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## “Among the Graves”: Constructing Community, Resistance, and Freedom on Nineteenth Century Plantation Burial Grounds

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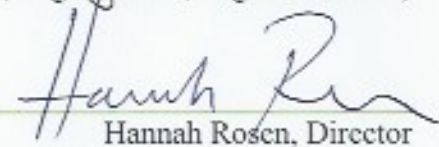
"AMONG THE GRAVES": CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITY, RESISTANCE, AND  
FREEDOM ON NINETEENTH CENTURY PLANTATION BURIAL GROUNDS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the degree of Bachelor of  
Arts with Honors in History from the  
College of William and Mary in Virginia,

by

Whitney Fields

Accepted for High Honors  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

  
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Williamsburg, Virginia  
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## PREFACE

This work was inspired by an experience that I had in Sanders Cemetery, a small burial ground located in Lynchburg, South Carolina. When I visited in the winter of 2014, dead leaves, rusting chains, and fence poles littered the ground. Engravings on several tombstones had faded, and displaced nameplates had weathered away. There was little organization save for several close relatives sectioned together or a husband and wife buried side-by-side. To some it may have looked as if the cemetery had been abandoned. But the fresh flowers encircling a recent burial proved otherwise: “Colleen Scarborough October 15, 1916 Beloved One Farewell” read the tombstone. Colleen Scarborough was my great-grandmother, and in December of 2013 she joined generations of relatives and Lynchburg residents in Sanders Cemetery. The number of generations and residents interred in the space remains unclear; no records of burials remain, and many grave markers are missing. But the crumbling and aged tombstones surrounding the cemetery reveal something of its history, evidently one that extends back to the days of slavery in rural South Carolina. One of the older tombstones near the cemetery’s entrance dates back to 1849. On that visit, I realized the vast scope of history that the cemetery contains. And I felt an odd comfort meandering through the graves knowing that somewhere there a story began.

What follows is my subsequent exploration of the stories of the antebellum graveyard. To trace these stories, though, I have turned from the faded words on the headstone to the recorded words of the formerly enslaved.

## INTRODUCTION

“Have you ever slept in a graveyard?” a formerly enslaved woman asked her interviewer. It was the late 1930s, and this woman was speaking to a Federal Writers’ Project worker who had just asked her to speak about her experience under slavery. The interviewer did not record the woman’s name or age (nor likely anticipate that she would be the one asking questions), but through the transcription, her voice speaks. “I know you haven’t but I have,” she continued, “Many a time when I was told that I was goin’ to get a beatin’, I would hide away in the cemetery where I stayed all night layin’ in gullies between graves prayin’.”<sup>1</sup>

The formerly enslaved woman also asked her interviewer, “Do you see this finger? You wonder why its broke?” Without pause, she depicted violent scenes from her childhood -- from the “mistress” beating her with a fire iron and breaking her finger, to taking her to the stocks, beating her, and breaking her leg in the incursion. “That’s been years ago but it still worries me now,” she admitted. Though the “peculiar institution” had been abolished sixty years prior to this interview, the history of violence continued to physically mark her, and it was very much alive and distressing in her memory. Persistent still were her memories of the nights spent in the graveyard, a place to escape the physical beating that was sure to come- another broken finger, broken leg, or lashing “til the blood run down.” In the company of “ha-nts” who were “pityin’ my case,” she resisted the authority of the mistress and the plantation system.<sup>2</sup> The graveyard was located within the plantation and thus within the reaches of its oppressive grip. At

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<sup>1</sup> *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 4 (1941): 303.

<sup>2</sup> “Ha-nts” is another word for spirits; explained by Ella Johnson in *Arkansas Narratives*, vol. ii part 4 (1941): 78.

the same time, it was far enough away or removed to provide refuge, if only temporary, from the constant abuse.<sup>3</sup>

Just as the graveyard remained on the margins of the plantation landscape, this woman's story and those of countless other enslaved people remain in the margins of scholarship. Admittedly, the challenges of studying enslaved people are many. Historians have attempted to reconstruct past lives of slavery as accurately as possible, but written sources from the perspective of enslaved people are limited and only capture a small fragment of their lived experiences. Nonetheless, recent historians have engaged critical interpretations and new ways of studying slavery and enslaved people.

For instance, Stephanie Camp offers a critical interpretation of the history of slavery by engaging the issue of space and methods of critical geography in her work, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. Camp examines the space of plantations and how it had been disciplined by plantation owners in order to control the movements of enslaved people.<sup>4</sup> For example, fences, slave patrols, and passes were meant to maintain order on the plantation and contain any possibilities of resistance and rebellion among the enslaved. Camp also identifies how enslaved people resisted these "containment geographies" and put plantation space to their own use. Engaging theories of resistance, gender, and space, she explains how

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<sup>3</sup> *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 4 (1941): 303.

<sup>4</sup> Spatial analysis is central to her book, which was informed by the work of cultural geographers interested in the use of space by enslaved people. Some prominent studies include John Michael Vlach's *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* and the compilation of essays in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*.

enslaved people created a subversive “rival geography” in the spaces within and surrounding the plantation to resist the demands of the plantation owner and slavery.<sup>5</sup>

It was from her work, interrogating the dynamics between resistance and space, that my own line of inquiry into the ways enslaved people used and thought about plantation burial grounds evolved. Recent studies of burial grounds have tended to focus on anthropological and archaeological studies attempting to derive information about enslaved people’s lives through material evidence and artifacts.<sup>6</sup> In the spirit of Camp’s work, I turn not to the spaces themselves, but to the records and testimony of enslaved people. From these sources, I hope to find answers to the following questions: Were burial grounds important spaces for enslaved people? Why did they go to the graveyard? What did they do there? And what do the practices created within its perimeters mean in a larger environment conceived and built to ensure their subjugation?

To answer these questions, I draw on two types of “slave narratives”: the testimony of formerly enslaved people produced by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the collection of slave narratives published in the nineteenth century. From

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<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Recent scholarship in anthropology and archaeology suggests that cemeteries are particularly useful sources for constructing histories of enslaved people. In 1992, an interdisciplinary team of researchers conducted a study of the New York African Burial Ground and the excavation brought public and scholarly attention to the burial grounds and remains of enslaved people. See Michael L. Blakey and Lesley M. Rankin-Hill, *The Skeletal Biology of the New York African Burial Ground*, vol. 1 and Enda Green Medford, *Historical Perspectives of the African Burial Ground: New York Blacks and the Diaspora*, vol. 3 of *The New York African Burial Ground: Unearthing the African Presence in Colonial New York* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 2009). Also see Michael L. Blakey’s Foreword to *Lay Body Down: Living History in African American Cemeteries* (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1996); and Ross W. Jamieson’s essay “Material Culture and Social Death: African-American Burial Practices,” *Historical Archaeology* 29(4): 39-58.



1936-1938, the WPA, a New Deal agency, hired writers to interview formerly enslaved people. Though their interviews are historically valuable, the primary object was to put the writers, primarily white and untrained interviewers, to work. These writers interviewed people across the South, and the interviews were compiled in 1941 as *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves* (now commonly referred to as the WPA Slave Narratives). The interviews were guided by a set of questions, including one about funerals. As a result, I found in the WPA Narratives brilliant testimony directly from enslaved people specifically about plantation funerals and burial grounds.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, these are an important source for this project. I have also learned, though, that the WPA Narratives have their limitations, the most obvious being their layers of bias. Critics argue that viewing the testimony of African Americans through the lenses of the mostly white interviewers at the height of the Jim Crow era compromised the credibility of the narratives. The transcriptions of the interviews also reflect the interviewer's attempts to standardize the words of enslaved people into a "Negro Dialect," which was imposed onto their words during transcription.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, some suggest that formerly enslaved people, who were mostly children and young adults during slavery, did not (or chose not to) accurately present their testimony to interviewers. Nonetheless, more scholars are turning to narratives as a historical resource. It remains one of the largest collections of testimony by formerly enslaved people, which is invaluable to the history of slavery, and our interpretation of it. If read

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<sup>7</sup> See Figure 1, WPA Administrative Files, Sample Questions (number 10).

<sup>8</sup> The Administration offered several instructions on how to transcribe the interviews in the Administrative Files entry, "Negro Dialect Suggestions."

carefully, with attention to the biases of the interviewers, and the silences and possible distorted memories of the interviewees, we can still gather some semblance of the lives and experiences of enslaved people through their stories.

I also refer to the nineteenth century slave narratives written by formerly enslaved people after they had escaped slavery. During the nineteenth century, when most of the narratives that I examine were written, they had a particular use of their own. They were intended for similar political ends and written pointedly to speak against slavery. In doing so, the authors translated the work of abolition into a literary form, which had proven quite effective (if the success of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is any indication). For the nineteenth century reader, or in this case white northerners, literature was targeted as the medium to open the mind to the cruelties of slavery and insight passions against the institution. Thus, the narratives were self-consciously fashioned strategic and political texts.

