

Honor, Control, and Powerlessness: Plantation Whipping in the Antebellum South

Author: Michael Dickman

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BOSTON COLLEGE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

HONOR, CONTROL, AND POWERLESSNESS:
PLANTATION WHIPPING IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

By

MICHAEL DICKMAN

HONORS THESIS

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ADVISER: CYNTHIA LYERLY

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An Introduction to Whipping: A Study of Slavery and Violence

As the day began to open, Tibeats came out of the house to where I was, hard at work. He seemed to be that morning even more morose and disagreeable than usual. He was my master, entitled by law to my flesh and blood, and to exercise over me such tyrannical control as his mean nature prompted; but there was no law that could prevent my looking upon him with intense contempt. I despised both his disposition and his intellect. I had just come round to the keg for a further supply of nails, as he reached the weaving-house.

"I thought I told you to commence putting on weather-boards this morning," he remarked.

"Yes, master, and I am about it," I replied.

"Where?" he demanded.

"On the other side," was my answer.

He walked round to the other side, examined my work for a while, muttering to himself in a fault-finding tone. "Didn't I tell you last night to get a keg of nails of Chapin?" he broke forth again.

"Yes, master, and so I did; and overseer said he would get another size for you, if you wanted them, when he came back from the field."

Tibeats walked to the keg, looked a moment at the contents, then kicked it violently. Coming towards me in a great passion, he exclaimed, "G-d d--n you! I thought you knewed something."

I made answer: "I tried to do as you told me, master. I didn't mean anything wrong. Overseer said—" But he interrupted me with such a flood of curses that I was unable to finish the sentence. At length he ran towards the house, and going to the piazza, took down one of the overseer's whips. The whip had a short wooden stock, braided over with leather, and was loaded at the butt. The lash was three feet long, or thereabouts, and made of raw-hide strands.

At first I was somewhat frightened, and my impulse was to run. There was no one about except Rachel, the cook, and Chapin's wife, and neither of them were to be seen. The rest were in the field. I knew he intended to whip me, and it was the first time any one had attempted it since my arrival at Avoyelles. I felt, moreover, that I had been faithful—that I was guilty of no wrong whatever, and deserved commendation rather than punishment. My fear changed to anger, and before he reached me I had made up my mind fully not to be whipped, let the result be life or death.

Winding the lash around his hand, and taking hold of the small end of the stock, he walked up to me, and with a malignant look, ordered me to strip.

*"Master Tibcats, said I, looking him boldly in the face, "I will not." I was about to say something further in justification, but with concentrated vengeance, he sprang upon me, seizing me by the throat with one hand, raising the whip with the other, in the act of striking. Before the blow descended, however, I had caught him by the collar of the coat, and drawn him closely to me. Reaching down, I seized him by the ankle, and pushing him back with the other hand, he fell over on the ground. Putting one arm around his leg, and holding it to my breast, so that his head and shoulders only touched the ground, I placed my foot upon his neck. He was completely in my power. My blood was up. It seemed to course through my veins like fire. In the frenzy of my madness I snatched the whip from his hand. He struggled with all his power; swore that I should not live to see another day; and that he would tear out my heart. But his struggles and his threats were alike in vain. I cannot tell how many times I struck him. Blow after blow fell fast and heavy upon his wriggling form. At length he screamed—cried murder—and at last the blasphemous tyrant called on God for mercy. But he who had never shown mercy did not receive it. The stiff stock of the whip warped round his cringing body until my right arm ached."*¹

-Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years A Slave*.

The story of Solomon Northrup has received notoriety in recent years due to the award-winning movie about his experiences under slavery in the antebellum South. The movie, based off Northrup's autobiography written after his return to freedom in the North, brought to the attention of audiences the horrors of the institution of slavery, even though the text had been available to the public for 150 years. It highlights the oppression faced not only by Northrup but slaves throughout a dark period of this country's history. Whipping was a brutal practice that took place countless times throughout the antebellum South, but it has not received much scholarly attention relative to the study of the institution as a whole.

This thesis seeks to bring whipping into a larger analytical perspective, examining the interaction between master and slave within the practice. The above excerpt describing Tibcats and Northrup reveals a master frustrated in his attempts to control the enslaved and a slave's violent opposition to his treatment. It is not a typical example because it shows rare aggressive slave resistance, but it demonstrates whipping as a violent act that highlighted the contrasts

¹ Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northrup* (Auburn, NY: Derby and Miller, 1853), 109-111.

between racial and social groups in the antebellum South brought about through the institution of slavery and the value system of the region.

The historiography for this thesis covers the entire realm of slavery and the interactions between master and slave. Few historians have addressed the topic of whipping in depth, but many have examined the existence of slavery in the South in conjunction with the value system established in the region, honor, which was an unwritten code of conduct governing the behavior of white men. The concept of honor will be covered more extensively in the first chapter of this thesis. Past writings on slavery, honor, and references to whipping within other texts covering these issues laid an appropriate foundation for this study of the practice of whipping as a central aspect of antebellum slavery.

The history of slavery in the South did not begin in the antebellum period, developing initially in colonial Virginia, but not before an extended period of time in which settlers decided upon indentured servitude as the preferred method of forced labor. Historian Edmund Morgan described this development from the founding of Jamestown in the beginning of the seventeenth century through the ensuing decades. It was not until the decline of mortality rates throughout the colony and the onset of Bacon's Rebellion that slavery offered an alternative to the use of servants.

The high death tolls across all demographics that had plagued Virginia throughout the century made enslaved labor an unreasonable option. If both enslaved or servant labor was likely to die sooner rather than later, early planters did not think it made economic sense to invest heavily in slaves if they would not live long enough to compensate for the initial costs of

purchase.² Once colonial life expectancy increased, a permanent source of labor became much more viable and cost-effective.

Bacon's Rebellion showed white elites the danger of oppressing a class of men, the white servants who would eventually gain their freedom.³ The authorities in Virginia had been able to control frustrated frontiersmen and indentured servants, leading to a large uprising against the political establishment closer to the Atlantic coast. Morgan stated that "there was an obvious lesson in the rebellion. Resentment of an alien race might be more powerful than resentment of an upper class. For men bent on the maximum exploitation of labor the implication should have been clear...It would sink in as time went on."⁴ Slavery did not expand rapidly in the immediate aftermath of the precedent, but it made Virginians aware of the benefits of slavery over servitude when it came to control of the labor force.

In addition to these two factors, the expansion of tobacco production towards the end of the seventeenth century accelerated the transition to slavery in the South. The less strenuous work of tobacco cultivation, particularly in comparison to sugar plantations of British colonies in the West Indies, made slavery a more appealing option.⁵ With longer-living laborers forced to work for life, managers of growing tobacco plantations began to reap the profits of this productive system. By the conclusion of the seventeenth century, half of the labor employed in agriculture in Virginia was enslaved, a number that continued to increase as the years passed.⁶

Slavery did not immediately come to dominate southern agricultural production in the early history of the United States, as seen in Morgan's depiction, but once it did, it became

² Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 297-98.

³ Morgan, 271.

⁴ Morgan, 269-270.

⁵ Morgan, 301.

⁶ Morgan, 307.

entrenched and directly tied in with the development of the entire region. This especially became the case in the emerging southwestern states, including Mississippi, wherein cotton created an increased need for massive amounts of enslaved labor. While slavery continued to exist in the Upper South, with its roots in Virginia, the nineteenth century and the dawning of the antebellum period witnessed the linkage of slavery with the profitable production of cotton.

Joshua Rothman presented a picture of antebellum Mississippi and the boom times experienced in the emerging state. The lucrative cotton production “there depended on the successful extension of slavery.”⁷ In a further extension of Morgan’s view of Virginia towards the end of the seventeenth century and growing slave numbers in the South, slaves constituted a majority of Mississippi’s expanding population throughout the 1830s. There, slaves in the cotton industry were described as “the fuel consumed to make that development possible.”⁸ This explosion in cotton production and the accompanying increase in enslaved labor contributed to tensions between whites and blacks in the region. It produced a situation in which the slave population increased dramatically, prompting whites in the region to worry about their security and control over the enslaved.⁹

Studies of prominent masters from the Old South, men who thrived under the regional culture of honor, illustrate how violence and honor shaped black-white interaction. Rhys Isaac’s study of Landon Carter, a Virginia planter during the revolutionary period, depicted a man with an aversion to all forms of rebellion, whether it be the American colonists rising up against the British crown or his own slaves resisting his authority.¹⁰ Drew Gilpin Faust’s examination of the

⁷ Joshua D. Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 10.

⁸ Rothman, 10.

⁹ Rothman, 12.

¹⁰ Rhys Isaac, *Landon Carter’s Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), xi.

life of James Henry Hammond portrayed a man with a steadfast commitment to the South and its customs, especially honor and slavery. When faced with the demise of this tradition through inevitable defeat in the Civil War, Faust described Hammond as preferring to die while the practices of the antebellum South were comparatively intact before they eroded entirely.¹¹ His death in the midst of the sectional conflict confirmed this sentiment. These two accounts show Carter and Hammond as men at the peak of southern society and dedicated to the status quo. The concept of honor placed them at the top, and the depictions by the respective authors showed their full support of that system.

Both men, masters of large plantations, used the whip to strengthen their authority over their slaves. Isaac described Carter as a master with high expectations placed upon his slaves when it came to their work: “An overseer at a distant quarter might merely be said to have ‘whipped’ a man ‘for not working’; but Landon’s own record was usually more precise. Thus, if an inspection revealed certain proof of ‘villainous lazyness’, the diarist would declare that ‘all shall pay for it tomorrow.’”¹² Faust discussed the motivation of Hammond in similar terms: “Those who performed unsatisfactory labor, left the plantation without permission, or in any other way challenged Hammond’s authority were lashed, in a public display of the consequences of refusal to comply with the master’s will.”¹³ Both masters punished slaves who acted against the established rules on their plantations, realizing that any rebellious behavior thwarted their mastery and threatened their positions at the top of the social hierarchy.

This thesis seeks to add substantively to the work already done on whipping. A historiography of the specific practice of whipping is rather limited, but what is available reveals

¹¹ Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 2.

¹² Isaac, 213.

¹³ Faust, 73.

different assessments of its brutality and impact upon the relationship between masters and slaves. Edmund Morgan asserted that the whip did not automatically instill a sharp divide between master and slave in colonial Virginia. Slaves and servants were regarded in similar fashions at first: “Slaves were the labor force of a plantation much as servants had been, and what is more important for an understanding of the role of race, masters, initially at least, perceived slaves in much the same way they had always perceived servants.”¹⁴ Morgan was making the point that it was not inevitable that race would come to be the dividing line and the justification for brutality against laborers.

Yet, Morgan also stated that slaves were able to cope with their bondage and escape from total oppression through the creation and their immersion in a rich black culture, granting themselves a level of autonomy from masters: “The success of Afro-Americans in maintaining a life of their own has dictated a recognition that slavery is always a negotiated relationship. Human beings find ways of asserting their humanity despite all efforts to reduce them to mere animals without a will of their own. Slavery can never be as absolute as slaveowners might claim it to be and wish it to be and legitimate it to be.”¹⁵ Morgan contended that through the establishment of a separate black culture in the South, slaves were able to circumvent the control that masters sought to enforce. In his mind, despite the efforts of masters to assert their dominance, slaves were able in their own ways to push back.

Todd Savitt examined the medical effects of whipping upon the bodies of slaves, coming to a much different conclusion. Savitt argued that all masters whipped, even those who advocated for the use of restraint in dealing with their slaves.¹⁶ These whippings resulted in

¹⁴ Morgan, 319.

¹⁵ Morgan, ix.

¹⁶ Todd L. Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 111.

horrific injuries, including torn skin, blisters, bruises, blood loss, and permanent scars. Savitt described the brutality of the practice: “Laying stripes across the bare back or buttocks caused indescribable pain, especially when each stroke dug deeper into previously opened wounds. During the interval between lashes, victims anticipated the next in anguish, wishing for postponement or for all due speed, though neither alternative brought relief.”¹⁷ According to Savitt, the whip forcefully removed any sense of control or power that slaves may have possessed, resulting in their absence from work in the immediate aftermath of severe whippings, for as much as a week on certain occasions.¹⁸

The reason that little scholarship exists on the topic of whipping is largely due to the reluctance of antebellum southerners to record the practice on a consistent basis. William Dusinger captured this difficulty in a blunt and succinct manner: “Whipping was like defecating: it happened regularly but one did not usually talk about it.”¹⁹ If this were the case, a considerable portion of whippings went unaccounted for, leaving the primary historical record rather bare relative to other aspects of slavery. Masters undoubtedly whipped slaves, but the absence of this in written documents has made the extent of the practice unclear.

This thesis has utilized various antebellum and post-bellum primary sources in order to better investigate whipping. To get at the perspective of masters, agricultural periodicals and manuals were examined. To understand the beliefs and thought processes of plantation managers, literature devoted to plantation management and discipline of slaves was analyzed. Furthermore, the diaries and journals of masters from the period afforded the opportunity to gain a more intimate glimpse into the mindset and behavior of that group. These primary source

¹⁷ Savitt, 112.

¹⁸ Savitt, 114.

¹⁹ William Dusinger, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 126.

materials engaged with whipping pretty extensively, revealing how and why the dominant class in the antebellum South permitted and promoted the practice of whipping.

