

# Self-interest, Slavery, and the Exploitation of Elderly Slaves in the American South

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, I show how the self-serving economic worldview of enslavers—and their belief that aging was a process of inexorable physical loss—motivated them to sell or abandon enslaved people as they grew older. It seeks to diversify our understanding of the exploitative character of American slavery by moving away from considering the vast profits gained by individual slavers, the systems of control or production on large plantations, and the economic value of slavery writ large, and to instead show how self-interest led antebellum slavers of low-to-middling means to offload the aged enslaved, and their stated need to avoid the obligations associated with paternalism on account of their own reduced circumstances. Rather than focus on the economic “efficiency” of slavers, or accede to their self-image as “masters”—whether of enslaved people or of the market—I emphasize their sense of insecurity and weakness when looking to rid themselves of elderly slaves. In doing so, I undermine their claims to mastery, underline how slavery was a system of exploitation enmeshed in wider social, economic, and political concerns, and provide direct evidence of the self-interest that shaped the actions of southern enslavers and the harm this caused enslaved people.

In 1841, the proslavery northern artist Edward Williams Clay offered up an idealized vision of nineteenth-century American slavery. In this political print, and the accompanying text, Clay’s fictional enslaved/enslaver characters converse over the virtues of American slavery, and the generosity of white slavers. As the younger members of the Black community frolic in the background, an elderly man and woman—white-haired, resting and with cane in hand—thank their “master” for providing for them in sickness and in health, and for the paternalistic care they had been gifted from cradle-to-grave. The slaver responds with a performed magnanimity, explaining in front of his adoring wife and curious children that such actions were the natural impulse of a true master. It was benevolence, not crass profit-seeking, that animated these honorable slavers. These elders were “a sacred legacy,” and “while a dollar is left to me, nothing shall be spared to increase their comfort and happiness (Figure 1).”<sup>1</sup>

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**Figure 1:** Edward Williams Clay, *America*/E.W.C (A. Donnelly, no. 19 1/2 Courtland St N.Y, 1841). Consulted at: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/pgs.05677/>

Clay was not alone in this romanticized assessment of U.S. slavery. As part of the ascendant political rhetoric of paternalism, nineteenth-century American slavers and their allies frequently asserted that they—unlike those unscrupulous Yankees—were not animated by unbridled pursuit of wealth; they upheld slavery to protect their family, “black and white,” who were bound in a web of mutual obligations that worked to the betterment of society.<sup>2</sup> Charles Manigault—whose rice plantation in South Carolina had Black infant mortality rates of 90 percent—explained in his post-emancipation writings that slavery had revolved around “mutual family interests, & kind personal feelings so generally prevailing (until recently) between Masters & their slaves.”<sup>3</sup> Many of these writers specifically claimed that slavers provided protections for children, the infirm, and the elderly. George Fitzhugh, a polemical pro-slavery author, insisted that Northern “free” labor was nothing of the sort: “you work him, ‘from morn to dewy eve’ – from infancy to old age—then turn him out to starve in slavery.” In comparison, Fitzhugh claimed of Southern slavery: “the children and the aged and infirm

work not at all, and yet have all the comforts and necessities of life provided for them. They enjoy liberty, because they are oppressed neither by care nor labor.”<sup>4</sup> At the risk of stating the obvious, Fitzhugh, Manigault, and Clay’s claims, as well as their underpinning assessment of American slavery, were false.

From at least the 1960s, scholars have firmly dismantled the paternalistic arguments of American slavers and their propagandists, emphasizing instead the profit-seeking behavior of southern whites, the economic power of slavery at an individual and institutional level, and the strategic use of coercion and violence to achieve these aims.<sup>5</sup> Scholars largely now agree that the pursuit of wealth animated southern slavers, and emphasize the harm this caused enslaved people as well as their resistance to exploitation.<sup>6</sup> These arguments have, in fact, been a significant component of slavery scholarship associated with the “new” history of capitalism. Debates remain over the novelty of some of these claims, or the efficacy and accuracy of the labels used to describe slavery’s economies; there are, too, important critiques of specific arguments associated with this work, both individually and collectively. However, it is fair to say that cumulatively this research has underlined how far American slavers sought to exploit enslaved people for financial gain, and their overall effectiveness in doing so. As historian James Oakes notes, this scholarship has firmly put to bed “whatever was left of the mythical version of an Old South that resisted the money-grubbing values of the market.” Instead, “southern slave society stood out by the extremity and ruthlessness of its exploitation. It was the worst of all possible worlds.”<sup>7</sup> This article aims to shine a light on, and to underline the extent of this ruthlessness, through specific assessment of the mistreatment of enslaved elders. It seeks to establish that age is a necessary category of historical analysis, a contested identity that informed tensions between enslaver and enslaved—as well as among avaricious white slavers—and to reveal that the aging process was a dynamic factor affecting the broader mechanics of slavery.

Scholars have long addressed the racialized violence of American slavery, the gendered traumas and (re)productive pressures enslaved people faced, and shown the mistreatment of enslaved children and youth.<sup>8</sup> The aged enslaved, however, have not faced similar sustained attention, with Daina Ramey Berry explaining how “scholars have not been very interested in the financial value of the elderly because of the assumption that they did not contribute substantially to the plantation economy.”<sup>9</sup> The tide is shifting, however. Nathaniel Windon, for example, has explored the biopolitics of labor on the plantation, Corinne T. Field and Liana DeMarco have considered the ramifications of aging for Black women in slavery, and Frederick Knight has considered the experiences of aging for African Americans in slavery and freedom. In my own work, I have considered the broader significance of aging at an institutional, ideological, and experiential level for both enslaved people and their enslavers.<sup>10</sup>

I want to move away from some of the general trends in this scholarship (including my own) in this article, though, and to go beyond the typical focus on work and life *on* the plantation. I want to reveal new layers to the exploitative behaviors of antebellum white southerners, and to show how the self-serving economic worldview of enslavers—and their belief that aging was a process of inexorable physical loss—motivated them to jettison enslaved people who, as one Alabama slaver put it, were “getting old” and from “that cause, become infirm and useless.”<sup>11</sup> It seeks to diversify our understanding of the exploitative character of American slavery by moving away from considering the vast profits gained by individual slavers, the systems of control or production on plantations and farms, and the economic power of slavery writ large.<sup>12</sup> In this article, I show instead how naked self-interest led antebellum

slavers of low-to-middling means to offload the aged enslaved, and their stated *need* to avoid the obligations associated with paternalism on account of their own reduced circumstances or economic failures. Rather than focus on the economic “efficiency” of slavers, or accede to their self-image as “masters”—whether of enslaved people or of the market—I instead emphasize their sense of insecurity and weakness when looking to rid themselves of older slaves. In doing so, I undermine their claims to mastery, underline how slavery was a system of exploitation enmeshed in wider social, economic, and political concerns, and provide direct evidence of the self-interest that shaped the actions of southern enslavers and the harm this caused enslaved people.

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Historical discussions on the treatment of the aged enslaved typically indicate their strategic placement by slavers in auxiliary roles designed to facilitate the labor of “prime” hands. Berry, for example, noted how the aged might expect to serve “as cooks, nurses, midwives, seamstresses, body servants, gardeners, and caretakers of enslaved children,” including both women and men in these discussions, and I have previously argued that using elders in these positions spoke to enslavers’ utilitarian calculations around productivity and profit.<sup>13</sup> These arrangements certainly existed, as when Jacob Stroyer of South Carolina recalled how “there were three or four women who were too old to work on the plantation” who “did the cooking,” or when Lewis Clarke claimed that children were left with “some old worn-out slave women to make broth and feed them.”<sup>14</sup> Historian Stacey Close explained that slavers were likewise “able to extract the last remnants of physical and intellectual ability from old [male] slaves before their death by having them serve in leadership and supportive roles on the plantation,” including in this description “carpenters, butchers, coopers, drivers, millers, nurses, trunk minders, and watchmen.”<sup>15</sup> Elderly men were also placed in nursing and caring roles, indicating how age, gender, and race intersected with and sometimes unsettled normative labor expectations in the period. Alonzo T. Mial, an enslaver from North Carolina, was informed by his cousin George Robertson that “Old Booch” was “the captain of the Negro yard” and looked after “the little negroes.”<sup>16</sup> Isabelle Dorrah offered a less romanticized assessment of one such role on her plantation: “One old n\*\*\*er had a weak back and couldn’t work much, so he use to play marbles in de yard wid de kids most every day.”<sup>17</sup>

