People as Crops

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When I think of 1808, I recall that the United States Constitution protected from Congressional interference the right to import slaves until January 1 of that year. Taking action at its earliest permitted opportunity, Congress passed legislation in 1807 to prohibit the importation of slaves beginning in 1808.

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1 This paper was prepared for and presented at a conference entitled, Commemorating 1808: Fighting for the Right to Dream, October 25, 2008, Univ. of Toledo. I applaud Professor Benjamin G. Davis for planning and facilitating an excellent conference, and humbly thank Ms. Naomi Twining, Toledo activist, for encouraging me to participate.

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3 U.S. CONST. Art. I, s. 9. (“The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight, but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such Importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each Person.”)

4 An Act to prohibit the importation of Slaves into any port or place within the jurisdiction of the United States, from and after the first day of January in the year of our Lord
The different Congressmen voting for this act probably did so for very different reasons. Abolishing the Trans-Atlantic slave trade may have been a defensive maneuver to protect whites from newly imported blacks not yet seasoned to accept slavery.\textsuperscript{5} Certainly the Revolution in Haiti reminded Congress of the danger an enslaved population posed. More locally, planned uprisings in West Florida in 1785 and in Henrico County, Virginia, in 1800 had to give the legislators pause.\textsuperscript{6}

Abolishing the trade may have been, for some, a step towards abolishing slavery altogether, in fulfillment of the Revolutionary mantra that all men are created equal.\textsuperscript{7} Thomas Jefferson wrote after this act was passed, “This will in some measure stop the increase of this great political and moral evil, while the minds of our citizens may be ripening for a complete

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one thousand Eight Hundred and Eight. 2 Stat. 426; 9\textsuperscript{th} Cong. sess. 2, ch. 22 (Mar. 2, 1807).
\end{quote}

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5 Slaves had to learn to obey instructions in a new language and had to learn to obey new masters. Tannenbaum reports that nearly half of the slaves imported died in the seasoning. FRANK TANNENBAUM, SLAVE AND CITIZEN; THE NEGRO IN THE AMERICAS 28, 35 (1946).
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6 KENNETH M. STampp, THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION 135 (1956). (As many as a thousand slaves were accused of participating in the Gabriel Prosser conspiracy in August 1800 in Henrico County.)
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7 Preamble to the Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776). (“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”)
\end{quote}
emancipation of human nature.” The decision to ban the trade may have been part of an economic battle, an effort to raise the sales price of domestic slaves by cutting off the supply of imported slaves. Whatever the individual motivations of those who voted for the act, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was outlawed effective January 1, 1808.

We know that prohibiting the trade did not stop it. The prohibition, in fact, made the

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9 Cramer reports that in the Upper South prices for slaves fell by almost half between 1783 and 1795. Cramer, Black Demographic Data 10, 53.

10 “[E]very state except South Carolina prohibited foreign importation at the time Congress took action.” Cramer, Black Demographic Data 52. South Carolina had prohibited the trade from 1787-1803. Id.

11 In his presidential message of 1849, Zachary Taylor said: “this trade is still, in part, carried on by means of vessels built in the United States, and owned or navigated by some of our citizens.” House Exec. Doc. 31 Cong 1, sess. III, pt. 1 No. 5, p. 7 in W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870, 163 (1896). Tannenbaum reported that from 1859 to 1862, at least 170 expeditions left the Americas to collect slaves from Africa; 74 of them sailed from New York. Tannenbaum, Slave and Citizen 34.
trade more lucrative, and thus more attractive for some.\textsuperscript{12} Given the lax enforcement of the statute and the rare imposition of any penalty, little other than an internal moral compass or a perceived threat to community reputation served to stem the trade.\textsuperscript{13}

The cotton gin, invented in 1793, made large scale cotton farming possible in new areas of the south and southwest. Cotton cultivation required labor, and this increased market demand encouraged breaches of the law.\textsuperscript{14} Although the trade continued, the numbers of persons imported into the United States diminished appreciably.

The increased demand coupled with the prohibition on importation served to incite

\textsuperscript{12} \textsc{Cramer}, \textit{Black Demographic Data} 53-54. Cramer reasons that by cutting off importation, Congress increased the price of slaves and encouraged a conscious program of breeding slaves. He cites estimates that perhaps 1,000 slaves were imported into the United States each year after 1808. Tannenbaum reported that, “A slave could be sold in Cuba for thirty times what he cost in Africa, . . .” \textsc{Tannenbaum}, \textit{Slave and Citizen} 33.

