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Elderly slaves of the Plantation South: Somewhere between heaven and earth

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The Ohio State University, 1992
Elderly Slaves of the Plantation South:
Somewhere Between Heaven and Earth

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the
Graduate School of the Ohio State University

by
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The Ohio State University
1992

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Ms. Maggie A. Close and Mr. Willie F. Close, my sisters, Ms. Dedra Close and Ms. Monica Close, my aunts, Ms. Myrlean Haire, Ms. Mildred Keaton, Ms. Carrie Roberts, Mrs. Doris Carter, and Mrs. Annette Davenport, my maternal grandmother, Ms. Annie Mae Allen, my paternal grandparents, Rev. J.B. and Ossie Close
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INTRODUCTION

While numerous scholars have studied the institution of slavery, Kenneth Stampp in the *Peculiar Institution* was among the first to focus significant attention on the enslaved African Americans as a people with a community separate from their owners. Stampp regarded the institution of slavery as bad. He refuted the racist and derogatory characterizations of African Americans in U.B. Phillips' *American Negro Slavery* published in 1918. Historian John Blassingame went beyond Stampp in the *Slave Community* (1972). Blassingame also argued that the slaves created a unique African American community different from the owners. However, Blassingame's major shortcoming was his failure to incorporate the lives of African American slave women within his study.¹

Other scholars focused significant attention on the lives of females. Deborah Gray White in *Ar'n't I A Woman* (1985) discussed the special vulnerability and the special burdens slave women carried. According to White, slave women's work and their childbearing and childcare responsibilities tied them more closely to the plantation or farm than slave men. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in
Within the Plantation Household (1989) argued that both black and white gender identities served to strengthen, accommodate, and destabilize the slave regime. Jacquelyn Jones in Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow (1986), also offered a provocative assessment of the black woman’s experience in America from slavery to the present. Although she acknowledges that class, and gender have often acted as forces of oppression, Jones focused primarily upon race.²

Much of the literature on slavery has dealt primarily with younger slaves and not the elderly. Scholars such as Phillips, Stampp, Blassingame, Genovese, Fox-Genovese, White, and Herbert Gutman did not totally omit elderly slaves from their studies. The authors gave modest treatment to the influence of the elderly slaves on the antebellum plantation. Phillips mentioned the burden of having old slaves, and Blassingame acknowledged the importance of the aged members of society. Stampp noted that few old slaves lived their lives as comfortable retirees.³ Stampp further mentioned old slaves that worked as spinners of cloth.⁴ Genovese in Roll Jordan Roll (1974) incorporated within his book a small section on old slaves. Deborah White’s work, unlike others, contains an insightful discussion of the mammy
stereotype compared with that of the Jezebel. Fox-Genovese recognized the importance of elderly female slaves within the plantation bighouse, but her look at the elderly slave was quite limited. Gutman dealt with the elderly in one section of *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976) in a section entitled "Aunts and Uncles and Swap-Dog Kin." These sources, combined with those from plantation records, slave narratives, and the journals of southern whites form the basis of the bibliography for this study. The newspapers consulted contained limited information on old slaves. The primary emphasis in newspapers dealt with the sale of old slaves.

The plantations covered by the sources have stable families with elderly members visible in plantation records, slave narratives, and journals. The primary plantations focused on are located in Georgia and South Carolina; yet, the conclusions drawn could apply to areas outside these states. Such sources provide both African American and European American views of the role and status of elderly slaves.

Plantation records, journals, and slave narratives, like all sources have drawbacks. The plantation records
contain slave lists and daily work schedules that note at times the age, occupation, and work valuation of slaves. However, on other occasions the plantation records cited list the work performed daily with no specific report on the workers. Deborah White, points out, consideration has to be taken that "whites wrote most of the antebellum America's records and African American males wrote just about all of the antebellum records left by blacks."

The white journal authors wrote most often about favored house servants and not very much about fieldhands. The antebellum slave narratives, particularly those recorded during the 1930s and 1940s, have to be used with caution because of the number of years the participants were removed from the institution of slavery. Nevertheless, these sources are a vital link between the worlds of the young and elderly African Americans.

These sources revealed that the slave community and white Southern slave owners differed in their perceptions and opinions about the role and status of old servants. Leslie J. Pollard stated that "blacks referred to elderly slaves as uncles and aunts for reasons different from whites." For enslaved Africans, "the obvious reason was that much blood relationships actually existed."

Herbert Gutman stated that "evidence hints that making
[black] children address adult blacks as either aunt or uncle socialized them into the enlarged slave community and also invested non-kin slave relationships with symbolic kin meaning." John W. Blassingame in "Status and Social Structure in the Slave Community: Evidence from New Sources" argued that the elderly slaves comprised the upper class of the slave community, after serving as conjurers, physicians and midwives, preachers, teachers, creators and carriers of culture, entertainers, and rebels.®

In contrast, Gutman believed that whites had two reasons to refer to blacks as aunt or uncle. Whites tried to reveal personal attachment and to some degree respect toward adult slaves (usually house servants). In essence, "whites used a nonreciprocal term of address that defined an essential status difference between a slave and his or her owners."9 On the other hand, old aunts "sometimes derived (their) titles from long service in the family, or frequently as the wife of a respected" old black man.10 Bertram Wyatt Doyle in Etiquette of Race Relations in the South (1937) agreed with the first part of Gutman's assessment when he argued that placing uncle or mammy next to a slave's name was not done in regards to age only, but because the owner considered the
slave to be part of the family. Dignity and other characteristics displayed by a slave brought the title of uncle or aunt, according to Doyle. Scholars of Southern History should not invariably conclude that "whites who referred to blacks as 'Uncle or Aunt' invariably did so out of respect. Such a possessive label may also have signified a black person's powerlessness." According to Robert Liston, planters, who referred to slaves as Aunt and Uncle sought to ridicule old slaves.

Southerners, both white and African American, had some concept of elderly. Some people used the terms aunt and uncle to mean elderly. However, a definition of elderly, even during the antebellum period, was not absolutely clear. W. Andrew Achenbaum stated in Old Age in the New World (1978) that some people considered the elderly to be those people of 50 years of age or older, while others considered those people 60 years of age or older as elderly. In "Aging and Slavery: A Gerontological Perspective," Pollard argued that there are certain inherent problems in defining old age for the purpose of determining attitudes. Pollard held that "old age defied the magical significance that we today attach to the 65th birthday."
For purpose of this study, elderly slaves are those 50 years of age or older. After the slave had reached the age of 50, masters believed the work capacity and monetary value of the slave would decline so drastically that in a short time the worker would be valueless as far as the slave market was concerned. In *Ar’nt I A Woman?*, Deborah G. White stated that women referred to as aunt or granny were "either middle aged or elderly but odds were that they had also had children and some grannies were past childbearing." Slave narratives, autobiographies, and plantation records often make no mention of the actual age of the old slaves; however, they do identify elderly slaves by using such terms as "old," "aged," and "bent."

Dominant white images of old male slaves were those of Uncle Remus and Uncle Tom. Uncle Remus was the storytelling old man portrayed by Joel Chandler Harris as the orator of the Br’er Rabbit tales. Uncle Tom was patterned after Harriet Beecher Stowe’s character of the same name. Uncle Tom was an older version of a Sambo. He was satisfied with his station and believed that to be a slave was the pinnacle of life. According to Donald Mathews, "Tom was created by Harriet Beecher Stowe to be the image of a suffering servant who through love and
forbearance in the face of personal destruction would be the means of redemption for his people...." Although some old men were an Uncle Remuses or Uncle Toms, there is evidence to discredit these stereotypes as the pervasive character of old male slaves.

The major theme of this study holds that the old male and female slaves contributed substantially to the creation and perpetuation of the unique African American culture and antebellum plantation society manifested in the South. Interwoven with this major argument are two subthemes. One centers on the fact that by the late antebellum period elderly slaves were the chief transmitters of Africanisms. The other subtheme focuses on how the gender based distinctions of the elderly became blurred. Although the roles of the elderly were often altered, elderly slaves helped to continue the commercial growth of the plantation economy in the South.

It is also true however, that those old people who were incapacitated posed serious economic and social problems for their masters. Many of the problems of elderly care were solved either by the compassion of slave community members or by slave trading. Laws protecting slaves in old age supposedly served to protect old slaves; however, these laws gave slave owners relief from caring for old slaves.
This study will be organized as follows to emphasize these arguments. Chapter one deals with the gerontological attitudes brought by Africans and Europeans to the new world. This chapter argues that perceptions about the elderly came as cultural luggage from Africa and Europe. Chapter two argues that old male slaves contributed substantially to the development of the African American slave community through their roles in childcare, teaching healthcare, leadership, and transmitting of Africanisms. Chapter three discusses the different types of duties assigned to elderly men within the plantation system assigned by white men. Chapter four examines health, economic, and social concerns for the plantation society. In addition, this chapter will focus on the resistance fostered by the aged community.

The study would not be complete without a discussion in chapter five of the role and status of old female slaves in the slave community. Further, in order to balance the arguments posed in the study between old male and old females chapter six will examine the relationship between elderly slave women and their white owners. The lives of the aged slaves were a myriad of complex and unique personalities.
Endnotes for Introduction


4. Ibid.


6. White, 23.


9. Ibid.


11. Ibid.


14. Pollard, 229

15. Ibid.


17. White, 130; see also Southern Historical Collection, James Hamilton Couper Papers, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina; Ibid., Kelvin Grove Plantation Book, Ibid.; Ibid., Kollock Plantation Book, Ibid.; Manuscripts Department University of Virginia Library, Huger Family Papers, Charlottesville: University of Virginia, The plantation listings make reference to the ages of several elderly female slaves on the Huger Plantation near Savannah in 1860 and 1861. The Huger Plantation at Murry Hill contained 87 slaves, 37 males and 50 females. No men were listed in a separate category as old; however, Phillis, Sabrina, Lucy, and Linda were listed as old women. In 1861, Hester is listed as Old Hester, who works in the house. In addition, Sally, Judy, Charlotte, and Granny Phillis have been added to Huger's list of old women making the total of elderly women at 8.;

CHAPTER I

Gerontological Beliefs About the Aged
from Ancient times to the Antebellum South

A study of the elderly slaves in the South requires some attention to gerontological beliefs about the elderly from ancient times to the Antebellum South. In this manner, the question of how Southerners, both African Americans and European Americans, developed their beliefs about aged African American slaves can be better understood. Notions about the elderly in the African world, Ancient Jewish society, European society, and American society lack continuity from century to century. The cultural luggage regarding the elderly which originated in Europe and Africa shaped the manner in which antebellum society viewed the elderly. These views formed powerful contradictions. George Minois, in History of Old Age, noted that throughout the Jewish world, old people lived in a state of importance. The culture's devotion to the ancient writings of the Bible, primarily the Pentateuch allowed the elderly of the
ancient Jewish civilization to maintain some of their aura. In contrast, the Christian world assigned an insignificant place for old people because the New Testament allows for easier "mockery of the elderly." Christianity inherited the Greco-Roman tradition, which was quite unkind to the elderly. African American slaves developed a powerful affinity to the plight of the ancient Israelites. Consequently, some of their notions about aging came from the Old Testament. Only after slavery did African Americans become firmly entrenched in "Jesusology." Thus, the Christianity of African American slaves allowed for the ordered presence of the elderly within society.

During the Early Middle Ages, Europeans had a confused notion of the aged. The Early Middle Ages failed to establish a major distinction between "adults and old adults." "Medieval society was certainly not systematically gerontocratic," wrote Minois, but "old people were numerous ...." The extremely harsh conditions caused people to undergo premature aging. Few people retired in this environments. In fact, the populous rarely commented on old age. Peasants suffered more heavily than other segments of society because the peasantry relied on their physical prowess, unlike the clergy and gentry. The more elite groups provided care
for bedridden and needy elderly in manors and monasteries. The children of old peasants extended aid to their parents. Such aid lost some of its benevolence when confronted with those physically unable to work.³

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries left the elderly in an unenviable position. Socially, their benefit to the community had begun to wane because the devastating Black Plague. During these centuries, a demographic revitalization occurred resulting in an influx of young people, who mercilessly condemned the aged. Moreover, the printing press relieved the elderly of their most cherished duties as storehouses of community facts.⁴

The sixteenth century in Europe would not produce a gerontocracy either, yet old people (particularly old men) would still be trusted. Old women were not trusted but this idea was primarily based on the fact that old women were not literate. Nevertheless, this century still found elements of extreme sympathy for the elderly in England and the rest of Europe.⁵

By the seventeenth century, transplanted Europeans began to foster a Euro-American perception of the aged that would permeate well into the nineteenth century. The elderly would be depicted as physically inept. For example, Benjamin Rush believed that few clergy,
physicians, and lawyers beyond the age of 60 exercised any redeeming actions in the world. Such persons hampered innovation and improvement, according to Rush. The comments made by Rush result from the influence of scholars/physicians who even advised the death of men one year after they retired. Nevertheless, on one occasion Rush revealed a sensitivity towards an 81 year old woman.

During the nineteenth century extreme prejudices existed against the aged. One of the most renowned figures of physical vitality, Daniel Boone found himself reduced with age from a hunter to a trapper and guide. In addition, Noah Webster posed a definition of the verb "superannuate," that emphasized the critical concern given to health. Webster defined the term as "To impair or disqualify by old age and infirmity." Nonetheless, the nineteenth century was not a period totally adverse to old age.

In 1862 the fifty-nine year old Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote an essay, "Old Age" in the Atlantic Monthly, which took a more positive perspective. Emerson believed that old age had definite benefits. For example, the advantages of old age were that the elderly no longer had to experience "physical and emotional dangers of youth and middle age." Furthermore, the aged correctly
comprehended the degree to which the struggle for social success was insignificant. Old age allowed the elderly to relinquish anxieties in the quest for success. The elderly people also held a "serenity of thought and behavior that youth lacked." Lastly, Emerson contended that the aged more easily ordered their lives than other members of society.  

There is a great deal of truth in the statements of Emerson, exemplified in the writings of other literary figures. John Greenleaf Whittier used his older companion's memories of colonial folklore in *Legends of New England*. It was quite common for writers such as Nathaniel Dodge, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Hannah Moore to use aged men and women as narrators of their works. Family members conditioned future essayists, readers, and poets not only to hear the sagas about the past, but also to record the "exciting, entertaining, edifying" information for nineteenth century readers. Joel Chandler Harris emerged from this white literary tradition. Harris learned much of the information for his *Br'er rabbit* tales from old African Americans in his hometown of Eatonton, Georgia.

In the agrarian environment of nineteenth century America, W. Andrew Achenbaum argues the aged contained within their faculties nearly every attribute of farm
life. The point is certainly significant because "sixty percent of all gainfully employed persons and a vast majority of all workers over sixty actually were farmers prior to the Civil War." There is little doubt that Americans believed that the elderly between 1790 and 1860 were useful because these people shared and synthesized American history and beliefs.

An excellent question to ask in regards to the elderly slaves of the Antebellum South is "did the respect for the aged and farmers in American society modify the racial animosity towards African Americans, particularly elderly African Americans." Southerners defended slavery by contending that the adult African Americans were essentially childlike. Some owners argued that "even the highly skilled and highly trusted remained a child, who had to be thought guided and controlled and provided for." Such ideas allowed white southerners to often devote special attention to the plight of elderly slaves because such attention made themselves appear more benevolent. Southern slave owners could only carry their feelings of gratitude for African American slaves to a certain level because the institution of slavery rested on racism. Nineteenth century notions of racism transcended those of ageism, regardless of the ability of the agricultural worker.

Before continuing, the
role of the elderly in African society must be ascertained in order to better understand the role that old slaves would play in the plantation South. Africa influenced African American slaves' attitudes about the elderly. Cultural traditions from African came from all parts of Africa not just the west coast. The custom and passing on of tradition had a place in the world of the American slaves as it did in the world of their African forebears. In the traditional African religions, the living have a direct link to the dead through the spirits of the ancestors. The old people hold a special role because they are viewed as approaching the time of this spiritual power sooner than others. Floyd M. Wylie argues that "a case could be made for the dropping away of the cultural traditions were it not for the fact that young Africans from their earliest days were inculcated with these values" about ancestors. 17

Minois contended that in "black Africa two or three of a tribe's old people would be regarded as sacred and placed within the third rank of the supernatural hierarchy, after genies and souls, the rest would be rejected." 18 This was not the case in all instances. Even when the elderly did not achieve such elevated positions, the young sought advice and consultation from them because of their vast experience. An African motto
states "when an old man dies a library burns down." Among the Ashanti, the old men transmit knowledge to educate the children with his stories and advice, while serving as a real live toy, whose beard and hair can be tugged.  

Austin Shelton accentuated the importance of the aged within Ibo society. Shelton held in "Ibo Aging and Eldership: Notes for Gerontologists" that psycho-senility tended to be rare among the Ibo people of Nigeria. Shelton believed that the rarity of senility occurs because of the inclusion of the elderly in the most "prestigious affairs." The Ibo perceived of their communities as umunna --children of the forefathers. Descent among the Ibo was patrilineal with a patrilocal residence. The ancestor had power over the descendants. Shelton also noted the importance of the eldest man in the Ibo village. The Ibo villager worshipped the ancestors through the eldest male in the village. This clan elder carried the aura staffs to the place of worship. The old man gave prayers, offers kolanut and palm wine (the traditional sign of welcome) to the dead forefathers, and begged the forefathers to protect the children, to ensure fertility, to promote health, and to teach the living to maintain common sense and wisdom. The elders often gathered to find a remedy to problems
that may arise in the village. The elders made sacrifices to the ancestors for spiritual help and coupled this with their learned knowledge to discover a solution to the problem.\textsuperscript{22} Shelton referred to the elders as the most important individuals in the Ibo village because these people learned how to avoid the more serious problems of life during their youth from their own elders.\textsuperscript{23} The Ibo considered it disastrous to traverse through life without producing offspring, for it is these offspring who will worship and take care of the parent. Shelton further argued that the "children are a great social insurance agency, a protection against [the wrong sort of] dependence in old age."\textsuperscript{24} All observers of the Ibo remarked about the duty of the older children to take care of the younger ones. "Parents and other elders, including older children, teach children as a matter of course."\textsuperscript{25} Parents and elders expect children "to learn, to imitate, and to follow." Little boys often carry tiny wooden stools in imitation of the small stools elder men carry; and little girls emulate the grown women by carrying pots to the streams.\textsuperscript{26}

Shelton viewed this dependence as both a virtue and problem. However, it is the virtuous aspects that are much clearer in the article. Shelton acknowledged that
reciprocal dependence exists in the individual Ibo’s life.

The Igbo is dependent upon the gods, the ancestors, the elders, and the lineage itself. Reciprocal dependence, furthermore, is acknowledged in Igbo thought. The gods are dependent upon them living for worship and sacrifice, just as the living elders ‘depend’ upon the obedience of the subordinates. And the lineage—considered as an organism—depends upon both the existence and the conforming behavior of its constituents. 

Dependence does not have a stigma attached to it as in America, according to Shelton. Shelton argues that in America the old man has to maintain himself in life. While the possibility of an old man failing to provide an adequate livelihood does not cause severe trauma in Ibo-African society because someone will care for the elderly man. The Ibo elder does not demand care because of former productivity but because of an acknowledged right. With this right, there is no sense of guilt, ego damage, or loss of face.

The social functions of the elders within the Igbo village varied widely. The elder as teacher presents himself/herself as a cultural storehouse of knowledge on the customary manners of performing all things. In marriage negotiations, the elders correct the marital misfortunes of couples as well as between clans. The old men form the historical archives of a nonliterate society;
naturally, no other group surpasses these old men in such endeavors.\textsuperscript{29}

In Africa, authority over children was vested in parents but was traditionally checked by grandparents who maintained relations of friendly familiarity with grandchildren. Likewise, within the slave community, a familiarity among slave children and older slaves enabled the extended family to flourish as it had in Africa. The extended family included both blood relatives and those not biologically related. The old people passed down a black heritage of caring, helping, and sharing. Following this tradition, the older slaves of America instilled in the young slaves social values of mutual cooperation and support, teaching them to feel a sense of obligation for the welfare of other African American slaves. In addition, African society passed on a tradition of advisement and consultation of younger people by older people.\textsuperscript{30} Wylie says that Africans of pre-teen and young adult years (who were among those most likely to be sold into slavery) had a "number of years of conditioning to the values of the village, the clan, and the extended family."\textsuperscript{31} According to Wylie, "Issues of 'belongingness' rather than of productivity appear to be dominant in these regards."\textsuperscript{32} This tradition of cooperation, support, and teaching shielded numerous slaves from the harshest brutalities of
slavery. Thus, the culture of Africa significantly affected the role and functions of the elderly slaves of the antebellum South.

