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Black Aristocrats: Domestic Servants on the Antebellum Plantation

MOST PLANTATION SLAVES in the antebellum South labored in the fields. Their work day began before dawn and ended after dark. Throughout the agricultural year they were busy, planting, cultivating, and harvesting the crops of the South. Winter labor was less intensive but there was plenty to be done. Time was spent in constructing and repairing fences and farm buildings, shrubbing and digging drainage ditches, killing hogs and preparing the meat, cutting firewood, and many other tasks necessary to maintain the plantation and its population.

Life for the field hand was burdensome, oppressive, and at best monotonous. Clothing for these laborers was simple and sparse. Basic rations consisted of corn meal and salt pork, supplemented by vegetables in season. Wooden cabins, usually with dirt floors, comprised the slave quarters, grouped together and removed from the master's "Big House."

Travelers in the Old South describe the field hand as "heavy, loutish, and slow; his features scarce elevated in expression above the mule;"¹ or as "coarse, filthy, brutal, lascivious; liars, parasites, hypocrites and thieves; without self-respect, religious aspirations, or the nobler traits which characterize humanity."² Frederick Douglass, himself once a slave, spoke of the "sorrow and hunger smitten multitudes of the quarter and the field. . . ."³

The second and most favored class of slaves on the antebellum plantation were the domestic servants, comprising those slaves who worked in and around the "Big House," i.e., nurses, cooks, body servants, butlers, chambermaids, coachmen, and those artisans who lived in close contact with the white owner and family. Domestic servants were "more sprightly, better clad, more intelligent,"⁴ "use better language, . . . and in a dozen ways show their superiority to the less favored helots of the plough."⁵ Henry Bibb, who spent years as a slave, revealed that "the distinction among slaves is as marked as the classes of society are in any aristocratic community; some refusing to associate with others whom they deem beneath them in point of character, color, condition, or the superior importance of their respective masters."⁶

¹ Joseph H. Ingraham, *The Sunny South: or The Southerner at Home* (Philadelphia: C.G. Evans, 1860), p. 35; Alex MacKay, *The Western World: or Travels in the United States in 1846-1847* (3rd ed.; London: Richard Bentley, 1850), II, pp. 123-25.

² James Redpath, *The Roving Editor: or Talks with Slaves in the Southern States* (New York: A.B. Burdick, 1859), pp. 256-57.

³ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (Reprinted; New York, 1968), p. 109.

⁴ Ingraham, op. cit., p. 35; C.W. Harper, "House Servants and Field Hands: Fragmentation in the Antebellum Slave Community," *North Carolina Historical Review*, 55 (Winter, 1978): 42-59; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972), pp. 134, 201.

⁵ Ingraham, op. cit., p. 35; Douglass, op. cit., p. 109; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York, 1956), pp. 41-42, 337-39; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (3rd ed.; New York, 1969), p. 191; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), pp. 327-65.

⁶ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb An American Slave* (New York: Published by the Author, 1850), p. 33.

Douglass testified that the house servants on his master's plantation "were a sort of black aristocracy. . . ."⁷

Close contact between domestic servants, masters and mistresses explains, in part, the cultural superiority enjoyed by these laborers.⁸ For example, William Wells Brown, a fugitive from slavery turned author, believed that "those [Blacks] brought into close contact with whites" had their "mental powers" increased compared to that of field hands who were not in constant and intimate contact with whites.⁹ Daniel Robinson Hundley, an Alabama lawyer educated at Harvard University and a defender of Southern institutions, observed in 1860 that those slaves in daily association with their masters were "more intelligent than the mass of blacks . . . polite and well bred . . . refined and aristocratic."¹⁰ Dr. George T. Winston of Raleigh, North Carolina, president of the College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, in an address before the American Academy of Political and Social Science in 1901 added support to the contention that contact with whites elevated blacks culturally.

The cooks, dining room servants, nurses, laundresses, coachmen, houseboys, gardeners, shoemakers, carpenters, blacksmiths and mechanics generally were in daily enjoyment of a very considerable degree of social intercourse with the white race. They entered into the traditions and spirit of the family to which they belonged, defended its name and its honor, accepted in a rude way its ideas of country, morality and religion, and thus became to a considerable degree inheritors of the civilization of the white race. It was this semi-social intercourse between the two races, . . . this daily and hourly contact producing personal interest, friendships and affections, added to the industrial training of slavery that transformed the Negro so quickly from a savage to a civilized man.¹¹

Without doubt, domestic servants absorbed more white culture than other slaves, but this was partially because domestics were selected for qualities which advanced that process. There were a number of desirable characteristics sought in a domestic servant. Mrs. Eliza Clitherall was favorably impressed with a new servant because "she has been religiously brought up."¹² Further, "her character was a strong recommendation, and her manners quite in her favor."¹³ During an earlier year Mrs. Clitherall had been "pleas'd" with a new maid for she had "good principles and a willingness to learn."¹⁴ Maria McDonald sought in a new cook, "youth (around 30), good eyesight, health (sound)," and "character and capabilities such as would render her a desirable

⁷ Douglass, *op. cit.*, p. 109; Robert S. Starobin, *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves* (edited; New York, 1974), p. XIV; Genovese, *op. cit.*, pp. 329, 331; Blassingame, *op. cit.*, p. 155, agrees that domestic servants formed part of the plantation elite.