Slavers and their defenders insisted these arrangements served as a form of leisurely retirement, with postbellum elegist Ann Simon Deas describing how on one South Carolina plantation, “Daddy Bristol and Daddy Moon, the superannuated coachman and miller . . . [did] wonderful as well as useful things in their little amateur work-shop.”<sup>18</sup> Formerly enslaved people, however, typically framed these arrangements as a rational plan by which slavers could use the labor of the aged to maximize the productivity of the “prime” workers. Enslavers were able and willing to use Black elders in diverse forms of work; labor considerations in the round shaped such compartmentalization, with enslavers reorienting the workforce to suit their requirements and to maximize returns on their “investments.”<sup>19</sup> However, focusing on this type of auxiliary labor for the aged enslaved risks reifying the popular image of slavery existing predominantly on large plantations with the demographic diversity to facilitate these arrangements. Across the antebellum South, however, “about one-quarter of American slaves lived on holdings with less than 10 slaves; half lived on holdings with between 10 and 49; and one-quarter on large plantations with more than 50.” As Damian Alan Pargas notes, “even in the cotton regions of the Deep South, fully half of the enslaved people lived on holdings with less than 32 slaves.”<sup>20</sup> Utilizing elders in auxiliary roles made

economic sense for slavers on large plantations with a mixed demographic profile, where elders could be carers for, and cared for by, their communities. Indeed, Liana DeMarco has recently offered a nuanced assessment of how slavers calculated the “efficiency value of enslaved women” by using them in these type of roles on cotton and sugar plantations of the Deep South.<sup>21</sup>

The implications of an aging workforce for slavers on small-holdings, or where the balance between the old, the young, and the “prime” privileged the former over the latter, have, however, been less well studied.<sup>22</sup> The fixed-cost character of slavery meant that “owners strove to keep slaves busy at all times of the year,” with Caitlin Rosenthal recently emphasizing how “though the nature of work might change over the course of a day, a season, or a life, the expectation was always that labor would continue.”<sup>23</sup> Slavers who required all of their “hands” in the fields, and who were unable to employ elders in auxiliary roles to maximize the productivity of a larger workforce, were thus animated by deeply rational motives to offload those who were deemed surplus to requirements, and they openly stated their fears at what might happen to them, or their posterity, if they did not. Rather than confidently assert their success as “masters” and “mistresses” of the market, they were instead forced to reveal their weaknesses, and to have this acknowledged by their peers. This article shows how far these cold calculations, and this notion of self-interest, was openly stated—or understood as a motivating factor—by antebellum Southerners in their discussions on manumission, abandonment, and the sale of enslaved elders. It underlines, moreover, the tragic effects such self-interest had on the enslaved themselves.

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The explosion of the nineteenth-century internal slave trade, following the 1808 closure of (legal) Atlantic slave routes to the United States, is well studied; scholars estimate that approximately one million enslaved people were forcibly moved from the Upper to the Lower South, largely to live and labor in service to “King Cotton.”<sup>24</sup> We know, too, that this “soul trade” was “markedly age-selective, concentrating most heavily on those about fifteen to twenty-five years of age.”<sup>25</sup> Stacey Close noted that “while the selling of old slaves did occur, it was extremely difficult for owners to do so because of the poor marketability of old men.”<sup>26</sup> More recently, Daina Ramey Berry and Jenifer Barclay respectively argued that enslaved people over the age of forty “understood, that by aging, their monetary values declined to the point that they could not be sold” and that “unsound” enslaved people “were less likely to experience sale.”<sup>27</sup> And yet, while making up a small proportion of the total traded in the antebellum years, enslaved elders clearly *could* still be sold and were subject to the horrors of the auction block. Sustained attention to the treatment and experiences of older slaves can help to underline the calculating character of American slavers, and the economic cynicism that shaped the system itself. Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth-Fox Genovese argued in 2011 that “economic exigency” was recognized as a legitimate factor in justifying slave sales and separations, while insisting it remained compatible with notions of paternalism. As part of this, they echoed (if perhaps inadvertently) expectations of protections for the elderly, and further reified the notion of slavery as being exemplified by large plantation-scale holdings. As they noted of slavers who sought to reconcile theory with practice: “it seemed more humane to sell a *young slave or two* rather than risk foreclosure and the breakup of the plantation household.”<sup>28</sup> In exposing slavers’ efforts to abandon elders through forms of cynical manumission and sale, however, I underscore the exploitative nature of American slavery from cradle-to-grave, emphasize the self-interest that drove

antebellum slavers, and firmly reiterate how slavery was, in the words of ex-slave James Watkins, “a robbery, torture, degradation, misery mental and physical, dealt out by the moment, the live long day, the whole period of existence.”<sup>29</sup>

Berry’s work on the life-course and values of enslaved people suggests that enslaved people were typically viewed as “old” from forty, with declining financial values from their mid-thirties onwards reflecting their lower capacities for labor, presumed or real.<sup>30</sup> However, I do not focus on (nor seek to quantify) the numerical age at which enslaved people were sold or manumitted. As part of my broader interests in considering “old age” as a social and cultural identity, rather than a fixed chronological category, I instead show how labels and epithets associated with aging were used subjectively to delineate functional abilities, to organize labor and enslaved life, and ultimately to justify efforts to get rid of presumed useless, or soon-to-be useless, “property.” Indeed, it was commonly stated that slavery’s violence unmoored the aging process from a strict chronology. Northern traveler Frederick Law Olmsted was shocked at meeting an enslaved man he considered to be “an old servant,” who thought he was about forty but Olmsted believed “had every appearance of being seventy.”<sup>31</sup> William Green explained to the readers of his fugitive narrative how such depreciation might occur. According to Green, local enslaver Harry Holliday earned the nickname of “the Great Labor Saving Man” because he “always over-worked his people.” The result of this was that “his young men of eighteen and twenty years looked to be thirty and thirty-five years old.”<sup>32</sup>

Antebellum slavers were flexible in their usage of age-related epithets, but they were consistent in framing the aging of enslaved people as something that would inevitably impact upon their bottom line. They understood, and openly voiced, their concerns at the damaging effects the aging of enslaved people had for their prospects in slaveholding society. As Eliza Gibbons explained to the Alachua County Probate Court, Florida, as administratrix to the estate of Moncrief Burton it was vital that she sold three enslaved people left in the estate because their age, both young and old, marked them out as comparatively useless. There was no sense of long-term planning or being able to employ the old or young elsewhere, with a clear emphasis on short-term “need” instead. As Gibbons explained, “the said negroes are of but little use to said minors *at this time* [italics mine],” and it was considered particularly important to sell the “two of them [who] are quite advanced in age.” Gibbons understood the inexorable logic of aging, and was granted permission to sell John, aged ten, and Thursday and Myrah, aged fifty-five and thirty-five respectively. Despite a chronological distance of twenty years, both Thursday and Myrah’s lives were upended by their shared designation as being “advanced in age.”<sup>33</sup> With this flexibility and sense of perception in mind, I emphasize how far subjective, as much as chronological, assessments, of age-related decline affected the dynamics of manumission and sale. I show how and when enslavers used (and sometimes fought over) discursive labels such as old or elderly when attempting to rid themselves of the aged enslaved. By exploring the manumission and sale of people whom enslavers deemed too old to productively exploit, I reveal the openly stated financial logic that underpinned American slavers’ behaviors and attitudes, and underline that fears of loss—both economic and social—animated slavers’ worst impulses. In so doing, I show how far the antebellum discourse surrounding aging framed it as a process of inexorable physical decline, and underscore how far slavers valued their “property” only insofar as they could profit them.

