers but ultimately responsible for the conditions of slavery. In the ex-slave narratives there are virtually no descriptions of overseers as anything other than violent and unscrupulous. Overseers were quick to resort to physical coercion and very few questioned their right to do so. Like overseers, patrollers were consistently identified by slaves as fearful and corrupt figures who were shunned and avoided. Even some whites described the activities of patrollers as contemptible, especially when patrollers encouraged slaves to steal from their owners and sell the goods to the patrols and poor whites. Unlike most white men, slaveowning women and children did not rely on physical violence to intimidate slaves as much as they used verbal and psychological coercion and the threat of male intervention, all of which were effective means of controlling slaves' behavior. Drivers exercised authority over other slaves and were entrusted with numerous tasks, yet they remained slaves with no hope of achieving
freedom or even a higher status on the plantation. Some drivers balanced the owner's demands with the needs of slaves; others were harsh and unsympathetic towards their fellow bondspeople. And, of course, any driver who was perceived by the owner to be too lenient with slaves did not remain a driver for long.
CHAPTER FOUR
SLAVE TREATMENT AND THE LAW

Slaves in the antebellum South were subjected to a tremendous amount of violence at the hands of their owners, managers, and other whites, and they received very little assistance or protection from the white legal system. Slaveowners sought to defend their rights and expand their authority to insure complete dominion over bondspeople, and to this end they established citizen patrols, slave curfews, pass systems, prohibitions on slave education, and trade regulations. Slave laws were designed to serve a slaveowning society and thus offered black victims of white brutality virtually no legal redress.

Often slaves who lived on large, geographically isolated estates had little if any knowledge of or contact with the formal law enforcement mechanism of their state or local government. The large majority of slaves who violated white rules were punished summarily by their owners or overseers, although sometimes a slave was brought to court by a white other than his or her owner and punished for a crime such as arson, theft, or assault. Usually in these cases the plaintiff was seeking monetary recompense and had tried unsuccessfully to collect damages outside the courtroom.

The nature of chattel slavery contributed to what some historians have called the dual legal structure of the antebellum South, which consisted of the formal state-wide legislative and judicial system that enacted and enforced slave laws, and the informal system of plantation law implemented by slaveowners on their individual estates. A critical feature of plantation law was that the state, in effect, allowed planters to define the codes of legal behavior for slaves, and to determine and administer punishment for violations of the codes.
Thomas R. R. Cobb, a slaveholder from Georgia recognized as one of the most learned legal scholars of the mid-nineteenth century, wrote extensively about slave laws and the slave's standing before the courts. An excerpt from his work described his concerns with plantation law and the complexity of defining the cruel treatment of slaves without unduly interfering with a planter's rights over his or her property:

[The] perfectly unprotected and helpless position of the slave . . . is one of the most vulnerable points in the system of negro slavery, and should be further guarded by legislation. Large compensation should be provided for informers, upon the conviction of the master of cruel treatment; and perhaps the best penalty that could be provided upon conviction, would be not only the sale of the particular slave cruelly treated, but of all the slaves owned by the offender, and a disqualification forever of owning or possessing slaves . . . . As to what amounts to cruel treatment . . . The general principle would be, that the master's right to enforce obedience and subordination on the part of the slave should, as far as possible, remain intact. Whatever goes beyond this, and from mere wantonness [sic] or revenge inflicts pain and suffering, especially unusual and inhuman punishments, is cruelty, and should be punished as such.¹⁶⁶

Most slave states gave whites wide latitude to exact obedience from bondspeople and to punish them; physical discipline was almost unlimited, and slaveowners had considerable legal authority over slaves. When protection was extended to slaves, at least on paper, it was often rendered worthless by a prohibition in Southern law against allowing slaves to testify in court, except against each other.¹⁵⁷ Often courts refused to make a distinction between what constituted acceptable correction of a slave and what was cruelty, and some whites used this to their advantage. After 1821 in South Carolina, for example, if a white murdered a slave it was a capital offense, but if the killing occurred "in heat and passion"¹⁶⁸ the penalty was reduced to a $500 fine and six months in jail.