⁸ Ingraham, *op. cit.*, p. 35; Bertram Wilbur Doyle, *The Etiquette of Race Relations in the South: A Study in Social Control* (Chicago, 1937), p. 74; Stamp, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

⁹ William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home or The South and its People* (Boston: A.G. Brown and Company, 1880), p. 28; John Dixon Long, *Pictures of Slavery in Church and State, Including Personal Reminiscences, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, etc.*, etc. (Philadelphia: Published by the Author, 1857), p. 23; Frances Ann Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838-1839* (Reprinted; New York, 1961), p. 62.

¹⁰ Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New York: Henry B. Price, 1860), p. 351.

¹¹ Dr. George T. Winston, "Relations of Whites and Blacks," address before The American Academy of Political and Social Science on April 13, 1901, "Scrapbook," Mary Norcott Bryan Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. (Hereinafter referred to as Southern Historical Collection.)

¹² Mrs. Eliza Clitherall, "Autobiography and Diary," entry of May 12, 1860, Southern Historical Collection.

¹³ *Ibid.*, May 11, 1860.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, April 25, 1853.

acquisition.”¹⁵ Other traits sought in domestic servants were “goodness,” “truth,” “diligence,” “patience,” “dependability,” “devotion,” “probity and loyalty.” Domestic servants already serving had those desirable traits sought in prospective servants.

Anna Matilda King of Retreat Plantation, St. Simon’s Island, Georgia, offered a typical description of a valued domestic servant who had spent her lifetime in the home of the King family. Hannah was a “good and faithful servant, with an honest — moral character — useful with perfect devotion to her owners.”¹⁶ Dr. Winston found several worthwhile attributes of a nurse during his boyhood. She was “honest, virtuous, industrious, intelligent, affectionate, and faithful.”¹⁷ Frequently, masters and mistresses described domestic servants as “good and faithful” or as “my valued and faithful servant.”

The selection of a domestic servant sometimes was reduced to a matter of experience versus a lack of attachments, as evidenced by a letter to A. B. Davidson of North Carolina from John Springs, his son-in-law:

... I have sent up Mary’s [his daughter’s] Negroes all to your house and you can select out such as you wish to keep at home and place the others on the plantation. I think Ann the best cook, but she has a large family. I don’t know how you would arrange with them. Peggy has cooked longer for me than any Negro I own, ... Mother kept her at it longer, but I never admired her for a cook and she is getting old and blind. Julia says she has cooked a good deal, but she is likely to have a large incumbrance of children. Fanny has no incumbrance of children and probably won’t have, but she has never been put to cooking, and is equal almost to a man on a plantation.¹⁸

Most often the master tended to choose the more intelligent slaves for domestic servants. Dorothy Seary, in a study of a Georgia planter and his plantations, found that servants chosen for housework were those who showed the greatest intelligence.¹⁹ A North Carolina mistress lamented the poor health of her servant, Judy, which “has been very bad for 18 months” and feared “she will never recover — she will be a great loss too, for she is remarkably smart, indeed, I believe is one of the most intelligent servants I ever saw.”²⁰ Dr. Winston told a Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, audience that

The smartest girls were trained to domestic service in its various branches, and became practically members of the family. Many of them could sew, knit, crochet, embroider, cut, fit, and make garments, clean up house, wash and iron, spin and weave, even more skillfully than the mistress who taught them. ... Negro lads who showed aptitude for trades were hired out under a sort of apprentice system, and taught to be skillful as carpenters, masons, smiths or the like.²¹

¹⁵ Letter from Aunt Maria McDonald to nephew Ben, January 20, 1850, Farish Carter Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

¹⁶ Anna Matilda King, “Journal,” entry of June, 1854; letter to Thomas Butler King, August 6, 1854, Thomas Butler King Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

¹⁷ Winston, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Letter from John Springs to A.B. Davidson, December 8, 1836, Davidson Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

¹⁹ Dorothy Seary, “A Georgia Planter and His Plantations, 1837-1861” (Unpublished master’s thesis, University of North Carolina, 1937), p. 44.