\textsuperscript{13} \textsc{Du Bois}, \textit{The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade} 109. The United States began coastal patrols to suppress the trade in 1819, but few persons were convicted for this offense. \textsc{Cramer}, \textit{Black Demographic Data} 54. Those who no longer imported slaves into the United States continued to ship them to Cuba or to Puerto Rico. \textsc{Tannenbaum}, \textit{Slave and Citizen} 34

\textsuperscript{14} Paul Finkelman estimates that 10,000 slaves were illegally imported after 1808. Introduction, \textit{Slave Trade and Migration} xi (Paul Finkleman, ed. 1989).
internal mechanisms for providing slave labor. One group that undertook the challenge to satisfy this demand was the Upper South slave breeders, those who encouraged slaves to reproduce so the children so created could be sold. It is not the Atlantic trade that concerns this paper, but the interstate trading of slaves, or, more precisely, the breeding of slaves for interstate commerce.

My interest in slave breeding is a rather personal one. As a young child, I traveled with my family almost every year to Farmville, Virginia, near where my father was born. My father’s uncles and aunts entertained us on our way to my father’s parents’ home. I noticed in the local phone book the large number of people named Wilson and asked if they were all my relatives. My father explained that a slave owner named Wilson had owned many slaves, and that most of them took his name when they were freed. Their families, through the generations, had stayed in the area.¹⁵

Not many years later, I met a white teenager who asked me, after our introductions, how it was that I was named Wilson. Bursting with her new knowledge, she explained that “Wilson” was an English name and, surely, I wasn’t English. I told her about slaves taking the name of their owners, and added that I might, in fact, be part English. Her face showed a range of emotions in response; surprise, curiosity, sympathy, compassion, revelation, envy that I had

¹⁵ The Wilsons owned land in Cumberland County. 1860 Census of Cumberland County, Va., Schedule 2, pp. 2, 56, 69, 79. My Wilson fore-parents, were born and are buried in Cumberland County. 1880 Census, Schedule 1, p. 100. Many had migrated to Farmville, in neighboring Prince Edward County, by the time of my visit. Farmville sits near the border between the two counties and is the largest city in the area.
known something she did not.

I, too, felt a range of emotions. I had just identified myself as a descendant of slaves. Would that change her reception of me? If so, how? Would that change my perception of myself? If so, how? I had never before vocalized that reality. I had heard about my slave heritage. My maternal grandfather loved to tell how his grandfather selected his name after he was freed. I knew that his Aunt, still alive when I was a child, had been a slave until she was four years old. I knew I was a descendant of slaves, but I had never vocalized it. I had to ask myself whether or not it made a difference. Wasn’t it just an objective fact like the day of the week on which you were born or the color of your hair? Did admitting my slave heritage have any significance? I concluded it did not.

A bigger issue for me was the number of Wilsons in the Farmville phonebook. Just how many slaves did Wilson have, and what did they all do? The landscape around Farmville does not lend itself to large farms like the cotton plantations of Mississippi and Louisiana. The land was hilly and laden with rocks and gullies. I saw small tobacco farms, but didn’t believe a large slave force would be useful in Farmville. Jessie Harrison wrote in 1833, “Virginia possesses scarcely a single requisite to make it a prosperous slave labour State.” Why were there so many “obviously not English” Wilsons in Farmville?

My answer came when I read about slave breeding. By the 1800s, Virginia farmers had exhausted their lands. Many planters uprooted and moved with their families and belongings,

including their slaves, southwest, to Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, to new land. Others stayed in Virginia where they abandoned their reliance on traditional farm products, and began the full-scale production of slaves to work the new farms in the southwest. The large numbers of Wilsons in Farmville make sense if the main crop on Wilson’s farm was slaves. At the end of the war, Wilson had to let his primary agricultural products go free. Wilson’s left over inventory, unsold because of the Civil War, continued to populate the Farmville area.

Slave breeding did not begin with the prohibition of the Atlantic trade. An advertisement in 1796, in Charleston, South Carolina, offering 50 slaves for sale contained these assurances,

[T]hey are not Negroes selected out of a larger gang for the purpose of sale, but are prime, their present Owner, with great trouble and expense, selected them out

17 The slave population in Texas increased from 58,161 to 182,566 from 1850 to 1860. In Arkansas, the slave population increased, 1820-1860 from 1,617 to 4,576 to 19,935 to 47,100 to 111,115 in ten year intervals. In Virginia, the slave population increase was minimal, ranging from 425,148 in 1820 to 490,865 in 1860. U.S. Bur. of Census, Negro Population in the US 1790-1915 p. 57 (1918 Kraus Reprint 1969).