Contemporary readers often interpret these works as literature due to the similar plot devices and language deployed in the texts. They are also, though, personal testaments to the author's lives and collectively provide historical portraits of slavery in the nineteenth century. Their focus on the author's recollections makes them all the more useful for historical analysis, as they give readers access to the lived experiences of slavery written by enslaved people.<sup>9</sup> To the benefit of this study, the authors of the narratives had the opportunity to detail more about plantation life and burials than did

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the slave narratives see the John Sekora and Darin T. Turner's *Art of Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory*, (Macomb, Illinois: Western Illinois University, 1982).

those speaking to WPA interviewers. Together, both the slave narratives and WPA narratives form a composite history of funeral and burial practices amongst the enslaved.

As we read both the WPA interviews and the nineteenth century narratives, a complex web of individual histories and experiences are evident, but so too are the common practices engaged during funerals and the uses of plantation burial grounds. In particular, I intend to bring the grave into focus as a space of resistance, as seen in the narrative that opens this introduction; the woman interviewed had used the graveyard as a space to escape the abuses of slavery and resist the punitive system. “Among the graves,”<sup>10</sup> she and other formerly enslaved people resisted the attempted control of their movements, bodies, and space. From their stories, I locate the grave as a space where enslaved people formed community, deliberately resisted plantation owner demands, and reinterpreted the meaning of freedom.

In Chapter One, I explore the use of burials grounds for funerals. From looking after the body, and preparing it, to traveling from other plantations to attend wakes and funerals, enslaved people transformed burial grounds into a space for community and the unbridled expression of grief. In relation to other spaces and practices on the plantation, enslaved people could gather there more openly and without as much oversight or secrecy. However, some plantation owners enacted restrictions around funerals, denying enslaved people the time to observe a death or the ability to conduct funerals. In Chapter Two, I examine how enslaved people resisted these constraints and conducted funerals in

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<sup>10</sup> The phrase comes from Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives Volume 2*, ed. Yuval Taylor (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 602. Jacobs describes the calm resolve that she felt at the gravesites of her parents before setting out for freedom. “My trust in God had been strengthened by that prayer among the graves,” she wrote.

whatever ways that they could. In extreme cases, owners responded violently to their gathering on burial grounds, but amid it all, enslaved people interpreted the space, not as a site of violence and death, but as one of escape and refuge. In Chapter Three, I explore how enslaved people used burial grounds to interpret freedom. In the graveyard, some hoped to find freedom in death, and reunion in afterlife.

In writing about enslaved people and their many uses of burial grounds for resistance, I hope to come to a deeper understanding of their individual motivations and ways of navigating enslavement. Though seemingly small in relation to the politics and history of the institution of slavery, burial grounds were significant spaces to enslaved people and their personal lives.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “Folkses set up all night wid de corpse and sung and prayed”:

#### Expressions of Community and Resistance Through Funerals and Burial Grounds

Reflecting on the funerals and burial on a “big old Ellis Plantation in Oglethorpe County,” then seventy-four-year-old Paul Smith noted the distinct funerary rituals performed by fellow enslaved people after they were notified of a death. With careful attention, families and friends bathed the body in hot water and soap, dressed it in a “windin sheet,” and laid the body out on “coolin’ boards.”<sup>1</sup> Smith suggested that enslaved people stayed with the body to prepare and protect it from preying animals, but “settin’ up” (as it was often called) was also a practice of community. Enslaved neighbors and visitors would walk “miles and miles”<sup>2</sup> to the cabin where the body lay. Before the funeral, he said, “evvybody went and paid deir ‘spects to de family of de dead” and, “Folkses set up all night wid de corpse and sung and prayed.”<sup>3</sup>

Through these wakes and ceremonies, enslaved people formed an extended network of support not necessarily built on kinship and family alone.<sup>4</sup> “Settin’ up” at night represented a communal practice attended by people “all ‘round” who formed community beyond the confinement of the plantation to sing, pray, and recognize their

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<sup>1</sup> Willis Cofer also describes how enslaved people prepared the body in *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 1 (1941): 207-208.

<sup>2</sup> Ed McCree in *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 3 (1941): 61.

<sup>3</sup> *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 3 (1941): 329-330. Also see Roy Redfield in *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 4 (1941): 330.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Angelo Gomez has described these practices of preparing the body as a “collective responsibility” and argues that people traveled to view the body because, “in honoring the deceased, they validated their own worth.” See *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial Antebellum South*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 276.

shared experience or “like fate”<sup>5</sup> to the fellow enslaved people that had passed.<sup>6</sup> This unit of solidarity continued into the day of burial, as they proceeded in song to their final destination: the burial grounds.

On large plantations, enslaved people were buried separately from the graveyards of the white plantation owners, and slave graveyards were designated to a separate plot of plantation property.<sup>7</sup> The testimony of formerly enslaved people suggests that the conditions of slave burial grounds were less than ideal. Roy Redfield remembered that when a fellow enslaved person died, “somebody would knock up some kind of box for ‘em to be buried in,”<sup>8</sup> and for the burial, “they would dig some kind of hole and put you in it, then cover you up.”<sup>9</sup> Dora Franks noted the poor conditions of the slave graveyard, Patnum Hill, when she visited her mother’s grave site: “Dey didn’ have no markers nor nothin’ at de graves. Dey was jus’ sunk in places.”<sup>10</sup> These observations of formerly enslaved people suggest a lack of attention paid by plantation owners to slave burial grounds. However, as they gathered and openly expressed their grief through song there, enslaved people transformed the slave graveyard into a center of communion and rendered the space significant and distinct from the surrounding plantation.

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<sup>5</sup> Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 276. For more on slave funerals see Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974) and David R. Roediger, “And Die in Dixie: Funeral, Death, & Heaven in the Slave Community 1700-1865,” *The Massachusetts Review, Inc.* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 163-183.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Moody in *Texas Narratives*, vol. xvi, part 3 (1941): 117.

<sup>7</sup> Lynn Rainville, *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Enslaved people were buried in boxes that ranged from the haphazardly assembled pine wood boxes to painted coffins assembled on the plantation.

<sup>9</sup> *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 4 (1941): 330.

<sup>10</sup> *Mississippi Narratives*, vol. ix (1941): 50-51.

Burial grounds were removed from the labor-intensive sites that dominated the plantation. For example, plantation fields and processing building were organized and specialized for economic productivity. In his 1845 narrative, Frederick Douglass described his environment growing up on a Maryland plantation:

The home plantation of Colonel Lloyd wore the appearance of a country village. All the mechanical operations for all the farms were produced here. The shoemaking and mending, the blacksmithing, cartwrighting, coopering, weaving and grain-grinding, were all performed by the slaves on the home plantation.<sup>11</sup>

Douglass opens the reader's imagination to his world where he and other enslaved people were coerced to work. The whole place, he wrote, "wore a business like aspect." Though every plantation was not as productive, Douglass's description points to the primary function of most plantation spaces, which was namely to produce crops and economic gain for the owner. It was not by chance that the plantation wore the appearance of order and structure. For well-off seventeenth century plantation owners, anthropologist John Michael Vlach says, "neatness and order were considered important attributes of landscape management." By the mid-eighteenth century, plantation owners sought to transform the "chaotic natural condition into a scene marked by strict, hierarchical order."<sup>12</sup> In other words, the plantation was not just haphazardly planned, but meticulously crafted for the comfort of the owner and the constraint of the laborers. The plantation plans that owners had drawn reveal rigid lines to demarcate the various locations where crops were cultivated and processed.<sup>13</sup> Though one might expect to find an essential space such as burial grounds located on the plan, slave graveyard were

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<sup>11</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York: New American Library, 2012), 323.

<sup>12</sup> John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>13</sup> For an example of a plantation plan, see Figure 2. Plan for a Rice Plantation

rendered useless for the productivity of the plantation. The absence of burial grounds in owners' plans supports the idea that burial grounds were outside of the owner's realm of control and rule.

Unlike burial grounds, the plantation field was one of the largest and most heavily regulated plantation spaces. Enslaved people worked in the field day to night under the scrutiny of an overseer and the threat of the whip. Additionally, the fences that enclosed the plantation served as physical reminders of their confinement to this land where they were meant to labor.<sup>14</sup> On special occasions, though, one might find an opportunity for communal gathering in the plantation field. In the WPA Narratives, for example, formerly enslaved people described corn-shucking and other field activities that interviewers identified as communal. In her interview with Wheeler Gresham, Minnie Branham Stonestreet surmised how enslaved people had "plenty of fun...in the Gresham and Booker community." People came "for some distance around" and "merriment and work lasted into the night."<sup>15</sup> A closer reading, however, suggests that these gatherings were also disciplined by owners and devised for their benefit. During a corn-shucking for example, Alice Hutcheson recounted how the plantation owner invited neighboring plantation owners and enslaved people. John F. Van Hook detailed how an enslaved person would stand among a pile of corn, act as the general, give orders, and pace their laboring to songs such as "General Religh How," "Have a Jolly Crowd," and "Little Jolly Johnny."<sup>16</sup> These events were structured as competitions to shuck as many ears of corn as possible, and the prize to the participant that shucked the most was alcohol. As Hook

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<sup>14</sup> See Figure 3. Illustration of a Rice Plantation

<sup>15</sup> *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 4 (1941): 69-70.