²⁰ Lucy Battle to sister, February 12, 1856, William H. Battle Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

²¹ Winston, *op. cit.*

It was generally assumed throughout the slave period by both whites and blacks that mulattoes were superior in intelligence to pure blacks. This superiority was attributed to the infusion of white blood.²² As a consequence, mulattoes came to consider themselves superior and to gain a confidence in themselves that the pure black servants did not enjoy. A servant whose grandfather and father were white expressed the feeling that "like my . . . Mother I thought myself of a superior caste and would have felt it a degradation to put myself on a level with those of a few shades darker than myself."²³ Very often the master selected mulattoes to fill positions as domestic servants because of the assumption of superiority.²⁴

The white South allowed Caucasian blood to serve as a mark of superiority and undoubtedly some mulattoes used their mixed blood to advantage. Sally, a mulatto field hand, approached Frances Anne Kemble and petitioned to be allowed to learn a trade. Hoeing in the field was so hard "on account of her color."²⁵

At times, emigrants to the South were affected by the assumption of mulatto superiority. Susan Davis Nye Hutchinson came south from Amenia, New York, in 1815. She taught school in North Carolina and Georgia during the years from 1815 to 1841. On a trip to Charlotte, North Carolina she called at the home of a friend and found an old servant "very feeble." She found, to her surprise, that her "room [was] furnished like a lady's, carpeted and curtained with all other needful furniture about her. . . ." Mrs. Hutchinson, as if unable to explain the acceptable appearance of the servant's room, rationalized: "but she was almost white."²⁶ She was accepting the premise that the infusion of white blood into the servant resulted in a level of existence superior to that of the pure black.

Interestingly, the assumption of mulatto superiority continued to persist in the South after slavery. Winston believed that:

One great evil connected with race familiarity, the evil of licentiousness and miscegenation was not entirely harmful to the Negro. Nearly all the leaders of the Negro race both during slavery and since have been mulattoes strongly marked by the mental and moral qualities of the white race. The mulatto is quicker, and brighter and more easily refined than the Negro. It cannot be denied that the Negro race has been very greatly elevated by its mulatto members. Indeed if you strike from its records all that mulattoes have said and done, little would be left. Wherever work requiring refinement, extra intelligence and executive ability is performed, you will find it usually directed by mulattoes.²⁷

²² Edward B. Reuter, *The Mulatto in the United States; Including a Study of the Role of Mixed Blood Races Throughout the World* (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1918), pp. 179-82; Kemble, op. cit., pp. 233-34; Joseph Chamberlain Furnas, *Goodbye to Uncle Tom* (New York, 1956), p. 148; Virginia Writers' Project, *The Negro in Virginia* (New York, 1940), p. 44.

²³ Richard Hildreth, *The White Slave or Memoirs of a Fugitive: A Story of Slave Live in Virginia* (London: Ingram, Cooke and Company, 1852), p. 23; also, James Hugo Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South, 1776-1860* (Amherst, 1970), p. 296.

²⁴ Reuter, op. cit., p. 174; Long, op. cit., p. 23; Frederick Law Olmstead, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States With Remarks on Their Economy* (New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856), p. 421; Johnston found that a preference was given to mulattoes as house servants, in op. cit., p. 299.

²⁵ Kemble, op. cit., p. 233. Reuter, op. cit., p. 174; Virginia Writers' Project, op. cit., p. 44; Charles H. Nichols, *Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of Their Bondage and Freedom* (Leiden, 1963), p. 37.

²⁶ Susan Davis Nye Hutchinson, "Diary," entry of April 27, 1838, Southern Historical Collection.

²⁷ Winston, op. cit.

Philip Alexander Bruce, writing in 1889, found that freedom brought diminished intimacy between master and servant. He postulated that the lack of association with the white man resulted in a rapid decrease in the number of mulattoes, and the "Negroes as a mass are gradually but surely reverting to the original African type."²⁸

Domestic servants frequently remained for generations on the same plantation in subjection to the same family. This group tended to perpetuate and even to increase itself. Ellen Mordecai's "faithful and loved servant" Sally, was the "daughter of Carolina — a personal maid and seamstress and George Scott the carriage driver." Sally's grandmother was "one of the milkers and the weaver and her great grandmother was a personal family servant." Sally was "an aristocrat coming from a generation of faithful and respected servants."²⁹ Ben Halsey, a "faithful body servant" was the son of a mother who "had charge of the hospital or sick house." His father was a "penman in the timber pen."³⁰

Doubtless, some masters felt like the owner who was forced to sell slaves to meet his debts but who was "very desirous of keeping [the family] together — they are affectionate to one another and they are good servants."³¹ General Samuel Simpson, unwilling to separate families, presented the Norcotts of North Carolina at the marriage of a young mistress with a family of domestics "called the Brimages." There were eleven servants including, "John our carriage driver, Maria our ever faithful maid, and Hallen . . .,"³² who was a most beautiful seamstress.³³

The reluctance of some owners to sell or separate their domestics added to an apprentice system that allowed job perpetuation and led to the overpopulation of many domestic staffs. Ingraham describes the apprentice system:

The carriage driver must not only have his deputy ostler, but the laundress must be waited on by a little Negress, to kindle her fires, heat her irons, and do everything that the dignity of the 'lade' in question deems 'derogatorum' for her to put her hands to. The chief washerwoman has from two to four ebony maids who do the grosser work while she does the 'fancy washing.' The cook must have a strapping lad . . . to chop the wood, bring the water, and be at hand . . . two or three small fry to catch the poultry, turn the spit, and steal all they can. The gardner has his aids; the marm-nurse hers; and all this army of juveniles are thus in full training to take the places, by-and-by, of those to whom they are appended. . . .³⁴

²⁸ Philip Alexander Bruce, *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1889), p. 53.