On the other side of the issue, ex-slave autobiographies and the WPA Narratives were analyzed to learn of the reactions of slaves to their punishment. These documents were written outside of the realm of the institution of slavery, relying on memories of their own experiences to relay the impact of whipping on the authors and those around them. Ex-slaves generally wrote the autobiographies after an escape or release from slavery and an entry into the North, as was the case with Solomon Northrup. The WPA Narratives were composed in the 1930s as part of the New Deal, in which elderly ex-slaves answered questions about their time in bondage.

Difficulties encountered in the use of the primary sources for both masters and slaves pertain to the role of the white ruling class in being able to adapt the source material to their benefit most of the time. Whether it be the antebellum periodicals or WPA Narratives in which black respondents often felt uneasy in the presence of a white interviewer, many times it appeared that whites were able to use their advantages to direct and control the contemporary and historical narrative surrounding whipping. The agricultural periodicals emphasized moderate whipping as a form of discipline and WPA interviews often resulted in ex-slaves blaming themselves for past whippings, absolving masters of any wrongdoing. These issues will be addressed more fully in the chapters to come, and despite these concerns, the sources still provide valuable insights into a study of whipping.

This thesis seeks to contribute to the current scholarship on the institution of slavery within the world of the antebellum South. It will expand upon the findings of past historians who have investigated various themes dealing with slavery and the South as a whole. A careful analysis of primary source accounts enabled this study to move beyond the works of the authors

mentioned herein and use dramatic and revealing evidence to shed light on a topic rarely covered to this extent.

The first chapter will examine the honor culture of the antebellum South and assess how it combined with the prevalence of violence in the region to establish a divide between master and slave. This insight into the cultural aspects of the South will reveal a rigid division along racial lines, setting the stage for the second and third chapters which will analyze how masters and slaves, respectively, approached and dealt with the practice of whipping. It will be a qualitative study as opposed to a quantitative one, not focused on the sheer number of whippings but instead on the first-hand experiences of those who came into contact with the whip. Events are not described in a chronological order but are separated according to their topical relevance, and therefore, this paper will demonstrate the trends and patterns found in whipping across the antebellum period and across the entire southern region.

Masters desired to maintain order in a society in which they were in unquestionable positions of authority. They used the whip as a tool to enforce this vision of society. Slaves, on the other hand, through their victimization and punishment, viewed the whip as the physical manifestation of their oppression under slavery. Most felt powerless to escape from their present situations, with a few exceptions, as seen in the display of aggressive resistance by Northrup. The whip stood at the heart of this divide between master and slave, displaying the power of the former while instilling the total lack of power in the latter, and in this way, whipping helped to solidify the status of each group relative to the other. The force used by masters pushed slaves downward while the torment experienced by slaves prevented any realistic opportunity of moving upward. The practice of whipping in the antebellum South, perpetuated by the inequalities between master and slave, highlight some of the atrocities committed under slavery.

Chapter One:

The Culture of Honor and the Slave-Master Divide

“The most brilliant achievements and the most perfect models of all that can awaken the admiration or gain the affections and the gratitude of man which we find recorded in history, are the manifestations of that delicate sense of honor which constitutes the essential element of greatness...wherever the darkness of perpetual night has been removed from the mind and a single ray of civilization has entered, in every condition of society where man is one remove from the beasts that surround him—in a rude and unpolished state of nature, with the forests for his home through which he roams by day and with only the starry canopy of heaven above him by night, no less than amid the glorious blessings of civilized life, do we find that sense of honor which binds him to the Spirit of the universe and lifts him above all other created beings.”²⁰

-William J. Headen, June 7, 1860.

These words, delivered at the commencement ceremony of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, underline the importance that was placed upon “the sentiment of honor” in the antebellum South. This excerpt displays the common belief held at the time that honor lay at the core of great accomplishments throughout history and separated civilized peoples from the beasts of the wilderness. It was Headen’s desire for the graduates of the university, deemed to be future leaders of the South, to continue this revered tradition by instilling within them the vital importance of honor.

Considering the date of the address, those in the audience that day must have realized the seeming inevitability of a sectional conflict between the North and South. Perhaps Headen viewed his speech as a platform to extol the virtues of the South in contrast with the evils of the North or perhaps it was a message with a foreboding tone, readying those about to head off to war by explaining to them what they would be defending. Before a conflict that would

²⁰ William J. Headen, “The Sentiment of Honor” (commencement address presented at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, June 7, 1860).

eventually shatter the long-standing institutions and practices of the South, his address serves as a reminder of an era that was about to come to an end.

Throughout the nineteenth century up until Headen's address, the Old South was defined by a culture of honor, which bolstered the supremacy of slave-owning white men in the region. This chapter seeks to outline the centrality of that culture during the antebellum period and examine how it influenced the relationships between members of the planter class. While all white men could be honorable, the ways that poor men and rich men displayed their honor, especially when it came to violence, differed, sometimes dramatically. The analysis will conclude with a question as to whether a pervasive culture of honor alongside rampant acts of violence contributed to the prevalence of whipping in the Old South, as this paper moves into the subsequent chapters.

Honor was "a system of values within which you have exactly as much worth as others confer upon you."²¹ This idea, whereby the thoughts and opinions of others dictated self-worth, indicates the tendency of the culture of honor to elevate external impressions and pressures over internal satisfaction. White men were held to these standards of interpersonal behavior, caring deeply about what others thought of them, believing themselves to be honorable as a result of their whiteness and explicit superiority over slaves.²² Therefore, it was a system based off race and action, but points of distinction did exist within this framework, even among white men.

For elite southern men, honor had some unique characteristics. Historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown regarded sociability, learning, and piety as the chief factors that contributed to the honor

²¹ Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 3.

²² Ayers, 13.

of southern gentlemen.²³ The attainment of those qualities distinguished members of society's elite from the rest of the population, but sociability, being able to "create good times with others," and specifically other honorable men, was viewed as most essential.²⁴ White gentlemen were expected to engage in friendly interaction with one another personally and professionally, with the ultimate goal being the achievement of a respected reputation within the community., explaining why sociability was the most important aspect of genteel honor.

Southern elites treated the principle of piety with "some ambivalence" in the Old South, despite its classification as an aspect of the general male honor culture, according to Wyatt-Brown.²⁵ This is not to say that the gentility did not follow the Christian faith. Most southerners were evangelicals, and some evangelicals touted their escape from the obsessions over status and other temporal pursuits that honor instilled. Edward Ayers notes that: "Southern men who had undergone a conversion experience discarded the equation of manliness with boastfulness and pride, replaced honor's vulnerable strengths with an inner strength that could resist the scorn of the worldly."²⁶ Christian piety did not usually mesh with the notion of honor. Christianity was inner-directed whereas honor was other-directed.²⁷ A pious believer would reject a framework in which individuals derived meaning from their standing in a society devoted to status and earthly gains. These tensions between elite society's emphasis on the cultivation of a highly-esteemed reputation and Christianity's devotion to a more austere way of living contributed to piety's lack of central importance within the concept of honor.

²³ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 89.

²⁴ Wyatt-Brown, 329, 90.

²⁵ Wyatt-Brown, 99.

²⁶ Ayers, 28.

²⁷ Ayers, 23.

Wyatt-Brown's inclusion of learning as an underlying component of honor would tend to suggest that success in academics and pursuit of an intellectual life were looked upon with admiration in elite circles. Yet the evidence shows that, similar to piety, learning was a secondary aspect of the culture of honor. In fact, "...it was the stress upon sociability and manliness as the highest significations of honor that obstructed a free pursuit of the life of the mind."²⁸ Headen's address demonstrates that higher education existed and was well established in the region, with various institutions preparing young men for life in the South, but it appears that a formal academic focus did not always reign supreme at these schools. A learning environment that young men entered, especially at the college level, during the formative years of their aspired ascension into honorable status, afforded them the opportunity to choose between a commitment to intellectual endeavors and an engagement in vibrant social circles. While the options did not always have to be exclusive, the preference many times was in favor of the latter.

College was only secondarily for book learning in the antebellum South. In the magazine *Southern Rose*, a woman recalled the return home of her two brothers from college. Upon arrival, one of the brothers was eager to speak of his progress at school: "we listened to John's list of college troubles and college exploits...Papa too, his old reminiscences brightening up, gave them his bygone experiences...Then came the stale jokes of a jest-book substituted for the president's bible...of the rolling of hot iron balls down entry stairs, to be taken up by some poor unsuspecting martyr-proctor..."²⁹ This description reveals a world where social experience and enjoyment reigned over academics. Dedication to school did not interfere with efforts to join desired social circles, even if these were meant to wreak havoc from time to time. Furthermore, the stories told seemed to bring the father back to his old college days, a fond reminder of his

²⁸ Wyatt-Brown, 98.

²⁹ "Original Sketches," *Southern Rose* (1835-1839) 4, no. 23 (Jul. 9, 1836): 177.

own past mischief, speaking to the fact that the rejection of a strict and dull learning focus was not condemned, but rather was passed down from one generation to the next. The young man may have been a diligent student, but he wanted his family to hear about all of the adventures that took place outside the classroom, experiences where he could become familiar with those around him and create some light-hearted fun. This suggests that he took no shame in his behavior, and was seeking to live up to the norm of sociability.

This vision of piety, sociability, and learning from the perspective of elite society highlights the Old South's emphasis on external realities over the internal. The fulfillment of genteel honor came about through external achievements seen by the community, not any spiritual or intangible goals reached behind closed doors. While piety and learning were relegated to the private realm, sociability became the crucial element of honor because it required the witness and approval of other honorable men. The support and respect that emerged from the sense of approval particular to an honor culture was necessary for those who wished to climb the ranks of Southern society. As Kenneth Greenberg observed about the Old South, "The men who achieve the most honorable positions in such a culture are statesmen – men whose vision of themselves and their world is confirmed by popular acclamation. The intellectual, who conceives of his activity as exposing hidden levels of reality, is engaged in work of peripheral interest."³⁰ The men who mastered sociability were accorded a far higher status than intellectuals.

Men of the gentry class worked to be sociable.³¹ Through either welcoming a stranger or distant family member into their homes or buying drinks at the local watering hole, these acts signified the ability to get along well in social environments, where members of the elite treated

³⁰ Kenneth S. Greenberg, "The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel in the Antebellum South," *The American Historical Review* 95 (1990): 62, doi: 10.2307/2162954.

³¹ Wyatt-Brown, 329.

their equals with honor if they expected to receive the same in return. As Wyatt-Brown noted, “Guest and host were supposed to show respect for each other, and failure to do so sundered the transaction of honor in which they were engaged.”³² In this vision of honor, the two sides displayed the proper level of decorum, and in these interactions would prove to themselves and to surrounding social circles that they were distinguished and deserving of inclusion within the circle of Southern honor.

Despite the professed ideal of hospitality, elite men did not always meet this standard. They sometimes exchanged insults, which was easy to do in a culture where men had extremely thin skins. Through these disputes, the duel, a distinct Southern tradition between men of honor during the antebellum period, could result. Wyatt-Brown astutely observed that: “Although the occasions for duels differed somewhat, almost all arose because one antagonist cast doubt on the manliness and bearing of the other, usually through the recitation of ritual words – liar, poltroon, coward. The stigma had to be dealt with or the labels would haunt the bearer forever.”³³ Therefore, the violence that resulted from interactions between men who considered themselves honorable was regarded as essential in order to uphold an upstanding reputation. The expectations of sociability within a society that placed a premium on genteel honor motivated individuals to risk their lives in order for the chance to retain respect among their peers. Many southern men preferred the risk of death to the loss of reputation.

The young student home from college who described his pranks to his family had a brother who had suffered an insult from a peer, an experience that lingered with him. The insulted brother struggled with this issue, discussing it with his sister who authored the piece, about his options in reaching a solution. During the antebellum period, when verbal barbs were

³² Wyatt-Brown, 339.

³³ Wyatt-Brown, 360.

exchanged between men of honor, the contention would continue until both parties, but especially the insulted, reached a level of satisfaction. The beliefs of the boy's father went in line with the mode of thinking on the matter in the Old South. The father "maintained that the agony of enduring an insult, and especially the scorn and contempt of society, are more intolerable than all the evils arising from the practice of duelling [sic]."³⁴ The father was responding to contemporary critiques of dueling, put forward by those who viewed it as cruel and not a fitting representation of honorable men. Still, for many men involved in such disputes, the threat of losing social esteem proved to be too much to handle. The young man was reluctant as he left to secure his satisfaction; the social pressures, expressed by his father, were unbearable and he could not ignore them. He eventually lost his life in the duel.

Dueling and sociability cannot be directly linked, as they are separate elements of honor, but they are both attributes concerned with the ability to get along well in the company of others. The gentry strove to exhibit sociable characteristics, and in this way, they would be able to avoid any need for dueling. Public opinion about a man's character largely determined his reputation and his worthiness as a man of honor. This culture governed the relationships between men of high standing, controlling the way in which they behaved by threatening to ruin their public images if they insulted someone or were on the receiving end of such abusive speech.