18 Cramer, Black Demographic Data 53; William L. Miller, A Note on the Importance of the Interstate Slave Trade of the Ante Bellum South 305, 309 in Slave Trade and Migration. (In northern slave states, slave sales were from 70 per cent as important as tobacco in 1830 to 30 per cent in 1840. Annual sales of slaves, 1830 - 1840, at an average price of $400, amounted to $3.75 million.)
of many for several years past. They were purchased for stock and breeding Negroes, and to any Planter who particularly wanted them for that purpose, they are a very choice and desirable gang.\textsuperscript{19}

Female slaves were evaluated as breeding animals when being bought and sold. Frederick Bancroft noted a newspaper advertisement, “She [a girl about twenty years of age] . . . is very prolific in her generating qualities, and affords a rare opportunity for any person who wishes to raise a family of strong, healthy servants for . . . [his] own use . . .”\textsuperscript{20} He reported that, “A girl of seventeen that had borne two children was called a ‘rattlin’ good breeder’ and commanded an extraordinary price.”\textsuperscript{21}

When the owners of a remainder-interest in a slave sought to revoke the sale of that slave, Justice McKinney, of the Supreme Court of Tennessee, noted that the slave had given birth to several children since her sale. He wrote, “the sale of the slave, so peculiarly valuable for her physical capacity of child-bearing, so far from being for the benefit of the owners of the remainder-interest, was an enormous sacrifice, . . .\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[20] Tannenbaum, Slave and Citizen 81 quoting Bancroft 74 quoting Charleston Mercury (May 16, 1838).  
\item[21] Tannenbaum, Slave and Citizen 82 quoting Bancroft 82.  
\item[22] Arrington v. Grissom, 41 Tenn. 522, 524 (1860).  
\end{footnotes}
Sellers of slaves boasted of uncommonly good breeders and charged premium prices for them. Slave buyers considered the fecundity of females when making their purchases. They aspired to benefit from the natural increase of their slaves.23

There was profit to be made in the sale of slaves. The cost of raising a child was estimated at eight to ten dollars per year.24 The child could then be sold at age eight to twelve years for $400 to $500 dollars.25 “[A] child of four was sold for $200, and another of six for $150. . . . In 1857 children four, five, and eight years old were sold for $376, $400, and $785, respectively.”26

Frederick Olmsted wrote, “[T]he cash value of a slave for sale, above the cost of raising it from infancy to the age at which it commands the highest price, is generally considered among


24 BANCROFT, SLAVE TRADING IN THE OLD SOUTH 78. A detailed calculation of an owner’s investment in a child would include charges for the insurance of the child’s mother at the time of his birth and for the time she lost from work before and after giving birth; food, clothing, nurse’s care and incidentals furnished in childhood; overhead charges; compound interest on all of these until the slave reached adolescence or early manhood; and a portion of similar charges on behalf of other children in his original group who died before they could be sold. PHILLIPS, AMERICAN NEGRO SLAVERY 359-360.

25 BANCROFT, SLAVE TRADING IN THE OLD SOUTH 79.

26 TANNENBAUM, SLAVE AND CITIZEN 81-82.
the surest elements of a planter’s wealth. . . . That a slave woman is commonly esteemed least for her laboring qualities, most for those qualities which give value to a broodmare is, also, constantly made apparent.” 27 An overseer in Georgia assured his employer, “I consider every child raised as part of the crop.” 28

Some women tried to resist this forced cohabitation, but were coerced into cooperating. Sarah Ford explained, when interviewed about her slave life in Texas, “When I’s growed mama tells me lots of things. She say de white folks don’t let de slaves what works in de field marry none, dey jus’ puts a man and breedin’ woman together like mules. Iffen the woman don’t like the man it don’t make no diff’rence, she better go or dey gives her a hidin’.” 29

Some found other ways to resist creating wealth for their owners. Herbert Gutman reported that slaves used various methods to prevent conception, including brews from roots or green coffee, and used abortion techniques such as drinking gunpowder mixed with sweet milk or eating the seed of the cotton plant. 30 This plan was equally dangerous because those found interfering with the production of an owner’s cash crop, more slaves, would be punished or sold


