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# "Double-Crossed, So to Speak": Black Female Resistance to Gendered Oppression in the South

Amolie Egloff

*The University of Southern Mississippi*

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The University of Southern Mississippi

“Double-Crossed, So to Speak’: Black Female Resistance to Gendered Oppression in the South

by

Amolie L. Egloff

A Thesis

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The University of Southern Mississippi  
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Approved by

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Dr. Heather Stur  
Associate Professor of History

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Dr. Phyllis Jestice, Chair  
Department of History

---

Dr. David R. Davies, Dean  
Honors College

## Abstract

Despite the vast amount of research focused on slavery and the American South, studies focusing solely on the black female's experience during this time period are a fairly recent development. In the existing literature, these women have been painted a helpless victim caught in the wrath of white men, black men, and even white women. This study presents the stories of black women courageously resisting oppression both while enslaved and just after emancipation from 1830 to 1890. The analysis of a handful of slave narratives taken by the Worker's Progress Administration in the 1930s and 1940s established that because black women were given specific gender roles to abide by, they also faced specific forms of mental and physical abuse. When they fought back, they became an inspiration for other slaves of both genders and they gained the attention of the one group of people that could truly emancipate them: white men. These narratives and accounts of black women standing up for themselves and their loved ones not only prove that they were willing to fight for equality, but also that they did not accept being considered the lowest member of society. This research contributes to the historical conversation on black women's history, slavery, and gender issues in the American South.

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## Introduction:

Affairs between white plantation owners and enslaved women were common in the South as early as the late 1600s. The infamous affair involving Thomas Jefferson and one of his house slaves, Sally Hemings, resulted in mixed children that added to his slave workforce until he died. At that point, they were legally granted freedom by manumission while their mother remained bound to Monticello. In many manumission cases, usually the enslaved mistress was freed, rather than all of her children, to ensure continuation of the plantation's workforce. Many scholars suspect that Sally negotiated with President Jefferson to allow her children the chance to become free when he died.<sup>1</sup> Her negotiations undermined slavery, regardless of whether or not she was conscious of the effects of her actions. Sacrificing her freedom for her children contributed to destruction of the lifeline of one of the most abominable legal institutions this nation has ever seen. Hemings' sacrifice is one of the many ways in which African American women resisted and slowed slavery's progress in unique ways that only a woman could.

Negotiations like this one occurred throughout the South, leading to the growth of a freedman's class prior to Emancipation. Even if it was a small portion of the population, free African Americans added to the building pressure that would eventually dismantle the institution of slavery. A large portion of this free population was made up of women who obtained manumission through various means including obliging the sexual needs of her master, or those who were indebted to their mother's personal negotiations.<sup>2</sup> These manumission negotiations

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<sup>1</sup> Millward, Jessica, "The Relics of Slavery: Interracial Sex and Manumission in the American South" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 31, no. 3, (2010), pp. 25-26.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp 24-25.



were one of many forms of resistance against oppression that black women used prior to the abolition of slavery in 1863 in an effort to gain independence and freedom.

After centuries of ignoring women in history, historians of the past 30 to 40 years have finally begun to churn out research on their story. However, there is still a significant lack of information on black women's history, leaving a gaping hole in our American history knowledge base. The goal of this research is to contribute to the ongoing historical conversation about the romanticized social dynamics of the Antebellum South by scouring slave narratives, newspapers, and oral histories for instances when black women resisted some form of oppression tailored to her gender that arguably contributed to the destruction of the institution of slavery throughout the Southern states just before the Civil War. "...For no race can rise higher than its woman," states Dr. P. Thomas Stanford in his article, "The Race Question in America." This statement describes the importance of discovering the true experience of black women in slavery in relation to understanding African American culture as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

In order for the Civil Rights Movement to succeed a century later, blacks essentially had to persuade white America that they were indeed equal in mind, body, and spirit, and, therefore, their rights, along with those of any other minority should be both recognized and protected by law. The women mentioned in this study provided a diverse sample of black women from different regions, backgrounds, and age groups. Despite all of their differences, there was one common strand: in their desperation for survival they rejected the threat of dire consequences and fought back. Their tools and methods of battle varied from verbal attacks to physically assaulting their aggressors to refusing to relinquish control over her reproductive system. These random acts of asserting their inherent freewill united to force whites to acknowledge that their

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<sup>3</sup> Stanford, Dr. P. Thomas, William L. Andrews, eds., *Six Women's Slave Narratives*, New York: Oxford, (1988), p. 67.

race was indeed equally human, and civilized, and capable of making independent decisions. While whites continued to utilize the argument that “the Negro is too ignorant to rule either himself or the white element” into the twentieth century in a desperate effort to maintain superiority, black women like those that will be discussed continued to prove their soundness of mind and spirit by refusing to be abused or taken advantage of.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, the significance of her gender and race made her the most vulnerable member in society. She was “double-crossed” by being both black and female, as lamented by Mary Church Terrell. This prejudice elevated a black woman’s local protests against the hierarchy to pivotal moments that gave hope to the disenfranchised, instilled fear in their self-imposed rulers, and began to convince some whites that they deserved to be full and equal citizens. While it was important for her to instill a desire for freedom in her race, it was more important that her actions gained the attention and respect of white abolitionists because they were the only ones that could make any change for African Americans. All in all, black female resistance to slavery was profound enough to gain the sympathy of the white abolitionists and helped to provide the significant rights for all blacks.

Dissecting the available research on enslaved African American women just before and during the Civil War provided the foundation of this study. While there is a plethora of literature published about the white master, their wives, and black male slaves, I found quickly that black women were largely looked over in the scholarly world. Perhaps it is because they were the “slaves of the slaves,” as one author titled a chapter in her book about the slave-owning white woman’s experience in the Old South. Another possibility is that historians avoid the topic because there is a lack of primary sources, especially from black women themselves. Personally,

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<sup>4</sup> “Save Louisiana,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, January 30, 1875, no. 1009, vol. XXXIX, p. 1.

I was drawn to researching the lives of black female slaves in the South from about 1830 to 1890 because it was a time of rapid change in America. I have been lucky to find a handful of personal narratives, but they were written by white abolitionists on behalf of the black woman. Therefore, bias is likely to have contaminated some aspects of these works. The narratives of African American men provided a perspective of black women that was unique because they shared the experience of slavery and, unlike a white Southerner's personal diaries or correspondence, black men often saw black women as their equal regardless of gender. In addition to published narrative collections I have capitalized on the abundant interviews with former slaves or children of slaves documented during the Great Depression by President Roosevelt's Worker's Progress Administration. Newspapers mentioning Southern black females during this time period came to were useful as well. Analyzing the context in which black women were referred to was crucial because the few articles that even referred to African American womanhood never particularly stated anything personal about their experiences. Overall the primary sources that were used in this study of racial and gendered oppression in the South required in depth analysis and interpretation based on existing research. This study will outline the ways in which slavery influenced the racial and gender roles of enslaved black women in order to maintain control over their race, their modes of resistance to those roles, and how these random acts of resistance unique to black females contributed to the destruction of slavery itself and arguably marked the beginnings of a movement for equality in America.

The first chapter of this study is devoted to the exploration of the African American woman's social role in the South from about 1830 to the outbreak of the Civil War. M. M. Manring's *Slave in a Box: the Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* focused on the development of the well-known and degrading stereotype of black women: the mammy. The idea originated in the

slave-holding Southern plantations, making white people believe slaves enjoyed their lack of freedom. The mammy became a mascot for pro-slavery activists which black women fiercely tried to resist. Although the bulk of this work focuses on Aunt Jemima's modern-American image as an advertising tool, Manring's research depicts how immensely white men manipulated and controlled social roles for black women through the media and marketing.<sup>5</sup>

*Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* added to formulating the expectation of an enslaved black woman based on each individual's general perspective – from white men, black men, to white women. In this work, Jacqueline Jones broke down how a female slave's roles interconnected and opposed the other three major groups of people in the South. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese published "Within the Plantation Household: Women in a Paternalist System" in which she expanded on the white woman's role in the Antebellum Southern home through researching Louisa McCord's pro-slavery political economy essays. McCord was "an outspoken and polemically effective defender of slavery and the subordination of women," and Genovese's dissection of her work provides a white woman's world view and her social roles compared to her female slaves' social roles throughout the time period.<sup>6</sup>

Jessica Millward's "The Relics of Slavery" contributed to the study of the African American woman's role as a slave in the South and how those roles were maintained to oppress her race even after Emancipation. She too discovered that these roles were all centered on the African American woman's ability to have children because having control over a race's reproduction capabilities in order to benefit another race is the ultimate form of oppression.<sup>7</sup> In

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<sup>5</sup> Manring, M. M., *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*, Charlottesville: Virginia, (1998),

<sup>6</sup> Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth, "Within the plantation household: women in a paternalistic system," *Society and Culture in the Slave South*, ed. J. William Harris, London: Routledge, (1992), pp. 48-76.

<sup>7</sup> Millward, "The Relics of Slavery," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3, (2010), pp. 22-30.

addition to this source, *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*, edited by Patricia Morton, provided a collection of research analyzing femininity and slavery that both oppressed black women and provided them with the opportunity to resist slaveholding altogether.

*Discovering the Women in Slavery* is a collection of scholarly research focused solely on the black woman's experience in slavery. Two essays were particularly helpful to the discussion in chapter two on how women were able to resist slavery's oppression specifically. Cynthia Lynn Lyerly's "Religion, Gender, and Identity: Black Methodist Women in a Slave Society, 1770-1810," discussed both how religion impacted the female slave's experience and how she interpreted Christianity and its meaning for her own life. Her research emphasized the importance of religion as a source that provided "hope and dignity" within the slave system for black women. She argued that studying religion is crucial to fully understanding the gendered history of the post and antebellum South. "Behind the Mask: Ex-Slave Women and Interracial Sexual Relationships," written by Helene Lecaudy was focused on miscegenation, or the mutual sexual relationship between a black individual and a white individual, in the slave South. Lecaudy utilized WPA interviews with female ex-slaves who had been directly involved in an interracial relationship or who told stories of loved ones that had been. Through these relationships, these women argue that they did indeed make choices even though slavery was not supposed to allow any black person to make their own decisions. The interviews she located contributed to this research as well.<sup>8</sup>

Tera W. Hunter's *To 'Joy My Freedom* analyzed black women's labor struggles and how their struggles affected their newly attained freedom in Atlanta, Georgia from the end of the

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<sup>8</sup> Morton, Patricia, ed., *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*, Athens: University of Georgia, (1996), pp. 202-225, 260-276.

Civil War to the Great Migration during World War I. Her study was an important addition to the history of the South, and even more critical to black and women's studies because she sought to find out what freedom meant for the average black woman's life in this evolving southern metropolis. Hunter explored the African American woman's transformation from slave to wage worker by tapping into city records, diaries, letters, newspapers, and court dockets.