While elite men dueled, violence was widely acceptable throughout the South during the antebellum period. Violence did not restrict itself to disputes over honor, however, as all social classes partook in some form of bloodshed, explaining why, as Wyatt-Brown argued, "violence as an aspect of Southern life clearly distinguished the region from the rest of the country."³⁵

Poor white men defended their honor in other ways. As Forret analyzes. "Indeed, a pervasive

³⁴ "Original Sketches," 177.

³⁵ Wyatt-Brown, 366.

culture of violence infused the habitually rowdy and disorderly interracial underworld that lower-class southerners of both races shared.”³⁶ As opposed to the regulated nature of dueling, organized according to a set of standards and protocols, violence committed by many Southerners was indiscriminate.

Despite the inclusiveness of all male social classes within a violent culture, the way in which the lower ranks expressed their violence revealed the differences between the gentry and those below. While dueling was regarded as a way to settle disputes of honor between reputable elite men, poor whites would engage in brawls and other altercations that left permanent physical evidence of these encounters, including gouged eyes on many occasions.³⁷ The reckless and damaging effects of violence committed by poor whites convinced the planters that poor men were dishonorable due to the culture’s emphasis on external appearances.

Kenneth Greenberg references the cultural obsession with appearances in his discussion of the importance of the nose in the elite South due to it being the most prominent feature of the face and physical appearance of a person. The act of nose pulling was regarded as the ultimate insult that could be delivered upon a man of honor.³⁸ This was symptomatic of the superficial culture of the region and continues to support the depiction of the culture of honor as a value system obsessed with external realities.³⁹ The peculiarities of this culture contrasts directly with the violence experienced by poor whites and, most significantly for the purposes of this thesis, slaves. The visible injuries and maiming effects of poor white combat revealed to the world of the gentry that poor white men were excluded from any honorable distinction.⁴⁰ This reverts

³⁶ Jeff Forret, “Slave-Poor White Violence in the Antebellum Carolinas,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 81 (2004): 140, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.bc.edu/stable/23522994>.

³⁷ Forret, 142.

³⁸ Greenberg, 57.

³⁹ Greenberg, 62.

⁴⁰ Forret, 143.

back to the discussion on the prime importance of sociability as a determining factor of genteel honor. The external reality of physical injury resulting from violent encounters, prevalent throughout poor white society, mirrored the public reputations crafted through the interactions of elite members of society. The gentry cherished physical attractiveness and refined social abilities, just as they equally rejected the way of life associated with inferior members of the community.

The divisions within white society came about through the dictates of a code of honor, seen especially in the restrictive practice of dueling, and the manner in which the lower classes settled differences between each other in violent engagements that showed no traces of civilized conduct. The sharpest division in the South at this time, however, was undoubtedly along racial lines. White southern men used the concept of honor to draw a line of division between those in power and deemed worthy of honor, the master class, and the clearly dishonorable group, the slaves. This served the function of confirming the proper order in the South moving forward at least in a theoretical sense.

Edward Ayers discussed southern honor and its direct connection with the institution of slavery. The people whom the culture bestowed honor upon lived in a society defined by the enslavement of a race of people regarded as inferior. Slavery and honor were related to such an extent as to suggest causation when Ayers stated: "Slavery generated honor."⁴¹ In this way, honorable interactions between white southern men were judged in relation with their relationships with the enslaved. This understanding revealed to white men that they existed in a separate and superior realm relative to slaves.

⁴¹ Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 26.

Kenneth Greenberg adopted an altered approach in his writings on southern honor. He viewed it as a peculiar language unique to the region, having to be translated in order to be understood by contemporary observers.⁴² This language became associated with a set of values that were cherished by white men, but Greenberg does not assert causation as did Ayers. Instead, the former viewed honor and slavery as interacting elements within a particular contextual framework. Both honor and slavery defined the region, setting white men unquestionably atop the social hierarchy.

The institution of slavery contrasted directly with the code of honor. Instead of creating conditions whereby honorable white men acted with courtesy and respect towards one another, these same men displayed a complete disregard for slaves. Whites, whether members of elite social circles or not, could unite over their skin color, acknowledging the inferiority of slaves. Ayers stated that “slavery by its very nature dishonored all members of one class and bestowed honor on another; in the American South, race codified and reified this class distinction.”⁴³ As a result, slaves were excluded entirely from the circle of honor, viewed with contempt and scorn by the white members of society that dictated the terms of honor. The demands placed upon the conduct of elite white men contrasted sharply with the vision of slaves being unable to meet any of these lofty expectations. They were seen as wholly unfit for the rigors of the honor culture, suited more properly to perform endless labor and serve those above them.

In furthering the notion of slaves’ dishonor, Greenberg argued that:

Master and potential masters distinguished themselves from slaves in many ways, but one of the most important distinctions involved the issue of lying. The words of the master had to be accorded respect and accepted as true simply because they were the words of a man of honor. The words of the slave could never become objects of honor. Whites

⁴² Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellion, The Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), xi.

⁴³ Ayers, 26.

assumed that slaves lied all the time – and that their lies were intimately connected to their position as slaves. Masters articulated their beliefs when they argued that it was absurd for slaves to engage in duels... Instead of the open confrontation expected of men of honor, slaves seemed to resist their masters by stealth and deceit... masters welcomed the chance to catch their slaves in lies.⁴⁴

Greenberg acknowledges the power exerted by elite whites over slaves in the antebellum South. Slaves were treated dishonorably and were seen as dishonorable. Nothing could be done to alter that reality. The culture of honor established a society divided rigidly along racial lines, and the support of the system by those in power buttressed that division, an order that was cherished dearly in the region.

This conception of the baseness of slaves connected directly with the experience of violence, a trend that was shown in the relationship between the gentry and poor whites. As a result of the appearance-driven outlook of men of honor, any and all persons that did not meet these lofty expectations set by elite members of the community were cast as dishonorable. Slaves existed within these social contexts, rejected entirely by the culture of honor and violence of the elite mainstream. Through the blending of honor and the violent tendencies of Southern life, the gentry viewed whipping as befitting of this subordinate race. The white ruling class, the same group that lived according to a fanatical set of standards in order to create an honorable reputation, delivered the brutal form of punishment and retribution unto the enslaved masses.

The physical injuries that resulted from whipping reinforced the notion of the inferiority of the slaves to the masters within the honor culture of the Old South. The visible flaws went against the emphasis on outward attractiveness. Therefore, blemishes in this regard would have confirmed the total exclusion of slaves from the circle of honor. Greenberg notes that: “The same attitude towards the external appears in the masters’ interpretation of scars on the backs of

⁴⁴ Greenberg, 65.

their slaves. For white Southerners, the mark of the whip on the back of a slave was a sign of the slave's bad character and 'vicious temper.'"⁴⁵ The whip mutilated the skin of slaves, creating physical evidence of their alleged dishonor. The remnants of their punishment displayed the baseness of their character and race as a whole from the viewpoint of the supposedly honorable class. In this way, the depiction of slaves and the ensuing justification of whipping was a vicious circle of behavior that acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy on the part of masters. They regarded slaves as dishonorable because they did not live up to the standards of physical appearance or proper behavior set by the white ruling class, which led to whipping. Yet, it was whipping itself that made possible the conditions under which slaves could not be viewed as anything other than entirely dishonorable.

The culture of honor served as a code of conduct within antebellum Southern society, governing the interactions of members of the elite classes and also the relationship between this group and those deemed unworthy of honorable classification. This code of honor created a society sharply stratified, most notably along racial lines, with this most clearly being evident in the differences between the practices of dueling and whipping. Duels pitted two men with an honorable status in the community against each other in a contest to settle any misgivings that had taken place. Whether those involved survived these encounters or deaths resulted, they reached satisfaction so that the proper order of society could be maintained. The exclusivity of dueling upheld the idea that honor separated a small portion of the population from the rest of the masses.

Whipping, on the other hand, represented the physical manifestation of the dominance of the master or honorable class over slaves. It was an exchange of violence in which only one side

⁴⁵ Greenberg, 67-68.

actively participated, as opposed to the dual nature of duel involvement. Whipping confirmed the power of honor for both master and slave. The former delivered the punishment unto the enslaved, revealing the extent of the control exerted over that group while the slaves understood the relatively helpless position in which they found themselves.

The social stratification within the antebellum South, inspired largely by the region's concept of honor, became entrenched through the violent nature of everyday life, but especially through whipping, allowing the racial divide between master and slave to be established and fortified, a reality that persisted through several generations.

Chapter Two:

The Perspective of Masters - Desiring Control, Experiencing Vulnerability

“No, you dare not make war on cotton. No power on earth dares to make war on it. Cotton is King...in all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life. That is, a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skills. Its requisites are vigor, docility, fidelity. Such a class you must have, or you would not have the other class which leads progress, civilization, and refinement. It constitutes the very mud-sill of society and of political government...Fortunately for the South, she found a race adapted to that purpose to her hand...We use them for our purpose, and call them slaves.”⁴⁶

-James Henry Hammond, on the floor of the Senate, March 4, 1858.

Hammond, a U.S. Senator from South Carolina, issued this powerful, public statement on the importance of slavery in the southern way of life towards the end of the antebellum period. As sectional tensions increased, Hammond sought to defend the customs of the region in which he had been born, raised, and prospered. The influential political leader and slave owner referred to principles later used by Headen in his commencement address, praising the “progress, civilization, and refinement” of the South made possible through the work of honorable men such as Hammond. Yet, none of this would have been possible without the involvement of the enslaved class, a group that fit perfectly into the demands required for the cultivation of cotton and other plantation tasks. Without this lower race, the livelihoods of elite, white Southerners would have been altered entirely.

This mindset went in line with the notion of honor in the Old South, employing rhetoric that justified the existence of a racial divide. If these were the opinions expressed openly in the nation’s capital on the eve of the outbreak of a civil war, it is safe to assume that these sentiments extended to plantation masters throughout the antebellum South, places where the practice of

⁴⁶ Carol Bleser, ed., *Secret and Sacred: The Diaries of James Henry Hammond, a Southern Slaveholder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 273.

whipping existed so as to preserve the reality put forward by the Senator from South Carolina. Proslavery theorists saw an absolute divide between whites and blacks, and the power of the whip would further entrench the elevation of the master class over their slaves.

Slaveowners were obsessed with establishing a sense of order and control during the antebellum period. These men recognized their placement at the top of the social hierarchy, in stark contrast to the position suffered by their slaves. The maintenance of this hierarchy, therefore, was vital to those who reaped its benefits at the expense of those who toiled endlessly. The practice of whipping stands at the center of slave-master interactions, especially when it came to discipline, viewed as an effective way to institute that sense of control that was highly sought after by the master class.

The master class of the Old South envisioned the whip as a device that corrected the errors and mistakes committed by their slaves, a forceful reminder of what not to do in the future. In this way, they intended whipping to rid the enslaved of bad habits so their oversight duties as masters would be eased, hoping that a rare instance of punishment would be enough to ensure order and control. Masters frequently described whipping in such utilitarian terms, depicting it as a practice that was rational and had the best interests of their slaves in mind. Through these descriptions, masters also claimed that their slaves were inherently inferior to them. The inferiority of slaves, in masters' minds, justified the whip as an instrument that instilled order and control, believing that their baseness often demanded punishment. If left on their own, slaves could prove to be dangerous.

While some slaveowners regarded whipping as a practice that had a corrective purpose, other slaveholders defended the practice of whipping because of their sense of vulnerability. Instead of masters acting from a position of strength, firmly established at the top of Southern

society, some became preoccupied with the possibility of the divide between master and slave shrinking and the ultimate fear of it being eliminated. These fears were more prominent during the late antebellum period, as the Civil War approached, when whites realized that many northerners wanted to end the oppression of slavery. This is much different from the image presented by James Henry Hammond, depicting the strength of the South, removing any vulnerability he may have felt at that time out of public view. When masters wrote in private settings, however, their feelings of lacking control over their slaves in the present moment as well as moving forward became more apparent. In this understanding, the whip not only attempted to establish physical control of their holdings, it sought to restore psychological control over their slaves and themselves.

This chapter seeks to analyze the distinctive manner in which masters employed the whip, with various ends in sight for different people and at different times. The distinctions can largely be seen in the two types of primary sources used as evidence in this chapter. The first grouping of source material is gathered from *DeBow's Review* and other similar publications from the period that published essays on topics that covered the interests of slave owners. In these anonymous writings appeared the vast majority of accounts that saw whipping as a practice with a corrective purpose in mind. The authors of these pieces did not advocate for whipping as a violent and reckless form of punishment. These writers appealed to restraint and cautioned against too much violence and severity. We should correctly view these writings as ideals, not realities. On numerous occasions, this source displayed ideals of racial superiority for its white readers, describing slaves as a primitive sort that often required whipping in order to be controlled most effectively.

The other source type employed herein is the diaries and journals of masters from the antebellum period. These accounts were intriguing due to their private nature at the time their authors composed them. Judging from the content, masters viewed their own writings as a chance to be more candid and forthright about the realities of slave ownership, as opposed to the published essays that would be widely read across the region. These authors used their personal pages as an opportunity to engage with the difficulties of mastery and the role that whipping served. *DeBow's* and the others offered treatises on slave ownership that touched upon common themes across a few decades while diaries and journals presented unique perspectives on direct interactions with master and slave, discussing the specifics of their own situation. Slaveholders used their pages as an opportunity to describe the tensions they felt on a daily basis with the attempted control of their slaves, in addition to the uneasiness of their social position with an eye towards the future. In this way, masters that wrote extensive diary entries displayed the vulnerability already touched upon. Whipping enabled them to escape from their uneasiness while momentarily establishing a sense of superiority in the exchange between master and slave.

