

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

CHILDHOOD REALIZATION OF ENSLAVEMENT

Enslaved children were rarely protected or spared the realities of slavery. However, they frequently had no understanding of themselves as property until they were sold for the first time or witnessed a sale. Countless narratives from formerly enslaved people like Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Keckley, and Harriet Jacobs include a moment of shock when children first learn they are chattel. Until that point, they had spent their lives with other children and were cared for by elderly enslaved people, often grandparents. Some served as playmates to their white peers and had memories of playing hide-and-seek, hopscotch, and tag with them. Others, like Douglass, lived with biological family members, such as parents or grandparents. "Living here, with my dear old grandmother and grandfather," Douglass explained, "it was a long time before I knew myself to be a slave. I knew many other things before I knew that." He recalled that "for the most part of the first eight years of his life," he was "a spirited, joyous, uproarious, and happy boy." Annie Burton of Alabama also had fond childhood memories: "On the plantation there were ten white children and fourteen colored children." They spent their days "roaming about from plantation to plantation, not knowing or caring what things were going on in the great world outside [their] little realm." Likewise, Keckley vividly remembered the birth of her enslavers' child, whom she referred to as her "earliest and fondest pet," one she had to take care of even though she herself was only four years old. Her earliest memories were from that part of her life, which was preparing her for the inevitable. The peace of early childhood did not last long. It was just a matter of time before enslaved youth had their childhoods bound by the yoke of slavery.⁸

Henry Gladney of Virginia remembered being given to his enslavers' children. "I was give to his grandson" to "wait on him and play wid him," he shared in an interview. As he aged, he had a better sense of his role.

"Little Marse John treat me good sometime; and kick me round sometime," but he understood that "now dat I was just a little dog or monkey, in his heart and mind, dat it 'mused him to pet or kick me, as it pleased him." Rebecca Grant experienced multiple whippings for not referring to her enslaver as "Marse Henry." She found it difficult because he "was just a little boy 'bout three or four years old—come 'bout half way up to me," she recalled.⁹

As they aged, the realities of their oppression became clear and, for many, frightening. At age four, Keckley learned to "render assistance to others" and to be "self-reliant," qualities that would enable her to transition as she matured. Douglass lamented, "As I grew larger and older, I learned by degrees the sad fact" that the land on which his grandparents lived belonged to someone his grandmother referred to as "Old Master." He also discovered "the sadder fact, that . . . grandmother herself . . . and all of the little children around her, belonged to this mysterious personage."¹⁰

Mingo White of Alabama was separated from his parents at around age four or five. "I members dat I was took up on dat stan," he relayed, "an' a lot of people came round an' felt my arms an' legs an' ast me a lot of questions." His enslaver coached his human property on how to respond to potential questions and asked them to lie about their health. Sadly, White recalled that he was quite young when he was taken from his parents, "jes' when I needed 'em most." His father had one last parting wish and that was for John the fiddler to look after his son. John did, and White remembered "many a night" waking up to find "mysef 'sleep 'twix' his legs while he was playing for de white folks."¹¹ White was fortunate to have a fictive or pretend caretaker, assuming their relationship involved mutual respect. After all, White had just learned his first few lessons of enslavement: all whites had authority over him; his parents were separated and sold; and he needed a father figure to care for him. The physical closeness he describes, being in between John's legs, hints at other outcomes to their relationship that will be addressed in the next chapter.¹²

According to Douglass, childhood for the enslaved included "clouds and shadows [which began] to fall upon" their lives at an early age. Such realities were "grievous to my childish heart," he explained. He was to live with

his grandmother only “for a limited time.” As soon as children “were big enough,” they “were promptly taken away” to live and serve their enslavers.¹³

The reflections of Burton, Douglass, and Keckley confirm children’s early awareness of their enslaved status. As they aged, they became governed by the rhythm of agricultural and nonagricultural labor. They also noticed a stark contrast in the behavior of their white peers, many of whom would, or had recently, become their enslavers.

