

Slavery the most controversial themes in the history of the united states

[History](#), [American History](#)



Chapter 1 Introduction:

Slavery is one of the most controversial themes in the history of the United States; throughout much of the past century historians have debated, sometimes quite heatedly, various interpretations of this area. For the purpose of this dissertation, the personal relationships amongst the enslaved will be the subject being examined.

Early research into the area on slave relationship tended to focus on the instability of slave families, The controversial Moynihan report of 1965 argued that the harsh regime of slavery shattered families of all that had been bound by it, and as a result the future generations of the ' Negro Family' lacked in strength and stability, Moynihan claimed that the majority of slave families "...developed a fatherless matrifocal (mother-centred) pattern"[as men were absent husbands and fathers.

Elkins notorious study on Slavery in 1959 also negatively depicted slave relationships. Elkins compared slavery to the Nazi system of concentration camps, arguing that the enslaved were psychologically infantilized by the regime. Elkins' argued that the totalitarian environment and "...absolute power..." held by the slave owners destroyed slaves capacity to resist the regime and form any sort of positive relationship with one another. Elkins asserted that the slave master was the only significant other in the life of a slave, and believed that significant bonds between slaves were unattainable.

However, these views of slavery tended to focus on the perception of the slave owners and neglected the views of the enslaved. In the 1970's new

revisionist historians shifted to examining perspectives of the slave rather than that of the master, moving towards investigating ' history from below'. The works of Gutman, Blassingame and Levine were of the first historians to look at slavery from this angle[5]; their works focused on the cultural aspects of the lives of the enslaved, a view that had been previously neglected. Similarities between their studies showed that cultural autonomy allowed slaves to distance themselves from the psychological pressures of the slavery regime and made it possible to establish and maintain positive, loving relationships.

Gutman criticised the earlier orthodox views of slavery put forward by Elkins, Moynihan and Frazier, arguing that they did not appreciate the extraordinary "...adaptive capacities..." of the African American slaves in spite of the rigours imposed under slavery.

The revisionist historians tended to focus on what Engerman referred to as "...the positive accomplishments of slaves under slavery." However more recently historians have criticised this approach, believing that the resilience and autonomy of the slaves have been overstated, shadowing the harsh truths of slavery, Kolchin's studies claim that revisionist historians have created "...an exaggerated picture of strength and cohesion of the slave community."

However one must note that by accentuating resilience and the desire for independence does not mean that historians are romanticising the whole regime of slavery and that the restrictions and exploitations imposed on

slaves by their masters were not significant. Rather as West argues the fact that the enslaved strove for independence under the terrible hardships of the regime is of immense importance, since it "...highlights the desire for freedom within the context of the restraints imposed by slaveholders." For slaves, spousal love and support was of vital importance in the fight for cultural autonomy and also to provide shelter and support from their bleak lives under bondage.

This research project will further this perspective, in the attempt to show that the relationships between enslaved spouses facilitated the desire for and the development of a social space between the lives of slaves and owners and a means of resistance against oppression. This dissertation will attempt to show the strength slave relationships under and in spite of the harsh restraints of bondage.

The chapters within this dissertation will look at enslaved courtship and marriage under the regime of slavery; each assessing the strength of these relationships in spite of the hardships and restrictions placed upon them.

Slavery in America was present for almost two decades; it would difficult to adequately cover these issues for this entire period, for this reason this dissertation will focus on the antebellum period (1820-1860) of slavery which took place before the civil war. The significance of this period is that slavery had already been established and legislated for a long time thus providing historians with numerous sources of evidence in which to study. The limit of this period for one looking at cultural issues, is the fact that by this time

there would be very few African born slaves; so this dissertation will be unable to look directly at the role played by native African slaves, as Kolchin argues that Antebellum period lacked the "...large-scale infusions from Africa that might have served to foster separate black cultural forms by reinforcing a cultural continuity with the traditions of their ancestors".[11] The majority of the slaves in the antebellum period would have been born and brought up under the regime of slavery, however, this smaller scope of study should not be looked at negatively, as Levine argues that the slave culture is one of oral tradition, where culture was passed on from generation to generation by stories, songs and folk tales therefore African culture would still be relevant in the lives of Antebellum slaves.[12]

As this dissertation is focusing on the antebellum period, it is limited to the Southern States of America as slavery had already been abolished in the Northern States. Although this may seem a broad geographical area, this dissertation will hope to prove that regardless of location the enslaved strove for the same autonomy to shape their own personal lives and relationships.

