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Old Age, Mastery, and Resistance in American Slavery

By DAVID STEFAN DODDINGTON

LEONARD BLACK “LIVED A SLAVE FOR MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS” IN Maryland before successfully escaping in 1837. Ten years later, Black published an antislavery memoir, in which he recounted the abuse he had endured, the horrors of family separation, and the instability created by being “placed out” to different enslavers. Black’s situation settled when he was returned to his first enslaver, a physician who resided in Anne Arundel County, but stability did not signify improvement. Black specifically noted how the advancing age of his “old master” led to worsening conditions for them all: “We were slaves yet, and the old man grew poorer and poorer the older he grew, and withal cross, much to our discomfort.” With declining conditions and fearing punishment from an ailing man, Black took flight while he still could. Although nearly captured by a search party made up of the “old master, his two sons, and many other people,” Black was grateful to discover it was the old man who came closest to finding him. The ravages of aging had taken their toll on more than just his finances. Despite being just across the road, he was unable to spot Black: “The only reason the old man did not see me was because he was near-sighted, and forgot to pull his spectacles down over his eyes.” Black swiftly dropped to his knees, crawled to a safe location, and set out on the road to freedom.¹

¹Leonard Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black: A Fugitive from Slavery* (New Bedford, Mass., 1847), 5 (first and third quotations), 6 (second quotation), 14–17 (fourth quotation on 17), 22–23 (fifth and sixth quotations on 23). All published slave narratives cited in this article were sourced at “North American Slave Narratives,” *Documenting the American South* (University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/texts.html>.

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In Black's description of his escape from bondage, the declining powers of his enslaver were framed as giving impetus to—and directly aiding—his resistance. In continually referring to his enslaver as old, emphasizing the man's white hair, failing health, and poor vision, Black conjured up an image of a weak old man who was incapable of exerting control over a young and vigorous rebel. This image of declining power would have been familiar to both Black and white Americans, in the North and the South. In *Exum v. Canty* (1857), the Mississippi High Court of Errors and Appeals accepted that “[f]eebleness and infirmity are the natural consequences of age,” while another antebellum writer recorded sadly, “You can hardly bear to see a man, with whom you have been acquainted in his better days, after he has lost his bodily activity, his hearing, his seeing, his memory, and all of his sociability. These are the usual effects and consequences of old age, in a greater or less degree.”² Black, of course, was happy to see it was an “old man” who stood in his way to freedom. The comparative framing of the aged enslaver's diminishing force with Black's youthful activism reveals how enslaved people understood their enslavers' claims to mastery as dynamic and contestable on account of an inevitable descent down the “steps of life.”³ Slaveholding authority in the antebellum South was based on public demonstrations of dominance and power, but enslaved people understood that the process of aging destabilized mastery and could personally diminish “masters.” They applied this knowledge when crafting individual and collective strategies for survival and forms of resistance, both temporary and permanent.

Historians have long stressed the significance that enslavers accorded to public expressions of authority, honor, and independence, as well as the wider importance of these ideals to the dynamics of slavery and social order in the antebellum South.⁴ Few have considered, however,

²*Exum v. Canty*, 34 Miss. 533 (1857), at 548 (first quotation); Nathanael Emmons, “Piety, a Peculiar Ornament to the Aged;” in Jacob Ide, ed., *The Works of Nathanael Emmons, D.D., Late Pastor of the Church in Franklin, Mass., with a Memoir of His Life* (6 vols.; Boston, 1842), 2:492–505 (second quotation on 496).

³On the use of metaphors for aging among antebellum Americans, including “the steps of life;” see Corinne T. Field, *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood: Gender, Race, Age, and the Fight for Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, 2014), 99–101.

⁴See, for example, Dickson D. Bruce Jr., *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin, 1979); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982); Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South* (New York, 1984); Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton, 1996); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s–1890s* (Chapel Hill, 2001); Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover, “Rethinking

how the performance of mastery came under pressure as enslavers aged.⁵ Recent work on the violence and exploitation of slavery has reiterated the terrifying power that enslavers, both men and women, wielded, and the harm it wrought on enslaved people.⁶ Walter Johnson, for example, describes enslaved people in the U.S. South as having to navigate the “carceral landscape” and outlines the power of the slaveholding class, notwithstanding enslaved people’s efforts to resist. Edward E. Baptist’s work on the “pushing system” likewise presents an image of consistent exploitation by rapacious enslavers.⁷ This research

Southern Masculinity: An Introduction,” in Friend and Glover, eds., *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South* (Athens, Ga., 2004), vii–xvii; Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore, 2007); John Mayfield, *Counterfeit Gentlemen: Manhood and Humor in the Old South* (Gainesville, Fla., 2009); Craig Thompson Friend, “Sex, Self, and the Performance of Patriarchal Manhood in the Old South,” in L. Diane Barnes, Brian Schoen, and Frank Towers, eds., *The Old South’s Modern Worlds: Slavery, Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress* (New York, 2011), 246–65; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *A Warring Nation: Honor, Race, and Humiliation in America and Abroad* (Charlottesville, 2014); David T. Moon Jr., “Southern Baptists and Southern Men: Evangelical Perceptions of Manhood in Nineteenth-Century Georgia,” *Journal of Southern History* 81 (August 2015): 563–606; and Robert Elder, *The Sacred Mirror: Evangelicalism, Honor, and Identity in the Deep South, 1790–1860* (Chapel Hill, 2016).

⁵Diane Miller Sommerville has provided this type of nuance in her outstanding work on suicide and suffering in the Civil War era. Advanced age is acknowledged there but is not foregrounded. Diane Miller Sommerville, *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War–Era South* (Chapel Hill, 2018), 12, 180–85.

There is in fact a dearth of studies on aging among enslavers in the U.S. South. Most general work on old age in the United States is focused on white Americans in the North and moves rapidly through the colonial, early republic, and antebellum eras to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Very few of these studies address enslavers in any depth or consider age in the context of slavery. See, for example, W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience since 1790* (Baltimore, 1978); David Hackett Fischer, *Growing Old in America* (New York, 1978); Howard P. Chudacoff, *How Old Are You?: Age Consciousness in American Culture* (Princeton, 1989); Thomas R. Cole, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (New York, 1992); Susannah R. Ottoway, L. A. Botelho, and Katharine Kittredge, *Power and Poverty: Old Age in the Pre-Industrial Past* (Westport, Conn., 2002); Gregory Wood, *Retiring Men: Manhood, Labor, and Growing Old in America, 1900–1960* (Lanham, Md., 2012); Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett, eds., *Age in America: The Colonial Era to the Present* (New York, 2015); and Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett, eds., “AHR Roundtable: Chronological Age: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 125 (April 2020): 371–459. Field’s *Struggle for Equal Adulthood* is an outlier in the context of exploring old age with reference to slavery, but this analysis relates predominantly to political conflict.

⁶Historians increasingly stress the power white women held over enslaved people and the violence they inflicted, rejecting earlier visions of “mistresses” as sympathetic or powerless in the face of patriarchy. See, for example, Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York, 2008); Emily West with R. J. Knight, “Mothers’ Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South,” *Journal of Southern History* 83 (February 2017): 37–68; R. J. Knight, “Mistresses, Motherhood, and Maternal Exploitation in the Antebellum South,” *Women’s History Review* 27, no. 6 (2018): 990–1005; and Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven, 2019).

⁷Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), chap. 8 (first quotation); Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, 2014), 116 (second quotation);

ensures that the brutalities of slavery are at the forefront of our understanding. In depicting enslavers as such dominant figures, however, there is a danger that we confirm their own self-image as “masterful” even while rejecting their claims of benevolence. Enslavers, however cruel and capricious, could not stop time from marching on, and the pressures associated with aging, both real and imagined, could wreak havoc on their public and private claims of dominance. As North Carolina enslaver William S. Pettigrew understood it, the process of aging involved an inevitable decline: “he who has attained 50 must soon expect the inexorable hand of time to soften that vigour which is all important in a ruler and without which he soon permits some stronger spirit than his own to assume the mastery over him.” White enslavers, and particularly men, were supposed to exert dominance over “dependents”—whether that meant women, children, or those whom they enslaved. In Pettigrew’s mind, however, the process of aging made it harder to fulfill the precepts of mastery and eventually caused a loss of power. The suggestion that some “stronger spirit” would “assume the mastery over him” indicates a recognition among antebellum southerners that age-related decline did not always inspire collective social or familial support but instead could be seized upon by rivals looking to assert themselves.⁸

Antebellum southerners, Black and white, understood that age served as a vector of power. Changes associated with aging among enslavers could, as in the case of Leonard Black, provide enslaved people with a window for negotiation or resistance. Real or perceived weakness associated with old age might also, however, be seized upon by other white southerners to exploit for their own gain; enslaved people struggled to prevent their becoming pawns in these intergenerational contests. This article, therefore, reveals the dynamic and contested nature of mastery in the context of the life cycle and considers its impact, both positive and negative, for enslaved people seeking to navigate bondage. Proslavery rhetoric that stressed innate white dominance could not save flesh-and-blood enslavers from “the inevitable ruin to which all animated matter is incident.” Mastery was never ordained but instead embodied, and both enslaved and enslaver understood that “the ravages

Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, 2014); Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, eds., *Slavery’s Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia, 2016); Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston, 2017); Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018).

⁸Robert S. Starobin, ed., *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves* (New York, 1974), 35. In this instance, Pettigrew was discussing the transition of power between his enslaved drivers, but the reflective tone indicates a wider presumption as to the effects of aging.

of time” came for all.⁹ Recognition of this fact shaped interpersonal relationships and the dynamics of authority, power, and resistance in the antebellum South.

