

**DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY**

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA 91125

SLAVE BREEDING

Richard Sutch
California Institute of Technology
University of California, Berkeley

An article prepared for the
Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery,
Randall M. Miller and John David Smith, eds.
Greenwood Press, 1986



SOCIAL SCIENCE WORKING PAPER 593

January 1986

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the historical work on slave breeding in the ante-bellum United States. Slave breeding consisted of interference in the sexual life of slaves by their owners with the intent and result of increasing the number of slave children born. The weight of evidence suggests that slave breeding occurred in sufficient force to raise the rate of growth of the American slave population despite evidence that only a minority of slaveowners engaged in such practices.

SLAVE BREEDING

Richard Sutch
California Institute of Technology

Contemporary opponents of Afro-American slavery accused southern slave owners, particularly those of the upper South, of deliberately breeding slaves for the market. The charge was often intended to arouse outrage at the ethics of slaveholders, but it also served to counter an oft-repeated pro-slavery argument that the rapid growth of the black population proved slaves were being treated humanely. The response of slaveowners as a group was muted and mixed. A few bitterly dismissed the charge, particularly the lurid comparisons to cattle breeding and the accusations of forced matings made by some abolitionists, but others privately boasted of their "breeders" and of the profit to be made in selling slaves.

Historical evaluation of the issue has been difficult. In part this has been due to the nature of the primary evidence -- it has been suggested that planters would be unwilling to keep written records of such activities (Stampp, 245) -- and in part also because the subject has an almost unique capacity to arouse strong emotions and these have sometimes interfered with the objectivity of the investigation. The first histories of slavery, for example, were written by those who reflected the perspectives of slaveowners. Most often they ignored the

issue of slave breeding, but if the subject was mentioned these historians took the position that the practice did not exist. Winfield Collins, writing in 1904, was the first historian to discuss the subject in any detail. He rejected the idea that planters intentionally raised slaves for sale. Instead he suggested that most slave sales were forced by exigencies such as bankruptcy of their owners. Collins also presented a calculation designed to show that raising slaves would not have been a profitable business considering the price of slaves and the cost of maintaining them. Ulrich B. Phillips, the historian who did so much to influence subsequent scholarship on slavery, reported that he could find "no shred of supporting evidence" for slave breeding when writing in 1918 (pp. 361-362).

Other historians, however, soon took an opposite view and the evidence which they accumulated began gradually to establish a different picture. George Bancroft in a well-researched study of the domestic trade in slaves amassed evidence drawn largely from southern newspapers which established that slaveowners had been greatly concerned with the number of children born to their slaves, that they placed a high value on fertile women, and that slave mothers were offered various incentives to encourage reproduction. In some cases, women were punished when they failed to produce sufficient numbers of children. Kenneth Stampp reached the same conclusions and extended the evidence significantly through extensive research in plantation manuscripts.

Histories of slavery that reflected the perspective of the slaves themselves presented evidence that at least some slaveowners actively interfered in the sexual life of their slaves in the interests of increasing the number of children born. E. Franklin Fraizer, in his classic history of The Negro Family, maintained that "there were masters who, without any regard for the preferences of their slaves, mated their human chattel as they did their stock" [p. 18]. Subsequent research in the narratives of ex-slaves produced testimony from a significant fraction of those interviewed that slave women were subjected to arranged marriages, forced matings, and other forms of sexual abuse. There were reports of the use of slave men, rented for the purpose, to impregnate slave women. Ex-slave Maggie Stenhouse explained: "Durin' slavery there were stockmen. They was weighed and tested. A man would rent the stockman and put him in a room with some young women he wanted to raise children from" (quoted by Escott, p. 45). Other ex-slaves reported that slaveowners systematically offered rewards and threatened punishment in an effort to increase the birth rate among the slave women.