The functions of old people in African society suggested the great influence that the elderly would have upon the lives of younger slaves. A transplanted tradition of cooperation, support, and teaching helped to develop a positive perception of elderly African Americans within the slave community, which sometimes contrasted with the image of old slaves proclaimed by white slave owners. The wishes and desires of slave owners and overseers ultimately forced their way into the lives of African Americans slaves and their community.

African forbearers also had a different concept of slavery and kinship tracing than that of whites in the United States. Slaves that had children while slaves in the Ashanti nation, for example, were "retained and kept as slaves of the land or serfs." Kinship traced through the father was recognized as patrilineal, and through the mother as matrilineal. Unknown to many West Africans was the cognatic descent where kinship was traced through both parents. The majority of the Ashanti people were patrilineal. Melville Herskovits, in his study of Dahomean in Africa, acknowledged their practice of patrilineal descent. The Yoruba of South Western Nigeria
traced through males, also. The Ashanti, however, traced their kinship matrilineally. Within the United States in the nineteenth century, patrilineal descent dominated slave lineage.

Thus, it appears that the culture of Africa had a more significant effect on the role and functions of the elderly slaves of the antebellum South than traditions of other regions of the world. In Africa, these old men were the chieftains and religious leaders. The functions and roles of old men in Africa revealed the great influence that the old slaves would have in the plantations of the South. White slave owners derived their attitudes towards the elderly largely from a European tradition, and African American slaves derived their attitudes from an African tradition.
Chapter I Endnotes


2. Ibid., 154, 207.

3. Ibid., 207-8.

4. Ibid., 248.

5. Ibid., 301-2.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.


9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 36.

11. Ibid., 36.

12. Ibid., 24.

13. Ibid.


15. Ibid., 24.


19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.


25. Ibid, 239.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 240.

28. Ibid., 241.

29. Ibid., 22.


32. Ibid., 69.


34. Ibid., 20.
CHAPTER II

The Elderly Male Slave and the Slave Community

The young slaves of the antebellum South realized the importance of the old slaves in their lives. Old male slaves contributed substantially to the perpetuation of the African American slave community by performing duties that were traditionally male, but also performing female duties as well. Their importance came in part because they provided a necessary service for other younger slaves.

Old male slaves were involved in caring for the children of the slave community. The *American Slave: Georgia Slave Narratives* edited by George Rawick indicates that all slaves who were not able to work in the fields were relegated to taking care of small children.¹ Eugene Genovese contended that, with parents in the field all day, "the old folks had the responsibility of disciplining unruly children and keeping an eye on the tiny nurses to the tinier tots."² Ex-slave Phoebe Faucette stated that "all the children,
too little to work had to stay at the street. They would have some old man or some old woman to care for them."^3

The master designated the street as an area for nursery or daycare activities while their families were in the fields. On a Virginia plantation, the child Molley, age two, was in need of a nurse. Her master wrote to his overseer, "I understand the Negro Payne 71 years old of the Forest Plantation is the grandfather... I now direct that Payne be ordered go to Cancer Plantation and live at Suckey's house to have the care of both his grandchildren."^4

By feeding, caring for, singing for, and playing with quarter children six days a week, many elderly became the effective grandparent of many more children than just his or her biological descendants.^ Georgia Baker, an ex-slave from Georgia, was under the care of her "grandpa who slept on a trundle in the kitchen and all he done was to set by the fire all day with a switch in his hand and tend the chillun whilst their mammies (mothers) was at work. Grandpa Stafford never had to holler at them but one time. They knewed they would get the switch."^5 One ex-slave's father was raised by an old conjuring man by the name of Uncle Ned.^ It should be made clear, however, that while elderly male slaves
were involved in caring for the children of the slave community, it was the older female slaves who carried the bulk of the childcare duties. The American Slave volumes overwhelmingly reveal this. Nonetheless, the childcare performed by these old men revealed cooperation by extended family members in rearing and instructing young children.

The old men also played an important role as the repositories of memory. The old men were cultural storehouses of tales that slaves loved to hear while gathered around fires. Blood curdling tales of demonic spirits, miracles, and murders were rendered with an uncanny ability to enthral the listeners. Leslie Owens points out that storytellers were frequently "old men as opposed to old women."

These storytellers did much to relieve misery by telling yarns during times of abuse and long dreary labor. Charles Ball remembered that the tales were sufficiently fraught with demons, miracles, and murders, to fix the attention of the many hearers. As a child, Ball passed numerous long nights with his grandfather listening to his narrations of adventures in Africa, and hearing of his grandpa's religion with its strong injunction of tenderness to wives and children.
Ball's grandfather expressed deep contempt for numerous other slaves because he believed them beneath him because he was from Africa. The elderly that were directly from Africa like Ball's grandfather believed that they were more esteemed than other slaves. It appears that the slave community treasured people from Africa more than those born in the Americas.

The vast number of references to Africa in storytelling on the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islands and coast was linked to the continued use of the African languages spoken by the slaves in these areas. Numerous African-born slaves inhabited All Saints Parish, South Carolina as late as the mid-nineteenth century. Many of the old slaves, like Daddy Tom, Maum Maria, and Old Scipio, continued to pray and count in their African languages and to call objects by their African names. They were the "last Africans in All Saints Parish, who could speak their indigenous tongues unadulterated." The ability to speak African languages helped to give storytelling its African flair.

Before bed children were treated to tales which had sometimes been handed down to their parents. William Henry Towns, an ex-slave, recalled that during the holidays, the slaves had to attend church on the plantation. After returning they could listen to the
older folks telling stories before bed. The younger grownups would dance or do something else for entertainment. Towns stated that "the young people got much pleasure out of the fairy tales told by the older ones."¹⁷

Slaves throughout the South told of the exploits of Br’er rabbit and other animals who took on human emotions and qualities. These stories closely resembled similar African folktales, told of shifty and crafty animals with human qualities. In addition, they were excellent entertainers. "At night when the day's work was done an old slave by the name of Uncle Joe would tell stories of Br’er Rabbit and Br’er Wolf to his two sons Joe and Hector and his voice could be heard throughout the quarters."¹⁸ Uncle Joe told his sons tales like the one below.

In the story Buzzard and Hawk, a hawk and a buzzard meet to discuss their methods of procuring food. It is clear from the tone of their discussion that Buh Hawk plans on showing off. In the process he impales himself on a sharp fence post. The tale ends with the buzzard making the statement that specifies the moral of the story: Hit good to wait on the lord".¹⁹

These stories with tricksters were a strong coping mechanism. They provided the slaves with an impression
that the owners were not all powerful and that the slaves had some type of control and could even outsmart their masters.

Storytelling was an important educational mechanisms. One of childhood’s chief diversions during slavery was to listen to the songs and tales of grandparents, which revealed a moral. Ex-slave Andrew remembered that he greatly enjoyed and learned a great deal from the tales of his grandfather, who brought over many stories from Africa. In turn, Andrew and other slaves would re-tell these stories to their children years later.

Although very much the outsider, Frances Kemble, the English wife of Georgia Planter Pierce Butler, enjoyed the storytelling of the old ones. Kemble found several superannuated men and women on her husband’s St. Simons Island and Hampton Point plantations who told splendid stories to all who listened. Kemble was so enthralled with the tales of the former grandeur of the estate that she likened them to those one would read in novels.

Solomon Northup’s cabinmate Abram was the plantation storyteller. The old man often became engaged in long discourses of the past, while other slaves listened.
In particular, Abram loved to recount the days of his youth when he rode with Andrew Jackson.24

The old men also passed down an oral history of past relatives and heroes. This was the primary source of slave history from the point of view of the slaves themselves. The names of Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey were well known long after their deaths and in some instances they were revered by the slaves.25 The elderly males served along with the elderly females as a link between the past and present world of the slaves.

Besides providing a necessary service with their storytelling, elderly male slaves were also involved in procuring medicine and health care as in Africa. Certainly, the mediums used were different because the plants and animals used for medicinal purposes varied. Nevertheless, the older men and women on the Southern plantations were medical experts as far as the slaves were concerned. The WPA Slave Narratives indicated that old colored men served as plantation doctors.26 The old slave Uncle Louis was believed to have a knowledge of wild plants and herbal medicine.27 He used butternut root, golden seal, and onion tea as ingredients for homemade remedies. In the quarters, folk medicine was more heavily relied upon than the white medical doctors. Many white doctors had strong inclinations to bleed
patients; therefore, some slaves preferred to use folk medicines and folk healers. For example, South Carolina planter Henry Ravenal's slave Old March (root doctor) addressed the ills of slave families to such a degree that the slaves often disregarded the prescriptions of white physicians. March's medical prowess and proficiency raised the ire of the white physicians visiting the Ravenal plantation. The knowledge of the old ones about folk medicine attracted enormous respect from the younger slaves.

The medical expertise of one old doctor was perceived in magical or mystical terms. Ex-slave Gus Smith stated "that his grandfather could simply blow on a burn and the fire and pain was gone. This secret was handed down from generation to generation."

When one thinks of a midwife usually an elderly woman comes to mind. Yet ex-slave Ferebe Rogers states that "there were men and women midwives"; however, women midwives were more prevalent.

Numerous old men who had a knowledge of medicine had learned from old black grannies much about herbs and roots and how they were to be used to cure all manner of ills. Some grannies had learned herbal medicine from relatives in Africa. These grannies served as medical
experts along with old men, but it was the women who were the most prominent.

Because of their diminished physical duties, old people had more time to practice medicine than younger slaves. Frederick Douglass's Old Uncle Isaac Cooper was the doctor of medicine and religious needs of the slaves on the plantation where he resided. The only duties of the crippled sixty year old was to "use epsom salts and castor oil for diseases of the body, while for children with diseases of the soul the old man used the Lord's prayer and hickory switches." 33

Old people also contributed to the diet of neighbors and kin by working in the vegetable gardens while younger slaves were in the fields. 34 Louis Hughes, who had been enslaved thirty years before his escape, stated that the vegetable garden on the plantation where he resided furnished employment for old Uncle Gooden and himself. 35 Another ex-slave mentioned that "grandpa helped to supply wild nuts, garden produce, and meat for the family table." 36 An article in the Baltimore Sun told of Uncle Ben, who "was too old to work. At one time he had suffered with a rheumatic knee and spent much of his leisure rubbing and bandaging his knee." Over time Ben became senile. During the summer, he was allowed to sit quietly in the shade of trees and
by the fireplace in the winter. When he was younger, he had been a gardener. South Carolina planter Thomas Chapin in his daybook entry for January 2, 1852 wrote about his old gardener. "Put old Judge to do some work in the garden, I intend to take him for a gardener altogether. He is ruptured, and not fit for work...." The Kelvin Grove Plantation Book of St. Simons Island, Georgia in 1853 show that of the 81 slaves on the plantation only five slaves were over the age of 50. They were Molly age 60, listed as a 3/4 hand; Robin age 80 listed as a 1/4 hand; Elsy age 60 a 1/4 hand; and the only elderly male slave on the plantation, Old Sam age 70. Sam held the title of gardener in 1853; however, in 1857 Molly is the only elderly slave with any work value at all. Molly is listed as a 1/4 hand, while Mary-age 63, Robin-age 83, Elsy-age 63, and Old Sam-age 72 have no job title listed. The work performed in the vegetable garden by elderly men did not slow down the plantation process; it added to the plantation profits because the goods produced could be sold outside the plantation.

The sale of produce outside of the plantation sometimes benefitted both slaves and owners. The overseer of Gowrie Plantation in Georgia received a letter from the owner which indicated that he needed someone to attend a garden that was very productive. The
owner suggested that the overseer choose someone "who has nothing else to do (such as Old Ned)." The owner believed that such duties might be beneficial to the health and comfort of the worker. The gardener's duties included repairing fences around the garden, barnyard, and house. In essence, the worker was to police the entire area to make it seem if someone was living in the main house." Such duties were by no means easy. It was strenuous for a vital young fieldhand to use the extremely heavy hoes and other tools, much more an old person of diminished physical ability. In addition, the work around the barnyard and house could at times become unpleasant when an owner became upset or angered.

To have lived long enough to garner the title of "uncle" could be advantageous, especially in supplementing the family's food supply through hunting. Dan Robinson, an ex-slave, recalled that "all slaves were not permitted to hunt on the plantation where he resided, only the old and trusted slaves were granted such permission." Ex-slave Esther Green related that "old Ben set turkey traps and was always bringing home numerous fat birds." Ben had long been superannuated by his master. Frederick Olmstead related that an old stock tender knew a trail frequented by deer and the point at which they crossed a fence. "The old man lashed
a scythe to the end of a pole and made a lance; this he set near the fallen tree that obstructed the path and the deer in leaping over the obstacle leapt directly on the knife." Josephine Anderson's grandfather was old and only required to do light work, mostly fishing and hunting for his owner and his family. On nightly incursions into the woods to hunt game, the opossum and the raccoon were particular delicacies desired by the slaves. Through the use of hunting dogs and clubs, the slaves acquired meat that was often the basic protein for their diets. Numerous ex-slaves voiced their opinion about the taste of the opossum and sweet potato dishes. Rabbits, squirrels, and turtles could be secured by hunting and sometimes trapping. It would seem that the elderly slave males would be consulted in matters regarding hunting just as they would be in regards to other concerns in the life of younger slaves. Hunting was not the only means by which elderly and younger males could aid their families, but along with fishing it probably was one of the most prominent means to increase the supply of meat in the diet.

Along the Georgia and South Carolina coast, old slaves were allowed to fish and also to train younger slaves to fish. Fredrika Bremer met an old man during her visit to the home of rice planter Joel Poinsett.
"She saw a very well dressed negro, who was standing in a little stream fishing. He belonged to Mr. Poinsett but had been liberated from all kinds of work in consequence of his age." Fishing on the Hopeton Plantation was granted to the capable hands of the old fisherman Bacchus. On Pierce Butler's plantation, where a number of slaves carried the name Quash, an older Quash trained many of his younger relatives in fishing. On the coast large numbers of mullet were caught at night in seines or cast nets, and they were brought home in sacks. Fishing and hunting by elderly male slaves added additional protein to the diet of slaves. Because elderly male slaves had lived on a plantation for a long period of time, they knew where game and fish could be secured more easily and they could direct others to them." A negative aspect of fishing is that standing in the cold water with nets caused arthritis and other ailments to occur.

One grandfather named Sam was even allowed to own a cotton patch, and the master allowed him to cultivate the crop at night. Two boys would each hold a light for him to work by. He preferred working at night to working on holidays. The master wrote to Steve Heard at the cotton mill in Augusta, Georgia telling him that he was sending the old man with the cotton and he wanted a receipt
returned to him. He also advised him to give all the money received to Sam. When the grandfather returned, he would be loaded down with sugar, cheese, tea, and mackerel for his family.45

Frances Kemble, in a conversation with Abraham (a slave of Pierce Butler), learned that his grandfather had been an old slave at Darien, Georgia. The old man was extremely clever as a carpenter, and so highly skilled and of good character that his master allowed him to purchase his freedom with money which he earned by working for himself at odd times, when his task was over. Frances asked Abraham what sum his grandfather paid for his freedom: "he said he did not know, but he supposed because of his skill as a carpenter .... it was probably high ..." After he died, it was found that the old carpenter had amassed "a small fortune of seven dollars, which he left to his wife and children, the former being a slave on Major Butler's estate."46

Religious leadership in the slave quarters provided male slaves and especially elderly male slaves with their greatest opportunity for influence over other slaves. They were respected for being old as well as for being religious leaders. The old men were in all likelihood no more religious than other slaves; however, the younger slaves acquiesced quite often to the leadership of older,
experienced males. On Pierce Butler’s Georgia plantation, the slaves learned right and wrong in a religious sense from old Cooper London. London had eulogized Shadrach (a slave) with remarks from the American Episcopalian prayer book as well as adding several extemporaneous phrases of his own. Frederick Douglass received religious advice from Uncle Charles Lawson. Lawson served as his trusted counselor, and unknown to his master he even predicted that Douglass had some special calling. On an Alabama plantation, the Methodist preacher was the slave Uncle Sam. In a building near his house, Uncle Sam would gather all the children on Sunday morning to teach them their duty to God and man. The ritual elder, Leonard Haynes served in that capacity on a plantation in Georgia (originally he was from Abodoo on the Gold Coast of Ghana). During planting and harvest periods, Haynes “performed a religious dance of the first fruit,” a ritual that insured excellent crops for the plantation. Eliza Frances Andrews of Georgia recalled:

Old Uncle Lewis, the old gray haired slave who has done nothing for years but live at his ease, was coddled and believed in by the whole family as its religious leader on the plantation. The children called him not Uncle Lewis but Uncle as if he had really been kin to them. Uncle Alex (Andrew’s Uncle) had such faith in him that during his last illness he would send for the old man to talk and
pray with him... A special place was always reserved for him at family prayer and Uncle Lewis was often called upon to lead devotions. I was brought up with a firm belief in him as in the Bible itself.49

Ex-slave Katie Dudley Baumont also related that elderly male slaves were important in the religious life of the slaves. "We had a church about three miles from us and a preacher called Uncle Willis, who later became a school teacher."50

Most of the old slave religious leaders were not educated like Willis; consequently, much of what they learned had to be memorized over the years. Reverend William Spotswood White remembered Old Uncle Jack as the pious Christian leader in Virginia. Jack could not read or write; yet his knowledge of religious matters resulted from his conversing and sharing his views with other knowledgeable persons.51

The Christianity in the slave community developed into an African American version of Christianity. The services contained call and response music and the ring shout, which were brought over from Africa. John Blasingame reports that a great portion of the religious music, methods, scale, dancing, patting of feet, clapping of hands, and pantomiming came from Africa.52 "Call and response was vital to the progression of the sermon," the
spirit uplifted the congregation to ecstatic response to sermons.\textsuperscript{53} Slaves strongly related to the teachings in the Old Testament, which they had often heard. They connected their station in life to that of the Israelites during the times of Moses.\textsuperscript{54} This belief gave African American slaves a feeling that freedom would one day succeed. Moses Grandy recalled that during his days as a slave in North Carolina, aged slaves and others would often go out into the rain and raise their hands to the heavens during violent rainstorms, while whites hovered beneath the sheets to be safe from the lightning.\textsuperscript{55} The African American version of religion not only provided an avenue to pray for freedom, it also granted slaves religious freedom. Erskine Clarke says in \textit{Wrestlin'\,Jacob} that the slaves of Charles Colock Jones accepted Christianity as a buffer against the use of guards, guns, and bayonets.\textsuperscript{56}

The slave preacher had to be sure not to verge too close on a gospel of equality through religion that whites might overhear. Sarah Ford (ex-slave) reported that Uncle Lew spoke to an audience about unity and equality of whites and blacks. The owner moved Uncle Lew into the fields because of his statements.\textsuperscript{57} An old preacher, Uncle Tom Ewing, once spoke the words "freed indeed, free from work, free from the white folks, free
from everything" in the presence of his owner and found himself threatened with not being allowed to preach. Consequently, Tom never used the words again.58

There was also a Muslim religious influence among the slaves. A planter on the Georgia coast had a head man, Bu Allah, who was described as being an African of superior intelligence and character. Bu Allah reared his children in the Muslim faith. Three times a day, he would spread his sheepskin prayer rug to the East and pray to Allah. Bu Allah lived to be a very old man and when buried, his Koran and prayer rug were buried along with him. On a visit to the Hopeton plantation, Sir Charles Lyell met Old Tom, an African of Foulah origin who still adhered to his Muslim religion. Tom was not as influential religiously as Bu Allah because most of his offspring declined the Muslim faith and adopted Christianity.59

It was often from the grandparents that children acquired most of their religious beliefs, as well as their knowledge of conjure signs and herbal medicines. James Parker’s grandfather not only taught him to read but gave him systematic religious instruction.60

 Conjuring was also a religion, and the conjurer held a special role in the slave community. Religion defined in this paper is the belief in supernatural or superhuman
forces. Conjuring certainly fits within this definition, even though some slaves considered it superstition. Conjurers were part of a group of significant others, who, unknown to the master, commanded respect in the slave community. Conjurer's had "distinct features such as 'red eyes and 'blue gums,' unusual dress, and the accoutrements of the trade- a crooked cane, charms, and conjure bag ...." Conjuring involved using roots or incantations to bring harm or good luck to slaves down in the quarters. As noted in the American Slave, "the lore of conjure men whom negroes looked up to and respected and feared as the equivalent of witches, wizards, and magicians came from African forefathers." 

Old slave conjurers and persons with medical expertise passed their knowledge down to younger slaves, and not always exclusively to males. Gus Smith remembered that his grandfather passed his knowledge on to one of Smith's female relatives.