Manumission, most simply understood as “the freeing of a slave from bondage,” is a complex process.<sup>34</sup> A surface-level observation suggests that efforts to free enslaved people provide evidence of antislavery impulses, but cross-cultural slavery studies have also shown how manumission served as a way for slavers to exert mastery at a personal and political level.<sup>35</sup> Manumission could also simply serve more cynical purposes, with the “gift” of freedom providing slavers a route by which they might rid themselves of people they deemed undesirable, whether on account of sickness, weakness, or old age. Scholars of global slavery have long noted this practice. William D. Phillips notes that in early modern Iberia, some slavers “manumitted aged or disabled slaves to starve in the streets or be maintained by the state,” while Kyle Harper states that in the late Roman world, “many slaves . . . were manumitted in their old age, after decades of expropriated labor had left them tired, spent, or frail.”<sup>36</sup>

The overt promotion of such practices by slavers of antiquity like Marcus Cato, who argued in his second-century BCE agricultural manual that masters should “sell worn-out oxen, blemished cattle, blemished sheep, wool, hides, an old wagon, old tools, an old slave, a sickly slave, and whatever else is superfluous,” was challenged by some observers, and debates over the comparative frequency of age-related manumissions in slave societies remain significant.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, even these rebukes (and historiographical debates) underscore the clear rationale for such actions; contemporaries, later observers, and historians largely agree the practice of manumitting elders, the infirm, and the unwanted, occurred in slave regimes cross-culturally and transhistorically. Plutarch, for example, regarded Cato’s “treatment of his slaves like beasts of burden, using them to the uttermost, and then, when they were old, driving them off and selling them, as the mark of a very mean nature,” but he did not deny the practice took place.<sup>38</sup>

Claims that manumission of the aged and useless was ubiquitous in slave societies elsewhere, in fact, were held up by some American contemporaries to extoll the virtues of their own “Peculiar Institution.” David Brown, a Northern proslavery advocate, explained to his readers in the 1850s that “for a long time, it was a practice common in Rome, to expose sick, helpless, decrepid, and aged slaves, on an island in the Tiber, in order to save their maintenance.” Brown insisted that no-one could say that same of Southerners: “But does, therefore, any one suppose that in the South there is any such practice?”<sup>39</sup> Ex-slaves, Black activists, and white abolitionists, however, *supposed* otherwise and highlighted the cynical routes to freedom slavers offered to those they deemed unproductive. In Maryland, 1819, Rachel, an elderly Black woman, insisted that abandonment on account of age did not require the Tiber’s banks. Rachel sought protection from the courts in requesting the appropriation of funds from the heirs of Daniel Dulany, who had enslaved her, and upon whose death she was left “at the advanced age of sixty years without any means of support.” Dulany’s heirs had, in fact, simply “departed from the United States for England without making any provision for her.” Rachel stressed to the courts her efforts to remain free from the charge of dependency, insisting that “she has endeavoured by her industry to earn an honest livelihood,” but time’s pressure hindered these efforts. As Rachel explained, she “has now become so old and feeble that she is unable any longer to labour and is entirely destitute and helpless and a burden to those around her.”<sup>40</sup> In Rachel’s case, as with others to be discussed in this article, it is hard not to find fault with Brown’s positive comparison of ante-bellum slavers to those of antiquity.

Legislation was passed in colonial North America, and the later United States, intending to stop cynical forms of abandonment for the aged enslaved. Sometimes this was bound up

in wider efforts to restrict manumission, particularly during the antebellum period, when promotion of such practice could be seen as undermining the institution from within by tacitly accepting that enslaved people wished to be free. There were often regional distinctions here, with historian Loren Schweninger demonstrating that where “most Lower South states severely restricted the freeing of slaves in wills and deeds,” requiring legislative approval or banning the practice entirely, “laws governing emancipations were more lenient” in the Upper South and Louisiana. Claims of meritorious service or exceptional cause were rife in manumission documents, but for portions of the antebellum period, slavers in the Upper South (and Louisiana) could grant freedom through wills, deeds, sale, and more. Despite more restrictions existing in the Lower South, slavers here could, and did, request legislative support for manumission, and records show that the practice occurred. Where and when manumission was permitted, however, there were usually additional stipulations. This often meant providing “security bonds with warranties that the emancipated slaves were not infirm, aged, mentally deficient, or unable to earn a livelihood.” The explicit concern with age reflects wider presumptions that aging entailed dependency, but, as per previous discussion, there was a degree of ambiguity as to when “old” age began. Schweninger notes that “the states had different definitions of old age, which ranged from thirty-five to fifty-five years,” and these malleable categories support Berry’s contention as to the early onset of old age in bondage, and of the fluidity to notions of aging itself.<sup>41</sup>

Flexibility in chronology, however, did not extend to the negative meanings associated with the aging process. The justifications for these restrictions underscore contemporary views that advancing age came with physical depreciation and a transition towards dependency. Anna, who petitioned for freedom in Maryland, 1817, explained (while rejecting the idea it related to her), that these restrictions were designed “to prevent persons held in slavery from being turned loose upon the community when they become superannuated.”<sup>42</sup> Alongside seeking to ensure the white community was not left to provide for presumed dependents, many of these laws framed manumitting older slaves as a form of abandonment, referred to slavery’s paternalistic promises, and claimed to punish those who did not provide adequate support for the “aged or infirm” enslaved.<sup>43</sup> The very frequency of these laws, however, speaks to a broader concern that slavers might otherwise seek to avoid responsibility for the individual and collective harms they caused.

Despite legal restrictions, ex-slaves insisted that enslavers found ways to absolve themselves of costs and obligations by manumitting those who, as one antislavery poet recorded, “in servile toil, had spent their prime.”<sup>44</sup> If slavers were not permitted (or inclined) to legally manumit elders, they might simply skirt the law by, to all intents and purposes, abandoning them. Alongside references to legal manumission, legislation frequently threatened punishment for slavers who allowed indigent enslaved people to go about “at large,” speaking to the prevalence of diverse forms of “freedom” in custom if not law.<sup>45</sup> Whether legal or otherwise, some Black elders were thus deliberately cast adrift. While specifically referring to the limitations of emancipation at the end of the U.S. Civil War, Peter Randolph’s description of “Uncle Phil’s” experiences of freedom reflect similar occurrences in slavery. Randolph took aim at the injustice of emancipation absent any compensation for a lifetime of stolen labor:

And now, like a horse that has been worked nearly to death for all that he is worth, until he becomes old, crippled and poor, this poor old man is turned loose without corn or fodder, on the cold charities of the world. Who are to blame for his destitute condition, himself, his parents, or those who have driven him until they could drive him no longer?



As Randolph explained, manumission granted thusly avoided any reflection on the lingering violence of slavery and the overt restrictions placed on Black people in freedom. Randolph insisted this was a national, not sectional, failing, and required reflection as such: “As the whole country aided in the oppression, the whole country is partly responsible for their present condition.”<sup>46</sup>

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Randolph referred to the postbellum years, but cynical acts of manumission in advanced age could have tragic effects and make a mockery of freedom’s “gift.” In 1832, a free Black man from Delaware petitioned for divorce from his “insane wife” to protect him from financial ruin. Little else can be gleaned from the petition, and we might plausibly see this also as a self-interested (and ultimately tragic) case of abandonment of a Black woman on the part of the petitioner. Nonetheless, Francis Ludenum, “at the advanced age of near sixty years old” insisted that this dire situation had arisen on account of the lingering violence of slavery, and the callous nature of freedom granted, as opposed to any personal or moral failings. Ludenum had been enslaved “until he was near forty years old,” and was set free with nothing to his name. This was critical, as he informed the courts he had been “deprived of all opportunity to accumulate any property whatsoever for advanced age, which renders it doubly hard that your petitioner should have to labour, far advanced as he is in life for the maintenance of so large a family, one of whom is an insane wife.”<sup>47</sup> Ludenum clearly desired freedom, but he understood his manumission, and the lack of compensation after slavers took his best years, to be a cynical demonstration of slavers’ abilities and desire to rid themselves of financial responsibilities as soon as they could.<sup>48</sup>

Sometimes the limited protections for the aged in slavery meant that freedom promised remained a mirage, or was wrought through with sadness. In 1848, Jane Dougherty, a free woman of color, petitioned to be allowed to remain in Tennessee despite state legislation requiring free Black people to leave.<sup>49</sup> Dougherty, who had been manumitted only two years previously, based her appeal on the grounds of supporting her elderly mother, who remained enslaved. Dougherty explained how “her Mother who is very old and very much afflicted is a slave for life belonging to the estate of Wyatt Christian Dec,” but revealed to the court that the beneficiaries of the estate were “scattered” and unwilling to provide any help themselves.<sup>50</sup> Proslavery writers insisted that the reciprocity inherent to paternalism gave enslaved people “the right of protection, the right of counsel and guidance, the right of subsistence, the right of care and attention in sickness and old age.”<sup>51</sup> Whatever slavers said in print and in public, Dougherty knew that she was her mother’s “principle stay & protector” and that “if she were compelled to leave the state . . . she fears her aged & afflicted mother would not receive that attention which her utter helplessness requires.” The court granted Dougherty’s request, and the white slaving community was likely spared the burden of supporting this “utterly helpless” woman.<sup>52</sup>

