

“Useless”: Disability, Slave Labor, and Contradiction on Antebellum Southern Plantations

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Abstract: African American slaves with disabilities (broadly defined as physical, mental or aesthetic conditions seen as unfavorable or impairing) performed a variety of duties on antebellum southern plantations. However, tensions between goals of production, profit, control, and planters’ expectations often created contradictory assessments of disability in slaves. Slaves with disabilities were also at risk of abuse—including corporeal punishment, neglect, and murder—from masters.

Key Words: African-American history, slavery, plantation labor

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Introduction

In the mid-1830s, Samuel G. Barker, a Charleston attorney and slaveholder, composed a detailed list of 87 plantation slaves in his estate book. The list identified Barker’s bondpeople¹ by their names, dates of birth, and gender, but also included descriptions of skills and identifying characteristics, accorded each person a “hand” rating, and noted whether they were considered “diseased” or “useless.” Among the slaves identified as “useless” were Old Stephen, who “rakes trash;” Old Betty, a nurse and midwife; Peggy, who “cooks for negroes;” Bess, a 23-year-old “feeble” woman who “can cook;” and Old Minda, a “first rate midwife and nurse” (Barker, n.d.). Other plantation records also categorized slaves as “useless” alongside descriptions of the duties those slaves performed. For example, in a chart from Edmund Ravenel’s Grove plantation in South Carolina, a column of “useless” female slaves included a cook named Mary, a nurse named Cotto, and Sary, a blind woman who minded poultry (Untitled List of Slaves, 1825). The contradiction between “uselessness” and utility embedded in these impersonal charts raise important questions about the roles of slaves with disabilities—defined here broadly as a number of physical, mental or aesthetic conditions that were viewed as unfavorable or impairing—on southern plantations, how slaveholders assessed the worth and utility of those slaves, and what kinds of treatment “useless” laborers received at the hands of masters and overseers.

Barker’s and Ravenel’s seemingly unproblematic use of the word “useless” to classify slaves with disabilities, even as they described the uses to which those slaves were assigned on their plantations, indicates the planters had clear ideas of what the term meant to them, but there were many different reasons a slave might be considered “useless” in antebellum society. In his 1839 compendium *American Slavery As It Is*, abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld indicates that slaveholders used the term “unprofitable” to describe disabled human chattel (pp. 132-33). However, “useless” could also denote a failure to live up to expected duties for a particular social role; in the case of slaves, this might be their ability to perform manual labor, to reproduce and add

to a master's labor force, or to be disciplined and controlled (Hackford, 2004). On a more personal level, slaveholders could have used the term to describe a slave who did not meet a master's individual expectations for behavior, physical appearance, and performance. Tensions between goals of profit, production, control, and the individual desires of planters created a number of contradictions in the ways planters assessed disability and "uselessness" in their laborers.

Background: Plantation Labor Systems in the Antebellum South

In order to discuss the roles of "useless" slaves on southern plantations, it is necessary to describe the operation and types of work performed in complex plantation labor systems in the early nineteenth century. Although the number of white "planter aristocrats" was small, the majority of African American slaves lived at least part of their lives on large plantations and participated in plantation labor systems. The term "planter" did not have a single meaning in the antebellum South—in some cases, it was synonymous with "farmer" and did not indicate the number of slaves owned—but by the early nineteenth century, when the majority of farmland in the eastern South was cultivated and most larger estates had been established, the term usually referred to slaveholders with large, or multiple, estates, and at least twenty slaves. As Oakes (1998) has noted, the large plantation ideal—a profitable, efficient model of mastery and production—influenced many slaveholders' identities and organization of labor systems. Most planters in the antebellum South planned labor schemes based on a "hand" system, a measure of proportional function that could be used to rank different slaves within any specific job category. In general, a person who was able to perform the expected amount of a full day's labor for an adult, able-bodied male slave was assessed to be a "full" hand. Full hands did the bulk of hard field labor, while three-quarter, half and quarter hands—including "elderly" slaves over the age of fifty or sixty, pregnant women or individuals with physical or mental impairments—were assigned less strenuous tasks (Bankole, 1998; Davis, 2006; Joyner, 1984). The overriding principle of plantation management was the discipline of the enslaved labor force, which was managed hierarchically by white overseers and white or black drivers (Oakes, 1998). House slaves may have been rated "full" hands, or "prime" in market terms, but domestic tasks were generally less strenuous and involved more direct supervision from white masters, as well as less interaction with other slaves.