Conjuring or fortune telling strongly influenced the slave community. It provided a source of protection beyond the family. One old slave promised that his potions would provide protection from the master's whippings. The charm did not always work. Julia Henderson of Augusta, Georgia, remembered that "old hoodoo man promised no whippings for slaves who chewed on
a piece of root, his conjuring failed and as a result he received a good cursing from a slave by the name of Tom for its failure.

Henry Bibb had somewhat better results in his negotiations with an old conjurer to get immunity from being flogged: "It worked the first occasion that he left the plantation without permission. On the second, occasion he was flogged by his master." Bibb had not learned his lesson about conjuring, so he decided to go to another conjurer. This old conjurer told him that the other slave was a quack and if Bibb paid him money, the old man would tell him how to keep from being flogged. Even with the new potion, Bibb was treated no better.

Nicey Kinney, an ex-slave from Georgia, believed that an old witch-man conjured her into marrying Jordan Jackson. A fortune teller told her how the conjuring was done. Kinney said that she preferred not to marry Jordan: "he could not get me to pay attention to him, so he went and got a conjure man to put a spell on me."

An excellent example of the influence that old conjurers wielded is provided by Ellen Belts. Belts recalled that an old man had cursed a group of children who had thrown rocks at him along the road. The man warned a young boy to cease or he would be cursed with death. Kinney and her family members were horrified the
next morning as the boy died upon the kitchen floor. Kinney recalled that "nobody ever bother that old man no more, for he sure lay an evil finger on you."  

Frank, a seventy year old fortune teller, resided on the plantation where William Wells Brown lived during his enslavement. Uncle Frank was a favorite with the young ladies, who would flock to him in great numbers to get their fortunes told. Although Brown says that he was not a believer in soothsaying, he was at a loss to know how so many of Uncle Frank's predictions came true. Most important to Brown was the fact that his eventual freedom was among the conjurer's many predictions that came about. Brown states that this alone was worth the twenty-five cents he paid the old man.

One old conjurer was believed by ex-slave William Adams to have the power to pass his hands over a wound and heal the wound. The old man miraculously healed a deep cut on a mule's leg. "He came over and passed his hand over the cut. Before long, the bleeding stopped ...."  

In some cases, the old conjurers wielded a certain amount of influence over masters. For example, one slaveholder overheard an old conjurer predicting the misfortune that was supposedly to befall an overseer. The overseer had angered the old man in some way, and
because of this the old man was going to seek his revenge by riding the back of the overseer. The slaveholder states that "the old man was a conjurer and his wife was a witch. One night the conjurer touched his son with a stick and together they went to ride the backs of the overseer and his son."\textsuperscript{72}

Elderly male slaves helped the slave community in its frolics and other entertainment. According to one source, "they were the music players for the group dances with the old men beating drums, stringed instruments, and calabashes."\textsuperscript{73} One ex-slave became exuberant when talking about the slave frolics. "Now talking about frolicking, we really used to dance. Old Elice Hudson played his fiddle for us and it had to be tuned again after every set danced. After two or three cups of corn juice Elice could get 'Turkey in the Straw' out that fiddle."\textsuperscript{74} "Old Uncle Aaron started a song about the crops and everyone joined in and grabbed a hoe and followed him on his march around the table."\textsuperscript{75} Isaac Williams recalled that often "when masters had company staying with them, they would collect all their slaves for a general frolic." The banjo-pickers took a prominent position and played their best tunes. All age groups were included in the "all-off-to Georgia style dancing, and twenty-five cents would go to the best dancer."\textsuperscript{76}
Courtships occurred regularly within the slave community. Alan Dundes, author of the Mother Wit From The Laughing Barrel, indicated that almost all very large plantation had an experienced old slave who instructed "young gallants" in the proper manners of ingratiating the young ladies of their choice." Uncle Gilbert was not only a shoemaker on the plantation where he resided, but also an authority on courtship. Young slave men often visited his shop for instruction in the "courtship's words and ways." Gilbert buried numerous wives and worked for several owners. Uncle Gilbert regarded courting as a very sensitive issue, and those who won a woman's heart had to be well equipped in verbalizing their desires. Gilbert believed that a "young man mus' tes' an' prove a gal befo' offerin' her his han.'" Gilbert argued that a young man could determine if a young woman was right for him if the young woman looked him squarely in the eye during conversation. In addition, the old man held that the young woman's ability to patch and clean clothing were enviable qualities for a wife. Gilbert stated that "sich er ooman is wuth havin.'" Because of the services they provided for the slave community, the old slaves received considerable social authority. In most families, children learned that the
commands of the grandparents, especially old men, were to be obeyed. This idea in many ways followed the West African tradition of the eldest male being the most powerful individual within the family structure. Often one or more grandparents assumed the role of arbiter in family disputes."

The old aunts and uncles were admired and respected throughout the slave community. They generally were well thought of by the younger slaves and children. As a child Frederick Douglass remembered that Uncle Tony, Uncle Harry, and Uncle Able were the blacksmith, cartwright, and shoemaker. They were called Uncle or Aunt by all the young slaves, according to the plantation custom to show respect, due from younger to older slaves."

Frederick Douglass stated that "young slaves must approach the company of the older with hat in hand, and woe be to him, if he fails to acknowledge a favor, of any sort, with the accustomed thank you." Douglass said that there was a "rigid enforcement of the respect to elders." The statements of Douglass were reiterated by other slaves who contended that "older colored men were called Uncle and older colored women Aunt because such action was believed to be proper manners."
Herbert Gutman argued that for the slaves down in the quarters all elderly males if not directly related would be considered as family or "swap-dog kin." These "swap-dog kin" or fictive relatives would be linked, not through blood, but heritage. These elderly males would help to ensure that the younger slaves did not enter into marriage with "swap-dog" cousins on other plantations. Such a practice was greatly looked down upon in the slave community, while for the masters it was customary to intermarry with relatives.\(^8^5\)

Slaves could also look to a council of elders to settle disputes. In 1845, Solomon Northup related that his cabinmate "Old Uncle Abram," the plantation elder, was well versed in the plantation philosophy as it was taught in the slave quarters. On the Sea Islands of Georgia a council of elders decided whether religious converts would be accepted into the church.\(^8^6\)

Old slaves also served as lookouts at clandestine meetings of slaves and protected younger slaves from danger. Beverly Jones stated that "Old Uncle Jackson would never let the patrol sneak up and break up a meeting."\(^8^7\) It seems that the old man had an uncanny ability to stay away from the patrols, while making sure that everyone else was not harmed. In another instance, one old slave persuaded Molly, a slave woman, to tell him
the whereabouts of her new born son, who had been discarded by the woman. Earlier, the old man overheard the overseer indicate that the woman would be whipped once more before stricter measures would be taken. Finally, the old man learned that the child was in a well and rushed to retrieve the child to prevent the woman's death. The action by the Molly bristled with rebellion; however, the old man justified his actions by the fact that he desired to save the woman from further harm.

In short, the old male slaves earned enormous respect from younger slaves for their contributions to the slave community through childcare, oratorical skills, health care, procuring of food, providing luxuries, and religious and social leadership. These contributions belie the stereotype of the retiring, storytelling Uncle Remuses of the antebellum period. The childcare provided by the old males was extremely important in promoting the emotional well being of the young slaves. This care aided slave parents in shielding slave children away from the dehumanizing institution of slavery for as long as possible. The oratorical skills of these old men were so great that few younger slaves could surpass them in their ability to enthrall listeners and to recount history. The subsequent health care, providing of food, providing
of luxury, and religious and social leadership all added to the influence and prominence of elderly male slaves. Thus, they were able to help in the creation and perpetuation of the African American slave community.
Chapter II Endnotes


9. Leslie Owens, 139.

10. Ibid., 140.

11. Ibid.


17. Rawick, ed., suppl. series vol. 1, 409; Letter to Kate Coles, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Manuscripts Department.

18. Webber, 170.


20. Webber, 175.

21. Ibid., 176.


24. Ibid.


27. Ibid., suppl. series vol. 1, 263.

28. Levine, 64.

29. Genovese, 523.


31. Ibid., 258.


34. Genovese, 523.
35. Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave* (Milwaukee: South Side Printing Company, 1897), 65.

36. Webber, 174.


38. The Kelvin Grove Plantation Book, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina; on gardening see also, Rosengarten, 340. On March 14, 1845, Chapin had Old Adam planting some muskmelons and cucumbers in the garden.


41. Rawick, ed., suppl. series 1, 166.


46. Kemble, 190-91.


50. The Ohio Narratives (Interviews with Ex-slaves in Ohio: Ohio State Historical Society, 1937), 1.


53. Ibid., 237.


57. Raboteau, 232.

58. Ibid.


60. Webber, 175.

61. Ibid., 276.


64. Rawick, ed., vol. 3, suppl. series part 1, 75.

66. Ibid., 71.


68. Ibid., 128.


70. Ibid.


73. Ibid., 37.

74. Killion, 110.

75. Ibid., 141.


77. Alan Dundes, Mother Wit From The Laughing Barrel (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 252.

78. Ibid., 253.

79. Ibid., 253.

80. Ibid.

81. Webber, 175.

82. Douglass, My Bondage, My Freedom, 69.

83. Ibid., 70.

84. Rawick, ed., suppl. series 1, 263.

Frazier does use the term swap-dog kin, his statement that none of the four black slave families are related coupled with the fact that their members still refer to one another as aunt and uncle showed non-kinship ties.


89. Ibid.
CHAPTER III

The Old Butlers, Companions, and Drivers

The plantation owners of the South were businessmen who had the power to shift their labor forces or decrease work whenever necessary. They were able to extract the last remnants of physical and intellectual ability from old slaves before their death by having them serve in leadership and supportive roles on the plantation. Elderly male slaves provided masters with domestic staffs, emotional security, historical knowledge, and a labor force for jobs that were necessary, often physically taxing, yet able to be executed at a slow pace.

Caroline Couper Lovell gives a glimpse of the role of the old butlers among the large rice planters on the coast of Georgia. These men served at the magnificent parties of the planters. At one party given by John Couper, "he had as his cook the immortal Sans Foix and the waiters are Sandy, Johnny, and old Dick from Cannon
Point." Old Dick was lavished with considerable accolades for his manners. White southerner Charles Wylly called "Old Dick was the best-mannered man he had ever known white or black." Even when his master was not home Dick would invite guests to the side door for refreshments. Although he had no wine glasses Old Dick provided the elder Wylly with what he considered the best bottle in the house. Lovell believed that Old Dick would rather give away his good name than shame his owner. Dick died along with his master on a steamship between Columbus, Georgia and Appalachicola, Florida.

Lovell's book is an attempt to vindicate the Georgia coastal planters treatment of slaves. Lovell probably accurately viewed some of the old men as faithful servants. However, most of the old men were not Uncle Toms just as the younger slaves were not the stereotypical Sambos.

An Uncle Tom was an elderly version of a Sambo. He believed that to be a slave was the best he could hope to be. He was contented emotionally being a slave. While some slaves were Uncle Toms, most of the old men realized that their true loyalty was to the slave community and they usually upheld that loyalty. Loyalty to masters was often simply a means by which numerous old slaves
minimized their disadvantages. It was much easier and less harmful to act in this manner. Lovell was not the only southern white to promote the image of faithfulness among old butlers. White southerner Letitia Burwell, who lived on Buena Vista Plantation in Virginia, boasted of Uncle Billy taking care of the house with an imposing dignity over domestic affairs. "He kept the brightest silver urns, sugar-dishes, cream-jugs, spoons; ... and cooled the best wine for dinner."*

Some owners did not have a regular house staff to care for their homes like the Coupers and Burwells. For example, R.J. Arnold did not allow his overseer free run of his house; instead he left the house keys with an old male slave, who had the authority to take a crew of slave women from the field whenever the old man believed the residence needed cleaning.³

At Christmas time, when directed by the owner, Old Uncle Shadrac barbecued five or six whole hogs and halves of young bullocks for the rest of the slave population. James Avirett in the Old Plantation (1977) stated that Shadrac took great care to baste the meat well with a long handled mop, which he dipped in a pan of salt, vinegar, and home grown red pepper.⁴ Avirett paints a romanticized view of slavery in Old Plantation. The
entire slave population he described is contented and well fed. The most beloved and content of the population are the elderly. Avirett was making a case for slavery as a just and blissful institution. The old men also influenced the lives of white children by serving as nurses or companions. Old Carey nursed his master upon his knee when the owner was a mere child. Some seventy-year-old slaves were degraded for the amusement of young masters. They were forced by young masters to race fifty yards in order to receive prizes. Another southerner remembered Uncle George whom he and his friends constantly teased. During one episode, the boys short loaded a gun without shot in a shooting contest and amused themselves in knowing that they had tricked the old man. The boys put five fingers of powder in the gun, which administered a painful jolt to the old man’s shoulder when the weapon was fired.

Other old men often drove the master’s children to and from school. White southerner Victoria V. Clayton had fond memories of her childhood days. She recalled “the commodious carriage, the bay horses, and old Uncle Abram seated on the driver’s seat to take us, the children, through the beautiful woods to make visits to the old maumers and colored friends down on the
The old carriage drivers were allowed the right to chastise the children by reminding them to conduct themselves with the same manners as their parents.

White children also enjoyed the stories by the old men. The white children of South Carolina planter J. Motte Alston often listened intently to the eloquent stories of African lore told by Old Scipio. In Virginia, Old Uncle George spun numerous tales and yarns for the family of white planter Richard Irby.

Some masters looked to their old slaves as chroniclers of local history. Planter James Hammond of South Carolina visited Old Jacob on April 3, 1841. Jacob related the life of his father and the history of the county.

I went yesterday to Moriss Bridge on Hollow Creek to see Old Jacob, the patriarch of this region. I was surprised to learn that he was a son of old Cofe. Old Cofe was an old negro formerly owned by James Boone. Cofe came to the area long before the Revolution and was George Dalphin’s miller. Three mills burned down during his life time. Cofe died on the cold Saturday in February of 1833, over 100 years old. Jacob borne and raised at the mills is now near 80, he says 85. He says his master ran 8 saws and 2 set of stones on the stream before the Revolution and sold his lumber in Savannah at $8 pr. M. Galphin was a famous Indian trader. Galphin had been a Tory and he talks about his murdering and plundering of the South
Carolina countryside. Jacob remembers a great deal about the fighting during the Revolution around the Silver Bluff area ... I must see the old chronicler again. He was long a miller here and says these mills were established long before he was thought of.\textsuperscript{13}

Another old chronicler became so adept at verbalizing the past that he was able to repeat some portions of the speeches he heard James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and Henry Clay recite. He accompanied his master William Armistead Burwell when he served as private secretary to Thomas Jefferson.\textsuperscript{14}

On the coast and the eastern part of Georgia where the Butler plantations were located, it was the general custom to perform all ordinary and regular work by tasks. The task system common on rice plantations was also adopted in the cultivation of the sea island cotton. The task system made it possible to alter field work to fit the energies of an aging slave.\textsuperscript{15} Overseers and drivers apportioned tasks according to the strength of the workers, who were divided into "full hands, three quarter hands, and one-quarter hands."\textsuperscript{16} The most famous of the Antebellum rice plantations of Georgia was the Hopeton Plantation owned and operated by John Couper and his son James Hamilton Couper. The Hopeton Plantation had 500 acres in rice, 170 acres in cotton, 330 acres in sugar
cane. The whole was tended by 500 slaves. "Of these, a great many were children, and some were old and incapacitated for work."\textsuperscript{17} The Couper property in 1859 consisted of three plantations (Atama, Hopeton, and Elizafild), located in Glynn, County, Georgia and covering over 6,200 acres. Only 1,200 acres were rice land or land actually worked.\textsuperscript{18}

Among the wide variety of occupations necessary on the large rice plantations, there were "plantation jobs particularly suited for the diminished physical capacity and enhanced knowledge of elderly slaves."\textsuperscript{19} Jobs delegated to elderly male slaves over the age of sixty, according to Charles Joyner, were those of carpenters, butchers, coopers, drivers, millers, nurses, trunk minders, and watchmen.\textsuperscript{20} Cooper London on Pierce Butler's coastal Georgia plantation served as the resident barrel maker as well as preacher. Some of the old men were given the demanding, yet necessary occupation of killing rats with the opportunity of collecting a bounty. The trunk minders had the difficult task of regulating the water levels in the rice fields.\textsuperscript{21} Old Scipio was called the watchman of the plantation. His exact duties were implied with his job title. Scipio watched the occurrences on the plantation
and reported anything unusual to his master. Some of their authority was derived from their role as patriarch of a large kin network. Norrece T. Jones in Born a Child of Freedom, Yet a Slave (1990) indicated that it was not chance that on slave lists and other records of planters, owners frequently recorded drivers as "old." Jones argued that these old drivers could exploit their age to require conformity.

Drivers may be considered lower level managers because they had to know how to handle the slave work force as well as be able to satisfy the desire of their masters. One old but able bodied man was the next in rank to the overseer on John Couper's Hopeton Plantation. Such men provide owners verbal reports on a weekly basis. These reports subsequently went on the books on Saturday afternoons. Without the drivers many proprietors would have been "sadly at sea in their full knowledge connected with his department." Bertram Wilbur Doyle in The Etiquette of Race Relations In the South: A Study in Social Control (1937) said that these old men could tell their respective owners whether the moon was right to plant grain, hoe tobacco, plant corn, harrow cotton, kill pork hogs, and shear sheep. In addition, these men resorted to experimental methods to
keep the hogs from overrunning the potato gardens. Owners listened intently to such advice with much profit in most cases.  

Masters sometimes relied on retired old men for their knowledge about rice cultivation although they were no longer drivers. For example, "Old Billy, although he was retired on the Whitehall, Georgia plantation, was still relied upon for his knowledge of rice planting along with having to care for the livestock." The old men of the rice culture fulfilled the above roles with a considerable amount of authority because many were patriarchs of kin networks. The physical capacity of the old men was diminishing; however, they still retained a great deal of knowledge of rice cultivation.

Once appointed as driver a man could usually expect to stay in that position for years. Drivers "often out-lived masters and remained in their jobs through an entourage of overseers. They were part of the slave aristocracy." When Sir Charles Lyell of England visited James Hamilton Couper's Hopeton Plantation near Darien, Georgia in January of 1864, "he was favorably impressed by the head driver Tom." Lyell's remarks about Tom's tenure as driver have no starting and ending date; however, "they do prove that he had been a foreman as far
back as the War of 1812, a period of well over thirty years."  Tom and three other drivers performed their duties quite efficiently, according to James Clifton in "Hopeton Model Plantation of the Antebellum South."

Another old male slave driver was described as being "very black with a very white head. He is further characterized as standing straight and tall in spite of his many years. The old man had been in his position over an extended period so as a result the master appointed an assistant named Handy...."  In 1844, overseer A.R. Bagshaw also noticed that his driver Isaac on the Lellagre family's Argyle Island plantation in the Savannah River was becoming "old and feeble and crabbed."  The overseer began a campaign to have Will, a likely fieldhand, promoted to Isaac's position should he fail. In 1859, Bram the driver who had served on Pierce Butler's plantation for numerous years was sold with four hundred other slaves during the "great weeping time in Savannah."  The "weeping time" occurred when over 400 of the Butler slaves were sold in Savannah to pay Pierce Butler's debts.  

The old drivers were called upon by owners to enforce morals in the slave quarters. The owner of the Smithfield Plantation along the Combahee River in South
Carolina called upon Old Anson to set the guidelines for the proper behavior of slaves. On the Smithfield Plantation slave marriages were by mutual consent and lasted until the death of partners. Neither Old Anson nor his master tolerated moral laxity of any kind, particularly marital unfaithfulness. The slaves were made to understand that the punishment for quarrels growing was most severe. Sary and Bill, two slaves on the Smithfield plantation, consummated an irregular marriage of a temporary kind, and Anson became aware of it. As a result, the old man warned against further foolishness or they would be sold. He assigned the couple quarters, and then they followed the plantation rules until Bill ran away to the Yankees during the Civil War. Anson, by setting the morals of the slave community, was teaching younger slaves to follow morals set by the master. Such action limited the control that slaves had over their lives. This old driver, like numerous other drivers, became another line of control for the master against his slave population.

Some old drivers also collaborated with masters who were transporting their slave populations away from the war front during the Civil War. After Federal troops had captured the area around Georgetown, South Carolina
"Daddy Hamedy devotedly supervised Mrs. Robert B.W. Allston's negroes during the final days of the Civil War at Loch Adele in North Carolina." In 1862, despite the advanced age of Ishmael, his owner called upon him to lead a large gang of slaves to a place of safety where they could avoid contact with federal troops. Ishmael successfully executed his orders, moving well over one hundred Negroes to the owner's inland plantation on the Wateree River in South Carolina. There he worked the slave gang until he was seventy-seven years old.

