

“As to those more advanced in life”

Old Age in Slavery

American slavery was a brutal system of exploitation in which white enslavers forced Black people to work for them. Debates continue to rage over whether enslavers were capitalists or how far the US – and the global – economy was shaped by slavery in the Americas, but there is general consensus among scholars that enslavers were profit-driven and focused on extracting the maximum labor from the people whom they enslaved. This manifested in violence, strategic “management,” commercial and capital investment, crop innovations, and the forging of global financial trade networks.¹ It also meant that enslavers sought to exploit enslaved people “from youth to grey hairs.”² Enslavers were cruelly adept

¹ On these debates, see, for example, Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944); Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*; Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*; Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*; Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*; Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*; Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018); Scott Reynolds Nelson, “Who Put Their Capitalism in My Slavery?” *Journal of the Civil War Era*, 5.2 (2015), 289–310; John E. Murray, Alan L. Olmstead, Trevon D. Logan, Jonathon B. Pritchett, and Peter L. Rousseau, “The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism,” *Journal of Economic History*, 75.3 (2015), 919–31; James Oakes, “Capitalism and Slavery and the Civil War,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 89 (2016), 195–220; Peter Coclanis, “Slavery, Capitalism, and the Problem of Misprision,” *Journal of American Studies*, 52 (2018), 1–9; John Clegg, “A Theory of Capitalist Slavery,” *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 33.1 (2020), 74–98; Gavin Wright, “Slavery and Anglo-American Capitalism Revisited,” *Economic History Review*, 73.2 (2020), 353–83.

² Mary L. Cox and Susan H. Cox, *Narrative of Dimmock Charlton, a British Subject, Taken from the Brig “Peacock” by the US Sloop “Hornet,” Enslaved while a Prisoner of War, and Retained Forty-Five Years in Bondage* (Philadelphia: The Editors, 1859), 1.

at assessing the temporal rhythms of the life cycle and adapting to the demands of embodied time when structuring their workforce. As with enslavers' other interactions with Black elders, this flexibility stemmed from economic self-interest and a desire for dominance, not concern for enslaved peoples' well-being – and it came at a great cost for these individuals and the wider slave community.

Within the emerging political rhetoric of paternalism, proslavery propagandists proclaimed enslavers' support for elderly slaves was “an example and mark of fidelity of the master, in consideration for the fidelity and loyalty of his servant.”³ Enslavers, however, were attuned to the temporalities of the aged body and adept at developing flexible work regimes designed to maximize the labor of those whom they enslaved.⁴ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese argued that, in theory, “when [enslavers'] interest and humanity clashed, piety and honor demanded a decision for humanity.”⁵ Nevertheless, minding Michael Tadman's injunction in his exploration of “key slaves” to explore what enslavers “did to slaves, rather than what they said they did,” it is clear that proslavery claims of a leisurely retirement for the aged were mostly baseless.⁶ When Abram Childress of Henrico County, Virginia, explained

³ James H. Easterby and Daniel C. Littlefield (Eds.), *The South Carolina Rice Plantation, as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 348. On paternalism and cultural hegemony, see Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 25–49, 147–9, 597. Further development of this thinking includes Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholder's Worldview* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and *Fatal Self-Deception: Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). On the nineteenth-century development of paternalism as a political ideology, see Lacy Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), especially chapters 5–6. On paternalism and historiography, see Kathleen M. Hilliard, *Masters, Slaves, and Exchange: Power's Purchase in the Old South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2–5, 184–5; Walter Johnson, “A Nettlesome Classic Turns Twenty-Five,” *Common-Place*, 1.4 (2001); Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, xix–xxxvii; Windon, “Superannuated,” 768.

⁴ The “fixed-cost” character of slavery meant that “owners strove to keep slaves busy at all times of the year,” but this has rarely been tied directly into assessments of strategies toward elders. See Ralph V. Anderson and Robert E. Gallman, “Slaves as Fixed Capital: Slave Labor and Southern Economic Development,” *Journal of American History*, 64.1 (1977), 24–46; Wright, “Slavery and Anglo-American Capitalism Revisited,” 372.

⁵ Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *Mind of the Master Class*, 368.

⁶ Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, xx–xxi and xxxi–xxxvi. Tadman explains that select individuals, usually drivers or senior domestic figures, are overrepresented in archival (slaver) sources on enslaved/enslaver relations, and that these figures had a degree of privilege that served a practical function in plantation management, but also an ideological

that “depreciation, natural to slaves in the decline of life,” meant his slaves were “diminishing in value every year,” he did not tenderly care for them because of a “bond of interest” between master and slave.⁷ Instead, Childress proposed to sell Martin and Elizabeth, two enslaved people who were passed down to his children from their grandfather. He wanted rid of those “in the decline of life” before they became “worthless and a charge upon their owners.”⁸ The courts granted his request and Martin and Elizabeth were sold. The profits were presumably used to purchase the bodies of those increasing in value.

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The rhythms of agricultural labor shaped the lives of most enslaved people across the US South.⁹ On plantations, farms, and smallholdings, the work enslaved people did from “the dawn of day in the morning, till the darkness was complete in the evening” required stamina, skill, and strength.¹⁰ This physically, mentally, and emotionally taxing labor required reckoning with the inevitability of aging and its bodily effects. Enslavers typically measured the laboring qualities of enslaved people through a dynamic system wherein “prime” or “full hand” described the ideal worker. Antebellum slavers were desperate to obtain and utilize these “prime hands,” conjuring up neat images of people as “a commodity: alienable, easily sold, and, in important ways, rendered effectively identical for white entrepreneurs’ direct manipulation.”¹¹ Enslavers understood, however, that enslaved people

role for enslavers. As Tadman explains, “the favoring of key slaves had the critically important role of allowing a slaveholder to tell himself or herself that he or she treated slaves well. The all-important thing was that, by considering that they treated ‘worthy’ and ‘more sensible’ slaves (key slaves) well, they could treat the rest with racist indifference – and could still maintain a self-image of benevolence” (p. xxxii).

⁷ Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *Mind of the Master Class*, 368.

⁸ Petition of Abram Childress, November 5, 1855, Franklin County Virginia, #21685519, Race and Slavery Petitions Project, Series 2. Race and Slavery Petitions Project (University Libraries, University of North Carolina at Greensboro), accessed via the “Slavery and the Law (1775–1867)” module of the subscription database ProQuest History Vault; hereinafter cited as RSPP. For an accessible searchable index of the RSPP, see <http://library.uncg.edu/slavery/petitions>.

⁹ Enslaved people worked in urban and industrial environments but the production and sale of commercial cash-crops – cotton, rice, grains, sugar – were the main drivers of the slave economy. For overviews, see Richard Follett, Sven Beckert, Peter Coclanis, and Barbara Hahn, *Plantation Kingdom: The American South and Its Global Commodities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

¹⁰ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 215.

¹¹ Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, 101; Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery*, 144; Berry, *Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 68.

were not bloodless commodities. As Frederick Douglass wrote, slavers knew they “had to deal not with earth, wood, and stone, but with men; and by every regard they had for their safety and prosperity they had need to know the material on which they were to work.”¹²

An aging workforce was a problem for enslavers seeking “prosperity,” as they knew that the physical deterioration of enslaved people over time would lead to ever-diminishing returns. Thomas Chaplin of South Carolina was disgusted at the thought of having to provide for those who did nothing to profit him. After listing the nine hands he was able to use in the fields, he listed the elderly slaves and children as “those that eat & do nothing in the world for me.”¹³ Benjamin Boulware, also of South Carolina, pleaded the necessity of offloading a group of enslaved people from his nephew’s estate because they were “growing old” and he did not want such obligations. Boulware, who served as trustee, argued that these elders were “in a deteriorating condition and depreciating in value every day.”¹⁴ Time’s march was measured in dollars lost, and Boulware successfully rid himself of those who did “nothing” for him.

The desire to replace those who had given the “best years and the best strength of [their] life,” as Frederick Douglass described one elder, with children born in (and of) oppression brings home the cyclical horrors of enslavement.¹⁵ As the executors of William Locke, a Tennessee enslaver, explained when trying to sell his land instead of enslaved people, although his five old slaves were “worthless,” the youngsters were “fast increasing in Value and in a few years will be worth more to the Heirs than the whole of the land.”¹⁶ Daina Ramey Berry and Jennifer Morgan, to name but a few, have clearly demonstrated that enslaved women’s (re)productive exploitation was shaped by age and embodied time.¹⁷ In 1857 Rachel Jane

¹² Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to This Time ...* (Hartford: Park Publishing Co., 1881), 156.

¹³ Theodore Rosengarten (Ed.), *Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter* (New York: Quill/William Morrow, 1986), 488.

¹⁴ Petition of Benjamin Boulware, July 12, 1859, Fairfield District, South Carolina, #21385955, Series 2, RSPP.

¹⁵ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 112–14.

¹⁶ Petition of Elizabeth Locke et al., c. 1832, Jackson County, Tennessee, #11483213, Series 1, RSPP.

¹⁷ Berry, *Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, especially ch. 1. On reproductive exploitation and slavery more generally, see Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Gender and Reproduction in the Making of New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Jennifer Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the early Black Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

Boland sought permission to sell an enslaved woman who was “old and of very little value.” She wanted to replace her with a younger woman “whose labor & increase will greatly promote their interest.” The request was granted and, aged fifty-eight, Rebecca was sold.¹⁸ Louise Mathews, enslaved in Texas, emphasized the naked self-interest of enslavers in making decisions about age and productivity; her enslaver counselled to “take good care de young’uns, ’cause de old ones gwine play out some-time, and I wants de young’uns to grow strong.”¹⁹



FIGURE 1.1 *Louise Mathews, ex-slave, Ft. Worth.* United States Fort Worth Texas, 1937. Nov. 9. Photograph. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

¹⁸ Petition of Rachel Jane Boland, December 7, 1857, Wilkinson County, Mississippi, #21085706, Series 2, RSPP.

¹⁹ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 5.3, 65.

Enslavers implicitly and explicitly acknowledged the inevitability of the aging process, while enslaved people were all too aware that their “masters” connected age with ability. Charles Ball overheard a conversation between two enslavers who were relocating to Georgia. One noted that now was the optimum time to do so: “prime hands were in high demand . . . the boys and girls, under twenty, would bring almost any price at present.” Ball was left with no illusions as to the relative lack of interest in elders: “As to those more advanced in life, he seemed to think the prospect of selling them at an unusual price, not so good, as they could not so readily become expert cotton-pickers.”²⁰ They would, however, still be sold. In a letter to his son, Charles Manigault, a leading rice planter in South Carolina, bemoaned the qualities of the aged while revealing they remained subject to the auction block: “I have seen the Lists of Carsons 210 Negroes also Capt. Ingrahams 70. Carsons are inferior most of them old very few single & prime. Ingrahams but little better. I am on the Constant look out, & hope in a few weeks at furthest to pick up 10 or 12 Prime.”²¹ Manigault “pick[ed] up” fourteen “prime hands” three days later. His dismissive postscript – “there is an old man & an old woman thrown in for nothing, as they wish to go with their family” – indicates both the low value of elders to enslavers and their continued exploitation.²²

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The “hands” system demonstrates how enslavers viewed and managed the dynamic effects of aging when assessing their body of workers. Daniel Hundley, a prominent proslavery writer, explained the system:

On most plantations a certain amount only of work is daily required of each competent person, men, women, and children or youths; the “task” prescribed being graduated in accordance with age and condition, from the “quarter-hand” of the youngest to the “half hand” and the “three-quarter hand” of older years, up to the “full-hand” of mature and healthful adult strength; thence retrograding, in like degrees, toward declining force and years.²³

Of course, it was enslavers who had the prerogative to determine what constituted reasonable tasks for those declining in “both force and years.”

²⁰ Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains or, The Life of an American Slave* (New York: H. Dayton; Indianapolis: Asher & Co, 1859), 45.

²¹ James M. Clifton (Ed.), *Life and Labor on Argyle Island: Letters and Documents of a Savannah River Rice Plantation, 1833–1867* (Savannah: The Beehive Press, 1978), 239.

²² Clifton (Ed.), *Life and Labor*, 240.

²³ Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New York: H. B. Price, 1860), 339–40.

Enslavers claimed these arrangements were applied on a day-to-day level. In a memo to the State Executive Department, South Carolina rice planter Robert Allston asserted that “the task is allotted to each slave in proportion to his age and physical ability.”²⁴ Ben Sparkman’s journal for his South Carolina rice plantation shows what these distinctions looked like in practice. On November 28, 1833, Sparkman recorded that “the 6 fellows commenced cutting wood.” While the “fellows” were employed as such, “the women & two old fellows” assisted “in caning & winnowing Rice.” Age-related distinctions appear regularly in Sparkman’s diary. Enslaved men labelled “old” were moved out of the all-male gangs undertaking the most vigorous physical labor, such as plowing, wood-cutting, and log-rolling, and moved into mixed-sex groups with comparatively lighter tasks. On December 11, 1834, Sparkman recorded that “The six fellows went to cut wood, the women & two old fellows to cut down corn stockins in negro House field.”²⁵ James Henry Hammond of South Carolina recorded similar distinctions, writing in his 1857–8 plantation book that “those, who from age & infirmities are unable to keep up with the prime hands are put in the suckler’s gang.”²⁶ Advanced age was conflated with infirmity, while placing all elders with nursing mothers shows that age operated alongside, and sometimes overruled, gender when shaping work and status. Hammond’s specific claim that these aged individuals were unable to “keep up with the prime hands” underscores the relational elements to these negative assessments of aging’s effects on the laboring qualities of enslaved people.

The task labor that predominated on rice plantations and across the Lowcountry was perhaps easiest to organize according to strength, age, and endurance. Differential work targets, however, were also set for individual workers on farms and on plantations where the gang system predominated. Charles Ball remembered how in South Carolina, “prime” hands were expected to pick fifty pounds of cotton, and women with children forty, while “twenty-five pounds was assigned as the daily task

²⁴ Easterby and Littlefield (Eds.), *The South Carolina Rice Plantation*, 346.

²⁵ Ben Sparkman Plantation Journal, 1848–1859, November 28, 1833, and December 11, 1834, #3574-z, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (SHC).

²⁶ Plantation Book 1857–8, James Henry Hammond Papers, Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War, Series A, South Caroliniana Library (University of South Carolina [SCL]), Part 1: *The Papers of James Henry Hammond*, 1795–1865, Reel 13–15.

of old people, as well as a number of boys and girls.”²⁷ Prince Smith, aged 100, neatly summarized to his WPA interviewer how the dynamics of slave labor were attuned to the rhythms of the life cycle:

Dere was three kinds of days work on de plantation: One is de whole tas’, meanin’ a whole han’ or a person een his prime. He wus given two tas’ fur his day’s wurk. A tas’ carried frum twenty four to twenty five rows which wus thirty-five feet long en twenty five feet wide. De three fourth han’ wus given one whole tas’ which consists of twelve rows. All de young chillun wus included in dis group. De half han’ was de old slaves who did a half tas’ for dere day’s work. When it was time to pick cotton, de three fourth han’ had to pick thirty pound an’ de half han’ twenty fur dere day’s work.²⁸

Ball saw the old and the young as occupying the same “step,” but Smith understood that the logic of aged decline already marked elders as inferior; they, unlike the young, promised ever-diminishing returns and thus occupied the lowest rung of plantation life.

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The toll that aging took on enslaved peoples’ powers of endurance and abilities sometimes led to a shift in roles. Describing her memories of a slave auction to her WPA interviewer, Mary Gaines noted how the seller acknowledged this woman “*has* been a good worker in the field,” but that her use now lay elsewhere: “He said this old woman can cook.” Regardless, “they sold her off cheap.”²⁹ Some enslavers thus separated elders from the main workforce and tasked them alternatively. John Carmichael Jenkins of Natchez described one such arrangement: “All hands in Saragossa field yet, will finish cutting out there this forenoon- Dan & old Bob diging out p[o]nd near Garden.”³⁰ John Nevitt, in the same region, similarly noted: “This day all hands picking cotton Except old Sam & Dan geting picketts for scaffolds.” Sam and Dan were frequently set apart from others. While the main workforce picked cotton from dawn to dusk during the harvesting months, the two men were separately set to ginning, cutting, splitting, and hauling wood.³¹

²⁷ Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 217. ²⁸ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 3.4, 117.

²⁹ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 9.3, 7. Italics mine.

³⁰ Dr. John Carmichael Jenkins Journal, Elgin Plantation Records, June 7–8, 1843, Historic Natchez Foundation, Natchez, Mississippi (HNF).

³¹ John Nevitt Diary, September 11, 1827 and October 30, 1828, *Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations*, Series J, *Selections from the Southern Historical Collection*, Part 6, Reel 3, 72, 160.

Certain plantation roles appear predominantly reserved for elders. One enslaver who sought to sell Jenny explained to the prospective buyer that she was a “good nurse, could work in a garden,” and stressed the generic expectations of aged working conditions: “[Jenny] could do and perform all the usual services of a female servant advanced in years.”³² Plantation records from across the South indicate a range of jobs were viewed as “usual services” for elders. Charles Manigault’s 1854 listing of slaves at his Gowrie and East Hermitage plantations labelled most enslaved people as “P” or “1/2,” indicating their work in the field. Several slaves had their age or the label “old” listed alongside their role. These included fifty-year-old George and Flora, serving as “Trunk Minder” and “Nurse,” respectively; “Hannah (Old, Minding Children)”; and “Joe (Old Watchmen).”³³ Manigault’s instructions to his overseer eight years earlier suggest these arrangements were part of a long-standing system for dealing with elderly slaves. According to Manigault, “anyone who has nothing else to do (such as ‘Old Ned’) who would attend to it would add much to their health & comfort” so should maintain the garden.³⁴ Manigault claimed this task provided comfort to an elderly man, but he also ensured there were no idle bodies on the plantation. Thomas Chaplin, of St. Helena Island, South Carolina, more directly stated how otherwise useless workers could be employed through shifting roles: “Put [Old] Judge to do some work in the garden. I intend to take him for a gardener altogether. He is ruptured, and not fit for other work.”³⁵ Sympathy for Judge’s “ruptured” condition was subordinate to the desire to ensure he was still “fit” for *some* work.

Enslaved elders were frequently put in childcare roles. These positions were commonly identified with enslaved women, with the ubiquitous image of “mammy” in antebellum and postbellum lore reflecting this association of childcare.³⁶ An 1851 *De Bow’s Review* article on the

³² In this instance it was a lie. Jenny was “labouring under long previous and permanent disability from chronic rheumatism & other disease,” required “constant attention,” and was now a “heavy charge” on Mitchell’s funds. Petition of Thadeus Mitchell, November 11, 1833, Lancaster County, Virginia, #21683322, Series 2, RSPP.

³³ Clifton (Ed.), *Life and Labor*, 183–5. ³⁴ Clifton (Ed.), *Life and Labor*, 62.

³⁵ While no age is provided for Judge, he is elsewhere listed as “Old Judge.” See Rosengarten (Ed.), *Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter*, 555, 742.

³⁶ On the politics of figures such as “Mammy,” see, for example, Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in the Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007). For general discussions on childcare and enslaved women, see Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 86; Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 227; Brenda Stevenson, “Gender Conventions, Ideals and Identity among Antebellum Virginia Slave Women,” in David Barry Gaspar and

“Management of Negroes on Southern Estates” described childcare arrangements:

A large house is provided as a nursery for the children, where all are taken at daylight and placed under the charge of a careful and experienced woman, whose sole occupation is to attend to them, and see that they are properly fed and attended to, and above all things to keep them as dry and as cleanly as possible, under the circumstances.³⁷

The structuring of this work from daylight, when prime workers took to the field, and the reference to “experience” suggest this was work for the elderly. Benjamin Woolsey, executor of Calvin Norris’s Alabama estate, explained directly how the use of elders in this role spoke to planter convenience: “Some of the said negroes are old & only serviceable as nurses of the younger negro children.”³⁸ Louis Manigault was simply dismissive when detailing his plans to deal with two aged arrivals: “The Woman Harriet is (as list says) $\frac{3}{4}$ Hand, so I’ll put her in the field. The other old Woman is not much. She can mind all these Children.”³⁹ A nursery for unproductive younger workers staffed by unproductive older workers allowed enslavers to maximize parents’ productive labor and to protect their “investments” for the future. The old woman was “not much,” but she could still be put to work.

In establishing the future interests of enslavers, childrearing was commonly framed as “the most profitable part of plantation business,” but using elders here also extracted maximum value from those who were “worn-out.”⁴⁰ As William Green, enslaved in Maryland, put it: “all the

Darlene Clark Hine (Eds.), *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 169–93, 174–5; Wilma King, “‘Suffer with them till death’: Slave Women and Their Children in Nineteenth-Century America,” in Gaspar and Hine (Eds.), *More Than Chattel*, 145–68; Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 64; Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 474; White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?*, 114.

³⁷ [Anon], “Management of Negroes upon Southern Estates,” *De Bow’s Review*, 10.6 (1851), 621–7, 624. See, also, Hammond, *Plantation Book*, 1857–8.

³⁸ Petition of Benjamin Woolsey, March 2, 1858, Dallas County, Alabama, #20185821, Series 2, RSPP.

³⁹ Clifton (Ed.), *Life and Labor*, 140.

⁴⁰ Andrew Flinn *Plantation Book*, 1840, Rules for Overseers, No. 14, Manuscripts P1b, SCL; Lewis Garrard Clarke and Milton Clarke, *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, During a Captivity of More than Twenty Years Among the Slaveholders of Kentucky, One of the So-Called Christian States of North America* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1846), 108.

children and old people that are past labor, are kept in the quarters. The old people are to mind the children and to keep them out of the fire, and to get their food.”⁴¹ On Josephine Cox’s Mississippi plantation, women “too old” to “work in the field” and therefore in charge of the children were dismissively called “the Drop Shot Gang.”⁴²

Elderly men were also tasked with childcare. Abner Green of Georgia told his interviewer that “dey had one old man to see after de little chillun like,” and that “de old people made us behave.”⁴³ David Gavin, an enslaver from South Carolina, noted upon the death of “old man Friday” how this man’s work had changed over a lifetime. In his early days Friday “carried my keys and attended to feeding the horses and attending to my cattle, hogs and stock generall as long as he was able.” As Friday aged, “he was unable to do any such thing much.” Instead, he “noticed the yard and the little negroes and would remind me of many little matters to be attended to.”⁴⁴ Although women more frequently held childcare roles, Charlie Aarons noted that “the old men and the women looked after the children of the slaves while their parents worked in the fields.”⁴⁵ Rebecca Jane Grant, enslaved in South Carolina, confirmed that limited utility on account of age was the main consideration here and indicated how advanced age cut across, and occasionally shifted, gendered norms relating to work and caring responsibilities: “all of us chillun, too little to work, used to have to stay at de ‘Street.’ Dey’d have some old folks to look after us – some old man, or some old woman.”⁴⁶

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Care-giving responsibilities frequently extended into cooking and nursing roles. As Litt Young of Mississippi explained, “old women what was too old to work in the field done the cookin’ and tended the babies.”⁴⁷ Slaver records show that age and gender were key here: seven of the eleven cooks listed in Alonzo White’s auction books between 1853 and 1863 were women aged between fifty and eighty years old. Charles Manigault’s

⁴¹ William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green (Formerly a Slave). Written by Himself* (Springfield: L. M. Guernsey, Book, Job, & Card Printer, 1853), 9.

⁴² Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp.*, Ser. 1, 7.2, 525.

⁴³ Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp.*, Ser. 1, 3.1, 271.

⁴⁴ David Gavin Diary, 1855–1874, September 13, 1856, #1103-2, SHC.

⁴⁵ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 6, 2. On gendered caring roles, see Damian Alan Pargas, “From the Cradle to the Fields: Slave Childcare and Childhood in the Antebellum South,” *Slavery & Abolition*, 32.4 (2011), 477–3, 482.

⁴⁶ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 2.2, 179. ⁴⁷ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 5.4, 228.

cook at the Gowrie plantation was Charity, whose rating as $\frac{1}{2}$ hand likely indicates advanced age, while his overseer at Encampment recorded in 1849 “the Death of an old woman by the name of Binah, who acted as plantation cook for the Hermitage hands.”⁴⁸ On the Georgia plantation of Frances Kemble’s husband, “an old woman, whose special business this is,” distributed food to the workers.⁴⁹ Anne Simon Deas’s postbellum paean to the “Lost Cause” expanded upon these arrangements. Deas created composite characters in a partly fictionalized account of life in antebellum South Carolina, including “old Maum Beck . . . who keeps the keys of the store room, gives out the meals, and exercises a general – and I should say a very lenient – supervision over the other servants,” and Plenty, “an admirable cook” who was “getting quite old.”⁵⁰

Notwithstanding claims of elders’ authority, it is evident that these roles were a way for enslavers to maximize productivity. On Jamie Parker’s plantation, Aunt Mag did the cooking because she “was too ‘old and useless’ to work in the field.” Indeed, “the women working in the field, of course had no time to attend to baking their bread.”⁵¹ Labor considerations in the round shaped such compartmentalization, with enslavers reorienting the workforce to suit their requirements and to maximize returns on their “investments.” Charles Ball recounted that on one plantation, enslaved families previously cooked for themselves, but as this adversely affected time spent in the field, the overseer “made it the duty of an old woman, who was not capable of doing much work in the field, to stay at the quarter, and bake the bread of the whole gang.”⁵² The emphasis on *made* underscores how limited capacity in some fields did not limit the potential for exploitation elsewhere.

Alongside caring and cooking, experienced elders commonly provided healthcare. Enslaved women in these roles were often skilled midwives, responsible for administering care for Black and sometimes white women before, during, and after birth. Ned Chaney of Mississippi described his mother’s skills here: “Ever’body call her ‘mammy,’ white folks an’ black

⁴⁸ Alonzo White Slave Auction Book, 1853–63, *Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations* Series B, *Selections from the South Carolina Historical Society*, Reel 8, 00001-00078; Clifton (Ed.), *Life and Labor*, 3–4, 70–1.

⁴⁹ Frances Ann Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984; originally published New York, 1863), 55.

⁵⁰ Anne Simon Deas, *Two Years of Plantation Life, Part 1* (1910), 48, 121, SCL.

⁵¹ Emily Catharine Pierson, *Jamie Parker, the Fugitive* (Hartford: Brockett, Fuller and Co., 1851), 36.

⁵² Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 120–1.

folks. She tend ter all of 'em when dey was brought down."⁵³ Elders were still often prioritized for general health concerns. Thomas Edward Cox instructed the "managers" on his Virginia plantation to ensure that "an intelligent and otherwise suitable woman will be appointed as a nurse upon each plantation, who will administer medicine and otherwise attend upon the sick."⁵⁴ Often, experience was synonymous with advanced age. In Alonzo White's sale lists, we have "Kate old nurse 75 yrs old," "Grace nurse 75 yrs old," and "Luna nurse 59 yrs old."⁵⁵

Former slaves commonly acknowledged that using elders in caring positions spoke to enslavers' utilitarian calculations around productivity and profit. Cyrus Bellus twice emphasized to his WPA interviewer that this transition occurred *after* more exploitative labor had sapped the elder's strength: nurses were "old folks that weren't able to work any longer . . . They wasn't able to work, you know."⁵⁶ Others highlighted the limits to enslaved healers' autonomy and the willingness of enslavers to discount their counsel when it suited them. James Boyd stressed that "ef hit was too bad, de white folks had dere doctor come and de Marster doctored us."⁵⁷ Elderly healers remained subject to exploitation, even when acknowledged as skilled. In 1817, two South Carolina enslavers argued over the death of an enslaved woman named Catherine, with neither accepting responsibility for her illness and subsequent death from smallpox. Notwithstanding the tragedy of her life and death, the dispute revealed that the use of skilled elderly nurses served the convenience of those who enslaved them. Catherine was initially rejected by the defendant, who "refused to take this negro on hire at any price in consequence of her being old," but he eventually found a use for her. She was unable to work in the fields, but "the defendant expected, and did derive a benefit from [Catherine] . . . for in the character of a cook and a nurse, in which service she was to be employed, it appears that she was considered as useful and valuable." Catherine was not

⁵³ Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp., Ser. 1*, 7.2, 373. Enslaved midwives are dealt with extensively in Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave* and Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 54–66. On general healthcare, see Fett, *Working Cures*; McCandless, *Slavery, Disease, and Suffering*, 177.

⁵⁴ J. W. Randolph Plantation Rule Book, in Thomas Edward Cox Books, 1829–54, *Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations*, Series J: *Selections from the Southern Historical Collection*, Part 9, reel 16, 0356–66.

⁵⁵ Alonzo White Slave Auction Book, 00014-00016, 00027-00028.

⁵⁶ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 8.1, 143.

⁵⁷ Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp., Ser. 2*, 2.1, 366. See, also: Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp., Ser. 1*, 10.5, 2192–3.

so “valuable,” however, as to warrant protection from an epidemic. Her enslaver was informed on March 12 about “the danger she [was] in, and yet he permitted her to remain exposed to the contagion of this dreadful malady until the 18th of April.”⁵⁸ Catherine’s enslaver received \$250 for the loss of his “property.”

* * *

Their frequent responsibility for infants meant that many older slaves were tasked with training children for work.⁵⁹ Anne Simon Deas, recalling life in antebellum South Carolina, noted that “there are generally one or two younger ones ‘learning’ in every department of the household, so that as the present incumbents grow too old for active work, their places may be supplied by capable persons.”⁶⁰ In August 1830, John Nevitt recorded that on his Mississippi plantation the full hands were “hoeing cotton in swamp” but that he had “Set old Nance with 10 r 12 children to Picking cotton in Punch Bowl field.”⁶¹ Sometimes elders passed on specific skills, as when Douglas Parish, enslaved in Florida, recalled how he was taught “about the care and grooming of horses from an old slave who had charge of the Parish stables.”⁶² Some training was more general. Abram Sells of Texas, described how

Us hab a ol’ man dat went ’roun’ wid us ’n’ look atter us, bofe de w’ite ’uns ’n’ de black ’uns, ’n’ dat ol’ man was my great gran’daddy. He was too ol’ to do any kin’ ’r’ wuk ’n’ he was jes’ ’pinted (appointed) to look atter all de li’l ’uns ’n’ teach dem how to wuk. Us all jes’ strung ’roun’ atter him, w’ite ’n’ black, watchin’ him potter ’roun’ ’n’ listenin’ to him tell how t’ings ort (ought) to be run ’roun’ dat place.⁶³

Similar arrangements were in place for domestic service. After listing the domestic “servants” as “de mammy, de butler, de body-servant, de coachman, de ladies-maids, de cook, de gardner,” George Glasker of Texas noted how beneath them “wuz de boys an’ girls dat wuz in tradin’ for de oldest ones place if dey is sold or leave.”⁶⁴ Both white and Black southerners understood the nature of these arrangements. Mary Esther Huger, whose family enslaved people on a rice plantation in South Carolina, remembered that “When I was a child, our servants were

⁵⁸ *De Tollener v. Fuller*, 8 S.C.L. 117, 1 Mill 117 (1817), 117, 119, 120.

⁵⁹ On children’s work, see: King, *Stolen Childhood*, 71–106; Pargas, “From the Cradle to the Fields.”

⁶⁰ Deas, *Two Years of Plantation Life*, 7. ⁶¹ Nevitt, Diary, August 17, 1830, 307.

⁶² Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 17, 258. ⁶³ Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp., Ser. 2*, 9.8, 3485–6.

⁶⁴ Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp., Ser. 2*, 5.4, 1503.

Ketch – an old grey headed Negro, & Johnnie, who he had trained, & when Ketch, was too old & tired of work, Johnnie, then a young man, took his place.” Huger noted a similar pattern for those working in the kitchen: “Smarts father was old Smart the cook, & he had an elder son Hampton in the kitchen with him, to do the work, for his health was not strong.”⁶⁵ Such arrangements sometimes allowed family members to pass on skills or roles to their children. Robert Henry, enslaved in Georgia, recalled that his father, who was “de butler at de big house,” was training him to “wait on Marster’s table,” while Fanny Finney of Mississippi noted her granny, who was “real old and the boss cook on our place . . . learnt all the girls on our place how to cook.”⁶⁶

Skilled labor typically placed less emphasis on physicality alone, and elders could hold onto these roles later in life.⁶⁷ In *Gantt v. Venning*, 1840, one witness stressed to the City Court of Charleston, South Carolina, that the skills of Phillander, an “old man about 50 years old,” outweighed purely chronological assessments of value: “though he was old, yet he might be more valuable on account of being a mechanic.”⁶⁸ The value placed on skilled elders extended to their ability to train up their replacements and ensure labor continuity. Robert Allston’s head carpenter Thomas, his “old and faithful man,” had four younger men working under him, while Abner Griffin of Virginia described his own intergenerational apprenticeship: “Old Uncle Jesse Shank taught me to shoemake.”⁶⁹ One enslaver outlined how this generational apprenticeship system extended across plantations, “generously” offering to lend an “old man for this year” to serve as blacksmith for his friend. Noting “that as he is quite old tho very active I must beg that his work may not be distrutioned [disproportionate],” this writer emphasized that the “old” man’s skills lay in training the next generation: “By offering him some trifling present I have no doubt he will teach your boy to do very good work this year if he be apt to learn.”⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Mary Esther Huger Reminiscences, MS vol. bd., 1890–1892, 23, SCL.

⁶⁶ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 12.2, 195–6; Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 8.2, 297.

⁶⁷ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 212–24. See: Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 2.2, 8.

⁶⁸ Testimony of Thomas N. Gadsden, *Gantt v. Venning*, City Ct. of Charleston, Box 34, Jan 1840, S.C., Sup. Ct. Records, South Carolina Department of Archives and History (hereafter SCDAH). Appeal reported in *Venning v. Gantt*, 25 S.C.L. 87 1 Chev. 87 (1840).

⁶⁹ James L. Petigur to Robert F. W. Allston, Charleston, April 3, 1855, in Easterby and Littlefield (Eds.), *The South Carolina Rice Plantation*, 122. See also Last will and estate of Alexander C. Wylly, June 30, 1834, Glynn County Court of Ordinary, Estate Records, Wills, Inventories, and Appraisements, book D, GSA.

⁷⁰ Letter dated March 13, 1851, Edmonia Cabell Wilkins Papers, 1782–1949, Series 1, Subseries 1.1., Folder 5, January 1851–March 1851, #2364, SHC.

The formal request to not overtax the aged man suggests that overwork might usually be considered par for the course. One former slave even claimed that an enslaver would specifically “buy up de old men that w’d er sold in dey prime fur thousands of dollars, blacksmiths an’ men wid er trade an’ nen he’d put um to wurk.” This was not benevolence but good business: “Sometimes he gittum fur ten dollars or twenty, when they master SURE they bout gone, fur as work went, but Mr. M –, he could keep um alive an’ wurkin fur years an’ years.”⁷¹ Here, longevity meant continued exploitation in order to further the enslaver’s profit margins.

For good or ill, skilled workers might hold on to roles as they aged, but time came for all and accordingly affected the dynamics of labor. In 1853, Louis Manigault recorded his annoyance that the carpenter Amos – the “Old Fool” – had “put almost every post down Crooked.” Manigault was delighted to hear that the younger man Jack would replace Amos for a short while, as only this would allow him to “get every thing ship shape.”⁷² In a trial over the fraudulent sale of two enslaved people, multiple witnesses derided the skills of sixty-year-old George on account of his age. George and Clarissa, who had been listed as fifty and forty respectively, were charged as being at least ten years older than this, with “the vigour and activity of both so much impaired by age as to render them of little value.” George was said to have lost his skills as a blacksmith and cobbler, with specific claims as to age-related decline. One witness claimed that “George is quite a feeble old negro,” and stressed that, in this, “he is like all old men of his age.” John Cunningham, who had known George for some time, acknowledged that once “he was a good smith,” but believed that now “from age and want of sight he lacks right smart of being a good Blacksmith.” James Fish assessed George less sentimentally: “he might do to work in the garden, to how corn and such as that – I did not value him as a mechanic. I think his eye sight is so bad that he is not capable of working at his trade.”⁷³ Despite serving his enslavers well for a nearly half a century, George’s talents were dismissed on account of his age; if once finding some personal validation in his skills and specialization, he could expect to do so no more. Nonetheless, he would still be put to work elsewhere.

Enslaved men in trustee positions also saw changes to work roles as they aged. Some enslavers preferred experienced men in charge and valued

⁷¹ Perdue et al., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 7. ⁷² Clifton (Ed.), *Life and Labor*, 141.

⁷³ Petition of Mordacai Offutt, November 14, 1852; Depositions of Simeon Griffie, James Fish, and John Cunningham, August 19, 1853, Scott County, Kentucky, #20785209, Series 2, RSPP.

the “good Judgment about Plantation work” and the assumed respect from peers that they had gathered over the years.⁷⁴ Lindsey Faucette of North Carolina explained that her enslaver made “Uncle Whitted de overseer kase he wuz one of de oldest slaves he had an’ a good n***r.”⁷⁵ However, enslavers also acknowledged the inevitability of declining force, and its impact on the ability to wield physical and psychological authority over the coerced workforce. As Jephtha Choice recalled, the driver “had to be good with his fists to make the boys who got bad in the field, walk the line.”⁷⁶

Inability – perceived or real – to make bad ones “walk the line” sometimes necessitated a change. In Jamie Parker’s fugitive narrative, the author noted that on Virginian plantations, “one of the most trusty, strong, and ‘likely’ of the slaves” was selected as foreman. These men were ostensibly “permitted to keep the situation for life,” but in reality it was “rather till worn out.” At this point they were “laid aside, like an old garment, labeled in the inventory ‘old and useless.’”⁷⁷ Such deliberations clearly took place on plantations and farms. Charles Manigault provides insight into how some enslavers viewed these transitions: “Driver Isaac is most old & feeble & crabbed,” and so Manigault had already lined up his replacement: “Should he fail one named Will, is best to make driver.”⁷⁸ William Pettigrew, a North Carolina enslaver, reported more sympathetically on managing the transition between drivers, but shared Manigault’s understanding of the inevitable impact of aging on work. Upon the death of Moses, Pettigrew expected Glasgow to take the role as driver, but only for as long as he could maintain the “vigor” required:

[Glasgow] is but thirty two years of age. His comparative youth may militate against him for a short while – but only for a short while, if he prove to be in possession of the abilities requisite for his station. The man of 32 will, in ten years’ time, find in any company of persons a far greater number behind him than are in advance of him. It will be many years before those disqualifications for command that usually characterize old persons will overtake the man of 30; While he who has attained 50 must soon expect the inexorable hand of time to soften that vigour which is all important in a ruler and without which he soon permits some stronger spirit than his own to assume the mastery over him.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Plantation Diary, April 21, 1858, Robert Ruffin Barrow Papers #2407-z, 231, SHC.

⁷⁵ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 14.1, 303. On authority and age for drivers, see Anthony Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 143–4.

⁷⁶ Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp.*, Ser. 2, 3.2, 708–9. ⁷⁷ Pierson, *Jamie Parker, the Fugitive*, 31.

⁷⁸ Clifton (Ed.) *Life and Labor*, 11. ⁷⁹ Starobin (Ed.), *Blacks in Bondage*, 35.

The suggestion that some “stronger spirit” would “assume the mastery over him” shows that aging was assessed comparatively, and indicates antebellum southerners recognition that age-related decline did not always inspire social support among the enslaved, but could be seized upon by rivals looking to assert themselves.

Whether in field work, domestic spaces, or skilled and managerial positions, enslavers realized that aging negatively affected the laboring qualities of enslaved people. Reduced skill, endurance, or ability, however, did not lead to leisurely retirement. Enslavers creatively exploited elders and enslaved people were forced to work upon pain of punishment, neglect, or abuse.

* * *

White southerners proudly claimed that “many of our slaves, when sixty years of age, imagine and declare that they are eighty or ninety, and are accordingly indulged with an exemption from further compulsory labor.”⁸⁰ Former slaves, abolitionists, and Black activists rejected this characterization of indulgences for the elderly. Alice Cole, enslaved in Louisiana, told her WPA interviewer: “Believe me son they sure did work the slaves, they did’nt have very much mercy on the poor old slaves in that way.” Cole compared the treatment of enslaved people to “poor old mules” whipped “every time they would slow down or stop.”⁸¹ Minerva Bratcher likewise informed her interviewer: “Laud Miss, you don’t know how much folks had to do them days, and everybody worked, the old slave women who were too old to work in the field cooked, took care of the little n***rs and helped spin and weave cloth.”⁸² Liza McGhee was reluctant to speak with her WPA interviewer, explaining that she “remember some things about old slave days,” but didn’t “want to say nothing that will get me in bandage [*sic*] again.” Aged ninety, McGhee explained: “I am too old now to be a slave. I couldn’t stand it.”⁸³

Enslaved elders could neither refuse nor deny the power of their enslavers to force them to continue their labors. Work, even if reduced, still had to be done upon pain of punishment.⁸⁴ Lewis Clarke was adamant that advanced age did not protect elders from the expectations of productivity and that antebellum enslavers contrived “all ways to keep

⁸⁰ Anon, “Editorial,” *Southern Medical and Surgical Journal*, 12 (February, 1856), 128.

⁸¹ Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp.*, Ser. 2, 3.2, 753.

⁸² Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp.*, Ser. 2, 2.1, 420.

⁸³ Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp.*, Ser. 1, 9.4, 1402. ⁸⁴ Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery*, 115.

them at work till the last hour of life.” Reeves Tucker of Alabama and Susan Smith of Louisiana separately recalled that while their enslavers “didn’ put de ol’ men and women in de fiel’ wid de other n***rs,” labor remained compulsory. Smith noted that “dey *put* de ol’ n***rs to wuk shuckin’ co’n and pickin’ seed co’n” while Tucker noted the “bosses . . . *made* the old wimmen what was too old to work, tend to the chil’ren while the slaves worked.”⁸⁵ These former slaves applied a language of compulsion – of *make* and *put* – that clearly rejected proslavery propagandists’ promises of leisurely retirement. These ex-slaves understood that desire for profit drove American enslavers and stressed the harm this wreaked on enslaved people. As Clarke acidly recorded, “they hunt and drive them as long as there is any life in them.”⁸⁶

James Matthews, enslaved in South Carolina, emphasized enslavers’ adaptability when exploiting their slaves. A reduced task rarely provided real respite: “The old and young always have to work alike. Each one is made to do as much as he can. I have seen old men and women so bent down that they have to lean on a stick with one hand, while they hoed with the other.”⁸⁷ The emphasis on doing “as much as they can” speaks to enslavers’ creativity in monitoring and measuring their workers from cradle to grave. “Uncle” Gabe Lance of South Carolina recalled the violence inherent to enslavers’ measurement systems. Whether tasks were reduced or not, they were not optional: if any slave hadn’t “done task,” the “least cut they give ’em (with lash) been twenty-five to fifty. Simply cause them weak and couldn’t done task – couldn’t done task! Give ’em less rations to boot!”⁸⁸

Elders and enslavers held different understandings of peoples’ capabilities and the level of task still appropriate, but only one side had the power to determine how work was allocated. Ellen Cragin described her elderly aunt’s punishment after claiming inability to work on account of age and infirmity; because she wouldn’t do any work, they made her sit on an ant-infested log and “let the ants bite her.”⁸⁹ Elizabeth Sparks recalled how work enslavers framed or recorded as “light” was understood very differently by those forced to perform it. Her “mistress” made “Aunt Caroline” knit all day and all night. This was neither light nor

⁸⁵ Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp., Ser. 2*, 9.8, 3367; Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp., Ser. 2*, 10.9, 3892. Italics mine.

⁸⁶ Clarke and Clarke, *Narratives of the Sufferings*, 112.

⁸⁷ James Matthews, “Recollections of Slavery by a Runaway Slave,” *The Emancipator*, August 23, September 13, September 20, October 11, October 18, 1838.

⁸⁸ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 3.3, 92. ⁸⁹ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 8.2, 45.

leisurely, instead combining her enslaver's concern for productivity and desire for dominance: "when she git so tired aftah dark that she'd git sleepy, she'd make 'er stan' up an' knit. She work her so hard that she'd go to sleep standin' up an' every time her haid nod an' her knees sag, the lady'd come down across her haid with a switch." Sparks was adamant this abuse was not unusual, but was unwilling to tell the unvarnished truth about enslavement: "Well I'll tell yer some to put in yer book, but I ain'ta goin' tell yer the worse."⁹⁰

White contemporaries likewise offered counternarratives to the proslavery claims of old age as a leisurely retirement. Frederick Law Olmsted noted that when residing in Washington, DC, an "aged negro" was tasked with providing fires for the hotel guests. This man was "very much bent, seemingly with infirmity," and had an "expression of impotent anger in his face, and a look of weakness, like a drunkard's." Olmsted's emphasis on impotence suggests he believed the man had little capacity for resistance, despite his obvious resentment at his situation. This was not, as proslavery writers proclaimed, a world where enslaved elders became a "family pensioner, secure from want."⁹¹ Despite his obvious infirmities, the man insisted he was forced to work at a blistering pace:

Don't you tink I'se too ole a man for to be knock roun at dis kind of work, massa? – hundred gemmen all want dair fires made de same minute, and caus de old n**r can't do it all de same minute, ebbery one tink dey's bou to scold him all de time; nebber no rest for him, no time.

This elder's attempt to gain sympathy because of his advanced age failed; Olmsted brusquely informed the man that his workload was "not my business; Mr. Dexter should have more servants."⁹² Olmsted at least did not inform on or abuse the man himself. Others received punishment if they voiced concern or failed to keep up with their work. One WPA respondent described the tragic end for an elder who had been tasked with keeping the fires on the place. Her mistress lost patience with her slow pace: "[she] went out to see what the trouble was, and there was the old lady bending down just like she was making the fire and old lady ___ cut her a lick with the cowhide." This punishment, however, was unnecessary. The woman "was [already] dead," her body stuck in rigor mortis and providing a tragic

⁹⁰ FWP, 17 (*Virginia*), 1936, 51–2, 50. ⁹¹ Hundley, *Social Relations*, 67–8.

⁹² Frederick Law Olmsted, *Journeys and Explorations in the Cotton Kingdom of America: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States. Based Upon Three Former Volumes of Journeys and Observations* (London: Sampson, Low, Son & Co., 1862), 30–1.

tableau vivant of a life enslaved.⁹³ Frances Kemble recalled the exploitation of older slaves on her plantation, indicating that this was endemic to a system that stressed productivity and profits. Kemble described how she was “accosted by poor old Teresa, the wretched Negress who had complained to me so grievously of her back being broken by hard work and childbearing.” Teresa begged for help on account of her age and infirmity, but she was “flogged for having complained to me as she did.”⁹⁴

Enslaved elders unable to complete their tasks risked punishment. Jacob Green described how Uncle Reuben, “an old negro in the family,” was forced to work despite severe sickness. Green described how “the poor old man worked until he fell,” but the overseer “came over and told him to get up, and that he was only playing the old soldier . . . when the old man did not move to get up Mr. Cobb gave him a few kicks with his heavy boots and told Reuben, sick as he was, that he would cure him.”⁹⁵ Cobb beat the already unconscious Reuben with his hickory cane, and he died hours later. Likewise, Moses Roper recalled how Phil, aged seventy, “was so feeble that he could not accomplish his tasks.” Despite this debility, “his master used to chain him round the neck, and run him down a steep hill; this treatment he never relinquished to the time of his death.”⁹⁶ William Green similarly emphasized how “reduced” labor was no protection for the elders on the nearby plantation of Harry Holliday, who made an old woman on his plantation “tend the sheep and cows,” come rain or shine. One “very cold day in Winter,” the woman failed to find the missing sheep and, despite pleading respite on account of the harsh weather, was forced to continue. This “old woman who was almost past work,” still “had to try to do all she could” to profit her enslaver. Holliday was adamant she was not doing “all she could”: “She told him she was almost frozen with the cold; he told her to be gone or he would make her; – she went, and the next morning she was found frozen to death under the fence.”⁹⁷

* * *

Recollections often suggest that the punishment of enslaved elders was particularly harrowing. This assessment spoke to common assumptions

⁹³ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 18, 6. ⁹⁴ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 154.

⁹⁵ Jacob D. Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, A Runaway Slave, from Kentucky, Containing an Account of His Three Escapes, in 1839, 1846, and 1848* (Huddersfield: Henry Fielding, 1864), 10–11.

⁹⁶ Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Gunn, 1838), 21.

⁹⁷ Green, *Narrative of Events*, 7–8.

that the strong should not abuse the weak. These claims were used to emphasize the demeaning nature of slavery and to attack the claims of southern honor. Abolitionist William Armistead explained that, “if the strong attack the weak, if the well armed assail the defenceless . . . we turn from the scene with indignation and abhorrence.”⁹⁸ Henry Watson, who served the gamblers at a Vicksburg hotel, described one such callous scene to his readers. While serving two of the establishment’s guests, an “old slave” named Jim dropped down with a fit of apoplexy. This became a new game of chance: “‘He is dead!’ exclaimed one. ‘He’ll come to,’ replied the other. ‘Dead, for five hundred!’ ‘Done!’ retorted the other.” These gamblers’ cruel treatment of this elder highlighted to Watson “the brutish manner in which a slave is treated,” and the degrading influence of slavery itself.⁹⁹

A lifetime of service provided no protection from abuse and harm. Joseph Sanford explained how recognition of the lies in regards to paternalism precipitated his escape: “The whipping he gave me did not hurt me so much as the scandal of it, – to whip so old a man as I was, and who had been so faithful a servant as I had been: I thought it unsufferable.”¹⁰⁰ Sanford’s testimony reveals how little faith enslaved people could put in the rhetoric of enslavers or their defenders, and antislavery activists commonly used the abuse of elders to underscore this point. Frederick Douglass recoiled from the whipping of “Old Barney” for failing to achieve the “unreasonable and exacting tasks” Colonel Lloyd set for him. Douglass described this event as one of “the most heart-saddening and humiliating scenes I ever witnessed”: “the spectacle of an aged man – a husband and a father – humbly kneeling before his fellowman, shocked me at the time; and since I have grown older, few of the features of slavery have impressed me with a deeper sense of its injustice and barbarity than did this existing scene.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Wilson Armistead, *A Tribute for the Negro: Being a Vindication of the Moral, Intellectual, and Religious Capabilities of the Colored Portion of Mankind; with Particular Reference to the African Race* (Manchester and London: W. Irwin, 1848), 29.

⁹⁹ Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson, A Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848), 27–8.

¹⁰⁰ Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee; or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves, with an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada* (Boston: J. P. Jewett and Company, 1856), 361.

¹⁰¹ Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 68–72.



FIGURE 1.2 “Whipping of Old Barney,” in Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself. His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time . . .* (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892), 71. Courtesy of The New York Public Library: <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-ac26-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

Former slaves and their antislavery allies were thus adamant that claims of leisured retirement for enslaved elders were far from the truth. Dianah Watson, interviewed some seventy years past emancipation, brought up the image of “old women half-bent from beatin’s goin’ to the field” to demonstrate the cruelties of slavery. Noting that “I’s seed them take them ole half bent wimmen and beat them till they couldn’t walk for three days,” Watson recoiled from such hideous memories: “if

n***rs of these days done see what I seed in slavery time they'd pray and thank they Gawd every day."¹⁰² John Jackson, enslaved in South Carolina, described the ubiquitous violence toward older slaves and stressed that for most elders, escape came only in death. James English, a violent enslaver, "commenced quarrelling with a slave named Old George, on the plea that he did not pick cotton fast enough." English insisted the man's age warranted neither respect nor reduced punishment: "Never mind, you old rascal, when I get better I'll give you sixty lashes, – never mind, you old rascal you." English died before he could punish George, and this turn of affairs greatly amused the enslaved population. The joy did not last long; English's brother took his place and continued to punish the elderly: "Mack English tied down a slave named Old Prince, and gave him one hundred lashes with the whip, and fifty blows with the paddle, because he could not work fast enough to please him."¹⁰³

Some former slaves recalled that elders were mistreated on account of their reduced productivity. Charles Ball described one of his workmates on a cotton plantation in South Carolina as "quite crooked with years and labor," and stressed his inability to keep up: "The old man whom I have alluded to before, was in the field with the others, though he was not able to keep up with his row. He had no clothes on him except the remains of an old shirt, which hung in tatters from his neck and arms." This man's ragged clothing was likely no coincidence, speaking instead to the reduced value enslavers placed on elders. Ball later noted how shoes were only "given to all those who were able to go to the field to pick cotton." This deprived "the children, and several old persons, whose eye-sight was not sufficiently clear to enable them to pick cotton."¹⁰⁴

Enslavers clearly made distinctions in material rewards on account of age and utility, with Stephen Duncan Jnr of Mississippi noting that "those who do not work out but stay about the quarter yard, do not receive spring shoes, & do not receive overcoats."¹⁰⁵ Historian David Silkenat notes that on Jefferson's Monticello plantation, "laboring men and women received one pair of leather shoes per year, while enslaved children went barefoot and elderly slaves shod themselves with the remnants of

¹⁰² Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 5.4, 145; Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp., Ser. 2*, 10.9, 3994.

¹⁰³ John Andrew Jackson, *The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1862), 12.

¹⁰⁴ Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 55, 78, 201.

¹⁰⁵ Duncan (Stephen Jr.) papers, Z/1980.000/F/Folder 1, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi (hereafter MDAH). Similar reductions in clothing can be found in Rosengarten (Ed.), *Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter*, 381–2.

previous years.” Compared to his neighbors, Jefferson “provided a relatively generous enslaved clothing allowance.”¹⁰⁶ Thomas Clay of Mississippi wrote disapprovingly of “the present economy of the slave system,” which was “to get all you can from the slave, and give him in return as little as will barely support him in a working condition,” but his “plan for improvement” remained a pipe dream for most enslaved people.¹⁰⁷ Those deemed less valuable as workers received less, and these reductions had harmful effects. Philemon Bliss of Florida claimed that worsened material conditions of life meant “the aged and feeble often *suffer from cold*.”¹⁰⁸ Bliss’s reporting suggests how the expectations of decline associated with age, or even genuine reductions in capacity, meant that enslavers were less concerned about their fate. They were on the way out, after all, and there were new workers to feed instead.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Richard Steckel’s work set-off extended interdisciplinary research on health and mortality in slavery that demonstrated how enslavers malnourished enslaved children in order to prioritize feeding more productive adult workers.¹⁰⁹ No quantitative study has been undertaken specifically with regards to old age, but both enslaver and enslaved spoke of reductions for the elderly on account of their reduced productivity. Thomas Chaplin recorded in his journal that he “gave out 1st allowance of corn to full hands,” but only “potatoes to little Negroes & olde ones.” Even this was to be circumscribed on account of fiscal concerns: “I want to try and save what I have left of potatoes, & if they keep, sell them later.”¹¹⁰ Harriet Jacobs stressed that reductions of this sort were a rational choice for

¹⁰⁶ David Silkenat, *Scars on the Land: An Environmental History of Slavery in the American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 119.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Clay, *Detail of a Plan for the Moral Improvement of Negroes on Plantations* (Printed at the request of the Presbytery, Georgia, 1833), 20; James Williams, *Narrative of James Williams, an American Slave, Who Was for Several Years a Driver on a Cotton Plantation in Alabama* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society; Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), viii.

¹⁰⁸ Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Office, 1839), 41.

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, Richard H. Steckel, “A Dreadful Childhood: The Excess Mortality of American Slaves,” *Social Science History*, 10.4 (Winter, 1986), 427–65; Richard H. Steckel, “A Peculiar Population: The Nutrition, Health, and Mortality of American Slaves from Childhood to Maturity,” *Journal of Economic History*, 46.3 (Sep., 1986), 721–41; Richard H. Steckel, “Biological Measures of the Standard of Living,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 22.1 (Winter 2008), 129–52; Eric B. Schneider, “Children’s Growth in an Adaptive Framework: Explaining the Growth Patterns of American Slaves and Other Historical Populations,” *Economic History Review*, 70.1 (2017), 3–29.

¹¹⁰ Rosengarten (Ed.), *Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter*, 598.

enslavers who prioritized profit over people. One man, who “had faithfully served the Flint family through three generations . . . hobbled up to get his bit of meat” during the rationing period. Mrs. Flint, however, “said he was too old to have any allowance; that when n***rs were too old to work, they ought to be fed on grass. Poor old man! He suffered much before he found rest in the grave.”¹¹¹ August Smith, enslaved in Missouri, noted how resistance to reductions could end tragically. A woman of “about seventy years old,” suffering from meager rations, stole a chicken to feed herself. Her enslaver caught her “while she had it on boiling” and “was so mad, he told her to get a spoon and eat every bite before she stopped. It was scalding hot but he made her do it. She died right away, her insides burned.”¹¹² The violence of this punishment suggests it mattered little whether the woman now lived or died; her death more usefully reminded the wider community of the futility of resistance.¹¹³

* * *

Former slaves and antislavery activists believed that the traumas of slavery exacerbated physical and mental ailments associated with the natural aging process, and their references to prematurely stooped backs, grey hairs, or broken bodies demonstrated the violence of slavery.¹¹⁴ William Brown, interviewed in Canada after escaping from Virginia, was described as “apparently eighty years of age, nearly bald,” and “what little hair he had was grey.” Brown informed his interviewer that he was mistaken over the chronology, but not the substance of his decrepitude: “I am not eighty – only sixty-three – but I am worked down, and worn out with hard work.”¹¹⁵ Jonathon Thomas, enslaved in Kentucky, insisted that the violence of slavery worsened physical ailments associated with aging. An enslaved man might be “fifty-two years old, if measured by Time’s hour-glass.” However, “if computed by labor done, and the wear and tear of excessive over-work, incited by the hope of freedom, we think he would have found the infirmities of seventy pressing upon his shattered frame.”¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself* (Boston: Published for the author, 1861), 142.

¹¹² Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp., Ser. 1, 2, 243*.

¹¹³ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 112–14.

¹¹⁴ On cross-cultural physical ailments associated with aging, see Ottaway, “Medicine and Old Age,” 342–5.

¹¹⁵ Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery*, 280.

¹¹⁶ John Blassingame (Ed.), *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 251.

The physical effects of aging clearly worsened experiences of bondage. John Brown noted that on tobacco plantations the period of transplanting was particularly hard on “the old slaves, some of whom I have seen, who, from constant stooping, could not stand straight up to save their lives.”¹¹⁷ James Reeves explained to his WPA interviewer that ill-treatment while enslaved had sped up the deterioration of his mother’s eyesight, which was so bad “before she died that she could hardly see to go nowhere.” Reeves’s mother “insisted” this loss of sight was “due to bad treatment in slavery time.”¹¹⁸ George P. Ripley, a white traveler from Connecticut, noted the damaging effect of hearing loss for “one aged slave.” This man “was remarkable for his industry and fidelity,” but was whipped after failing to hear the commands of his overseer. The overseer had no sympathy for his reduced circumstances: “damn you, if you cannot hear I’ll see if you can feel.”¹¹⁹ Such testimony is borne out in the words (and deeds) of Louisiana enslaver Bennet H. Barrow, who recorded that “Old Demps” had “been doing nothing since Last November” on account of “loss of his eye sight.” Barrow prescribed Demps “25 cuts” and “ordered him to work blind or not, to show the scoundrel.”¹²⁰

The elderly also commonly suffered from excessive tiredness, a complaint with devastating effects for those who were forced to continue laboring in old age.¹²¹ Sylvester Sostan Wickliffe described how an “ol’ lady name Aunt Jane” was unable to keep up with the ferocious pace of the sugar harvest on their plantation: “One day she was jes’ a-cuttin’ cane down de row and she fall fas’ asleep.” Wickliffe claimed that superstitious power (or perhaps muscle memory built up over a lifetime of labor) meant that even though “she ain’ woke up ’till she git to de en’ of de row,” she “fin’ she done cut de row jes’ right. She ain’ miss a stalk. Dat in her sleep, too.” Wickliffe noted how lucky this was. Notwithstanding her advanced age, “dey would have wored her out wid de rawhide.”¹²² Henry H. Buttler, enslaved in

¹¹⁷ John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Now in England* (London: L. A. Chaemerovzow, 1855), 182–3.

¹¹⁸ Rawick (Ed.), AS, 10.6, 27. ¹¹⁹ Weld, *American Slavery As It Is*, 85.

¹²⁰ June 12, 1844, Bennet H. Barrow Diary, Mss. 2978, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Italics mine. (Hereafter LLMVC.) Demps was described as an “old negro” on June 21, 1842.

¹²¹ On fatigue in old age, see Stanford, *Aged Christian’s Companion*, 6, 8, 67–8; Benjamin Rush, “An Account of the State of the Body and Mind in Old Age and Observations upon Its Diseases and Their Remedies,” in Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1797), 310–11.

¹²² Rawick (Ed.), AS, *Supp.*, Ser. 2, 10.9, 4043.

Virginia, described a less fortunate result for “Old Pete.” Pete, “the ox driver, had been engaged in hauling rails and then assisting us with the log rolling, became so exhausted that by the time we had finished, that he fell asleep without unyoking the oxen. For that infraction of a rule, he was given 100 lashes.”¹²³

Outside of punishment, excessive tiredness might simply lead to accidents, as in the death of a fifty-year-old enslaved man from Georgia who fell asleep on a railroad track and was run over by the train. His fatigue meant he slept through the “noise of a running train” and the driver’s whistle.¹²⁴ Fatigue also apparently led to the death of “Old Pye,” recorded by Natchez enslaver John Nevitt as having fallen in the fire and “Burnt his head and face very much.”¹²⁵ In his slave narrative, William Anderson specifically linked the advanced age of an enslaved man to his tragic death. This “old slave” was the fireman in a Louisiana sugar plantation and was forced to stay awake “every night” during the firing season. The “constant taxing of the old slave’s faculties, finally used up his powers of keeping awake, and one night the old man fell asleep and tumbled into the kettle of boiling hot sugar. When found he was cooked through and through – emphatically ‘done brown.’”¹²⁶ In these cases, enslaved elders were quite literally worked to death.

* * *

Antebellum enslavers claimed the mantle of paternalism to defend their institution, but, in Thomas Jefferson’s phrase, the “boisterous passions” of slavery could run roughshod over such self-serving assertions.¹²⁷ John Thompson even claimed that the abuse of elders served an ideological purpose in proving the dominance of enslavers. Thompson’s enslaver “would not employ an overseer who did not practice whipping one or more slaves at least once a day; if not a man, then some weak or gray-headed woman. Any overseer who would not agree to these terms, could

¹²³ Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp., Ser. 2, 3.2, 554.*

¹²⁴ *Sims. v. Railroad Co.* 28 Ga. 93, March, 1859.

¹²⁵ Nevitt, diary, January 18–20, 1827.

¹²⁶ William J. Anderson, *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson, Twenty-Four Years a Slave; Sold Eight Times! In Jail Sixty Times!! Whipped Three Hundred Times!!! or The Dark Deeds of American Slavery Revealed . . .* (Chicago: Daily Tribune Book and Job Printing Office, 1857), 49. On the fatigue associated with sugar cultivation, see Richard Follett, “Heat, Sex, and Sugar: Pregnancy and Childbearing in the Slave Quarters,” *Journal of Family History*, 28.4 (2003), 510–39, 511, 522.

¹²⁷ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 172.

find no employment on Mr. Thomas's farm."¹²⁸ When moved onto a new plantation, Thompson found that cruelty to elders was the norm, not an exception: "My old grey-headed mother, now cook, was the first victim to the uncontrollable, hellish passions of her new Mistress." She was unable to please this woman despite her previous experience, and her enslaver beat her "with shovel, tongs, or whatever other weapon lay within her reach, until exhausted herself; then, upon her husband's return, she would complain to him, and cause him to strip and whip the victim until she was unable longer to stand."¹²⁹

Some contemporaries suggested that overseers and hired "masters" were the most culpable for elder abuse, with Thomas Edward Cox of Virginia believing it necessary to instruct his managers to "be kind and attentive to [slaves] in sickness and in old age."¹³⁰ Advice manuals specifically noted the dangers of relying on an overseer as "to him it is of no consequence that the old hands are worked down, or the young ones overstrained."¹³¹ Matilda Mumford recounted a case where the overseer asserted his authority over nonproductive elders: "I 'member dere wuz two old women, dey couldn't work much. De overseer so mean, he tie 'em to a buggy, stark mother nekked, put a belly band on 'em, and driv' 'em down de road like dey wuz mules, whippin' 'em till dey drap down in de road." This was too extreme for some observers, who "reported him and prosecuted him, and he got run out of de county," but it was too late to help the women.¹³² Laura Clark described how her enslaver similarly let two overseers "go" after returning from the Civil War to find they had abused an elderly woman. This was too little, too late, and this enslaved elder never got to see freedom: "dey done whupped dat ole 'oman what come wid us to deaf."¹³³

One Florida enslaver claimed that "divided mastery" ended the life of a "rather old" man he had hired to the Macon Railroad Company. Having discovered the enslaved man "had not the strength" to handle the rails on account of pneumonia, the Company set him to work "ramming dirt under

¹²⁸ John Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave; Containing His History of 25 Years in Bondage, and His Providential Escape. Written by Himself* (Worcester: John Thompson, 1856), 34.

¹²⁹ Thompson, *Life of John Thompson*, 48–9.

¹³⁰ J. W. Randolph Plantation Rule Book, in Thomas Edward Cox Books, 1829–54, *Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations*, Series J: *Selections from the Southern Historical Collection*, Part 9, reel 16, 0356–66.

¹³¹ Franklin, "Overseers," *The Southern Cultivator* II (1847), 107.

¹³² Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp., Ser. 1, 4.2, 464.* ¹³³ Rawick (Ed.), *AS, 6, 73.*

the cross ties.” The man was described by one witness as “between forty and forty five,” and another as “between fifty and sixty years old,” but there was general agreement he was elderly. As one witness put it, “he showed his age in his grey hairs.” As he grew sicker, and accordingly less productive, he was isolated in a railroad car with limited or even “no opening for the air to enter,” and he “had not the necessary conveniences.” He died not long after his enslaver sent a doctor to check in on him. This dispute speaks less to a kindly paternalist protecting his esteemed elder than to the financial concerns occasioned by his death. The enslaver was awarded six hundred dollars for “his” loss.¹³⁴

Claims that overzealous overseers or hiring “masters,” rather than the “masterful” owners, were to blame for mistreatment sometimes masked the everyday abuse of elders. These claims offered up a scapegoat in much the same way as that of a hiring “master” or the “trader,” who could be blamed for poor treatment, sale, and separation.¹³⁵ Some contemporaries insisted that apparent abhorrence at the poor treatment of elders was self-serving and hypocritical. Abolitionist Richard Hildreth sarcastically noted that “The young lady who dines heartily on lamb, has a sentimental horror of the butcher who killed it; and the slave owner who lives luxuriously on the forced labor of his slaves, has a like sentimental abhorrence of the man who holds the whip and compels the labor.”¹³⁶ Some former slaves rejected the idea that their enslavers had even pretended to be concerned with overzealous overseers. Essex Henry of North Carolina recalled the cruel treatment his grandmother faced from both overseer and enslaver: “De oberseer tried ter whup her an’ he can’t, so he hollers fer Mr. Jake. Mr. Jake comes an’ he can’t, so he hauls off an’ kicks granny, mashin’ her stomick in. He has her carried ter her cabin an’ three days atterward she dies wid nothin’ done fer her an’ nobody wid her.”¹³⁷ Wes Brady, enslaved in Texas, likewise noted that the desire for productivity and a concern for

¹³⁴ *Tallahassee Railroad Co. v. Macon*, 8 Fla. 299 (1859), 300, 299, 300, 302–3; Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹³⁵ See Michael Tadman, “The Reputation of the Slave Trader in Southern History and the Social Memory of the South,” *American Nineteenth Century History*, 8.3 (2007), 247–71; Martin, *Divided Mastery*, 73, 106; William E. Wiethoff, *Crafting the Overseers Image* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 32–54; Laura Sandy, *The Overseers of Early American Slavery: Supervisors, Enslaved Labourers, and the Plantation Enterprise* (London: Routledge, 2020), 350.

¹³⁶ Richard Hildreth, *The White Slave; or, Memoirs of a Fugitive* (Boston: Tappan and Whittemore, 1852), 24–5.

¹³⁷ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 14.1, 395.

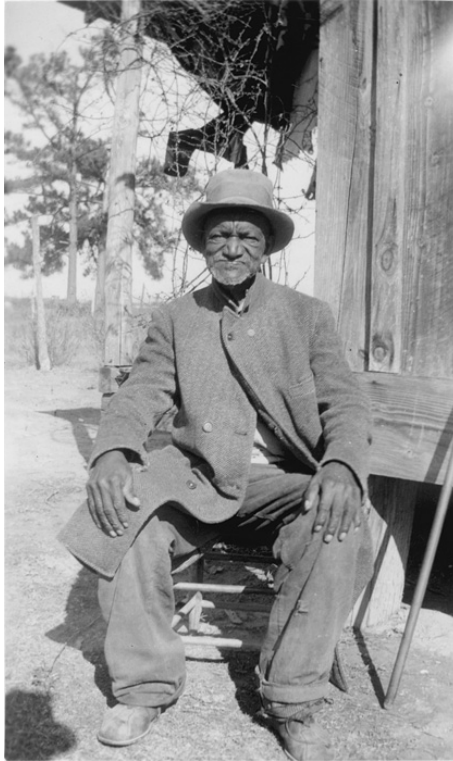


FIGURE 1.3 *Wes Brady, ex-slave, Marshall.* United States Marshall Texas, 1937. Dec. 4. Photograph. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

profit underpinned slavery and legitimized the exploitation or abuse of those incapable of working at such pace. After the stock were set loose in the field, the overseer on Brady's plantation blamed an old man, and broke his neck while punishing him. The slaver kept the overseer on and casually recorded a false cause of death: "the old man jus' got overhet and died."¹³⁸

Brady's testimony illustrates the difficulties historians face when looking for elder abuse or other forms of violence in the records kept by white enslavers.¹³⁹ Peter Neilson's account of the life of Zamba, enslaved in

¹³⁸ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 4.1, 135.

¹³⁹ On the politics surrounding archival records relating to slavery's violence see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Raquel Kennon, "Slavery and the Cultural Turn," in David Stefan Doddington and

South Carolina, emphasized how power dynamics shaped the experiences of enslaved people and their historical afterlife: “To say that by law the negro is entitled to this or to that is all a mere mockery; for who is there to see these laws put in execution? or to whom is the aggrieved negro to make his complaint?”¹⁴⁰ Despite the difficulties Neilson identified, some white contemporaries recorded their actions and experiences with older slaves. Priscilla Munnikhuysen Bond of Mississippi noted her anguish at witnessing her father-in-law’s casual punishment of elders: “I feel sad – more whipping going on. One poor old man the sufferer of man’s passion. Thank God my husband is not so heartless. It is indeed hard to bear, to be compelled to stay where such is carried on *daily*.”¹⁴¹ Frances Kemble likewise emphasized the ubiquity of elder abuse in her critical response to proslavery claims that older slaves “ended their lives among all the comforts of home, with kindred and friends around them, in a condition which he contrasts, at least by implication, very favorably with the workhouse.” Kemble recalled instead that elders were exploited until the end. Such was the case with Charity, “a miserable, decrepit old Negress,” who Kemble felt must be close to death. Charity, however, was all too aware that her labors had not ended:

She did not think her work was over, much as she looked unfit for farther work on the earth; but with feeble voice and beseeching hands implored me to have her work lightened when she was sent back to it from the hospital. She is one of the oldest slaves on the plantation, and has to walk to her field labor, and back again at night, a distance of nearly four miles.¹⁴²

Plantation journals and diaries reveal enslavers’ lack of sympathy with elderly slaves and their use of physical violence to compel work or obedience. After noting his annoyance that “Old Will” had been sick and would thus “not do much work for me soon,” David Golightly Harris recorded his need to punish two elderly slaves who were struggling to complete their tasks: “Yesterday I went to old Esthers. When I got there I found her & old Luke hauling her corn. The mule was stauled and would not pull. They whipped him unmercifully.” Harris responded in kind: “I got some

Enrico Dal Lago (Eds.), *Writing the History of Slavery* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 399–416.

¹⁴⁰ Peter Neilson, *The Life and Adventures of Zamba, an African Negro King; and His Experience of Slavery in South Carolina. Written by Himself. Corrected and Arranged by Peter Neilson* (London: Smith, Elder, 1847), 167.

¹⁴¹ Priscilla Munnikhuysen Bond Papers, Typewritten transcription, Diary, 27 August 1861, Mss. 2155, LLMVC. Italics mine.

¹⁴² Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 359, 288–9.

hickorys and gave them a good whipping.”¹⁴³ John Nevitt punished older slaves for running away, and the repeated truancy of “Old Edmund” and “Old Sam” in 1828 suggests these men did not consider their life to be one of leisurely retirement. Sam, who was caught while stocking up with supplies from home, was whipped by Nevitt and immediately “put to work.”¹⁴⁴ Washington Skinner, Manigault’s overseer on the Hermitage plantation, described how he was “forced” to whip Carpenter Jack and Amos, aged thirty-five and fifty-three respectively, to get them to complete their work. The punishments were seen to be proportionate to their age, but the effects were clearly worse for the older man: “I had Ishmael to whip Jack well, and then Amos slightly. Jack has did [*sic*] well since. Amos had been laying up of his old complaint since Sunday night last (Asthma).”¹⁴⁵

Some enslavers claimed that elders deserved protection, but theoretical reservations meant little. Enslavers wielded extraordinary power over their “property,” while there were many practical difficulties standing in the way of flight for the elderly. Laura Cornish described how her own enslaver intervened to protect two elders who sought refuge from violence, but they had been forced to run away to escape violence elsewhere: “Dey takes him round de knees and begs him do he not tell dere massa where dey at, ’cause dey maybe git kilt. Dey say dey am old Lodge and Baldo and dey run ’way ’cause dare massa whips dem, ’cause dey so old day can’t work no more.” Cornish’s enslaver bought these men and allowed them to stay on his plantation, but such escapes were the exception, not the norm.¹⁴⁶

Everard Green Baker, an enslaver from Mississippi, recounted a case where a woman “between 50 & 60 years of age” was found “hanging in the calf lot, to a sapling & from the evidence it appeared her master had whipped her for 2 nights before because she would not attend to the chickens &c.” Green did not seem sympathetic over the woman’s choice to kill herself and implied that her response was shaped less by the physical violence than its import. He claimed the woman had been engaged in “immoral conduct” with her enslaver, and this violent punishment showed that she was no longer wanted: “my opinion is that feeling herself slighted, & as she supposed set aside & imposed upon she preferred to die than live thence the rash act.”¹⁴⁷ Abolitionists commonly presented

¹⁴³ Racine (Ed.), *Piedmont Farmer*, 47, 98.

¹⁴⁴ Nevitt, diary, February 17, 1828 and May 20, 1828.

¹⁴⁵ Clifton (Ed.), *Life and Labor*, 122. ¹⁴⁶ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 4.1, 255.

¹⁴⁷ Everard Green Baker Papers, 1848–76, Diary, June 15, 1861, #41, SHC.

images of “concubines” abandoned as they grew older, with the tragic story of Cassie, who was sexually abused, “sold, and passed from hand to hand, till [she] grew faded and wrinkled,” underscoring the degrading nature of antebellum slavery in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.¹⁴⁸ We must be cautious in using the words of a dismissive enslaver, and even white abolitionists, to uncover how these women felt about, and dealt with, sexually exploitative relations. Brenda Stevenson’s assessment of the complex position of enslaved concubines, who frequently met tragic ends, offers insight here. Stevenson shows that “many concubines did not benefit from special support or privileges even when the men were alive,” and “slaveholding men could abandon them and their children whenever they desired.”¹⁴⁹ The fate of the unnamed woman described by Green aligns with Stevenson’s poignant conclusion; her actions speak perhaps to the realization that, as she grew older, abuse of the kind practiced in the chicken house was only likely to worsen.

As they grew older and weaker, some elders concluded that self-destruction was their only escape from continued abuse. T. W. Cotton recalled in her WPA interview that a woman known by the age-related epithet of “Aunt Adeline” “hung herself to keep from getting a whooping,” with a sense that such punishments would likely only worsen over time.¹⁵⁰ Adline Marshall bluntly assessed how little advanced age protected elders from the rapacious pursuit of profit, and brought home the tragic implications of this for the enslaved. Marshall told her interviewer that “Old Cap’n was jes’ hard on his n***rs,” and this punishing pace was felt most by Beans, a Black elder “so old he can’t work good no more.” Yet work he must, and when he failed to fulfill his task Beans was viciously flogged. The next morning “dey finds him hanging from a tree back of de quarters.” Some historians posit suicide as a complex form of resistance for enslaved people, but Diane Miller Sommerville reminds us that such acts must also be seen as “powerful testimony to the brutal conditions under which they lived and worked.”¹⁵¹ This conclusion is brought home in Marshall’s

¹⁴⁸ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin or, Life Among the Lowly, with an Introduction by David Bromwich* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009; originally published Boston: John P. Jewett, 1852), 459–60, 470–9.

¹⁴⁹ Brenda Stevenson, “‘What’s love got to do with it’: Concubinage and Enslaved Women and Girls in the Antebellum South,” *Journal of African American History*, 98.1 (2013), 99–125, 121.

¹⁵⁰ Rawick (Ed.), AS, 8.2, 40.