Before entering into a discussion on the role of whipping in the relationship between masters and slaves, an outline of Southern customs and belief patterns will reveal the foundation for the perspective of masters on this issue. The economic and cultural importance of agricultural practice in the South created the motivation to pursue mass enslaved labor, enabling Southern planters to maximize their profits from these endeavors. Slavery and southern agriculture became intertwined throughout the region's history but was particularly linked during the antebellum period when sectional tensions increased. Pieces from *DeBow's Review* indicate that its writers desired the South to be unified behind the values of slaveholders, and they used

the publication as a platform by which they could retain the traditions of the South against threats from northern influence.

An author of an essay in *DeBow's* discussed the grand importance of agriculture, attempting to convince readers that agriculture was central to the southern economy: "It is the best pursuit, because, while independent and self-sustaining itself, all others are dependent upon it. It would be impossible to estimate all the disastrous consequences which the loss of a single cotton crop would produce among men."⁴⁷ Agriculture not only produced economic benefits for the South, but it also instilled worthy attributes into those who engaged in such work, including independence and self-sufficiency. The moral fabric of the South was found in agriculture, in the opinion of this author.

The same essay went on to describe the ends of Southern agriculture as surely being profitable if planters adopted the values described above and consistently applied them to their everyday work. This reinforced the need to be independent and competent at what they did, since any shortcomings would fall squarely on their own shoulders. The author opined: "[T]he planter seldom loses his fortune, but by improvidence, neglect, or the most culpable mismanagement, and when disappointments and disaster are the result of his labors, he cannot impute the failure to his occupation, but he will have his own vice or folly to blame."⁴⁸ The certainty and stability of the practice lent itself to economic well-being as long as planters fulfilled their responsibilities.

This depiction of the independence and self-reliance of Southern planters contrasted directly with common notions of the enslaved, regarded as morally corrupt and unable to live on their own without the supervision of masters. The strong opposition to the idea of emancipation

⁴⁷ "The Prospects of Southern Agriculture," *DeBow's Review*, Feb. 1857.

⁴⁸ "The Prospects of Southern Agriculture," *DeBow's Review*.

engaged with these beliefs about slaves and the necessity of bondage in providing satisfactory conditions for all involved. As a result of their inferiority, slaves could not be trusted with freedom so their supervision under the watchful eyes of powerful whites better suited them while also aiding in the agricultural pursuits of the planter class.

Another *DeBow's* essay illustrated this point by bringing up the failure of emancipation in the British colonies in the Caribbean, which he said had led to widespread trouble from the newly-freed black populations there. The following excerpt came from a British associate of the author:

‘[N]o legislative experiment was ever conducted with so much sentimental folly and mischievous disregard of reversionary interests as the sudden emancipation of our West India slaves – that is, the sudden admission of men, of those who, intellectually and in self restraint, were below the condition of children. Our own levity in granting was dramatically mimicked by their levity in using. They were as ready to abuse ungratefully as we to concede absurdly. At present, we are suffering the penalties of our folly.’⁴⁹

Emancipation was depicted as a shock that disrupted the proper order of things, with the foolish actions of those in power enabling those previously held in bondage to act freely and in touch with their childlike dispositions. This upset the traditional makeup of society, and this tumultuous and unruly vision of another former slave society after emancipation served as a warning to Southerners to not be tempted to free their slaves.

White Southerners justified their opposition to emancipation through widely-held views at the time that slaves were better off in slavery than if they were granted freedom. Due to their utter dependence upon masters to provide them with living essentials, they would not have been able to make it out on their own. Southerners used these beliefs about the nature of slaves to argue that they were perfectly content in their enslaved condition. One author talked about how southern slaves were happy: “The most cheerful class of people that meets the eye of a

⁴⁹ “Practical Effects of Emancipation,” *DeBow's Review*, May 1855.

stranger in this or any land, and everywhere enjoying the influence of pure religion, makes one consider what misplaced pity there is in British lamentations over American slavery.”⁵⁰ This responded to anti-slavery critics who argued that the institution made slaves into a miserable group. Abolition would have been detrimental to both masters and slaves, hurting the agricultural endeavors of the masters while also unleashing slaves into a cruel and unforgiving world without the capabilities to deal with it.

These viewpoints were clearly warped by mainstream southern society in order to advance whites’ interests in slaveholding and plantation agriculture. Emancipation would have completely eroded the system of Southern agriculture and the region’s identity in the process. It also would have redefined the relationship between whites and blacks, placing them on a more equal footing as opposed to the sharp divide existing during the antebellum period. This divide was created in part through the language used in describing Southern customs. Masters controlled the discourse, ascribing values of independence and self-sufficiency to themselves brought about through agriculture. These ideals were non-existent in the enslaved population, a belief that made emancipation an unappealing proposition.

Due to the formation of this divide through Southern practices, the master class wanted to create a system that would properly manage their slaves. Another piece appearing in *DeBow’s Review* discussed this topic, imploring Southerners to take plantation management seriously moving forward so as to capitalize upon the interaction between profitable Southern agriculture and the institution of slavery:

One good article upon this subject, would be worth more to the master than a hundred theories about ‘rotations’ and ‘scientific culture;’ and infinitely more to the slave than whole volumes dictated by spurious philanthropy looking to his emancipation. For it is a fact established beyond all controversy, that when the negro is treated with humanity, and

⁵⁰ “Practical Effects of Emancipation,” *DeBow’s Review*.

subjected to constant employment without the labor of thought, and the cares incident to the necessity of providing for his own support, he is by far happier than he would be if emancipated, and left to think, and act, and provide for himself.⁵¹

This author engaged with the necessity of rational methods of plantation management, believing that they would benefit both master and slave. Masters would be able to better regulate their enslaved labor force while slaves would be able to sustain themselves through vigorous work, recognizing, as seen above in the discussion on emancipation, that they had no other alternative.

The essays from *DeBow's* have brought to the surface a paternalistic view of slaves, with masters and those in charge of outlining plantation management strategies asserting they knew what was in the absolute best interests of the enslaved. They treated slaves as children, and posited that as long as slaves were treated humanely and kept busy, their condition would far exceed anything possible if they were to be set free. While punishment or whipping was not explicitly mentioned in these accounts of plantation management, whipping was certainly crucial to masters' control over their slaves.

Some periodical writers directly discussed the role that whipping should serve on plantations in providing a proper level of discipline unto slaves. Since the authors of these pieces were describing the ideals in plantation and slave management, the majority indicated that whipping should be a rational and moderate measure taken only to instruct and correct errors committed by slaves, not to brutally punish them for nefarious reasons. The history of the South and the persistence of whipping throughout different time periods, however, would indicate that this depiction of management falls short of the truth. James Breeden, an editor of a compilation of *DeBow's* and other articles on the subject of plantation management, objects to this view presented by antebellum Southerners. He discusses the contradictions between the realities of

⁵¹ "Management of Negroes Upon Southern Estates," *DeBow's Review*, June 1851.

slave ownership in the region and the representation of the institution in journals and periodicals from the period.⁵²

It is difficult to determine the personal sincerity of such accounts due to the anonymity of the authors, being impossible to track them down and see if they lived up to the standards that they wrote down.⁵³ This is troublesome to a contemporary observer interested in examining the relationship between expectations of slave ownership and actions carried out in that regard and whether there was a disconnect. Yet the writings on whipping as a practice extended across numerous decades and the various locations of its authors, signaling that the idea that the whip should be sparingly used and never in anger was a common belief of the period. This view of whipping was thus the public ideals of the practice. It is hard to think that many slave owners took the advice fully to heart, but the number of accounts sharing similar viewpoints on the role of whipping points to the fact that the belief was there, even if the eventual actions of masters failed to adhere to it.

Many articles indicated that a consistent and moderate use of the whip would prove more effective in the long run in securing order and control on a plantation than punishments characterized by reckless violence. An anonymous planter from Virginia in 1834 wrote the following in *Farmers' Register*:

[T]here should always be perfect uniformity of conduct towards them...moderate punishment, with a certainty of its succeeding a fault, is much more efficient in producing good conduct than severe punishment irregularly inflicted...It is the certainty of punishment, and not its severity, which deters from misconduct and, in fact, after awhile, on a well regulated plantation, that certainly will prevent the necessity of inflicting punishments almost entirely.⁵⁴

⁵² James O. Breeden, ed., *Advice Among Masters: The Ideal in Slave Management in the Old South* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), xi.

⁵³ Breeden, xxi.

⁵⁴ Breeden, 80-81.

The master expressed a desire to not whip at all, viewing the punishment as unnecessary if it had been employed in the proper manner initially. If the lash had been used to “deter misconduct,” the hope would be that the misconduct would no longer be present due to the consistent application of the whip in such circumstances. On the other hand, if faults had been left unpunished at various points, slaves might have been more willing to further flout the orders of the master moving forward, understanding that they may not face any repercussions for their actions. Even though this account seems to indicate a sense of gentleness towards the slaves, the master in this case sought not to waste energy using the whip if it was not entirely needed. The purpose of the whip was to instruct slaves of their mistakes and correct them efficiently so as to avoid the continuation of these actions. If carried out properly, the plantation would enjoy a sense of order and control.

Other pieces expressed similar sentiments regarding a moderate form of whipping, advocating for methods that would best be able to avoid injuring slaves. An overseer from South Carolina, writing in *Southern Agriculturalist*, wanted whipping to be carried out with the utmost precaution in order to prevent the infliction of bodily harm unto slaves. “The lash is, unfortunately, too much used; every mode of punishment should be devised in preference to that, and when used, never to lacerate.”⁵⁵ The author presented whipping as a device used only as a last resort and with proper care, fearing that severe injuries suffered by slaves would strip away the desired order and control of masters. From the same essay, the author discusses the impact that physical scars from slavery would produce: “A Negro at twenty-five years old, who finds he has the marks of a rogue inflicted when a boy...has very little or no inducement to be

⁵⁵ Breeden, 79.

otherwise.”⁵⁶ The South Carolinian was not upset by the inhumanity of scarring a slave for life because of a childhood mistake. He was worried about what effect such scars would have on labor control and plantation discipline when that child became a man. In this way, brutal whippings were depicted as counterproductive, inciting rebellious tendencies within slaves when they recognized that their temperaments would lead to nothing but further punishment. These slaves would view whipping as part of their past, present, and future experiences.

Another piece appearing in *Southern Agriculturalist* by a South Carolina overseer engaged with the notion of whipping as a corrective instrument not meant to injure. This account called for moderate punishment of slaves in accordance with the mistake made, as opposed to dwelling upon a specific fault for an extended period. More severe treatment would harm the disposition of slaves and hinder their ability to work for their master. The overseer must not dwell on the slaves’ mistakes: “I have always discovered that where the overseer is positive that the negroes are better disciplined, more mildly treated, and consequently more happy; once, however, a negro has been punished, the fault should be overlooked, and his spirits should not be broken down by continually reminding him of his past misconduct.”⁵⁷ As with the slave realizing the meaning of his scars from prior instances of whipping, this excerpt indicates the belief that a restrained practice of whipping that focuses on the issue at hand and does not over step the boundaries of discipline serves the best function for plantation management. It did not require indiscriminate violence to ensure order. In these views, moderation proved to be a more powerful method than excess.

The preceding authors discuss the ideal practice of whipping, asserting that with a corrective purpose in mind, a moderate punishment will perform the desired task of establishing

⁵⁶ Breeden, 79.

⁵⁷ Breeden, 81.

order and control over the enslaved. Whether these views were motivated by an interest in slave well-being was irrelevant to the authors since, above all else, the interests of slaveholders trumped all others. These accounts did not have to be genuine in their concern for the enslaved in order for readers to understand that the maintenance of the slave-master divide stood behind any writing that claimed to outline the methods of ideal plantation management. Some saw a moderate and corrective function as the preferred option towards realizing order while others engaged with beliefs about the inferiority of slaves in a much more explicit manner in order to support their viewpoints.

A planter from South Carolina saw the benefits of moderate whipping with a corrective purpose in mind, but the justification for it derived from his belief in the inferiority of the enslaved class and the need to clearly distinguish master and slave. He cautioned in an issue of *DeBow's*: "Every person should be made perfectly to understand what they are punished for, and should be made to perceive that they are not punished in anger, or through caprice. All abusive language or violence of demeanor should be avoided; they reduce the man who uses them to a level with the negro."⁵⁸ The statement begins with the expression of the ideal in slave management, using the whip in a detached way, free of passionate emotion that deters from the ultimate goal in whipping which was the realization of order. Yet, at the end, the author made reference to the existence of the slave-master divide, desiring the whip to achieve its ends while also capturing the superiority of masters over their slaves. By acting with restraint, masters demonstrated that they were capable of civility and reason, two characteristics not found in the lower order, according to antebellum Southern culture. Whipping did not have to be severe in order to perpetuate the racial divide.

⁵⁸ Breeden, 86.

