

Life under the "Peculiar Institution": Family Life

Most slave-owners encouraged their slaves to marry because they believed that married men were less likely to rebel or run away. Others hoped to increase the size of their slave populations by urging (or, as the case may be, forcing) their slaves to marry and have children. By age twenty, female slaves were expected to have given birth to at least four or five children. To expedite the reproductive process, some plantation owners promised to free female slaves after they had produced fifteen children.

Although many slaves did want to get married, several men confided in their autobiographies that they were reluctant to marry women from the same plantation. For example, as former slave John Anderson explained, "I did not want to marry a girl belonging to my own place, because I knew I could not bear to see her ill-treated." Moses Grandy agreed when he wrote that, "No colored man wishes to live at the house where his wife lives, for he has to endure the continual misery of seeing her flogged and abused without daring to say a word in her defense." Furthermore, as the excerpts below attest, one of the biggest dangers that married couples faced as slaves was the possibility of being separated from one another. Because the American legal system did not recognize slaves' marriage or family ties, slave owners were free to sell husbands from wives, children from parents, and sisters from brothers. According to a study of records kept by the Freedmen's Bureau, over 32% of slave marriages were destroyed in this way.

If a slave man and woman wished to marry, a party would be arranged some Saturday night among the slaves. The marriage ceremony consisted of the pair jumping over a stick. If no children were born within a year or so, the wife was sold.

At New Year's, if there was any debt or mortgage on the plantation, the extra slaves were taken to Clayton and sold at the courthouse. In this way families were separated.

Source: Burton, Annie L. (1909). *Memories of childhood's slavery days*. Boston: Ross Publishing Company.

Master Jonas Mannyfield lived seven miles from us, on the other side of the Blue Ridge; and he owned a likely young fellow called Jerry. We had always known each other, and now he wanted to marry me. Our masters were both willing; and there was nothing to hinder, except that there was no minister about there to marry us.

One day, there was a colored man – a peddler, with his cart – on the road. Jerry brought him in and said he was ready to be minister for us. He asked us a few questions, which we answered in a satisfactory manner, and then he declared us husband and wife. I did not want him to make us promise that we would always be true to each other, forsaking all others, as the white people do in their marriage service, because I knew that at any time our masters could compel us to break such a promise.

Source: Veney, Bethany. *The narrative of Bethany Veney: A slave woman* (Worcester, MA: Press of Geo. H. Ellis, 1889).

Again and again I revolved in my mind how all this would end. There was no hope that [my master] would consent to sell me on any terms. He had an iron will, and was determined to keep me, and to conquer me. My lover [a free, black carpenter] was an intelligent and religious man. Even if he could have obtained permission to marry me while I was a slave, the marriage would have given him no power to protect me from my master. It would have made him miserable to witness the insults I would have been subjected to. And then, if we had children, I knew they must "follow the condition of the mother." What a terrible blight that would be on the heart of a free, intelligent father! For *his* sake, I felt that I ought not to link his fate with my own unhappy destiny.

He was going to Savannah to see about a little property left him by an uncle; and hard as it was to bring my feelings to it, I earnestly entreated him not to come back. I advised him to go to the Free States, where his tongue would not be tied, and where his intelligence would be of more avail to him. He left me, still hoping the day would come when I could be bought. With me the lamp of hope had gone out. The dream of my girlhood was over. I felt lonely and desolate.

Source: Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*. (Boston: Published for the author, 1861).

The power of the male slaveholder in Southern society was absolute and virtually limitless. It constituted the fundamental fact of slave women's lives. White males provided their food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. They assigned their tasks, directed their working conditions, disciplined them, and controlled their children's futures. They could also force their female slaves to engage in sexual intercourse against their will. (It is possible that some women more-or-less willingly entered into such relationships with their masters, hoping to improve their living conditions.) Because so few slaves wrote about their experiences, it is extremely difficult now to determine the frequency of interracial sex or rape with any precision. In 1860, the US census classified ten percent of the slave population as mulatto, a figure that many scholars believe to be a very conservative estimate (especially considering the fact that census takers categorized race by sight at the time). Whatever the case, it is clear that the sexual violation many African American women suffered under slavery profoundly affected their families.

The whisper that my master was my father may or may not be true. [However], true or false, the fact remains, in all its glaring odiousness, that slaveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers. This is done too obviously to administer to their own lusts and to make the gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable; for by this cunning arrangement, the slaveholder, in cases not a few, sustains to his slaves the double relation of master and father.

I know of such cases; and it is worthy of remark that such slaves invariably suffer greater hardships, and have more to contend with, than others do. They are, in the first place, a constant offence to their mistress. She is ever disposed to find fault with them; they can seldom do any thing to please her. She is never better pleased than when she sees them under the lash, especially when she suspects her husband of showing to his mulatto children favors which he withholds from his black slaves. The master is frequently compelled to sell these slaves, out of deference to the feelings of his white wife. Cruel as this deed may strike anyone to be, for a man to sell his own children to human flesh-mongers, it is often the dictate of humanity for him to do so. Unless he does this, he must not only whip them himself, but must stand by and see one white son tie up his brother, of but few shades darker complexion than himself, and ply the gory lash to his naked back; and if he slip one word of disapproval, it is set down to his parental partiality, and only makes a bad matter worse, both for himself and the slave whom he would protect and defend.