Hunter gained a thorough collection of data to portray the freedwoman's perspective on the world around her. Without, however, the author's dual emphasis on her white counterpart's experiences and views on the new free population her study would be incomplete. By providing direct quotes from the white employers, usually the women of the household, Hunter painted a picture of the painful struggle of both races to adjust to the new way of life. A high percentage of black women were domestic wage workers, so researching the white women employers' opinions and stories about their black female counterparts was crucial to portraying the daily life and struggles of an average freedwoman's experience in Atlanta. The deep, cultural misunderstandings between blacks and whites during this time period were rooted in brutal violence, racism, and the oppression towards a race that has still not been eradicated altogether. Hunter provided information to help present day America better understand what factors drove a racial divide that still exists in some communities.<sup>9</sup>

Michael J. Rhyne's "'Conduct...inexcusable and unjustifiable': Bound Children, Battered Freedwomen, and the Limits of Emancipation in Kentucky's Bluegrass Region" heavily inspired the last chapter of this study. By utilizing the records of the Freedmen's Bureau, he explores the freedwoman's experience after slavery. While black men had no real rights at the time, black women were even further from having legal protection, much less true citizenry by way of a

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<sup>9</sup>Hunter, Tera, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War*, Cambridge: Harvard, (1997).

vote. His findings argue black women may have enjoyed even less protection from whites when they were set free, and the Freedmen's Bureau often could not help their situation at all. Black women had to rely on themselves and their families for maintaining any kind of protection from white supremacy groups that reigned supreme over any government official at the time.<sup>10</sup>

Abolitionist James F. Rhodes' *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 to the Final Restoration of the Home Rule at the South in 1877* was read with an objective lens, providing evidence of how black women were viewed on a "scholarly" level by whites, specifically those who were proponents for freedom.<sup>11</sup> Harriet Jacobs' narrative titled *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* served to provide ample evidence for all three chapters in this research. She was born in Edenton, North Carolina, and as a teenager was owned by Dr. James Norcom who repeatedly abused her for not submitting to his sexual advances. She was taught to read and write by her white mistress, Margaret Horniblow, which later enabled her to publish her story on behalf of all slaves.<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Keckley, who was once the dressmaker to First Lady Lincoln will also be briefly mentioned in chapter one to add to the discourse on what was expected of a black woman in the 1800s.

A multitude of slave narrative collections were used for this research, particularly *Black Slave Narratives* edited by John F. Bayliss', *Slave Narratives* edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and William L. Andrews', *Six Women's Slave Narratives* edited by Andrews as well, and *Weevils in Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips. Various narratives will be dissected and interpreted throughout each chapter to tell the story of black women from the slave's perspective. Black

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<sup>10</sup>Rhyne, Michael J. "'Conduct...inexcusable and unjustifiable': Bound Children, Battered Freedwomen, and the Limits of Emancipation in Kentucky's Bluegrass Region," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 42, no. 2, (Winter 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Rhodes, James F., *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 to the Final Restoration of Home Rule at the South in 1877*, Vol. 1, New York: Macmillan, (1892), pp. 332-337.

<sup>12</sup> Brent, Linda, *Incidents in the life of a slave girl, Seven Years Concealed*, ed. Maria L. Child, Boston, (1861).

male narratives are not only more plentiful in number than female narratives, but they usually were personally written and published by the individual, which provides future generations with an unbiased account of the author's life. Male narratives also give us the image of a black woman through the eyes of a fellow member of her community—one that shared the same sufferings as he did. Among the male narratives that proved to be helpful was Henry Bibb, a fugitive slave who later became an antislavery activist. Bibb founded the first black newspaper in Canada after multiple escapes to freedom. Josiah Henson's account of his life also included his perspective of the opposite sex, specifically his mother.<sup>13</sup>

Personal female narratives were often not written by the women themselves. As William L. Andrews points out in his introduction to *Six Women's Slave Narratives*, when the narratives are not written by the author themselves, they are subjected to either an intended or an unintended infiltration of bias. Mary Prince, a slave born in the West Indies, was one of the first slave narratives to be published in the United Kingdom. Her narrator, Thomas Pringle, was an abolitionist. He illustrated her as holding all of the nineteenth century "traditional feminine virtues," but in the same breath was sure to point out that she had a "somewhat violent and hasty temper." The same "temper," however, that Andrews argued saved her life in many cases.<sup>14</sup> Pringle was downsizing what Prince went through altogether by making that claim. Therefore, how can we know what else he may have altered when transcribing her story? The same thing goes for any narrative written by a person other than the true author, but they do not present such a problem that researchers should exclude them from their evidence base altogether because these editors were usually on the slave's side. Regardless of these shortfalls, Prince's narrative as well as the narratives published by the Works Progress Administration throughout the 1940s,

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<sup>13</sup> Bayliss, John F., ed., *Black Slave Narratives*, New York: Collier Books, (1970), pp. 91-107.

<sup>14</sup> Andrews, William L., ed., Introduction to *Six Women's Slave Narratives*, New York: Oxford, (1988).



which are now electronically accessible through the Library of Congress's website proved to be crucial to all three chapters of this book.

In addition to these personal accounts of slavery from black men and women regarding female oppression and resistance, the use of public documents, specifically those produced by the Freedmen's Bureau, provided the skeleton of chapter three. Pamphlets and simple notes on aggressions against and committed by blacks depicted both how black women were targeted in Southern communities and the brutal attacks on men that tried to protect them against a white person's anger. Thus the Freedmen's Bureau's records are important to painting the picture of the South during Reconstruction.

The previously existing arguments on black women and their experiences in the South were very influential in shaping this topic in that, through my study of them, I have noted that no one seemed to point out how profound a black female resisting a white oppressor really was. The added weight of being a female and black often led to black women being more likely to be physically, mentally, and emotionally bullied by white men and women. Yet, among the few existing accounts, several depict black women standing up for themselves despite grave consequences for themselves or their loved ones—those actions spoke volumes to me. There was a lack of existing historical analysis of these available primary sources and my goal is to begin to fill that void. Why did these women sporadically reject continuous oppression? Did her actions have any impact on her situation or her race as a whole? If it did, in what ways can we trace that impact through African American history? Did she face the same forms of oppression after slavery was abolished and in what ways did her experience change with this new found freedom? These questions drove this study of the Southern black woman's experience from 1830 to 1890, and the results are encapsulated in three chapters. The first introduces the 19<sup>th</sup>

century Southern white male hierarchy and how black women fit into it. The second chapter fleshes out the ways in which various black women rebelled against both those imposed roles and the masters of the hierarchy while they were enslaved, and how their actions impacted the hierarchy. The third chapter focuses on freedwomen's rebellions against oppression from about 1865 to 1890 and how they gained significant ground on the road to equality in America.

## Chapter 1

Exploring the social and gender role of a female slave is crucial to gain a holistic view of life in the South in the 1800s because the female slave was deemed the lowest class of individual there was during that time; not only were they black, but they were women as well.<sup>15</sup> Further, because the overall goal of this research is to argue that black women could and did undermine the very foundations of slavery by gaining the attention of white abolitionists, we must understand the various roles white, upper-class men created for black women, and the demands that each entailed. This chapter will present the stereotypes with which black women were labeled in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, and how they shaped her interactions with white men, white women, and black men. Although the slave narratives of individuals like Elizabeth Keckley, Harriet Jacobs, and Josiah Henson have been used in other studies, there are none that specifically focus on the language used in order to define the gender-race roles that all black women were expected to adhere to in the South. Further, this chapter argues that these roles were largely rooted in a black woman's sexuality, or the assumptions whites made about it. Each role was tailored to the general needs of both the plantation and the owner himself. On some farms she was simply the "Mammy" that took care of the children and any other domestic task, while on others she became both a worker and a concubine for her master.

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<sup>15</sup> Lyerly, Cynthia Lynn, "Religion, Gender, and Identity: Black Methodist Women in a Slave Society, 1770-1810," ed. Patricia Morton, *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*, Athens: University of Georgia, (1996), p. 203.

From the available primary sources of the time period, it has long been agreed that rich, plantation-owning white men controlled the roles of white women, black men, and most of all, black women. Therefore, the social roles that these men expected black women to meet, even if they resisted those roles, many times were somewhat fulfilled because of the oppressive control white men had over their lives. These expected social roles morphed into racial stereotypes that have lingered long after slavery, emancipation, and even the Civil Rights' Movement. However, the African American woman's place in society as defined by her mistresses and their male counterparts is more elusive and only found in the available sources that contain the personal opinions of these parties compared to roles imposed by white men.

White men popularized two characters portraying the African American woman in an effort to glorify slavery just before and after it was condemned by the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863: the Mammy now appeared on a pancake mix box as Aunt Jemima, and her counterpart, Jezebel. The former is a characterization of the black motherly slave, rejoicing in bondage and the latter represented an exotic temptress to the white man and a threat to the "pure" white woman. These personas, especially those of the Mammy's, were both integral characters stereotypical to the romanticized Antebellum South because they were endorsed by the most powerful gender and race in the country at that time. Southern white men used multiple communicative devices such as the theatre, the media, and "scholarly" published research, to turn a daydream into two somewhat permanent stereotypes that would haunt black women and black men long into the future.<sup>16</sup>

Both characters were created as a means to reinforce the belief that slaves were "happy" being inferior to the white race. The image of the heavy-set Mammy, completely content with

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<sup>16</sup> Manring, *Slave in a Box*, Charlottesville: Virginia, (1998), pp. 21-23.

her slave life was well known even before Aunt Jemima's image was placed on a pancake box. The Democratic leaders that were trying to gain support against the Civil War but outlawing slavery in the North utilized the common idea that slaves were happy in their current chattel state to depict President Lincoln's war efforts as unnecessary. The question Democrats raised to their fellow Yankee dissenters at the convention at Montpelier in 1863 was this: if the slaves did not even want freedom or if they could never be made into "socially, politically, morally" equal citizens among whites, why should the Northerners sacrifice their sons to fight for them in a Civil War? Democratic leaders in the North filled their speeches with language claiming President Lincoln was "going by a great war...to turn the Negro white," and giving white men the option to be killed or married "to a wench," or an African American woman.<sup>17</sup>

These campaigns caused outrage and riots resulting in heavy violence against the innocent blacks unfortunate enough to have found freedom in the North.<sup>18</sup> Invoking the image of a forced interracial relationship in which a white man was the "victim" of a falsely-stereotyped sex-crazed black woman, rather than the usual case of the black woman being the enslaved victim, infuriated whites regardless of regional location. The message was clear: liberating African Americans from the torment of slavery meant races would become "mixed." Black women became a symbol of the threat against maintaining a "superior" white race, free from all African descent.

Even those rallying against slavery published "research" on African Americans that admonished any interracial relationships that could result in a mixed race. A black woman "lacked chastity" because she did not own her own body according to James F. Rhodes, a white male author in the 1890s. Rhodes warned that although slavery was an evil institution, the

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<sup>17</sup>"How Rioting is Produced," *The Burlington Daily Times*, July 23, 1863.

<sup>18</sup>*ibid.*

enslaved woman's desire for a white male, especially with all of the "power" he was entitled to could not be contained in freedom, therefore she came to represent the threat of interracial relationships that would result in an inferior race dominating America if there was no master to control her sexual desires.<sup>19</sup>

However, before the Emancipation Proclamation, it was common for "mulatto" children to be roaming around a master's plantation, likely the result of one of his extramarital relationships with a slave girl. While the white-dominated media portrayed black women of "lacking chastise" as Rhodes claimed, slave accounts often depict the very opposite. Regardless of a religious upbringing, if a slave girl was to have been afforded any teaching of moral principles from an elder relative or mistress at all, resisting any white man with power over her was relatively "hopeless," as Harriet Jacobs seemed to feel throughout her personal narrative. If she did not succumb to bribery of "presents" or the promise of an easier life, a slave faced the threat of violence "into submission to their will."<sup>20</sup> Based on Jacobs' narrative as well as established research on the subject, it is clear that generally black women were rarely, if ever, given the choice to consent to sex with an aggressive white man. She, unlike many others, was given the option to peacefully or forcefully submit to his sexual desires.