Any historical dispute that remains over the question no longer concerns the existence of slave breeding, but rather the matter of degree. Was slave rearing so common and so widespread that it had a significant impact on the profitability of slavery? Did breeding practices have an impact on the rate of growth of the slave population? Were the majority of slave women subjected to systematic and repeated sexual abuse? Although the research on these questions continues, the

emerging answers seem to be "yes" to the first question, "probably" to the second, and "probably not" to the third.

Research on the profitability of slavery suggests that the slave market and the practice of slave breeding were predictable consequences of the fact that in the nineteenth century American slave plantations were businesses, established and managed to make money for their owners. As the growth of the slave population on the farms and plantations of the older states of the upper South produced a surplus of labor in those regions, owners who did not sell off unneeded slaves would have found their fortunes declining as the burden of maintaining a larger than optimal labor force cut into their profits. As a consequence most slaveowners either sold slaves or purchased land as necessary to maintain an efficient balance between the labor supply and the land under cultivation. The sale of slaves produced a substantial increment of income which supplemented the proceeds from tobacco, cotton, and other crops.

Lewis Gray in his monumental history of southern agriculture rejected Collins' arguments that the business lacked profit and argued that "the rearing of slaves constituted an important element in the agricultural economy of the South" (II, p. 663). Calculations by economists Alfred Conrad and John Meyer established that the gains generated by the growing slave population were an important component of slave owners' income and that the steady sale of slaves by owners located in the upper South was necessary to maintain the profitability of slave agriculture in those regions at levels comparable to the

returns on alternative investments. These results have been confirmed in numerous studies of the profitability of slavery and they lend a strong element of plausibility to the slave-breeding hypothesis.

The term "slave breeding" suggests the deliberate and routine interference by owners in the sexual life of their slaves in order to increase the number of slaves born. Some economic historians, however, have argued that the profitability of slave rearing need not imply the wide-spread practice of slave breeding. No doubt many slaveowners simply let nature take its course and found they were satisfied with the increase in their slave holdings without the need to resort to overt acts. Stanley Engerman has even suggested that a policy of noninterference might have been the best way to increase the birth rate, "given the natural tendencies of men and women" (p. 511). On some plantations this might have been the case. On those where it was not, however, economic considerations would have induced masters to take measures to increase the birth rate. For owners located on poorer land where crop productivity was low, such steps would be a matter of economic survival. In that situation, competitive pressures would overwhelm the restraining influence of moral or ethical considerations and rule out policies incompatible with maximum economic efficiency. The question then is reduced to whether or not the overall slave birth rate was higher than it would have been otherwise because of measures introduced by these slave owners.

Demographic studies of the slave population have established that the fertility of slave women was extraordinarily high. Indeed, during

the period before the Civil War, slave fertility was close to the biological maximum. After the close of the African slave trade (1808), the American slave population grew at a phenomenal rate -- well in excess of two percent per annum. These high rates of increase were maintained despite very high infant mortality rates. Richard Steckel has estimated that infant mortality among slave children exceeded that observed among the poorest populations of the world today.

The demographic mechanisms of high fertility were an early start on childbearing, short intervals between births, and a low rate of childlessness. The median age of slave women at the birth of their first child was comparatively low, only two or three years after the onset of fertility and about two years earlier than southern white women (Trussell and Steckel). These findings corroborate the direct evidence that slaveowners actively encouraged early marriages for slave women. Child spacing was unusually short perhaps because slaveowners encouraged early weaning of infants in order to speed their mother's return to field labor after the birth. Since lactation tends to inhibit the post-partum return of fecundity, these practices should have increased fertility. There is also evidence to suggest that masters sometimes broke up slave marriages that failed to produce children or forced new partners on childless women.