One of the most common reasons for enslaved people to comment on the advanced age of their enslavers related to fears of sale or separation if the enslaver grew ill or died. As Lewis Clarke put it, “When master is sick we are in great trouble.” Charity Morris of Arkansas succinctly explained to her Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviewer why mortality mattered: “When de ole haid died out dey chillun got de property. Yo[u] see we slaves wuz de property. Den we got separated. Some sent one way an some nother.”¹⁰ Death and ill health, of course, were not the preserve of the elderly: estate divisions, sale, or separation could come at any point in enslaved peoples’ lives.¹¹ Contemporaries

⁹W. A. Riddlemoser, “Conception in the Human Female,” 1843–1844, Box 150, Part II, Joseph Meredith Toner Collection of Manuscripts (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.). Discussions on old age among enslaved people have often been embedded in wider social and cultural histories of slavery, with a general emphasis on contrasting the violence of slavery with the support of the slave community. See, for example, Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 519–23; Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (Revised ed.; New York, 1999), 114–18; and Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 45–59. Work that specifically centers age for enslaved people includes Leslie J. Pollard, “Aging and Slavery: A Gerontological Perspective,” *Journal of Negro History* 66 (Fall 1981): 228–34; Herbert C. Covey and Paul T. Lockman Jr., “Narrative References to Older African Americans Living under Slavery,” *Social Science Journal* 33, no. 1 (1996): 23–37; Leslie J. Pollard, *Complaint to the Lord: Historical Perspectives on the African American Elderly* (Selinsgrove, Pa., 1996); Stacey K. Close, *Elderly Slaves of the Plantation South* (New York, 1997); Jillian Jimenez, “The History of Grandmothers in the African-American Community,” *Social Service Review* 76 (December 2002): 523–51; Dorothy Smith Ruiz, *Amazing Grace: African American Grandmothers as Caregivers and Conveyors of Traditional Values* (Westport, Conn., 2004); Dea H. Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South, 1800–1860* (New York, 2013); Berry, *Price for Their Pound of Flesh*; David Doddington, “‘Old Fellows’: Age, Identity, and Solidarity in Slave Communities of the Antebellum South,” *Journal of Global Slavery* 3, no. 3 (2018): 286–312; and Nathaniel Windon, “Superannuated: Old Age on the Antebellum Plantation,” *American Quarterly* 71 (September 2019): 767–87.

¹⁰Lewis Clarke, *Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clarke During a Captivity of More Than Twenty-Five Years, Among the Algerines of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America* (Boston, 1845), 77 (first quotation); George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (19 vols.; Westport, Conn., 1972), Vol. 10, Pt. 5, p. 150 (second quotation); hereinafter cited as Rawick, ed., *American Slave* (main series).

¹¹On sale, separation, and the internal slave trade, see Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619–1860* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 61–132; Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison, Wis., 1989); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999); Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York, 2005); Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 2012); Damian Alan Pargas, *Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South* (New York, 2015); and Anne C. Bailey, *The Weeping Time: Memory and the Largest Slave Auction in American History* (New York, 2017).

like John S. Jacobs, however, applied a language of temporality and embodied time to underscore how enslaved people understood that as their enslavers' age increased, so, too, did the likelihood of death, sale, and separation: "Time passed swiftly on, and in due season death smote down Mrs. H——, my mistress. The hungry heirs ordered us slaves to mount the auction-block; and all of us, old and young, male and female, married and single, were sold to the highest bidder." Enslaved people thus commonly viewed the advancing age of their enslavers, the inevitable passing of time, and the ambition and advancement of "hungry heirs" as the occasion of their own tragedies.¹² As Peter Still told his brother when discussing the ailing health of the "old man" who owned them, "if he dies, we'll all be sold—they allers has an auction when folks dies—and then their people's scattered all about. O 'pears like 'taint no use livin' in this yer world. I sha'n't never see you no more!"¹³

Enslaved people sometimes hoped that older enslavers might rethink their position as they neared the end of their mortal coil and feared eternal judgment. James W. C. Pennington, for example, believed that as his former slaveholder "was now an old man not far from his grave," he might be more willing to free Pennington's parents. Sadly, age had not tempered the old man's avarice. Even in instances where an enslaver's regret seemed sincere, enslaved people knew that any intervention could occasion intergenerational conflict; dominion did not extend beyond death, and good words did not amount to much. As William H. Robinson claimed of his own enslaver's family: "boys then were like a good many are today, just waiting for the old man to die, so they could run through with what he had accumulated."¹⁴ Historian Lorri Glover has argued that southern parents "sought to inculcate in sons an abiding sense of family loyalty," but white southerners hoping to rise in a slave society could see the diminished force of aged parents as providing the platform for their own success.¹⁵ Henry Blue, interviewed after

¹² John S. Jacobs, "A True Tale of Slavery," *The Leisure Hour: A Family Journal of Instruction and Recreation* 10 (February 7, 1861): 85–87 (quotation on 86).

¹³ Kate E. R. Pickard, *The Kidnapped Church and the Ransomed: Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and His Wife "Vina," after Forty Years of Slavery* (3rd ed.; Syracuse, N.Y., 1856), 56 (first quotation), 58 (second quotation).

¹⁴ James W. C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States* (London, 1849), 62 (first quotation); W. H. Robinson, "From Log Cabin to the Pulpit"; or, *Fifteen Years in Slavery* (3rd ed.; Eau Claire, Wis., 1913), 28 (second quotation).

¹⁵ Glover, *Southern Sons*, 12–17 (quotation on 12). On family structures, expectations, and obligations in the Old South, see also James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York, 1982); Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*; Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore, 1987); Joan E. Cashin, "The Structure of Antebellum Planter Families: 'The Ties That Bound Us Was Strong,'" *Journal of*

escaping to Canada by abolitionist Benjamin Drew, claimed his enslaver was a “kind and honorable man,” who “used to say it was wrong to hold slaves.” Talk, however, was cheap: “a good many who hold them say the same. It’s a habit—they mean, they say, to set them free at such a time, or such a time,—by and by they die, and the children hold on to the slaves.” Enslaved people understood that shifting power dynamics on account of age had broader implications in shaping personal relations among white and Black southerners. Annie Row, interviewed for the Texas WPA project, witnessed one unwanted transition of power from her aging master to his son Billy: “‘Tis a fine come to pass w’en de son goes ’ginst his father,’ de Marster tells his boy.” The son was clear as to who was now in control: “‘Jus’ to protec’ my property,’ Billy answers him.”¹⁶ Enslaved people, as the “property” so frequently in question, understood that intergenerational disputes could cause devastation in their own lives.

Proslavery writers such as Daniel R. Hundley stressed that enslavers, large and small, prioritized “the stoutest independence” and “ask[ed] no favors of either friend or foe.”¹⁷ A loss of power or status associated with aging, however, visibly contradicted such claims and could be seized upon by those seeking to advance in the world. Kentucky enslaver William Davis faced one such situation, and his enslaved workers suffered the consequences. Davis acknowledged that “through his own imprudences and from the effects of old age,” he was “utterly incompetent to the transaction of any kind of business whatsoever.” His son saw the declining fortunes of his father as an opportunity to make his own: by “an undue influence obtained over him by reason of his weak state of mind and by fraud . . . and by false representations and by many other dishonourable and illegal acts,” the son tricked the father into signing over “every article of property that he possessed.” The son knew Davis lacked the power to resist and threatened “to turn his Father & mother out of their house, to seize upon the negroes and send them to the southern market to be sold.” Davis was forced to highlight his submissive

Southern History 56 (February 1990): 55–70; Peter W. Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, 1995); Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York, 1996); and V. Lynn Kennedy, *Born Southern: Childbirth, Motherhood, and Social Networks in the Old South* (Baltimore, 2010).

¹⁶ Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery: The Refugee; or, the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada, Related by Themselves, with an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada* (Boston, 1856), 270 (first, second, and third quotations); George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Supplement, Series 2* (10 vols.; Westport, Conn., 1979), Vol. 8, p. 3372 (fourth and fifth quotations).

¹⁷ D. R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New York, 1860), 84.

status and connected his advanced age to his and his wife's plight: "if permitted [the son] will strip them of all their property, take from them their whole means of support and throw them in their old age and in their helplessness upon the charity of the world." The petition was dismissed, and we are left to wonder how charitable the world was for enslaver and enslaved alike.¹⁸

Enslaved people were thus right to fear that their enslavers' advancing age might increase the risk of sale or separation on account of heirs and rivals smelling blood in the water. Jason Miller of South Carolina understood that aging risked upending existing hierarchies, in both Black and white families: "I has seen many cases, where de head of de house turn over all his belongin's to de son who move in." Miller was clear that this change entailed a wider assumption of mastery: "In most of dese cases, de head of de house become no more pow'ful than a child."¹⁹ A cessation of power on the part of an enslaver might be humiliating or upsetting, but the disruption could be more severe for those whom they enslaved. In Maury County, Tennessee, in 1858, Samuel Caruthers, who was in his sixties and suffering "greatly with p[h]ysical debility and mental infirmity," complained to the court that "his most cherished desire" to free his slaves was taken from him. Caruthers, who described himself as being "in his decrepid & infirm old age," claimed that in his reduced state he had fallen "victim to the cupidity & avarice of a set of persons who beset him on all sides." These fraudsters "preyed upon his substance" like "vultures." Caruthers's nephews Samuel and Thomas Love rode to the rescue at this point, informing their uncle that they could raise enough money to pay Caruthers's debts and "save his slaves from Executions." This was a lie: the nephews saw in their uncle's descent to decrepitude a chance to enrich themselves. The Loves sold several of his slaves and even looked to hasten his decline by refusing to supply him with "the necessities of life." Caruthers asked for assistance from the court to regain whatever property his nephews had not yet squandered.²⁰ But Caruthers's appeal was too late for several enslaved people who, having already been sold, were the true losers of this intergenerational power struggle.

¹⁸Petition of William Davis, John Frazer, and George W. Grey, Woodford County, Kentucky, October 24, 1832, #20783211, Series 2, Race and Slavery Petitions Project (University Libraries, University of North Carolina at Greensboro), accessed via the "Slavery and the Law (1775–1867)" module of the subscription database ProQuest History Vault; hereinafter cited as RSPP. For an accessible searchable index of the RSPP, see <http://library.uncg.edu/slavery/petitions>.

¹⁹Rawick, ed., *American Slave* (main series), Vol. 3, Pt. 3, p. 188.

²⁰Petition of Samuel Caruthers, March 15, 1858, Maury County, Tennessee, #21485814, Series 2, RSPP.