Other writers stated that moderate whipping was the preferred course of action, even if it was difficult to fully manage slaves, given their base natures and inability to conform to the wishes of their masters. They called for the decent treatment of slaves, again seemingly not taking slaves' best interests into account but rather seeking to avoid further unrest from the troublesome group. Moderate discipline could ensure stability in the relationship between masters and slaves, but this was not guaranteed, as seen in an excerpt from a South Carolina planter in 1830 in *Southern Agriculturalist*:

To keep a diary of their conduct would be a record nothing short of a series of violations of the laws of God and man. To moralize and induce the slaves to assimilate with the master and his interest has been and is the great desideratum aimed at; but I am sorry to say that I have long since desponded in the completion of this task. But, however true this picture may be, of those servile creatures, we are bound under many sacred obligations to treat them with humanity at all times and under all considerations.⁵⁹

The account concluded stating that it was the duty of those in power to act with care and regard towards the slaves but prefaced that with a lengthy description of their baseness and inferiority. Through these statements, the divide between master and slave was recognized.

The periodicals from the antebellum period depicted the master-slave relationship as characterized by stability and mutual interest. Both groups worked together for the benefit of all. Anyone with a slight familiarity with the institution of slavery is aware of the misleading nature of this image. Masters operated from a position of unquestioned power and authority while slaves attempted to cope with their unenviable condition. Whipping went a long way in maintaining this distinction, and even if the support for moderation served as a mask to cover up the reality of discipline under slavery, masters advocated above all for order and control. When examining other primary sources on the subject, the diaries and journals of slaveholders, however, this sense of order seemed like less of a sure thing. The stability of the master-slave

⁵⁹ Breeden, 79.

divide was something that was of great importance to the master class. While in public, masters spoke of order and discipline. If we pull the curtain on the perspective of masters we see a much different mindset, one where masters were vulnerable and felt a loss of that desired sense of control.

The diaries and journals of Southern slaveholders often described their involvement with the practice of whipping as having a corrective purpose. Slaveholders did not punish indiscriminately. As with the accounts from agricultural manuals, masters in these sources wanted to use the whip to correct flawed behavior so they would not have to do the same in the future. The personal writings of masters, however, do speak more directly to beliefs about the inferiority of slaves and whippings that were delivered in a severe fashion, outside of the realm that was discussed in the essays on plantation management. Overall, the diaries reveal the innermost thoughts of masters as they pursued order and control, an insightful glimpse into the minds of those responsible for the persistence of slavery.

The diary of Landon Carter, a prosperous Virginia planter during the revolutionary era, highlights the tensions felt by slave owners later on throughout the nineteenth century. An excerpt from his diary reveals the trouble he experienced at times in managing his slaves and getting sufficient work from them: “All is my own fault to think a drunkard could be reclaimed, or a negroe honest enough to carry on any business long enough for more than one year. I must get new overseers everywhere.”⁶⁰ He was committed to order on his plantation, but he was not always successful in this regard, especially given the contentious times in which he lived. Carter’s vulnerability could be seen in his disturbed reaction to eight of his slaves running away from his plantation in 1776, revealing to him that the turbulent events that had begun to sever the

⁶⁰ Isaac, 191.

ties between the American colonies and the British homeland were hitting close to home. Carter worried that the rebellious spirit of the colonies had extended to his own slaves, with Carter representing the ruling force that had come to be viewed with contempt.⁶¹ For a person committed to order, those times and corresponding events were the cause of great unease.

Carter frequently whipped his slaves, including his close attendant Nassaw, out of frustration with the slave's disobedience. One instance stood out in particular:

But what should I not do to Mr. Nassaw? Nobody could find him. At last Tom Parker on horseback found him at sunset – asleep on the ground dead drunk. As soon as he was got home I offered to give him a box on the ear and he fairly forced himself against me. However I tumbled him into the Sellar & there had him tied Neck & heels all night - & this morning – Monday – had him stripped & tied up to a tree limb – and with a Number of switches Presented to his eyes – and a fellow with an uplifted arm. . . I expostulated with him on his and his father's blasphemy of denying the holy word of God in boldly asserting that there was neither a hell nor a devil, and asked him if he did not dread to hear how he had set the word of God at naught – who promised everlasting happiness to those who loved him and obeyed his words & eternal torments to those who set his goodness at naught and despised his holy word. After all I forgave this creature out of humanity, religion, and every virtuous duty – with hopes – though I hardly dare mention it – that I shall by it save one soul more alive.⁶²

Carter's punishment extended from his anger towards Nassaw out of his unruliness, but his ego also played a central role. He thought he could serve as a savior, bringing Nassaw and others like him in closer connection with God. Therefore, an improvement in the slaves' disposition would confirm his role as a moral steward and, more importantly in a temporal sense, restore the sense of order on the plantation he desperately wanted.

Carter serves as a precursor to slaveholders of the antebellum period that strived for order and were generally successful in this pursuit but were still plagued by doubts or concerns as to whether they would be able to control their slaves. Daniel Cobb is an enlightening comparison to Carter, a resident of Virginia several decades after the revolutionary era. As with his

⁶¹ Isaac, 3.

⁶² Isaac, 314.

predecessor, the evidence suggests that Cobb also viewed whipping as a device to forcefully inform slaves of their mistakes in the hopes that they would correct their behavior. Cobb, unlike the *DeBow's* accounts, admitted the severity of his punishment in the semiliterate account in his diary, one in particular from 1854: "My plougher has not work so I had her to chastise for it and that I dun severely."⁶³ Cobb's clear lack of education shows he had a meager status as a slaveholder in comparison to individuals like Carter and Hammond, but nonetheless, his position as a white master enabled him to whip his slaves and enforce the reality of the racial divide.

Cobb's diary revealed his own sense of vulnerability. He lived in Southampton County, an area notorious in the history of the Old South as the location of the Nat Turner rebellion, resulting in the deaths of over fifty whites. This momentary shock gave concerned Southerners a glimpse into a world without clearly-defined racial boundaries. If slaves were allowed to move about freely, the results could be disastrous for the masters formerly in power, as was the case with the 1831 uprising. While whipping could be used to fend off these fears, masters in their private writings conceded their underlying uneasiness.

Cobb was twenty years old when Turner and his followers revolted, old enough to realize the gravity of the event, and it became clear that it impacted him years later as an owner of slaves in his own right. Historian Daniel Crofts notes that: "Throughout the antebellum era he faithfully noted any rumor about slave discontent. Anxieties most often developed during the late summer slack season, when farmwork lightened and protracted religious meetings took place."⁶⁴ Cobb worried about the motives and dangerous potential of slaves when they were left to their own devices, particularly during the summer months, which is when the Turner rebellion

⁶³ Daniel W. Crofts, ed., *Cobb's Ordeal: The Diaries of a Virginia Farmer, 1842-1872*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 89.

⁶⁴ Crofts, 84.

took place. If slaves were not constantly occupied with their work and could attend religious meetings among themselves, it was thought that they could plot against the master.

All mentions of primary sources thus far have included the thoughts of masters, men who were directly responsible for their slaves and carried out the practice of whipping. The letters of Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox depart from this pattern but still provide an insightful look inside the world of the slaveholding class, regardless of gender, and how owners viewed the enslaved. Another interesting aspect of the Fox account is her origin as a northern woman from Massachusetts before entering the antebellum South in pursuit of employment. She first moved to Mississippi to become a plantation tutor, an activity that “entrenched her in the world of slaveholders.”⁶⁵ Residing in the region exposed her to an entirely different social experience, in which the white inhabitants of the plantation existed in a separate realm from slaves.

Absorbed into the southern way of life, Fox became convinced of her inherent superiority over the enslaved, especially after she married and moved to her husband’s plantation in Louisiana. Despite her roots in Massachusetts, a state famed for its abolitionist activity during this period, she assumed pro-slavery sentiments, knowing that her newfound status in the South was dependent upon the ownership of slaves. Wilma King argues that: “Her new way of life was tied into the slaveholding society in Mississippi and Louisiana.”⁶⁶ Her distinction as the wife of a master elevated her social position, and she wanted to retain this.

Fox’s letters contain no reference to whipping, but the viewpoints that came across in her writing suggest that she was an ardent supporter of the slave-master divide. This desire derived from her social esteem and her low opinion of slaves. She wrote in such a way that informs a reader that she was responsible for the behavior and work of household slaves, a duty with which

⁶⁵ Wilma King, ed., *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South: Letters of Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 1.

⁶⁶ King, 13.

she often expressed frustration. In 1857, she talked about how she had begun to tire of the attention necessary to keep the slaves in check: “It requires more watching & telling & running after them to get the work done, than to do it oneself. Mary has annoyed me more than I can tell you for the last few weeks & the better I treat her, the more impudent & lazy she grows.”⁶⁷ The last portion of that excerpt seems to indicate that Fox would have been in favor of some sort of punishment to correct the faults of the slaves.

Further on in the same letter, Fox engaged with the debate over the merits and detriments of emancipation: “Talk about freeing negroes, some of them couldn’t take care of themselves ten days.”⁶⁸ Since slaves could not manage on their own, without the supervision of a master, this reinforced the need for a system of discipline and control. In addition, through this statement, Fox gave credit to her efforts to subdue the unruly tendencies of the enslaved. Only with her guidance were the slaves under her watch able to serve a function. If they resisted her demands, she regarded it as an affront to her authority and status as a slaveholding woman. In this way, even if whipping was not explicitly presented as a feature of the interaction between slave and master, Fox still desired order and control in order to preserve and enhance her status.

The Fox account also delves into feelings of her utter contempt for slaves. Their incessant neediness took a toll on her over time, as she described in an 1860 letter: “There are so many things needed about the house & clothing & bedding to make the servants comfortable for the winter that I am discouraged; you have no idea what a wasteful, improvident race the negroes are.”⁶⁹ She had no interest in expending her time and effort in caring for the servants, but given her views on emancipation, she had to acknowledge that there was no alternative to the present

⁶⁷ King, 65.

⁶⁸ King, 65.

⁶⁹ King, 104.

situation. She had to put up with the duties of slave ownership, knowing full well it was preferred to granting them their freedom, which would have eliminated the divide between master and slave and diminished her social standing.

Vulnerability is not as apparent within the letters of Fox as in the other writings from antebellum slaveholders. Frustration is a more apt term to describe how she dealt with the slaves, realizing that she had to continue forth in the same manner if the slave-master divide were expected to be upheld. She seemed to tolerate this frustration on her own behalf in order to avoid the vulnerability that would come if circumstances were to have changed. If the slaves were freed or if she permitted them to act as they wished, then her authority as a member of the master class would have come into question and vulnerability would ensue. All of these hypotheticals aside, the Fox letters show that the slave-master divide was perpetuated by men and women alike.

Historian Brenda Stevenson relayed a story of severe abuse committed by a slaveholding woman, along with the cooperation of her daughter, against a young slave girl:

The slave child was a domestic who worked cleaning up her owner's home. One day her mistress caught her stealing a piece of peppermint candy. In a fit of rage she not only beat the child brutally, but called on her own daughter to help her. In the end, the slaveholding woman and her child caused Henrietta to be physically deformed for life – they had placed Henrietta's head under the rocker of a chair and rocked forward on it in order to hold her in place while they whipped her. Because Henrietta was still young, her jaw bones were soft enough for the force of the rocker to meld them together. She never was able to open her mouth completely again or to eat solid food.⁷⁰

This passage reveals an extreme example of slave whipping and punishment carried out by vengeful female participants. It supports the point that even though the Fox letters do not indicate any direct evidence of abuse on her part, a woman as angry and hateful towards her

⁷⁰ Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 112.

slaves as she expressed herself to be could have resorted to violence at some point but simply did not mention them in her correspondence with family members.

The final antebellum master with extensive writings from the period is David Golightly Harris, another modest slaveholder similar to Cobb. A resident of South Carolina, he also viewed whipping as a corrective measure, seen in an 1858 interaction with one of his slaves.

This morning I had a difficulty with Matt. I tied him up and gave him a gentle admonition in the shape of a good whipping. I intended to put him in jail and keep him there until I sold him, but he seemed so penitent & promised so fairly & the other negroes promising to see that he would behave himself in future that I concluded that I would try him once more. I think it a great piece of folly for any person to keep a negro that will not behave himself.⁷¹

Harris thought that effective whipping could improve the behavior of slaves, an essential function in his mind since he refused to own a slave that would not follow orders. These methods provided the opportunity for the reformation of slave behavior for the better, and his stance against unruly slaves demonstrated his desire to maintain order and control.

The diaries and journals investigated for the purposes of this chapter were written in the late antebellum period, which is significant especially when considering the existence of vulnerability within these accounts. It seems that as conflict between North and South became increasingly likely, masters engaged in their private writings about their feelings on those developments and how it could have an impact on their status as slaveholders moving forward. The centrality of the slavery issue in the contentious back-and-forth between representatives of northern and southern states indicates that masters would have realized that the outcome of this conflict would directly impact their livelihoods and their position within the slave-master divide. One can understand the potential vulnerability experienced by southern masters when they

⁷¹ Philip D. Racine, ed., *Piedmont Farmer: The Journals of David Golightly Harris, 1855-1870* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 71.

allowed themselves to ponder the worst-case scenario, in which their slaves were set free and their statuses diminished significantly.