<sup>16</sup> *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 4 (1941): 78-79.



noted about these events and other holidays on the plantation, “work was the primary object, especially in connection with slaves.”<sup>17</sup> Though enslaved people may have used these ceremonies as an opportunity to labor and commune under less restrictive conditions, the social gathering and entertainment was intended for plantation owners as they watched the dancing, singing, and paced labor from a distance.<sup>18</sup>

Seemingly recreational gatherings also occurred in spaces surrounding the plantation. For example, enslaved men were some times permitted to go hunting in the woods at night. For some, this was an exciting occasion for community and leisure. As enslaved child John F. Van Hook remembered, “the most fun was when we found the ‘possum in a hollow log.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, John Glover looked forward to possum hunting with his grandfather, but lamented that his grandfather died before he was old enough to join him.<sup>20</sup> For both Van Hook and Glover, hunting presented the opportunity to become part of a larger male community and tradition.<sup>21</sup> Though the boys and men of the plantation forged connections during their hunts, their task was still conditioned by the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> See Figure 4, “A corn shucking” in the Appendix. Also see “Francis Fedric/ ‘A Corn Shucking’,” in *The Unlevel Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport* edited by David Kenneth Wiggins and Patrick B. Miller, (University of Illinois Press: 2003): 17. Rogers D. Abrahams suggests that corn-shuckings and the performances associated with them were exploitative spectacles for the planter, but opportunities for celebration for enslaved people in *Singing the Master; The Emergence African American Culture in the Plantation South*, (New York: pantheon Books, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 4 (1941): 78-79.

<sup>20</sup> *South Carolina Narratives*, vol. xiv, part 2 (1941): 138.

<sup>21</sup> In his essay, “My Constant Companion: Slaves and their Dogs in the Antebellum South,” John Campbell has said, “Through their hunting with dogs, men derived an element of respect, status, and importance within the slave community. The collective support and recognition in turn made it easier for me to blunt the dehumanizing assaults of slavery and sustain their sense of self worth” in *Working Toward Freedom: Slave Society and Domestic Economy in the American South* edited by Larry E Hudson (University of Rochester Press, 1994): 57.

underlying need for food security and subsistence. Some enslaved people had scarce diets, and men were expected to hunt to provide the sustenance that families needed to survive. On a cotton plantation in South Carolina, for instance, Charles Ball attributed a child's death to a father who had neglected his responsibility to hunt and provide food for his family.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the social benefits of hunting were secondary to the need to sustain health and nourishment.

The woods beyond the plantation were also sites for social gatherings, but these were held in secret. Sneaking away from the demands and constraints of plantation life, enslaved people could attend parties in the woods that lasted all night. Plantation owners tried to deter enslaved people from attending parties because it could interfere with the efficiency of their labor. For example, Adele Frost remembered when her father, “used to tell us how hard it was for him to get up in the morning after being out most of the night frolicking.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, enslaved people made sure to leave the plantation in secrecy and return early the next morning. They found the “rewards of congregation” within what Stephanie Camp calls “secular institution” that enslaved people created in the woods, however if caught leaving the plantation, they would face punishment.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike these illicit gatherings on the land beyond the plantation, enslaved people could gather more openly to conduct funerals on burial grounds. Burial grounds too were

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black Man Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina* (1837), in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives Volume One*, ed. Yuval Taylor (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 374-375.

<sup>23</sup> *South Carolina Narratives*, vol. xiv, part 2 (1941): 89.

<sup>24</sup> Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 73. For more on the use of woods for truancy and secret parties see Camp's chapters “I Could Not Stay There” and “The Intoxication of Pleasurable Amusement. For testimony on parties, see John F. Van Hook in *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 4 (1941): 78-79; Adele Frost in *South Carolina Narratives*, vol. xiv, part 2 (1941): 89.

not as easily figured as economically lucrative and labor intensive locations as most other spaces on the plantation. And nor were they associated with the plantation owner's entertainment or amusement.

Funerals were thus rituals, and burial grounds spaces that offered enslaved people a greater degree of autonomy and self-expression than other realms of life on the plantation. There are, though, several indications that funerals and burials were conducted under the presence of the white plantation owner, overseer, or preacher. Alice Hutcheson recalled, "White mens preached all de fun' rals."<sup>25</sup> What owners' intentions were in attending these funeral were not always clear.<sup>26</sup> They may have been there as participants either to preach, as some did, or preside over the occasion. Eugene Genovese suggests that the owner attended slave funerals to supervise or control the events, lest enslaved people attempt to replicate the events of Gabriel's Rebellion (1800) and plan insurrection after the funeral ceremony.<sup>27</sup> Some owners were known to heavily regulate slave funerals. In his interview, Elige Davison of Richmond recalled George Davison's treatment of enslaved people's deaths: "When a slave die, he jus' 'nother dead nigger. Massa, he builded a wooden box and put the nigger in and carry him to the hole in the ground. Us march round the grave three times and that all."<sup>28</sup> Through Davison's account it is clear how the plantation owner presided over the funeral to supervise and restrict the expression of a community about the death of one of its members. The "ring

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<sup>25</sup> *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 2 (1941): 286-287. Also see Emma Virgel in *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 4 (1941): 118; Willis Cofer in *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 1 (1941): 207-208.

<sup>26</sup> See Figure 6. The owner stands removed from the ceremony in the left corner in John Antrobus's painting "Plantation Burial" (1860).

<sup>27</sup> Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 194-195.

<sup>28</sup> *Texas Narratives*, vol. xvi, part 1 (1941): 299.

ceremony” typically enacted at the grave to assist the body to the afterlife was confined to a curt “march round the grave three times.”<sup>29</sup>

In some cases, though, if plantation owners were present, they did not make an impression on many enslaved people. Adele Frost, for instance, depicted a night funeral: “everybody would light a lightud knot as torch while everybody sing.”<sup>30</sup> The singing and sometimes dancing that accompanied the funeral may have alarmed some onlookers seeing as nineteenth century Anglo- traditions did not incorporate these practices.<sup>31</sup> But for the enslaved on that plantation, singing was an essential component to the ritual of funeral and burial. During the procession to the graveyard, Paul Smith recalled, “Det started singin’ when dey left de house and sung right on ‘til dat corpse was put in de grave.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, singing sustained the fabric of funerals and unified the participants in motion and sound. Through the incantation and steady march to the burial grounds, one’s individual grief could be absorbed and amplified into the collective out pouring of emotion.

As fellow enslaved people shoveled the dirt over the grave and the preacher addressed the family of the dead, Cordelia Thomas recalled, “de mourners had done sung sompin on de order of Hark From De Tomb.”<sup>33</sup> “Hark from the Tomb” was one of the

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<sup>29</sup> This act of marching around the grave may have been an expression of a “ring ceremony,” an African funerary tradition. See Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 118.

<sup>30</sup> *South Carolina Narratives*, vol. xiv, part 2 (1941): 89.

<sup>31</sup> Lynn Rainville, *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014): 58.

<sup>32</sup> *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 3 (1941): 330. See also Jim Gillard and his experience “marchin’ befo’ de body” during a funeral in *Alabama Narrative*, vol. i: 155. Also see Isaam Morgan in *Alabama Narrative*, vol. i: 284.

<sup>33</sup> *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 4: 20.

many poems written by white poets that they sang, but enslaved people adapted the lyrics to suit their experiences of loss.

For example, Alice Hutcheson remembered singing a hymn written by Jane Taylor for the “Death of a Scholar.” The hymn reflects on the mourning of an acquaintance that died unexpectedly, and it serves as a reminder to those still living that they could face death at any moment as well. However, the version that enslaved people sang had substantial changes. In their version, death did not “borne away” the life of an acquaintance in peaceful transport, but “Death has been here and *tore* away a sister from our side.” Through the seemingly simple replacement of the one word, the entire tone of the poem shifts to evoke the violence and profound pain of their loss. Just as life on the plantation was arduous, so too was the experience of death both for the deceased and the living. To close, the last stanza of Taylor’s hymn was typically sung this way:

All needful strength is Thine to give;  
To Thee our souls apply  
For grace to teach us how to live,  
And make us fit to die<sup>34</sup>

In the version that enslaved people sang, according to Hutcheson, the lyrics were altered to the following:

And needful help is thine to give  
For Grace our souls to Thee apply,  
To larn us how to serve and live,  
And make us fit at las’ to die.<sup>35</sup>

It is quite possible that the subtle change in the third line, was altered from “For grace to teach us how to live” to “To larn us how to serve and live ” to reflect the realities of

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<sup>34</sup> These lyrics appear in *The Sunday School Hymn Book* compiled by J.P. Clapham. (Leeds Sunday School Union, 1860): 176.

