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Citation for final published version:

Doddington, David 2018. "Old fellows": Age, identity, and community in slave communities of the Antebellum South. *Journal of Global Slavery* 3 (3) , pp. 286-312. 10.1163/2405836X-00303005 file

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1163/2405836X-00303005>

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## “Old Fellows”

### *Age, Identity, and Solidarity in Slave Communities of the Antebellum South*

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#### **Abstract**

The last few decades have seen scholars successfully challenge the idea that enslaved men in the US South were emasculated by slavery, proving that despite their oppression, enslaved men could craft a gendered sense of self. Much work on the topic has focused on public demonstrations of strength and virility, on resistance, or on men's activities as husbands and fathers, providers and protectors. However, at times, this work has treated manhood and male identity as static, and has not considered change over the course of a lifespan. As enslaved men grew older, the performances expected of them and the possibilities afforded them could shift, and this shift was not inevitably perceived as positive or accepted without strife. While much existing work on conditions of life for elderly enslaved people has stressed the solidarity and assistance other members of the community extended to them, support was not always offered, nor was it always desired. In this article, I explore perceptions of change contemporaries associated with age and consider how this impacted on the lives of enslaved men in slave communities of the antebellum US South.

#### **Keywords**

slavery – manhood – masculinity – age – old – elderly – work – resistance – community – solidarity

James Stewart McGehee, born in 1860 in Louisiana, was a successful southern planter and businessman. He was a man whose success was predicated on the exploitation of enslaved people. His grandfathers were both prominent enslavers in Mississippi, and they had built up their wealth and influence in the region through large slave plantations. Among his writings lamenting the

downfall of a pre-emancipation “Southern Eden,” McGehee offered the story of what he called “a remarkable slave family.” In these recollections, McGehee described what he had “seen and heard” of an enslaved man named Peter Veal and his family, recounting their faithful service to his family for over one hundred years. As to be expected considering McGehee’s labeling of the story, Veal was perceived to be no “ordinary” slave. Despite having been granted freedom by his enslavers, he apparently chose to remain on the plantation and became a “privileged” servant with a degree of autonomy. According to McGehee, this autonomy, if not freedom, was extended to all of his family. While offering portraits of the various members of the family, McGehee gave sustained attention to Veal’s son, Hector. All the children were considered physically impressive, but Hector—“the serious member of the family”—became a leading figure on the plantation. Veal’s children were granted the option of “house” work, with domestic labor considered emblematic of their more privileged position. Hector conspicuously rejected this path: of his “own accord he chose the vocation of ‘field hand.’” This was no random decision, but instead spoke to personal identity. His views on work appeared to be shaped by ideas on suitably “manly” traits and abilities. According to McGehee, Hector’s choice was connected to the belief that “field hands were all supposed to be manly.”<sup>1</sup>

We must, of course, be cautious when taking the word of a white southern man—a man whose family fortunes were built on enslavement—when considering the worldview and identities of enslaved men. We should also acknowledge that white southern constructions of an idyllic pre-emancipation South frequently employed images of contented slaves strategically, with the image of the “loyal” slave a powerful trope of postbellum nostalgia and political agendas.<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding the limits of McGehee’s insights into Hector’s sense of self, there are elements of this identification of work with manhood that are worth interrogating. As part of the broader historical challenge to models of black emasculation in slavery, scholars from the 1960s onwards argued that

1 James Stewart McGehee, “A Remarkable Slave Family, 1775–1903,” 123–136, James Stewart McGehee Collection, Mss. 326, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

2 On the cultural and political symbolism of representations of loyal, often elderly, slaves, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 284–291; Nathaniel A. Windon, “A Tale of Two Uncles: The Old Age of Uncle Tom and Uncle Remus,” *Common-place.org*, 17, no. 2 (Winter 2017). <http://common-place.org/book/a-tale-of-two-uncles-the-old-age-of-uncle-tom-and-uncle-remus/>. On the broader significance of claims of slave loyalty to self-image in the antebellum and postbellum South, see Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Fatal Self-Deception: Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

enslaved men crafted a masculine identity through work, whether by using their efforts to provide for dependents or simply by demonstrating their skill, independence, and autonomy in diverse forms of labor.<sup>3</sup> Historians have shown that the enslaved population of the US South associated certain forms of work with masculinity and held gendered expectations of enslaved men in relation to the labor they performed for themselves and for others.<sup>4</sup> Despite the clear

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- 3 Claims that black men were innately childlike are found in early Southern histories which served to mythologize the antebellum era. See for example Winfield H. Collins, *The Truth About Lynching and the Negro in the South in which the author pleads that the South be made safe for the white race* (New York: Neale Publishing Co., 1918), 47, 140; Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929), 187–217. Despite rejecting the racist worldview which illuminated these studies, claims of emasculation were reinforced in the more sympathetic literature of the 1950s. See for example Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Knopf, 1956), 343; Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 130. Scholars from the 1960s challenged this, emphasizing the diverse and varied ways enslaved men could create a masculine self, stressing how they collectively fought against the emasculatory effects of slavery. See for example John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 93; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 486. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 97. The emphasis on enslaved men, and the seeming framing of patriarchal structures as normative found in some revisionist work, was rightfully critiqued by historians, including: Jacqueline Jones, “My Mother Was Much of a Woman’: Black Women, Work, and the Family Under Slavery,” *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 2 (1982): 235–269; Deborah Gray White, “Female Slaves: Sex Roles and Status,” *Journal of Family History* 8, no. 3 (1983): 248–261. Following this, historians reject claims of emasculation without reifying patriarchal dominance. The strength of the historiographical shift here is overwhelming. For examples where slave masculinity is connected to work and provision see Emily West, “The Debate on the Strength of Slave Families: South Carolina and the Importance of Cross-Plantation Marriages,” *Journal of American Studies* 33, no. 2 (1999): 221–241, 223; Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, “Black Men’s History: Towards a Gendered Perspective,” in Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, eds., *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men’s History and Masculinity. Volume 1. “Manhood Rights”: The Construction of Black Male History and Manhood, 1750–1870* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 1–58, 13–29; Edward E. Baptist, “The Absent Subject: African American Masculinity and Forced Migration to the Antebellum Plantation Frontier,” in Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover, eds., *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 136–173, 147–147; Rebecca Fraser, “Negotiating their Manhood: Masculinity amongst the Enslaved in the Upper South, 1830–1861,” in Sergio Lussana and Lydia Plath, eds., *Black and White Masculinity in the American South, 1800–2000* (Newcastle under Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 76–95; Kenneth Marshall, *Manhood Enslaved: Bondmen in Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth Century New Jersey* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 6; Sergio Lussana, *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2016), chapter 1.
- 4 Kirsten Wood, “Gender and Slavery,” in Robert Paquette and Mark Smith, eds., *The Oxford*

condescension present in McGehee’s account of slave life, it is plausible, therefore, that Hector may have been able to connect the work he performed to his identity as a man.