The worst fears of Harris came to life through the Civil War and the eventual emancipation of slaves, much to the dismay of masters throughout the South. In an August 1865 entry into his journal, Harris expressed his disgust with the reality after the war. “For the negroes now, with the Yankees to back them in their meanness, are worse than nothing.”⁷² Defeat and emancipation resulted in the complete dissolution of the antebellum standard, with freed slaves and northerners together stripping the South of centuries-long traditions and practices. Previous feelings of vulnerability had become tangible. The whip could no longer rein in any unruly slaves in an attempt to uphold the slave-master divide. That divide had been irreparably broken.

The primary accounts of masters found in their diaries and journals, especially from the late antebellum period, pointed to the common theme of whipping viewed as a way to correct the errors of slaves so as to better establish their control. Yet, Harris and the other masters examined became aware of the instability of their mastery. The whip could be used to solidify their hold over slaves, but that did not prevent them from experiencing vulnerability. They recognized the precarious nature of the slave-master divide with the Civil War approaching on the horizon. As the war began and with the eventual defeat of the South, bringing to an end the customs of antebellum society, the control that had long been instituted through the whip unraveled.

The examination of the primary evidence detailing the perspective of masters on the practice of whipping in the antebellum South revealed vastly different ways of interpreting its uses. The predominant methods prescribed in the public realm of those interested in plantation

⁷² Racine, 389.

management thought the whip served a corrective purpose, achieved through moderate means, whereby masters would punish their slaves for errors committed with the hope being that slaves would reform. If slaves behaved better, masters would not have to whip them further and could enjoy the fruits of their labor without the additional strain created by unruliness. On the other hand, in the personal writings of masters, whipping seemed to deter feelings of vulnerability, establishing control that they may have felt was slipping away. In either perspective, masters sought to maintain the divide drawn rigidly along racial lines in the antebellum South, a social composition that served their best interests.

It is important to note that all mentions of vulnerability within this chapter are in relative terms, given the undoubted facts about the privileges and advantages enjoyed by masters during the antebellum period. They were in unquestioned positions of power and authority over their slaves, and the vulnerability discussed in connection with their diaries and journals was nothing compared to the actual vulnerability experienced by the slaves repeatedly victimized through the practice of whipping. The findings of this chapter do not intend to minimize the horrors of slavery or exaggerate any fleeting moments of desperation on the part of masters. The ensuing chapter will grant a voice to slaves who experienced the opposite end of whipping.

Chapter Three:

The Reaction of Slaves - Recognition of Powerlessness

*"I'se seed niggers beat till de blood run, an' I'se seed plenty more wid big scars, frum whuppin's but dey wuz de bad ones. You wuz whipped 'cordin' ter de deeds yo' done in dem days. A moderate whuppin's wuz thirty-nine or forty lashes an' a real whuppin' wuz a even hundred; most folks can't stand a real whuppin'."*⁷³ –Willie Cozart, WPA interview, May 12, 1937.

*"This battle with Mr. Covey, undignified as it was and as I fear my narration of it is, was the turning point in my 'life as a slave.' It rekindled in my breast the smouldering embers of liberty...I was a changed being after that fight. I was nothing before; I was a man now. It recalled to life my crushed self-respect, and my self-confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be a free man...It was a resurrection from the dark and pestiferous tomb of slavery, to the heaven of comparative freedom...When a slave cannot be flogged, he is more than half free."*⁷⁴ –Frederick Douglass, passage from his autobiography, 1892.

The responses of slaves to being whipped by their masters varied widely, as these two quotes suggest. If the brutal nature of whipping within the antebellum South can be regarded as sufficiently similar for slaves across the region, what caused these distinct reactions? An examination of primary source evidence indicates that slaves regarded whipping as an act that confirmed their entirely inferior status in relation to the master class.

Different reactions arose as a result of slaves' willingness to either accept this aspect of their existence under slavery or to actively resist against their subordination, resulting in three main groups of responses. Firstly, many expressed the idea that the whip reinforced the powerlessness and hopelessness of their situation, the whip serving as the physical embodiment of their oppression. Through the practice of whipping, slaves recognized their inability to escape from that reality, a system that placed their white masters in an unquestioned position of

⁷³ Willie Cozart interview, Works Progress Administration Slaves Narratives at the Library of Congress, hereafter cited as LOC – WPA.

⁷⁴ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: Written by Himself* (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892), 177.

authority, a fact that became physically apparent again and again with the use of the lash. While this does not mean that members of this group agreed with whipping, accounts show that they realized that not much could be done to alter their condition. Secondly, some slaves accepted whipping as a part of their lives but believed that it had to be administered in a reasonable manner, with all notions of reason being relative within the context of slavery. They expected whippings to occur due to the inherently violent nature of the institution, but they staunchly opposed forms of the practice carried out under unjust and cruel circumstances. Thirdly, a select few, including Frederick Douglass, realized a relationship between whipping and a concept of honor, a concept that excluded slaves. Examples of physical confrontations with masters in protest against further whipping reveals a desire on the part of this group to assert themselves as individuals worthy of dignity and respect, two ideals that the whip sought to strip from them.

The powerlessness expressed by slaves of the first category contrasts sharply with the resistance offered by some slaves, using physical force to assert their agency against a practice that attempted to remove any semblance of humanity from them. While some accounts overlap between groups, including Willie Cozart, whose experiences fall under the first and second classifications, it is useful to examine these reactions separately in order to display the manner in which the responses of some differed significantly from those of others. This chapter will seek to analyze the specifics of the three groups described above, not in terms of individual circumstances of the slaves during their time in slavery, but instead with an emphasis on the reactions alone.

A study of the reaction of slaves to whipping during the antebellum south would not be possible without the existence of the WPA and North American Slave Narratives, the two largest pieces of primary source material documenting individual experiences with slavery. They

provide the opportunity to analyze this subject from a vastly different perspective than that encountered within sources dealing with masters. While their contributions are essential to the findings of this chapter, both narratives present some problems that must be dealt with when taking them into consideration.

The WPA Narratives, compiled during the New Deal, offered elderly ex-slaves the opportunity to relay their experiences from the antebellum period by responding to questions posed by writers employed by the Works Progress Administration.⁷⁵ These writers, who were usually white women, came into the homes of the ex-slaves and asked them questions about those experiences that most often took place in the decade preceding the outbreak of the Civil War. Very often, the subjects told the interviewers what they wanted to hear about their time during slavery, not wanting to issue statements that might be regarded as inflammatory by the community in which they resided. These types of responses will be addressed when analyzing those who viewed whipping as an acceptable amount of violence in particular cases.

The responses still provide insight into the experiences of ex-slaves and their attitudes many years after the fact. But, the interview subjects of the WPA were generally quite young during their enslavement, which might have resulted in them not suffering the worst abuses of the institution as their parents sought to shield them. It seems reasonable to infer that masters would be more lenient in their punishment of children compared to their adult counterparts. These sources are also shaped by memory lapses due to the passage of time since slavery and their reluctance to be critical of their white masters amid fear of stirring up controversy within the still discriminatory South. Regardless, enough interviews of ex-slaves pose distinct patterns,

⁷⁵ Norman R. Yetman, "An Introduction to the WPA Narratives," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro00.html>.

indicating the existence of common experiences during the antebellum period, to make this a worthwhile collection to study when it comes to whipping.

The North American Slave Narratives consist of full-length autobiographies written by former slaves, many times after they achieved their freedom by running away to the North. The authors of these accounts tended to be much older during their time in slavery, and the high number of runaways among this group when compared with WPA subjects indicates that they were more resentful of the institution and took advantage of a chance to abscond.⁷⁶ Ninety-four percent of the autobiographers explicitly stated the cruelty of their whipping experiences while only one-third of WPA subjects made the same claim, reflecting that sense of resentment that appears in this source.⁷⁷ This provides support for prominent autobiographies including episodes of active resistance against whipping. After many years of suffering under the whip, they resorted to aggressive action to seek a remedy to their plight.

The concern with such a high number of severe accounts is the abolitionist influence over the writing of the autobiographies, which took place once the runaway slaves established themselves within Northern society. Yet there is no indication that this produced an exaggeration of cruel actions against slaves within the source. The stories related therein should be considered valuable for an investigation into the reaction of slaves to whipping because of the great detail that the passages provide, expressing an understanding on the part of the authors of the oppressive environments of which they used to be members. They also serve as a great contrast to the style of the WPAs. Whereas the interview transcripts were recorded in a manner to display the ignorance and illiteracy of the elderly ex-slaves, the authors of the autobiographies composed their works in eloquent prose. This elevation in style helps show how these authors

⁷⁶ David Thomas Bailey, "A Divided Prism: Two Sources of Black Testimony on Slavery," *The Journal of Southern History* 46 (1980): 386, doi: 10.2307/2207251.

⁷⁷ Bailey, "A Divided Prism," 391.

were better able to control the direction of their narratives than the WPA subjects, who were largely dependent upon the nature of the questions raised by the interviewers.

The first group of reactions to be examined will be those that exemplified the powerlessness and hopelessness of life under slavery. The large majority of accounts in this section come from the WPA Narratives, pointing to an oppressive existence endured by slaves in the antebellum South. They reveal the physical and emotional tolls of whipping on the lives of slaves, something that even extended to the present day for some interview subjects. Those who used the whip appeared to do so indiscriminately and without reason, except to solidify the status of slaves as lowly individuals undeserving of any forms of human decency, an idea that ex-slaves expressed in both narrative accounts.

The multiplicity of examples showing the brutal suffering of slaves, but at the same time, offering no evidence that they actively sought to remove themselves from their situation or push back against their oppression, supports the idea that these slaves viewed themselves to be in a powerless position. They understood that resistance could make their lives measurably worse. Therefore, many were left to cope with the trauma of whipping for the rest of their lives, not having an opportunity to demonstrate their grievances until they crafted an autobiography or, in the more likely case, were interviewed by a federal worker several decades later. The following specific accounts deal with the notion of whipping in relation with recognition of a slaves' powerlessness under slavery.

The interview of Andrew Boone highlights the utter brutality of the practice of whipping and his engagement with that reality. Boone discussed in vivid and horrific detail the intricate steps that went into whipping and how that impacted the individual being exposed to such violence:

Dey whupped me wid de cat o' nine tails. It had nine lashes on it. Some of de slaves was whupped wid a cobbin paddle. Dey had forty holes in 'em an' when you wus buckled to a barrel dey hit your naked flesh wid de paddle an' every whur dere wus a hole in de paddle it drawed a blister. When de whuppin' wid de paddle wus over, dey took de cat o' nine tails an' busted de blisters. By dis time de blood sometimes would be runnin' down dere heels. Den de next thing was a wash in salt water strong enough to hold up an egg. Slaves wus punished dat way fer runnin' away an' sich.⁷⁸

Boone described his knowledge of the practice step-by-step, seeming numb to the entire process, explaining the details in a casual, matter-of-fact manner to the interviewers. This excerpt mirrors that of Willie Cozart, who also related his experiences with precise detail, indicating that both men had vivid memories of the violence they were powerless to prevent. The manner in which they described acts of whipping suggests that they accepted it as a part of slavery. This does not imply that they welcomed the punishments by any stretch. Instead, the whip served as a reminder of their hopelessness, confirming the damaging effects that the violence dictated by masters had on their physical conditions.

Masters attempted to exert their dominance over slaves' minds as well as bodies, extending that powerless conception even further into their lives. Henry Bobbit indicated that he had been whipped for displaying an interest in learning, showing how some masters viewed the education of their slaves as a threat to their unquestioned authority: "Now talkin' 'bout sompin' dat we'd git a whuppin' fer, dat wuz fer havin' a pencil an' piece of paper er a slate. Iffen you jist looked lak you wanted ter larn ter red er write you got a lickin'."⁷⁹ Masters regarded literacy as providing a greater potential for slaves to become unruly and thus threaten their superior position over them. By examining Bobbit's excerpt alongside those of Boone and Cozart, the total control exerted by masters through the whip becomes more apparent. The physical brutality of repeated strikes against the naked flesh of a slave, combined with the prevention of reading

⁷⁸ Andrew Boone interview, LOC-WPA.

⁷⁹ Henry Bobbit interview, LOC-WPA.

and writing, emphasizes the use of the whip as a tool to overtake slaves so as to remove any purpose or motivation in their lives besides their utility as laborers. A slave scarred physically and mentally understood their rightful place in southern society, as determined by those in a position to commit violent acts against them.

The WPA conducted their interview with Henry Bobbit, who was 87 years old at the time, on May 13, 1937. Exactly two weeks later, his brother, Clay, aged 100, took his turn. The elder Bobbit handed heavy criticism against his former master: “Massa Dick ain’t good ter us, an’ on my arm hyar, jist above de elbow am a big scar dis day whar he whupped me wid a cowhide. He ain’t whupped me fer nothin’ ‘cept dat I is a nigger. I has a whole heap of dem whuppin’s, mostly case I won’t obey his orders an’ I’s seed slaves beat ‘most to deff.”⁸⁰ Bobbit believed that his race, not only his status as a slave, contributed to his whipping, something that he opposed, believing that the punishment was cruel and unjust. He experienced these actions repeatedly during his enslavement, something that comes across in the passage, and a reality that would once again instill a sense of powerlessness within him. If Henry had been whipped for displaying an interest in learning, and Clay’s punishment derived from his status as a black man held in bondage, the Bobbit brothers witnessed the practice of whipping motivated by different reasons, none of which they could work to change. Their oppression under these circumstances indicated their inability to control the direction of their lives. Masters, through the whip, determined that.

