

THE PRICE FOR
THEIR POUND
OF FLESH

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

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ELDERS' RECOGNITION OF MORTALITY AND SOUL VALUES

Polly and Davy, aged fifty and fifty-eight, respectively, joined nearly 150 other enslaved people at an auction in Louisiana. These two humble "grey heads" both sold for \$500, after having spent their entire lives in bondage. A witness from the North explained the bell curve of life this way: "for forty years [Polly and Davy] have devoted their strength" to their enslaver. "They gathered forty harvests for him" and likely "brought him ten times as much as he is now getting for their worn-out bodies." Note that their enslaver did not count the first ten years of their lives, when they were groomed for enslavement.¹¹

There are generally two approaches to understanding elderly enslaved people's place in the history of slavery. At one end of the spectrum, they were revered and treated with respect; at the other, they were isolated and disregarded. Enslaved voices that have been central throughout this study can help make sense of these opposing positions.

Enslaved people were pained to see their parents and grandparents marginalized. Moses Grandy found that elderly enslaved people had poor care and were isolated, depressed, and left to die. "When my mother became old, she was sent to live in a little lonely log-hut in the woods," he explained. To his disgust, "aged and worn out slaves, whether men or women" received little care. Enslavers treated elderly enslaved people like

livestock—in Grandy's words, turning them out like "an old horse," not caring if they lived, suffered, or died.

Fortunately, he and his sister Tamar lived close enough to their mother's place in the woods that they could visit her quite frequently. On one of his "night-visits," he recalled hearing "her grieving and crying" as he approached the residence. "She was old and blind," he lamented, "and so unable to help herself." Grandy indicted enslavers for the "general practice" of mistreating elderly enslaved people, as he believed it was commonplace.¹²

When neglect occurred, literate enslaved people sent letters to their enslavers seeking support. Cyfax Brown sent a letter to his enslaver, St. George Tucker, asking for help to "support my self as I am old and infirme." In "his old age," Brown asked for "something if you please," hoping that the years he'd served would be returned with kindness. Phillis, an aged woman, wrote to the same enslaver and his wife two years later stating that "old age And infirmity Begains to follow me which Cause me to think that my Business in Life are nearly to an End." Her only request was to be able to live with the enslaver who owned her children because she was "going down very fast to my grave."¹³ These requests exemplify the desire to live their last days in some comfort and care, peacefully and, if possible, with family. The desire to spend time with family at the end of their lives was common, especially since they spent most of their years laboring in the dwellings and fields of their enslavers. And they, like others, reflected on their lives and harbored dreams of an afterlife that involved a reunion with their deceased relatives.

Able-bodied enslaved people forty and older performed a host of tasks, including serving as cooks, nurses, midwives, seamstresses, body servants, gardeners, and caretakers of enslaved children. As for those under ten, labor assignments were rarely gendered at this age. Men and women also functioned in the spiritual and supernatural realm, serving as healers and diviners. They were "transmitters of Africanisms" and extremely significant to the enslaved community.¹⁴ Slaveholding families even recognized those known for these skills. Margaret Hall Hicks remembered that the "negroes" on their plantation "all believed in being hoodooed . . . And were always . . . finding a rabbit's foot, or a green lizard, or a stuffed snake's skin under their doorstep." But, she explained, "there was always an old negro man or woman who could break the hoodoo." These individuals "were held

in great respect and reverence, and reaped many nickels and dimes, and even larger amounts of money for their services."¹⁵ In addition to such gifts, some women with special skills assisted in birthing babies and were affectionately known as "grannie midwives."¹⁶ Elders also supervised and nursed both black and white infants and toddlers.