As time went on the Stewarts moved west, forcing their coerced workers to relocate to a sugar plantation in Louisiana. Despite this disruption, Hector continued to stand out, first becoming a foreman, and then the fireman in the sugar house. Hector had proven himself to be a powerful and skilled worker. He was respected, perhaps even feared by other enslaved people, and able to uphold a position of authority.<sup>5</sup> However, he could not do so forever. After noting Hector’s successes as fireman, as well as his general sense of independence and autonomy, McGehee indicated that problems occurred in the sugar house when Hector “became old.” This was not a neutral observation: McGehee claimed that this aging was noticeable because Hector had less strength or stamina (or at least that others felt so). The suggestion that Hector’s abilities had declined because of aging—that “becoming old” was perceived as leading to a comparative loss of skill, power, or authority—can serve to open a broader discussion as to the complex ways in which enslaved people conceived of masculine identities, roles, and values, as well as how these identities might change over time.<sup>6</sup> The evidence for this article speaks mostly to the later antebellum decades (1831–1861), but the emphasis on slave masculinity as relational, and on comparative and functional assessments of age, contributes to wider theoretical debates, applicable to colonial and early America.<sup>7</sup> It also speaks to ongoing

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*Handbook of Slavery in the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 513–544, 515–516; Sergio Lussana, “‘No Band of Brothers Could Be More Loving’: Enslaved Male Homosociality, Friendship, and Resistance in the Antebellum American South,” *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 4 (2013): 872–895, 874–875.

- 5 On managerial authority and manhood, see David Doddington, “Discipline and Masculinities in Slave Communities of the Antebellum South,” in Paul Lovejoy and Vanessa Oliveira, eds., *Slavery, Memory, Citizenship* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2016), 51–83. On the plantation regimes in Louisiana see Richard Follett, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana’s Cane World, 1820–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), esp. 91–179.
- 6 The larger project will extend to exploring similar issues for enslaved women. Existing work here includes Deborah Gray White, *Arn’t I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999 [1985]), 114–118; Jillian Jimenez, “The History of Grandmothers in the African American Community,” *Social Science Review* 76, no. 4 (December 2002): 523–551; Dorothy Smith Ruiz, “Slavery, Family, and Religion: The Traditional Roles of Older African American Women in the Antebellum South during the Nineteenth Century,” in Dorothy Smith Ruiz, ed., *Amazing Grace: African American Grandmothers as Caregivers and Conveyors of Traditional Values* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 1–13.
- 7 On the idea of masculinity as relational and comparative, see David Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). While

questions over the existence or nature of resistance, solidarity, and survival in slave communities of the antebellum South.

Historians commonly emphasize how black manhood was showcased in public demonstrations of authority and power, as when defiant rebels like Frederick Douglass used resistance to demonstrate “how a slave was made a man.”<sup>8</sup> Other scholars have emphasized the significant role enslaved men played as fathers and lovers, and as providers and protectors.<sup>9</sup> However, the desire to “prove” that enslaved men could gain manhood, as well as the emphasis on supportive homosocial networks that allowed enslaved men to demonstrate masculinity, has led to overly static and rigid models of masculinity. Few historians have considered how the performances expected of or possibilities available to enslaved men changed as they aged, as well as the extent to which these factors might affect their sense of identity and place in the wider community.<sup>10</sup>

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scholars have typically emphasized the supportive nature of slave masculinity, there have been challenges to assumptions of shared gendered values among enslaved men. See, for example Riche Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 8; Timothy R. Buckner, “A Crucible of Masculinity: William Johnson’s Barbershop and the Making of Free Black Men in the Antebellum South,” in Timothy R. Buckner and Peter Caster, eds., *Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men: Black Masculinity in U.S. History and Literature, 1820–1945* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 41–60, 54; Maurice Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men’s Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). On the significance of functional age, and not just chronological distinctions, see Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3–6; Paul Johnson and Pat Thane, *Old Age: From Antiquity to Post-modernity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1–18; Corrine T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett, eds., *Age in America: The Colonial Era to the Present* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 1–20.

- 8 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 65–66. Early work which suggested resistance was the act of “exceptional men” includes Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 92. Revisionist scholarship made resistance a more wide-ranging term but continued to emphasize enslaved men’s central role. See Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, chapters five and eight. While historians now emphasize how enslaved women resisted slavery, concepts of resistance were heavily gendered. An excellent treatment of this issue can be found in: James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, “Violence, Protest, and Identity: Black Manhood in Antebellum America,” in Hine and Jenkins, eds., *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men’s History and Masculinity. Volume 1. “Manhood Rights”: The Construction of Black Male History and Manhood, 1750–1870* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 382–395.
- 9 Emily West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 57–60; Rebecca Fraser, *Courtship and Love Among the Enslaved in North Carolina* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 69–88.
- 10 Concerns over aging and masculinity have been noted in other contexts. See, for exam-

Deborah Gray White explained in her influential study on enslaved women that aging could cause problems for enslaved men, but most other historians have tended to present positive portrayals of age-related transitions within the slave community.<sup>11</sup> Scholars have suggested that male slaves gradually and willingly took on positions as caregivers, were valued patriarchs who passed down skills or knowledge to younger men, or that they were figures of respect in communities bound by West African traditions of esteem for elders. Stacey Close, for example, claimed that “the old male slaves earned enormous respect from younger slaves for their contributions to the slave community through child-care, oratorical skills, health care, procurement of food, provision of luxuries, and by religious and social leadership.”<sup>12</sup> Sergio Lussana, more recently, has suggested that older men “most likely served as father figures and role models for young boys, performing the roles of surrogate father and brother.”<sup>13</sup>

