



Slave hut in the Maroon plantation, Louisiana (photo Steve Norcutti)

## **AFRICAN-AMERICAN SLAVE OWNERS**

*By Elizabeth Steger Trindal*

**M**y interest in the Negro race stems from my childhood. During the Depression, in order to help make ends meet, my mother had a boarding house in our large, Victorian home in East Falls Church, Va. One of my favorite people was Anna May, our live-in maid, and my friend. I spent many evenings in her quarters. To clean her teeth, she used one of her hairpins. My admiration and love for her extended to my doing the same thing with another of her hairpins. When Anna May left us to get married, I wanted to leave with her. When she had a baby, I was terribly jealous.

The Thompson family lived next door to us. No doubt, old Fish was Mr. Thompson's best friend. They whiled away the summer days sitting on the back porch steps or shuffled off together to go fishing. Mr. Thompson was special to me, so Fish was special too. Fish's parents had been slaves.

Mr. Thompson's wife had died, leaving him with six children to raise. In reality, it was their Negro maid, Jane, who had the most influence on the youngsters. She became the mother figure, and ran a tight ship. All of us respected Jane, and knew to give her little trouble.

Before we moved to Virginia, my parents and I made our home in Washington, D.C. My playmates were my nephew, and Cotton, a curly haired, black boy. The three of us palled around together. Race was not an issue.

Later in life, my husband and I lived in Louisiana, in the early to mid 1950s. Many times I witnessed a high regard between the races. I was a collection officer for the Internal Revenue Service. I was surprised to see the patience shown by my fellow

agents to late, tax paying Negroes where little patience was shown to their white counterparts.

For the most part, my early experience with people of color was positive and often heartwarming. Unfortunately, for the last 40 years there has been a movement to ruin racial relationships in the country. Carl Marx believed that in order to reshape people, their heritage must first be eradicated. This is done through brain washing. The undesirables must be made to feel ridden with guilt, to be classified as inferior and even to be made to feel evil. This modus operandi was used against the American Indians, and still is to some extent. Negroes are considered substandard because they came from slaves. They must be given every break or they will surely fail. All Southerners are racists, they all had slaves, and they went to war to protect slavery. Consequently their songs, flags, special days, and other symbols of their heritage are considered evil and must be abolished. With the American Indian, their children were taken from them and sent to government schools. They were not allowed to speak their native language, dance their native dances, or sing their native songs. Their heritage, like Southern heritage, must be invalidated. If the desired result was to reshape America into mindless robots, I will say, to a great extent that has happened. On the other hand, hate and distrust have been masterfully accomplished. Now, contemporary Unionists are stepping forward who want to see America at its best : a harmonious and free union of people who truly care for each other. Karl Marx's concept will never accomplish that. Only with truth gained from laborious research, and the sharing of knowledge can we have a genuine union of people of good will.

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, "*What is history but a fable agreed upon*". Certainly one ongoing fable is the misconception that most Southern whites had slaves. On the contrary, 75 % of Southern families did not own slaves. Out of a total population of 8 million, only 385,000 were slave holders. Of those, 50 % owned 1 to 5 slaves ; 38 % owned 5 to 20 slaves ; 12 % had 20 or more. Those who had 20 or more slaves were classified as planters.

According to the South Carolina 1860 Census, 791 slaves were owned by black slave masters. William Ellison, Sr. of the Sumter District owned 63. According to the book *The Free People of Color in Louisiana and St Domingue : A Comparative Portrait of Two Three-Caste Society*, William Ellison was freed at the age of 29 and eventually became a major planter, patented his own cotton gin, purchased a plantation house from the governor of South Carolina, and was accepted into the restricted white Episcopal Church of Sumter. William Ellison would eventually own 100 slaves. When he died he was buried in the white cemetery of the Episcopal Church. Both daughters married white men of substantial means. His children emigrated sometime after the 1850s. Until then they had been accepted by white society.

According to the 1830 U.S. Federal Census, 10,000 slaves were owned by African-Americans in the states of South Carolina, Louisiana, Virginia, and Maryland. Eight African-Americans in New York City owned 17 slaves at that time.