Enslaved people over forty understood that they had different values placed on their bodies, because they had experienced commodification for many years. They also understood that, by aging, their monetary values declined to the point that they could not be sold. One "old Baptist" man at sixty-two dreamed of life as a free man and longed for liberty: "I shold like bery much to spend de very few years I's got to live in freedom . . . [and] I would give any man \$20 to \$30 down, if he could get me free." He shared this with a traveler from the North who asked him about his worth; to this, he responded that his enslaver would likely sell him for \$200.¹⁷ Not only did the man know his market value, but he also understood the terms of sale, which sometimes involved a certain amount of cash down.

VALUATION OF ELDERLY ADULTS IN LIFE

Determining how many enslaved people aged forty and older were sound and commanded high prices is almost impossible. But we do know that their internal values were elevated and celebrated within their communities. By the time enslaved people reached forty, they had exceeded the life expectancy for those in bondage. Not surprisingly, even those who reached forty longed for freedom. One forty-five-year-old interviewed by a Northern abolitionist shared his desire for liberty when asked, "Do you know of any slaves around here, who are contented with being in bondage?" His response: "No, mass'r . . . Not one of dem."¹⁸ Mortality schedules, which differed from the life-expectancy figure discussed above, suggest that, in 1850, blacks lived an average of 21.4 years, compared to whites, who lived about 25.5 years.¹⁹ These figures are extremely low by today's standards. Thus, if enslaved people made it to forty and beyond, they held a special place within the enslaved community, whether they wanted to live or die.

At age forty, Hannibal preferred death to life and sometimes blamed God for his enslaved status. "I have often cursed God for my fate," he explained. "Death, to me, would always have been a welcome relief! I prefer

it *now* to the prospect of living longer in my present condition." As a result, he did all he could to escape to a free state. However, in addition to his black skin, which identified his enslaved status, he was a big man, over six feet tall, weighing about three hundred pounds. When thinking about escape, he knew that he was "so much larger than most slaves," that "every one who sees me would demand a pass." More important, "the hounds, and half the devils who own them, would chase me." The thought of running away was too risky, and he knew that he'd either "be taken, or *killed*." In a conversation with a Northern ally who offered to purchase his freedom, Hannibal said, "The man would be shot who should come here, with any sum of money, proposing to buy me *and carry me North*." He also fully understood that freedom via purchase from a Northern ally was next to impossible, because as a free man, his testimony would compromise Southern enslavers. He would bear witness to his experiences. Thus, "the slaveholders here know that I know all about slavery, and that I could tell what I know."²⁰

Enslaved grandparents like Old Maria were not spared from family separation, and sometimes this trauma was unbearable. Three generations of her family consisting of "old grand parents," their six children, and eighteen grandchildren experienced separation because of a gambling debt. Rather than put money on the betting table, their enslaver "staked six slaves . . . on a game of billiards, and they were won by a New Orleans gambler." When the moment of separation came and the six were placed on a train, it was too much for the elderly couple. The grandmother sat on a pine log in "her emaciated form, curved spine, and snow white hair." Her body contoured into a crouched position as she swayed back and forth in anguish. "Neither words nor tears" showed until the train left the station. In shock, she could not engage in a conversation with her daughter when she bid her farewell because she was "beyond tears . . . or mute in despair!" Her husband, "the grandfather," equally aged and "bent down with toil," stood with "a long staff that ran above his head," while he placed his right arm on the shoulder of one of his sons. A witness described the scene as "a vivid, life-like picture of an aged father, standing by the death bed of an *only, idol* son, on whom he had leaned for support and comfort in his old age." Ironically, in accordance with the bell curve of life, the grandparents' grandchildren were not taken away and they played nearby, not fully aware of the magnitude

of the event. Their “doomed fathers and mothers” embraced one another as well as their parents, for what they considered might be their last touch. In addition to parents and their adult offspring being separated, the husbands and wives went to different enslavers as well. Bystanders recalled the sounds of a shrieking daughter and wife as she forgot to give her husband a parting gift. The train left, and she burst into “the most frantic wails” one could imagine.²¹ Her elderly parents were left to care for their grandchildren in the absence of their parents, who were sold to cover a bet.