The assessment that older men were able to earn and maintain respect as patriarchal figures within their own communities, if not within white society, is indeed evidenced in the primary sources. As Solomon Northup noted: “Old Abram,” who entertained and informed his “younger brethren,” was “a sort of patriarch among us.”<sup>14</sup> One former slave interviewed in the 1930s noted how “my daddy was a blacksmith ... Thar wasn’t but two on the place an’ my daddy’d take the young boys an’ learn them the trade.”<sup>15</sup> Prince Johnson, interviewed by the Works Progress Administration in Mississippi, described how “on certain

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ple Edward H. Thompson Jr., “Older Men as Invisible Men in Contemporary Society,” in Stephen Whitehead, ed., *Men and Masculinities: Critical Concepts in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2006), 349–369; Sara Arber, Kate Davidson, Jay Ginn, “Changing Approaches to Gender and Later Life,” in Sara Arber, Kate Davidson, Jay Ginn, eds., *Gender and Ageing: Changing Roles and Relationships* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2011 [2002]), 1–15; Helen Yallop, “Representing Aged Masculinity in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Cultural & Social History* 10, no. 3 (June 2013): 191–211; Sarah Toulalan, “‘Elderly years cause a Total dispaire of Conception’: Old Age, Sex and Infertility in Early Modern England,” *Social History of Medicine* 29, no. 2 (2016): 333–360.

11 White, *Arn’t I A Woman*, 114.

12 Stacey Close, *Elderly Slaves of the Plantation South* (New York; London: Routledge, 1997), 26. See also: Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 521–524; Leslie Pollard, “Aging and Slavery: A Gerontological Perspective,” *Journal of Negro History* 66, no. 3 (1981): 228–234.

13 Lussana, *My Brother Slaves*, 35. See also Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved from Womb to Grave in the Building of the Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 130–134.

14 Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853* (Auburn: Derby & Miller, 1853), 185–186.

15 George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplement, Series 1, Volume 3, Part 1* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972–1979), 330.

days of the week one of the old men on the place took us house servants to the field to learn us to work. We was brought up to know how to do anything that came to hand.”<sup>16</sup> Beyond work, older slaves frequently held important roles in the community as leaders and orators. Johnson Thompson, enslaved in Texas, noted that “we learned something about religion from an old colored preacher named Tom Vann.”<sup>17</sup> Charles Ball, when describing slave social affairs, explained the significance of elders in the community and the respect in which they were held:

Our quarter knew but little quiet this night; singing, playing on the banjo, and dancing, occupied nearly the whole community, until the break of day. Those who were too old to take any part in our active pleasures, beat time with their hands, or recited stories of former times. Most of these stories referred to affairs that had been transacted in Africa, and were sufficiently fraught with demons, miracles, and murders, to fix the attention of many hearers.<sup>18</sup>

Frederick Douglass offered a wide-ranging comment on the degree of intergenerational support from within the slave community: “there is not to be found, among any people, a more rigid enforcement of the law of respect to elders.”<sup>19</sup>

These supportive dynamics could clearly exist in US slave communities. However, uncritical acceptance of historical depictions of supportive and straightforward transitions to the role of respected elder risk neglecting some of the tension or sadness that could mark a change in status associated with aging. Indeed, given that contemporary images of aging typically portrayed it as a process involving a decline of sorts, enslaved men may not have unquestionably perceived a changing position or status in a positive light. In describing age-based transitions, nineteenth-century Americans frequently employed metaphors of the seasons, the life-cycle, or made use of the trope “the steps of life.”<sup>20</sup> The common use of a staircase metaphor by the nineteenth century—a

16 Rawick, *American Slave, Supp., Ser. 1, Vol. 8, Pt. 3*, 1168.

17 *Ibid.*, Vol. 12, 311.

18 Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains; Or, The Life of an American Slave* (New York: H. Dayton, 1859), 140.

19 Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom: Part 1.—Life as a Slave. Part 11—Life as Freeman* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 69.

20 General studies on the history of aging in America include W.A. Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience since 1790* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 28–31; David Hackett Fisher, *Growing Old in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Thomas Cole, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Ageing in America*



staircase that rose and fell—indicated a sense that aging involved a loss of some abilities. There was not a single or absolute chronological boundary marking out a change in attributes or status, but American writers, religious leaders, politicians, and medical practitioners commonly acknowledged that getting older entailed a decline in some abilities or endurance, both physical and mental. In 1791, Thomas Paine wrote that “At fifty though the mental faculties of man are in full vigour, and his judgement better than at any preceding date, the bodily powers for laborious life are on the decline. He cannot bear the same quantity of fatigue as at an earlier period.”<sup>21</sup> In 1805, the seventy-four-year-old Joseph Lathrop delivered “A Sermon to Aged People,” in which he noted how “Old age is a time when strength faileth. There is then a sensible decay of bodily strength ... Once we were men; now we feel ourselves to be but babes. Once we possessed active powers; now we are become impotent.”<sup>22</sup>

Similar claims were found in antebellum literature and writing. The historian Corrine T. Field noted one example from 1848 where a man reaches the top of the staircase at fifty, a time when “strength begins to fade but wit confers new powers.”<sup>23</sup> Much literature and advice on the topic emphasized the knowledge, wit, and wisdom older people offered, and white Americans typically conceived of “old” age as commencing around the age of sixty.<sup>24</sup> However, there was clearly a sense that changes occurred through the *process* of aging, and, in particular, that physical powers were seen as beginning to decline from around the age of fifty. In a lecture delivered to the University of Louisville Medical Department, 1846, Dr. Charles Caldwell explained that age twenty-five to forty-five was the period which constitutes a man’s “chief season of business, enterprise, and action.” After this, changes would inevitably occur: “And

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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); S. Ottoway, L. Botelho, K. Kittredge, *Power and Poverty: Old Age in the Pre-Industrial Past* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002); Lisa Dillon, *The Shady Side of Fifty: Age and Old Age in Late Victorian Canada and the United States* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008); Corinne T. Field, *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood: Gender, Race, Age, and the Fight for Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

21 Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man. Part the second. Combining Principle and Practice* (Boston: Thomas and John Fleet, 1792), 76.