Perhaps the most startling evidence of slave breeding to emerge from the demographic studies concerns the sex distribution on slave plantations. Richard Sutch undertook a study of 2,588 separate slave farms examining the age-sex distribution of their slave holdings as

reported in the census of 1860. He found on slave holdings with at least one woman, the average ratio of women to men exceeded 1.2. The imbalance between the sexes was even more dramatic in the "selling states" -- the states of the upper South that supplied slaves to the newer states of the south and west. There the excess of women over men exceeded three hundred per thousand. The missing men were located on holdings with only one slave. The unbalanced sex ratios suggest that slave holders with large holdings wished to maximize the number of children produced by a given number of adult hands. The adults constituted the work force available for crop production (the size of the labor force required would be determined by the amount of acreage under cultivation) and the children born represented the potential gains from slave breeding. The more women in the labor force, the higher would be the potential number of children produced on a given farm. The maximum child-to-adult ratio was achieved on farms where women outnumbered men by between two and three to one. In the selling states the ratio of children to adults on such farms exceeded that on farms with balanced sex ratios by more than one-third.

Unbalanced sex ratios and high fertility do not prove that forced matings, multiple sexual partners, or other forms of sexual abuse were common. Nor does the surplus of women over men on some holdings prove that many women did not have stable relationships with men they considered their husbands. Slave women were often allowed to have husbands who resided on nearby farms. Historical studies of the slave family suggest that while master-directed interferences in the family

and sexual life of slaves occurred with alarming frequency most slave women nevertheless escaped such degradations. But those who escaped abuse were by no means left unaffected. All slave women lived with the knowledge that what was sometimes forced on others could at any time legally be forced on them. The best insurance against such abuse was for a woman to marry early and to produce many children within that marriage. That is what most slave women actually did and the result was generally a steady increase in the net worth of their owner as measured either by the size of his slave holding or by the returns from selling surplus slaves to others.

REFERENCES

- Frederic Bancroft, "The Importance of Slave-Rearing," Chapter IV in Slave-Trading in the Old South (Baltimore: J. H. Furst, 1931): 67-87.
- Winfield H. Collins, "Were Some States Engaged in Breeding and Raising Negroes for Sale?" Chapter IV in The Domestic Slave Trade of the Southern States (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1969 reprint of 1904 edition): 68-83.
- Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyer, "The Economics of Slavery in the Antebellum South," Journal of Political Economy 66 (April 1958): 95-130; reprinted in Hugh G. J. Aitken, editor, Did Slavery Pay? Readings in the Economics of Black Slavery in the United States (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971): 132-175.
- Stanley L. Engerman, "Comments on the Study of Race and Slavery," Chapter XX in Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese, editors, Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975): 495-530.
- Paul D. Escott, "Types of Slave Breeding," in Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979): 43-45.
- E. Franklin Frazier, "Human, All Too Human," Chapter II in The Negro Family in the United States (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Revised and Abridged edition 1948, original edition 1939): 17-32.
- Lewis Cecil Gray, "Commercial Slave Breeding," in History of Agriculture in the Southern United States To 1860 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1933): II, 661-663.
- Herbert G. Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).
- Herbert G. Gutman and Richard Sutch, "Victorians All? The Sexual Mores and Conduct of Slaves and Their Masters," Chapter 4 in Paul A. David, Herbert G. Gutman, Richard Sutch, Peter Temin, and Gavin Wright, Reckoning with Slavery: A Critical Study in the Quantitative History of American Negro Slavery (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976): 134-162.
- Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, "Business Aspects of Slavery," Chapter XIX in American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918): 359-401.
- Kenneth M. Stamp, "Slavemongering," Chapter Six in The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1956): 237-278.
- Richard Steckel, "The Health and Mortality of Slave Children Reconsidered: Were the Abolitionists Right?" Explorations in Economic History 23 (forthcoming, 1986).

- Richard Sutch, "The Breeding of Slaves for Sale and the Westward Expansion of Slavery, 1850-1860," Chapter VIII in Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese, editors, Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975): 173-210.
- James Trussell and Richard Steckel, "The Age of Slaves at Menarche and Their First Birth," Journal of Interdisciplinary History 8 (Winter 1978): 477-505.