

THE SOUTHWESTERN MIGRATION AND ITS EFFECT ON SLAVE BREEDING IN THE  
BORDER STATES (1792-1860)

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## THE ROLE OF SLAVE BREEDING IN THE SOUTHWESTERN MIGRATION (1792-1860)

By the end of the eighteenth century, calls for the prohibition of the transatlantic slave trade had become prevalent in American society. Economic depression in the upper South reduced the demand for new slaves and legislation passed at both the national and state levels banned the importation of African slaves. The Constitutional Convention of 1787 prolonged the slave trade for twenty years, creating a scramble in which tens of thousands of Africans were imported into the Deep South, which continued to suffer from labor shortages.<sup>1</sup>

The increasing demand for cotton exacerbated labor shortages in the Deep South and also opened a lucrative slave trading system in the upper South. The African slave trade, which was abolished in 1807, created a vacuum that led to the hyper growth of a new slave population. This new slave population was created by planters who promoted pregnancies amongst their female slaves, increasing the number of slaves available for the Southwestern migration. The historical evidence of renegade ships continuing the transatlantic trade, such as the *Wanderer* captured in 1857 carrying an illegal cargo of 409 Africans from Angola, also provides evidence of the huge demand for labor in the cultivation of cotton.<sup>2</sup>

Many historians suppose that this growth was achieved naturally and cite the shorter nursing periods of North American slaves juxtaposed to those of African women in South America for the wide gap in population growth. Other theories suggest that geographical and climate issues are the cause for the differences in the two slave populations. These arguments comprise the majority of mainstream explanations for the high population growth of African

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Kolchin, *AMERICAN SLAVERY 1619-1877* ( New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 79-85.

<sup>2</sup> Erik Calonius, *The Wanderer: The Last American Slave Ship and The Conspiracy that Set its Sail* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2006),

slaves in North America. While slave-breeding is viewed as controversial or taboo despite an abundance of historical evidence.

The first histories of slavery in America, which were solely written from the perspectives of slave owners ignored the issue and only addressed it in an attempt to discredit its existence. Winfield H. Collins, one of the first historians to address the issue of slave breeding in 1904, rejected its validity and set precedence for how the historiography of the domestic slave trade would be interpreted. Collins argued that slaves were only sold by planters who were bankrupt and even created calculations that showed a lack of profitability in rearing slaves juxtaposed to the cost of maintaining them.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, highly influential historians such as Ulrich Phillips outright ignored slave breeding by stating that he could find, “no shred of supporting evidence” for its existence. Historiography would have to wait nearly fifty years until this system would be given any serious consideration. Calculations made by economists during the late 1950’s established the importance of a growing slave population to the income of Southern planters and historians such as Lewis C. Gray, rejected Collins’ arguments against the profitability of slave breeding. In his work, *History of agriculture in the southern United States to 1860*, Gray states, “the rearing of slaves constituted an important element in the agricultural economy of the South.”<sup>4</sup> These differing arguments set the stage for two differing historiographies regarding the scale and existence of the practices that manipulated the procreation among slave populations for economic purposes.

In *AMERICAN SLAVERY*, Peter Kolchin writes, “scholars do not fully agree on the reasons for the unusual natural growth of the American slave population.” He also suggests,

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<sup>3</sup> Randall Miller, John Smith, *Dictionary Of Afro-American Slavery*. (Westport, Ct: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1988), 83.

<sup>4</sup> Randall Miller, John Smith, *Dictionary Of Afro-American Slavery*, 83.

“although historians continue to debate the factors responsible for the atypical growth of the American slave population, their disagreements are less over the existence of these factors than over their relative importance.”<sup>5</sup> But these factors play a much larger role in how slavery is interpreted. Excluding the effects of slave breeding from the demographics, and by referring to these numbers as “natural population growth,” limits the historical understanding of slavery as it occurred in North America.