Beyond familial support, some unwanted elders received their freedom on account of, or were protected by, free Black communities and abolitionist networks.<sup>53</sup> They insisted, however, that this came after the individual and systemic abuse of slavers who acceded to these requests only once they determined age had rendered people useless as property. Louisa Picquet offered her gratitude to the collective contributors who purchased her mother, for the sum of \$900, while railing against the callous profiteering that structured this manumission: “So the poor old mother is free at last! and the miserable wretch who bought her twenty years ago for perhaps \$600, and has had her labor for twenty long years, now receives

his \$900 for her old and calloused flesh and bones.”<sup>54</sup> In his abolitionist volume celebrating the achievements of Black people in the Americas, H. G. Adams detailed how “poor Solomon” had “completed a century of suffering and sorrow” before his enslaver determined no more could be wrought from the lash. He “then brought him from Virginia to Ohio, and left him on the banks of the river.” Despite his “years and infirmities,” Solomon prospered as a free man in Cincinnati. This, however, aroused the avarice of his former enslaver: “finding [Solomon] had still a few dollars worth of labour left in him, [he] sent his brother-in-law to bring him back.” Solomon was saved “by the benevolence of one of his own race,” who organized a whip-round the wider Black community and used this collection to secure Solomon’s freedom and to provide him with “a comfortable home in his declining years.”<sup>55</sup>

Elements of Solomon’s story may ring as apocryphal given the extremities of age, but the institutionalization of support networks speaks to the wider realities of elder abandonment and slavers’ cynical instrumentalization of manumission. Abigail Mott included in her “interesting anecdotes of persons of color” from New York the tale of Zilpha Montjoy, who “was industrious and frugal” but struggled in freedom nonetheless. This was, Mott acknowledged, due to the deliberate circumstances of “being liberated late in life, [so] she barely procured a subsistence; and for the last two or three years, being nearly past labour, was dependent on the benevolence of others.”<sup>56</sup> Moving further South, Sarah Grimke served as visiting commissioner for the Ladies’ Benevolent Society in Charleston, S.C, and she reported how they “were applied to for the relief of several sick and aged colored persons.” Grimke explained that “on inquiry, we found that *nearly all* the colored persons who had solicited aid, were *slaves*.” This was necessary, according to Grimke, because those who were “no longer able to work for their ‘owners,’ were thus inhumanly cast out in their sickness and old age.” According to Grimke, these elders—free in principle if not in law—“must have perished, but for the kindness of their friends.”<sup>57</sup>

In some instances, local whites might step in for absent “masters,” but they maintained a keen interest in protecting their own finances. In 1859, John H. Hood of Lancaster District, South Carolina, requested support from the House of Representatives to cover expenses incurred in relation to a blind seventy-year old enslaved man named Burrell. Marcus Tuttle, the man’s previous enslaver, had determined to make his fortunes elsewhere, and calculated the aged man, in particular, as an encumbrance to this aim. Tuttle “ran off from this State, and on his way, set down said Slave on the public Road, in the Neighbourhood he had left, and abandoned him to his fate.” Burrell was left wandering before receiving support from Hood, who sought (and received) compensation for the support he had offered to the “nearly totally blind,” “helpless,” and “destitute” man who had been abandoned by his “master.”<sup>58</sup> In Upson County, Georgia, 1854, D. Kendall sought to ensure he was not personally liable to provide long-term support to an elderly woman known as Granny Judy. Although Kendall’s family had never enslaved her, Judy had been allowed “to occupy a house [on the property] at a time when she was able to maintain herself.” As she grew older, however, she was now a charge on the estate: “in consequence of loss of sight to a great degree, and being disabled by repeated attacks of rheumatism, she is now utterly incapable of doing any thing by which she can support herself.” Neither Hood nor Kendall had personally enslaved these elders, and the paternalistic bargain was in theory not theirs to uphold. As Kendall insisted, “I am under no more obligation from any past services or other considerations than any one else.”<sup>59</sup> Their testimony nonetheless reveals how formerly enslaved people—denied any heritable wealth, land, or riches from their lifetime of labor—could find the promises of proslavery paternalists sorely lacking in old age, and how forms of

freedom—both legal and otherwise—offered a route for self-interested slavers to rid themselves of people they deemed no longer exploitable.

Notwithstanding the powerful political economy of paternalism, Black activists and their allies insisted slavers who granted freedom to elders often did so as a deliberately abusive and deeply cynical process shaped by financial considerations. Angelika Grimke Weld, for example, recorded how freedom came to an aged slave in Charleston. The man “was too old to work . . . and he was turned out to make his living by begging.”<sup>60</sup> Charles Brown equally explained how his grandmother had, in fact, been kidnapped as a free woman and forced into slavery. Prolonged protests, statements of support from local whites, and personal resistance did not see her enslaver accept her free status. Old age, however, did: “She got free herself, as I have heard, but ‘t was when she got too old to do any more work.”<sup>61</sup> Ex-slaves and abolitionist allies insisted that enslavers’ claims of paternalism were paper-thin and easily torn when set against economic self-interest, emphasizing here the cynical role manumission might play in resolving these tensions.

Ex-slaves, Black activists, and abolitionists did not discount the idea that freedom in advanced age could be positive, and nor do I. James Watkins, for example, explained that his mother was set free aged seventy and noted how, “Old as she was it gave her no small pleasure to be able to call her body and soul her own.” Watkins, too, was “exceedingly glad” to hear “that she was no longer a chattel but a free woman.” However, these authors consistently argued that it was self-interest that motivated slavers to manumit elders “with their best days behind them.”<sup>62</sup> As Watkins noted in his caveat to the story above: “my mother was *nominally* liberated when seventy years of age, and helpless and infirm, and had to maintain herself with an allowance only of a peck of corn a week.”<sup>63</sup> Black Americans thus insisted that antebellum Southerners understood—and made calculations around—the financial dimensions of the aging process. One antislavery preacher who toured the South recorded, in verse, his encounter with an elderly man who had purchased freedom for him and his wife, “after the vigor of youth had passed from him, and labor had bent him low.” The man understood the temporal logic, and the cyclical violence of slavery, that shaped his slaver’s “gift” of freedom:

I paid for myself, I have paid for my wife—  
But our sands are nearly run—  
And the freedom I’ve bought at the end of life  
Would have come with my setting sun.”

He smote his breast with his eyes on high,  
In a voice of subdued tones  
Said—“Master has all my strength, and I  
Have nothing but these old bones.

“Time adds a weight to each month that rolls;  
We soon shall rest in our graves;  
We trust in Christ to receive our souls—  
BUT WE LEAVE OUR CHILDREN SLAVES!”<sup>64</sup>

These episodes of manumission and abandonment show the broader systemic violence practiced on those who had faced the pressure of time’s weight. Slavers believed the aging

process of enslaved people negatively affected their bottom line and, as this unnamed poet underlined, knew it was in their best interests to absolve themselves of legacy costs. Notwithstanding the strident claims of proslavery polemicists, southern whites clearly understood and accepted the cold, hard logic that shaped such actions over the promises of paternalism.

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Abandonment of enslaved elders was theoretically illegal, but enslavers had alternative ways to rid themselves of costs and obligations towards those they deemed unproductive, or whom they were unable to redeploy in auxiliary roles on account of either financial pressures or demographic factors. Although the internal slave trade of the antebellum decades was concentrated “most heavily on those of about fifteen to twenty-five years of age,” older (and younger) slaves were not safe from the auction block, and there were few overt restrictions in place to protect the aged.<sup>65</sup> Proslavery authors like Henry Deedes recorded in his paean to the antebellum order that “no one thought of parting with a good old servant,” but enslaved people knew all too well that this was a lie.<sup>66</sup> As Frederick Douglass explained of the sale process, “Silvery-headed age and sprightly youth, maids and matrons, had to undergo the same indelicate inspection. At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder.”<sup>67</sup>

Some elders who believed themselves free, in fact, had their status cast into doubt when needy slavers thought there remained value from their bodies. In 1838, Dicey informed the Jefferson County Chancery Court, Kentucky, that she was “old not able to do hard labor,” and that she had purchased her freedom from Michael McMann for \$120. The deed of manumission was not recorded, however, and eventually McMann determined money mattered more than promises made. McMann had Dicey “taken into custody by an auctioneer and set up for sale with the fraudulent view of reducing her again to slavery.” This progressed so far “that [Dicey] was actually cryed off.”<sup>68</sup> The sale did not progress due to the public nature of the dispute, but the court’s protection came only after Dicey had suffered the horrors of the auction block. Not all were even this fortunate. Twenty years earlier, in the same state and county, Ralph, “an old man of color,” claimed that he and his family had been manumitted by Thomas Hogan after they “had served him faithfully for many years and borne with humble submission the galling yoke of Slavery.” After Hogan’s death, however, his administrator Thomas Jones set the family up for sale. Ralph was all too aware of the pecuniary self-interest that motivated antebellum slavers, insisting that Jones was “moved and seduced by the mammon of avarice and unrighteousness.”<sup>69</sup> In Christian County, Kentucky, 1852, a similar case played out when Fan fought to make good her claims to having been manumitted. Aged fifty-nine, Fan risked reenslavement and sale by Rachael Pennington, who argued her late husband did not legally execute the manumission and that it was thus null and void. Rachael played upon her own advanced age, noting she was “old and in indigent circumstances [sic],” when seeking to justify the sale.<sup>70</sup> Time’s pressures came for all, but they were not shared equally. In both instances, the Kentucky courts dismissed the Black elders’ pleas for protection.