Slavery was nothing new to African natives. Most who had come to this country had been made slaves by an opposing African tribe and sold for profit to white New England and Dutch ship sea captains. To native Africans, being a slave owner was an admirable position to be in. The two Southern states where the largest number of free people of color owning slaves were in South Carolina and Louisiana. They dealt with their slaves just as their white counterparts. The punishment of runaway slaves, and dealing with the long-term care of slaves were just as demanding for African-American

slave holders as any other slave holder. It was not the law, but it was rigidly followed that slaves would be taken care of from birth to death, namely : housing, food, clothing, and medical care. Northern factory workers should have fared as well, or the poor of any race, era, or geographical location. Life for them has always been cruel. As an aside, it wasn't until the 20th century, with the formation of labor unions, that working conditions for Northern factory workers began to improve. Up until then the working, starving poor immigrants had no rights.

The logical question would next be, how did free people of color acquire slaves ? Off times when a slave was given his freedom, his master gave him or her a slave or two. No slave could be set free unless he could support himself. Freed slaves acquired their skills while on the plantation, such as : farming, blacksmithing, carpentry, stone and brick masonry, animal husbandry, sewing, baking, house cleaning, laundering, and child care. The Negro son or daughter of a white planter would often be given a slave gift with real property to their offspring when freed.

When the first U.S. Federal census of 1790 was taken in Charleston City, South Carolina, it revealed that 36 out of 102 free blackheads of households owned slaves. Surprisingly, during the antebellum period, the majority of urban black slave holders were females. By the 1850 Federal Census, the number of black women who owned slaves was reported at 123, while only 68 black men owned slaves in that city. Ten years later, male masters surpassed the number of female mistresses.

Many free black women inherited their slaves from their deceased free black husbands. As an example, when a Charleston colored butcher died, he left his six slaves, Stella, Mary, Jacob, Lizzie and Selina to his wife, Mary Kochler. They were valued at 2,530 \$.<sup>1</sup>

Many female black slave owners purchased their own slaves. Rebecca Jackson, a successful Charleston laundress, needed help. In 1818, she purchased a black woman. At Rebecca's death she had three slaves, Rose, Molly, and Martha, who were valued at 1,900 \$.<sup>2</sup>

On April 6, 1865, Esther Hill Hawkins related this in her diary : *“On our way home visited Noisetts' garden. The proprietor is a black woman, of great wealth, the widow of a black man, the owner of a great many slaves, and this most beautiful and productive farm. They have cultivated early vegetables for the city of Charleston markets and also supply the most rare and beautiful flowers. There are acres of land, now neglected, but covered with Japonica, oleanders, and great rose bushes. The lane leading from the street to this house, a quarter of a mile or more, is hedged on either side with beautiful rare Cherokee rose bushes. It is one of the finest places in this vicinity”*.<sup>3</sup>

**T**he first, permanent, English settlement in Virginia was established in 1607, thirteen years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts. In 1619, Anthony Johnson was one of the original 20 Africans brought to Jamestown and sold to the colonists. By 1623 he had earned his freedom. By 1651, Johnson was prosperous enough to import five slaves. He received a grant of 250 acres as “headrights”.<sup>4</sup> Johnson was the first black to establish a Negro community, the first black landowner and first

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<sup>1</sup> *Records and Wills of Charleston County, vol. H1834-1844, pp 243-244.*

<sup>2</sup> *Miscellaneous Records Vol. 4Y 1822-1824 (Secretary of State), pp. 159-160.*

<sup>3</sup> *Gerald Schwartz, ed., A Woman Doctor's Civil War, University of South Carolina Press, 1992, p. 127.*

<sup>4</sup> A “headright” is a type of land grant given by the king in appreciation for bringing in colonists. It appears the importation of slaves would come under that classification.

black slave owner.<sup>5</sup>

Nat Butler, a Negro, lived near Aberdeen, Maryland. He “helped” slaves by stealing them from their owners and providing them with a hiding place at his farm while they trustingly waited to be taken north. But Nat had another idea. While the trusting slaves waited, Nat went to the former owners and tried to sell back the slaves he had stolen. If the price was too low to suit Nat, he would find another buyer.<sup>6</sup>