Source: Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*. (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office 1845)

My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves. But did the mothers dare to tell who was the father of their children? Did the other slaves dare to allude to it, except in whispers among themselves? No, indeed! They knew too well the terrible consequences.

Southern women often marry a man knowing that he is the father of many little slaves. They do not trouble themselves about it. They regard such children as property, as marketable as the pigs on the plantation; and it is seldom that they do not make them aware of this by passing them into the slave-trader's hands as soon as possible, and thus getting them out of their sight.

Some poor creatures have been so brutalized by the lash that they will sneak out of the way to give their masters free access to their wives and daughters. Do you think this proves the black man to belong to an inferior order of beings? What would you be, if you had been born and brought up a slave, with generations of slaves for ancestors? I admit that the black man is inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in which white men compel him to live; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him; it is the fierce bloodhounds of the South, and the scarcely less cruel human bloodhounds of the north, who enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. They do the work.

Source: Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*. (Boston: Published for the author, 1861).

The only incident I can remember...was the appearance one day of my father with his head bloody and his back lacerated. He was beside himself with mingled rage and suffering. The explanation I picked up from the conversation of others only partially explained the matter to my mind; but as I grew older I understood it all. It seemed the overseer had sent my mother away from the other field hands to a retired place, and after trying persuasion in vain, had resorted to force to accomplish a brutal purpose. Her screams aroused my father at his distant work, and running up, he found his wife struggling with the man. Furious at the sight, he sprung upon him like a tiger. In a moment the overseer was down, and, mastered by rage, my father would have killed him but for the entreaties of my mother, and the overseer's own promise that nothing should ever be said of the matter. The promise was kept, like most promises of the cowardly and debased, as long as the danger lasted.

The laws provide means and opportunities for revenge so ample, that miscreants like him never fail to take them. "A [black man] has struck a white man"-that is enough to set a whole county on fire; no question is asked about the provocation. The authorities were soon in pursuit of my father. The fact of the sacrilegious act of lifting a hand against the sacred temple of a white man's body...this was all it was necessary to establish. And the penalty followed: one hundred lashes on the bare back, and to have the right ear nailed to the whipping-post, and then severed from the body.

Source: Henson, J. *Uncle Tom's story of his life: An autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson*. (London: Christian Age Office, 1877).

"Family Amalgamation among the Men-Stealers," 1834



Family Amalgamation among the Men-stealers. Page 91.

Many Northerners viewed the growing mulatto population (evidence of the frequency of interracial sex or rape) as one of the most demoralizing effects of the “peculiar institution.” Aiming for humor, abolitionists published this illustration, in which a slave joins his father/owner at the dinner table, to highlight the scandalous behavior fostered by slavery.

Source: Bourne, George. *Picture of slavery in the United States of America* (Middletown, Conn.: E. Hunt, 1834), p. 91. **Image source:** Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division <<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a52182>>

In the antebellum South, slaves were considered chattel property. Thus, like any domestic animal, they could be bought, sold, leased, and physically punished. Slaves were prohibited from owning property, testifying against whites in court, and traveling without a pass. Moreover, the American legal system contained no provisions to legalize slave marriages or divorces, making slave families extremely vulnerable to separation. As a result of the sale or death of their mother or father, over a third of all slave children grew up in households from which one or both parents were absent. About a quarter of all slave children grew up in a single-parent household (almost always with their mother) and another tenth grew up apart from both parents. As the former slave Lewis Clarke once explained, "Generally there is little more scruple about separating slave families than there is with a man who raises sheep and sells off the lambs in the fall."

I once saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her; but they took all. The children were sold to a slave-trader, and their mother was bought by a man in her own town. Before night her children were all far away. She begged the trader to tell her where he intended to take them; this he refused to do. How could he, when he knew he would sell them, one by one, wherever he could command the highest price? I met that mother in the street, and her wild, haggard face lives today in my mind. She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed, "Gone! All gone! Why don't God kill me?" I had no words wherewith to comfort her. Instances of this kind are of daily, yea, of hourly occurrence.

Source: Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*. (Boston: Published for the author, 1861).

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant, before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result.

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, unless a slave has special permission from his or her master to the contrary, a permission which they seldom get, and one that gives to him that gives it the proud name of being a kind master. I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. Very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived, and with it her hardships and suffering. She died when I was about seven years old, on one of my master's farms, near Lee's Mill. I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew any thing about it. Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger.

Source: Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*. (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845)

"Slave Auction in the South," 1861



This illustration originally appeared in *Harper's Weekly* in 1861. As the image of the children clutching one another at the foot of the stage suggests, one of the greatest fears slaves faced was the possibility of being sold off and separated from loved ones.

Source: Davis, T. "Slave auction in the South." *Harper's Weekly* (1863, July 13, p. 442). University of Rochester Libraries.

Additional Resources:

- The complete digital forms of some of the above texts are available from the Library of Congress American Memory Project: <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem>> and at the University of North Carolina's "Documenting the American South" project: <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/>>