Southern commentators such as Patrick Hues Mell claimed that “[s]laveholders are more likely to be dignified in their intercourse with each other” because their self-assurance and shared position as “master” made them “more likely to command respect from others.”²¹ Changes associated with aging, however, could cause self-assurance to dwindle and community respect to be removed; mastery was not static or stable but was instead a performance shaped by the temporal rhythms of the life cycle. The willingness in 1841 of some whites to exploit these changes, and attempt to rise as another fell, ended the hopes of freedom for a group of enslaved people in Tennessee. Henry Chiles, who described himself as “aged and infirm,” was a bachelor whose fourteen slaves had “cared much for him in his old age.” As reward for this care, Chiles wanted to “manumit all the slaves, at his death if not before.” With no children, and “being incompetent, from age, disease, and want of education, to transact much of his business,” Chiles had been increasingly forced “to confide in others to do it for him.” Jesse Williams and William Rodgers, two local whites, saw their chance. After advising Chiles that state law prevented this planned manumission and noting his increased frailties, Williams and Rodgers suggested that he convey the slaves to them, and they would enact his wishes. Chiles agreed but, after hearing of no progress and finding that “Williams studiously avoided having any conversation with him on the subject in the presence of any person who could be a witness,” realized his trust had been misplaced and sought to restore his title to the slaves. Chiles’s “precarious” health made “him the more anxious and solicitous to have his matters all arranged for death,” but this precarity only encouraged the fraudsters: “This is all well known to the said Williams, and still he refuses to come up and have a settlement.”²² With no result recorded, it is hard to be optimistic as to the outcome of the proposed manumission. Historians have long identified the rapacious desire for profit among white southerners in shaping the mistreatment of enslaved people, but abuse in the name of wealth and status extended into enslavers’ dealings with one another. Bertram Wyatt-Brown notes in his final work on southern honor that “humiliation has only a thin bibliography,” but elderly enslavers could find themselves cast aside by the rising generation, who

²¹ Patrick Hues Mell, *Slavery: A Treatise, Showing That Slavery Is Neither a Moral, Political, nor Social Evil* (Penfield, Ga., 1844), 35–36 (first and third quotations on 35; second quotation on 36).

²² Petition of Henry Chiles, May 30, 1853, Knox County, Tennessee, #21485331, Series 2, RSPF.

saw dependency, submission, and weakness to exploit.²³ To say as such is not to make these old slaveholders the object of pity but instead to further reveal the culture of exploitation that drove slavery and to show that age played a role in shaping the dynamics of mastery and power in the antebellum South.

These aged enslavers attempted to protect their own names and interests, as well as the enslaved people they hoped to manumit. Those who had died, of course, were forced to trust executors or the courts to enact their last will and testament. They were not always right to do so. Although southern courts acknowledged that “the right to make a will, was . . . a very sacred right,” the quest for profit that animated southern enslavers saw ferocious disputes erupt over the transferal of enslaved “property” between generations.²⁴ This discord was particularly true in cases of emancipation where the economic loss was shared by all white parties. Alongside procedural complaints relating to the composition of a will, such as illegible handwriting and insufficient witnesses, antebellum southerners who challenged posthumous manumission could make use of increasingly stringent legal restrictions on the practice, as well as broader white antipathy toward emancipation, to make their case.²⁵

Challenges could, however, take more dramatic turns with claims of undue influence—both physical and mental—and the dismissal of the testator’s ability to make a will on account of mental incapacity. The very language applied when addressing mental incompetence—the charge of being non compos mentis (“not master of one’s mind”)—speaks plainly to the dynamic nature of mastery in the antebellum South. Undue influence likewise rested on proving that the testator had submitted to the imposition of another; submission, as historians have long argued, was a racial and gendered charge used to

²³ Wyatt-Brown, *Warring Nation*, 7.

²⁴ *Peebles v. Smith*, 42 S.C.L. (8 Rich.) 90 (1854), at 96.

²⁵ For general work on inheritance in U.S. history, see Lawrence M. Friedman, *Dead Hands: A Social History of Wills, Trusts, and Inheritance Law* (Stanford, 2009); and Hendrik Hartog, *Someday All This Will Be Yours: A History of Inheritance and Old Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012). On inheritance, wills, and manumission in the South, see T. Stephen Whitman, *The Price of Freedom: Slavery and Manumission in Baltimore and Early National Maryland* (Lexington, Ky., 1997); Adrienne D. Davis, “The Private Law of Race and Sex: An Antebellum Perspective,” *Stanford Law Review* 51 (January 1999): 221–88; Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law*, 81–102, 371–400; Bernie D. Jones, *Fathers of Conscience: Mixed-Race Inheritance in the Antebellum South* (Athens, Ga., 2009); Yvonne Pitts, *Family, Law, and Inheritance in America: A Social and Legal History of Nineteenth-Century Kentucky* (New York, 2013); Kelly M. Kennington, *In the Shadow of Dred Scott: St. Louis Freedom Suits and the Legal Culture of Slavery in Antebellum America* (Athens, Ga., 2017); Kimberly M. Welch, *Black Litigants in the Antebellum American South* (Chapel Hill, 2018), 173–76; and Loren Schwenger, *Appealing for Liberty: Freedom Suits in the South* (New York, 2018), 70–91.

normalize hierarchies of white male dominance.²⁶ These charges, of course, were not invariably affected by age, and southern courts even sought to disabuse those who uncritically entwined the two. Justice Joseph Henry Lumpkin of Georgia asserted in *Potts v. House* (1849) that “*old age* does not deprive a man of the capacity of making a testament.” Lumpkin quoted the opinion of a New York jurist to underline the importance of protecting the aged from avaricious heirs: “it is one of the painful consequences of extreme old age, that it ceases to excite interest, and is apt to be left solitary and neglected. The control which the law still gives to a man, over the disposal of his property, is one of the most efficient means which he has, in protracted life, to command the attention due to his infirmities.”²⁷ Judicial protections and legal niceties, however, could not save testators from the public airing of disregard and disrespect from family, friends, and neighbors after death. Such legal procedures did not always save the people who were the “property” being fought over either.

The antebellum courtroom, as Ariela J. Gross has demonstrated, was a space for the airing of individual and collective grievances and a site for the construction of a sociocultural and legal discourse around body, health, and self.²⁸ It served as an arena in which the discourse surrounding aging was applied and contested when making judgments on the actions and identities of enslavers. Those who hoped to prove that the testator, at time of death, was not master of one’s mind frequently sought to associate advanced age with bodily and mental infirmity and cast crude aspersions on the testator’s capacity in later life. In his study on inheritance in the nineteenth-century North, Hendrik Hartog notes that to make such a challenge required “having to talk—and be cross-examined—about intimate ‘dirty’ aspects of care and life.” According to Hartog, “Few if any adult children would have found the prospect of such talk—making private matters public—anything but horrifying.” Robert Elder has similarly highlighted the importance among southern whites of posthumous respect, claiming that “those who lived by honor’s tenets believed that a name was the most important thing one left behind when leaving the world.”²⁹ Challengers who seized upon the age and infirmity of testators, however, publicly traduced their name in

²⁶ See note 4 for the wider literature on the topic of submission and honor.

²⁷ *Potts v. House*, 6 Ga. 324 (1849), at 355.

²⁸ Ariela J. Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Princeton, 2000), 98. See also Welch, *Black Litigants in the Antebellum American South*, 16–18.

²⁹ Hartog, *Someday All This Will Be Yours*, 171 (first and second quotations); Elder, *Sacred Mirror*, 177 (third quotation).

seeking to rise at their expense. In so doing, such challengers established mastery over their elders in death.

In 1848, Edmund Talbot's proposed emancipation of his enslaved people was denied by the Kentucky Court of Appeals after a challenge from his children. The court determined that Talbot, who "was old and feeble, both in mind and body," had "no will of his own" at the time of his decline. He had instead, in his dotage, become subservient to and "submitted implicitly to the dictation of a colored woman whom he had emancipated, and whose familiar intercourse with him, had brought him into complete and continued subjection to her influence." David T. Moon Jr. has noted that "the very notion of submission ran counter to manly liberty and honor in the South," but in this case all (white) parties publicly asserted and agreed that Talbot's descent to decrepitude marked a loss of authority, autonomy, and honor. Talbot had become humiliatingly dependent and "undisguisedly yielded to an influence of such a character, and lost, under its exercise, apparently all independence of thought and action." This circumstance, the judge insisted, proved "that his mental faculties had given way, before the combined operation of old age and disease; and that he no longer retained that degree of intellect and mental capacity, which would have enabled him to make a valid disposition of his estate by will."³⁰ Connections of advanced age to dependency, submission, and frailty—whether of body or mind—provided ambitious enslavers with a discourse that normalized their dominance of elders who stood in their way. These conflicts might occasion tragedy for the enslaved people caught amid these intergenerational power struggles.

Enslaved people understood that they faced trouble when aged enslavers' promises of freedom were weighed against the avarice of ambitious heirs. In 1843 Nancy was forced to petition the Tennessee courts for her family's freedom after finding her mistress had been prevented from manumitting them by the deceit of her brother James Mahon. The elderly Sally Mahon had attempted to make her will accordingly but was told by James that the best chance of success would be to convey the family to him: "He then could and would take them to a free state and set them free." It did not take long after Sally's death for his true intention to come to light. The slaves not only were kept enslaved but also, according to Nancy, were being used by James to secure the repayment of debt. One witness called in Nancy's behalf

³⁰*Denton v. Franklin*, 48 Ky. 28 (1848), at 30 (first, second, third, fifth, and sixth quotations); Moon, "Southern Baptists and Southern Men," 595 (fourth quotation).

believed there was a coordinated deceit of the aged woman; the witness had asked the executor if he was “ready to attend business” on Nancy’s behalf. He cynically replied, “not in the way she wanted it done.” James had, by this point, already tried to sell one of Nancy’s children.³¹