22 Joseph Lathrop, *The Infirmities and Comforts of Old Age: A Sermon to Aged People* (Springfield, Mass.: Henry Brewer, 1805).

23 Field, *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood*, 99.

24 W.A. Achenbaum, “Delineating Old Age: From Functional Status to Bureaucratic Criteria,” in Corrine T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett, eds., *Age in America: The Colonial Era to the Present* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 301–320; Susannah Ottoway, “Medicine and Old Age,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Medicine*, ed. Mark Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 338–355, 341.

then commences his period of decline. Having reached the mid-day of his life, and basked for a time in the enjoyment of its sunlight, he must now descend, through its afternoon and evening, to its night in the grave.”<sup>25</sup>

If the perception of reduced physical ability, and possibly mental faculties, was equated with aging by white Americans, what did this mean for enslaved people whose survival ultimately depended on their ability to do productive labor for those who enslaved them? The slave population in the antebellum years typically trended young, with both the census of 1850 and 1860 showing eighty-five percent of the slave population were under the age of forty.<sup>26</sup> While white Americans might conceive of old age as being around the age of sixty, Daina Ramey Berry has noted that, “during enslavement, those who reached age forty were considered elderly,” and historians have demonstrated that the monetary value of enslaved people tended to drop after this, with those who reached sixty less likely to be sold off.<sup>27</sup> Given the geographical and economic expansion of slavery in the antebellum period, and the frequent and brutal separation of slave families that accompanied it, the fact that older slaves were less likely to be sold indicates a perceived lack of value as laborers, rather than a paternalistic manifestation of care from “cradle to grave.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, while clearly a minority of the total population, there were 461,700 enslaved people over the age of forty in 1850, a number which had increased to 571,558 by 1860. Of these, 435,495 were between the ages of forty and sixty, and, while no longer in their “prime,” would still be expected to perform labor for those who enslaved them.

The status of older men in the plantation regimes of the antebellum South is important for addressing functional and relational assessments of age, identity, and masculinity, as well as in understanding how people navigated change over the course of a lifespan.<sup>29</sup> Communal and personal judgments on the abil-

25 Charles Caldwell, *Thoughts on the Effects of Old Age on the Human Constitution: A Special Introductory* (Louisville: John C. Noble Printer, 1846), 14.

26 See appendix 1 and 2 for tabulated data on age of enslaved population. Derived from census data for 1850 and 1860, available via: <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

27 Berry, *The Price for their Pound of Flesh*, 130; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 521; Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of Negro Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989 [1974]), 72–75.

28 On family separation, age-dynamics and slave trading, see Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996 [1989]), 25–31, 133–179, 233–235. For a wide-ranging discussion on the valuation and perception of elderly slaves, see: Berry, *The Price for their Pound of Flesh*, chapter 5.

29 Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 3–6; Johnson and Thane, *Old Age*, 1–18; Field and Syrett, *Age in America*, 11.

ities of people to fulfil tasks or roles that were valued—rather than a clear chronological marker—commonly shaped descriptions of enslaved people as “old” and depictions of the aging process.<sup>30</sup> These perceptions were inextricable from the conditions of enslavement. Contemporaries frequently asserted that the harshness of bondage intensified the physical and mental pressures associated with old age. Charles Ball, for example, evaluated his fellow slaves upon his arrival at a plantation in South Carolina by noting “one very old man, quite crooked with years and labour.”<sup>31</sup> Jourden Banks, a fugitive slave whose narrative was penned by abolitionist James Pennington in 1861, stated that the hardships of slavery “used up” enslaved people and aged them prematurely. When explaining conditions in Alabama’s “cotton paradise,” Banks noted how “some young men who were not more than nineteen or twenty looked like men forty or fifty years old.”<sup>32</sup> To look like “forty or fifty” required an evaluation of appearance, abilities, and characteristics associated with aging, suggesting the degree to which perceptions of old age were both relational and comparative. Descriptions of enslaved men as old, aged, or elderly often corresponded to perceived or real ability, or, indeed, inability, to perform tasks and actions, whether in work, in family life, or in social activities.

While pro-slavery propagandists like George Fitzhugh proclaimed that “the children and the aged and infirm work not at all, and yet have all the comforts and necessaries of life provided for them,” the rapacious desire for profit which drove antebellum slaveholders meant that elderly slaves were not exempt from hard labor. If the productive capacity of enslaved workers lessened with age, so might their value in the eyes of those who enslaved them.<sup>33</sup> Charles Ball stated that on his cotton plantation in South Carolina shoes were only given to those able to work in the fields, excluding “children, and several old persons, whose eye-sight was not sufficiently clear to enable them to pick cotton.”<sup>34</sup>

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30 It is worth noting that enslavers sometimes approximated, were incorrect, or lied about the age of their slaves. Restrictions on slave literacy and separation of families could make it difficult for enslaved people to have accurate knowledge on their birthdate. As such, numerical information relating to dates of birth should be treated with caution.

31 Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 88.

32 James Pennington, *A Narrative of Events of the Life of J.H. Banks, an Escaped Slave, from the Cotton State, Alabama, in America* (Liverpool: M. Rourke, 1861), 49.

33 George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters* (Richmond: A. Morris, 1857), 29. On the ruthless economic drives of antebellum enslavers, see Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

34 Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 201.