Combined with the abundant evidence of interracial relationships between white men and their slave women, the appearance of anti-miscegenation laws established prior to the abolition of slavery provides an interesting side to this study. These policies were designed to control the slave population and prevent any racial "mixing" between whites and races that were deemed "inferior." However as we have seen throughout the ages, legislation cannot control human action entirely, especially if the aristocrats in charge of creating the legislation decide they are

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<sup>19</sup> Rhodes, *History of the United States*, Vol. 1, New York: Macmillan, (1892), pp. 332-337.

<sup>20</sup> Brent, *Incidents in the life*, ed. Child, Boston, (1861), pp. 79-80.

exempt. Therefore, white men dictated the four roles black women would have conformed to: a mistress, a concubine, a forced breeder or a victim.<sup>21</sup>

According to historian Jessica Millward's domestic court case research, some slave women gained freedom by actually marrying their masters and becoming his mistress, just as a white woman usually did. However, the universal language used in the marriage license as well as other court-related documents does not provide researchers with how the parties involved actually felt or their motives for marrying someone of a different race. Sadly, on many plantations white men did not view black women as a woman they would marry, but as a concubine. She conveniently was classified as his property and, therefore, she became an object he owned and one that had the ability to satisfy his sexual needs. In other situations, a slave woman may have been forced to "mate" with a certain slave in order to reproduce good, strong workers—slave masters would "breed" their slaves much like they bred farm animals in order to insure healthy livestock. Lastly, the slave woman was often sexually abused and raped by white men and black men alike. Ironically, white men often led white women to believe it was only the black man who was capable of committing such atrocities. Black overseers were often classified as traitors among slave communities for working for the master and beating his own race. Thus, it was not a surprise if he sexually abused a woman that did not behave in the fields. All of these roles that white men created for black women contributed to the development of the racial and gendered stereotype as seductive, lustful "wenches" that manipulated white men and terrorized white women.<sup>22</sup>

Millward argues that legislation and policies that clearly impeded black individuals' freedom of choice throughout the Antebellum South left deep scars in the African American

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<sup>21</sup> Millward, "The Relics of Slavery," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 31, no. 3, (2010), pp. 22-30.

<sup>22</sup> ibid.

population's psyche. These policies would affect generations to come, even those who would eventually live as freed citizens. She argues that black women may have conformed to multiple roles for various reasons even after emancipation, all reinforcing the white man's superior seat in the social hierarchy of America. Laws regarding interracial marriages allowed white men to "use" black women to fulfill their sexual desires and needs, but barred black men from doing the same with white women. The policies that regulated the black woman's reproductive abilities gave the slave system the backbone it needed to ensure a subservient population.<sup>23</sup>

African American women were biologically ordained to be the vessel that safely carried on the institution of slavery. This ability and duty to rear children who could provide the master's family with great profit made the black slave woman's experience a unique one. While both sexes were equally oppressed, being a female resulted in a specific type of sexual vulnerability that manifested itself in various relationships between the black woman and the white man. Jacobs illuminated this twisted relationship in her personal diaries when telling of her owner's incessant sexual pursuit of her as a teenager. She recalled that there was no "shadow of law to protect" a slave girl from the pain that could be "inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men."<sup>24</sup>

"Alas! The Sunny face of the slave is not always an indication of sunshine in the heart."<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave and dressmaker for First Lady Lincoln, illustrated an interesting aspect of the relationship between the slave-owning class and the slave in this simple sentence. The black "Mammy" popularized by Aunt Jemima's image on the pancake box glorifies the Post-bellum Southern dream of the "sunny face" of a female slave content with her

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Brent, *Incidents in the Life*, ed. Child, *Slave Narratives*, Boston, (1861), p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> Keckley, Elizabeth, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, New York: G. W. Carleton & Co., (1868) p. 29.



situation in life. She was happy to serve, ignorant, and a master of all domestic tasks. She was the “Mammy” figure that exemplified “how black women behaved when under proper white control,” as M. M. Manring describes in *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*.<sup>26</sup>

However, Solomon Northup’s account of a young female slave named Patsey being brutally whipped into a state of incoherence for displaying such a sunny disposition and a “sprightly, laughter-loving spirit” proves slave-owning whites were not always content with this figure—especially if she were youthful and pretty enough to instill a “green-eyed monster” in her mistress. Patsey, “young and agile,” was constantly targeted by her master’s wife, Mistress Epps, and Northup blamed it on jealousy. Mrs. Epps likely developed this jealousy over the paranoia of her husband’s attractions to Patsey. The young girl sought companionship in their white neighbor’s black wife, Harriet. While Northup never says if Harriet was a freedwoman or not, he labeled her as the “notorious profligate” neighbor’s wife, likely because he was seen as a “unblushing libertine” among the whites of the community for marrying a black woman. Perhaps Northup himself did not favor interracial marriages either. Although his account never says that Epps had intimate feelings concerning Patsey outright, Mrs. Epps’ suspicions over her husband’s feelings about Patsey were not completely invalid based on Northrup’s description of Epps’ realization that the slave girl had ventured next door without permission:

“...but the suspicion gradually entered the brain of Epps, that another and a baser passion led her thither – that it was not Harriet she desired to meet , but rather the unblushing libertine, his neighbor. Patsey found her master in a fearful rage on her return. His violence so alarmed her that at first she attempted to evade direct answers to his questions, which only served to increase his suspicions.”

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<sup>26</sup> Manring, *Slave in a Box*, Charlottesville: Virginia, (1998), pp. 21-23.

Her master proceeded to serve her a punishment so scarring that Northup claimed to have permanently placed a “burden of deep melancholy” on her “spirits.” The major factor that led to Patsey’s tragedy was that she was not the submissive “mammy.”<sup>27</sup>

Mistress Epps’ “hatred and jealousy” that drove her to torment her young and spirited slave Patsey could have been rooted in her suspicions of her husband and her frustration with her position in the social hierarchy as well. In terms of social power, white women did not enjoy much more sovereignty than their female slaves. However, their responsibility to manage the plantation household did give them power over the house slaves that they directed. Unlike in the North, where economic prosperity was often found outside of the home, the Southerner’s finances were inextricably linked to plantation production and slave workforce reproduction. Therefore, a mistress’ title as director of all things domestic often overlapped with crop production. Her duty was to complete her expected chores for her husband’s comfort, even if she was not fortunate enough to own her own slaves. Naturally, white women mostly adopted their husbands’ or fathers’ ideals. Thus, their perspective of a female slave’s role was very similar to his: take care of all the domestic work in the home as well as the strenuous field work. Fox-Genovese’s dissection of the writings of the unique Louisa McCord, an upper-class Southern mistress and a part-time political theorist, show how white women felt about their roles in Southern society. McCord harped on maintaining a natural hierarchy among human beings based on race and gender, embodying her ideals that women were not equal with men in her exclamation, “Wo to the drudge who would exalt himself into the ruler!”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bayliss, *Black Slave Narratives*, New York: Collier Books, (1970), pp. 86-90.

<sup>28</sup> Fox-Genovese, “Within the Plantation Household,” *Society and Culture in the Slave South*, ed. Harris, London: Routledge, (1992), pp. 50, 64-65.

Although white women were given the daunting responsibility of managing the home, and usually embraced their status as a lower class individual subservient to their husbands, they were expected to have enough slaves to do help keep up with the upper crust of Southern society. She became the overseer of the home, charged with teaching, disciplining, and ordering the house slaves, which could be old or young women, or even young boys. Being placed inside the “Big House,” as slaves referred to the plantation home, versus the field created class difference among blacks in the slave community. However, those slaves in the home would go to great lengths to be put back out on the field to work, especially women like Harriet Jacobs that were constantly in close quarters with masters that sought unwanted explicit relationships with them. The jealous mistresses reacted in vicious ways, likely because she felt like a slave herself, or because children and women were less likely to strike back than the stronger field workers.<sup>29</sup> Regardless of the inner-confliction over her title as mistress of the household, African American women served as pedestals to white femininity; they worked in order to keep their mistress’s hands free of callous as proof of their social status.

Black women were expected to reproduce with black men to continue human chattel, but they were also expected to essentially adopt the white mother’s duties in the home. She was the all-encompassing motherly figure for white children growing up in the South, and she had to love them as if they were hers, even if her own enslaved children were neglected.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, if she were to take the mistress’ place as the master’s lover, by her own will or against it, she was held responsible for enticing the white man’s sexual appetite. Further, she became a target for her mistress’ outrage and her own slave family often frowned upon her,

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<sup>29</sup> Jones, Jacqueline, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*, New York: Basic Books, (2010), p. 21-23.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

especially if they thought she was willingly participating in an extramarital relationship.

Adulterous relations between the master and his slaves would not result in much punishment for the married master other than being forced by his wife to sell the female slave he fancied. Even though these relationships were always oppressive for the black servant, it was she that would become the target of the frustrated mistress. A white woman would punish her unfortunate female servant by having her beaten for any reason, sold off to another plantation away from her family, or in Jacobs' case, by stalking her at night and waking her up with whispers in her ear as if she was her husband in order to trick her into admitting any wrongdoing.<sup>31</sup>

After the Christianization of the slave community, African Americans generally expected each other to live a "religiously inclined" life that included abstaining from sexual relations until he or she was able to secure a "marriage" at the consent of the slaveholder. Jacobs' grandmother had taught her piety, but with the combined constant pressures from her owner, and the dream of being taken care of by another white man in town, she succumbed to the "sin" that slave women often had to accept and conceived a child out of wedlock.<sup>32</sup> With the likely advances from her owner, his sons, or the overseers, this expectation for a black woman to remain a virgin until she found her partner was almost impossible. Therefore, black men had to accept the reality of their wives already having sexual relations prior to their engagement.

Not surprisingly, the relationship between the African American man and woman during the mid-1800s in the South was controlled by whites. If they were to find a slave or even a free person of the same race to marry, it was up to his or her owner to allow the marriage. Even then, slaves had no protected rights and their marriage was never a legal relationship. Often times, the

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<sup>31</sup> Brent, *Incidents in the life*, ed. Child, Boston, (1861), pp. 49-54.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

families were split apart at the slave auction.<sup>33</sup> If an individual's life were completely controlled by another, did he have the capacity to define any other individual's societal roles? In the scenario involving a black man and woman in slavery, he had a limited expectation and influence on her behaviors because blacks still developed their own specific culture, language and a sense of history together.

Whether or not Christian morals were prominent on a plantation amongst the slave population, men expected monogamy when they married a woman. Even though his patriarchal role was deprived of him, there are accounts that prove African American men saw to building furniture or hunting small game to provide for his family even if he lived on another plantation and was rarely able to visit. In regards to protecting his family, the black man was extremely limited and often sacrificed his own life for those he loved.<sup>34</sup> Josiah Henson's father almost killed an overseer for attacking his mother and suffered a lynching for striking a white man.<sup>35</sup> Fugitive slave Henry Bibb represented the father and husband that incessantly tried and failed to pave the way to freedom for his wife and daughter by escaping on his own and coming back multiple times to retrieve them. If a couple were married and dreamed of running away to freedom, it was the woman's job to stay on the plantation until she could safely attempt at following him with the children. Bibb's wife was never able to make it to freedom and, after years of waiting, she gave in to her white master in order to be treated well.<sup>36</sup>

All in all, until the Emancipation Proclamation, the black man's ability to lead, provide, and protect his family was extremely limited. There was little to nothing to be done if an intruder were to disrupt the harmony of his home. His wife and children could be beaten or sold

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<sup>33</sup> Bayliss, ed., *Black Slave Narratives*, New York: Collier Books, (1970), pp. 95-96.