Although many planters strove for efficiency and maximum output in their labor scheme designs (Genovese, 1974; Oakes, 1998), slave populations were constantly in flux, and the structure of labor had to be fluid to accommodate these changes. Since a slave was expected to work for his or her entire lifetime, a slave's "hand" rating and place in the plantation labor system were subject to change, and many slaves were, at some point, evaluated as less than a "full" hand. For instance, Maryland ex-slave Charles Ball (1859), describing his experiences on a large South Carolina plantation in the early nineteenth century, noted that of 263 slaves in that community, only 170 were "full hand" field workers; "the others were children, too small to be of any service as laborers...old and blind persons, or incurably diseased." Of those, "the most handsome and sprightly" were chosen to serve as house servants for the white slaveholding family, while the others performed a variety of non-field tasks (p. 117). Such a labor scheme was not

uncommon in the antebellum South, since slaveholders considered their human chattel to be lifetime investments, and placed them to work for as many years as possible. However, plantation labor schemes were not under the absolute control of slaveholders and overseers; slaves themselves, by setting their own work rhythms and demonstrating the range of their abilities, were in a position to negotiate the amount and type of labor they would perform (Davis, 2006; Genovese, 1974).

Plantation records—letters, journals, memoirs, and inventories of slave work gangs—are useful primary sources to demonstrate the wide range of duties that slaves of different ages and abilities performed. In many cases, disabled slaves were employed in a variety of tasks that did not involve field labor. Some slaveholders assigned trusted elderly male slaves to be drivers for field laborers, positions that rewarded faithful bondsmen and capitalized on the slave community's respect for its older members (Jones, 1990; Pollard, 1996). For instance, Paul, a “very trusty” driver on Samuel G. Barker's plantation, was categorized as a full hand despite his being older and “diseased” from a hernia, or “rupture” (Barker, n.d.). Elderly or disabled slaves regardless of gender also worked in plantation kitchens and watched children. A journal from the medium-sized Rockingham Plantation in Brunson, South Carolina included a list of “not all taskable” slaves on the plantation in 1828 and 1829, including a driver, a “Nurs” [sic], a gardener, dairy workers, stock and poultry minders” (Rockingham Plantation Journal, 1828-1829, Sec. A, p. 1). Indeed, the wide variety of duties necessary for the successful management of large plantations ensured that there were a number of different jobs for slaves with disabilities.

Some planters felt that such specific, “simple” jobs were particularly suited to bondspople with physical or mental impairments (Postell, 1953). As Louisiana planter Haller Nutt complained in an 1843 journal entry, overseers sometimes erroneously assigned “hearty strong negros [sic]” to simple tasks “which could be done equally as well by some feeble hand or cripple” (Nutt, [1843-1850], p. 5). However, the simple jobs that disabled slaves often performed were not necessarily easy; for instance, New Hampshire native Emily Burke's memoir (1991) of life in Georgia in the 1840s claims that “the task of the cook was the most laborious” of all house servant positions, since cooks had to rise early, prepare lots of meals, and perform strenuous tasks like grinding meal or meat and gathering firewood (p. 41). Burke also notes that some elderly women held the job of watching over plantation nurseries—which could include children from one week to five years old—and “it is no small task for two or three of these females, themselves in a second infancy, to rock the cradles and attend to the wants of twenty or thirty young children” (p. 91). Furthermore, old age or physical impairment did not automatically preclude a slave from being assigned to hard labor. On the Ball family's Limerick plantation in South Carolina, an 1807 crew assigned “to work on the roads” included several “old hands past muster” like Old Billy, Old Handy, and Old July (Ball Family, 1807). For some slaves with disabling conditions, learning a skilled trade seemed like a better alternative than field or house labor. In a letter from slave Nancy Venture Woods to her master in 1825, Woods asks that her grandson Virgin be trained as a tailor or shoemaker, because he was impaired by “a hurt he has had in his ancle [sic] which he still feels at times” (Starobin, 1974, p. 87). James L. Smith (1881), a slave who had become disabled in childhood, was trained in shoemaking, and placed to work in a

shop in Heathsville, Virginia. These examples indicate that slaves with perceived disabilities were employed in a wide variety of duties—and not necessarily easy ones—in and out of plantation labor systems in the antebellum South.