²⁹ Ellen Mordecai, *Gleanings from Long Ago* (Savannah, 1933), p. 82.

³⁰ Excerpt from *The Morning Star*, Wilmington, North Carolina, October 21, 1911, Eliza H. Parsley Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

³¹ Letter to Lewis Thompson from Will Hargrave, May 7, 1855, Lewis Thompson Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

³² "Scrapbook," Mary Norcott Bryan Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

³³ Mary Norcott Bryan, *A Grandmother's Recollections of Dixie* (New Bern, North Carolina: Owen G. Dunn, Printer n.d.), p. 14.

³⁴ Ingraham, op. cit., pp. 179-80; Franklin, op. cit., p. 191.

The problem of over-staffed homes could be a perplexing one for the mistress. Mary Steele Henderson, writing from Salisbury, North Carolina, found herself involved with a surplus of servants. Following are excerpts from her diary regarding this problem:³⁵

January 1, 1858

... what will I do with so many idle servants they can't be employed and will be a great expense.

January 2, 1858

We are overrun with servants not hired.

January 13, 1858

... I have any number of seamstresses at present, indeed too many for I cannot long employ them all, wish we could hire them at any price ... we have 10 extra ones at home ...

January 22, 1858

We can't dispose of our surplus Negroes — they will be a heavy expense to us — the young servants worry me, have been unemployed and very idle.

January 23, 1858

We have *only 15 additional mouths to feed.*

What servants lacked in skill they fully made up in numbers. George Cary Eggleston was born in Vevoy, Indiana, and visited his father's relatives at Locust Grove, Virginia, in 1857. He recorded that:

In hardly anything else was the extravagance of the Virginians so manifest as in their wastefulness of labor. On nearly every plantation there were 10 or 12 able-bodied men and women employed about the house, doing the work which 2 or 3 ought to have done, and might have done; and in addition to this there were usually a dozen or a score of others with merely nominal duties or no duties at all. The master liked to have plenty of servants always within call. His dinner table bore, every day, food enough for a battalion, so his nature demanded the presence of half a dozen servitors whenever one was wanted. Indeed, these people usually summoned servants in squads, calling three or four to take the guest's horse to the stable or to bring one pitcher of water.³⁶

Masters and mistresses were reluctant, sometimes, to send domestic slaves to the field. Domestic on larger plantations usually were sent to the field only as punishment.³⁷ Domestic were often looked on as quasi-members of the master's family, and family members did not labor with common field hands. On small farms and plantations it was common for owners and domestics to work side by side in the field.

The letters and diaries of slave owners are filled with references to blacks as "family" members. In most cases if a domestic became ill and died the death was deplored as if an immediate family member had been lost. A North Carolina master had sickness in the family for two months. "Angeline's little girl died on New Year's day. She had been sick for a month, but did not appear

³⁵ Mary Steele Ferrand Henderson, "Diary," Southern Historical Collection.

³⁶ George Cary Eggleston, *A Rebel's Recollections* (reprinted, Bloomington, 1959), pp. 50-51; Franklin, op. cit., p. 191.

³⁷ Alice Ruffin, letter to her mother, March 13, 1851, Thomas J. Ruffin Papers, Southern Historical Collection; Ingraham, op. cit., p. 35; MacKay, op. cit., pp. 123-25; Genovese, op. cit., p. 329.

bad off. I assure you it was a sad day to us all."³⁸ A mistress "had much sickness amongst our Negroes . . . the disease was bloody flux. Our white family, that is our children, had it but it did not go hard with them."³⁹ When Toney died, Mrs. Lucy Battle wrote, "his death has cast a gloom over the whole house, I do feel very sad . . . O! me, how we shall miss him for he was a right good servant, so brisk, so active. . . ."⁴⁰ Farish Carter was informed by his son that his "family" had two additions. "Betsy has a daughter and also Granny and both doing very well."⁴¹ When one young girl saw family slaves put on a box and auctioned off to the highest bidder, she burst into tears. It was almost like selling members of the family.⁴² Another young girl whose family was disposing of servants wrote her friend:

. . . it is really distressing to be compelled to sell good, faithful servants that have raised you and that you love like your own blood and the worst of all to hear of those best of servants that were treated with so much respect and were such great favorites being so unkindly treated. . . . These are trials I've had to bear. Sometimes I feel like my brothers and sisters were those who were thus suffering.⁴³