American Slavery has been an area where sources of evidence has been heatedly criticised, the majority of early research into this topic was based primarily on 'white' sources which tended to rationalise the exploitation of their black counterparts. Other revisionist historians have focused on ex-slave testimonies which too have been criticised as being unreliable which will be discussed in more detail further on. However this dissertation will draw from sources of oral testimony left behind by former slaves, as Frederick Douglass explains one

“...cannot see things in the same light with the slave, because he does not, and cannot, look from the same point from which the slave does...”[13]

The Works Progress Administration Narratives (which will be referred to as WPA throughout this dissertation) are a collection of over 2,300 interviews of former slaves from the southern states conducted from 1936-38. These interviews are of vital importance when investigating slavery from the perspective of the enslaved and gives historians insight into the personal lives of slaves which is neglected in the majority of ‘white’ sources.

There is however many arguments against the reliability of these narratives, the main one is that over two thirds of the respondents were more than eighty when they were interviewed, it has been suggested that their memories of bondage would be affected over time, and that they were only young children during the regime of slavery. West explains that even though the respondent memory may have dimmed with age, they still remembered “...a great deal about life under the peculiar institution” Moreover even if slave narratives weren’t perfectly recollected, the nature of the unique source still holds immense value to that of a historian.

Another issue that has been noted is that many respondents would have been children at the time of slavery; this could be problematic when assessing courting and marital relationships as the former slaves could have possibly been too young to partake in these types of relationships themselves, however as previously mentioned Levine’s study shows American slave culture was one that rested on folk tales and the passing

down of stories through the generations, therefore slave testimony on their parents and grandparents relationships will still be highly significant to this study.

To end with Woodward brilliantly sums up that even though the WPA narratives are sometimes confusing and contradictory "...they represent the voices of the normally voiceless, the inarticulate masses whose silence historians are forever lamenting"

Chapter Two "...Set Out to Play an' Court all Dey Pleased...": Courtship among the enslaved.

As detailed in the introduction this dissertation will examine the personal relationships in which slaves participated; in the attempt to show the strength of these relationships and also the degree in which slaves strove for the autonomy from their masters to develop and maintain these relations. This chapter will examine the role of courtship amongst the enslaved, although there has been much more recent research into the 'romantic' lives of slaves since the wave of revisionist historians in the 1970's, courtship has been looked at as a 'mere passage instead of its own social event'; historians have either overlooked this area completely or merged it into a broader study of marriage. This chapter will detail early historical views of enslaved courtship before discussing the variety of restrictions which were in place to hinder courtship before finally discussing the ways in which the enslaved managed to create meaningful relationships of their own.

By the antebellum period slavery had become institutionalised across the American South, slaveholders were increasingly concerned with controlling every aspect of their 'properties' lives, especially that of sexual unions. This is due to the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in 1808, which stopped any more African people being imported as slaves; hence the sexual unions that slaves created became increasingly important to slaveholders to insure that they would have future generations of slaves to perpetuate the southern social order. Oral testimony from the former slave, Hannah Jones showed that there were some plantations who "...just raised niggers...". By examining other slave testimonies it can be seen that many slave owners decided who their slaves would be with, in order to produce the best offspring. Katie Darling, a slave born in Texas in 1849, argued that slaves didn't court each other under the restraints of Slavery, merely that their masters would "...pick out a po'tly and a po'tly gal and jist put ' em together..." to reproduce as he needed more " stock".

This shows one of main reasons why historians have neglected the topic of enslaved courtship as they viewed the way in which slaves formed relationships to some extent as an insensitive and unemotional process, as the majority of masters' chose partners for their slaves with little or no considerations of their personal feelings. Genovese acknowledged that in some cases; masters had a paternalistic attitudes towards their slaves and let them choose their own partner yet the process was still not regarded as a ' romantic' one as

“ if a man saw a girl he liked he would ask his master’s permission to ask the master of the girl for her. If his master consented and her master consented then they came together“

As a result of forced breeding, coerced relationships, and the ‘ unemotional’ joining of partner as detailed in ‘ white’ sources and also in a few slave narratives, Fraser concluded that “...courtship and the normal relationships preliminary to marriage seldom existed”. By examining more of the WPA slave narratives, however, it can be seen that this negative image of courtship was not always the case; instead one can see the importance that the enslaved placed on the creation of their personal relationships, as they “...sought to define the nature and shape of their own courtship experiences.” By examining the ‘ courtships’ of those who were bound by slavery, historians can gain insight into the cultural and social aspects of their rituals and how the enslaved strove to meet and choose their significant other, free from the influence of their master.