<sup>34</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, New York: Basic Books, (2010), p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> Bayliss, ed., *Black Slave Narratives*, New York: Collier Books, (1970), pp. 102-103.

<sup>36</sup> Bibb, Henry, "Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave," in *Slave Narratives*, eds. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr., New York: Literary Classics of America, (2000), pp. 460, 467-469.

at anytime and his only option was to attempt at escaping and risking all of their lives in the process. If he was to have any influence on a black woman's behavior, it was limited in scope because he could never be the central source of authority in her life until she was a freed woman.

Historians have found that the negative and conflicting gender identities assigned to bonded women in the Antebellum South were largely rejected by both male and female slaves. Yet, still lingering on grocery store shelves across America is the image of Aunt Jemima, a symbol for the "good ole days" before the Civil War and a painful reminder to African Americans of their oppressed ancestry. But for every time a white person dictated what a black woman "ought to be and do" prior to the abolition of slavery, there was at least one slave woman in the South that refused to accommodate to her "superior's" expectations.<sup>37</sup> These forced stereotypes defined in the first chapter of this study ranged from the beliefs that all black women were either sexually immoral, or had the innate talent and desire to cook for a family other than their own, or had the stamina to complete extremely strenuous tasks for long periods of time. Negative assumptions regarding her character provided the bondswoman with specific opportunities to resist white authority on a local and specific level. By doing so, even if the instances of rebellion had no relation to each other and were randomly occurring throughout the South, women were significantly contributing to the demise of America's most heinous legal institution.

I have established the gendered and racial roles of black women in the South. Now I will explore how the women used specific situations to inch slowly but surely towards freedom and equality for their race. Desperate situations called for desperate actions in order to resist oppression; black women's lives and social roles may have been completely controlled by their

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<sup>37</sup> Lyerly, "Religion, Gender, and Identity," *Discovering the Women in Slavery*, ed. Morton, Athens: Georgia, (1996), p. 203.

white masters. They still found ways to resist. The next chapter will explore the ways in which slave women's sexuality and ability to reproduce may have been viciously abused by white men. Yet, these factors also gave her opportunities to benefit herself, her loved ones, and her race. After dissecting the sexual resistance specific to black women we can then flesh out her other gender specific opportunities to rebel against slavery.

## Chapter 2:

White men utilized their powerful position in society to manipulate black men, women, and white women to their benefit. Because of their slavery status, sex, color, and reproductive capabilities, black women were subject to some of the most oppressive forced social roles that have translated into degrading stereotypes used in modern America. But even through this seemingly desolate situation, there shined a light ahead—a dream of freedom and equality in America. The light was sparked by instances in which a black woman refused to submit to an order, whether it was a personal directive or a demand by society, and succeeded. She did not have to succeed in the sense that she said “no” and overcame the force that was making her do something she did not want to do, because in many cases she was either punished or forced to submit. As long as she made a stand of refusal, she succeeded in asserting her inherent independence. That spirit lifted those who witnessed her struggles to desire a better life and it captured the attention of great abolitionists and orators. Further, that spirit ignited a divide between the North and the South.

This chapter will present the stories of various black women that refused to cooperate when they felt cooperation was not in their best interest. I will interpret slave narratives and the WPA’s ex-slave narratives of both men and women with a focus on aspects such as the speaker’s feelings about the action of refusal, the impact that resistance may have had on their life or the lives of other blacks, and how these narratives may have influenced whites to mobilize in the abolition efforts. My interpretation is unique to the historical conversation regarding black enslaved women’s resistance.



Resistance, for the sake of this research, can be defined as an individual's conscious or unconscious defiance of authority. Black men resisted slavery; however, a slave woman's rebellious actions were arguably more powerful when she chose to defy her white oppressors after experiencing any gender-specific form of oppression. Her womanhood allowed for certain opportunities to fight back that would never be presented to a black man. For instance, if a slave woman was to intentionally or unintentionally attract the sexual desires of her master or overseer, like Harriet Jacobs did as a young woman, she had the power to deny his assumption that she must submit to his orders.<sup>38</sup> Or, as I will discuss later in this chapter in depth, women would ingest herbs that prevented or terminated pregnancies to thwart her master's economic prosperity when he tried to breed her to produce more slaves.

In addition, those black women like Mary Prince, who actively sought out whites that would transcribe and publish her slave experience, publicized instances in which she or other women resisted slavery. Doing so made their profound stories available to whites in America and around the world. Narratives by both men and women were tools to gain support for abolition and black rights. More specifically, those narratives that mentioned a black woman's resistance to an oppressive situation forced whites to sympathize with slaves. Therefore, they had to acknowledge that African American's were biological and psychological equals, with the capability of becoming intellectual equals if given the chance. These situations were all gender specific, giving black women very powerful position over the most powerful player in the game of Southern Antebellum life. Although she never united with other black women to form a massive front against the white plantation owners of the South, her sporadic acts of defiance throughout the region continuously eroded the foundation of slavery. Those slave women that

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<sup>38</sup> Brent, *Incidents in the life*, ed. Child, Boston, (1861), pp. 62-64.

chose not to cooperate with the establishment ignited dreams of freedom in African Americans, dreams that later they would fight to become reality.

The mid-1800s marked the height of slavery in America. Slavery existed prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it was during this era that the southern region grew to truly believe the United States would not survive without enslaved laborers. Although many northerners had already begun to fight for abolition, they still were considering policies that would transplant African Americans back to Africa as remedies to what was known as the “black question.” The slave trade had been booming because there had been a high demand for free laborers to clear newly acquired lands quickly. The purpose of the clearing was to capitalize on the domestic and European demands for rice, tobacco, sugar cane, and most importantly, the King Cotton. Quickly, the stereotypical weaker sex among the enslaved proved herself an equal in completing rigorous tasks traditionally thought of as men’s work.<sup>39</sup>

According to Jacqueline Jones, a black woman was recognized as “integral to the sustenance of enslaved populations” by somewhat maintaining her traditional African roles. These included leading funerary rites, being a spiritual leader or “conjurer,” and preparing meals. Black women were bits of home away from home that quelled discontent among the slave communities that plantation owners feared could lead to uprisings. She had a natural knack for “women’s work,” that is taking care of the home and her master’s children. Her reproductive capabilities were the symbol of the provision of more slaves to continue to strengthen the American slave system. The combination of femininity and being a piece of property all too often resulted in her being bought or sold to fulfill a white man’s sexual desires as well.<sup>40</sup> The combination of being able to work like a man, reproduce and have sex like a woman, and

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<sup>39</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, New York: Basic Books, (2010), p. 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 11-12

manipulate the overall mood in her slave community made a black woman vulnerable to being overworked and sexually abused. On the other hand, these qualities also made women a necessity on the plantation. Therefore, her choice to not cooperate was a significant factor in undermining white power.

Slave owners would prove their omnipotent power over their slaves by trying to control the most natural function of human behaviors through forcing marriages between “healthy” slaves that they predicted would create strong workers, just as farmers manipulate breeding amongst their animals. Rose Williams lamented that her otherwise kind master forced her “to live with dat nigger, Rufus, ‘gainst my wants” when she was just sixteen years old. Williams, calling herself an “igno’ mus chile” for believing her master only wanted her to fix up a cabin for Rufus and other slaves to share, was shocked enough to hit Rufus with a fire poker when he tried to share a bunk with her. She soon discovered that “de massa” wanted her to “bring forth portly chillen” with Rufus and if she refused she would face the whip. Williams gave up her fight and provided her master with two slave children. Her story shows how many slave women did comply with their master’s inhumane wishes and how cooperating deeply affected their perspective on life. Williams never married after her “one ‘sperience” with a man and refused to “plenish de earth,” with any more children, free or enslaved.<sup>41</sup>

However if a slave owner desired sexual gratification, he could take an active part in insuring his own economic prosperity by impregnating his slaves and either keeping them on his own plantation or selling them for a quick profit at the slave auction.<sup>42</sup> Although miscegenation between masters and slaves was common, state legislation during slavery was legal exhibits

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with Rose Williams, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*, Library of Congress, March 23, 2001, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>, (Accessed February 25, 2012).

<sup>42</sup> Blassingame, John W. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford, (1979), pp. 155-157.

otherwise. Interracial relationships were vehemently frowned upon among Southern society during and long after Emancipation according to the laws that were established as early as 1662 in Virginia.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly enough, states known for racism, such as Mississippi, took longer to actually establish anti-miscegenation statutes.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps this delay was because lynch mobs were enough to quell black and white relationships until the abolitionist movement, and the Northern aggression threatened the sanctity of the Southern social hierarchy. Even with both the established and understood laws prohibiting sexual relationships among blacks and whites, mutual and forced affairs between masters and their female slaves were prevalent on the plantations. So, it may have been that powerful white men in Mississippi found it socially acceptable for a white man to take advantage of a slave woman. Thus, they were reluctant to establish anti-miscegenation laws.

Even with these laws preventing interracial relationships, the government did not protect an enslaved woman from rape by her master because of her status as his property. These relationships that occurred are difficult to define because the slave system did not allow any independent decision making, especially about her sex life. Distinction between rape and consent is almost impossible to declare without speaking with the people involved.<sup>45</sup> The bondwoman's gendered vulnerability to rape by both white and black men, and the crazed jealousy she instilled in white women paints a terrifying picture of the life of a slave girl on a Southern plantation.

At the same time, a black woman could sometimes transform her own gendered vulnerability to sexual abuse into a source of power. Her sexuality, her capability to reproduce,

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<sup>43</sup> Millward, "The Relics of Slavery," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3, (2010), p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> The Constitution of the State of Mississippi, Article 14, Section 263, Adopted November 1, 1890.  
[http://www.sos.state.ms.us/ed\\_pubs/constitution/constitution.asp](http://www.sos.state.ms.us/ed_pubs/constitution/constitution.asp)

<sup>45</sup> Lecaudy, Helene, "Behind the Mask: Ex-Slave Women and Interracial Sexual Relations," ed. Morton, *Discovering the Women in Slavery*, Athens: University of Georgia, (1996), pp. 261.

and her status as a slave made her vulnerable. Simultaneously however, she could capitalize on these factors for her own benefit, her family's, or indirectly, on behalf of her entire race.

Successfully satisfying her master's demand sometimes resulted in her master manumitting herself or the children she bore for him. Mary Reynolds, a former slave in Dallas, Texas, was owned by Dr. Kilpatrick's family and, according to her memory, "the doctor took a black woman quick as he did a white and took any on his place he wanted, and he took them often." He brought back a woman from Baton Rouge that Reynolds described as a "yaller girl," most likely a mulatto, and put her to work as a fine clothing seamstress living in her own home away from the plantation. Although other slaves that lived on the plantation claimed that Dr. Kilpatrick was their children's father, he obviously favored the children born to the seamstress. So much so that they would play with he and his wife's children until "Missy Kilpatrick" overheard "them white niggers say, 'He is our daddy and we call him daddy when he comes to our house to see our mama.'" The children ceased to play together, but he never sold or stopped visiting his mulatto mistress. It is unclear as to what happened with her children. Reynolds' interview leads the audience to believe that they were not ever put to any plantation work and they were taught "fine manners," so it was very likely they were treated as freed children.<sup>46</sup>

Prominent individuals in American history have notoriously had sexual relationships with their slaves, the glorified Thomas Jefferson being one of them. Author Annette Gordon-Reed dissected the scandalous history of Jefferson's alleged relationship with his slave, Sally Hemings. Some historians argue that the affair resulted in three light-skinned slaves working for the former president until his death at Monticello. Gordon-Reed's research led her to believe that perhaps Hemings traded her own freedom for her mixed children's manumission, a sacrifice

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Mary Reynolds, *American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology*, University of Virginia, March 6, 1998, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/wpa/reynold1.html>, (Accessed February 25, 2012).

that many other slave women may have made which insured a new free population of blacks in America. Slave children were the lifeline of the entire institution. Thus, if a black woman was to trade her freedom for her children like Hemings may have done, she was manipulating her master into contributing to slavery's overall deterioration in America.<sup>47</sup> In conclusion, the ultimate form of oppression gave black women the chance to commit the ultimate form of resistance that supported the abolition of slavery.