Such treatment might speak to gendered norms that associated femininity with submission and normalized male control over women regardless of age. The extended efforts of Barbara to protect her children after her enslaver’s death, however, reveal how the dependency associated with old age operated alongside and sometimes superseded gendered norms. The case underscores the disrespect and disregard aged enslavers might suffer from those who saw them as a burden, as well as the suffering of enslaved people caught amid intergenerational conflict. Barbara insisted that Stephen Osborne had promised that neither she nor her children would ever serve his children, but his promises of freedom were not recorded legally. As Osborne grew older, his children took control of his affairs, and Barbara’s family suffered the consequences. The heirs attempted to convince Osborne to sell either the children or Barbara but failed. They did not take this failure lightly and took active steps to destroy Barbara’s family. First, they got rid of Barbara’s husband, a free Black man, “by cursing and abusing of him, pissing on him, and threatening him with Horrid imprecations and ruin, if he did not leave their said fathers plantation and give up all claim to those your oratrixes children as free persons.” Barbara specifically understood that the frailties of the eighty-year-old Osborne left him unable to protect her family. She explained that “the said Stephens children seemed so determined to destroy him [Barbara’s husband] or drive him off, and that the said Stephen had become so old and infirm that he could not prevent it (being about 80 years old).” The Osbornes’ mastery of their father extended over his deathbed, with Barbara insisting that the eldest son, Jonathan Osborne, “would not let him speak knowing what he intended to say.” Barbara was granted the opportunity to defend her children’s right to freedom, but Jonathan Osborne fought against her by playing up the associations between age and incapacity. He insisted that “if any such contract as that alleged ever was made he contends that it was absolutely void because from mental imbecility he was for many years before his death incapable to contract.” Barbara did, eventually, receive freedom for herself and her children, but only after enduring

³¹ Petition of Nancy, March 10, 1843, Sumner County, Tennessee, #21484330, Series 2, RSPP.

horrendous abuse from those who understood the declining powers of an aged enslaver might occasion their own ascent and acted accordingly.³²

In *American Colonization Society v. Gartrell* (1857), the Georgia Supreme Court's dismissal of Francis Gideon's efforts to manumit his slaves through the auspices of the American Colonization Society speaks to the growing antipathy toward manumission in the late antebellum era. Justice Lumpkin denied the plan on a technicality, but his derisive commentary as to the character of those who sought to emancipate their slaves spoke to the power of the discourse that associated old age with decline and decay. In a heavily gendered opinion, Lumpkin wrote that emancipation was the act of the aged and the submissive and must be rejected accordingly: "Let our women and old men, and persons of weak and infirm minds, be disabused of the false and unfounded notion that slavery is sinful, and that they will peril their souls if they do not disinherit their offspring by emancipating their slaves!"³³ The discursive construction of old age as a form of emasculation, the connections to infirmity and weakness, and the awareness of competing generational claims to power underline how aging held personal and public consequences for enslavers and enslaved alike. Age was a vector of power in the antebellum South, and intergenerational tension occasioned strife among white southerners.

This strife held dire consequences for enslaved people, with the collective cynicism held toward aged enslavers' powers succinctly captured in "folklore" recorded by the WPA in Indiana:

My ole missus promise me
When she died she'd set me free
But she done dead this many years ago
And here I'm a hoein' this same old row.³⁴

Beyond threatening sale, separation, and manumission, advanced age was understood by contemporaries, Black and white, as having affected the moods, material wealth, and actions of slaveholders. Leonard Black indicated how a loss of physical or mental acuity affected others' conditions of life: "the old man grew poorer and poorer the older he grew,

³² Petition of Barbara, May 1826 (first, second, and third quotations), and Answer of Jonathan Osborne, December 27, 1827 (fourth quotation), Scott County, Virginia, #21682613, Series 2, RSPP. Further details on Barbara's efforts to protect her children, as well as their struggles once freed, can be found in Petition of Jonathan Osborne, September 2, 1831, Scott County, Virginia, #21683111, Series 2, RSPP; and Petition of Barbara, Senah, and Wesley to the Virginia General Assembly, December 17, 1836, #11683624, Series 1, RSPP.

³³ *American Colonization Society v. Gartrell*, 23 Ga. 448 (1857), at 465.

³⁴ George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Supplement, Series 1* (12 vols.; Westport, Conn., 1977), Vol. 5, p. 69; hereinafter cited as Rawick, ed., *American Slave, Supp. Ser. 1*.

and withal cross, much to our discomfort.”³⁵ Similar issues were raised in Abram Harris’s rendition of one of “dem old songs . . . in de slabery times” in his WPA narrative. Its resemblance to the song quoted above reiterates the collective enslaved memory as to the pressures and negative effects of enslavers’ aging on their own lives:

My old Mistis promised me
dat when she died, she gwine set me free,
But she lived so long en got so po
dat she lef me digging wid er garden ho.³⁶

White southerners likewise claimed that declining powers associated with aging could induce aged enslavers to fail to perform their duties as “masters.” This concern rarely stemmed from sympathy for the enslaved people but instead spoke to self-interest and a desire to protect the so-called rights of the rising generation. David Golightly Harris of Tennessee was annoyed at having to assist his elderly parents but believed his help was necessary because they were “getting too old and weak” to manage themselves: “My Father has not been to see his hands this Spring. They as usual are behind.” Harris reluctantly assisted his parents, but others appeared less keen. In December 1859, Susan Sillers Darden of Fayette, Alabama, recorded the “great excitement” of the community after hearing that a man named Sam Hartwell had tried to poison his father-in-law. The community gossip was that “he wanted the old man to be out of the way, so he could get his wife’s share of the property.” The father-in-law was saved from this fate but was furious at this betrayal, and he insisted to all and sundry he was no burden. He stressed, in fact, that “he was doing so much for him [Hartwell] & for him to be guilty of such an act & bring disgrace upon his family is too much to bear.” The strength of these protestations suggest that it was no little concern to be considered dependent or a burden. Hartwell’s actions, moreover, indicate that the push for profit that historians have identified as central to antebellum slavery extended into white southerners’ interactions with one another.³⁷

³⁵ Black, *Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black*, 17.

³⁶ Rawick, ed., *American Slave* (main series), Vol. 9, Pt. 3, pp. 174–75 (first quotation on 174; second quotation on 175). On collective histories and the vernacular culture found in WPA testimony, see Edward E. Baptist, “‘Stol’ and Fetched Here’: Enslaved Migration, Ex-Slave Narratives, and Vernacular History,” in Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M. H. Camp, eds., *New Studies in the History of American Slavery* (Athens, Ga., 2006), 243–74.

³⁷ Philip N. Racine, ed., *Piedmont Farmer: The Journals of David Golightly Harris, 1855–1870* (Knoxville, 1990), 81 (first and second quotations); Susan Sillers Darden Diary, December 14, 1859 (third and fourth quotations), and December 15, 1859 (fifth quotation), *Records of Ante-bellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War*, Series N:

Attempted murder was, of course, an extreme option. Other antebellum enslavers simply portrayed the aged as increasingly unable to cope with the pressures of slaveholding. Sometimes this difficulty was acknowledged by enslavers themselves. Emma Taylor, who had been enslaved in Mississippi, informed her WPA interviewer, "Marse, he git-tin' old and 'cide he didn't need so many slaves, so he have de sale and a man come and put us all up on a big platform."³⁸ These decisions might otherwise be taken out of an individual's hands. Thomas J. Miller, who had served as the agent for Elizabeth Marshall in Williamson County, Tennessee, explained in a legal petition that Marshall was "an aged woman and afflicted with bodily infirmities which prevented her from attending to her business with any degree of convenience." Miller used her lax treatment of her enslaved people to press his claims of her general incapacity: "The defendant was much inclined to be fickle and whimsical in the management of her affairs, some times insisting upon a strict performance of duty from her slaves, which your orator was called upon to enforce, at other times extending to them great indulgence." Miller insisted on his own capacity for control over that of the aged enslaver.³⁹

Charges of submission and dependency in the antebellum South were gendered feminine and racially coded; such rhetoric—and the willingness of the court to accept Miller's claims—might simply reflect the power of these gendered norms. The transition toward dependency and bodily frailty in old age, however, operated alongside and sometimes superseded binaries of male/female and Black/white. Age was understood as a relation of power; the transition toward dependency—real or imagined—for women and men had real-world effects. In Davidson County, Tennessee, in 1851, William M. Alexander sought court intervention to ascertain the mental state of his father. His petition was filed not out of consideration for his father's well-being but instead due to naked self-interest: "Your petitioner is a son of said Thomas Alexander who is about to waste his estate for want of sufficient mental capacity to take care of and manage the same." The committee who assessed the elder Alexander acknowledged that he was "neither an idiot nor a lunatic" but still determined that he was no longer capable of mastery or even self-control: "Thomas Alexander is upwards of eighty

Selections from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (microfilm; Frederick, Md., 1985–), reel 6, frame 264.

³⁸ Rawick, ed., *American Slave* (main series), Vol. 5, Pt. 4, p. 74.

³⁹ Petition of Thomas J. Miller, February 23, 1852, Williamson County, Tennessee, #21485212, Series 2, RSPP.

years of age and his mind is so much impaired from his extreme old age and physical debility that he is incapable of managing his affairs.” The court granted William Alexander’s request to assume control of his father’s property and person.⁴⁰

In *Hill v. McLaurin* (1854), the Mississippi High Court of Errors and Appeals heard contested testimony about the poor treatment of enslaved people by Duncan McLaurin as he moved “towards the decline of life.” In the bill of complaint it was asserted that McLaurin was, “in his better or younger days, a liberal feeder of his negroes, a good planter and cropper.” However, “he became so mentally and physically enfeebled by age and infirmities, as to cease making crops of any account, and so penurious and childish as not to feed his negroes,” and his sons determined to intervene. As they put it, “the childishness and dotage of their father” left them no choice: “something must be done with the old man and his affairs.” The dispute itself revolved around the remaining heirs challenging two brothers’ assumption of control and their manipulation of their old father, rather than out of any concern for the welfare of the enslaved. All parties accepted, however, that the aged McLaurin lacked the capacity to control himself or others.⁴¹ The willingness of the court to accept the charges of undue influence over a dependent and submissive man as well as the portrait of a fickle and inconsistent enslaver in his “dotage” suggests the broader social and cultural acceptance of the limitations of old age.⁴²

The heirs of James Lockett of Mississippi, who challenged his will in Claiborne County probate court in 1838 on account of aged incapacity, felt similarly emboldened to use his problematic actions as a “master” to argue for his “imbecility and want of mind.” Lockett, who was “upwards of sixty,” was described as “whimsical” and as having acted “more like a spoiled child than any thing else” on account of physical and mental decline. His flights of fancy were deemed permanent by one expert witness: “in advanced life recovery rarely takes

⁴⁰Petition of William M. Alexander, October 1, 1851 (first quotation), Report of the jury, October 16, 1851 (second and third quotations), and Court order, December 1, 1851, Davidson County, Tennessee, #21485136, Series 2, RSPP.