The *The Christian Examiner* of March 1859, and the *Plaquemine, Louisiana Sentinel* newspaper of the same year, told about a wealthy Negro who purchased a 4,000-acre Louisiana plantation including 200 slaves. The purchaser, one of the wealthiest men in the South, paid \$ 250,000 for the plantation. I believe the newspaper accounts were mistaken and they were referring to August Dubuclet of Iberville Parish, where Plaquemine is located. Dubuclet was considered the wealthiest of Negro slaveholders. His real property was valued at \$ 200,000. His plantation totaled more than 1,200 acres. He had 94 slaves. Of that same parish was Antoine Decuir of Point Coupee who owned more than 1,000 acres and had 112 slaves.<sup>7</sup>

In general, the free colored of Louisiana had French names and were mulattoes who had inherited substantial wealth from their white fathers. Life was inordinately difficult for a spouse who could not satisfy her husband with a male heir and whose husband had to resort to a black mistress. Subsequently, the planter’s wife held little standing either among the blacks or the whites on the plantation.

As late as 1863, two years after the alleged war for the freedom from slavery had started, there were three Negroes who owned slaves in the District of Columbia ! Genealogists may be interested to know they were Robert Gunnell, owner of 10 slaves ; Gabriel Conkley, owner of 8 slaves, and James W. McDaniel, owner of 2 slaves.<sup>8</sup>

The Pendarvis family was one of the largest slave owning colored families to plant rice in the state of South Carolina. It started during the mid 1730s when the mulatto children of Joseph, a white planter, and his mistress Parthenawere were given a 1,009-acre plantation in Charleston Neck. Joseph bequeathed to his seven children not only land, but slaves, thus becoming one of the most prominent slave holding families in South Carolina.<sup>9</sup> Upon the death of James Pendarvis, the oldest son of Joseph owned a vast estate. Joseph’s estate consisted of two plantations, the Leggs and Beech Hill in addition to 3,000 additional acres. He owned 155 slaves.<sup>10</sup>

Families endure a great trial when they see the father purchased by one master, the mother by another, and each of the children by still another. All this for the money that they owe the sea Captain. Surprisingly, this was the sad story of many of the white, poor immigrants who came to this country without funds. From three to eight years were worked off with the prospect of freedom. Sadly, many would never know freedom since they were too poor for legal defense.<sup>11</sup>

I found an instance where free Negroes became the purchasers and masters of transported white people. There were two families from Germany who had not been able to pay their passage from Amsterdam to Baltimore and were sold for their passage

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<sup>5</sup> WPA Writers’ Program, *Virginia Guide to the Old Dominion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1940, p. 378.

<sup>6</sup> *American Heritage Magazine*, February/March 1993, “Selling Poor Steven” by Philip Burnham, p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> *Free People of Color in Louisiana and St. Domingue : A Comparative Portrait of Two Three-Caste Societies*, by Laura Foner.

<sup>8</sup> “Rambler”, ‘Emancipation Board Report in 1863 is Studied by the Rambler’, “Washington Star” newspaper, January 12, 1927.

<sup>9</sup> *Record of Wills*, vol. 3-1732-1737, Charleston County, pp 210-242.

<sup>10</sup> Brent N. Holcomb, ad., 1786 Tax Return, South Carolina.

<sup>11</sup> Parke Rouse, Jr., *The Great Wagon Road. 1915 New York : American trail series*, 2001, p.31.

money to a term of labor. The information appeared in a volume issued in 1818 in Stuttgart. It contains letters written in 1817 addressed from Baltimore to the Baron von Gagern, at Frankfort-on-the-Main. The Germans of Baltimore were so outraged by this action that they immediately raised enough money to purchase the immigrants freedom.<sup>12</sup> Logically, it would seem that there were many white immigrants who did not have a purse raised for their freedom and remained in servitude to black masters.

**T**here was a lot of discrimination, and still is, within the Negro race. As recent as Mayor Anthony Williams of Washington, D.C., who was scorned because of his light skin. General and Secretary of State, Colin Powell has suffered the same ridicule from his darker brethren.