The overseer's journals for planter George Kollock's Ossabaw Island plantation allow us to trace the career of one disabled slave, a blind man named March, to demonstrate the utility of disabled slaves. Around 1850, as Kollock was consolidating assets on a new plantation, March was rated to be a "quarter hand," with no indication of the jobs he was expected to perform at that time. In the 1850 and 1851 journals March is not included in tallies of cotton pickings by weight, unlike most other male slaves on the plantation, and is never mentioned by name in daily work logs or sick lists (Kollock, 1850). However, the 1855 journal notes that March had two sick days, one in January and one in July, indicating at that time he performed some sort of work for which an absence was noteworthy (Kollock, 1855). In 1858, March was listed as one of the "hands that went to bring back [the] boat" that had carried a few slaves "to town" for Christmas (Kollock, 1858, p. 2), and in early 1859, overseer H. Jarrel composed a letter to Kollock, indicating that March wanted his master to measure bushels of corn he had shelled (Kollock, 1859). This evidence of March's work at Ossabaw Island, though fragmentary, offers a glimpse at the role of a disabled slave on a growing cotton plantation. In 1850, when the plantation was young and the labor system not fully realized, a slave like March, whose blindness may have prevented him from performing the labor necessary to establish plantation fields, would seem relatively unimportant to his master and overseers. However, after several years it seems that March had been assigned to tasks that were important to the running of the established plantation; his illness merited a notation in the journal because the overseer viewed it as "time lost." Most importantly, the fact that March made an appeal through the overseer, to his master to view the corn he had shelled indicates he had been assigned to a regular task, and might suggest that his performance had accorded him a degree of respect from white authority figures. The experiences of March on Kollock's Ossabaw Island plantation are a good indication of the different kinds of work slaves with disabilities performed, as well as the fluidity of plantation labor systems.

The Devaluation of Slaves with Disabilities

As these sources indicate, the successful management of a large plantation involved a variety of different tasks, some of which were performed routinely by slaves who were considered disabled. However, despite the different kinds of important work that elderly or impaired plantation slaves performed, slaveholders often explicitly or implicitly devalued such slaves. Although Postell (1953) claimed that "unsound" slaves were often appraised at or near market rates in estate inventories (p. 52), Fett (2002) has argued that appraisals of elderly and impaired slaves, despite their skills or labor histories, were usually very low. For example, slaves belonging to Charles Carroll, a Chesapeake Bay planter and the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence, were appraised in the early 1830s; nineteen of his slaves were described as extremely old, crippled or diseased, and valued at one penny apiece (Franklin & Schweininger, 1999). In 1854, the estate of Bennet H. Barrow included a 43-year-old blind slave named Temps (or Demps) who was appraised at fifty dollars, the same price as infants; other male

slaves in their forties were valued between seven and nine hundred-fifty dollars (Davis, 1943). This evidence indicates that slaveholders who considered their disabled slaves “useless” were concerned with their resale values, rather than the labor they were actually capable of performing.