These slavers believed they might make some money yet off of the aged enslaved, and some explicitly noted the time-sensitive nature of this market activity as well as their own pressing need on account of reduced circumstances. Despite the powerful political economy of paternalism, slavers openly justified their decision to sell older slaves through a temporal language that identified aging as a process of inexorable decline, and their need to avoid

losses accordingly. This decline was, indeed, terminal. In Lowndes County, Mississippi, Abram S. Humphries noted the need to sell enslaved people to protect his guardian's estate because of "the risk of death as to the diseased negroes and said old negro Jack." With some half of the enslaved people he received from the estate listed as either elderly or children, Humphries believed it was impossible to balance labor requirements in the ways suggested earlier, or to hire the group out profitably. Indeed, the demographic imbalance was such that any income gained would hardly let them "support and maintain themselves, much less contribute anything to the support, maintenance and Education of said Ward."<sup>71</sup> They could, however, be sold, and Humphries was granted permission to do so. M. C. Stokes, administrator of the estate of Isaac Amason in Montgomery, Alabama, successfully petitioned the courts to sanction the sale of two aged enslaved people, equally leaning on the discourse of aging as a process of inexorable decline and having emphasized the difficulties of securing alternative forms of profit from a small number of slaves. Stokes convinced the court of the necessity of this action because "the said negroes is getting old, and therefore will from that cause, become infirm and useless to said children of the said deceased." The need to rid the estate of the aged enslaved was time-sensitive, moreover, on account of the debt Amason had left behind, and these two people were "all the property" belonging to the estate.<sup>72</sup> The framing of depreciation by age as self-evident (and unstoppable) reiterates just how significant the aging process was to slavers as they sought to extract value from the bodies and mind of the enslaved.

Concerns over age were also shaped by the combined (re)productive exploitation of slavery, where women faced a different sort of violence once considered past childbearing.<sup>73</sup> Alex Lacy, enslaved in Texas, specifically recalled how "Master George didn't have no old wimmen on his place cause he got shed of them just like old mules," and the gendered specificity and concern with childbearing was matched in slaver records.<sup>74</sup> When Henry Davis explained the necessity of selling Caroline, who had become "sickly and infirm," he advised that it would be "advantageous for the purposes of said Trust that the said negro Should be Sold and another and more healthy wench purchased and substituted in her Stead."<sup>75</sup> The sexualized language of replacing the infirm with a "healthy wench" spoke to the cyclical nature of reproductive exploitation and visions of the aging process as one that entailed rising, and falling, "value."<sup>76</sup> Enslaved people were all too aware of the intersections of age, sex, and gender in shaping perceptions of usefulness, and used such episodes as evidence of the avaricious nature of antebellum slavers. Susannah Wyman told her seemingly disbelieving Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviewer, "But people did sell women, old like I am now, or say they didun' have no chillun—the fus' speculator come along and wants to buy, he kin have you."<sup>77</sup>

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Contemporaries understood, and openly stated, the self-interest that motivated sellers in getting rid of the aged enslaved. Prospective buyers, however, were often equally desirous to avoid purchasing the aged, both men and women. Thomas Cole, enslaved in Alabama, noted that while all were at risk from the auction block, "babies and ole folks did not bring much." As Cole put it, "ole folks couldn't do much besides dey was liable to die any time. Dey was mostly considered worthless property after dey gits feeble."<sup>78</sup> Advanced age might limit sale options, but it did not stop it from occurring. Some contemporaries recorded, in fact, how traders and slavers used deceit to profit from not only the aged enslaved, but also from their less scrupulous white peers. One antebellum writer recorded a disputed sale where, having

been listed as 32 and set on the auction block, Ponto insisted to all and sundry that he was “rising 40,” and had a number of infirmities. The auctioneer moved swiftly on, and sought to cast doubt on the claims while insisting as to his mastery of the situation: “this fellow does not want to be sold . . . [but] I shall find a master for him.”<sup>79</sup> Slavers craved the respect and honor of their peers, with elaborate codes of behavior (and the ever-present threat of violence) shaping interactions between white Southern men, in particular, but they also sought to dominate others. This could include nefarious behavior between supposed equals, but who in fact equally sought mastery of the market and one another. As John Mayfield has noted in his study on southern honor, success here entailed “shrewdness over fearlessness, cleverness over generosity . . . and the occasional need to be downright deceptive rather than transparent.”<sup>80</sup> Competing interests in the market could see “honor” fall by the wayside, as slavers grubbily tricked and fought one another to protect themselves from having to provide for Black elders.

Deceit and fraud were common concerns for those seeking to make a bargain from the “soul trade,” with buyers often seeking assurances over behavior and attitude, but also health and “soundness.” They frequently connected the latter two with age, which might lead to cynical dealings in the market. Former overseer-turned-abolitionist John Roles addressed the deliberate lies of those hoping to offload the elderly:

Their faces are greased with tallow, to hide the ashy appearance of age and sickness, and not unfrequently, as it is said, their gray hairs are dyed black to deceive the purchaser. The trader has given them all a new age; some must tell the purchaser that they are five years younger than they really are; others will likely stand ten years below their real age. They are also instructed as to what they shall answer the purchaser when he questions them about their former health.<sup>81</sup>

Prospective purchasers knew this deception might occur. Rather than trust their fellow slavers, they sought to exert mastery over one another, and more distressingly over the enslaved, through callous and crude physical inspections.<sup>82</sup> Contemporaries were certain, however, that unscrupulous slavers lied in order to eke out the most profit from older people; physical inspection—while callous and cruel—was far from certain. In one postbellum memoir, the editor explained that Pharoah Jackson Chesney’s final sale saw him “represented” as being “fifty years of age,” but that “he was undoubtedly sixty or more.”<sup>83</sup> The language of representation speaks to the games traders and slavers played daily with enslaved peoples’ lives. Indeed, the competitive avariciousness of white southerners was on full display in the internal slave trade; antebellum whites seeking to protect their interests were willing to destroy another’s in order to do so, and the aged enslaved could serve as a pawn in the game. In Scott County, Kentucky, 1852, Mordacai Offutt was forced to humiliatingly request the court’s support in rescinding a trade of enslaved people to John Emison. Offutt was forced to disclose that he was “by nature of feeble mind and disposed to believe every thing said to him,” with this condition inspiring the avarice of Emison, “a neighbour of his [who] had his unbounded confidence.” This involved setting a trade of Joseph, “a likely negro boy,” for George and Clarissa. Offutt noted that Emison orchestrated the fraudulent swap by claiming that “George was a good hand and about fifty years old and that the said woman was forty odd years old, when in truth the defendant knew that George was over sixty and Clarissa over fifty years old.” The cold hard logic of antebellum slavery—and the assumption that advanced age equated with reduced value—shaped Offutt’s concerns with rescinding the

swap. As he explained to the courts, who agreed to his request: “the vigour and activity of both [was] so much impaired by age as to render them of little value.”<sup>84</sup>

Buyers had recourse to the law if they could prove fraudulent dealings. The doctrine of *caveat emptor* (buyer beware), however, left some enslavers out of pocket.<sup>85</sup> Whether successful in regaining money or not, disputed sales underline how far southern whites hoped to make money through a final exploitation of elders deemed no longer productive, or to simply prevent taking care of the aged enslaved themselves. One North Carolina slaver complained about mis-selling on account of age and sought due recompense. Having been provided with “a verbal representation that the slave was 26 years of age,” he was distressed to find the man “was in fact 34 or 35 years old at the date of the sale.”<sup>86</sup> This, the purchaser determined, was too old for his liking. In *Westmoreland v. Walker*, 1854, the Mississippi High Courts of Errors and Appeals similarly heard the complaints of an enslaver that they had been tricked into buying a man listed as twenty-seven, and “warranted sound.” Upon closer examination, however, “the proof” revealed the man was “unsound, and nearly forty years of age or upward.”<sup>87</sup> This set off a ferocious battle over who should be left with this unsound (and unnamed) elder. Concerns over the cost and health (insofar as their ability to work) of enslaved people on account of their age reveals how far slaver self-interest shaped interactions with enslaved people, but also on occasion with their supposed peers.