<sup>35</sup> Also see Mary Colbert’s interview in *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 1 (1941): 220; *Georgia Narratives* vol. iv, part 4: 20.

bondage. In enslaved people's experience, servitude did not only mean supplication to a higher power, but also the visceral and demanding servitude that the enslaved experienced daily on the plantation.

Finally, Adele Frost recalled one of the common songs that she and fellow enslaved people sang at the graveyard:

Goin' to carry dis body  
To the grave-yard,  
Grave-yard don' you know me?  
To lay dis body down.<sup>36</sup>

This song "Lay This Body Down," drew its origins within enslaved communities and it had been passed down through the oral tradition for generations. During a night funeral on Barnwell Island, South Carolina, journalist W.H. Russell observed, "one singer beginning was followed by the others in unison, repeating the refrain in chorus, and full of quaint expression." In one variation of the spiritual, the line follows: "I'll lie in de grave and stretch out my arms." Moved by their lyric and cries, T.W. Higginson wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly*: "Never, it seems to me, since man first lived and suffered, was his infinite longing for peace uttered more plaintively than in that line."<sup>37</sup> The sentiment of "infinite longing for peace" parallels the feeling expressed by formerly enslaved people who saw death as a release to a place "where they would not be any more slaves."<sup>38</sup> Thus, the unity that resonated within the people surrounding the grave extended to include those interred in the graveyard. In the lyrics, enslaved people enunciated the

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<sup>36</sup> *South Carolina Narratives*, vol. xiv, part 2 (1941): 89.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in *Slave Songs of the United States* (A. Simpson & Company, 1867): 19-20.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Gaffney quoted in *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History Through Songs, Sermons, and Speech* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006): 12.

promise that the souls of the living and those past will meet once more in death and at the grave.

From beginning to end, slave funerals united the enslaved as a community. Across plantations enslaved people gathered to attend wakes, walk to the burial grounds, and conduct funerals. Regardless of plantation owners or onlookers, supervising and observing, enslaved people sang and openly expressed their lamentation to escape enslavement. At the graveyard, they also communicated to the dead through collective cultural expression and forged a spiritual community that united both the living and the dead.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **“In them days they wasn’t no time for mournin’”:**

#### **Constraints and Resistance at the Grave**

Not all enslaved people could use burial grounds for gathering and communion. Time efficiency was an important component to plantation management, and some owners imposed restrictions on how and when funerals were conducted. Enslaved people could not stop working to observe a death, lest they disrupt the work schedule determined by the plantation owner. “When you could see to work,” commented formerly enslaved person Austin Grant, “you was workin’ for him.” Grant continued, “they didn’ want you to know nothin’, that’s what, nothin’ but work.”<sup>1</sup>

The conditioning for work started early for enslaved children. Mary Reynolds learned this lesson quickly as a young girl on a southern plantation. When she was “jus’ ‘bout big ‘enough,” she was taught to sweep. From there she soon graduated into working in the fields and cutting corn. Like so many enslaved women and girls across the South, she grew up with a hoe in her hand and her feet firmly planted in the fields.<sup>2</sup> Reynolds learned not only to labor at a young age, but also the consequences if she did not meet the demands of the owner. ““For the love of Gawd,” the older woman training Reynolds warned her, “you better larn it right, or Solomon [the overseer] will beat the breath out you body.” Reynolds was always aware of the overseer and the threat of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Texas Narratives*, vol. xvi, part 2 (1941): 85. See Figure 7 for the WPA’s photographs of Austin Grant.

<sup>2</sup> See Figure 8.



whip.<sup>3</sup> As enslaved people worked the fields, they were punished if they dared to stop when they heard men and women, tied down yelling from the stocks, as “Solomon the overseer beat them with a big whip and massa look on.” Reynolds remembered in graphic detail how they “cut the flesh most to bones” and some “never got up again.”<sup>4</sup>

From the “larning” in the fields, the caution that they “better not stop” working, and the owner’s privilege to “look on” as the bodies of enslaved people were beaten by his orders, one thing was clear: “mastery” of the owner rested on the control of the bodies of enslaved people, the labor they did with their bodies, and how they moved their bodies through time and space.<sup>5</sup> This lesson was asserted by slaveholders too through jurisprudence. “The slave lives for his master’s service,” claimed the South Carolina Court. “His time, his labor, his comforts, are all at the master’s disposal.”<sup>6</sup> Just as they could not stop work, enslaved people could not stop to mourn death. Reynolds reflected, “Niggers mourn now, but in them days they wasn’t no time fur mournin’.”<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, there was no time to go to the graveyard and conduct a funeral. Formerly enslaved person Sam Polite commented that enslaved people could not conduct funerals during the day because, “you can’t knock off wuk for berry um.”<sup>8</sup> If it was not Sunday, Austin Grant recalled, “you couldn’ go; you went to that field.” Most of the enslaved people working on the plantation with Grant had to keep on working, while a few others were ordered to hastily bury the body without a ceremony. To Grant’s

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<sup>3</sup> Martha Bradley and Angie Garret discuss how they had to “learn” to take punishment as children in *Alabama Narratives*, vol. i.

<sup>4</sup> *Texas Narratives*, vol. xvi, part 3 (1941): 239. For photographs of Mary Reynolds, see Figure 9.

<sup>5</sup> See Camp, *Closer to Freedom*.

<sup>6</sup> *The Negro Law of South Carolina* compiled by J.G. Bowman (1848): 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Texas Narratives*, vol. xvi, part 3 (1941): 239.

<sup>8</sup> *South Carolina Narratives*, vol. xiv, part 3 (1941): 274.

disapproval, “They jes’ put ‘em in a box, no preachin’ or nothin’.”<sup>9</sup> In his narrative, Henry Bibb, a runaway from Kentucky, recalled a time he spent on a plantation after attempting to escape the plantation, being captured, and sold to a Deacon named Whitfield. “As to the burial of slaves,” he wrote, “but very little more care is taken of their dead bodies than if they were dumb beasts.” When his second child died, he “was compelled to dig my own child’s grave and bury it myself without even a box to put it in.”<sup>10</sup> The meager materials further hindered the possibilities to not only conduct burials for enslaved people, but to appropriately grieve their deaths. Faced with the necessity to place the exposed and unprotected body in the grave that he dug himself, deepened the Bibb’s profound sense of loss.

Enslaved people found ways to conducted funerals on their own time and to resist the injunction to resign the bodies to the grave without ceremony. For, example, when Hannah Crasson’s ten year old sister Violet died, seven family members met on the plantation- the meeting arranged among themselves. Her father made the coffin and her uncles carried the body to the grave.<sup>11</sup> Though Crasson was notably upset that they did not sing or pray during the burial, the family did what they could to conduct a burial for their loved one under their constraints and conditions.

Some plantation owners went as far as prohibiting gathering entirely. Generally, the concern underlying this rule was a fear of assembly. The restrictions on burial grounds were similar to the restrictions imposed on plantation meeting grounds.

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<sup>9</sup> *Texas Narratives*, vol. xvi, part 2 (1941): 85.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave*. 1849, In *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives Volume Two*, edited by Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999): 61.

<sup>11</sup> *North Carolina Narratives*, vol. xi, part 1 (1941): 191.

Plantation owners restricted enslaved people from assembling out of fear that such gatherings would be opportunities to plan ways to rise and rebel against the slave owning minority. Henry Bibb put it plainly: “Being more numerous than the whites there was fear of rebellion, and the overpowering of their oppressors in order to obtain freedom.”<sup>12</sup> Particularly in parts of the South where enslaved people outnumbered whites, this was a major concern. Thus, religious services and other gatherings were often limited or prohibited.

Additionally, owners required enslaved people to obtain passes if moving beyond the boundaries of the plantation so as to restrict the movements of enslaved people. In 1687, South Carolina law required the use of passes: “it shall not be lawful for any negroe or negroes. Or other slave, upon any pretence whatsoever to travel or goe abroad from his or her master or mistresses house in the night time, between sunseting and the sunrising, or in the day time without a note from his or her master or overseer.”<sup>13</sup> If they could not acquire a pass, enslaved people were effectively prohibited from attending a funeral or burial. In Timmonsville, South Carolina, John Glover noted, “Slaves didn’ have no way to go to de funeral but to walk. Den a white man would stop you en if you have a ticket wid you dat have pass word on it, you could go on.” In any case, “if you didn’ an got caught, you got one of the worst whippins’.”<sup>14</sup> Though, slave movements were heavily regulated by patrols of white men, “slipping off” as it were, was still a fairly

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<sup>12</sup> Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 61.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Laws and Violence in Virginia and the Carolina*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> *South Carolina Narratives*, vol. xiv, part 2 (1941): 140.

common practice.<sup>15</sup> Only if enslaved people were able to evade the law and the patrols, were they able to go to a funeral.<sup>16</sup>

To further deter enslaved people from leaving the plantation for religious services and ceremonies, plantation owners imposed structures to contain both their movements and expression. Slaveholder James Henry Hammond had meeting grounds built on his plantation specifically to undermine attendance of his enslaved laborers at black churches where he had little control. In his diary he wrote, “no religious meeting is allowed on the plantation besides singing, praying at such times as will not conflict with plantation hours & always with the permission of the Master or Overseer.” Later he wrote, “religious troubles among the negroes. They are running the thing into the ground by being allowed to[o] much organization- too much power to the head men & too much praying & church meeting on the plantation. Have ordered all church meetings to be broken up except at the Church with a white Preacher.”<sup>17</sup>

Similar logic and actions applied to funerals as well. During his enslavement on a Maryland plantation, James W.C. Pennington observed, “when a slave died, their remains were usually consigned to the grave without ceremony.” However, enslaved people constructed informal ceremonies in the absence of formal observations. Pennington

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<sup>15</sup> Dora Franks in *Mississippi Narratives*, vol. ix (1941): 50-51.