The economic devaluation of slaves with disabilities seems to have been a common, unremarkable practice, but the handling of plantation slaves with disabilities was a sensitive subject in the antebellum United States. This was particularly apparent in discussions of the treatment of slaves impaired by old age, who had resided on plantations for their entire lives but were unable to continue in the jobs they had performed when they were younger. Although some planters manumitted elderly slaves who could no longer work, most elderly slaves remained on plantations with their families, and their masters were expected to provide for them until they died. Many proslavery advocates highlighted the care and affection shown to older slaves as an indication of the institution’s overall benevolence, but in many antislavery accounts, elderly and disabled were more frequently subjected to abuse than kind treatment at the hands of their masters. Disabled slaves could be punished for their limitations, or inability to perform certain tasks or work as effectively as others; slaves with physical or mental limitations often worked more slowly and had trouble with the physical demands of plantation labor, affirming a common stereotype that African Americans were inherently “lazy” (Genovese, 1974, p. 298). Philemon Bliss, an Ohio minister who had lived near Tallahassee, Florida, in the mid-1830s, noted that “the most common cause of punishments [for slaves] is not finishing tasks” (Weld, 1839, p. 103). Old age or disability did not stay the whips of slaveholders; Frederick Douglass (1845/1986) recalled watching one of his former masters, Colonel Lloyd, “make old Barney, a man between fifty and sixty years of age, uncover his bald head, kneel down upon the cold, damp ground, and receive upon his naked and toil-worn shoulders more than thirty lashes at a time” for unsatisfactory performance (p. 61).

There are many other examples of slaves who faced neglect when age or disability prevented them from working (Genovese, 1974; Pollard, 1996). Less profitable slaves often received reduced rations from masters; ex-slave Harriet Jacobs (1861/2000) recalled an elderly, “faithful” servant whose mistress denied him an allowance of meat, claiming “that when niggers were too old to work, they ought to be fed on grass” (p. 104). Some slaveholders sold their worn out slaves to remove the burden of caring for disabled property (Craft, 1860). In 1852 escaped slave Henry Bibb composed a series of letters to his former master, Albert G. Sibley, chastising him for selling Bibb’s aging mother after promising her liberty. Bibb’s mother was forced to work for six years as the chief cook in a Bedford, Kentucky hotel, which left “her constitution... completely broken” and rendered her unable to care for herself (Blassingame, 1977, pp. 54-55). Others manumitted their elderly and disabled chattel and sent them to southern cities, abandoning them to a life with no financial or community support. Burke (1991) described an asylum in Savannah, where “old and worn out” slaves “left without any sort of home or means of subsistence” often ended up; in Burke’s estimation, life in the dreaded institution was “next to having no home at all, and those who avail themselves of the comforts it affords only do it when every other resource for the means of subsistence fails them” (pp. 24-25). Increasingly strict legislation against manumission in the later

antebellum years largely precluded this practice, protecting elderly or infirm slaves while also preventing them from becoming public charges (Genovese, 1960, 1974; White, 1999). There were, however, slaveholders who bent these laws; Louisiana planter Bennet H. Barrow noted in his diary in 1842 that “Uncle Bat. told my boy to turn old Demps loose & let him go. Been runaway for some months...he shall not stay in this neighbourhood [sic].” Apparently, Demps, an “old & cripple” man, had been treated badly by his owner (Davis, 1943, p. 262), and probably welcomed the chance to flee; from his master’s perspective, however, allowing Demps to escape was an expedient method for Barrow to free himself from the burden of caring for a disabled slave.

More commonly, slaveholders abandoned elderly and disabled bondspeople without sending them away from the plantation. When the “usefulness” of slaves ran out, particularly due to old age or blindness, they were often sent to rooms or cabins in the woods to live alone and fend for themselves, separated from masters and the slave community (Owens, 1976). In 1813, Mary Woodson wrote to the mayor of Alexandria, Virginia, to relate the story of a disabled slave who was left by her master to live alone. According to Woodson, the slave, “the property of on[e] Posten in whose service she was burnt almost to death before Easter,” had been isolated in a single room “without a change of clothing, or one single necessary of life, or comfort” (Owens, 1976, p. 48). Similarly, abolitionist Philo Tower (1856) described meeting a superannuated and blind woman whose master had consigned her to live alone in a shanty, and gave her no provisions except corn. The woman told Tower that she did not have adequate clothing, and “suffer[ed] a good deal from cold in the winter”; she also had no one to bring her water, and was too feeble to carry it herself. Her twelve children had all been sold—at a profit of at least six thousand dollars, according to Tower’s estimate—and the lonely woman, who had spent seventy years laboring in the cotton field, essentially waited to die (pp. 170-72).