By the 1850s all state slave codes had made the cruel treatment of slaves a punishable offense, even when the mistreatment did not result in the death of the slave.¹⁶⁹
Whether by constitutional provision, court action, or statute, all slave states prohibited slaveowners from willfully inflicting death or mayhem on a slave, even to make the slave obey. A Kentucky court ruled that if death resulted from a master’s mistreatment of his or her slave, the legal presumption was that “no sufficient cause existed for its infliction.” In Virginia there was a legal distinction between “securing proper subordination and obedience” and “punishment for punishment’s sake.” And as early as 1824 the Louisiana state slave code declared that although the “slave is entirely subject to the will of his master, who may correct and chastise him,” such punishment could not be “with unusual rigor, nor so as to maim or mutilate him, or to expose him to the danger of loss of life, or to cause his death.”

By the mid-1800s state slave codes consistently recognized excessive physical violence against slaves as a crime. In 1841, for example, South Carolina made the unlawful beating or whipping of a slave a misdemeanor punishable by a $500 fine and up to six months in prison. Alabama could levy fines of $25 to $1,000 on any slaveowner who inflicted, or allowed to be inflicted, cruel punishment on a slave. If abuse resulted in the accidental death of a slave the perpetrator could be found guilty of second-degree murder. Furthermore, “any person who with malice a forethought causes the death of a slave, by cruel whipping or beating, or by any inhuman treatment, or by the use of any weapon in its nature calculated to produce death, is guilty of murder in the first degree.”

Despite the laws that made cruelty to slaves a punishable offense, many whites violently abused bondspeople with little concern for legal consequences. Slaveowners rarely accused each other of cruelty, and even then some states, like South Carolina, allowed a white person “by his own oath, [to] clear and exculpate himself.” Sometimes whites who were guilty of murder went unindicted because any semblance of resistance on
the part of the slave removed whatever protection the law offered. And even when whites were indicted for assaulting or murdering slaves they frequently avoided conviction. The testimony of former slaves, like Frederick Douglass, supports this conclusion:

One of the commonest sayings to which my ears early became accustomed, was, that it was "worth but half a cent to kill a nigger, and half a cent to bury one." While I heard of numerous murders committed by slaveholders on the Eastern Shore of Maryland [where Douglass was enslaved], I never knew of a solitary instance where a slaveholder was either hung or imprisoned for having murdered a slave. The usual pretext for such crimes was that the slave had offered resistance. Should a slave, when assaulted, but raise his hand in self-defense, the white assaulting party was fully justified by Southern law and Southern public opinion in shooting the slave down, and for this there was no redress.

The owners of bondspeople injured by other whites sometimes initiated a civil action to recover the value of the slave if the slave died as a result of the attack, or for the amount the injury diminished the monetary worth of the slave. Owners sought compensation for damage done to their property, not necessarily punishment for the perpetrator of the abuse. The scarcity of criminal prosecutions of whites for cruelty towards slaves resulted from solidarity among masters and other whites, such as public prosecutors, who chose not to prosecute owners despite ample evidence of abuse in the civil court records.

When a slaveowner was formally charged with mistreating his or her own slave, the court records often revealed considerable savagery. In *State v. Jones* (1843), an Alabama planter, Jones, appealed his conviction of murdering a female slave, Isabel, by beating her with clubs, sticks, and whips. The original verdict of guilty of murder in the second degree, with a ten-year penitentiary sentence, was affirmed.

In *Souther v. Commonwealth* (1851), a Virginia slaveholder, Souther, appealed his conviction of second-degree murder and its five-year prison term. Souther was originally found guilty of killing his slave Sam, who
was tied to a tree and whipped with switches. When Souther became fatigued . . . he called upon a negro man of his, and made him cob Sam with a shingle. He also made a negro woman of his help to cob him. And after cobbing and whipping, he applied fire to the body of the slave; about his back, belly, and private parts. He then caused him to be washed down with hot water, in which pods of red pepper had been steeped. The negro was also tied to a log and to the bedpost with ropes, which choked him, and he was kicked and stamped by Souther. This sort of punishment was continued and repeated until the negro died under its infliction.\textsuperscript{182}