28 STAMPP, THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION 250.

29 REMEMBERING SLAVERY 26-27 (Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, eds. 1998).

30 GUTMAN, THE BLACK FAMILY IN SLAVERY & FREEDOM 81-82.
immediately.\textsuperscript{31}

Still other women took their lemons and tried to make lemonade. Slave owners encouraged sexual activity, and provided rewards or granted privileges to those who reproduced.\textsuperscript{32} In addition to relief from labor during her pregnancy, a new mother might receive a new dress or some other gift.\textsuperscript{33} Slave women were motivated by other realities to cooperate in procreating. They knew that most of the females sold off of the plantation were young, under 25 years old. Proving fecundity at an early age was a kind of insurance policy. It enhanced the value of the female to her owner and diminished the likelihood that she would be sold. Couples believed they would be allowed to stay together if they produced children.\textsuperscript{34}

Some slave owners sought to influence the gene pool of those they sold, or to populate their plantations with their own progeny. Elizabeth Sparks reported that, “Old Massa done so much wrongness I couldn’t tell yer all of it. Slave girl Betty Lilly always had good clothes an’ all the privileges. She wus a favorite of his’n.”\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{31} \textsc{Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery \\ & Freedom 81-82.}

\textsuperscript{32} \textsc{Stampp, The Peculiar Institution 248-250.}

\textsuperscript{33} \textsc{Stampp, The Peculiar Institution 248-251.}

\textsuperscript{34} \textsc{Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery \\ & Freedom 76.}

\textsuperscript{35} Autobiography of Elizabeth Sparks, # 450010 p. 5 (Jan. 13, 1937), 16 \textsc{The American Slave.}
Alfred Conrad and John Meyer refuted assertions that the American slave system was on the verge of collapse just prior to the Civil War by arguing that American slavery produced both a final good, cotton or tobacco or sugar cane, and an intermediate good, more slaves. They wrote, “The annual returns from slave productive activities . . . include both field labor and procreation.”36 They continued that, “Each prime field wench produced five to ten marketable children during her lifetime.”37 Their children were productive by age six and self-sustaining by age nine if male and age thirteen if female.38 They calculated a return on investment of 7.1 per cent for a mother of five children.39 Frederick Douglass explained, in his narrative on his life, how his grandmother had served her master faithfully from youth to old age. He wrote, “She had been the source of all his wealth; she had peopled his plantation with slaves; she had become a


great-grandmother in his service."^{40}

In Virginia, slave breeding was taken to a different level. It became a common course of business regularly engaged in for profit, rather than a side benefit from the use of slave labor. The combination of the increase in demand brought on by the cotton gin and the expansion of slavery to new lands, the diminution of a traditional supply of new labor when the trade became illegal, and the exhaustion of lands in the upper south encouraged these farmers to change or add to the type of crop they would grow. The interstate slave trade enabled the slave-exporting states to obtain a financial benefit from their exhausted soils.^{41} Slave breeding was a way to make ends meet. Without the trade, many slave-holders would not have survived.^{42}

The exhausted farms of Virginia were otherwise unproductive. In 1833, Jessie Harrison

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^{40} NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE AND TIMES OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS 99-100 (1962); in GUTMAN, THE BLACK FAMILY IN SLAVERY & FREEDOM 98.

^{41} Miller, A Note on the Importance of the Interstate Slave Trade of the Ante Bellum South 311 in SLAVE TRADE AND MIGRATION. Conrad and Meyer argue that “the slaveowners of the border states, consciously or unconsciously, were engaged in a specialized breeding operation, producing chattel labor for the growing Southwest. . . . sales of slaves provided an important capital gain for the exporting states. . . . probably the most important, product of the more exhausted soil of the Old South.” Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyer, The Economics of Slavery in the Ante Bellum South, LXVI J. of Pol. Econ. 95, 113-114.

^{42} STAMPP, THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION 239.
wrote, “The only form in which it can safely be said that slaves on a plantation are profitable in Virginia, is in the multiplication of their number by births. . . . though their labour may have yielded him [a farmer] not a farthing of nett (sic) revenue, he finds . . . when grown up . . . productive value . . . [he can] turn the increase of his capital, at regular intervals, into money at the highest market price!”

Moncure Conway wrote, “As a general thing, the chief pecuniary resource in the border states is the breeding of slaves; and I grieve to say that there is too much ground for the charges that the general licentiousness among the slaves, for the purpose of a large increase, is compelled by some masters and encouraged by many.” When the House of Delegates of Virginia discussed state assisted gradual emancipation after Nat Turner’s Rebellion in 1831, Thomas Marshall asserted a property right in after-born children equivalent to a land owner’s right to future crops. He argued, “Where is the difference between taking away the future produce of my land, and the future increase of my slave? The truth is, the existence of the after-born though not actual, is potential, and constitutes an element of present value.”