Within this dissertation numerous WPA slave narratives will be discussed to show the extent of personal relationships between the enslaved. However when looking into the area of courtship one must note that the majority of former slaves who partook in these testimonies were young children during the years of bondage, hence they may not have participated in courtships themselves until after slavery and historians must acknowledge this issue. However this does not mean that the testimonies are of no value as many recount the stories that have been passed on to them or those they witnessed personally, giving historians insight into how courtship was shaped

within the slave community and also how the slaves strove for the autonomy to create strong relationship bonds. A perspective that many traditional historians neglected as can be seen in the previous chapter as they used primarily 'white' sources.

Many slave owners expected to decide the timing of courtship and coupling among slaves and to constrain their slaves' choice of partner to suit their own needs; such as keeping their slaves on their plantations at all times and producing 'quality' offspring destined to be the master's future slaves and/or income. To make sure this was the case slave holders placed numerous restrictions in the way of their slaves' courtships; time was one of the largest constraints faced by the enslaved, as Smith explains "all time on the plantation, whether work or leisure, was ultimately the master's to bestow, manipulate and define". With slaves spending all their time working in the fields or domestically in the masters house, even when their long day at work was over, their master still controlled what they did and even when they had to go to sleep. For example, Ex-slave Matida Mckinney explained the concept of curfews on her plantation, pointing out that the

"...curfew horn was blown and no lights could be lighted after its warning not had sounded. There was very little visiting to or from the group which dwelt here, as the curfew hour was early"

This shows how relatively little freedom slaves had in their day to day lives to socialise or court one another.

As well as time, slave owners also restricted their slave's mobility. The enslaved were restricted to the boundaries of their plantations. The Former slave Austin Steward points out that

“ Slaves are never allowed to leave the plantation which they belong, without a written pass. Should anyone venture to disobey this law, he will most likely be caught by the patrol and given thirty-nine lashes.”

The enslaved had to gain their masters permission to leave their plantation, they were required to get a written pass, detailing their master's name, the origin of their trip and their destination, and they were also required to produce this pass at the request of any white person.

Not only were their ' patrollers' hindering slaves geographical mobility but slave owners also placed physical boundaries, such as high fences, around the perimeter of their plantations to contain and restrict slaves mobility further. Former slave Louisa Adams argues that

“ All de plantation wuz fenced in, dat is all de fields, wid rails; de rails wuz ten feet long”

It should be noted here that the restrictions imposed on the enslaved were inconsistent throughout the Antebellum South, not just in differing states but “ between slaveholders themselves; urban and rural environments and different police measures in the county” Regardless of these restrictions the enslaved managed to control their personal relationships through working around the restrictions enforced upon them by the regime of slavery. Certain

social events were organised by the slave owners and occurred as part of the work regime, for example 'corn shucking' and 'candy pulling' where numerous slaves from neighbouring plantations would come together to complete a large task. Even though the slaves were working on these occasions by reviewing many of the WPA slave testimonies it can be seen that the enslaved looked forward to these events and the majority described them as 'fun'. As well as working the slaves had the chance to engage in socialising, flirtation and courtship at these events. For instance, they played numerous courtship games such as 'kissing for a red ear of corn' and 'dropping the handkerchief' which allowed them to possibly establish a meaningful personal relationships. The former slave Anna Wright explained how these organised events offered a good place for the enslaved to meet a potential partner but also for existing couples to continue their courtship, she explained that courting couples relished these days as they could "...set out to play an' court all dey pleased". Therefore the enslaved managed to manipulate some of the terms of their working lives to their own ends.