The appeal claimed that Souther's behavior amounted to manslaughter only, but the supreme court upheld his murder conviction because Souther "in so inflicting punishment for the sake of punishment" could not use the relation of master and slave as an excuse, and thus was subject to "the principles of common law in relation to homicide."\textsuperscript{183}

Sometimes a white killed a peer's slave, as in the case of\textit{State v. Mann} (1829). The defendant, John Mann of North Carolina, hired the slave Lydia from Elizabeth Jones. Jones prosecuted Mann for committing assault and battery on Lydia, who was shot as she fled Mann. The lower court convicted Mann, who appealed to the state supreme court where the decision was reversed. The judge, Thomas Ruffin, stated that slaveowners could not be held criminally responsible for assaulting a slave (even though in this case the slave did not belong to Mann) because it contradicted the absolute power of the slaveholder: "The slave, to remain a slave, must be made sensible that there is no appeal from his master; that his power is in no instance, usurped; but is conferred by the laws of man at least, if not by the law of God."\textsuperscript{184}

A large number of criminal prosecutions for cruelty towards slaves were initiated by slaveowners against their overseers. In the Mississippi case\textit{Dowling v. State} (1846), the overseer, Dowling, was charged with the murder of the slave Dick Smith, whom he threw to the ground and assaulted with a two-and-a-half inch thick wooden paddle, inflicting bruises
on Smith's head, stomach, back, sides, and legs. Smith died two months later from his injuries. The state supreme court reversed the lower court's decision of second-degree manslaughter and awarded Dowling a new trial because the prosecutor in the first trial introduced evidence to the jury that should not have been admitted. 185

In the case Craig v. Lee (1853), a Kentucky planter, Craig, sued his agent and overseer, Lee, to recover the value of a pregnant slave whom Lee beat to death. The original verdict found for Lee but the appeals court reversed the judgment and stated that an agent or overseer "may not possess and exercise over the . . . slave power and authority which does not belong to the owner himself, and inflict punishment in a degree and to an extent which would be unlawful in inflicted by the master." 186

Recouping monetary losses was a primary concern of the white parties involved in prosecutions for cruelty to slaves. In Kennedy v. Mason (1855), for example, the owner, Kennedy, dismissed her overseer, Mason, for killing a slave. Mason claimed $600 from Kennedy as the final amount due for his wages but Kennedy filed a reconventional demand for $1,000, the value of Jim Crack, the dead slave. Crack ran away and was captured and returned to Mason, who stripped Crack, tied him "with his belly to the cold ground" (it occurred in January), and beat him with a hand-saw and whip for "at least an hour and a half." 187 Crack died soon afterwards. The lower court found in favor of the unpaid overseer. The supreme court reversed the decision but conceded that Mason enjoyed a "fair reputation" as "a good and humane overseer" who "in this instance . . . permitted his passions to mislead him." 188

On rare occasions the court openly censured whites who were found guilty of abusing slaves. In Jordan v. State (1857), a Georgia overseer, Jordan, whipped a thirteen year-old runaway, Mariah, over four hundred times. She died of her injuries, and Jordan
was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter. The judge who ruled against a new trial stated that "I have looked in vain through the evidence for a single mitigating circumstance... to reduce the crime below the grade of murder. The prisoner had power over the slave. He exercised it most cruelly, inflicting... a beating... which showed... an abandoned and malignant heart." 189

Legal proceedings provide a window through which the attitudes and behaviors of whites and slaves can be examined. State slave codes like those of Alabama and Louisiana show that many slaves engaged in activities that slaveowners perceived as dangerous to white society and as a threat to white authority and control. Slave codes also provide evidence that the abuse of slaves by whites was a serious and widespread occurrence that warranted legislation. State supreme court cases are another valuable source of information on the nature of white-slave relations. They demonstrate that when whites abused slaves, the system of justice denied slaves protection from brutality and often failed to punish whites accused of cruelty towards slaves.
CHAPTER FIVE
PERCEPTIONS OF TREATMENT