The affection felt for servants by whites is revealed in the eulogies written about favored and departed domestic servants. None appear more genuine and heartfelt than the tributes paid by William S. Pettigrew to his faithful servant Moses. To his sister he wrote:

. . . he is entitled to all that any one can say in his praise; and as to my own feelings, I shall cherish for his memory the highest of the merits of those who have aided me in acting my part amid the toils of life. I humbly trust he has exchanged the duties of this world for the rest and enjoyment of a better. If so, the loss is only ours, the gain is his.⁴⁴

Anna King was as sincere in eulogizing her departed servant Hannah. To her husband she wrote:

. . . I have again to mention the death of one of the most faithful of servants, our poor afflicted Hannah . . . to her owners she was all we could desire in a servant: in fact as servant, daughter — sister, wife, she had not her equal. . . . Tho I know death to her was a relief still I can't but sorrow for the departure of so good, so faithful a servant as Hannah ever was to us.⁴⁵

Some masters went to other lengths to honor a beloved servant. Professor Guion Griffis Johnson reports an account of a slave funeral that occurred in Salisbury, North Carolina in 1850. A servant woman belonging to H. C. Jones died and her master asked the Reverend M. Ricand to preach the sermon at the plantation. A notice was sent out to that effect. At the appointed hour the slaves of Salisbury were seen moving out "not on foot like beasts of burden, or like friendless, unrespected human wretches, but like genteel and able folk in carriages, barouches, buggies, carryalls, and on horseback." It was estimated

³⁸ M.L. Bynum to cousin Martha M. McDowell, February 12, 1857, Thomas J. Lenoir Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

³⁹ Mary Jeffrey Bethell, "Diary," entry of December 12, 1853, Southern Historical Collection.

⁴⁰ Lucy Battle to husband, February 7, 1856, William H. Battle Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

⁴¹ Letter from a son, March 13, 1855, Farish Carter Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

⁴² Elmira Foster, "Reminiscences of Childhood," Southern Historical Collection, 6.

⁴³ Letter to Sarah J. Lenoir from friend Lizzie, September 28, 1850, Lenoir Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

⁴⁴ Letter to sister, 1860, William S. Pettigrew Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

⁴⁵ Anna Matilda King to husband, August 6, 1854, Thomas Battle King Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

that some five hundred were in attendance at the funeral. The masters and mistresses of the servants had lent their horses and vehicles for the occasion.⁴⁶ A departed servant was not always eulogized by an owner only. A neighbor "having long known Isaac to be a smart servant, honest and friendly, and good tempered — in short a good man — [was] penetrated with sorrow at the announcement of his death." He further declared that "the neighborhood and this part of the country knowing him well will sorrow for his demise. . . ."⁴⁷

In the final analysis, however, the servant was property, and it was difficult for some masters to forget the economics of slavery. When servant Theodore was buried in North Carolina "his color'd friends pray'd and sang over his remains in a solemnity more impressive than [seen] at many white funerals." The mistress concluded in sorrow that "my poor child loses by him his wages of \$350 per annum."⁴⁸ And in a farm journal a master recorded the death of Connor who "will be very much missed as he was shoemaker, tanner, cooper, distiller and useful generally."⁴⁹

Close associations that developed genuine affection of whites toward blacks also tended to develop ties of affection and respect that were reciprocated. It was not unusual for domestic servants to "consider themselves as forming part" of the master's family.⁵⁰ Members of the white family often received a "warm" and "family" welcome from domestic servants upon returning from an absence. Henry Laurens describes one such homecoming:

I found nobody there but three of our old domestics — Stepney, Exeter, and big Hagar. These drew tears from me by their humble and affectionate salutes. My knees were clasped, my hands kissed, my very feet embraced, and nothing less than a very — I can't say fair, but full — buss of my lips would satisfy the old man weeping and sobbing in my face . . . they . . . held my hands, hung upon me; I could scarce get from them. 'Ah,' said the old man, 'I never thought to see you again, now I am happy; ah, I never thought to see you again.'⁵¹

Kate Carney, upon returning home from an absence, was greeted by all the servants "from Aunt Snell down to Idealia, the little darkey, our cook's youngest, Rosey, Helen, Jennie, not mentioning old and young, little and big. . . ."⁵² "All the servants" gave John Grimball "a warm welcome" and complimented him on his "appearance."⁵³ An illustration of individual personal affection between owner and servants was recorded by William D. Valentine whose white neighbor "treated his Negroes more dearly than he did the balance of mankind. In his lifetime he was their only friend and they knew it. Hence they loved their master."⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Guion Griffis Johnson, *Antebellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill, 1937), p. 541.

⁴⁷ William D. Valentine, "Diaries," entry for January 12, 1850, Southern Historical Collection.

⁴⁸ Clitherall, op. cit., entry for January 24, 1853.

⁴⁹ Stephen A. Norfleet, "Farm Journal," Stephen A. Norfleet Diaries, entry of October 29, 1860, Southern Historical Collection.