Unfortunately, in many cases interracial relationships between a master and slave women also resulted in her own trip to the auction block or the sale of her mulatto children to please the mistress of the plantation. In other cases, she might have relented to a master or overseer rather than continue resistance in order to avoid a violent beating or, in a less likely case, to gain favoritism amongst her fellow slaves. Doing so would ease her work load on the plantation.<sup>48</sup>

Jefferson and Hemings' rumored relationship depicts the loopholes white men found or allowed in the anti-miscegenation laws if the sex was between a white man and a black woman rather than a white woman and a black man. Manumission laws that allowed a master to free a mistress that he impregnated often served as incentives for slave women to continue their affairs with their owners, either for their own personal benefits or in some cases for their offspring's benefit. Unfortunately, in many cases the slave woman involved rarely obtained freedom for herself much less her children. It was more common for a slave owner to sell away his own children or their mother for economical or marital purposes.<sup>49</sup>

To avoid the consequences of interracial marriages, a white man could buy his lover and any of his offspring if he developed "feelings of affection" for a slave woman, as Jessica

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<sup>47</sup> Millward, "Relics of Slavery," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3, (2010), p. 22.

<sup>48</sup> Lecaudy, "Behind the Mask," *Discovering the Women in Slavery*, ed. Morton, Athens: University of Georgia, (1996), pp. 268-269. See also, Jones, *Labor of Love*, New York: Basic Books, (2010), pp. 18-19.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

Millward pointed out in her research. Arguing that the legislation that tried to dictate sexual relationships in the South before and just after emancipation could never dictate an individual's actions, Millward compared the ban on interracial marriages to the current ban many states have against gay marriages. She described a couple that resided in Annapolis, Maryland, that "intermarried" after the white husband had owned his blushing bride for fourteen years prior to their engagement. Millward indirectly hypothesizes that the "mutual" relationship formed "over time," leading the audience to imagine a concubine that bartered her way to freedom through acquiescing to her master's sexual desires.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to this sex for manumission trade, young black women in Louisiana would sometimes be granted placage or the "privilege" of being "placed" in a home separate from her master as long as she maintained her sexual relationship with him. This would prevent his wife from learning of the relationship. These women were free from working in the fields or in the household. Instead, they assumed the new chore of providing sexual gratification for their masters. In some cases, especially if she were a light-skinned African American, she would be given the "privilege" of being his escort to ritzy parties in New Orleans.<sup>51</sup> This public display of affection between a white man and a black woman obviously did not result in someone calling the authorities to jail them for miscegenation. Even if she was still his property, the black woman was displaying confidence in herself and her womanhood when she gallivanted around town with the "superior" race, symbolizing that first breath of a demand for equality.

Black women utilized another form of resistance completely contradicting to that those women that willingly engaged in sexual relationships with white masters to in an effort to resist enslavement. Whether she was successful or not, the act of refusing any unwanted sexual

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<sup>50</sup> Millward, "Relics of Slavery," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3, (2010), p. 22.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

encounter revealed that she could never be completely controlled by a man. Suki was a brave slave woman that said “no” when her master told her to take off her clothes. When he clearly refused to cooperate, she proceeded to “shove an’ push his hindparts down in de hot pot o’ soup” forever reminding him to never violate a slave woman again.<sup>52</sup> American slave women like Suki were not difficult to find, and given the horror stories of what could happen when she refused her master, overseer, or mistress, this kind of resistance illustrates the courage of those enslaved women that would be passed on from generation to generation.

In an interview with Mrs. Minnie Folkes of St. Petersburg, Virginia, Folkes told of an overseer beating her mother brutally by tying a rope around her wrists and hanging her from the ceiling in the barn to whip her “nekked ‘til the blood run down her back to her heels.” When Folkes asked what her mother had done to deserve such a beating, she was told, “Nothin’ tother t’dan ‘fuse to be wife to dis man.”<sup>53</sup> This all too common recollection is a reminder that black women obviously resisted enslavement by denying their owner a sexual relationship outright by her own verbal or physical force. Like Folkes’ mother, even if she was not successful in warding off her enemy and was beaten or raped anyway, her decision to not give her body to her aggressor undermined the very fundamental “truth” that was crucial to keeping slavery: that there is a natural racial hierarchy and the inferior could and should be controlled by the superior races.

The legal rape of slave women plagued the African American’s everyday life. The hopelessness that filled the men and women in bondage drove them to regret having children. Fugitive slave Henry Bibb illustrated this parental pain in his narrative when he stated that

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<sup>52</sup> Lecaudy, “Behind the Mask,” *Discovering the Women in Slavery*, ed. Morton, Athens: University of Georgia, (1996), pp. 272.

<sup>53</sup> Perdue Jr., Charles L., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Philips, eds., *Weevils in Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia, (1976), p. 92-93.



“being a father and a husband of slaves” was the “one act” in his slave life that he would always “lament over.” His manhood allowed him to make an escape to the North for freedom while his wife had to remain on the plantation with their small daughter because their culture mandated that her role as a woman was to take care of the children.<sup>54</sup> If she made the decision to try to escape slavery, she would have been undermining her own culture’s gender roles. Risking her life and leaving her daughter, without a mother would have been unacceptable; therefore, the cost outweighed the gain of obtaining freedom.

Of the two sexes, women, according to Jones’ survey of the Federal Workers’ Project Slave Narrative Collection, were much more likely to stand up to their masters, mistresses, and overseers without running away afterwards, as many slave men did.<sup>55</sup> The likelihood of a slave mother running away was rare. Margaret Garner’s tragic story that is discussed later in this chapter is evidence that escaping the South to find freedom was virtually impossible with small children. The slave culture’s gender roles relegated the responsibility of raising the children to the mother, so when enslaved fathers like Bibb heard “the voice of liberty...thundering” in his soul singing, “Be free, oh, man! Be free,” his slave wife could only hope to follow him with his children in the future.<sup>56</sup>

As a woman and a mother, her natural responsibility to love, protect, and nurture her children was taken away from her the moment her child was born into slavery. While many studies have covered the father’s perspective on his loss of control over his family to his master and how it contributed to the break-down of the African American family, the slave mother’s perspective has only recently been researched. Therefore, there is a lack of information. The

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<sup>54</sup>Bibb, Henry, *Slave Narratives*, eds. Andrews and Gates Jr., New York: Literary Classics, (2000), p. 459.

<sup>55</sup>Jones, *Labor of Love*, New York: Basic Books, (2010), p. 20.

<sup>56</sup>Bibb, *Slave Narratives*, eds. Andrews and Gates Jr., New York: Literary Classics, (2000), p. 460.

options for a slave woman to defy slavery or her owners significantly decreased when she had children. Again, running away could result in being separated from her children forever, leaving them alone and at the mercy of the institution. Additionally, defying her plantation authorities outright could result in a trip to the auction block or a beating that could lead to her death. Knowing her own misery as a slave, especially if her owners were fond of brutal punishment or sexually abusing their slaves, a mother could do very little to prevent putting her own offspring through slavery.

Frances Harper was an African American woman that was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1825. Harper was best known for poetry and fiction works that were devoted to promoting abolition and equal civil rights for all, especially women. She dedicated her life to fighting for peace and equality among all races and genders, beginning with the abolition of slavery to assisting Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the women suffragists' in the early 1900s. Although she was never a slave, her ability to read and write made her a voice for her race, and more specifically her gender. She fought for equality until she died in 1911.<sup>57</sup>

In Harper's poem titled, "The Slave Mother: A Tale of Ohio," she tells the story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave mother that killed her baby girl and attempted to kill her three sons in an effort to save them from returning to a life of slavery just before she was captured by her slave owner. Harper's poem was written as a form of anti-slavery propaganda. It depicted the tragic true story of a woman that had exhausted all of her options to gain freedom and was desperately trying to gain control over her life. The poem begins with imitating the despair that Garner might have felt when she knew she would soon be caught and her children would have to return to slavery:

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<sup>57</sup>Grohsmeier, Janeen, "Frances Harper," Unitarian Universalist History & Heritage Society, <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/francesharper.html>, (Accessed February 26, 2012).

Dreams! Vain dreams, heroic mother,  
 Give all thy hopes and struggles o'er,  
 The pursuer is on thy track,  
 And the hunter at thy door.

In order to make her story relatable to others, the poem represented Garner's thoughts before she committed one of the most heinous acts a human could do. Like all of Harper's literary works, "The Slave Mother" was a tool to garner support for abolition that portrayed the dire effects of slavery on the enslaved. Garner murdering her infant was "a deed for freedom," a sacrifice to assist in the demise of the slave system. The poet's words instill the same desperate, hopeless, and panicked feelings that the young mother was probably feeling moments before she ended her daughter's life, saving her from her "darkly threatened doom" and paving her a "path to freedom Through the portals of the tomb."<sup>58</sup>

Historian Steven Weisenburger argued that not only was Garner trying to protect her daughter from a life of servitude, but she was also rebelling against her master. Weisenburger claimed that this baby girl was the result of Garner's master sexually abusing her before she attempted to escape. Murdering her child was a direct attack on his person and to the economic gain her daughter would provide his family.<sup>59</sup> Other slave women would chew an abortifacient herb called the cotton root bar or *gossypium hirsutum* in order to insure that they never carried a pregnancy to term. If they were caught chewing cotton root bar, the risk of being severely punished or even killed by her master was a risk a bondswoman seemed worthy of taking.<sup>60</sup>

Infanticide and self-inflicted abortions may seem like extreme measures to be taken in order to resist slavery. To put it into perspective, these women were deliberately attempting to

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<sup>58</sup> Harper, Frances E.W., *Complete Poems of Frances E.W. Harper*, ed. Maryemma Graham, New York: Oxford, (1988), pp. 28-30

<sup>59</sup> Weisenburger, Steven, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder From the Old South*, New York: Hill and Wang, (1998).

<sup>60</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, New York: Basic Books, (2010), p. 33.

commit genocide of their own race in order to put the white people in their place. Biologically, women are made to bare and raise children. Self-sacrifice in the name of ending slavery depicts the power that even those individuals that were considered the lowest class of American society were capable of wielding. What is even more interesting is comparing women like Margaret Garner to Sally Hemings. They both were practicing a similar kind resistance to slavery in a sense that they were decreasing the slave population but the means to which their goals were achieved were markedly different.

Although Hemings children were given the chance to live to see freedom, she, like Garner had to make a significant sacrifice in order to see that they were liberated from bondage. It cannot be proven, but we can speculate that she submitted to the will of Jefferson in order to better her own circumstances in life. When the affair resulted in a handful of pregnancies, she may have initially felt the same way Garner felt when she decided to murder her child: desperate to rid her children of their “darkly threatened doom.”<sup>61</sup> However, if Hemings did indeed trade her freedom for her children’s liberation when Jefferson died, then she may have seen her pregnancies as a window of opportunity to provide her children with better life, to decrease the slave population, and to increase the freed African American population. The most significant benefit was an increase in free blacks because they could assist with the abolitionist movement.