⁴¹*Hill v. McLaurin*, 28 Miss. 288 (1854), at 289 (quotations). For the case files from the lower court, see Case File 125, Box 15, Lawrence County Chancery Court Cases (Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Miss.; hereinafter cited as MDAH), microfilm, reel 13317.

⁴²As Kimberly M. Welch notes, the tales southerners offered in a courtroom “had to be recognizable to the other participants. They had to be plausible and fit into other narratives.” Welch, *Black Litigants in the Antebellum American South*, 54. See also Gross, *Double Character*, 98.

place.”⁴³ Luckett’s failures were not described with sympathy for the enslaved people he owned, but instead, as in the *McLaurin* case, to challenge the distribution of his estate. Irrespective of this purpose, however, the recorded testimony reveals the instability that enslaved people endured under ailing masters. Alongside excessive violence for minor faults, Luckett mixed up names and orders; contemporaneous medical, social, and cultural commentators commonly accepted that “the act, in which the intellect of persons advanced in years, *first most frequently, and most troublesomely fails*, is that of *remembrance*.”⁴⁴ Witnesses recalled that Luckett would “give orders to his servants to do things and if it did not please him he would swear he had never told the servants to do so.” George Henderson described the punishment of those who failed to complete his impossible demands: “I went into his field with him once & he ordered his servants to quit ploughing and go to hoeing in an hour or two afterwards he flew into a great rage and ordered them to go to plowing again, and swore he had never told them to go to hoeing.” While commenting on the legality of the document, the presiding judge’s belief that the witnesses had “concur[red] in showing what was both natural & reasonable, in the decline of the old man under an incurable disease,” suggests how far aging was understood to shape the dynamics of mastery and interpersonal relations among antebellum southerners, Black and white.⁴⁵

In Anderson District, South Carolina, in 1856, Hampton Stone petitioned in his role as committee to sell “the entire personal property” of Posey Trussell, “a very old man, and of extremely imbecile mind,” because, in his infirmity, his land had been “neglected for some years past, dilapidated and worn out.” The language of dilapidation extended to Trussell himself, whose neglect stretched to his performance of

⁴³ *Joseph Brock v. Legatees of James Luckett*, Case 641, Box 5803, Series 208, Case Files of the Mississippi High Court of Errors and Appeals, State Government Records Collection (MDAH); hereinafter cited as Luckett Case File.

⁴⁴ Charles Caldwell, *Thoughts on the Effects of Age on the Human Constitution: A Special Introductory* (Louisville, Ky., 1846), 25 (emphasis in original). On mid-nineteenth-century understandings of memory loss in age, see also John Stanford, *The Aged Christian’s Companion: Containing a Variety of Essays, Adapted to the Improvement, Consolation, and Encouragement of Persons Advanced in Life* (2nd ed.; New York, 1849), 6–7; Barnard van Oven, *On the Decline of Life in Health and Disease, Being an Attempt to Investigate the Causes of Longevity; and the Best Means of Attaining a Healthful Old Age* (London, 1853), 46; Joseph Lathrop, *The Infirmities and Comforts of Old Age: A Sermon to Aged People* (Springfield, Mass., 1805), 4–5; and *Potts v. House*, 6 Ga. 324 (1849), at 355.

⁴⁵ Luckett Case File. The will was eventually accepted to probate, with Chief Justice William L. Sharkey opining in the Mississippi High Court of Errors and Appeals that, while Luckett’s “mind had not its original vigor” and “he was infirm from both age and disease,” the will had been made during a “lucid interval.” All parties, however, portrayed Luckett as frail, dependent, and submissive to others. *Brock v. Luckett’s Executors*, 5 Miss. 459 (1840), at 483.

mastery. The slaves “have also been without a master for many years, and having been permitted to have their own way for so long a time, it must be with great inconvenience, difficulty and expense, that they can be managed in such way as to avoid serious loss.” Trussell, the petitioner asserted, was approaching his end meekly and weakly; he was “phisically unable to help himself in any respect.” The passage of time would bring only more suffering, and, as “there is not the slightest probability of any improvement hereafter,” Stone and his supporters insisted that a takeover was required to protect the interests of the rising generation. They had no qualms in suggesting the enslaved peoples’ lives should be upended to serve this purpose: “I am decidedly of opinion, that it will be greatly to the interest of old Mr Trussell and his heirs at law, that the entire personal property, except one or two negroes, to wait on the old man, should be sold, and the proceeds directed for their interests.” The court agreed, and the sales occurred.⁴⁶ As enslavers moved down the steps of life, then, it was those whom they enslaved who might suffer the consequences.

The decline associated with aging also served to demonstrate the limits to enslavers’ corporeal powers. Israel Campbell, for example, described the cruelty of his elderly mistress: “She would swear, rant and beat the slaves as if they were brutes, and could never be pleased by any one—not only the slaves but her husband would feel the weight of her wrath if he dared to interpose a word in behalf of the slave.” As she took sick her violence continued, but Campbell made clear to his readers that a reckoning was coming. “Old mistress died as she had lived—raving, swearing and screaming,” he wrote, “nor would she listen even in her last moments to consolation or direct her mind to the great event which was fast approaching.” Enslaved people looked to enslavers in late-life frailty and saw the limits of personal power in the face of the life cycle. As Campbell noted, “the dreaded and last enemy spares not the strong, and as the day passed away her spirit took its flight.”⁴⁷

Ailing enslavers who looked to their death with fear presented to some enslaved people a pitiful image that was the antithesis to the honor and respect male enslavers so craved. White southern men were supposed to admire “a style of death that demonstrated mastery and control

⁴⁶ Petition of Hampton Stone, June 6, 1856 (first through sixth quotations), Affidavit of M. H. Brock, June 1856 (seventh quotation), and “A Bill of Sale of the goods and chattels of Posey Trussell” and “A Bill of Sale of four negroes,” August 7, 1856, Anderson District, South Carolina, #21385608, Series 2, RSPP.

⁴⁷ Israel Campbell, *Bond and Free: Or, Yearnings for Freedom, from my Green Brier House. Being the Story of My Life in Bondage and My Life in Freedom: An Autobiography* (Philadelphia, 1861), 8 (first quotation), 10 (second and third quotations).

rather than fear and submission,” but John Brown of Georgia was clear that this rhetoric did not always match reality.⁴⁸ Brown’s “old master Thomas Stevens” could not match the violent fortitude of even Campbell’s old mistress. Stevens instead panicked every time he took ill and resorted to “begging and praying” for his enslaved nurse “to get the devil away from behind the door.” The language of submission, frailty, and fear employed by Brown underscored how gendered norms associating masculinity with authority and autonomy were disrupted by the march of time. Stevens survived each of these episodes, but his terror—and the stark reality that enslavers could not command the temporal rhythms of life and death—served to showcase that these masters were mere mortals. Brown explained that, while enslavers tried to “make us believe that they are superior to us in every thing, and a different order of beings, almost next to God himself,” they could not keep this image up in the face of aging, disease, and death. This clearly mattered to Brown: “when the masters die, we cannot but feel that somebody is stronger than they are.”⁴⁹

Plantation management manuals sagely explained, “The negro should feel that his master is his lawgiver and judge; and yet is his protector and friend, but so far above him, as never to be approached save in the most respectful manner.”⁵⁰ Enslaved people knew, however, that rhetoric was not reality and that the hardships of aging could cause enslavers to become pitiful instead of powerful. When stating so, ex-slaves rubbished proslavery claims of Black dependency—claims that served to justify racist policies and practice well into the twentieth century—and demanded a rethinking of assumptions as to just who was dependent on whom during slavery. Maggie Stenhouse insisted to her WPA interviewer that her “master”—“the old man”—was entirely reliant on his slaves. He was not the powerful patriarch of plantation legend but a man meekly regressing to second infancy: “he had to be tended to like a child. He would knock his stick on the wall and some of the small children would lead him about where he wanted to go.” Henry Lewis of Texas similarly reversed the proslavery claim that enslaved people

⁴⁸Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery*, 91. On the politics and culture of death, see also Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799–1883* (New Haven, 1999); and Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover, eds., *Death and the American South* (New York, 2015).

⁴⁹John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England* (London, 1855), 203 (first quotation), 204 (second through fifth quotations).

⁵⁰“Management of Negroes,” *De Bow’s Review* 19 (September 1855): 358–63 (quotation on 361).

needed their masters and portrayed his enslaver as dependent, even degraded, in old age: “When he grow old he have de gout and he put de long mattress out on de gallery and lay down on it. He say, ‘Come here, my li’l niggers,’ an den he make us rub he foots so he kin git to sleep.”⁵¹ Serena Mulberry Anndora Slate, enslaved in North Carolina, recalled that the slaves on her plantation mocked their mistress’s delusions of youth, describing how “she try to dress like she was sixteen ’stead of sixty.” The community laughed behind her back, but they still dared not say anything to her face: “Mis’ Henrietta was ole an’ she walked wid a cane. But you better not say she was ole, no suh, you sho hadn’, an’ you could tell by de way dat cane tap whether she was mad or glad.”⁵²

Jokes within the quarters, as many historians have noted, served as a form of collective cultural resistance for enslaved people, allowing them to puncture the self-importance and pride of those who enslaved them.⁵³ Mockery came at a risk, but some believed that the physical decline associated with age affected their oppressors’ willingness or ability to apply discipline. Frances Patterson of Mississippi described her “Old Marsa” as “sorter chicken hearted” and unwilling to spill blood. Monroe Franklin Jamison explained how his enslaver, “an old man about seventy years of age,” was “too old and frail to attend to the farm.” His incapacity did not benefit the slaves, however, with overseers being hired instead. But the enslaver’s frailty extended to being unable or unwilling to stop these overseers from going “beyond their limits” and from punishing “those who were forbidden to be whipped.” Jamison viewed this situation as evidence of the aged enslaver’s “disregard for the feelings and rights of men,” but it might plausibly have reflected his own submission to the overseers.⁵⁴

Enslaved people sometimes understood that excessive punishment stemmed from the enslavers’ fears that their powers were declining and

⁵¹ Rawick, ed., *American Slave* (main series), Vol. 10, Pt. 6, p. 222 (first, second, and third quotations), and Vol. 5, Pt. 3, p. 9 (fourth quotation).