Acknowledging the role of slave breeding not only provides evidence for the atypical population growth in North America, but also provides examples of how slaveholders used sexual manipulation and preferential treatment in order to encourage obedience, increase their slave populations and produce offspring that would garnish a higher trade value. In his work, *In the Hands of Strangers: Readings on Foreign and Domestic Slave Trading*, Robert Edgar Conrad details over twenty narratives by ex-slaves in the 1930’s WPA’s Federal Writers Project that detail the breeding of slaves for eventual sale.<sup>6</sup>

Along with the narratives of former slaves, evidence of slave breeding can also be found in the testimonies of several prominent Southerners, such as Thomas Jefferson Randolph, a grandson of Thomas Jefferson, who claimed that over 8,000 slaves had been reared in Virginia and sold to Southern states in the twenty years prior to his 1832 speech to the Virginia legislature. He also told this body that it was “a practice, and an increasing practice in parts of Virginia, to rear slaves for market. How can an honorable mind...bear to see this ancient

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Kolchin, *AMERICAN SLAVERY 1619-1877*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Conrad, *In the Hands of Strangers: Readings on Foreign and Domestic Slave Trading*. (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 232.

dominion converted into one grand menageries where men are to be reared for market like oxen for the shambles?”<sup>7</sup>

Early American leaders were not unaware of the labor shortages that would be created by the prohibition of the transatlantic slave trade and decided to allow the trade to continue for twenty years after the 1797 date to ban it. During these transitional years the slave population grew from 681,777 to 1,005,685, expanding to seven additional states.<sup>8</sup>

While most Border States were active in supplying slaves for the Southwestern migration, Virginia would serve as vanguard to this domestic system of the slave trade.<sup>9</sup> In 1832, Thomas Dew, one of the most visible defenders of the institution of slavery and professor of history, metaphysics, and political economy at The College of William & Mary, told the Virginia legislature, “that upwards of 6,000 [slaves] are yearly exported to other States. Virginia is, in fact, a *Negro* raising State for other States. She produces enough for her own supply, and six thousand for sale.”<sup>10</sup>

There are three important factors that created the ideal atmosphere for slave rearing in the Border States. First, a decline in tobacco cultivation due to overworked and depleted soils created a lack of labor. The strict economic views on slavery created planters who made greater demands on the soils. After frontier conditions disappeared, planters continued the one-crop

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Conrad, *In the Hands of Strangers: Readings on Foreign and Domestic Slave Trading*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 231.

<sup>8</sup> Historical Statistics of the U.S. (1970), Franklin (1988). Accessed from <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/wahl.slavery.us>, on 1 October 18, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> The term Border States refers to eight states, Delaware, Maryland, District of Columbia, Virginia, North and South Carolina, Kentucky and Tennessee. The Southern States, or Deep South refers to six states that imported slaves consisting of Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida, and Alabama. Georgia holds the position of an Eastern coastal state that played a smaller less significant role in breeding slaves for the Southwestern migration.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Conrad, *In the Hands of Strangers: Readings on Foreign and Domestic Slave Trading*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 232.

system perpetuated by slavery, which also prevented much-needed crop rotation. Next, the popular beliefs that depicted people of native and African descent as sub-human allowed Europeans to treat their slaves as soulless cattle. Both religious and philosophical doctrines of the era proposed that Africans were a cursed race of savages and that Europeans or White men were left the duties of civilizing a lesser group of people. Finally, the Border States had to compete with the growing capitalist power of the Northern States. As industry began to surge, most Border States remained mostly agrarian and struggled to keep pace. These events essentially created a similar situation to that of the Northern States that only required slaves for domestic and manual semi-skilled labor positions. Unlike some Northern states that relaxed the laws regarding slavery, Border States continued the practice and prospered by supplying the labor force that made cotton king in the South.<sup>11</sup>