While black men were resisting slavery by escaping to freedom and adding to the freed black population, black women were still bound to the plantations by their children. At first glance one might think the male slave played a more active and significant role in undermining the institution of slavery. There is, however, a great significance in the enslaved black woman’s presence on the plantation who dared to nourish her slave community’s culture through teaching

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<sup>61</sup> Harper, *Complete Poems of Harper*, ed. Graham, New York: Oxford, (1988), pp. 28-30.

the slave children about God. The word of God provided hope for a future free of the shackles of bondage and demanded justice for all of His people. Even before Christianity was adopted as a religion among the American slave population, an enslaved woman became an authority figure among her fellow slaves. These women were often known as “conjurers,” a title African Americans brought with them from their homelands to describe a spiritual leader and healer in the community. So great was her influence over the other slaves, the slave owners both resented and respected her power to subdue or encourage “strife” among his slaves.<sup>62</sup> Her power to influence the overall mood of “his” slave community was a threat to the white man’s authority on the plantation, one that would be realized later when she began to follow and lead others to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

With the introduction of Christianity into slave society, bondswomen adopted this hopeful religion as theirs with ease. Many of the white masters used the Bible and Christian religion to convey slavery as a patriarchal duty in order to take care of what they deemed a less advanced race, and also completely prohibited slaves from attending church. Even so, blacks eventually adopted their own version of the religion that promised redemption for their transgressions and a judgment day for any white person that committed any evil acts against a slave or any individual who supported the institution in the first place.<sup>63</sup> The simple notion that whites could not control how they interpreted the Bible was resistance in itself. But, when women like Mary Prince “followed the church earnestly every opportunity” and the church was led by anti-slavery leaders, owners obviously prohibited their slaves to attend if they were fortunate enough to find out about their attendance in the first place. “I did not then tell my mistress about it; for I knew that she would not give me leave to go. But I felt I *must* go,” Prince

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<sup>62</sup>Jones, *Labor of Love*, New York: Basic Books, (2010), pp. 36-37.

<sup>63</sup> Lylery, “Black Methodist Women,” *Discovering the Women in Slavery*, Athens: Georgia, (1996), p. 208, 212.

lamented. The “Moravian church” that she had been attending not only taught her of how she was loved by God no matter what sins she committed, just as equally as God loved the next white person, but they also taught her rudimentary literacy skills, both reading and writing.<sup>64</sup>

Although slave owners may have taught their slaves to read so they could read the Bible, if a slave could write it would “threaten the social order,” as Janet Cornelius argued in her research. The power to write could enable a slave to write about their lives and all of the evil they endured while enslaved.<sup>65</sup> Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, and Harriet Jacobs are examples of the handful of fortunate fugitive slaves that were taught how to read and write. Their narratives gained the sympathy of a nation and European nations. Although narratives written by abolitionists served to raise awareness and were published with good intentions, the author’s bias misconstruing something a slave said out of context is very likely to have occurred. It is not to be forgotten that although some whites believed slavery was indeed wrong, they did not necessarily believe African Americans were an equal race. These blacks that were able to further their education when they fled the South were the Civil Rights’ leaders of their day, providing the groundwork that blacks would need in order to demand suffrage and equality in America in the 1950s and 1960s.

The power to write was an obvious threat to pro-slavery whites. However, slave owners took it upon themselves as their Christian duty to teach slaves to read the Bible. Historians have not emphasized the power that “Bible literacy” had. Once slaves were able to read the Bible for themselves, even if they could not write, his or her interpretation of the passage could not be controlled by the master. Attending one present-day Sunday school class will illuminate that the

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<sup>64</sup> Andrews, ed., *Six Women’s Slave Narratives*, Oxford: New York, (1988), p. 16

<sup>65</sup> Cornelius, Janet, “‘We Slipped and Learned to Read:’ Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process, 1830-1865,” *Phylon* (1960-), vol. 44, no. 3, Atlanta: Clark Atlanta, (1983), p. 171.

Bible, specifically the New Testament, is filled with language about freedom and a redeeming love for all of mankind. On the other hand, the Old Testament illustrates an angry God who seeks justice against evildoers; this promise of a “Judgment Day” gave embittered slave women the hopeful image of whites being punished for their wrongdoings. Cynthia Lynn Lyerly made note of a Methodist preacher’s account which told when he witnessed a heartbroken mother being sold to another plantation. When she cried out in anger, instead of making the promise of seeing her children again in “Heaven” after she died, a mother slave in Virginia promised that she would meet them “again at Judgment Day.”<sup>66</sup>

In conclusion to this chapter, we must refocus on the white interviewer or transcriber that the slave and ex-slave narratives used to give examples of all of the black female heroic acts of struggle. I have established that whites held the power in the world, specifically white males. Blacks had to gain at least a portion of the white population’s sympathy in order to gain freedom because the whites retained the power to give it to them. Male or female, these individuals that helped to publish the slave’s experience were likely to have had varying interpretations of what the abolition of slavery should entail, but they did all agree that slavery was an inhumane institution. In a world filled with individuals that relied on slavery for their incomes, their goods, and their services, it took great courage for a white person to step out against the institution. It took hearing the first-hand account of the heart-wrenching tale of a woman’s children being sold at the auction block, never to be seen again, or the story of a brave woman throwing a white rapist into a pot of boiling water to ward his sexual aggressions off forever in order to be granted a white person’s sympathies. Further, those abolitionists were whites that had heard of these accounts of the weakest members of society fighting back and when they did, they could not help

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<sup>66</sup> Lyerly, “Black Methodist Women,” *Discovering the Women in Slavery*, Athens: Georgia, (1996), p. 119.

but put themselves in their place and imagine a black enslaved woman's world. Although they may have had their bias, or to some extent still reserved a racial prejudice against blacks because it was so ingrained into their minds from birth, their participation in retelling the stories of black women was necessary to end slavery.

Racial and gender stereotypes that made the African American woman desirable property for whites combined to make her experience throughout slavery a unique one. Her hardships also brought specific opportunities to reject the negative characteristics that were expected of her. When she capitalized on the moment and stood up for herself or her loved ones, regardless of the consequences, she took a little bit of power away from her white authorities. Her life was not considered her own: her master, mistress, or overseer always needed her to work for them in some manner. That desire for her to comply gave her the option to adhere or rebel. There were violent consequences that she would more than likely reap for not submitting to her authorities' expectations or demands, but her ability to refuse proved to be a weakness in the institution that black women would capitalize on. Although there was no united strike against white power until they were organized under figures like Dr. Martin Luther King, there was sporadic resistance throughout slavery's existence that contributed to the institution's demise and paved the way for the long road ahead to equality.



## Chapter 3:

Finally, I have come to the point in which I will discuss the freedwoman's experience after the Civil War's end and until about 1890 in the American South. As in Chapter Two, this portion of the research will interpret their stories of resistance through a unique historical lens with a focus on aspects such as the speaker's feelings about the action of refusal, the impact that resistance may have had on their life or the general black experience, and how these narratives may have influenced whites to mobilize in the abolition efforts.

The year is 1865 and the country is united yet literally shattered to pieces after finishing the bloodiest war it had seen or would ever see. The flopped Confederate currency left Southern states' economy in an economic shock. Not one person enjoyed any safe haven from the War's after effects; even the wealthiest of plantation owners suffered tremendously. Southern states were filled with free slaves—that is freedmen that were practically slaves to whites because they had virtually no money. The triumphant federal government was not quick to relax after the war either. Southern rebellions and regression into an unofficial form of slavery after the death of so many men haunted every Republican's dreams. Evidence of this real threat to the fragile new-found unity exists in an article published in the New York-based pictorial newspaper, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* titled "Save Louisiana."<sup>67</sup>

In an effort to appeal to the Northern whites, the author argued for Louisianan whites to regain complete governmental control because blacks simply could not be trusted and could not adequately care for themselves much, less their fellow citizens. Sympathizing with the Democrats, the Yankee author claimed Louisiana should regain its freedom from "the

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<sup>67</sup>"Save Louisiana," *Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, January 30, 1875, no. 1009, vol. XXXIX, p. 1.

Administration,” or the Federal government, Republican powers, and the “government by negroes” because states that were “governed” by these entities, specifically those that allowed blacks to vote, were plagued with “corruption, robbery, ignorance and degradation.” By placing the power in the hands of the state’s Democrats, Louisiana would enjoy “peace, prosperity, and growing intelligence.”<sup>68</sup> Democratic arguments for limiting the rights of black citizens took on the guise of a caretaker for the helpless because slavery rendered them ignorant of the ways of the world. In reality, though, it was an excuse for whites to maintain the oppressive hierarchy of the slave South with white men at the top and black women trailing at the bottom. Their arguments proved to be convincing enough to gain the support of Northern newspapers such as this one. The Republican Congress believed they formed an answer to these arguments that threatened the purpose of the Emancipation Proclamation, along with a plan for Reconstruction that included harsh penalties and military rule in the former Confederate States. Their anger was the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, commonly known as the Freedmen’s Bureau.

Up to this point, I have dissected the black female’s gender roles that were established while she was enslaved. More specifically, I have portrayed how she was able to sporadically show that she could thwart the overall progress of slavery on a very limited level by rejecting her assigned role. Now I will examine the black woman’s experience as a free individual: the new and many often familiar forms of oppression that she faced specifically because of her gender and race after the Civil War, and how she persisted. Even with the military presence in the South during Reconstruction, little changed for the freedwoman in respect to her position in society – she still remained at the bottom of the hierarchy. If she had been a target while enslaved because

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<sup>68</sup> ibid.

of the combined “weakness” of her gender and race, her vulnerability was multiplied after slavery was abolished.

This chapter is not arguing that the Bureau made things worse for newly freed blacks or black women specifically. As W. E. B. Du Bois explained, it would be “convenient” to blame “on the Freedmen’s Bureau all the evils of that evil day, and damn it utterly for every mistake and blunder that was made.”<sup>69</sup> The goal of this final discussion is to continue the story of black womanhood and the specific oppressive situations that confronted her because of her sex. With a new focus on the transitional years from slavery to freedom, from about 1863 to 1880, the archival records of the Freedmen’s Bureau tell the bulk of the story of the freedwoman’s experience in the face of a frustrated white population that was seeking retribution for its loss of power to a seemingly foreign Federal government.<sup>70</sup>

The Freedmen’s Bureau Act of 1865 was supposed to create a protective body for the African Americans, and in many ways it was successful. If it were not for this “big brother” to the freedmen and women of the South, there would have been almost no schools available to encourage advancement in society, and blacks would have been completely unprotected in all aspects of their lives. The Bureau was the sole provider of fair trials between whites and blacks. Even so, black codes that were installed in state constitutions hindered them from pursuing the life, liberty and happiness the Constitution promises for every citizen. But its existence did not change the fact that blacks were ruled by lynch mobs. If they were lucky, they were arrested without cause, and rarely given a fair trial with a jury of their peers. Further, it often caused more tension between whites and blacks, providing more feelings of animosity that built the

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<sup>69</sup> Du Bois, W.E.B., “The Freedmen’s Bureau,” *Atlantic Monthly*, no. 87, (1901).

<sup>70</sup> Cimbala, Paul A. and Randall M. Miller, *Freedmen’s Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations*, New York: Fordham, (1999), pp. XV-XVIII.

color wall which took a century to break down.<sup>71</sup> Thankfully, in regards to historical research, the records it left behind are rich with information regarding the black woman's experience during her first few years of freedom, or lack thereof.