⁵² Rawick, ed., *American Slave, Supp. Ser. 1*, Vol. 11, pp. 43–44 (first quotation on 43–44; second quotation on 43).

⁵³ See, for example, Lawrence W. Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York, 1993); Sterling Stuckey, *Going Through the Storm: The Influence of African American Art in History* (New York, 1994); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990); and Sergio Lussana, “Reassessing Brer Rabbit: Friendship, Altruism, and Community in the Folklore of Enslaved African-Americans,” *Slavery and Abolition* 39, no. 1 (2018): 123–46.

⁵⁴ Rawick, ed., *American Slave, Supp. Ser. 1*, Vol. 9, Pt. 4, p. 1679 (first and second quotations); Monroe Franklin Jamison, *Autobiography and Work of Bishop M. F. Jamison, D.D. (“Uncle Joe”) Editor, Publisher, and Church Extension Secretary: A Narration of His Whole Career from the Cradle to the Bishopric of the Colored M. E. Church in America* (Nashville, 1912), 23–24 (third and fourth quotations on 23; fifth, sixth, and seventh quotations on 24).

that they needed to dominate while they still could. Henry “Box” Brown explained that his “old master” was increasingly “unable to attend to all his affairs himself,” and that the white community was unnerved by his lax discipline: “I fancy the neighbours began to clamour about our masters mild treatment to his slaves, for which reason he was induced to employ an overseer.”⁵⁵ Plantation advice given to antebellum enslavers confidently asserted that “no man should attempt to manage negroes, who is not perfectly firm and fearless; and who, moreover, has not entire control of his temper.”⁵⁶ This rhetoric, however, relied on an image of mastery as innate rather than embodied, and flesh-and-blood enslavers knew the limits of such discursive projections of power. Enslaved people, too, understood that the pressures of aging could undermine the identities and authority of enslavers. Eliza Overton, enslaved in Missouri, told her children, “Old man Coffman was a mean old slave holder. He was afraid of his slaves and had some one else to do the whipping.” Joe McCormick of Georgia believed that his enslaver lived in fear of any decline in powers, with his anguish at this thought intensifying his violence. McCormick claimed that his enslaver Bill Hamilton “was afraid the slaves might some day overpower him, and for this reason kept them under rigid subjection.” Rachel Cruze’s memory of a violent encounter between enslaved and enslaver on her Tennessee plantation suggests that such fears were not unreasonable: “Ole Major said he’d do his own whipping right bravelike, but he really wasn’t very successful at it.” In one instance, “instead of ole Major punishing him he whipped ole Major. And that was the end of that.”⁵⁷ The language of fear and failure that these former slaves used to describe their “masters” struck directly at the notions of honor and dominance that supposedly underpinned male enslaver identity; it reveals that enslaved people understood old age affected the application of white power.

In fact, such awareness of aging’s effects might enable forms of resistance both covert and overt. Some enslaved people claimed that the advancing age of their enslavers influenced their plans to escape. John B. Meachum, who bought his freedom after hiring himself out, intensified his plans to exit from slavery on account of his enslaver’s old age.

⁵⁵ Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (Manchester, Eng., 1851), 14.

⁵⁶ J. W. Randolph Plantation Rule Book, in Thomas Edward Cox Books, 1829–1854, *Records of Ante-bellum Southern Plantations*, Series J: *Selections from the Southern Historical Collection*, Part 9, microfilm, reel 16, frames 0356–66.

⁵⁷ Rawick, ed., *American Slave, Supp. Ser. 1*, Vol. 2, p. 215 (first quotation), Vol. 4, Part 2, pp. 389–90 (second quotation on 390), and Vol. 5, pp. 300–301 (third quotation on 300; fourth quotation on 301).

Meachum claimed his Kentucky enslaver was a “good man,” but Meachum could not be “satisfied” in this condition: “he was very old, and looked as if death was drawing near to him. So I proposed to him to hire my time, and he granted it. By working in a saltpetre cave I earned enough to purchase my freedom.” Some enslaved people thus took preemptive steps to avoid the dangers attendant upon the passing of an elderly master, with knowledge of the possibility of intergenerational power struggle to come. Isaac Throgmorton of Kentucky was concerned his fate would worsen after the death of his elderly enslaver, who had treated him “well enough,” and made his plans accordingly: “when he got married, his wife and all her kin considered that I had been treated too well, and I knew directly that his head was laid low (and he was an old man) I would be done forever.” Throgmorton took flight while he still could and escaped to Canada.⁵⁸

A loss of power associated with aging thus influenced some enslaved people to make plans for resistance. Elijah Jenkins recalled that after his young enslaver died, “I fell to her mother, an old woman.” Jenkins understood that she was not long for this world, and with the knowledge that “on her death I would have to be sold,” he decided to take flight. His escape was made easier, Jenkins intimated, on account of her reduced powers: “I ran away, and did not meet with much difficulty in doing so.”⁵⁹ A sense that weakness was a universalizing accompaniment to old age challenged and occasionally overturned gendered presumptions of power. Sarah Wilson of Oklahoma recalled the time her “old Master,” who was “mighty feeble” in his old age, failed to overawe her aunt. Wilson described how her aunt, after being threatened with punishment, “just stood right up to him and never budged, and when he come close she just screamed out loud and run at him with her fingers stuck out straight and jabbed him in the belly.” Wilson added, mockingly, “he had a big soft belly, too, and it hurt him.” A. J. Mitchell offered a similar tale, describing how his Aunt Susan told her elderly master, whose “head [w]as white as cotton,” that she would not let him whip her, and he failed to physically overpower her. For both aunts, however, the ultimate power of the slaveholding class was made clear.

⁵⁸ John B. Meachum, *An Address to All the Colored Citizens of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1846), 3 (first, second, and third quotations); John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge, 1977), 432–36 (fourth and fifth quotations on 434).

⁵⁹ Drew, *North-Side View of Slavery*, 113.

The women may have resisted physical punishment, but they were sold away.⁶⁰

Notwithstanding such broader structural force enslavers could harness, individual slaveholders were aware of the dangers they faced if their powers faded with age. John Walker of Virginia recorded in his plantation journal that, at age fifty-four, he could “feel the infirmities of age only in loosing my strength I cant hold out to walk so far and as fast My eye sight fails very much,” while Robert F. W. Allston of South Carolina informed the daughter of a family friend that “in my declining years, it would be presumptuous to undertake the management of an insubordinate Slave.”⁶¹ Regardless of the proslavery claims that paternalism and reciprocal relations governed the master-slave relationship, enslavers understood the need for brute force. Emily Liles Harris, who recorded in a journal entry of November 1864 that she felt “old and miserable and ugly,” outlined the struggle to maintain discipline in such a condition just a few months later: “I had a fight with old Will and hurt myself worse than him. It is a painful necessity that I am reduced to the use of a stick but the negroes are becoming so imprudent and disrespectful, that I cannot bear it.” Harris’s slaves appeared to share the belief she, like the Confederacy, was declining in power and purpose and acted accordingly.⁶²

Advice manuals to enslavers explained that “[s]laves have no respect or affection for a master who indulges them over much, or who, from fear, or false humanity, fails to assume that degree of authority necessary to promote industry and enforce good order.”⁶³ Lucinda Davis of Oklahoma described how this disrespect might play out for aged slaveholders if they lost power. Davis’s enslaver, a Native American known as “Old man Tuskaya-hiniha,” “was near ’bout blind before de War,” and his condition only grew worse with the passage of time: “’bout time of de War he go plumb blind.” In his weakened condition, he simply “set on de long seat under de bresh shelter of de house all de time,” and

⁶⁰Federal Writers’ Project, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, Vol. 13 (Washington, D.C., 1941), 346 (first through fourth quotations); Rawick, ed., *American Slave* (main series), Vol. 10, Pt. 5, pp. 103–4 (fifth quotation on 104).

⁶¹Plantation Journal of John Walker (typed transcription), August 15, 1839, Folder 5, John Walker Papers #2300 (Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) (first quotation); Robert F. W. Allston to Sarah Carr, January 17, 1859, in J. H. Easterby, ed., *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston* (Chicago, 1945; Columbia, S.C., 2004), 151–52 (second quotation on 152).

⁶²Racine, ed., *Piedmont Farmer*, 350 (first quotation), 365 (second quotation).

⁶³Robert Collins, “Management of Slaves,” *De Bow’s Review* 17 (October 1854): 421–26 (quotation on 425).

Davis would sometimes “lead him around de yard a little, but not very much.” Walter Johnson has noted how “the discipline slaveholders exercised over their slaves on a daily basis was defined by visual power,” but one’s sight was shaped by the rhythms of the life cycle. Notwithstanding the carceral landscape the slaveholding class created, individual decline could occasion individual resistance. Contemporaries who recorded that, of the senses, “sight is perhaps the first that gives warning of the course of time” would perhaps be unsurprised to learn from Davis that, with the old man in this condition, it was “about de time all de slaves begin to slip out and run off.”⁶⁴

In his postbellum memoir of slave life, Isaac D. Williams recalled how an elderly white man had failed to stop his flight. When setting the scene for his escape, Williams made the point of his own positionality at the prime of life, by describing himself as “a heavy built man, over six feet in height, and weighing over two hundred and sixty pounds, yet there was no superfluous flesh on me—it was clear bone and sinew.” Early in his escape effort, he was confronted by “an old man with a gun and a large dog” looking to capture him. The man missed his shot, however, and Williams beat the dog until “he returned to his aged master howling pitiously.” The old man was left “shaking his fist in impotent rage.” Despite using language of impotence and frailty, Williams “could not help but admire the courage of the old man.” He also recognized that the man’s individual failings did not mean that Williams had reached safety: “As his frail body stood out in bold relief beneath the lengthening shadows of the evening I could but think of the power he represented.”⁶⁵ The statement emphasizes the structural dominance of enslavers writ large, but Williams escaped because the old man who stood in his way was too frail to exert mastery. Power represented was not always power manifested, and enslaved people recognized that the gap between rhetoric and reality could work in their favor.