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Slavers rarely sought out elderly slaves, and cases of fraud and deceit on account of age could lead to ferocious legal battles. Despite making up a small proportion of the overall trade, however, elders risked sale across the south and advanced age did not promise protection from the horrors of the auction block.<sup>88</sup> In his fugitive narrative, William Craft offered a personal memory of his own family separation, and the loss of his aged parents to this trade in human flesh: “My old master had the reputation of being a very humane and Christian man, but he thought nothing of selling my poor old father, and dear aged mother, at separate times, to different persons, to be dragged off never to behold each other again.” He insisted, moreover, that pecuniary interest outweighed paternalists’ promises: “The reason he assigned for disposing of my parents, as well as of several other aged slaves, was, that ‘they were getting old, and would soon become valueless in the market, and therefore he intended to sell off all the old stock, and buy in a young lot.’”<sup>89</sup> The cyclical horrors of slavery are laid bare in such calculations, as, too, is the sense of the wider antebellum discourse addressing time’s relentless physical pressures.

While much recent scholarship emphasizes the confidence and self-regard of antebellum whites when discussing the economic dimensions to slavery, we have to consider how financial loss—both feared and actual—was used to self-pityingly justify the exploitation of those deemed unproductive. When enslavers had to balance their books against the promises of paternalism, financial concerns largely won out. As one Georgian enslaver noted when justifying having “Sent off two men one woman & 2 children for sale,” he had been *forced* to do so because “my negroes have worked so badly of late I could not support them.”<sup>90</sup> One abolitionist author described the tragic separation of Peter, “a poor negro man, aged and worn, with a head white as cotton,” from his wife and children, on account of a slaver’s economic failings. Peter was told he was to be hired out, and believed this to be “bekase Masser has bin hard run fur money,” but he underestimated the scale of the losses. He was instead sold “down do ribber” and permanently separated from his family.<sup>91</sup> While accepting the political valence of such claims in abolitionist literature, slavers openly stated their concerns over the

daily depreciation of the aged, and their need to avoid these costs before it was too late. In 1826, Thomas Lawrence of Maryland petitioned the Orphans Court to sanction the sale of eight enslaved people left in Thomas and Priscilla McConnell's estate, insisting in his role as guardian that "it would be to the interest and advantage of his Wards that the said slaves should be sold." One of the reasons offered to the court was that "several of them are now aged and *daily* becoming more infirm." A relatively small estate made distribution among—or direct exploitation by—the six heirs difficult, and this was worsened by the fact that several of those listed were deemed unproductive on account of age, and were worsening on a daily basis. A sale was cynically understood as the best route for the heirs to protect their interest, and Lawrence emphasized the need for speed. Time's sands were running out: "in case of the decease of any of them it would be an entire loss to his Wards, whereas if they were sold, a certain sum would be realized by, and permanently secured to, his Wards."<sup>92</sup>

Sale records reveal how little faith enslaved people could put in the promise of proslavery propagandists "that the aged slave, when past labor, is often as comfortable as if independently rich and free."<sup>93</sup> They underline the brutal reality that outside of large plantations and farms, the economic imperative for slavers lay less in using Black elders in auxiliary roles than in offloading them elsewhere. In 1848, James DeLoach explained to the Pickens County Circuit Court, Alabama, that he needed to sell "certain negro slaves" because they could not be equitably divided between their multiple "owners." Indeed, "there are five shares and only two negroes." DeLoach insisted, moreover, that the clock was ticking: "said slaves are now in the decline of life and would Command a better price at this time than at any Subsequent period."<sup>94</sup> DeLoach's self-interested assertion as to the need to rid himself of the burden of holding a few elderly slaves, but also the inexorable decline associated with aging, was accepted by the courts who granted his request. When Georgia slaver Susan Dillard, guardian of Perry Dillard's children, sought permission to sell one slave belonging to the children "at private sale and invest the proceeds in repairing their other property or reinvest it in some other property that will be of more interest to said children," she insisted as to the necessity of doing so quickly on account of their own circumstances but also because of the "Boy named Bob['s]" advanced age. This "boy" was sixty-eight and "his age will cause him to depreciate annually." Time's crushing pressure necessitated the Dillards absolve themselves of the costs of supporting a man after a lifetime of forced labor, and they emphasized the urgency. Dillard noted that there was "an opportunity of selling said Boy at private sale now for one hundred dollars and that it is more than she could realize at any future time," and her wishes were granted.<sup>95</sup> The actions of enslavers like DeLoach and Dillard exemplify the economic imperatives of American slavery and reveal further how slavers' self-interest and avarice determined the material conditions of life for enslaved people. Where much recent scholarship on this type of exploitation has focused on the vast gains American slavers made, and the wider economic power of slavery as an institution, this article has shown how economic failings, as well as the complex dynamics of slaving at a small-scale, was framed by southern whites as a reason to rid themselves of Black elders, and that this logic could be accepted and condoned by their peers. In showing this, it has emphasized again the cruelty of slavery, and the violence it wreaked on enslaved people.

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This article has shown how American slavers deliberately sought to prevent themselves becoming burdened by "the old and infirm slave," or from providing the "kind superintending care" proslavery propagandists promised the elderly.<sup>96</sup> It has underlined how far slavers



openly stated the impossibility and undesirability of utilizing elders in auxiliary roles so long associated with the aged enslaved, often making reference to their own limited capacity or financial security; their naked expressions of self-interest, and understandings of the logic to forms of abandonment and sale underline the cynicism and cruelty of southern slavers, the wider financial calculations that shaped their actions, and the extent to which age factored into their measurements on productivity and potential. American slavers wanted to profit from enslaved peoples' labors; they believed the temporal rhythms of the life-cycle affected the physical capacity of enslaved people, and accordingly looked to obviate their obligations when managing their coerced workforce. Historians have long focused on the significance of race, gender, and class, in shaping the lives of enslavers and enslaved people, and the institutional forces of slavery itself. This article, however, underlines and insists as to the necessity of seeing age—both chronological but also subjective—as a vital factor which shaped the dynamics of slavery, the actions, identities, and experiences of enslavers and enslaved people.

The language of utility in justifying these sales highlights the disregard of enslavers towards those whom they enslaved, and the wider willingness of white southerners to accept brutally functionalist assessments of the value of Black peoples' lives. In 1833, S. J. McMorris sought permission from the Richland County Court to leave the state of South Carolina with his daughter, Martha, for whom he served as guardian. Having received six enslaved people from Martha's maternal grandfather, McMorris had been able to secure the necessary capital to move by hiring out three of them, but also selling those who did not fit his purpose. This included Rhoda, whose sale was explicitly justified "on account of her extreme age and consequent expense" to his ward. McMorris's plans were successful, and he now had hopes of "employ[ing] the capital which he has under his management for her, more to [Martha's] profit and benefit." McMorris spoke eloquently of his desire to move to a country "where all departments of business are more active and flourishing," and passionately insisted that he "would not propose any measure disadvantageous to" his daughter.<sup>97</sup> It is impossible to forget, however, that this capital—and Martha's "advantages"—came after deliberately offloading someone whose life was lost to slavery. As Peter Randolph insisted in his fugitive narrative: "Slaveholders carry the price of blood upon their backs and in their pockets; the very bread they eat is the price of blood; the houses they live in are bought with blood; all the education they have is paid for by the blood and sorrows of the poor slaves."<sup>98</sup>

In Henrico County, Virginia, 1862, the County Court heard the request of three enslavers, John A. Hutcheson, Hugh M. Hutcheson and John B. Young, to divide the estate of Ambrose Hutcheson. They determined that the only way to do so "fairly," was to sell the enslaved people. This was because they could not "be conveniently divided with equality to all the parties in kind" because "several of the negroes are very old and some of them valueless." The slavers openly stated their intention to divide this group, recognizing that some might earn them money yet, but that their success overall depended on getting rid of the "worthless" elders. As the petitioners stated: "the partition can be best effected by a sale, at which any of the parties can purchase such of them as they may want, and those not wanted can be got rid of."<sup>99</sup> These "very old" people who were "not wanted" had, to borrow one abolitionist author's framing, "been worn down by Slavery," and now they had nothing left to give, they received nothing in kind.<sup>100</sup> Josephine Howard spoke for many ex-slaves when insisting as to the ubiquitousness of this mentality. Howard, who was interviewed by the WPA in 1938, described herself as "old an' blind an' no 'count for nothin'," but insisted her current circumstances were better than if slavery had endured: "white folks didn't have no use for black folks when dey gets too old to work good, an' dey gets shet of 'em one way or

t'other." Howard's determined retort to her seemingly incredulous white interviewer serves as a fitting conclusion on how far enslavers' economic self-interest led to the abuse and exploitation of the aged enslaved by design: "Yes suh, I's tellin' de truth, white folks sure give us bad treatment."<sup>101</sup>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research for this work was supported by the Leverhulme Trust [Grant Number RF-2018-159\3], and I am enormously grateful for their support. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editorial team at the *Journal of Social History* for their thoughtful comments on this piece. I would like to thank Pedro Machado and Olimpia Rosenthal for inviting me to the Mellon Foundation's Sawyer Seminar, "Global Slavery, Fugitivity, and the Afterlives of Freedom" at Indiana University, Bloomington, and to the participants and audience members who provided feedback on ideas addressed in this article.

