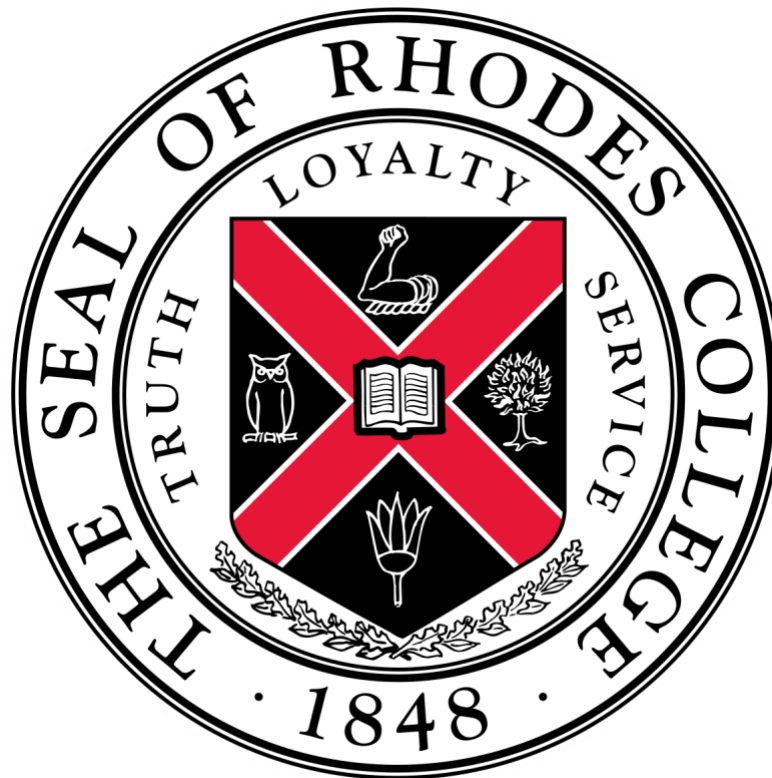


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**A White Man's World: The Sexual Exploitation of Enslaved
Women in the Urban Deep South**

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Introduction

In the nineteenth century southern United States the role of the female slave had a dual nature. Enslaved women played an important role in the daily operations of domestic life and were typically used to provide labor in spheres that were not particularly physically demanding. Added to their roles as domestic laborers, enslaved women were often expected to, by virtue of their bodies, perpetuate slavery and improve the lives of white slaveholding men. For slave owners, the inherent value of enslaved women was connected to their reproductive abilities. White slave traders and white slave owners often exploited female slaves for their own monetary or personal gain. Due to this exploitation, young women garnered higher prices than their older or less "desirable" female counterparts and were subject to habitual mistreatment by white slave owners due to their young age and reproductive abilities. In urban settings, the possibility of sexual assault and abuse was heightened due to the close proximity of enslaved women and slave owners in cities. To explore the experiences of enslaved women who lived in the urban Deep South, the slave trade and population of four regionally important cities will be discussed. Memphis, Tennessee; Nashville, Tennessee; Vicksburg, Mississippi; and Mobile, Alabama, were each home to large slave populations and booming slave trades. The lives of women enslaved in these urban environments were inherently different from their plantation counterparts. The

density of urban environments and the organization of domestic urban slavery allowed white men uninterrupted access to the women of color they owned. This allowed for the exertion of physical dominance over enslaved women which often ended in sexual violence. Due to the urban living structure, enslaved women in Memphis, Nashville, Vicksburg, and Mobile experienced a considerable amount of sexual assault at the hands of their owners. Evidence of this sexual exploitation and abuse is attested to in the businesses records of the slave trade, former slaves' personal accounts of mistreatment, and can be inferred from the population statistics of mixed-race slave populations present in all four cities.

Background

The sexual exploitation of enslaved women was paramount to the continuation of the slave trade in the United States. Wilma Dunaway, in *Women, Work and Family in the Antebellum Mountain South*, states three distinct patterns of systemic reproductive exploitation that plagued the lives of female slaves: sexual exploitation by males, owners' structural interference into the pregnancy and childbirth practices, and owners' structural pressures toward high fertility.¹ Antiquated and racist ideas regarding the bodies of African people, built into the institution of American slavery, gave white slave holders the perceived justification for the mistreatment of their black slaves. These myths greatly affected the treatment of female slaves. African women's' bodies were believed to be of a different caliber than those of European women. European men insisted that pregnancy and childbirth came easily to African women, that their bodies did not require the same recuperation that European women required. One

¹ Wilma A. Dunaway, *Women, Work, And Family in the Antebellum Mountain South*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 239.

European travel writer in West Africa wrote of African women that “in the second or third day [after childbirth] they already go among people and do their housework and business.”² The idea that African women would be able to recover from childbirth at such a remarkable pace, especially when compared to the weeks that elite European women spent recuperating, furthered the belief that African women were natural “breeders” and therefore inherently different than their white counterparts.

Not only did African women have to contend with white views of African childrearing, they also had to contend with their bodies being viewed as inherently sexual objects by the white males who owned them. The stereotypes of the “jezebel” and the “mammy” dominated the perspectives of enslaved black women. The “jezebel” being a woman “obsessed with matters of the flesh,” and the “mammy” being an asexual, maternal image. They contradict each other, but both ideologies come rooted in patriarchal views towards the bodies of African women. “One was at heart a slut, the other deeply religious,” but they both served as justification for sexual exploitation of enslaved women.³

The ideas about black women being inherently promiscuous stem from European misunderstandings of African culture. The cultural practices of African peoples were misunderstood by Europeans due to their own ideas about what constituted “civilized” culture. The difference in dress (due to climate) was labeled “savage” nudity. Traditional dances, ceremonies, and practices all became “profane exhibitions of limitless passion.”⁴ Patrick

² Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (2004, University of Pennsylvania Press), 65.

³ Deborah Gray White, *Aren't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 46.

⁴ Patrick Mingos, *Far More Terrible for Women: Personal Accounts of Women in Slavery*, (John F. Blair, Publisher, 2006), 4.

Minges, in *Far More Terrible for Women: Personal Accounts of Women in Slavery*, argues that these misguided ideas about overtly sexual traditional African cultures, combined with racial prejudice and ethnocentrism, led to brutal colonial patriarchs and generations of white men who were convinced their sexual relations with women of color were consensual and even desired. Adding to this, during the Victorian era, enslaved women existed outside of the strict societal restrictions that governed the sexual culture of the time period. This outsider position created a perception of “freedom” to have sexual relations with slave women and legitimized the sexual advances white men made towards them.⁵ The pervasive idea that white men had a duty to satisfy the “insatiable appetite for sex” that black women held served as another justification for sexual violence and exploitation.