As well as these occasions, many slave owners also recognised different times of the year as holidays, during these times the usual time and mobility restrictions enforced on the enslaved were temporarily relaxed allowing slaves to move between different plantations and spend time socialising and courting. For instance for Christmas Holiday which could last anything from a couple of days to a couple of weeks, one former slave detailed that on his plantation from Christmas through to new year the slaves "...feast, an' we dance, an' we sing." Another slave explained that at Christmas, slaves "...

went up de riber to other plantations ter dances an' all dem things..."

However it must be noted that these opportunities were completely dependent on the slave owner, who could withdraw these privileges at any time or choose not to partake in them at all.

It can be seen so far that the enslaved had very little opportunity to partake in courtships, and the opportunities they had, if any, to escape being governed by their masters were seldom. Some slaves, however, resisted these restrictions which bound them and sought to have a social world separate to their plantation and thus developed '...alternative or illicit social spaces, where they socialised, flirted and courted without the presence or consent of the slave owner'.

The enslaved would go to unauthorised ' frolics' or their significant other's plantations without obtaining the permission of their master in order to pursue or create a courtship. For example, ex-slave Penny Williams recounted that

" Dar was some nigger men what ud go courtin' spite de debil, an' master ain't gibbin dem no passes dey go widout ' em"

She also detailed how regardless of the punishment bestowed on them when they were caught, they would still continue this behaviour in pursuit of love. This point was furthered by former slave Hugh Berry, who described that he would risk severe punishment to "...go back over there to see that girl". By doing this the enslaved defied and resisted the systems of control, such as time and geography.

In conclusion, the enslaved in the antebellum south strove to meet and court a significant other of their choosing. Slave utilised the time that their owners allowed them, such as work based event and holidays to extend the limits of their lives, but they also strove to establish romantic bonds with one another in spaces that was separate from their plantation and their master's authority. This chapter shows the value and importance slaves placed on their courtships, so much so that they would risk a severe beating in order to pursue their love interest. Also by examining slave testimonies, one can see that courtship was a vital stage in the romantic relationships of the enslaved, despite being neglected by early academics.

Chapter 3 " Jumping the broom": Weddings and Marriage amongst the enslaved

The last chapter analysed the opportunities the enslaved had to meet and court a partner of their own choosing, this chapter will look at the next stage in the romantic relationship; marriage. Slave marriages have been one of the most controversial areas of research within the topic of slavery, numerous orthodox historians viewed slave marriages as weak and unstable, Stampp believed that with all the constraints imposed on the enslaved, ' no deep or enduring affection could develop between husband and wives'. This chapter will examine the extent to which this claim is true, focusing on the difficulties and restrictions that affected slave marriages and how the enslaved managed to overcome them.

The first question this chapter will examine is opportunities that the enslaved had to get married; the southern legal system never recognised slave

marriages on the grounds that property could not enter into a legal contract, slave holders would not tolerate a legal contract that would interfere with their rights to dispose of their property as they pleased, therefore early scholars concluded that marital relationships could not have existed amongst slaves. However, throughout this chapter it can be seen that this was not the case; although slave marriages were not legislated they were culturally formed and respected by the slave community.

As in courtship, marriages between slaves were greatly influenced by the slaveholders; some slave owners forbade their slaves to enter in marriage at all. There were many different reasons for this, one of which being the threat to the master's authority, for example Harriet Jacob's master rejected her requests to wed a free black man as he thought that it would displace her loyalties to him, he asserted, " Well, I'll soon convince you whether I am your master, or that nigger fellow you honour so highly".

Another reason for master's forbidding enslaved matrimony, which is suggested by reviewing slave testimonies, is the practice of forced breeding as discussed in the previous chapter. A former slave recalled the application of this in her plantation;

" As a rule negro men were not allowed to marry at all, any attempt to mate with the negro women brought swift, sure horrible punishment and the species were propagated by selected male Negros, who were kept for this purpose, the owners of this privileged negro, charged a fee of one out of every four of his offspring for his services"

A former Texas slave, also described a less explicit way of forced breeding, where the women on his plantation were paired and forced to cohabit with a mate that their master deemed as suitable, as effective reproduction was more important to the slave owner than his slave emotions. Franklin believed that this was the case for the majority of slave women, who were forced into 'relationships' and pregnancy by the venality of her master, Franklin asserted this made it unlikely that slaves would ever establish a loving and affectionate bond with their significant other.