Cornelia Andrews provides an interesting glimpse into the development of confidence and conviction within subsequent generations of African-Americans, while at the same time, the ex-slaves themselves expressed notions of shame and vulnerability, which emanated from the

⁸⁰ Clay Bobbit interview, LOC-WPA.

abuses they suffered under slavery. Her interview proceeded along without a hitch, providing sufficient responses to the questions raised by the interviewer, until she was asked whether or not she had ever been severely beaten during her enslavement. Andrews answered with a blunt response of “no.” Yet, her daughter happened to be in the same room while the interview was being conducted and she objected to her mother passing over the issue:

Here the daughter, a graduate of Cornell University, who was in the room listening came forward. ‘Open your shirt, mammy, and let the lady judge for herself.’ The old ladies eyes flashed as she sat bolt upright. She seemed ashamed, but the daughter took the shirt off, exposing the back and shoulders which were marked as though branded with a plaited cowhide whip. There was no doubt of that at all.⁸¹

After this intervention by her daughter, Andrews went on to describe how she had been whipped for dropping dishes, resulting in the scars that she carried with her to the present day.

Andrews visibly displayed a level of shame towards the interviewer when the issue of her past physical abuse came up. Without the presence of her daughter, she would have continued on with the questioning without having ever disclosed the nature of her experiences with whipping. Some could argue that this simply revealed an elderly woman trying to move the process along without creating an uncomfortable situation for the white interviewer, seeing no benefit in mentioning troublesome issues from the past, and while that could very well have been true, her reaction in the present day seemed to indicate long-lasting effects from her time in slavery. This points to the fact that Andrews still felt the powerlessness pressed upon her by slavery and the damaging effects of whipping, experiences which her daughter did not have to go through at an earlier point in her life.

The fact that Andrews’s daughter attended and graduated from Cornell is significant not only for agency acquired through a high level of education, which she clearly asserted by

⁸¹ Cornelia Andrews interview, LOC-WPA.

interrupting the interview to force her mother to reveal the truth behind her experiences with whipping, but also because of the school's location in the North. At Cornell, she was no doubt exposed to a different set of social and cultural values than those that existed in the South, a region where her mother had been raised according to an entirely different worldview. Her mother's behavior during the interview displayed a timid disposition in the presence of a white figure, something that undoubtedly originated during the antebellum period. Andrews' reluctance to reveal the evidence of whipping scars suggests that the habits of behavior that were instilled within her many years prior continued to have an effect.

Interactions between slaves and their masters in various accounts touch on the power of whipping and feelings of shame that the Andrews interview stressed. These expressions of powerlessness and hopelessness did not only take place within the WPA Narratives but also with the autobiographies. William Wells Brown provides a great example of this idea in his writing. He admittedly became overwhelmed with shame after an experience with whipping. It all started when dinner guests of his master, a man by the name of Walker, spilled wine because Brown had overfilled their glasses, a mistake that infuriated Walker: "Mr. Walker apologized to them for my carelessness, but looked at me as though he would see me again on this subject. After the gentlemen had left the room, he asked me what I meant by my carelessness, and said that he would attend to me."⁸² Walker's guests were also distinguished white men, and they had all been discussing proposed slave sales among one another. Brown's mistake intruded upon a privileged meeting between men of vastly superior social positions. The fact that Walker brought the issue up again once his guests had left the room indicates the embarrassment that Brown had brought upon him, an error that required sufficient punishment.

⁸² William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, An American Slave: Written by Himself* (London: Charles Gilpin Bishopgate – St. Without, 1849), 52-53.

Walker sent Brown to a jailer, who would administer the whipping himself. While he made his way to be whipped, he struggled with the reality of his impending punishment. Brown then tricked a free black man whom he encountered on his trip to take the note and money to the jail, claiming that he did not have enough time to complete a task assigned to him by his master. After the free black man entered the jail, Brown listened outside and heard the man receiving a terrible whipping, knowing that it had been intended for him instead.

After deceiving this man into being whipped in his place, Brown became overwhelmed by a sense of shame: “This incident shows how it is that slavery makes its victims lying and mean; for which vices it afterwards reproaches them, and uses them as arguments to prove that they deserve no better fate.”⁸³ Brown acknowledged a sense of self-contempt after this incident, believing that the practice of whipping pushed slaves to pursue actions that they would not have chosen if they were not fixed in an oppressive existence. The violence inherent in the institution created the motivation on the part of slaves to seek relief from their pain and suffering. The passage indicates that actions that harmed others worsened their morale and further reinforced notions of their own inferiority that southern society had already instilled within them. An avoidance of whipping momentarily preserved Brown’s physical well being at the expense of another man’s. This damaged his psyche, something that already had to have been quite vulnerable due to the presence of the whip within the lives of slaves.

The preceding narrative accounts add to an understanding of whipping in the antebellum South as a practice that degraded its victims in physical and emotional manners, serving to suppress their identities as human beings in the hopes of creating a group of slaves that would be loyal to their masters. In this way, masters succeeded in taking away any opportunities for their

⁸³ Brown, 57.

slaves to pursue actions that would benefit their situation, forcing them to accept the vicious reality of a violent institution. This section by no means intends to cast blame upon those slaves who did not attempt to resist this treatment. The accounts do not express the idea that slaves willingly went along with whipping. Rather, circumstances made it nearly impossible for resistance to succeed, a plausible conclusion given the brutal conditions that the whip created for them. Their experiences with the worst of whipping illustrated the inherent cruelty of slavery and the difficulties it created for those suffering under it.

The next grouping of responses differs slightly from the preceding section in that these accounts engaged the idea that whipping had to be practiced according to a “reasonable” set of expectations, given the violent nature of slavery. Some slaves regarded their punishments as somewhat deserved, knowing full well their position within the social order while others opposed whipping they viewed as violating some sense of justice, even within the context of slavery. A link can be made between the powerlessness of the first group of accounts and the set of expectations established here. Realizing the nature of slavery and the whip’s oppressive ability, slaves seemed to understand that whipping would inevitably take place, but that a line still had to be drawn at some point. Even with tempered expectations, slaves revealed their rejection of whipping that occurred for clearly unjust reasons.

The first part of this grouping points out the existence of whipping that went along with the expectations of slaves regarding violent interactions with masters. For instance, if slaves committed a mistake or acted out of line, masters would undoubtedly punish them for it. Numerous interview subjects admitted that punishments were oftentimes reasonably administered, something that can be seen in the Willie Cozart excerpt. He acknowledged that the slaves that experienced the worst whippings were “de bad ones,” as if to point out that there were

many slaves that acted and behaved in a proper manner, and they were not punished like those who disrupted plantation life.⁸⁴ The unruly slaves that he referred to, though, could expect to be whipped knowing the position they occupied within the system and their subsequent susceptibility to violence.

In his interview, ex-slave Millie Barber brought up the idea that whippings were handed out for mistakes of their own doing, especially when the master or his family discovered those mistakes. He offered a personal story involving these circumstances: “Did I ever git a whippin’? Dat I did. How many times? More than I can count on fingers and toes. What I git a whippin’ for? Oh, just one thing, then another. One time I break a plate while washin’ dishes and another time I split de milk on de dinin’ room floor. It was always for somethin’, sir. I needed de whippin’.”⁸⁵ Barber claimed that he deserved the whipping given the fact that the accidents were his own fault. Whipping, even after an innocuous misstep such as spilled milk, would have been expected according to the understood standards under slavery. These incidents provoked minimal opposition among slaves, as expressed in the narrative accounts.

Tom McAlpin presents another aspect to the theme of whippings that went along with the norms of slavery. He described his efforts on one occasion to keep his master’s hogs out of the plantation’s corn crop, a task that had been specifically assigned to him. Frustrated after several failed attempts to fulfill the objective, McAlpin decided to sew the hogs’ eyelids completely shut, believing it would be an effective way to solve the problem. His master did not appreciate his actions and whipped McAlpin for it, something that he viewed as a plausible reaction, as McAlpin stated to his interviewer: “Boss, dat was de onlies’ lesson I ever needed in my life. It

⁸⁴ Willie Cozart interview, LOC-WPA.

⁸⁵ Millie Barber interview, LOC-WPA.

done de wuk.”⁸⁶ His reference to whipping as a “lesson” indicates that he understood his punishment within a larger framework, whereby he realized that similar whippings came along as a result of the violent nature of slavery. McAlpin seemed to regard that incident as teaching him about reasonable standards for future interactions with the whip.

The specifics of the Cozart, Barber, and McAlpin accounts reveal that these men had been exposed to a wide range of physical torment committed either against themselves or their peers, forming the basis of a set of expectations about the violence that accompanied their involvement with the master class and the practice of whipping. Whipping would take place if they acted against the wishes of their masters. According to this view, they did not oppose these instances of whipping. This creates problems with regard to the proper interpretation of the WPA Narratives.

The analysis of WPA accounts encounters difficulties with the issue of ex-slaves telling the interviewers what they would prefer to hear about their past experiences, especially when it came to a sensitive topic such as whipping. These narratives depicting whipping as a somewhat deserved or expected act have provoked a lot of speculation as to their sincerity, trying to determine whether or not the ex-slaves talk about their experiences in this manner to appease the white interviewers in front of them since most of the ex-slaves being questioned still resided in areas close to their former plantation, suffered under conditions of immense poverty, and were reluctant to criticize the actions of former prominent members of society with the fear being that any negative remarks about their past would present trouble for them in the present day. There is also the possibility of having subservience towards whites having been instilled within them early in life while they were enslaved, leading them to act in a more acquiescent manner towards

⁸⁶ Tom McAlpin interview, LOC-WPA.

the interviewers.⁸⁷ Those who believe in the existence of these elements within the WPA Narratives would argue that the responses by ex-slaves indicating the justification behind the practice of whipping were inherently flawed and should not be considered as their actual opinions.

The analysis of this section of the chapter, though, seeks to separate the notion of justified whipping from the expected actions taken by masters given the inherent violence of slavery. It would seem foolish to assert that either Barber or McAlpin would assent with their punishments, realizing that the scope of their infractions pale in comparison with the effects of whipping. The distinction lies in a punishment that would be justified universally versus one that could be reasonably expected within the realm of the antebellum South. The violent environment that they lived in set the stage for an understanding of whipping as something that would inevitably take place under certain circumstances, but this does not mean that they agreed with the practice. This idea helps to reconcile the answers of ex-slaves to the interviewers' questions with the brutal reality of whipping.

Moving forward with the second grouping of reactions, some interview subjects dealt with whipping delivered by either less affluent slaveholders or slave patrols, a practice that they vehemently opposed. They regarded these punishments as cruel and unjust due to their victimization at the hands of men motivated solely by shallow self-interest. This contrasts with the examples of Barber and McAlpin, who expressed a level of understanding with their whippings, realizing that they were foreseeable outcomes within a violent and oppressive society. The accounts that follow rejected whipping carried out by lower-class white men.

⁸⁷ Bailey, "A Divided Prism," 403.

Manda Walker, in her WPA interview, relayed a tale of her father, who lived on an adjacent plantation, coming to visit her and the rest of his family. In order to leave his own plantation, he had to obtain a pass specifying the permitted length of his absence. But, since a river separating the two plantations was at a very high level, he could not make it back before the expiration of his pass. Upon discovering this, slave patrollers began to whip him in front of Walker, which she acknowledged as being a traumatic event in her life. During the course of the whipping, her master and mistress encountered the scene and protested to what was taking place, allowing her father to safely return to his plantation without any further punishment.

The opposing reactions to her father's expired pass among the patrollers and her master prompted Walker to criticize the practice of lower-class whites in administering the whip:

Why de good white folks put up wid them poor white trash patarollers I never can see or understand. You never see classy white buckra men a patarollin'. It was always some low-down white men, dat never owned a nigger in deir life, doin' de patarollin' and a strippin' de clothes off men, lak pappy, right befo' de wives and chillum and beatin' de blood out of him. No, sir, good white men never dirty deir hands and souls in sich work of de devil as dat.⁸⁸

The last sentence of that excerpt is problematic and patently untrue; but it might be the case that Walker experienced slavery under a benevolent and caring master or that she did not want to criticize the master class in front of the interviewer. Whichever was the case, the most important distinction for this chapter is the one she made between poor whites and masters. She held masters to be of a higher moral order than their poorer counterparts, leading to patrollers abusing their limited power against innocent slaves. Walker opposed whipping perpetrated by individuals with no regard for slaves or their families. This differs from the Barber and McAlpin accounts that understood their punishments in the larger context of the South. This cultural

⁸⁸ Manda Walker interview, LOC-WPA.

framework did not matter for Walker, who viewed the individual actions of the patrollers against her father as cruel, unjust, and humiliating.