## ENDNOTES

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3. Charles Manigault, "The Close of the War \_ The Negro," 8. Box 2, Series 2, Folder 9, Charles Manigault's Writings, in the Manigault Family Papers #484, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Underlined in original. Infant mortality rates on Manigault's planation from: William Dusbiberre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (Oxford, 1996), 49–56.
4. George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals, All! Or, Slaves Without Masters* (Richmond, 1857), 32, 29.
5. The debates are voluminous here. Select examples focused on the US include: Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of Negro Slavery* (New York, 1989 [1974]); Gavin Wright, *Slavery and American Economic Development* (Baton Rouge, 2006); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA, 2013); Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, 2014); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); 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, 2017); Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); John E. Murray, Alan L. Olmstead, Trevon D. Logan, Jonathon B. Pritchett, and Peter L. Rousseau, "The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism," *Journal of Economic History*, 75, no. 3 (2015): 919–931; James Oakes, "Capitalism and Slavery and the Civil War," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 89 (2016): 195–220; Peter Coclanis, "Slavery, Capitalism, and the Problem of Misprision," *Journal of American Studies*, 52, no. 3 (2018): 1–9; John Clegg, "A Theory of Capitalist Slavery," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 33, no. 1 (2020): 74–98; Gavin Wright, "Slavery and Anglo-American Capitalism Revisited," *Economic History Review*, 73, no. 2 (2020): 353–383.

6. The most sustained challenge to this perspective is found in the works of Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, both of whom are now deceased. See, most recently, *Mind of the Master Class* and *Fatal Self-Deception*. Although less directly focused on the economic dynamics or ideological structures of slavery, elements of this approach shape Eugene Genovese's posthumously published final book, *The Sweetness of Life: Southern Planters at Home* (New York, 2017).
7. Oakes, "Capitalism and Slavery," 216.
8. Work cited in note 5 largely addresses the racial dynamics of slavery's economies. For gendered dimensions, see, for example: Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1999 [1985]), 91-118; Thelma Jennings, "'Us Colored Women Had To Go Through a Plenty': Sexual Exploitation of African American Slave Women," *Journal of Women's History*, 1, no. 3 (1990), 45-74; Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004); Brenda Stevenson, "What's Love Got to Do With It? Concubinage and Enslaved Black Women and Girls in the Antebellum South," *Journal of African American History*, 98, no. 1 (2013): 99-125; Berry, *Price for their Pound of Flesh*, 10-33. Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie Harris, eds., *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas* (Athens, 2018). On childhood, see, for example: Richard H. Steckel, "A Dreadful Childhood: The Excess Mortality of American Slaves," *Social Science History*, 10, no. 4 (Winter, 1986): 427-465; Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington, 1995); Crystal Lynn Webster, *Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood: African American Children in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill, 2021).
9. Berry, *Price for their Pound of Flesh*, 131.
10. Examples of this recent literature include: Berry, *The Price for their Pound of Flesh*, ch. 5; Nathaniel Windon, "Superannuated: Old Age on the Antebellum Plantation," *American Quarterly*, 71, no. 3 (2019): 767-777; Corinne T. Field, "Old-Age Justice and Black Feminist History Sojourner Truth's and Harriet Tubman's Intersectional Legacies," *Radical History Review*, 139, no. 1 (2021): 37-51; Liana DeMarco, "Managing 'Old Mummy,' Making 'Mother Wit': Older Enslaved Women, Efficiency, and Survival on the Plantation," *Slavery & Abolition*, 44, no. 2 (2023); Frederick Knight, *Black Elders: The Meaning of Age in American Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia, 2024). For my own contributions, see: David Stefan Doddington, *Old Age and American Slavery* (New York, 2023), and related articles from 2018-2022. For earlier discussions around elders and aging in slavery, see: John Blassingame, "Status and Social Structure in The Slave Community: Evidence From New Sources," in Harry P. Owens, ed., *Perspectives and Irony in American Slavery* (Jackson, 1976), 137-151; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 519-23; Leslie Pollard, "Aging and Slavery: A Gerontological Perspective," *Journal of Negro History*, 66, no. 3 (1981): 228-234; Stacey Close, *Elderly Slaves of the Plantation South* (London, 1997).
11. Petition of M. C. Stokes, June 9, 1858, Montgomery County, Alabama, #20185825, 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.
12. While acknowledging the significance of losses and financial stresses on slavers, often by addressing the global markets of slavery and cycles of boom and bust, much of the work cited in note 5 stresses the gains through productive exploitation of enslaved people on—and in—the large-scale plantation regimes associated with the "Cotton Kingdom," and connects this to the broader financial strength of the slave regime of the antebellum South.
13. Berry, *Price for their Pound of Flesh*, 133; Doddington, *Old Age and American Slavery*, 45.
14. Jacob Stroyer, *My Life in the South* (Salem, 1885), 10; Lewis Garrard Clarke and Milton Clarke, *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, During a Captivity of More than Twenty Years Among the Slaveholders of Kentucky, One of the So-Called Christian States of North America* (Boston, 1846), 108. 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>.
15. Close, *Elderly Slaves*, 33, 36.
16. George W. Robertson to Alonzo T. Mial, September 11, 1857, in Alonzo T. Mial Papers, P.C. 132.2, Business Correspondence, personal and business, North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina. (Hereafter NCDHAH).

17. George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Series 1, Volume 2, Part 1* (Westport, CT, 1972), 327.
18. Anne Simon Deas, *Two Years of Plantation Life, Part 1* (1910), 25-26. South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.
19. Doddington, *Old Age and American Slavery*, 44.
20. Damian Alan Pargas, "Slavery in the US South," in Damian Alan Pargas and Julien Schiel, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Slavery throughout History* (Cham, 2023), 441-459, 447.
21. DeMarco, "Managing 'Old Mammy,'" 319.
22. On how regional and demographic dynamics affected childcare and community organization, see: Damian Alan Pargas, "From the Cradle to the Fields: Slave Childcare and Childhood in the antebellum South," *Slavery & Abolition*, 32, no. 4 (2011): 477-493, 482.
23. Ralph V. Anderson and Robert E. Gallman, "Slaves as fixed capital: slave labor and Southern economic development," *Journal of American History*, 64, no. 1 (1977): 24-46; Wright, "Slavery and Anglo-American Capitalism Revisited," 372; Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery*, 115.
24. On the rise of the "Cotton Kingdom," see: Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, especially ch. 9 and 10, or Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, ch. 5.
25. Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, quote on 25, detailed breakdown of age-ranges, 25-31. See, also: Jonathan B. Pritchett and Herman Freudenberger, "A Peculiar Sample: A Reply to Steckel and Ziebarth," *Journal of Economic History*, 76, no. 1 (2016): 139-162. On the broader dynamics of the internal slave trade, see: Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York, 2005); Heather A. Williams, *Help Me To Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 2012); Justene Hill Edwards, "'This Slavery Business Is a Horrible Thing': The Economy of American Slavery in the Lives of the Enslaved," *Business History Review*, 97, no. 2 (2023): 307-334.
26. Close, *Elderly Slaves*, 55.
27. Berry, *Price for their Pound of Flesh*, 133-34; Jenifer L. Barclay, *The Mark of Slavery: Disability, Race, and Gender in Antebellum America* (Champaign, 2021), 39. Barclay includes the aged enslaved in her discussions on "soundness."
28. Genovese and Fox-Genovese, *Fatal Self-Deception*, 38. Italics mine.
29. James Watkins, *Struggles for Freedom; or the Life of James Watkins, Formerly a Slave in Maryland, U. S.; in Which is Detailed a Graphic Account of His Extraordinary Escape from Slavery, Notices of the Fugitive Slave Law, the Sentiments of American Divines on the Subject of Slavery, etc, etc* (Manchester, 1860), ix.
30. Berry, *Price for their Pound of Flesh*, 130.
31. Frederick Law Olmsted, *Journeys and Explorations in the Cotton Kingdom of America. A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States. Based upon three former volumes of journeys and observations* (London, 1862), 90-91.
32. William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green, (Formerly a Slave.) Written by Himself* (Springfield, 1853), 7-8.
33. Petition of Eliza Gibbons, Alachua County, Florida, c. 1858-January 4, 1858, #20585805, Series 2, RSPP.
34. Shawn Cole, "Capitalism and Freedom: Manumissions and the Slave Market in Louisiana, 1725-1820," *Journal of Economic History*, 65, no. 4 (2005): 1008-1027, 1008.
35. See, for example: Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), 209-239; Marc Kleijwegt, ed., *The Faces of Freedom: The Manumission and Emancipation of Slaves in Old World and New World Slavery* (Leiden, 2006); Alejandro de la Fuente and Ariela Gross, *Becoming Free, Becoming Black: Race, Freedom, and Law in Cuba, Virginia, and Louisiana* (New York, 2020).
36. William D. Phillips, *Slavery in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia* (Philadelphia, 2013), 127; Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD275-425* (Cambridge, 2011), 242.
37. Marcus Cato, *On Agriculture*. Translated by W. D. Hooper, Harrison Boyd Ash. Loeb Classical Library 283. (Cambridge, MA, 1934), 9. Consulted at: <https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL283/1934/volume.xml>. On comparative frequency of manumission of the aged, see Kleijwegt, *The Faces of Freedom*, 28-29, 33-34.