⁵⁰ Junius Redivinus in Achille Murat, *A Moral and Political Sketch of North America with a Note on Negro Slavery by Junius Redivinus* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1833), p. 98; James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London: John W. Park and Son, 1857), p. 187; Reverend T.P. Ozanne, *The South As It Is, or Twenty-one Years' Experience in the Southern States of America* (London: Saunders, Otley and Co., 1863), p. 75.

⁵¹ David Duncan Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens* (New York, 1915), p. 436.

⁵² Kate S. Carney, "Diary," 1859-1862, entry of July 15, 1860, Southern Historical Collection.

⁵³ John Grimball to sister Elizabeth, August 14, 1860, John Berkeley Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

⁵⁴ Valentine, op. cit., entry of January 12, 1850.

Significantly, the mutual affection and respect that developed from the close association of masters, mistresses, and domestic servants was recognized and emphasized by foreign visitors to the slave South. Ethan Allen Andrews, in a letter from Baltimore to the executive committee of the American Union for the Relief and Improvement of the Colored Race, wrote in 1836:

The situation in which domestic slaves are often placed, in prosperous, moral, and intelligent families is one of far more unmingled happiness than is usually imagined by those who have never witnessed it. The mistake into which many fall . . . arises principally from their failing to estimate properly the amount of happiness occasioned by the mutual affection between the white and the colored members of the same family.⁵⁵

It would be naive to believe that bonds of genuine affection developed between every owner and servant. At the other extreme was a relationship marked by hatred. If an owner developed dislike or mistrust for a servant his solution was to sell the slave. Sophy “of whom the best and the worst character could be given” was sold because her mistress “had lost self control — and as a consequence could not control her.”⁵⁶ Servants who strongly disliked their masters might conceal their animosity. More often it erupted into disobedience or violence. A North Carolina mistress had to imprison her servant Sarah “for impudence to me and for violence offered by her to my person.”⁵⁷ Another “felt a good deal of irritation at Laura’s disobedience. . . . She possesses a very singular disposition . . . and I think I must bear with her until there is a prospect of getting a better.”⁵⁸ Mary Boykin Chestnut’s cousin was strangled to death by her domestic servants.⁵⁹ At least one black woman was put to death in antebellum North Carolina for poisoning her master, mistress, and two others.⁶⁰ In Asheville, North Carolina, Josh, the cook of the Gale family, became angry with a white member. He set the Gale home on fire at night, threatening the lives of the retired family.⁶¹ Jenny, a house servant in North Carolina, was “launched into eternity” for setting fire to a stable in retaliation for being punished.⁶²

In general, the most common relationship was neither one of great affection nor great hatred toward whites among the great mass of slaves. But in regard to domestic servants the relation was most often marked by deep and genuine affection and only in some cases intense dislike.

The role of master or mistress could be a “vexing business” and a “torment.” The white owner who saw the domestic servant as “family” also felt a strong obligation and responsibility to train his “black family” members as he did his white family “to regular and industrious habits — good dispositions

⁵⁵ Ethan Allen Andrews, *Slavery and the Domestic Slave-Trade in the United States* (Boston: Light and Stearns, 1836), p. 34.

⁵⁶ Lucilla Agnes McCorkle, “Diary,” entry for January 1, 1850, W.P. McCorkle Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

⁵⁷ Sarah Porter Fuller to cousin E. Pettigrew, January 23, 1833, Pettigrew Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

⁵⁸ McCorkle, *op. cit.*, entry of first Saturday of June, 1852.

⁵⁹ Mary Boykin Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie*, ed. by Ben Williams (Boston, 1949), p. 139.

⁶⁰ Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 513.

⁶¹ Katherine Polk Gale, “Recollections of Life in the Southern Confederacy 1860-1865,” Southern Historical Collection.

⁶² Hutchinson, *op. cit.*, entry of November 12, 1829.

and respectful manners."⁶³ To one mistress this responsibility "presses like a mountain upon my spirit."⁶⁴

The spiritual salvation of the black family was especially of concern to some whites. This interest was related to the degree of personal conviction of the white "parents." Most whites would have concurred with the master who prayed, "help us our God to instruct them in the great truths of the Bible and salvation by Christ,"⁶⁵ and the mistress who asked, "oh our Father have mercy upon our households. *May our darling children be taught of thee! and may our servants become the servants of the living God.*"⁶⁶

Incidences in which faithful or favorite servants failed to live up to established moral standards could be felt as a personal failure by the master or mistress. Usually the white family looked upon desertion by a favorite domestic as a personal insult to the family. Robert Phillip Howell's servant, Lovet, disappointed him more than any of them.