The treatment slaves received from their owners was influenced by economic considerations, and most owners sought a balance that allowed them to mistreat slaves without unduly interfering with slaves' productivity. Planters valued slaves for their ability to serve the interests of whites, much like draft animals, as Harriet Martineau noted: "I was frequently told of the 'endearing relation' subsisting between master and slaves; but, at the best, it appeared to me the same 'endearing relation' which subsists between a man and his horse." 190

Slaveowners like Robert Collins believed that their economic success dovetailed neatly with the well-being of slaves:

Indeed, the creator seems to have planted in the negro an innate principle of protection against the abuse of arbitrary power, and it is the law of nature which imperatively associates the true interest of the owner with the good treatment and comfort of the slave. Hence abuses and harsh treatment carries its own antidote, as all such cases recoil upon the head of the owner. Every attempt to force the slave beyond the limits of reasonable service, by cruelty or hard treatment . . . only tends to make him unprofitable, unmanageable, a vexation, and a curse. 191

Planters and slave managers disagreed about how, when, and how much punishment should be administered. Who should punish slaves was also debated. Some planters delegated the task to overseers whereas others reserved it for themselves. Many insisted that punishment be delivered immediately but some recommended that a period of time elapse in order to allow for "cooling off." Others argued the merits of private versus public whippings.

Whatever their differences, many experts on slave management, like Hill Carter of
the Virginia Tidewater, agreed that punishment should be consistent: "In the management of negroes there should always be perfect uniformity of conduct toward them; that is, you should not be too rigid in your discipline at one time and too lax at another . . . . It is the certainty of punishment, and not its severity, which deters from misconduct."192 The planter P. C. Weston instructed his overseer to "remember that a system of strict justice is necessary for good management. No [slave] should ever be allowed to break a law without being punished."193 And the slaveowner Joseph Acklen suggested that slave managers should "never fail . . . to notice the breach of an established rule, and be equally unfailing in punishing the offender."194

A large number of slaveowners placed special emphasis on the importance of administering punishment in a rational and detached manner. They commented repeatedly that slaves should be disciplined coolly and calculatedly, not in the heat of passion. The errant slave should never believe that his or her punishment brought pleasure to the owner or overseer; rather, the correction was for the slave's own good and was administered because of the owner's sense of duty to the slave.195 The slave should recognize that punishment was a consequence of misbehavior and not due to the "excited temper"196 of the owner or overseer. According to one planter, whites should "never display [themselves] before [slaves] in a passion; and even in inflicting the severest punishment, [they should] do so in a mild, cool manner, and it will produce a tenfold effect."197

Some planters, like P. C. Weston, specifically warned against verbally abusing slaves because it reduced "the man who uses [profanity] to a level with the negro, and [is] hardly ever forgotten by those to whom [it is] addressed."198 The slaveowner Harris Evans declared that some slave managers "not only lash with their whips, but whip with their tongues. Under this process the moral, no less than the physical, the inward, no less than
the outward man is subdued. The negro is not only corporeally [sic] bastinadoed into
callousness, but his spirits are chafed into insensibility, and broken down and destroyed.\(^{199}\)

Occasionally a slaveowner instructed his or her overseer to tailor the punishment to
the individual slave instead of providing an inflexible set of rules for the punishment of all
bondspeople. The goal was always to coerce the slave to do what he or she was told to do,
and to this end one planter recommended that "with one [slave], perhaps, moral suasion will
do--with another flattery, while with the majority the fear of punishment is the motive power.
One is whipped with the first lick, another with moderate correction, while a third one may
require punishment to an extent revolting to the humane man."\(^{200}\)

When planters advocated corporal punishment as a method of disciplining slaves
they preferred whipping, and often went to considerable lengths to justify their behavior.
Some pointed out that throughout the South whites were publicly whipped for committing
crimes, students were whipped by teachers, wives were whipped by their husbands, and
children by their parents.\(^{201}\) Slaveholders also claimed that the use of the whip to correct
slaves was a particularly humane form of punishment when compared with physical
mutilation, which was frequently used in the eighteenth century to punish whites and blacks
convicted of crimes.