As enslavers in training, Southern white youth were raised much differently than the enslaved. They were protected from the exigencies of heavy labor, and their parents spent time educating and preparing them for adulthood. White parents taught their children about slavery and clearly explained the differences between enslaver and enslaved. Some learned about the institution from bedtime stories and books such as *The Child’s Book on Slavery; or, Slavery Made Plain*, which sought to educate children about an institution that might seem incomprehensible to a young mind. The book opens with the following explanation: “The *design* of this little book is to show the truth in regard to Slavery, and to give important information concerning it to all readers who do not already know it well.” The other objective of this literature “addressed to children and youth” is to introduce slavery to a wide readership. Geared to a Northern audience, the book explained the business of slavery to readers who knew little about it. In order to “understand it fully, you must take the reliable testimony of others, just as you take the testimony of those who write Geographies and other books.” Rich with biblical language drawing upon the story of Moses, the book elucidates the concepts of liberty and freedom and even evokes the American Revolution. In the chapter “What Is A Slave,” children learn that “to be a slave is to be held and treated as a piece of property.” As property, they were sometimes kept by enslavers until they died or “sometimes [the enslaver] sells them or perhaps gives them away to his children.” The book also makes clear that enslaved people “according to slavery can not own” themselves and “slave parents can not own their children.”¹⁴

Through books and training, white children learned the difference between themselves and the enslaved. They also experienced a shift when

they had to separate themselves from their enslaved peers with whom they played. By age ten, enslaved and free children recognized that their lives were on very different trajectories.

Visual cues, including coffles—enslaved men, women, and children chained together in an assembly line—heading to auctions, also captured these realities. Witnessing a coffle traversing the neighborhood would have made a significant impression on a young person’s mind. The sounds of the clanking chains marked the rhythmic cadence of the enslaved on their way to a market. One can imagine the looks on young people’s faces as the enslaved people headed to courthouses, town centers, and auction houses. “When I was about seven years old I witnessed, for the first time, the sale of a human being,” recalled Elizabeth Keckley.

Like Rachel’s owner, described earlier, Keckley’s owner had experienced a financial challenge. Enslaved people were liquid forms of property, easily converted into cash. As Keckley quickly learned, selling Little Joe, the cook’s son, was a solution to the family’s financial embarrassment. Without knowing why, “his mother was ordered to dress him up in his Sunday clothes and send him to the house,” but what happened next made a lasting impression on Keckley. Little Joe was “placed in the scales, and was sold, like the hogs, at so much per pound.” His mother, still unaware of the transaction, had no idea that *the price of his pound of flesh* covered her enslavers’ financial embarrassment. Apparently, the enslaver went to buy hogs for the winter, but had not had enough money to cover the cost. Little Joe was stolen from his family so that the enslaver’s family could afford food during the cool months. The sale transpired while Little Joe’s mother was laboring in the fields, worried about the whereabouts of her son. But the story does not end with Little Joe on the scales and his mother in the fields. Keckley vividly recalled that Little Joe’s mother became suspicious when she saw her dressed-up son put on a wagon heading for town. When she inquired, the enslaver assured her that he would return the next day. However, each day that he did not return, Little Joe’s mother mourned for her child and received whippings for not controlling her grief. Sadly, “the mother went down to the grave without ever seeing her child again.”¹⁵



Enslaved siblings separated from each other and their mother during sale.

Historians have commented on enslaved children's awareness. Eugene Genovese noted that "slave children had a childhood, however much misery awaited them."¹⁷ Wilma King, author of the foremost study on enslaved youth, proclaimed, "Enslaved children had virtually no childhood because they entered the work place early and were more readily subjected to arbitrary plantation authority, punishments, and separations." As a result, enslaved children grew "old before their time."¹⁸

Little Joe's sale was an important milestone in Keckley's life. To her, it revealed the significance of an enslaved person's age and the duplicity involved in separating children from their mothers. Shortly after this episode, when Keckley was eight years old, she saw the separation of her own parents and was forced to part with her father forever. Watching her parents cry, hug one another, and say their final good-byes was an image that became a haunting memory. "My father cried out against the cruel separation" but still had to give "his last kiss" as he pulled "my mother to his bosom; the solemn prayer to Heaven; the tears and sobs—the fearful anguish of broken hearts." "The last kiss, the last good-by; and he, my father, was gone, gone forever," she lamented. It was all too much for the young Keckley, who was reminded that she, too, could be sold at any time and that her life and the lives of her family members were valued on the same scale as livestock. She learned that "love brought despair." Keckley realized early on that her family's humanity was ignored and that the capital investment in their bodies was all that mattered to members of the planter class and their allies. This lesson was an excruciating but significant one for enslaved children and anyone else witnessing or experiencing similar events.¹⁶ Their lives were at the mercy of their enslavers.