William Anderson recalled in his fugitive narrative that an “old slave” who was the fireman in a sugar plantation in Louisiana was forced to stay awake “every night” to serve the operations. The “constant taxing of the old slave’s faculties, finally used up his powers of keeping awake, and one night the old man fell asleep and tumbled into the kettle of boiling hot sugar. When found he was cooked through and through—emphatically ‘done brown.’”<sup>35</sup> Adeline Marshall, a woman formerly enslaved on a Texas plantation, revealed in an interview during the 1930s that harsh usage of the elderly led them to suicide. “Old Cap’n was jes’ hard on his niggers, and I ‘member de time dey strops old Beans what’s so old he can’t work good no more, and in de morning dey finds him hanging from a tree back of de quarters,—he’d hung hisself to ‘scape his misery.”<sup>36</sup>

Outside of punishment, slaveholders used a variety of strategies to deal with aging slaves, including sale, manumission, or shifting work roles. Some former slaves claimed that slave traders sought to hide the age of those on the auction block, a recognition that aging led to a loss of economic value.<sup>37</sup> According to John Brown, enslaved in Georgia: “As soon as we were roused in the morning, there was a general washing, and combing, and shaving, pulling out of grey hairs, and dyeing the hair of those who were too grey to be plucked without making them bald.”<sup>38</sup> If sale was not possible, less productive older slaves sometimes found themselves being granted an invidious form of freedom. Historian Dea Boster has noted that “when the usefulness of slaves ran out, particularly due to old age or blindness, they were sent to rooms or cabins in the woods to live alone and fend for themselves, separated from slaveholding families and the slave community.”<sup>39</sup> Fugitive slave Moses Grandy, whose own mother was subject to this treatment, claimed that this callous response was widespread: “Aged and worn out slaves, whether men or women, are commonly so treated.”<sup>40</sup> The connection of old age with being

35 William J. Anderson, *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson, Twenty-four Years a Slave; Sold Eight Times! In Jail Sixty Times!! Whipped Three Hundred Times!!! or The Dark Deeds of American Slavery Revealed* (Chicago: Daily Tribune Book and Job Printing Office, 1857), 49.

36 Rawick, *American Slave, Supp. Ser. 2, Vol. 7, Pt. 6*, 2578.

37 Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 521; Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, 72–75; Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 25–31; Berry, *The Price for their Pound of Flesh*, esp. chapter 5.

38 John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Now in England* (London: L.A. Chaemerovzow, 1855), 112.

39 Dea H. Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South, 1800–1860* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 65–67; Jeff Forret, “‘Deaf & Dumb, Blind, Insane, or Idiotic’: The Census, Slaves, and Disability in the Late Antebellum South,” *Journal of Southern History* 82, no. 3 (August, 2016): 503–548.

40 Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy; Late a Slave in the United States of America* (London: C. Gilpin, 1843), 51–52.

“worn out” indicates how views on aging were shaped by perceptions of peoples’ abilities in the workforce.

Not all enslavers went to such extreme lengths when dealing with elderly slaves. As Leslie Pollard and, more recently, Jeff Forret, have shown, state-wide regulations designed to prevent manumission of superannuated slaves and ensure that slaveholders took responsibility for dependent former slaves were developed beginning in the colonial period. In states like Virginia, county almshouses and boarding-houses allowed some enslavers to thrust “responsibility for them [elderly or infirm slaves] on someone else.”<sup>41</sup> In most cases, however, enslaved workers on plantations and farms who were viewed as old were given reduced loads or moved into forms of labor seen to require less strength or endurance. Grandy, for example, went on to note that “some few good masters” employed old slaves “in doing light jobs about the house and garden.”<sup>42</sup> Charles Ball explained how on his plantation in South Carolina, prime hands were expected to pick fifty pounds, women with children forty, while “twenty-five pounds was assigned as the daily task of old people, as well as a number of boys and girls.”<sup>43</sup> Planter documents also indicate that older men were removed from all-male working gangs which tended to do the most arduous physical labor, such as plowing or log-rolling. Benjamin Sparkman, who had a rice plantation in South Carolina, recorded in his journal entry for 11 December 1834: “The six fellows went to cut wood, the women & two old fellows to cut down corn stockings [sic] in negro House field.”<sup>44</sup> James Henry Hammond of South Carolina wrote in his plantation book of 1857–1858 that “Those, who from age & infirmities are unable to keep up with the prime hands are put in the suckler’s gang.”<sup>45</sup>

Having earlier noted the connections contemporaries drew between work and manhood, it is worth considering how older men might have perceived this separation. Sergio Lussana has noted that “enslaved men were able to claim a distinct gendered identity in the field because their owners generally regarded male labor as ‘superior,’ typically assigning men the most physically arduous tasks.”<sup>46</sup> Yet, if enslaved men perceived as old were publicly separated from other men, what impact did this have upon their gendered identity? The

41 Pollard, “Aging and Slavery,” 232; Forret, “Deaf and Dumb,” 525–535.

42 Grandy, *Narrative of the Life*, 52.

43 Ball, *50 Years in Chains*, 217.

44 Ben Sparkman Plantation Journal, 11 December, 1834, #3574-z, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

45 Plantation book 1857–1858, James Henry Hammond Papers, South Carolina, Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations, Series A, Series A, Part 1, Reel 13, 14, 15.

46 Lussana, *My Brother Slaves*, 29.

frequent connections contemporaries made between old age and infirmity, as seen in Hammond's divisions, suggests that aging was commonly viewed in a negative light. Even enslaved people who stressed the positive roles of elders acknowledged this. Solomon Northup, for example, had praised "Old Abram" as "a sort of patriarch among us," but also emphasized that he suffered through aging: "In his youth he was renowned for his great strength, but age and unremitting toil have somewhat shattered his powerful frame and enfeebled his mental faculties."<sup>47</sup>

Enslaved men might forge a masculine identity through work, but what happened to their sense of self when they were perceived to be (or genuinely were) losing the skill-set or the physical strength they had prized? What if they no longer enjoyed the respect, confidence, or even fear, of their peers? Enslaved men like Abram might take on roles as esteemed elders, but if they had prided themselves on their power, endurance, or authority, these changes could come at a cost. And here it is worth returning to McGehee's account. Hector's work had apparently been central to his identity and standing in the community, but his "old age" was becoming a source of concern. His enslavers resolved, therefore, to bring in support. A "stout 'man-hand' at the beginning of one of the grinding seasons was told to go quietly and carry the heavy wood from the pile, within fifty or sixty feet of the boilers, and lay it near the furnace so Hector would have naught to do but attend to the firing." The use of the words "stout man-hand," juxtaposed with the image of an "old" man deemed unable to work as hard as he once did, indicates how gendered identities and the perceived abilities of men to perform masculine roles could be based on comparative assessments. We could plausibly see these changes as the beginning of Hector's transition to the role of respected elder, or to some form of training model. Such an option provided one route by which older male slaves could maintain a sense of status and responsibility, as well as help develop wider networks of solidarity among the enslaved. Hector, however, did not appear to share such a positive view. After having been asked to offer this assistance, the "stout 'man-hand'" soon reported back and asked for a new task. When challenged as to why he did not stick to his original task, the man's reply suggests that Hector was not willing to take a downward step:

When reproached for having left the one already allotted he [the "man-hand"] said he was willing to work but was not hunting the grave; that "Unc Hec" had a pocket-knife with a long blade and had threatened to

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47 Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 185–186.

disembowel him if he did not leave. Hector therefore continued to fire the boilers until the place was finally turned to cotton cultivation.<sup>48</sup>

The image of a “loyal” slave refusing to stop working plausibly speaks to the paternalistic and pro-slavery sentiment of the author. However, given how commonplace it is for historians to relate enslaved manhood to work and expressions of power, there are elements of this anecdote that can be used to explore enslaved people’s identities and values. To be perceived of as in decline could have meant the loss of a sense of security and status in the community, as well as a hard-earned sense of self. The way Hector fought to preserve his work role suggests that not all men were willing to accept work regime relegation. Hector’s threatened violence against the younger man suggests that perceptions of age-based decline and the implications of helplessness were solidified or intensified by comparison to other men. Some enslaved men might have appreciated taking on supervisory positions or having reduced labor, while others clearly resented the implication that they were considered unable to perform in the fashion they previously had, and were hence inferior to other men.

The younger man meant to replace Hector acceded to his desire to remain in post, albeit following the threat of disembowelment, but inter-generational support was not found in all cases. William Pettigrew, a prominent slaveholder from North Carolina, highlighted in a letter to his sister how physical decline associated with age was a problem for men who had forged an identity based on authority and dominance. Referring particularly to slave drivers, Pettigrew wrote about the “disqualifications for command that usually characterize old persons,” noting that “the man of 32 will, in ten years’ time, find in any company of persons a far greater number behind him than are in advance of him.” The men behind were not always waiting to offer support. Indeed, Pettigrew claimed that by the age fifty, men 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.”<sup>49</sup> For Pettigrew, vigor inevitably declined with age. His suggestion that some “stronger spirit” would “assume the mastery over him” indicates that such a decline did not inevitably inspire collective support among enslaved laborers. To be “mastered” by another was to be made dependent, to be emasculated in

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48 McGehee, “A Remarkable Slave Family,” 132.

49 Robert Starobin, *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974), 34–35.

the eyes of others, and suggests that imposed alteration of workloads could be viewed as contests over manhood.

W.E. Hobbs, whose father held slaves in Tennessee, recalled the time a driver struggled to subjugate a group of young men, described as “seven or eight young, well muscled bucks,” whom his master had placed under his authority. From the first, the young men “wouldn’t do anything he told them to do.” His failure to maintain control revolved around his comparative lack of physical ability: “He couldn’t make them do anything, because any one of them could whip him in a fight.” The reference to the youth and physical vitality of these men suggests some perception of age difference as part of their dominance over the driver. We could perhaps read the actions of the younger men here as resistance to their enslavement, but the results of their defiance for the driver was devastating: he was whipped by his enslaver, beaten, mocked, and humiliated by the young men, and then sold.<sup>50</sup>

Other opportunities for resistance, often linked by both contemporaries and historians to the assertion of manhood, could also pose problems for older men.<sup>51</sup> The physical strength and endurance required to evade or navigate “the large and small rivers, lakes, panthers, bears, snakes, alligators, white and black men, blood hounds, guns, and, above all, the dangers of starvation,” which stood in the way of fugitives, might be hindered by the process of aging.<sup>52</sup> Solomon Northup recalled that, after his early plans to escape were foiled, he feared that “the summer of my life was passing away; I felt I was growing prematurely old; that a few years more, and toil, and grief, and the poisonous miasma of the swamps would accomplish their work on me—would consign me to the grave’s embrace, to moulder and be forgotten.”<sup>53</sup>

Anti-slavery activists commonly gendered the activities of male rebels and fugitives, as when Jourden Banks’ resistance was said to have provided southerners with evidence that “they had a man to deal with.”<sup>54</sup> In stressing the exemplary manhood of these individuals, these activists were also forced to consider men who had not been willing or able to take the risk of fight or flight. Some attributed inaction to old age and a sense of resignation to the condition of bondage. The account of abolitionist James Redpath of his travels in the South during the 1850s is full of admiring conversations with manly rebels, including one example where he asked a bondman in North Carolina if he

50 Rawick, *American Slave, Supp., Ser. 2, Vol. 10, Pt. 9*, 4346.

51 See note 9.

52 Anderson, *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson*, 26.

53 Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 235.

54 Pennington, *A Narrative of Events*, 41.



would be willing to escape and “run the risk of being captured and brought back.” The man’s response was made indicative of his manhood: “‘Yes, mass’r,’ said the slave, in a manly tone, ‘I would try; but dey would never bring me back again alive.’”<sup>55</sup> Redpath applauded resistance and rebellion but acknowledged that others were not able or willing to take the risk. One enslaved man, asked by Redpath if he wanted to be free, replied in the affirmative but framed his age as a limiting factor: “I’s would like to be free; but it’s no use, massa—it’s no use. I’s a slave, and I’s been one sixty years, and I ‘specs to die in bondage.” Another man, aged thirty-seven, noted with a sigh that he had too many responsibilities to his family to flee slavery, adding the following: “I wouldn’t run the risk now of trying to escape. It’s hardly so much an object, sir, when a man’s *turned the hill* [italics added]. Besides, my family. I might be sold away from them, which I won’t be, if I don’t try to run away.”<sup>56</sup>

This man was thirty-seven, and the language of having “turned the hill,” in a similar fashion to the metaphor of seasons, a cycle, or a rising and falling staircase, clearly denotes a sense of decline associated with age. Older men could still aid runaways and rebels, but this man felt as though his abilities, even his willingness to escape, had declined with age. Statistics from across the colonial and antebellum years show that younger men were indeed those most likely to attempt flight, as “the great majority of runaways were young men in their teens and twenties.”<sup>57</sup> Enslaved men who remained in bondage found alternative routes to manhood. The man Redpath interviewed, for example, took great stock in his ability to provide for his family. However, the fact that his explanation was prefaced with a sigh suggests a degree of sadness, as this alternative route to manhood constituted a recognition that he would remain enslaved until death.