The fate of James H. Wood, Mississippi enslaver, suggests that Williams’s frail pursuer made a lucky escape in failing to catch a more vigorous runaway. In 1848, the fugitive James was confronted by Wood, and a fight ensued. Despite having a hunting dog with him, Wood was utterly dominated by the runaway, with his advanced age understood by

⁶⁴ Federal Writers’ Project, *Slave Narratives*, Vol. 13, p. 54 (first through fifth and eighth quotations); Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 166 (sixth quotation); Van Oven, *On the Decline of Life in Health and Disease*, 43 (seventh quotation). On declining eyesight, see also Stanford, *Aged Christian’s Companion*, 7.

⁶⁵ Isaac D. Williams, *Sunshine and Shadow of Slave Life: Reminiscences as Told by Isaac D. Williams to “Tege”* (East Saginaw, Mich., 1885), 8 (first quotation), 26 (second quotation), 27 (third through sixth quotations).

the court as shaping the encounter: “the boy made towards him, & he gave back, but being old & in the bushes he could not get out of the way, & the boy advanced & cut him once, & turned & left him.” Wood died from his wounds, and James was caught the next evening. When questioned, James was aware of his advantage over his pursuer due to Wood’s advanced age, dismissively recalling that “he cut some old man but he did not know who it was.”⁶⁶ In *Gilbert v. State* (1847), the Supreme Court of Tennessee heard that Gilbert and an accomplice beat their aged enslaver to death. They then set fire to the barn where the body lay, planning to use his known frailty and presumed inability to escape the blaze to cover their tracks. Gilbert clearly did not fear the “old and very nearly blind man” who presumed ownership of him. Witnesses claimed that Gilbert had already “threaten[ed] his master’s life several times” and been seen brandishing “the hickory, which he called the peace-maker,” that he used to beat his enslaver to death. The comparative age and vigor of enslaved and enslaver was viewed as having directly shaped the contours of the act. The supreme court concluded, “It was a cruel murder, inflicted on a feeble old man.”⁶⁷ These rebels, and the courts who judged them, understood the aged men were “masters” in mere name. This knowledge of declining powers with age directly shaped enslaved people’s decisions and actions in resisting slavery.

In Grace Lintner’s postbellum paean to the antebellum order, she described how, on the ascent of the steps of life, white children were “to be reared rulers over their sable playmates, and [have] impressed on their unfolding minds ideas of superiority in birth.” It was this inculcation in mastery that enabled “them to exercise authority to a degree inconceivable by those raised with different surroundings.” Those who were moving down the steps of life, however, could see their authority diminished and denied, by both Black and white peers. One abolitionist author, for example, portrayed a scene in which an enslaved man called Bob dealt a humiliating blow to “an elderly white man, a very ill-tempered fellow,” who had tried to chastise Bob on the streets of Charleston, South Carolina. This white man, who took pleasure in randomly beating Black people—enslaved or free—took his superiority for granted regardless of his advanced age. Bob, however, understood this power to be illusory. After checking that no other white person was

⁶⁶ *State of Mississippi v. James, a slave* (1848), Pontotoc County, Case 07, Box 21839, Series 1818, County Court Case Files (MDAH).

⁶⁷ *Gilbert v. State*, 26 Tenn. 524 (1847), at 525 (first quotation), 528 (second and third quotations), 531 (fourth quotation).

around to intervene, Bob “lifted the old fellow by the neck and the heels, as one would do an infant, and, carrying him deliberately over to the deepest part of the puddle, softly and cautiously laid him down upon his back in it.” This humiliating reversal of mastery was a source of humor for both Black and white: “the redoubtable white man with the cudgel was much more cautious and peaceable in his walk thereafter; and Big Bob the carpenter, was much applauded by all his coloured acquaintances, and even many white gentlemen laughed at the exploit.”⁶⁸

Bob’s abolitionist tale might, of course, be apocryphal. The message it conveyed, however—that aged enslavers risked having their claims to honor and authority denied by both Black and white observers—indicates that antebellum southerners understood that aging had the potential to reshape the dynamics of mastery and interpersonal relations. Benjamin Johnson of Georgia offered a similar tale about the public humiliation of an enslaver who failed to maintain his dominance. “O’ man Brady” tried to punish Johnson after catching him on his plantation without a pass, but Johnson turned the tables on the enslaver: “‘Bout dat time when I stooped over to take off my coat I caught ’im in his pants an’ throwed ’im in a puddle o’ water an’ den I lit out fer home. If you git home den dey couldn’t do nuthin’ to you.” When Brady tried to punish him at “home” the next day, Johnson’s enslaver insisted, in front of all and sundry, that Brady’s failure to exert mastery was final: “‘If he had you he shoulda whupped you an’ dat woulda been his game but he let you git away an’ so dat wus yo’ game.’” This public humiliation was witnessed with pleasure by the enslaved people. Nearly eighty years after slavery ended, Johnson still relished the memory: “O’ man Brady’s face turned so red dat it looked like he wus gonna bus’.”⁶⁹

The failing force of enslavers—once powerful figures now reduced to pathetic creatures—enabled some slaves to enact revenge for past abuses. One ex-slave interviewed by the WPA recalled how she was expected to take on the role of nurse when “Old mistress got sick.” She took the opportunity for vengeance instead. While pretending to keep the flies off her mistress, this enslaved woman “would hit her all in the face,” relying on the fact that the old woman was too infirm to be able to tell her husband. The mistress soon died, and the enslaved population rejoiced: “‘Old God damn son-of-a-bitch, she gone on down to hell.’”

⁶⁸ Grace Lintner, *Bond and Free: A Tale of the South* (Indianapolis, 1882), iii (first and second quotations); Peter Neilson, *The Life and Adventures of Zamba, an African Negro King; and His Experience of Slavery in South Carolina. Written by Himself* (London, 1847), 238–39 (third quotation on 238; fourth quotation on 238–39; fifth quotation on 239).

⁶⁹ Rawick, ed., *American Slave* (main series), Vol. 12, Pt. 2, p. 323.

Sojourner Truth likewise described how infirmity might see mastery, as well as gendered power dynamics, inverted and allow for wrongs to be righted. The enslaver Hasbrouck, who had taken cruel pleasure in tormenting a sick slave woman and her child, found himself reliant on an enslaved woman as he himself sickened over time. Truth claimed to take no pleasure in the story, explaining, “It was fearful to hear his old slave soon tell how, in the day of his calamity, she treated *him*.” But her actions were clearly seen as a form of righteous revenge:

She was very strong, and was therefore selected to support her master, as he sat up in bed, by putting her arms around, while she stood behind him. It was then that she did her best to wreak her vengeance on him. She would clutch his feeble frame in her iron grasp, as in a vice; and, when her mistress did not see, would give him a squeeze, a shake, and lifting him up, set him down again, *as hard as possible*. If his breathing betrayed too tight a grasp, and her mistress said, “Be careful, don’t hurt him, Soan!” her ever-ready answer was, “Oh no, Missus, no,” in her most pleasant tone—and then, as soon as Missus’s eyes and ears were engaged away, another grasp—another shake—another bounce. She was afraid the disease alone would let him recover,—an event she dreaded more than to do wrong herself. Isabella asked her, if she were not afraid his spirit would haunt her. “Oh, no,” says Soan; “he was *so* wicked, the devil will never let him out of hell long enough for that.”⁷⁰

Such accounts may seem like the narrative devices of abolitionists seeking to stress the punishment that awaited enslavers if they did not change their ways. White southerners, however, shared a belief that enslaved people might take control of aged enslavers and asserted as much in the courtroom. Some claims of enslaved people’s “influence” took dramatic forms, including manipulation, coercion, and even violence. As John Mayfield has noted, “in the highly symbolic structuring of Southern masculinity, to be manipulated and mastered was to be a slave, regardless of race.”⁷¹ Charges of aged “masters” being controlled by their slaves might, of course, simply reflect the complainants’ competing claim for supremacy. In making these claims, however, white southerners publicly acknowledged that aging risked mastery. In *Belcher v. McKelvey* (1859), the South Carolina Court of Appeals heard that George used his aged enslaver’s infirmities to plot his escape to freedom. Robert Tucker, “about eighty years of age, altogether

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. 18, p. 134 (first, second, and third quotations); Sojourner Truth and Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828* (Boston, 1850), 83–84 (fourth quotation on 83; fifth quotation on 83–84).

⁷¹ Mayfield, *Counterfeit Gentlemen*, 58.

unlettered, and of a mind, originally feeble, impaired by age and disease,” hoped to emancipate his slaves at his death. George, who “had great influence over him,” decided it was prudent not to wait for Tucker’s death and found a sympathetic white man who “would befriend him and the other negroes by taking them to a free State.” He then organized his own bill of sale to W. W. Belcher, who would stand as his new master. The attesting witness, John Johnson, “said to George, you are Belcher’s property,” but George was confident in his plans: “I am not afraid; Belcher is too good a man not to do what he has said, and he will contrive a way for my escape.” Johnson came to believe the entire sale was orchestrated by George, who “seemed more interested than Tucker in having the deed drawn.” George’s confidence in Belcher was not misplaced: George escaped after Tucker’s death and was “probably in Pennsylvania.” It was not “contested that George left this State with the consent of Belcher,” but George was clearly seen as the agent of his own freedom. The frailty of Tucker, who was “exceedingly feeble in mind and body” and “an easy subject of imposition and undue influence,” was understood to have eased George’s flight.⁷²

White southerners thus argued that enslaved people might use the advanced age of their enslavers to serve their own interests and even to escape. Even if we are skeptical that courtroom testimony speaks only to the dueling interests of the parties, the fact that complainants were willing to base their charges on such claims suggests the broader power of the discourse equating old age with submission and dependency. In *Minor’s Heirs v. Thomas (of color)* (1851), the Court of Appeals of Kentucky heard that a group of enslaved people were emancipated and given a tract of land by the will of Jeremiah Minor. The heirs contended this document was fraudulent on account of the “undue influence of the emancipated slaves . . . upon the mind of the deceased, when enfeebled by illness and extreme old age.” Their “influence” extended to exploiting his “sense of utter helplessness” and “feeling of complete dependence upon these slaves.” The court heard that Minor, a widower in his nineties, “lived alone with his slaves, that they had unbounded influence over him, and controlled him at discretion.” The language used to describe Minor—a man in “second childhood and complete dotage,” with “the exhausted faculties and expiring intellect of an old man”—and the rejection of his will indicate how aging was understood

⁷²*Belcher v. McKelvey*, 32 S.C.Eq. (11 Rich.) 9 (1859), at 11 (first and second quotations), 13 (third through sixth quotations), 14 (seventh and eighth quotations), 21 (ninth quotation), 22 (tenth quotation).

by white southerners as destabilizing the performance of mastery and potentially inverting the power dynamics of slavery.⁷³ Indeed, in his dotage, it was Minor who was deemed incapable of “resisting” his enslaved people.