Some white travelers to the South also justified planters' use of physical violence to
maintain slavery or, like Sir Charles Lyell from London, denied the extent of abuse: "That the
whip is rarely used, and often held for weeks over [slaves], merely in terrorem, is, I have no
doubt, true on all well governed estates."\(^{202}\) Southern white physicians such as Dr.
Cartwright offered pseudo-scientific rationales for whipping slaves: "A remarkable
ethnological peculiarity of the prognathous race is, that any deserved punishment, inflicted
on them with a switch, cowhide, or whip, puts them into good humor with themselves and
the executioner of the punishment, provided he manifest satisfaction by regarding the
offence as [atoned] for."\textsuperscript{203}

In contrast to slaveowners' and other whites' descriptions of slavery as a humane
system based on reciprocity and mutual obligation are ex-slaves' accounts of abuse,
deprivation, fear, and grief. Harriet Tubman stated, "I think slavery is the next thing to hell";
Benedict Duncan of Maryland would "rather have a day free, than a week of life in slavery";
John A. Hunter of Maryland believed "that slavery is the greatest evil that ever existed"; Mrs.
Christopher Hamilton of Mississippi stated that she would "rather live in Canada, on one
potato a day, than to live in the South with all the wealth they have got"; and Isaac Griffin of
Kentucky called slavery the "greatest curse on earth . . . . A slave in the South suffers death
many times before he does die."\textsuperscript{204}

Some ex-slaves, among them Clara Allen, Anna Crawford, Della Harris, Sister
Harrison, Hannah Johnson, Beverly Jones, and Richard Slaughter, unreservedly identified
their former masters as "good," "kind," or "nice."\textsuperscript{205} Ex-slaves were especially likely to
describe their former owners as tolerable if they did not physically abuse bondspeople and if
they kept slave families together. Ex-slaves also spoke positively of whites who provided
them with adequate food and living quarters.

Most former slaves, however, qualified their positive statements about
slaveowners, which suggests their ambivalence and the low standards to which they held
whites. Albert Jones said his "mastah wuz mighty good" and "he won't ruff; dat is 'f yer done
right"; Patience Avery said her master, Tom Hatcher, "was very kind to his slaves an' didn't
'low dem to be too severely punished"; Elizabeth Sparks described her mistress as a "good
woman. Course I mean she'd slap an' beat yer once in a while but she warn't no woman fur
fighting, fussin', and beatin' yer all day lak some I know . . . . Course no white folks perfect";
and Sister Robinson said her master "wuz a very nice man. I nevah had a lick fum him. Course I was only a slave wen i wuz a little girl."\footnote{206}

That a small minority of slaveowners refrained from physically abusing their bondspeople is evident in the narratives. A few slaves stated matter-of-factly that their owners refused to beat slaves and did not allow beatings by overseers or patrollers. Of the slaves whose masters disavowed physical punishment, a number recognized their unique position vis-a-vis other slaves and used neighboring plantations as standards of how much worse their masters might have been. Candis Goodwin said she was never whipped but she knew of other slaves who were whipped with cowhide; Arthur Greene described his master as not as cruel as other whites; and Marriah Hines said that although she lived with good white folks, she knew there were plenty of slaves who did not fare as well and were treated like "cats and dogs."
\footnote{207 Levi Pollard said his "mars" was good to slaves and "he ain't treat us like us wuz real slaves, like lots er niggers wuz treated";} Frank Bell denied being abused even though he "got in plenty of ruckus"; and Louise Jones said she "didn't have uh bit o' whippin' "\footnote{208 except from her grandmother.} Most slaves' experiences with whites, however, caused slaves to respond like Mrs. James Seward, who said slaves "were all afraid of master: when I saw him coming, my heart would jump up into my mouth, as if I had seen a serpent."\footnote{209 And ex-slave Edward Patterson questioned how anyone could define the conditions of slavery as tolerable: "I was well used, as it is called in the South, but I don't think my usage was human. For, what is good treatment?"\footnote{210} The historian Paul Escott's content analysis of the Federal Writers' Project ex-slave narratives revealed that while ex-slaves did not often mention incidents of mutilation or extreme cruelty, severe abuses did occur. The great majority of slaveowners relied upon}
physical coercion to control slaves, and the larger the plantation, the more likely a slave was
to encounter abuse. For example, on farms with up to fifteen slaves, about four out of five
(78.9%) slaves were whipped, whereas on estates with over one hundred slaves, more than
thirty-nine out of forty (97.9%) slaves felt the whip. 211 Slaves like William Brown observed
firsthand that "no matter how good or useful a slave may be, he seldom escapes the
lash." 212
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

An especially important development in Southern historiography over the past twenty-five years has been the recognition of slave-based sources as critical to our understanding of U.S. history. The Federal Writers' Project ex-slave narratives, slave autobiographies, and fugitive slave accounts are valuable because they provide slaves' perspectives on bondage and myriad details about master-slave relations in the antebellum South.