<sup>16</sup> Such was the chance that Henry Bibb took when he decided to go to a prayer meeting on a neighboring plantation without a pass. Upon his return, the plantation owner “found out that I had violated his law, and I should suffer the penalty which was five hundred lashes, on my naked back.” Such reactions to small gestures of autonomy such as slipping away could motivate more bold resistance. Immediately upon hearing the news of his owner’s intent to beat him, Bibb tells his readers, “I concluded then to run away.” He thus escaped the punishment that defying the owner’s “law” had motivated.

<sup>17</sup> James H. Hammond’s “Instructions to Overseers” is quoted in J. William Harris’, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta’s Hinterlands*, (LSU Press: 1998): 51.

recounted the efforts of an enslaved man to provide the dead with funeral services.

“When ever [this man] heard of a slave having been buried in that way, [he] would send notice from plantation to plantation, calling the slaves together at the grave on the Sabbath, where he’d sing, pray, and exhort. I have known him to go ten or fifteen miles voluntarily to attend these services.”<sup>18</sup> So, in some cases, individuals spearheaded efforts to conduct funerals.

If enslaved people attempted to conduct ceremonies against the wishes of the plantation owner, they did so under threat of punishment and death. Through the acts of retaliatory violence, the meaning of the space shifted away from the gathering of enslaved people, and to one of disciplining and management by owners. Tines Kendricks recalled the sudden sickness of an enslaved woman’s son, Moses. Despite her pleas, the mistress would not allow the child to have medical attention, and he died shortly after. They carried the young boy’s body to the grave where a preacher, Uncle Billy Jordan, began a funeral service. Just as soon as they started singing and praying, the plantation owner rushed to the burial grounds on horseback and threatened to lash everyone to death if they dared to conduct a funeral again. Directly to Jordan, he said “iffen he ever hear of him doi’ any more preachin’ or prayin’ ‘roung ‘mongst de niggers at de grave-yard or anywheres, else, he gwine lash him to death.”<sup>19</sup>

There were other occasions when plantation owners enacted violence in plantation graveyards. In her testimony, Isabella Jackson told the story of an inebriated plantation

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<sup>18</sup> James W.C Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States* (1849), in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives Volume Two*, ed. Yuval Taylor (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 146.

<sup>19</sup> *Arkansas Narratives*, vol. ii part 4 (1941): 179.

owner who murdered an enslaved man without provocation, dragged his body to the graveyard, and forced two boys to dig a grave. She continued, “Right on the dead he jumps and stomps ‘til the body is masked and twisted to fit the hole.”<sup>20</sup> Additionally, Cato Carter remembered hearing how plantation management would threaten to take enslaved people to the graveyard and, “shoot ‘em down and bury ‘em face downward, with their shoes on.”<sup>21</sup>

The reasons for this violence enacted at burial grounds are unclear. But their actions suggest that they were trying both to dissuade enslaved people from gathering at the cemetery as well as using the graveyard as a space for spectacle and disciplining. It is likely that plantation owners were trying to reassert some form of dominance through violence. Figuring slavery into a larger theoretical discourse, Walter Johnson write, “The slaveholders’ violent responses, which seem at first to emblemize the license of unchecked power, upon closer inspection reveal the brittleness of their control; mastery had constantly to be-could only be-shored up though brutality.”<sup>22</sup> Though plantation owners may have tried to orient space toward disciplinary ends, enslaved people continued to develop alternate uses of that space. The grounds for interpretation, both literally and conceptually, were always in flux.

In some instances, enslaved people associated the graveyard with ghosts and haunts, and as a result avoided the space, especially at night. But formerly enslaved person Fannie Griffin did not buy this idea: “they say they see ghosts and hants, and sperits but I ain’t never see none, don’t believe there is none. I more scared of live

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<sup>20</sup> *Oklahoma Narratives*, vol. xiii (1941): 153-154.

<sup>21</sup> *Texas Narratives*, vol. xvi, part 1 (1941): 205.

<sup>22</sup> In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* edited by Glenn Hendler and Burgett Bruce (New York: NYU Press, 2014): 225.

people than I is dead ones; dead people ain't gwine to harm you.”<sup>23</sup> As Griffin punctuated with her commentary, the danger was not in the cemetery, but the world outside of it. Despite some people's fears, graveyards were a place where one could run *away* from the danger and *away* from the abuse. As the enslaved woman in Georgia whose words opened this thesis, enslaved people could use the graveyard as a space to escape the abuses of slavery, temporarily runaway, and hide.

In his testimony, Page Harris recalled a particular practice involving graveyards: “It was always said that slaves, when they ran away, would try to go through a graveyard and if he or she could get dirt from the grave of some one that had been recently buried, sprinkle it behind them, the dogs could not follow the fleeing slave, and would howl and return home.”<sup>24</sup> Thus some enslaved people used the graveyard to thwart the chances of being caught by their owners when running away. Similarly, Hester Hunter recalled how runaways commonly hide in the graveyard. In one instance, Hunter and her mistress found a runaway hiding in there. As soon as they spotted the man, the mistress turned around and proceeded back to the house as if she had not seen him.<sup>25</sup> Enslaved people would hide in the graveyard presuming that white people looking for them would be too afraid of ‘haunts’ to hunt them down, and in this case at least, it had worked.<sup>26</sup>

The testimony of enslaved people shows that the use of the graveyard was not simply fixed to funeral ceremonies. Perhaps this helps to explain why some plantation owners, prompted by a fear of rebellion, applied strict rules around the assembly of their

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<sup>23</sup> *South Carolina Narratives*, volume xiv, part 2 (1941): 210.

<sup>24</sup> *Maryland Narrative*, vol. viii (1941): 24.

<sup>25</sup> *South Carolina Narratives*, vol. xiv, part 2 (1941): 337-338.

<sup>26</sup> Also see Mamie Riley's story about running away to the graveyard for three days when the Union Army arrived on the plantation in *South Carolina*, vol. xiv, part 4: 23.

laborers, especially on meeting and burial grounds. But even when they were denied the ability to conduct funerals, enslaved people used burial grounds to challenge those constraints. However, enslaved people continually sought out the graveyard for resistance, refuge, and escape.



## CHAPTER THREE

**“Resolved I am to strike the blow, For freedom or the grave”:**

### **Interpreting Freedom through Death**

If we think of the plantation as a space of confinement, enslaved people sought freedom anywhere beyond that plantation. Some successfully escaped outside of the state or region, but even then, their release from enslavement was not guaranteed. Though he had escaped a southern plantation, Charles Ball remained aware of the fact that he could be re-enslaved at any moment. In his 1836 narrative, he wrote, “By the laws of the United States I am still a slave; and though I am now growing old, I might even yet be deemed of sufficient value to be worth pursuing as far as my present residence, if those to whom the law gives the right of dominion over my person and life, knew where to find me.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, as long as enslaved people remained in the United States their freedom was in jeopardy.

Seeking to deter the possibility of re-enslavement, others aspired to escape to Canada. In 1849, Henry Bibb wished to summon all enslaved people to “break your chains and fly for freedom!” for the “Blessings of Liberty” awaited in Canada.<sup>2</sup> Fifteen years later, Jacob. D. Green echoed the same sentiment in his work, *Narrative of the Life of J.D. Green, A Runaway Slave from Kentucky*. The poem that appears at the end of the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black Man Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina* (1837), in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives Volume One*, ed. Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 318.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave*, 1849, in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives Volume Two*, ed. Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 12.

narrative, “Slavery and Liberty,” details the narrator’s days on the plantation serving the master and being denied the fruits of his labor. Finally, the narrator decides to escape:

My soul is vexed within me so  
To think I am a slave,  
Resolved I am to strike the blow,  
For freedom or the grave.<sup>3</sup>

Evading the pursuing hounds and a relentless master, they dreamed of their arrival to Canada, “the land of liberty” and celebrated the thought of leaving America, “the native land of slavery,” behind for good. During the nineteenth century this was the route to freedom that some took, hoping one day to reside in the land “where all coloured men are free.”<sup>4</sup> The poem metaphorically parallels Green’s own escape to Canada by way of the Underground Railroad. Outside of the bounds of the institution of slavery, he was able to attain and maintain his freedom. This notion of “freedom or the grave” was not simply a device to “rearticulate”<sup>5</sup> or mimic the revolutionary fervor spoken during the American and French revolutions ninety years past. Rather, enslaved people confronted the decision to pursue freedom or death in their daily lives. Some enslaved people, like Charles Ball and Henry Bibb, risked death to find their freedom.

