THE PRICE FOR THEIR POUND OF FLESH

The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation

DAINA RAMEY BERRY

Beacon Press
Boston

Who determined the cost of an unborn child? What was the fiscal value of enslaved people at preconception and how were childbearing women priced? The answers to these inquiries are linked to a mother's uterus, because the institution of slavery in the United States extended its reach into women's bodies. Enslaved women entered the market as objects and producers of goods; yet, they appeared as assets and as liabilities depending on the perspective of the seller or the needs of a potential buyer. So when K. G. Hall stated, "For Sale: A Young Negro Woman," to advertise an unnamed woman and her two children, he was not doing anything unusual. This woman was a "complete Washer and good ironer," but Hall did "not want a breeding wench."[10] Therefore, he placed the family up for sale. There was no mention of the father, nor any indication of the woman's age, except "young." The record only reveals her status as a "breeding wench" with young children in her care. Despite labor skills, her ability to procreate ultimately led to her sale.

On the eve of the American Revolution and the early nineteenth century, many American-born enslaved women shared this experience. They were sold because they gave birth and had young children to nurture. Because procreation and healthy children increased their monetary value, sellers like Hall capitalized by putting enslaved women and their children up for sale. The women's reproductive values were crucial to the expansion of the institution, particularly when the African supply source via transatlantic slave trading was abolished in 1808. This shifted the source to the natural, coerced, encouraged, and forced reproduction of enslaved women in America and other New World slave societies.

When the French and Spanish occupied Louisiana, eighteenth-century enslavers had relied on captives directly imported from Caribbean and West African countries. Georgia did the same, despite initially having

a ban on slavery for nearly the first two decades of settlement (the ban was lifted in 1751). Across the South, slavery increased rapidly along with technological developments like the 1793 invention of the cotton gin. Responding to these impetuses, planters moved their enslaved people to the Southwest, enticed by lands included in the 1803 Louisiana Purchase.[11] As a result, Louisiana became the slave-trading center of the Deep South in the nineteenth century.[12]

Changes in the international slave trade and market innovations affected the domestic traffic in human beings. Given the markup for childbearing women, it appears that the acquisition of land and technological inventions altered the face of slavery at the turn of the century. Women played an important role, as the shift to import more enslaved women assured enslavers that they could produce additional labor sources on their farms and plantations. They did not have to depend on the market to purchase human property. Instead, by making calculated choices about their enslaved population, they could, in fact, grow their own. Enslaved women's bodies were catalysts of nineteenth-century economic development, distinguishing US slavery from bondage in other parts of the world.

Incorporating late-eighteenth-century slave-valuation data into antebellum studies of enslaved prices provides an opportunity to untangle the web of trade relations and explore the fiscal strengths and weaknesses of female slavery. Most scholars interested in the monetary value of the enslaved examine the antebellum prices of prime male field hands, leaving discussions of women to brief summaries or passing footnotes.[13] But studying female price patterns offers another important perspective, particularly when we look at their fiscal values compared to other women. By examining a sample of 4,892 individual female appraisals from 1771 to 1820, one can speculate whether the monetary value of enslaved women during this crucial period of American history relied on their ability to give birth. U. B. Phillips, the first scholar to seriously analyze enslaved people's prices, argued early in the twentieth century that a "fertile woman usually commanded *no higher price* than a barren one." Further, he believed that "the prospective increment of picaninnies [*sic*] was offset by the loss of the woman's service during pregnancy and suckling and by the possible loss of

either mother or infant during childbirth."[14] In his mind, pregnancy and the high infant mortality rate offset differences in women's prices, supporting his focus on male valuations.

If financial values for women did not fluctuate based on the capacity to bear children, then what made one woman more valuable than another? Maintaining women's centrality through comparisons *among* women enables gendered price studies to stand on their own. Such comparisons highlight the importance of women's role in populating the workforce (intentionally or unintentionally). In earlier studies of antebellum prices, childbearing women had higher monetary values than men. Yet, this trend is much more dynamic when including figures for the colonial and Revolutionary eras.[15] We cannot assume a static connection between childbearing and appraisals because shifts in natural increase, international laws concerning slave trading, and economic currents of supply and demand influenced a woman's value.