The idea of slave women as inherently sexual beings was deepened by the reliance of the institution on the systematic abuse of enslaved females. When the international slave trade was outlawed in 1807, the continuation of slavery relied on a self-sustaining internal mechanism which replenished the slave population through those babies, black and mulatto, born to enslaved women. This introduced an economic incentive, on top of the already prevalent personal sexual desire, to institutionalize gender based abuse. The femininity of enslaved women was entirely reduced to reproduction.⁶ White slaveholders perceived enslaved women as “breeders,” and their value in the slave trade directly stemmed from their ability to reproduce⁷. Numerous first-hand accounts of former slaves tell stories of forced sex with other slaves by direct order of the master in order to increase the volume of slaves. Rose Williams, a former slave born in 1846 in Texas,

⁵ Minges, *Far More Terrible for Women*, 4.

⁶ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1999), 144.

⁷ Wilma King, “Mad Enough to Kill: Enslaved Women, Murder, and Southern Courts,” *The Journal of African American History* 92, no.1 (Winter, 2007), 37-56.

told one such story in a Works Progress Administration slave narrative interview. She recounted how at 16 her owner forced her to live and mate with an enslaved man named Rufus. She quotes the master as saying to her, “Woman, I’s payed big money for you, and I’s done that ‘cause I wants you to raise me chillun. I’s put you with Rufus for dat purpose.”⁸

Economic incentives existed not only for white masters to forcibly mate slaves, but also to impregnate enslaved women themselves. Catherine Clinton in her book *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South*, argues that mulattos, slaves of white and black heritage, are solely a product of “unbridled capitalistic greed,” and quotes an 18th century white woman, Evangeline Andrews, as saying “I sincerely believe they [slave owning white men] are excited to that crime by no other desire or motive but that of adding to the number of their slaves.”⁹

When purchasing slaves, buyers sought young women of child-bearing age to act as a self-renewing labor force. The most sought after female slaves were aged sixteen to nineteen and were “large enough to nurse,” demonstrating that enslaved women were considered to be the most valuable during peak reproductive fitness.¹⁰ The average age of enslaved women at the birth of their first child was roughly 21 years old.¹¹ The age of an enslaved woman not only determined her ability to bear children, but also increased her chance of sexual assault. A former slave who wrote about her experiences reported that “black female slaves were usually sexually assaulted when they were between the ages of thirteen and sixteen.”¹² Diana Berry, in “In Pressing Need of Cash,” recounts how one slave owner did not want to pay full price for an

⁸ Minges, *Far More Terrible for Women*, 12.

⁹ Catherine Clinton, *The Sexual Dynamics of Slavery* (Pantheon Books, 1982), 211.

¹⁰ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 144

¹¹ Dunaway, *Women, Work, And Family in the Antebellum Mountain South*, 242.

¹² Bell Hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Pluto Press, 1982), 24.

enslaved woman's "services" once he realized that his slave had a "disease of the womb" and was not capable of reproducing.¹³ The only services affected by a "disease of the womb" would have been the woman's ability to bear children or perform other sexual acts, not common domestic chores. In a 1932 essay entitled "Black Folk and Birth Control," W. E. B. DuBois, an early prominent civil rights leader, commented on how the role of slave women to increase the labor force through childbearing created multi-generational societal ramifications. He stated that "as slaves, every incentive was furnished to raise the largest number of children possible" and named the "chief surplus crop" of the southern region to be the "natural increase of slaves."¹⁴ The physical health and reproductive value of "bondswomen" (another term to denote an enslaved woman) were the most important factors in the trade of female slaves. The belief held by white men that bondswomen were natural breeders as well as the accessibility of enslaved females, directly resulted in sexual violence and exploitation.¹⁵ The sexual exploitation of female slaves was such a crucial factor in the slave trade of the southern United States that the continued existence of slavery relied upon ritual and continual rape.

Male buyers perceived bodies of lighter skinned or mulatto females to be "delicate," and not well suited for strenuous labor. This forced them into domestic positions. Lightness of skin tone was associated with femininity and domesticity, and as a result, lighter skinned females were favored and were more likely to be placed in visible roles.¹⁶ Lighter skinned enslaved women may also have been preferred due to their parentage. Joseph Henry, a New Englander

¹³Diana Berry, "In Pressing Need of Cash: Gender, Skill, and Family Persistence in the Domestic Slave Trade," *The Journal of African American History* 92, no. 1 (Winter, 2007), 32.

¹⁴ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, "Black Folk and Birth Control," *Birth Control Review* 16, no. 7 (June 1932), 166-167.

¹⁵ King, "Mad Enough to Kill," 39.

¹⁶ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 152-153.

who spent six months in Vicksburg, Mississippi between 1838 and 1839 to document the treatment of slaves in the city, noticed that most of the house slaves he encountered were of a lighter skin tone. In his essay recounting his time, he states, “It is well known I suppose to most readers, that a large proportion of the slaves are the offspring of the slaveholders themselves. . . . For this reason I account for the fact that a greater proportion of the house slaves are of the mixed color than of the field slaves.”¹⁷

It is crucial to this discussion to understand the almost non-existent legal rights that enslaved women possessed. In 1857, Reverend J. D. Long explained, “one of the reasons why wicked men in the South uphold slavery is the facility it affords for a licentious life. Negroes tell no tales in courts of law of the violation by white men of colored females.”¹⁸ It was not possible for enslaved women to have any legal agency or to report the sexual exploits of their masters. In fact, by law it was “not legally possible for a nonwhite female to be sexually exploited by a white male.”¹⁹ In the same time period, other interracial relationships were criminalized, but in the cases of white men and colored women, white men were never considered perpetrators. Consent of enslaved females would never have been a factor in these relationships. Slave owners displayed “despotic” rule, and since the female had no personal agency under the law, she also did not have the power to “freely” give herself to her master.²⁰ Modern understandings of rape place this freely given consent first. In Antebellum law, rapes perpetrated against enslaved females were not tried due to the understanding that “the white race of the [rape] victim gave to

¹⁷ Joseph Henry, “Statement of Facts Respecting the Condition and Treatment of Slaves in the City of Vicksburgh and its Vicinity in the State of Mississippi in 1838 and ‘39”, (Publisher Unknown, 1839), 11.

¹⁸ Calhoun, *American Family*, 2:295, through Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 211.

¹⁹ Dunaway, *Women, Work, and Family in the Antebellum Mountain South*, 231.

²⁰ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 213.

the offense its enormity.”²¹ Essentially, to rape a white woman was an enormous crime, but to rape a woman of color was a pastime. In addition, rape laws were colored by racist stereotypes that upheld a belief in the innate sexual promiscuity of African women. Dunaway writes that “the legal rule of thumb was that rape was a charge that could not be applied to slaves because the intercourse of these females was promiscuous.”²²

In spite of the patriarchal system that governed the lives of slaves, the system of *partus sequitur ventrem*, directly translating to "that which is brought forth follows the womb", was adopted in the 1600s and ensured that any and all children born to female slaves became the property of the enslaved woman's master.²³ This model of matrilineal lineage within the institution of slavery gave rise to the “drop of ink” idea surrounding racial identity. Any amount of African or Native American heritage overruled any white heritage that may be present in a person. Joseph Henry saw the effects of this system at work in Vicksburg in the late 1830s. He writes, “I have seen slaves of every shade of color, from jet black to clear white. As handsome a woman as I ever saw was a slave in Vicksburgh...Not the slightest trace of the negro color...her color remarkably white and clear. But her mother having been a slave when she was born, she, of course, was a slave also.”²⁴ This system allowed white male slave owners to sexually abuse and exploit their slave women and not only benefit personally, but also economically. From this, it is clear that gender politics and the institution of slavery cannot be separated. The continuation of slavery relied on the guarantees provided by exploiting the bodies of the women it enslaved. The potential of women's bodies was essential to the cultivation of crops, extraction of wealth, and

²¹ Dunaway, *Women, Work, and Family in the Antebellum Mountain South*, 235.