Charlie Crump spoke harshly of his time during slavery, rejecting the manner in which his master treated him and his fellow slaves: “we got very little ter eat, nothin’ ter wear an’ a whole lot o’ whuppin’s. Dey ain’t had no slaves ‘cept seben or eight, in fact, dey wuz pore white trash tryin’ ter git rich; so dey make us wuck.”⁸⁹ His account agrees with Walker’s disapproval of whippings carried out by poorer whites. Crump characterized his master according to his lowly economic status, especially when compared to many other slaveholders of the period. He opposed his master’s exploitation of slave labor in pursuit of self-interest, stating that he had done nothing to deserve the frequent whippings.

Walker and Crump differed from Barber and McAlpin in their reactions to whipping because of the absence of any constructive purpose behind the practice in their minds. While the masters involved in the initial accounts restricted punishments within the realm of reasonable expectations of violence, the slave patrols and Crump’s poor master violated those expectations by indiscriminately using the whip. Mistakes had not been made to warrant such actions, as opposed to the admissions made by Barber and McAlpin, and they believed these instances to be cruel and unjust. The accounts in this section reveal the distorted view of life within the context of slavery. Reactions to whipping depended largely upon the inherently violent character of life in the antebellum South for the enslaved, an idea that contributed to some accepting whippings without defiant opposition. A certain level of violence seemed to be allowed, but a point was reached at which whipping could no longer be tolerated, as with the actions of poor whites.

⁸⁹ Charlie Crump interview, LOC-WPA.

The third and final group in this chapter points to a realization of whipping's relation with a Southern concept of honor, found most prominently in the autobiographies penned by ex-slaves. They understood that masters used the whip to mark the clear distinction between the honorable planters and the dishonorable slaves, creating that sense of powerlessness already examined. The consideration of honor in conjunction with whipping created the greatest opportunity for active resistance in order to assert their own sense of honor against the cultural concept, which masters invoked to justify the institution of slavery, among other southern practices. The autobiographical accounts of Solomon Northrup and Frederick Douglass reveal powerful images of slaves entering into confrontations with their masters. While each author described a forceful counterattack against whipping, the two men ultimately disagreed over their relationships with Southern honor.

Northrup indicated a recognition of a culture of honor and his vulnerability and powerlessness within it. After having come under the authority of Master Tibbeats, he stated the dichotomy between his true feelings towards the man and his inability to effectively assert control over his situation: "He was my master, entitled by law to my flesh and blood, and to exercise over me such tyrannical control as his mean nature prompted; but there was no law that could prevent my looking upon him with intense contempt."⁹⁰ While he despised the abuse and tiresome work that Tibbeats forced upon him, he understood a sharp distinction between master and slave. At the outset, Northrup admitted his realization of inferiority within the South and an apparent powerlessness to remove himself from such a situation.

He made a concerted effort to change that reality after having had enough of Tibbeats' abuses; as he was about to be whipped once again, Northrup resisted his master's advances,

⁹⁰ Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northrup* (Auburn, NY: Derby and Miller, 1853), 109.

quickly gained the advantage in the ensuing altercation and proceeded to whip Tibbeats numerous times. After this exchange, Tibbeats stormed off, leading Northrup to second-guess his decision to use force against his master: “The reaction that followed my extreme ebullition of anger produced the most painful sensations of regret. An unfriended, helpless slave – what could I do, what could I say, to justify, in the remotest manner, the heinous act I had committed, of resenting a white man’s contumely and abuse.”⁹¹ He understood the nature of Southern society and his placement within it, realizing his lowly position in the context of what had just taken place with the consideration of his inherent dishonor in comparison to Tibbeats. When Tibbeats returned with two acquaintances with the idea to hang Northrup from the nearest tree limb, he offered no resistance, apparently too ashamed to once again take aggressive action. At that point, he had fully accepted his position as a slave and submitted to their authority, only being saved at the last moment by the intervention of a white overseer.

Northrup’s account highlights a range of emotions that he experienced in a short period of time that came about through his efforts to remove the burdens imposed upon himself by a system that relegated slaves to the bottom of the social order. Ultimately he came to terms with Southern honor, not in terms of agreeing with its meaning and intentions, but rather admitting to himself that slavery and whipping were potent forces, phenomena that could not always be overcome simply through the use of brute force. Despite his powerful resistance, he could not liberate himself from the shackles of slavery and continued whipping.

Douglass, in his dealings with his master, Mr. Covey, also experienced feelings of disgrace through his exposure to whipping: “Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me – in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed; my intellect languished; the disposition to

⁹¹ Northrup, 113.

read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died out; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me, and behold a man transformed to a brute!”⁹² Through the oppression that the whip forced upon him, he felt like a dishonorable man who had allowed his constant punishment to deprive himself of a true sense of humanity. As a result of these ideas of self-contempt stirring up within him, Douglass often found himself hiding out in the woods to escape the abuses of Covey: “Life in itself had almost become burdensome to me. All my outward relations were against me. I must stay here and starve, or go home to Covey’s and have my flesh torn to pieces and my spirit humbled under his cruel lash. These were the alternatives before me.”⁹³ This passage indicates the physical and emotional scars that whipping could inflict upon its victims, and Douglass here displayed a sense of hopelessness with his situation, with no end to his misery in sight.

That all changed, though, when Douglass actively fought back against Covey and his endeavors to once again punish him violently. As the two men grappled with one another, they stood against each other “as equals before the law. The very color of the man was forgotten.”⁹⁴ In this initial phase of the conflict, Douglass had already displayed a change in his outlook, any distinctions previously made according to honor were now forgotten. Douglass and Covey were interacting on a level plane of existence, an entirely different reality from the earlier scene with Douglass in the woods. He admitted that after this fight, Covey never again whipped him.⁹⁵ Through his physical opposition to whipping and the rejection of Southern honor that went along with it, Douglass removed himself from that exclusionary system and created a personal sense of honor. His actions taken against Covey had an empowering effect and enabled him to bring

⁹² Douglass, 152.

⁹³ Douglass, 165.

⁹⁴ Douglass, 173.

⁹⁵ Douglass, 176-177.

honor upon himself, something that had not yet been seen in any of the previous narrative accounts.

An investigation into the reactions of slaves to the practice of whipping, whereby distinctions within individual reactions can be identified, offers an example of how people adapt to adverse conditions and confront their problems. Obviously, slavery presented an extreme set of circumstances to those who suffered under its yoke, clearly seen in accounts describing the impact of whipping upon the physical and emotional states of its victims. The purpose of this chapter was not to assert the benefits of one group of reactions over another. These reactions evolved out of individual circumstances and the responses taken by one group may not have been possible for others. Therefore, this chapter shows the variety of ways in which slaves interacted with their victimization, highlighting three main distinctions. More importantly, it indicated the attempt of an oppressed segment of the population to deal with the cruelty of their existence.

Conclusion - Moving Beyond Slavery

I have aimed to assure them that knowledge can be obtained under difficulties; that poverty may give place to competency; that obscurity is not an absolute bar to distinction, and that a way is open to welfare and happiness to all who will resolutely and wisely pursue that way; that neither slavery, stripes, imprisonment nor proscription need extinguish self-respect, crush manly ambition, or paralyze effort; that no power outside of himself can prevent a man from sustaining an honorable character and a useful relation to his day and generation; that neither institutions nor friends can make a race to stand unless it has strength in its own legs; that there is no power in the world which can be relied upon to help the weak against the strong or the simple against the wise; that races, like individuals, must stand or fall by their own merits; that all the prayers of Christendom cannot stop the force of a single bullet, divest arsenic of poison, or suspend any law of nature. In my communication with the colored people I have endeavored to deliver them from the power of superstition, bigotry, and priest-craft. In theology I have found them strutting about in the old clothes of the masters, just as the masters strut about in the old clothes of the past. The falling power remains among them long since it has ceased to be the religious fashion in our refined and elegant white churches. I have taught that the "fault is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings," that "who would be free, themselves must strike the blow." I have urged upon them self-reliance, self-respect, industry, perseverance, and economy, to make the best of both worlds, but to make the best of this world first because it comes first, and that he who does not improve himself by the motives and opportunities afforded by this world gives the best evidence that he would not improve in any other world.⁹⁶

-Frederick Douglass, 1892.

Douglass wrote these words towards the end of a life filled with a variety of experiences, from his beginnings in slavery, wherein he suffered under the most oppressive elements of the institution, through his escape to the North and eventually culminating in his ascension to prominent abolitionist and spokesman for African-Americans in this country. He felt what it was like to be regarded as inferior solely on the basis of his race but was later able to advocate for the rights and privileges of those who continued to toil under conditions that he endured under slavery. Douglass, through his experiences at both ends of this spectrum, gave hope to those who had been stripped of any semblance of human dignity and respect.

⁹⁶ Douglass, 582-583.

Douglass expressed these ideas in the concluding portion of his autobiography, stating that newly-freed blacks, in the aftermath of the Civil War and their emancipation, had the ability to stand on level ground with whites, the race of their former masters, and aspire towards a level of honor previously unattainable during their enslavement. Nobody would help them in this regard, however, and it would be the responsibility of blacks to reach these lofty goals. Fortunately, whites no longer possessed the power to prevent their advancement. Douglass believed that his fellow blacks should endeavor to improve their lot and leave the legacy of slavery behind as a distant memory. If successful, they would mirror his own experiences, resisting the brutal mastery of Covey and eventually being able to reap the benefits of freedom and his own hard work in elevating himself above the degradation that slavery and the whip sought to instill.

The experiences of Douglass were extraordinary, though, in comparison with the plight of the vast majority of blacks who were held in bondage during the antebellum period. Douglass virtually stood alone as a figure representing African-American success and independence as a direct result of the oppression faced by slaves due to the brutality of the whip and other aspects of the institution. His call for blacks to remove the stigma brought upon them by slavery and pursue their own paths moving forward, separate from the orders and punishments delivered by masters, was noble in its intent but unrealistic and even impossible for many ex-slaves.

The passage of the Civil War Amendments in the wake of the sectional conflict abolished slavery and was supposed to ease the transition of freed slaves into southern society, but the developments in the years to come proved that the end of slavery would not produce immediate and sweeping changes for the racial divide in the region. The institutional makeup of the South had been altered through its defeat in the Civil War, but the ideology of its white population was

not influenced by emancipation and the enactment of national legislation that sought to place blacks on more equal terms with whites. Historian C. Vann Woodward asserted that, “Whites clung unwaveringly to the old doctrine of white supremacy and innate Negro inferiority that had been sustained by the old regime.”⁹⁷ They wanted to maintain the reality that had persisted in the South for centuries, no matter what changes had taken place to dissuade them.

The former master class, when confronted with the problem of having to live alongside former slaves now freed, desired to ensure that equality between the races would not be established. In the absence of slavery, southern whites turned to segregation as the vehicle by which their mastery would continue to exist. The resulting Jim Crow era witnessed segregation in public accommodations, first in modes of transportation such as trains and street cars before extending to restaurants, bathrooms, and various other facilities. Southern blacks experienced oppression at the hands of whites who wished to uphold the subordinate position of the formerly-enslaved race. The actions of the Ku Klux Klan and the rampant nature of lynching revealed that violence committed against blacks did not come to an end with the abolition of slavery. Whipping may not have been around anymore, but whites had revamped the institutional framework of the South so as to maintain their dominance in the region.

Douglass died within three years of writing the passage at the beginning of this section, and it had to have been clear to him at that point that the situation of blacks in the country, but in the South specifically, had not improved drastically since abolition. Jim Crow policies had fortified the racial divide that had been threatened by the end of the antebellum era and the defeat of the Confederacy in the Civil War. Douglass supported African Americans’ empowerment and liberation from their prior condition of enslavement and oppression, but southern whites

⁹⁷ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 22.

thwarted any realistic attempts at achieving these visions. A year after Douglass' passing, the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that 'separate but equal' was constitutional, validating the efforts of the Jim Crow South to undermine the ability of blacks to achieve what Douglas had set out in his autobiography.

The next several decades of southern history was filled with instances of injustice committed against blacks, whether it be their disenfranchisement through corrupt poll taxes or grandfather clauses or their convictions at the hands of all-white juries in trials that were almost certainly determined ahead of time, among many other examples. The Civil War Amendments failed to accomplish their purpose in being passed. Southern blacks had been freed, technically enabling them to pursue a life of their choosing without any restraints as had been the case under slavery. Instead, the discrimination experienced by blacks rendered them inferior relative to whites, a pervasive reality throughout the region until the passage of the civil rights legislation in the 1960s, a century after the dissolution of the antebellum period and slavery.

The progression of the South after the Civil War suggests that the institution of slavery had long-term effects in how it shaped the way of life in the entire region. Abolition did not usher in a newfound era of equality and tranquility between blacks and whites. Segregation established a system that would continue the separation and elevation of whites above blacks, demonstrating that slavery and the practice of whipping left behind a legacy that continued to be felt under Jim Crow.

Whipping helped entrench the divide between master and slave during slavery, a gulf that separated the two races well into the future. Masters used the whip in order to establish and maintain the order and control they desired on their plantations during the antebellum period. They recognized their dominant position atop the social hierarchy of the South, and the practice

of whipping served to uphold that. This pursuit to preserve the racial divide and superiority of whites over blacks persisted after the antebellum period, as seen in the development and entrenchment of Jim Crow segregation policies. The institutional framework had shifted, but the ideological consistency across multiple generations of southern whites enabled oppression and discrimination to exist for centuries, contributing to one of the darkest chapters in this nation's history.

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