But for others, one need not look further than the plantation itself, for the place to find freedom was the burial grounds. Some believed that they would find freedom in death, united once more with their children, other family members, and generations

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<sup>3</sup> J.D. Green, *Narrative of the Life of J.D. Green, a Runaway Slave, from Kentucky, Containing an Account of His Three Escapes, in 1839, 1846, and 1848*. 1864, in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives Volume 2*, ed. Yuval Taylor (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 713.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Mikko Tuhkanen, *The American Optic: Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory, and Richard Wright* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 168.

passed. In this chapter, I will discuss how enslaved people used plantation burials grounds as a site to interpret meanings of freedom.

Throughout the history of slavery there have been numerous sites associated with freedom and enslavement. One of the first symbols of confinement confronted by the ancestors of North American slaves was the slave ship. In many ways, the ocean was the first graveyard where enslavers dumped the starved and diseased bodies over the side of the ship, their deaths equated to a loss of property.<sup>6</sup> For others, though, the ocean presented the opportunity to escape. In his eighteenth century narrative, Olaudah Equiano described his descent into the deck of the slave ship. Met with immediate repugnance and shock, he “wished for the last friend, death” and subsequently, looked for the opportunity to jump overboard the ship. Ultimately, his plan was foiled by the close surveillance of the crew. Any time that an enslaved person attempted to jump, they were “severely cut” and put back in their place.<sup>7</sup> In the nineteenth century, enslaved people continued to look overboard the ships of the internal slave trade. In the case of Charles Ball, he was too restricted to even pursue suicide as a possibility. Chained and handcuffed on a Georgia bound ship, Ball thought, “I should find no respite from misery but the grave. I longed to die, and escape from the hands of my tormentors; but even the wretched privilege of destroying myself was denied me.”<sup>8</sup> For the slave ship crew, any

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<sup>6</sup> See Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage From Africa to American Diaspora*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 145.

<sup>7</sup>Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavos Vassa, the African*. 1789. In *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narrative Volume I*, ed. Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 58.

<sup>8</sup>Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States 1837*, In *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives Volume One* edited by Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 275-276.

measures taken by enslaved people to escape, even through death, threatened the slave ship operations and their potential economic gain.<sup>9</sup> Simply put, the more slaves that survived the trip, the more money they could collect. Nonetheless, records show that enslaved people did take their own lives on the ships, jumping into the watery graveyard to find some means of escaping the conditions and the uncertainty that lay ahead in North America and on the plantation.<sup>10</sup>

The possibilities for resistance shifted slightly once on a plantation. After arriving on a South Carolina cotton plantation, Ball observed suicide and death more frequently and attributed the trend to the harsh southern plantation conditions:

Surely if any thing can justify a man in taking his life into his own hands, and terminating his existence, no one can attach blame to the slaves on many of the cotton plantations of the south, when they cut short their breath, and the agonies of the present being, by a single stroke. What is life worth, amidst hunger, nakedness and excessive toil, under the continually uplifted lash?<sup>11</sup>

Ball describes the severe context in which some were driven to take their own lives.

Though perceived as a measure of freedom from enslavement by the enslaved, plantation owners tried to prevent suicides to protect both their economic interest and reputations.

Under a particular understanding of mastery among slaveholders that has been labeled “paternalism” by historians, owners fashioned themselves as the patriarchs and

benevolent caretakers of the people that they kept enslaved.<sup>12</sup> Though severe punishment was deemed permissible, slave owners wanted to remain absolved of any blame for

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<sup>9</sup> See Richard J. Bell, “Suicide By Slaves,” *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion, Volume 2*, ed. Junius P. Rodriguez. (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 494.

<sup>10</sup> Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 145.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>12</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage Books, 1976.

cruelty on their part.<sup>13</sup> But it was against the very cruelty and constraints that they owners imposed that enslaved people resisted.

The efforts of plantation owners and management could not keep enslaved people from contemplating suicide. Such was the case for formerly enslaved authors Solomon Northup and Frederick Douglass. Frederick Douglass revealed, “I found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed.”<sup>14</sup> Solomon Northup shared his experience of re-enslavement on a Louisiana plantation. As he lay on the floor of the slave hut “smarting the undeserved wounds which an inhuman master had inflicted” he thought of his father’s grave in Sandy Hill, New York, “longing only for the grave which had covered him, to shield me from the lash of the oppressor.”<sup>15</sup> Both Northup and Douglass were able to escape rather than take their lives, but the notion that one could find freedom in death remained in their thoughts on the plantation.

Some were ultimately taken to the plantation graveyard, and their bodies were laid next to their loved ones just as they had wished. Such was the case for Lydia, an enslaved woman on a South Carolina cotton plantation. With a hoe in her hand and a child on her back, the near twenty-year-old worked the cotton fields each day.<sup>16</sup> After

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, 289.

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives Volume One*, ed. Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 571.

<sup>15</sup> Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and rescued in 1853* (1853), in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives Volume Two*, ed. Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 173.

<sup>16</sup> See Figure 10, an illustration of an enslaved woman and her child in the fields

Charles Ball inquired about her carrying the child, she said, “Poor thing, I wish we were both in the grave, where all sorrow is forgotten.”<sup>17</sup> In the position of greater suffering, Lydia could only find comfort in the hope that she and her child would end their suffering in death. Ultimately, her wish was granted and the next winter her child died. As they walked from the grave where her child was buried, Ball remembered how “she was rejoiced that her child was dead, and out of the world in which slavery and wretchedness must have been its only portion. I am now, said she, ready to follow my child, and the sooner I go, the better for me.”<sup>18</sup> After that day she refused to return to the cotton fields. In retaliation for her defiance, the overseer forced her to consume a solution of copperas and water and, Lydia died shortly thereafter. Ball helped to carry her body to the plantation graveyard, and to bury her next to her child. “Death,” he later wrote, “was to her a welcome messenger, who came to remove her from toil that she could not sustain.”<sup>19</sup>

Lydia’s resignation to death was not due to any lack of imagination about freedom. It was her response to her reality. She and her child were bound together and bound to a land that kept her beaten and confined. From that perspective, perhaps, her only feasible escape and freedom was death. Her story shares a striking similarity to the story of an enslaved woman Eliza Berry, who was parted from her young children during a slave auction. The freedom that she once wished for her and her children was replaced by a freedom that could only be attained by death. Like Lydia, she stopped working in the cotton fields, and withdrew into the cabin for weeks, until fellow enslaved people

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, 325.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 375-376.

returned one night and found her dead. Reflecting on her death and burial, Solomon Northup wrote, “Far up the Red River, where it pours its waters sluggishly through the unhealthy low lands of Louisiana, she rests in the grave at last—the only resting place of the poor slave!” She was overcome by “the burden of maternal sorrow,” a responsibility felt by enslaved women across the north and south.<sup>20</sup>

Harriet Jacobs, too, wished for the freedom of her children. “I could have made my escape alone” she said, “but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom.” As a child, Jacobs had endured a life of sexual advances by the plantation owner and abuses from the mistress. But over ten years, she visited the graveyard, a mere mile away from the center of the plantation, and used the space to find some degree of autonomy. During her father’s funeral, she followed his remains to the “humble grave” where she joined fellow enslaved people to recognize and respect his memory.<sup>21</sup> Often times, Jacobs revisited the graves of her father and mother to find respite from the abuse that she daily faced. She found comfort in the idea that at least her parents were free where “the prisoners rest together, they hear not the voice of the oppressors, the servant is free from his master.” Her experience unites with countless other enslaved people who used burial grounds as a space of resistance to forge community through funeral, find release from enslavement, and interpret freedom.

The last scene at the graveyard ends with Jacobs, no longer a girl but a woman, kneeling at the graves of her parents. She “kissed them, and poured forth a prayer to God for guidance and support in the perilous step I was about to take,” with her father’s voice,

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<sup>20</sup> Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 235;188.

<sup>21</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives Volume 2*, ed. Yuval Taylor (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 547.

“bidding me not to tarry till I reached freedom or the grave.” In that moment, she planned her escape. Years later she and her children were free from the life of servitude and control, but not before she gained strength to find freedom at that last prayer “among the graves.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), 602.



## CONCLUSION

When I returned to Sanders Cemetery in the summer of 2014, I returned to a transformed landscape. No longer amid litter and rusting poles, the tombstones dotted a lush lawn. The smell of freshly mowed grass and a smiling face peeping beneath a brimmed cap welcomed me at the cemetery's entrance as I made my way to my great-grandmother's gravesite once more. During the spring, residents took action to upkeep the burial grounds. If it were not for the hard work of the Lynchburg residents who do all that they can to preserve the gravesites of their loved ones, this essential site for families and the community would surely have faded from the landscape long ago.