²² Dunaway, *Women, Work, and Family in the Antebellum Mountain South*, 235.

²³ Clinton, *The Planation Mistress*, 203.

²⁴ Henry, “Statement of Facts Respecting the Condition and Treatment of Slaves in the City of Vicksburgh and its Vicinity in the State of Mississippi in 1838 and ‘39”, 11.

the continuation of the “peculiar institution.” In the words of former slave Harriet Jacobs, “slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women.”²⁵

Slavery in the Cities

The focus of this paper will be four southern cities: Memphis, Tennessee; Nashville, Tennessee; Vicksburg, Mississippi; and Mobile, Alabama. Attention is purposefully being placed on urban centers in the slave-holding Deep South, in contrast to the majority of the literature focusing on plantation slavery which also does not explicitly focus on the experiences of female slaves. Each of these cities played a strategic role in the regional economy in the Antebellum South, each situated on a major body of water and used for regional and international trade and transport. Memphis and Vicksburg are both located on the Mississippi River, Nashville on the Cumberland River, and Mobile having the distinction as an important port city located on Mobile Bay, a bay that opens into the Gulf of Mexico. With the growth of other sectors in each city, primarily situated around cotton and the transportation of cotton, the trade of slaves also grew.

Memphis, Tennessee had a large slave trade due to its prime location in a fertile, cotton-producing region on the Mississippi River. The city’s location on the river made it easy to transport slaves from upper southern states, states like Virginia and Maryland, to the slave markets in the Deep South. Planters from surrounding areas would come to these markets to purchase slaves.²⁶ In addition, Memphis’ growing population bolstered a thriving urban slave market with six slave trading companies being listed in the city directory of 1850 and nine in 1860.

²⁵ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, (Boston, 1861), 119.

²⁶ Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (Baltimore: J.H Furst Company, 1931), 250.

The economy of Vicksburg, also situated on the Mississippi River, (close to Natchez and New Orleans) similarly depended on the transport of cotton. Surrounded by plantations along the Mississippi River and several smaller rivers, Vicksburg served as the county seat where planters often visited to shop at markets and gather supplies. Beginning in the 1830s, the city entered a period of rapid growth and was home to an “exploding slave market.”²⁷ Not only was the slave trade booming, (Vicksburg quickly became the second largest slave market in the state behind Natchez) but it was said that “on any given day, more than 400 boats might be docked at the river front”, highlighting the booming commerce fueled by the river.²⁸

Nashville’s location in central Tennessee created an economy based less on the industry of plantation slavery and more on its burgeoning political importance and status as a center of commerce. By 1843, Nashville had been chosen as the state capital.²⁹ In the years that followed, the city grew in size and importance. The geography of the surrounding area made plantation farming difficult, so instead, iron manufacturing flourished in the city.

In Mobile, the main enterprise was the export of cotton. The port, second only to the port of New Orleans, was a major international cotton exporter. Slave manifests from the Antebellum Era show that a booming slave trade existed in Mobile, based in the ports. Many slaves were transported to and from the port of New Orleans as well as the port of Pensacola, connecting the Mississippi River slave trade in New Orleans to other cities on the Gulf Coast.

Many aspects of the slave population in these four cities did not follow the trends seen in other prominent southern cities. Richard Wade, in *Slavery in the Cities*, argues that by 1860,

²⁷ Pamela Lea Grillis, *Vicksburg and Warren County: A History of People and Place*, (Dancing Rabbit Books, 1992), 37.

²⁸ Grillis, *Vicksburg and Warren County*, 40.

²⁹ “Nashville’s Historical Timeline,” Metro Government of Nashville and Davidson County, Accessed June 25, 2018, <https://www.nashville.gov/Encyclopedia/Timeline.aspx>.

most of the established cities of the South were “shedding slaves” and that less people had stock in the system of slavery. From 1850 to 1860 the white population of Memphis nearly tripled, growing from approximately 7,000 in 1850 to almost 19,000 by 1860.³⁰ The slave population rose in tandem with the white population, increasing from around 2,500 to almost 4,000.³¹ The same growth in the slave population is also seen in Mobile, Vicksburg, and Nashville, though not at such a rapid rate. Between 1850 and 1860 the slave population of Vicksburg grew from 1,176 to 1,418, a difference of 242. Nashville’s rose from 2,028 to 3,264, a bigger shift of 1,236. Mobile’s rose from 6,794 to 7,169, increasing the slave population by only 375.³² This growth in the slave population goes against the trends seen in other southern urban areas such as New Orleans, Baltimore, and Charleston during the same time period. Citing this trend of slave population decrease seen in other areas, Richard Wade argues that slavery and urban centers were incompatible. However, the trends in all four cities of this study, Memphis, Mobile, Nashville, and Vicksburg run contrary to that argument, suggesting that the institution of slavery thrived despite the threat of the urban environment.³³ Wade also argues that the introduction of slavery in cities with a widespread practice of “living out” and “hiring out” caused the authority of the master to begin to break down. In cities, it was common for slave owners to contract out their slaves to individuals and businesses. Many times, the slaves that were “hired out” also lived away from their masters during the duration of their contract or with other slaves or free blacks. Any earnings slaves received for their work were paid to their master. “Living out” removed

³⁰ Bancroft, *Slave Trading*, 250.

³¹ Marius Carriere Jr., “Blacks in Pre-Civil War Memphis,” *Tennessee Historical Society*, (Spring 1989), 33.

³² 1850 and 1860 Federal Census.

³³ Richard Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 243-281.

slaves from the authority and constant supervision of their master.³⁴ While “hiring out” did occur in the slave trade, its popularity peaked in the 1830s, and dropped in the following decades.³⁵ In Vicksburg in 1830, 17% of the slave population was involved in hiring out. By 1860, that number had dropped to 9%.³⁶ Neither of these trends took a strong hold in Memphis. Kathleen Berkley, in her dissertation “Like a Plague of Locusts: Immigration and Social Change in Memphis, Tennessee 1850-1880,” refutes Richard Wade’s argument concerning slaves living out of the house. She states that due to strict local ordinances, slaves in Memphis did not have much interaction with free blacks and other groups that would lead to a breakdown in the master’s authority. In fact, Berkley uses an “index of dissimilarity” to measure the degree of segregation of a population against the rest of the population.³⁷ She found that slaves in Memphis were the “least residentially segregated group” in 1850, meaning that slaves lived in very close proximity with their masters.³⁸

The rise in the slave population coupled with the close proximity in which slaves and masters lived, helps to explain the amount of sexual exploitation that took place. In the structure of plantation slavery, slaves typically lived away from the big house in community with other slaves in family units and separate cabins. It is this separation that enslaved women in cities did not experience and what made the difference in their experiences. Sexual exploitation tarnished the experiences of all enslaved women, but in the four cities studied, sexual exploitation directly

³⁴ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 21, 82

³⁵ Christopher Morris, *Becoming Southern: The Evolution of a Way of Life, Warren County and Vicksburg 1770-1860*, (Oxford University Press, 1995), 67.

