

A Comparative Study Into Relationships Between Enslaved Women and White Women in the Household in Nineteenth Century America

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INTRODUCTION

The relationships formed between enslaved African American women and their mistresses in the antebellum period constituted a key influence in their experiences as slaves. Interviews conducted by the Federal Writers Project (FWP) in the 1930s shed light upon how formerly enslaved women viewed themselves and the nature of their relationships with their mistresses. From these interviews, we can identify key influences on the relationships enslaved and slaveholding women formed, such as violence, material well-being and religious instruction. The nature and extent of these influences differed greatly by region, owing to slaveholding sizes, regional economies, and the differing roles of white women as slaveholders. Yet, while recent work has re-evaluated the position of white women as slaveholders, there has been little attention given to the significance of this regional variation. In this project, I thus explore the influences on relationships between enslaved women and their female enslavers and how these varied across the South to better understand the complexities and nature of their relationships.

METHODOLOGY

The scholarship surrounding the FWP interviews has evaluated their usefulness and validity as historical sources, where the old-age of interviewees, the Jim Crow context of the interviews, and the economic hardships of the Great Depression are all understood to have shaped the testimony former slaves gave. Despite their limitations, I believe these sources can give us great insight into the slave experience, and, more particularly, the relationships such individuals formed with their former owners. In my research, I employed a comparative approach in order to discover what factors influence slave-mistress relations most between the regions of South Carolina (SC) and Virginia (VA). Such framework enabled me to discover the varying factors that influenced slave-mistress relations, and to different degrees. A limitation of the interviews in this framework is that there only exists one volume of interviews conducted in VA, while SC has four, which makes it more difficult to identify distinct patterns and compare them more effectively. Due to this, I had to consult other interviews conducted in VA around the same time as the FWP interviews in other collections.



Della Garlic, VA, c. 1937

FINDINGS: KEY THEMES OF RELATIONSHIPS

VIOLENCE

In VA, where slaveholdings were generally smaller, descriptions of violence were more personal and were often at the hands of the mistresses themselves.

In SC, however, violence was often carried out by overseers, owing to the larger size of slaveholdings, and when mistresses were violent, interviewees recalled them being justified and did not appear to be resentful towards their former owners. In this sense, the more developed and sophisticated system of slavery as found in the low country may explain the more limited violence experienced by slaves at the hands of their mistress.

The better material conditions and stronger family units generally found in the low country may also have contributed to less conflict between slaveholders and the enslaved. Moreover, geographical factors may also be of significance here: VA is further north than SC so runaway slaves had more chance of reaching the emancipated north and so may have more readily engaged in direct resistance.

“dat was de meanes’ white ‘oman in de world, I reckon. Dat ‘oman treat me so mean dat I took an’ run ‘way from her.”
 — Louise Jones, VA

“De massa and missus was good to me but sometime I was so bad they had to whip me.” — Victoria Adams, SC

MATERIAL WELL-BEING

The material well-being of slaves heavily influenced not only their relationship with mistresses but their perception of them too. SC was wealthier than VA, meaning slaves were kept in better conditions and often developed networks of kinship due to the larger amount of slaves on each plantation. Antebellum VA was, however, suffering economic decline, meaning slaveholders struggled to feed themselves, as well as their slaves. In VA, field workers were better fed than the house servants, which points to economic incentives of looking after slaves; and interviewees were generally not as positive about their mistresses as SC interviewees because they were not as well fed or treated. As seen in the SC volumes, the greater treatment mistresses could provide for their slaves (e.g., food, nursing when sick), influenced the perception of mistresses in eyes of slaves as good women, domestic, motherly and pious. However, we must consider the context of the interviews conducted during the Great Depression, and how the economic hardships interviewees were experiencing may have influenced their perceptions of slavery.

“In de house ole Missus was so stingy-mean dat she didn’t put enough on de table to feed a swaller.” — Henrietta King, VA

“In slavery, us have all de clothes us need, all de food us want, and work all de harder ‘cause us love de white folks dat cared for us” — Adeline Hall, SC

“I member when a preacher say, ‘honor your missus an’ mossa dat your days may be long for dey is your only God.”
 — Dave White, SC

its instruction held great weight in determining not only the relations formed between slaves and their mistress, but also their perception of her as a person. Domestic ideology was much more prevalent in SC than in VA, and mistresses tended to have a greater role in instructing their slaves in religion. Subsequently, these slaves began to associate their mistress with what she taught — as pious, good and almost as a saviour in some cases. Nevertheless, mistresses often used religion as a form of control over slaves, especially in larger slave holdings. In contrast to VA, segregation in SC churches was also more strict and uniform, due to widespread racist ideology, and enforced the subordinate status of slaves which in turn influenced the relationship formed with their mistresses.

RELIGION

In both regions religion proved to be a significant survival strategy for slaves, providing a source of comfort for them during the abhorrent experience and conditions of slavery, as well as the Great Depression. While slaves in VA often attended church, their mistress was not commonly involved in the practice and did not provide much instruction as was more common in the low country. In SC, however, religion and

Her mistress was “a perfect angel, if dere ever was one on dis red earth.”
 — Josephine Stewart, SC

CONCLUSION

Exploring these dominant themes in the VA and SC FWP narratives enables us to identify the subtle nuanced differences between each region, and how these differences influenced the relationships formed between enslaved women and their mistresses. Slaveholding size and type, material conditions, and the particular roles mistresses’ took in slavery all influenced black women’s experience of slavery and their relationship with their female enslavers. This helps to explain varying levels of resistance and runaways between regions, and to account for differences in how formerly enslaved women viewed their mistresses. In turn, these regional variations add further dimensions to our understanding of the positions of white women in American slavery.