Thomas Jefferson Randolph reported that it is a practice, and an increasing practice in

43 HARRISON, REVIEW OF THE SLAVE QUESTION 16.

44 BANCROFT, SLAVE TRADING IN THE OLD SOUTH 76.

45 Speech of Thomas Marshall in the House of Delegates of Va. 4. Harrison agreed that a slave owner had a present and marketable right to unborn slaves. HARRISON, REVIEW OF THE SLAVE QUESTION 27.
parts of Virginia, to rear slaves for market. Thomas R. Dew, who became president of William and Mary College in 1836, said with pride that, “Virginia is in fact a negro (sic) raising state for other states; she produces enough for her own supply, and six thousand for sale. . . . Virginians can raise [them] cheaper than they can buy; in fact, it [raising slaves] is one of their greatest sources of profit.” On the eve of the Civil War, advocates for the renewal of the Atlantic slave trade complained that, “For the past half century Virginians had monopolized the domestic trade, . . .” They believed slaves could be imported more cheaply from Africa.

An advertisement in South Carolina proclaimed,

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY NEGROES FOR SALE. – The subscriber has just arrived from Petersburg, Virginia, . . . The lot now on hand consists of ploughboys, several likely and well-qualified house servants of both sexes, several women with children, small girls suitable for nurses, and several small boys without their mothers. Planters and traders are earnestly requested to give the subscriber a call previously to making purchases elsewhere, . . .

BENJAMIN DAVIS
(Hamburg, S.C., September 28, 1838)

Virginia may have bred and sold as many as 300,000 slaves after their importation was prohibited. Between 1815 and 1860, 2,000 to 5,000 traveled by ship down the eastern coast

46 TANNENBAUM, SLAVE AND CITIZEN 81.


48 TANNENBAUM, SLAVE AND CITIZEN 77-78.

49 STAMPP, THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION 238. Frederick Olmsted reported that his train
each year, others traveled overland in coffles. Some traveled with Virginians who were relocating. Others accompanied the sons or hired overseers of Virginia farmers. Still others traveled with new masters from the southwest who came to Virginia expressly to purchase slaves. Some would be traded for land or supplies or for other forms of capital when their new or old masters arrived at their destination.

Thousands of other slaves made their trip southwest in the custody of professional slave traders, or speculators, who bought slaves born in the upper south to sell to buyers in the newly settled southwest for profit. A slave bought in Virginia for $350 could be sold in Louisiana for $500. Manda Boggan, a former slave, told her interviewer, “I don’t know who mars bought my

from Richmond to Petersburg, Virginia, included two freight cars holding about forty slaves, “most of them belonging to traders, who were sending them to the cotton states to be sold.”

OLMSTED, THE COTTON KINGDOM 12.

50 ULRICH BONNELL PHILLIPS, AMERICAN NEGRO SLAVERY 195-197(1918).

51 STAMPP, THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION 238.

52 STAMPP, THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION 269.

53 PHILLIPS, AMERICAN NEGRO SLAVERY 189-190; William Calderhead, How Extensive Was The Border State Slave Trade? A New Look 42, 53 in SLAVE TRADE AND MIGRATION.

54 Introduction, SLAVE TRADE AND MIGRATION x.
mudder from, but I knows my pa wuz bought from a man in Virginia.”

John C. Reed of Georgia wrote, “Really the leading industry of the South was slave rearing. The profit was in keeping the slaves healthy and rapidly multiplying. . . . many of these older sections turned from being agricultural communities, into nurseries, rearing slaves for the younger states where virgin soil was abundant.” Reed likened slave-rearing to “having a magical orchard that bore regularly, gathered and cared for its own fruit and steadily enlarged its own area and production.” People as crops. Along with the maize and tobacco, the green beans and potatoes, my family was a crop.

The romantic in me likes to think of children as a product of passion. For whatever reasons, the man and the woman who engage in the act of procreation choose one another. Even in an act of rape, as dreadful as the experience is to the victim, at least the perpetrator has made a choice. In this era of readily available birth control, we speak of planned pregnancies and controlling family size. But the product of a planned pregnancy is not a crop, as there is no intent to market the newly born child.

When raising people as crops, a third person makes the decision for the two parties who will eventually become parents. Someone instructed my great, great, great, grandfather to lay down with my great, great, great grandmother. Perhaps he was given a chance to select his mate,

55 Remembering Slavery 40-41.

56 Bancroft, Slave Trading in the Old South 76.

57 Bancroft, Slave Trading in the Old South 87.
perhaps she was also, but the decision to procreate was not his or hers; it was imposed upon them by their owner.