Historians have commonly noted that, notwithstanding pressures faced from enslavers or from conditions of bondage, older slaves did find support from their peers. Stacey Close, for example, argues that “a transplanted tradition of cooperation, support, and teaching helped to develop a positive perception of elderly African Americans within the slave community, which sometimes contrasted with the image of older slaves proclaimed by white slave owners.”<sup>58</sup> However, comparative assessments of men’s relative age within the slave

55 James Redpath, *The Roving Editor: Or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968 [185]), 125.

56 Redpath, *The Roving Editor*, 35.

57 John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 210–212.

58 Close, *Elderly Slaves*, 10. See also Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 522–523.

community could serve as a means of asserting dominance over others and, while elders might hope for or expect respect from within their community, these ideals were not always rigidly enforced. In 1848, in Richmond, Virginia, Moses, a “feeble old man over sixty years of age,” was beaten to death by a man named King following a dispute over property. The coroner’s use of “feeble” to describe Moses’ age indicates the functional as well as chronological nature of age-related assessments. After their initial argument, King waited for Moses outside the house before knocking him down and violently beating him. During this assault, he pointedly asserted superiority over his rival, asking Moses “how come his name was King.” Moses attempted to make use of his advanced age to protect himself, hoping his rival would take pity on him. During the beating Moses cried out, “King I ain’t fit to die. I don’t want to go to Hell King, don’t kill such an old creature as I,” and offered him “every cent of money I have got.” His plaintive cries went unheard, however, and he died from his wounds.<sup>59</sup>

Age-related jibes also surfaced during social gatherings. On one such occasion, on a boat in Rockbridge County, Virginia, 1853, Jim Gooch murdered a fellow slave named Sam. The conflict was shaped by a dispute over a card game, and was exacerbated by inter-generational insults. Gooch was quarreling with another man before Sam, who was known to be “overbearing,” stepped in, telling his rival: “go sit down and behave yourself.” When Gooch retorted, Sam derisively told him “I don’t like to see an old man like you going about and meddling with things of no account.” Gooch was unwilling to take the insult, and, tellingly, connected his actions to his manhood. According to one witness, Gooch informed his rival “he was a better man than he was” and that he was willing to use violence to prove this.<sup>60</sup> Having stabbed Sam to death, Gooch was clearly a man of his word.

Age was also a factor in a conflict that broke out during a weekend gathering of enslaved people in Blandford, Virginia, where it was “in the habit of negroes to collect and drink.” John was murdered by Billy, a fellow slave, and generational distinctions did nothing to protect John. After his initial request to borrow money for a drink was denied, John, the elder man, left, but not before insulting Billy, telling him “It was not worth while to tell a damned lie about money; if you have none I can’t keep it.” Despite the age difference, and the fact that John was apparently drunk, this insult worked Billy “up into a passion.” He sought to restore his reputation with violence. Billy followed John, saying, “look here old man you called me a damned lie,” before he “overtook [him] and

59 Executive Papers, William Smith, January-April 1848, Box 7, Folder 4, LVA, March 18, 1848.

60 Rockbridge County Minute Book, 1852–1854, Reel 43, LVA, November 1853, 189–202.

knocked him down.” Knight, a fellow slave, claimed to have tried to pull Billy off, noting “It was a damned shame to strike such an old man.” While Knight’s intervention suggests that such actions did not receive communal approval, the damage was done and John died of his wounds.<sup>61</sup> Jeff Forret has noted how on one plantation in South Carolina, an older slave was beaten up by a younger man. This humiliation motivated him to ask “his mistress for permission to find a new master,” or in her words: “York has given him a whipping and he wishes to leave the place.”<sup>62</sup> Enslaved men who had carved out a masculine identity within slavery might thus face violent challenges to that identity as they aged. A perceived or actual decline in physical abilities or status sometimes made it harder to fulfill the characteristics and attributes contemporaries associated with manhood, and these struggles could be reinforced in comparison or conflict with other men in the community.

On occasion, enslaved men who were viewed by their peers as “old” would demand to fight even when outmatched, seemingly unable or unwilling to take the suggestion that they were past their prime and hoping to demonstrate their manhood by not backing down. Lula Jackson’s testimony of her experiences of slavery in Alabama highlighted the tragic consequences of such actions. Jackson described how her “mama’s first husband,” a man named Myers, “was killed in a rasslin’ (wrestling) match” with another slave (parentheses in original quote). The conflict appeared to have escalated over concerns related to aging. The protocol for instigating a match, as Jackson recalled it, entailed one man walking up to another and saying: “‘You ain’t no good.’ And the other one would say, ‘All right, le’s see.’ And they would rassle.” The pressure to prove reputation and abilities to other men, rather than simply have this claim respected, speaks to the contested nature of slave manhood. Evidently, age was also a factor. While Jackson noted only in passing that Myers was “pretty old,” this detail appeared to be of some importance to the conflict. In fact, Jackson’s testimony included several references to age, from Myers’ “old age” to the comparative youth of the other man. Myers apparently spent some time attempting to make the young man “rassle with him,” but the younger man refused, stating that “Myers was too old.” This rebuttal, whether based on respect for elders, a deliberate insult, or simply the truth, only seemed to spur Myers on further. Whether intended or not, the connotation that he was past his prime and there-

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61 Executive Papers, William Smith, January–April 1848, Box 7, Folder 4, LVA, February 18, 1848.