Although most historians agree that slavery played a role in depleting the soils throughout both the Border States and Deep South, there is no such agreement on the role it played in slave breeding. This is most likely due to the uncomfortable sentiments that stem from acknowledging that some African Americans were given the same treatment as farm animals during the domestic slave trade. Throughout history the paternalism of planters is placed at the forefront of debates concerning slavery. It is typical for planters to be viewed as a “family orientated” group that cared for and protected their “investments.” In an article debating the effects of soil depletion on slave rearing, Conway Zirkle suggests, “actually the economic value of the internal slave trade was negligible when compared with the value of the crops grown by slave labor. Perhaps the commercial breeding of slaves was never openly acknowledged because it did not occur, and it did not occur because it could not pay. In fact, the Southerners could

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<sup>11</sup> Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy & Society of the Slave South*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 85-99.

afford to be as moral about slave breeding as the New Englanders could be about slavery itself.”<sup>12</sup> To the layman this argument may appear valid, but further examination illustrates that these arguments must have been made on an emotional level, far from reality. Conservative estimates of slave sale prices between 1850 and 1860, values them at two hundred million dollars, or twenty million per year.<sup>13</sup> These staggering numbers would be difficult to consider negligible during any period of history and are even more sobering when considering they are associated with the sale of humans as property or investment capital.

The demographics of slave populations provide additional evidence that the capitalist system of slavery encouraged the rearing of slaves for market. In his essay, *The Breeding of Slaves for Sale and the Westward Expansion of Slavery 1850-1860*, economist Richard Sutch details census data that conclusively illustrates higher rates of population increase in the Southwestern slave states than in the Eastern or Border States. In regards to the highly detailed work of his study, Sutch suggests, “There is no question that the states with poorer soil were providing slaves for the rapidly growing western regions.”<sup>14</sup> This essay which cites slaves being treated as capital assets for the staggering demographics of slave-breeding, indicates that over two hundred thousand slaves were exported from the Border States into the Deep South during the final decade of slavery.

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<sup>12</sup> Zirkle, Conway, "Soil Exhaustion, the Territorial Limitation of Slavery, and the Civil War." *The University of Chicago Press on behalf of The History of Science Society*. 34/4. (1943), 356.

<sup>13</sup> Engerman, Stanley L., Eugene D. Genovese, Alan H Adamson, and Mathematical Social Science Board. History Advisory Committee. *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 176.

<sup>14</sup> Engerman, Stanley L., Eugene D. Genovese, *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies*. 176.

When analyzing census data, it must be remembered that demographic evidence cannot conclusively prove or disprove the existence of deliberate slave breeding. As Randolph Campbell suggests in "The Slave-Breeding Hypothesis: A Demographic Comment on the "Buying" and "Selling" States," a rebuttal to the population data analyzed by Sutch, "the available evidence does suggest, however, that there was little regional specialization in the buying and selling of slaves. It seems likely that most slaves who moved from the upper to the lower South migrated as plantation forces with their owners."<sup>15</sup> But the referenced material does suggest that there was a degree of regional specialization between the Border States that sold slaves and the Deep South which purchased them. The combination of testimonies of planters, demographic information and narratives of ex-slaves provides a much more conclusive indication of the practice of slave breeding. Only recently, during and after the civil right movement has the accounts of slaves been included in the history of slavery in America. Although they echo the sentiments of their former masters, they are a valuable tool in understanding the complete history of slavery.

In the WPA's Federal Writers Project, there are eighty total references to six types of slave breeding ranging from planters directing pairings on the plantation to the renting of men from different plantations for procreation. These rented men were referred to as "travelin' niggers" or "stockmen" and were described as "fine and stout." In the narrative of Maggie Stenhouse she explains, "they was weighed and tested. A man would rent the stockman and put

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<sup>15</sup> Randolph Campbell, "The Slave-Breeding Hypothesis: A Demographic Comment on the "Buying" and "Selling" States." *The Journal of Southern History*. 42/3. (1976): 412.

him in a room with some young women he wanted to raise children from.”<sup>16</sup> Other narratives suggest that planters would charge the fee of one child out of every four born from the pairings.