In a few extreme cases, elderly and disabled slaves were murdered for their inability to perform satisfactory labor. Northern journalist James Redpath (1859/1968) recalled a conversation with an elderly male slave who had witnessed the homicide of an ailing girl. Her overseer was frustrated that the girl was “lagging behind” and ordered her “to mend her gait”; when the girl replied that she was “so sick I kin hardly drag one foot after the other,” he struck her on the neck. The girl “was taken up insensible, and lingered till the following morning” (p. 120). On Haller Nutt’s Araby Plantation in 1843, the planter reported several slave deaths that resulted “from cruelty of overseer,” including that of a man who was “beat to death when too sick to work” (Nutt, [1843-1850], p. 205). Although slave murder was technically illegal, there are cases of slaveholders who escaped responsibility for killing their disabled slaves. Burke (1991) recalled the story of an “old feeble woman” who was sold to a new master, and made to work in the fields for the first time in her life. After sustaining a severe beating, “she was scarcely able to support her weight upon her feet” and could not wield her hoe to the satisfaction of her master; he “gave her a blow to the neck, and she fell dead at his feet.” Several days later, physicians performed a postmortem examination and determined that the slave had been murdered, but her master had left the plantation and could not be found. Eventually, “the excitement died away, and as it was only a poor old slave when the cruel tyrant did return the whole matter was nearly forgotten” (pp. 59-60). Similarly,

in his personal journal, Sea Islands planter Thomas B. Chaplin described the murder of Roger, a disabled slave who had belonged to neighboring planter James H. Sandiford, in February 1849. Apparently, Roger had been late in returning with oysters, and received a beating from Sandiford; later, Roger was overheard telling another slave “that if he had sound limbs, he would not take a flogging from any white man,” which his master interpreted as insubordination. Sandiford then shackled Roger in wet clothing in an open outhouse overnight, where he died not from exposure, but from strangulation from the chain around his neck after Roger “slipped from the position in which he was placed.” Roger’s death was deemed to be accidental, but Chaplin felt “the verdict should have been that Roger came to his death by inhumane treatment to him by his master” (Rosengarten, 1986, pp. 456-67).

All of these examples, which appeared in published abolitionist propaganda as well as private plantation records, indicate there was certainly a broad spectrum of the treatment of slaves with disabilities. However, although elderly and disabled slaves’ experiences ranged from kind treatment to being ignored or mistreated, it seems that planters were often indifferent, if not overtly hostile, to “useless” slaves who were unable to do the work their masters expected or desired, although those slaves were often assigned to necessary duties. Such examples indicate that the existence of disabilities in slaves, including impairments due to old age after a lifetime of service, played a significant role in masters’ treatment of their disabled human chattel.

Conclusion

In developed antebellum plantation labor systems, there were a number of jobs and skill levels required of slaves, and even those with perceived disabilities were used for different kinds of labor. The fact that planters like Samuel Barker and Edmund Ravenel would categorize some of their slaves as “useless” even as they described the duties that “useless” slaves performed illuminates a fascinating and underexplored contradiction in assessments of disabled bondpeople. Based on evidence in plantation work logs, correspondence and estate inventories as well as published sources, it is clear that, although individuals with disabilities could do a number of jobs that were necessary to the running of plantations, many slaveholders devalued their disabled slaves, and subjected them to a number of abuses—including punishment, neglect, and even murder—because of their disabilities. The contradiction of using the “useless” on antebellum plantations calls into question the assumption that planters only ascribed to economic motivations in their assessments of their bondpeople. As this article suggests, a variety of other factors—including issues of control and discipline, and psychological or emotional reactions to impaired enslaved bodies—were involved in how planters assessed the utility and performance of slaves with disabilities. The careers of “useless” plantation slaves and their treatment at the hands of masters, therefore, provide an important glimpse at different, and sometimes contradictory, factors that contributed to ideas of slave disability and labor in the antebellum United States.

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twentieth centuries. She is finishing work on a disability history of African-American slavery in the nineteenth century.

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Endnotes

¹ For the sake of variety, I use the terms “slave” and “bondsperson” interchangeably throughout the paper.