62 Jeff Forret, “‘He was no man attal’? Slave Men, Honor, Violence, and Masculinity in the Antebellum South,” in Timothy R. Buckner and Peter Caster, eds., *Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men: Black Masculinity in U.S. History and Literature, 1820–1945* (Columbus: University of Ohio Press, 2011), 23–40, 35.

fore unworthy of fighting was perhaps considered an insult and one that he desired to disprove. If masculine identity could be demonstrated through physical competition among peers, to be refused access to this homosocial activity because of one's age could constitute a denial of or dismissal of their claims to manhood.<sup>63</sup>

Myers eventually badgered the young man into combat but quickly lost and was thrown to the ground. This first taste of defeat was not enough: "Myers wasn't satisfied with that. He wanted to rattle again." Whether content with his first victory or aware of the dangers of the conflict escalating, "the young man didn't want to rattle again." Without knowing exactly what was said, Jackson claimed that "Myers *made him*" fight once more. On this occasion, the consequences were more severe: "the second time, the young man threw him so hard that he broke his collar-bone ... He lived about a week after that." Despite the use of "old" to describe Myers, and the emphasis on the relative youth of his opponent, he was clearly not decrepit. He had a wife, and she was "in a family way at the time." Myers's insistence on fighting, however, meant that he died "before the baby was born."<sup>64</sup> Myers may simply have enjoyed wrestling, but the evidence that enslaved men faced pressures relating to work, resistance, and their standing in the community as they aged makes it conceivable that Myers felt he had to fight in order to prove he was still a man, and that he feared that such a loss marked the beginning of his decline in the eyes of others.

Historians have demonstrated that enslaved men successfully fought against the emasculatory effects of slavery and that they forged a masculine sense of self despite bondage. However, we must be more sensitive to how identities might have changed over the course of a single lifespan, as well as consider how social dynamics and hierarchies within slave communities could be marked by intergenerational tension. As they grew older, enslaved men could face problems relating to their perceived abilities or desires to fulfil the roles and responsibilities they considered central to their identity. Older men who faced pressure from enslaved rivals or from their slaveholders sometimes suffered sadness, strife, and even violence. Enslaved men who crafted a masculine identity within slavery could be forced to negotiate with others, adapt, or reconsider the values and attributes they identified as central to their identity as they grew older. This was not always a happy process. Changes contemporaries associated with aging—such as a loss of power or prestige—could be revealed and

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63 Sergio Lussana, "To see who was best on the plantation: Enslaved Fighting Contests and Masculinity in the Antebellum Plantation South," *Journal of Southern History* 76, no. 4 (2010): 901–923.

64 Rawick, *American Slave, Ser. 2, Vol. 9, Pt. 3*, 12.

cemented through tensions, disputes, or even internecine violence. Enslaved men sometimes found support from the wider community or accepted new roles as they aged, but this was not inevitable or unquestionably viewed by them as a positive. The inexorable march of time was not a march that all men went on willingly.<sup>65</sup>

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65 Paraphrased from Starobin, *Blacks in Bondage*, 34–35.

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## Appendix 1

TABLE 1 US slave population, 1850

Age bracket	Number			% of slave population
	Male	Female	Total	
Under 1	39,343	41,266	80,609	2.52
1 and under 5	227,745	232,140	459,885	14.35
5 and under 10	239,163	239,925	479,088	14.95
10 and under 15	221,480	214,712	436,192	13.61
15 and under 20	176,169	181,113	357,282	11.15
20 and under 30	289,595	282,615	572,210	17.86
30 and under 40	175,300	178,355	353,655	11.04
40 and under 50	109,152	110,780	219,932	6.86
50 and under 60	65,25	61,762	127,016	3.96
60 and under 70	38,10	36,569	74,671	2.33
70 and under 80	13,16	13,688	26,854	0.84
80 and under 90	4,378	4,740	9,118	0.28
90 and under 100	1,211	1,473	2,684	0.08
above 100	606	819	1,425	0.04
age unknown	1,581	1,533	3,692	0.12
	1,602,245	1,601,490	3,204,313	100

Derived from *Census of Population and Housing, 1850*, chapter 5, "Slave Population of the United States," 88–94. <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>

TABLE 2 Breakdown of 1850 data

Total slave population 1850		3,204,313.00
	Number	% of slave population
Total slave population under 40	2,738,921	85.48
Total slave population over 40	461,700	14.41
Age unknown	3,692	0.12
		100.00
Slave population under 20	1,813,056	56.58
Slave population between 20–40	925,865	28.89
Slave population between 40–60	346,948	10.83
Slave population between 60–100+	114,752	3.58
Unknown	3,692	0.12
	3,204,313	100.00

### Appendix 2

TABLE 3 US slave population, 1860

Age bracket	Number			% of slave population
	Male	Female	Total	
Under 1	55,257	58,393	113,650	2.87
1 and under 5	266,899	272,617	539,516	13.65
5 and under 10	287,299	288,650	575,949	14.57
10 and under 15	276,928	264,320	541,248	13.69
15 and under 20	220,365	228,481	448,846	11.35
20 and under 30	355,018	343,023	698,041	17.66
30 and under 40	218,346	220,520	438,866	11.10
40 and under 50	140,791	139,002	279,793	7.08
50 and under 60	79,776	75,926	155,702	3.94
60 and under 70	46,219	44,124	90,343	2.28
70 and under 80	15,433	15,724	31,157	0.79
80 and under 90	4,627	5,334	9,961	0.25

TABLE 3 US slave population, 1860 (*cont.*)

Age bracket	Number			% of slave population
	Male	Female	Total	
90 and under 100	1,317	1,714	3,031	0.08
above 100	671	900	1,571	0.04
age unknown	13,679	12,407	26,086	0.66
	1,982,625	1,971,135	3,953,760	100

Derived from *Census: Population of the United States, 1860*, Recapitulation of the Tables of Population, Nativity, and Occupation, Slave Population by Age and Sex, 594–595. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1864/dec/1860a.html>

TABLE 4 Breakdown of 1860 data

Total slave population 1860	Number		% of slave population
Total slave population under 40	3,356,116		84.88
Total slave population over 40	571,558		14.46
Age unknown	26,086		0.66
	3,953,760		100.00
Slave population under 20	2,219,209		56.13
Slave population between 20–40	1,136,907		28.76
Slave population between 40–60	435,495		11.01
Slave population between 60–100+	136,063		3.44
Unknown	26,086		0.66
	3,953,760		100.00