The large biracial population also suggests that these planters also took a direct role in the sexual relationship of their female slaves. Many plantations became known as brothels with planters having their way with slave women and using their offspring as a means to their financial gain. Carl F. Hall, an ex-slave and resident of Boyd County, Texas, recalls that, “often the father of a comely black woman’s child would be the master himself, who would heartlessly sell his own offspring to some other master, without regard for his welfare.”<sup>17</sup> This narrative helps illustrate the way planters used sexual manipulation and deviancy amongst their slaves to their own gains. Other narratives confirm this manipulation, like that of Willie McCullough, ex-slave and resident of Raleigh, North Carolina, who states, “There was classes of slavery. Some of the half-white and beautiful young women who [was] used by the master and his men friends, or who [was] the sweetheart of the master only, were given special privileges. Some of’em worked very little. They had private quarters well fixed up and had a great influence over the master. Some of these slave girls broke up families by getting the master so enmeshed in their net that his wife was greatly neglected.”<sup>18</sup>

Theses narratives illustrates some of the complex relationships that emerged from American slavery and also highlights further evidence of the system that reared slaves for eventual sale. Understanding the value of their “investments,” planters would speculate and maintain awareness of the current selling rate for their slaves. Slavery was the ultimate

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-century Slave Narratives*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975),45.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Conrad, *In the Hands of Strangers*. 237.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Conrad, *In the Hands of Strangers*. 239.

capitalistic venture and required planters to take advantage of any opportunity available. The more slaves that an individual owned allowed them to create more wealth. Along with breeding for plantation or domestic labor, planters in the Upper South had access to trading companies such as Franklin and Armfield, located in Alexandria, Virginia. Along with several less visible trading companies, Franklin and Armfield reached its pinnacle in the 1830's, well after the end of the transatlantic slave trade. Reporting a very conservative estimate of 1,200 sales over an eight year span of operation details both the demand for slave labor in the Deep South and the abundant surplus in Virginia.<sup>19</sup>

The existence of slave trading companies alone does not provide sufficient evidence of an intentional breeding system, but paired with the testimonies of prominent Virginians provides a glimpse of the system that placed capital over humanity. A letter from a Virginian Methodist minister, dated March 13, 1835, describes this dilemma,

“There are many vices which are winked at by the good and encouraged by the ungodly, who hold slaves. I allude to the breeding of slaves. There is a great temptation to this. No property can be vested more profitably than in young healthy negro women. They will, by breeding, double their value in every five years. Mulattoes are surer than pure negroes. Hence planters have no objection to any white man or boy having free intercourse with all the females; and it has been the case that an overseer has been encouraged to make the whole posse his harem and has been paid for the issue. This causes a general corruption of morals.”<sup>20</sup>

From some testimonies it appears that the rearing of slaves was more widely accepted in the nineteenth century than in the twenty-first. But, it must be understood that slave breeding and

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Kolchin, *AMERICAN SLAVERY 1619-1877*, 97.

<sup>20</sup> Weld, Theodore Dwight, and James A Thome. *Slavery And the Internal Slave Trade In the United States of North America: Being Replies to Questions Transmitted by the Committee of the British And Foreign Anti-slavery Society, for the Abolition of Slavery And the Slave Trade Throughout the World*. (Presented to the General Anti-slavery Convention, Held In London, June, 1840. By the Executive Committee of the American Anti-slavery Society. London: T. Ward, 1841), 33.

the horrific visualizations that it evokes were often exaggerated by abolitionists in order to further their cause. One possible example of this anti-slavery exaggeration can be seen in the work of Reverend, Moncure D. Conway, a Virginian and outspoken opponent of slavery who wrote,

“as a general thing, the chief pecuniary resource in the border states is the breeding of slaves; and I grieve to say that there is too much ground for the charges that general licentiousness among the slaves, for the purpose of a large increase, is compelled by some Masters and encouraged by many. The period of maternity is hasty, the average youth of Negro mothers being nearly 3 years earlier than that of any free race, and all made it is utterly unknown among the women.”<sup>21</sup>