³⁶ Christopher Charles Morris, *Town and Country in the Old South*, (University of Florida, 1991), 191.

³⁷ Kathleen Berkeley, “Like a Plague of Locusts: Immigration and Social Change in Memphis, Tennessee 1850-1880” (PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 1980), 47-48.

³⁸ Berkeley, “Like a Plague,” 47-48.

perpetrated by white male slaveholders was the particular type of sexual abuse that defined city existence.

Evidence: Advertisements

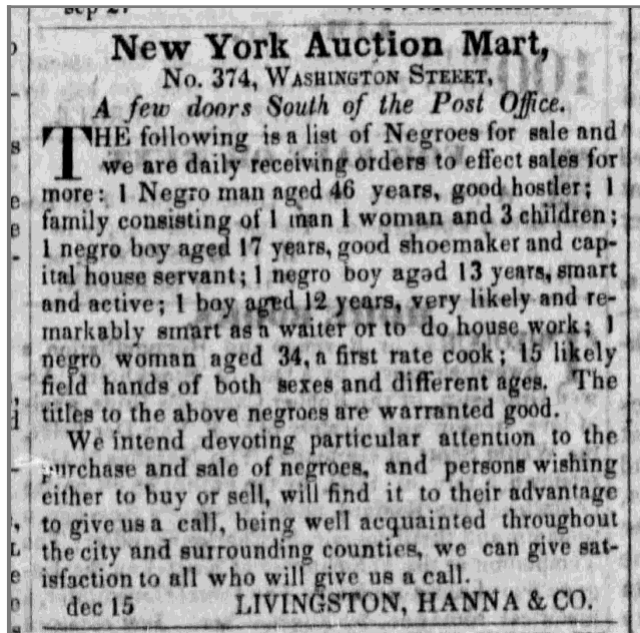


Figure 1. *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, February 7, 1846

Certain advertisements in local newspapers help to paint a picture of the attitudes towards female slaves in each city. By focusing on what is being advertised and how certain advertisements are worded, inferences can be made about the conditions of the lives of female slaves in each city.

The clipping shown in Figure 1 is from an 1846 edition of the *Vicksburg Daily Whig* and it announces the sale of a particular group of slaves to be sold at an upcoming auction. What is notable about this particular advertisement is that it publicizes for an entire family to be sold as a single unit. This family consists of an adult male, an adult female, and their three children. While most advertisements only classify slaves as “likely” or by the function they can perform, this Vicksburg advertisement focuses on the family unit, a unit that in all likelihood has the potential to produce more children and create more slave wealth in the future.

ISAAC L. VAUGS,
 ISAAC G. NEWLY.
 March 7—6m. } Franklin, Tenn.

55 Negroes for Sale.

I HAVE on hand 55 NEGROES for sale, consisting of men, women and children, amongst them several good Blacksmiths, a No. 1 Fancy Girl. Also several House Girls. These Negroes are bound to go; call immediately. March 7. REES W. PORTER.

CALL SOON

AND make payment of your notes or accounts to the late firm of STEVENSON & BIRTHWRIGHT, which are in the hands of the undersigned, or they will be placed

Figure 2. *The Tennessean*, March 8, 1856

Figure 2, a clipping from the Nashville based *The Tennessean* shows the other side of exploitation of female bodies. In this advertisement, the slave family is also represented as pure potential for more slave capital, but this advertisement also showcases a “No. 1 Fancy Girl,” directly appealing to the sexual desires of white men. Slaves bought for the sole purpose of serving as concubines were often called “Fancy Girls.” In this article it also lists “House Girls” as a separate category from the “women” that are for sale. In the four cities studied, this Nashville advertisement for a “Fancy Girl” was the most overtly sexual ad found, guaranteeing a future of sexual exploitation, unabashedly advertising this morally corrupt side of slavery. The language used in this ad directly ties together slavery and female sexuality.

As will be explored further in following sections, many aspects of slavery in these four cities did not follow conventional patterns demonstrated elsewhere in the slave-holding United States. The discrepancies regarding the exploitation of enslaved females may be explained by the fact that these four cities became increasingly reliant on slave labor as industry grew, leading

into the outbreak of the Civil War, and continuously relied on the exploitation of slave women to grow. While comparing his life in Baltimore to his life on a Maryland plantation Frederick Douglas wrote that “a city slave is almost a free citizen”.³⁹ Although, for enslaved women in the cities of Memphis, Nashville, Vicksburg, and Mobile, this did not ring true.

Evidence: Price Data

The practice of buying female slaves for sex or companionship occurred openly. The advertisement for a “No.1 Fancy Girl” in Nashville is an example of this common occurrence, but this was not the only reason female slaves were bought nor the only way in which their gender affected their relationships with their masters. Their sexuality also came into question when buyers tried to put a price on the reproductive potential of the body of female slaves.

Walter Johnson in *Soul by Soul* argued that high prices of female slaves revealed the sexuality of the slave market. The roles that female slaves held in households dictated their monetary value in the slave trade. The owner paid according to what he expected from the slave. Louis Hughes, a former slave who lived in Memphis and the surrounding area, spoke about the pricing of female slaves in his autobiography. He states that “servant women sold for \$500 to \$700, and sometimes as high as \$800...A house maid, bright in looks and well formed, would sell for \$1,000 to \$1,200.”⁴⁰ A brief statement in the *Nashville Gazette* newspaper lists similar prices for enslaved women in Nashville. It states, “men bring from eleven to twelve hundred and fifty dollars, and girls from nine to eleven hundred.”⁴¹ “Hughes’ description shows what was

³⁹ Frederick Douglas, through Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 110.

⁴⁰ Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom* (Milwaukee: South Side Printing Company, 1897), 15.

⁴¹ *Nashville Gazette*, March 3, 1856.

deemed as desirable and important to male slaveholders. The focus on physical appearance and the importance of being “well formed,” (perhaps meaning sexually mature) alludes to the intent of mistreatment of bondswomen by the buyers. The high prices paid by men were not only measures of desire but also of dominance. The ownership of a slave “mistress,” or “fancy,” gave slave owners and traders a reputation of power. Of course, when registering slaves in their households, slave owners would describe their property as “cooks,” “domestics,” or “seamstresses.”⁴² The prices that are seen in the slave trades of Vicksburg, Memphis, Nashville, and Mobile all demonstrate the commodification of the bodies of women.