Planned marriages, still common in some cultures, share this third-party decision making. But in most planned marriages, those planning the marriage would argue that the marriage is best for the couple, or at least creates an advantage for the families of the couple. Rarely would the families advocate a marriage for the sole benefit of someone outside of the family. As a slave, my fore-parents were procreating for the benefit of their owner, to increase their owner’s wealth. Standing near the end of this genealogical chain, looking back, I realize that my existence is a consequence of their owner’s greed. I am here because he wanted to be richer, or, perhaps, to not be poorer.

Slaves were both persons and property. As persons, slaves had minds and souls and likes and dislikes. They had aspirations and desires; they had dreams. As property, they were forced to obscure their minds and souls, likes and dislikes, aspirations and desires, their dreams, and yield to the will of their master. The ads for runaways attest to the large numbers of persons who sought to follow their dreams. Not knowing where to go, they took off in a direction called, “away.” Some were successful; some were not. Some hid out in the woods for a short, or long, period of time then returned. Some who did not run away sought to frustrate their owner’s will by feigning sickness or imbecility. Others hired out their free time, hoping to earn money to buy their freedom.⁵⁸

Similarly, not all women submitted willingly to the plans prepared for them by their

⁵⁸ STAMPP, THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION 95-124.
masters. Fannie Berry, of Petersburg, Virginia, reported to a WPA interviewer, “One tried to throw me but he couldn’t. We tusseled an’ knocked over chairs an’ when I got a grip I scratched his face all to pieces; an dar wuz no more bothering Fannie from him; but oh, honey, some slaves would be beat up so, when they resisted, an’ sometimes if you’ll ‘belled de overseer would kill yo’. Us colored women had to go through a plenty, I tell you.”

The bodies of women slaves were early on wrested from their control. Young women taken in raids were sometimes kept by their African captors. While held captive in forts still located on African soil, women were selected to satisfy the lusts of slave traders. The towns of mixed race people surrounding these forts, where male captives were kept separated from female captives, attest to the decisions of captors to not load women they had impregnated onto slave ships when the other captives walked through that door of no return. Aboard ship, women were often selected against their will to entertain the sailors.

Slave holders paid a premium for women who would be used as concubines or prostitutes. Ulrich Phillips wrote that, “[U]nusual looks on the part of a young woman might

59 Interview of Mrs. Fannie Berry, Petersburg, Virginia, # 450009 p. 2 (Feb. 26, 1937), Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration, 16 THE AMERICAN SLAVE: A COMPOSITE AUTOBIOGRAPHY, Virginia Narratives (1941).

60 TANNENBAUM, SLAVE AND CITIZEN 36.

61 STAMPP, THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION 196.
stimulate the bidding of men interested in concubinage.”

Minnie Fulkes, a former slave interviewed in Petersburg, Virginia, told about her mother being beat because she resisted her overseer.

You know dar wus an’ overseer who use te tie mother up in the barn with a rope aroun’ her arms up over her head, while she stood on a block. Soon as dey got her tied, dis block was moved an’ her feet dangled, yo’ know - couldn’t tech de flo’.

Dis ol’ man, now, would start beatin’ her nekkid ‘til the blood run down her back to her heels. I took an’ seed th’ whelps an’ scars for my own self wid dese here two eyes. ‘was a whip like dey use to use on horses; it was a piece of leather ‘bout as wide as my han’ from little finger to thumb. After dey had beat my mama all dey wanted another overseer. Lord, Lord, I hate white people and de flood waters gwine drown some mo. Well honey dis man would bathe her in salt and water. Don’t you kno’ dem places wus a hurtin’. Um, um.

I asked mother, what she done fer ‘en to beat and do her so? She said, “nothin’, tother than she refused to be wife te dis man.”

An’ mama say, if he didn’t treat her dis way a dozen times, it wasn’t nary one.

The well-dressed man who Frederick Olmsted met when traveling through Louisiana in 1854 would have been surprised to hear this story. He told Olmsted that, “[N]o colored woman would be likely to offer any resistance, if a white man should want to seduce her.”

62 PHILLIPS, AMERICAN NEGRO SLAVERY 193.

63 Interview of Mrs. Minnie Fulkes, Petersburg, Virginia, # 450013 p.11 (Mar. 5, 1937), 16 THE AMERICAN SLAVE.

64 OLMSTED, THE COTTON KINGDOM 137-139.
women provided more than labor for their owners. Whether for profit or pleasure, slave owners exploited the sexuality of their female slaves.