¹⁵¹ Diane Miller Sommerville, *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War-Era South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 106. On suicide,

interpretation of Bean's actions. Beans was responding to his immediate punishment, but he also understood there was pain yet to come as he grew older and weaker still: Beans "hung himself to 'scape his misery."¹⁵²

Expectations of control and the essentially unrestrained power of enslavers on farms and plantations was a horrifying mix for some elders. Martha Griffith Browne's antislavery autobiography, based on her "firsthand experiences" as a slaver before turning abolitionist, emphasized the violence practiced on older slaves deemed useless by those who enslaved them. Polly, an elderly woman on a Kentucky plantation, lost her mind after a horrific beating and was simply left to suffer. Her enslaver Mr. Peterkin specifically fought against providing medical treatment "on that old n***r, unless you cure her, and make her able to work and pay fur the money that's bin laid out fur her." The doctor was clear this was unlikely and shared the utilitarian understanding of enslaved peoples' value: "the old thing was of but little value; she was old and worn-out." Polly died from her injuries, and the abuse predicated on economic self-interest continued after death: "Coffin! hoity-toity! Father's not going to give her a coffin, an old store-box is good enough to put her old carcass in." In the end, even this small comfort was not provided: "Good and faithful servant, even in death thou wast not allowed a bed!"¹⁵³

Select cases bring home the horrors of violence in slavery. In Gates County, North Carolina, 1858, "Old Lamb" was beaten by two white men who held an unexplained grudge against him. They "kicked his eye out and beat him over the head with a stick" before putting him on a barrel, "bucking" him, and continuing the abuse. They only stopped "after perceiving that life was nearly extinct," but insisted that "he was deceitful and not dead," carrying him back to his cabin and dumping him on his bed. To continue with the subterfuge, they dressed him and left him there to die.¹⁵⁴ In 1855, in Wilkes County, North Carolina, Jim, aged sixty, suffered hideous abuse for his failure to satisfactorily complete his

resistance, and agency, see also Terri L. Snyder, *The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015).

¹⁵² Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp.*, Ser. 2, 7.6, 2577–8.

¹⁵³ Martha Griffith Browne, *Autobiography of a Female Slave* (New York: Redfield, 1857), 128–9, 140–3, 165–9. On posthumous violence, see: Berry *Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, chp 6.

¹⁵⁴ Coroner's Inquest over Slaves, August 29, 1858, Gates County, Slaves Records, 1783–1867, Box CR.041.928.002, NCDAH.

tasks in the stable. Over the course of an evening, Jim's enslaver Christopher Robbins tortured him to death:

After the deceased fell, the prisoner jumped on him, and stamped him for more than ten minutes; that he stamped him upon the head, shoulders, back and sides; indeed, all over; that the prisoner then called for his wagon-whip, and with the butt of it beat the deceased a long time, to wit, for half an hour, upon the head, back and sides; that he would beat until he became exhausted, and then rest and commence again; that he then called for scalding water, and there being none, had water heated, and poured it on the head, back and sides of the deceased; that he then took salt, and putting it on the back of the deceased, whipped it into the flesh with the wagon-whip . . . he heated water four or five times, and poured it on the deceased; that this stamping, whipping with the wagon-whip, and pouring of the scalding water, continued without cessation until 9 or 10 o'clock at night.

The coroner's report made clear that Jim was old and comparatively weak, and later reports of the murder emphasized how "Old Jim" was "practically helpless from too much work already done that day."¹⁵⁵ Robbins, however, had the power to determine the levels of work expected of his aged bondsman and used sadistic levels of force to demonstrate this.

Robbins was found guilty and hung, but the court's deliberations revolved on the severity of force and perceived predetermination to kill, rather than the principle of violent punishment. Indeed, the court charged the jury "that if the master chastise his slave for the purpose of correction and amendment, and unfortunately kill him, without any intention of so doing, and without a weapon calculated to kill, he is not guilty of any offense."¹⁵⁶ On occasion southern whites would condemn their own, but in reality enslaved people could not use the law for their own defense, and violence that took place on the plantation was hidden from public view. As Andrew Fede argues, "the recorded antebellum US slave master capital convictions enforcing these laws were among the most brutal, sadistic, and wanton killings." In practice, enslavers who "legally enforced their power . . . [could] 'rest assured that no one would interfere with their dominion over their slaves.'"¹⁵⁷ Jim's case was exceptional, but the trial

¹⁵⁵ Evidence docket, *State v. Robbins* (1855), Wilkes County, Slave papers, 1830–60, Box CR.104.928.006, NCDH; *State v. Robbins*, 48. N.C. 249 (1855), 250–1; "Slave Driver Killed Negro by Hot Lead Poured in Ear," *The Charlotte Observer*, Sunday July 26, 1925 (Charlotte, North Carolina).

¹⁵⁶ *State v. Robbins*, 48. N.C. 249 (1855), 253.

¹⁵⁷ Andrew Fede, *Homicide Justified: The Legality of Killing Slaves in the United States and the Atlantic World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 223; Robert Young,

revealed expectations of dominance and of elders continuation in their labors that were simply par for the course.

* * *

Enslavers and their defenders, both during and after slavery, claimed paternalistic protection for elders. The cases listed here, however, reveal the tenuous grasp of an ideological defense of slavery when confronted with white southerners' practical concerns for profit and dominance. As Theodore Dwight Weld noted, theoretical claims over the protections of slavery all too easily melted away in the face of day-to-day tensions and the dialectics inherent to the enslaver/enslaved relationship: "Even if it were for the interest of masters to treat their slaves well, he must be a novice who thinks *that* a proof that the slaves *are* well treated. The whole history of man is a record of real interests sacrificed to present gratification."¹⁵⁸ Other proslavery writers were less romantic when assessing the possibility of violence but used the material interest of the master to reject claims of ill-treatment. One white WPA interviewer discounted their interviewee's recollections of mistreatment because, "irrespective of the moral turpitude involved, common sense – an ordinary regard for valuable personal property, should have restrained them from driving Negroes to the point of exhaustion, thus endangering their lives and depreciating their sales value."¹⁵⁹

Those who argued that economic concerns protected enslaved people from mistreatment often neglected the inconvenient truth that, when applied to elders, such concerns simply did not hold up. As Weld went on to say: "in respect to large classes of slaves, it is for the *interest* of their masters to treat them with barbarous inhumanity." The first group listed here were "Old slaves," of whom Weld argued "It would be for the interest of the masters to shorten their days."¹⁶⁰ Even proslavery writers such as Josiah Clark Nott raised similar points, when discussing the practical concerns with the life insurance market in enslaved people:

As long as the negro is sound, and worth more than the amount insured, self-interest will prompt the owner to preserve the life of the slave; but if the slave become unsound and there is little prospect of perfect recovery, the underwriters

Domesticating Slavery: The Master Class in Georgia and South Carolina, 1670–1837 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 132–3.

¹⁵⁸ Weld, *American Slavery As It Is*, 132. Italics in original.

¹⁵⁹ Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp., Ser 1. 3.1*, 10–11.

¹⁶⁰ Weld, *American Slavery As It Is*, 133. Italics in original.

cannot expect fair play – the insurance money is worth more than the slave, and the latter is regarded rather in the light of a superannuated horse.¹⁶¹

The application of this logic is shown in the correspondence of James Bruce, a Virginian master who advised his nephew how best to spread out rations during the Civil War: “put your wife and children on the smallest amount of food, kill dogs, and old negroes if necessary.”¹⁶² The callousness of the remark is chilling, and indicates both the dehumanization of enslaved people by their enslavers and the brutally functionalist way elders were perceived in light of their presumed uselessness.

Former slaves certainly believed that elders were viewed as surplus to requirement, and that nakedly functional assessments placed them in danger. Jake Terriell, enslaved in North Carolina, noted that doctors were called when laboring slaves got sick, but deemed unnecessary for those with no hope of recovery: “Sometimes a slave git leg broke and massa say he no more ’count and finish him up with de club.”¹⁶³ Jim Threat of Alabama claimed that two enslavers had planned on taking such measures with Black elders on account of their reduced financial circumstances, and with reference to the wider dismissal of the aged enslaved by their enslaving peers: “Gum and Alex decided they would kill off their old n***rs so they wouldn’t have to take care of them any longer as they couldn’t sell them and nobody wanted old n***rs.” The plan was only foiled on account of their incompetence, with Alex accidentally shooting Gum instead.¹⁶⁴

John Hawkins Simpson’s account of the life of Dinah, a Virginian slave, recorded enslaved people’s fears of financially motivated murder. On one plantation, the enslaved people believed the overseer would “give to slaves who were too old to work and required attendance a dose of black juice which sent them to sleep, and that for ever.” Simpson counseled skepticism regarding these claims and, outside of the Bruce letter, there is little evidence that enslavers practiced or proposed euthanasia on elderly slaves in the US South. In some respects, however, the “truth” is less important than the meaning imparted by such beliefs. Enslaved people were clearly worried about how they would be treated as they grew older and either

¹⁶¹ Josiah Clark Nott, “Statistics of Southern Slave Population,” *De Bow’s Review*, 4.3 (1847), 275–89, 286. On life insurance and slavery, see Sharon Ann Murphy, “Securing Human Property: Slavery, Life Insurance and Industrialization in the Upper South,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 25.4 (2005) 615–52; Berry, *Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 55, 88, 117, 142.

¹⁶² Cited from Barclay, *The Mark of Slavery*, 30. ¹⁶³ Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, 5.4, 79.

¹⁶⁴ Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp., Ser. 1*, 12, 331.

became or were perceived as being less productive. Such beliefs that enslavers would casually murder them demonstrates how far enslaved people rejected proslavery claims that enslaved elders were considered “the heir-looms of the house” who would “enjoy the evening of life and repose upon the fruits of labor past.”¹⁶⁵ Old age, the enslaved knew, brought with it continued abuse, exploitation, and fear.

Simpson’s skepticism was not in defense of enslavers. He did not dispute the rationale of enslavers’ efforts to dispose of the elderly, merely the methods applied. The tragic story of Dinah’s life demonstrated the range of alternatives available to enslavers seeking to divest themselves of their older slaves: “Mr. Hope determined to sell Di; for, said he, ‘You are now of no service; my children are grown up, and you won’t marry Jones, so there is no use my keeping you; you will be sold to-night to a trader.’”¹⁶⁶ Josephine Howard, enslaved in Texas, explained to her interviewer that she was glad to be growing old in freedom, not slavery, for these very reasons. According to Howard, “’iffen it was slave times, I’d be dead long ago, ’cause white folks den didn’t have no use for black folks when dey gets too old to work good, an’ dey gets shet of ’em one way or t’other.” Her interviewer clearly tried to challenge her on this point, with the transcript only recording Howard’s defiant response here: “Yes suh, I’s tellin’ de truth, white folks sure give us bad treatment.”¹⁶⁷ It is to enslavers’ efforts to “gets shet of” elders, whether through sale, abandonment, or neglect, that we now turn.

¹⁶⁵ “Master and Servant, by the Rev. H.N. McTyeire, of New Orleans,” in Holland Nimmons McTyeire (Ed.), *Duties of Masters to Servants: Three Premium Essays* (Charleston: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1851), 34.

¹⁶⁶ John Hawkins Simpson, *Horrors of the Virginian Slave Trade and of the Slave-Rearing Plantations. The True Story of Dinah, an Escaped Virginian Slave ...* (London: A. W. Bennett, 1863), 50.

¹⁶⁷ Rawick (Ed.), *AS, Supp.*, Ser. 2, 5.4, 1810.