The punishment and abuse of slaves by whites are particularly salient in these sources. Indeed, white violence was frequently directed at slaves and was designed to humiliate and terrorize them into submission. Because slave labor supported and sustained the economy of the South, slaveowners had strong incentives to force slaves to work. Violence, or the threat of violence, was perhaps slaveowners' most effective means of upholding slavery, and thus preserving their way of life.

The South earned a well-deserved reputation for violence and brutality that resulted from white attempts to enslave blacks, and black challenges to white authority. The culture of violence that existed in the slave states had its roots in white supremacy, and a language, symbols, and rituals that reflected white preoccupation with controlling and subduing blacks. These rituals were characteristic of the antebellum slave South and consistent across time and space. Field hands on an Alabama plantation experienced the violence of slavery in the 1830s in much the same ways as did house slaves in Virginia on the eve of the Civil War. Both groups were punished in similar ways for violating the same standards of behavior.

Whites punished slaves for activities that threatened to weaken their control over
bondsperson. Running away, one of slaves' most effective means of leverage with their masters, was severely punished, as were work-related offenses that hurt the economic well-being of slaveowners. Some planters did not provide slaves with adequate food and supplies, which forced slaves to steal from their owners, thus undermining white authority. And slaves who attempted to learn to read and write were frequently beaten by their owners, who perceived slave literacy as a threat to white hegemony.

The imagery associated with punishment was animalistic and primitive; whites often removed slaves to the barn, stripped them, and tied them up before striking them with a bull or horse whip. The psychological abuse and coercion of slaves by whites was as common and necessary to the perpetuation of white supremacy as was physical violence, and both were critical to the success of the slave system. The threat of sale was one way slaveowners established and enforced domination over slaves. It was a constant reminder that masters had the power to disrupt slaves' most important relationships. Abuse and the threat of injury were integral parts of the daily lives of slaves, and all whites claimed as their right the power to physically and verbally compel the actions of slaves.

Many ex-slaves, like Edward Patterson, rejected the idea that the institution of slavery was ever tolerable, regardless of slaves' physical condition and material provision. Of course, Patterson recognized that the details of slaves' daily lives did matter, in a very real and immediate way. Ample and nutritious food, durable clothing, and adequate shelter, for example, helped slaves to survive, and strengthened their ability to resist white domination and abuse. Patterson, however, believed that the very nature of slavery made the issue of good treatment a peripheral one, and it invalidated slaveowners' and managers' claims that slaves could be "well used."

Between owners, overseers, and patrollers, slaves were subject to near-constant
white supervision and harassment. Overseers and patrollers earned reputations among slaves for unmatched viciousness, and they symbolized lawlessness and seemingly unlimited white authority to brutalize slaves. Ironically the very individuals appointed to manage slaves and regulate their behavior were often viewed by whites and blacks alike as unscrupulous and disorderly rabble rousers.

Poor whites were sometimes pitted against slaves by their wealthier slaveowning neighbors, who played on the racial fears and prejudices of the white working class and encouraged poor whites to exercise their privileges as members of the ruling race. Slaveowners benefited economically from discordant relationships between poor whites and slaves, but sometimes these groups engaged in mutually beneficial activities, such as trading, that worked to the disadvantage of slaveowners.

In addition to being subordinate to all whites, including children, slaves were expected to obey other blacks who held positions of authority in the slave hierarchy. Drivers in particular wielded power over slaves because their status was conferred by the owner, who required all field hands to follow the driver’s instructions. Slaveowners and managers relied upon drivers and allowed them latitude in dealing with field hands and mediating between slaves and white management. The position of intermediary was a precarious one, and drivers who were able to successfully accommodate the needs of whites and slaves were undoubtedly skilled diplomats.