Although exaggerations concerning slave breeding surely took place throughout history, evidence is strong enough to include the topic in any examination of slavery as it occurred in America. Proslavery writings often mirrored the same slave breeding sentiments cited by abolitionist ministers. In 1858 Howell Cobb, the United States Secretary of the Treasury and former governor of Georgia asserted, “with us the proprietor’s largest source of prosperity is in the Negroes he raises.”<sup>22</sup> Both abolitionists and boastful Southerners recognized the occurrence of slave breeding. The abolitionist arguments often centered on supposing that slavery in the Border States only continued due to the labor demands of the Deep South. Boastful Southerners showed pride in the fact that their system provided enough labor for their home state as well as the Western frontier. This proslavery rhetoric can be summed up in the *CAUCUSES OF 1860, A HISTORY of the National Political Conventions of the CURRENT PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN*. This documentation of political correspondence details the account of a Mr. Gaulden of Georgia,

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Conrad, *In the Hands of Strangers: Readings on Foreign and Domestic Slave Trading*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 232.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Conrad, *In the Hands of Strangers: Readings on Foreign and Domestic Slave Trading*, 232.

who proclaimed himself as a proud slave breeder. In a debate with a Virginian at the Charleston convention Gauden was reported to have stated,

“Well, I will say the slave-breeding State of Georgia, then. I glory in being a slave-breeder myself. [Loud laugh.] I will face the music myself, and I have got as many negroes as any man from the State of Virginia. And as I invited the gentlemen of this Convention at Charleston to visit my plantation, I will say again that if they will come to see me, I will show them as fine a lot of negroes, and the pure African, too, as they can find anywhere. And I will show them as handsome a set of little children there as can be seen [laughter], and any quantity of them, too. [Renewed laughter.] And I wish that Virginia may be as good a slave-trading and slave-breeding State as Georgia ; and in saying that, I do not mean to be disrespectful to Virginia, but I do not mean to dodge the question at all.”<sup>23</sup>

One issue that is agreed upon by all is that the domestic slave trade was lucrative and that planters had to make profits from the investments made in slave labor. Regardless to how new slave generations were created, they would be an asset as long as America embraced the system of domestic slavery. George Weston epitomizes the way some planters would have felt regarding slavery and slave rearing: “Under the actual conditions of things in the slave States, the profits of slave breeding are almost fabulous.”<sup>24</sup>

The southwestern expansion created a huge labor demand that could not be filled without slave labor. The prohibition of the transatlantic slave trade forced Americans to create a domestic system of slavery to meet the labor demands of westward expansion. The role of slave breeding in the Southwestern migration continues to be a controversial topic among historians, even though evidence is available through the narratives of prominent planters as well as ex-slaves. Demographic information also provides evidence of an unusually high fertility rate amongst

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<sup>23</sup> Murat Halstead, *CAUCUSES OF 1860, A HISTORY of the National Political Conventions of the CURRENT PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN: Compiled from the Correspondence of the Cincinnati Commercial, written "On the Circuit of the Conventions," and the Official Reports.* (Columbus Ohio: Follett, Foster and Company, 1860) , 201.

<sup>24</sup> George Weston, *The progress of slavery in the United States.* Washington D.C.: Buell & Blanchard. 1857. 76.

slave women in the Border States and tracks the movement of slaves in the increased labor demands during the Southwestern cotton boom. Geographic data illustrates the depletion of soils in the Border States, which limited the labor for slaves and eventually sent them westward in the expansion of cotton cultivation. While many historians dismiss the role that slave breeding played in American history, they do not dispute the soil depletion that led to its emergence. The term breeding brings fourth negative and dehumanizing imagery and is uncomfortable for many to examine. This may be a valid reason for arguing against the existence of rearing slaves for market, but is not strong enough to eliminate this topic from the historiography of slavery in America. The only historical dispute that remains regarding slave breeding is the scope and scale of its occurrences.

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