In the twenty-first century experience of visiting antebellum plantations and rural areas across the South, the burial grounds of enslaved people are difficult to locate and have been absent from the cotemporary narratives of plantation life. One might be inclined to think that they never were a part of the landscape at all. Visitors more readily turn their attention to the imposing "big house" and other structures of order on the plantation while the burial grounds and the stories of enslaved people remain on the margins.

Through this study, I hope to bring attention to the burial grounds where countless stories of expression and resistance were born. Enslaved people navigated enslavement by repurposing the space of the plantation -- the main site of their subjugation. They seized the capacity of burial grounds to reinforce the bonds of community and spirituality in the death and funerals that frequented life on the plantation. In a space deemed insignificant to the motives of the plantation owner, enslaved people claimed the burial grounds to find some release and resist the attempted control of their bodies and

movements. Some went as far as to locate their freedom there in the burial grounds, because in death, some believed that they would find eternal freedom and reunion with their families in the afterlife.

Though the enslaved people whose words appear in this study have passed, the importance of burial grounds and their experiences in them remain with us. We must continue to uncover the stories and preserve the memories of the enslaved people to develop a more complex history of the nation and recognize the people who built it.

## APPENDIX

Figure 1. WPA Administrative Files, Sample Questions

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STORIES FROM EX-SLAVES

The main purpose of these detailed and homely questions is to get the Negro interested in talking about the days of slavery. If he will talk freely, he should be encouraged to say what he pleases without reference to the questions. It should be remembered that the Federal Writers' Project is not interested in taking sides on any question. The worker should not censor any material collected, regardless of its nature.

It will not be necessary, indeed it will probably be a mistake, to ask every person all of the questions. Any incidents or facts he can recall should be written down as nearly as possible just as he says them, but do not use dialect spelling so complicated that it may confuse the reader.

A second visit, a few days after the first one, is important, so that the worker may gather all the worthwhile recollections that the first talk has aroused.

Questions:

1. Where and when were you born?
2. Give the names of your father and mother. Where did they come from? Give names of your brothers and sisters. Tell about your life with them and describe your home and the "quarters." Describe the beds and where you slept. Do you remember anything about your grandparents or any stories told you about them?
3. What work did you do in slavery days? Did you ever earn any money? How? What did you buy with this money?
4. What did you eat and how was it cooked? Any possums? Rabbits? Fish? What food did you like best? Did the slaves have their own gardens?

5. What clothing did you wear in hot weather? Cold weather? On Sundays? Any shoes? Describe your wedding clothes.

6. Tell about your master, mistress, their children, the house they lived in, the overseer or driver, poor white neighbors.

7. How many acres in the plantation? How many slaves on it? How and at what time did the overseer wake up the slaves? Did they work hard and late at night? How and for what causes were the slaves punished? Tell what you saw. Tell some of the stories you heard.

8. Was there a jail for slaves? Did you ever see any slaves sold or auctioned off? How did groups of slaves travel? Did you ever see slaves in chains?

9. Did the white folks help you to learn to read and write?

10. Did the slaves have a church on your plantation? Did they read the Bible? Who was your favorite preacher? Your favorite spirituals? Tell about the baptizing; baptizing songs. Funerals and funeral songs.

11. Did the slaves ever run away to the North? Why? What did you hear about patrollers? How did slaves carry news from one plantation to another? Did you hear of trouble between the blacks and whites?

12. What did the slaves do when they went to their quarters after the day's work was done on the plantation? Did they work on Saturday afternoons? What did they do Saturday nights? Sundays? Christmas morning? New Year's Day? Any other holidays? Cornshucking? Cotton Picking? Dances? When some of the white master's family married or died? A wedding or death among the slaves?

13. What games did you play as a child? Can you give the words or sing any of the play songs or ring games of the children? Riddles? Charms? Stories about "Raw Head and Bloody Bones" or other "hants" of ghosts? Stories about animals? What do you think of voodoo? Can you give the words or sing any lullabies? Work songs? Plantation hollers? Can you tell a funny story you have heard or something funny that happened to you? Tell about the ghosts you have seen.

14. When slaves became sick who looked after them? What medicines did the doctors give them? What medicine (herbs, leaves, or roots) did the slaves use for sickness? What charms did they wear and to keep off what diseases?

Stories from Ex-slaves -3-

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15. What do you remember about the war that brought your freedom? What happened on the day news came that you were free? What did your master say and do? When the Yankees came what did they do and say?
16. Tell what work you did and how you lived the first year after the war and what you saw or heard about the KuKlux Klan and the Nightriders. Any school then for Negroes? Any land?
17. Whom did you marry? Describe the wedding. How many children and grandchildren have you and what are they doing?
18. What do you think of Abraham Lincoln? Jefferson Davis? Booker Washington? Any other prominent white man or Negro you have known or heard of?
19. Now that slavery is ended what do you think of it? Tell why you joined a church and why you think all people should be religious.
20. Was the overseer "poor white trash"? What were some of his rules?

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The details of the interview should be reported as accurately as possible in the language of the original statements. An example of material collected through one of the interviews with ex-slaves is attached herewith. Although this material was collected before the standard questionnaire had been prepared, it represents an excellent method of reporting an interview. More information might have been obtained however, if a comprehensive questionnaire had been used.

Figure 2. Plan for a 1784 Rice Plantation owned by James Grant (credit: [http://www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/Plantations/plantations/Rice\\_Cultivation.htm](http://www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/Plantations/plantations/Rice_Cultivation.htm))

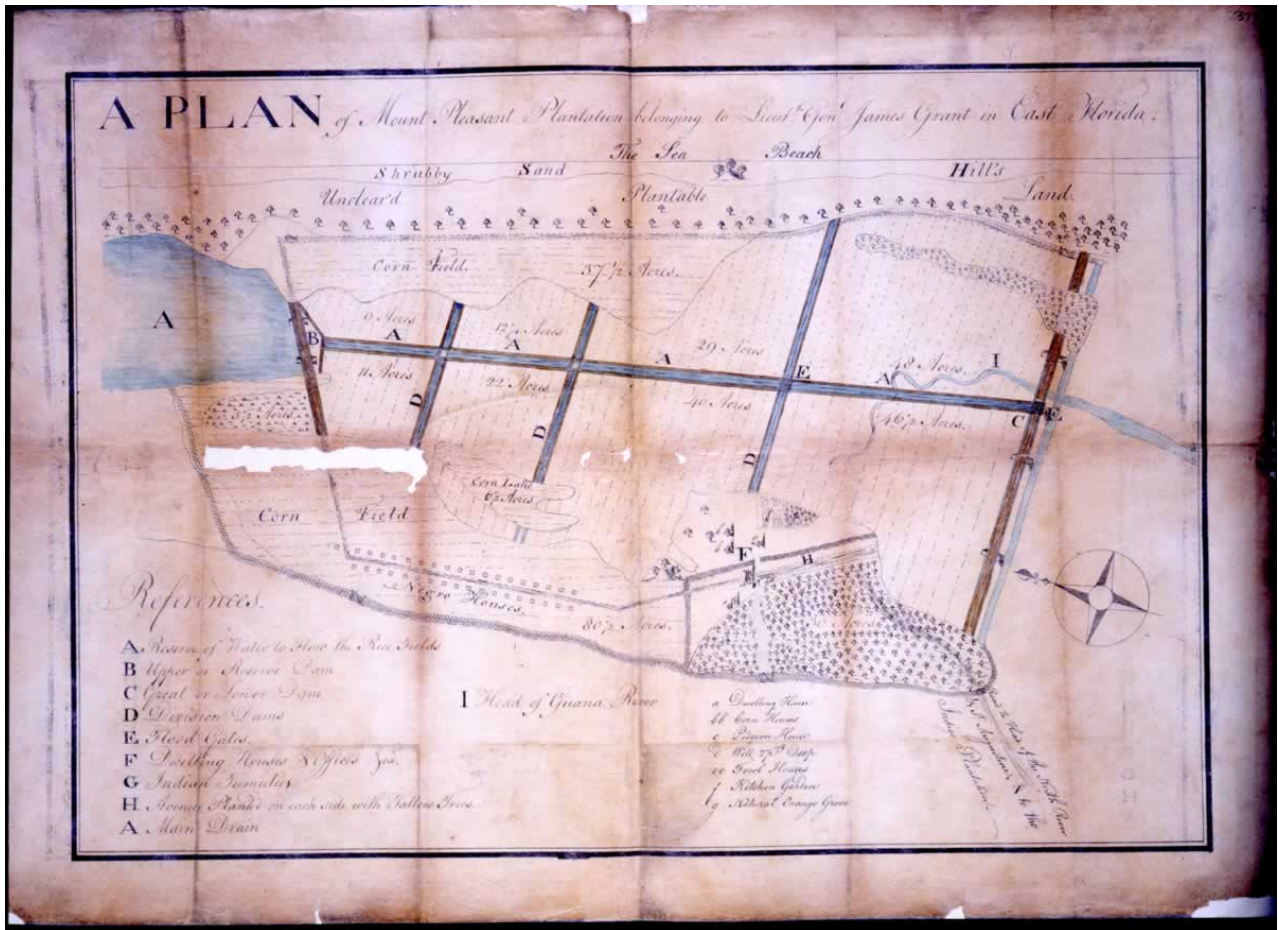


Figure 3. Illustration of a Rice Plantation  
(credit:[http://www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/Plantations/plantations/Rice\\_Cultivation.htm](http://www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/Plantations/plantations/Rice_Cultivation.htm))