He was about my age and I always treated him more as a companion than a slave. When I left I put everything in his charge, told him that he was free, but to remain on the place and take care of things. He promised me faithfully that he would, but he was the first one to leave. . . .⁶⁷

Especially do the manuscripts reveal the concern of mistresses. Susan Davis Hutchinson was troubled by the immorality of her nurse Maria. When Maria gave birth to a son, Mrs. Hutchinson revealed that "Maria's son is the child of some white man — how awful is the sin."⁶⁸ Two years later she had a "solemn" talk with Maria "whose habits in respect to personal purity are a continual violation of the Seventh Commandment."⁶⁹ Lucy Battle wrote to her husband of "the horrible case of infanticide committed by a favorite servant. She was unmarried — had always borne a good character, indeed was a shouting Methodist."⁷⁰ Mrs. Battle recorded that "Cinda's baby died Saturday night, she smothered it, it was about three months old."⁷¹

The difficulties of slavery led some owners personally to disavow the institution. William W. Lenoir and wife Nealy "after limited experience with slaves" felt "determined . . . never to own another slave." The "evil of being a master and mistress . . . is greater than we are willing to bear. . . . Our present feeling is that we will eventually make our home in a free state."⁷² Anna King "suffered severely by being a slave holder" and was so "heartily sick of being one that I would even sell at a sacrifice if I could sell out altogether."⁷³ Another mistress felt "a natural repugnance toward slavery."⁷⁴

⁶³ McCorkle, op. cit., entry of First Sabbath of May, 1850.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ James Harvey Greenlee, "Diary," entry of June 4, 1848, Southern Historical Collection.

⁶⁶ McCorkle, op. cit., entry of September 30, 1860; Bethell, op. cit., entries of November 30, 1860 and December 9, 1857.

⁶⁷ Robert Phillip Howell, "Memoirs," Southern Historical Collection.

⁶⁸ Hutchinson, op. cit., October 5, 1827.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, September 6, 1829.

⁷⁰ William H. Battle papers, February 21, 1856.

⁷¹ Bethell, op. cit., entry of June 6, 1860.

⁷² W.W. Lenoir to brother Thomas J. Lenoir, April 19, 1858, Thomas J. Lenoir Papers.

⁷³ Anna Matilda King to son Henry Lord King, June 7, 1852, Thomas Butler King Papers.

⁷⁴ McCorkle, op. cit., September 11, 1859.

The disposition of the antebellum slave to remain within the slave regime was directly related to treatment. Professor Guion Johnson believes that slaves so readily responded to good treatment that the planter often found that he had but little to do in order to win their good will.⁷⁵ She records North Carolina Chief Justice Thomas Ruffin's observations on reward and loyalty in 1855:

Sometimes matters, very trivial in themselves, have exceedingly great effect in improving the slave and uniting him to his owner. I know a gentleman, one of the most successful planters, who produced a marked change for the better among his slaves, by the small boon of a cheap looking glass for each of their quarters. Another bound his people to him by a devoted affection by joining with solemnity in their processions at the burial of their dead, in a grave yard which he had protected by a plain post and plank enclosure.⁷⁶

Justice Ruffin's views are corroborated by Lewis Hughes, a slave for thirty years, who said that he would have "thought less of liberty, had my mistress been more kind to me. I know the cruel treatment which I received was the main thing which made me wish to be free."⁷⁷ Solomon Northrup, a freeman captured and sold into slavery for twelve years, indicated upon gaining his freedom that "had my family been with me, I could have borne his [master's] gentle servitude, without mumuring all my days."⁷⁸

The most severe test of family fidelity and loyalty came during the Civil War. The invasion of the Northern army was disruptive and Southern discipline relaxed as control over slaves was gradually lost. The "mass" exodus of field slaves from plantation to freedom is common knowledge.⁷⁹ What is less known is the extent to which domestics fled the "Big House." In most families there were several loyal and steadfast slaves who for one reason or another did not break the close personal relationship with the white family when the opportunity appeared. Almost exclusively these faithful slaves were domestic servants. When given the choice to remain within Northern lines or to share the fortunes with their mistress, four personal servants of a North Carolinian made the latter choice.⁸⁰ "Altimore, my Father's faithful servant, his mother (dear old Mammy), his wife (Aunt Winny), and his son Taylor; all valued members of our family" never wavered in their devotion to the white family.⁸¹ Strong in the memory of one mistress "were those servants who through those days that 'tried men's souls,' remained faithful, Aunt Millie, her daughter Jenette and granddaughter, Uncle Matthew, Riley, a body servant, and

⁷⁵ Johnson, op. cit., p. 496.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Lewis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom* (Milwaukee: South Side Printing Co., 1897), p. 79.

⁷⁸ Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narratives of Solomon Northrup, a Citizen of New York Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841 and Rescued in 1853 from a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River in Louisiana*, ed., Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge, 1968), pp. 103-04.

⁷⁹ James M. McPherson estimates that approximately 500,000 slaves came within Union lines during the War. *The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted During the War of the Union* (New York, 1965), p. ix.

⁸⁰ McCorkle, op. cit., entry of September 11, 1859.

⁸¹ Ibid., 34.