Years ago, the mulattoes from one group, especially along the coast of South Carolina, thought themselves superior to their darker skinned brethren. There was, and still is, snobbishness between the rural and urban Negroes, and the educated and less educated. In pre and post Civil War days, “po” white trash was looked upon as less than poor blacks by both Negroes and Caucasians.

We may wring our hands about slavery in this country, thinking it was an institution of the whites. That restitution should be made to those poor unfortunate, beaten, black slaves of the past. But how would this be accomplished, when there were blacks who not only had slaves, but were also slave dealers in this country ?

What would the descendants think of Aunt Fanny Canady, a colored woman of Louisville, KY, who bought several members of her own family ? She owned Jim, her husband, a drunken cobbler. One day Fanny went into her husband’s shop with fire in her eyes and finger pointed. “*Jim,*” she said, “*if you don’t have yourself, I’m gwine sell you down river*”. Jim sat mute and trembling, as to be sent down river meant to be sold to a Negro trader and be taken to the cotton fields of the far South.<sup>13</sup>

At the outbreak of the Civil War, in Norfolk, Virginia, there was an industrious Negress who was a huckster in the market and owned her husband. He was an ardent secessionist and was in full sympathy with the firing on Fort Sumter. After Norfolk was evacuated and was occupied by Federal troops, her husband was loud in expressing his Southern views. His outbursts ended him in a chain gang.<sup>14</sup>

A colored man, named Dubroca, who lived until 1906 near Mobile, Al, had been the owner of numerous slaves. Not long before his death he was asked by a white acquaintance how he felt. He replied : “*O, I’m feeling poorly. I am getting old. They all tell me it was a good thing to free the Negroes, but I wish I had my ‘niggers’ back once more*”.<sup>15</sup>

F.L. Olmsted, the author of the book *The Cotton Kingdom* was told by a former slave, that he had known of many black slave owners. He said they were very bad masters, very hard and cruel - hadn’t any feelings. “*You might think, dat dey would be good to dar own nation; but dey is not. I will tell you de truth, it’s a fact. De was very bad masters. I’d rather be a servant to any man in de world, dan to a brack man. If I was sold to a brack man , I’d drown myself. I would dat - I’d drown myself*”.<sup>16</sup> We will

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<sup>12</sup> Calvin D. Wilson, *Negroes Who Owned Slaves*, Reprinted from the *Popular Science Monthly*, November, 1912, p. 489.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin D. Wilson, *Negroes Who Owned Slaves*, Reprinted from the *Popular Science Monthly*, November, 1912. p. 488.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*. p. 489

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* p. 492.

never know how many slaves, owned by their own race, availed themselves of the famous Underground Railroad.

Jacob Gasken of New Bern, South Carolina, owned his father. When Jacob did not act as the father thought he should, the father corrected his son. The son became angry and sold his father to a Negro speculator. Afterward Jacob boasted that “*the old man had gone to the corn fields about New Orleans where they might learn him some manners*”.<sup>17</sup>

I wonder how many of us, today, would have cared about slavery had we been living in those days, so long ago ? How active would we have been to make life better for blacks or whites when we consider what we presently allow ?

According to John Walsh, of *America's Most Wanted* television program, there are over a million reported child abuse cases each year in this country. 15 percent of school children have been sexually abused by their teachers. 1,200 children die each year from child abuse.

For those who believe the killing of unborn babies is bad, 40 million women have aborted their babies since *Roe vs. Wade* of 1973. This is according to the *Washington Times* of 1/27 - 2/7/03.

According to the FBI statistics, 1 out of every 3 marriages in the U.S. has, at least, one incident of domestic violence.

In Virginia, every 12 minutes an abused person seeks help from a domestic violence program.

And where are the tears for the 30,000 Christian black children thrown into slavery in the Sudan by the Islamic regime ? Where is the anger of our African-Americans when their own people are being skinned alive, burned, and crucified in the Sudan ? It seems their only interest is to blame whites for slavery of the past in the United States and care nothing about their own people of today.

When we wring our hands about slavery of the past, I ask myself what are we doing about the wrongs of today ? There are plenty of organizations that desperately need hands-on help right now ... today !



*The slaves quarters in the Rockville plantation, SC  
(Collection Mrs. Hanson and E. Weaver)*

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* p. 485