The Bureau was created with good intent. Its purpose was to take care of the issue that lingered on everyone's minds after the institution was abolished, "what to do with the slave population." It adhered to the Northerner's definition of the "white man's burden," to assimilate, Christianize, and instruct "savage" races on how to be better human beings. "She was given forty acres of land and a colt," Joseph Samuel Badgett told his WPA interviewer at the age of 72 in Little Rock, Arkansas. He was describing the land that he believed was "a gift" to his mother after "freedom came" from her master.<sup>72</sup> The act specifically took care of "every male citizen, whether refugee or freedman," but because she was a woman it is likely that her master was assigned to her as a white guardian of sorts by the local appointed assistant commissioner. These commissioners were charged with taking care of "all subjects relating to refugees and freedmen" throughout divided regions of the conquered South in order to help transition the formerly disenfranchised slave into the world of free labor and to soothe their new relations with their fellow American citizens.

In an effort to educate blacks in on how to become civilized citizens, the Bureau would issue informative pamphlets, most of which if read in the present day and out of historical context seem patronizing and racist. As Brevet Major-General Clinton B. Fisk explained in his *Plain Counsels to Freedmen: in Sixteen Short Lectures*, the government believed blacks needed to be taught to "deserve the good will of all the white people" to insure peace in the South, and

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Joseph Samuel Badgett, by Samuel S. Taylor, *Born in Slavery*, Library of Congress, March 3, 2001, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>, (Accessed April 19, 2012).

the Bureau would serve as their protection until they behaved at a satisfactory level.<sup>73</sup> At first glance, this imperative may sound quite condescending to a person living long after slavery's demise. However backwards *Plain Counsels* may seem today, Fisk's directives for freedmen and freedwomen's behavior were logical because he was acknowledging that although the government had given blacks the title of "equal," a majority of society refused to recognize their new title. "The two great obstacles" that led to the inevitable failure of the Bureau "were the tyrant and the idler" as labeled by Du Bois: "the slaveholder who believed slavery was right" and refused to let it go "and the freedman, who regarded freedom as perpetual rest." He labeled the whites as "the Devil" and blacks "the Deep Sea" that refused to cooperate with each other.

This reasoning was often absent from the Bureau's practices and instead the mission was to integrate blacks into free society by force – sometimes against the black person's will and of course against the majority of the white population's will. The Bureau was to become a government of its' own, specifically serving the newest class of American citizens with its own operating job center, welfare distributing center, a court system, and it even installed schools. Bureau commissioners organized all indentured workers and any complaints filed on behalf of or against any African American individual. The appointed commissioner was given the responsibility for all of the Southern lands that had been acquired by the federal government through "confiscation or sale," abandonment, "or otherwise..." during the war at a low rent cost of six cents a year for three years. Further, the Bureau was supposed to provide enough food, "clothing, and fuel," as the Secretary of War saw fit to the "destitute and suffering refugees and freedmen and their wives and children." All of these welfare programs were delegated to

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<sup>73</sup> Fisk, Brevet Maj.-Gen. Clinton B., *Plain Counsels for Freedmen: in Sixteen Brief Lectures*, Boston: American Tract Society, (1866), p. 13.

assistant commissioners in order to best answer each region's problems efficiently.<sup>74</sup> However, with an embittered white population feeling like victims of an armed robber that stole their sons' lives, their land, their livestock, and their servants, the Bureau's presence did little to unite Southern whites and blacks.

Along with providing land to farm and make a living and labor contracts to provide blacks with work, the leaders of the Bureau made assimilation into American society a priority—specifically white American society. Without taking into consideration the condescending quality of imposing one culture shared by the majority onto the minority group simply because the latter believed they are superior in all ways, these goals to make blacks conform to Victorian-era ideals of gender roles were understandable. It was driven by the theory that, perhaps whites would be more accepting of their newest citizens if blacks relinquished their culture and adopted whiter way of life. With proper leadership, propaganda, policies, and improving education opportunities for blacks, not all hope was lost for ameliorating Southern race relations.

Pamphlets like Fisk's *Plain Counsels* demanded these Victorian gender roles in simple and specific language. To the "so long degraded" freedwomen of the South, there were crucial "suggestions" of behaviors that would allow them to "rise to the dignity and glory of *true* womanhood." The word "true" is emphatic in a sense that as women that were slaves, they did not have a "true" sense of what it took to be a woman of society—again, specifically white society. Throughout the rest of his chapter devoted to black women, Fisk makes a point to touch on every aspect of their lives and tells them the attitudes and behaviors they should adopt, as if they had never known how to live a "moral" life. Ironically, many of the suggested behaviors had been adopted by black women long before the abolition of slavery. "You have much work

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<sup>74</sup>Creating the Freedmen's Bureau," Freedmen & Southern Society, <http://www.history.umd.edu/Freedmen/fbact.htm>, (Accessed February 28, 2012).

to do,” and you should “devote yourselves to it,” he demanded, as if they had not been performing hard labor from sun up until sun down for generations. Never let a man “despoil you of your virtue” for any reason, because inevitably “the brand of shame” will arch over the “unchaste woman,” wrote the wise Brevet Major-General. He even went as far as to tell the black female readers to avoid white men “who come to you with smooth words and good promises,” because their intentions were never beneficial.<sup>75</sup> Fisk’s intentions were good indeed, but it was not the black woman that needed to be told to work earnestly and stay away from white men seeking sexual favors. Perhaps this was one of the biggest failures of the Bureau.

Inevitably, race relations steadily worsened. Even with coerced new “duties” for blacks to fulfill, whites were not accepting black freedom and blacks were never going to be white. In slavery, the weakest slave, who was usually a woman, often received the brunt of the master’s anger rather than a stronger slave that could fight back. Unfortunately, the principle did not die with the abolition of slavery. Women were targets for abuse from their racist white employers or bored young men that deemed themselves vigilantes of the Confederacy who formed organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. Freedmen also were targeted by whites that wanted to assert their dominance in the south, but freedwomen endured specific forms of oppression tailored to their gender just as they did in slavery. Just as there seemed to be no hope for preventing a harmful situation while they were chattel, there always was an opportunity to fight back in some way or another. Women were included in the spoils of war and just as the Civil War ended, a new war began between blacks and whites in the South. Thus, the black woman’s physical safety was just as susceptible to harm as it was in slavery. She may have been even more threatened because she gained the freedom to leave the “safety” of her plantation and

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<sup>75</sup> Fisk, *Plaint Counsels*, Boston: American Tract Society, (1866), pp. 25-27.

owner, which might have protected her from being raped or beaten by other men. Classified as a piece of property, she may have had the imminent threat of a tyrannical master or overseer's wrath. If she chose to capitalize on her freedom she faced unknown enemies.

Womanhood is symbolic of the continuity of mankind. Therefore, a woman of a specific race represents the future of her own race. The vulnerability these factors instilled in black women's lives was recorded in a letter from freedman Private Calvin Holly to the Mississippi Freedmen's Bureau General Oliver O. Howard. In it, he describes the horrors inflicted on the freedwomen of the state that were subject to these Black Codes in an effort to reinforce the South with more support to give "the Colored man all the rights of a white man" in the face of an oppressive white majority. One woman complained to a Colonel Thomas after spending the night outside with eight freezing children because "She had paid some rent on the house," and the owner apparently kicked them out anyway. He heard of another report in which two black women's mutilated bodies were found carelessly left on the side of the road.<sup>76</sup> A majority of Holly's laments are about how the females of his race are being targeted, evidence of them being the most vulnerable to being taken advantage of or physically attacked by white men.

The paranoia of being sexually abused in slavery lingered long after abolition in black women's minds—some living with the scars and children as permanent reminders of the pain they endured. After being forced to "breed" with another slave, Ms. Williams of Bell County, Texas, claimed to have sworn off all sexual relationships for the rest of her life saying "one 'sperience am 'nough" for her." Her pain of having to sacrifice her ability to reproduce for her master's economic well-being never left her, leading her to make the decision to never participate in one of the most natural human functions. She prayed, "De Lawd forgive dis cullud

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<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Olsen, Christopher J., *The American Civil War: A Hands-On History*, New York: Macmillan, (2007), pp. 242-243.



woman, but he have to ‘scuse me and look for some others for to ‘plenish de earth.” This statement, filled with sadness and anger, was a stand against not only white men but black men who took advantage of her as well. Even though Rufus was ordered to “breed” as well, he never had to carry the child in his womb or even raise it, for she claimed she never saw him again.<sup>77</sup> Williams’ resolve to never have her own children or enjoy her new freedom to legally marry a man she loved exemplified resistance to oppression. Not only did she refuse to provide more slaves to her master after she had the one forced child, she also refused to provide more men and women that would likely be subject to the same pains she went through under the white man’s social hierarchy. No more women to be sexually abused or taken advantage of, no more men to emasculate or work to death for little to no pay as a tenant farmer, and no more individuals that could be lynched for standing up for themselves.

Often, freedwomen that were single mothers had to enter into oppressive annual contracts with plantation owners, or had to give up their children to the Bureau to become apprentices. Freedmen and women that entered into these contracts or apprenticeships were frequently overworked, underpaid, and sometimes even physically abused by their white employers just as they had been prior to Emancipation.<sup>78</sup> Although these apprenticeships were supposed to provide food, shelter, and an education in a trade to “orphan” children of freedmen and women, they sometimes forcefully took children from their guardians on the basis that the parents or parent were unable to properly care for them.<sup>79</sup>

Another discrepancy within the apprenticeship program was that former owners took priority over children that were being put up for apprenticeship without the consent of the

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<sup>77</sup> Interview with Williams, *Born in Slavery*, 2001, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>, (Accessed April 19, 2012).

<sup>78</sup> Jones, *Labors of Love*, New York: Basic Books, (2010), pp. 53-54.

<sup>79</sup> Rhyne, “Conduct...inexcusable and unjustifiable” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 42, no. 2, (Winter 2008), pp. 324-326.

mother. According to Rhyne's research in "Conduct...Inexcusable and Unjustifiable," there were several reported cases in Kentucky in which whites were abusing or not paying their apprentices. When guardian tried to intervene, the Bureau often sided with the whites because they failed to "recognize their own racist preconceptions." Rhyne tells the story of one mother, Lavina Newland, that tried to resist the system after Shelton Scott, the man she worked for and her son was an apprentice for, abused him. After witnessing him beat her son with a stick, she got into a physical altercation with Scott. She complained, but the Bureau sided with the Scott because her son was his apprentice, therefore, he could discipline him as he saw fit. Newland's actions against Scott confirmed to the Bureau that her son was with the more capable guardian.<sup>80</sup> Although it is not known what became of Newland and her son, it is unlikely that Scott rescinded his rights to her son as an apprentice. Even though her courage to protect her son nullified her case against Scott in the Bureau's opinion, she may have successfully prevented any future physical abuse on her son.

The language of Bureau indentures depicts both the remnants of the patriarchal slave society in which the white man was seen as a fatherly caretaker of his slaves, and the rights that young African Americans lost as soon as they were deemed an apprentice. In Casswell County, North Carolina, a girl named Lucy at the age of 9 was indentured to apprentice under a J. L. Motley until she reached the age of 18. In it, Lucy was required to "faithfully...serve and obey" Motley's "lawful commands willingly...and shall not absent from the service of her master day or night, without his leave..." While she was bound to serve Motley and his family for the entire term as a housekeeper, she would be promised a "sum of \$50" and lessons in "reading, writing,

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<sup>80</sup>ibid.

and arithmetic” at the end of her service.<sup>81</sup> It is unknown how she was treated throughout her service, but the language of the contract made her Motley’s responsibility until she had completed her term. More specifically, it gave him the power to reprimand her as he saw fit. Indentured service contracts were slave contracts in sheep’s clothing; by placing an overwhelming majority of young black children to work in the homes of whites upheld the patriarchal hierarchy of the post-Civil War South.