38. Plutarch. *Plutarch's Lives*. with an English Translation by Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA, 1914), 2, 5.2. Consulted at: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0013%3Achapter%3D5%3Asection%3D2>
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40. Petition of Rachel, c. 1819, Baltimore County, Maryland, #20981914, Series 2, RSPP.
41. Loren Schwenger, *Appealing for Liberty: Freedom Suits in the South* (New York, 2018), 35. Schwenger uses North Carolina as the beginning of the "Lower South."
42. Petition of Anna, July 2, 1817, St Mary's County, Maryland, #20981701, Series 2, RSPP.
43. On manumission statutes, see, for example, Benjamin Joseph Klebaner, "American Manumission Laws and the Responsibility for Supporting Slaves," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 63, no. 4 (1955), 443-453; Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619-1860* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 371-400; T. Stephen Whitman, *The Price of Freedom: Slavery and Manumission in Baltimore and Early National Maryland* (Lexington, 1997); Kelly M. Kennington, *In the Shadow of Dred Scott: St Louis Freedom Suits and the Legal Culture of Slavery in Antebellum America* (Athens, 2017); Schwenger, *Appealing for Liberty*.
44. [Anon.] A Lady of Providence, "Hard Fate of Poor Ellen," in Frances H. Green, and Eleanor Eldridge, *Memoirs of Eleanor Eldridge* (Providence, R.I., 1838), 106-108.
45. See, for example: Georgia. General Assembly, "An Act To Compel Owners of Old or Infirm Slaves to Maintain Them," in *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia . . . 1815* [Volume 1], 34-35; Virginia. General Assembly, "An Act to Amend an Act, Entitled 'An Act to Reduce Into One Act, The Several Acts Concerning Slaves, Free Negroes, and Mulattoes,' and For Other Purposes," 5 March 1824, in *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia . . .* (Richmond, 1824), 34.3 (37).
46. Peter Randolph, *From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit. The Autobiography of Rev. Peter Randolph: the Southern Question Illustrated and Sketches of Slave Life* (Boston, 1893), 78-9, 85-6.
47. Petition of Francis Ludenum, January 4, 1832, Sussex County, Delaware, #10383212, Series 1, RSPP.
48. We might reflect, too, on what Ludenum's desire to rid himself of responsibilities to his wife tells us about the complex relationships among Black Americans in the antebellum period, and of the tensions embedded in family life in the shadow of slavery. Ludenum's request for a divorce was, in fact, rejected.
49. On the frequency of restrictions on free Black residency, see: Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law*, 372.
50. Petition of Jane Dougherty, June 30, 1848, Shelby County, Tennessee, #21484843, Series 2, RSPP.
51. E. N. Elliot, *Cotton Is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments* (Augusta, 1860), vii.
52. Petition of Jane Dougherty (note 50).
53. On these collaborative arrangements, see: Frederick Knight "Black Women, Eldership, and Communities of Care in the Nineteenth-Century North," *Early American Studies*, 17, no. 4 (2019): 545-561.
54. Hiram Mattison, *Louisa Picquet: The Octoroon: or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* (New York, 1861), 53.
55. H. G. Adams, ed., *God's Image in Ebony: Being a Series of Biographical Sketches, Facts, Anecdotes, etc, Demonstrative of the Mental Powers and Intellectual Capacities of the Negro Race* (London, 1854), 149-51.
56. Abigail Mott, *Biographical Sketches and Interesting Anecdotes of Persons of Colour. To Which is Added, a Selection of Pieces in Poetry* (New York, 1826), 51.
57. Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York, 1839), 43.
58. Petition of John H. Hood, c. 1859, Lancaster District/Parish, South Carolina, #11385903, Series 1, RSPP. See, also: #11386001.
59. Petition of D. Kendall, c. 1854, Upson County, Georgia, #20685417, Series 2, RSPP.

60. Weld, *American Slavery As It Is*, 54.
61. 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), 350.
62. Sterling N. Brown, *My Own Life Story* (Washington, D.C., 1924), 7.
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64. Anon., "The Worn Out Slave," in Aaron, *The Light and Truth of Slavery: Aaron's History* (Worcester, MA, 1845), 41. Capitalized in original.
65. Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, quote on 25, breakdown of age-ranges, 25-31. On regulations and the internal slave trade, see: Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery*, 141-151; Andrew Fede, "Legal Protection for Slave Buyers in the U.S. South: A Caveat Concerning Caveat Emptor," *American Journal of Legal History*, 31, no. 4 (1987): 322-358; Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law*, 102-132; Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 162-166; Charles W. Calomoris and Jonathan B. Pritchett, "Preserving Slave Families for Profit: Traders' Incentives and Pricing in the New Orleans Slave Market," *Journal of Economic History*, 69, no. 4 (2009): 986-1011.
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67. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: Written by Himself* (Boston, 1845), 45.
68. Petition of Dicey, February 17, 1838, Jefferson County, Kentucky, #20783802, Series 2, RSPP.
69. Petition of Ralph, July 24, 1807, Jefferson County, Kentucky, #20780702, Series 2, RSPP.
70. Petition of Fan, June 23, 1852; Answer, Rachael Pennington, June 28, 1853, Christian County, Kentucky, #20785227, Series 2, RSPP.
71. Petition of Abram S. Humphries, January 4, 1855, Lowndes County, Mississippi, #21085506, Series 2, RSPP.
72. Petition of M. C. Stokes, June 9, 1858, Montgomery County, Alabama, #20185825, Series 2, RSPP.
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82. See: Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 135-158; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 135-161.
83. Pharaoh Jackson Chesney and John Coram Webster, *Last of the Pioneers: Or, Old Times in East Tenn., Being the Life and Reminiscences of Pharaoh Jackson Chesney (Aged 120 Years)* (Knoxville, 1902), 127.
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85. See, for example: *Lobdell v. Burke*, 5 Rob. La. 93, June 1843, 93-95.
86. *Hampton vs. Phelps*, 1861, in Records of Slaves and Free Persons of Color, Davidson County, NCDAH.
87. *Westmoreland v. Walker*, 25 Miss. 76, October 1852, 76, 77.
88. On breakdown of ages, and sense of relative infrequency for the sale of the aged, see: Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 25-31, 241-247; Close, *Elderly Slaves*, 55; Berry, *Price for their Pound of Flesh*, 134; Barclay, *The Mark of Slavery*, 39.
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100. Anon., *Slavery Illustrated, in the Histories of Zangara and Maquama, Two Negroes Stolen From Africa and Sold Into Slavery. Related by Themselves* (Manchester; London, 1849), 27.
101. Rawick, ed., *American Slave, Supp., Ser. 2, 5.4*, 1810.

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Journal of Social History, 2024, 00, 1–23

<https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shae057>

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