Antebellum southerners thus understood—or were willing to claim—that depredations of aging cut across categories of race and gender and undermined normative hierarchies of power. An inversion of gendered power dynamics on account of old age was evident in Susannah Langdon’s efforts to annul three decisions her father, David Roper, made toward the end of his life. Roper, an enslaver in Kentucky, provided deeds of land and money to his neighbor David James and, more shockingly, “bequeathed all his personal estate to two of the slaves whom he had emancipated” in his will. Langdon insisted that these acts be made void on account of the “fraud, influence and imposition practised upon him, in his advanced age, and feeble state of body and mind, by those in whose favor those instruments were executed.” The court heard that James had taken “advantage of [Roper’s] confidence and perfect submission to his opinions and will” and, by “alarming his fears and increasing his dread and apprehension,” convinced Roper to give James the land and money. The court rejected this conveyance: “A deed thus extorted from the excited fears and terrors of a feeble-minded old man . . . ought not and cannot be permitted to stand.”⁷⁴

The challenge to the proposed emancipation, however, was trickier to adjudicate. The justices agreed that Roper had long expressed “that those slaves should serve no one after his death,” and that the deeds he had executed to this effect were done during his more active period of life. They were plainly disturbed about the distribution of his estate to the slaves, however, and viewed this decision as evidence of his declining powers. This action came during “his last illness, and not long before his death, at a time when his body and mind, naturally weak, were both much enfeebled by age and disease.” More shockingly, Lucy and Hector, the two named slaves, had apparently directed this action: Roper “was much under their influence and control, and there is good reason to believe that Lucy used means to prejudice and embitter his mind against his children Indeed it is proven that he was induced to believe that his children

⁷³ *Minor’s Heirs v. Thomas (of color)*, 51 Ky. 106 (1851), at 106 (first quotation), 111 (second, third, fourth, and seventh quotations), 109 (fifth and sixth quotations).

⁷⁴ *James v. Langdon*, 46 Ky. 193 (1846), at 193 (first and second quotations), 194 (third and fourth quotations), 195 (fifth quotation).

visited him for the purpose of plundering him of his property, and there is grounds to believe that this impression was made on his mind by the tales of Lucy.” The court believed that such reversals of mastery were, in fact, common, noting that “it is not surprising that an aged man like Roper, suffering under the pains of disease, and of a weak mind naturally, should become alienated from his children” and instead “have his affections concentrated upon those who were daily around his person, and plying him with tales calculated to excite and prejudice his mind.”⁷⁵ The normative narrative of aged decline provided a rationale for rejecting Roper’s wishes as a true final expression of mastery; the court canceled the conveyance of property while allowing the emancipation.

A more dramatic reversal of the master-slave relationship was presented in *O’Neill v. Farr*, in 1844. The South Carolina Court of Appeals and Errors heard that William B. Farr’s decision to change his will to favor an enslaved woman named Fan—“his paramour”—was apparently shaped by “the threats and menaces of Fan.” Fan was likely forced into this relationship as, while Farr was in the “vigor of health of manhood,” she had been “respectful and submissive to his will.” As he grew older and took sick, Fan reversed the dynamic and exerted control over Farr and, indeed, over others on the plantation. According to one witness, “Fan could have sold, or prevented the sale of, any of Farr’s negroes.” Her control allegedly took the form of not only words but also deeds; Fan “had even attempted violence on his person.”⁷⁶ In *Potts v. House* (1849), the Georgia Supreme Court further outlined the level of control Fan held over Farr when using the case as a comparator for its own discussion of “undue influence” by Charity, a woman enslaved by James Potts. Potts, aged ninety, was at this point “rendered almost speechless by age and the loss of his health; was bedridden, and on account of his bodily infirmities at least, if not mental, rendered pretty much incapable of attending to and managing his ordinary business.” Charity was argued to have taken advantage of this situation “to exercise a controlling influence over him,” including making provisions for her family’s manumission in the will. In earlier testimony that the court disallowed, one physician attending to the old man lamented Potts’s weak nature, claiming his “extreme old age” manifested itself in “a childishness that is not common to men of ordinary minds” and

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 196–97 (first through fourth quotations on 196; fifth quotation on 197).

⁷⁶ *O’Neill v. Farr*, 30 S.C.L. (1 Rich.) 80 (1844), at 80 (first quotation), 82 (second quotation), 86 (third, fourth, and sixth quotations), 85 (fifth quotation).

stressing that the enslaved essentially did whatever they wanted. With Charity in charge, another witness claimed, the community simply “obeyed or disobeyed [Potts’s] orders pretty much as they pleased.”⁷⁷

Although the court was disturbed by Potts’s “miserable infatuation” with Charity, “shocking . . . to our sense of decency and propriety, and proper subordination on the part of our negroes,” it fell “immeasurably short . . . on the score of unjust control, of that which accompanied Farr’s will.” In making this assessment the court restated the depth of Fan’s dominance:

[S]he shook her fist in his face and threatened to knock his teeth down his throat; witness heard them quarrel in the night; heard her call Hannah, a servant, to bring her the whip and she would beat his skin off. They would get drunk together and she was insolent to him; told him to hush or she’d give him hell; cursed him for a d—ned rascal; rubbed her fist in his face and dared him to open his mouth; called him a d—ned old palsied rascal. Testator told Dawkins, that Fan had tried to kill him with a spear; she threw it at him and stuck it in the bed post Many other disgusting details were narrated on the trial, which need not be repeated.⁷⁸

Fan’s resort to violence marked her case as particularly transgressive, but both instances appalled the court. The cases reveal how southerners—Black and white—understood slaveholding authority as contingent and contestable, rather than innate. They demonstrate, moreover, how enslaved people might see the aging of their enslavers as opening a window for negotiation or acts of resistance.

Old age could dramatically upend the claims of white superiority and reshape the expected dynamics of authority between Black and white southerners. In Tennessee in 1838, William Slaughter, a man “far advanced in years,” pleaded for the court’s assistance in canceling a deed of conveyance he had made to a free Black man named Richard Stuart. Slaughter had entered into a contract with Stuart, a former slave with the reputation for “honesty, sobriety, and industry,” to supply the aged Slaughter and his wife with necessary goods and “other things that is common for folks of their age.” Slaughter soon discovered how fast power relations could shift for aged dependents: “not long after your Orator had placed himself in the power of said Stuart he discovered that

⁷⁷ *Potts v. House* (Ga.), at 325 (first quotation), 357 (second quotation), 363 (third and sixth quotations); Rule of Exception, Troup County Superior Court, November term 1848, *Potts v. House*, Caveat, Case A-418, Criminal Appeals Case Files, 1846–1917, Records of the Georgia Supreme Court, Record Group 92 (Georgia Archives, Morrow, Ga.) (fourth and fifth quotations).

⁷⁸ *Potts v. House* (Ga.), at 360 (first and second quotations), 363 (third quotation), 361–62 (fourth quotation).

the character & conduct of said Stuart were undergoing a total change—that he put off the bearing of a slave and put on that of a Master.” Slaughter claimed that Stuart “soon became indifere[n]t to the wishes and comfort of your Orator; and gradually insolent, neglectful, and almost utterly regardless of all the obligations imposed on him by said agreement,” leaving Slaughter and his wife to fend for themselves. Slaughter was, in fact, frightened of this slave-turned-master: “The said Stuart has formed habits of drunkenness and utter indolence, and not only refuses to perform his agreement, but sets your orator at utter defiance; and distressing beyond endurance as is Your Orator’s condition he dare not complain for fear of bodily injury.” Slaughter had the deed revoked by the court, but his stark admission that in his advanced age he was “unable to protect himself” clearly indicated how changes associated with old age could shape the dynamics of authority, power, and resistance in the antebellum South. The dominance of enslavers was embodied, not innate, and those “far advanced in years” sometimes discovered the distinction between rhetoric and reality to be a hard lesson.⁷⁹

Antebellum enslavers presided over a cruel and violent system of exploitation, and enslaved people suffered horrendous abuse from white southerners, men and women, old and young. Recognition of this central fact is fundamental to any understanding of slavery as an economic system and as a contested site of personal domination. Despite the coercive dominance of the slaveholding class and the structural force enslavers wielded, changes associated with age—both physical and mental, real and imagined—disrupted and denied enslavers’ efforts to make this power real. Age served as a vector of power for antebellum southerners, Black and white, and issues associated with aging had the potential to shape and reshape social hierarchies and interpersonal relations in the Old South. Enslaved people might become pawns in intergenerational white conflicts, but they could also see that the advancing age of enslavers might provide them with a limited space to adapt, negotiate, and resist their condition. Such a response was not inevitable or even necessarily successful in the long or short term. Even small-scale acts of insubordination and temporary reversals of the dynamics of mastery, however, helped demonstrate the limits of enslavers’ powers and upend their claims to permanent and natural dominance. Enslaved people understood that mastery was not innate but instead embodied, and that

⁷⁹Petition of William Slaughter Sr., February 26, 1838, Washington County, Tennessee, #21483802, Series 2, RSPP.

as the body grew “withered by time,” so, too, might their enslaver’s pretensions of authority, dominance, and honor.⁸⁰ This knowledge shaped enslaved people’s strategies for survival and their forms of resistance.

⁸⁰Diary of Benjamin Leonard Covington Wailes, July 17, 1860, *Records of Ante-bellum Southern Plantations*, Series N, reel 19.