The Black Codes that were installed throughout the U.S. upheld the same white patriarchal theme as the indentured servant contracts. With freedom, one of the greatest advances for blacks was the ability to quit their employers if they felt they were being mistreated or they were not being paid adequately. However, various factors prevented them from capitalizing on this new freedom of choice. Black codes instilled a contracting system of work that mandated all freed people to enter into a contract with their white employer. Mississippi’s Black Code, for example, mandates that any African American who works for more than one month for an employer must enter into a binding contract for a certain term of service. If he or she quit before the term was finished, “without good cause, he shall forfeit his wages for that year up to the time of his quitting.” Further, any “deserting employee” caught by a policeman was to be arrested and taken back to his or her employer.<sup>82</sup> Sections like these in the Black Codes throughout the states were devised to reverse every freedom freed blacks were granted at the end of the Civil War.

Plantation owners credited shelter, a plot of land to farm for the family’s food, and any other things the workers needed in exchange for a year’s worth of field service. Even though

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<sup>81</sup> “Indenture of Apprenticeship,” October 21, 1865, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of North Carolina, *The Freedmen’s Bureau Online*, <http://freedmensbureau.com/northcarolina/ncindentures3.htm>, (Accessed February 29, 2012).

<sup>82</sup> Mississippi State Legislature, *Mississippi Black Codes, 1865: an Act to Confer Civil Rights on Freedmen, and for Other Purposes*, <http://home.gwu.edu/~jjhawkin/BlackCodes/pdfMississippi.pdf>, (Accessed March 20, 2012).

blacks were given wages, they would often find themselves in debt at the end of the year because the plantation owners charged so much for all of the goods he gave his workers, creating an employer-worker relationship that resembled the medieval feudal system. Those women that were once sought out by slave owners for reproductive capabilities now became liabilities to plantation owners that began “contracting” with their black workers. So if freedwomen with children were lucky enough to land a job on a plantation, her life was not much different than before emancipation, in that she was tied to her employer’s land because she and her family became indentured servants. According to Jones in her work *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, contracting goods and shelter for work often came with rules that prevented the indentured from being able to leave a plantation without permission of the owner, and resulted in giving the owner “authority” to punish his workers just as he would have when they were slaves.<sup>83</sup>

The authority a plantation owner was given in the annual contract system essentially recreated the institution of slavery without it being legitimized by law. However, just as in slavery, the black women that found themselves in an annual contract with an oppressive employer were able to find ways to assert justice for themselves through various actions. The complaints filed with the Bureau showed that black women were not abused or manipulated to the point of no response. That is, according to the 1868 Register of Complaints for the State of Louisiana under a table that listed the “Source of Complaint’s by Initiator’s Race” quoted 693 of the 1,990 complaints to the Bureau against another individual were black women, 411 of which were against whites for “Nonpayment of wages; dispute over working conditions or compensation.”<sup>84</sup> Her willingness to stand up for her earnings, whether she was not getting paid enough or anything at all, or she was unhappy with her working environment, is significant

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 299-300.

because it shows black women were not accepting any treatment that resembled the way they were treated as slaves. Even if the Bureau did not provide any remedy, she was making a big risk by taking a stand at all with the threat of white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan around. She was resisting the white population's efforts to maintain a practical institution of slavery.

Fortunately, the oppressive annual contract system was not the only option for black women seeking work. If she lived in a rural area, she may have been fortunate enough to have come across some money after she was freed. Additionally, if she was married and her husband was able to find work, black women avoided becoming indentured tenants on a plantation and maintaining their new freedom to quit, travel, or relocate. Black women were able to find work in the cities as domestic workers such as laundresses, housekeepers, or cooks. However, even in the cities the transition from enslaved labor to free labor was resisted constantly by white employers. Black women would utilize their ability to quit at any chance they could get, while whites classified this action as "idleness" and "vagrancy," both "prosecutable offenses." It was simply women asserting their freedom and their right to being treated with respect. According to *To 'Joy my Freedom*, "African-American women decided to quit work over such grievances as low wages, long hours, ill treatment, and unpleasant tasks." Even though she would suffer the loss of wages and a required recommendation letter to obtain another job in some cities, black women would still defy a difficult mistress just to prove that she could.<sup>85</sup>

For the first time since their debut in North America, black women were not always alone in their resistance to gender specific oppression. An altercation between a freedwoman and her husband, Henry Jones and young white man by the name of Robert A. Jones, shows that the

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<sup>85</sup> Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, Cambridge: Harvard, (1997), p. 28.

newfound male and female unity after slavery was outlined in a letter from Substitute Assistant F. B. Sturgis to the Acting Assistant Adjunct Lieutenant L. K. Morton of the Bureau for the State of Texas. Accordingly, he says Robert “undertook to whip the wife” of freedman Henry after she threatened to “come up to the Freedman’s Bureau and make a complaint that Jones had taken some thirty acres of the plantation first allotted to them to cultivate, all of which they had plowed up and planted.” When Henry “interfered,” telling Robert “he must not whip his wife,” the white man, with the assistance of his father Adam R. Jones, proceeded to return to his home to retrieve his pistol that would end Henry’s life over a piece of land.<sup>86</sup>

At first glance, the altercation was about a piece of land. Obviously, this dispute was over a deep-seated battle between races and genders. Henry and his wife were most likely indentured servants of Adam and Robert’s. The white men, as they often did, were probably asserting their dominance over their workers by taking away the land that they had given them when they began an annual contract. Henry, and possibly his wife depending on when they were married, was most likely a former slave of theirs as well because slaves often took the last name of their owners. With those factors being taken into consideration, the freedwoman’s courageous attempt at seeking justice against the whites speaks volumes. To stand up to a former master and his son was continuing the resistance to white domination that began with her ancestors. If, however, they had been enslaved when this occurred, her husband would have had to stand by and watch his wife be disciplined by a man, guilty of nothing other than having the will to stand up for herself and her family. Henry’s stand against his former master was proof that no man

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<sup>86</sup>Sturgis letter to Morton, “Miscellaneous records relating to murders and other criminal offenses committed in Texas 1865-1865,” September 25, 1866, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Texas, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1868, <http://freedmensbureau.com/texas/galveston.htm>, (Accessed March 03, 2012).

could enslave the will of another. It was an assertion of his race's masculinity and will to protect women that would carry on his legacy through childbirth.

While enslaved, blacks could never unite under one front against oppression. Black men were emasculated and forced to sit back and watch whites reap havoc upon their women, scarring them physically, mentally, and emotionally in ways that would transcend for generations to come. The abolition of slavery instigated a domino effect of the white male hierarchical society instilled so long ago. It allowed for blacks to begin to unite under one front for equal rights and complete freedom. It was the catalyst that the women courageous enough to commit sporadic acts of resistance throughout the South against slavery, inequality, and the social hierarchy needed to begin the long road to the Civil Rights' movement.

### Conclusion:

The prominent black female activist Mary Church Terrell once summed up the black woman's experience in America in this all-encompassing statement:

“But the white women of England and the United States have only one burden to bear...sex. What would they do I wonder if they were double-crossed, so to speak, as the colored women of this country are: if they had two heavy loads to carry through an unfriendly world, the burden of race as well as that of sex?”<sup>87</sup>

From the very beginning, the institution of slavery brought layer upon layer of oppression upon black women specifically. It traded their biological father figures that were supposed to protect and provide for them and replaced them with sexually aggressive strangers that were quick to beat them into submission. Slavery took them away from their own children and husbands that they desired to care for, and put them in a strange man's home to take care of his light-skinned children. If black women were not assigned to work in the home, they were out in the fields side by side with their men, with the expectation that she should perform equally strenuous tasks from sun up to sun down even if she were with child. All of these social demands emanating from the all-powerful white man brought specific opportunities for black women to resist his self-imposed authority and the social hierarchy as a whole. Her choice to refuse to adhere to a white man's gender specific demands was a significant contributor to the demise of slavery and the advancement of her people as a whole. Through this, she was able to gain the attention of white sympathizers, she frustrated the white supremacists, and she empowered other blacks to do the same.

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<sup>87</sup> Mary Church Terrell, “Being a colored woman in the United States,” Mary Church Terrell Papers, Collection 102, Box 3, Folder 53, p. 1, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.



Studying the ways in which the most historically oppressed race and gender group in the U.S. fought for their physical and mental protection and their varying worldviews from about 1830 to 1890 is important for understanding a plethora of aspects of this country's social and cultural history. To know a society to its full extent means to know every member's perspective of themselves and their environment around them. Finding proof of black women committing courageous acts that demanded the respect of whites and black peers as early as 1830 marked the beginnings of a movement for true equality in America.

Considering the questions that drove this thesis mentioned in the introduction, this research has provided a wealth of information to add to the American historical conversations in regards to black women, slavery, the effects of the Freedmen's Bureau, and social relations in the South. I have found that the effects of one woman's resistance to a single instance in the slave South does not always seem significant at first glance. But, given the number of instances used in this relatively short historical analysis, which served as a miniscule sample of the number of instances that have not been read or written about yet, I can confirm that there was a widespread, disunited, and sporadic wave of resistance to white oppression between the years of 1830 to 1890 in America. We can confirm that a black woman's gender in combination with the added weight of being of African descent made her the most likely target for bullying by the powerful white male. It will also be noted that there was a general positive flowing correlation between the youthfulness of the interviewee in the WPA collection of slave narratives and the energy behind the anger and resentment for her status and treatment as a slave. Some critics may find that there are plenty of interviews in which the slave women missed the "good ole' days of slavery," but it can be guaranteed that a majority of them claim to be the oldest of the women interviewed.

The slave women's experience did not change drastically as a freedwoman after 1865 and up until 1890. They faced many of the same physical and emotional threats with the added threat of attaining financial security. As many times as one black woman did not stand up for herself, there were plenty of women who had regardless of the consequences. Their actions sent a message to their younger generations. African American women's resistance to gendered oppression, whenever it was witnessed or rehashed with other blacks was a key to insuring equality, freedom, and safety for future generations because it instilled a fighting spirit in their youth. The will to do better for one's children than one's parents could do for them drove generations to keep fighting for full and equal rights in America. But, if her resistance was witnessed by or her story was told to a white person that was pliable in his or her opinions for whatever reason, there stood the possibility to persuade the most influential member of society to fight for her race's rights.

The discourse on black women's history in slavery can be expanded on in many ways depending on a researcher's access to information and time constraints. An entire book could be written about the complicated sexual relationships between white men and black women, and how they impacted white women and black men. It would just be a matter of spending time reading through the WPA archives or any other narratives at hand. Also, it would be interesting to research further how the black female's non-specific work roles on the plantation may have influenced her work roles as a woman in the free market world. The National Archives in Washington, D.C. holds an abundant amount of primary resources from the Freedmen's Bureau. The continued resistance to white oppression on behalf of black women specifically could be analyzed through reading complaints on behalf of or against black women as well. After exploring the way black women contributed significantly to the sporadic movement toward

equality and freedom in America, I not only have contributed to black history and black women's history specifically, but I have gained a better understanding of American race relations in the South as well.

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