In addition to working as drivers, men also engaged in craftwork during their later years. Such craftwork provided household luxuries and other goods for masters and slaves. "In Edgefield, South Carolina, Dave, who lived to be eighty-three years old, became a most accomplished potter." Dave's pots tended to be "wide at the shoulders, and his forty-gallon jar is the largest piece of stoneware known in the South. It was not unusual for Dave to use fifty pounds of clay. His owners and co-workers greatly admired the strength and skill required to turn such pots." The slave Uncle Umphrey provided leather goods for his master by tanning cow hides and pig hides.
The old carpenters also repaired and built fences, furniture, and houses. Ex-slave Randall Lee noted that the plantation where he lived was kept under fence by men who were old but strong and who had some knowledge of carpentry. They were sent out to keep fences and furniture repaired, and often built new items. Ex-slave Henry Barnes recalled that his owner sometimes contracted his grandfather, who was a carpenter, out to other plantations to build houses.

One old slave who wished to remain with his family was hired by his master's son. The son desired to keep the slave on his plantation, so he agreed to make the man a carpenter at the age of fifty. The shift of the slave to an occupation requiring skill enabled the master's son to extract work from the old man that was more profitable on paper than if the man had been left as a fieldhand. Usually artisans sold for a higher price than fieldhands.

"Elisha Garey's grandfather Jack Gaines was the plantation shoe maker." Because Old Jack was able to make shoes for plantation slaves, he saved his master expense of purchasing shoes from the city.

Old males also trained the fighting roosters and hounds of their masters. Frederick Douglass's old Uncle
Isaac Cooper trained fighting roosters for his master. 42 Ex-slave Uncle Phil was in charge of the hunting dogs on his master's plantation. 43

Younger male slaves would learn how to perform certain duties and jobs from the old men. Chicken George, mentioned in Alex Haley's *Roots*, was taught how to train roosters to fight in the cockfighting arenas by an old male slave. 44 In the slave quarters, fathers sometimes taught their sons to take over the training of horses; for example, old Uncle Barney, another elderly slave on the plantation where Frederick Douglass resided, taught his son how to care for the master's exotic horses. 45 Ex-slave Douglas Parrish was trained to take over his master's stables by an old experienced stableman. He became a stable boy at age 12, and together with the elderly teacher, was required to keep the buggies, surreys, and spring wagons clean, in addition to caring for the horses. 46

There were other jobs elderly male slaves held on the plantation. In Alabama, an old slave had to ration the food supply for the plantation where Olmstead bedded for the night. Olmstead thought that the man was not very careful in making his measurements. 47 Ex-slave Bacchus White recalled that old Uncle Isaac Andersen
drove a wagon on a Spotsylvania County, Virginia plantation. Frederick Law Olmstead met an old coach driver adorned in a livery top-coat made of velvet, buttoned tightly to the chin. Olmstead also mentioned an elderly male slave who was "the stock tender on a plantation in Mississippi. It was the old man's job to tend the cattle which were allowed to the woods of the plantation." Although, it was uncommon for slaves to be overseers, a few slaves held that position. One elderly male slave listed in the Slave Testimony, Old Uncle Henry Mott, was the overseer on the plantation where he resided.

Most slave gangs had to be roused in the morning for work, and in some instances masters allowed the old reliable men to awaken the other slaves for the day's labor. The alarm for work on a Hancock County, Georgia plantation was sounded by old Uncle Alex Hunt, the bugler. Old Gus Rogers in Alabama went around and rapped on the cabin doors of the slaves to awaken them in the morning.

In order to travel from Hampton's Point to St. Simons Island, Georgia, a guest had to be rowed by boat. Pierce Butler's principal boatman was Old Quash. He often led the crew which rowed whites to Hampton's Point.
or St. Simons Island. Since the water was alligator and stump infested, a skillful boatman or oarsman was required.54

Some planters had old slaves spinning thread and working around the mills. One planter reported that "he had his Spinning Jenny going at a round rate. Old Charles was spinning and Esther was reeling the thread...." As a result, Charles became quite productive even though he was not doing traditional "men's work."55 Similarly, slave Randall Lee recalled that old women and a few old men belonging to Dr. Miller in Florida worked around the house, cotton gin, and the loom.56 The plantations of the South could provide many kinds of work for able-bodied old men, and for obvious economic reasons it was important for there to be alternatives as the men's physical abilities diminished.

During the height of the harvesting season, slave owners extracted substantial amounts of labor from old enslaved men. Most slave owners recognized that fieldhands were a most valued commodity in the antebellum South; however, they would not have been as efficient as they were on a number of large plantations without the "busy work" done by old male slaves. John Cade states that "old men made baskets for cotton and shuck collars
for the teams." In addition, one or two of these old men would go to the fields with the slave gang and "sharpen the hoes, thus making it unnecessary for any laborers to cease work to sharpen hoes." Such men kept the plows, hoes, sweeps from becoming rusty by pouring kerosene over them and rubbing the rust away with brick bats. Cade held that in unusually busy times children performed the sharpening of hoes at the houses. The old men also ensured that the horses and mules would have an ample supply of feed in their troughs once they were brought from the fields.

In short, old slaves gave their masters sound domestic staffs, governors for children, historical knowledge as chroniclers, and a labor force for jobs that were necessary, yet not physically taxing. The old butlers were seen by their white owners as loving and well mannered servants; indeed, many were just that. Care by old companions provided many white children with happy childhood memories, while the old chroniclers gave a vivid picture of the past for those whites who requested information from them. The plantation masters of the South realized that once slaves were too old to work in the fields as full laborers, work on plantations could be altered to fit their physical conditions.
Numerous old men used their knowledge of rice planting and animal care to keep the plantations of the South operating. In addition they were allowed to train younger slaves to take over their duties. Many, like Solomon Northup's Uncle Abram, were left to toil for the rest of their lives in the fields of the plantation South. The relationship between the masters and elderly male slaves was basically one between workers and employers. While the old men conversed with whites and worked for whites, their relationship was never as intimate as the relationship between the younger slaves and the elderly male slaves down in the slave quarters.
Chapter III Endnotes

2. Ibid., 127.
3. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
15. James Hamilton Couper Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina; Joyner, 63.

18. James Hamilton Couper Papers.


20. Ibid., 60.


23. Ibid., 67.


26. Avirett, 63.


28. Stone, 147.


30. Ibid., 65.

31. Ibid., 146.

32. Ibid., 64.

34. Stone, 147.

35. Ibid., 68.

36. Ibid., 70.


39. Ibid., 353.


41. Ibid., 55.


45. Preston, 69.


49. Olmstead, 36.

50. Ibid., 75; Susan Eppes expresses a similar episode about an Uncle Tony. Uncle Tony, sheep herder watched the sheep at night to prevent a possible loss by bear, panther, or other carnivorous animals. Eppes
indicated that Tony had a gun for the country was fairly new and the above animals were not uncommon. Susan (Bradford) Eppes, The Negro of the Old South (Chicago: Joseph Branch Publishing, 1925), 26.


54. Bell, Jr., 561.


58. Ibid.
CHAPTER IV

Elderly Slaves: Health, Economic, and Social Concerns

As valuable a role as the elderly slaves played in the plantation community, the time eventually came when they could no longer care for others and had to be taken care of themselves. Slave owners saw old slaves as a detriment to the plantation, and they showed a greater preference for youth. For numerous planters, the presence of superannuated or bedridden old slaves caused economic and psychological distress; however, the laws protecting old slaves, the compassion given by younger slaves, the practice of freeing old slaves, and slave trading solved many of the problems of elderly care from the viewpoint of the masters.

Statistics fail to reveal the number of old slaves that were bedridden or in need of medical care. The census dealt primarily with the number of slaves a slave owner had and their ages. According to Kenneth Stampp,
the census of 1850 indicated that the average ages of African Americans at death was 21.4 years and the average age for whites at death was 25.5. "In 1860, 3.5 per cent of the slaves and 4.4 per cent of the whites were over sixty; the death rate was 1.8 per cent for the slaves and 1.2 for the whites...."¹ "In 1860 only 1.2 percent were over seventy; thus the owner of a hundred slaves seldom had more than one or two senile slaves to support."²

In addition, the life expectancy of slaves was lower than the U.S. white population life expectancy of forty years. In addition, slave life expectancy proved comparable to life expectancy in France and Holland during the 1850s. Also, slaves had a higher life expectancy than urban industrial workers in England and the United States Northeastern worker, who lived twenty four years.³

The life expectancy for slaves on the Ball Plantations (South Carolina) 1800-49 fell below the previous country wide estimates for slaves. Also, these estimates were below the estimates for urban industrial workers. Ball Plantation male slaves could expect to live 19.8 years at birth and female slaves to live to 20.5 years.⁴ Life expectancy is a volatile measure because of infant and childhood mortality reduce averages
significantly. Calculation then becomes quite inoperable as a measure of adult experience.\(^5\)

A more meaningful technique is to estimate the proportion of adults who survived their reproductive years from age fifteen to fifty. On the Ball Plantations, 35.9 percent of the male slaves reached age fifty. "Female slaves survived in fewer numbers. About 33.2 percent lived to age fifty."\(^6\) Of the 100 couples on the Ball Plantations, only fifteen of the unions held together until both partners reached fifty.\(^7\)

Slave owners certainly had medical expenses associated with elderly slaves. For example, Dr. James Boisseau of Virginia visited Old Isaac (a slave) on February 25, 1855, March 1, 3, 6, 8, 10, 12, and 14 of 1855.\(^8\) No details are given as to the type of medicine he brought; however, each visit cost $2.25. While slave owners occasionally relied on doctors, historian David Whitten argued that normally a slave owner provided medical care without the aid of a doctor. Whitten argued further that those past regimented working age did not receive the same level of care as younger slaves from doctors.\(^9\)

Some areas of the South had large numbers of old slaves to care for. The task system of the rice
plantation in some ways was not as taxing as work on sugar cane and cotton plantations. This could be the reason for the survival of more than one or two elderly slaves on the Butler Plantations. According to Frances Kemble, "she found an immense proportion of old people." Kemble's concept of immense is not totally accurate because she considered several slaves in their forties as old.

These large plantations maintained infirmaries or hospitals for sick and aged slaves. Kemble described the structures as "wretched hovels." The care in the infirmaries, however, was even more wretched than the structures. Manager Roswell King had devised a compound of plaster and mortar which was used to make the slave cabins and infirmary. These structures were extremely sound and withstood the storms and inclement weather that periodically ravaged the Georgia coast. Although elderly slaves were housed in the infirmaries, the facilities were primarily built to address the medical needs of younger slaves rather than serving as convalescent homes for old slaves.

Kemble was so affected by the condition of the old slaves at the infirmaries that she would often weep. For instance, "A feeling of hopelessness overcame her on one
visit to the infirmary and she began to sob; crying over the whole unfortunate lot. A poor crippled old man lying in the corner of the piazza is recalled in his consolation of Frances as saying; 'Missis you no cry; missis, what for you cry?'

Even more distressing to Kemble was the death of an old male slave at the infirmary. Kemble found upon entering the infirmary's first ward a dark, filthy forlorn room. "I have so christened an old Negro called Friday lying on the ground. She questioned what ailed him and perceived from the glazed eyes and from the feeble rattling breath, that he was at the point of expiring." His tattered shirt and trousers barely covered his poor body; "his appearance was that of utter exhaustion from age and feebleness; he had nothing under him but a mere handful of straw that did not cover the earth he was stretched out on.... With tears of unavailing pity upon him there was a sudden quivering of the eyelids and falling of the jaw and he was free."

Frances Kemble had no knowledge of her husband's involvement in owning plantations in Georgia when they met in Philadelphia. Her adamant convictions against slavery were probably reinforced by seeing how the aged were neglected.
Most states of the antebellum South had laws that required owners to provide health care for old slaves; however, these laws were not systematically enforced. These laws particularly dealt with slaves that had been manumitted. "By the Code of 1806," notes V. Alton Moody "those slaves disabled on Louisiana plantations through old age, sickness, or any other cause, whether their diseases were incurable or not were to be fed and maintained by their owners." Georgia had a law similar to that of Louisiana. In 1815 the Georgia General Assembly enacted the Old Age Relief Act for slaves. It gave county courts the right to make inquiries in cases of neglect by owners of old slaves. Such inquiries were almost nonexistent; in addition, few courts in the South would ever convict a white owner of neglecting old slaves.

William Postell contended in his dissertation that, long before the American public was aware of such terms as social security, old age pensions, health and accident insurance, public welfare and relief, and unemployment insurance, the Southern planter was well acquainted with these services which are so called today. Lewright Sikes made a similar argument in "Medical Care for Slaves: A Preview of the Welfare
State." Sikes stated that there are questionable aspects of the institution of slavery, but medical care was not one of them. Sikes correctly argued that planters desired to keep their investments productive.

However, the assistance provided by the slave community were more pertinent for the welfare of elderly slaves than that which the masters provided; therefore, the extent of the social security provided by masters is overstated by both authors. It is true that throughout the slave's life he had to be disciplined, trained, fed, clothed, provided medical attention, and cared for in old age; however, much of the burden for the care of the elderly fell upon younger slaves. Thus, if a pre-social security system existed in the Southern plantation system, it was the slave community that defrayed most of the costs for the aged and indigent African American slaves. Postell and Sikes appeared to argue that the owners defrayed most of the costs. In addition, the establishment of a social security system might assume that a worker would receive from the system something comparable to the efforts put forth to build such a system. However, such compensation never materialized for enslaved Africans in the South.
Yet, some southerners realized the importance of having younger slaves attending old slaves. A Virginia slave owner in 1860 wrote "please let me know the condition of the old negroes at Cherry Grove and whether there is the remotest likelihood of their closing this life during the present century. They must be very helpless; and will soon, if not now, require the personal attention of a young negro." White southerner Sarah Grimke recounted seeing an aged slave in a very despairing state. The old man was lying disheveled on a board in a corner on filthy rags dying of cancer. However, the slaves were kind to him; they often stole time to come and see about him, as well as bringing him something to eat.  

Usually, the children or near relatives took turns attending the old slaves at night. They brought food from their allowances for the old ones and also performed any chores that the aged required. Scipio, the old watch man of J. Motte Alston, moved to a cabin in the woods to live out the rest of his life. "Old Scipio, who had out-lived three wives, married his fourth wife. The young woman's only duties were to care for the old man."
Although some grandparents maintained their own cabins until death, it was possible in the quarters for single grandparents to move in with one of their married children after they became too feeble or old to work in the fields.\textsuperscript{22}

The veneration and strong affection of young slaves for old slaves amazed one white traveler. The traveler noted that "Negroes have a peculiarly strong affection for the old people of their color. Veneration for the aged is one of their strongest characteristics."\textsuperscript{23} Suicide occurred rarely among old slaves, although it was high within the white elderly United States population.\textsuperscript{24}

Some masters revealed affection for their old patriarchs in their letters. For example, William Pettigrew shows considerable grief over the death of Uncle Charles. "It grieved me sincerely to learn of the death of your poor Uncle Charles although I could not say it surprised me, for I had for some time lost all hope of the ulcers on his legs being cured and thought it more that we never meet again on this earth .... It is ever a comfort to me to be present when my people depart for the land of spirits."\textsuperscript{25}
The Pettigrew family later honored two old foremen through hymns entitled "Moses' Hymn" and "Henry's Hymns." The hymns are quoted.\textsuperscript{26}

\textbf{Moses' Hymn}

'Tis my desire with God to Walk 
And with his children prey and talk 
Though persecuted I shall be 
Jesus suffered so for me.

'Tis my desire to serve the Lord 
Though by the wicked I behold 
Sin entice I'll not consent 
To serve the Lord is my intent

To serve the Lord in the right way 
Shall be my search both night and day 
An infant [illegible] once was I 
But now 'tis done I'll lay it by

Put on Christ and him I'll wear 
and be baptized as Christians are 
On my own works I dare not trust 
I am as poor and weak as dust.\textsuperscript{27}

\textbf{Henry's Hymn}

Come ye that love the Lord 
And let your joys be known 
Join in a song of sweet accord 
And thus surround the throne

Let those refuse to sing 
Who never knew the Lord 
But servants of the heavenly king 
should speak their joys abroad

The God that rules on high 
And all the earth surveys 
He rides upon the storm sky 
And calms the roaring sea.\textsuperscript{28}
Shirley Jackson ("Black Slave Drivers") argued that the recording of the foremen’ favorite hymns was a testimony to the fondness the Pettigrews had for the old men.\textsuperscript{29} Slave owner James H. Hammond was also concerned about the loss of his gardener and plantation patriarch, who had been a faithful friend and one of the best men on the plantation.\textsuperscript{30}

Masters also wrote letters to one another concerning the welfare of old slaves. In a letter to Robert F.W. Allston, J.W. LaBruce was troubled with keeping Old Conky who could not work:

Dear Sir I received your note by Conky saying I could have him, I am willing to take care of him as I have his wife, he is old and I dont think will be able to pay me in work for it, but if you will let him come, I will be much obliged to you. They as you say are many old people of Pipedown which was one reason John and myself did not go in debt for them, I am much obliged to you for the acorns.\textsuperscript{31}

Historian James Oakes does not argue entirely correct when he stated that "for slaveholders, sickness and death mitigated racial distinctions and brought blacks and whites together as equals." Oakes further argued that in descriptions of death slaveholders made few distinctions between African American slaves and whites.
In both the 1850 and 1860 Mortality Censuses, old age was the most frequent recorded cause of death for slave adults. The high frequency of old age deaths reported in the census was seen by contemporary apologists for slavery as evidence of the benign nature of the institution. However, "the presence of a large number of old age deaths can best be explained by the use of the phrase to describe a variety of afflictions of the elderly ...." A vivid illustration can be seen by looking at the ages of slave deaths recorded in the 1850 and 1860 Mortality Schedule. "In 1850, slaves over age fifty accounted for nearly two-thirds of the reported adult mortality. In 1860 the proportion declined somewhat to 50 percent." At Comingtee (South Carolina), the deaths of slaves over age fifty accounted for 38 percent of all the pre-Civil War deaths cited in the mortality schedule.22 Other slaves were certainly dying; however, the old people seem to receive a larger amount of attention than their numbers within the total slave population studied by Cody.

In certain cases a planter's lamentation of death of a faithful servant failed to reveal sincerity. Rachel O'Connor's brother wrote to inform her of the death of "Poor Old Daniel" in 1833. The brother stated that the
memory of Daniel, a slave of over sixty years, would be forever etched in his mind. O'Connor's grief faded when Daniel was replaced with Arthur, "who does better than his father ever did. In him I find poor Old Daniel's loss quite made up ...." O'Connor at this point certainly does not appear to be distraught over the loss of an African American family member. Norrece T. Jones in Born a Child of Freedom, Yet a Slave (1990) noted that the planters "were more concerned with the loss of valuable laborers than with the dissolution of any paternal bonds when chattel died." As proof Jones used the statement by Thomas Porcher to show his true interest in a dead slave. Porcher wrote "My old man Sempey died this morning .... He is a loss to me. As he took great care of everything at the farm." These are excellent examples of the attitudes of owners, whose primary interest was in economics not the health of their older workers.

Others owners revealed their displeasure with retaining old slaves as workers. One owner became quite angered, when "80 slaves left Shirley Plantation for federal lines leaving Carter [plantation owner] with four cradles and 10 broken-down old men and women in the harvest of 1864." Carter asserted that such a workforce made for 'poor business.'
Nevertheless, care needed to be provided for such workers. Consequently, some white southerners sympathetically provided for indigent aged slave. Former slave Peter Still recalled such an event that "Uncle Pompey, who was set free by his master at the age of 80, for sometime wandered to and fro, a prey to the cruelty of patrols and other ruffians. By these he was persecuted and beaten till Miss Sarah, his former owner, pitying his sufferings, took him home and cared for him the remainder of his life." Too often, however, this was not the case.