Enoch, faithful servants through all the harrowing scenes of strife."⁸² Henry William Ravenel, a former slave owner, wrote after the Civil War:

I must give them credit for great attachment and fidelity — for as much of honesty and fair dealing as could be expected from any people in the condition of life — for generous and forgiving dispositions, and especially for the absence of vindictive and revengeful feeling.⁸³

The sharing of food, scarce during the latter days of the war, was one faithful servant's way of showing her loyalty. After a raid by "marauders" Hannah, the cook, led the white family "off to her cabin where she had set a table as neatly as she could and prepared for us a turkey, cut up and stewed, saving part uncooked for future meals, scrambled eggs, bread and butter and rye coffee. From the same hospitable cabin we got all our meals for the next five days, the Negroes catering for us, and using their own rations which had been given to them for the week, only the day before, and which the Yankees did not take."⁸⁴

One might assume with the disruption of Southern society and the gaining of freedom that servants without exception deserted their white family. This may be an exaggeration in light of evidence to the contrary. In fact, in numerous incidences, North Carolina servants and field hands remained beyond the summer of 1865 before departing. Some servants were reluctant to leave the security of the plantation because of age or lack of skills needed to acquire employment. There were those who stayed because of attachment to the white family cemented over the years by personal contact in and around the "Big House." The Gale servants, Altimore, Aunt Winny, and son Taylor, remained with the family long after the war. Altimore showed "his devotion to the end of his life."⁸⁵ Two maids of Harriet Cobb Lane remained faithful to their mistress long after the war.⁸⁶ Zack and his wife Lucy remained on the plantation after freedom and throughout their lives, "continuing to address their former owners as marster and mistiss. . . ."⁸⁷ Mary Jeffreys Bethell had fourteen servants to leave in the later summer of 1865 "but all of them left with our consent except two who ran away."⁸⁸ Later that year she records "all of our servants have left us but four. . . ."⁸⁹ As late as 1872 she had "three good servants."⁹⁰

Undoubtedly some slaves failed to leave the plantation because of the opportunity to remain and share in the profits from the harvested crop. A

⁸² Matilda Lamb Morton, "Memories of the War Between the States 1861-1865," Southern Historical Collection, 6; Sudie Duncan Sides, "Women and Slaves: An Interpretation Based on the Writings of Southern Women" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1969), p. 245.

⁸³ Henry William Ravenel, "Recollections of Southern Plantation Life," Southern Historical Collection, 13; Chestnut, op. cit., pp. 43, 475, 524, 538.

⁸⁴ Emma L. Rankin, "Reminiscences of the War — Stoneman's Raid," Southern Historical Collection. Instances of slave faithfulness are quite numerous. See Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston, 1953), pp. 49-50; Sides, op. cit., pp. 244-46.

⁸⁵ Gale, op. cit., p. 60.

⁸⁶ Harriett Cobb Lane, "Some War Reminiscences," Lillie V. Archbell Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

⁸⁷ William Wallace White, "Diary," 1857-1910, Southern Historical Collection.

⁸⁸ Bethell, op. cit., entry of August 7, 1865.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, December, 1865.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, February 8, 1872.

Virginian told his servants that they were free and that they could go. If they wished to stay, he asserted that he would pay them wages. "To this every Negro on the place agreed . . . they lost not an hour from their work and the life on the plantation underwent no change whatsoever until its master was forced by a pressure of debt to sell his land."⁹¹ A North Carolinian upon hearing that the slaves were free "told those I had control of that they were free. They appeared astonished . . . told them they could go when they pleased or if they wanted to stay — would deal fairly with them and give them what was right of what was made. They said it was poor freedom to starve, they had nothing to live on or to work on."⁹² The servants on this plantation remained to plant and harvest the crop. In 1866 "a large family of handsome and intelligent mulatto women, girls, men and children" remained on their master's lot in Fayetteville, North Carolina. "There never was a family more kindly treated by their owners, or more attached to their owners than this. . . ."⁹³

These acts of fidelity and loyalty suggest that past estimates of the unfaithfulness of domestic slaves to their masters are exaggerated. Incidences of mutual respect and affection shared by masters, mistresses, and domestic servants are abundant. Contrasted to field hands, house servants were a separate group, black aristocrats, often living in the "Big House," in close contact with the white family and the cultural influences of the planter class. These domestic servants were, in the main, loyal, before and during the Civil War, influenced by conditions of their "elevated" position as members of the white family group. Domestic servants remained after the Civil War on plantations of their birth and departed at their leisure and of their own volition.

⁹¹ Eggleston, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁹² Greenlee, *op. cit.*, May 9, 1865. John Gwyn believed that "many of them would remain at home till fall or winter if let alone." "Diary," entry of May 31, 1865, Southern Historical Collection.

⁹³ E.J. Hale to Cornelia Phillips Spencer, January 11, 1866, Cornelia Phillips Letters and Writings, Southern Historical Collection.