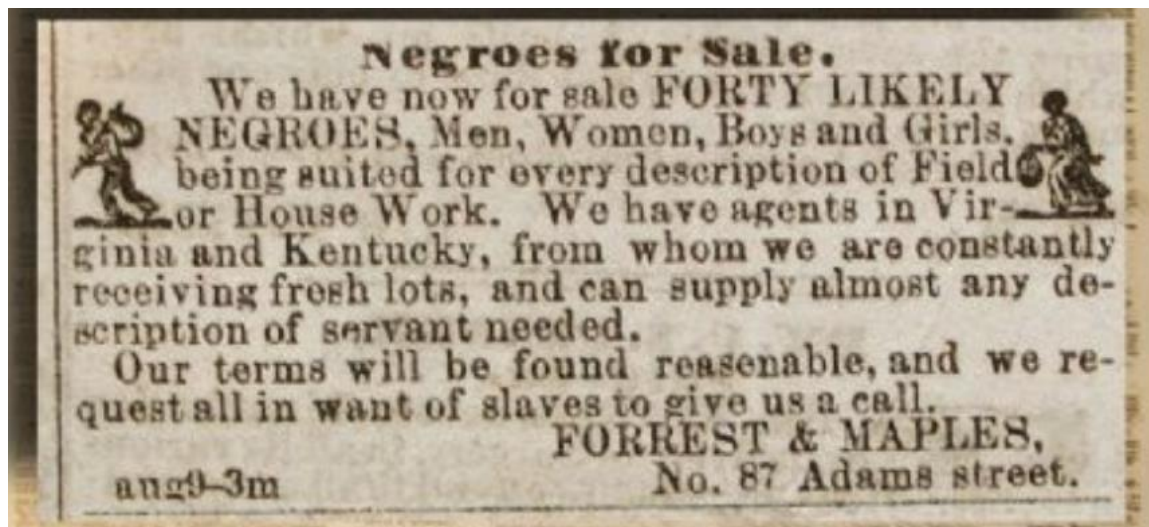


Figure 3. Advertisement from October 25, 1855 edition of *The Memphis Eagle and Enquirer*

The trend in prices for female slaves, as described by Hughes, can be seen in the 1856-1858 slave ledgers of Memphis-based slave trading company Bolton, Dickens and Company. This particular company also operated in Vicksburg. The company ledger keeps records of their

⁴² Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 114.

business transactions during those years, including the names of the slaves, the acquisition prices, and the amount the company received for a trade. As seen in the advertisement from the *Memphis Eagle and Enquirer* (Figure 3), slave traders consistently advertised their slaves as desirable or “likely negroes...suited for housework.”⁴³ In the sample of the ledger analyzed, the prices indicate a trend towards the purchase of slaves for domestic use. Due in part to advertisements from the time, it can be assumed that slaves sold by large slave trading companies were of the most desirable qualities, and therefore were sold for a price that reflected those qualities. Between 1856 and 1858, the average price for a female slave at Bolton, Dickens and Company in Memphis was \$1,126, and in Vicksburg it was \$1,145. These prices are well within the \$1,000 to \$1,200 for “well formed” housemaids range described.⁴⁴ However, enslaved women were sold between the prices of \$887 and \$1,300, demonstrating that many factors went into consideration for the purchase price of an enslaved woman.

Although women who could provide further services were valued monetarily more than servant women, male slaves were still valued the most. In the same slave ledger from Bolton, Dickens and Company, the average price for a male slave was \$1,262 with prices ranging from \$950 to \$1,450.⁴⁵ While these prices alone do not show much about the gender differences in the slave trade, the higher average price combined with the fact that only 39% of the slaves analyzed were female, show a higher demand for and value of the manual labor male slaves could provide. The prices for male slaves were consistently higher than female slaves due to the need for

⁴³ *Memphis Eagle and Enquirer*, October 25, 1855.

⁴⁴ Bolton Dickins and Company Slave Ledger, 1856-1858, Memphis and Shelby County Room collections, Memphis, Tennessee.

⁴⁵ Bolton Dickins and Company Slave Ledger.

manual labor in the city and on plantations, and due to a society where women, black or white, were not valued or treated as highly as men.

Evidence: Bills of Sale

Bills of sale provide a more detailed look at the sale of enslaved females in mid-nineteenth century Memphis, Nashville, Vicksburg and Mobile and demonstrate that, in particular, young women sold for higher prices than other female slaves. The probate records and bills of sale also show the reliance on exploitation of the reproductive potential of women in the slave trade. Many bills of sale, deeds, and wills, indicate that along with the purchase of an enslaved woman, the slaveholder already has claim to her “future increase,” or any children she may have in the future. The inclusion of “future increase” of enslaved females, a promise of future growth in capital, shows the reliance upon the idea of reproduction. Enslavement and the slave trade “destroyed any illusions that childbirth and the reproductive potential of women’s bodies were somehow private.”⁴⁶ Many bills of sale provide the age of the woman being sold, a very important factor in determining her reproductive potential and therefore her monetary value to the buyer. Some bills of sale also indicate physical characteristics, such as skin tone, that would affect the price a slaveholder would be willing to pay. For all four cities, overall averages could not be calculated due to the nature of the bills of sale. Many of the sales records are for sales of multiple or large groups of enslaved people with only one lump sum price recorded, making it impossible to break down the monetary value of each slave. The bills of sale that have been analyzed are mainly single sales of enslaved women.

⁴⁶ Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 68.

An 1836 Shelby County (Memphis) bill of sale records a sale for “one thousand dollars...bargained sold and delivered...one Negro woman named Mariah twenty five years of age.”⁴⁷ Considering this particular sale occurred in 1836, twenty years before the Bolton, Dickens and Company ledger sales, it can be assumed that with slight inflation due to the time difference, a sale of \$1,000 for a female slave was a large investment. The expensive price is notable considering that Mariah is recorded as being young and within child-bearing years. She had the potential to perpetuate her master’s wealth by having children, justification for her high price. Another 1836 bill of sale involving the same man, Britton Duke, records the sale of a “mulatto girl aged about 12 or 13 years named Jane for... the sum of seven hundred dollars.”⁴⁸ The sale of such a young girl for the price of \$700, in 1836, was most likely due to her lighter skin, thought to be more desirable. The higher prices for young, mulatto women may be an indicator of future sexual exploitation and abuse.

An 1854 bill of sale by the Bolton, Dickens and Company slave trading firm sheds light on the pricing of slaves in the 1856-1858 slave ledger from the company, analyzed previously. This bill of sale details a payment of “nine-hundred dollars in full for a negro girl by the name of Mary, between the age of 13 or 14 years of age.”⁴⁹ In the slave ledger for the company, created solely as a business record, no mention of age is included with each listing of a slave. This 1854 bill of sale from the company allows for a better understanding of their pricing of slaves in their slave ledger. Also as previously stated, the term “housemaid” or “domestic” carried with it the

⁴⁷ Bill of Sale, 1836, The Britton Duke Papers, Memphis and Shelby County Room collections, Memphis, Tennessee,

⁴⁸ Bill of Sale, 1836, The Britton Duke Papers, Memphis and Shelby County Room collections, Memphis, Tennessee.