On many occasions, elderly slaves were left to take care of themselves. A slave remembered a couple, both around 80 years old, who were turned out by their master to fend for themselves. One old man was allowed to go where he wanted to, so he dug a room into the side of a hill and put wooden posts to help hold up the interior of the structure. Northern editor James Redpath traveled extensively throughout the antebellum South and upon his arrival in Georgia he found an elderly male slave in most wretched condition in a jail. Redpath wrote:

A very old negro came up to the door and put his face against the grating. I never before saw so very frail and venerable a negro. He was very sick and
could not work therefore his purchaser refused to take him. Alone and sick a member of an outcast race without money without family and without a home in his tottering age. Where could he go but to the police to be put in a putrid cell.\textsuperscript{38}

Other elderly slaves were forced to aimlessly wander the countryside until they died from exposure, starvation, or a bullet. In one instance, two white men, seeing "a discarded slave in the field began to joke" about his condition. One of them said "Tom I'll wager you a dollar that I wing that old good for nothing nigger the first shot at fifty yards."\textsuperscript{39} The second white man accepted the wager. The old slave was aware of the fate that awaited him but unable to prevent the demented and horrible act. The shot met its mark; however, it proved to be not fatal. The old slave survived the sordid sport.\textsuperscript{40}

David Whitten offered an interesting assessment of the care of elderly slaves. Whitten contended that the master was the true beneficiary of care for the aged and infirm in the long run. The kind treatment of the aged and infirmed allowed the owner to maintain some semblance of morale among the slaves. Whitten argued that allowing the slaves to grow old and die in peace maintained stability and granted slaves something to look forward
to. Otherwise, Whitten believed the slave would flee from his owner or not work quite as efficiently as he might under different circumstances. Also, the care of slaves by masters could possibly curtail uprisings. In other words, Whitten failed to include the importance or influence of old slaves on the slave community and the white community.

Manumission was another answer to the problems of old age care; however, it could have serious repercussions. For instance, the manager of Pierce Butler’s plantation in Georgia was deeply troubled by Butler’s desire to free several superannuated slaves. Roswell King was afraid that the other slaves would also desire manumission if the old people were freed. King wrote: "As for old Betty, she is free already. She does as she pleases and you feed and clothe her. As for Jacob he certainly is a most deserving Negro. If you liberated Jacob, what will Bram say? He has earned you more than ten thousand dollars.... Jacob is useful as a head carpenter his health is bad and I dont allow him to do anything but lay off work, as he has a large family of fine children on the estate." Butler was dissuaded from freeing Jacob in 1815; however, in 1821 the ailing slave was sent to Philadelphia for better care. Back on
the plantation in 1835, Jacob, old and crippled, was said by Roswell King, Jr. to be "faithful in grinding corn and attending to other small matters." If they had been freed, the old people would have had immediate difficulties because Darien, Georgia, had laws that forced blacks to pay taxes. An ordinance passed in 1818 called for all negroes and mulattoes to pay an annual tax or, if a newcomer, a special fee. For those aged 15 to 50, men had to pay ten dollars and women five dollars.

Some emancipated elderly slaves lived during slavery without a substantial amount of work by tricking their owners into believing that they were incapacitated. These old people pretended to be crippled and helpless. Once freedom came, these freedmen suddenly regained their vitality once they got an opportunity to work their own land. White Georgian Eliza Andrews indicates that Uncle Lewis, who had long concluded his working years, suddenly regained his vigor once the Yankee troops occupied the area. Lewis even had the audacity to claim a part of her family's plantation.

For the elderly male slave who was freed his status still left him at a disadvantage just as it did all slaves who were manumitted. Some former slaves during the 1830s asked their former masters to return
home or asked for some type of aid. In one letter, Cyfax Brown, who was said to be 116 in 1844, was writing in an attempt to convince his master to send him some type of aid in his old age. The letter reads as follows:

Dear master
I am now unable to support myself as I am old and infirme pray old master can you help the old servant in his old age to something if you please If you feel disposed to send me something you can lodge it with nick Scott my nephew in Richmond then I can get it Seartinley

Your most humble Servant
Cyfax Brown.

Most old male slaves would never receive the opportunity to be free. Although, young male slaves were most likely to run away, some elderly male slaves also caused social problems by taking flight from their masters. Norman Yetman in Voices from Slavery indicates elderly males were not immune from running away. Silas Jackson, an ex-slave, remembered his grandfather’s escape through the underground railroad with the aid of Harriet Tubman. Old Ned, an elderly male slave from Georgia, went North to join the Union Army. Ex-slave Callie Elder’s Grandfather York attempted to escape so often that his owner made him wear long old horns (probably a neck collar). Isaac D. Williams in Sunshine and
Shadow of Slave Life relates that one of his best friends and counselors, the Reverend Moses Myers, was sold to a Georgia man because his master thought he preached too much, and, as he said, had "got religion on the brain." He was a man of about sixty-five years old, according to Williams. After being suddenly wrenches from his family and friends and being mistreated by his new master, the man attempted to escape. Although he eventually returned to his former home, he was recaptured and taken back to his new master where he was severely whipped for his actions. The persistence of the old man was extraordinary, and a year later he tried unsuccessfully to depart from Georgia again. Reportedly, the new master, agreed to free the old man if he escaped once more. The old man escaped six months later and lived in the swamps and woods on oak leaves and briars. He outwitted the hounds by doubling back through brooks and streams. Upon reaching his former master, the old man was set free.31

Although Old Scipio did not run away, he strongly asserted that he would as the result of condescending remarks by his master. The aged Scipio was the butt of a joke by his master and as a result he responded, "Don’t bother me mossa, enty you know I bin libbin in dese woods
The grandfather of fugitive Charles Ball helped his son escape to freedom. The grandfather overheard the master planning to seize Ball's father for stealing a pig. The 80-year-old grandfather revealed the plot to his son and sent the man fleeing out of Maryland with a bottle of cider and a small bag of parched corn.  

Some elderly male slaves were also involved in what overseers and masters deemed as petty problems. The manager of the Butler plantation in Georgia had petty troubles with two old people, Mumm and Gardener Bram. Mumm and Bram had become quite troublesome and had broken plantation rules. As a result King had been told by Pierce Butler to punish them by withholding clothes. In a letter to Pierce Butler, Roswell King informed the owner "I have clothed the Negroes except Mumm and Bram it was your order not to clothe. Old Bram I had no other way to punish the old rascal only to stop his clothing." However, King reneged on the wishes of Butler and gave both of them shoes. Another master complained that Old Charley was giving the family problems. The old man
would work very well for a few weeks at a time, yet after those weeks very little.\textsuperscript{33}

Younger slaves at times conferred with old slaves about the possibility of using violence. In South Carolina, Gullah Jack, the General for Denmark Vesey’s conspiracy, consulted with two aged Africans numerous times for their great wisdom. "Old Daddy had marks on both sides of his face [probably scarring done in Africa for ritual purposes]. Although he was too old to actually participate in the rebellion, Old Daddy privately received much of the information on the conspiracy. He was a great inspiration for Jack." Jack trusted only full blooded Africans. "Old blind cartman Philip provided an element of mysticism for Gullah Jack and the other people involved in the conspiracy." Philip, a seer born with a ‘caul.’ Those slaves born with a caul "were believed by slaves to be empowered with the ability to foretell the future and see spirits."\textsuperscript{34} With this mysticism, Jack was able to frighten or silence those people involved in the conspiracy.

The petty problems and social misconduct of old slaves can also be seen as resistance. Running away, refusing to perform tasks, and advising conspirators are all examples of overt and covert resistance. An Uncle
Tom would not challenge his masters authority by resisting his owner's wishes. Thus elderly male slaves were not all Uncle Toms.

In fact, the mere survival of a slave or slaves to old age could be construed in two ways, as resistance or as collaboration. Old men like Old Tom of the Hopeton plantation still adhered to cherished African beliefs, which shaped some of the African-American slave community views. His family continued to accept the Islamic faith that Tom adhered to and taught. Also, Tom retained some specific words and stories from the Foulah people of Africa which he passed to the younger generation. By the mid-1850s the old slaves would be the portion of the slave community that carried extensive first hand accounts of the culture of Africa than younger members of the slave community. The intrastate slave trade filled the demand for slaves during the antebellum period, thus curtailing the need for slave owners to acquire workers from Africa. The trickling influx of indigenous Africans resulted in the slave quarters losing a large portion of its direct and constant connections with indigenous African culture. In this manner, Tom kept alive something uniquely adverse to Anglo-American culture. On the other hand, Tom also served for many years as the
driver on the Couper plantation in Georgia. In this manner, the old slave acted as a conservative influence within the realm of the slave society.

The possibility of slaves being punished was omnipresent, and old slaves were not exempted. The American Slave volumes, Voices from Slavery, and other works include several accounts of elderly slaves being beaten or disciplined for failure to perform work in the fields. One master tarred and burned an old male slave who he thought was shirking his work; as a result the man died from the burns. The slave Abram mentioned by Solomon Northup was stabbed in the back by a drunken master for what his master deemed as laziness. A slave owner brutally stomped and kicked a ninety year old slave for a petty offense. Witnesses recounted the bruises that deeply disfigured the old man's back. The elderly male slave, like all slaves, was always under threat of the whip, if he contravened the rules of a master.

Another alternative to taking care of the elderly slaves or disciplining them was to get rid of them. While the selling of old male slaves did occur, it was extremely difficult for owners because of the poor marketability of old men.
For this reason, before sale, elderly slaves were oiled or greased in order to make them look younger. Ex-slave Joe Brown related that upon his sale into Georgia that there was a general washing, combing, shaving, and pulling out of gray hairs.\(^1\)

Old slaves were of little monetary value, because their highest periods of earning power were over. Male field hands were most productive between the ages of twenty-five and possibly fifty, and in the case of artisans from thirty to fifty-five years of age. The ratio between the capital value of a male slave and his annual net earnings would decline steadily from the beginning to the end of his working life. At the age of twenty it might well be as ten to one, at the age of fifty it would probably not exceed four to one; at sixty-five it might be less than parity.\(^2\) In the *Georgia Narratives* ex-slaves indicate that usually the "aged and the infirm slaves had no value at all."\(^3\)

This statement is certainly not inclusive of all slaves, yet it is reinforced by the appraisal of the slaves of Pierce Butler of Georgia who were not to be sold. Malcolm notes that "The first two slaves on the list were Driver Frank, 61, bedridden and superannuated and his wife Betty, 58, poultry minder. Frank had no
value. Frank had been the driver on plantation during Frances Kemble's residence on the Georgia plantations."

Other elderly male slaves were valued as follows; "Raccoon George, 51, $400, Trunk Harry, 60, superannuated, Jew Frank, 71, superannuated jobber, no value." The appraisal was amended several times in an attempt to keep the old or superannuated from being sold, or for unstated reasons. Butler had two different lists of the slaves that were to be sold. The Butler slave list showed that Cooper London, the old barrel maker and preacher, had no value at all. There were also three other old men who were given no dollar value at all. They were shown as superannuated Africans. They were Carpenter George, 68, Lawyer Peter, 67, and Sam, 70.

Earlier in 1800, Major Pierce Butler deeded sixty slaves to his son Thomas. Among the sixty were two of the oldest couples on the Butler Plantation at the time with no value. They were April, 62 and Nancy, 47, and Quakoo, 62, and Cumba, 52.

The plantation records from the William McKinley Book also revealed the desire for young hands in the fields. There were three elderly slaves: Dave died on October 22, 1859 around the age of 75 or 80 with no value; earlier, Bivah was appraised at the price of $700;
however, he died in February of 1839 at the age of 70. The 75 year old Davy Hobbs died on February 8, 1856 without any value given.  

The inventories of plantations revealed the prices owners paid for various ages of slaves. The following lists slaves sold at the 1858 sale of the estate of Washington Durden of Bibb County, Georgia. It is interesting to see the price of the three elderly male slaves in comparison to that of the old woman Chloe. The 75 year old Chloe brought a higher price at sale than any of the old men 50 or above. Chloe might have been a midwife or possibly more fit than the old men.

**Negroes in the Estate of Washington Durden**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bob aged 60</td>
<td>$250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Station</td>
<td>$300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bartlett</td>
<td>$350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harty</td>
<td>$1100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>$1100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>$1250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>$1100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neel 23</td>
<td>$1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodson 20</td>
<td>$1100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua 22</td>
<td>$1250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green 25</td>
<td>$1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 12</td>
<td>$900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walker 19</td>
<td>$800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob 10</td>
<td>$750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elbert 7</td>
<td>$500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viney aged 48--------</td>
<td>$400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peggy 49-------------</td>
<td>$400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily /child 31------</td>
<td>$900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth 7----------</td>
<td>$500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah 5--------------</td>
<td>$400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The inventory of the slaves belonging to the Estate of John W. Gilliam of Chesterfield County, Virginia also revealed the limited monetary value placed on elderly male slaves. Tom (age 70), Isaac (age 68), and Wiley (age 62) were appraised at $125, $200, and $350 respectively. Gilliam priced his prime male field hands ages 16-34 at an average price of $900. The only old female slave was valued by Gilliam at a price of $100.69

William McKinley's records contain several lists for prices of antebellum slaves. One listing on January 4, 1859 has 37 negroes who were sold in Georgia on credit. Five of these individuals were listed by McKinley as old and nearly worthless, while the other 32 were 2 to 42 years old with the average of 15 years of age. Their average price was $905.70

Some slave owners were only willing to sell their slaves together; consequently a trader might have to pay
an owner to keep old slaves who could not work. U.B. Phillips notes that a broker at Savannah reported to a client in 1856 that when a local plantation gang was offered for sale as a unit, "the purchaser gave $2000 more than the asking price for 85 with the privilege of rejecting 10 old people. In other words, he paid the proprietor two thousand dollars to retain the ten superannuates on his own hands."  

It was considered shrewd business to sell off a useless slave to a buyer. One plantation owner became very disillusioned after buying an elderly slave. Planter William Massie was upset because of the price he paid for the fifty-four year old George and the subsequent possibility of caring for George for another 13 to 18 years past labor. Massie had been swindled in the purchase. On Massie's Confederate tax return George appears aged with no value, with diseased ankles.

On certain occasions, planters had to prove in writing that slaves were sound workers, particularly old slaves. Slave owner Robert Woody wrote a letter on July 31, 1838 in reference to the physical ability of Jacob, who was about sixty-five years of age, and also a female slave of about forty years of age. Woody received $400 dollars for the two people. Woody wrote to the buyer: "I
warrent and defend myself, my eirs [heirs] and all other persons, also to be sound in mind and body. Where unto I affix my hand and seal, this 31 day of July 1838."

On one occasion an owner achieved the sale of old slaves only after arguing with a slave trader for hours over the price. An English traveler observed such an event in South Carolina. An old man and his wife were sold on the auction block together for $13. The couple had to remain on the auction block through considerable bargaining by their master before sale."

In summation, the slave owners of the antebellum South realized that there were certain problems that were inherent with the aging of slaves. The older slaves would have to be nursed and watched in their old age by younger slaves like the care rendered to Old Scipio by his young wife. The younger slaves rendered this care with a great veneration for the aged. Some southern whites did take care of the old slaves when they saw them being abused, while others revealed concern for the welfare of their old servants. Unfortunately, the South had some unscrupulous masters, who set their old people free to take charge of their own lives with no concern for their welfare. The states of the South had laws against the owners freeing slaves to fend for themselves.
However it was rare that a Southerner was prosecuted or fined for not caring for an old slave. Some of these old men regained their vitality once they were freed, and caused concern among whites. At times the old men also became quite rebellious and refused to be subservient. Old slaves also ran away or broke rules of owners, although less frequently than younger slaves. Such action casts doubt on the stereotype of Uncle Tom.

Many of the old slaves were disciplined by their masters in order to make them fall in line with their wishes. The severity of such discipline was dependent upon the type of master the old men had.

Some white slave owners found that the economic, social, and health problems that came with having an elderly population could be solved by selling their old slaves. Although some owners had to sell their slaves to pay bills, such action helped to solve the problems of care for the elderly. Those owners purchasing groups of slaves lost money in certain instances because they had to not only pay for younger slaves but also pay the cost for the seller keeping the old slaves. There is little doubt that the declining value of many old slaves troubled numerous owners. Slave trading of old men and women offered very little monetary benefit to owners.
However, it did offer relief from economic and social problems for owners with old people to sell. While the masters complained about the presence of bedridden old slaves, few complaints of young adult slaves about caring for their aged kin survived in letters, narratives, and diaries.
Chapter IV Endnotes


4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 241.

8. Inventory of the Estate of John W. Gilliam, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Library Manuscripts Department.


11. Ibid., 254.

12. Ibid., 256, 287.

13. Ibid.


23. Moody, 86.


26. Shirley M. Jackson, "Black Slave Drivers in the Southern United States" (Ph.D. diss.: Bowling Green State University, 1977), 134.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.


32. Cody, 301-2.


40. Ibid.

41. David Owen Whitten, "The Medical Care of Slaves on South Carolina Rice Plantations" (M.A. thesis: University of South Carolina, 1963), 56.

42. Ibid.


44. Ibid., 558.
45. Ibid., 142.


49. Ibid., 232.


54. Bell, Jr., 167.

55. Buck Family Papers, University of Virginia Manuscripts Department.


58. Ibid.


65. Bell, Jr., 326-27.

66. Ibid., 552.


69. Inventory of the Estate of John W. Gilliam.

70. William McKinley Book.


72. Ibid., 246.


CHAPTER V

Nearer To Thee: The Old Women of the Quarters

This chapter examines the elderly female slaves and ascertain their roles and status during the antebellum period on plantations. As mentioned earlier, consideration has to be taken that "whites wrote most of the antebellum America's records and African American males wrote just about all of the antebellum records left by blacks." African American females wrote very few and those by old African American females were almost nonexistent for the antebellum period.

The dominant images of old women that permeated the South were those of mammy and granny. The elderly mammy was the boisterous epitome of black female domesticity. Southern whites depicted her as the quintessential domestic power within the white household. Deborah White argues that "most of what we know about Mammy comes from memoirs written after the Civil War." The granny filled the role as the plantation midwife or doctor, who
prescribed folk medicine for other people on the plantations of the South.

The works on gerontology cited offer little information on the status of elderly African or African American women. Minois, Shelton, Achenbaum and others provide ample discussion of the importance of old men only in the respective societies studied. W.E.B DuBois's well known statement that slave men and women lived and resided in closer equality than their white owners can be easily transplanted to the relationship between elderly male and female slaves. Older women shared along with elderly male slaves in the support of the slave community.

No other group of individuals received quite the attention as elderly female slaves in southern lore. These women raised and cared for their grandchildren and other children often with great love and affection. The American Slave: Georgia Narratives indicated that those slaves who were not able to work in the fields took care of small children. Rx-slave Louis Hughes stated that the old women on the plantation, where he resided took care of children usually without the aid of anyone. Responsibility such as this enhanced the image of the elderly female slaves in the slave community. Such
responsibility also tied the elderly female slave to traditional domestic or female roles on the plantation. The slave community identified childcare more with old females than male slaves.

In addition, grandmothers frequently prepared cookies and cakes for little children. Occasionally, these women sometimes stole delicacies from the owner's table to give to little children.

Moreover, these grandmothers provided younger slave women with an extended family network to help with childcare duties. These old grandmothers helped to ensure childhoods for slave children that were as normal as possible under the circumstances. The elderly female slaves played a part in caring for the children of the slave community of the Atlantic seaboard; however, the young adult female slaves carried the bulk of the childcare duties for infants. The American Slave volumes of Georgia, South Carolina, and Genovese's Roll Jordan Roll reveal this pattern.

The notion of the old black mammy being the focal point of childcare does not hold true for all slave plantations because some women became mammies in their teens or younger. A sixty-year-old woman is certainly old by many standards; however, a twenty-year-old woman
is old to a child. Mammies always were older than children under their care; consequently, upon reaching adulthood white children recorded remembrances of elderly mammies. These younger children helped and learned from the old mammies by keeping the plantation babies cared for in the nurseries. Consequently, the elderly female slaves taught children to work at an early age for the benefit of the slave community.

Southern white women also engaged in the care of both African American and white children. Not all southern white women handed over their children to African American slave women to raise and train. In addition, some southern white women supervised slave children during the day, while their parents labored in the fields.

Old female slaves served as the commanders of the companies of young children who worked in the yard around the bighouse. Old Mandy made the children on the plantation sweep yards and drive cows into the pasture and carry water to the fieldhands. Such work helped to alleviate much of the burdens of younger adult slaves. Old Maum Phibby, the head nurse at Chicora Wood in South Carolina, "trained the children big enough to learn to run up a seam and a hem, in the way of sewing, and
knitting first squares for wash-cloths, and then stockings, and then to spin. "13 On Cumberland Island in Camden County, Georgia, young girls delivered "meat from the smokehouse, water and wood for the granny who cooked dinner for babies" and for the mothers who suckled those infants. 14 Such action helped to lessen the stress and strain of younger adult slaves. In addition, it helped to maintain the power and prestige of older women, particularly in the eyes of African American children.

