CHAPTER 12

DOCUMENT SET 1
Life in Bondage: Voices from Below

Essential to an understanding of the Civil War is a familiarity with the antebellum South's central social and economic institution, chattel slavery. Recognizing its importance, your textbook emphasizes slave life and African-American culture in its treatment of the Old South. However, any attempt to assess the impact of enslavement on the slaves themselves is complicated by serious methodological difficulties, most of them rooted in the scarcity and unreliability of evidence. One serious problem is the potential bias in the elite sources often used in historical research and writing. Since most slaves were illiterate, leaving few letters, diaries, or memoirs, later generations interpreted their lives through the eyes of the master class or contemporary outside observers.

In recent years, however, scholars have turned increasingly to social history and the examination of the past "from the bottom up." This trend has led to an increased emphasis on the story of the underclass in America, including a strong focus on black history. The result has been a heightened awareness of the research problems encountered in interpreting slavery and its impact on those who struggled within its confines.

Among the most important sources of documentation in this effort are slave narratives and the memoirs of escaped slaves. While both are valuable, they present significant challenges to students and scholars seeking to form a balanced view of the "peculiar institution." Modern scholars understand the special value of oral tradition in preserving black culture and depicting black experience, but they also recognize the limitations of relying on memory as well as the possible influence of an interviewer. Significant as slave memoirs are, the purposes of black abolitionists also must be considered when evaluating their recollections as accounts of enslavement.

The primary problem addressed in the following documents is slavery's impact on the enslaved as seen from the slave's perspective. As you review the evidence, be aware of the factors that influenced the authors' accounts. Ask whether the source persons were educated and whether they remained slaves until after the war. Determine what their goals were in providing the accounts. Compare these accounts with your textbook's treatment of slave discipline, family life, black music, and the nature of resistance.

Questions for Analysis

1. What do the documents reveal about the relationships between slaves and their masters and mistresses? Was the experience of bondage different for men and women? How? Why?

2. How was slave culture influenced by enslavement? What were the respective roles of religion, musical expression, and the family in slave life? What do the documents reveal about the black and the white perspectives on these institutions?

3. What was the impact of enslavement on slave personality? What light do the documents shed on the self-images developed by slaves? What was the impact of bondage on the slave's view of the world and response to slavery?

4. Compare the recollections of escaped slaves who fled north with the memories of those who remained entrapped in the "peculiar institution." How would you account for the differences? What is the significance of disagreements revealed by the available evidence?

5. What precautions should scholars take in evaluating slave music, narratives, and memoirs? What are the limitations of the evidence? What unique opportunities does it offer?
I have met many religious colored people, at the south, who are under the delusion that God requires them to submit to slavery, and to wear their chains with meekness and humility. I could entertain no such nonsense as this; and I almost lost my patience when I found any colored man weak enough to believe such stuff. Nevertheless, the increase of knowledge was attended with bitter, as well as sweet results. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest slavery, and my enslavers. . . . Knowledge had come; light had penetrated the moral dungeon where I dwelt; and, behold! there lay the bloody whip, for my back, and here was the iron chain; and my good, kind master, he was the author of my situation. The revelation haunted me, stung me, and made me gloomy and miserable. As I writhed under the sting and torment of this knowledge, I almost envied my fellow slaves their stupid contentment. . . . It was this everlasting thinking which distressed and tormented me; and yet there was no getting rid of the subject of my thoughts. All nature was redolent of it. Once awakened by the silver trump of knowledge, my spirit was roused to eternal wakefulness. Liberty! the inestimable birthright of every man, had, for me, converted every object into an asserter of this great right. . . .

My feelings were not the result of any marked cruelty in the treatment I received; they sprung from the consideration of my being a slave at all. It was slavery—not its mere incidents—that I hated. I had been cheated. I saw through the attempt to keep me in ignorance; I saw that slaveholders would have gladly made me believe that they were merely acting under the authority of God, in making a slave of me, and in making slaves of others; and I treated them as robbers and deceivers. The feeding and clothing me well, could not atone for taking my liberty from me. . . . [P]ious as Mr. Covey was, he proved himself to be as unscrupulous and base as the worst of his neighbors. In the beginning, he was only able—as he said—"to buy one slave"; and, scandalous and shocking as is the fact, he boasted that he bought her simply "as a breeder." But the worst is not told in this naked statement. This young woman (Caroline was her name) was virtually compelled by Mr. Covey to abandon herself to the object for which he had purchased her; and the result was, the birth of twins at the end of the year. At this addition to his human stock, both Edward Covey and his wife, Susan, were ecstatic with joy. No one dreamed of reproaching the woman, or of finding fault with the hired man—Bill Smith—the father of the two children, for Mr. Covey himself had locked the two up together every night, thus inviting the result.

But I will pursue this revolting subject no further. No better illustration of the unchaste and demoralizing character of slavery can be found, than is furnished in the fact that this professedly Christian slaveholder, amidst all his prayers and hymns, was shamelessly and boastfully encouraging, and actually compelling, in his own house, undisguised and unmitigated fornication, as a means of increasing his human stock. I may remark here, that, while this fact will be read with disgust and shame at the north, it will be laughed at, as smart and praiseworthy in Mr. Covey, at the south; for a man is no more condemned there for buying a woman and devoting her to this life of dishonor, than for buying a cow, and raising stock from her. The same rules are observed, with a view to increasing the number and quality of the former, as of the latter. . . .

[As] I now look back, I can see that we [slaves] did many silly things, very well calculated to awaken suspicion. We were, at times, remarkably buoyant, singing hymns and making joyous exclamations, almost as triumphant in their tone as if we had reached a land of freedom and safety. A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of

"O Canaan, sweet Canaan,
I am bound for the land of Canaan,"

something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the north—and the north was our Canaan.
2. Slave Music and the Desire for Liberation

Go Down, Moses

Go down, Moses,
'Way down in Egypt land,
Tell ole Pharaoh,
To let my people go.

Go down, Moses,
'Way down in Egypt land,
Tell ole Pharaoh,
To let my people go.

When Israel was in Egypt land,
Let my people go,
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go,
Thus spoke the Lord, bold Moses said,
Let my people go,
If not I'll smite your first-born dead,
Let my people go.

Go down, Moses,
'Way down in Egypt land,
Tell ole Pharaoh,
To let my people go.

I Thank God I'm Free at Last

Free at last, free at last,
I thank God I'm free at last.
Free at last, free at last,
I thank God I'm free at last.

Way down yonder in the graveyard walk,
I thank God I'm free at last,
Me and my Jesus gonna meet an' talk,
I thank God I'm free at last.

On-a my knees when the light pass by,
I thank God I'm free at last,
Thought my soul would rise an' fly,
I thank God I'm free at last.

One o' these mornin's bright an' fair,
I thank God I'm free at last,
Gonna meet my Jesus in the middle o' the air,
I thank God I'm free at last.

Free at last, free at last,
I thank God I'm free at last,
Free at last, free at last,
I thank God I'm free at last.

3. A Slave Perspective on Family Ties

Once Massa goes to Baton Rouge and brung back a yaller gal dressed in fine style. She was a seamster nigger. He builds her a house 'way from the quarters, and she done fine sewing for the whites. Us niggers knewed the doctor took a black woman quick as he did a white and took any on his place he wanted, and he took them often. But mostly the children born on the place looked like niggers. Aunt Cheyney always says four of hers was Massa's, but he didn't give them no mind. But this yaller gal breeds so fast and gits a mess of white young-ons. She larnt them fine manners and combs out they hair.

Once two of them goes down the hill to the dollhouse, where the Missy's children am playing. They wants to go in the dollhouse and one the Missy's boys say, "That's for white children." They say, "We ain't no niggers, 'cause we got the same daddy you has, and he comes to see us near every day and forches us clothes and things from town." They is fussing, and Missy is listening out her chamber window. She heard them white niggers say, "He is our daddy and we call him daddy when he comes to our house to see our mama."

When Massa come home that evening, his wife hardly say nothing to him, and he ask her what the
matter, and she tells him, “Since you asks me, I’m studying in my mind ‘bout them white young-uns of that yaller nigger wench from Baton Rouge.” He say, “Now, honey, I fitches that gal just for you, ‘cause she a fine seamster.” She say, “It look kind of funny they got the same kind of hair and eyes as my children, and they got a nose look like yours.” He say, “Honey, you just paying ‘tention to talk of lit-tle children that ain’t got no mind to what they say.” She say, “Over in Mississippi I got a home and plenty with my daddy, and I got that in my mind.”

Well, she didn’t never leave, and Massa bought her a fine, new span of su-ryh hosses. But she don’t never have no more children, and she ain’t so cordial with the Massa. That yaller gal has more white young-uns, but they don’t never go down the hill no more to the big house.

4. Religion as Social Control: A Catechism
for Slaves, 1854

Q. Who keeps the snakes and all bad things from hurting you?
A. God does.

Q. Who gave you a master and a mistress?
A. God gave them to me.

Q. Who says that you must obey them?
A. God says that I must.

Q. What book tells you these things?
A. The Bible.

Q. How does God do all his work?
A. He always does it right.

Q. Does God love to work?
A. Yes, God is always at work
Q. Do the angels work?
A. Yes, they do what God tells them.

Q. Do they love to work?
A. Yes, they love to please God.

Q. What does God say about your work?
A. He that will not work shall not eat.

Q. Did Adam and Eve have to work?
A. Yes, they had to keep the garden.

Q. Was it hard to keep that garden?
A. No, it was very easy.

Q. What makes the crops so hard to grow now?
A. Sin makes it.

Q. What makes you lazy?
A. My wicked heart.

Q. How do you know your heart is wicked?
A. I feel it every day.

Q. Who teaches you so many wicked things?
A. The Devil.

Q. Must you let the Devil teach you?
A. No, I must not.

5. A Slave Recollection of Insecurity

Weren’t none o’ de slaves offen our plantation ever sold, but de ones on de other plantation of Marse William were. Oh, dat was a terrible time! All de slaves be in de field, plowin’, hoein’, and singin’ in de boolin’ sun. Ole Marse, he come through de field with a man call de speculator. Dey walked round just lookin’, just lookin’. All de darkies know what dis mean. Dey didn’t dare look up, just work right on. Den de speculator he see who he want. He talk to Ole Marse, den dey slaps de handcuffs on him and take him away to de cotton country.

Oh, dem was awful times! When de speculator was ready to go with de slaves, if dere was’ anyone who didn’t want to go, he thrash ’em, den tie ’em be-hind de wagon and make ’em run till dey fall on de ground, den he thrash ’em till dey say dey go without no trouble. Sometime some of dem run away and come back to de plantation, den it was harder on dem dan before. When de darkies went to dinner de ole nigger mammy she ask where am such and such. None of de others want to tell her. But when she see dem look down to de ground she just say: “De speculator, de speculator.” Den de tears roll down her cheeks, cause maybe it her son or husband and she know she never see ’em again. Maybe dey leaves babies to home, may be just pappy and mammy. Oh, my lordy, my ole boss was mean, but he never sent us to de cotton country.
Dey was very few schools back in dat day and time, very few. We darkies didn’t dare look at no book, not even to pick it up. Ole Missie, dat is, my first ole missie, she was a good ole woman. She read to de niggers and to de white chillun. She come from ‘cross de water. She weren’t like de smart white folks livin’ here now. When she come over here she brung darky boy with her. He was her personal servant. ’Course, dey got different names for dem now, but in dat day dey calls ’em “Guinea niggers.” She was good ole woman, not like other white folks. Niggers like Ole Missie.

6. Memories of a Brutal Institution

Me and my husband couldn’t live together till after freedom ’cause we had different marsters. When freedom come, Marster wanted all us niggers to sign up to stay till Christmas. After dat we worked on shares on de Hart plantation; den we farmed four-five years with Mr. Bill Johnson.

I’m goin’ to tell you de truth. I don’t tell no lies. Dese has been better times to me. I think it’s better to work for yourself and have what you make dan to work for somebody else and don’t get nothin’ out of it. Slavery days was mighty hard. My marster was good to us (I mean he didn’t beat us much, and he give us plenty plain food), but some slaves suffered awful. My aunt was beat cruel once, and lots de other slaves. When dey got ready to beat you, dey’d strip you stark mother naked and dey’d say, “Come here to me, God damn you! Come to me clean! Walk up to dat tree, and damn you, hug dat tree!” Den dey tie your hands round de tree, den tie your feet; den dey’d lay de rawhide on you and cut your buttocks open. Sometimes dey’d rub turpentine and salt in de raw places, and den beat you some more. Oh, it was awful! And what could you do? Dey had all de advantage of you. I never did get no beatin’ like dat, but I got whippin’s—plenty o’ em. I had plenty o’ devilment in me, but I quit all my devilment when I was married. I used to fight—fight with anything I could get my hands on.

You had to have passes to go from one plantation to another. Some de niggers would slip off sometime and go without a pass, or maybe Marster was busy and dey didn’t bother him for a pass, so dey go without one. In every district dey had about twelve men dey call patterrollers. Dey ride up and down and round looking for niggers without passes. If dey ever caught you off your plantation with no pass, dey beat you all over.