⁴⁹ Bill of Sale, 1854, Bolton, Dickins, and Company file, Memphis and Shelby County Room collections.

insinuation that sexual relations between the enslaved woman and slave owner may have occurred.⁵⁰ Due to the sexual connotations associated with domestic housemaids that sold for \$1,000 to \$1,200, it can be assumed that the “well-formed” enslaved women were of at least the age of sexual maturity, meaning at least 16 to 19 years old.⁵¹ Mary, the previously mentioned girl sold for \$900, garnered \$200 to \$400 more than the price for a typical servant while only being 13 or 14 years old.⁵² The price hints at that despite having not yet reached peak maturity, the intentions of her buyer may have still been sexual in nature. The monetary value of 13-year old Mary also sets a price benchmark for the Bolton, Dickins and Company slave ledger. Since the average price for a female slave was \$1,126, many female slaves being sold were likely older than Mary and at the age of maturity, therefore worth more to male buyers.

A Mobile bill of sale from March 3, 1859 documents a purchase of a 26 year old woman named Delphia for \$1,000.⁵³ Her purchase price also follows the trend for “well-formed housemaid” and she is young enough to have a long reproductive life. This sale is contrasted to a bill of sale from 1858, also in Mobile, for a woman named Nannett. Nannett, who is 10 years older than Delphia, was purchased for \$700.⁵⁴ The discrepancy in price is most likely because the “breeding” potential of Nannett is less valuable to a slave buyer than that of a younger slave, like Delphia. These prices indicate that the same factors taken into consideration in the pricing of enslaved women in Memphis were present in the Mobile slave trade.

⁵⁰ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 114.

⁵¹ Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 15 and Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 113, 144.

⁵² Hughes, *Thirty Years*, 15. This point makes use of the numbers provided in Hughes’s autobiography.

⁵³ Bill of Sale, Mobile County Probate Court, Book G.

⁵⁴ Bill of Sale, Mobile County Probate Court, Book G.

In the Vicksburg Chancery Court, similar pricing trends can be seen in the records. An 1854 bill of sale records the purchase of an 11-year-old girl named Sophia for \$750.⁵⁵ This price is incredibly high when the age of Sophia is taken into account. This high price suggests that Sophia's future in the home of her buyer may be marked by the prospect of sexual assault, since the buyer was willing to pay more for her than the average price for a mature servant. Another example of young women being sold for exceptionally high prices in Vicksburg is found in the case of a woman named Elizabeth. This 1860 bill of sale records Elizabeth, 16 years old, being sold for \$1,100, well within the range paid for "desirable" house maids.⁵⁶ The bill of sale describes her as having "black complexion." Though she is not described as having "light" or "copper" skin as many women who were bought for exorbitant prices were, she was 16 and within the age range that white male slave buyers preferred, in the middle of peak physical and sexual maturity. Another bill of sale from Vicksburg continues the pattern of high prices for desirable young women and highlights the inherent sexuality of the slave trade. In February 1861, a 25-year-old woman named Polly was sold for \$1,200.⁵⁷ Polly, young and sexually and physically mature, was described as being "dark brown." Her purchase further shows that the prices described by Hughes, held true in Vicksburg as well.

Of all of the purchase records collected for the four cities, Nashville seems to have some of the most consistently high prices for female slaves. In Nashville, there was an obvious monetary advantage of being a young woman with reproductive potential, or being a young mother, due to demonstrated reproductive potential. An 1858 bill of sale for a woman by the name of Violet, of "dark complexion" and her two young children, Tom aged six, and Buck aged

⁵⁵ Bill of Sale, Warren County Chancery Court, Book Y, Page 575.

⁵⁶ Bill of Sale, Warren County Chancery Court, Book BB, Page 606.

⁵⁷ Bill of Sale, Warren County Chancery Court, Book CC, Page 162.

two, lists that the buyer paid \$1,600 for the three of them.⁵⁸ Another 1858 bill of sale documents Mary, aged 17 and of “dark complexion”, being bought for \$1,100.⁵⁹ In 1859, Margaret, aged 19 and of “yellow color,” was sold for \$1,200.⁶⁰ All three of these sales demonstrate the imbedded sexuality and exploitation ingrained in the slave trade. Violet and Mary are examples of young women with demonstrated reproductive success being sold for very high amounts, and Margaret’s sale follows the trend of young women, and in particular light skinned women, being bought for abnormally high prices.

The exceptional prices paid for particular slaves is indicative of alternative motives for their purchase, as these high prices did not constitute the norm in all slave transactions. An 1862 bill of sale states that Mary Ann was bought for about \$400.⁶¹ There is no indication of age or skin coloration included in this bill of sale, but due to the significantly lower price it can be assumed that Mary Ann was bought for reasons relating more to the physical rather than sexual labor she could provide. The bill of sale for Nathan also helps to contextualize the prices seen in previous bills of sale. Nathan, a 45-year-old man, was sold for “about three hundred and thirty-six dollars.”⁶² Men typically sold for more than women due to the perceived greater value of the labor they provided, but here we show see Nathan being sold for much less. It shows that white male buyers might have been willing to pay more for the possibility of female companionship than for guaranteed manual labor. This sale helps to demonstrate the aspect of sexual desirability

⁵⁸ Bill of Sale, Davidson County Register of Deeds, September 16, 1858.

⁵⁹ Bill of Sale, Davidson County Register of Deeds, September 26, 1858.

⁶⁰ Bill of Sale, Davidson County Register of Deeds, December 3, 1859.

⁶¹ Bill of Sale, 1862, Driver-Hunt family papers, Pink Palace Museum Collections, Memphis, Tennessee.

⁶² Bill of Sale, 1841, Driver-Hunt family paper, Pink Palace Museum Collection, Memphis, Tennessee.

in the slave trade and shows that sales where the motivation for buying was sexual, were more the exception rather than the norm.

Significance of Mulatto Presence

In southern slave-owning households, the presence of mulatto slaves was the tangible evidence of the abuse of enslaved females. The close proximity in which owners and slaves lived allowed for easier access to female slaves and therefore, more opportunities for sexual abuse to occur.⁶³ It was in the white domestic household where “sexual exploitation of young slave girls usually occurred.”⁶⁴ In her diary, Mary Chestnut expressed the attitudes towards sexual relations between master and slave. She wrote that sexual relations between white slaveholding men and their female slaves “was the thing we can’t name.” “Every lady,” Chestnut stated, “tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody’s household, but those in her own she seems to think dropped from the clouds or so pretends to think.”⁶⁵ Chestnut’s statements on the treatment of female slaves provide evidence that white slave-owning males did take advantage of their female slaves in the household. While the presence of slave mistresses remained very prevalent in society, its effects were not discussed by the families affected. A high percentage of the slave population in each city being classified as mulatto would indicate that sexual abuse of enslaved females by white men was very prevalent. It can also be inferred that most sexual contact between white owners and enslaved women was not consensual due to the power dynamics that existed between slave and master. An enslaved woman was nothing more

⁶³ Berkeley, “Like a Plague of Locusts,” 48.