Conversely, even though numerous slaves were coerced into relationships, some managed to manipulate their masters so they could be with the person of their choosing. An example of this can be seen in the testimony of former slave Virginia Yarbrough, who recalled once when her master forced two slaves together even though they were in love with others, they slept in separate beds " 'Twas' bout three months aftah, de marster see thar am no chillums gwine to be bo'n, so he tuks her f'om dat fellow an' ' lows her to stay wid de one she laks." However, it must be noted that this happened in the minority.

By examining numerous slave testimonies, however, one can determine that the majority of slave owners did allow slaves to marry the person of their choosing, as Genevieve explains most owners understood that if slaves were denied their request to marry the one they loved, they would become sullen workers and would be more likely to run away. Slave owners also allowed informal ceremonies to mark marital unions amongst slaves even if there were not legitimate.

This Chapter will now examine some of the various ceremonial rituals which took place at slave weddings; one of the most common of these rituals was jumping over the broomstick where slave couples literally jumped over a broomstick together and were then married. Historians take different views on the meaning of this ceremony; Blassingame and Gutman believed this ritual originated in Africa and was initiated by the slaves themselves. On the contrary, Stevenson argues that the broomstick ritual derived from pre-Christian Europe and was passed down generations as a quaint and amusing remnant of the past, Stevenson believes this ritual was imposed on slaves by their masters, which suggested the lack of respect and honour slave-owners held for their '...blacks attempt to create meaningful marital relationships' By reviewing numerous slave testimonies that describe the broom stick ceremony, they tend to fit in with Stevenson's analysis of the ceremony, this can be seen by the use of coercive language, that they were required to perform this ceremony. Again reaffirming the master's control over slave marriages; for example Georgina Giwbs said that, ' When yer married, yer had to jump over the broom three times. Dat wuz de licence. ' Another instance of this can be seen by reviewing the testimony of George Womble, he describes that slaves '...were commanded to jump over the broom '.

All slave ceremonies were not as basic as jumping over a broomstick, they ranged from extravagant weddings as described in several slave testimonies, for example Tempie Durham recalled her "...big weddin...", where her master arranged for her to have a "...big weddin' cake...", a massive feast, a bible wedding ceremony with a "...nigger preacher..." and a grand white

wedding dress. One may question why masters would arrange elaborate ceremonies for their slaves, Stamppp suggests the reason is for the white masters to mock and belittle their black 'property', delighting in watching '...a bride and groom move awkwardly through the wedding ceremony'. Genovese, however, disagree with this notion; instead believing that masters indulged slaves on their wedding days expecting that in return slaves would become more loyal and work harder. Regardless of the ulterior motives of masters, Will's research shows that slaves preferred the elaborate trappings of the white culture, this signifies how the enslaved wished to have the same opportunities as their white counterparts to celebrate their personal relationships

For the enslaved, wedding ceremonies legitimised their personal relationships to the extent possible during their time in bondage. The value and importance of these ceremonies held by slaves; whether extravagant events held in their masters house or the simple act of jumping over the broomstick, reflect the commitment slaves held in marriage and also the importance of the communal validation of their relationships.

As with so many issues vital to the enslaved, white laws and planter control inevitably limited the range of marriage options open to slaves, yet working within the range and persistently attempting to widen this range of possibilities as seen also in the previous chapter, slaves forged marriage rituals that they not their masters ultimately determined and guarded.

The importance of attaining marriage status alone is not sufficient evidence however to prove that slave marriages were not weak, unstable and unaffectionate as orthodox historians suggested.

Another factor which led early scholars to label slave marriages with negative connotations was the idea that slaves were sexually promiscuous, and could not remain faithful to one another, as one white slave mistress recounted " Not one in a thousand, I suppose, of these poor creatures have a conception whatever of the sanctity of marriage...". This is reiterated in some slave narratives, for example an former slave from Alabama explained that he couldn't stay with the same woman instead he "...jes tuck up wid one likely gal ater anoder..."

Gutman, however, argues that this was not the case and '...fidelity was expected from slave men and women after marriage' by reviewing numerous slave narratives one can see that the majority of married slaves were loyal to each other regardless of the adverse situations they found themselves in. For example, Susan Snow a former slave, recalled that she "...never hear'd tell o' wives runnin' round wid other men in dem days"

Another example of the enslaved devotion to their spouse is recalled by Bryant Huff, whose father was sold far away yet his mother refused to be unfaithful to him, she "... grieved over his departure and refused, although urged, to marry again".

A serious problem which affected slave marriages was not the loyalty between spouses but the sexual exploitation faced by female slaves at the hands of white men usually their master, former Slave Henry Bibb explained that

“ slaves wives... cannot be true to their husbands... they dare not refuse to be reduced to a state of adultery at the will of her master”

This was extremely difficult for female slaves but also their significant others who were often powerless to stop the abuse; Henry Bibb further detailed his experience of when his wife Malinda was being sexually abused by their master,

“ I was compelled to stand and see my wife shamefully scourged and abused by her master; and the manner in which it was done, was so violently and inhumanely committed upon the person of a female, that I despair in finding decent language to describe the bloody act of cruelty”

Some male slaves attempted to protect their wives from this abuse, former South Carolina slave Philip Evans recalled how his aunt was abused by a white overseer, her husband Dennis then attacked the overseer before fleeing into the woods, he was then caught and jailed before being stripped and flogged, the abuse on his wife still continued.

By assessing these two testimonies it shows historians that however difficult it must have been for slave couple to endure sexual exploitation, the fact that they did is further evidence of the strength of slave marriages and the support spouses provided to one another.

Another factor which would give a historian insight into determining the strength of slave marriages; is the length of time slaves were married. An example of this can be seen by reviewing the journal of a former slave holder Chaplin who noted that two of his female slaves had been married for over twenty seven years, he found that this was a strange phenomenon but by reviewing numerous slave testimonies one can draw the conclusion that it was common for slave marriages to be lifelong unions, unless broken by separation (which will be discussed in more detail further on in this chapter). This is reiterated by the work of Gutman, his study showed that the majority of slaves remained married when possible, as only 9% of slaves in his study had separated due to mutual consent or by desertion

Franklin believed that the permanency of a slave marriage would depend on the extent to which the couple could live and work together, based on this he deemed that slave marriages would only work if the couple remained together on the same plantation. However, as aforementioned slave marriages could not be legitimised as it would interfere with the owner's rights to sell or give away their 'property', this meant that slave marriages were under constant threat of separation either through long distance or local sales, being gifted between white family members and also when estates of deceased owners were divided up Crawford estimates that nearly a quarter of all slave families were broken by sale.

Slave owners understood the value slaves held in their marriage and used this knowledge as a way to control their slaves; the threat of being separated from their spouses was the most feared punishment, '...a haunting fear

which made all of the slave's days miserable...' This overwhelming fear of being separated from their spouses shows further evidence of the importance of marital ties between the enslaved.

Gutman 1970 study highlighted the strength of marital and family ties, however it has been criticised as his work only focused on large plantations where marital and family bonds would have been stronger, however it must be noted that these large plantations, where hundreds of slave presided were the exception, not the norm, Crawford's research showed less than 50% of slaves lived on the same plantation as their significant other. The Majority of the enslaved in South were from small plantations with only a few other slaves, this meant much to their master's dismay that they had to form cross plantation unions. These Cross plantation marriages were said to have constituted for over 33% of slave marriages, whilst these arrangements have been denigrated, work from revisionist historians have used them to exemplify the strength of marital bonds between the enslaved. Another important detail to note is that even slaves from large plantations sometimes married slaves from other plantations; the existence of cross plantation marriages amongst these slaves shows historians another example of the enslaved striving for autonomy from their masters.

Cross Plantation Marriages were obviously harder than maintaining a relationship with a significant other on the same plantation; but despite the drawbacks, slaves went to incredible lengths to maintain their long distance relationships; for example A slave owner described how one of his slaves

walked 40 miles to see his wife, only love explains his willingness to repeat this trip over and over again.

Cross plantation unions also took place between free blacks and slaves, in many of these cases the free slave would attempt to purchase their significant other to no avail, however an example of the devotion held in these unions can be seen in the case of Samuel Small, a free black, who became a slave for seven years to pay for his wives freedom.

Recently Russell has argued that local as well as long distance sales caused the high rates of family separations, however West believes that even though any type of separation would cause great anguish, the system of cross plantation unions coupled with the strength of relationships between spouses meant in the case of local separations the consequences may have not been so damaging.

This chapter will draw attention to one final area, slave marriages once they were free; Gutman emphasised that when slaves were emancipated they went to great efforts to reunite with their families which they had been separated from.

Molly Tillman recounted the anguish she felt when her master sold her husband to another state, “ well ma’am, I grieved fo’ dat nigger so dat my heart wuz heavy in my breas’. I know I never would see him no more” after emancipation she still could not get over her husband until one day several years later she found him “ I wuz so happy I shouted all over dat meetin’

house. We jes' tuck up whar we lef' off an' ' fo' long us got married" they lived happily as man and wife until he died 20 years later.

The enthusiasm in which slaves registered to be legally married after the emancipation shows how much they valued their marriages.

In conclusion, with all the difficulties that affected matrimonial ties between slaves one can understand why many historians deemed slave marriages as weak and unstable. However, when assessing the issues faced by slaves; legitimacy, the control owners had over their slave, forced coupling, sexual exploitation and separation, the fact that the majority of slaves managed to work through these and still managed to create deep and enduring relationships show the truth strength, resilience and value of slave marriages.

By reviewing numerous slave testimonies, it is clear that through their words and behaviour slaves repeatedly strove to make their marriages last, the enslaved worked strenuously within and around the power structure which restricted their lives to maintain their marriages.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In Conclusion this dissertation has shown that the enslaved of the antebellum South strove for autonomy from their masters and the harsh restraints of slavery; to do this they created strong and loving bonds with a significant other. By creating their own social space to create and maintain

these unions, this illustrates that slaves were able to survive and resist the oppression they faced under bondage.

Slave owners constantly intruded on the lives of their slaves, believing it was their right to control every aspect of the lives of their slaves, they attempted to decide, sometimes successfully, the opportunities slaves had to meet a potential partner, the partner their slaves should be with, the type of wedding ceremony their slaves received if any, the amount of time they could spend with their significant other and finally to separate romantic unions for sales or if they saw fit. These constant impingements forced slaves to adopt what West depicted as an “underground” approach to their ‘romantic’ lives. This has been described throughout this research project, entailing secret frolics, socialising with slaves in different plantations, celebrating marriages with appropriate ceremonies, and finally risking severe punishing at the hands of their masters or the patrollers to be able to visit the one they loved.

The majority of slave testimonies that have been examined throughout this research project have shown that the majority of slaves strove to marry the person of their choosing and were also prepared to withstand great hardships to maintain their marriages. This is contradictory of the early academic views on slave relationships, especially that of Elkins as aforementioned, who believed that slavery destroyed slave’s capacity to resist the regime in any capacity, and form relationships with anyone other than their master. The research for this dissertation has shown the opposite, that in fact the majority of slaves managed to create and maintain loving

and enduring marriages despite the regime of bondage, this strength is further highlighted when examining the sexual exploitation faced by female slaves and how in many cases their significant other either attempted to protect them or provided love and support to shelter them from such adversity. Another noteworthy factor when accessing the strengths of enslaved romantic bonds is that of cross plantation union, which as previously discussed shows the lengths slaves would go to be with the one they loved, including risking cruel violent punishments to see their loved ones as much as possible.

As mentioned in the introduction chapter Kolchin believes that this positive perspective on slavery dismissed the hardships of the regime, believing instead the slaves in fact flourished during their time in bondage, however this is not what this project is attempting to achieve, instead it is the fact that slaves strove for autonomy to form a connection with another, which gave them a separate identity than that of a slave, embodying roles such as companion, confidante and soulmate.

Indeed for the enslaved of the antebellum South, falling in love was burdened with extreme emotional and physical difficulties, even former slave Harriet Jacobs asked herself:

“ Why does the slave ever love Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence”

West explained that despite all the problems 'romantic' bonds entailed, the majority of marriages amongst the enslaved sheltered and supported them in face of adversity, these loving, affectionate, and supportive relationships created a mindset of cultural independence.

Finally to end with a quote from Rawick;

" While from sunup to sundown the American slave worked for another and was harshly exploited, from sundown to sunup he lived for himself and created the behavioural and institutional basis which prevented him from becoming the absolute victim"

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