Childbearing women commanded competitive monetary values in the market under specific circumstances in the early National Era.[16] First, female values were dependent on ethnicity (in this case, African or American born), location (urban or rural), age (childbearing or not), and time period (pre- or post-Revolution), to name just a few factors.[17] Some of the variables included health, skill, and monetary values in five colonies and, later, states: Georgia, (French) Louisiana, Maryland, South Carolina, and Virginia. All figures throughout the book except those directly quoted are in US currency based on the consumer price index for 1860 dollars.[18] Given women's childbearing age range as fifteen to thirty-five, women across the South appear to have had higher financial values in all five regions than younger girls and older women, indicating that Phillips's assumption was incorrect. As we shall see in the coming pages and chapters, before 1800, the average age for women at first birth was nineteen. The age of first menarche in the nineteenth century was, in some cases, thirteen or fourteen years old. Yet, we have evidence of women in their thirties having children in the antebellum era as well. Many of these women were known as "breeding wenches."[19] Historian Kenneth Morgan noted that the traditional view that male slaves' market values exceeded those of female slaves on the auction block in colonial South Carolina has

more "documentary support." He also explained that this male bias stems from "the low ratio of women to men."[20]

Not all the women I address in this chapter experienced sale through public auctions. Some were sold privately; others were mortgaged, transferred, exchanged, given away, used as collateral, or sold through a legal deed. Because colonial and Revolutionary records rarely contain black women's voices, we must rely on the narratives of their husbands, sons, brothers, uncles, and, most often, their enslavers to shed light on their experiences. Here we learn that not all women wanted to be mothers, and that some had greater attachments to their husbands than to their children.

The story of Tamar, an enslaved woman from Camden County, North Carolina, is representative of women's experience with pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, and multiple sales.[21] Born sometime in the late 1770s or early 1780s, she encountered the auction block because her owner thought she was giving birth too often. In some instances, women who had "children too fast" were hired out with their progeny to someone willing to "maintain them for the least money," or "benefit [from] whatever work the woman can do."[22] However, Tamar's enslaver could not prevent her from living in the "woods" on a parcel of cleared land on which she cultivated corn and flax for sale. She also hired herself out and "obtained corn, herrings, or a piece of meat for a day's work." She raised her young children in this setting, but as soon as they "became big enough," five of her six children were sold away from her. Tamar's "husband" lived on a distant estate, twenty-five miles away, and could do little to prevent the breakup of their family. Tamar, however, responded boldly to her first sale.

After being forced to travel more than a hundred miles chained together on the way to an auction block in either Georgia or New Orleans, Tamar fled the coffle and escaped back home to the small plot of land in North Carolina on which she had been living. The risky nature of absconding forced her to leave behind her sixth child, an eighteen-month-old toddler. Apparently she was unable to "obtain" the child and therefore made the difficult decision to travel solo. According to her brother's narrative, Tamar "travelled by night, and hid herself in thick woods by day." During the journey, she experienced "great danger on the road, but in three weeks reached the woods near" her former residence.[23] Upon her arrival, she notified her

brother, mother, and husband and remained in hiding. Sometimes she hid in "a hollow under the floor" of her mother's "hut," while other times she spent the night in the woods with her husband.[24] Here, in the woods, she and her husband gave birth to three additional children, of which two survived. After the birth of her ninth child, Tamar was discovered and "taken to the house of her old master," and her sale experience began all over again.

Tamar was subjected to multiple sales and several cruel enslavers. At one sale, she was sold along with her two remaining children. The whereabouts of her other offspring are unknown. In addition to being traded by various enslavers three times after her discovery, Tamar's sales brought her across state lines and through various transactions. Her first sale took her from North Carolina to an auction block in Norfolk, Virginia; next she was mortgaged to cover debts and transferred to Elizabeth City, North Carolina; finally she was "taken away in a cart" to an auction block in Georgia. Tamar represents larger trends in trafficking patterns of the enslaved. Excess enslaved people from Maryland and Virginia (Chesapeake region) were sold to markets in Louisiana and other parts of the Deep South. Such trade patterns were true of the domestic slave trade and of slave breeding.[25] As a result, the Low Country had fewer market particularities, except for the types of women placed on the auction block, because of the increased traffic in enslaved bodies in these markets.[26]

What can we learn about black women's experiences through Tamar's story? I argue that her nine pregnancies coupled with separations from all but two of her children explain the meaning of "home" and "marriage" under slavery. She ran away, only to return to her previous location, where she and her husband gave birth to more children. Discussions of self-liberated individuals emphasize a gender distinction among runaways, noting that women chose truancy—that is, temporary escape for one to two weeks—as opposed to complete flight, because of their children.[27] Yet, many women ran away in search of their partners who had been traded. Perhaps, like Tamar, they mourned the children lost to the auction block and hoped for more. It is also plausible that they desired intimacy. Pregnancy could have been an unintentional outcome of marital sex. Her story confirms that marital ties created bonds that warrant attention equal to the bonds of motherhood.