The extended family relationship in the slave community allowed the elderly female slaves the leeway to administer physical punishment to children. An ex-slave recalled that "a heap of times our ole granny would brush our hide wid a peach tree limb. But us needed it kaize us stole aigs [eggs] en roasted them." 15 Such action provided slave children with a quick realization that if you steal you better not get caught.

Slave women of all ages supplemented the diets of their families through fishing. However, slave women in some instances taught younger slaves how to catch fish. Frederick Douglass's grandmother was highly esteemed for her ability to construct fishing nets for catching shad and herring. Her nets were in great demand in neighboring villages of Tuckano, Hillsboro, and Denton in
Virginia. The old woman's efforts were tireless and quite draining physically. In fact, Douglass recalled that "I have known her to be in the water half the day." Few men, old or young, surpassed the net making ability of Douglass's grandmother. As mentioned earlier, along the Georgia and South Carolina coast, fishing provided a supplement to the diets of slave families; however, much of the fishing done on the coasts was performed by groups of enslaved men, whose major duty was fishing. For example, the Hopeton Plantation overseer and owner allowed Old Bacchus to fish for the plantation. Slaves caught large numbers of mullet at night in seines or nets, and brought them home in sacks.

Some old female slaves chose additional ways to supplement their family's diets through gardening. Once again, Douglass's Grandmother Betty was "more provident than most of her neighbors in the preservation of seedling sweet potatoes, she had a reputation to have been born to good luck." "In the time of sweet potato planting, Grandmother Betty simply placed the seeds in the soil..." A bountiful potato harvest often occurred because other members of the community thanked her with "gifts of appreciation."
Although the ability to earn hard currency was limited within the slave population, some members of the slave quarters earned money from their labors. Among these were some old female slaves. William G. Proctor in "The Ambiguous Auction Block" recorded the efforts of the old woman Granny Sabia. The white mistress allowed Granny Sabia to knit and sell her wares. Sabia passed on a great amount of this money to younger relatives. Slave owner Ann Matilda Page King paid numerous enslaved persons for fowls and other products to be sold outside the plantation. King operated two plantations consisting of over 980 acres, livestock, furniture, and 116 slaves with a total value of $72,460 in Wayne County, Georgia. On November 20, 1845, King gave an old woman $.60 for three fowls. Old Jane received $4.50 on May 22, 1845 for honey and Old Kate received $.62 1/2 for five fowls. King also listed Old Cupid as receiving $.37 1/2 for three chickens. In addition, King paid Old Dembo the balance due him on $4.25. Such earnings though meager by today's standards brought considerable prestige for those able to earn the money.

Similar to old men, old women also recounted an enormous amount of the legend and lore on the plantations. Ex-slave Shad Hall recalled that his old
grandmother served as an oral repository of the history of African Americans. The old woman spoke often of Africa and its numerous animals. The tales told by this woman made it possible for African American slaves to understand the foibles of the powerful owners in confrontation with the slave community. These stories filled with tricksters and oppressors provided psychological coping mechanisms. They provided the slaves with an impression that owners were not all powerful. In addition these tales revealed that slaves had some type of control and could even out smart their masters. An example is that of the Fox and the Rooster: The Fox begged the Rooster to come down from his perch because all of the animals had signed a peace treaty; therefore, no harm would come to the Rooster from the Fox. The Rooster was almost convinced by this good news, the Rooster was about to descend when he thinks better of it and tests Fox by pretending to see a man and a dog approaching from the road. "Don' min' fo' comin' down den," Fox says as he flees. "Dawg ain't got no sense, yer know, an' de man got er gun." The above trickster tale is a confrontation in which the weak use their wits to evade the strong. Joel Chandler Harris reformed these stories of a counter culture into a
"local-colour device" for the entertainment of white audiences in the 1880s and later.

Old slave women like old men helped to perpetuate the vast amount of references to Africa in storytelling on the South Carolina Sea coasts and islands. These slaves continued to use African languages spoken by the slaves in these areas. Old African born slaves inhabited All Saints Parish, South Carolina as late as the mid-nineteenth century. Maum Maria was one of the many old slaves who continued to pray and count and call objects by their African names. Maum Maria and other old slaves were the "last Africans in All Saints Parish, who speak their indigenous tongues unadulterated."25

Another means by which the slave community kept its spirits up and entertained its people was through music. Most plantations had musicians or chief singer who entertained the rest of the people on the plantation. On one plantation an old African American slave woman accompanied the head fiddle player in the most captivating musical renditions. The old woman thumped in perfect harmony on a hollow drum.26 Like storytelling, music provided relief from the burdens of bondage.

Besides providing a psychological lift for the slave community with their storytelling and musical abilities,
elderly female slaves were best known primarily for medicine and health care. The older women were the medical experts for the plantation slaves. Ex-Georgia slave George Womble recalled that "those slaves too old to work in the fields remained at home, where they nursed the sick slaves". Womble failed to mention whether he specifically meant old men or women. Old women would certainly fit into the assessment he made. The aged wife of Old Sam, owned by Theodore Chapin of South Carolina, fed, clothed, and cared for her husband for three years. She faithfully tended him through his paralytic convulsions. Plantation mistress Frances Kemble affirmed Womble's claim when she wrote in her journal about Old Rose and Old Sackey serving as the primary operators of the Butler Island infirmary. On the Manigault Plantation in Georgia, the plantation community regarded old nurse Bina mentioned earlier in regards to her childcare duties as a woman of the highest medical ability. Bina dutifully administered medicinal care to any ailing plantation member. Many white doctors had strong inclinations to bleed patients; therefore, some slaves preferred to use folk medicines and folk healers. However, "sometimes the white plantation doctor would tell old grannies what remedies and food to administer to
the sick." In addition, these old women had ample opportunities to practice their remedies for diseases upon the children of the slave community because they often served as guardians over the small groups of children and "plantation doctors." Old slaves such as Old Mandy taught children to heal the sick. Ex-slave Sarah Felder indicated that such learning "beats eny doctor you ebery seed."

According to Kemble, some of the medical practices administered by the midwives were quite harsh. For example, one old Butler Island midwife assisted women in childbirth by tying a cloth tight around the throats of women in labor and drawing upon it until the old woman almost produced strangulation. This action supposedly reduced the extreme difficulty of childbirth. In truth, drawing the cloth around the throats prevented the women in labor from screaming. The inclusion of such harsh methods by midwives does not diminish the fact that these old women were successful in the births of African American children.

Some old midwives had the luxury of using facilities that were somewhat extraordinary for the time period. The healthcare facilities on Hopeton Plantation in Georgia were technologically ahead of neighboring plantations.
In "Hopeton Model Plantation of the Antebellum South," James M. Clifton indicated that "the nursery in the remaining portion of the building (infirmary) accommodated all children up to age twelve during the day. The entire building was steam heated and well ventilated." \(^{35}\)

As mentioned in a preceding chapter midwives were of both sexes\(^ {36}\); however, elderly female midwives were more prevalent. Furthermore, those old men who had a knowledge of herbal medicine had learned the use of roots and herbs from old black "grannies."

In fact, numerous young people acquired a knowledge of medicine from elderly slave women.\(^ {37}\) Some of these women also doubled as the plantation conjurers and taught young people conjuring as well.\(^ {38}\) These old women formed the primary medical force for the slave community along the Atlantic seaboard of Georgia and South Carolina.

The duties of midwives held considerable benefits, some of which were monetary. For example, the owner of the grandmother of ex-slave Mae D. Moore allowed the grandmother to retain portions of her earnings from her medical work. Eventually, the grandmother saved enough
money to purchase the freedom of her husband and herself but not her children.39

Some mid-wives and herbal doctors helped slave mothers hide cases of infanticide. Georgia slave owner Charles Colock Jones found an African American infant dead and tied up in a piece of cloth. The baby was of full maturity but the body was decomposed. A woman, Lucy, was known to be in the family way. On Tuesday October 11, 1856, the manager directed the midwife to attend to the bad bile of Lucy. Between the 11th and the 15th of October, the midwife administered medical care to Lucy. White officials questioned the midwife about what she saw on the 14th of October; she indicated that she never saw a child.40 The mother of Lucy and the midwife both claimed that Lucy never had a child. Jones had Lucy examined by a white physician, who claimed that Lucy had indeed given birth to a child. Although only Lucy was tried and convicted, Jones believed that Lucy's mother and the midwife should have also been tried for their roles in the conspiracy to coverup the infanticide by Lucy.41

Overall, the status of old slave women seemed to have increased with age as a consequence of childcare, nursing, and midwife duties. For many men this period was
marked by decreased status because they no longer could endure the physically demanding duties required by their owners. Some men were reduced to performing traditional female roles of spinning and childcare, which in all likelihood caused a significant amount of psychological disappointment. Old women did not undergo such psychological disappointment, according to historian Deborah White. Old women, argued White, as the years advanced increased their knowledge of "doctoring and nurturing" thus increasing their prestige among the slave community. The remarks by White are certainly true. A certain amount of prestige was lost for old men that were no longer able to toil in a regimented fashion. However, the elderly male slaves had a positive influence on the slave community and the tremendous respect granted to all elderly by the slave community.

Religious leadership such as preachers fell primarily to the male slave. Nevertheless, old female slaves proved quite adept at swaying some religious practices in the slave community. On the Sea Islands in 1864, Laura Towne encountered Maum Katie, an African woman, who remembered worshipping her own gods in Africa. Over a century old, she was a spiritual mother, a fortune teller, prophetess, and a woman of tremendous influence.
over other slaves. Finkelman states that "the interpretation of dreams and strange occurrences brought the real world closer to the supernatural realm and offered spiritual guidance to the ill, the troubled, and the lovelorn." Although Katie worked on the plantation for a number of years, she still adhered to cherished beliefs from Africa. In this way, Katie resisted in part the culture of her owner. On the Whitehall Plantation of Richard James Arnold, Mum Kate led and influenced the plantation slaves with her ability to recall with great precision biblical lessons from the text of the plantation minister. At the Beaufort Church in South Carolina, elders both male and female exercised religious control over other slaves by inspecting not only reports of death but also the propensity of members of society to backslide. Although many of the slave preachers were middle aged or elderly men, the women both old and young were the primary conveyers of spirit possession and the ecstatic Christian religion of the slave community. The female slaves were often the first members of the slave community to shout and praise God. In Voices from Slavery, an ex-slave indicated that his "grandmother was a powerful Christian woman, and she did love to sing and
shout." The master had her locked up in the loom room because the grandmother would begin shouting so loud and make so much noise that people in the church could not hear the minister. Later, the woman would "wander off from de gallery and go downstairs and try to go down to de white folkses aisles." This behavior continued, and the owner could never stop her from shouting and wandering around the meeting house, after she became aged. On numerous plantations, the enslaved population appointed old women who cared for children to teach the children their prayers, catechisms, and a few hymns in the evenings. Women, particularly old women had a strong propensity to practice their religion more openly than men.

Enslaved African Americans also conveyed the Christian religion of slave community through religious testimony to other members of the slave quarters. "Religious testimony was so important that slaves reduced prayers to formulas and taught them to young converts." During these testimonial services, younger slaves learned from old women "old cherished ways of saying and doing things for the edification of their fellow negroes on the slave plantations of the United States." Old female slaves played a vital role in
these testimony services. African American women continued to lead most African American evangelical churches in testifying, even after slavery. Such ecstatic behavior profoundly affected slave children. Some slave children believed that their grandmothers' prayers might produce freedom. Ex-slave Amanda Smith recalled hearing her grandmother pray that God would deliver her grandchildren from bondage. This charge for freedom came along with a desire for Smith and her siblings to have better masters and mistresses.52

Some elderly slave women resorted to using religion to gain control of a slave plantation from an overseer. Old Sinda passed as prophetess among her fellow slaves on the Butler Plantation in Georgia. Sinda acquired so much authority over the rest of the slaves that her prediction of the end of the world became resistance that caused a halt to all work by slaves on the Butler Plantation. Her assertion took such a massive hold upon the African American population that the rice and cotton fields were threatened with an indefinite fallow because of this strike on the part of the workers. The overseer warned the rest of people that he believed that Sinda was mistaken in her prediction and if her prophecy proved false she would be punished. Nevertheless, King had no
choice but to wait until the appointed time for the appearance of the prophecy because Sinda had greater influence than King over the rest of the workers during the time of her prophecy. Obviously, Sinda’s prophecy failed to occur; consequently, King severely flogged her for causing upheaval on the plantation.53

Old Julie, another conjure woman, rivaled the mystical abilities of Sinda. Shortly after the Civil War, freedmen recounted the exploits of Julie. The freedmen recalled that Julie caused much death and maiming on the plantation. As a result the owner responded by selling Old Julie. This sale proved quite difficult. Although the owner personally escorted Julie to a steamboat to carry her far from her home, witnesses reported that the old woman miraculously used her powers and forced the steamboat to reverse its course. To his chagrin, the plantation owner found the boat anchored the next morning at its previous point of exit. This momentous feat supposedly compelled the owner not to part with Julie.54 The actions of Julie are extremely suspect; however, the fact that the slaves remembered her with such awe is a testament to the power of conjurering within the slave community.
An ex-slave in *Weevils in the Wheat* recalled an old woman who instilled fear in a white owner because of her mystical ability. "Ole Aunt Crissy was another slave what was [a] caution. She was, ole she was, ...."^55 

"Aunt Crissy was a smart talkin' woman... Ole master got sore, but he ain't never said nothin' Aunt Crissy."^56 

This old woman used her influence as a conjuror to usurp the authority of the white owner, thus increasing her power within the slave community.

In some instances, the Muslim faith supplanted the influence of Christianity and conjurering in the lives of older women. Such was the case with the ancestors of ex-slave Katie Brown. Brown recalled that her grandmother staunchly adhered to the Muslim faith during a time in which most slave families were more receptive to Christianity. Katie's grandmother made a "funny flat cake she call 'saraka.' She make um same day ebry yeah, an it big day. Wen dey finish, she call us in all duh chillun, an put in hans lill, flat cake an we eats its."^57 Brown stated that her grandmother and grandfather carefully fasted and feasted in recognition of specific Muslim holidays.

The slave community admired and respected old female slaves because of their staunch religiosity and other
actions. They generally were well thought of by the younger slaves and slave children. Frederick Douglass's assessment of the respect granted to old slaves in *My Bondage My Freedom* certainly applied to treatment of old female slaves on the plantations along the Georgia and South Carolina coast.\(^5\) Douglass stated that there was "rigid enforcement of the respect to elders."\(^5\) The young slaves who resided on the plantation with Maum Katie showed a similar kind of deference to the old spiritual mother that Douglass spoke of in *My Bondage My Freedom*.\(^6\)

The adoration and respect for one grandmother reached such a level that a child requested to be named after her. Ex-slave Mary Colbert desired to be like her grandmother; therefore, she begged her mother to rename her Mary Hannah after her grandmother. The plantation slave community where the old woman lived considered her to be a strong fieldhand and extremely intelligent.\(^6\)

On the Liberty County, Georgia plantation of Charles Colock Jones, children frequently received the names of grandmothers, grandfathers, and other adults. For example, Erkine Clark records in *Wrestlin' Jacob*:

Robin was named after his grandfather Daddy Robin, Niger I had his son Niger II named after him and his grandson; Sam had a son Sam and saw his
granddaughter Tenah give birth to a daughter who was not only his but also Niger I's great-granddaughter and child was named after her grandmother Lucy. There was Andrew and his son Andrew, Gilbert and his son Gilbert, and a whole host of Kates named after grandmothers and aunts.\textsuperscript{62}

Other slave children chose to emulate the actions of their grandmothers in adulthood. Ex-slave Amanda Harris observed her grandmother smoking a pipe quite often. Harris questioned her grandmother about the need to smoke and found that her grandmother used smoking as an emotional release from troubles and anxieties. Amanda began to use tobacco after her grandmother died.\textsuperscript{63}

The influence of old women sometimes included the ability to exert their authoritative powers to compel younger, slower working women to perform their duties with greater rapidity. Elizabeth Botume, a white New Englander, viewed such an instance in the Sea Islands. A young woman, Amy, had grown sullen and performed her tasks quite slowly until Aunt Mary arrived from Beaufort. Under the tutelage of Aunt Mary, Amy became a more proficient worker.\textsuperscript{64} This action usually ensured that other members of the African American community were not harmed as the result of the failure of one slave to perform a specific task.
Because of their social positions on the plantation, older female slaves could ask for and receive certain concessions for other slaves from owners. Augusta Kollock, a white Southerner from Georgia, stated that "Maumer begged me this afternoon (as July was out driving the carriage) to tell you that July wanted to join the baptist church here." "The minister, who is a white man, will not allow him to join the church or be baptized" until he received a note from the owner stating that he could join the minister's church. "She asks you to send an answer in the letter of the first person you wrote to-I suppose because they have particular baptism Sundays." 65

Another old woman, who cared for children and served as plantation nurse also came to the aid of slave women who were being treated cruelly by an overseer. The old woman, Aunt Dinah, reported the cruelty to the mistress and the mistress, supposedly a woman of strong religious convictions, persuaded her husband to tell the overseer to alter his methods of punishment. Rather than forcing the women to lie unclothed over a barrel for punishment, the owner informed the overseer to merely slip their clothes from their shoulders and whip the women upon their backs." While much action by Aunt Dinah did not
in all likelihood limit the severity of the lash, it may have reduced some of the humiliation of being punished in the nude.

Some plantations maintained specialized work gangs composed of old women, young girls, and pregnant women. This "trash gang" served a socialization function. Young girls learned numerous lessons of life from women, who were either pregnant or breast feeding, or who were grandmothers many times over. The "trash gang" was sometimes referred to as the "Drop Shot Gang," similar to the "trash gang," the "Drop Shot Gang" also comprised "women that were too old or were sick and couldn't work in the field."

In summation, the elderly female slaves contributed substantially to the creation and perpetuation of the African American slave community of the South. Leslie J. Pollard's assessment summed the plight of old slaves in the antebellum South. Pollard argued that "in a production-based slave system, the slave community learned to care for those who became infirm or grew old, lacking the capacity for productive labor. It emphasized their inclusion and belonging to a black community that did not define its existence solely in terms of the Big house." The lives of old female slaves differed from
those of elderly male slaves because their childcare duties and nurturing roles held them closer to their plantation homes. Elderly male slaves engaged in childcare but not to the same degree as aged females. Old male slaves also often engaged in fishing and hunting which often took these men away from the plantation albeit not a great distance. The work of Old Quash and the other fishermen on Pierce Butler’s plantation carried the men to the seashore for hours on end everyday. Their influence over other slaves increased because they were respected for being old as well as being religious leaders. The old women of the Atlantic seaboar ensured that for the most part that slave children had childhoods. These women also served diligently as the viable medical staffs for the large plantations along the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. In addition, their storytelling served as important entertainment, educational, and coping mechanisms. These old orators helped to serve as repositories of some African, African American, and European American traditions and histories. Similar to old men, some of these old women were able to recount elements of the stories and tales in African languages. The slave community’s elderly population realized that living was of greater essence than growing
old. The old people instilled in the younger generations values of living and thereby strengthened the bonds between ancestors long gone and the young in the slave community. The presence of aged members of society kept the spirit of forefathers and alive. E. Franklin Frazier argued in 1939 that the African American grandmothers kept the generations together after emancipation. Efforts of these grandmothers continued well into the 1930s, according to Frazier. These grandmothers were certainly extremely important within African American society without a doubt; however, it was not the actions of these women alone that kept the African American generations together.
Chapter V Endnotes


2. White, 46-47.


5. Norman Yetman, ed., *Voices from Slavery* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 45, 50, 104-5, 192, 228; Rawick, ed., vol. 3, part 1 suppl. series 1, 251; Rawick, ed., vol. 14, part 1, 105; see also Charles H. Nichols, ed., *Black Men In Chains* (New York: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1972), 268, "Ex-slave Harriet Jacob's childhood was made enjoyable due to the fact that her grandmother provided many childhood comforts. Her brother Willie and she received portions of crackers, cakes, and preserves she made to sell...

6. Ibid., *Voices From Slavery*.


8. Ibid., vol. 7, part 2, 409.

9. White, 60.


11. White, 52.

12. Ibid, 53.


18. Douglass, 36.


24. Ibid., 106.


29. Kemble, 34, 251.


36. Yetman, 258.

37. Ibid., 258.


41. Ibid.


43. Ibid.


51. William Charles Suttles, Jr., "A Trace of Soul: The Religion of Negro Slaves on the Plantations" (Ph.D. diss.: University of Michigan, 1979), 44.