State slave codes and state supreme court cases provide evidence of the type and extent of abuse endured by slaves, and of slaves’ challenges to white control. Although laws and regulations regarding white and slave behavior varied from state to state, every code set forth guidelines for acceptable conduct on the part of whites and slaves. The content of the codes suggests that slaves continually questioned the validity of white claims
of ownership and control over black lives. Bondspeople hastened the demise of slavery with ceaseless defiance of white authority: slaves pursued literacy, became fugitives, fomented insurrection, stole from their owners, sabotaged agricultural production, and defended themselves against the assaults of whites.

Evidence gleaned from the trial records of state supreme court cases throughout the South demonstrates that slaves experienced brutality at the hands of their owners and managers who, despite laws to the contrary, frequently attacked, maimed, and killed slaves with impunity. Slave laws were designed to further the interests of the planter class and thus provided minimal protection for slaves. When whites were prosecuted for cruelty to slaves they often avoided conviction, and even a guilty verdict could mean a light sentence.

A central and recurring concern of whites who took another white, usually an employee or a neighbor, to court for harming a slave was simply to recoup financial losses if the slave was permanently disabled or killed as a result of the abuse. Slaveowners and overseers rarely expressed any feeling for the pain and suffering inflicted upon the injured slave; likewise, courts were often conspicuously silent in the face of horrific abuse. The denial of slaves’ suffering was a mechanism that most white Southerners used in an effort to define slaves as subhuman, as property, and thus without rights or feelings. Trial records offer grim testimony to the savage behavior some whites displayed towards bondspeople.

Court documents are unusual because they provide whites’ perspectives on the mistreatment of slaves by other whites. Some pro-slavery sources, including Southern agricultural journals, acknowledged the potential for the abuse of slaves by their masters and overseers but minimized its importance and spent far more time emphasizing the need for slave discipline. What whites defined as discipline, however, was perceived by slaves as tyranny. The institution of slavery, according to its black subjects, was an illegitimate one,
thus the use of violence by whites to maintain slavery was equally untenable.

Contrary to the expectations of some slaves, the Civil War and emancipation did not change the attitudes and behavior of many whites, who continued to treat blacks with cruelty. During the post-war years, former slaveowners, managers, and other whites directed violence and brutality at ex-slaves. Undoubtedly, emancipation alone could not conquer racism, end the deprivation experienced by blacks, or result in the restructuring of a grossly exploitative labor system.
NOTES


6 Fogel and Engerman, 41.


13Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself; His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 49.


16Drew, 115.

17Genovese, 43.

18Stampp, 179.


20Blassingame, 171.


23Perdue et al., 194.

24F. N. Boney, ed., *A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a*
Fugitive Slave (Savannah, Georgia: Beehive Press, 1972), 36.

25Perdue et al., 66.

26Ibid., 79.

27Ibid., 116.

28Ibid., 274.


30Perdue et al., 202.

31Genovese, 67.

32Osofsky, 107.

33Boney, 76.

34Perdue et al., 205


38Boney, 41-42.
39Ibid., 42-43.

40Perdue et al., 215.


42Philip J. Schwarz, Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 15. Of the slaves executed in Virginia between 1706 and 1809 for crimes against property or persons, or for insurrection, twenty-five were decapitated and their heads or bodies were displayed, and fifteen were quartered and displayed (Schwarz, 15).


44Ibid., 106.

45Authors who have discussed the sexual abuse of slaves include bell hooks (Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism), Jacqueline Jones (Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present), and Deborah Gray White (Ain't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South).


47Ibid., 1304.

48Ibid., 1313.

49Ibid., 1313.


52Perdue et al., 149.

53Ibid., 149.

54Gutman, 163.

55Gutman estimated that the two million included 260,000 slaves who were married and 186,000 slaves who were less than thirteen years old (Gutman, 163).

56Gutman, 124.

57Perdue et al., 102.

58Ibid., 104.


61Ibid., 75.

62Ibid., 75.


65Perdue et al., 74-75.

66Ibid., 275.