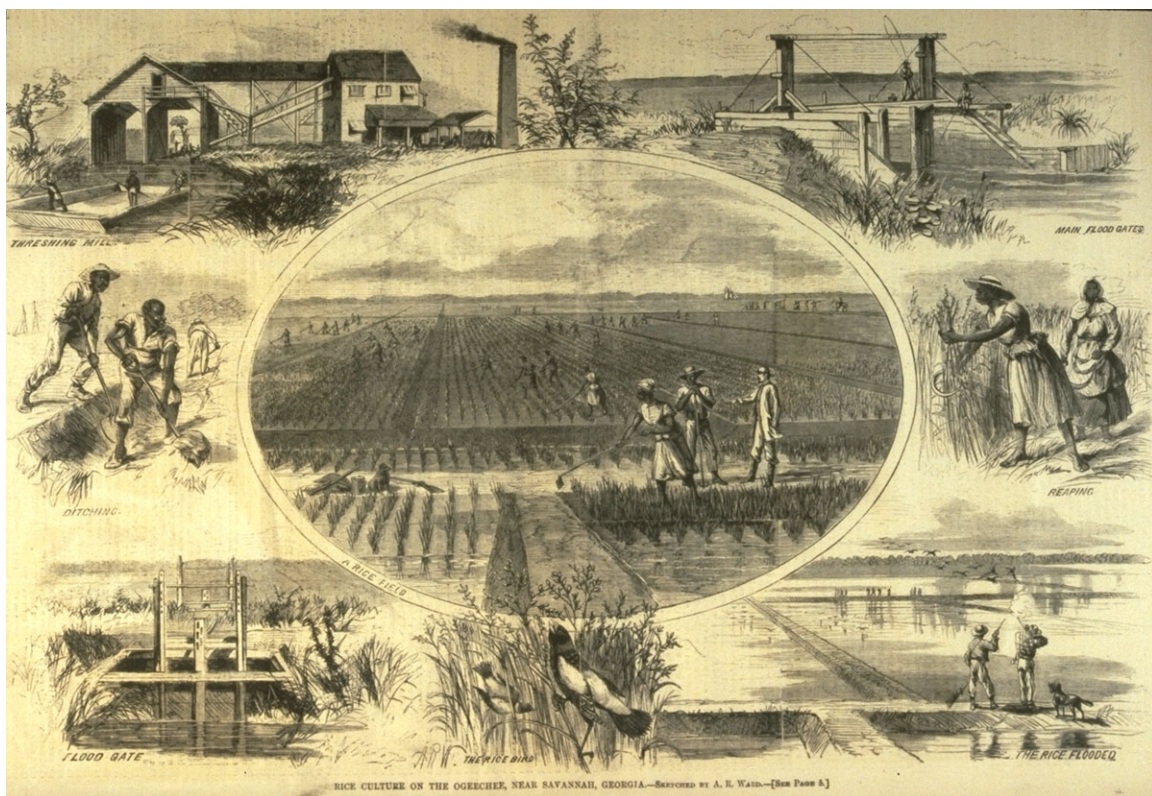
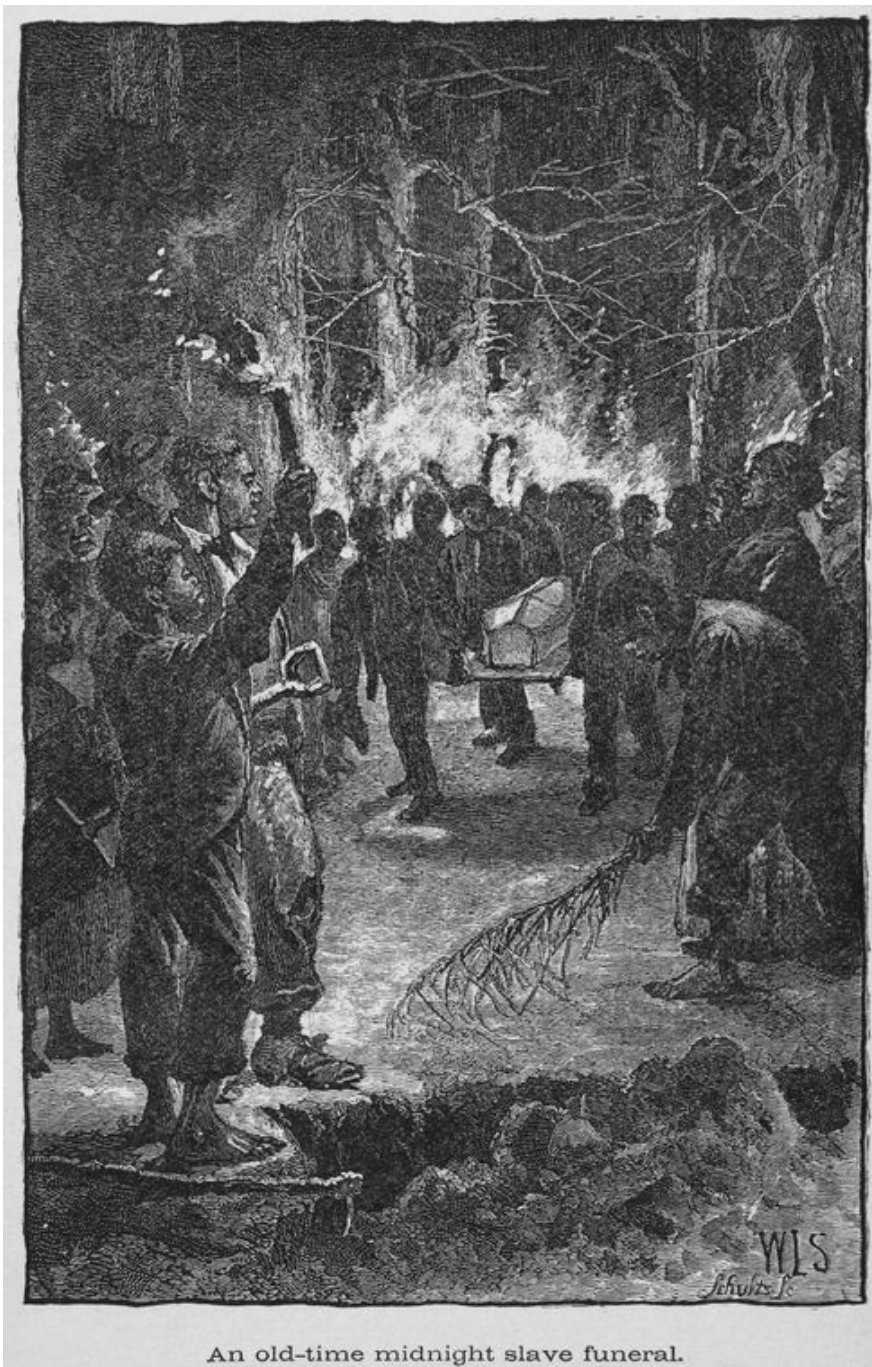


Figure 4. A corn shucking, Library of Congress (credit: *Unlevel Playing Field*)





Figure 5. A funeral held at night (credit: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/>)



An old-time midnight slave funeral.

Figure 6. “Plantation Burial” (1860) by John Antrobus (credit: Image Reference NW0179, as shown on [www.slaveryimages.org](http://www.slaveryimages.org), compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and University of Virginia Library”).



Figure 7. WPA Photos of Austin Grant

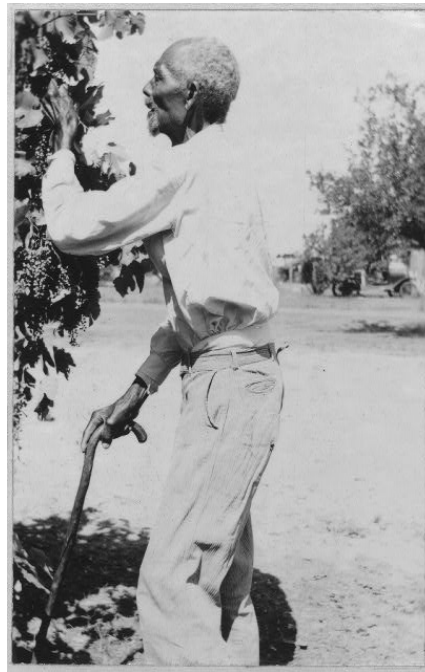


Figure 8. Women and men hoe a sweet potato field on John's Hopkinson's Plantation. 1862 (credit: <http://www.ushistoryscene.com>)



Figure 9. WPA Photo of Mary Reynolds



Figure 10. Illustration an enslaved woman and her child in the plantation field (credit: *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself*)



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