To those who would say that slave breeding did not occur, Rose Williams speaks in no uncertain terms about her experiences with the power of her owner.

Massa Black has a big plantation, but he has more niggers dan he need for work on dat place, ‘cause he am a nigger trader. He trade and buy and sell all de time.

Mass Black am awful cruel, . . . . Mammy and Pappy powerful glad to git sold, and dey and I is put on de block with ‘bout ten other niggers. When we-uns gits to de tradin’ block, dere lots of white folks dere what come to look us over. One man shows de interes’ in Pappy. Him named Hawkins. He talk to Pappy and Pappy talk to him and say, “Dem my woman and chiles. Please buy all of us and have mercy on we-uns.” . . .

De sale start and, ‘fore long, Pappy am put on de block. Massa Hawkins wins de bid for Pappy, and when Mammy am put on de block, he wins de bid for her. Den dere am three or four other niggers sold befo’ my time comes. Den Massa Black calls me to de block and de auction man say, “What am I offer for dis portly, strong wench. She’s never been bused and will make a good breeder.”

I wants to hear Massa Hawkins bid, but him say nothin.’ Two other men am biddin’ ‘gainst each other, and I sho’ has de worriment. Dere am tears comin’ down my cheeks’ cause I’s bein’ sold to some man dat would make sep’ ration from my mammy. One man bids five hundred dollars and de auction man ask, “Do I hear more? She am gwine at five hundred dollars.” Den someone say, “Five hundred twenty-five,” and de auction man say, “She am sold for five hundred twenty-five dollars to Massa Hawkins.” Am I glad and ‘cited! Why, I’s quiverin’ all over.

After I been at he place ‘bout a year, de massa come to me and say, “You gwine live with Rufus in dat cabin over yonder. Go fix it for livin’.” I’s ‘bout

sixteen year old and has no larnin’, and I’s jus’ a igno’mus chile. I’s thought dat him mean for me to tend de cabin for Rufus and some other niggers. Well, dat am de start of de pestigation for me.

I’s took charge of de cabin after work am done and fixes supper. Now, I don’t like Rufus, “cause he a bully. He am big, and ‘cause he so he think everybody do what him say. We-uns has supper, den I goes here and dere talkin’, till I’s ready for sleep, and den I gits in de bunk. After I’s in, dat nigger come and crawl in de bunk with me ‘fore I knows it. I says, “What you means, you fool nigger?” He say for me to hush de mouth. “Dis am my bunk, too,” he say.

“You’s teched in de head. Git out,” I’s told him, and I puts de feet ‘gainst him and give him a shove and out he go on de floor, ‘fore he know what I’s doin’. . .

De nex’ day I goes to de missey and tells her what Rufus wants, and de missey say dat am de massa’s wises. She say, “You am de portly gal and Rufus am de portly man. De massa wants you-uns for to bring forth portly chillun.”

I’s thinkin’ ‘bout what de missey say, but say to myse’f, “I’s not gwine live with dat Rufus.” Dat night when him come in de cabin, I grabs de poker and sets on de bench and says, “Git from me, nigger, ‘fore I busts you brains out and stomp on dem.” He says nothin’ and git out.

De nex’ day de massa call me and tell me, “Woman, I’s pay big money for you and I’s done dat’ cause I wants you to raise me chillum. I’s put you to live with Rufus for dat purpose. Now, if you doesn’t want whippin’ at de stake, you do what I wants.”

I thinks ‘bout Massa buyin’ me offen de block and savin’ me from bein’ sep’rated from my folks, and ‘bout bein’ whipped at de stake. Dere it am. What am I to do? I ‘cides to do as de massa wish and so I yields.66

On the breeding farms, just as cattle are separated for sale, or corn is packaged and shipped, so were slaves separated and sold without regard for family relationship. Minnie Fulkes reported, “When Graves bought us, he sold three of us . . . My brother an’ sister went down

66 REMEMBERING SLAVERY 129-130, 299-300 (Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, eds. 1998); Bullwhip Days (James Mellon ed. 1988).
An advertisement in New Orleans offered, “A negro (sic) woman, 24 years of age, and her two children, one eight and other three years old. Said negroes (sic) will be sold SEPARATELY or together, as desired.” Delia Garlic reported that, “Babies was snatched from dere mother’s breas’ an’ sold to speculators. Chilluns was separated from sisters an’ brothers an’ never saw each other ag’in. . . . I could tell you ‘bout it all day, but even den you couldn’t guess de awfulness of it.” She, herself, had been sold to a speculator.

I never seed none of my brothers an’ sisters ‘cept brother William. . . . Him an’ my mother an’ me was brought (sic) in a speculator’s drove to Richmond’ an’ put in a warehouse wid a drove of other niggers. Den we was all put on a block an’ sol’ to de highest bidder.

I never seed brother William ag’in. Mammy an’ me was sold to a man by de name of Carter, . . .

Frederic Douglass wrote of his grandmother’s family after her owner’s death.
She had rocked him in his infancy, attended him in his childhood, served him through life, and at his death wiped from his icy brow the cold death sweat, and closed his eyes forever. She was nevertheless a slave - a slave for life - a slave in

67 Interview of Mrs. Minnie Fulkes, Petersburg, Virginia, # 450013 p.13 (Mar. 5, 1937), 16 THE AMERICAN SLAVE.

68 TANNENBAUM, SLAVE AND CITIZEN 77.

69 REMEMBERING SLAVERY 8. Delia Garlic was a slave in Virginia, Georgia, and Louisiana.

70 REMEMBERING SLAVERY9-10.
the hands of strangers, and in their hands she saw her children, her grandchildren, her great-grandchildren, divided like so many sheep and then without being gratified with the small privilege of a single word as to their own destiny.  

Douglass goes on to describe how his grandmother was then taken to the woods, where a small hut was built for her. She was left to fend for herself, alone, without the aid or affection of her large family. He called it, “turning her out to die.”

I have an awareness of descending from slaves, and an awareness that I have been unscientifically genetically engineered. I recall a remark by Howard Cosell, that blacks do well in sports because they are born with talent. His remark was offensive because it ignored the hard work required to manifest any genetic talent. My brother made a somewhat similar remark. Two of my brothers and I were on track teams in high school. The younger of the two stayed fit and is able, at age 57, to win worldwide competitions in Masters Track events as a hurdler. I have only dabbled with running since high school. To encourage me to commit to a more demanding practice schedule, he told me that running is in my genes. I’m not so sure. Running is hard work, and is harder work once you’ve been away from it for some time. But it may be in my genes. It may be that when Wilson was selecting which breeders to pair he picked one with strong legs and mated him or her to someone with agility and speed.

Was that a good or bad thing? Does it matter? Why am I so incensed about something that happened so long ago? Why is it that when I read about activists setting mink loose from

71 GUTMAN, THE BLACK FAMILY IN SLAVERY & FREEDOM 98.

breeding farms in Utah, I want to ask, “Where were the activists in Virginia in the early 19th Century? Who tried to free slaves from those breeding farms?” Why does the year 1808 evoke the Rorshach response “Slave breeding farms” from me? 

I believe the answer lies in a search for truth. In trying to discover the who I am and what I did that causes others to treat me differently, I uncovered a secret sin that is not my sin. Slave breeding farms are a part of who I am, but not a part of what I did. They are what someone else did.

Slave breeding and slave trading were not regarded as high or noble activities for southern gentlemen, even at the time southern gentlemen engaged in and reaped profits from these activities. There’s a message about the disconnect between the values to which the United States claims to hold true and the behavior of its honored citizens. There is an endemic disease that pervades any examination of American reality that causes Americans to mask over hypocrisies. It allows Americans to use water boarding to fight for freedom, to listen to the intimate telephone conversations of our soldiers in our effort to fight terrorism, to lie and steal and rape and destroy and then walk away unrepentant because we are Americans and anything we do will be forgiven and forgotten.

When condemning the genetic engineering of the Nazis, this nation might look to its

73 The Rorshach Inkblot Test is an evaluation tool used to examine personality and emotional functioning.

slave breeding history and say, “Yes, there was a time when we thought that was alright. We now know better.” When condemning the genocide of others, the nation might look to its African slave trading and say, “Yes, there was a time when we thought that was alright. We now know better.” When we condemn the invasion of Georgia by Russia, this nation might look to its actions in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and say, “Yes, there was a time when we thought that was alright. We now know better.”

As a nation, we need to be reminded of the kinds of behavior our nation has tolerated in the past to protect us from believing we are incapable of such behavior in the present or in the future. Any responsible organization periodically reviews its history to learn how not to repeat its mistakes. So, too, should our nation honestly evaluate our past. Slave breeding is a part of America’s history. This story must be told.