67Ibid., 156.

68Osofsky, 322.

69Perdue et al., 223-24.

70Ibid., 160.

71Boney, 151.

72Perdue et al., 281.

73Ibid., 322.


75Perdue et al., 166.

76Ibid., 190.

77Ibid., 63.

78Ibid., 154.

79Ibid., 162.

80Ibid., 267.
81Nicholls, 73.

82Perdue et al., 191.

83Boney, 14-15.

84Perdue et al., 79.

85Ibid., 178.

86Ibid., 216.

87Osofsky, 352.


89Nicholls, 74.


91Nicholls, 75.

92Ibid., 75.

93Virginius Dabney, Virginia, the New Dominion: A History from 1607 to the Present (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1971), 226.

94Rose, 334.

95Hindus, 578.
96 Rose, 182.

97 Drew, 46.

98 Perdue et al., 67, 71, and 57.


100 Perdue et al., 161-62.

101 Ibid., 276.

102 Ibid., 57.

103 Brown, 1-2.

104 Perdue, 93.

105 Ibid., 327.

106 Ibid., 106.

107 Ibid., 194.

108 Douglass, 66.

109 Ibid., 45.


111 Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 74.


114 Fogel and Engerman, 200. Scarborough, however, estimated that on moderate-sized holdings, about one out of nine planters used overseers (Scarborough, 10).

115 Scarborough, 12.

116 Ibid., 14 and 16.


119 Ruffin, 48.

120 Perdue et al., 266.

121 Ibid., 117.

122 Ibid., 156.

123 Ibid., 290.

124 Ibid., 96-97.

126 Douglass, 47.

127 Perdue et al., 125.

128 Ibid., 208.

129 Ibid., 253.

130 Ibid., 326.

131 Stampp, 214.

132 Fry, 85.

133 Ibid., 85.


135 Rose, 179.

136 Ibid., 179.

137 Ibid., 180.

138 Perdue et al., 79.

139 Ibid., 107.

140 On rare occasions free blacks served on slave patrols.

141 Drew, 110.

143 Perdue et al., 290.

144 Ibid., 55.

145 Fox-Genovese, 24.


147 Boney, 7.


149 Perdue et al., 191.

150 Ibid., 301.

151 Ibid., 4.

152 Osofsky, 370.

153 Perdue et al., 298.


155 Ibid., 19.

156 The term "slave driver" was also used to describe a white overseer or slave
trader.


158 Van Deburg, 4.

159 Nicholls, 76.

160 Ibid., 76.


162 Osofsky, 350.

163 Nicholls, 77.

164 Fogel and Engerman, 128.

165 Ibid., 128.

166 Rose, 203.


168 Hindus, 578.

169 Stampp, 219.

170 Bobby Frank Jones, "A Cultural Middle Passage: Slave Marriage and the Family in the Antebellum South" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1965), 47.
171Ibid., 47.

172Ibid., 47.

173Rose, 176.

174Hindus, 578.

175Rose, 192.

176Ibid., 192.

177Ibid., 192.


179Hindus’ study of antebellum South Carolina examined the trial records from eighteen of the state’s forty-six districts, and only sixteen of seventy-one (22.5%) prosecutions for slave murder resulted in conviction. Only one (6.25%) of those carried the death penalty (Hindus, 579).

180Douglass, 68-69.


182Ibid., 224.

183Ibid., 224.

184Rose, 223.


Ibid., 639.

Ibid., 56.

Martineau, 207-8.


Hurricane, 276.


Weston, 38.
199 Evans, 231.

200 Hurricane, 276.

201 Genovese, 64.


203 "Dr. Cartwright on the Caucasians and the African," *DeBow's Review* 25 (1858): 54. "Prognathous" refers to jaws that project forward to a considerable degree.

204 Drew, 20, 77, 80, 124, and 199.

205 Perdue et al., 6, 77, 130, 134, 158, 181, and 289.

206 Ibid., 178, 15, 273, and 241.

207 Ibid., 107, 123, and 139.

208 Ibid., 228, 27-28, and 185.

209 Drew, 29.

210 Ibid., 84.

211 Escott, 56.

212 Brown, 2-3.
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