⁶⁴ Hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*, 25.

⁶⁵ *Mary Chestnut’s Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) 29, quoted by Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 115.

than property that could be used, or abused, as the owner wished. Any women who did not “willingly respond to the sexual overture of masters and overseers were brutalized and punished.”⁶⁶

In the context of urban slavery, the risks of enslaved women being sexually assaulted by white men were heightened by the living structure in cities. In literature from the era, there is much discussion of this semi-public practice of slave and master relationships. Franklin Law Olmsted wrote after a visit to Mobile and New Orleans that he was told the practice of using enslaved women as concubines “pervaded the entire society.”⁶⁷ In 1859, a young man from Cincinnati visited Mobile and wrote that he knew of “few southern boys who would not sleep with Negresses.”⁶⁸ In Vicksburg, the number of mulatto slaves was noticed by a northerner in the city. He also wrote of the semi-public nature of the origins of these slaves. He wrote, “it is well known I suppose to most readers, that a large proportion of the slaves are the offspring of the slaveholders themselves.”⁶⁹ In Southern urban settings the dense populations, frequent contact, and in some situations a shortage of white women, caused the number of slave and master relations to increase.⁷⁰ The urban setting that enslaved women lived in in Memphis, Mobile, Vicksburg, and Nashville, directly caused them to be subjected to much greater instances of sexual abuse and exploitation.

⁶⁶ Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 26.

⁶⁷ Franklin Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States; With Remarks on Their Economy*, (Dix and Edwards, New York, 1856), 601.

⁶⁸ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 123.

⁶⁹ Henry, “A Statement of Facts Respecting the Condition and Treatment of Slaves in the City of Vicksburgh and its Vicinity, in the State of Mississippi in 1839 and '39,” 11.

⁷⁰ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 123.

In 1853, Nathan Bedford Forrest, just entering the Memphis slave trade market, made his first recorded purchase as a slave trader.⁷¹ On November 10th, 1853, Nathan Bedford Forrest paid “twelve hundred and fifty dollars in full for a negrow (sic) woman named Catherine aged seventeen and her child named Thomas aged four months.”⁷² The exact motivations for purchasing Catherine are impossible to know, but possible to extrapolate. The high price of \$1,250 would seem to indicate that there was some sexual motive behind the purchase of Catherine, but Jack Hurst poses the theory that perhaps Forrest was simply making an investment with this purchase. The rising values of women of child bearing age would have caused the purchase of Catherine to be a smart investment at the start of Forrest’s Memphis business ventures, but the exorbitant price paid for the young woman and her baby would suggest the intentions of the purchase were not for the future resale value of Catherine. In 1864, an article published in the *Chicago Tribune* makes a mention of a slave named Catherine in connection to Forrest, 11 years after the initial recording of the bill of sale for “Catherine.” The article, entitled “The Butcher Forrest and his Family,” begins by recounting the news of the capture of Fort Pillow by General Forrest and continues on to describe his family life and his business ventures as a slave trader. The article claims that Forrest had two wives, “one white, the other colored (Catherine) by which he had two children. His ‘patriarchal’ wife, Catherine, and his white wife had frequent quarrels or domestic jars.”⁷³ Hurst argues that if it were not for the emphasis of the name Catherine (with same spelling as the 1853 bill of sale) and due to the brief and biased nature of the article, it would have been completely dismissible.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Jack Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 36-37.

⁷² Shelby County Register’s Records, Book 16, p.125.

⁷³ *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 1864.

⁷⁴ Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest*, 37.

In the 1870 Memphis census, there is one entry that seems to prove many of the claims made by this 1864 article. In the 1870 census, in the 4th ward, there is a listing for a female Cath. Forrest, age 36, from Tennessee, labeled as mulatto. With just one name separating them and listed as being in the same tenement, there is also a listing for a girl named Narcissa Forrest, age 13, also from Tennessee and also labeled as mulatto.⁷⁵ The evidence strongly suggests that the Cath. Forrest listed in the 1870 census and the Catherine bought in 1853 at age 17, rumored to have been Forrest's mistress in 1864, are the same woman. Many of the names in this particular census were abbreviated, furthering the argument that the "Cath. Forrest" listed is the shortened version of "Catherine Forrest."

The 13-year-old girl, therefore, may have been one of the children mentioned in the 1864 article. The Catherine bought in 1853 aged around 17 years old, would have been around 36 years old in 1870, making the timeline correct and any disparity in time likely due to the unavailability of exact birth dates and ages. The labeling of "mulatto" may also be accurate. In the original bill of sale there is no indication of the tone of her skin besides referring to her as a "negro woman," typical of all bills of sale. If the Catherine in the 1853 bill of sale was actually mulatto, or had light, mulatto-like skin, then the unusually high original price of \$1,250 could be explained due to her more desirable skin tone. Lighter skinned women typically held more monetary value in the slave market. The presence of a child, also with the surname Forrest, further solidifies the argument that these two women were indeed the mistress and child of Nathan Bedford Forrest. The child, Narcissa, is recorded as being mulatto. Thus, this may be proof that her father was white. If Catherine was, in fact, mulatto and had a daughter with a man who was not white, the resulting child would not have been labeled as mulatto. Also, the

⁷⁵ United States Ninth Census, 1870, Fourth Ward, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee.

birthdate of Narcissa would most likely be sometime in 1857, well before the 1864 publication of the article that named Catherine as Forrest's "colored wife" and mentioned two children that resulted from their relationship.⁷⁶ The presence of a slave mistress in a prominent household was a common occurrence for the time. Taking all the evidence into consideration, her age, her last name, her mother's name, and her status of being mulatto, it is most likely that Narcissa Forrest was fathered by Nathan Bedford Forrest. Due to the societal status that slave owning bestowed, it would have made sense for Forrest, at the start of his Memphis ventures, to buy a slave to gain status. Taking the relationship a step further would have been a natural move for the period. It was "so common for female slaves to have white children, that little or nothing is ever said about it."⁷⁷

Evidence: Census Data

By probing the census data from the late Antebellum period, a better understanding of the degree to which the exploitation of women in these four cities occurred, can be acquired. The census data cannot divulge the true extent to which sexual exploitation occurred because children of mixed race were born only after the occurrence of the most the extreme and violent type of exploitation, rape. Thus, the true extent to which all types of sexual assault occurred is impossible to know. Also, the recording of coloration in census data was based on the arbitrary observations of the recorder and enslaved people were not asked their lineage. Taking this into account, it is very likely that the numbers of mulatto slaves were higher than even what was

⁷⁶ *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 1864, 3.

⁷⁷ Theodore D. Weld, *Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York, 1839): 101 accessed through John White, "Whatever Happened to Slavery in the Old South?" *Journal of American Studies* 8, no. 3 (December 1974), 383.

recorded by white census takers of the time. The numbers can only tell part of the story, as Catherine Clinton explains, “statistical evidence only partially advances our understandings of racial and sexual dynamics.”⁷⁸ The full extent to which women held in bondage were abused can only be speculation.