54. Levine, 71.


56. Ibid.


58. Frederick Douglass, 69.

59. Ibid., 70.


67. Finkelman, ed., 393.


CHAPTER VI

Varying Degrees: Old Slave Women and Owners

In 1923, the Daughters of the Confederacy attempted to persuade Congress to adopt a suitable site for a memorial to the antebellum plantation "mammy." Mammy without a doubt was the most legendary of all the antebellum perceptions of African Americans. Old female slaves were the least threatening of all slaves because of their sex and age. The term "Old" fits quite well with the notion of loyalty. Thus, owners invariably viewed the presence of an elderly female slave in their homes for a number of years as signs of extreme loyalty or of their benevolence. However, age also produced different actions from other old women. In fact, such old women refused to resign themselves to passivity. These women used their medicinal and intellectual prowess to usurp the power of owners.

Although the old female exerted tremendous influence in the slave community, the plantation owners
of the South could also exercise control over the lives of elderly female as well as other slaves. Rice planters were some of the most innovative plantation operators. They often adopted new techniques where feasible such as the open planting of rice as opposed to the usual covering tradition. Consequently, rice planters and other planters were able to extract the last remnants of physical and intellectual ability from old female slaves by having them serve in capacities that were equal to their physical stamina.

Often elderly female slaves like elderly male slaves could not keep pace with the gangs of young workers because of diminishing stamina; so masters often reduced the workload capacity of elderly female workers. A look at the Kelvin Grove Plantation Book of St. Simon Island, Georgia in 1853 revealed that of the 81 slaves on the plantation only five slaves were over the age of 50. The manager reduced the amount of work to be completed by these individuals. They were Molly age 60, listed as a three-fourth hand, Robin age 80 listed as a one-fourth hand, Elsy age 60 as a one-fourth hand. The old women remained as field workers except for Old Robin. Plantation records from the papers of Planter George Noble Jones indicate similar findings. Jones had several
old slaves among his slaves some of whom he reduced their labor. Jones listed Prince, age 62 as Driver and Old Joe, age 72 listed as doing very little coopering. Jones recorded Old Sam, age 72 as drawing water for the mules, while Old Simon Marshall, age 73 raked leaves. In addition, Jones also added that Delia, age 62 spun (cloth). Delia remained on the plantation books as a one-half hand. Jones indicated that the overseer's cook Phillis, age 52 was feeble. The owner listed Old Phillis, age 72 and Old Easter, age 72 as bedridden, while Old Easter had no description connected to her name.³

On the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, it was the general custom in rice planting to perform all ordinary and regular work by tasks. The task system was also adopted in the cultivation of Sea Island cotton. The task system made it possible to alter field work to fit the life of an aging slave.⁴ "The basic daily task was half an acre, whether slaves were hoeing, furrowing, or harvesting. When digging ditches or canals, the daily task was 600 cubic feet."⁵ On the rice plantations, it was not uncommon for slaves to work well into their sixties and seventies as was the case on the Kollock Plantation.
In addition to the task system, the large size of these plantations allowed for variation in occupations among the elderly. Those rice planters or farmers with less than one hundred acres of arable land faced serious difficulties in being competitive. The Hopeton Plantation owned by John Couper and operated by James Hamilton Couper was the most famous of the plantations of Georgia. Hopeton Plantation had 500 acres in rice, 170 acres in cotton, 330 acres in sugar cane. Five hundred slaves tended the crops on the Hopeton Plantation. "Of these a great many were children, and some were old and incapacitated for work." The Couper property in 1859 eventually consisted of three plantations (Atama, Hopeton, and Elizafield), located in Glynn County, Georgia covering over 6,200 acres. Only 1,200 acres were in rice land or land actually worked. Thus, the size of such plantations required whatever efforts an old worker could put forth whether male or female.

Residing on these huge land tracts were numerous related families. Charles Joyner’s assessment that "there was not much interaction between rice plantation slaves and slaves on cotton or sugar plantations" supported the idea of family cohesion among rice slaves. Joyner argued that "rice slaves might be sold from one
rice plantation to another... But were rarely sold off to other kinds of plantations." 9

The 840 slaves on the Pierce Butler plantations at Hampton and Butler Island in 1849 consisted of 197 families plus nineteen slaves living separately. Some of the unattached slaves were aged men or women who were the only survivors of their families. Families varied in size from two to ten. Joyner wrote:

Among the 840 slaves, 267 were men and 252 were women. There were 321 children under thirteen. One hundred men and women were over fifty. There was one man in his eighties and one woman in her seventies; thirty men and women in their sixties, and sixty-eight in their fifties. The estate appraised gives at least a relative estimate of the value of slaves. The 840 slaves were evaluated at $281,125— an average value of $335. The drivers were the values highest at $1000 each as was the blacksmith. The highest appraisal for women was $500. Women over fifty were rarely valued over $200. Their average appraisal was much lower. 10

There were plantation jobs on rice plantations particularly suited for the diminished physical strength and enhanced knowledge of elderly slaves. Some of those duties delegated to slaves over the age of fifty were those of carpenters, butchers, coopers, drivers, millers, nurses, trunk minders, basket weavers, morticians, spinners and watchmen. The occupations of carpenters, butchers, coopers, drivers, millers, trunk minders, and
watchmen were delegated primarily to men as mentioned earlier. On the other hand, old women were often listed as nurses, spinners, and morticians.\textsuperscript{11}

Old women functioned in other capacities such as basket weavers, morticians, and spinners. Maum Maria, an old slave at Chicora Wood Plantation in South Carolina, "made baskets and wove beautiful rugs from the rushes that grew along Long Cane Creek."\textsuperscript{12} One old woman shrouded and washed dead bodies. The old woman operated effectively without the embalming tools that antebellum white funeral directors used in their practices. The old woman laid black people upon "cooling boards" for their final rest before they were taken to the grave sites for burial by slave men.\textsuperscript{13}

Slave owners also extracted additional work from old slave women by requiring the women to sew and spin cloth after completing field labor duties. Many female slaves both old and young were skilled in sewing.\textsuperscript{14} On the Manigault Family plantation, male field servants received coats, while women of all ages received cloth to make garments.\textsuperscript{15} On the Miller Plantation in Florida, old women performed the majority of the spinning of thread and the sewing of cloth.\textsuperscript{16} Spinning and sewing at night added to the burdens of all ages of slave women.
Other old women suffered the misfortune of working both as field and house servants. Judy, the old slave of Thomas Chapin, doubled as a midwife and a field worker. On September 9, 1845, Chapin called Old Judy to administer childbirth care to Mrs. Chapin as a measure of insurance against the woman being without someone knowledgeable in the healthcare of women in labor. Judy was to serve until white midwife Maria Cook was available. Later on December 3, 1850, Chapin had Old Judy grating arrowroot; however, Judy failed to complete the arduous task much to Chapin’s displeasure. Chapin also delegated Judy along with Charles the duties of planting cotton.

Other old slave women cared for the fowl flocks, swine, and cattle herds of the plantations of the South. I.E. Lowery’s Granny took great care of the chickens and turkeys. She also cared for the pigs, who ran about the yard. The waste from the kitchen was saved for the pigs. It was Granny’s duty to ensure that the cows were milked at regular intervals. In addition, Granny kept the milk cans and pans clean, while performing the churning herself. An ex-slave from South Carolina recalled that Grandmother Phoebe ran the plantation dairy for Miss Susan, the plantation mistress. The slaves would bring
their gourds in the morning and leave them for Grandmother Phoebe to fill in the evening. These duties were necessary but not as physically taxing as others such as field labor.

The old women along with other slaves on the Pettigrew rice plantations of North Carolina controlled the destructive force of rice birds. In "The Founding of the Pettigrew Plantations," Bennett H. Wall writes that "all slaves both young and old, male and female, had the task of keeping the hordes of tiny 'rice birds' and pigeons from the rice fields." In turn, Molley took the world of the slave owner into the quarters. In all likelihood, it was Old Molley along with other house servants, who told the numerous slave women about Kemble's easy acquiescence to
their demands for additional supplies mentioned earlier in this paper.

The African American house servants acquainted children of slave owners with the superstitions of the slave community. These servants taught white children not to let anyone step over them or they would cease to grow. White children also learned that "you must always burn and not throw your hair, because the birds will pick it up to make their nests, and that will make you crazy." Old slave women frightened children with the great terror of the "will-o'-wisp." This creature of the night would certainly snatch any child out after dark without a grown person. Supposedly, the fiendish creature would catch unsuspecting victims and drag them through the bogs and bushes. Minnie Walter Myers' in Romance and Realism of the Southern Gulf Coast recalled an old slave superstition that "If you sweeps the feet of a child with a broom, it will make him walk early. To cure a wart take a green pea rub it on a wart, then take the pea and wrap it in a piece of paper and throw it away; the person who will pick it up will get the wart." One black house servant even taught a white child to count in an African language. F.D. Sprygle, white southerner, "was proud of the fact that his Black Mammy
taught him how to count up to ten in an African dialect." Sprygley indicated that this was the woman's only recollection of her native language. 27

White children also learned necessary household skills of knitting, sewing, and carding from older African American women. White southerner Rebecca Latimer Felton reflected on such an instance. She wrote "I can see in memory a little child intent on learning things Mammy could teach her to knit, to sew, to card cotton rolls. I was trying to do what Mammy did. I never heard an ugly word from her lips." 28

Because Richard Arnold's old servant Mum Phebe and her sons had a biological link to the white Arnold, Phebe and her offsprings were afforded authority over other slaves. Frederick Olmstead was particularly impressed by the amount of authority Amos, Phebe's son, wielded because it went beyond that of the overseer. 29 Mum Phebe was the Arnold's mammy, and in that capacity she accompanied the Arnold family to Rhode Island, leaving behind Amos and another mulatto son. In Rhode Island Phebe provided care for the Arnold's young child. The only account given of Mum Phebe on the 1831 journey was the payment of one dollar for clearance for Phebe recorded in the account books. 30
At times black house servants served as an additional stabilizing force to instill etiquette in white children. Anthony G. Albanese (The Plantation School) contends that the mammy "taught the children, the proper forms of etiquette, of deportment to all of the people of the plantation, the proper forms of address and the proper distance to maintain."^31

A mammy such as this could be found on the largest plantations as part of specialized house servant force. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in Within the Plantation Household argued that the lives of these specialized servants required enormous amounts of drudgery. Nevertheless, the association with the bighouse brought status for house servants over field servants in the eyes of slave owners.^32 Such status led some owners to regard old African American women as special in comparison to other slaves like those in the fields. The slave mistress of Granny Sabia allowed the woman to knit and barter her wares; in addition, the mistress engaged in religious dialogue with the slave woman.^33 House servants were not a privileged class of slaves within the power structure in the slave community. This statement has to be made in consideration to the degree of respect granted to the elderly by the slave community.
One of the major duties fulfilled by old women such as Phebe was that of cooks for the slave owners and slaves on the rice plantations. The job of cook stabilized the lifestyle of the planter because these old cooks served as a constant non-threatening factor day after day. On Butler Island, there was a small shed called the cook’s shop, where an old woman distributed the daily allowances of rice and corn grits to the field workers. White Southerner I.E. Lowery in Life of the Old Plantation in the Antebellum Days indicated that in his estimation the old Granny performed her duties as cook and servant to near perfection. Rebecca Latimer Felton also remembered the delicacies which tantalized her tastebuds during childhood visits to the cabin of her old mammy.

Some southern whites realized the advantages of allowing older women the leeway to issue reprimands to other slaves. Elizabeth Allston Pringle’s family used Maum Phibby as a controlling force to ensure that young children were kept clean by their mothers. Pringle stated that Maum Phibby checked to see that the plantation children were clean. Phibby reported those women who were negligent in bathing children to the master, mistress, or overseer. Maum Phibby and slaves
like her helped to further stabilize the power of the slave owners.

Old servants made the lifestyles of well-to-do planters extremely pleasurable. The living style of General Preston delighted Jefferson Davis. Davis described "those old gray-haired darkies and their noiseless automatic service, the result of finished training." Davis further indicated that he missed this service because he had long been away from his plantation in Mississippi. Such servants saved the owners from having to be concerned with matters white owners deemed beneath their societal upbringing. In addition, their presence showed the supposedly mild nature of the institution of slavery.

White southerners and African American house servants developed a closeness which sometimes astonished European visitors. Fredericka Bremer, a European visitor to antebellum South Carolina, observed such an occurrence at a wedding. Bremer was intrigued that an old negro woman was allowed to sit like a "spectre, black and silent by the altar. This was the nurse and foster mother of the bride...." For Bremer, this action revealed some semblance of respect. As the granny of the
young woman about to be wed, the old slave received the opportunity to view the wedding.

Antebellum Southern whites often referred to old female slaves as granny, aunt, mammy, or maumers, yet such titles were form and not the content of respect. S.D. Sides in "Women and Slaves: An Interpretation Based on the Writings of Southern Women" asserted that "respect does not exist between people who are automatically relegated one to a position of superiority the other to bondage." Sides also wrote that "respect implies a freedom, a fearlessness, which never belonged to a slave no matter how like the whites." However, white Southerner Victoria V. Clayton indicated that some white parents taught children to respect age in whatever position they found it and the older African American women were called "maumers" as signs of respect due to their years. Clayton failed to see the conditional status in the term maumer, rather than her saying mother. Southern white women like Clayton granted the old women as much respect as a white person could give an African American without crossing the barrier to the respect given to white people. Such paternalism, argued Leslie J. Pollard, "in the abstract might well have been toward all slaves, but it translated into behavior on a one-to-
one basis mostly toward house servants." Thus, a more profound respect existed within the slave community than between the slave community and the owners.

Pollard proposed an interesting point because on the plantation rolls and books of planters and in the court records of the antebellum South elderly female slaves are present. Yet, these are the women upon whose countenance and attitudes the southern belle and white matriarchs make little or no reference because these women were not the favored house servants. The journals of the southern matriarchs omit such women as Nelly, age 60 of the Frost Plantation in South Carolina or Charlotte, age 50 of the Clinch Plantation of Georgia. Thus it was difficult for paternalism to trickle down to these women from the matriarchs.

Although some owners may have stated that they respected old female slaves, other Southern whites failed to reveal such notions. One overseer made an old granny punish another female slave for failing to abide by his wishes. Fannie Moore said that "Old Granny call Aunt Cheney to dc kitchen and make her take her clothes off, den she beat her till she just black and blue." This respect failed certainly in the case of an old slave by the name of Jinny. Ex-slave James L. Smith recalled that
one mistress treated the old slave in a brutal manner. The woman stripped Jinny bare to her shoulders and applied fifty lashes to the woman's back.⁴⁵ At the white woman's death, Jinny grieved in the presence of whites owners but rejoiced among the slaves about the death of the cruel mistress.⁴⁶ In another instance, Rebecca Latimer Felton revealed in *Country Life in the Days of My Youth* that as a child, she slapped her old mammy for no reason at all.⁴⁷ Felton stated that "I suffered as I deserved to suffer until Mammy came in, to get her orders for the morning's breakfast."⁴⁸ Although Felton apologized she fails to mention the humiliation and suffering undergone by the old house servant.⁴⁹ John Brown, Georgia fugitive, recalled that a slave owner stoned an old woman, Mirney, the mother of thirteen children, because the woman could not run fast enough to satisfy the owner.⁵⁰

This group of hard working contented and mistreated mammies, nurses, and fieldhands contained within it small pockets of discontented women. For example, an old negro assisted additional slave community members in the poisoning of slave owners. Records from *Plantation and Frontier, 1649-1863* stated that "an old negro furnished younger slaves with hemlock to poison North Carolina
owners who wished to remove them (slave family members) to Alabama. The strategic location of older slave women or house servants allowed them greater access to such toxins than those of other enslaved people.

Old slave women also attempted to resist by running away. During the Civil War an old couple attempted to escape from a plantation near Savannah, Georgia but were caught and returned to their master. While the old man received lashes, his wife collected her children and grandchildren in a nearby marsh for another escape. The entourage used a boat to drift down river to the Union Army. The close proximity of the Union Army had an impact on the continued attempts of the family fleeing in mass, and in general African American slaves frequently fled to the Union Armies in the South during the Civil War. This courage exemplified by the nearly seventy year old woman was proof positive of the strong will and resistance of slave women.

In another instance of an old woman running away, Aunt Betsy, whom Levi Coffin described in Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, displayed bravery that resembled that of the seventy year old woman mentioned above from Savannah. Betsy waited years in anticipation of the manumission promised by her owner, which never came.
disappointment led her to plan the flight of her entire family. Betsy persuaded her husband, who was somewhat afraid of the attempted escape, to agree to do so. Betsy used a little unsuspecting white boy as an accomplice in her family's escape. Betsy told the little boy not to mention to his parents about the trip to town, which he believed was a sightseeing tour not a quest for freedom for slaves. Her husband and children were hidden among the vegetables loaded in the wagon. The white youth assumed the reins of the wagon when they reached the ferry. The ferrymen paid little heed to the wagon because of the white youth and also because Betsy often delivered produce across the river by the ferry. Once in Covington, the family received assistance from allies arranged by Coffin. A hired German drove the wagon onto the ferry, which crossed to Cincinnati. The leadership of old female slaves in escape attempts reveals an added dimension in the demeanor of old slave women.

Resistance also took on other forms among the old slave women such as the destruction of garden crops. For example, Old May, the slave of Thomas Chapin, constantly allowed her owner's hogs to break into the garden and root up all the arrowroot. Chapin referred to this
troublesome old women as "infernal." Nevertheless, he allowed her to continue her work in the garden because he could not spare anyone else to do the work.  

Old Molley and other house servants at Butler Island in Georgia led numerous slave women in the initiation of complaints about inadequacies in food and supplies on Butler Island. The slave women used Frances Kemble as a mediator to voice their desires and complaints about the ill treatment of slave women to her husband Pierce Butler and to the overseer. Molley and other slave women persuaded Kemble to provide the slave women with additional supplies that these women desired such as sugar, rice, and baby clothes. Kemble brought so many complaints for the slave women concerning their workload to her husband that he forbade her to address any more complaints from the growing contingent of women desiring some type of relief from their work. Molley and other slave women effectively worked the emotions of Kemble in order to ease the harshness of plantation life. The actions of Molley, Sinda, Maum Katie, and Old May contrasted significantly with the image of the contented old female servants. Moreover, these actions are strong indicators of resistance.
Some old female slaves chose refusal to work when requested to do so by white people as their form of resistance. Eliza Frances Andrews and another white woman, Flora, found that Lizzie was unwilling to serve as cook for the wedding in which they were involved. Aunt Lizzie retorted when asked to cook, "What you talkin' 'bout chile?" "I wouldn't cook fur Jesus Christ to-day let alone Dr. Pope." Andrews used this statement as an example of the insolence of older supposedly heavily domesticated slaves.

The older female members of the slave community supported runaways by clandestinely bringing foodstuffs and medical aid to confined runaways and the sick. For example, while Moses Roper was confined to a dungeon in South Carolina for running away, "his grandmother used to come bring me something to eat besides the regular jail allowance, by which my sufferings were somewhat decreased." His grandmother cautiously avoided the presence of the jailer. Fannie Moore, an ex-slave indicated that an old granny doctored her uncle during the moments the old woman stole away from her kitchen duties.

For those old women, who lived to an advanced age, eventually the time would come when they were no longer
able to perform any type of labor on the plantation. Some plantation owners dealt with these caring for bedridden old women in the same manner as they did old men. The owners did such things as housed sick aged slaves in infirmaries, passed ordinances against freeing old slaves, emancipated old female slaves, and sold old slaves. The treatment of old bedridden slaves whether male or female by slave owners was quite similar.

The large plantations in the South maintained infirmaries or hospitals for sick slaves. Although infirmaries housed elderly slaves, the facilities served to address the medical needs of younger slaves rather than the convalescent need of bedridden old slaves. The statuses of old house servants did not ensure deferential treatment in the infirmary above the treatment shown to aged fieldhands on the Butler Plantation. Butler housed old house servants as well as field servants together when sick or bedridden at the infirmary, which Kemble described earlier as a "wretched hovels."62

States in the antebellum South had local ordinances and state laws that required owners to provide health care for old slaves; however, these laws were not enforced heavily regardless of sex. Such laws gave county courts the right to make inquiries in cases of
neglect by owners of old slaves. The *Louisville Daily Courier* carried such an order in regards to a "helpless negro woman." The summons made no mention of whether the woman was actually a slave or not at the time, but presumably she was. The local court ordered a summons against Richard Jeffrey, Silas Johnson, and William Hall. These men were heirs of Elizabeth Jeffrey. The court required the men to provide proof why they failed to support "Eva, a very old and infirm negro woman." However, later editions of the paper made no references to the plight of the woman.

In other cases, some slave owners did demonstrate benevolent attitudes towards old female slaves. White Georgian Eliza Frances Andrews visited Old Aunt Lizzie on the plantation of Colonel Maxwell of Georgia and found the old woman's life quite comfortable. Andrews recalled that "she lives in a pretty little cottage on a corner of the lot, and is more petted and spoiled more than any of his (Maxwell's) children." The evidence over whether Lizzie exemplified traits of being spoiled or petted is sketchy.

In his journal Southerner Henry William Ravenal recorded a case of benevolence that failed to materialize for an elderly slave. A slave owner, a Mr. Heyward, spoke
about moving a deranged old woman to another area where better care would be taken of her. Old Fanny wandered onto a train tressel and fell to her death before Heyward acted upon this notion.  

In other instances, some slave owners provided in their wills for the emancipation and support of old slave women. "John Humphries, a justice of the peace and owner of fifteen slaves in 1826 provided in his will that 'my old negro woman Amy, ... is to be permitted to live with which of my children she pleases but not as a slave, and which ever she chooses to live with shall be compelled to [let her] live with some of them." The will of slave owner Joseph Dickson allowed "his old negro woman, Phillis, remain on the plantation with my wife until her [his wife’s] death, after which she is to be supported by my sons Hugh, David, and Melton Dickson." The overall outcome of such measures is impossible to predict; and such owners were outside the norm. Few planters made such written pledges.

Rather than pondering the possibilities of manumission of old female slaves or providing for them in their wills, some owners chose to sell their old female slaves in order to rid themselves of inefficient workers or in hopes of buying a younger slave lot from the
proceeds of sale. Some owners even tried to swindle purchasers of old slaves by denying their existence among large populations of slaves intended for sale. In a letter on March 18, 1859, J.W. LaBruce, a South Carolina planter, complained to Robert F.W. Allston, South Carolina coastal planter, that he did not purchase Pipedown (Plantation) because the owner purposely failed to mention the large numbers of old men and women who resided at Pipedown.\textsuperscript{70

Some slave owners considered it shrewd business to sell off old slaves (male or female) who could no longer perform field work. In \textit{Running A Thousand Miles For Freedom, Or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft From Slavery}, William Craft stated that his master sold his parents, and other aged slaves because "they were getting old, and would soon become valueless in the market, and therefore he intended to sell off all the old stock, and buy in a young lot."\textsuperscript{71

One owner offered an old woman for sale to the lowest bidder. Records from the Bell Family Papers of Virginia contain references to a superannuate woman belonging to the Bell estate, who was offered for sale to the lowest bidder in 1811 to support her during the rest of her life."\textsuperscript{72


Even worse, the grandmother of Frederick Douglass suffered from terrible neglect after being abandoned by her owner to a little hut in the woods. The grandmother of Douglass languished in such a state after having lived out her economic usefulness to her owner. Douglass recalled that "the old woman suffered not only from loneliness but neglect as well." Douglass' grandmother was one of the most respected individuals among the blacks, and in her life performed many of the roles that helped the elderly maintain their esteemed status among the young slaves." It is true that old slaves had to be fed, clothed, and provided medical attention; however, much of the burden for the care of the elderly fell upon old female medical experts and younger slaves. The younger slaves and old grannies were able to provide strong emotional care for their aged kin. In fact, it was quite common for younger family members to care for elderly slaves such as the ex-slave Hannah Crasson’s grandmother who was taken in by her family when the woman became unable to care for herself.

The old age of these women resulted in social and economic concerns for plantation owners. Those owners who retained old slaves found that old age did not necessarily guarantee docility or acquiescence to the
wishes of white Southerners. However, old slave women were the least feared segment of African American society. After all, these women were old, African, poor, and also slaves. The actions of Old Sinda, Old May, and other elderly African American women were strong indicators of resistance among the elderly population. The correspondence between owners and overseers revealed that they were definitely troubled by the presence of old slaves whether male or female. Slave trading served as a means for solving the problems of old age care for some planters. Slaves, no matter the age or condition, could and would be sold off if and when the owner so desired. In some respects, the role and status of elderly female slaves proved positive for slave owners as long as the women were economic contributors for slave owners. Once the economic capabilities of elderly slaves dissipated slave owners no longer viewed the elderly female slaves as a viable force. Antebellum whites did refer to aged African American women as Aunt, Maumers, or granny; however, such action meant that African American women like African American men would not be granted the more respectful titles of Mrs., mother, and grandmother.
Chapter VI Endnotes


2. The Kelvin Grove Plantation Book, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina: Chapel Hill (microfilm). For more explanation of the altering of work of old people see Kollock Plantation Book, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina: Chapel Hill (microfilm); for further information consult the Richard Irby Papers, University of Virginia Library, University of Virginia: Charlottesville (microfilm), Richard Irby's 1854, January inventory contained 4 slaves over the age of 50. They were Abram, age 60, a crop hand, valued at $300; Amy, age 66, no occupation listed, valued at $100; Feggin, aged 50, crop hand, valued at $550; and Hal, age 61, blacksmith, valued at $700. Irby grew wheat and tobacco with his 48 slaves on the plantation. By December, the valuations and occupations of the old slaves had changed. Irby increased Abram's (crop hand) value from $300 to $400. Amy's occupation changed from no occupation to chicken minder. Feggin remained a crop hand valued at $600 up from $550. Hal, blacksmith, value decreased from $700 to $650.


5. Charles Joyner, Remember Me: Slave Life in Coastal Georgia, (Atlanta: Georgia Humanities Council, 1989), 7; "Rice field hands both men and women were considered 'prime hands' if they were able to accomplish the standard task within nine or ten hours."., 11.

7. James Hamilton Couper Papers

8. Ralph Betts Flanders, *Plantation Slavery in Georgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933), 123. James Hamilton Couper Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.; James M. Clifton, "Jehossee Island: The Antebellum South's Largest Rice Plantation" *Agricultural History* (January 1985), 56-65, William Aiken of Charleston owned Jehossee which was the largest single plantation in working hands. "By 1850 Jehossee Island had a slave population of about 700 slaves, the largest number ever on any single plantation in the South." "Allowing for the young, disabled, aged, and sick, the 700 slaves at Jehossee Island would provide the equivalent of a work force of approximately 350 full hands."


10. Ibid., 7.

11. Charles Joyner, *Down By The Riverside*, 60-63; see also Manigault Family Papers.


13. George Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: North Carolina Narratives* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1941, vol. 14, parts 1), 53-54. Cooling boards were planks on which the dead were shrouded or rested upon before burial. In the prayers of slaves and freedmen, cooling boards are frequently referred.

14. Kelvin Grove Plantation Book, Krolley Plantation Books, James Hamilton Couper Papers, see also Manigault Family Papers. see also Manigault Family Papers. see also Manigault Family Papers. Old Charity died as a rice worker in the fields.

15. Slave List, Manigault Family Papers.


18. Ibid., 513.


26. Ibid., 57.

27. Ibid., 362.


29. Ibid; see also I.E. Lowery, Life of the Old Plantation in Antebellum Days (Columbia, South Carolina: The State Company, 1911), 46-47.


35. Lowery, 46-47.


40. S.D. Sides, "Women and Slaves: An Interpretation Based on the Writings of Southern Women" (Ph.D. diss.: University of North Carolina, 1969), 22.


44. Yetman, ed., 228.


46. Ibid.

47. Rebecca Latimer Felton, 98-99.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.


54. Ibid., 312-314.

55. Ibid., 314-15; William Still, The Underground Railroad (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1872), 394-95, Still also mentions an old female slave, who seized the initiative for freedom. "Jane did not know how old she was. She was probably sixty or seventy. She fled to keep from being sold. She had been 'whipt right smart,' poorly fed and poorly clothed, by a certain Roger McZant, of the New Market District, Eastern Shore of Maryland. His wife was a 'bad woman too.' Just before escaping Jane got a whisper that her master was about to sell her; on asking him if the rumor was true, he was silent. He had been asking one hundred dollars for her." Already Jane's
children had been snatched and sold. Jane fled to the woods to escape the misfortune of being sold. She lived three weeks in the woods until coming into contact with someone affiliated with the "Underground Railroad."

56. Rosengarten, 403, 530.
57. Kemble, 166, 168.
58. Ibid., 183.
63. Spencer King, Georgia Voices (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1966), 183; Minnie Walter Myers, Romance and Realism of the Southern Gulf Coast, (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1898), Myers writes a romanticized idea of old age care. She begins "if the master failed to do this (old age care), the slave was sent to the nearest hospital, and the derelict master was taxed so much a day for his support; and if he failed to pay, the hospital had a lien on his plantation for that amount. ", 62-63.
64. "Helpless Negro Woman" Louisville Daily Courier, June 12, 1855, 4.
65. Ibid.
68. Robert E. Corlew, "Some Aspects of Slavery in Dickson County," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, (1951), 242-43; Proctor, 69, "In 1849 Benjamin Mitchell of Talbot County was a large slaveowner who possessed twenty-four bondsmen." "...He provided in his will that my old negro man Ben and my two old negro women Becky and Rachel after the death or marriage of my wife be left to the care and protection of my two sons... with the liberty of laboring entirely for themselves."

69. Ibid., 241.

70. James Easterby, *South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. Allston,* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1961), 157; see also U.B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1957), 175. Some slave owners were only willing to sell their slaves together, consequently a trader might have to pay an owner to keep old slaves who could not work. A broker at Savannah reported to a clerk in 1856 that when a local plantation gang was offered for sale as a unit, "the purchaser gave $2000 more than the asking price for 85 with the privilege of rejecting 10 old people. In other words he paid the proprietor two thousand dollars to retain the ten superannuates on his own hands."


72. Slave List, Bell Family Papers, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville: University of Virginia (microfilm).

73. Douglass, 180.

74. Pollard, 230.

CONCLUSION

The lives of the aged slaves in the antebellum South revealed a mosaic of complex and unique personalities. The image of the Uncle Remus, storytelling old slave, and that of the contented Uncle Tom did not apply totally to the elderly men of the slave community and neither did the concept of the totally Eurocentric old mammy. The elderly slaves contributed substantially to the creation and perpetuation of the African American slave community through such things as childcare, storytelling, health care, procuring food, and religious leadership while also aiding their masters in the operation of the plantation. The subsequent incapacitation of the old people became problematic economically, socially, and medically for many masters; however, such things as manumission and slave trading solved many of these problems. The impact of the elderly male slave upon the slave community had grave importance for the slave world. These old gentlemen brought the culture of Africa to the North American mainland and helped to perpetuate it on the various plantations of the
United States. In Africa authority over children was vested in the parents but was checked by grandparents who maintained a relation of friendly familiarity and almost social equality with grandchildren. Within the family structure elderly male slaves were extremely important; numerous grandchildren, children, and other relatives were given the names of grandfathers or other old male relatives out of respect. It is difficult to believe that elderly men played a role in child care but the pattern of them caring for children is depicted again and again in the slave narratives and autobiographies. The extended family structure proved beneficial in helping the slave community cope with the atrocities of the institution of slavery.

Their storytelling was an important entertainment, educational, and coping mechanism. The old orators helped to serve as repositories of African tradition. Some of these old men were able to recount some elements of the tales and stories in their own languages, thus giving their tales an African flair. The storytelling and rendition of tales helped to mitigate the harshness of the slaves’ lives, and sometimes it even entertained their owners.
The old men also helped to perpetuate and care for the slave community by serving as medical experts on the plantations. Their knowledge of folk medicine attracted enormous respect from younger slaves. They gave the slave community a source of medical care beyond the white physicians. Many of these doctors had a strong inclination to bleed their patients; consequently slaves preferred their own doctors. Because of their diminished physical duties the old men had more time to practice folk medicine but not to the same level as elderly female slaves.

By working in the vegetable gardens while their kin were in the fields, the elderly male slaves contributed additional food to the table. Often elderly slaves could not keep pace with the younger workers; so masters gave elderly males as well as elderly females garden work that would produce food but not slow down the work process of the gang system.

In addition these trusted old men also provided protein to the diet of their families by hunting and fishing. Hunting dogs were used to track the raccoon and opossum that they liked to eat. Once cornered the raccoon or opossum were killed with clubs. Along the Georgia and South Carolina sea coasts, old slaves were
allowed to fish and train younger slaves to fish with seines. Some of the fish were kept for the plantation while others were sold. Some old men were fortunate enough to be able to work and earn excess luxuries and money for their families.

Religious leadership in the slave quarters provided the elderly male slave with their greatest opportunity for influence over other slaves. Their influence was increased in that they were respected for being old as well as for being religious leaders. It was often from the grandparents that children acquired their religious beliefs. The African Americans of the antebellum South religiously practiced not only Christianity but also conjuring and the Muslim faith. This Christianity was an African American form of Christianity. Conjuring came from the Yoruba of West Africa, and the old men used it to control and influence younger slaves. Conjuring was used by the “old root doctors” to stop masters from whipping slaves and to bring luck, good or bad. Old Bu Allah not only practiced his Muslim faith by praying to Allah three times a day but he also persuaded his family members to worship Allah.

Although more old male slaves served as preachers than did elderly female slaves, the old slave women of
the plantation South were among the most vocal and open practitioners of the ecstatic form of African American Christianity. These old women prayed and shouted numerous slaves to near convulsions.

Within the realm of the conjurers, the abilities of old slave women reached heights that were unparalleled by the best male conjurers young or old. Women like Old Sinda at times controlled entire plantations, including the white overseers.

During the times of non-religious ceremonies or frolics, the elderly slaves took a vital part. For instance, they were the music players for group dances. The old men beat drums, calabashes, and stringed instruments. Elderly women at times played drums in with these bands. In most quarter families, children learned that when their families gathered for such events, it was the commands of the grandparents that had to be obeyed first.

Old men and women were admired and respected throughout the slave community. Frederick Douglass recalled that “young slaves must approach the company of the older with hat in hand, and woe be tide him, if he fails to acknowledge a favor .... with the accustomed thank you ....” Many of these old men were not
directly related to other slaves by blood; these "swap-dog" aunts and uncles were considered kin because they lived on the same plantation.

This respect enabled these elderly people to form councils of elders. These councils established a plantation philosophy for the slave community to follow. For instance, the religious converts on the Sea Islands of Georgia had to come before several church elders before acceptance in the church. Their conversions had to be of a nature befitting a pious Christian. Thus, the old male slaves were able to shape and influence the religious views of younger slaves.

Old slaves proved to be beneficial to the plantation society by providing their owners with sound domestic staffs, pious companions, historical knowledge, and a labor force for jobs that were necessary, yet not physically taxing. Southern whites believed that their old house servants fulfilled their domestic duties with a quiet dignity. They served with an imposing presence over the large mansions of the plantation South. Masters allowed certain old slaves to influence the lives of their children as nannies and governors. These companions drove the children safely to and from social visits. In addition, they also chastised them when they
failed to conduct themselves as young gentlemen and young ladies. As the result of the presence of old storytellers many white children were privy to the eloquent stories of Africa. Other aged men and women functioned as chroniclers of local history for those whites desiring to hear about past events.

Most planters and their overseers realized that occupations could be altered so that elderly slaves could perform occupations that were not as physically taxing as field labor; therefore, they could extract the last remnants of work from the aged workers. Their work helped to keep the plantation economy stable. On the great rice plantations those occupations included carpentry, coopering, driving, trunk minding, and security. Artisans such as shoemakers, tanners, and basket weavers used their depleted skills to continue to increase the wealth of the masters. Numerous plantation rolls stated that "Old Ned" or "Old Katie" did very little; however, the little that the old feeble workers put forth saved the owners other workers insurmountable time. The roles the elderly slaves played were extremely valuable on the plantation, but the time would eventually come when they could no longer care for others. Then they had to be taken care of themselves. Thus, the care for many
superannuated or bedridden old men was seen by owners to present economic and social problems; however, the care by other slaves and slave trading solved many of them.

Owners instituted laws to alleviate many of the economic pressures of caring for old slaves. The correspondence between masters revealed that they were definitely troubled by the presence of old slaves. Indeed, it was costly to have dependent slaves that produced nothing. These people had to be fed, clothed, and given medical attention. Consequently, some antebellum Southern states implemented codes and laws that required owners to care for their slaves. Few, if any owners were ever tried or fined for failure to care for old slaves.

Some unprincipled masters even released old men and women to take care of themselves. For the most part, they were able to survive through the kindness of young slaves. The younger slaves would sneak food and other supplies to the indigent old people. Few younger slaves complained about caring for an old, indigent member of the slave community. African American slaves believed that these old persons existed in a state somewhere between heaven and earth, thus, it would be an insult to the ancestors and possible detriment to the afterlife, if a young person mocked an elder.
Another means for solving the problem of old age care for some planters was slave trading. The economic problem was then thrust upon the slave trader desiring to purchase entire gangs of slaves with elderly people. Slaves no matter the age, gender, or condition could or would be sold off if and when the master so desired this threat was prevalent and it did occur. A bankrupt or indebted owner had no other recourse but to sell his property. Old men and women endured many of the same feelings of humiliation at being sold from families as did younger slaves.

Those owners who retained some old male slaves found that the elderly slaves were sometimes quite rebellious. They not only ran away but they also provided advice for slaves plotting conspiracies. Thus the perception that all old slaves were Uncle Toms is discredited. The slave community provided as much emotional support for its old people as the plantation permitted. In return, they gave younger African-American slaves a history from an African-American perspective. The African experience is extremely important in understanding the lives of black slaves; however, it is also significant to remember the long history of black people in America of which the old male slaves were an important part. Lewis Paine gives a
partial summation to the life of the elderly male slave in the following statement. "Year in and year out slaves are engaged in the same round of labor, till the arrival of old age renders them unable to continue work in the fields. Then they are switched to doing gardening or other work around the house."²

The worlds of the old female and old male slaves were in many ways quite similar. Certainly, both old male and female slaves would toil in the fields of the antebellum South with equal strain. However, the world of slave women allowed for the development of close interpersonal relationships with younger slave women throughout the day in the drop shot gangs. The childcare duties of the old female slaves held them closer to the plantation homes than those of the elderly male slaves. Old age produced for many old women a bastion of newfound respect and worth. The medicinal talents and culinary abilities granted these women a special place in the hearts of other bondsmen and bondwomen. At times elderly female and male slaves lost a great amount of self-esteem because they were displaced by younger, stronger, and talented slaves. Nevertheless, their actions kept the generations together.
It would be the old slave women more so than elderly male, who would introduce the young white children to the mysticism of Africa and the lore of the quarter. Thus, the planter world drew near to that of the bondsmen, yet still remaining essentially aloof.

Slave owners perceived of the elderly female slaves as the epitome of the perfect slave. The fact that old women resided on plantations for a number of years, accorded slave owners with the belief that they were a benevolent and loving people to their old black relatives. The fact that these women were old and female allowed the owners to feel less threatened by them than by younger slaves. For such owners, it was quite easy to see an all-loving mammy. This is not to say that old slave women were completely docile.

Old slave women reacted to the harsh realities of slavery in many of the same ways as younger slaves. Those who were more able fought back by poisoning owners, running away, or using religion to sway younger slaves to their will. Others carried out household duties and chores to alleviate the possibility of future punishment. Years of wisdom about resistance and living under bondage would be learned from old women by younger slaves.
This dissertation is an attempt to refine the images of elderly male and female slaves. These individuals served as living monuments to the strength in the slave community, in addition to serving as the poignant conveyers of white benevolence in the eyes of white southern society.
Conclusion Endnotes


BIBLIOGRAPHY

Journals and Narratives


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APPENDIX

Manuscripts

Georgia State Archives and Records
Ann Matilda Page King Plantation Record Book
Ossabaw Island Records

Southern Historical Collection
Garnett Andrews Papers
Arnold and Screven Family Papers
William J. Ball Books
Barrow Family Papers
Annie (Campbell) Bradwell Papers
John M. Carr Diary
Farrish Carter Papers
James Hamilton Couper Papers
Elizafield Plantation Book
Jackson and Prince Family Papers
Kelvin Grove Plantation Book
Kollock Plantation Books
William McKinley Book
Manigault Family Papers
Columbus Morrison Papers and Record Book
Planters Bank of Savannah Papers
Slave Birth Records
Wooley Family Papers

University of Virginia Library Manuscripts Department
Allen Farm Journal
Anderson Family Papers
Roger Atkinson Letterbook and Account Book
Richard Baylor Family Papers
Bell Family Papers
Breckenridge Family Papers
William S. Brown Diary
Goose Creek Baptist Church Records
Hillyer Family Papers
Huger Family Papers
Richard Irby Papers
Kent-Hunter Family Papers
Lewis Latane Daybook
Philip Lightfoot Account Books
Smith Family Papers
Willis Family Papers

Virginia State Library
Carter Family Papers
Wilson-Hairston Family Papers
Other Manuscript Sources

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