7. Josiah Henson Recalls Broken Families and Personal Opportunity

Common as are slave-auctions in the southern states, and naturally as a slave may look forward to the time when he will be put upon the block, still the full misery of the event—of the scenes which precede and succeed it—is never understood till the actual experience comes. ... Young as I was then, the iron entered into my soul. The remembrance of the breaking up of McPherson’s estate is photographed in its minutest features in my mind. The crowd collected round the stand, the huddling group of negroes, the examination of muscle, teeth, the exhibition of agility, the look of the auctioneer, the agony of my mother—I can shut my eyes and see them all.

My brothers and sisters were bid off first, and one by one, while my mother, paralyzed by grief, held me by the hand. Her turn came, and she was bought by Isaac Riley of Montgomery county. Then I was offered to the assembled purchasers. My mother, half distracted with the thought of parting forever from all her children, pushed through the crowd while the bidding for me was going on, to the spot where Riley was standing. She fell at his feet, and clung to his knees, entreating him in tones that a mother only could command, to buy her baby as well as herself, and spare to her one, at least, of her little ones. Will it, can it be believed that this man, thus appealed to, was capable not merely of turning a deaf ear to her supplication, but of disengaging himself from her with such violent blows and kicks, as to reduce her to the necessity of creeping out of his reach, and mingling the groan of
bodily suffering with the sob of a breaking heart? As she crawled away from the brutal man I heard her sob out, "Oh, Lord Jesus, how long, how long shall I suffer this way!" I must have been then between five and six years old. I seem to see and hear my poor weeping mother now. . . .

The character of Riley, the master whom I faithfully served for many years, is by no means an uncommon one in any part of the world; the evil is, that a domestic institution should anywhere put it in the power of such a one to tyrannize over his fellow beings, and inflict so much needless misery as is sure to be inflicted by such a man in such a position. . . . The natural tendency of slavery is to convert the master into a tyrant, and the slave into the cringing, treacherous, false, and thieves victim of tyranny. Riley and his slaves were no exception to the general rule, but might be cited as apt illustrations of the nature of the relation. . . .

My situation as overseer I retained, together with the especial favor of my master, who was not displeased either with saving the expense of a large salary for a white superintendent, or with the superior crops I was able to raise for him. I will not deny that I used his property more freely than he would have done himself, in supplying his people with better food; but if I cheated him in this way, in small matters, it was unequivocally for his own benefit in more important ones; and I accounted, with the strictest honesty, for every dollar I received in the sale of the property entrusted to me. . . . For many years I was his factotum, and supplied him with all his means for all his purposes, whether they were good or bad. I had no reason to think highly of his moral character; but it was my duty to be faithful to him in the position in which he placed me; and I can boldly declare, before God and man, that I was so. I forgave him the causeless blows and injuries he had inflicted on me in childhood and youth, and was proud of the favor he now showed me, and of the character and reputation I had earned by strenuous and persevering efforts.

8. Slaves as Property

A. Slave Branding Irons, Early Nineteenth Century
B. An Abolitionist View of Slave Discipline
C. Slave Auction in Virginia, ca. 1850s
ESTATE SALE.

124 RICE FIELD NEGROES,
Belonging to the Estate of the late Dr. G. W. MORRIS,

BY JACOB COHEN & SON.

Will be Sold, in the Chalmers Street Mart,

ON TUESDAY, JANUARY 12, 1858, AT 11 O'CLOCK,

TERMS:

One-third Cash: balance in three equal annual instalments, interest payable annually, secured by bond and mortgage, with approved personal security.

25% Purchasers to pay us for papers.
Chapter 12: Document Set 1 References

1. Frederick Douglass Comments on the Pain of Enslavement, 1845

2. Slave Music and the Desire for Liberation

3. A Slave Perspective on Family Ties

4. Religion as Social Control: A Catechism for Slaves, 1854
   "Frederick Douglass' Paper," June 2, 1854, from The Southern Episcopalian (Charleston, S.C., April, 1854).

5. A Slave Recollection of Insecurity

6. Memories of a Brutal Institution
   Ferebe Rodgers/A Narrative, in Yetman, pp. 257–258.

7. Josiah Henson Recalls Broken Families and Personal Opportunity

8. Slaves as Property

Chapter 12: Document Set 1 Credits

7. "My First Great Trial" from Slavery in the South, edited by Harvey Wish.
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8. B. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society
   D. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society