For Memphis, Nashville, Mobile, and Vicksburg, both the 1850 and 1860 federal census data was analyzed. The slave schedules for the 1850 and 1860 federal census allowed for general analytics of race, gender, and age to be conducted. A study from the 1970s, attempting to prove that claims of sexual exploitation made by slaves regarding slaveholders were greatly overstated, cited census data that states only 7.7% of slaves in the United States were mulatto.⁷⁹ In the Southern states that the four cities in this study are located in, Alabama, Tennessee, and Mississippi, the overall average of slaves listed as mulatto is about 7%, making the study’s assessment of the overall slave population true, but not necessarily its conclusions. Per the 1850 census, in Alabama, 6.3% of the total slave population was listed as mulatto. In Tennessee, 8.5% of the slave population was recorded as mulatto. In Mississippi, 6.36%.⁸⁰ These numbers include not just the urban areas, the few that existed, but also all rural areas and plantations that operated within each state.

The majority of the slave population in these three states did not live in the urban centers. Data on mulatto populations within the four urban areas is drastically different than the data from the entire state, and shows the jarring differences of life in urban and rural slavery. The percentages of sexual abuse and exploitation seen in the cities are remarkable high. In 1850, the

⁷⁸ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 221.

⁷⁹ Fogel and Engelmann, *Time on the Cross*, (Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 132.

⁸⁰ Statistics from the 1850 census found in W. O. Blake, *The History of Slavery and the Slave Trade, Ancient and Modern* (Haskell House Publishers, 1858).

percentage of the slave population that was recorded as mulatto in Mobile, Alabama was 18.98%. In Vicksburg, Mississippi it was 25%. In Nashville it was 33.92%, and in Memphis it was 26.33%.⁸¹ In the 1860 census, every city, except Nashville, saw a rise in the percentage of mulatto slaves. In Mobile the percentage rose to 20.84%. In Nashville it dropped to 24.14%, but an additional 3.35% of the population was listed as “yellow”, perhaps referring to skin tone or perhaps to Native American heritage. In Vicksburg the number rose to 34.4%, and in Memphis it rose to 32.56%.⁸²

Figure 4. Percentage of Slave Population Recorded as “Mulatto”

Location	1850	1860
Alabama	6.3%	
Tennessee	8.5%	
Mississippi	6.36%	
Memphis, TN	26.33%	32.56%
Nashville, TN	33.92%	24.14%
Vicksburg, MS	25%	34.4%
Mobile, AL	18.98%	20.84%

Figure 5. Slave Population in Each City

City	1850 “Black”	1850 “Mulatto”	1860 “Black”	1860 “Mulatto”
Memphis, TN	1628	582	2348	1134
Nashville, TN	1327	688	2357	785
Vicksburg, MS	882	294	929	488
Mobile, AL	5505	1290	5636	1484

⁸¹ 1850 Federal Census Slave Schedule.

⁸² 1860 Federal Census Slave Schedule.

The demographics of the whole slave populations of Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee are vastly different than the demographics of the urban slave population. The extremely high population of mixed-race slaves in the cities, is indicative of large amounts of sexual assault occurring in urban centers where slaves and slaveholders were in close proximity. Again, these numbers only include the sexual assaults that resulted in children being born. The abundance of day to day aggressions of white men towards enslaved women can only be imagined.

In each of the four cities studied, the mid-1800s signified a period of growth and a rise in both white and slave populations. In the years between 1850 and 1860, Memphis, Vicksburg, Mobile had a rise in the percentage of the mulatto population. A deeper understanding of the total population data and occurrences of sexual assault can be gained by looking at the percentage of the “mulatto” population that were born in the decades from 1840 to 1850 and 1850 to 1860. The percentage of mulatto slaves born in these two decades show how often sexual assault resulted in children in those years. In each city there was either no significant change or a slight decline in mulatto births from 1840 to 1850. The 1850 slave schedule records 33.16% of the Memphis mulatto population being 10 years old and younger, meaning born between 1840 and 1850. In Vicksburg, 36.05% were 10 and under in 1850. In Nashville, 30.08% of the mulatto slaves were 10 and younger, and in Mobile 31% of the mulatto population were born between 1840 and 1850.⁸³ In the 1860 slave schedule, 32.09% of the Memphis mulatto population were born between 1850 and 1860. In Vicksburg, 31.35%, in Nashville 29.68%, and in Mobile, 26.54% of the mulatto population were born from 1850 to 1860.⁸⁴ The disproportionately young

⁸³ 1850 Federal Census Slave Schedule.

⁸⁴ 1860 Federal Census Slave Schedule.

mulatto slave population suggests a large amount of births, and thus, rapes, occurring in cities during these time periods.

Figure 6. Percentage of Mulatto Population 10 years old and younger		
City	1850	1860
Memphis, TN	33.16%	32.09%
Nashville, TN	30.08%	29.68%
Vicksburg, MS	36.05%	31.35%
Mobile, AL	31%	26.54%

Conclusion

The findings of this research suggest that the circumstances associated with living in an urban environment increased the potential of sexual assault and exploitation for enslaved women. In the Southern cities of Memphis, Tennessee; Nashville, Tennessee; Vicksburg, Mississippi; and Mobile, Alabama, the evidence of sexual assault and exploitation by white male slaveholders is overwhelming, especially when the data is compared to rural counterparts. While sexual exploitation came in many forms, the evidence suggests that, in southern urban areas explicit sexual exploitation by white males was much more prominent than in other areas. In rural areas, while sexual assault perpetrated by white male slaveholders occurred, it seems that the motivation for exploitation was centered around the reproductive potential of enslaved women. The overwhelmingly large population of mulatto slaves in Memphis, Nashville,

Vicksburg, and Mobile, as well as the overwhelmingly young age of the mulatto population are evidence that rape and sexual exploitation occurred as a part of the everyday experience of women held in urban slavery, much more so than in the lives of their rural counterparts. It cannot be overstated that the value of women in the slave trade depended on their reproductive potential and their sex appeal to white men. The bodies of enslaved women were owned and abused by men who saw them as their own and did not acknowledge their humanity. The white ownership of their bodies was leveraged when white male owners sexually assaulted or raped them. The evidence of “fancies” in the cities (concubines that could be bought) and the sexual expectations of “house girls” and “domestics”, show that white male ownership equated dominance over all aspects of life for enslaved women. Contrary to the arguments of Richard Wade, the patriarchal authority of the white male master did not lessen or break down with the growth of urban slavery. In fact, this research suggests that in Memphis, Nashville, Vicksburg, and Mobile the dense urban environment strengthened the leverage that slaveholders had over the bodies of their female slaves. The institution of slavery depended on the exploitation of all those held in bondage, but particularly hinged on the bodies of the enslaved women. Slavery was a terrible existence for all those held in bondage, but is it evident that in Southern cities it was indeed “far more terrible for women.”⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Jacobs, “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself”