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The Peculiar Institution on the Periphery: Slavery in Arkansas

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The Peculiar Institution on the Periphery: Slavery in Arkansas

The Peculiar Institution on the Periphery:
Slavery in Arkansas

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in History

by

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Abstract

Slavery grew quickly on the western edge of the South. By 1860, more than one quarter of Arkansas's population was enslaved. While whites succeeded remarkably in transplanting the institution of slavery to the trans-Mississippi South, bondspeople used the land around them to achieve their own goals. Slaves capitalized on the abundance of uncultivated space, such as forest and canebrake, to temporarily escape the demanding crop routine, hold secret parties and religious meetings, meet friends, or run away for good. The Civil War created upheaval that undermined the slave regime but also required those African-Americans still in bondage to carefully navigate their use of the woods and "wild" spaces.

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Thanks to Carl Moneyhon for introducing me to the study of the South, the late C. Fred Williams to the frontier, and Randolph B. “Mike” Campbell to the study of slavery. Dr. Campbell models sharp scholarship and professional generosity. In addition to showing me how to research and write, he taught me important life lessons like being a compassionate educator, defining my long-term goals, and firing a shotgun.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memories of our sisters: Ash and Bertie.

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Introduction

Reuben Johnson's life on a plantation south of Little Rock changed forever when he heard a man read from the Bible one Sunday. From that moment, Johnson became determined to be able to do the same. But he was a slave—chattel, under the laws and conventions of Arkansas and the South—and was therefore forbidden from achieving an education. Nevertheless, the determination to learn to read and write engulfed him, and Johnson found ways to teach himself. He listened to recitations of the alphabet outside the white children's schoolhouse, and eventually managed to secure a book to study on his own. Although the master confiscated the book and whipped him for having it, Johnson raised money for another one by gathering walnuts to sell to passing peddlers. This time, a hollow log housed the precious contraband. Johnson snuck into the woods to bring out one page at a time for studying in the quarters. Eventually, however, he was found out. Again his book was seized, and again he paid for it in lashes. Johnson persevered, however, securing yet another book by enlisting the plantation wagoner to help him sell hay he had been gathering at night. Johnson again relied on a log to conceal his latest prize, but now restricted his study to sessions in the woods. Finally, Johnson realized his dream of literacy after fleeing to fight for the Union in 1864.¹

Reuben Johnson was one of hundreds of thousands of slaves making calculated use of space to negotiate their bondage in places across the South. He relied on the public road to meet passing peddlers in order to sell nuts he gathered from the woods, probably using the woods that bounded the road's edges for cover until the right person passed. Swaths of tall grass in clearings

¹Rev. Reuben Johnson, "My Struggles for Education," *Christian Recorder*, May 23, 1878.

or, perhaps, abandoned acreage, became marketable hay after he combed his neighborhood in the night to cut and gather it. Johnson used uncultivated spaces around him to his advantage when he could. The forest provided forage that he converted to cash for one of his books, and he chose the woods as a safe place to store each book he acquired. Finally, after Johnson's pursuit of literacy became too dangerous to practice on the plantation, the woods became his classroom.² Ira Berlin has shown how the context of place and time, on a larger scale, is crucial to understanding the experiences of American slaves, like Johnson, in the places they lived. For example, the "charter" generation of Africans in early New Orleans experienced different work routines and found different opportunities for resistance than people held in bondage in North Carolina during the years of slave exportation from that state. Place and space mattered.³

But the place where Reuben Johnson lived, worked, and resisted—the southern periphery—is underrepresented in the historiography. Places west of the Mississippi River, where slavery was young in 1860 and the terrain thinly (yet rapidly) settled, still receive relatively little attention as scholars continue to target slavery in the southeast for study. Token mentions of slavery in Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, and northern Louisiana make their way into general histories, but more in-depth investigation into the daily lives of enslaved people on the periphery of the South is needed. Even Walter Johnson's recent magisterial work on slavery in the Mississippi Valley, *River of Dark Dreams*, while it offers a good general synthesis of the

²Ibid.

³Although his account does not specify where he cut the hay he sold for books, Johnson's nighttime gathering suggests that he cut it from grassy zones where whites would not have missed it. Ibid.; Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003), 93, 215.

Mississippi Valley, is focused more on the east side.⁴ Some context is available on the stories of people on the edge of the South, provided by historians like Randolph B. Campbell, who first brought the story of enslaved Texans to light, and more recently, Diane Mutti Burke, who explores the lives of slaves on Missouri's small holdings.⁵ But the focus of scholarship on American slavery remains in eastern, higher-populated, and longer-settled zones of the South. Reuben Johnson's home, Arkansas, has been especially neglected by the scholarship. *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, published in 1958, remains the only published statewide study of slavery in the natural state.⁶

To examine the experiences of Reuben Johnson and the 111,000 other men, women, and children enslaved in Arkansas is to explore slave life in rugged space. Arkansas was remote, thinly populated, and made up of mostly undeveloped terrain even at the start of the Civil War. As Peter Kolchin points out in *American Slavery*, most of the Old South can be described as

⁴Johnson does not acknowledge that the experience may have differed some on the Arkansas side, a point taken up in Chapter Two of this dissertation. Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013)

⁵Campbell proved that, although many Texans prefer to think of their state as western rather than southern, southern slavery was an integral part of the political, social, and economic development of Texas. My project adds to what *An Empire for Slavery* has accomplished in the history of slavery beyond the Mississippi, by emphasizing forced migration and rugged conditions, and incorporating the perspective that historians of slavery have developed in the twenty-five years since Campbell's work was published. Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); Burke describes her subject as on the "border" of slavery in terms of geography, but also in the way that most Missouri slave owners ran smaller operations, not plantations, placing them on the border of slaveholding society. Diane Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small-Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

⁶Orville W. Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, reprint (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000). Donald P. McNeilly's study of Arkansas's cotton frontier is more about the planter class, the rise of cotton, and slavery as an institution than about slave life. Donald P. McNeilly, *The Old South Frontier: Cotton Plantations and the Formation of Arkansas Society, 1819-1861* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000).

rural, but the population of slave and free thinned out dramatically at its western edge. Although he resided only a few miles from the capital, Reuben Johnson did not live near a very large city, even by southern standards. The larger cities within the South (even excluding the larger border cities like St. Louis, and the old port city of New Orleans) held populations in 1860 that Little Rock (the closest thing to an urban area in Arkansas) would fail to reach until the next century.⁷ Little Rock's 1860 population, at 3,727, paled even in comparison with smaller river towns of the Old Southwest. The inhabitants of Little Rock numbered little more than half the population of Natchez in 1860, and were nearly 1,000 fewer than in Vicksburg that same year.⁸ Arkansas's youth as a state, position on the far side of the Mississippi River, lack of any truly urban centers, border with Indian Territory, and exponential growth of slavery in the decade before the Civil War all combine to form a landscape of slave life that cannot be adequately represented in studies that privilege the southeast.

In addition to its terrain, other aspects of slavery in Arkansas have not been sufficiently explored. Reuben Johnson's struggle in the woods and fields of central Arkansas represents exactly the aspect of slavery that is wanting in Taylor's 1958 study. Taylor demonstrated that slavery in Arkansas was a powerful and quickly-growing force in the state's development, a significant feat at the time. A state with a much lower total slave population than most of the older slave states, even on the eve of the Civil War, Arkansas (and the western South as a whole)

⁷Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery: 1619-1877*, first revised edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 177.

⁸James W. Bell, "Little Rock," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed January 1, 2014); John Hebron Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest: Mississippi, 1770-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 190; US Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Warren County, MS.

had been overlooked by historians. Taylor’s study illuminates Arkansas’s history with slavery, but, crucially, stopped short of investigating the viewpoint of the enslaved. The historiographical shift toward emphasizing the slaves’ point of view occurred just as Taylor wrote. Kenneth Stampp broke ground with *The Peculiar Institution* in 1956, blasting the myth—perpetuated by slavery apologist U. B. Phillips and his students—that slavery was a benevolent and civilizing institution. Historians after Stampp resented the emphasis on the brutality of slavery, prodded in good part by Stanley Elkins’ infamous “Sambo thesis” (wherein slaves became numbed, dependent “Sambos” as a result of bondage, like victims of Nazi concentration camps). Scholars reacted with accounts emphasizing slaves’ agency—what they were able to do for themselves. The consequent historiographical turn emphasized slaves’ resistance to dehumanization, their culture, families, communities, and religion. Historians at the helm of this burst of scholarship in the 1970s include Herbert Gutman, John Blassingame, Eugene Genovese, and Albert Raboteau, all seeking to orient the focus of slavery studies toward the slaves themselves.⁹ In this light, Reuben Johnson’s case becomes less significant for the brutal whippings he received for attempting to self-educate, and more for his persistence in his quest to learn to read and write despite the risks.

⁹Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (Vintage Books edition, New York: Vintage Books, 1989); Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A survey of the supply, employment and control of Negro labor as determined by the plantation régime* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1918); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (first Vintage Books edition, New York: Vintage Books, 1977); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: “The Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Updated Edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

The celebration of slave agency continues in studies of the culture and family of people in bondage. Stories similar to Reuben Johnson's are not only celebrated as evidence of resistance to dehumanization, but are investigated in their own right for what they show about the ties of kinship, cultural autonomy, acquisition of property, and much more. Historians continue to write about all aspects of slave culture, adding considerations of gender, space, and property to the stories of the lives bondspeople maintained apart from whites. Wilma King has explored the unique experiences of slaves as children, Sharla Fett the power of women healers and conjurers on plantations, and Dylan Penningroth the ties of property between bondspeople, to name only a few.¹⁰ Due to the ongoing effort by historians to excavate all aspects of slaves' agency and cultural autonomy, students of slavery can read about such topics as slaves and print culture, clothing, hair styles, and even a bit about their pet ownership. Historians recognize all of these activities as inherently political in nature, and so the emphasis on what slaves were able to do for themselves survives.¹¹

Fifty-six years later, however, Reuben Johnson's story still has not been told, and no one has picked up where Taylor left off in Arkansas. The need for a bottom-up study of slavery there remains. Some works have expanded from Taylor's original points by further exploring the role

¹⁰Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1998); Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*; Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Sharla M. Fett *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

¹¹Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina press, 2004); Shane White and Graham White "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of Southern History* 61 (February 1995): 45-76; Sarah Hand Meacham, "Pets, Status, and Slavery in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake," *Journal of Southern History* 97 (August 2011): 521-554.

of slavery in Arkansas's history, but without spending much time looking out from the slaves' vantage point.¹² For example, the economic and social structure of Arkansas's development is outlined in *The Old South Frontier*, wherein Donald P. McNeilly shows how the development of Arkansas society was dominated by an ever-strengthening planter class supported by slavery. Providing much more analysis than Taylor, McNeilly emphasizes slavery as the basis of the economic and social evolution of Arkansas and shows how slaveholders managed to gain and keep a firm grip on Arkansas society through the development of a strong cotton plantation economy. The book also shows how slavery in changed over time in Arkansas, something that Taylor did not address much.¹³ But, like other work on Arkansas, because *Old South Frontier* is structured primarily as a "top-down" study, it only barely touches on the experiences of the slaves themselves.¹⁴

This is not to say that no one has been looking to unearth stories like Johnson's. In fact, considerations of the slave point of view and explorations of their agency are not absent from Arkansas's historiography. They are, however, few and far between and never book-length. General histories of the natural state (*Arkansas: A Narrative History* and *Arkansas, 1800-1860*) sufficiently incorporate the perspectives of enslaved people into their chapters on slavery, while

¹²S. Charles Bolton's article, "Slavery and the Defining of Arkansas," views the institution from the top down, building on Taylor's contribution and explaining that although slavery did not have time to become as dominant and widespread as in some other southern states, it was a pervasive influence on Arkansas's development. S. Charles Bolton, "Slavery and the Defining of Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 58 (Spring 1999): 1-23.

¹³McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*.

¹⁴*The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, by Carl Moneyhon, begins with an in-depth survey of antebellum Arkansas in which the role of slavery is highlighted and well-documented. Slaves' activities and goals are worked prominently into the narrative where appropriate, but are not a major focus of the book as a whole. Carl H. Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas: Persistence in the Midst of Ruin*, reprint (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002).

some smaller-scale studies have targeted specific parts of slave life.¹⁵ Paul D. Lack investigated slave life in Little Rock, for example, finding lively social activity and plenty of opportunity for autonomy.¹⁶ Taking a look at families across the state, Carl Moneyhon has demonstrated how enslaved people created their own institutions for the socialization of slave children and the establishment of slave society separate from that of whites. His study argues that affection existed between family members despite the especially uncertain circumstances of slavery on the periphery.¹⁷ The initiative of slaves discussed in those two studies shows itself as more implicit or passive than direct and outright. By far, the most in-depth investigation of slave agency in Arkansas history is S. Charles Bolton's study on runaways, entitled *Fugitives from Injustice: Freedom-Seeking Slaves in Arkansas, 1800-1860*. Bolton uses runaway slave advertisements, largely from the *Arkansas Gazette*, to analyze slaves' journeys in search of freedom.¹⁸ Several local studies enrich our knowledge of the institution's many faces across Arkansas while

¹⁵While this dissertation uses Whayne, et al, *Arkansas: A Narrative History* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002), a second edition was published in 2013; S. Charles Bolton, *Arkansas, 1800-1860: Remote and Restless* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 125-144; William Van DeBurg offered a peek into the politics of slaves' labor when he reclaimed the history of slave drivers in Arkansas. In an effort to work against earlier characterizations of slavery as completely dehumanizing, Van DeBurg argues that black slave drivers have probably been wrongly vilified in WPA Slave narratives, and provides readers along the way with some sense of slaves' roles as foremen. William Van DeBurg, "The Slave Drivers of Arkansas: A New View From the Narratives," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 35 (Autumn 1976): 231-245.

¹⁶Paul D. Lack explores the society that slaves in Little Rock, Arkansas's most urban area, created for themselves, including their economic autonomy and local hierarchy. He is wrong that slaves ran to Little Rock because they sought to enjoy the relative freedom of movement and occupation there granted by masters. Slaves who ran very far sought freedom, not a "better" master, and likely looked to benefit from whatever anonymity the relative population density might offer in Little Rock. Paul D. Lack, "An Urban Slave Community: Little Rock, 1831-1862," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 41 (Autumn 1982): 258-287.

¹⁷Carl H. Moneyhon, "The Slave Family in Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 58 (Spring 1999): 24-44.

¹⁸S. Charles Bolton, *Fugitives from Injustice: Freedom-Seeking Slaves in Arkansas, 1800-1860* (Omaha: National Parks Service, Department of the Interior, 2006).

providing bits of insight into slave life, but none of them solve the historiographical problem of the need for an in-depth look at the slave experience in Arkansas.¹⁹ Work has been done, then, on the slave point of view in Arkansas, yet a full-scale monograph on the topic of slave life and agency in Arkansas remains overdue.

The contestation of slavery on the southern periphery, has not yet been told in depth. This dissertation rectifies the problem by using original research paired with the findings of other scholars to finally bring the historiographical emphasis on slaves' point of view—their families, communities, and agency—to Arkansas in a study of the whole state. It pulls from the shelves of scholarship now available on slaves' romances, religion, work, and leisure, but is also heavily influenced by scholarship that explores slaves' interaction with their environments and the uses and meaning of space. In order to emphasize what enslaved people did for themselves in Arkansas, this dissertation conceives of resistance very broadly, searching all slave activity for signs of pushback against dehumanization, even cases in which slaves probably did not think of themselves as challenging masters' claims to ownership or as undermining the slave regime.

It argues that at the center of the institution in Arkansas lay slaves' use of uncultivated zones. When whites pushed slaves into Arkansas, they transplanted them to the margins of the South where most space remained uncultivated—*because* most space remained uncultivated—in

¹⁹Kelly E. Houston, "Slaveholders and Slaves of Hempstead County, Arkansas," M.A. Thesis, University of North Texas (May 2008); John S. Otto, "Slavery in the Mountains: Yell County, Arkansas, 1840-1860," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 39 (Spring 1980): 35-52; Gary Battershell, "The Socioeconomic Role of Slavery in the Arkansas Upcountry," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 58 (Spring 1999): 45-60; Ted J. Smith, "Slavery in Washington County, Arkansas," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Arkansas, 1995; Georgena Duncan, "Manumission in the Arkansas River Valley: Three Case Studies," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 66 (Winter 2007): 422-443; Georgena Duncan, "'One negro, Sarah . . . one horse named Collier, one cow and calf named Pink': Slave Records from the Arkansas River Valley," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 69 (Winter 2010): 325-345.

the effort to profit from fresh cotton land. But even as slaves were made to convert woods and prairies into fields, they worked amid vast expanses of space they could claim for resistance. Like slaves elsewhere, they did their best to claim the seams between white domains for their own. This dissertation draws from environmental historian Mart A. Stewart's consideration of slaves' use of the environment. It follows Stewart's point that the South's racialization of agricultural labor and the surrounding natural environment went hand-in-hand, that the "wilderness" was populated with slaves who not only mastered knowledge of cultivated space, but uncultivated zones as well, claiming them for their own uses when they could. American slaves fought against their bondage via their own family, society, and culture, but also in their appropriation of places like the woods, river bottoms, and canebrakes.²⁰ "The Peculiar Institution on the Periphery" argues that slaves' use of uncultivated space was central to slave life in Arkansas.

This project begins with a survey of early Arkansas and an investigation of the legal, governmental, and natural landscapes of slavery. Chapter One, "The Landscape of Bondage on the Edge of the South" describes what Reuben Johnson and his compatriots were up against. This and the following chapter follow Mart Stewart's lead in using the term "landscape" to indicate the continual process of negotiation and change, and to refer to both the natural and political terrain.²¹ Whites worked efficiently to transplant slavery into Arkansas, drawn by the fertile soil

²⁰Whites, especially poor whites, also used "wild" places. Slaves' use of them often contradicted the wishes of their masters. Mart A. Stewart, "If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian: American Environmental History West and South," *Environment and History* 11 (May 2005): 139-162; Mart A. Stewart, "Rice, Water, and Power: Landscapes of Domination and Resistance in the Lowcountry, 1790-1880" *Environmental History Review* 15 (Autumn 1991): 47-64; Mart A. Stewart, *What Nature Suffers to Groe": Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

²¹ Stewart, "What Nature Suffers to Groe," 11.

to be found on cheap acreage. They crafted laws and society that hardened over time to claim Arkansas's ground for slavery. In the east, the Mississippi River delta drove much of Arkansas's plantation development. Arkansas's upcountry slaveholding regions converged geographically and historically with those of Missouri, while the southwestern Red River Valley housed its own plantation region connected to eastern Texas and northern Louisiana. The Arkansas River sliced through the heart of the state, nurturing a plantation belt that stretched from Indian Territory to the Mississippi.

In some respects, then, Arkansas slaves lived on desolate land as slavery hardened, but in other ways their environment offered opportunity. As a counter to the white regime explored in Chapter One, Chapter Two, "The Landscape of Resistance on the Edge of the South," explains how slaves stood their ground the best they could, and sets out themes that resurface throughout the following chapters. Though frontier slavery meant hard work under a strong slaveholding regime, life in rural parts of the South could offer some opportunities for slave autonomy not available in town. The abundance of "wild" spaces, found all over the South and especially in Arkansas, provided cover for runaways, parties, religious observance, as well as a bounty of food and resources. For Reuben Johnson, this meant nighttime harvest of walnuts to finance a book, a safe place to hide his contraband, and eventually a secluded space to hide and practice.

This contest between slavery and freedom often took place on the move. As chattel—moveable property—bondspeople on the Southern margins engaged in a great deal of movement—not only under the coercion of their masters, but also of their own accord. Chapter Three, "Chattels, Pioneers, and Sojourners for Freedom: Arkansas's Bonded Travelers," emphasizes geographic mobility as a crucial part of the slave experience in the Old Southwest. Slaves who came to Arkansas had been uprooted from the southeast and border states and

forcibly migrated west to the southern periphery. Reuben Johnson's separation from his parents as a child was probably related to this process. Arrival on the fringes of the slave South meant hard labor for slaves forced to do the work of transforming the forests into productive cotton regions. While many slaves surely had a hand in the cotton production of other slave states, some would have been unfamiliar with this work routine. Bondspeople who had previously worked on farms needing little improvement, or who were unfamiliar with cotton cultivation (instead having experience with crops like tobacco or rice) would have had to adjust to the new demands of the cotton frontier. Bondspeople in Arkansas might travel at least short distances away from their usual neighborhoods when they were hired out, relocated to work in various locations, sent on their masters' business, or when they accompanied whites in travel. These instances provided them with important geographical knowledge that they might use to escape or assist others in that effort. Arkansas could be a destination or crossroads for people who fled from those who wished to hold mastery over them. River bottoms, canebrakes, and brush hid fugitive slaves passing through and out of Arkansas. Relocation or travel could bring either hope or sorrow, and occurred in situations that could either empower or harm them. Slave movement on the cotton frontier displays the tension between the power of whites to craft a slave society on the margins and the ways in which slaves resisted.²²

Slaves' time was ordered by the work they were made to do, but they worked their family and community life into the seasons of work as best they could, overlaying family milestones on top of the agriculture rhythm. Chapter Four, "Occupied Time: The Rhythm of Slave Labor and Life" is a seasonal depiction of slave life in Arkansas that follows the routine of work and resistance and its interaction with slaves' autonomy. Men and women cleared trees, raised

²²Johnson, "My Struggles for Education."

homes, constructed roads and fences, and broke new ground for cotton. They sized up overseers in January, watched “trash gang” boys transition to plowing men in the spring, and snuck away to party on summer nights after long hot days of hoeing and chopping. They might even be able to enjoy a lighter work load for a few weeks if they were lucky enough to enjoy a “laid by” time as summer closed. August and September ushered in the hard work of the harvest on top of building frontier farms, which often brought slaves’ resistance to a boiling point in the fall. Christmas feasts and the clearing of fields that followed signaled the transition to another crop year. Life went on for slaves as the stages of the crop progressed. They injected their own meaning into the slivers of time between working hours and stole more time when they could, often in the seams of woods and brush between the fields.

Chapter Five, “Confidants and ‘No ‘Counts’: Slaves’ Social Circles on the Margins” explores slave social life in Arkansas, emphasizing the wide range of interactions. Slaves were selective in who they let into their inner circles of community. Family and close friends came first, and strangers might be looked upon with suspicion. Slaves identified with each other, but did not necessarily band together in solidarity. Reuben Johnson, for example, was assisted by some slaves but was betrayed by others. Religion and (often secret) parties comprised much of the glue that held people together. The relatively low, scattered population and distance from many truly urban centers was a major factor in the development of relationships between people because it meant that bonds were more likely forged by farm and forest than market and trade. Although whites were remarkably successful in establishing control of slave labor on the cotton frontier, slaves created and protected their own sacred relationships while doing their best to navigate relations in their neighborhoods. The sites of that autonomy included the quarters, to be

sure, but slaves also used the brush and cane between farms as places for their social relationships to grow and strengthen.

However, both cultivated and uncultivated spaces took on new meaning for many slaves with the coming of the war. Chapter Six, “Stormy times for everybody”: Wartime Slavery,” describes the conflict of the war from the standpoint of those in bondage, interrogating the ways in which slaves waded through that dangerous upheaval. Whites sought to preserve slavery as an institution as well as in their households and communities, while slaves, aware of the war’s implications, navigated the conflict with a wide range of strategies directly related to location. Sometimes assisting both sides in order to stay afloat, slaves in Arkansas knew their lives were changing forever, for better or worse. Thus, bondspeople did their best to negotiate a war zone in which hard choices came with higher risks, yet held more promise. Slaves’ use of rivers and woods to run away brought bigger gains than ever when they could reach Union lines and freedom. But the Civil War caused them to have to contest uncultivated spaces in an unprecedented way. Slaves’ occupation of brush and cane became condoned and even forced by whites when they sought to keep their slave property from the labor demands of the Confederacy or the freedom of the Union. Slaves’ stomping grounds became populated by their oppressors when whites began to occupy those areas more and more to hide from armies or guerillas, or to act as guerillas themselves. However, some slaves were able to claim public spaces like never before. Slaves exercised caution in their wartime choices, and most were able to undermine the institution from the inside even if they remained with their masters.

“The Peculiar Institution on the Periphery” will not be the last word on slavery in Arkansas, but strives to bring slave life in Arkansas back into the academic conversation, provide researchers, teachers, and the public with the stories of people like Reuben Johnson, and stoke

further scholarship on the topic of bondage in the natural state. In addition to its historiographical goal, this dissertation is intended to serve as a useable history of slavery in Arkansas. On top of the academic need for a broad study of slavery in Arkansas that puts slaves at center-stage, Arkansans themselves need to hear this story. With every passing anniversary of Arkansas's notorious outrages—most famously, the Central High Crisis—the legacy of slavery and racial oppression is recalled, and this dissertation is meant to add to the resources available to those seeking to understand the long history of the African-American struggle in their state. It may even be that the state's own leaders need reminded about the history of bondage in Arkansas. In 2009, for example, Arkansas state representative Jon Hubbard self-published a book claiming that “the institution of slavery that the black race has long believed to be an abomination upon its people may actually have been a blessing in disguise” because later generations were able to enjoy citizenship in the United States. This viewpoint is easily corrected with some knowledge of the history of slavery.²³ Finally, this dissertation is meant to provide another source for African-Americans genealogists, who may find the connections between names, places, and years offered here helpful in fleshing out their families' triumphs.

²³Jon Michael Hubbard, *Letters to the Editor: Confessions of a Frustrated Conservative*, quoted in “Republican extremists, in their own words,” by Max Brantley, *Arkansas Times* Arkansas Blog, October 5, 2012, www.arktimes.com (accessed August 3, 2014).

Chapter One: The Landscape of Bondage on the Edge of the South

Whites successfully spread chattel slavery into Arkansas through the legal code, political protection of the institution, importation of black bodies, and cultivation of cotton and corn. They organized, governed, and profited from the roughly 53,000 square miles that came to make up the state of Arkansas. This chapter surveys the political and legal scaffolding, agricultural development, and natural landscape in order to understand the system faced by slaves in Arkansas.¹ Bondspeople struggled on ground claimed for slavery and white supremacy, in a political environment that grew increasingly hostile to freedom.

Arkansas's earliest African-American slaves arrived on terrain "criss-crossed by buffalo traces, Indian trade routes, and warpaths," but the institution of slavery did not establish a solid foundation in this early period. In 1686, Henri de Tonty, an Italian exploring on behalf of the French, set up and distributed land grants in a Quapaw town, Osotouy, but the region remained under-utilized by European settlers and few of any nationality moved beyond the tiny outpost that came to be known as Arkansas Post. The Post was devoid of many French other than soldiers and *coureurs des bois*, "runners of the woods," until 1717. Scottish entrepreneur John Law initiated the importation of slaves there when he geared up the *Compagnie d'Occident* to support German settlement of land in Arkansas granted by the French king. Two years later,

¹S. Charles Bolton's *Territorial Ambition and Arkansas, 1800-1860* explain the growth and development of Arkansas territorial and antebellum years, emphasizing the role of slavery. Donald P. McNeilly's *The Old South Frontier* shows how a planter class developed by securing Arkansas's most fertile ground for cotton plantation agriculture. Walter Johnson's recent work, *River of Dark Dreams*, explores the world slaves negotiated in the lower Mississippi Valley, emphasizing the capitalistic system that pressed down on slaves. Bolton, *Territorial Ambition: Land and Society in Arkansas, 1800-1840*; Bolton, *Arkansas, 1800-1860: Remote and Restless*; Bolton, "Slavery and the Defining of Arkansas"; McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*; Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*.

more than 600 African slaves arrived in Louisiana, though very few made their way to Arkansas. It is likely that those who did originated in Senegambia, as did two-thirds of the Africans who landed in Louisiana between 1726 and 1731.² Living at an intersection between the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers, slaves inhabited a commercial and diplomatic center, however remote, where French, Osage, and Quapaw traded, worked, and vied for power. But this early chapter of slave life at Arkansas Post was short-lived and never extensive. A French inspector of the post mentioned only six slaves in 1723, and the next year most, if not all, the area's slaves and many indentured servants were moved to plantations closer to New Orleans when the Law endeavor folded.³ In the following decades, the post and its slave population grew slowly. By 1793, only forty households occupied the site. The Northwest Ordinance, creating the Northwest Territory north of the Ohio River and thereafter prohibiting slavery there, changed the continental landscape of slavery in a way that made Arkansas more attractive for slaveholding settlers. With the northwest now claimed for freedom, small groups of slaves came down the Mississippi River to Arkansas when a few French families sought soil where they could remain masters. Of these probable "refugees of the Northwest Ordinance," the largest slaveholder, Joseph Bougy, owned eleven slaves in the 1793 count. Slaves at the post cleared land, planted wheat, and loaded/unloaded the goods and supplies that sustained the post's commercial existence. Their

²Sonia Toudji, "Intimate Frontiers: Indians, French, and Africans in Colonial Mississippi Valley," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Arkansas (May 2012), 177, 192; Morris S. Arnold, *Colonial Arkansas, 1686-1804: A Social and Cultural History* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991), 7, 8 (quotation), 9-12, 16-17; Jeffrey M. Mitchem, "Hernando de Soto, (1500?-1542)," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed March 14, 2014).

³Arnold, *Colonial Arkansas*, 8, 16; Kathleen DuVal, "Arkansas Post," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed April 17, 2014).

neighbors were soldiers and German and French families who traded in skins, furs, oil, and supplies for *coureurs des bois*.⁴

The farm seasons and trade patterns of the French/Quapaw frontier held the most sway over slave life in colonial Arkansas, but bondspeople were at least technically ruled, however lightly, by the *Code Noir*, a set of laws implemented in 1724 to regulate slavery in French Louisiana. The code prohibited manumission without the approval of French authorities, provided for the instruction of slaves in the Catholic faith, disallowed the sale of young children from their mothers, recognized slave marriages, and criminalized marriage or concubinage between whites and blacks or mulattoes.⁵ The code protected slave families to some extent then, at least in theory. It is difficult, however, to determine how energetically French officials enforced the code in Arkansas, home to so few Africans and located so far from a seat of French colonial power. Laws against intimate connections, for example, were difficult to enforce, and recent research reveals a type of “sexual diplomacy” evident in the cohabitation of African women with French men as well as between African men and Quapaw women in French Louisiana.⁶

The United States’ purchase of 800,000 square miles from France in 1803 brought Arkansas into American hands and further encouraged whites to spread slavery there. France was exasperated at the difficulty in controlling her American colonies, exhausted from fighting to suppress the slave revolt and war for independence in Saint Domingue, and preparing to make war against England. For these reasons, the French sold Louisiana at a bargain. Fewer than one thousand slaves inhabited Arkansas at the time of the purchase. White property rights to these

⁴Arnold, *Colonial Arkansas*, 16, 58-62.

⁵Toudji, “Intimate Frontiers,” 192-193.

⁶*Ibid.*, 185.

people remained legally undisturbed in the treaty. African Americans now settled Arkansas in greater numbers as the chattel of incoming white settlers, even as the territory itself was politically reorganized.⁷ The political landscape continued to evolve through 1819 as territorial borders shifted, but not in ways that made much difference for everyday slave life. Until 1805, Arkansas made up a portion of the District of Louisiana, which became part the Territory of Louisiana. When the state of Louisiana entered the union, Arkansas constituted the southern portion of Missouri Territory.⁸ The slave population steadily increased in these years (to 1,613 by 1820), but slaves as a percentage of the total population actually decreased.⁹

In 1819, whites succeeded in protecting the institution of slavery in the course of Arkansas's transition to a stand-alone territory, but not without a challenge. Arkansas applied for territorial status when Missouri sought statehood, suddenly bringing up the question of slavery's fate in the Trans-Mississippi. Representative James Tallmadge of New York proposed an amendment to the Missouri statehood bill that held two provisions: prohibiting the further importation of slaves into Missouri and freeing Missouri's slaves at the age of twenty-five. The Tallmadge Amendment would have effectively destroyed slavery in Missouri, and kicked off a firestorm of debate as southerners in Congress fought to defend the expansion of the institution. As historian Robert Pierce Forbes explains, "an unanticipated amendment to a routine bill had turned into nothing less than a referendum on the meaning of America." Arkansas's future was decided in this watershed moment. Representative John W. Taylor of New York had energetically defended his colleague's amendment to the Missouri bill and proposed the same two restrictions on slavery in an amendment to the bill creating Arkansas Territory. By

⁷Whayne, *Arkansas: A Narrative History*, 78-79; McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 33.

⁸Bolton, *Territorial Ambition*, 23-24; Bolton, *Arkansas, 1800-1860*, 24-25.

⁹Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, 21-23; Bolton, *Arkansas, 1800-1860*, 25; Whayne, *Arkansas: A Narrative History*, 93.

preventing additional slave importation and emancipating slaves at twenty-five, the Taylor Amendment would have made short work of extinguishing the institution of slavery in Arkansas, and would have set the future state on an entirely different trajectory. The Tallmadge amendment passed in the House, only to be struck out later by the Senate. Taylor's passed, was reconsidered, and finally defeated by speaker Henry Clay's tie-breaking vote. No further restrictions on slavery in Arkansas were proposed, and the territory was organized in 1819. Arkansas Territory was thus claimed for slavery, an action with lasting consequences. (Taylor then went on to propose another amendment to the Arkansas Territory bill that would bar slavery north of the line 36° 30' N in the future. Taylor's line was aggressively defeated, but later passed as part of the Missouri Compromise.)¹⁰

The protection of slavery in the new territory increased investment in the institution and accelerated the forced migration of African-Americans to Arkansas for agricultural labor. Travel into Arkansas was slow and uncomfortable as whites and slaves trekked crude paths and floated the small flatboats and keelboats that crept up the Arkansas, Ouachita, White, and Red Rivers.¹¹ Enough settlers made these journeys that the total population of Arkansas more than doubled in the decade after the territory was established (from 14,273 in 1820 to 30,388 in 1830). The slave population during those years spiked from 1,617 (11 percent of the total) to 4,576 (15 percent of the total).¹² At 30,388 in 1830, Arkansas's total population was less than a quarter of that of

¹⁰Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, 21-22; Robert Pierce Forbes, *The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath: Slavery and the Meaning of America*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 35-43 (quotation), 45-47.

¹¹Robert B. Walz, "Migration into Arkansas, 1820-1880: Incentives and Means of Travel," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 17 (Winter 1958): 315; Mattie Brown, "River Transportation in Arkansas, 1819-1890," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 1 (December, 1942): 292-308; Bolton, *Territorial Ambition*, 29.

¹²McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 35, 53-56; Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, 48; Moneyhon, "The Slave Family in Arkansas" *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 28 (Spring, 1999):

surrounding states, including the young state of Missouri. The earliest population centers of Arkansas Territory were located on the banks of the Arkansas River for easy access and in the hills of northwest Arkansas where the land was less prone to flooding and disease-causing mosquito infestation. Farmers grew cotton, corn, peas, beans, and potatoes, focusing most of their efforts on subsistence. Within a few short years, however, Arkansas's farmers became increasingly concerned with marketing their yields.¹³

Soon fields of cotton and corn blanketed more and more of Arkansas's acreage. The invention and widespread use of the cotton gin, which quickly and efficiently remove the clingy seeds from the fibers, made possible the expansion of cotton cultivation into the interior. Between 1800 and 1860 for example, the United States' yearly cotton production increased from 73,000 to 3,837,000 bales. The expansion of slavery accompanied the expansion of cotton. In 1800, about 900,000 slaves were employed in the United States. This grew to nearly four million by 1860. Eli Whitney's gin (and subsequent models by other inventors), allowed one worker to clear fifty pounds of cotton fiber per day of its seeds, rather than one pound per day by hand. Demand for cotton by the North and Great Britain's booming textile industry further drove this

27-28; Hanson and Moneyhon, *Historical Atlas of Arkansas*, 37. Slave populations grew faster in and made up greater proportions of the states surrounding Arkansas in these years. Between 1820 and 1830, slaves in Missouri increased from 10,222 (15 percent of the total population) to 25,096 (18 percent). In that decade, slaves in Louisiana increased from 69,064 (45 percent of the total population) to 109,588 (51 percent). In those same years, Mississippi's slave population grew from 32,814 (43 percent of the population) to 65,659 (48 percent). U.S. Bureau of the Census, Fourth Census of the United States, 1820, Schedule of Free Population, Schedule of Slave Population, Fifth Census of the United States, 1830, Schedule of Free Population, Slave Population, all from *Historical Census Browser*, University of Virginia Libraries, mapservr.lib.virginia.edu.

¹³McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 13-15, 17-21, 138; Bolton, *Territorial Ambition*, 29, 39-40, 46; Gerald T. Hanson and Carl H. Moneyhon, *Historical Atlas of Arkansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 32.

development.¹⁴ Cotton cultivation and the expansion of slavery was delayed until after the Louisiana Purchase and progressed relatively slowly in the following 20 years. Even though the *Arkansas Gazette* heralded cotton as the staple of the territory in 1825 and reported that hundreds of bales from several counties were being shipped to New Orleans or sold for cash at Arkansas Post, they overstated the case. On the edge of the Old Southwest, Arkansas was a latecomer to extensive cultivation of the crop. Further down the Mississippi, soil depletion and erosion from decades of cultivation already affected the Natchez region by the time the crop took a firm hold in Arkansas. Corn was a staple food source for people and livestock, but was grown commercially as well, and never created as much wealth as cotton. However much staple crops had begun to boom, trade in skins kept its “princely power” in Arkansas’s economy.¹⁵

As the production of cotton became more profitable, particularly along the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers, whites implemented a series of Indian removals designed to claim Arkansas’s landscape for staple crop production. Native people, seen by whites as dangerous and inhibiting progress, were pushed out as slaves were imported to convert the land to money-making fields of cotton and corn. Some native groups displaced from the southeast had long been settled in Arkansas. Populations of Cherokees, Choctaws, Delawares, and Shawnees already resided in Arkansas at the time of the Louisiana Purchase. The 1804 legislation to separate Upper Louisiana (of which Arkansas made up a portion) from the Territory of New Orleans also designated Arkansas land as available for the resettlement of southeastern Native Americans. In 1818, the Quapaw ceded 28 million acres below the Arkansas River to make way for Indian

¹⁴C. Wayne Smith and J. Tom Cothren, ed., *Cotton: Origin, History, Technology, and Production* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 1999), 78, 80, 436; Whayne, *Arkansas: A Narrative History*, 161.

¹⁵Kaye, *Joining Places*, 97; McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 13-15; *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Western Arkansas* (Chicago and Nashville: Southern Publishing Company, 1891), 117.

groups being removed to Arkansas. Whites reacted with fury to an 1820 treaty granting a huge tract of land between the Arkansas and Red Rivers to the Choctaw.¹⁶ Treaties removing Indians literally shaped Arkansas. The western border became defined by a line running north-south from Fort Smith. A treaty in 1825 moved the Choctaw west of that line, while an 1828 agreement removed Arkansas's Cherokee to that zone as well. The Quapaw, native to Arkansas, inhabited the richest cotton land of the Arkansas River Valley and were thus removed to Louisiana in 1824. Conditions in their new home in the Red River Valley were so horrible that many returned, only to be removed again to Indian Territory in 1833. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 finished the process of clearing Native Americans under tribal governments from the southeast and through Arkansas to Indian Territory. Native groups like the eastern Cherokee, Seminole, Creek, and Chickasaw passed through Arkansas in waves through the 1830s. White businesses and infrastructure benefited from federal funds granted to those in Arkansas seeking to facilitate journeys across Arkansas.¹⁷ As Indians and tribal governments were forced off of and marched through Arkansas's terrain, slaves were forced onto that ground.

Arkansas's slave territory developed on an international border where the institution thrived. Arkansas became bordered to the west by Indian Territory, a place where slavery survived within tribes. The Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Choctaw, and Chickasaw all held slaves, so the territory did not offer much of a haven for Arkansas slaves seeking freedom. This was especially true in the 1850s after the Fugitive Slave Law was deemed applicable to Indian Territory. Slave communities were initially concentrated on the more easily drained cotton ground of southwest Arkansas, along the Red River, just across from New Spain, and after 1821,

¹⁶Wayne, *Arkansas: A Narrative History*, 112-117; Kitty Sloan, "Indian Removal," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed 4/23/14).

¹⁷Wayne, *Arkansas: A Narrative History*, 114-115; Sloan, "Indian Removal."

from Mexico. But Arkansas slaves did not live on a border with freedom in that direction, either. The government of newly-independent Mexico restricted slavery, but the use of 99-year and multi-generational indentures and Texas's exemption from Mexico's general emancipation order combined to keep the institution alive to the southwest.¹⁸

Arkansas whites established a code of laws in the territory to ensure that the institution they transplanted to the frontier remained regimented and profitable. The legal code, although intended to claim Arkansas Territory's ground for slavery and slaveholders' interests, revealed contested ground. Early laws reveal a developing institution that left some room for slave autonomy and provided bondspeople minimal protection. Gone was the recognition of slave marriage and the prohibition of separation of small children from their mothers that the old *Code Noir* had provided. The law provided mechanisms for masters who sought to free their slaves and for slaves seeking freedom under the law. Slaves could petition courts for their freedom and whites could manumit them in wills. Some laws restricted free blacks, who whites watched closely for signs of "burdening" society or influencing slaves. Freedpeople who failed to pay taxes were to be hired out until the amount due was paid, but there were no restrictions concerning where free blacks could live or travel. In a strict law against kidnapping free blacks into slavery, whites could be executed for knowingly placing a free black person into slavery through theft or sale. Neither blacks nor mulattoes could serve as witnesses against whites in

¹⁸Theda Purdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540-1866* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979); Barbara Krauthamer "Slavery," *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, Oklahoma Historical Society, digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia (accessed 5/1/14); Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 22-26.

territorial courts.¹⁹ Whites passed laws to catch and punish runaways and truants, as well as limit slaves' group activity. Slaves were unable to leave the master's residence without a pass, and those caught "strolling" by the patrols could be whipped on sight. Probably reflecting the fear that rippled across the South after Nat Turner's Rebellion in Virginia in 1831, whites passed laws meant to minimize the possibility of slave insurrection. The assembly of slaves was monitored closely—groups of slaves could not gather for longer than four hours at a time and suspicious or riotous groups were to be disbanded and punished. Slaves caught inciting insurrection were to be punished with death. Whites found to be connected with unlawful slave gatherings or who illegally traded with slaves faced fines. Revealing whites' fears of harm at slaves' hands, the law declared that slaves could face the death penalty as punishment for administering medicine unless it was proven by whites to have been administered without ill will. Reflecting the necessities of frontier life, however, the law provided that slaves (and free blacks) could keep and use guns with permission from masters. Punishment for slave crimes was generally in the form of "well laid on" whippings for men and women.²⁰ In laws allowing slaves' gun use, whites recognized the practicality and benefit of gun-wielding slaves in the Old Southwest for protection and hunting, a practice that would have probably taken place with or without legal sanction. Practical necessity in working, farming, hunting, and traveling in the territory meant that slaves enjoyed whites' trust to a certain degree in Arkansas Territory. But strict laws on slaves' gatherings show the uneasiness whites felt with a growing slave population on the heels

¹⁹*Laws of Arkansas Territory, Compiled and arranged by J. Steele and J. M. Campbell, under the direction and superintendence of John Pope, Esq., Governor of the Territory of Arkansas* (Little Rock: J. Steele, 1835), 268, 329, 521-530.

²⁰The law did not reserve whipping as a punishment strictly for slaves and free blacks. Whites could be whipped for unpaid fines. *Laws of Arkansas Territory*, 521-525.

of the Turner revolt. Therefore, slaves in groups were watched much more closely, and thus had fewer opportunities than they did individually.

Whites safely shepherded Arkansas into statehood without restrictions on slavery, but, as in the territorial debate, not without a fight. By the early 1830s, as the population of Arkansas Territory increased and the agricultural economy developed, whites began to think about statehood. As the population neared the 40,000 needed for admission, politicians touted their ability and willingness to bring Arkansas out of her territorial status as soon as possible. Arkansas's leaders anticipated a struggle. No slave state had attempted to enter the union since Missouri. The balance of twelve slave states to twelve free states secured the harmony of the Senate when Arkansas requested consideration for statehood in 1835.²¹ Among Arkansas's territorial leaders, perhaps its delegate to Congress, Ambrose Sevier, pushed hardest for statehood. He was born in Tennessee, the son of John Sevier, that state's first governor. Sevier was a member of "the Family," a political faction of territorial Arkansas held together by family ties of blood and marriage. Sevier looked out for the political interests of the Family in pressing for statehood. Arkansas's status as a state rather than a territory would better enable the Family to support Richard M. Johnson, the brother of Sevier's father-in-law (Benjamin Johnson) in his upcoming bid for the presidency. The Family also had an interest in moving quickly for statehood in order to ensure the security of slavery. Sevier argued that as soon as Arkansas had the appropriate population and a treasury free of dangerous debt, it should apply for statehood. When Michigan applied for consideration in 1834, Sevier saw statehood as a more immediate

²¹Cal Ledbetter, Jr., "The Constitution of 1836: A New Perspective," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 41 (Autumn 1982): 221.

need.²² If Michigan was admitted, the balance between the free and slave states in the Senate would be upset. Florida was preparing to apply for admission as a slave state, and if it succeeded, Arkansas would have to wait indefinitely for a “sister state,” as the next probable free state, Wisconsin, remained far from ready. Arkansas needed to apply for statehood quickly with Michigan in order to be considered in the near future. Pro-statehood Arkansans decided to be ready. They initiated the process of electing a constitutional convention in order to have a state constitution in hand to submit with the bill. Some opposed this initiative, declaring it as illegal, but the states of Vermont, Kentucky, and Maine had all entered the union in the same fashion.²³

The politics of slavery dictated Arkansas’s statehood process. More whites agreed on Arkansas’s right to begin writing a constitution than agreed on how the writers should be chosen. The southeast was dominated by larger cotton-producing operations with large slave populations. The white population was larger and poorer in the northwest, in contrast to the richer, fewer white population in the southeast.²⁴ The northwesterners wanted representation in the convention to be based on free white population alone, while southeasterners sought to include slaves in the population count for apportionment. After all, southeasterners argued, the inclusion of the slave population helped make statehood possible in the first place. In the end, delegates to the convention were chosen almost exactly evenly from the southeastern and northwestern counties, but controversy continued as the constitutional committees debated the issue of legislative

²²Dumas Malone, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography, Under the Auspices of the American Council of Learned Societies Volume VII*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935); Marie Cash, “Arkansas Achieves Statehood” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 2 (December, 1943): 292-294; Whayne, *Arkansas: A Narrative History*, 105.

²³Ledbetter, “The Constitution of 1836,” 221-222; Cash, “Arkansas Achieves Statehood,” 294, 300; Whayne, *Arkansas: A Narrative History*, 106.

²⁴Hanson and Moneyhon, *Historical Atlas of Arkansas*, 39; Cal Ledbetter, Jr., “The Constitution of 1836,” 224; McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 4-5.

representation in the future state of Arkansas.²⁵ Delegates agreed that the institution of slavery should be permitted and protected but took time to work out how the slave population should apply to representation in the legislature. Ultimately, representation was apportioned by the white population and no portion of the slave population was considered.²⁶

Arkansas's constitution promoted mastery in the Old South's new state. Only a few provisions of the constitution deal with the institution, but they were important. While historian Orville Taylor suggested that the 1836 Arkansas constitution was more aggressively protective of slavery than other southern constitutions, political scientist Cal Ledbetter interpreted the document as quite similar to other southern states on its position concerning slavery. Arkansas's state constitution granted the general assembly the authority to prevent the entrance of slaves into the state who had committed crimes in other states or the entrance of slaves "for the purpose of speculation, or as an article of trade or merchandise." The emancipation of slaves was forbidden without the consent of the owner, and it was directed that slaves be treated humanely. In addition, the constitution guaranteed the right of slaves to an impartial jury and state-appointed counsel when on trial, and instructed that slaves convicted of capital offenses were to receive the same punishment as whites for the same offense. The constitution also protected slaveowners who brought their human property into the state with them, and did not ban freed slaves from the state.²⁷ Slavery induced constitution writers to change the phrase "That all men are born equally free and independent and have certain inherent and indefeasible rights" to "That all free men, when they form a social compact are equal, and have certain inherent and indefeasible rights."²⁸

²⁵Whayne, *Arkansas: A Narrative History*, 106-107; Ledbetter, "The Constitution of 1836," 224.

²⁶Ledbetter, "The Constitution of 1836," 233.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 244.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 233.

Ledbetter has described Arkansas's 1836 constitution as a near carbon copy of the constitutions of the various other southern states (except Mississippi, whose constitution provided for frequent popular elections of judges and public officials). Taylor showed that many other southern constitutions that were effective at the time Arkansas's was written included no direct references to slavery: Maryland (1776), North Carolina (1776), South Carolina (1790), Louisiana (1812), and Virginia (1830).²⁹ As the bill to admit Arkansas with this constitution was reviewed in Washington, some proposed amendments that would have limited slavery there were defeated, including a proposal by Representative and former president John Quincy Adams that the state's power to limit emancipation be stricken from its constitution. On June 15, 1836, President Andrew Jackson signed the bill admitting Arkansas into the union.³⁰

Meanwhile, as white Arkansans worked to protect mastery, the institution solidified to the southwest, surrounding Arkansas's slaves with ground hostile to freedom. The province of Texas fought for independence from Mexico, in great part to allow the spread of American slavery there to continue, in a backlash to Mexican regulations against American immigration. The resulting Lone Star Republic moved quickly to protect slavery, and wrote into its constitution a prohibition on any law that might prevent immigrants from importing slaves. In 1845, Arkansas's neighbor entered the union as a fast-growing slave state and a destination for many bondspeople from Arkansas who were forced to resettle with whites.³¹

With Arkansas claimed for slavery, its first general assembly passed a slate of laws to codify the institution there. As time passed, legal scaffolding for the institution hardened, increasingly hedging in slaves' opportunities for autonomy. Laws used by whites to combat

²⁹Ledbetter, "The Constitution of 1836," 244; Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, 46.

³⁰Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, 44; Cash, "Arkansas Achieves Statehood," 308.

³¹Campbell, *Empire for Slavery*, 35-49.

slaves' tendency to flee their bondage or gather without whites' permission reveal the increasing sense that all whites could and should assist in policing slavery's terrain. The code intended to protect property, white lives, and to order the interaction between slaves and masters as well as between slaves and other whites. The fundamental task was to provide mechanisms to prevent slave uprising. Antebellum Arkansas law evidenced real concern for the possibility of "riots, routs, affrays, fightings, and unlawful assemblies." Each township elected a constable (who appointed deputies) to put down any such incidents. Coroners, in addition to their main duties, were also directed to "quell and suppress" all riots and affrays. This arrangement of duties involved white county officials in the maintenance of the frontier slave society and helped knit a white front against slaves' rebellion.³² In 1854, the state supreme court affirmed the right of *any* white person to subdue a slave in rebellion.³³ During times of heightened alert, whites took extra precautions. For example, the series of unexplained North Texas fires creating the "Texas Troubles" hysteria of 1860 prompted Little Rock slaveholders and city government to hire investigators into possible slave insurrection.³⁴

While the law of the land encouraged any and all whites to enforce mastery, specially-appointed neighborhood patrols in parts of Arkansas combed the countryside on horseback for runaways, truants, and unauthorized slave gatherings. Laws provided for patrols of a fairly fluid structure, probably because the slave population varied greatly across the state. The justice of the

³²Josiah Gould, *A Digest of the Statutes of Arkansas; Embracing all laws of a general and permanent character, in force at the close of the session of the General Assembly of 1856* (Little Rock: Johnson & Yerkes, State Printers, 1858), 257-258, 272 (second quotation); Chris M. Branam, "Slave Codes," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed 4/25/14).

³³*Austin, a Slave v. the State* (1854), 14 Ark. 555.

³⁴Lack, "Urban Slave Community," 280; James M. Smallwood, "Slave Insurrection," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, www.tshaonline.org (accessed June 2, 2014).

peace, when “three householders of his township” felt it necessary, was empowered to appoint from one to three patrol committees, each with a fixed captain, who presided over up to five underling patrollers, all of whom served terms of four months. As of an act of January 12, 1853, patrols were to ride at least once every two weeks and more often if deemed necessary. Patrols rode “any place in their township where they have reason to believe that negroes will assemble unlawfully.” Patrollers were exempt from road work duty, and received compensation at the discretion of the county court.³⁵ The Arkansas Supreme Court held later in 1854 that patrols should be understood as neighbors protecting their community:

The patrol system is a police regulation, which, being kept alive upon the statute book, is a slumbering power, ready to be aroused and called into action, whenever there is an apparent necessity for it. The presumption is, that the people of each township are able to quell all ordinary disturbances occurring in it, by or among their slaves, and this can be better and more appropriately done by those who are neighbors and friends, having a common interest to protect, and a common danger to guard against, than by strangers, whose interference has not been invited.³⁶

Law in the 1840s provided that runaway slaves were to be sold to the highest bidder after two months of being captured and unclaimed at a county jail.³⁷ In later years, the code evolved to declare that captured runaways could be detained for six months, and then were to be taken to the state penitentiary to labor with other prisoners (further increasing the risk for slaves who tried to flee). Arkansas law later stipulated that any person could apprehend a runaway slave or a black/mulatto person suspected of being a runaway slave. As of a January 3, 1855 law, depositing a runaway with a jailer entitled the captor to a \$25 bounty from the slave’s owner.

³⁵Gould, *Digest of the Statutes of Arkansas*, 822-823. While the law provided counties the power to establish area patrols, it did not require them. I plan to conduct future research to investigate which counties set up patrols and how often.

³⁶*Hervy v. Armstrong* (1854), 15 Ark., 164.

³⁷E. H. English, *A Digest of the Statutes of Arkansas; embracing all laws of a general and permanent character in force at the close of the session of the General Assembly of 1846* (Reardon & Garritt, 1848), 945.

Arkansas's 1850s law also declared that any slave found twenty miles from home without a pass would be declared a runaway. This code made it easy for any white person to take part in the potentially profitable pursuit of Arkansas's runaway slaves. In effect, all white Arkansans were slave patrollers.³⁸

Other measures reflected a hardening of the institution over time. The law reduced the penalty for kidnapping free blacks into slavery. While the laws of Arkansas Territory had already prescribed a death sentence for kidnapping a free person and placing her into slavery, after 1838, the sentence ranged from three to twenty-one years in prison. Stealing any slave, "whether black, white, or yellow," could mean imprisonment for five to twenty-one years, a bit more than the five to fifteen possible for horse-stealing.³⁹ Showing a fear of abolitionists influencing slaves, the law declared that a free person, whether "speaking or writing, maintain that owners have not right of property in their slaves" they could face up to a year in prison, and fine no less than 500 dollars. Further, Arkansas's lawmakers passed an act of November 22, 1850 that prohibited writing, printing, or circulating any material that might incite slaves to insurrection, imposing a penalty of one to five years in prison. Additionally, whites could face two to five years of prison time for "enticing" a slave to run away from his or her master.⁴⁰

As the legal environment became increasingly inhospitable to freedom, the emancipation of slaves became more difficult. Emancipation via a will or other document with a signature and seal required two witnesses, and was taken to the circuit court of the county. The newly freed person was then issued a document signed by the county clerk. Slaves could take matters into their own hands, though, and had the right to sue for freedom. Grounds for these suits were

³⁸Gould, *Digest of the Statutes of Arkansas*, 1027-1029.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 338, 342 (quotation).

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 344-345 (quotation).

usually based on deceased masters' wills or slaves' claims that masters made promises of freedom before death that were not carried out by the heirs. Slaves who brought these suits were assigned counsel (in the fashion of suits brought by paupers). Freedom suits might have been risky. Although Arkansas law stated that slaves bringing such suits should not be "subject to any severity" by masters or other whites in retaliation, it is difficult to believe that it never happened.⁴¹

Having achieved freedom through manumission, suit, or birth, free blacks in Arkansas lived on increasingly hostile ground. Legal scaffolding for white mastery limited free blacks. Newcomers or previously undocumented freedpeople had to provide proof to their county courts to obtain certificates of freedom. Although the territorial period allowed free blacks to receive permissions to carry firearms, antebellum law declared that free blacks could not. White Arkansans exhibited a growing uneasiness with the presence of free blacks, and sought to limit that population. An act of January 20, 1843 prohibited additional free blacks from moving into Arkansas after March 1, 1843. In addition, free people of color living in Arkansas, whether newcomers or long-time residents, were required to bring documentation in to county officials for registration and put up a \$500 security bond to the county court. Clearly this was not universally obeyed, as leaders re-issued the call for free blacks to come forward and put up bond on January 9, 1845, allowing an additional six months for compliance. Hostility toward the presence of free blacks in Arkansas culminated in the 1859 law requiring all free African Americans to leave the state altogether or be sold into slavery. Of the estimated 700 free blacks

⁴¹Ibid., 483, 550-552.

of Arkansas, all but 144 left. It seems that none of the remaining free blacks were actually auctioned off as slaves, perhaps due to the patronage of whites.⁴²

As whites crafted a political and legal system that supported slavery in Arkansas, their agricultural pursuits drove the state's economic development. This is the part of Arkansas's history with slavery that is best known. Orville Taylor well documented Arkansas's agricultural growth in relation to the expansion of slavery there, as have S. Charles Bolton and Donald McNeilly, who fleshed out the story much further. Slaveholders poured into Arkansas, intensifying the production of corn and cotton there in the decade before the Civil War. While corn remained at the center of agricultural pursuits in Arkansas as a crucial food source, cotton drove the growth of slavery in Arkansas. McNeilly demonstrates the process by which much of Arkansas became land dominated by planters, who claimed the most fertile ground—the rich, dark soil of river valleys—for cotton plantations.⁴³

The growth of cotton and slavery in Arkansas was also shaped by outside investors. Speculation by wealthy men in other parts of the South had a hand in the development of the southern periphery. For example, James Sutherland Deas of Mobile, Alabama and his business partner, Thomas Broom Lee of New Orleans, traded in land and slaves in southwest Arkansas from territorial days through the Civil War. Purchasing a New Madrid claim from Jane Bradley and land from Davidson and Eliza Bradley in 1834-1836, through his agent, Deas set up a plantation in Arkansas seemingly without ever leaving the gulf.⁴⁴

⁴²Ibid., 483, 553-554, 556-557; Billy D. Higgins, "Act 151 of 1859," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed March 14, 2014).

⁴³See Chapter Three, "Making the Planter Class," in McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 53-91.

⁴⁴James Sutherland Deas papers, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

Although the largest slave populations of Arkansas resided in the plantation regions, however, the small holdings of yeoman farmers constituted the most geographically widespread form of slave agriculture. Choosing from the less prime farmland, small slaveholders targeted well-watered acreage with fewer hardwoods that might slow their progress, and made the best of Arkansas's sandier soils.⁴⁵ Planters and small slaveholders extracted enough labor in this system to expand cotton harvests through the antebellum period. The fiber's production in Arkansas exploded between the harvests of 1849 and 1859, more dramatically in some colonies than others (See Table 1). The state as a whole produced 367,393 bales in the 1859 harvest. Corn production increased as well, culminating in 17,823,588 bushels in the state's last harvest counted by the census before the Civil War.⁴⁶ Slave agriculture in Arkansas became more efficient over time. For example, the ratio of cotton bales to slaves increased from 2.12 to 5.5 in Chicot County and from 1.3 to 2.7 in Union County between the agricultural censuses of 1850 and 1860. Bondspeople were knowledgeable farmers, not just muscle, and they learned and taught the methods of cotton production, too. Slaves of the Bozeman plantation even attended a meeting of the Clark County Agricultural Society in 1857. Slaves tested planting devices in 1859 at Wagram. The efforts of black and white farmers created great wealth in Arkansas, bringing the cash value of the state's farms from \$15,265,245 in 1850 to \$91,649,773 in 1860.⁴⁷

⁴⁵McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 97-100.

⁴⁶J. D. B. DeBow, *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850, Embracing a statistical view of each of the states and territories* (Washington: Robert Armstrong, Public Printer, 1853), 554-557; Joseph C. G. Kennedy, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860: compiled from the original returns of the eighth census, under the direction of the secretary of the interior* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864), 6-9.

⁴⁷Newberry, "Clark County Plantation Journal," 405, 408; Ford Diary, March 22, 1849; Kaye, *Joining Places*, 92, 99; McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 126; Kaye, *Joining Places*, 96-99. The labor routine of slaves in cotton production is discussed in Chapter Five of this dissertation

Table 1: Cotton Production (bales) of Seven Arkansas Counties and State Totals, 1850, 1860⁴⁸

County	1850	1860
Chicot County	8,450	40,948
Union County	6,270	17,261
Hempstead County	2,503	16,318
Independence County	274	2,120
Conway County	499	3,181
Washington County	1	15
Jefferson County	4,273	28,586
State Total	65,344	367,393

Table 2: Corn Production (bushels) of Seven Arkansas Counties and State Totals, 1850, 1860⁴⁹

County	1850	1860
Chicot County	222,595	329,941
Union County	341,406	452,553
Hempstead Co.	278,818	563,093
Independence Co.	388,395	604,470
Conway County	164,192	265,119
Washington Co.	557,757	663,510
Jefferson County	191,829	490,765
State Total	8,893,939	17,823,588

⁴⁸DeBow, *Seventh Census of the United States*, 556; Kennedy, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860*, 7.

⁴⁹DeBow, *Seventh Census of the United States* 555; Kennedy, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860*, 7.

Table 3: Improved Acreage of Seven Arkansas Counties and State Totals, 1850, 1860⁵⁰

County	1850	1860
Chicot County	29,886	66,423
Union County	56,841	101,424
Hempstead County	32,618	65,548
Independence County	23,602	51,769
Conway County	11,885	21,747
Washington County	38,847	59,379
Jefferson County	22,245	65,387
State Total	781,530	1,983,313

Table 4: Slave Population of Seven Arkansas Counties and State Totals, 1850, 1860⁵¹

County	1850	1860
Chicot County	3,984	7,512
Union County	4,767	6,331
Hempstead County	2,460	5,398
Independence County	828	1,337
Conway County	240	802
Washington County	1,199	1,493
Jefferson County	2,621	7,146
State Total	47,100	111,115

⁵⁰DeBow, *Seventh Census of the United States* 554; Kennedy, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860*, vii, 6.

⁵¹U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Slave Population, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Slave Population*, Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia Libraries, mapserver.lib.virginia.edu.

A bird's eye view of the landscape of slavery in Arkansas shows the economic and political layers of Arkansas converging with the state's geography and natural environment to make up a land dotted with different sizes and types of farms. Two major divisions are evident, though scholars have probably generalized too much about what they mean. Historians have long used the division between Arkansas's hill country and delta to understand the state's social and economic development. Indeed, these two sections, "upcountry"/"upland" and "low country"/"lowland," are defined by characteristics that have influenced Arkansas's development from initial settlement to the present day. Orville Taylor wrote that "An imaginary line bisecting Arkansas from northeast to southwest marks the approximate division between the highlands and the lowlands, the former lying north and west of the line." He pointed out that some of the highland counties had some similar traits of the lowlands, laying along rivers, but as settlers carved more counties out of the mountains, additional "true" highland counties emerged.⁵² McNeilly's *Old South Frontier* embraces the two-halves paradigm, and invokes historian Ira Berlin's argument for two types of American slavery—"societies with slaves" and "slave societies." In short, slave societies are those in which the economy depends upon the use of slave labor, while societies with slaves are just that—places where slave labor exists, but where it is not crucial to the area's social and economic fabric. McNeilly characterizes the southeastern half of Arkansas as a slave society, while considering the northwestern half as being made up of societies with slaves. He explains: "Antebellum Arkansas was of both worlds. The two geographic regions nurtured the development of two societies. The highlands of the northwest became a world of small self-sufficient farms, many of which had a slave or two. The lowlands .

⁵²Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, 27.

. . . developed into one dominated by cotton plantations and the dictates of slavery.”⁵³ But this categorization makes more sense when discussing a top-down view of the economy of slavery in Arkansas, than for an understanding of the slave experience in that system across the state. A closer look blurs the distinction between these two categories when it comes to slave life in Arkansas. Data from four counties—Hempstead, Conway, Pope, and Independence—demonstrate how slaves lived and worked in zones that do not fit neatly into either category.

Although the county is not situated in the delta region, more slaves lived in Hempstead County than any other county in 1830. And while Arkansas’s slave communities came to be concentrated in the southeast, the southwest continued as a major center of Arkansas’s slave population through the antebellum years.⁵⁴ Most sites of bondage in the county were smaller than plantations, but the number of plantations there grew steadily after statehood, especially during the 1850s. By 1860, 58 percent of slaves in the county lived on plantations, meaning that while most whites experienced the institution on the smaller scale, slaves were more likely to experience it on plantations.⁵⁵ Most of these plantations, however, were of moderate size. Some grew quite large by the close of the antebellum years (the largest at 205 slaves), but were not as large as those of Chicot County, the county that epitomized lowland slavery in Arkansas.⁵⁶ Hempstead County’s cotton production levels were meager in comparison to Arkansas’s most important cotton county—Chicot County—but Hempstead County’s cotton production increased

⁵³McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 4-5; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 7-13.

⁵⁴Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, 26.

⁵⁵U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Schedule 4 (Productions of Agriculture), Hempstead County, AR; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Schedule 4 (Productions of Agriculture), Hempstead County, AR.*

⁵⁶U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Hempstead County, AR; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Hempstead County, AR.*

by 548 percent between the harvests of 1849 and 1859—more than double the rate of Chicot (See Table 1).⁵⁷ All told, Hempstead County was an important lowland river county with widespread slavery (447 holdings in 1860), a high slave population, and produced 3 to 5 percent of the state’s cotton, but as Orville Taylor stated, Hempstead was not part of the “true lowland group” because the scale of plantation slavery did not match the southeast. Here, more than half of enslaved people resided on plantations, and they spent their lives growing cotton and corn—with more emphasis on the latter than Chicot County (See Table 2). Slaves’ communities never grew as large as in the Delta but were not nearly so scattered as in hillier parts of Arkansas.

Like Hempstead County, the ground of Conway County defies easy categorization. Only 802 slaves lived there in 1860, while whites numbered 5,895. Slaves made up only 12 percent of people there—less than that for the state as a whole, which was about 25 percent that same year. But although the county as a whole seems to indicate that this region was a “society with slaves,” the story of slave life is more complicated. Welborn Township, in the southern part of the county along the Arkansas River, was a black majority township—home to 502 slaves and 360 whites. Slaves made up 58 percent of the population of the township. Just over half of the slaves in the county (51 percent) resided in Welborn. 61 percent of the county’s cotton in 1860 came from Welborn.⁵⁸ Most holdings were small—only seven of the county’s 110 slaveholding farms could be classified as plantations. But slaves living along the river in Conway County would have had

⁵⁷U.S. Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Schedule 4 (Productions of Agriculture), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Hempstead County, AR; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 4 (Productions of Agriculture), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Hempstead County, AR. Hempstead County cotton production increased from 2,552 bales to 16,548 bales between the harvest of 1849 and the harvest of 1859 (a 548 percent increase).

⁵⁸U.S. Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Schedule 4 (Productions of Agriculture), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Conway County, AR; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 4 (Productions of Agriculture), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Conway County, AR.

more in common with bondspeople in the cotton expanses of the Delta than hillside yeoman farmers—a larger slave community and riverside cultivation of cotton. Spreading the county’s slavery data across all townships misses the intensification of slavery along the southern edge, where slaves outnumbered whites and where they grew more than half of the county’s cotton.⁵⁹

Pope County, Conway County’s neighbor to the west, similarly complicates the usual divisions. Gary Battershell found in his article “The Socioeconomic Role of Slavery in the Arkansas Upcountry” that in the upcountry, contrary to what many may have believed, slavery influenced daily lives, politics, and government. Many more people than just those who owned slaves benefitted economically from their labor. While these findings have been a crucial part of moving forward the historiography of Arkansas slavery, Battershell used Pope and Johnson Counties as representative of upcountry slavery. A closer look, however, shows Pope as less than the quintessential upcountry slave county.⁶⁰ Although further into the hills, Pope County was home to even more slaves than Conway County in 1860 (972), double the number of slaveholdings (209), and produced even more cotton than Conway County, by about 500 bales (3,723 bales total). Similarly, the center of Pope County slavery was not in its highlands, but along the Arkansas River. Pope County’s southern townships look similar to Conway County’s. Galley (or Galla) Rock—as the major southern township was known in 1860—and Illinois Township together held 500 of the county’s 972 total slaves in 1860. More than half of the county’s slaves resided along the river. Only three of the farms where slaves lived were large enough to be called plantations, though. The percentage of the population of Galley Rock in slavery stood at 24 percent (in line with the statewide proportion), and even lower in Illinois

⁵⁹Kennedy, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860*, 224.

⁶⁰Battershell, “The Socioeconomic Role of Slavery in the Upcountry,” 45-60.

Township.⁶¹ Like Conway, Pope County's slave population concentrated enough in one place that it fails to fit the mold of small holdings spread across the hillsides, but neither was it engaged in plantation agriculture either. Battershell brings the Arkansas River to his readers' attention in his article on Pope and Johnson counties, explaining that "The availability of rich bottomland did render these counties somewhat more disposed to large-scale farming than other parts of the Arkansas upcountry. Yet in their ways of life, county residents more closely resembled Arkansans residing" in the upcountry. Slaves' ways of life, however, might have been very different. With more than half living on larger operations on the river, their experience would have been less like what we think of as upcountry slavery. Like Conway, Pope County shows some weakness in the "imaginary line" separating upcountry from lowcountry slavery.⁶²

Like Hempstead, Conway, and Pope, Independence County serves as a caution against the too-easy categories of two types of slave life in Arkansas. Located at the meeting of the Black and White Rivers in northern Arkansas, Independence County's location on a map might suggest that it housed the upcountry version slavery of Arkansas. However, like Pope and Conway Counties, Independence County hosted a strip of more intensified slavery. Of the

⁶¹Because of the condition of the agricultural manuscript census for Pope County, there are whole sections that are illegible, and it is not possible to determine exactly how much of Pope County's cotton was grown by slaveholding farms on the river. Only about 560 bales, or 15 percent, originated there for certain. The actual percentage must be higher, but probably not as high as in Conway County. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1850, Schedule 4 (Productions of Agriculture), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Pope County, AR; Kennedy, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860*, 224.

⁶²In fact, Georgena Duncan's article in the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* used Pope County (and Conway County) to represent river valley slavery. While the labels "upcountry" and "river valley" are not necessarily mutually exclusive, it is clear that Pope County is not the best place to represent upcountry slavery. Duncan, "One negro, Sarah . . . one horse named Collier, one cow and calf named Pink," 325-345.

county's 1,337 slaves, almost 67 percent (891) resided along rivers.⁶³ By measures outlined in Carl Moneyhon's description of antebellum Arkansas in *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, Independence County shows more similarities to Union County in south Arkansas than to its neighbor Van Buren County. For example, although there were only thirteen plantation-sized holdings in Independence County's 246 in 1860, the average size of the plantation force was 26.9 slaves, close to Union's 32.7, but drastically different from Van Buren, which had none. At that time, 20.5 percent of slaves in Independence County resided on plantations, compared to 33 percent in Union, and 0 in Van Buren.⁶⁴ Here again, the economic landscape blurs distinctions between upcountry and delta.

The examples of Hempstead, Conway, Pope, and Independence Counties demonstrate that rather than existing somewhere in a "dual society consisting of highland farm districts and lowland plantation districts," Arkansas slave life inhabited a topography fashioned by intersecting political, economic, and natural features that could vary widely and thus can defy easy categorization. Slaves lived out a spectrum of experiences not limited to either remote hillside smallholdings *or* expansive lowland cotton operations.⁶⁵ Rather than splitting Arkansas's slaves communities using a diagonal line from southwest to northeast, this chapter devotes some attention to looking particularly at features central to Arkansas's development—the river systems. This is not to replace the consideration of the delta or mountains, but to overlay Arkansas waterways onto our understandings of the role of natural regions in the development of slavery across the state. Rivers fed the economy that drove the growth of slavery and created

⁶³U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 4 (Productions of Agriculture), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Independence County, AR.

⁶⁴Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 18-21; Kennedy, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860*, 224.

⁶⁵McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 4. McNeilly, Taylor, and Battershell acknowledge the importance of rivers, but are a bit too tied down by the "imaginary line."

ribbons of dense slave communities that (usually) traced south and east across the state. Waterways teemed with steamboats that carried the fruits of slaves' labor and sometimes offered the means for their escape. Larger channels like the Mississippi, Arkansas, and Ouachita cultivated an African-American "river world" explored in the pages of Chapter Three. Smaller rivers and creeks cut into Arkansas's hills, creating rich bottomlands that supported slave agriculture in small holdings. Rivers supported the settlement of towns where slaves worked in homes, hotels, and stores. Historian Carl Moneyhon and geographer Gerald T. Hanson identify six main river systems in Arkansas: the Mississippi, Arkansas, White, St. Francis, Ouachita, and Red.⁶⁶

The Mississippi River anchored the development of cotton plantation agriculture in fertile delta soil. Rivers that fed the Mississippi stretched that economy and society into the interior of the state. Plantations of eastern Arkansas drew from the rich alluvial soil and plugged into the highway of information, supplies, and people provided by the Mississippi River. The development of the area by whites was slowed at first by the problems of drainage, the task of clearing swampy acreage, and disease. Slave populations were most concentrated in the river frontage of southern counties like Chicot and Phillips, some home to more slaves than the state capital's entire population in 1860. Overseers and patrols were in greatest use there, slaves' labor was focused on large-scale production, and their laboring hours were more likely to go to the support of elite whites. Hundreds of slaves resided in large plantations owned by planter families and absentee owners. One Kentuckian who had only previously witnessed slavery on smaller holdings commented on Arkansas's developing plantation system, exclaiming "I will say

⁶⁶Gerald T. Hanson and Carl H. Moneyhon, *Historical Atlas of Arkansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), "4. Surface Water Bodies."

that I had no conception of slavery until I went to Arkansas. . . . I was horrified by what I saw there. I was an anti-slavery man before I went there, but I came back a violent abolitionist.”⁶⁷

The cotton routine was most rigid here. This is also the part of the state where slave communities were most extensive. Walter Johnson’s *River of Dark Dreams* explores this world that radiated from the Mississippi, painting a bleak picture of slaves’ daily existence, but showing where opportunity lay as well. Arkansas’s side of the Mississippi River drew the investment of many whites who did not care to live there themselves, like Mississippi planter R. C. Ballard. It is perhaps on absentee-owned operations where slavery in Arkansas was its harshest, where veritable factories of cotton churned out thousands of bales every fall. Paternalistic patriarchs were nowhere to be found on absentee-owned plantations, reducing whatever benefit slaves might have gotten from on-site owners who sought to be thought of as “good” masters. Instead, slaves had to contend with overseers who wanted to be able to make promising reports on the crop and secure the next year’s contract. These men came and went often, as described in Chapter Four, at times due to sabotage at the hands of slaves.⁶⁸

If the Mississippi River made the dark dreams of capitalistic slavery come true, the Arkansas promised a similarly sinister dominion. Formed from the snowpacks of the mountains of the far west, the waters of the Arkansas served as the main artery of slavery within the state, running 505 miles. The Arkansas River Valley created an east-west plantation belt that united the

⁶⁷McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*; U. S. Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants); Testimony of Hon. James Speed before the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, pp. 32-33, November 1863, filed with O- 328 (1863), Letters Received, ser. 12, Record Group 94, NARA, Freedmen and Southern Society Project, K-93, College Park, Maryland.

⁶⁸Extensive information on the management of absentee plantations can be found in R.C. Ballard Papers, Subseries 1.3, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; U. S. Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants).

state's commerce and agriculture, drawing eastward to the major artery of the Mississippi. From Arkansas Post to Fort Smith, the Arkansas River worked as heartbeat and highway of agricultural life in the center of the state, linking Indian Territory, the capital city, and the delta. In 1860, 20 percent of the state's farmland was located in the twelve counties along the Arkansas River. Slave families in the Arkansas River Valley cultivated the strip of rich bottomland terrace soils that stretched across the state, dotted by settlements like Van Buren, Lewisburg, and Cadron. The western valley's sandy loam hills stretched up to the Boston Mountains, giving way to wider expanses of alluvial soil to the south and east. Bondspeople of Arkansas and Prairie Counties cultivated the eastern prairie earth north of the Arkansas, where a compact clay subsoil lay underneath the rich silt-loam surface.⁶⁹ About midway down the river, a denser slave community resided in the state's most urban area, the river city of Little Rock. Hardly a city, Little Rock never reached a population of even 4,000 before the Civil War. While most southern cities were not very large, Little Rock was thinly settled even in comparison to nearby cities, like Vicksburg, which grew to 8,000 people by 1860. But by 1860, 846 bondspeople lived in Little Rock. Women made up 56 percent of the slave population in the town, a significantly greater proportion than for the state as a whole (49.4 percent), probably because hard field work was not the priority labor need for whites there. As will be discussed in Chapter Five, Little Rock hosted the most vibrant slaves' economy.⁷⁰

⁶⁹*Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Southern Arkansas* (Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1890), 11; Mark K. Christ, *Civil War Arkansas, 1863* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 8; U. S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants).

⁷⁰Kolchin, *American Slavery, 177-178*; Christopher Morris, *Becoming Southern: The Evolution of a Way of Life, Warren County and Vicksburg, 1770-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 115; Lack, "An Urban Slave Community," 258; Moneyhon and Hanson, *Historical Atlas of Arkansas*, "3. Soil Patterns," "4. Surface Water Bodies."

Slaves occupied the region of the White River—flowing North out of the Boston Mountains before doubling back to flow southward through eastern Arkansas—since early days of white settlement. Near the river’s source, they farmed corn and winter wheat in thin rocky limestone and sandstone soils (enriched by the organic material provided by deciduous hardwoods), with greater yields in the deeper soil of the slender bottomlands of the White’s branches. The upper White and its forks drew slaveholders to Washington County, in particular, where bondspeople worked a variety of tasks. Mostly residing in single holdings, slaves farmed the flat fertile land along the streams and branches that drained the county. Their skills and tasks in farm life ranged widely, as smaller numbers meant a greater range of responsibilities, while their social lives with other slaves were limited by the sparse slave population. The river itself was not the only attraction for slaveholders, however. Larger slaveholdings were found in Cane Hill area, and many other slaves resided in town. Fayetteville, at one-third of its inhabitants enslaved in 1860, was a slave town. Slaves worked the flour mills, blacksmith shops, hotels, and more. Northern Arkansas enterprises could be connected to activity in other regions, as in the case of large Washington County slaveholder Mark Bean, who ran a “cotton factory,” (possibly a textile mill) fueled by cotton from his Arkansas River valley holdings. As the White River plunged south and reached into the alluvial plains of eastern Arkansas, it fed corn and cotton cultivation on a greater scale. A port town on the White, Batesville linked the rocky hills and alluvial plains. Slaves farming near the confluence of the Black and White Rivers cultivated the zone where the deeper loessial hills and forested coastal plain met the thin Ozark soils. Like the Arkansas, the White stitched the uplands and lowlands together.⁷¹

⁷¹Ted J. Smith, “Slavery in Washington County, Arkansas, 1828-1860,” M. A. thesis, University of Arkansas, 1995, 18-23, 50-53; Michael A. Hughes, “Wartime Gristmill Destruction in Northwest Arkansas” in Bailey and Sutherland, *Civil War Arkansas*; Moneyhon and Hanson,

Similar to the lower White, the Ouachita and Saline rivers fed small farms as well as plantation agriculture in southern Arkansas. The Ouachita and Saline Rivers work their way out of and through the Ouachita Mountains and tied those summits to the gulf coastal plain. Slaves, like the small groups of bondspeople clustered in the tributary of Caddo Cove, farmed the fertile soil along the system's streams. The Ouachita and Saline Rivers slowed drastically as they flowed southward, watering the rich valley cotton fields worked by slaves in south Arkansas. The rich bottomlands were sandwiched by the acidic yellow-red sandy silt and pine of the rolling forested coastal plain. Cotton increased in importance as the rivers slowed on their way southeast. Slaves, like those on John Brown's farm, lived on large holdings and produced thousands of bales of cotton in the Ouachita River valley. The rivers were fed by branches like the long meandering Bayou Bartholomew, before flowing through northern Louisiana and pouring into the Mississippi.⁷²

To the west, slave communities were older. Feeding smaller farms and a more than a few plantations, the Red River was an early center of slave agriculture in Arkansas, East Texas, and Northern Louisiana. A major obstacle that came with this region was the Red River "raft"—a huge floating mass of logs and debris that impeded river traffic--was cleared in the 1830s, but clogging of the Red remained a problem. Slaves there worked a range of soil types. Sandy silty soil made acidic by pine forests met rich bottomland and blackland prairie, where a rich dark upper layer covered clay subsoil. Masters borrowed, traded, and cashed in at the towns of

Historical Atlas of Arkansas, "3. Soil Patterns," "4. Surface Water Bodies"; George E. Lankford, "Batesville" *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed May 14, 2014).

⁷²Moneyhon and Hanson, *Historical Atlas of Arkansas*, "3. Soil Patterns," "4. Surface Water Bodies"; *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Western Arkansas* (Chicago: The Southern Publishing Company, 1891), 469; Rebecca DeArmond-Huskey, "Bayou Bartholomew," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed May 14, 2014).

Columbus, Fulton, and Washington, in a region that came to host the state's Confederate government. The Red supported a stretch of slave communities that reached from southwestern Arkansas into northern Louisiana, and carried slave-grown cotton down to Shreveport. As discussed above, bondspeople cultivated corn and cotton (privileging the latter), much of it along the bottoms of the Bois d'Arc creek, in a growing plantation economy that did not support holdings quite as large as those to be found along the Mississippi.⁷³

Whites successfully mounted a steady campaign to secure Arkansas's terrain for slavery, establishing a system that implicated all whites. They shaped the law and the land in the effort to support white supremacy and the growth of the peculiar institution. Legal restrictions on slaves grew stronger as cotton became more profitable. While the environment supported variations in the place of slave labor in the economy, Arkansas's land and economy were more complicated than *either* upland *or* delta, as the state's river bottoms stitched the two main regions together, bleeding hill country into floodplain.

⁷³Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 36; Moneyhon and Hanson, *Historical Atlas of Arkansas*, "3. Soil Patterns," "4. Surface Water Bodies"; Guy Lancaster, "Red River," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed June 14, 2014); Houston, "Slaveholders and Slaves of Hempstead County, Arkansas," 8, 15-19.

Chapter Two: The Landscape of Resistance on the Edge of the South

Although white deed holders, surveyors, speculators, and legislators carved up Arkansas's river valleys, hills, and prairies into plots where corn, cotton, and slavery grew, bondspeople staked their own claims. Particularly, slaves appropriated the uncultivated spaces between farms and fields. They took advantage of the heavily forested terrain, low population, and relative isolation to avoid work, visit family and friends, hold religious meetings, enjoy leisure time, hunt and forage, and escape to freedom. This chapter explores slaves' resistance in relation to their environment on the southern periphery, finding that Arkansas's imprisoned pioneers contested their bondage by seizing opportunities offered by the land surrounding them.

Uncultivated zones blanketed Arkansas. If in Natchez, where less than half the land was under cultivation, "the typical neighborhood was given over mostly to wild places," then Arkansas's slave neighborhoods lay in a veritable jungle.¹ Territorial law had warned whites that "many times slaves run away and lie hid and lurking in swamps woods and other obscure places, killing hogs and committing other injuries to the inhabitants of this district." Arkansas remained covered with such "obscure places" from which slaves could benefit.² As lightning-fast as bondspeople were made to transform Arkansas's wilderness into seas of staple crops, Arkansas's landscape remained much less developed than her neighbors.³ For example, while Arkansas and Mississippi were home to a comparable number of farms in 1860 (33,190 in Arkansas and 37,007 in Mississippi), much less of Arkansas's acreage had been improved. Arkansas showed

¹Kaye, *Joining Places*, 35-36.

²*Laws of Arkansas Territory*, 523 (quotation), 524.

³Arkansas's early banking crisis, reputation for lawlessness, and "dead end" in being situated next to Indian Territory may have inhibited the state's early development. See Bolton, *Territorial Ambition*.

fewer than 2 million improved acres, in contrast to more than 5 million in Mississippi. Further, Arkansas's improved acreage in farmland amounted to only about 6 percent of the state's land that year, while around 16 percent of Mississippi's land was improved in farms at the same time. While both states were predominantly rural in 1860, and Mississippi had undergone a frontier period of its own, Arkansas's land remained even less developed in this period than her neighbor across the river. The region as a whole grew quickly, but the landscape of Arkansas underwent especially dramatic transformation. For example, Mississippians had added a million and a half improved acres between the census enumerations of 1850 and 1860. While the people of Arkansas cleared fewer in that time, the increase amounted to a *doubling* of the state's improved farmland in ten years. Arkansas's ground changed quickly, but remained overrun with uncultivated space.⁴

The difference in development could be stark even directly across state lines. The Mississippi River served as both a political boundary and a natural divider. Farmland in Mississippi and Tennessee counties along the east side of the river boasted almost five times more acreage in improved farmland than Arkansas's along the west bank. Slave communities were also much smaller. The slave population was 78 percent lower in Arkansas counties along the Mississippi as compared to those on the east side in 1850, and at least 63 percent lower there in 1860. (Arkansas's total slave population amounted to about 1/6 of Mississippi's in 1850, and 1/4 in 1860.) However, the slave population in Arkansas's riverside counties grew faster than their counterparts along the eastern bank. While riverside slave populations grew by 150 percent in Arkansas between the 1850 and 1860 census enumerations, those in Mississippi experienced

⁴U.S. Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Schedule 4 (Productions of Agriculture), Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 4 (Productions of Agriculture), *Historical Census Browser*, University of Virginia Libraries, mapserver.lib.virginia.edu.

only a 34-percent increase in those years. Thus, while the convergence of political and natural boundaries in the Mississippi River seems to have created a lag in the development of Arkansas's side of the valley, the boom of the 1850s created rapid change there.⁵ Similarly, southern Arkansas was less populated and developed than northern Louisiana. Although a river did not divide the two states, southern Arkansas counties held only 62 percent of the improved acreage found just across the Louisiana state line, and was home to a little more than half as many slaves (25,514 in Arkansas, versus 47,408 in Louisiana).⁶ All this is to say that Arkansas slaves inhabited rough terrain of sparser settlement, characterized by rapid development.

⁵Together, Chicot, Crittenden, Desha, Phillips, and Mississippi Counties, Arkansas, held 82,706 acres in improved farmland and 9,410 slaves in 1850. Tipton, Shelby, and Lauderdale Counties, Tennessee, and De Soto, Tunica, Coahoma, Bolivar, and Washington Counties, Mississippi, together held 397,672 improved farm acreage and 42,195 slaves. Chicot, Crittenden, Desha, Phillips, and Mississippi Counties, Arkansas, together held 229,905 acres in improved farmland and 24,018 slaves in 1860. Shelby and Lauderdale Counties, Tennessee, and De Soto, Tunica, Coahoma, and Bolivar Counties, Mississippi, held a total of 501,589 acres in improved farmland and 56,728 slaves in 1860. Data for Washington County, Mississippi, is missing from that census enumeration. If the slave population of Washington County held steady at the 1850 total, the difference would be 63 percent. Like the surrounding counties, however, Washington County's slave population would have grown. Thus, the percentage difference was probably much greater than 63. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Productions of Agriculture, Slave Population, *Historical Census Browser*, University of Virginia Libraries, mapserver.lib.virginia.edu.

⁶Union, Lafayette, Columbia, Ashley, and Chicot Counties, Arkansas (346,908) as compared to Carroll, Moorehouse, Union, Claiborne, Bossier, and Caddo Parishes, Louisiana (559,105). U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Productions of Agriculture, Slave Population, *Historical Census Browser*, University of Virginia Libraries, mapserver.lib.virginia.edu.

Counties on either side of the Arkansas-Texas line looked fairly similar in improved acreage in 1860. Sevier and Lafayette had more slaves and improved acres, but are also larger in area than Bowie and Cass. Slaves in Sevier and Lafayette Counties numbered 7,677, and 6,126 in Bowie and Cass Counties, Texas. In those counties, improved acreage in Arkansas numbered 97,300 and 80,5235 in Texas. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Productions of Agriculture, Slave Population, *Historical Census Browser*, University of Virginia Libraries, mapserver.lib.virginia.edu.

Northern Arkansas counties had more improved acres and a higher slave population than southern Missouri. Benton, Madison, Carroll, Fulton, Lawrence, Randolph, Greene, and Mississippi Counties, Arkansas, boasted 230,352 acres of improved farmland and 3,601 slaves in

Slaves made their stands on this rugged landscape, employing tactics that ranged from underground (or “everyday”), to direct, even violent. In Arkansas, where the institution was young and where newcomers constantly arrived, the terrain of struggle was consistently remade and could vary widely. For some slaves, simply keeping a small “truck” garden constituted an act of defiance if that practice was prohibited by their masters, where on others it might not carry much political meaning. Even indirect action against restrictions placed on them by their bondage whittled away at slaves’ subjection. Like other oppressed groups throughout history, they used what political scientist James C. Scott has called the “weapons of the weak.” Scott coined the term to articulate how people who are seemingly powerless in a society are able to fight back against their circumstances. Slaves’ weapons included tactics like work slowdowns, faking or exaggerating sickness, and playing whites off one another. Slaves’ most common victories were sufficiently indirect as to safely make life more bearable without challenging slavery outright. Direct resistance in Arkansas, however, was as vibrant as anywhere else in the slave South, and many slaves fled or fought.⁷

Slaves engaged in the politics of space. Although their voices were not heard in Arkansas’s statehouse or courtrooms, slaves’ “terrain of struggle,” to quote historian Anthony Kaye, lay in their neighborhoods. Neighborhoods were made up of fields and homes as well as

1860, while McDonald, Barry, Stone, Taney, Ozark, Howell, Oregon, Ripley, Butler, Dunklin, and Pemiscot Counties, Missouri, numbered 137,185 improved acres and 1,091 slaves that year. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Productions of Agriculture, Slave Population, Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia Libraries, mapserver.lib.virginia.edu.

⁷Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 3; James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 27-36. For a survey of Arkansas slave resistance ranging from indirect to direct, see Kelly Houston Jones, “‘A Rough, Saucy Set of Hands to Manage’: Slave Resistance in Arkansas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 71 (Spring 2012): 1-21.

the forests and brush between, tied together by slaves' social networks. Slaves assigned meaning to and extracted the best uses out of their surroundings. As Kaye explains, "The topography lent its contours to the field of struggle, set off places of work and leisure, inclined certain kinds of socializing toward particular venues." Slave constructions of neighborhood and habits of resistance overlay the natural topography, putting particular meaning on spaces and places. Anthony Taylor described the patchwork of cultivated and wild space owned by the Bullocks in Clark County: "Most of the farm was fur pine country land. There would be thirty or forty acres over here of cultivation and then thirty or forty acres over there of woods and so on." As the work of historian Mart A. Stewart demonstrates, spaces in the "wilderness," like the Clark County swaths of pine forest described by Taylor, served as the sites of slave resistance and autonomy. Enslaved farmers negotiated the politics of cultivated environments, to be sure, but while the fields represented zones inhibited by whites' regulation and desire for profit, the forests, brush, and river bottoms, meanwhile, represented opportunity. Slaves on the southern periphery used the abundant uncultivated "wilderness" to resist dehumanization.⁸

Like farmers all over the South, slaves understood the world around them through its natural cycles. This is evident in interviews of former slaves, in which they might measure their ages and stages of life through references to natural events or seasons. For example, Peter Brown's father remembered and expressed his age based on the fact that he was a small boy "before the stars fell,"—possibly referring to a meteor shower of the 1850s. Charlie Hinton of Jefferson County referred to himself and other children as "undergrowth" when recounting

⁸Kaye, *Joining Places*, xi, 32; Stewart, "If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian," 143-153; Mart A. Stewart, "Slavery and African American Environmentalism," in *To Love the Wind and the Rain": African Americans and Environmental History*, edited by Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 11; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 61; Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 228-229.

stories of his childhood.⁹ As children, slaves played in streams and woods surrounding the farms and fields, learning about the workings of nature and the landscape while they acquired a worldview informed by their surroundings. Children were taught stories of morals and understandings of nature by older people, who related with youngsters (and got them to sit still) via tales of animals. Aunt Patsy at the Bullock plantation wove Christian scripture with tales of nature when she explained to children how God had slipped a tight skin over “the Serpent’s” legs to cause him and his progeny to crawl on their stomachs.¹⁰

Bondspeople knew their environment in Arkansas well because they lived, as Stewart argues, “closer to the ground.” They learned about the landscape when they hauled cotton to the river, accompanied masters to town, walked to visit loved ones, washed clothes in springs, searched for lost livestock, hunted, and hid.¹¹ They could gain the most knowledge about their surroundings on their own and from elders if they grew up in one place, but this circumstance was less likely in later-settled parts. Slaves acquired wider geographical knowledge of the region when they moved about the Old Southwest (as will be discussed in Chapter Three). Mart, a slave of the Bozeman family, gained knowledge of the woods, streams, and blackland prairie south of Arkadelphia when he moved about in his work, but also picked up such intelligence when he covered ground with whites. Mart sometimes accompanied white men of his neighborhood when they took long hikes for pleasure or to scope out potential real estate purchases. For example, one spring he joined the plantation’s overseer, Henry Bozeman, and a neighbor, D. F. Ross, “a-surveying” down the Terre Noir Creek. Mart may even have served as a guide. Nearby,

⁹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 262, 201.

¹⁰Margaret Jones Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden: Harriet Bailey Bullock Daniel’s Memories of a Frontier Plantation in Arkansas, 1849-1872* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 35, 71; Stewart, “Slavery and African American Environmentalism,” 13.

¹¹Stewart, “If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian,” 143; Stewart, “Slavery and African American Environmentalism,” 10.

the Bullock slaves periodically made the five-mile trip from Sylvan to Cassamassa for the mail, giving them time out and about in the countryside. The knowledge gained from these excursions armed bondspeople with valuable intelligence that they could use for themselves and pass on to others.¹²

One opportunity in particular for bondspeople to learn the terrain presented itself in animal husbandry. Slaves might care for hundreds of head of stock on one plantation. While animals that were used for riding, plowing, or hauling (like mules or horses) were generally kept in stables and pastures, stock raising in the antebellum South often amounted to turning hooved animals loose to forage in the canebrakes, to be rounded up later. Hogs, particularly, roamed the brush and bottoms, to be gathered up from time to time, most notably in the yearly autumn slaughter. Nelson Densen explained of Arkansas's landscape, "The timber made it a good place for cattle and hogs for at that time they run out in the woods free." Thus, slaves caring for stock worked a great deal of time away from cultivated and cleared spaces. They herded cattle and rustled up hogs from the woods, cane, prairies, and swamps, all the while gaining useful knowledge of the terrain. On the Bozeman plantation, slaves Mart and Anthony cared for sheep, and followed strays "up into the mountains" (the Ouachitas) when they wandered away from the flock.¹³ The miles that slaves like Mart and Anthony trekked through the forested areas away from the fields added to their knowledge of the landscape. In the course of this work in herding, however, bondspeople also learned of the dangers of the woods and swamps. Arch, who drove cattle for the Chicot County Hilliards, got lost in the swamp overnight, and was feared drowned.

¹²Farrar Newberry, "A Clark County Plantation Journal for 1857," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 18 (Winter 1959): 402; Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 45.

¹³DeBlack, "A Garden in the Wilderness," 105; Stewart, "From King Cane to King Cotton," 68; John Brown Diary, November 27, 29, 1852, microfilm, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville; Ford Diary, February 11, 1849; Newberry, "Clark County Plantation Journal," 405; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 38.

While Arch returned safely, Jackson, the stock driver for the Walworth holdings in the same county, was not so lucky. One winter evening, Jackson, who only had one leg, failed to return to the plantation at the usual time to bring in the cattle. Because his mule appeared at the plantation soaking wet, and his missing leg would have hindered his movement, those on the plantation suspected Jackson may have drowned. Slaves combed the area for weeks, and his body was found along the river more than a month later.¹⁴

While enslaved people on the margins gathered and shared what they knew about the dangers and opportunities of the landscape, they also shared methods for applying that knowledge for their own good. For example, places on the edges of fields and pastures supplied the herbs and roots slaves used to care for each other's ailing bodies. They passed the knowledge of harvesting those leaves, berries, and roots down generations, and carried on traditions of applying them as medical remedies or even in the practice of conjuring.¹⁵ Slaves used their knowledge of the terrain to spread news, too. The power of news, gossip, and warnings worked against the framework of mastery that whites created to rule slavery's frontier. Slaves swept the countryside for information through subtle listening and discreet sharing.¹⁶ John Bates described the spread of news in Pulaski County: "Well durin dem times just like today nearly everybody knew what was goin on, news traveled purty fast, iffen de slaves couldnt gits it ter each other by gitten a pass, dey would slip out after dark and go in ter another plantation from de back way ter

¹⁴Hilliard Diary, May 3-4, 1850; Ford Diary, January 28, March 10, 1849.

¹⁵Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 58; Mart A. Stewart, "From King Cane to King Cotton: Razing Cane in the Old South," *Environmental History* 12 (January 2007): 61; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 425.

¹⁶Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 41; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, February 3, 1859, R.C. Ballard Papers, Subseries 1.3, folder 301, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

gits it scattered.” For slaves, the “back way,” through the trees and brush and away from roads and open spaces served as the most efficient way to “scatter” intelligence.¹⁷

The back ways, brush, and bottoms served several uses. In addition to extracting health remedies from the forests and crafting news networks through them, slaves used them as cover in the fight to exert power over their spiritual lives. Slaves who were forbidden from possessing Bibles, praying, or gathering for religious services might covertly continue their practice in the woods and brush. O. W. Green’s family secretly met to hear preaching and to “shout”—participate in charismatic worship—in the woods with other slaves even though they risked severe punishment if discovered. The “old masta” of the Mobley place in Bradley County “was good,” insisted Green, “but when he found you shoutin’ he burnt your hand. My grandmother said he burnt her hand several times.” Far from “wilderness” to slaves who made use of them, the woods became sanctified sites where slaves could worship freely out of sight and earshot of whites.¹⁸

Uncultivated space also provided refuge from work and punishment. Slaves ran away to these “wild” spaces often, if only for a while. Indeed, for slaveholders and slaves alike, the phrase “in the woods” was synonymous with runaways. On a Chicot County plantation, Franklin exasperated a mistress who noted that he was “in the woods” one summer.¹⁹ Charlie McClendon’s father laid out “in the woods” of Jefferson County for at least a month on one occasion. Another man on the same place, Miles Johnson, “just stayed in the woods,” stealing

¹⁷Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 317.

¹⁸Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 169, 48. Slaves’ religious communities are discussed more completely in Chapter Five.

¹⁹Hilliard Diary, May 2, 1850.

away so often that the master eventually decided to sell him off. The forest, brush, and cane aided truant slaves in avoiding punishment and work.²⁰

That very strategy was evident in Peter Brown's story of his parents' lives under slavery in Phillips County. When the Hunts forced his mother to work too hard while pregnant, his father "stole her out" to the canebrake. According to Brown's account, his parents were approached by a panther in the night, which his father killed with a bowie knife. Then his mother gave birth out in the canebrake. Thenceforward, as long as Brown's father promised to "stay out of the woods" then his mother (now recognized by the profit-minded master as a "good breeder") would no longer have to work in the fields.²¹ Whether the details of the remarkable story are true or exaggerated by a proud son, Brown's story suggests the power of the bargaining chip that bondspeople wielded when they fled into the surrounding forests.

Slaves often brought food and provisions to their friends in the woods. In Dallas County, June and Damon ran away together into the canebrake across the Ouachita River from the Bullock plantation, and hid in a small cave they had dug. They foraged for food but also relied on what other slaves brought out to them. In fact, to catch the two men, whites followed the trail left in the cane by slaves who had been provisioning them. (Later, June ran away alone and drowned trying to cross the river. Decades later, Harriet Bailey Bullock Daniel included June's fate in verse of her creepy poem about the plantation's slaves: "June was the smithy and ever gave trouble, 'til he swam in the river and sank with a bubble.")²²

Escape into the forests of Arkansas was a popular strategy for slaves in more populated zones as well. As much as town life might offer slaves, the woods provided them a place for

²⁰Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 207.

²¹*Ibid.*, 262.

²²Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 75-76, 35.

recreation or simply for time away from whites' demands. Frank, owned by David Fulton who lived just outside Little Rock, was sent into the woods one day to gather firewood for the night but instead stayed out all day. Frank "sank into the arms of morpheus where he remained until 4 o'clock p. m.," leaving the house freezing and without firewood. In later years, Frank, like so many others, finally ran away for good, and was sold while "in the woods."²³ The wild spaces surrounding Little Rock during the territorial period hosted a base camp for runaway slaves, who snuck into town at night to steal provisions, and may have supported marooned slaves up into the late 1850s.²⁴

Slaves used wild spaces as a refuge in another way as well, when they hunted and fished the woods and waters of Arkansas. Game was plentiful, though probably not quite as abundant as the Kentucky friends of the Chicot County Hilliards believed, after having heard "such accounts of the game of our country, they imagine a fire at the gatepost, or in any direction, will 'bring down the buck.'"²⁵ Animals valuable for their flesh or skins—such as wolves, bears, deer, and turkey—were so abundant in the Ouachita Valley that Moriah, the cook at the Daniels' frontier plantation, stepped out the door and killed a wild turkey with a stick.²⁶ Slave hunting and fishing provided relief from the crop routine, held cultural and community value by offering slaves an avenue to push back against their bondage by claiming time and resources for their own. As historian Walter Johnson explains, "The landscape of forage and that of resistance overlapped in

²³Lack, "Urban Slave Community," 272.

²⁴"Fugitive Negroes," *Arkansas Gazette*, November 18, 1828, p. 3; Lack, "An Urban Slave Community," 277; *Arkansas Gazette* May 29, October 30, 1839, March 23, 1842.

²⁵Hilliard Diary, April 12, 1850.

²⁶Pate Newton, Early Settler Interview; Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 33; McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 127.

the woods and swamps of Cotton Kingdom.”²⁷ Family members who hunted or fished together strengthened bonds. For example, in her golden years, Mittie Freeman cherished memories of fishing with her father in Ouachita County. For slave families, game and forage supplemented their food sources and the sharing of nature’s bounty could forge ties in the quarters. When Betty Brown’s mother hunted and trapped in Greene County, she fulfilled part of what whites expected as masters, but also provided for her family’s material needs.²⁸ Friendships and social ties were forged and strengthened on these hunts, like those between Scott Bond and other young men and boys during frequent nighttime expeditions for opossum and raccoons in the woods of Cross County.²⁹

Slaves went hunting with masters, too, which, at times, might have felt less like recreation and more like work. In doing so, however, slaves learned the terrain, forged whites’ trust, and may have valued some time away from the drudgery of their usual work. Joe Bean squirrel hunted on horseback with his master in the woods of Washington County. “Little Bill,” trusted with more autonomy than other slaves owned by Henry Shugart in southern Arkansas, accompanied the master to the swamps on duck hunting excursions. It is not clear, however, if Bill simply carried supplies or shot birds himself. The Bullock slaves hunted with whites for opossum and other small game. When master Bullock and his sons or guests hunted deer, slaves might have to run through the woods to drive them by the stands for whites to shoot.³⁰ Full-

²⁷Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 231; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 382, 428; Nicolas W. Proctor, *Bathed in Blood: Hunting and Mastery in the Old South* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 144. Proctor completely ignores slave life in Arkansas. This weakens *Bathed in Blood*’s gentrified interpretation of the master-slave relationship on the hunt, but the description of slaves’ interpretations of their *own* hunting activity still basically holds true.

²⁸Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 129, 428.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 74.

³⁰Shugart Plantation Journal, February 10, 1839, microfilm, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville; Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 75, 89; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 382.

blown hunting expeditions, could be dangerous. In 1823, Ben, owned by Frenchman and founder of New Gascony Antoine Barraque, lost his life during the height of Osage rage against whites and other native groups in Arkansas. Ben was one of seven men killed in a hunting party made up of whites and Quapaw was ambushed by Osages in western Arkansas Territory.³¹

Bringing in meat, fish, and skins could endear slaves to whites who benefitted from their success in Arkansas's woods and streams. When the mistress at the Hilliard plantation fretted over how best to impress out-of-town (and seemingly more well-to-do) guests at the Hilliard plantation in Chicot County, Rob saved the day by bringing in a "tremendous" turtle and half a dozen "magnificent" trout. The guests were treated with turtle soup and a dinner that "went off admirably" in eyes of the mistress, thanks to Rob's provision.³² Slaves could bring in cash, too. When Arkansas law allowed county courts to set bounties for wolf "scalps" it specified that masters could collect for wolves hunted or trapped by slaves, although it is not known how many wolves might have been killed by slaves.³³ Autonomy in other regards and privileges to hunt or fish might have been mutually reinforcing. For example, Thom, who performed a lot of the important business for the Browns, such as errands to town, would fish for the family at times, too. He may have initially received chances to go out fishing because he had been trustworthy in other business, or may have been able to secure those other chances by bringing in fish for the

³¹*United States v. Osage* (1824), Abstract, Territorial Briefs and Records, William H Bowen School of Law, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, arcourts.ualr.edu (accessed 4/23/14); Steven Teske, "Antoine Barraque (1773-1858)," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed 4/32/14).

³²Hilliard Diary, April 3, 4, 1850.

³³Gould, *Digest of the Statutes of Arkansas*, 1086. Only pelts with both ears were accepted.

white family.³⁴ The ability to go out into the woods alone could be a perk of “privileged” status, and profitable hunting or fishing could create its own rewards.

Slaves’ appropriation of uncultivated space, whether for spreading news, for religious meetings, parties, or hunting, did not mean that danger and oppression disappeared. In fact, hazard was inherent in their pursuit to claim those zones. The drownings discussed above present some examples of the perils of going out alone. Additionally, animals like snakes, bears, or mountain lions lurked in Arkansas’s thick woods. The following description by John Wesley reflected the restrictions imposed on a child by a mother worried about those very dangers: “Wild animals and snakes was one thing we had to look out for. Grown folks and children all kept around home unless you had business and went on a trip.” In Wesley’s characterization, the plantation and farm grounds represented relatively safe and regimented space, while going out from that perimeter was only for those who “had business.” Plenty of slaves took up the “business” of subversion in the forests and cane, but the woods might also be sites of white violence against slaves. When Woodruff Norseworthy took a slave off into the woods of Jefferson County to punish him for stealing a visitor’s shirt, young Horatio Williams followed. He told an interviewer “he takes dat nigger down in de bottom and I crawls through de brush and watches. Dey tie his foots together over de limb and let he head hang down and beat him till de blood run down on de roots of dat tree.” It may have been that Norseworthy felt added anger fueled by the embarrassment of having his house guest’s things tampered with. The master’s removal of the man into the woods, which may have been designed to prevent the guests from witnessing the brutal punishment, represents whites’ willingness to use the cover of woods and brush to exact violence upon slaves. It is also significant, however, that Norseworthy only

³⁴Brown Diary, August 19, 1854.

thought his actions had gone unobserved. His hidden witness serves as an example of slaves' readiness to contravene whites' regime in the woods. The dangers of wild spaces are part of what makes slaves' appropriation of them that much more meaningful.³⁵

All this is not to say that slaves in Arkansas failed to achieve gains in other places. Like bondspeople all over the South, slaves in Arkansas negotiated their circumstances to their advantage the best they could, and that could happen on roads, in public spaces, and in whites' homes. For example, in 1854, when two slaves were hired out by E. L. Diamond of Phillips County to fellow yeoman slaveholder, J. C. Berry, they ran away declaring they had been mistreated by their temporary master. It made more sense to run back to him to achieve what they wanted than away into the woods. Knowing that the master was sympathetic, the Diamond slaves reckoned that knocking on his front door could achieve their goals with less risk than hiding in the woods.³⁶

But slaves did not only challenge white rule of Arkansas's ground in this discrete, piecemeal fashion. Slaves put up direct challenges, often in the heat of the moment, as they tested whites' resolve. Because the system of law and governance set up by whites was backed up by the threat of violence, it is no surprise that slaves' negotiation of power in an inherently violent system could turn violent. Men and women alike threatened bodily harm to masters, overseers, and patrols. Whites knew on what dangerous ground they treaded by using the lash. One overseer explained his reluctance to whip, because it "might be attended to with evil consequences."³⁷ According to one family story, a "riding boss" prepared to whip Mandy

³⁵John Wesley interview, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*, Library of Congress, memory.loc.gov; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 74, 217.

³⁶*Berry v. Diamond* (1857), 19 Ark. 263.

³⁷John Pelham to R. C. Ballard, November 15, 1857, R. C. Ballard Papers, Subseries 1.3, folder 263.

Buford's pregnant sister for failing to keep up by digging a hole in preparation for laying her face down. Buford prevented the whipping by threatening to chop him up with her hoe. Slaves did not stop at threats, though, and murdered masters, overseers, and other whites. In 1849, a St. Francis County bondswoman snuck up behind her master, James Calvert, and beat him to death with a mallet "that had been used for beating hominy."³⁸ Outbursts like Mandy Buford's set limits on how far some whites were willing to go to extract labor, while deaths like Calvert's struck fear in the hearts of whites that statutes and ordinances could never completely extinguish. Austin, of Independence County, even created legal precedent with his challenge to whites, resulting in the Supreme Court ruling *Austin v. State*. Austin had rebuffed his master, a Batesville teacher. Understanding the potential consequences of his resistance, he packed some clothing as if to flee. Knowing he might be confronted by a posse of whites, Austin grabbed an axe and paced the farm, finally killing one of the white men who accompanied his master in the pursuit of correcting him. Austin's prosecution resulted in the legal precedent that any white person was justified in trying to subdue slaves in rebellion.³⁹

In direct but nonviolent initiative, slaves used whites' own statutes to free themselves and their kin in Arkansas. Sometimes they sued when manumitting wills were not upheld by executors of the estates of deceased slaveholders, or in other circumstances when they thought they had a case.⁴⁰ In freedom suits, the code established by whites became tools for slaves. County lines, court jurisdictions, and legal processes all became real to enslaved people who sought to use the system to achieve freedom. In these situations slaves worked with the

³⁸"Atrocious Murder," *Arkansas Gazette*, February 1, 1849, p. 2.

³⁹*Austin, a Slave v. the State* (1854), series 1, gray box 37A, folder 2454, pp. 13-15, 21-22, Arkansas Supreme Court Briefs and Records, University of Arkansas at Little Rock/Pulaski County Law Library Archives.

⁴⁰*Campbell et al v. Campbell et al* (1853), 13 Ark. 514.

institutions set up by whites in order to achieve their goals. Slaves' hopes often resided in the very system that defined their bodies as property, even if those efforts were not always successful. Dean, who won his freedom from his Crawford County master in the late 1840s, was one of many people in Arkansas who was effective in launching a freedom suit.⁴¹ When whites made promises of freedom, slaves—particularly mothers with children—fought in white courts to see that they were kept. In 1846-1847, Aramynta and her children from Pulaski County fought for the freedom promised them at the death of Cynthia Robinson, her debts being paid for with her other assets. Aramynta's claim pitted her against William E. Woodruff, businessman and founder of the state's first newspaper, who served as executor of Robinson's estate.⁴² According to a will filed in 1838, Harriet and other slaves of Gilbert Barden in Pulaski County were supposed to be freed at the death of his wife Caroline Barden. Harriet and her children Mary Ann and David were to have a tract of land of twenty-nine acres, the land he had lived on in 1838, severed from another forty acres to the South. Caroline, who died in 1851, had provided in her own will that Harriet and Isaac and Harriet's children Mary Ann, David Scott, Martha Jane, Lucinda, and Isaac Henry, should also be set free when each turned twenty-one years old. In the meantime, they were to be hired out with half of that income going to the Methodist Episcopal

⁴¹*Wilson v. Dean* (1850), 10 Ark. 308-309.

⁴²Woodruff had filed to dismiss this petition but the probate court decreed in favor of Aramynta and her children. But the circuit court found that this dispute was not the jurisdiction of the probate court, to which the Arkansas Supreme Court agreed. *Aramynta v. Woodruff* (1847), 7 Ark. 422-424; Mary L. Kwas, "William Edward Woodruff (1795–1885)," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed 4/25/14).

Church in Little Rock. But when Harriet and others petitioned the courts for freedom, they were denied.⁴³

Slaves continued to press claims, though they became more difficult over time. In 1857, the state supreme court declared that “the authority given to emancipate by a prescribed method was a prohibition to emancipate any other way.”⁴⁴ In southwest Arkansas, Bob, who was born in Virginia and taken to Arkansas as a child, unsuccessfully pressed to make good a promise made by whites. The Brown family promised Bob his freedom, but sold him to another man who died without fulfilling the original promise of freedom. When Bob was sold to pay for the deceased master’s debts he petitioned the Sevier Circuit Court for his freedom, was granted it, only to have it taken away again with the overturn by the Arkansas Supreme Court in 1857, which declared that such promises were not binding. Arkansas’s courts viewed manumission as a benevolent action on the part of masters, not in terms of binding contracts or arrangements between masters and slaves. Masters were not beholden to any claims or promises made to slaves.⁴⁵ This meant that appeals to circuit courts in particular became the major avenue for slaves seeking legal avenues to freedom.

Living on the edge of the South proved an advantage when Abby Guy sued for freedom. Abby was born to a mulatto woman named Polly in Alabama. She came to Arkansas with William Daniel and his brother sometime in the 1830s. Sometime after they arrived in southern Arkansas, Abby, described as having a very light complexion and straight hair, began to live separately from the Daniels. Abby and her children, Elizabeth Daniel, Mary Daniel, John Guy,

⁴³*Harriet and others v. Swan & Dixon* (1857), 18 Ark., 496. The will to free Harriet and her children was supported by Albert Pike, who authenticated the signatures of the attorney and witness on the will.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 496.

⁴⁵*Jackson v. Bob* (1857), 18 Ark., 399-413.

and Malissa Arnold had been living as free whites since 1844, farming in Bayou Bartholomew in Ashley County. Abby made her own contracts, paid her own debts, and hired men to do work on her farm, such as hauling cotton and moving fences. She was able to board her oldest daughter and pay for her schooling. For some time she lived as the wife of a white man with the last name of Guy, though they were not legally married, and he passed some land to her when he died. Abby and her children also socialized and attended church as whites with whites. But William Daniel began claiming Abby as a slave after about 1856, causing her to sue for the freedom of herself and her children.⁴⁶

Abby struggled to prove her whiteness to a group of people who held to the “one-drop rule”—the notion that any bit of black “blood” defined an individual as non-white. This was crucial, as blackness presumed enslavement. After lengthy discussions in the courtroom about hair, skin color, and nose shape, at one point Abby and her children were asked to remove their socks and show their feet to the jury, in order that a doctor’s theories of blackness and foot shape could be tested. But in addition to revealing notions of race, this case demonstrates the importance of migration, the subject of the next chapter. Abby Guy was able to establish her own household, relationship, and social life as a free person, and raise her children as free people, because her community had never known her as a slave. Her looks made this possible, to be sure, but both Abby’s slave mother—the main indicator of enslaved status—and William’s father, James Daniel, who had owned Abby and her mother, had died years ago before the move to Arkansas. In order to prove Abby’s slave origins, the attorneys for Daniel called witnesses who had known Guy and Daniel in Alabama. This testimony turned out to be much more important

⁴⁶*Daniel v. Guy* (1857), 19 Ark. 121-138 and (1861) 23 Ark. 50; Abby Guy’s case is explored in more detail in Robert S. Shafer, “White persons Held to Racial Slavery in Antebellum Aransas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* XLIV (Summer 1985):134-143.

than that describing her whiteness. Abby eventually won her case, but she and her children were forced to work as slaves for some time during the legal proceedings. Here, the cotton frontier provided just enough disruption for a woman to slip from slavery to freedom unnoticed for a time. Her light skin and persistence secured that freedom in law for herself and her children.⁴⁷

Slaveholders and slaves contested Arkansas's ground in the antebellum period. Arkansas remained rugged—thick with uncultivated space. The low and scattered population of land with slow access to goods and information was dominated by forests. Some level of slave autonomy was beneficial, even necessary, in places where slaves needed to hunt, run errands, catch hogs, etc. While slaves were forced to work at transforming canebrakes and woods into cash crops, they made their own meanings of the seams between white domains. Bondspeople socialized, worshipped, traded, ate, and hid under the canopy of Arkansas's woods. Arkansas was covered with forest and canebrakes in which slaves could resist work, socialize, spread news, have fun, and gather food. The swamps, forests, and canebrakes offered cover, leisure, and sustenance. Arkansas's hollows and river bottoms were claimed by slaves. Uncleared land paved the highway of runaways crisscrossing Arkansas, as described in Chapter Three, and provided cover for prayer meetings and social gatherings, as shown in Chapter Four. Canebrakes provided cover for truants. Brush and forest became prayer chapels and gambling rings. Forests and streams provided food and recreation. Slaves did not stay put, however, but crisscrossed the landscape of bondage, as discussed in the next chapter.

⁴⁷Ibid.

Chapter Three: Chattels, Pioneers, and Sojourners for Freedom: Arkansas's Bonded Travelers

The family history of Samuel Horton, a bondsman taken to Arkansas in the 1850s, played out across the map of the Old Southwest. His father died in Vicksburg in 1834. His mother hanged herself near Nashville in 1841. Sometime in the 1850s, Horton was taken from middle Tennessee to swampy Pine Bluff, Arkansas, by a master looking to cash in on the cotton boom of that decade.¹ The life stories and family histories of enslaved people like Horton illustrate slaves' travels to, through, and within Arkansas as chattels, pioneers, and fugitives. Geographic mobility constituted a crucial part of the frontier slave experience. Slaves engaged in considerable movement—not only under the coercion of their masters, but also of their own volition. Slaveholders brought their human property to Arkansas from places as far away as St. Domingue, and continued to relocate bondspeople through further moves, sales, and other kinds of forced travel.² But although whites caused much displacement of slave populations through forced migration to and within the region, slaves themselves traveled near and far seeking temporary respite or total freedom through movement. Whites appreciated the mobility of slave property when it came to liquidity, easy transfer of the labor force, and the ability to send bondspeople to independent work or on errands, but were consistently frustrated with the tendency of slaves to take charge of their own movement. Slaves' travel and emigration widened

¹Brief in the Case of Samuel Horton, Disallowed Claims of U.S. Colored Troops, 1864-1893, 54th USCT, Records of the Pay and Bounty Division, box 60, entry 449, Records of the Accounting Officers of the Department of the Treasury, Record Group 217, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 2 (Slave Population), Jefferson County, AR.

²*Morine v. Wilson* (1858), 19 Ark. 520.

their neighborhoods and worldviews, making their self-constructed communities that much more important.³

Negro Slavery in Arkansas does not investigate slave movement. Aside from statistics on population growth and increases in cotton production, Orville Taylor presents a rather static view of slavery. Taylor's goal to provide "convincing proof of the vigorous and expanding nature of slavery in Arkansas," at a time when the scholarship on slavery overwhelmingly focused on its importance in the eastern South, drew his attention to the rates of growth in the slave population of Arkansas without analyzing what forced migration to Arkansas meant for the enslaved.⁴ As part of Taylor's task to describe the rising slave prices and the region's vibrant slave trade, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas* gives some clues as to slave relocation, pointing out that "Negro slaves in Arkansas, like other pieces of property, were frequently transferred from one owner to another."⁵ Of slave hiring, Taylor wrote, "the slave, who of course was not consulted in the matter, he probably preferred a settled life among familiar surroundings on his own master's farm to the transient existence of a hireling under a temporary master who expected full and visible return for every dollar expended."⁶ Taylor both ignored any agency slaves might have had in their own movement and failed to speculate what that movement meant to slaves.

Since Taylor wrote, the themes of space, place and agency have become increasingly important considerations for historians of slavery. Both Ira Berlin and Anthony Kaye have employed these, though their studies work on different scales. Breaking ground with his emphasis on space and time, Ira Berlin introduced phases of slave movement in *Generations of*

³It was S. Charles Bolton who first considered slaves in and around Arkansas as "Arkansas Travelers" in Bolton, *Fugitives from Injustice*.

⁴Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, 47.

⁵*Ibid.*, 59.

⁶*Ibid.*, 91.

Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves. Berlin's concept of a "second middle passage" described the experience of hundreds of thousands of slaves displaced in a forced migration driven by the rise of King Cotton in the Old Southwest. Likening the process to the passage of earlier generations of Africans from their ancestral lands to the Americas, Berlin describes this displacement as similarly disorienting. Slaves were torn from the lives, families, and communities they had constructed for themselves in the slave societies of the southeastern U.S. and transported to the southern frontier through trade, with migrating white families, or a combination of forces. Berlin declares this mass forced relocation westward as the most formative event in the lives of African-American slaves in the nineteenth century. But the movement of slaves in *Generations of Captivity* is described as having taken place in phases as the history of slavery progressed over time, not emphasized as a consistent reality that continued to shape the lives and worldviews of enslaved people.⁷

Space, not movement, is Anthony Kaye's main focus in *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South*, in which he studies slavery in the Natchez region. Drawing from statements to pension examiners in the years after slavery, Anthony Kaye organizes slaves' lives into neighborhoods made up of adjoining plantations, socially constructed by the slaves themselves. Kaye explains that these neighborhoods were bondspeople's primary "terrain of struggle."⁸ Slaves constantly remade their neighborhoods, as they were periodically disrupted by moves and sales, making those constructed communities even more crucial. Slaves drew strength from this "indirect brand of agency" as they imagined permanence in their neighborhoods.

⁷Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 161-163.

⁸Kaye, *Joining Places*, 8, 32. Kaye also includes a chapter titled "Beyond Neighborhood." See, also, Stephanie H. M. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) for an emphasis on space in slave life.

Kaye's study acknowledges that movement affected slave neighborhoods, but does not take up movement as a major theme. While Kaye convincingly proves that slaves' immediate constructions of neighborhoods were the main organizer of their lives, the "terrain of struggle" necessarily widens when considering slave movement.⁹ However, these works feature space and place but do not specifically deal with the continued displacement and travel that slaves experienced, both real and potential. But movement, both forced and self-initiated, pushed slaves into and out of neighborhoods. This movement could be either a positive or negative force in the lives of slaves in Arkansas, because relocation or travel could bring either hope or sorrow, and occurred in situations that could either limit or provide opportunity. Slave movement on the cotton frontier displays the tension between the power of whites to craft a slave society on the margins and the ways in which slaves resisted. Whether slave movement proved a boon or crisis to individuals, it is most important to frame that mobility from the viewpoint of the enslaved.

The roots of Arkansas's history of slavery lay in forced migration westward across the South, a process that continued in waves, driving the state's economic development and building its slave society. As discussed in Chapter One, some early European settlement of Arkansas, as well as federal removal of Native Americans brought bondspeople to and through Arkansas, though how many is unknown.¹⁰ As the cotton economy of the Southern periphery grew, a mass forced relocation of enslaved people caused a seismic shift in the distribution of African Americans. It is estimated that more than 875,000 slaves were removed from the seaboard South

⁹Kaye, *Joining Places*, 31, 50.

¹⁰Celia E. Naylor, *African Cherokees in Indian Territory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 1-2, 15-16.

to newer cotton states between 1820 and 1860.¹¹ As a slave-importing state, Arkansas's slave population grew by 136 percent between 1850 and 1860. Michael Tadman estimates that more than 80,000 slaves moved into Arkansas between 1810 and 1860. By 1860, more than 111,000 slaves resided in there, owned by more than 11,000 masters.¹² In interviews conducted by the WPA in the 1930s, many former slaves recall their own and their relatives' birthplaces east of Arkansas—commonly Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. The waves of incoming slaves did not cease in the state's early history of slavery, but continued as the major component of slave life in Arkansas until the demise of the institution.¹³

Historians estimate that around sixty to seventy percent of the forced migration of African-American slaves to the cotton frontier took place as part of the domestic slave trade. New Orleans supplied countless slaves to power Arkansas's cotton farms and plantations, including Rora and Susan, who made the journey up to Henry Shugart's farm from New Orleans in 1839, followed by Nat, Martha, and Charity the next spring.¹⁴ But while New Orleans and Memphis were the two main large-scale slave trading points for Arkansas, Mississippi River towns like Greenville and Vicksburg figured in as well, and private slave sales took place all

¹¹See "Migration Generations" in Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 161-244; Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 43.

¹²Joseph C. G. Kennedy, *Population of the United States in 1860, Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864), 12-13, 503-504; Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 12.

¹³For some examples, see Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 36, 66, 104, 126, 134, 45, 53, 104 and Edward E. Baptist, "'Stol' and Fetched Here": Enslaved Migration, Ex-slave Narratives, and Vernacular History," in Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M. H. Camp eds., *New Studies in the History of American Slavery* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 243-244, 252-254; Brief in the Case of Elijah Brown, box 60, Disallowed Claims of U.S. Colored Troops, 1864-1893, 54th USCT, RG 217, NARA.

¹⁴Shugart Plantation Papers, May 1, 1839, March 28, 1840.

over the state. In *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*, Steven Deyle has shown how the domestic slave trade drove the development of antebellum America by allowing for the rapid expansion of the South and indirectly providing the raw material needed by textile factories in the North and in Great Britain.¹⁵ Therefore, when Molly Finley's father was sold in Kentucky to traders who then sold him in Tennessee to Baker Jones, who brought him to Arkansas, he moved in the center of a process that uprooted countless African Americans, ensured the survival of cotton culture beyond the Mississippi, drove the development of Arkansas, and fueled the industrial revolution.¹⁶

All masters were essentially traders in slaves, as slave trading drove the development of the marginal south. The trade in Arkansas may not have been as visible as in more populated southern zones. But, for example, partners Templeman and Richardson, with connections to New Orleans, kept a "negro yard" in Pine Bluff (said to be plagued with whooping cough). Other traders held slaves for sale in Camden.¹⁷ James Hines Trulock's cousin Uriah Trulock traded slaves from Virginia and South Carolina to Arkansas. After moving to Arkansas, James purchased Peter from him in February 1846, 18-year-old Charles (bought in Chester, South Carolina), and Maria and her children Martha, Jim, Sam, and Nancy (bought in King George County, Virginia) sometime between 1848 and 1854.¹⁸ Wealthy absentee planter Rice C. Ballard got his start in the slave trade with such partners as Franklin and Armfield, went on to create Ballard, Franklin, and Company, and used the profits from those ventures to establish a multi-

¹⁵Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 44; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 23-24. See, also, Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹⁶Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 249.

¹⁷*Sessions v. Hartsook* (1861), 23 Ark. 519;

¹⁸Sarah Brooke Malloy, "The Health of Our Family: The Correspondence of Amanda Beardsley Trulock, 1837-1868," M.A. thesis (May 2005), University of Arkansas, 86.

state plantation empire that included Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Ballard was able to convert the cash made from slave trading in the 1830s and 1840s into cotton plantations that fed the textile mills beyond. But entrepreneurs like Ballard were not the only ones to merge the trading and working of slave property.¹⁹

Even slaves whose future seemed secure might be exported to Arkansas if they found themselves at auction. In 1802, Peggy was gifted to Fanny Stovall of Granville County, North Carolina, when she married Obadiah Liggin. The couple moved twelve miles away into Virginia. Five or six years later, Obadiah sold Peggy to satisfy a debt. Unhappy with his son-in-law's sale, Fanny's father bought Peggy back. But in order to allow Fanny to receive Peggy's labor without risking her sale by Obadiah, Mr. Stovall "verbally loaned" her to Fanny for her lifetime. Peggy stayed with the Liggin family, but Fanny's father had Peggy brought over to his home every Christmas, around the time he settled his accounts for the year, in order to claim ownership of her and keep her from being sold to pay Liggin's debts. The yearly visit circumvented the law equating five consecutive years of possession with ownership, and may have eased Peggy's fears of being sold again at the whim of Obadiah. This continued until Stovall died in 1820, leaving a will that explicitly gave Peggy to Fanny, and provided that she could not be sold to pay Liggin's debts. Nevertheless, when Obadiah died four years later, Peggy was sold at auction to satisfy the debts of the estate, sold two more times, and then taken to Arkansas by William B. Easley in 1835 or 1836, remarkably, with her four children.²⁰ Although Peggy left no record of her ordeal, such treatment revealed a capricious fate, at best, for slaves who found themselves in Arkansas.

¹⁹William K. Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-nineteenth-century South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 125, 176; Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 3-4.

²⁰*Whitfield v. Browder* (1852), 13 Ark. 143-150.

While much of the forced migration of African-American slaves occurred in connection to the slave trade, many slaves came to the cotton frontier with white families or young white men looking for fresh fertile ground in the Old Southwest to set up homes and plantations. For example, in 1837, when James Trulock, of a wealthy South Carolina family, took his new Connecticut bride to southwestern Georgia, then on to finally settle in Jefferson County, Arkansas. All of Trulock's slaves made the trip except one elderly man, perhaps deemed too weak for the difficult journey and hard work ahead.²¹ Moved as a wealthy family expanded their reach across the South, Dave, a blacksmith, was picked out by a planter's son from among his father's slaves in Georgia, taken with others to Mississippi, then Arkansas, and finally on to Louisiana.²² Bondspeople could also be moved when planters expanded their holdings westward, as were the seventy-eight slaves who moved into Chicot County, Arkansas from Mississippi when R. C. Ballard added Wagram Plantation to his plantation empire sometime in the mid-1850s.²³ Slaveholding family networks pulled enslaved people westward as well, when whites sought to share or pass on their labor. Such was the case for Amelia (or Parmelia) was sent from Kentucky to Conway County, Arkansas to nurse Nimrod Meniffee's sister-in-law in 1840.²⁴

While the draw of fresh beginnings and hefty profits to be made on the cotton frontier created a strong force pulling slaveholders to the edge of the South, westward migration could also be related to the negative consequences of debt—a constant worry for slaveholders and a source of instability for slaves. When slaveholders fled with slave property to avoid creditors, the

²¹ Malloy, "The Health of Our Family," 1-2, 22.

²² *Trammel v. Thurmond* (1856) 17 Ark. 203.

²³ Wagram Plantation Journal, series 5, box 30, folder 457, Rice C. Ballard Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; James M [illegible] to Col. R. C. Ballard, *ibid.*, series 1.3, box 7, folder 108.

²⁴ *Meniffee's Administrators v. Meniffee et al.* (1847), 8 Ark. 9.

inconvenience of whites could mean great distress for uprooted slaves. Men and women could find themselves whisked away by masters needing to put some distance between themselves and those to whom they were indebted. In a family financial drama that stretched from the late 1830s into the 1850s, the Holloway family fled with slaves from Coosa County, Alabama, to southern Arkansas with their slaves (including a man named Sam) to avoid creditors.²⁵

Slaves could be forced out to the cotton frontier as the combined result of several factors. As indebted slaveholders struggled to keep their operations afloat, seeking fresh beginnings on the South's periphery, slave families were separated and displaced. The practice of gifting slaves to newly married daughters, the prevalence of slaveholder debt, and westward migration could combine to create a perfect storm of uncertainty for enslaved people. William Pond of South Carolina was so improvident that he tried to protect his wife and children from himself. But the failed management of his debt directly caused his slaves to be traded west to Arkansas. In 1833, Pond deeded (in trust) to a family friend a slave woman named Maria and her children, Stephen, Emily, and Harriet, for the exclusive use of his wife, Mary Pond, and their children. Mary was to have the benefit of the labor and increase of the slave family while her husband was alive and in the event of his death. If Mary died a widow or remarried, the woman, Maria, and her family were to be divided between the Pond children. William took Maria and her children out of his control "to prevent them from being sold in one of his drinking sprees." Mary Pond died six years later, and the widowed Pond, seeking a fresh start and a better income, moved hundreds of miles west to Hot Spring County, Arkansas with his children and slaves. All of Maria's children were able to come along except Stephen, who was left in South Carolina to secure Pond's debt. But, in 1844, Pond sold Maria's children (Emily, Harriet, Tom and Peter) for \$900 total, while

²⁵*Anderson v. Dunn* (1858), 19 Ark. 651-666.

keeping all of his other slaves. Pond, entrenched in his ways, was later described as “a dissipated man” who had “wasted, or made way with other property received by his wife” since moving to Arkansas.²⁶

Although the decisions made by white men as patriarchs and property owners resulted in the forced migration of bondspeople, white women were complicit as well. In *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (which virtually ignores Arkansas), Joan Cashin uses manuscript sources such as family letters and diaries to describe the new family and gender dynamics wrought by the frontier experience. She finds rowdy white men who lose much of their sense of paternalism and neglected white women who become, on the frontier, more dependent on men than ever. Cashin suggests that white women—lonely, and slower to shed notions of paternalism than white men—were more likely to feel sympathetic toward slaves than their male counterparts.²⁷ But while Cashin’s main source base is family correspondence, court records show that white women on the frontier could be as calculating in their financial dealings with slave property as men, especially if they found themselves widowed.²⁸ Slaves were uprooted as a consequence. In Kentucky, in 1826, Thomas Humphreys willed a slave woman named Cynthia (and any future children) to his daughter, Susan Mills, “to be enjoyed by her during her lifetime, and then to descend to her lawful heirs.”²⁹ Four years later, Susan and her husband Ambrose Mills moved to southeastern Arkansas. Three years later, Ambrose died and Susan sold Cynthia and her eleven-year-old child for \$500.³⁰ In this case, whatever sentimental feelings Susan may

²⁶*Pond v. Obaugh* (1855), 16 Ark. 95.

²⁷Joan Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

²⁸*Moren et al. v. McCown et al* (1861), 23 Ark. 99.

²⁹*Maulding et al. v. Scott et al* (1852), 13 Ark. 89.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 88-95.

have had about Cynthia dissipated in the face of the economic reality of becoming widowed on the southern periphery. In the process of trying to ensure stability for themselves or their children, slaveholding white women could demand the relocation of slave men and women, sundering their connections with family and friends. Perhaps Arkansas's best evidence against Cashin's suggestions is found in the case of Amanda Beardsley Trulock, who had come to Arkansas as the bride of James Hines Trulock in the mid-1840s. Trulock wholeheartedly embraced her life as a plantation mistress on the Arkansas River. When her husband died, she did not return to Connecticut as her family pleaded, but stayed, showing no signs of being especially sympathetic to slaves on account of her gender.³¹

Whatever the immediate causes for the move west—white migration, the domestic trade, individual sale, escape from or satisfaction of creditors, or family property disputes—overland journeys from the seaboard South to the Trans-Mississippi cotton frontier were monumental turning points in the lives of enslaved people. Cora Scroggins remembered: “My mother spoke of her one long journey on the steamboat and stagecoach. That was when she was brought to Arkansas. It made a memorable picture in her mind.”³² These treks, considered inconvenient by whites, must have been nearly unbearable for bondspeople. Jenny and Celia were among the women and men moved by John Mebane Allen and his family from Alamance County, North Carolina to Ozan Township in Hempstead County, Arkansas in the fall of 1852. With each bridge and river, and with each passing night spent in camp, Jenny and Celia would have been conscious of the greater distance being put between themselves and the families and friends they

³¹The story of Trulock's life as a plantation slaveholder in Jefferson County is detailed in Malloy, “The Health of Our Family.”

³²Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 173; Adeline Blakeley, Early Settlers' Personal History Questionnaire, WPA.

were forced to leave behind (however, we will see below how Jenny is able to ameliorate that separation). The trek was physically uncomfortable, to boot. The group usually traveled upwards of fifteen miles per day, and could cover as many as twenty-five miles in a day. In two weeks, the party had crossed into Tennessee.³³

While they doubtless understood that the cotton frontier would mean great changes for them, some indication of the differences of their bondage in Arkansas would have been noticeable to the Allen slaves as soon as they crossed the Mississippi River, as even counties just opposite the river from each other could differ markedly in their development, as shown in Chapter Two. Jenny, Celia and the other slaves may have felt uneasy to notice a much less developed landscape. They would have also noticed sparser distribution of slave communities, as the slave population was less concentrated in southern Arkansas than in Alamance County, North Carolina, whence the Allen slaves had come.³⁴

The problems of rough roads and overturned wagons impeded the party's progress. The group camped by the roadside or stayed at churches or with strangers. Although there was usually a good bit of resting on the weekends, the chores of preparing food and hauling water to camp would have especially burdened slaves in the company. Sometimes, due to bad weather or other inconveniences, the party settled in for the night without dinner, and often water was scarce.³⁵ It is reasonable to assume that the effect of such shortages would have been felt more severely by the enslaved members of the party. Other travelers had trouble too. Allen noted that

³³John Allen Journal, John Mebane Allen Papers (1 volume), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

³⁴Alamance County, North Carolina included 110,655 acres of improved farmland and was home to 3,445 slaves in 1860. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 4 (Productions of Agriculture), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), *Historical Census Browser*, University of Virginia Libraries, mapserver.lib.virginia.edu.

³⁵Allen Journal, 9-11.

there were “A great many movers, some of them get along with great difficulty.” The pace slowed as the terrain became more rugged. The party made only nine miles one day through the swamps and canebrakes just east of the St. Francis River. On Friday, November 5, Allen wrote, “We all feel low spirited.” While Allen recorded discomfort and “low spirits” among whites along the trip, the slaves must have felt absolute desolation. Finally, the cheerless caravan reached the Arkansas River on November 12, but were unable to immediately cross. The next day, they waited “all day in consequence of so many wagons being before us.”³⁶

After passing through southern Arkansas, Jenny, Celia, and the rest of the Allen slaves finally arrived at their new neighborhood and could begin to take stock of the latest site of their bondage on November 20, when the party camped twelve miles east of Washington in Hempstead County.³⁷ With the journey from the seaboard South to their destination on the cotton frontier complete, these women, along with the rest of the slaves in their company, would have been painfully aware of their final separation from home.

But not all slaves completely lost their connections to their former homes. Jenny, or “Aunt Jenny” (as whites called her) kept up correspondence with North Carolina, at least between 1852 and 1864. Celia and other blacks are mentioned in letters from North Carolina, but do not seem to have sent nor received their own.³⁸ Jenny was able to “hear all the news” of births, deaths, injuries, illnesses, slave sales, and even enslaved newcomers on several different

³⁶Ibid., 14-16.

³⁷Ibid., 9-11.

³⁸See transcripts of letters to John Mebane Allen, 1852-1864. About one-third of the letters to Allen from North Carolina in that period include some greeting or note to Aunt Jenny, mostly those from Fannie Thompson and Mary Jane Allen. John Mebane Allen Papers (1 volume), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. John Allen did own slaves in 1850; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Alamance County, NC.

farms back east through letters that mostly came from her master's sisters. And while the female gossip chain seems to have been a major source of information, this transmission of news was not only disseminated by women. For example, letters to John Allen from his uncle might include notes such as, "Tell Jenny that Betsy had a fine boy this morning." News could be accompanied by messages from other slaves back in North Carolina, such as when "Uncle Bob" sent greetings to Jenny and Celia, and wanted them to know that he had had a religious conversion and was very happy. All of this information allowed Jenny to maintain and update her construction of the black neighborhood back home from hundreds of miles away.³⁹

In addition to receiving news from North Carolina, Aunt Jenny could serve as a conduit to send information about herself and other slaves in Hempstead County with roots in North Carolina, though this messaging passed through whites' hands. Perhaps dictating them to John Allen's wife, Aunt Jenny consistently sent letters to whites in North Carolina. This gave her the opportunity to maintain the sources of information about her loved ones back home, and send her own messages of affection and news to them from distant Hempstead County, Arkansas.⁴⁰

Thus, the move to the cotton frontier created a great disruption in the life of the Allen slaves, but their ties with those back east were not completely severed, due largely to the favored position of Aunt Jenny. Therefore, Jenny's community continued to include connection with those from whom she had been separated, albeit by delicate threads. In fact, the Allen letters indicate that Aunt Jenny probably made a visit back to North Carolina with John Allen and his

³⁹Mary Jane Allen to Dear Brother and Sister, January 18, 1853, John Scott to Dear Nephew, Sept. 24, 1852, Lizzie K. Allen to My dear brother and sister, August 1, 1858, M. J. Allen to Dear Brother, December 14, 1859, Mary Jane Allen to Dear Aunt Jenney, June 21, 1856, Allen Papers.

⁴⁰Mary Jane Allen to My dear brother and sister, August 13, 1857, M. J. Allen to Dear Brother, June 8, 1858, Allen Papers.

wife in late 1860 or early 1861. Clues, such as a note to Aunt Jenny informing her of an upcoming slave marriage with a plea for Jenny to make plans to attend, suggest that a visit was planned near the end of 1860.⁴¹ Continued news and a visit back to her old home in North Carolina would have gone far to widen the scope of Aunt Jenny's constructed networks of family and friends, which stretched beyond her new home in southwest Arkansas and carried on for years after her forced migration west.

Jenny's circumstances were extremely unusual, as most enslaved Arkansans would have known little if anything about the fates of their loved ones from whom they had been separated. Migration that took place outside the slave trade could mean a greater degree of family cohesion, but did not guarantee stability. Jenny and Celia were not the only ones to make such journeys with slaves who were already part of their communities. Westward movement in groups helped bondspeople to keep important bonds of family and friendship, such as the adult siblings who were brought together to Dallas County from North Carolina by the Bullock family. This was surely treasured by Emma Moore's parents, who came from Tennessee to Arkansas together and by Molly Finley's grandmother, who was lucky enough to make the journey from Kentucky to Tennessee to Arkansas together with her sons.⁴²

Countless slaves experienced the move to the cotton frontier under much harsher circumstances. This was true for Harve Osborne, who was moved to Arkansas from North Carolina, and whose story contrasts with Jenny's. He was born in 1825—only a few years apart from Jenny—on the Osborne farm near Asheville, North Carolina. His master, Morgan Osborne, heard about the opportunities to profit from cotton cultivation in the west and brought his slaves

⁴¹M. J. Allen to My dear brother, November 28, 1860, *ibid.*

⁴²Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 15, 24; Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 33-34.

out to Arkansas in 1850. After more than a month of travel, Osborne settled on a large tract of land along the White River about ten miles away from Batesville. Upon arrival, Harve was hired out for a year to another plantation, perhaps while his master made ready to begin the new operation, or because he needed cash to do so. Harve never saw his parents again.⁴³ Such abrupt disconnections were common, and stories of family separations abound in ex-slave interviews. T. W. Cotton's mother left behind a son in Virginia that she never saw again after the move to Arkansas, while Molly Hudgen's mother was permanently separated from her family in North Carolina.⁴⁴ Moriah, called "Aunt "Riah" was married to a man named John, owned by another family, before the Bullocks moved from North Carolina to Dallas County, Arkansas. She had to leave John behind but their children Polly and Jenny came with her. Billy, or "Uncle Billy" also left a spouse owned by another household back east—his master's brother. He had to leave his wife and children. But Moriah and Billy found solace in each other, and married.⁴⁵

But forced movement in Arkansas could also pull people in the other direction—east. Arkansas's border with Indian Territory was a center of movement since its creation. But after the Fugitive Slave Act was declared to apply to Indian Territory, interest in African-Americans there, especially those among the Seminoles, resulted in slave raids into Indian Territory by white Arkansans. In May 1852, a man named Dennis complained to the authorities in Fort Arbuckle, Chickasaw Nation, that although Harriet Bowlegs had set him and others free, white men had been kidnapping members of this free black settlement, including his wife, and taking them to Arkansas. Other African Americans who had been freed back in Florida were said to have been enslaved in Van Buren. William Factor, a former Seminole slave living in Sebastian

⁴³Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 172.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 244, 246-247.

⁴⁵Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 33-34, 41.

County captured the wife and children of Abraham who was living near Fort Arbuckle in Chickasaw Nation in a night raid with help of some Creeks, in summer 1855. A Creek council determined the claims against Abraham to be unfounded, and the family was returned, but Abraham lived in continued fear of a repeat raid. Several members of a free family named Beams of Creek Nation were kidnapped and enslaved in a raid based out of Van Buren in 1854.⁴⁶ At least thirty-four slaves owned by a deceased Seminole woman, Mah-kah-tist-chee (or Molly), were kidnapped and taken into Arkansas by a group of Creeks in 1853.⁴⁷

However they got there, arrival in Arkansas was not the end of movement for relocated slaves. The slave trade remained a perpetual threat. Bondspeople found that migration with white family groups rather than commercial traders did not necessarily guarantee permanence, as they might easily be sold after making the journey to the cotton frontier.⁴⁸ William Brown recalled how, as a child, his mother explained to him the sight of slaves being driven from Cross County south to Louisiana.⁴⁹ Katie Rowe described terrible scenes of separation seared into her memory: “I seen chillun sold off and de mammy not sold, and sometimes de mammy sold and a little baby kept on de place and give to another woman to raise. Dem white folks didn’t care nothing ‘bout how de slaves grieved when dey tore up a family.”⁵⁰ A combination of trading and mortgaging created upheaval among a group of men and women owned by “old man” John Humphries of Searcy, White County, in 1844. Humphries and his sons took a group of slaves down to New

⁴⁶Daniel F Littlefield, Jr., *Africans and Seminoles: From Removal to Emancipation* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 156-158, 171-173.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 162-163.

⁴⁸*Smith v. Jones* (1847), 8 Ark. 109; *Lindsay v. Harrison* (1848), 8 Ark. 302; *Maulding v. Scott* (1852), 13 Ark. 88; *Roane v. Rives* (1854), 15 Ark. 328; *Trammell v. Thurmond* (1856), 17 Ark. 203.

⁴⁹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 89.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 147.

Orleans, sold them, brought another man back, and took a man named Bannister north to neighboring Independence County to mortgage for a boat load of corn. Bannister stayed at that farm, owned by Morgan Magness, from February through July.⁵¹ Similarly, the practice of gifting could mean that the move to Arkansas was just one stop on a multi-leg relocation. Mary Overton was born in Tennessee, and was moved when she was very young to Carroll County, Arkansas by the Kennards. At four years old, young Mary was given to the master's newlywed daughter and moved again to Fort Graham in Hill County, Texas.⁵² Rose, who was gifted to a white woman of South Carolina was later "run out" of Arkansas, with her children, when the mistress found herself widowed and financially desperate on the cotton frontier.⁵³

An investigation of the movement of slaveholders out of one southwest Arkansas County—Hempstead County—serves to demonstrate this mobility within the state and sometimes out of it. Tracking relocating slaveholders can give some indication as to the travels of bondspeople caught up in that movement. If birthplaces listed on the U.S. Census are any indication, Bolin C. Phillips' family was originally from Virginia, but he moved to Alabama, then Mississippi, and finally on to Hempstead County, Arkansas, owning at least one slave there by 1847. Moving again, Phillips resided with more slaves in Sevier County by 1850, relocating to another township in that county by 1860.⁵⁴ Robert T. Cook, a small slaveholder in Hempstead County in 1847, had moved to Clark County and increased his holding to eleven slaves by 1850.

⁵¹*Humphries v. McCraw* (1848), 9 Ark. 92-98.

⁵²Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 53.

⁵³*Gaines v. Briggs* (1848), 9 Ark. 46-47.

⁵⁴Hempstead County Tax Rolls, 1847, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Sevier County, AR; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Sevier County, AR.

Somewhere along the way, slaves who had already been moved experienced the upheaval of being sold, because, by 1860, Cook had moved to Arkadelphia, owned no slaves, and worked as a merchant. These group of bondspeople were shuffled around as whites chose to uproot their operations and start anew in another area, or, as in the instance of the Cook slaves, enter endeavors other than farming.⁵⁵ Some slaveholders moved longer distances within the state, moving and selling bondspeople in the process. C. F. M. Robinson, born in Virginia, began his time in Arkansas in Pulaski County in 1838. He had moved to Hempstead County by 1847, owning seven slaves by 1850. By 1860, Robinson had moved with his slaves to Pulaski County. As indicated by the ages in the census slave schedule, these were not the exact same seven people, however. While some deaths may have occurred, Robinson most likely took part in a combination of buying, selling, and moving slaves as he relocated around the state.⁵⁶

But slaveholders, reevaluating their prospects, might choose to relocate much further, scattering slave families along the way. George Tarwater, born in Virginia, settled in Hempstead County with at least four slaves by 1847 (a woman and children), but moved to Camden by 1850, where he kept a tavern. By 1860, however, Tarwater had moved to Memphis and was working as a salesman in the seventh ward. By then, only one nineteen-year-old slave man lived with Tarwater. His age matched that of one of the children listed as owned by Tarwater ten years before, but there is no way to be certain if he was indeed and the same. If so, the young man

⁵⁵Hempstead County Tax Rolls, 1847; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Clark County, AR; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Clark County, AR.

⁵⁶Pulaski County Tax Rolls, 1838, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock; Hempstead County Tax Rolls, 1847; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Hempstead County, AR; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Pulaski County, AR.

would have experienced quite a bit of Arkansas by the end of his teens. The woman and other children must have been sold by Tarwater somewhere along the way. As whites like Tarwater changed course, the fate of slave families remained precarious.⁵⁷

Arkansas's bonded travelers made temporary journeys as well. As chattel—movable property—slaves might travel at least short distances away from their usual neighbors when they were hired out, relocated to work in various locations, sent on their masters' business, or when they accompanied whites in travel. Domestic servants, those who knew skilled trades, and slaves who were especially trusted were the most likely to go on longer journeys. In order to maximize his profit from their abilities, R. C. Ballard routinely moved his carpenters between his plantations in Mississippi and Arkansas as various jobs required their skills.⁵⁸ Caroline, who waited on Amanda Beardsley Trulock, accompanied her 200 miles up the Arkansas River from their Jefferson County plantation to Dardanelle Springs in July 1846.⁵⁹ “Just like a cow would leave a calf,” Mary Jane Hardridge bluntly described the necessity of her mother, Mary Price, leaving the plantation without her for long periods of time. When the Scull family would leave for a trip away from the plantation, Hardridge's mother, a skilled house worker, was forced to go along. This was stressful for mother and child. One time in particular, her mother left while she was ill. Both mother and daughter wept, and were separated for three months. Another bondwoman took care of the girl while her mother was away.⁶⁰

⁵⁷Hempstead County Tax Rolls, 1847; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Ouachita County, AR; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Shelby County, TN.

⁵⁸Jn. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, October 23, [1857], subseries 1.3, box 17, folder 261, Ballard Papers.

⁵⁹Malloy, ““The Health of Our Family,”” 82.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 195-196.

Their work in transportation caused some slaves to travel for at least short periods at a time. For example, Charles Green Dortch's father (bought in Richmond, Virginia and taken to Dallas County, Arkansas) may have driven a stage from Arkadelphia to Camden or Princeton. While geographic mobility could provide slaves with useful knowledge and connections, travel on the frontier could be dangerous. On a trip back from New Orleans with John Pyeatt and John B. Mosby, a slave man of Pulaski County suffered severe frostbite. The party had walked ninety miles across a wet and partially frozen prairie in the southern part of Arkansas Territory in January 1823.⁶¹ When Flan, a slave of George Case (a northern-born merchant in Batesville, Independence County) worked as a cook on the steamboat *Thomas P. Ray* in the early 1850s, he would have increased his geographical knowledge and allowed him to encounter new people and opportunities, albeit under the watchful eyes of whites.⁶²

Trusted slaves could engage in travel that took them out of their neighborhoods quite often—both overland and on the rivers. Thom, in whom John Brown of Dallas County held great trust, routinely made trips between the Brown place and Camden, more than thirty miles away, as well as trips to Tulip running errands, but often on the important tasks of getting the ginned cotton to the market. Thom was often gone for four to five days, and made these trips frequently when cotton was ginned and ready to go. On December 17, Brown noted, “We keep the waggon constantly going either at home or abroad.”⁶³ In later years, when Brown abandoned planting, Thom traveled less often and with less autonomy. In fall 1854, Thom was hired out to a neighbor in Camden, then contracted to the railroad. Thom's movement shifted from that of trusted

⁶¹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 195-96, 94, 96; *Arkansas Gazette*, January 14, 1823.

⁶²*Case v. Maffitt* (1858), 19 Ark. 645-646; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Independence County, AR.

⁶³Brown Diary, July 14, August 2, 23, Oct 30, 1852, January 14, February 2, 6, March 31, April 7, May 1, May 9, October 19, December 12, 17 (quotation) 1853.

errand-runner to cash creator.⁶⁴ Those who were tasked with masters' business could go much further than the county seat or river and back, though. "Little Bill" moved about much through the neighborhood of Princeton Township, Dallas County, Arkansas on various tasks with his master, Henry F. Shugart. He even accompanied the ill overseer to New Orleans, to drive the carriage.⁶⁵

Movement at the demand of whites was not the only kind of relocation slaves engaged in, however. Whether to escape the work routine, cruel masters, or to reunite with loved ones, slaves engaged in an incredible degree of movement on their own accord. The woods, brush, and river bottoms teemed with bondspeople "laying out" away from white domains and demands. Arkansas's expansive forests and canebrakes provided cover and some provision. Although men were more likely to run, women ran plenty. Slaves took chances to temporarily escape restrictions on their movement, such as "Old Polly," who took off from Henry Shugart's farm for two days in 1839. Bill on that same plantation ran away so often that Shugart referred to him as "Old Runaway Bill" when noting his death. While running away usually amounted to short-term truancy, some slaves went on long journeys in search of freedom north or west, working their way through the uncultivated spaces that shielded them from capture. Having already experienced the long passage to the edge of the South, their geographic knowledge and travel experience may have emboldened slaves in and around Arkansas to flee.⁶⁶

⁶⁴Brown Diary, September 25-October 2, 36, December 30, 1854.

⁶⁵Shugart Plantation Papers, November 1839.

⁶⁶Instances of truancy are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four. Shugart Plantation Papers, January 16-18, April 7, September 10, 1839; Stewart, "If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian," 146.

Whites heard about and were distressed by the presence of free blacks in southern cities “abducting” and “running off” slaves to freedom in Canada.⁶⁷ In 1850, white Arkansans worried that a town of free blacks in Indian Territory was “a den of runaway slaves where every negro who can make his escape from Louisiana and Arkansas, is harbored.”⁶⁸ In one of the more well-known incidents of long-distance flight, Nelson Hacket (or Hackett) fled a Fayetteville farm owned by Alfred Wallace in the early 1840s. Hacket passed through Kentucky and traveled up the Ohio River into Canada. Because Hacket had taken a horse, a coat, and a gold watch with him, Wallace was able to call for Nelson’s extradition for theft. Hacket’s movement created an international incident, catching the attention of the governments of Arkansas, Michigan, the United States, and Canada as well as British and American abolitionists.⁶⁹ Masters knew that runaways might head north. When Jacob fled Benjamin Johnson’s farm south of Little Rock in 1827, Johnson believed he was on his way to Missouri.⁷⁰ R. C. Smith recalled that slaveholders in northwest Arkansas, particularly Judge West, had a great deal of trouble with slaves running to the North in the years just before the Civil War.⁷¹

But runaways had reasons to go many different places, not necessarily north. As evidenced by his ad in the *Arkansas Gazette*, Arkansas County slaveholder J. Floyd Smith had no clear idea where George, who absconded in 1852, was headed, speculating on all possible directions: “I suspect said negro is lurking about Little Rock, as he has a wife at Dr. Watkins’, but in all probability is making for the northern or western part of the State or toward Memphis,

⁶⁷*Arkansas Gazette*, July 12, 1850.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹Bolton, *Fugitives from Injustice*, 84, 65-66; Roman J. Zorn, “An Arkansas Fugitive Slave Incident and its International Repercussions,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 16 (Summer 1957): 139-149.

⁷⁰*Arkansas Gazette*, October 23, 1827.

⁷¹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 393.

as he started in the direction of the Big Prairie when he left.”⁷² In short, whites believed that George could have been going anywhere. He may very well have had relations or connections in Little Rock *and* Memphis due to previous migrations.

Arkansas could be a destination or crossroads for people who fled from those who wished to hold mastery over them. In 1826, Pennington Tucker of Natchez ran an ad for the capture of Phill, who he believed may have been headed to Arkansas Territory. Phill had been “stolen” and taken to central Arkansas before and had been consistently trying to return to Arkansas since. Clearly, Phill had made some connections in Arkansas strong enough to risk several runaway attempts.⁷³ Henry, a presumed runaway slave who had been living as a free man for several years but was captured in Helena, was said to be “well acquainted with the coast between Natchez and New Orleans.”⁷⁴ It is clear that runaways in Arkansas had a sense of place wider than their immediate neighborhoods and took opportunities to make connections in several places as they were forced to move to and around the region.

The Mississippi River was a major conduit for those who fled their enslavement, and its system supported the African-American pan-Mississippi world described in Thomas C. Buchanan’s *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World*. Life on and around the rivers of the Old Southwest helped shape slaves’ worldviews and “created the intellectual, psychological, and material bases for broad networks that helped African Americans survive slavery.”⁷⁵ The African-American river network among smaller rivers in Arkansas, however, was anemic in comparison to the Mississippi River. Buchanan notes

⁷²*Arkansas Gazette*, April 23, 1852.

⁷³*Ibid.*, November 28, 1826.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, October 9, 1827.

⁷⁵Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 20.

that river work was “not a desirable job” for African Americans coming into Arkansas, who would have noticed a sharp decrease in the number of free blacks and an increasingly hardening slave system, knowing that “one betrayal could easily leave them building levees, clearing forests, and draining fields to fulfill the dreams of one of the region’s young upstart masters.”⁷⁶

All the more reason for slaves to run. Anderson, a young man owned by Henry Borrough of Montgomery County, ran away in March 1847 and worked on a steamboat until his capture in Johnson County two months later. The same night Anderson was jailed, though, he disappeared, and was presumed kidnapped by a white “scoundrel,” with whom Anderson might have been cooperating.⁷⁷ At the center of a black “river culture,” the Mississippi harbored an underground network of free and enslaved blacks who assisted runaways, according to Buchanan. Although Buchanan probably exaggerates when he claims that “free black and slave boat workers were willing to risk the loss of their own freedom to help fugitives”—this generalization does not allow that slaves might sometimes have refused to help—but is probably right that in the Delta, “Talking with a river hand was often a crucial step in running away.”⁷⁸ Eli Jackson ran away from a plantation in New Orleans, but was turned over to white authorities in Phillips County by a Mississippi River steamboat captain in 1829. George and Lewis, both from the southern Mississippi delta, were detained by white authorities in Arkansas County that same year. Lewis had already been forcibly relocated from Lexington, Kentucky to a place 150 miles south of Natchez, before turning north to his escape, possibly back to Kentucky.⁷⁹ Again, though, not all movement was northward. Although the plantation he fled in Georgetown, Kentucky, was closer

⁷⁶Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*, 38, 39.

⁷⁷*Arkansas Gazette*, July 22, 1847.

⁷⁸Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*, 101 (first quotation), 102 (second quotation).

⁷⁹*Arkansas Gazette*, September 16, 1829.

to the “free” states, Austin, who was captured in Helena, seemed to have been headed south or west in 1829.⁸⁰

Whites well knew the power of the Mighty Mississippi to whisk away their slaves. When John Pelham, overseer at Wagram Plantation in Chicot County, suggested purchasing lumber upriver and having slaves guide it down to Wagram, the plantation owner, Rice Ballard, refused the idea. Pelham had suggested, “Four hands can go up in a day,” and then “float down in a little more than a day, say three days” on a raft made out of the lumber purchased. After Ballard expressed displeasure at this idea, Pelham backpedaled: “I am glad you mentioned the hiring someone to raft the lumber down for I had much rather do that and will do so if I can as would not send the negroes with any one.”⁸¹

Slaves took great risks when they fled, and often returned hungry and weakened. Sam, at about twenty-one years old, ran away for several weeks from John A. Lindsay’s farm in Powhattan, Lawrence County, in summer 1853. But he returned very weak, and never fully regained his strength. He eventually died in early fall. A doctor explained that “excessive fatigue, the exposure undergone by the boy in being out in the woods exposed to the changes and inclemences of the weather . . . anxiety to which the boy was liable while run away . . . caused the emaciated & debilitated condition” that led to Sam’s death.⁸² A trip to Louisville turned deadly when a slave of the Hilliard’s tried to make his escape. Rob, Bush, and Melie and her children accompanied the Hilliards to Louisville in May 1850. Rob and Bush were hired out in the city because the mistress worried it would “ruin” them not have enough work. Bush had ran

⁸⁰Ibid., September 30, 1829.

⁸¹Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., April 14, 28, 1857, Ballard papers.

⁸²*Lindsay v. Wayland*, series 1, box 73, folder 1417, pp. 57-59, 65-68, Arkansas Supreme Court Briefs and Records, University of Arkansas at Little Rock Bowen School of Law/Pulaski County Law Library, Little Rock.

away, hiding on a mailboat. He was discovered and put in a smaller vessel, but as they were approaching the bank he jumped overboard and drowned.⁸³ Physical harm was not the only risk, though. Slaves could find themselves in Arkansas as the result of journeys that had begun in search of freedom but ended in auctions or private sales hundreds of miles from where they started, as did one runaway from New Orleans, who was captured and sold at auction in Natchez, and taken to Little Rock in the 1840s. Similarly, Eli Jackson, who had run from New Orleans, was sold in at a sheriff's auction in Phillips County.⁸⁴ Henry Shugart, after spending weeks looking for a slave named Nat, gave up on trying to keep him and decided to sell him in New Orleans.⁸⁵ Jim ran away so often from Jefferson County that he was described to a court as "addicted to running away," resulting in his eventual sale in New Orleans.⁸⁶ In addition, masters exasperated by searching for removed slaves might even sell them in their absence. This happened to Frank, a runaway from E. A. More in Pulaski County. More advertised that he had sold Frank, who was "in the woods" in 1847.⁸⁷

But the story of slave movement on the South's periphery is not as simple as taking place *either* by the force of whites *or* as the agency of slaves. Slave movement could take place in circumstances that were neither completely forced by whites nor totally acts of slave resistance. This was probably often the case in many situations where whites reported their slave property as "stolen." The specter of slave kidnapping loomed large enough on the margins of the South to cause distress among slaveholding whites.⁸⁸ But Arkansas's slaveholders watched their border

⁸³Hilliard Diary, May 22, June 7, 16, 17 (first quotation), 19, 1850.

⁸⁴*Trapnall v. Hattier* (1845), 6 Ark. 18; *Arkansas Gazette*, September 30, 1829.

⁸⁵Shugart Plantation Journal, October 10, 1839.

⁸⁶*Morton v. Scull* (1861), 23 Ark. 289.

⁸⁷*Arkansas Gazette*, August 5, 1847; *Cocke v. Chapman* (1846), 7 Ark. 197.

⁸⁸*Arkansas Gazette*, January 14, 1823.

with Indian Territory with unease as reports of the theft of slaves and horses circulated. After terrorizing property owners in the area for a couple of years, the Starr gang, who reportedly murdered whites and Indians alike and kidnapped slaves, was finally brought down by Cherokees close to Fort Smith in 1848.⁸⁹ It is true that rising slave prices and the ability to easily liquidate slave property for cash made it tempting for whites who did not mind operating afoul of the law to kidnap bondspeople. But claims of theft in newspapers might have often simply amounted to disputed ownership.

The travels of Martha, a middle-aged domestic servant on R.C. Ballard's plantation, although hard to follow in the sources, demonstrate movement with unclear motives. Martha was reportedly "stolen" from Chicot County and turned up in Memphis with a couple of white men. After being apprehended in circumstances that are not altogether clear from Ballard's cryptic correspondence on the matter, she was taken to New Orleans to be sold. Martha alerted whites when another slave in New Orleans named Anthony ran away (perhaps to Natchez) when he was about to be sold away to Helena, only to suspiciously disappear herself soon after. Martha had reported to whites that her previous "captors" were in the area before her last disappearance, and was presumed to be somewhere in Texas with the same white man who had "kidnapped" her before. Although she was willing to inform on another slave in order to gain the trust of the whites who held her in New Orleans, there was clearly a level of cooperation between Martha and whoever kept spiriting her off.⁹⁰

⁸⁹Ibid., December 26, 1846, June 7, 1848, August 20, 1850.

⁹⁰Martha's story is also significant because it provides evidence of a woman making the kind of journey that we think of as men taking more often. Peete & Raglan to Mr. Ballard, [April 1858], series 1.3, box 18, folder 277, Ballard Papers; W. Cox & Co. to Col. R. C. Ballard, May 6, 1858, series 1.3, box 18, folder 278, *ibid.*; C. M. Rutherford to Coln. Ballard, May 16, July 5, 6, 1858, series 1.3, box 18, folder 283, *ibid.*

Slaves could bide their time in some circumstances to convert forced movement into freedom. The participation of black and white Arkansans in the California gold rush illustrates just that. Kent Pennington of Pulaski County was born in Kentucky, and came to Little Rock with the family of William Q. Pennington, who resided in Pulaski County as early as 1839. In spring 1849, Kent, around forty-three years old, and another slave traveled with William Pennington, then in his late twenties, to California to mine gold with the Little Rock and California Association. This company of forty-three people, including maybe five slaves counting Kent, departing in waves from Van Buren on April 14, 1849 (although some may have set off earlier in smaller groups as early as March 25).⁹¹ There is no way to know whether Kent wanted to take the trip or not, but it is certain that his life was forever changed.

Although Kent is barely visible in the sources connected to this expedition—never mentioned by name but only as Pennington’s “boy”—we can imagine some of what his experience must have been like through the lens of whites who recorded the adventure. One in the company wrote: “Our progress has been rather slow from Fort Smith, on account of so much wet weather and the road having been so badly cut up by the numerous wagons which have preceded us.” Another letter described the various activities of the members in an evening around the campfire: “One is singing, ‘The Girl I Left Behind Me’; One is playing on the French horn . . . another is telling a tall story . . . while all around on the outside are various noisy groups at work repairing wagons, making fires, cooking, etc.”⁹² Somewhere in that camp of men eating, singing, laughing, and working was Kent. Although some good times were no doubt enjoyed, this was a dangerous trip for everyone. Travelers in Kent’s company documented prairies

⁹¹Pulaski County Tax Records, 1839, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock; Priscilla McArthur, *Arkansas in the Gold Rush* (Little Rock: August House, 1986), 39, 49.

⁹²MacArthur, *Arkansas in the Gold Rush*, 54.

teeming with wolves who prowled the perimeter of camp, the ever-present threat of attack by Native Americans, and the danger of injury and disease. Not everyone made it. Jordan, a slave of one of the Thibault men of this Little Rock company died along the way about fifty miles from Tucson, in August. He was buried about 100 yards from a young doctor who had died two days earlier. But the contingent made it to Agua Fria on November 15, seven months after leaving Arkansas.⁹³

The Little Rock company settled on the bank of the Toulumne River and first hired their labor for ten dollars per day for at least a week and then bought into a mining operation as a group. Starting in January 1850, they began to dig a canal that they surmised would divert enough of the river water and aid in extracting gold. In July, they planned to wait until the Toulumne river fell low enough to “throw our dam across, and commence collecting the gold.” It is impossible to tell how much say Kent would have had in the group’s mining strategy—possibly none whatsoever—but it is safe to assume that he worked hard. (One account suggests that William Pennington ran a store for a time; Kent may have worked there.) The presence of slaves as workers was a huge gain for whites looking to make good in the goldfields, but they also found they could liquidate them in cash. Three of the slaves who accompanied the group from Little Rock were sold in one week at high prices, two for \$1,000 each and one for \$1,200. This may be what happened to the other Pennington slave. By the end of September, the group’s damming efforts had failed, leaving many in debt. William Pennington wrote: “Mining now is a rather slow business—all the old diggings are very nearly exhausted.”⁹⁴

⁹³Ibid., 98.

⁹⁴Ibid., 119-140.

When William Pennington chose to return to Arkansas, Kent stayed behind in California to “try his fortune further.” According to California’s state census of 1852, Kent lived in Calaveras County and worked as a miner in a neighborhood made up mostly of foreign-born or northern-born miners. Kent lived as a free person among people from all over the world. His neighbors hailed from Massachusetts, New York, Ireland, Italy, France, Malay, and China. Four other blacks lived nearby whose previous residences were Missouri, Texas, Louisiana, and England.⁹⁵

At 48 years old, Kent returned to Pulaski County. Because the sources confirm that he came through New Orleans, it makes sense to assume that he traveled via the Isthmus of Panama, which by then would have had at least twenty miles of railroad track to expedite the journey across. Travelers used Native dugout boats down the Chagres River, going overland from there on. The Panama Route home could take about 3.5 months, which was faster than overland across the western American plains, but cost at least \$500 and could cost over \$1000. Some idea of the sea journey comes from a traveler taking the steamship in the opposite direction: “In the midst of constant rain and terrible storms, to which I was exposed, for I had to sleep on the open deck, with mouldy bread to eat and foul water to drink. . . . To stand on deck was to be drenched by rain and exposed to the pitiless storm—to go below was to be crowded into a dark, dirty, dismal hole with 150 men.”⁹⁶

When Kent arrived in Pulaski County (after being suspected as a runaway and detained for some time while passing through New Orleans), the *Arkansas Gazette* told the story in an

⁹⁵*Arkansas Gazette*, November 26, 1852; California State Census of 1852, Calaveras County, CA.

⁹⁶McArthur, *Arkansas in the Gold Rush*, 23.

article titled “The Attachment and Fidelity of a Slave” in November 1852.⁹⁷ But the *Gazette* had been wrong to assume that Kent Pennington had no love for freedom. He was not among the twenty-nine people counted as held in bondage by William Pennington in Pulaski County eight years later. By then, Kent was a free man living with his wife, Betsy, and a child in Bourbon County, Kansas, neighboring another black family with whom they may have shared roots.⁹⁸ While it is not clear whether Kent purchased his freedom (the *Gazette* declared that he returned with a “well filled purse”), was manumitted, or ran away, his trip to California had to have had an impact on his plans and outlook. Kent’s arrangement with William Pennington to stay out west without him shows that Kent already enjoyed a greater sense of autonomy than was typical. Living and working free in California probably filled Kent with the resolve to break slavery’s hold on himself and his family for good. Kent’s “attachment” reported by the *Gazette* was to his family and future plans—not servitude to William Pennington. Movement was an essential factor in Pennington’s agency and eventual freedom.⁹⁹

Participation in the California gold rush aided at least one other Arkansas slave in achieving freedom. A slave man (whose name is not mentioned in the record) owned by James Murphy of Johnson County was hired to a group of men heading out to find their fortunes in California: William Rheubottom, Ellison Logan, Boon Logan, and Dickson Logan, in 1849. But

⁹⁷*Arkansas Gazette*, November 26, 1852.

⁹⁸Both Kent and Betsy listed birthplaces as Kentucky, and so may have been traded from there into Arkansas together. The black family next door also had older members who had been born in Kentucky and a child born in Arkansas, possibly indicating that all of these people had experienced the move from Kentucky to Arkansas then to Kansas together. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Pulaski County, AR; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Bourbon County, KS.

⁹⁹*Arkansas Gazette*, November 26, 1852.

on the return journey to Arkansas in December 1851, Dickson Logan turned back at the Isthmus of Panama with the man and returned to California. Boon and Dickson Logan were in Trinity County, California at the time of the state census of 1852—without the black man, who never returned to Murphy.¹⁰⁰

Movement up and down rivers, through brush and forests, and across rugged trails to and around the southern periphery proved a major factor of frontier slave life that shaped bondspeople's families, communities, and worldviews. Firstly, forced migration from the older South to the cotton frontier was devastating. The networks cultivated between slave friends and family were almost always severed with those back east, whether that transition took place due to family migration or sale. From the opposite side of slaves' emigration, slave communities in Arkansas were consistently injected with newcomers. In one year, a county could experience an increase of about twenty-five percent of the slaveholder population of the county, who brought slaves with them or purchased them along the way.¹⁰¹ Newly arrived bondspeople had to be worked into slaves' communities, which shifted as people moved in and out. The constant possibility of sale, inheritance, gifting, or further migration meant that slave communities were ever-changing. However, movement was also central to slave resistance on the periphery. While slaveholding whites were able to transplant countless slaves over hundreds of miles to build a cotton empire in the Trans-Mississippi South, slaves' resistant movement complicated their visions for mastery on the frontier. Slaves used the sprawling forests of Arkansas as cover for

¹⁰⁰*Rheubottom v. Sadler* (1858), 19 Ark. 491; California State Census of 1852, Calaveras County, CA.

¹⁰¹The estimate is based on calculations of new slaveholdings in Hempstead County between the years 1847 to 1848, and from 1853 to 1854. Hempstead County Tax Records, 1847-1854.

truancy and as concealed thoroughfares for journeys to freedom. Emboldened and educated by their treks to the periphery, slaves crisscrossed the marginal south in efforts to reconnect with loved ones in the region and to pursue complete freedom at last in the North. Or flight from masters could occur in situations where slaves chose to take their chances with other whites—as in the case of Martha and others who were assumed kidnapped. Sometimes slaves converted journeys that began at the initiative of whites, like the gold rush to California, into important stretches on their sojourns for freedom. At the same time that whites transported their slave property around the region for their own profits, slaves themselves profited from the knowledge and connections made along the way.

Emphasizing slave mobility widens slaves' "terrain of struggle" from immediate neighborhoods outward to reveal a more dynamic slave experience in Arkansas as part of the Trans-Mississippi South than Orville Taylor presents. This is not to say that all individual slaves in Arkansas were widely traveled—in the same way that not all slave women were raped by white men, not all slave children sold from their parents, and not all slave men savagely beaten, the *potential* for these occurrences was crucial. The migration and travel that did take place (at the demands of whites and of their own initiative), in addition to the rapid development of this slave society on the margins of the South, meant that the interplay between slaves and masters took place against a backdrop of shifting landscapes. Mobility touched slave communities as a whole, not only those individuals regularly or directly experiencing it. Scholars must "zoom out" to see where slaves had been already and where they might go next in order to get the full picture

of slaves' constructions of their communities and worldviews. Opening our investigations of slave movement shows slaves' constructed communities as all the more important.¹⁰²

¹⁰²Kaye, *Joining Places*, 8, 32.

Chapter Four: Occupied Time: The Rhythm of Slave Labor and Life

Arkansas slaves' time was occupied—both in the sense that they were busy working and in that their time was owned and regimented according to profit-minded masters. The rhythm of life and the crop cycle intertwined for slaves on farms of all sizes. As the seasons of the year and the stages of the crop changed, so did the family, faith, and resistance of slaves grow and renew over time. Important stages of life—birth, childhood, adult milestones, and death—often took place in the field.¹ Parents taught children how to work—how to complete the tasks demanded of them, to be sure, but also greater lessons in coping with bondage. While masters on the periphery of the slave South extracted enough labor from slaves to drive the cotton economy, bondspeople did the best they could to ease the work load, acquire and defend autonomy, and maintain dignity. They drew upon their environment to meet those goals. The uncultivated spaces between fields, along rivers, and in Arkansas's vast forests provided opportunities for slaves to claim their own time out of the seasonal crop cycle.

While scholars of American slavery often separate the themes of work, resistance, family, religion, and leisure, this chapter weaves these considerations into the rhythms of seasons, weeks, and days dictated by slaves' work as farmers. As Anthony Kaye explains, "Slaves worked the annual routine of plantation labor so deeply into their consciousness it marked their sense of time as well as place."² Slaves simultaneously cultivated crops and families, and were resourceful in contending with nature and

¹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 353.

²Kaye, *Joining Places*, 85. Kaye includes a chapter on the distribution of labor, but it is not strictly ordered by season.

demands on their labor. Just as the crop season was punctuated by the peaks and valleys of different kinds of work according to the time of year, so did the push back of slaves tend to ebb and flow over time. This chapter begins with the year, examines the weekly routine, then finishes with a look at a day in order to present the rhythms by which slaves lived and worked in fields and at hearths across Arkansas.

Emphasizing labor as the driver of slave life does not have to diminish agency. In fact, pushing labor to the background is detrimental to a full understanding of what slavery was like. Peter Coclanis's 2004 review of Ira Berlin's *Generations of Captivity* strikes at the heart of the problem when he asks how, "given all of the time slaves purportedly allocated to politics, religion, and bargaining (compliance questions?), the masters got so much tobacco, rice, sugar, and cotton grown?"³ On the other hand, in *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, Orville Taylor covered slave work without much credit to the agency of slaves, and focused mostly on the perspective of whites, presenting a problem that is yet to be rectified in Arkansas's historiography. This chapter seeks to bridge the gap by situating the labor routine as a major backdrop of slave life, integrating what slaves were made to do with what slaves themselves wanted and tried to do, and identifying seasonal trends in work and resistance.

Slaves completed tasks and received training according to gendered divisions of labor, but masters and overseers did not shrink from using any and all labor available

³Peter A. Coclanis, Review of *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*, *William and Mary Quarterly* 61 (July 2004): 551. Already in 1982, the trend away from agricultural labor in favor of social and cultural history of early America was lamented in T. H. Breen, "Back to Sweat and Toil: Suggestions for the study of Agricultural Work in Early America," *Pennsylvania History* 49 (October 1982): 241-258. *The Old South Frontier*, by Donald McNeilly, briefly surveys the work done by slaves in Arkansas, but that topic is not a major focus of his work.

when they felt the need. Steven Hahn points out that divisions of labor were “far less pronounced” on smaller operations, but Arkansas’s sources show that they could be fairly fluid on frontier plantations as well.⁴ Although they did have a limited sense of black womanhood in terms of their reproductive potential and lesser physical strength, whites did not consider black women’s bodies and mental constitutions to have the same sort of frailty that they ascribed to white women. Women’s grit under hard labor demands is a clear source of pride in stories of slavery documented by the WPA in the 1930s. Lucindy Allison declared that her “Ma was sure ‘nough [a] field hand,” and that her Aunt Mandy kept pace with the men in the field, speculating that Mandy may have been under extra pressure to exert herself in the field due to her lack of children. All three of Adrianna Kerns’ aunts worked in the fields, and “could handle a plow and roll logs as well as any man.” Sallie Crane’s words speak for themselves: “I had to do anything that came up—thrashing wheat, sawing logs with a wristband on, lifting logs, splitting rails. Women in them days wasn’t tender like they is now. They would call on you to work like men and you better work too.”⁵

While slaves’ work was primarily ordered by gender, skills separated their tasks as well. At the Shugart farm, Tom, skilled at carpentry, worked the usual tasks such as roofing, and repairing buildings, but also built other things, such as a sled to haul water. Ginnis, on that same farm, created a coal kiln as one of his projects.⁶ Some slaves with knowledge, training, or experience in specific tasks, like blacksmithing or weaving,

⁴Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 20.

⁵Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 269, 86, 71 (first quotation), 72, 102, 136 (second quotation).

⁶Shugart Plantation Journal, January 10, March 16, 22, 28, 29, April 2, October 19, 24, 1839.

received and capitalized on the trust and privileges bestowed by whites who valued their talents. But slaves with sought-after abilities endured closer attention from masters and overseers. For example, R. C. Ballard expected overseers to send detailed reports of the work done by the carpenters he deployed to Chicot County.⁷ While skilled slaves held down specific duties related to their expertise, this did not necessarily keep them out of field work. Rarely was a slave fully exempt from the rhythm demanded by the cash crop. Skilled slaves produced the most wealth when at their craft, but whites wanted all hands on the crop if something unexpected happened, meaning that possessing skills did not quite mean “an emancipation from the fields.”⁸

Men and women, carpenters and hoe hands alike pioneered cotton and corn cultivation in a rough wilderness. “The country was kind of wild in those days,” as Ellen Briggs Thompson described it. Molly Finley’s father cleared land around the Arkansas River, where slaves “worked in huddles” while overseers stood watch, ready to shoot any “panther, bears, and wildcats” that might make their appearance. According to Henry Blake, even Little Rock settlers had to keep fires burning to keep away the wolves and “varmints.” Slaves prepared the land for cultivation at the same time as they prepared the farm for habitation. James Gill described how slaves arrived in Phillips County from Alabama in late January and set right to work building the Gill farm, where cane gave way to cotton: “de han’s was put right to work clearin’ lan’ and buildin’ cabins. . . . dey jus’ slashed de cane and deaden de timber and when cotton plantin’ time come de cane was layin’ dere on de groun’ crisp dry and dey sot fire to it and burned it off clean and

⁷Most letters from John Pelham and H. L. Berry to R.C. Ballard mention the status of the carpenters’ projects. R. C. Ballard Papers, Subseries 1.3, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁸McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 146.

den planted de crops.” Elsewhere in the county, “Uncle Dock” Wilborn described the work of clearing land for the Wilborn brothers’ farms. White and black camped in tents in the wilderness until log houses could be built.⁹ At the Bullock plantation, eight miles from Arkadelphia, slaves constructed the plantation bit by bit. They began with the construction of a weaving room, which served as whites’ quarters while slave cabins and the main house were being built.¹⁰

Building and improving farms and plantations, however, went on for years after initial settlement, and never completely ceased as regular maintenance was necessary. This meant that a major building project or task might cut into the time usually spent on a particular phase of the crop. Fencing, for example, required continued attention. Slaves cut, hauled, and split rails. Nine men made quick work of fence preparation, splitting 1,100 rails in one day at the Bozeman farm in 1857.¹¹ No particular time of year was set aside for improvements; slaves had to integrate this kind of work into the crop routine whenever it was needed. For example, in 1839, Henry Shugart’s slaves built fences during ploughing and planting season. Slaves on John Brown’s southern Arkansas plantation performed that task in July 1852. And at Bozeman’s plantation in Clark County, slaves worked at rails and fencing the whole month of February.¹² Often, when

⁹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 170 (first quotation), 24 (second quotation), 271 (third quotation), 294-295; McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 127.

¹⁰Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 31-32.

¹¹Shugart Plantation Journal, February 2, 13, March 30, 1839; Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 402.

¹²Shugart Plantation Journal, February 22-24, April 2, 6, August 15, 1839; John Brown Diary, July 17, 1852, August 8, 16, 25, 1853, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville; Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 403; Horace Ford Diary, January 1, February 12-16, 1849, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, February 18, 1859, subseries 1.3, folder 302, Ballard Papers.

men worked at these other tasks—like shoring up the levy or making other improvements to the place—the duty of keeping up with the crop fell to women.

Shouldering whatever additional burdens were laid on them by the ongoing task of farm and plantation development and improvements, slaves commenced the cotton season with the removal of the useless remains of the crop they just harvested and the clearing of additional acreage for cultivation, though this preparation could begin before the entire previous crop had been completely ginned and shipped. Women might do this work while men caught up on farm improvements or other building tasks. For example, the women on John Brown's place cleaned up the fields in preparation for the new crop while the men were out at Camden working on his new house. Slaves slashed through the dry stalks, pulled up them out of the ground, heaped them into piles, and burned the piles to make room for the next crop. Alternatively, the old cotton and corn stalks might be chopped and plowed into the earth early enough that they had time to rot before the new planting. Or slaves might simply burn off last year's stalks.¹³ For slaves, the new year was not only a new crop year, but a new year for births, deaths, beginnings and endings. In 1859, for example, the beginning of the crop cycle coincided with an addition to the slave community at Wagram when Lucille gave birth to a baby on January 1st.¹⁴

¹³Brown Diary, January 4, 9, 11-14 16, 21, 23, 1854; Jack Sanders to R. C. Ballard January 18 or 19, 1857, Ballard Papers, folder 251; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, January 24, 1859, *ibid.*, folder 300; Newberry, "Clark County Plantation Journal," 402; Ford Diary, February 26, 1849.

¹⁴Wagram Plantation Journal, January 23, 1857; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, January 8, 1859, Ballard Papers, subseries 1.3, folder 322. Lucille's brother Andy (and perhaps her father, Caney) were probably also at Wagram new welcome their newest family member.

As slaves cleared the remains of the last harvest from the fields in preparation for a new crop, they also carved out fresh acreage for cotton. Slaves chopped and burned smaller trees and brush.¹⁵ After slaves brought down larger trees, they heaped them into piles. In the process of “rolling logs,” groups of slaves used chains to drag the timber into piles where it could be burned. This work could be dangerous. Jim Marsh split his big toe, “the whole length of it,” at that work in January 1849.¹⁶ The practice of “deadening” timber provided a labor-saving, but slower method for the removal of larger trees. Slaves made a deep cut around the circumference of the tree, causing it to slowly die. First, the limbs will begin to drop off, providing fire wood. After a few years, the tree died and fell over without leaving a stump in the ground. The first crop in a new field could be planted around these large slowly dying trees.¹⁷ “Trash gangs” of women and children followed the wake of wood-cutting men to pick up brush and debris. Women pulled up and piled cane, vines, and briars with useless wood onto burn piles while men chopped trees. By January 6, slaves at Wagram had cleared 60 acres of new ground and had piled all the

¹⁵Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Sir, December 17, 1857, *ibid.*, folder 265; Wagram Plantation Journal, January 17, 1857; Thomas A. DeBlack, “A Garden in the Wilderness: The Johnsons and the Making of Lakeport Plantation, 1831-1876,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Arkansas (1995), 114.

¹⁶Ford Diary, January 24, 1849 (quotation); Shugart Plantation Journal, March 13, 20, 1839; Rich. T. Nicholson to Col. Ballard, February 5, 1857, Ballard Papers, folder 252; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, January 18, 1858, *ibid.*, folder 268.

¹⁷Brown Diary, January 14, 19, 25, 27, 29, February 4, 1853; Jack Sanders to [R. C. Ballard], January 18, 1857, Ballard Papers, folder 252; Rich. T. Nicholson to Dear Sir, February 5, 1857, *ibid.*, folder 252. Nineteenth-century methods of deadening timber and grubbing are outlined in Jonathan Periam, *Home and Farm Manual: A New and Complete Pictorial Cyclopaedia of Farm, Garden, Household, Architectural, Legal, Medical, and Social Information* (New York: Thompson & Co., 1884), 285 and Samuel Hazard, *The Register of Pennsylvania: Devoted to the Preservation of Facts and Documents, and Every Other Kind of Useful Information Regarding the State of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Printed by W. F. Geddes, 1829), 37.

brush, and had fenced all the new ground by February 1st. The arrival of four boxes of axes from a steamer meant that more chopping and clearing lay ahead.¹⁸

Henry Morton Stanley described the system of clearing pine from Major Ingraham's plantation in Saline County, where he watched slaves "chopping up timber into portable or rollable logs, some were 'toting' logs to the blazing piles, others rolled them hand over hand to the fires, and each gang chanted heartily as it toiled." But as much as Stanley enjoyed the scene, historian S. Charles Bolton points out that the moment was "more romantic for Stanley than for anyone else." What Stanley interpreted as slaves' enjoyment of invigorating exercise actually represented the degree to which slaves had fine-tuned the process at hand, working in rhythm as a unit. Demanding group tasks required cooperation and the ability to overcome not only tired limbs, but mental exhaustion as well.¹⁹

Indeed, clearing and gathering wood for fire, improvements, and sale was the second largest use of slaves' time outdoors besides working crops. Farms and plantations of all sizes relied upon wood for fuel, heating, cooking, and shelter. Plantations might sell wood in towns or to steamboats on the Mississippi. This work at the edge of fields and pastures, or deeper into densely forested zones, sometimes gave slaves some time out of whites' sight. Two slave men, recently purchased by small slaveholder Thomas Edwards,

¹⁸H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, January 6, 1859, Ballard Papers, folder 298; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, January 8, 1859, *ibid.*; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, February 1, 1859, *ibid.*, folder 301; Brown Diary, February 26, March 2, 1853; Shugart Plantation Journal, January 15-22, 1839; Rich. T. Nicholson to Dear Sir, February 22, 1857, Ballard Papers, folder 253; H. L. Berry to Dear Col., January 18, 1858, *ibid.*, folder 268; Newberry, "Clark County Plantation Journal," 403; Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 20.

¹⁹Henry Morton Stanley, *The Autobiography of Henry Morton Stanley*, quoted in DeBlack, "A Garden in the Wilderness," 113; S. Charles Bolton, *Arkansas, 1800-1860*, 131.

took their chance while at this work. They killed Edwards with their axes as he approached their work site by the river in Lafayette County and dumped his body in the water.²⁰

Clearing the fields and preparing for a new crop at the beginning of the year was cold work for slaves. John Brown complained in 1853 of catching cold just standing watch over slaves at such work: “I owe this spell very much to standing out in the new ground all day when the hands were rolling logs and getting my feet cold.”²¹ Lou Fergusson never forgot having to work in the sleet, while Molly Finley recalled that her mother’s coat tail would freeze while she worked. Slaves at Wagram were allowed to stop work when the sleet and snow got too heavy in January 1857. Slaves suffered from sore throats and colds and chills and fever working out in such weather. Nearly twenty slaves at once came down with influenza at Walworth’s Chicot County plantation in winter 1849.²²

Cold weather could be accompanied by cold tension, though, as the first of the year was also the season for slaves to test the resolve of new overseers, whose contracts normally began in January. Testing overseers was a yearly ritual on operations large and

²⁰Shugart Plantation Journal, January 1, 9, 15, February 1, 16, March 28-19, 1839; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, May, 14, 1859, Ballard Papers, folder 307; DeBlack, “A Garden in the Wilderness,” 113; “Outrageous Murder,” *Arkansas Gazette*, April 4, 1851, p. 3; US Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Lafayette County, AR; *Abraham v. Gray* (1853), 14 Ark. 303-304.

²¹Brown Diary, January 25, 1853.

²²Brown Diary, January 25, 1853, February 4, 5, 6, 15, 1853; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 48, 140, 102, 25; Wagram Plantation Journal, January 23-24, 1857; Jack Sanders to R. C. Ballard, January 18 or 19, 1857, Ballard Papers, folder 251; Rich. T. Nicholson to R. C. Ballard, February 5, 1857, *ibid.*, folder 252; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, January 18, 1858, *ibid.*, folder 268; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, January 24, 1859, *ibid.*, folder 300; Ford Diary, January 12, 17, 20, 1849.

prosperous enough to require and support them. Solomon Lambert remembered the beginning of the new year: “That was a busy day. That was the day to set in workin’ overseers and ridin’ bosses set in on New Year day.”²³ Masters pressured overseers for maximum productivity, and overseers transferred that pressure onto slaves, who lived under the threat of the lash. Decades later, Harriet Daniel tried to downplay the severe treatment of slaves by overseer Joe Hinton Scott at the Bullock plantation, but had to admit that he whipped women mercilessly, ripped a lock of hair from one man’s head, and even cut Uncle Fed—the leader of the hoe hands—with a knife across the stomach. Although Daniel supposed that the slaves harbored no ill will toward the overseer, she described them as “sullen and rebellious.”²⁴ Slaves at Bullock’s place had to tolerate Scott for years, but overseer turnover on Arkansas’s plantations was frequent. For example, five overseers worked at Wagram in three years. Lucretia Alexander’s recollection of overseers went thus, “The first overseer I remembered was Kurt Johnson. The next was named Mack McKenzie. The next one was named Pink Womack. And the next was named Tom Phipps.”²⁵

Slaves worked less diligently when not closely supervised, much to the annoyance of those trying to drive them. When John Brown hired an overseer after nine years without one, he wrote, “I feel greatly relieved at the idea of getting a lazy trifling set of negroes off my hands.”²⁶ Some slaves were notoriously resistant to overseers. In Hempstead County, a neighbor of R. A. Brunson’s claimed that an overseer would be

²³Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 247. Hired-out slaves also often began new contracts in January.

²⁴Daniel blamed these violent escalations on Scott’s intemperance with whiskey. Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 36.

²⁵Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 411.

²⁶Brown Diary, January 26, July 20, 1854.

justified in asking for more than the usual pay rate on that place because the bondspeople there were known as “a hard set.”²⁷ Despite the tension, overseers—because they moved often—might rely on slaves for much of their information about the place they managed, especially at absentee-owned plantations like Wagram or Francis Terry Leak’s plantation. When Richard Nicholson noted the mule count shortly after starting at Wagram in 1857, he included that nine were lame, adding, “Said to be the ones bought with the place.”²⁸ Slaves’ lies, half-truths, or exaggeration could work to the disadvantage of whites on absentee-owned farms. Thus, overseer H. L. Berry promised not to put too much stock in the advice of the slaves: “as to listening to negroes I never do I hope you don’t think so I never consult them eny way you air all the one I want infermation from.” When slaveholders or overseers went out of town for business or to visit, others might supervise, giving slaves a chance to try to get away with less work. When slaveholder Michael Bozeman and his overseer nephew, Henry Bozeman, left “surveying” for a couple of days in January 1857, the slaves there may have felt relieved at the break in supervision. At Wagram, an overseer went away to Mississippi to visit his father for ten days, leaving the plantation in the hands of another man named John W. Tucker.²⁹

But slaves made up part of the power structure that kept the work routine going when they served as drivers or foremen. While these stations could come with privileges and greater trust of whites, they also meant closer scrutiny and possibly tension with

²⁷*Brunson v. Martin* (1856) series 1, box 19, folder 307, p. 14, Arkansas Supreme Court Briefs and Records, University of Arkansas at Little Rock/Pulaski County Law Library Archives.

²⁸Wagram Plantation Journal, January 27, 1857.

²⁹H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, October 1, 1858, subseries 1.3, folder 291, Ballard Papers; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, November 23, 1858, folder 293, *ibid.*; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, December 19, 1857, folder 265, *ibid.* (quotation); Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 403, 407.

other slaves. Emma Moore described her grandfather as a “whipping boss,” suggesting that he not only supervised work but enforced it. Louis Lucas remembered a black foreman named Jesse who presided over the work of the six or seven slaves on a farm on Bayou Bartholomew in Jefferson County. Solomon oversaw his fellow slaves’ labor on Bill Newton’s farm in Johnson County.³⁰ Positions in the leadership of work could be passed down or distributed across families. For instance, Harriet Daniel remembered slaves Moriah and Billy as a powerful couple with many privileges as cook and foreman at Sylvan Home plantation in Dallas County. Moriah’s sister Rachel was married to the leader of the hoe hands, “Uncle Fed.”³¹ James (Jim) Pine of Phillips County was ten years the foreman of the slaves on the Deputy Plantation, of about 75 slaves. Pine had been taken to Arkansas from South Carolina when he was twelve years old. He said of the white overseer, “He used to take my word for everything.”³²

Amanda Trulock of Jefferson County took her slave Reuben’s word for everything for years. Reuben assumed the role of overseer/driver/manager at the Trulock plantation in Jefferson County no later than March 1846, but probably earlier. When James Hines Trulock died, Reuben took charge and made the plantation more profitable than it had ever been, dragging the operation out of debt. He worked hard, worried

³⁰Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 108; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 15, 203. Louis Lucas also mentioned that the farm employed a black overseer for a time. William L. Van Deburg argued that black drivers were probably not as harsh as Depression-era interviewees described them, due to informants’ desire to minimize whites’ brutality. William L. Van Deburg, “The Slave Drivers of Arkansas: A New View from the Narratives,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 35 (Autumn 1976): 239-240.

³¹Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 34.

³²Deposition of James Pine, heirs of Joseph Deputy (Phillips County, AR) claim no. 18147, Southern Claims Commission, 1871-1880, Records of the House of Representatives, Record Group 217, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC, reproductions at Fold3.com.

constantly over the progress of the crop, and liked to compete with his neighbors. Reuben had a lot of power in the decision-making—the widowed mistress Amanda Trulock used “we” when relating the deliberation of important decisions, like building a gin—and seems to have used his son, Orren, in the overseeing effort. Reuben’s position was not only at the head of labor supervision, but was worked into the whites’ patriarchal power structure as he and his son sent letters to Amanda Trulock’s father and brother in Connecticut, explaining how business was going and justifying his choices on the farm.³³

But white overseers were the main target—coming and going more often than slave drivers—so their resolve needed to be assessed as soon as they showed up, which was usually in January. Slaves took advantage of the turnover and began testing new overseers immediately. Martha Jones started giving trouble during the transfer between overseers at Wagram in 1857. She tested the new manager’s resolve to keep her pace of work, as Pelham wrote, “Sent her out and she tried to stop the same day but failed and has done very well since.”³⁴ Annoyed at having to adjust to five different overseers within three years, the Wagram slaves violently resisted H. C. Buckner in the beginning of his tenure at Wagram in January 1860. By the 4th, three had run away:

one Left Monday & the other two left to night in a skift. Miles left Monday morning about sun up I went to Corect him & he struck me with his ax & would of killed me if I had not of goton out of his way I tride to shoot him But my pistole would not shoot. I think they have gon to vicsburgh.³⁵

³³Malloy, ““The Health of Our Family,”” 78, 94-95, 102-103; James W. Leslie, “The Reuben and Orrin Letters,” *Jefferson County Historical Quarterly* 18 (1990): 12-30.

³⁴Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, February 28, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 251, Ballard Papers.

³⁵Henry C. Buckner to Col. Ballard, January 4, 1860, folder 322, *ibid.*

The men returned in a few days. Some slaves remained unruly, though, and Buckner guessed right when he wrote that three “(ap)pear to Be vry much Dissatisfide”—George Kentuck, Jerry Johnson, and Henry Jackson—looking “like the Devil was in them.” Only chains would restrain Dick Hill and George Kentuck.³⁶ Upriver, in the first week of January 1849, Levi, who was threatened with whipping by a new overseer at one of Walworth’s plantations, pled his case to the other overseer Horace Ford, who interceded for him. Levi avoided a whipping and the newcomer either quit or was fired the next day. Pedro tested the replacement by feigning sick, and was whipped for it. This overseer quit after little more than a month on the job, “because he could not manage just as he was a mind to.” While waiting for a replacement, Horace Ford stressed, Levi and Pedro likely enjoyed the freedom, and the other slaves brooded over the prospect of having to adjust again. Ford recorded the tension: “This evening all hands a little cross things go bad no overseer but Levi & myself.”³⁷ Slaves’ new year testing of overseers with fresh contracts was so acute that in mid-January of H. L. Berry’s first year managing at Wagram, he proudly recorded, “I have got one weeks work out of them with out running eny of.”³⁸

By and large, though, slaves settled into a work routine and began breaking the land with plows in February or March. Whether they pushed through the rocky soil of the hills or the dark rich earth of the Delta, slaves’ work behind the mule and plow required skill and strength. Plowing took up a lot of the time and labor on a farm of any size. By

³⁶Henry C. Buckner to Col. R. C. Ballard, February 7, (quotations), 1860, folder 324, *ibid.*; Henry C. Buckner to Col. R. C. Ballard, March 20, 1860, folder 327, *ibid.*

³⁷Ford Diary, January 5, 6, 27, February 9, 19 (first quotation), 22 (second quotation), 1849. Levi had taken a much milder route than Wilborn, who had stabbed Walworth’s overseer to death a few years earlier, and was hanged by an angry mob for it. “Mob Violence,” *Arkansas Gazette*, July 13, 1846, pp. 3-5.

³⁸H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, January 18, 1858, subseries 1.3, folder 299, Ballard Papers.

the time cotton boomed in Arkansas, cotton rows were terraced, a practice that helped reduce erosion but also required the extra work of ditching. Plow gangs tore across new and old ground with efficiency—eleven slaves at Wagram had plowed about 670 acres by February 5, 1857.³⁹ On smaller farms, whites joined the effort. Slaves worked the cotton rows over in the early spring, then again in the early summer.⁴⁰ Rain could slow the effort because ground plowed while too wet had to be done over.⁴¹

Plowing was a necessary part of the crop season, but his task also made its mark on slave families and gender relations on farms of all sizes. The ability to plow separated children from adults, as far as the division of labor was concerned. Children kept fires, carried wood, ran errands, swept, carried water, fed chickens, milked cows, and gathered brush, trash, and rocks from the yard. As John Jones explained to an interviewer, “all us little fellows had to work.”⁴² Decades after slavery ended, Katie Rowe lamented:

Lots of li'l chillun just lak my grannchillun, toting
hoes bigger dan dey is, and dey poor little black hands
and legs bleeding whar dey got scratched by de brambedy
weeds, and whar dey got whuppings 'cause dey didn't git
out all de work de overseer set out for 'em.⁴³

Whatever limited sense of childhood slavery did offer was painfully brief, and a teenaged boy's “graduation” from relatively light chores to the more strenuous task of plowing was just one way in which slave children were forced to make the “quantum leap from

³⁹Rich. T. Nicholson to R. C. Ballard, February 5, 1857, folder 252, *ibid.*; Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 403-404; DeBlack, “A Garden in the Wilderness,” 114-115; Kaye, *Joining Places*, 96, 100; Ford Diary, January 30, 1849.

⁴⁰Brown Diary, July 13, 17, 1852, February 12, March 25, 28, May 30, June 21-22, 1853.

⁴¹Jno. B. Pelham, March 22, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 257, Ballard Papers; Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 406.

⁴²Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 13 (quotation), 15, 23, 102, 104, 122, 136, 164, 197, 370-371.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 144.

childhood into the world of work” described by historian Wilma King.⁴⁴ Boys deemed old enough to help work in the fields stopped wearing long shirts and began wearing pants.⁴⁵ Manhood in work could grant slaves access to some adult enjoyments like tobacco and whiskey. Overseer John Pelham described the transition from boy to plow hand under the supervision of an older slave:

By making Henry attend to the plows instead of plowing I can spare more time about the building. In fact I have had to make him change from plow to plow for several days as I have several awkward new hands at the plow and I had to be at the levee. . . . I made little John Wesley take it and he now plows very well. There are two more little boys I wish to learn, that I may have as many men out as possible.⁴⁶

The mothers of John Wesley and the other boys must have watched with sorrow as their children were transitioned to adult labor.⁴⁷

Women did not simply observe, however, but plowed many of Arkansas’s acres themselves. The first thing that James Speed mentioned when recounting what horrified him about slavery in Arkansas (as opposed to his Kentucky home) was the presence of women plowing.⁴⁸ At Wagram, Caroline came in from the fields to help clean the main house and arrange things for a day or two in late February, but was sent back out as soon as she could be used in the plowing effort. The overseer explained that he would “not hinder her or anyone else unless absolutely necessary,” in short, explaining that on a

⁴⁴Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* second edition (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2011), xxi-xxii, 71 (quotation) -106.

⁴⁵Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 67, 309.

⁴⁶Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, March 4, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 254, Ballard Papers.

⁴⁷Ford Diary, January 7, 1849; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, December 30, 1858, subseries 1.3, folder 296, Ballard Papers.

⁴⁸James Speed testimony, p. 32.

frontier plantation—even one of around eighty slaves—no time could be wasted in preparing the crop.⁴⁹

While cotton drove Arkansas’s agricultural economy, corn fed it. Thus, slaves bedded corn ground every spring, too. Cultivating both crops at the same time kept slaves busy in the spring.⁵⁰ Corn fueled people and stock, and also offered income alongside cotton. In some areas, slaves worked corn more than cotton. Arkansas’s hillsides and prairies exhibited higher corn-to-cotton ratios than her river valleys. For example, Washington, Hot Spring, and Lawrence Counties produced more than 100 bushels of corn per bale of cotton, while Chicot, Desha, and Jefferson produced less than 25 bushels per cotton bale. Corn remained important, everywhere, though. Slaves at Lycurgus Johnson’s Chicot County plantation produced 3,000 bushels of corn in 1850 and more than 10,000 in 1860.⁵¹

If plowing cotton and corn marked the arrival of spring, so did heavy rains and rising rivers. The control of water supported life and work, being essential for growing crops, watering livestock, and sustaining workers. To slake their thirst through the work day, slaves drank from barrels in the fields. They washed the sweat and dirt from their bodies and clothes in springs and creeks.⁵² They dug wells and built dams to hold water for the stock.⁵³ But as crucially as slaves needed rivers and springs for farming and

⁴⁹Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, February 26, 28, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 253, Ballard Papers.

⁵⁰Rich. T. Nicholson to Dear Sir, February 22, 1857, *ibid.*; Kaye, *Joining Places*, 99.

⁵¹Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 21-24; DeBlack, “A Garden in the Wilderness,” 119, 167.

⁵²Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 24.

⁵³Shugart Plantation Journal, January 1, 1839; Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 407.

sustenance, heavy springtime rain could create a nuisance or even a danger. Spring storms blew over trees and crops and created standing water.⁵⁴ Ditching to prevent destructive water flow across fields created work. When hard rains fell, roads could become impassable, but movement around the plantation itself became difficult.⁵⁵ If a major feature of the workings of the plantation was to position slaves and stock in the right places for the right tasks at the right time, then spring floods interrupted the basic routine in a way that frustrated whites and created extra and more dangerous work for slaves. Due to one spring's heavy rains, two enslaved mothers at Wagram had to be ferried across flooded portions of the place from time to time to nurse their babies (probably to their own dismay and definitely to the annoyance of the overseer, who then moved them to other work closer to the house). Oxen were swum over to areas where they were needed.⁵⁶ Slaves turned plows to avoid standing water and sinks, but would have to go back and add rows after water receded.⁵⁷ In those instances where the crop was threatened, whites were more likely to work alongside slaves to salvage it. Due to the unusually wet spring of 1853, Brown's slaves worked with the master and his son to get back on track. Brown complained: "In a press with the crops all the time. We are vastly behind and the land is so incessantly wet that we work to great disadvantage. I arise early and go constantly all day except an hour at dinner, to eat and take a nap of about 20 or 30 minutes." (Brown's slaves probably had a similar day, then, but most likely without the

⁵⁴H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, June 15, 1859, subseries 1.3, folder 309, Ballard Papers; Hilliard Diary, March 17, 1850.

⁵⁵Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 70; DeBlack, "A Garden in the Wilderness," 85; Ford Diary, Feb 2, 1849.

⁵⁶Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, March 14, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 255, Ballard Papers.

⁵⁷Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., February 28, 1857, folder 253, *ibid.*

nap.)⁵⁸ Water damaged fifty acres of the Wagram crop in 1859, forcing slaves to plant additional cotton when the Mississippi's overflow receded.⁵⁹

On riverside plantations in particular, flooding complicated the improvement and building, creating even more labor for slaves forced to build a plantation while producing a crop. This meant extra work like building cisterns in the fields to provide drainage.⁶⁰ The work might be more drastic, though. In anticipation of spring floods at Wagram, slaves moved the front fence (which was 50 feet from the bank of the Mississippi River) and main house (which was only 150 feet from the river) away from the ever-caving bank. The cable kept breaking in their first attempts, but after M. Coxe came up from Vicksburg, six slaves helped him move the house 400 yards. The frustration of those efforts proved more than carpenter George Turner was willing to put up with. He ran away but was caught the same night.⁶¹

Flood control was an especially important part of slaves' spring routine on such plantations. They maintained ditches and levees as the Mississippi River could rise six inches per day, caving banks and threatening farms. In 1858, slaves in the Arkansas Delta fought flooding so strong that it changed the course of the Mississippi River.⁶² When

⁵⁸Brown Diary, April 7, May 14, 16, June 2, 1853.

⁵⁹H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, July 1, 1859, subseries 1.3, folder 309, Ballard Papers.

⁶⁰Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., November 27, 1857, folder 263, *ibid.*

⁶¹Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Sir, December 17, 1857, folder 265, *ibid.*; H. L. Berry to Dear Col., December 18, 1857, *ibid.*; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, [January] 30, 1858, subseries 1.3, folder 269, Ballard Papers; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, February 2, 1858, folder 270, *ibid.*; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, February 13, 16, 27, 1858, folder 271, *ibid.*; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, March 4, 1858, folder, 272, *ibid.*

⁶²Rich. T. Nicholson to Dear Sir, February 22, 1857; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, March 4, 1858; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, July 1, 1859, subseries 1.3, folder 310, Ballard Papers; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, February 26, 1859, folder 302; DeBlack, "A Garden in the Wilderness," 89-90, 114, 161.

overseer John B. Pelham declared, “levee making and fighting water is an old business to me,” he could have spoken for many slaves up and down the lower Mississippi Valley who battled the river every spring. Slaves at Wagram leveed the whole riverfront edge of the place, sometimes working at it until 10:00 at night, but in early years simply as a hurried temporary fix that would have to be gone over next year.⁶³ In March, H. L. Berry reported that slaves had been working on the levee for the past three days when they should have been planting. He asked Ballard to send some whiskey for the hands “as I have to work in mud and water.” Fighting water was not strictly men’s work. While the rest of the women cleared patches of new ground, “eight of the stoutest women” at Wagram filled in low spots of the levee after men finished constructing it.⁶⁴ Slaves often got sick at this watery work, developing sore throats, colds, and fevers.⁶⁵

Owners of land along the Mississippi River or other rivers subject to overflow, are supposed to keep up levees “against the ordinary wear of crawfish holes, cattle paths, and washing by river.” County courts used levee taxes to support levee construction and maintenance. When in danger of floods, the levee commissioner had the power to require slaveholders to provide hands for levee repair, on penalty of a fine of 5 dollars per day per hand refused. Some areas were exempt from county levee administration.⁶⁶

Whatever other work needed accomplished, cotton was the primary focus of labor, and in late spring it was time to get it in the ground. Slaves began planting cotton at

⁶³Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., February 28, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 253, Ballard Papers; Ford Diary, February 5, 1849.

⁶⁴Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, March 4, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 254, Ballard Papers; Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, March 14, 1857, folder 255.

⁶⁵H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, March 14, 29, 1859, folder 304, *ibid.*; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, April 2, 1859, folder 305, *ibid.*

⁶⁶Gould, *Digest of the Statutes of Arkansas*, 741-742.

the end of March or in April. One person opened the ground, dropping the seed, and the next person covered it with a foot or a hoe. But slaves might try new practices, as whites experimented with farming methods. After having slaves test a new tool at Wagram in spring 1859, the overseer reported, “My new cotton planters dose veary well in loose old dry ground But When the ground is a Little wet they clog up and they wont doo a tall so I don’t think they will pay.”⁶⁷

Spring planting was split between the cash crop and food crops, although farmers might try to get corn planted before cotton.⁶⁸ Ballard slaves planted “pepper grass,” mustard, collard, and okra, to supplement their diets.⁶⁹ Slaves at Lycurgus Johnson’s plantation grew corn, peas, beans, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, and even kept bees for honey.⁷⁰ The Bozeman slaves grew oats, wheat, potatoes, peas, watermelons, apples, and peaches.⁷¹ On Ozark hillsides, slaves might build up earth supported by rock walls to create level spaces suitable for growing vegetables. Some slaves kept their own family garden plots, but others were prohibited from doing so.⁷²

Cotton began to rise from the ground in April. At this point, slaves discovered where they would have to replant due to late frosts or flooding.⁷³ Their bodies worked the

⁶⁷H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, April 17, 1859, folder 306, *ibid.*

⁶⁸H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, March 11, 1859, folder 304, *ibid.*; DeBlack, “A Garden in the Wilderness,” 114; Ford Diary, March 16, 1849.

⁶⁹Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, February 28, 1857.

⁷⁰Brown Diary, February 18, 28, April 9, 1853; DeBlack, “A Garden in the Wilderness,” 119.

⁷¹Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 404-405.

⁷²Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 199, 54, 165, 390.

⁷³Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, April 4, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 256, Ballard Papers; Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, February 28, 1857; Agricultural reforms in cotton cultivation were in full swing by the time cotton boomed in Arkansas, part of which forced earlier planting times, meaning more likelihood that slaves would have to replant. Kaye, *Joining Places*, 99.

ground, but slaves' hearts and minds focused on family life. While cotton and corn seedlings were nurtured so did love germinate on the Ballard place in 1857, when Martha Ann, around eighteen years old, and George Turner, around nineteen, were married on a Saturday. After a long week of slaves' clearing land and planting, "They are all now enjoying themselves," the overseer noted, in celebration of the union. Martha Ann and George cultivated a new beginning in their relationship as well as the cash crop.⁷⁴ Sorrow followed, however, when an ill child, described by the overseer as "the little deformed boy" died the night after the wedding. While the master and overseer contemplated the profits of each year's upcoming harvest, life's turning points marked those years for slaves.⁷⁵

After planting, the cotton had to be scraped and tended to keep out grass, and the necessary chopping and hoeing was done at the same time that plows were still being used in succession. Grass had to be kept out of the corn as well.⁷⁶ Adults went down between two rows, working them both as they went along.⁷⁷ With increasing acreage in cotton, this spring and summer stoop labor grew each year. In May 1839, Henry Shugart proudly recorded in his plantation journal that he had scraped more than twenty-five acres of cotton with twenty-four hands in one day. Like plowing, whites on smaller operations took part in the work when necessary.⁷⁸ Slave farmers fought insects, boll

⁷⁴Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, February 28, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 253, Ballard Papers.

⁷⁵Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, March 4 (quotation), 8, 1857; Henry C. Buckner to Col. R. C. Ballard, March 20, 1860, folder 327, *ibid.*

⁷⁶H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, April 23, 1859, folder 306, *ibid.*; Brown Diary, May 10, 13-14, 1853; Newberry, "Clark County Plantation Journal," 405.

⁷⁷Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 1.

⁷⁸Shugart Plantation Journal, May 7, 1839.

worms, and “rust” (fungus).⁷⁹ Corn also had to be thinned and worked over, but not as much as cotton, and was “laid by” in June. Like other phases of the crop year, slaves juggled the work of chopping and scraping with other tasks. On the first year of cultivation of Ballard’s Wagram plantation, the men were so involved in the work of setting up the fences and buildings, that the bulk of the late spring and summer cotton work fell to the women. The overseer explained to his employer when ordering implements for the year’s work: “The women will be the main workers of the crop and these hoes are heavier than I am in the habit of giving to men.”⁸⁰

Summer was hot and busy. On farms that grew wheat, mid-to-late June was time to start harvesting it and thrashing it, while those who grew oats needed to tie them up and “shock” them. Dry weather created problems, as insufficient rain hardened the ground and created dust, while the heat made slaves’ usual work especially uncomfortable. A harsh summer could stunt the crop and devastate the profits that whites anticipated, putting more pressure on slaves’ productivity. In 1854, an exceptionally dry season reduced cotton yields in Arkansas and the entire South. This likely meant that slaves experienced even closer watch to ensure that they got the most out of what acreage did survive.⁸¹

⁷⁹H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, May 8, 14, 1859, subseries 1.3, folder 307, Ballard Papers; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, June 1, 1859, folder 308, *ibid.*; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, July 25 (quotation), 1859 folder 311, *ibid.*; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, June 20, 1859, folder 309, *ibid.*; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, July 9, 1859, folder 310, *ibid.*; DeBlack, “A Garden in the Wilderness,” 118.

⁸⁰Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, April 4, 1857.

⁸¹Brown Diary, June 30, July 1, 1853; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, July 25, 1859, subseries 1.3, folder 311, Ballard Papers; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, August 16, 1859, folder 306, *ibid.*; DeBlack, “A Garden in the Wilderness,” 157-158.

As the crops neared the “laid by” stage—the period where the cotton plants no longer required the attention of hoe hands, but had not yet opened for picking—other work commenced. Slaves sowed turnips, kept grass from corn and peas, plowing/digging up potatoes, and gathering fodder, even cutting sugar cane.⁸² Slaves on Henry Shugart’s place pulled fodder from his farm as well as that of a neighbor’s, through some kind of labor trade arrangement.⁸³ Slaves also might get back to clearing land, working at farm improvements, repairing implements, or even make baskets.⁸⁴ Summer was also prime time for whites to set slaves to work on public roads, often for a couple of days at a time. County courts appointed overseers of roads who had the power to require the labor of free men between 16 and 45 years of age, and of male slaves between 16 and 45.⁸⁵ This included bridges, like the one John Brown’s slaves spent several days building over Tulip Creek in late July and early August 1853.⁸⁶ Like other manual labor, this work was not limited to men, even if the county did not specifically require the work of slave women. Lucindy Allison told an interviewer that her mother was required to help “grade a hill” and build a road between Wicksburg and Wynne. Farms and plantations easily experienced years when “laid by” time was non-existent due to crops that were behind

⁸²Brown Diary, July 14, 17, 27, 31, August 2, 4, 5, 11, 1852, August 8, 15-16, 1853; Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Sir, December 11, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 264, Ballard Papers; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, July 25, 1859, folder 311, *ibid.*; Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 407, 408.

⁸³Shugart Plantation Journal, August 11, 15, 1839; Brown Diary, August 13, 15, 1853.

⁸⁴Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 407-408.

⁸⁵Gould, *Digest of Arkansas Statutes*, 964-965; Kaye, *Joining Places*, 164-165.

⁸⁶Brown Diary, July, 31, 1852, August 4, 10, 1853.

due to weather or the infringement of building work, so slaves' work on roads might be added on top of farm work.⁸⁷

Summer offered reasons to celebrate, too, even if plenty of work remained. Two women—Cassidy and Charlotte—delivered baby boys at Bozeman plantation in early summer 1857. Slaves later marked the Fourth of July holiday by beginning the third working over of the cotton with hoes, but “All hands quit a while before night.”⁸⁸ (Bondspeople at John Brown's plantation did not get to enjoy any time off for July 4th 1853, if Brown's note that he “celebrated this memorable day at home by a very fatiguing days attention to my crop” is any indication of how the slaves spent that day.⁸⁹) Lee and Rachel and Stephen and Martha Jones married the week before they “laid by” Wagram's cotton in July 1859. When John Bates said that slave marriages usually took place in the fall, he may have been recalling marriages between the cultivation stage and picking season.⁹⁰ Slaves in the Ouachita River valley enjoyed religious renewal every summer when the cotton and corn were laid by, at a yearly “colored” religious meeting. Held at Manchester Church, about 2.5 miles from the Bullock plantation, this meeting was attended by slaves from miles around. Pate Newton's neighborhood in the Arkansas River Valley also held these yearly religious meetings for slaves.⁹¹

Finally, after months of cultivation, cotton squares began to crack open in early August, signaling the picking frenzy soon to follow. Picking time was crucial, and whites

⁸⁷Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 71.

⁸⁸Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 406-407.

⁸⁹Brown Diary, July 4, 1853.

⁹⁰H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, July 15, 1859, subseries 1.3, folder 308, Ballard Papers; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 318.

⁹¹Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 62-63; Pate Newton, Early Settler Interview. The Manchester meeting is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

pushed slaves to harvest the fiber as quickly as possible, in order to get it ginned and off to market. Although picking involved tedious stoop labor in hot weather, the pounds rolled in quickly under the watch of overseers and masters. Slaves were observed by more than their own masters and overseers, as neighboring whites rode over each other's crops to decide whose cotton was getting picked fastest and cleanest. Picking "clean" cotton required pulling the fiber from the boll without allowing dirt or pieces of the boll squares and plant leaves to cling to it as it was pushed into the canvas bag or basket. Skilled pickers made clean and quick work of the harvest, but the task caused sore fingers as the sharp edges of the opened boll scraped against them. Older children helped in the cotton fields, by assisting adults in picking or helping to move the baskets down the rows while adults picked. Betty Robertson Coleman remembered assisting her father with field work as a child. When old enough, they were assigned a row to pick for themselves.⁹² When slaves completed this field work in family groups, Steven Hahn argues, they "plac[ed] the imprint of kinship on the organization of labor."⁹³

While the minds of masters and overseers rested on the profitability of the upcoming harvest, life went on for slave families. The transition to picking coincided with important turning points for slaves at the Shugart plantation in 1839. The day that the first cotton opened, Fanny's child died. Slaves there worked at pulling fodder the next day, burying the child that rainy evening before the picking season began in earnest. Eliza Johnston at Wagram plantation gave birth at the beginning of picking season, September

⁹²Newberry, "Clark County Plantation Journal," 408; Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, September 16, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 259, Ballard Papers; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 371, 4, 102, 305, 244, 124, 216.

⁹³Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 21-22 (quotation).

15, 1857.⁹⁴ Fanny was preoccupied with her loss and Eliza focused on her growing family while the cotton routine pressed on.

Slaves' daily picking totals varied by gender, age, and whether the entire day was devoted to picking or split between other tasks. The pounds were usually lower in the beginning, when only some of the bolls were open. Slaves at John Brown's brought in from 100 to 128 pounds each, about 1200 to 1400 pounds total, early in the season. The best hands on the place picked 170 or 180 pounds per day.⁹⁵ At Wagram, hands averaged a little over 100 pounds each early on in the 1857 crop, according to the overseer's account of 32 hands, "little & big," bringing in 3,255 pounds one mid-September day.⁹⁶ In August 1859, Wagram slaves' daily totals amounted to nearly 200 pounds each when all who were old enough to pick were brought out into the fields, According to the overseer, "With 41 hands I picked over 8 thousand pounds of clean cotton in one day," the best August yield he had ever seen, due to the very dry plants opening unusually quickly.⁹⁷

Their daily hauls grew heavier as slaves tried to keep up with the opening cotton. In 1852, the Brown plantation had harvested about 18,000 pounds of cotton by the end of the second week of October. In November, Brown sped up the work, noting, "getting out cotton as fast as we can."⁹⁸ When Pelham at Wagram listed 9,125 pounds of cotton in one day off of 20-25 acres, he bragged that the most the slaves had picked in a day was

⁹⁴Shugart Plantation Journal, August 2, 3, 1839; Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., September 16, 1857.

⁹⁵Brown Diary, September 10, 24, 1853.

⁹⁶Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., September 16, 1857.

⁹⁷H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, July 25, 1859, subseries 1.3, folder 311, Ballard Papers; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, August 22, 1859 (quotation), folder 313, *ibid.*

⁹⁸Brown Diary, October 13, November 9, 1852.

over 12,000 pounds. A couple of years later, slaves at Wagram averaged 195 pounds in a day's picking according to one count.⁹⁹ Joseph Badgett claimed that his mother could pick four hundred pounds of cotton in a day. (This number may have been inflated, or might reflect later twentieth-century harvests when cotton plants yielded even more fiber.) James Bertrand related that men were expected to pick 300 pounds per day, women 200. Charles Dortch remembered 150 pounds per day as an average, but noted that three or four hundred was not unheard of.¹⁰⁰

Women were crucial to the picking effort, especially when men were needed at other tasks. Brown moved the men from picking to clearing new land in December, but kept the women picking well into January 1853. In fact, at Brown's, women were the last to stop picking in early 1853, and first to start picking the new crop in August 1853.¹⁰¹ Wagram's overseer felt the need to show that he would only pull women from picking when absolutely necessary when he wrote: "I set Sarah to spinning a little of the wool here to knit me some socks as I could not get any fit to wear she has been picking cotton."¹⁰² The diary of Maggie Walker Benton of Elmwood in Chicot County provides an additional glimpse into the role of gender in the picking routine. Benton listed the names of slave men and women on a chart that tracked their pounds of cotton picked per day over the course of thirty work days. In the 29 days that Lithia worked (she was sick one day) she picked 6,752 pounds of cotton, averaging nearly 233 pounds each day. Lithia's numbers were actually a higher total and daily average than Bill, who picked the

⁹⁹Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., October 26, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 261, Ballard Papers; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, August 22, 1859, folder 313, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 93, 95, 185.

¹⁰¹Brown Diary, October 13, November 6, 1852, January 14, 25, August 30, 1853.

¹⁰²Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, December 5, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 264, Ballard Papers.

most cotton of all the slave men listed in the record. Bill picked cotton 28 days out of the 30. He harvested 6,204 pounds total, and picked, on average, 221.5 pounds per work day. This may have been due to Bill's being set to other tasks during a couple of the cotton picking days, because his most productive cotton picking days yielded upwards of 330 pounds, while the least he picked in one day was 140—less than half of what he was capable of. Much of the cotton picking work on that farm must have been shifted to women while men were needed elsewhere on the plantation.¹⁰³

Arkansas weather could still be quite hot and dry in the early fall. Picking progress was slowed when cotton plants dried. In picking season 1853, John Brown decided that it had gotten too hot for him to supervise, but slaves kept working on through the heat, though probably less energetically, in the heat without a supervisor. "I do not stay with the hands now but see them every day once or twice and direct," Brown noted, "The sun is too hot to keep in it constantly picking cotton."¹⁰⁴ When it did rain picking progress slowed. During 1857 rains, slaves at Bozeman's split rails, sewed turnips, cut sugar cane, and fixed fences. Further south at Wagram, women worked at odd jobs while the men got slats, made rails, and got timber for boards in the rain.¹⁰⁵

The weather cooled as picking season wore on, but slaves' resistance heated up, probably because picking season was such a labor-intensive part of the crop year. The slaves on Brown's place significantly slowed the pace of the 1852 harvest. Brown left the plantation in early fall 1852, and slaves took advantage of his decision not to employ an

¹⁰³Maggie E. Walker Diary, Stebbins Supplement, Small Manuscripts Collection, folder 6, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock.

¹⁰⁴Brown Diary, September 3, 12, 1853.

¹⁰⁵Newberry, "Clark County Plantation Journal," 408; Jno. B. Pelham to Ballard, October 23, 1857.

overseer while he was gone.¹⁰⁶ After another trip in January, when all of his cotton still had not yet been picked and baled, he remarked, “The negroes as I expected had not done much . . . we must try to be the more energetic hereafter.”¹⁰⁷ On January 12, Brown complained, “We are not done ginning yet and have only sent off to Camden 15 bales of cotton.” Because of the delay, that year Brown did not finish ginning his own crop until February 24, and finally finished harvesting cotton purchased from a neighbor’s field on March 12.¹⁰⁸

Slaves ran away more often in picking season. The Shugart slaves gave plenty of grief during the harvest of 1839. Runaways including Nat, Henry, Elijah, and Ginnis. Susan (who was taken to the Shugart plantation from New Orleans four months earlier) had been whipped by Shugart (who did not record why) at the same time that Ginnis and Elijah ran away. A fugitive from another farm stopped by the Shugart’s and stole a horse.¹⁰⁹ Slaves’ picking season resistance hit whites at the precise time in which they hoped to reap the rewards of mastery. The slaves at the Hilliard plantation frustrated that season for whites in 1849, causing Miriam Hilliard to sullenly record in October: “Gloomy prospect, short crop, cotton opening slowly; five negroes in the woods.”¹¹⁰

Slaves engaged in more than truancy and work slowdowns, however, when they hit a tipping point during the cotton harvest. On farms that were being built while they operated, slaves might refuse the extra strain on their labor. Slaves pushed back so strongly against the demands of Wagram’s overseer, John Pelham, in picking season

¹⁰⁶Brown Diary, August 20, October 14, 1852.

¹⁰⁷Brown Diary, January 10, 1853.

¹⁰⁸Brown Diary, January 12, February 24, March 12, 1853.

¹⁰⁹Shugart Plantation Journal, August 25, September 2, 17, October 1, 1839.

¹¹⁰Hilliard Diary, October 11, 1849.

1857 that he was fired by Ballard, who believed he was too easily manipulated. The strain created by the demands of picking and the improvements of the place lay at the center of the incident. The slave quarters, corn crib, and other outbuildings were still under construction, and Pelham had pledged, “I shall do all I can in building and picking.” For example, he had planned for the field hands to have the crib and stables built before picking time but was unsuccessful and then tried to get all of that work at once out of the slaves in order to prove his productivity to the plantation owner. But the slaves resisted these demands.¹¹¹

Slaves’ defiance at Wagram included (and may have been stirred up by) a group of carpenters who had been sent from Ballard’s other holdings to lend their skills to the building of the plantation. George Turner, John Rutherford (and possibly Henry, though he seems to have been a more permanent part of the work force) came to Wagram at the end of summer or early fall, 1857.¹¹² The carpenters, knowing their value, had the upper hand at Wagram. These men did not waste opportunities to remind the overseer that they were only at Wagram temporarily (when he planned to issue them clothes, they responded that their clothes were made where they usually work), milked any sickness, and set a slow pace of work on their projects. They became sick almost immediately after arrival, which the overseer assumed was due to the men not having “been acclimated,” and took advantage of the chance to get out of work or to do lighter work. As soon as

¹¹¹Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, September 16, 1857; Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., October 26, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 261, Ballard Papers; Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., November 25, 1857, folder 263, *ibid.* At the same time that the slaves at Wagram were pushing back against Pelham, the slaves at another plantation of Ballard’s were “trying hard to get rid of” the overseer there because he made them work harder than they had in the last several years. Samuel Boyd to Dear Col., December 8, 1857, folder 264, *ibid.*

¹¹²Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, October 13, 1857, folder 260, *ibid.*

they were put to a full work load, the men would take sick. About John and George, Pelham said, “Neither of them can do much nor do they like to do what they can.”¹¹³

Henry reached Ballard with his side of the story. Pelham defended himself, saying Henry had told a “double damned lie”:

I suppose Henry did not tell you he was more than a month making the door & window frames & part of the shutters. I found as soon as he was put in the sun he was laid up a part of every day or two with a chill, therefore I put him to work under shelter as I wrote you. Frequently when I would stop to see his work and he had done nothing, his chill or fever had just gone off as he has lied to you no doubt he frequently lied to me for sometimes I would catch him with the fever or chill and sometimes not. I know they have no good will for me and will tell any thing they please.¹¹⁴

Other Wagram slaves pushed back during that harvest as well. They likely resented the expectation that they keep up with the picking as the cotton opened and to pick as clean as possible, while meeting the added demand of creating fences, cutting and hauling wood, and other tasks to assist the construction. When slaves on more established places would have been balancing picking with other routine work to maintain or expand farms, the slaves at this frontier plantation harvested the crop while undertaking several large projects. Slaves took advantage of Pelham’s inability to oversee all these projects and the harvest at the same time. The absentee master grew impatient with the slow progress of the cotton picking, complaining that the overseer had not driven the slaves hard enough, and had been too reluctant to whip them. Pelham recognized that some resistance was to be expected, and later explained that the Wagram slaves “would have

¹¹³Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., September 16, October 13, 1857.

¹¹⁴Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., December 13, 1857.

played off on another as much as they did on me while carrying on all the different kinds of work,” but resolved to drive them harder in an attempt to keep his job.¹¹⁵

Thus, bondspeople at Wagram came under closer supervision and harder driving as the mission to pick and build pressed on with an increasingly desperate overseer. The carpenters were whipped and made to make up work on Sundays. As for the field workers, the overseer pledged, “I will get more out of them if it is to be had,” and forced a faster picking pace.¹¹⁶ Men and women also came under closer scrutiny for the quality of their picking, and were whipped frequently according to the overseer’s letters, which include “It requires some strap to get cotton that is pure,” and “Henry requires strapping occasionally and gets it so do those who do not pick as they should.” Slaves resented the new pace and freer lash. Bill had enough, and ran away in December. By then, it was clear that the Wagram slaves’ resistance had succeeded and Pelham would not be returning as overseer at Wagram.¹¹⁷

Harvest tensions could escalate into violence. Nathan, a field hand on R. A. Brunson’s plantation in Hempstead County, rebelled against first-time overseer James Martin during picking season in October 1853. Infuriated by the slaves’ resistance, Martin went to town that morning to drink and complain about the insubordination of the Brunson slaves, who were known as “a hard set.” In fact, a neighbor claimed that an overseer on that place would be justified in asking for a higher salary for that very reason. Martin declared that “after this if I ever do oversee again I will make the negroes obey

¹¹⁵Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., September 16, 20, 1857; Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., November 15, 25, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 263, Ballard Papers; Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., December 5, 1857, folder 264, *ibid*.

¹¹⁶Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, October 23, 26, 30, November 25, 1857.

¹¹⁷Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, November 2, 13, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 262, Ballard Papers; Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, December 18, 1857, folder 265, *ibid*.

me or I will kill them” and set off to the Brunson place to make an example out of someone. He started to correct Nathan, demanding he remove his shirt for a whipping. For his part, Nathan declared he had “given his shirt” to the last overseer and would not do it again. Martin, who was armed with a whip and a pistol, repeated his demand and added a threat, to which Nathan replied, “Shoot and be damned!” Hands still full of cotton, Nathan charged, stopped only by three shots from Martin’s pistol. He died a few days later.¹¹⁸

While autumn fields of cotton meant sore backs, swollen fingers, and hot tempers, roads and rivers carried the harvest southeast to market. Slaves began ginning cotton and pressing it into 400-pound bales before all of it was picked. Certain slaves, often children, might be designated to run the gin. Emma Moore remembered sitting at the gin as a small girl, for the purpose of periodically tapping the mule that powered it. On riverside plantations, slaves piled bales on the banks to await pickup by steamboats.¹¹⁹ The bales were sent off in waves as soon as enough were ready to make a trip to Vicksburg or New Orleans. Slave men often drove the team hauling the fruits of their labor to the nearest town or river port, like Thom for the John Brown plantation and Mart of Bozeman’s. These short trips may have been welcome escapes from picking.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸*Brunson v. Martin* (1856), series 1, box 19, folder 307, pp. 13-19, Arkansas Supreme Court Briefs and Records, University of Arkansas at Little Rock/Pulaski County Law Library Archives.

¹¹⁹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 13, 15; Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 402, 409; DeBlack, “A Garden in the Wilderness,” 96.

¹²⁰Brown Diary, November 12, 18, 1852, October 3, 6, 7, 17, November 4, 1853; Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 403.

While tensions associated with the scramble to get the cotton out as fast as possible raged on, Arkansas slaves harvested corn, too.¹²¹ When it rained, slaves might move from picking cotton to pulling corn instead. Or women might gather corn while men worked on fences or buildings. The completion of the corn harvest could take on a feeling of celebration as slaves gathered to husk the corn. Hannah Jameson described such a gathering as she remembered in southwest Arkansas, with a song that hinted at the need for secrecy: “After the corn was all husked and all the white folks was gone to bed they danced the rabbit dance and sing like this:

Early one morning, on my Massa’s farm
Cut that pigeon wing, Lizy Jane
I heard dem chickens a-givin the alarm
Shake yo feet, Miss Lizy Jane
Shake yo feet, Niggers, It’ll soon be day,
Skoot along lively, Miss Lizy Jane
Massa ketch us dancin’, there’ll be ---- to pay,
We got taters to dig and hoe dat corn,
Hit dat duffle-shuffle, Lizy Jane
You’d better be a-humpin, coz it’ll soon be morn,
Shake dat balmoral, Lizy Jane.”¹²²

Columbus Williams said that while such festive corn huskings were known to Georgia and Mississippi, they were not allowed on “mean” Ben Heard’s place in Union County, Arkansas. Similarly, while other types of seasonal celebrations were recalled by Pate (or Pete) Newton, corn huskings were unknown to him in Johnson County. Louis Davis of Pulaski County said that the work of shucking during the day was accompanied by singing, but did not become a party at night (or perhaps they took place without his knowledge as a youngster). Williams’, Newton’s, and Davis’s testimony, paired with the

¹²¹Brown Diary, September 1-2, 1853; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, October 25, 31, 1859, folder 317; Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 408; Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, October 16, November 13, 27, 1857.

¹²²Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 165.

lyrics of Jameson's song, suggest that corn husking celebrations in Arkansas often had to be held in secret, if at all.¹²³

Like corn, pork was a staple of Arkansas slaves' diets, and like corn, slaves "harvested" pork toward the end of the year (or early January, if necessary). One slaughter could produce thousands of pounds of pork.¹²⁴ Harriet Daniel described the slaves' work:

On the day before great loads of wood and several of rock were hauled to the slaughter pen, out some distance behind the Negro cabins. At four o'clock in the morning the horn, a large pink lined conc shell about the size of a calf's head, was blown by Mr. Scott and all the Negro men rolled out of bed to set fire to the previously laid heaps and to fill the vats with water from a nearby branch. These vats were made up of two pine logs about six feet long, with the side of each one sawed off. These were put in frames and wedged together, the seams having been chinked with cotton. Rocks were put in the fire of pine knots and when red hot were thrown into the vats, thus heating the water for scalding. . . . Amid songs and mirth, the work of removing the hair from the slain hogs was begun and soon they were hanging in rows on long elevated poles.

Slaves were cheered by the prospect of pig tail snacks, and the chance to acquire "a piece of liver to cook for breakfast, or a maw to cook for dinner."¹²⁵

More highly anticipated on some farms and plantations than an abundance of fresh meat, though, was a short break for Christmas. It was common for slaves to get Christmas off. Horace Ford noted in 1848, "Today is Christmas the Negroes are all on tiptoe. The first salute is for Christmas gifts." Slaves at John Brown's plantation got five

¹²³Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 376, 434; WPA Early Settlers' Personal History Interviews, Pate Newton interview, University of Arkansas Libraries, Special Collections, libinfo.uark.edu/SpecialCollections/wpa.

¹²⁴DeBlack, "A Garden in the Wilderness," 114; Ford Diary, December 23-24, 1848; Newberry, "Clark County Plantation Journal," 409.

¹²⁵Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 69 (quotations); Pate Newton, Early Settler Interview.

days off for Christmas. Brown explained: “It is a human as well as wise regulation of society to allow them a few days as a Jubilee, and they enjoy it. All are brushing up, putting on their best rigging, and with boisterous joy hailing the approach of the Holy days.” Slaves at Brown’s also enjoyed this time without his “particular oversight.”¹²⁶ Cindy Kinsey remembered Christmas celebrations including a large fire outside near the quarters, around which slaves danced. The master and mistress presented red stockings or shoes to women and men, and “hot toddies” to older slaves. Molly Finley said that Christmas included a large chicken dinner picnic cooked in washpots. Not all slaves enjoyed a celebration, though. Louis Davis of Pulaski County said of Christmas, “We knowed when it came, and that was all.”¹²⁷

The holidays meant more to slaves than feasts and rests, though. While whites understood the ritual gift-giving and dinners of the season as solidifying their positions as paternalists, slaves *expected* to enjoy the fruits of their labor and reward for their hard work at this time of the year. Further, and more importantly, slaves’ focus at the close of the year was not on whites at all, but on their *own* leisure, family, and enjoyment of seasonal treats. The celebrations provided opportunities for slaves to knit their social ties. This was true for Charlie McClendon’s mother, who enjoyed an extra special holiday when he was born on Christmas Day at William E. Johnson’s place in Jefferson County. To the west, John W. used his Christmas holiday to visit his wife Rose on another plantation.¹²⁸ While seasonal holidays allowed slaves like Charlie’s mother, and John and

¹²⁶Ford Diary, December 25, 1848; Brown Diary, December 25, 1853; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 48; H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, December 30, 1858, subseries 1.3, folder 296, Ballard Papers.

¹²⁷Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 330, 24, 434.

¹²⁸Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 206; Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 34.

Rose to take time to build their relationships, a fortunate handful had the chance to choose to work for wages. Some of the men at Brown's took him up on the opportunity work over the holidays making and hauling rails, each making as much as \$2.37 for this extra work. They converted a seasonal rest into their own material gain, and may have either used the money to buy some things they wanted, or things their families needed. Either way, slaves' spent their energies during the holidays on their own goals—whether social or material—as best they could.¹²⁹

Whether it was accomplished by the time Christmas festivities began or if it lingered until February, the year did not really end for many slaves across Arkansas until the cotton crop was finished. When Henry Shugart noted in his journal on a Saturday, “finished picking cotton and I am not sorry,” his opinion was likely shared by all the slaves on the place, who began clearing the stalks for the next crop the following Monday. The fibers of the Mastadon breed of cotton stayed on the plant into January or even February. Thus, crop years might overlap, with some slaves picking while others readied fields for the next crop. For example, slaves at Michael Bozeman's farm in Clark County did not finish picking the 1856 crop until early February 1857.¹³⁰

While the shifting seasons of clearing, plowing, planting, cultivating, laying by, and harvesting repeated in Arkansas's fields, the work of those who labored within white households maintained the space and material that sustained white slaveholding households on the periphery. Although their work was not literally to clear the forests and build plantation homes, domestics constructed much of what white mastery meant. For

¹²⁹Brown Diary, December 25-30, 1853.

¹³⁰Shugart Plantation Journal, December 21, 23, 1839; Kaye, *Joining Places*, 99; Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 403.

whites who lived on their plantations, clean floors, hot fires, full tables, pampered guests, and all of the finishing touches and pretty details that occupied domestic workers' waking hours propped up whites' sense of mastery—be it over grand cotton estates or corn and cattle operations—even if they were usually looking out from isolated log houses carved out of the Arkansas backwoods. This process was heavily gendered because it was usually white women who ruled the homes that black women worked. The experience in Arkansas was no exception to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's succinct explanation: "The privileged roles and identities of slaveholding women depended upon the oppression of slave women, and the slave women knew it."¹³¹

On plantations large enough for such a division of labor, most domestic workers were women, and may have inherited that work. At the Bullock's Sylvan Home plantation in Dallas County, Moriah was the cook (assisted by her daughter Polly), Aunt Clay weaved, Emily and Leah worked as maids, and Lisa was assigned as nurse to one of the white children, Harriet. (But men, often older, did domestic work, too. "Uncle Tony" Wadd did small jobs around the house in Arkansas County, while Edmund worked in and around the Brown home at Camden.) Although Anthony Kaye explains that domestic service was often "a family trust," where slaves passed down their domestic skills and responsibilities to their children and nieces, many recently-settled plantations of Arkansas

¹³¹Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 35. The slaveholding yeoman household as a political unit in the antebellum South is analyzed in Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

had not been settled long enough to create the “Gordian knot” of generational family domestic labor relationships that Kaye finds in some places around Natchez.¹³²

Bondspeople in domestic service worked hard under very close watch. House work encompassed cooking, sewing, weaving, cleaning, washing clothes, keeping fires, caring for the white children, and more. In homes with fewer slaves, all fell to one or two women who worked in the home. Laura Shelton’s mother and grandmother both worked in the house. Her mother performed chores like churning and watching children, while her grandmother prepared the food for all on the plantation. Domestic work did not necessarily mean strictly indoor work. Harriet McFarlin Payne recalled that work distinguished as separate from field work did involve tasks outdoors around the “barn, orchard, milk house, and things like that.”¹³³ These duties brought domestic slaves close to whites’ lives and bodies. Harriet Daniel, the planter’s daughter at Sylvan Home recalled “we children had never been required to wash our own faces,” but that slave women and girls were assigned to do it for them.¹³⁴ Rob in Chicot County was entrusted with protecting the white mistress Miriam Hilliard when her husband was out of town overnight. She slept with a knife under her pillow and set Rob out as “sentinel.”¹³⁵ Slaves who had been in the family a long time were carriers of information, whether they liked it or not. Moriah the cook was the one who related much of what Harriet Daniel knew

¹³²Kaye, *Joining Places*, 85 (quotation), 87, 89 (second quotation); Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 33-35; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 31; John Brown Diary, February 7, 1854.

¹³³Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 27; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 366, 30, 215, 165.

¹³⁴Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 22, 86, 95, 108, 185, 359, 362, 259, 289, 246-247, 124; Bolsterli, *A Remembrance of Eden*, 41, 49.

¹³⁵Hilliard Diary, undated entry, page two of typed transcription.

about her own deceased mother.¹³⁶ Because their job sites were almost constantly under the noses of masters and mistresses, domestic slaves could come under punishment often, or even lose their place. Richard, the personal bodyservant of John P. Walworth, fell out of favor and was sent to the fields in March 1849, to be replaced by Charles. It is not known whether Richard and Charles preferred house or field.¹³⁷

Not only were domestic workers close to the bodies and business of whites, but found themselves placed squarely in the middle of white domestic politics. While slaves in the fields periodically tested new overseers, those in the house spent their lives navigating the demands and quirks of a growing white family until sold or gifted to another. It must have been excruciating for house slaves at Sylvan when the widowed master, whose temper flared more commonly after his wife died, decided to shop around for a new wife—“on the carpet,” as the slaves whispered to each other. He brought in a girl the same age as one of his daughters and expected the house servants to make sure “everything was done to please these two girls.” Keeping a party atmosphere for the young girls was a lot of work, and sometimes with little notice, meaning that “All day there was a great stir of baking and cleaning going on in the house.”¹³⁸ Domestic workers at the Hilliard place came under increased pressure after the mistress returned from a trip to New Orleans where she experienced opulent dinners and observed beautiful homes at the homes of family and friends. Domestic workers paid the price for her desire to compete with her sister-in-law when the visit was returned. We can imagine how she projected her insecurities on the slaves when Hilliard confided her in her diary, “I am on the rack all

¹³⁶Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 39-40.

¹³⁷Ford Diary, March 24, 1849.

¹³⁸Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 43-44.

the time for fear my ‘table d hote’ will not be prepared and served to please her.” When visitors from New Orleans finally arrived, Hilliard resolved to “put best foot foremost.” The slaves were badgered into cooking as luscious of feasts as could be mustered on the Arkansas frontier, and were made to spruce up the Hilliard home after the mistress found it wanting. She wrote, “Three servants scrubbing & dusting all day-and after all, nothing a whit nicer looking.” The Hilliard house slaves—and doubtless countless others held in cotton frontier households—paid in sweat for their mistress’s quest to impress white visitors.¹³⁹

But slaves played whites off each other within households to their advantage when they could. Discord in the Rose household of Chicot County was directly related to Mary, Williams Rose’s domestic servant, taking advantage of his northern-born wife, Nancy. Nancy eventually filed for divorce, claiming, in addition to other insults, that William encouraged the slaves to disobey her, making life at the plantation unbearable. It seems that Mary had been in charge of the Rose household, on a small plantation keeping around twenty slaves, ever since William moved there in 1839. By the time Nancy arrived in 1841, Mary had been running the Rose home how she pleased for long enough to resent intrusion. Mary easily benefitted from Nancy’s inexperience in mastery, and had noticed William’s scorn for his new wife. Mary routinely ignored Nancy’s orders, knowing that William would not enforce them. A witness claimed that Nancy showed bruises on her arm inflicted not by her husband (which surely would have gone further to strengthen Nancy’s case) but by Mary. She had instilled such fear in Nancy that she sometimes refused to eat Mary’s cooking, in case the food was poisoned. Mary worked

¹³⁹Hilliard Diary, March 29 (first quotation), April 3 (second quotation), April 12 (third quotation), 1850.

so diligently and made herself so trustworthy in the eyes of William, that she gained more respect and autonomy than his wife, who experienced frequent headaches and took plenty of naps. William saw his wife as a “lazy trifling white woman,” as opposed to a hard-working black woman like Mary. Thus, Mary was able to successfully place herself in charge of the Rose household and defend her position by establishing supremacy over the new mistress of the house.¹⁴⁰

As significant a role domestics played in the experience of Arkansas slaves, for many there existed no clear distinction between house and field work. Only the largest plantations could afford to relegate certain women strictly to domestic work, meaning that most slave women in Arkansas who did domestic work did it in addition to field work. This is where the seasonal changes in the crop routine made its impact on domestic work life. While domestic work in January would have been similar to what they had to do in June, for example, domestics were not entirely insulated from the seasonal rhythm. Molly Finley’s mother “was a nurse and house woman and field woman if she was needed.” So was Minnie Stewart’s mother, who sewed for the mistress in the house, but could also be found in the field. Mollie Barber said of her mother, “seem lak she done ‘bout ever’thing.” Betty Brown explained that there was only one slave family on the Nutt farm in Greene County. Thus, her mother cooked, weaved, tanned leather, made moccasins, and trapped and hunted game.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰*Rose v. Rose* (1849), 9 Ark. 508, Transcript and Record, 3, 11, 16, 43-45, 48, 56, 63, 69, UALR Bowen School of Law/Pulaski County Law Library Archives, Little Rock.

¹⁴¹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 23 (first quotation), 166-167, 20, 260 (second quotation), 128-129.

Women on large operations also juggled field and house work. When John Brown's daughter married, he planned to wait until the crop was finished before sending Martha and her child Sally, to wait on her. Until then, Nancy was taken from the field to help in the Brown home.¹⁴² Women were often assigned to spinning in the cold months after cotton was in and before new crops were to be planted. When the time was right, they were moved back into the fields to make room for the new crop.¹⁴³ In preparation for a biannual distribution of clothing, overseers might set women to sewing in the spring while other slaves plowed, as one overseer explained:

The sewing is far behind. Sarah has made three garments per day ever since I came up. I find she will need help and my womens work is up so I shall start Caroline to help sew tomorrow and I think it likely I had better start two others. I am in the habit of giving out summer clothes 1st Sunday of April and winter clothes 1st Sunday Oct. or Novr. I can now spare three or four women very well to help.¹⁴⁴

At Wagram sewing was primarily Sarah's job, but other women were assigned to help her again for a few weeks in April, in order to get the winter clothes ready before work in the field picked up again. The overseer explained, "When the crop gets ready for work there will be no time to help her and attend to other work."¹⁴⁵

While the cotton and corn routine ordered the years and months for slave farmers and pioneers in Arkansas, weekly routines punctuated the seasons. Saturdays were usually work days, but sometimes bondspeople would be allowed Saturday evenings off, or might only work half that day. On Saturdays at noon, the cradles of slaves' babies at

¹⁴²Brown Diary, May 5, 9, 1854.

¹⁴³Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 22; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 23, 166-167, 20, 260, 128-129; Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, December 5, 1857, subseries 1.3, folder 264, Ballard Papers; Brown Diary, February 5-7, 26, March 1, 1853.

¹⁴⁴Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, March 22, 1857.

¹⁴⁵Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, April 20, 1857.

the Bullock plantation were returned to their mothers' cabins until Monday morning. (Because the babies spent so much time away from their family's cabin, the cradles were kept in another woman's cabin for the week.)¹⁴⁶ After a long Saturday of plowing and hauling rails and wood in February 1839, the Shugart slaves attended a dance held at Mr. Sutton's old place.¹⁴⁷ Charley Ross said that slaves on his place in Arkadelphia could get passes to go to dances on Saturdays. Louis Davis explained, "Saturday was the only night we took for frolicing," and that Saturday night was prime time for sneaking out to see friends. Louis Young said he had had no experience with Saturday night parties (possibly being too young for the secret ones) until the slaves were sold and taken to Texas, where Saturday nights came with dancing and singing, something "us never heard of sich befo."¹⁴⁸ Rose at the Bullock plantation looked forward to Saturday evening because every other week her husband John came to visit from the Bozeman plantation.¹⁴⁹ Some slaves attended religious meetings on Saturday evenings. John Bates said that the slaves there used to go to preaching on Saturday nights "if we wasn't in de grass"—meaning if the cotton was scraped and hoed clean of weeds—until Uncle Ben was caught preaching freedom out of the Bible, then that was not allowed anymore. Saturday could also be the time to distribute rations (although some places did that on Sundays). Hannah Jameson said, "If it didn't last—do the best you could to Saturday agin," stressing that not all slaves were allowed to tend to gardens to supplement their diets.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 59-60.

¹⁴⁷Shugart Plantation Journal, February 16, 1839.

¹⁴⁸Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 60, 165, 433, 298.

¹⁴⁹Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 34.

¹⁵⁰Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 353, 318, 376, 164-165.

While Saturdays might be days of rest, Sundays were more likely to be reserved free from work. The day of religious rest and restoration was also quite literally a day of rest for weary bodies. But although Arkansas law stated that slaves could not be compelled to labor on the Sabbath, they often were.¹⁵¹ As seen above with the carpenters at Wagram, slaves who fell behind on the tasks demanded of them might be made to make up that work on Sundays. On a farm with only nine slaves in Phillips County, Louis Young said the slaves did not experience Sundays off.¹⁵² Lucretia Alexander remembered that slaves hired to other whites had to work until noon on Sundays in her neighborhood in Chicot County, then they would go to church. One man, “old man Bill Rose” kept the slaves right up until the last minute, so they were forced to attend church dirty from work. Slaves’ own household chores might keep them busy on Sundays, if there was no time to complete them during the week. James Speed noticed that slaves had to cut wood for their fires and wash their clothes on Sundays on one Arkansas plantation, because whites allowed them no other time for those tasks.¹⁵³ Harriet McFarlin Payne remembered “washday,” when a few women would spend the entire day scrubbing clothes to a clean white, possibly gathering the water from a nearby spring. On the Cockrill plantation in Jefferson County, this chore had to be done every Sunday evening. Hannah Jameson describes the task as taking place well into Sunday nights, by the light of a pine torch, if need be, because the washing “had to come out clean by Monday

¹⁵¹Gould, *Digest of the Statutes of Arkansas*, 373-374.

¹⁵²Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 297.

¹⁵³Holding hired slaves to the last minute sounds like something that the temperamental William Rose of the contentious Chicot County divorce case might do, but there is no way to know for sure if it is the same man. Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 413; James Speed testimony, p. 33.

morning.”¹⁵⁴ Having killed fifty-three hogs the day before, slaves worked at salting the meat on a Christmas Eve Sunday on the Walworths’ Southfield plantation in 1848. Other Sunday tasks at Walworth’s included catching and breaking horses and mules, chopping wood, or hauling cotton seed.¹⁵⁵ But while not universally protected, Sundays were the only days that slaves seem to have at least routinely been allowed time off and could enjoy leisure time with those they cared about. Molly Finley said that slave families shared one meal together after work each day during the week, but three together on Sundays. Louis Davis recounted the Sabbath as a youngster: “Sunday, we didn’t have to do nothing. We visited around in the quarters, cracked walnuts and ate them, lolled under the shade trees in the summertime.”¹⁵⁶

But the religious significance of the Lord’s Day created meaning that lasted all week, even after work resumed and relaxation ended. Some slaves were required to attend Sunday services, especially if the master was a preacher. The Bozeman slaves attended Sunday services and even seem to have taken part in a protracted meeting that relieved them of Saturday work the weekend before picking commenced in 1857.¹⁵⁷ One Sunday per month, if road conditions permitted, slaves at Sylvan were preached to on the plantation by an Irish Presbyterian minister named Alexander Beattie.¹⁵⁸ Whites’ sermons to slaves usually were meant to create obedient workers for the next six days and the entire crop year. Molly Finley recalled, “The white preacher would say, ‘You may get to the kitchen of heaben if you obey your master, if you don’t steal, if you tell no stories,

¹⁵⁴Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 165.

¹⁵⁵Ford Diary, December 24, 1848, January 14, February 11, March 18, 1849.

¹⁵⁶Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 24, 48, 434.

¹⁵⁷Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 60; Newberry, “Clark County Plantation Journal,” 408. Slaves’ faith communities are explored in greater detail in the next chapter.

¹⁵⁸Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 42-43.

etc.” Whites pledged that diligent and honest work as a slave on earth, then, could be translated into a reward of freedom in heaven.¹⁵⁹

But slaves created their own religious meaning out of Sunday services. Sundays hosted sustaining prayers and services for many slaves. The Trulock slaves had experienced a religious revival while in Georgia and created their own habit of holding weekly services for themselves. They became so sick and had worked so hard since moving to Arkansas, however, that their weekly religious meetings faded away for a time. In March 1846, though, after a great deal of the plantation had been cleared and the whites’ house finished, health and better spirits renewed strongly enough that the Trulock slaves again took up their church services, gathering to hear preaching at the plantation’s chapel every other Sunday.¹⁶⁰ Sunday’s sanctity gave way to Monday’s monotony, though, and slaves’ hard work began again. Whatever Christian kindness masters might have professed on Sunday did not change their labor demands come Monday. Recalling this weekly routine, George Kye scoffed, “Old Master was baptized almost every Sunday and cussed us all out on Monday.”¹⁶¹

Slaves’ daily work routines could vary greatly across the southern periphery, but carried the same themes of place and productivity. Whites expected slaves’ to be at the right places at the right times, performing the right tasks with due attention throughout the day. At sunrise, Arkansas’s slaves set out for the fields, kitchens, mills, roads, rivers, and workshops across the state. Sometimes family members went their separate ways for the day, while some stayed together. Daylight often initiated the work day, but work

¹⁵⁹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 24.

¹⁶⁰Malloy, ““The Health of Our Family,”” 77-78, 98.

¹⁶¹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 67.

could easily begin before the sun's rays appeared. On plantations, the overseer usually blew a whistle or horn to summon slaves to work.¹⁶² Columbus Williams remembered the morning signal: "When that horn blows, you better git out of that house, 'cause the overseer is comin' down the line, and he ain't comin' with nothin' in his hand." Competitive managers, or those fearful of disappointing their employers might call up slaves to work extra early. Noticing Reuben's success as overseer of the Trulock plantation, one neighbor declared that Reuben blew his horn so early in the morning that he was "gaining two days in every week."¹⁶³ Inside the Bullock home, domestics were required to begin the day with morning prayers led by the master. Some slaves started their work day with their own secret prayer, however, probably asking for very different things than master Bullock prayed for in his house. Minnie Johnson Stewart's mother told her how slaves in Howard County would drop to their knees in prayer at daybreak, so afraid of being caught by the overseer that they would "be watching for him with one eye and looking for God with the other."¹⁶⁴

Slave children experienced rough mornings as they were often separated from their parents during the day. Peter Brown recalled waking up to the sound of brutal whippings at the Woodlawn plantation owned by the Hunts in Phillips County: "I heard that going on morning after morning."¹⁶⁵ Dinah Perry's mother had already left for the fields every day by the time she woke every morning. Mandy Tucker explained, "I didn't know nothin' bout my mother and father cause it was night when they went to work and

¹⁶²Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 22.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, 376; Reuben [Blackwell] to Bronson Burton Beardsley, April 2, 1852, quoted in Malloy, "'The Health of Our Family,'" 98.

¹⁶⁴Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 37; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 167.

¹⁶⁵Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 262.

night when they come in.” Harriett Payne experienced a similar scenario on the Chaney place in Arkansas County: “We wouldn’t see our mammy and daddy from early in the morning till night when their work was done.” At the Bullock plantation, slave children were dropped off at Rose’s cabin each morning for the day. Their mothers, wanting to allow them to sleep as long as possible, might send them with their breakfast in a tin bucket for later. George Kye remembered spending so much time in a cabin with the rest of the plantation children that he did not even recall living in a cabin with his mother, Jennie, on the place owned by Abraham Stover north of Van Buren.¹⁶⁶ Sometimes the work routine of bondwomen meant that white women would step in to care for their children. Charlie Norris’s mother told him that “Susan Murphy [the mistress] would suckle me when my mother was out workin’ and then my mother would suckle her daughter.” The slave children on the Horton farm stayed in a house together with Miss Mary the mistress during the day while their parents worked.¹⁶⁷

More often, older slave women were entrusted with the care of slave children during the day. These women might be expected to feed the children in time that their parents would not have to prepare a meal for them when they returned from work in the fields. At the Bullock’s Sylvan Home, slave children were set out a lunch in a large skillet of meat and peas, from which each child ate using a mussel shell for a spoon.¹⁶⁸ But what food was provided for the six or seven slave children on the Robinson farm in Calhoun County was not enough, in the eyes of Augustus Robinson’s grandmother, the

¹⁶⁶Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 210, 214, 30, 66-67; Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 59-60.

¹⁶⁷Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 368, 15.

¹⁶⁸Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 60.

cook. He recalled her hiding food in her apron, sneaking it to the cabin where the children were “locked up,” and slipping it through the cracks.¹⁶⁹

The daily separation was painful for parents. Becky, a bondwoman on the Bullock plantation would come to the mistress’s house at about 10:00 a.m. every morning to feed her baby, presumably stopping in for more feedings throughout the day, and must have hated to leave her child to go back to work.¹⁷⁰ James Speed, who was interviewed after the war about what he saw of slavery in the South, told of slave women in Arkansas having to walk a mile to the house to nurse their babies once during the day. On two occasions, he claimed, a mother came to the house to find her infant dead. “She was just ordered back to the field again, & did not attend the funeral at all. The child was just boxed up & buried.”¹⁷¹ While Speed’s testimony as an abolitionist seeking to expose the horrors of slavery probably caused him to exaggerate, the story, even in a milder form, expresses the helplessness and sorrow slave mothers must have felt having to leave their children in the care of others, especially if tragedy struck.

But as much as their labor encroached upon time they would have rather spent caring for their children, slave women in some circumstances actually worked under a routine that kept them close to their little ones. On the Jack Hall plantation along the Arkansas River in Jefferson County, Senia Rassberry and her sister both spent their days in the house where their mother was a cook. At least this arrangement would have meant close proximity to their mother, even if she was busy. In these situations, special bonding between mother and child could be possible despite the work load. For example, as a

¹⁶⁹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 67, 50 (quotation).

¹⁷⁰Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 61; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 24.

¹⁷¹James Speed testimony, p. 33.

child running errands and completing odd jobs around the house on the Newton farm in Clarksville, Johnson County, Eva Strayhorn remembered fondly the moments when she was able to help her mother cook. Although Ellen Briggs Thompson's mother had to work in the fields owned by the Mitchell family of Hempstead County, she was at least able to spend time with her grandmother, who worked in "the big house" cooking, making clothes, and caring for children. But domestics were expected to put the needs of the white family first.¹⁷² Thus, even as work made it more difficult for slave women to devote as much time for family as they would have liked, some were lucky enough to labor under arrangements that meant daily routines with closer contact with loved ones.

After their long work days, slaves came back together, but were probably often too tired to do much besides eat and sleep. Slaves returned to their quarters, where families sat down together for an evening meal from their weekly rations, perhaps "white salt meat," as described by Joe Ray. Women might leave the fields early to prepare evening meals for their families, while men might hunt in the evenings to supplement their family's diet. Other than rations, slaves consumed poke salad, wild lettuce and cabbage, wild onions, sassafrass tea, muscadines, possum grapes, pawpaws, deer, bear, wild hogs, opossum, raccoon, turkey, pigeons, prairie chickens, squirrel, and fish. After a long day of toil, slave women had the added burden of what Stephanie M. H. Camp has termed the "second shift"—evening time spent completing chores necessary for the slave family and cabin. While men might *choose* to hunt and fish at night to supplement their family's diet, women *always* had the "greater and more consistent" chores of cooking supper, cleaning the cabin, cleaning and mending clothes, and providing any of the extra

¹⁷²Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 211, 223, 170, 196.

articles such as linens, bonnets, or socks that their families might enjoy as a supplement to textiles provided by masters. Women might quilt some at night, Columbus Williams remembered, but it was difficult to get the material.¹⁷³ This “second shift,” though, could include some appropriation of the resources of the plantation, as weary families looked to have a bit of a special supper. Emma Moore said “at night some of the folks used to steal one of old massa’s shoats and cook it at night. I know when that pot was on the rack but you better not say nothin’ ‘bout it.”¹⁷⁴

But evenings could also be marked by work, even after the official work day ended. Often, after slaves finished their work in the field in the evenings, they set to additional tasks assigned them such as washing or spinning cloth. While slaves out in the quarters finished their evening tasks, up in the big house, slave children could be seen by the fireside with a task such as picking a shoe full of cotton while the white children took their lessons. Hannah Allen explained, “you did a lot before you got that shoe full of cotton when it was pressed down. This was almost enough to pad a quilt with.”¹⁷⁵ Slave women working in the house had to get their children and the white children ready for bed before they could rest for the night. In the Bullock home, domestic servants had to endure nightly prayers with the white family before they could get away to rest for the

¹⁷³Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 142, 24, 376; Adeline Blakely, Malinda Sutton, William Smith, Harry Parker, Pate Newton, Primus Moore, WPA Early Settlers Personal History Interviews; Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 32-33.

¹⁷⁴Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 15.

¹⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 185, 376, 24, 317-318, 164, 165, 353 (quotation).

night.¹⁷⁶ At Wagram, a young man named Jesse had the job of sitting up at the steamboat landing to keep a light when the overseer anticipated a delivery of supplies.¹⁷⁷

Although they could be accompanied by unwanted work, evenings also held special moments. Scott Bond, who was to become an influential black leader in Arkansas, remembered that his mother was a house worker, whose various duties kept her so busy that she was unable to spend much time caring for her son. But late at night, after his mother was finished with her work, she would check in on him. Evenings for Sweetie Ivery Wagoner's mother were special because at that time her mistress taught her to read and write. And just as secret prayer might begin the day, some slaves ended the day with prayer after dark. Ellen Briggs Thompson's grandmother used to take her with her when she crept away for prayer after nightfall. The cane and brush insulated her practice from whites' eyes and ears. In these ways, slaves claimed meaningful time in the late hours of the day for themselves.¹⁷⁸

While slaves might wind down with family or prayer, the cover of darkness also allowed for secret parties. Camp describes secret parties as another "invisible institution" that was "contingent upon opportunity, season, locale, the availability of resources, and the emotional climate within enslaved communities and between bondpeople and their owners." Such clandestine gatherings had to take place out away from the "big house" and the quarters, in nearby woods, making it unlikely that many domestic servants would take part.¹⁷⁹ Slaves might take some time in the evenings for their own prayer meetings. Lucretia Alexander explained that slaves were unsatisfied with the Sunday sermons they

¹⁷⁶Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 37, 41.

¹⁷⁷H. L. Berry to R. C. Ballard, January 15, 1859.

¹⁷⁸Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 73-74, 23, 169.

¹⁷⁹Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 193-194.

received from white preachers on Sundays, and so would pepper the weeknights with their own prayer meetings: “My father would have church in dwelling houses and they had to whisper. . . . Sometimes they would have church at his house. That would be when they would want a real meetin’ with some real preachin’. It would have to be durin’ the week nights. . . . They used to sing their songs in a whisper and pray in a whisper.”

Slaves had to be careful with their activities after dark, because even their night hours were watched. Overseer John Pelham would read or nap in the early evening then go on a round at about 10:00 or 11:00 at night to be sure that no slaves were out, and no outsiders were around.¹⁸⁰ But the close of the work day during the week was more often than not pretty ordinary. Used to the routine of hard work and short rest, weary slaves would settle down for the night, and “talk awhile before going to sleep” in their beds of corn shucks stuffed into a cotton bag. After all, only a handful of hours separated bondspeople from the next occupied day.¹⁸¹

Arkansas slaves lived and worked as farmers and pioneers whose lives and labors were embedded in the seasons of cotton and corn. They sowed resistance, tended to their children and families, cultivated social lives, and looked to harvest the gains of their religious faith. Slaves rapidly converted Arkansas’s forests into fields, transforming the uncultivated spaces of resistance into open spaces of contest over their labor. The cotton routine on the margins of the South was often quite harsh when slaves were made to construct farms and plantations while immediately turning a profit for whites. White slaveholding families set up the trappings of their domains through the work of domestic workers. On smaller operations and absentee-owned plantations, real divisions between

¹⁸⁰Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 413; Jno. B. Pelham to Dear Col., April 28, 1857.

¹⁸¹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 142.

domestic and field labor were nonexistent. Work weeks broken up by Saturday frolics and Sunday prayers—often held in the seams between fields—made up a crop year punctuated by peaks and valleys of labor and resistance. In terms of years, relatively few of these cycles were completed in the time that Arkansas existed as a slave state in the union.

Chapter Five: Confidants and “No ‘Counts”’: Slaves’ Social Circles on the Margins

From the Delta to the Ozarks, the enslaved people of Arkansas constructed their own communities of family, friends, and neighbors. Although whites successfully established supremacy on the cotton frontier, slaves created and protected their own sacred relationships while doing their best to navigate relations in their neighborhoods. Slaves’ social connections had to be constantly remade as the result of forced migration, interruptive sales, the relocation of slaveholders, and their own flight. The relatively low, scattered population and distance from many truly urban centers was a major factor in development of bonds between people. This chapter works from slaves’ inner circles of sociability outward, emphasizing slaves’ agency in choosing their associations, from confidants to no ‘counts. Although the historiography of slave society and family life now includes a wealth of information thanks to the last forty years of scholarship showing the meaningful ways in which slaves created and kept up ties with kin and friends, this is the most barren part of Arkansas’s slavery historiography. Thus, this chapter’s first purpose is to reclaim that history by arguing that slaves in Arkansas, as elsewhere, created their own meaningful social lives. Within that, however, it emphasizes slaves’ use of uncultivated space in their social lives and attends to the ways in which their sociability might differ on the periphery.

Orville Taylor did not address slave communities on their own terms in *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, but an abundance of scholarship on slaves’ sociability has been produced since, although without much focus on Arkansas. Taylor’s work presents slave life generally as a side note to the efforts and goals of whites. Taylor’s discussion of slave marriages is almost clinical, examining the legitimacy of those bonds in the eyes of whites, rather than what they meant to

slaves. His work does not examine friendships nor community-building among bondspeople. As part of ignoring the existence of slave communities, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas* neglects slave-white interaction, except to discuss slaves' criminal activity toward whites. Since Taylor wrote, scholars have identified a slave community—a subversive underground, in which families and social ties were built on slaves' own terms in order to cope with bondage and in opposition to the white world. Famously, John W. Blassingame used psychological analysis to describe the roles played in this world in *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*.

Blassingame was one of the first scholars to examine slave social activity for its own sake, and declared that “the slave family must be analyzed in order to understand slave life.” Eugene Genovese emphasized the role Christianity played in creating solidarity within a largely monolithic slave community in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Since, scholars like Ira Berlin, Steven Hahn, and Stephanie Camp have enriched the historiography with their emphasis on slaves' abilities to create their own meaningful social and family lives despite the horrors of bondage.¹

Yet, in this effort to demonstrate slave autonomy, historians have come to characterize the slave community as a separate parallel underworld. But a growing number of scholars are coming to recognize that the portion of slave sociability that existed apart from whites should be recognized and explored without regarding these relations as always entirely independent of those of whites. Further, historians are moving away from the assumption that slave communities were always united and monolithic. It is more realistic to acknowledge that intersecting communities of slave and free, white and black, were constructed in tandem. Anthony Kaye reflects current historiographical understandings when he explains, “Slave society cannot be

¹John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (Revised & Enlarged Edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 151; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*; Camp, *Closer to Freedom*.

explained in simple terms of autonomy and universal solidarity because it was not monolithic but plural, comprised not a single community but many neighborhoods.”² Kaye has furthered this more nuanced analysis in *Joining Places* by looking at antebellum communities as a whole unit, privileging slaves’ roles in that construction. By “exploring how slaves made and thought about social spaces,” Kaye describes a 360-degree view of the worlds in which slaves lived and operated.³ In a similar vein, Dylan C. Penningroth examines social ties and property ownership in *The Claims of Kinfolk*, finding that “There is no reason to think that the black community in the 1800s was any more harmonious than the white community, or any more ‘egalitarian’ than it is today. And yet our understandings of nineteenth-century black life are grounded in just such assumptions.”⁴ But the more holistic and nuanced views of slave communities and neighborhoods have not yet been integrated into the historiography of slavery in Arkansas.⁵ This chapter seeks to apply recent historiographical perspectives to Arkansas slavery, while pointing out where the story might be different on the southern periphery. Most of what has been said about slave families, communities, and neighborhoods holds true for Arkansas. However, some considerations should be made for the youth of slavery there, the very low and scattered

²Kaye, *Joining Places*, 10.

³*Ibid.*, 12. The prevalence of movement, as discussed in Chapter Three, complicates the neighborhood as a unit but does not remove its usefulness. As neighbors left and newcomers arrived, slaves had to rework their constructed communities. Informants of WPA interviews were young at the end of slavery and likely remembered neighborhoods that were more established than those their parents would have experienced through most of their lives, especially on the margins of the South.

⁴Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 8.

⁵In fact, no one has published work on the slave family and social life in Arkansas in several years. See Paul D. Lack and Carl Moneyhon’s work for some coverage of the topic. Lack, “Urban Slave Community in Little Rock,” 258-287; Moneyhon, “Slave Family in Arkansas,” 24-44.

population of Arkansas, the abundance of “unimproved” land and wild spaces, and the relative difficulty in engaging in a slaves’ economy.

Slaves’ community-building took place within their understandings of their places in neighborhoods made up of white and black, slave and free, in which they cultivated intimate circles of family and friends, from which radiated lesser intimacies with acquaintances and strangers. The core of slaves’ sociability was made up of their relationships with each other. Working outward from this carefully protected core, overlapping circles of interaction with friends, acquaintances, and strangers were created, including both black and white members. But at the center lay family—created by the love and commitments between men and women, between parents and children, between siblings and aunts, uncles and grandparents. Strong friendships and bonds forged in faith and fun made up lesser intimacies. While white supremacy complicated these interactions, some slaves could and did choose to incorporate some whites into these orbits of familiarity. “No ’counts”—or those whom slaves distrusted—and strangers occupied the outer limits of slave sociability.⁶

Relationships between couples formed the bedrock of slave family. While sexual activity did not always necessarily result in long-term intimacy, slaves were not generally blasé about sexual relationships, as historians used to posit. Orville Taylor concluded that “probably a majority, if not all, of Arkansas slaves were sexually promiscuous by white standards at some point in their lives, partly because of the general lack of social restraint to such practices, and partly because in relation to other members of the slave class there was, legally speaking, no such thing as promiscuity” (a belief that whites at the time used as an excuse to exploit black

⁶Genovese writes about “Brothers, Sisters, and No ‘Counts” in Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 622.

women).⁷ But slaves did have sexual norms of their own. Flirtatious “sweethearting” and romances often led to “taking up” and marriage as slaves’ courtship evolved into lasting relationships and families. Interviews with people who had experienced slavery as children provide rich remembrances of these lasting relationships. While topics like whipping and treatment by masters might have been touchy for many interviewees, informants were often eager to relate the love they witnessed between family members while growing up. Love between couples is central to those recollections. The persistence of slave relationships might even compel whites to acknowledge and even assist them. Joe Ray said his mother was sold to his father’s master so they could be together.⁸

Nuclear family units were difficult to sustain on the southern frontier, but couples made meaningful connections and worked to keep up their relationships. Historian Carl Moneyhon found that although two-parent family units were less common on the plantations of Arkansas than on operations in other southern states, slaves created two-parent families when possible. Moneyhon explains, “at least in part the instability of the slave family in Arkansas may have been aggravated by the developmental character of the state’s economy and society. With the plantation just beginning to take hold, the larger number of small slaveholdings created a situation where fewer co-residential nuclear families could exist.” But slaves made meaningful pairings the basis of family life when possible. Sixty percent of former slave children interviewed by the WPA remembered a family with both parents. In twenty percent of these cases, parents lived on different plantations. Certainly, in those situations, finding the time to

⁷Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, 195.

⁸Kaye, *Joining Places*, 55-61; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 142.

cultivate family in the midst of a tasking work routine was difficult, but worth the effort.⁹

Scholars have documented slaves' avoidance of marrying cousins as a factor in partner choice and a contributor to abroad marriage. This is not emphasized by those interviewed about slavery in Arkansas, nor is it noted by white owners or overseers there, probably because people enslaved in Arkansas were not likely to have had as much time to create extensive biological kinship networks across their neighborhoods. With their cousins spread throughout the South, it would not have been very difficult for most to find a partner who was unrelated. (It should be noted, though, that WPA interviewees usually experienced slavery as children and teens, so would not have had much reason to comment on the choosing of romantic partners under slavery.)¹⁰

As part of signaling their sacredness and solidifying the legitimacy of these unions for friends and neighbors, slave couples took part in a spectrum of marriage ceremonies often presided over by whites. Ellen Briggs Thompson described wedding feasts on the farm officiated by a preacher, "just like they do now."¹¹ Slaves might dress up in the best clothing they could acquire to mark the occasion. As seen in Chapter Four, these ceremonies commonly took place during certain turning points or down times in the crop routine. The seat of white power on plantations, the "big house," was often the site of these ceremonies. Using that space to consecrate slave unions brought black and white together in the act of legitimizing slave marriages in the eyes of the community, if not legally, and played to whites' desired mastery of not only slaves' bodies, but social lives as well. Whites who hosted wedding ceremonies in the

⁹Moneyhon, "Slave Family in Arkansas," 30, 32-33, 35-37, 41.

¹⁰Gutman, *Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 88-93; Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 35.

¹¹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 169.

big house might do so to improve their self-image as masters, and could hold a patronizing attitude toward slave marriages, which they knew had no legal standing. Slaves welcomed the public acknowledgement of their unions, but likely felt uneasy about masters' presumptions at the same time. Cora Scroggins's mother married inside the master's home in Batesville.¹² Harriet McFarlin Payne described wedding ceremonies at the "big house":

When two of de slaves wanted to get married, they'd dress up as nice as they could and go up to the big house and the master would marry them. They'd stand up before him and he'd read out of a book called the "discipline" . . . Then he'd say they were man and wife and tell them to live right and be honest and kind to each other. All the slaves would be there too, seeing the "wedden."¹³

In Payne's account, the importance of marking the occasion with a degree of formality brought by the couple's best clothing, readings from scripture, and the presence of other slaves at the "big house" is evident. Everyone's attention focused on the couple, and black and white publicly acknowledged their new life together. Wedding ceremonies, whether lavish or simple, involved the community in marking unions not recognized by law.¹⁴

Marriages were not always attended to with much pomp and circumstance. Lou Fergusson described a more subdued entrance into matrimony. If a man wanted to marry a woman, Fergusson recalled, he first asked her mother then the master. After being granted permission, the couple would then move in together and from then on were considered

¹²Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 173; Dressing "up as nice as they could" gave slaves' weddings a formal feel and could help slaves make their own statement in a ceremony heavily overseen by whites. Shane White and Graham J. White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 32-33.

¹³Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 31.

¹⁴Kaye, *Joining Places*, 73-74; Emily West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 31-32.

married.¹⁵ In the example offered by Fergusson, family played a major part in the couple's decision. Men who followed this custom of applying to their sweethearts' mothers acknowledged the important role of women and matriarchs in slave families. According to Columbus Williams' experience in Union County, although the decorum of a period of courting was important, ceremony was not. It was expected for men to court women, but to take the next step, the couple would "jus' go on and marry. . . . Sometimes you would take up with a woman and go on with her. . . . Far as I saw there was no ceremony at all." This is not to say that slaves like Williams held any less respect for marriage, but that like all people, slave couples might take part in relationships that were more serious than courting but less so than marriage, and not all slaves' marriages were marked with ceremony.¹⁶

Most slaves considered unions binding whether they were attended to with much ceremony or not. Referring to the years during and after the Civil War, Hueston Blackburn recalled: "The soldiers had to marry if they lived together with their wives. When the law first came out that old marriages were no good. I married under the new law."¹⁷ Significantly, Blackburn did not consider this second act as being legitimately married for the *first* time but as a *renewal* of the "old marriage" under the "new law." Similarly, Walker Frazier explained, "I had a wife that I had in slave times & we were married again."¹⁸ The conviction in the solidity of slave marriages was so ingrained that John Holt's explanation to a WPA interviewer caused him to note: "His mother and father were legally united at the time, but after the War was over, they

¹⁵Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 141.

¹⁶Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 377; Kaye, *Joining Places*, 55-61.

¹⁷Affidavit of Hueston Blackburn, Eliza Frazier Pension Application no. 220802, for service of Simon Frazier (54th USCT), Civil War and Later Pension Files, Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

¹⁸Affidavit of Walker Frazier, *ibid.*

were remarried, according to a new law then put into effect regarding ex-slaves.”¹⁹ That is exactly how the Holts and others understood their unions: The marriages had already been binding; post-slavery weddings were simply a matter of compliance with *new* rules.

Slave family life centered on nuclear families could have varying spatial backdrops, but the slave quarters were the most common spaces hosting those relationships. Logs or weatherboarding sheltered families while candles of animal fat or bees wax lit their evening quiet time together. Children lay under bedding mended by their mothers. Young couples set up house to mark their new lives together. Harriet McFarlin Payne remembered the quarters: “everything happened in that one room—birth, sickness, death, and everything.” At the Bullock plantation in Dallas County, slave quarters were placed 600 to 800 feet from the main house, with gardens adjoining each slave cabin. Rose, who cared for the children during the day, had a home to herself set off from the other slave quarters. On the absentee-owned Wagram plantation, slave families made due with a rougher setup, sheltered in rough shacks (without gardens) that they slowly replaced with sturdier structures. These spaces marked slave life off from whites’ and gave slave families privacy and their own space. Historian Stephanie Camp explains that the quarters were of two worlds—both stark symbols of the restrictions of slavery and spaces to nurture slaves’ relationships.²⁰

But families did not necessarily live on the same place. This meant that a central feature of their efforts to spend time together was their travel between farms and plantations. Passes allowed these visits to take place in the open, but meetings unauthorized by whites were executed under cover of darkness or via the woods. Abroad marriages—unions between slaves

¹⁹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 384.

²⁰*Joining Places*, 55-61; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 3 (quotation); Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 95-96; Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 93-94.

who lived on different farms—were common in areas with lower slave populations. John Holt’s parents in Washington County were such a couple. Adrianna Kerns’ mother often repeated the story of a man who would walk three to four miles to deliver food to his wife who lived on another farm, in order to make sure that she got enough to eat. Charley Ross remembered his family members creating a whole neighborhood, living with different branches of the same white family around Arkadelphia.²¹ Slaves did their best to keep up ties with beloved family members on other places, and probably did not make as much effort with those with whom they felt less kinship. Manuel lived with the Fultons outside of Little Rock part of the time, and part of the time with his wife, who was owned by E. Ames. He would go visit her often and stayed longer than his mistress appreciated. But in 1843, Ames either moved away or sold Manuel’s wife, leaving him inconsolable. His mistress wrote: “I hope he will stay at home as he has no wife.”²² For some, abroad marriages could be difficult to keep up. After a time, John W. of the Bozeman plantation eventually stopped visiting his wife, Rose, across the Ouachita River at the Bullock plantation, and married someone on the place where he lived, leaving her grieving like a “widow” for years.²³ A benefit of abroad marriages was that slaves could avoid witnessing much of whites’ domination over their spouses. That perk, however, probably did not lead as many people to avoid marrying on their own places as Blassingame asserts in *The Slave Community*, because couples’ highest priority was usually to be together as much as possible.²⁴

The inner circles of slaves’ intimate relationships began with family, but family ties became more complex when slaves were related to masters or other whites. Elisha Worthington

²¹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 384, 101, 59.

²²Lack, “Urban Slave Community,” 273-274 (quotation).

²³Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 34.

²⁴Blassingame, *Slave Community*, 164-165.

is probably the best known planter in Arkansas who had children with an enslaved woman he owned.²⁵ Augustus Robinson said his master in Calhoun County was also his father (which led to his exile at the hands of the angry mistress). Joseph Samuel Badgett's father was his mother's master's father. And Minnie Johnson Stewart said her mother Mahala McElroy's father was the master, Wiley McElroy. It was possible for some of these interracial blood ties to come with love and closeness, however complicated and inherently unequal they were. WPA interviewee Betty Brown's father was an Irishman named Millan, of Greene County in northeast Arkansas. Her mother used his last name, suggesting a meaningful relationship between the two.²⁶

Family, then, was at the heart of slave sociability, but friendships held an important place too. Slaves enjoyed companionship in work and resistance. The populations of Arkansas's plantation zones offered more chances to socialize, while smaller holdings meant there were fewer fellow slaves to befriend. But such bondspeople, especially men, may have had occasion to make friends when hired out to other farms. Ellen Briggs Thompson talked about slave women who might get to take a friend along when taken to white gatherings to cook. Steven Hahn explains how ties of friendship and family weaved together over generations in the older areas of the South: "On large plantations with deep generational roots, kinship could eventually have linked an individual slave to more than three-quarters of those resident." But on more recently settled portions of the southern periphery, bondspeople's social lives lacked those "deep generational roots" and were created from a much younger patchwork of alliances, connections, and kinship. As with visiting spouses, some slaves could secure passes to visit friends on

²⁵DeBlack, "Garden in the Wilderness," 135-136.

²⁶Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 50, 92, 167, 128.

weekends, while others may not be allowed to leave to socialize without sneaking away. The cover of uncultivated space assisted them in secret social visits.²⁷

Indeed, the natural world around slaves hosted the building of their relationships when they hunted, hid, and played in cane, creeks, and forests. Slaves crossed prairies and rivers to go visiting, shared with loved ones game brought down in the forests, and wore paths through the brush to provision their truant friends. Springs and creeks for example, stood as sites for leisure and work. Nelson Taylor Densen said, “My first clear memory is playing as a child on the banks of the river near whar I lived in Arkansas.” Molly Finley remembered how water brought slaves together near the Jones place in Arkansas County: “We lived around Hanniberry Creek. It was a pretty lake of water. . . . We fished and waded and washed. We got our water out of two springs further up. I used to tote one bucket on my head and one in each hand. You never see that no more.”²⁸

While slaves formed friendships with each other, they also made acquaintances with whites, from which cautious friendships could emerge.²⁹ While masters discouraged outright socialization between slaves and whites, many slaves rubbed elbows with whites while working. Masters and overseers might become uneasy about allowing white workers to come on the place to work alongside slaves. Faced with the prospect of hiring free labor for brick work at Wagram, overseer John Pelham expressed concern that the men might stir trouble.³⁰ Still, white outsiders came onto farms to do temporary skilled jobs like stonework or carpentry. But workforces could

²⁷James Speed testimony, p. 35; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 87, 384, 173, 186, 170-171; Kaye, *Joining Places*, 38, 153; Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 17-18.

²⁸Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 38 (first quotation), 23 (second quotation); Stewart, “If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian,” 144-146.

²⁹Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins*, 41-43; *Collins v. Woodruff*, 9 Ark., 463.

³⁰John B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, March 8, 1857, Ballard Papers.

be larger. In February 1859, thirty Irish workers came into the Chicot County plantation community to drain part of Grand Lake to free up more cotton acreage. It is not known how much interaction they may have had with slaves in the area.³¹ A 35-year-old man enslaved at John F. Graham's farm in Clark County was the only slave on the place, and lived there with four young white men working as "day laborers." Whites and slaves working in the fields together might avoid each other or strike up friendships. Charles Green Dortch and Adrianna Kerns were the grandchildren of a white man who worked on the Dortch plantation in Dallas County, named Wilson Rainey. He may have taken advantage of their grandmother, as he was described by their mother as "the meanest man in Dallas County," but the circumstances are not clear.³²

While slaves cultivated their close relationships between family, friends, and fellow laborers, they also forged casual ties in leisure time, often by way of surreptitious parties. Music and dance was central for many bondspeople. Gourd banjos and fiddles played music for dancing partygoers.³³ The clothing worn to gatherings was a way to mark the occasion, as young people sought to look their best at these events.³⁴ Slaves could travel on the roads when their gatherings were permitted by whites, but would need to hide and slip through the woods and brush for underground get-togethers. Slaves took the risk in order to have as much fun together as possible. Mary Ann Brooks recalled, "I was a mighty dancer when I was young—danced all night long. Paddyrollers run us home from dancing one night." But slave partying was not

³¹H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, February 18, 1859; K. Rayner to Rice Ballard, January 31, 1859, Ballard Papers.

³²U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Clark County, AR; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 94, 101 (quotation), 118.

³³Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 16, 24, 186.

³⁴Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 60.

always secret. Likely some gatherings were best kept under wraps while others could be held openly, meaning that slaves' social lives existed as a mix of underground and visible. Slaves looking to dance and sing in group celebration had to navigate whites around them in order to decide what could be done in the open and what gatherings were best kept secret. For example, Charley Ross's master—a preacher—did not allow dances on the place, but would allow slaves to attend dances elsewhere.³⁵ Katie Rowe remembered that the slaves on Isaac Jones's plantation were not given passes to go elsewhere, but people on other places were granted that opportunity.³⁶ Gatherings with alcohol could get rowdy, or even turn deadly. Drinking and carousing in Little Rock led to disaster in 1854 when a slave man killed another in a drunken fight.³⁷

Slaves did spend social time with whites, too, but not as often and probably with their guards up. The desire to relieve the work routine with a bit of music and booze could find them in common cause. Jeff Forret points out that “Much of the convivial drinking between slaves and poor whites took place in the predominantly masculine realm of southern grog shops.” But how many of these were available to slaves on the southern margins? Drinking and gambling between slaves and poor whites in Arkansas were probably more often enjoyed in private gatherings, and might have been sheltered by the woods.³⁸ Slaves might socialize with others on the outskirts of towns and farms, as did a Desha County slave man, unnamed in the record, who camped with a group of white men and Native Americans one night. The white men prevailed upon him to play a fiddle at a gathering with a group of Indians who were passing through. The men wanted to

³⁵Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 421 (quotation), 60.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 149.

³⁷*Arkansas Gazette*, October 20, 1854.

³⁸Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins*, 53 (quotation), 56-63.

“have a frolic with the Indian women.” But the Indians later became offended by the conduct of the white men and “drove them off,” while the slave man stayed. He slept in a tent with an Indian man, but the two got into a fight sometime in the night, resulting in the death of the native man.³⁹ Such outcomes probably confirmed to masters the evils of such get-togethers. Slaves socializing with whites without the permission of the master or overseer could bring punishment down on themselves and the whites. Laws against whites who might “harbor or entertain” slaves sought to manage that kind of interaction. In fact, crime involving whites and slaves are what generated many of the records available on slave-white socializations. For example, prosecutions of rape against slaves Frank and Dennis along with a white man named Jeduthan Day confirm socialization between black slave men with white men (the three men were together whether or not they committed the crime), and likely confirmed for whites their fears of the “evil” accompanying such ties.⁴⁰ The day after Christmas 1856, a group of slaves in Pulaski County, possibly over-stretching their holiday time off, spent some time with George Cadle. He was later charged by authorities with harboring slaves without permission.⁴¹

While parties and gatherings brought people together and strengthened already existing connections, slaves could gain social capital within their own circles with news. Some slaves were in special positions to get information and pass it along to friends and family. Skills and leadership in labor allowed some slaves, such as drivers, to be especially well informed about what was going on in the masters’ house and in the surrounding neighborhood. News and gossip were important ways slaves knit social relationships and helped each other. Often slaves with skills had the opportunity to travel throughout the neighborhood and could find out the most and

³⁹*Reed v. the State* (1855), 16 Ark. 505.

⁴⁰*Dennis (a slave) v. State* (1843), 5 Ark. 230.

⁴¹*State v. Cadle* (1858), 19 Ark. 613.

pass it along to other slaves. Because they were trained in jobs such as carriage drivers and blacksmiths, men had more access to news abroad than women. But women who were maids and cooks had greater opportunities to overhear useful information at home. “There wasn’t no way of getting news around, ‘sept by what is called the grapevine way. That is, one hands it on to the other. . . . When we made these visits, we exchanged all the news we heard,” explained Louis Davis. The “grapevine” was connected by roads and towns, but also stretched across wooded zones and reached up and down rivers. Trading news and gossip across the Arkansas wilderness was a central part of social life and resistance.⁴²

Like the ability to get and share news knit slaves together, so did skills and knowledge in healing and medicine as bondspeople cared for each other. Slaves tapped into the resources in the forests around them for that purpose. Slaves used their knowledge of their environment to identify and collect roots and leaves for treating sickness and wounds. One reason that slaves were able to take charge of much of their own care was that white doctors could be hard to get and were expensive, so masters and overseers normally avoided calling them in to treat slaves when possible. (Doctor visits usually cost planter Henry Shugart two dollars each in the 1840s, depending on the distance the doctor traveled and the amount of medication prescribed. Eight miles and two prescriptions might cost ten dollars.)⁴³ Molly Finley remembered, “If a doctor was had you know somebody was right low.” Slave knowledge of herbal teas and poultices was common for minor illness. But while many slaves knew basic natural remedies and wore charms to ward off disease, they deferred to those wealthiest in healing knowledge. Liza Smith remembered that if a slave on the place in Jefferson County took sick, “de master would send out

⁴²Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 317, 433, 95-96, 380; Hahn, *Nation under our Feet*, 40-42.

⁴³Shugart Plantation Papers, ledger.

for herbs and roots. Den one of de slaves who knew how to cook and mix ‘em up for medicine use would give de doses.” When slaves applied remedies and tonics from ingredients found in uncultivated spaces, they strengthened relationships.⁴⁴

Skills in folk medicine and midwifery were highly valued, so slaves with those skills, usually women, enjoyed special status, like the “old doctor woman” that Mandy Tucker remembered in the Cockrill plantation family. At the Bullock plantation, Aunt Rose was respected as an authority on medicine by black and white alike. She kept a trunk containing (at least) the following: turpentine, castor oil, Jerusalem oak, or Worm-seed syrup, and sulphur. She treated children’s cuts and sores, and other ailments that cropped up, but she also administered a preventative routine. Every so often she gathered the plantation’s children—one row of white children and one row of black children—and made her way down the lines administering sulphur and molasses to maintain the youngsters’ health. Historian Sharla Fett explains of such women, “It was they who administered food and medicines, eased pain, caught the babies, soothed and wrapped injuries, and prepared the bodies of the dead for burial.” Fett has shown how slaves’ concept of healing included a “relational vision of health” in which medicine, conjuring, superstition, personal relationships and community dynamics all figured. This connection is demonstrated in Cindy Kinsey’s description of her mother, Zola Young’s, power in Pulaski County. Young presided over slave funerals, wearing a veil that was beautiful, protective of evil spirits or ghosts, and imbued with healing power. Their master, Louis Stuart, knew to allow Young time off for such occasions, because only she could lead the slaves through such distressing times. Remembering her mother’s veil as an elderly woman, Kinsey groaned, “Wisht

⁴⁴Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 24, 290, 425.

I had me dat veil right now, mout hep cure dis remutizics in ma knee what ailin me so bad.”⁴⁵

The spiritual power of healing related to slaves’ natural remedies. Mart Stewart explains, “Some plants, indeed, saved both body and soul” by the reckoning of enslaved people.⁴⁶

But the relationship between medicinal skills and conjuring or root work, often feared by whites, could cause a power struggle concerning what methods defined appropriate practices and who could administer them. Many slaves freely used herbs and roots from the surrounding natural landscape to treat ailments, but others had to exercise caution. George Kye, who grew up on a farm north of Van Buren, said that the master prohibited herb medicine but “I wore a buckeye on my neck just the same.” And although slave women were often looked to as domestic healers, whites might try to exert a measure of control over their practice. O. W. Green’s grandmother had a knack for the art of medicine and moved between two worlds—the provenance of white men with training and the realm of folk medicine where a knowledge of natural remedies was key. Green described her methods and record as a healer: “Grandmother used herbs fo’ medicine—black snake root, sasparilla, blackberry briar roots—and nearly all de young ‘uns she fooled with she save from diarrhea” (a nineteenth-century killer). She worked under her master as a nurse for thirty-seven years and was trained in his methods of healing. But threatened by her knowledge, the master would whip her to scare her from sharing his medical secrets (He also burnt her hand for taking part in secret religious meetings).⁴⁷ Overseers and masters might altogether avoid consulting slaves with medical knowledge. Two women at Wagram plantation, Jane and Pauline, who suffered from prolapsed uteruses (an ailment that

⁴⁵Fett, *Working Cures*, 118, 6; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 143, 48, 214, 329, 334; Bolsterli, *Remembrances of Eden*, 60.

⁴⁶Stewart, “Slavery and African American Environmentalism,” 14.

⁴⁷Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 67, 48.

plagued them for years), were treated by the overseer according to a home health manual in 1857. It is possible that these women also received care from their fellow slaves in addition to whatever procedure the overseer subjected them to.⁴⁸

Sharing and growing their religious faith together could be just as important for slaves' sense of community as caring for each other when sick, and was also facilitated by the natural world around them. Slaves who were not allowed to worship, who could not worship in the style they preferred, or who simply sought to protect their relationship with the sacred secret used the woods and brush to house spiritual activity away from whites' gaze.⁴⁹ George Newton's mother, a house worker at the Newton plantation, recalled intimate practices of faith necessitated by white attempts to control religious activity: "Cullud folks could fiddle an' dance all dey please, but wa'n't 'lowed t' sing an' pray. She say sometimes dey go out an' turn de wash pot bottom up 'ards so de echo go under de pot an' de white folks couldn' hear de songs. I've heard mother tell dat a hundred times."⁵⁰ Carrying a pot to the edge of the farm or plantation and positioning it so as to stifle the sounds of prayer or song was only one trick. The slaves on the Mobley place in Bradley County could not hold religious services or "shout"—an emotional, boisterous expression of worship—and risked having their hands burnt as punishment for doing so. They sneaked away from the fields and yards into the woods to sing, pray, and shout under cover. The

⁴⁸Wagram Plantation Journal.

⁴⁹Orville Taylor wrote about slave religion from the standpoint of whites as missionaries to slaves, rather than what slaves might have thought and done, organizing his discussion around the actions of various denominations across the state. While Taylor does list slaves as church members and preachers, he closes his discussion with the following comment: "Left to their own devices, as most of them were, it is evident that the Negro slaves of Arkansas concerned themselves to a relatively small degree with matters of religion, at least in a formal or organized manner." Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, 187.

⁵⁰Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 16; Albert J. Raboteau broke ground in the history of slave religion in 1978. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: "The Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Updated Edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

style was only one reason for secrecy, though. Religious leaders like Ben, on Harry Hogan's farm in Pulaski County, preached a subversive interpretation of the Bible. The master overheard Bates' scriptural explanation of freedom and scoffed, "Hell no, you never will be free, you'll be a slave as long as you live." Bates was stripped of his Bible (with its "bad ideas") and slaves there were no longer allowed to attend church. Ben secured another Bible, however, but kept it hidden. Slaves also had strong ideas about Christian salvation that might clash with whites. The Bullock slaves were allowed to be "sprinkled" in baptism, but were forbidden by the master to undergo immersion. His daughter later recalled, "Some of them secretly lamented this. Aunt Rose said folks could not go to heaven unless they went under water." While Daniel did not report anyone being caught breaking this ban, it makes sense that the fiercest believers in immersion would have. Daniel did write that "when the war was over and our slaves were set free, all of them went down to the river and were immersed."⁵¹

Slave religion was not always invisible, however. Some practices were witnessed by whites, but were guarded in comparison to religious meetings in the woods. On slaves' church services, Ellen Briggs Thompson commented that "Whites didn't care what they had. They would help prepare for it." She added that slaves in her neighborhood might also get passes to attend church meetings nearby in Center Point and Arkadelphia, where they would listen to black preachers. But even when not exercised in complete secrecy, slaves made their worship their own whenever possible. William Wallace Andrews, owned by the Ashley family, ran the Wesley Chapel, a church for slaves in Little Rock that included Sunday School (which might have been a front for teaching fellow slaves to read and write). Whites may have kept a close eye on that church, but it existed for slaves, and slaves sustained it. And although the slaves who attended

⁵¹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 48, 13; Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 64-65.

the Wesley Chapel probably exercised caution in the content of their services, it was their own. (Some slaves must have attended the black Baptist church of Little Rock). Most of Arkansas's slaves would not have had access to such an institution, however. The slaves on Abraham Stover's place north of Van Buren might have been more typical. The master did not bar them from singing and praying on the place, and if they wanted to hear another sermon, they walked to the white church on Sundays to listen outside.⁵²

Harriet Daniel's memoir provides an excellent account of the yearly Manchester meeting, a two-week religious revival for African Americans. White preacher Andrew Hunter held this meeting in the church building used by black and white on usual Sunday services. He requested the presence of whites, although the targeted souls were black, perhaps to ease any misgivings or suspicions. While slaves filed into the building, whites took their places as chaperones and spectators in the back pews or listened through open windows while they sat in their carriages outside. The white observers took on a condescending attitude, as Daniel remembers, "I fear the white people who sat at the windows enjoyed the talk and actions of the colored people more than they did the preaching." The white preacher instructed churchgoers, but so did at least one black preacher from a neighboring plantation, named Lany Strong. The services included energetic "shouting" and emotional prayers from the "mourners bench," including Billy, respected as an "exhorter." Those who got too boisterous might be scolded by the preacher, who admonished one woman caught up in emotionally describing heaven's glory. According to Daniel's account, he scolded, "You stop jumping up there like a chicken with its head cut off!" Billy's niece became so ecstatic that two people had to hold her down, one of them ripping the dress she borrowed for the event. Appearance was important at the Manchester meeting. One

⁵²Lack, "Urban Slave Community," 269-270; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 67.

“bright” woman caught attention when she arrived at the meeting dressed in finery. Daniel remembered, “She did not seem to know many of the other colored people nor care to get acquainted with them.” Rose said that the woman came from a plantation “way down the river.” Each year’s meeting was an important seasonal gathering with suppers, fellowship, and religious renewal, but one year was especially meaningful to participants as it coincided with the passing of a comet or some kind of meteorological event. The fellowship that the Manchester meeting offered enslaved Christians was significant for their religious bonds in south Arkansas, but because whites organized and presided over it, they could not open up as they would in their own secret services.⁵³

Whites tried to monitor and limit slaves’ public religious activity. The social aspect of slaves’ religion, even in white-sanctioned services, threatened many. After a group of slaves had attended a religious meeting (possibly the Manchester meeting) in south Arkansas, they were stopped on the way home by a group of men on patrol, who beat them so badly that their owner sued for the loss of their labor. The patrols claimed the group had been “strolling about, from one house to another” on their way home.⁵⁴ When the legal battle escalated to the Arkansas Supreme Court, the justices reminded the court of “an implied license for them [slaves] to attend religious meetings, when conducted in an orderly manner, on Sunday.”⁵⁵ In the pews and on the roads, then, slaves were reminded that although they may be neither slave nor free but “one in Christ Jesus,” whites would fight the autonomy that communities of faith offered.⁵⁶

⁵³Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 62-64.

⁵⁴*Hervy v. Armstrong*, 15 Ark., 162-169.

⁵⁵*Hervy v. Armstrong*, 15 Ark., 166.

⁵⁶Galations 3:28, Holy Bible, King James Version.

Like worshipping in view and earshot of whites, slaves might practice religion *alongside* whites, giving the practice of their faith multiple layers, the public expression with white Christians, and the more protected community of faith that they built with each other through secret or private worship. Molly Finley described alternating black and white church services in Arkansas County, adding that sometimes black preachers could come to the place and preach to the slaves.⁵⁷ Some slaves routinely attended white churches, while others only did so occasionally.⁵⁸ But religious practice with whites was plagued by inequality. For example, the slaves of Arkadelphia preacher and lawyer Strotter Adams were *required* to attend church with him on Sundays. Even for slaves who may have wanted to attend, the demand that they do so added just one more layer to whites' imposition on slaves' lives and movement.⁵⁹ Inside the church building, whites used space to make sure that religious observances reinforced mastery. Sweetie Ivery Wagoner's mother had to go to the white church every Sunday with the white mistress, wife of Newt Tittsworth, and was made to sit "back over on one side of the seat rows."⁶⁰ Slaves and whites attended services together at the Presbyterian Church in Arkadelphia, but slaves were seated in the back of the sanctuary in elevated seating. (A partition in the middle of the pews also separated white men and women. It is not clear whether black men and women

⁵⁷Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 24.

⁵⁸Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 170; Newberry, "Clark County Plantation Journal," 408. Slaves may have been members of Cane Hill's early Presbyterian congregation. An entry of "Lucy Cox, colored" is found in the July 23, 1833 minutes. Cumberland Presbyterian Church Presbytery Records, Cane Hill, University of Arkansas Libraries Special Collections, Fayetteville.

⁵⁹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 60.

⁶⁰Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 23.

were similarly separated.) Thus, worship with whites in churches did not hold the meaning for slaves that their own meetings in the woods did.⁶¹

Like faith, property was a medium through which slaves interacted and forged bonds, or established hierarchies. Property ownership could be rooted in slaves' harvest of the fruits of the natural world around them. Dylan Penningroth shows the substantial part property played in relationships between slaves, sometimes strengthening their ties, and at other times fraying them. Penningroth argues that "property ownership and the special efforts it demanded from slaves put an unmistakable dynamism into their social ties."⁶² On the margins of the South, this property most often connected with what slaves extracted from the vast uncultivated spaces around them and with the ability of domestic workers to secure household goods. Betty Brown's mother, for example, hunted and trapped in the forests of northeast Arkansas, converting skins into the goods she wanted. When peddlers came around, she was ready with piles of raccoon, deer, beaver, and mink hides to trade for calico printed cloth and trinkets. Because they were the only slave family on the place, her activity did not come into competition with other slave family economies.⁶³ Sam Word's mother did no such hunting, but she acquired nice things like quilts, stored in a chest in her cabin, by way of her work in the house.⁶⁴ Women working in homes had greater access to some finer material things like textiles, such as when dresses were handed down. Rachel, who worked in the Bullock home, secured some quilt pieces from the planter's young daughter by promising not to report her misbehavior.⁶⁵

⁶¹Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 43.

⁶²Penningroth, *Claims of Kinfolk*, 6.

⁶³Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 129; Stewart, "Slavery and African American Environmentalism," 14.

⁶⁴Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 33, 34.

⁶⁵Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 72-73.

The acquisition and exchange of property very often involved slaves in dealings with whites. Dylan Penningroth points out that whites allowed and joined in slaves' extralegal economic activity. Slaves in the possession of contraband had to choose their friends wisely. Goods like alcohol, tobacco, and clothes linked slaves with whites in exchange. But access to the wrong things in the wrong place was dangerous. The possession of alcohol may have made for a deadly stunt on Isaac Jones' plantation in Hempstead County. Slaves there were able to get some liquor and left a half-drunk jug outside the black foreman (Sandy)'s cabin. When the overseer saw it, he became enraged and, according to the story, took Sandy out into the woods and beat him to death.⁶⁶ A slave man named Pleasant also had some friendly interaction with a poor white woman named Sophia Fulmer before he was accused of attempting to rape her. Because Sophia testified that the altercation began with Pleasant entering her home looking to score some liquor and tobacco, it seems that exchange in or sharing of those items might have been a regular part of their interaction. Whether or not their friendship/acquaintance had actually turned violent, the fact that they knew each other and that Pleasant felt comfortable coming into the home looking for those items suggests that they had traded or shared in the past.⁶⁷

But it was very difficult for bondpeople on the margins to get their hands on material things they wanted to have, relative to those in more populated, urban, or longer-settled areas, like the southeast or Natchez or Vicksburg. For Arkansas pioneers in the early days (and for many for the entire duration of the antebellum period), Donald McNeilly points out, "neighbors, general stores, and itinerant peddlers were nonexistent."⁶⁸ Because population centers were

⁶⁶Penningroth, *Claims of Kinfolk*, 6; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 147.

⁶⁷*Pleasant v. The State* (1853), 13 Ark. 363. A witness for the defense testified that Sophia had once served a slave woman at her table.

⁶⁸McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 127.

small, few, and far between, it was more difficult—though not impossible—for slaves on the fringes of the cotton frontier to take part in the market. Anthony Kaye and Anthony Gene Carey find much more market activity among slaves in the Natchez and Chattahoochee regions than the slave narratives and Southern Claims Commission records seem to suggest for most of Arkansas. Both locales studied by Kaye and Carey had higher population concentrations as well as larger percent slave populations than Arkansas overall in 1860.⁶⁹ For example, counterparts to the “slave gentry” of Virginia, a group of finely dressed slave men whose public demeanor infuriated some whites, were unknown on the cotton frontier.⁷⁰ References to the slaves’ economy are fairly scarce in the WPA slave narratives of Arkansas. As did many other states, Arkansas law prohibited slaves from buying commodities, especially alcohol, from whites without permission from their masters, or from other slaves under any circumstances. Masters might watch this activity closely. To test and see if passing boats would break the law against selling to slaves, Walworth sent a blacksmith with a dime to try to buy some whiskey. To Walworth’s relief, he was denied. The law also barred slaves from hiring out their own time. But total enforcement of that restriction would have been difficult, it seems to have been routinely ignored.⁷¹ The few relatively urban areas in Arkansas, such as Little Rock and Fayetteville, provided slaves, especially those with skills, more access to the market than in places dominated by plantation agriculture. Many slaves in Little Rock were able to use their skills to acquire fine

⁶⁹Kaye, *Joining Places*, 103-109, 114, 186, 221; Carey, *Sold Down the River*, 99-103, 43.

⁷⁰Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins*, 33.

⁷¹Gould, *Digest of the Statutes of Arkansas*, 1032, 1035, 1051-1052, 382, 1031; Ford Diary, December 15, 1848.

things to supplement their material life. However, only about 3.5 to 4 percent of Arkansas's slaves lived in towns.⁷²

Those in Arkansas's most urban region kept a relatively vibrant slaves' economy, and used those chances to strengthen their family and enjoy leisure time. For James Jackson, the opportunity came from willingness of the master and cultivating a reputation as a hard worker among other whites. Jackson swept some Little Rock stores in the morning, sending his master a portion of the earnings and keeping the rest. In fact, Jackson hired his own time in Little Rock for 25 years, allowing him to run a "confectionery establishment," "as fine a one as there was" in the town. Jackson's material success was a family affair. His wife and children kept the shop while he did the sweeping and other work around town. One person who hired him was James E. Gibson, a clerk at J. J. McAlmont's drug store. Jackson probably made at least 25 or 30 dollars a month more than what he paid his master. He was able to provide for his family and eventually purchase some livestock. The Jackson family used James's hard-working reputation in the community to secure chances for material gain, and produced and consumed those as a household, creating even greater status. This strategy served Jackson during the war as well, as will be seen in the next chapter.⁷³

For Joseph, owned by the Fultons of Little Rock, exchange in goods allowed him to enjoy leisure time and facilitated his social life. Joseph seems to have gotten as much alcohol as he cared to drink at the Anthony House hotel, perhaps from friends working there. On one occasion he drove the mistress and children out for a Sunday ride, but got too drunk (possibly

⁷²Lack, "Urban Slave Community," 263-266, 258; Matilda A. Harbison Claim, Southern Claims Commission, Claim #9868.

⁷³James Jackson, Southern Claims Commission, Claim #20344; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Pulaski County, AR.

with friends) to pick them up and drive them home. Joseph became so drunk so often that the family stopped using him as a driver. Perhaps tired of coming under so much scrutiny, Joseph supposedly “joined the temperance” for a time, at least. He later ran away and may never have returned.⁷⁴

Indeed, alcohol was one commodity that slaves seem to have been able to acquire fairly easily in towns, often via trade with poor whites. Alcohol loosened up slaves’ parties and gambling rings, and created social and economic ties. While the law prohibited it, sources reveal that plenty of whites engaged in that trade with slaves. In Pulaski County, fifteen men and women between 1848 and 1863 were charged with selling “ardent spirits” to slaves.⁷⁵ Slave access to commodities like alcohol became a source of contention in western Arkansas bordering Indian Territory just before and during the Civil War. In Crawford County, whites kept a closer eye on slaves’ handling of cash and liquor in the tense years before the war. They cracked down on a slave named John working in a grocery store/dram shop owned by William Powell, a white merchant from the north.⁷⁶ And they pressed charges against the seller when Charles, described as mulatto and owned by wealthy slaveholder Thomas Aldridge of Franklin County, bought two gallons of whiskey from a Crawford County man.⁷⁷

Whites pushed back against slaves’ market activities in Little Rock as well, becoming uncomfortable with the extent that Little Rock slaves were setting up households away from their masters’ residences. In 1856, Little Rock passed an ordinance prohibiting slaves to live in

⁷⁴Lack, “Urban Slave Community,” 273.

⁷⁵Pulaski County Indictment Records, 1848-1863, Books B-C, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock.

⁷⁶*Powell v. The State* (1860), 21 Ark. 509-511.

⁷⁷*Omey v. The State* (1861), 23 Ark. 281; U. S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Crawford County, AR.

separate households from masters and imposed a curfew. Penalties for allowing slaves to hire their own time increased as time passed.⁷⁸

While a lucky few slaves got work in whites' stores or otherwise enjoyed trade and property on their own in Arkansas's towns, most lived in the countryside and faced more difficulty. Some could perform extra work for money or hire out their extra time. R. C. Smith's father in Washington County was a stonemason and was allowed to hire out his own time and keep the money for himself. Slaves' activity in peddling their own farm goods seems to have been extremely rare in Arkansas, but may simply be unrecorded. While some people may have enjoyed arrangements like the slaves at Ed Lindsey's place in Pine Bluff, who could sell cotton that they grew in their own gardens, there does not seem to have existed anything like the slaves' market activity (selling eggs and other farm products) in Vicksburg and Natchez.⁷⁹ But slaves on the margins took advantage of what opportunities were available. When they were assigned to pick neighbors' cotton, John Brown's slaves might receive the offer to earn 50 cents per hundred pounds picked. At least once, Brown paid his slaves money for all cotton above 100 pounds picked (or more, if they were better pickers, and 100 was too easy to meet).⁸⁰ In these ways, a lucky few could gain some cash to buy things their family needed or alcohol to party with their friends, or even money to save for something bigger and better in the future.

But slaves might also simply take what they wanted from the farm or plantation. Cynthia Jones of Drew County explained, "I thought what was my white folks' things was mine too."⁸¹ And although Jones was speaking of her indignant reaction to Union soldiers' appropriation of

⁷⁸Lack, "An Urban Slave Community," 258-287.

⁷⁹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 353, 390, 199; Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 31.

⁸⁰Brown Diary, October 21, 25, 26, November 7, 14-18, 29, December 2, 5-9, 14, 1853.

⁸¹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 118.

the masters' belongings during the war, the sentiment held some truth beyond that context.

Slaves who took from the food stores or goods of the plantation may have simply reckoned that they created the wealth and so had a right to it, and tried not to get caught. Others may not have felt the need to rationalize at all, knowing full well that the world in which they lived was not fair, and that resourcefulness and risk could pay off. Snatching something from a tool shed or a chest of drawers could facilitate slaves' fun and sociability. Manuel, owned by the Fultons just outside of Little Rock, stole a bridle and saddle from his wife's master and lost them gambling.⁸² Stephen at one of Walworth's plantations stole shoats and sold them for clothes, but was caught and whipped for it. (It is not clear if the Walworth slaves were inadequately clothed or if Stephen wanted to resell the clothes to others, or if he simply desired new clothes.)⁸³ Thus, theft—if slaves even thought of it that way—could be a means for slaves to share a treat together, acquire clothes for an occasion, or have some fun at the card table on the old master's dime.

Clothing could be an important part of expression in slaves' social circles. Clothing was central to material comfort, but could infer status and allow slaves to express themselves to one another as well. While slaves routinely received the commonplace set of clothes twice a year, the acquisition of extra or nicer clothing was a source of excitement. One of Charley Ross's special childhood memories was of a white woman giving some shoes to the mistress, who then gave them to him. Similarly, Joe Ray praised the homespun cotton clothes of the time and remembered a special pair of red shoes the master gave him.⁸⁴ Hannah Allen recollected that slaves might be able to work on the weekend for themselves, the proceeds of which went to

⁸²Lack, "Urban Slave Community," 274.

⁸³Ford Diary, December 17.

⁸⁴Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 60, 67, 143.

purchase clothes and shoes.⁸⁵ Slaves wanted to keep their nicer clothes in good shape and look their best at occasions that they felt were important. They might wait to put shoes on until they were close to church, in order to spare them all the dust and mud from the walk. Or, they might change altogether into a nicer set of clothes as they neared their destination. Callie Washington recalled, “Our Sunday clothes was striped, in the prettiest colors you ever seed.” Slaves at the Manchester meeting put on their best clothes. The woman from “down river” had gotten noticed in her finery, to be sure, but so did other slaves choose to present their best outfits at important gatherings. When Jenny ripped Beck’s dress during the emotional Manchester service, she had ripped a dress borrowed especially for the occasion, angering her friend and starting a fight between them.⁸⁶

Property and trade connected and divided slaves in Arkansas, as they acquired, shared, traded, and disputed. Family ties were strengthened as the nuclear family household worked as the major unit of distribution and consumption of things.⁸⁷ Sharing game and the fruits of the land may have been more frequent forms of this interaction than accumulating stock, large items, or valuables on the edges of the cotton frontier. But although the slaves’ economy on the periphery paled in comparison to the older and more settled sections of the South, Steven Hahn points out that the differences would have been a matter of “degree rather than kind.” Earning, trading, and sharing would have remained meaningful to bondspeople—perhaps even more so.⁸⁸ The produce of the forest (like skins, or nuts) and items “stolen” from their masters’ farms seems to have been slaves’ primary source of items to trade or share, every once in a while a slave

⁸⁵Lankford, 353.

⁸⁶Ibid., 235, 416 (quotation); Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 64.

⁸⁷Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 26.

⁸⁸Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 25.

could earn a little money working extra. Alcohol and textiles seem to be the prime things that slaves in Arkansas were able to acquire for themselves. Circles in which slaves exchanged money, goods, skins, toasts, bets, and laughs were important aspects of slaves' society, made all the more precious by their rarity.⁸⁹

While many things brought slaves together—work, medicine, religion, play, and trade—it makes sense to point out that some slaves did not get to know each other and some did not get along. Like everyone else, slaves were discerning in who they forged relationships with. There were people who slaves simply did not know very well, even within their neighborhoods. In his seventies, Aaron Williams testified of Simon Frazier, “I knew him a little down in Bradley Co. where he lived about 6 miles from me. . . . I don’t know any thing about his having a woman down in Bradley Co.” In another interview, Williams said, “I just knew him when I saw him for 4 or 5 years before the war.”⁹⁰ Adolph McGee’s master was related to Simon Frazier’s master, but the two did not know each other until they met in Pine Bluff while enlisting in the Union army.⁹¹ Similarly, Wright Allen, who grew up three miles away from Frazier, saying, “we had

⁸⁹Slaves’ trade and acquisition could be an important component of their interactions with one another and with whites, but material things also played a role in the master-slave relationship that is worth mentioning here. Slaves at the Hilliard plantation displayed “curiously patterned” quilts when the mistress came around with her friends to walk the quarters. Miriam Hilliard also gave out treats and clothing when she left town in May 1850, such as “pickles, honey, preserves, groceries, baby clothes.” When the slaves lined up to see her off, she handed out slices of ham, biscuits, cakes, figs, and raisins. Some of these things, like clothes and groceries, may have been given to make sure slaves were adequately supplied for a time while the mistress was away, but this also seems to have been ritual gifting. Hilliard Diary, May 15 (quotation), May 19, 1850.

⁹⁰Affidavit of Aaron Williams, Eliza Frazier Pension Application no. 220802, for service of Simon Frazier (54th USCT), Civil War and Later Pension Files, Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁹¹Affidavit of Adolph McGee, *ibid.*

been raised together,” did not know all the Frazier slaves.⁹² The existence of these loose connections matter because they remind us that not all slaves in a given neighborhood had to be worked meaningfully into each other’s social circles for those circles to have meaning.

In addition to having neighbors they never quite got acquainted with, slaves often moved in and out of communities in the periphery of the South, causing them to meet complete strangers. Outsiders might be viewed with suspicion and could not necessarily count on friendship and assistance from slaves in whose neighborhood they arrived, whether they got there through sale or flight. Such incidents and divisions did not mean that slaves “broke ranks,” as Eugene Genovese supposed, but that they were acting as individuals. While they suffered common trials, bondspeople did not automatically feel loyalty or solidarity with strangers who were also enslaved. Walter Johnson describes an “ethic of solidarity that assured slaves they could expect support when they tried to escape” but qualifies that statement by explaining that solidarity “was less an achieved state than a continual terrified request: Can you help me? Do you know the way? Will you share what you have? Will you risk your life to save mine? Many were the individuals whose supplications were unsuccessful.” Constant implied and real requests for solidarity asked slaves to risk what they had built.⁹³ Thus, the distrust and necessity to protect themselves kept some slaves from forming bonds with others via assistance in resistance. For example, in 1857, the slaves at Wagram exposed one runaway—having already been promised “fees” for such information—but a couple of months later, when a seamstress had fled one of Ballard’s other plantations (in either northern Louisiana or western Mississippi), the new Wagram overseer believed that she could be harbored by the Wagram slaves, writing, “I will

⁹²Affadavit of Wright Allen, *ibid.*

⁹³Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 623; Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 214, 215.

double my diligence now and hope to meet with her if she is about. I am confident there is not one here too good to harbor her.”⁹⁴ Though it is not known whether these slaves actually did help the seamstress, the difference between the two scenarios is important. In the first instance, a stranger was quite literally “sold out” by the slaves at Wagram who would rather have cash than solidarity with the runaway, but, in the second, a woman who might have been known to slaves (who could easily have lived previously on the same place as the missing seamstress) were more apt to hide her. When slaves did identify with and assist each other, this was not due to a “web of paternalism” that “reinforced the provincial tendency to identify across class lines within a particular community” but slaves’ own evaluation of the value in befriending or assisting other slaves with whom they crossed paths.⁹⁵ The existence of distant acquaintances and strangers even within a neighborhood might seem like common sense, but pausing to examine that part of antebellum life reminds us that slave neighborhoods had to be made and remade. Trust and kindly feelings were not necessarily a given. Like everyone else, slaves picked and chose who they associated with and to what extent.

And, like everyone else’s, slaves’ relationships with each other were subject to conflict. Dortch claimed “There wasn’t any unfriendliness of the other slaves toward my father. . . . I don’t think he ever had any trouble with the slaves any more than he had with the white folks.”⁹⁶ This comment, meant to assure the interviewer that Dortch’s position did *not* stir up rivalries, seems to indicate that those kinds of tensions *were* a real possibility for others with skills or a privileged position. Tensions were more complicated than fault lines that might run between

⁹⁴Rich. T. Nicholson to R. C. Ballard, February 5, 1857; Jno. B. Pelham to Col. Ballard, April 28, 1857.

⁹⁵Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 625.

⁹⁶Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 95.

slaves based on their labor divisions. Close relationships where emotion ran high could be volatile. For example, a Union County slave man may have killed his wife with an axe in 1853.⁹⁷ Personal disputes and angry outbursts affected slave interactions, and sometimes slaves made enemies. Nat, of the Chicot County Hilliard plantation, was “attacked by four negroes and badly hurt.” The attackers do not seem to have been from the same place. Nat survived but the injuries inflicted on him by fellow slaves were serious. The mistress noted: “the outer part of the skull is broken, but the inner plate is uninjured.”⁹⁸ Things got even uglier at Wagram. It seems that George Mills was killed by other slaves there. The overseer overheard married couple Cole and Marinda arguing about the incident, including Marinda’s threats to tell what happened. The overseer then beat the rest of the information out of Cole. According to him, George Washington, Dick, and Miles killed George Mills and may have hid his body on the plantation.⁹⁹

Slaves clashed with whites in their neighborhoods, too. And while not all tensions directly related to masters or patrols, all slaves’ interactions with whites were imbued with the possibility of conflict due to their status as chattel. Slaves might be skeptical or disdainful of whites in their communities, and commonly measured whites by their wealth, labeling them “poor white trash” or as being of “quality.” Community dynamics and the maintenance of white supremacy could place slaves and poor whites at odds. One major source of interaction and

⁹⁷*Arkansas Gazette*, May 6, 1853.

⁹⁸Hilliard Diary, May 2 (first quotation), May 4 (second quotation).

⁹⁹H. L. Berry to Col. Ballard, January 15, 1859. After promising not to tell anyone and pleading with Ballard to come to the plantation, Berry’s letters become increasingly vague then fall silent on the matter, possibly at the urging of his employer.

tension between slaves and whites other than their masters were the slave patrols, as discussed in Chapter One, whose ranks were often filled with less affluent whites.¹⁰⁰

Slaves' clashes with whites in the community could result in angry outbursts against those they did not respect. This was true for neighbors in Lafayette County in southwestern Arkansas. Either the houses of Caroline Brown and William Madison Sims were quite close, or the Browns were occupying a home owned by or on Sims' property. Either way, the Brown children seem to have been a great annoyance to the neighboring slaves in 1854. Sarah, a slave of Sims' described as mulatto, was charged with "beat[ing], wound[ing], and ill treat[ing]" Mortica (Mordecai) Brown, Caroline Brown's son. It seems that the little boy was throwing things at Sarah, who got angry and supposedly threw a piece of kog wood used in the mill, and another board at the six year-old, before picking the child up and slamming him onto the ground near a shop between the houses.¹⁰¹ Brown also pressed charges against a slave named Bone, who was similarly annoyed by Brown's children. When William Sims and other white men left the premises, Bone chased the Brown children, cursing them and threatening to "whip them to death," according to Caroline. She claimed that when she asked what he was doing, Bone told her to "Go to hell, God damn you!" and declared that he was on his master's land and that "I don't care for you, none of your children, nor nobody else." According to the story, Bone continued to stalk around the house, brandishing a stick and cursing until Mr. Brown came home, at which time Bone returned to the Sims house. (In the attempt to try to get Sarah out of the 175-lash punishment, and Bone from his 300-lash sentence, the defenses did not deny that the

¹⁰⁰Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006)17, 28-33-34, 39, 52; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 96, 87.

¹⁰¹*Sarah v. The State*, series 1, box 66, docket no. 4686, pp. 19-10, Arkansas Supreme Court Briefs and Records, UALR/Pulaski County Law Library, Little Rock.

incidents took place, but argued that the responsibility for them lay not with the slaves, but with Sims as master.) Even if these stories were inflated by Caroline, both Sarah and Bone were clearly enraged by their white neighbors, and it is telling that they both felt confident enough to challenge Brown and her children.¹⁰² They saw the Brown family in the light described by Forret in disdain for whites who they deemed of “poor quality.” To Sarah and Bone, the Browns were “no ‘counts.’”

Connections between space, property, and community are evident in some incidents, as in Bone’s insistence that he could act as he pleased on his master’s land. In a more obvious example, Wagoola, owned by Sarah Ridge of Benton County, was accused of using his gun to shoot a neighbor’s mare that had been trampling the fence. (Ridge was also neighbor of Cephas Washburn, the well-known missionary to the Cherokees.)¹⁰³ Wagoola’s frustration with the horse had been brewing and was known to neighbors, as shown in testimony of the incident: “A few days before the mare was shot, a witness heard Wagoola tell the plaintiff, that he did not keep her away from the defendant’s plantation, he, Wagoola, would kill her.” Wagoola and two other slave men from Ridge’s place “frequently carried guns; that used by Wagoola, being a large rifle.”¹⁰⁴ Wagoola held a proprietary attitude over the land he worked and lived on to the extent that he openly challenged a white neighbor.

Slaves built their communities from the center working outward. They created and maintained bonds and interacted with others in the community, bringing varying levels of power and autonomy to their interactions and circles. Although slaves certainly identified with each

¹⁰²*Bone v. The State*, series 1, box 13, folder 228, pp. 21-22, *ibid*.

¹⁰³Sarah Ridge owned thirteen slaves in Benton County (a large holding for that area. *Ridge v. Featherston* (1854), 15 Ark. 160; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants)*, Benton County, AR.

¹⁰⁴*Ridge v. Featherston* (1854), 15 Ark. 160.

other, they were selective in who they trusted. The shifting sands of communities created by births, deaths, and movement meant that slaves were constantly in the process of making and remaking their communities in the creation of family, during worship, in the course of neighborly visits, in the exchange of food and goods, and in resistance. Arkansas's uncultivated spaces harbored a great deal of this construction—providing space for the faithful to “shout,” youngsters to dance, and couples to plan futures—away from the eyes and ears of whites. Some of slaves' social activity, such as marrying in the big house or attending camp meetings, took place within whites' domains. However, slaves reserved their own meanings for those interactions. While some slaves in towns were able to plug into the market, farm and forest played a more important role in Arkansas slaves' interactions with each other than did cash and trade. This was due to most slaves' distance from urban areas. Time spent praying in the brush or playing in the streams was easier to come by. Slaves' sociability in Arkansas was much more vibrant and complex than suggested by Taylor more than fifty years ago. The communities in which slaves lived were soon to experience upheaval with the coming of the war.

Chapter Six: “Stormy times for everybody”: Wartime Slavery

In only a few decades, the peculiar institution was established, protected, and destroyed in Arkansas. The secession crisis and the Civil War shook a region that had already been experiencing fast-paced change. The same generation that challenged the boundaries of slavery and mastery in Arkansas took part in its final contest. Slaves and whites alike knew what was at stake. Whites sought to preserve slavery as an institution in their state, households, and communities, while slaves worked toward freedom. The same themes that informed slave life—movement, labor, and community—continued to be important, but with greater risk and more promise. William Smith, who was born a slave in Ozan, Hempstead County, described the war years as “Stormy times for everybody.”¹ This chapter examines what slavery was like during wartime, stopping short of fully analyzing the process of emancipation in Arkansas. While slaves’ runaway activity and the effect of the proximity of the Union army on slavery in Arkansas are discussed, the specific goal of this chapter is to examine the experiences of those still enslaved as the war raged. Some slaves navigated the war under tight restrictions, while others were able to take advantage of wartime upheaval and undermine the institution in which they were held. The meaning of space changed during the war. Wild spaces where slaves used to go for respite were now brimming with soldiers and guerillas. On the other hand, some slaves achieved greater autonomy in public spaces.²

¹William Smith, Early Settlers Interview, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, libinfo.uark.edu/SpecialCollections/wpa/.

²I plan to discuss the process of emancipation in Arkansas in a future manuscript. Ryan Poe demonstrates that both slaves’ and officials’ actions influenced emancipation in southwest Arkansas in Ryan M. Poe, “The Contours of Emancipation: Freedom Comes to

The historiography of Civil War Arkansas is rich, but lacks much on the experiences of slaves. Carl Moneyhon's *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas: Persistence in the Midst of Ruin* includes discussion of the wartime condition of slaves in the course of surveying the effect of the war on the state, finding that the Civil War "caused changes in slavery, appearing to be on the verge of destroying it even behind Confederate lines."³ Surveys of the war, like Thomas DeBlack's *With Fire and Sword: Arkansas, 1861-1874*, advance our understanding of wartime Arkansas without specifically investigating the lives of slaves there during the war.⁴ *Civil War Arkansas, 1863*, by Mark Christ, mentions the effect of the Emancipation Proclamation and the flight of slaves to Union lines, but it is not in the scope of that study to investigate life among enslaved people as the battles raged that year. This chapter looks at the war years from the point of view of those still in bondage.⁵

White and black Arkansans interpreted the meaning of Abraham Lincoln's election in much the same way: that slavery's days were numbered. Although masters tried to limit slaves' information, or spin news to their own benefit, slaves knew enough

Southwest Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 70 (Summer 2011): 109-130. For a discussion of the self-emancipation argument and an overview of the historiography of emancipation, see James McPherson, "Who Freed the Slaves?" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 139 (March 1995): 1-10; Joseph P. Reidy, "Emancipation" in Lacy Ford ed., *A Companion to the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 277-298.

³Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 122. Further, Moneyhon has contributed to the literature on the transition from slavery to freedom with an article that details the labor of freedmen on federally-owned and operated cotton plantations. Carl H. Moneyhon, "The Federal Plantation Experiment in Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 53 (Summer 1994): 137-160.

⁴Thomas A. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword: Arkansas, 1861-1874* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003).

⁵Mark K. Christ, *Civil War Arkansas, 1863: The Battle for a State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010).

to craft their own understandings of the events leading up to the war, coming to the conclusion that Lincoln would use his army to free the slaves. Folk stories of Lincoln emerged as slaves sought to understand the man who they believed had taken up their cause. Adrianna Kerns recounted her mother's explanation of Lincoln's actions: "My mother used to say that Lincoln went through the South as a beggar and found out everything. When he got back, he told the North how slavery was ruining the nation."⁶ Bondspeople who looked to Lincoln with hope ran up against the interpretation of Arkansas whites, not because they disagreed with their assessment of Lincoln, but because they *also* saw him as an abolitionist. Whites, particularly from the Delta, warned that whites of all classes would suffer economic ruin from the destruction of slave property.⁷ Perhaps nothing expresses Arkansas's slaveholders' desire to protect slavery more clearly than an early message from Governor Henry M. Rector to the initial meeting of Arkansas's secession convention delegates:

An irrepressible conflict, says he [Lincoln], is going on between freedom and slavery. That institution is now upon its trial before you, and if we mean to defend and transmit it to our children, let us terminate this northern crusade, by forming a separate government, in which no conflict can ensue. . . . Does there exist inside the borders of Arkansas any diversity of sentiment, as to the religious or moral right of holding negro slaves? . . . God and his omnipotent wisdom, I believe created the cotton plant—the African slave—and the lower Mississippi Valley to clothe and feed the world, and a gallant race of men and women produced upon its soil to defend it, and execute that decree.⁸

⁶Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 65-66; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 102.

⁷Carl H. Moneyhon, "1861: 'The Die is Cast'" in Mark K. Christ, *Rugged and Sublime: The Civil War in Arkansas* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 3.

⁸Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 97; *Journal of Both Conventions of the State of Arkansas* (Little Rock: Johnson and Yerkes, State Printers, 1861), 41-49 (quotation); DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 24.

After taking a wait-and-see stance until the firing on Fort Sumter, a second convention in Arkansas voted to secede from the Union on May 6, 1861. Less than two months earlier, the vice president of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens, had articulated the basis of that government, declaring, “Its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition.”⁹ As the state delegation embraced secession, they drafted a new constitution, almost identical to the 1836 document, but with a few subtle yet important differences. The constitution placed Arkansas in the Confederate States of America and declared that “all *free white men*, where they form a social compact, are equal, and have certain and inherent inalienable rights”—a change from simply “all free men” in the 1836 version (italics added).¹⁰ Arkansas slaves lived in a state whose government was willing to send young men to die to preserve white supremacy and black slavery.

Slaves and whites alike understood the war’s threat to the institution in Arkansas. Slaves came under tighter restrictions as whites beefed up watches and patrols across the state. Whites of Chicot County became so apprehensive about a possible slave revolt that every township in the county organized guards, and the county put up \$20,000 to arm them. The Planters Township Guard drilled in an empty corn field on Saturdays with canes and sticks. Over the summer, however, the zeal of Chicot County home guards

⁹Alexander H. Stephens, “Cornerstone Address,” March 21, 1861, *Modern History Sourcebook*, Fordham University, www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1861stephens.asp (accessed July 1, 2014).

¹⁰*Journal of Both Conventions of the State of Arkansas*, 382.

waned, but whites fears never fully subsided.¹¹ White Camden residents aimed angry suspicion at “Dutch” merchants in their town, who they suspected might be sympathetic to the cause of abolition. In Searcy, a tanner accused of inciting slaves to rebellion was lynched, as were several slaves accused of cooperating with him. Other slaves were driven from the area.¹² Upon the passage of conscription exemptions for planters, John Eakin of the *Washington Telegraph* explained “Some one *must* be with the slaves” to keep them at home and disciplined, and make sure “They must be kept at work, and, by the products of their industry, support our armies.”¹³

While slaves already in Arkansas came under closer scrutiny at the advance of the war, the beginning of the conflict initiated a flood of forcibly migrated slaves into the state, as whites in the southeast and seaboard South feared the loss of their slave property. Some arrived early. Robert Houston, born in Buckingham County, Virginia, was taken to Memphis at the beginning of the war, with 40 or 50 other slaves, by a slave trader named A. M. Boyd, then sent with the others to work on Boyd’s plantation in Chicot County in early 1861. Mingo Scott, born in Hinds County, Mississippi, was also taken to Arkansas in 1861.¹⁴ Many slaves were making at least the second far move of their lives. Mary Estes Peters said her mother was sold from Missouri to Mississippi, then taken to

¹¹Don R. Simons, *In Their Words: A Chronology of the Civil War in Chicot County, Arkansas, and Adjacent Waters of the Mississippi River* (Sulphur, LA: Wise Publications, 1999), 13.

¹²Carl H. Moneyhon, “1861” in *Rugged and Sublime*, 18.

¹³Quoted in Carl H. Moneyhon, “Disloyalty and Class Consciousness in Southwestern Arkansas,” in Anne J. Bailey and Daniel E. Sutherland, *Civil War Arkansas: Beyond Battles and Leaders*, 124.

¹⁴Testimony of Robert Houston, Claim of Robert Houston, 21992, Approved Claims, Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 217, NARA; Testimony of Mingo Scott, *ibid*; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 17-18.

Arkansas during the war years.¹⁵ Slaves who were pushed to the southern margins during the war likely resented the journey *and* the destination, and may have come from much more settled zones of the South. Doc Quinn was struck by the ruggedness of the Red River Valley when he arrived with other slaves moved by Colonel Ogburn from Monroe County, Mississippi:

When we fust came here dis place, as well as de rest ob de Valey, wuz just a big canebrake—nothin’ lived in dere but bears, wolves, and varmints. Why de Mahster would habe to round up de livestock each afternoon, put dem in pens, and den put put out guards all night to keep de wolves and bears frum gettin’ em. De folks didn’t go gallivatin’ round nights like dey do now or de varmints would get them.¹⁶

While newcomers were being forced into the wilds of Arkansas, bondspople already there could be moved or hidden, even within their own neighborhoods, as whites tried to keep them out of freedom’s reach. Upon the approach of Federals, many slaveholders would take their slaves to the very places that they were normally exasperated to find them—the margins of cultivated spaces. When Union soldiers got too close, Solomon Lambert recalled, “Moster Lambert then hid the slaves in the bottoms. We carried provisions and they sent more ‘long. We stay two or three days or a week when they hear a regiment comin’ through. . . . We didn’t care if they hid us. We hear the guns. We didn’t wanter go down there.” The same cane, woods, and brush where truant slaves sought cover from masters and overseers became targets for whites looking to hide their own slaves. Whites who used to follow trails into the cane to catch slave hideouts

¹⁵Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 281.

¹⁶Doc Quinn, Folklore Subjects, Social Customs-Reminiscences of an Ex-Slave, *Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. 2, Part 6, p. 1-2, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*, Library of Congress, memory.loc.gov. Another version of Quinn’s testimony is found in Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 242-243.

now create such paths themselves as they provisioned slaves hiding in those spaces. As Lambert explained, slaves who complied with their concealment did so out of fear. Other African Americans spoiled masters' plans, though, when they told of the hidden whereabouts. Johnson Chapman of Columbia explained to William E Woodruff that the hidden slaves were "found invariably through bad faith of some of the Negroes."¹⁷

Knowing the danger of keeping slaves so near the tempting highway of the Mississippi River within easy access of Union soldiers, planters along the river often moved slaves to the interior of the state. Chicot planter Charles C. Stuart explained, "We have all moved our hands some distance from the River, but have no work of value to do." Seventeen of Stuart's slaves were hired in Little Rock jobs, but within eight months four had died and another was seriously ill. Maj. Reynolds recorded, "the plantations seem to be almost a waste, the slaves have nearly all been moved back, further in the country, & elsewhere." William E. Woodruff hired some of the relocated Chicot County slaves in 1862.¹⁸

A great many slaves took charge of their own movement to seek freedom with the federal army. As DeBlack explains, "black Arkansans along the route of the march were not inclined to wait for an official proclamation."¹⁹ Finding that Confederates had used

¹⁷Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 382, Ira Berlin et al., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, Series Volume II, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 660; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 248-249; Simons, *In Their Words*, 33. In addition to hiding themselves, some slaves were directed by masters to hide cotton in their homes and in the cane, to avoid its capture by Union forces.

¹⁸First quotation from William E. Woodruff papers, second quotation from David H. Reynolds Papers, Special Collections, University of Arkansas, both quoted in Simons, *In Their Words*, 35, 36; Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 115.

¹⁹DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 60.

slave labor to create physical obstacles in his path across Arkansas in spring and summer 1862, and that hundreds of African Americans descended on his army seeking freedom, Union general Samuel R. Curtis saw an opportunity to undermine the Confederate effort. Concerned that the slaves might be recaptured and used against him, and being interested in employing them for the Union cause, Curtis drew on the authority of earlier “Confiscation” acts. Issuing certificates of freedom to hundreds of the “contraband” fugitives, Curtis proclaimed permanent freedom for slaves who had been used against the Union.²⁰ Word spread among Arkansas’s slaves, and when Curtis’s army arrived at Helena, so did crowds of slaves who had been following the army. “Like a magnet,” one historian described the attraction of slaves to Curtis’s lines in search of freedom and protection.²¹ C. C. Washburn, commander of the Post of Helena, wrote that return to their homes was not an option for former slaves even if they wished it, and that to ask them to do so would have been unreasonable considering the dangers. This area of eastern Arkansas remained a draw for runaway slaves, and freedpeople’s settlements multiplied.²² Boston Blackwell described the journey from the Blackwell plantation to Pine Bluff in October 1863: “We made the stream for a long piece. Heerd the hounds a-howling, getting ready for to chase after us. Then we hide in dark woods. It was cold, frosty weather. Two days and two nights we traveled. That boy, he got so cold and

²⁰Ira Berlin et al, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, Series I, Volume I, *The Destruction of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 249-260.

²¹William L. Shea, “A Semi-Savage State,” in Bailey and Sutherland, *Civil War Arkansas*, 95.

²²Christ, *Civil War Arkansas, 1863*, 104; Berlin, *Freedom*, Series I, Volume II, 665.

hungry, he want to fall out by the way, but I drug him on. When we gets to the Yankee camp all our troubles was over.”²³

Soon, the president who many slaves already trusted issued his famous order. Lincoln’s initial Emancipation Proclamation, announced in September 1862, warned that areas still in rebellion at the beginning of the next year would see their slave population officially free in the eyes of the U.S. government. The measure was meant to weaken the Confederacy and strengthen the moral high ground of the Union. On January 1, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, and slaves continued to flock to the Union Army in droves, achieving the freedom they longed for. Fred Russell, working at the U.S. General Hospital in Fayetteville, wrote home in 1863 that Union advances had freed hundreds of slaves.²⁴

Bondspeople had everything to gain, then, if they were willing to risk flight. And so, working their way through the woods and hollows, slaves relied on old traces through cane and brush, this time not with a plan to lay out for a few days, but to freedom forever. Deputy. H. Walke, commander of the USS Carondelet reported in July 1862, “very numerous, standing under the banks of the river and making signals to us at night, asking to be taken away.”²⁵ Slaves fled masters all over the state. Nearly 100 people fled Lycurgus Johnson’s plantation between 1862 and 1863. All of planter James Peak’s slaves ran away to freedom, forcing him to cook and wash for himself.²⁶ Amanda Trulock complained that all the slaves on her place had been “taken” from her, except

²³Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 187.

²⁴William L. Shea, “The Aftermath of Prairie Grove: Union Letters from Fayetteville,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* LXXI (Summer 2012): 213.

²⁵Simons, *In Their Words*, 25.

²⁶DeBlack, “A Garden in the Wilderness,” 193-194.

America and her children, by summer 1864. By then, Reuben, the enslaved overseer, had gone and was working on a nearby farm owned by the Roane family. (Later, to Freedman's Bureau officials, Reuben dated his flight from Trulock at October 1863.)²⁷ As one man explained decades later, "We all called ourselves free after we ran away and came to the Yankees."²⁸

Slaves fled for freedom from masters, but many also looked to join the fight. More than 5,000 of Arkansas's slaves enlisted in the Union army. Union service pension files show that slave men often made this move in groups of friends and/or family. For example, in Bradley County, young men crept away in twos and threes from their neighboring plantations about 36 miles from Pine Bluff, and 40 miles from Camden. Simon Frazier, Walker Frazier, Emanuel Frazier, Wright Allen, and Aaron Williams fled to join the Union Army in December 1863. While the Fraziers and their neighbors joined what became the 54th USCT, African Americans from Arkansas also served in the 46th, 56th, 69th, 112th, and 113th USCT regiments.²⁹

²⁷Malloy, "The Health of Our Family," 113, 115. Reuben, described as a "rara avis" by a federal official, secured the position of overseer or "head man" at a plantation of Patrick Benjamin & Co. in Jefferson County by bragging about his excellent management of his Trulock's plantation under slavery—paying off \$20,000 of debt in the three years after the master's death, and that \$10,000 had once been offered for him. W. G. Sargent to Col. John Eaton, Jr., July 1, 1864, G-103 (1864), Letters Received, ser. 269, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Colored Troops Division, Dept. of Arkansas, Record Group 393, Pt. 1. Alfred, a slave of Jonathan MacLean, returned to his master in spring 1864, possibly because he felt in danger. Simons, *In Their Words*, 116.

²⁸Affadavit of Aaron Williams, Application of Eliza Frazier, W-220802.

²⁹The Fraziers were owned by John Frazier; Wright Allen was owned by John Marks. Affidavits of Walker Frazier and Emanuel Frazier, Eliza Frazier Pension Application no. 220802, for service of Simon Frazier; Christ, *Civil War Arkansas, 1863*, 104; Steven L. Warren, "Black Union Troops," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net.

Slaves who stole away from their masters might be reluctant, though, to become involved with soldiers or become soldiers themselves, whether they had heard stories of rough treatment in the ranks, sought to avoid battle, or simply desired, like other men, to stay close to protect their families. Steven Hahn expresses compelling reasons that slaves had to avoid Union lines and army camps altogether: “They only had to rely on their own intelligence networks to learn that fugitives could be denied entrance, surrendered to demanding owners, impressed into military service, contracted to profit-hungry lessees, physically abused and sexually violated by Yankee soldiers, and generally treated with contempt.”³⁰ Jim Downs’ recent groundbreaking *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness during the Civil War and Reconstruction* elucidates the extreme health risks slaves incurred when they arrived at Union lines and freedom. Camps cultivated disease among people already weakened by the journey to reach them.³¹

Those who did not want to enlist might have to stay hidden to avoid aggressive recruitment. One soldier recalled, “they hide from us like chickens from a chicken hawk.”³² Small slaveholder Robert Mecklin of Washington County told of federal soldiers coming through and impressing slaves. Mecklin claimed that three black companies swept the area “conscripting such as were unwilling to join. They got some five or six, all of whom they had to take off in strings. One fellow they ran down, caught and tied his hands together, also his feet, then placing a rail between them he was carried swinging in this painful attitude to the guard house by two buck negroes, amidst the

³⁰ Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 84.

³¹ Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6, 22.

³² Christ, *Civil War Arkansas, 1863*, 104.

shouts and roar of laughter of officers and soldiers.”³³ While this particular incident was witnessed through the eyes of a man looking for confirmation that freedom and responsibility brought out the worst in blacks, the incident indicates that African Americans had varying ideas of how best to navigate the war. Like other young men in the Civil War, slaves and freedpeople had their reasons for resisting military service, giving blacks one more reason to hide and keep up their guards in the sheds, woods, and roadsides of wartime Arkansas.

While thousands of men and women moved from slavery to freedom in Arkansas, most remained the commodities of anxious masters becoming increasingly desperate to keep them. Countless slaves were forced to flee the state—mostly to Texas, but also to other surrounding states—with masters seeking to get as far from Union lines as possible. Slaves from east and west were sent to Texas with overseers or taken with masters. Frenchman Anton Neice of western Arkansas sent his slaves into Texas. Sebastian County small slaveholders James P. Spring (owner of three slaves) and E. B. Bright (owner of five slaves) may have forced their slaves to move to Texas as well.³⁴ At least half of the slaves owned by Arkansas’s largest slaveholder, Elisha Worthington of Chicot

³³Walter J. Lemke, ed., *The Mecklin Letters, written in 1863-64 at Mt. Comfort by Robert W. Mecklin, the Founder of Ozark Institute* (Fayetteville: Washington County Historical Society, 1955), Entry November 30, 1863, p. 28. Mecklin includes the account of a sixteen-year-old boy successfully hiding from Union recruiters on December 30, 1863, p. 31.

³⁴Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 48; Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands. Records of the Assistant Commissioner for Arkansas, Register of Rebel Property In Scott, Sebastian, and Crawford Counties Subject to Confiscation, Volume 78. (National Archives, Washington, DC [Microfilm, Arkansas History Commission]); US Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Sebastian County, AR.

County, moved with him to Tarrant County, Texas.³⁵ One contemporary estimated that “150,000 slaves had crossed the Red River by the middle of the war.”³⁶

Arkansas slaves understood very well why they were “drove off.” The master of Molly Finley’s parents sent his slaves to Houston because “he didn’t want the Yankees to scatter them and make soldiers of them.”³⁷ In addition to protecting their investments, these masters wanted to escape the horrors they believed would accompany Federal control and black freedom, like what was described by the *Arkansas True Democrat*, claiming that Union soldiers “permitted a number of negro teamsters to seize the daughters of Mr. Anthony, and ravish these unprotected females. Their mother besought the protection of the officers, but these brutal men only cursed her as a d____d rebel...It is a saddening, sickening picture of the condition to which society is reduced wherever the vandals of the North pollute our soil.” The above incident might never have occurred but the story may have brought increased suspicion down upon many slaves.³⁸

More importantly, the forced movement of slaves out of Arkansas distressed and disrupted slave life, involving the separation of their families—not for the first time, for many. Sometimes all of the slaves on a place made the move, but others were separated when masters chose to leave behind a skeleton crew to maintain their farms or plantations, or if they took only men and left the women. Mary Myhand, of Clarksville,

³⁵Worthington instantly became the largest slaveholder in the county, by far. There were only 850 slaves in the entire county in the 1860 count. 1864 County Tax Records, Tarrant County, TX; US Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Tarrant County, TX.

³⁶Thomas A. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword: Arkansas, 1861-1874* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003) 93, 97; Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Refugee Life in the Confederacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 4; *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* (Houston), October 7, 1863.

³⁷Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 24.

³⁸*Arkansas True Democrat*, April 15, 1863.

Arkansas, recollected her near-separation from her brother. As a young slave girl, her master “took my brother and a grandson of his and started South. I was so scared. I followed them about a half mile before they found me and I begged so hard they took me with them.” At twelve years old, Moses Mitchell was taken to Texas from Arkansas Post when it fell to Union forces, forever separating him from his mother and infant sister.³⁹ Slaves on the move were separated by death, too. John Wells’ mother died—either giving birth or after delivery—while on the road with the master to Texas. Her child died too. Senia Raspberry’s mother died of a “congestive chill” during a three-year stay in Texas.⁴⁰ Mary (or Martha) Allen McGehee was “ran down into Texas” with her brother John McGehee to Grayson County. She was sold, and died before the war ended.⁴¹

One of the most immediate problems for slaves making the forced journey was the poor quality of roads. Crowds of refugees trudging down the same poorly maintained roads made for excruciatingly slow travel.⁴² Slaves moving west out of Arkansas fought “heat, dust, wind, insects, reptiles, and boorish neighbors.” Scarcity of water posed a problem, too. The long, dry stretches between rivers made bathing and washing a luxury. The only food and goods slaves and whites could be sure to have on the way was what they took with them. All of these inconveniences would have been more serious

³⁹Myhand was born in White County, Tennessee, taken to Missouri, then to Benton County, Arkansas. Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 365, 45, 28, 373, 379.

⁴⁰Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 69, 243, 211.

⁴¹Affadavit of John Bradley, H. K. Weatherby, and John W. Miller, Thomas McGehee Application for Arrears of Pay and Bounty, Brief in the Case of Isaac Hobson, Disallowed Claims of U.S. Colored Troops, 1864-1893, 54th USCT, Records of the Pay and Bounty Division, box 60, entry 449, Records of the Accounting Officers of the Department of the Treasury, National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 217, Washington, DC.

⁴²Ralph A. Wooster, *Civil War Texas: A History and a Guide* (Texas State Historical Association, 1999) 33 (quotation); *Marshall Republican*, October 7, 1864; Massey, *Refugee Life in the Confederacy*, 61.

hardships for slaves, as they were most likely to have to walk, the last to enjoy a break or to eat and drink, and the first to have to keep up chores, such as gathering water, while camping on the road. Just as they and their parents had done on the way to the marginal South, so did these men and women have to suffer forced migration in the worst of circumstances.⁴³

These journeys could be dangerous, not just inconvenient. The countryside crawled with ruffians who claimed allegiance to either the Union or Confederacy, depending on who they happened to be terrorizing at the moment. These “lawless bands abroad in the land” not only stole and destroyed property; their existence was characterized by indiscriminate violence, breaking down the social order of Arkansas.⁴⁴ “Every steamer and wagon train leaving Fort Smith and Little Rock” became inundated with “families compelled by the ravages of war to seek a place of safety.”⁴⁵ The danger is clear in historian Thomas DeBlack’s assessment: “In large areas of Arkansas beyond the Confederate-controlled southwest and the Federal-occupied towns, the last remnants of civil government and the rule of law had disappeared, guerillas and desperadoes roamed the countryside, and the only authority came from the barrel of a gun.”⁴⁶ Such characters made up a good portion of the whites who were forcing Arkansas slaves out west. A few

⁴³Massey, *Refugee Life in the Confederacy*, 64; Wooster, *Civil War Texas*, 32.

⁴⁴Massey, *Refugee Life in the Confederacy*, 27; Michael B. Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas: The People and Policies of a Frontier State in Wartime* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1976) 108; Leo Huff, “Guerillas, Jayhawkers and Bushwhackers in Northern Arkansas during the Civil War,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 24 (Summer 1965): 145; Daniel E. Sutherland, “Guerillas: The Real War in Arkansas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 52 (Autumn 1993): 257; Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, 246.

⁴⁵Civil War Diary of Evan Atwood, Small Manuscript Collection, Arkansas History Commission; Huff, “Guerillas, Jayhawkers and Bushwhackers in Northern Arkansas during the Civil War,” 145 (quotation).

⁴⁶DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 102; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 130.

Yell County slaves, owned by Henry W. Maynard (who owned three young adults and two children in 1860), were “jayhawked” in the course of the war. Two were taken to Clarksville, Texas by May 1864, in the possession of partisan ranger Captain James Fitzwilliam’s family, who claimed that Maynard was really a Unionist. Others were reported to have been taken to Indian Territory. Maynard was never heard from again, and was suspected to have been murdered. The slaves were sold off and the money divided among Fitzwilliam’s company.⁴⁷ Slaves heading west with whites were preyed upon by these groups. Mary Ann Brooks summed up her journey as a child, in which the party forded the Saline River, and had two run-ins with guerillas: “We had six wagons, a cart, and a carriage. Old Dr. [Asa] Brunson rode in the carriage. He’d go ahead and pilot the way. We got lost twice. When we came to the Red River it was up and we had to camp three weeks till the water fell. We took some sheep and some cows so we could kill meat on the way.”⁴⁸

After successfully completing the trek to Texas, bondspeople endured uncomfortable, crowded living arrangements.⁴⁹ Arkansas refugees settled primarily in northeast portions of Texas. The cities of Bonham, Clarksville, Jefferson, Marshall, Sherman, Tyler, and Henderson were popular places for refugees to make their temporary homes. Some Confederate Arkansans already had connections in northeast Texas

⁴⁷B. H. Epperson to Gov. Flanagin, July 28, 1864, Item # 917, Kie Oldham Collection, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Yell County, AR.

⁴⁸Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 420.

⁴⁹Massey, *Refugee Life in the Confederacy*, 95; “A Camden Girl as a Refugee in Texas.”

through family and friends, and simply relocated to be near those people.⁵⁰ Some refugees who shared the same hometowns in Arkansas, like those from the Camden area who were temporarily located near Tyler, were clustered closely enough to each other that visitation was possible. Thus, some Arkansas slaves might have been able to see friends and acquaintances while in east Texas.⁵¹

Although slaves removal to Texas (or other refugee areas) took place under unusual circumstances, it was no kind of respite from work or from the usual uncertainties that characterized slave life. The farther west slaves moved out of Arkansas, the more difficult it was to reach Union lines and freedom. Slavery was well-protected in Texas (only 47 slaves from that state managed to escape their masters and enlist in the Union army), leaving relocated bondspeople few options and the risk of separation through sale as slave prices climbed. Slaves continued to toil, and might have to adjust to new tasks. “What didn’t we do in Texas? Hooeee!” exclaimed John Wells in remembering his labor there. Relocated near Greenville, Wells learned to herd sheep. He was responsible for 500 head, on which he commented: “Carry ‘em off in the morning early and watch ‘em and fetch ‘em back b’fore dark. I was a shepherd boy is right. I liked the job till the snow cracked my feet open. No, I didn’t have no shoes. Little round cactuses stuck in my feet.” Not everyone’s jobs changed very drastically, though. Wells’ uncles made shoes and farmed cotton, corn, and wheat. Lou Fergusson and other slaves

⁵⁰Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction in Arkansas*, 133-134; Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas*, 114; “Camden Refugees in Texas,” Camden Civil War Record Book, Eno Collection, University of Arkansas Libraries, Special Collections, Fayetteville.

⁵¹“Camden Refugees in Texas.”

“settled down and made a crop” on land rented by her master in Texas.⁵² Slaves were often sold or hired out by their masters to other whites. These arrangements could have served to keep slaves busy and provided needed income for refugee slave owners. A letter written by an Arkansas refugee includes specifics on the hiring of bondspeople from Camden: “Pa has hired Lucky, Nat, and Fin for \$150.00 a piece. Rachel and children for \$50.00, Flora \$50.00, Nancy and Fannie \$50.00. Women without children hire for \$100.00. I think they will all hire without any trouble, except the women with little children.” Moses Mitchell was sold in Marshall, Texas for \$1,500.⁵³

Back in Arkansas, bondspeople in areas under Confederate control worked harder, if anything, as whites sought to make up the loss of so much of the slave labor force. Josephine Howell’s mother Rebecca Jones remembered rough times on Gabe McAlaway’s plantation near Augusta in Woodruff County. She told her daughter that “during the War women split and sawed rails and laid fences all winter like men. Food got scarce. They sent milk to the soldiers. Meat got scarce.”⁵⁴ To the south, the Bullock slaves made a great crop the first year of the war, harvesting the “white oceans” of cotton and storing many of the bales in the very woods where truant slaves from that plantation had a habit of hiding.⁵⁵ Toward the end of the war, most of the maids there had been moved from house work to the fields. (While Harriet Daniels’ memoir explains that this was to train the white women into more independence to prepare for emancipation, it was probably because so many slave men had fled, and was a last effort to get as much labor

⁵²Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, 243-245, 248; Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 69, 141.

⁵³“A Camden Girl as a Refugee in Texas” (quotation); Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 28.

⁵⁴Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 400.

⁵⁵Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 86.

from slave property while the institution lasted). When soldiers passed through, domestic slaves were expected to feed and attend to them, even as battles raged around them.

Virginia Sims of Jefferson County remembered: “General Shelby’s troops was comin’ on this side of the ribber. That’s one time I was scared. Never seed so many men in my life. They wanted something to eat. Mama cooked all night. . . . I toted canteens all night long.”⁵⁶

Confederate whites expected to use slaves’ labor to support not only white families but the rebel cause as well. Slaves worked in the mining and processing of niter in Marion, Newton, and Searcy Counties during the war. Slaves took part in the process of extracting potassium nitrate (saltpeter) from Arkansas’s limestone caves and converting the mineral into gunpowder for Confederate soldiers. This work greatly increased the number of slaves in Newton County, where taxable slaves rose from 24 in 1861 to 46 in 1862. About 100 slaves worked the mines in Marion County, guarded by one company of soldiers. But General Henry Halleck destroyed the works in Marion County in 1862, taking the slaves who worked there. The proximity of federal troops in Batesville early in the war inspired the slaves in the Searcy County munitions operation to flee. Aside from the failed saltpeter operations, slaves drove wagons, fortified Confederate positions, and worked as blacksmiths for the Confederates. Bondspeople in and around Little Rock might work in the hospital or man the salt works. The Bullock slaves of southern Arkansas worked at mining and bagging salt for some time during the

⁵⁶Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 101.

war. But slaves at work for the Confederacy in Arkansas might fall ill or become injured, and some ran away.⁵⁷

Confederates' need for labor only increased, a problem that actually served overall to chip away at the institution of slavery. In 1862, the state legislature approved the impressment of one slave man for every six slave men between ages 18 and 45 in Arkansas for the Confederate cause. Jerry White was one of the men in Arkansas pressed to serve the Confederate army, later to be "confiscated" by General Curtis.⁵⁸ Daniel Rhone of Phillips County went as a "bodyguard" for Tom Jones. Years later his son explained, "My father stuck with him till peace declared—had to do it." Virginia Sims' husband was sent to work for the Confederate army.⁵⁹ Confederates impressed more slaves than the measure called for, however, as labor-strapped officers took as many men as they needed. In summer 1864, Confederate military authorities announced the conscription of all slave men between 18 and 45.⁶⁰

Slaveholders and slaves alike balked at these orders. Slaves did not care to get injured or separated from family, while masters worried about their property loss in a war that was already proving economically devastating. Slaves and masters, then, often

⁵⁷James J. Johnston, "Bullets for Johnny Reb," in Sutherland and Bailey, *Civil War Arkansas*, 57-58, 69; Bernard Reed, "Saltpeter Mining," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed July 12, 2014); Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 96; Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 114-115.

⁵⁸DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 61.

⁵⁹Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 287 (quotation), 423.

⁶⁰Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 114-115. Growing increasingly desperate, the Confederacy decided to try arming slaves in 1865, exchanging freedom for military service. Some soldiers welcomed help, but by and large, white Arkansans were horrified. John Brown of Camden "It is virtually giving up the principles upon which we went into the war." Quoted in Moneyhon, "1861" in Christ, *Rugged and Sublime*, 154.

worked together to avoid their impressment. In response to a call for slaves to work on breastworks, slaveholders in eastern Arkansas sent as few as they could get away with. A. M. Boyd's father-in-law sent only one man, and then went to Lake Village to make a speech against the conscription of slave labor, declaring it was too deadly to put slaves to work in the unhealthy swamps. When the requisition for slave manpower was repeated, Boyd's overseer, Mr. Hedspeth, instructed the Boyd slaves to "put out to the woods and he would send us provisions till we could get to the Yankees. And he had to leave the country. We stayed in the woods about three weeks." The group then made their way to the Mississippi River.⁶¹ Similarly, James Pine, slave driver of the Joseph Deputy place, remembered, "They the rebels tried to press some hands from Deputy to work on Fort Pillow up the river, but Deputy had us colored men posted to give notice when the pressers were coming, so we could get back in the woods and run the horses and mules in the cane."⁶²

In these evasions, the spaces at the seams of fields of corn and cotton were redefined. Instead of truant and runaway slaves hiding in the forests and brush awaiting provision from sympathetic fellow slaves, hidden bondspeople did so at the urging of whites, and waited for their masters and overseers to provision them (as in instances where whites hid slaves from Union soldiers). The seams between cotton fields became useful for whites as well as slaves. Masters hated to see their investment working in the

⁶¹Testimony of Robert Houston, Claim of Robert Houston, 21992, Approved Claims, Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 217, NARA.

⁶²James Pine Testimony, Heirs of Joseph Deputy Claim, Approved Claims, Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 217, NARA.

malarial swamps out of their sight, and slaves looked out for their own safety and security. Thus, the goals of bondspeople and those who claimed mastery over them momentarily overlapped in the brush and cane.

While whites tried to direct slaves' activity during the war, Arkansas slaves carefully navigated the conflict, weighing their options. They exercised caution as they continued to move, work, and relate in communities that were changing forever. Winfield Scott treaded delicately on the Rapley plantation just south of Little Rock, describing the white family there as "bitter rebels."⁶³ Slaves in Confederate zones bided their time and did what they always had—survived the best they knew how. Those far from Union lines stayed on with their masters during the war for the same reasons they did before the war began. In Hempstead County, for example, the power structure remained largely intact and the presence of Confederate forces meant that most slaves there had to ride out the war, as flight posed greater risk. Slaves there continued to work, but some indication of wartime insubordination is revealed by the *Washington Telegraph's* story of a woman who had trouble keeping the focus of her house workers who felt "above their business" and who awaited the arrival of the federals.⁶⁴ The shifting nature of wild spaces likely contributed to keeping slaves on site. The places they had used before to hide and run were now teeming with whites with a whole spectrum of motivations.

Bondspeople tried to balance care for their families with whites' demands, all under increasing risks. When Virginia Sims' husband (who was sent to Confederate lines as a substitute for the master) came down with the measles, she put on boots and waded

⁶³Scott actually belonged to Major William Field, the father of Mrs. Rapley. Matilda A. Harbison Claim, Approved Claims, 9868, Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 217, NARA.

⁶⁴Poe, "Contours of Emancipation," 116-119 (quotation).

to his camp to attend to him.⁶⁵ But whites made demands on slaves. As the war shifted the meaning of wild spaces in Arkansas, bondspeople trudged out into the brush and bottoms when forced to assist rebels hidden in the woods. Slave women brought provisions and ran errands. Fannie Sims recalled washing clothes for soldiers in the nearby spring near the Ouachita River in Union County, then bringing the clean clothes to the hidden soldiers after dark. Women might hide in the woods themselves with Confederate horses or livestock in order to prevent passing soldiers from taking them.⁶⁶ Bondspeople had to be careful of whites on both sides, and everyone in between. Matilda Hatchett explained that her father had to simply go along with whoever was around. “The Secesh wouldn’t go far. They would just hide. One night there’d be a gang of Secesh, and the next one, there’d come along a gang of Yankees. Pa was ‘fraid of both of ‘em. Secesh said they’d kill ‘im if he left his white folks. Yankees said they’d kill ‘im if he didn’t leave ‘em. He would hide out in the cotton patch and keep we children out there with him.” This was a practice that pleased his mistress who did not want him taken by either side, but he employed this strategy because he had to.⁶⁷

Net, the cook at Robert Mecklin’s farm outside Fayetteville bided her time and left the Mecklin family when she saw fit. Assisted by another bondswoman, Net borrowed a horse from a neighbor to go to town to make her arrangements, returned for the rest of her things, and began work cooking for a woman in Fayetteville for board and wages of two dollars per week. Mecklin fumed that the “impudence is not bearable.” While Net started out on her own, Marinda stayed on with the Mecklins, for the time

⁶⁵Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 423.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 370-371.

⁶⁷Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 403.

being, taking on the position as cook, with control of her own kitchen. Mecklin wrote, “Rindy has cleaned up her kitchen very neatly and seems to be getting on well in doing our cooking.” The old patriarch knew the time was borrowed, however, and might have tried to treat Rindy with kindness, out of fear that she might also decide to leave. “I do hope that none of Abe’s abolition minions will put it into Rindy’s head that she would do well to leave us,” he worried.⁶⁸

While Rindy made do with a northwest Arkansas Confederate, Jack and Eliza Bradley of Des Arc lived with a Unionist widow, Martha W. Bradley. The Bradley place was closely watched by Confederates who feared Mrs. Bradley would head to federal lines with her slaves. Eliza said that a Confederate officer, Major McCoy, had threatened to kill Mrs. Bradley, and that the widow replied that she would take the risk. News of the threats spread quickly among the slaves, who must have wondered if they were included. An enslaved slave neighbor, Sylvester Caldwell, who partly attributed his awareness of the gravity of the war to his master reading him newspapers, knew Mrs. Bradley to be a Unionist and had joined her in that support. He explained:

Our fences joined. I was well acquainted with her. I knew her sentiments about the Union for she told me she proposed to be a Union woman. She said to me, ‘Sylvester people that is Union is far better than secessionists’ and I said ‘Miss Martha those that are Union is on the right side and they ought to stand fast.’

Caldwell said these conversations took place early in the war, when the fighting was still far away. When Caldwell explained that “The colored people lived in regard to her being a Union woman,” he revealed much. The Bradley slaves knew that they could root for

⁶⁸Lemke, *Mecklin Letters*, January 24, 1864, p. 37 (first quotation), January 28, 1864, p. 38 (second and third quotations).

and exchange news about the Union in Widow Bradley's presence without fear. Jack and Eliza may have reckoned that it could be safer to ride out the war with the widow than to risk being kidnapped deeper into Confederate territory, or worse.⁶⁹

Slaves on Joseph Deputy's plantation near Helena seemed to employ a similar strategy of preferring to negotiate the known, rather than the unknown until real gains could be made. Many of them tried to steer clear of soldiers, but found that that they would eventually all need to head to Union lines for their own safety when the master died. Not all of the Deputy slaves had immediately fled to federal camps. Slaves like Aleck Castile may have wanted to navigate the war without being drawn into battle or crowded into diseased camps if they could help it. Castile said that his master, a Unionist, recognized that the slaves would be free, but wanted them to stay on the place with him in the meantime. The Deputy slaves might have reckoned that if they stayed through the war, they could achieve good arrangements with Deputy as free laborers when the war ended. Running from Deputy's place would have been risky anyway. Southern Arkansas was covered with Confederate bands who would kidnap freed slaves back into bondage. Pine related that slaves were wary of the danger of venturing into the woods, "as there might be rebels in the woods they were always hanging about buskwacking." Many of the Deputy slaves stayed, then, and helped Deputy avoid Confederate impressment and guerillas. Castile recalled, "One time I was out with his stock for over two weeks in the timber to keep them out of the way of the rebels."⁷⁰

⁶⁹Martha Bradley Claim, Claim # 315, Records of the Southern Claims Commission.

⁷⁰Testimony of James Pine, Testimony of Aleck Castile, Heirs of Joseph Deputy Claim, 18147, Records of the Southern Claims Commission; Brig. Genl. Elias S. Dennis

All bets were off though, when Deputy died. There were Feds in town, Rebs in the woods, and an overseer on the place. Peggy Deputy remembered the fear that resided in the hearts of many, especially women: “The men was so bad, the women had to keep out of the way, if they hadn’t they would not have been worth two bits.” The overseer tried to keep the plantation running as it had for a time, but began to spend more and more of his time with Confederate guerillas. He “would go off to the bushwackers sometimes and stay a few days and then come back.” Eventually, most of the slaves and the overseer left the plantation for good. But Castile stayed on the place to survive and take care of his two little boys. When Deputy died, he tried to take up residence in his empty house. But that was too much for Confederate guerillas lurking in the area. “I moved up in his house, and tried to stay there, but the rebels went for me there one night.” Castile finally came in to Union lines then. Looking out for himself and his family, Castile had bided his time and tried to avoid the crossfire of the war. Upon the death of his master, he had tried to live more comfortably, claim the space he worked, and provide for himself and his family independently. But because the woods were full of Confederate guerillas, he and his boys were driven out.⁷¹

Near the Deputy plantation, slave family business facilitated the Unionist element in Helena. Even before the arrival of Union troops, there existed a small but fiercely Unionist element in Helena, who gave voice to their sentiments in the safety of a slave owned and operated barber shop. James Milo Alexander’s father owned the shop.

Alexander described his father as “the same as free” because “he hired his own time and

to Lt. Col. Willard Slocum, September 24, 1864, Military Commands, 13th AC, (Letters Sent) Entry #1944, vol. 17/67.

⁷¹Testimony of Peggy Deputy (first quotation) and Aleck Castile (second and third quotations), Heirs of Joseph Deputy Claim.

went and came at will.” Young Alexander learned his father’s trade and worked at the shop from 1857 to May 1863. Alexander’s father’s customers included a handful of Unionists who stopped in a few times a week. Alexander explained, “I would see them meet in our barber shop, and knew there was a secret understanding between them they would congratulate each other over Union successes when there was none other but colored men in the shop. This was in 1861, and 1862.”⁷² Moses Clark was the slave of J. U. Childers in Helena. Childers had him apprenticed to a barber to learn the trade, “as he desired to make me a valet so that I could travel about with him.” Clark went to the Helena barber shop in 1857, stayed until 1859 when he moved to Nashville, returning to Helena in 1860. Clark spoke for all slaves who waited for freedom when he explained that “at that time every body had to pretend to agree with the popular sentiment,” and “had to seem a good rebel if he was not.”⁷³

Most bondspeople could not move as freely. Tensions ran high during the war, when slaves were expected to work hard, while the constant danger and shortages of food and goods made life difficult. Moriah, a cook who had, at least by Harriet Daniels’ account, always enjoyed a place of privilege at the Bullock place, bore the brunt of her master’s frustrations. Moriah did the best she could preparing food despite shortages. Her makeshift coffee of parched wheat and sweet potatoes angered the master, who beat her over the shoulders with a horse whip.⁷⁴ The slaves at Isaac Jones’s plantation in

⁷²James Milo Alexander Testimony, heirs of Joseph Deputy Claim.

⁷³Clark worked in “old man Alexander’s” barber shop until he left again for Nashville, this time with free papers, after the arrival of General Curtis’s army in Helena in 1862, when he was 16 years old. Moses Clark testimony, *ibid*.

⁷⁴Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 70.

Hempstead County had to endure their master's angry ravings against any notion that the fighting in other parts of Arkansas might mean freedom for them:

Dem Yankees ain't gwine git dis fur, but iffen dey do you all ain't gwinegit free by 'em, 'cause I gwine free you befo' dat. When dey git here dey going find you already free, 'cause I gwine line you up on the bank of Bois d'Arc Creek and free you wid my shotgun! Anybody miss jest one lick wid de hoe, or one step in the line, or one clap of dat bell, or one toot of de horn, and he gwine be free and talking to de debil long befo' he ever see a pair of blue britches!⁷⁵

Jones was killed in a gin explosion, though, freeing the slaves from his abuse, at least.⁷⁶

When Annie Page's temperamental master died while on furlough, he was said to have requested to be buried "by the side of the road so he can see the niggers goin' to work."

Slaves were sustained, however, by news they received about the war and its meaning.⁷⁷

In addition to increased animosity between slaves and masters, connections between slaves and whites could be looked on with more suspicion or anger than usual. Old habits came under fire. Pulaski County slaves associated with J. T. Pendergrast (or Pendergrass), a poor white man originally from Alabama, at least to buy whiskey, but perhaps for partying. During the war, he was indicted for selling the alcohol to slaves but was also slapped with the charge of "encouraging slaves to rebellion" in fall 1862.⁷⁸ Because the material witness was away in the Confederate army Pendergrast got out of the alcohol charge, and the case against him for inciting slave rebellion seems to have

⁷⁵Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 144-145.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid., 369.

⁷⁸Pulaski County Indictment Book C, p. 436, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock.

fizzled out as well.⁷⁹ Area whites, affronted by Pendergrast's actions, probably simply wanted to raise the stakes for those who broke codes meant to regulate slaves, but it is possible that slaves might have been making plans with Pendergrast for something bigger than booze. Pendergrast's charges coincide with the case of Mary "a colored woman, slave for life," charged with arson, though this may be a coincidence. Pulaski County authorities declared that Mary "with force of arms, feloniously, wilfully [sic] and maliciously, did set fire to a certain dwelling house...with intent thereby then and there to injure the said William Murray."⁸⁰ Was Mary part of an attempt at rebellion? There is no evidence that this incident was connected to Pendergrast's activity with slaves, but the documents connected to both cases are slim. Mary was found guilty and sentenced to receive five hundred lashes "well laid on" her bare back (later overturned by the Arkansas Supreme Court due to technicalities).⁸¹

Slaves tried to keep up social ties during wartime, even if they may have been watched more closely. In Phillips County, James Milo Alexander of the Helena area had strong connections to the bondspeople on the neighboring Joseph Deputy plantation. He explained, "two thirds of them were my relatives." Alexander was in the habit of visiting them two or three times per week." In fact, that is exactly what he was up to when Union soldiers arrived at the plantation, before that area turned into a more hostile zone. "I was on the place the day the U.S. soldiers came thru from Helena, one day about the middle of July 1862. The colored people from three plantations were to have a barbecue on that

⁷⁹Ibid, 435; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Pulaski County, AR.

⁸⁰*Mary v. The State* (1862), 24 Ark. 45; Pulaski County Indictment Book C, 436-437, Arkansas History Commission.

⁸¹*Mary v. The State* (1862), 24 Ark. 45, 50; Pulaski County Indictment Book C, 441 (quotation).

plantation, I had heard the Federals were coming that day, and they did come to that plantation about three hours after we got there.” They also received some comfort by keeping up their networks of news and rumor, facilitated by information-gatherers like the young man on the Mosely place in Jefferson County, who served as a go-between for news when his master was away at war.⁸²

Many slaves took advantage of chances to increase their autonomy during the war. Although other Pulaski County slaves in the Pendergrast incident could not even buy whiskey without stirring paranoia, James Jackson’s baking business boomed in Confederate Little Rock. Jackson simply continued what he had begun before the war, but now to greater profit. Hungry soldiers, even if their fight was to preserve slavery, funded the Jackson family’s future. He recalled, “I made considerable money after the war broke out. I baked cakes and pies and sold to the Confederate soldiers, and with the Confederate money obtained this way I carried on my business, and whenever I had a chance I bought gold and silver with it, and laid that away.” Jackson also did favors and ran errands for federal prisoners for money.⁸³ Bondspeople like Jackson enraged some whites. The *True Democrat* lamented the numbers of slaves in Little Rock who “have cookshops, beer holes, and other pretended means of support. They are flush of money; buy pistols and horses and get white men to bid for them at auction.” The slaves’ economy grew stronger in more urban areas like Little Rock and Helena.⁸⁴

To the northwest, slaves’ labor became all the more important in the eyes of whites as that corner of the state remained embroiled in guerilla warfare. The slaves of

⁸²James Milo Alexander Testimony, heirs of Joseph Deputy Claim.

⁸³James Jackson Testimony, James Jackson Claim.

⁸⁴*True Democrat* (Little Rock), July 8, 1863, quoted in Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 122.

Robert Mecklin of Washington County, for as long as they stayed, took on an air of confidence during the war. Wesley, Net (a cook with two children) and Rindy (Merinda, who took up cooking after Net left) lived outside Fayetteville, at Mt. Comfort, at the house on the campus of the Ozark Institute. All of the Mecklin slaves, Mecklin complained: “Net, her children and Rindy are all well, fat, saucy, and feel much inclined to make declaration of their independence.” There were very few slaves left in these farms outside Fayetteville and they knew that their labor was of great value. Mecklin speculated, “They all seem to be enjoying themselves finely. Our own have done well when we consider the influences which have been operating on them to get them away from us.”⁸⁵

Wesley enjoyed a considerable amount of autonomy, even maneuvering himself into a state of quasi freedom. He moved freely about the neighborhood. He visited his wife, the cook at Mrs. Nolen’s, on a nearby farm, every weekend.⁸⁶ He worked at the usual tasks at the Mecklin farm, but also took on odd tasks that come to be more and more usual, like hiding wheat from the Federals. Wesley took the chance to spend more time converting bounty of nature into economic gain. He trapped pheasants and sold his game to Union soldiers in town. But he claimed public spaces, too. Wesley rode about the roads of his neighborhood conducting his own business, and ran errands for whites, too. On one occasion, he drove a family to get the body of their son, and then carry them to Benton County for the burial. His master grumbled, “Wesley does a little work for me

⁸⁵Lemke, *Mecklin Letters*, January 17, 1864 p. 35, September 19, 1863, p. 16.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 5-6, August 23, 1863, p. 10. Wesley’s Civil War life was explored in Rebecca Howard, “No County for Old Men: Patriarchs and the Guerilla War in Northwest Arkansas,” unpublished paper presented at the meeting of the Arkansas Historical Association in Washington, April 14, 2014.

and a little for himself, smokes and chews his new tobacco, spits, struts, gasters around with an air of independence not known to the common soldiers of Lincoln's army; and really enjoys more freedom, ease and comfort than any of those darkies who went off with the Federals."⁸⁷ Wesley's status was made possible by his volition, of course, but also by the fact that the only people left in his neighborhood were women and older men. The guerilla war of Northwest Arkansas was particularly intense. It raged around them, frightening Wesley's master (who was too old for military service, but was still deemed a threat by enemies). The vacuum left room for Wesley to become the responsible able-bodied man of his neighborhood. While his master hid at the sound of approaching horses, Wesley moved about as he pleased.⁸⁸

Some whites in wartorn Arkansas became wholly dependent upon bondspeople. Wesley fell very ill with typhoid pneumonia on one of his weekend visits with his wife. He was not well enough to travel, and did not return to the Mecklins for at least a week. Robert Mecklin did not write between those days, most likely because he was too busy doing all the work Wesley would normally have been taking care of but could not. On the day Wesley returned, Mecklin wrote, "I have been pulling, hauling and husking my corn and putting it away for our bread. Worked a little too much like a young man and am pretty well worn out." Suffering from some type of tumor in addition to recovering from

⁸⁷Lemke, *Mecklin Letters*, August 23, 1863, p. 10, January 28, 31, 1864 p. 38, 40, September 19, 1863, p. 16.

⁸⁸Sutherland, "Guerillas: The Real War in Arkansas," 284; Howard, "No Country for Old Men."

his fever, Wesley remained weak into November, when it was time to plow winter wheat. Mecklin tried to plow and prepare for planting but could not do it on his own.⁸⁹

While slave men might be able to claim public spaces and economic activity for themselves, slave women might shift into roles as protectors of white women, a role they may have tolerated when it came with some increased power. Rindy and Delia were expected to save their mistresses from approaching Federals during a visit that turned horrific. The women spirited Mrs. Mecklin away from the home through grown up pasture and brush. Mecklin described the scene: “The weeds were nearly as high as she was on her pony and much higher than Rindy on foot; but they weeded their way through. Laid down and put up a high heavy-railed, staked and ridered fence, and thence through the brush into the road leading by Mrs. Moore’s and got home safely but much fatigued.”⁹⁰

Stories of the river valley were similar. The slave quarters of the Howell place in Pittsburg, Johnson County, made up a little ghost town by early 1865, because Seth J. Howell had left with the slaves to Texas. When Lutetia M. Howell and her sister in law, Susan Willis, were harassed by Union soldiers and locked in one of the slave cabins, three slave women came and released them and put them to rest inside their home. The bondswomen walked to a spring to wash clothes and when they returned, they found the white women laying in the yard and the home ablaze.⁹¹ In the same neighborhood in January 1865, Lucy, an “old Negro woman,” helped the white women of the family save

⁸⁹Lemke, *Mecklin Letters*, October 11, 1863, p. 18, November 2, 1863, p. 23, November 9, 1863, p. 1863, p. 24.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, September 15, 1863, p.15.

⁹¹Nancy Dane, compiler, *Tattered Glory: A Documentary Civil War History of the Arkansas River Valley* (2005), 240-241.

one who had been pushed into the fireplace by Union soldiers looking for food and goods. Lucy also helped the women bury men who had been killed by the federals.⁹² Because white and black men were out of the area, women had to weather the conflict. White women increasingly looked to slave women. Failing to recognize it was her husband and friend who had approaching the Bullock home, when the mistress saw soldiers outside, she panicked, ran out into the yard to her maid, and “flinging herself into Betsey’s arms, she cried, ‘O save me, Betsey! Save me and my children!’” What made the mistress believe her slave could save her from a murdering band of guerillas? In the absence of the men they relied on as protectors, white women perhaps looked for security in those who they believed to be loyal servants.⁹³

Elsewhere in the same county, Eva Strayhorn, her sister, and her mother became more and more heavily relied upon by white women left in the country. As she remembered, “The white men dat was not too old was n de army and de colored men and boys had been refuged to Texas.” As older men might lead slaves to Texas, this left mistresses and bondswomen together. Some of their goals were at odds, but their major goal of survival often meant cooperation. Strayhorn remembered her mother’s hard toil in tasks that were commonly considered men’s work: “Mother had to work mighty hard as she had to cut wood and haul it in with a team of oxen. Us children helped her all we could.” On one occasion, Strayhorn and her sister were posted as watches for federals who might be after the mistress’s son. The little scouts fell asleep, though, failing to warn

⁹²W. S. Jett, “A Bit of Civil War History by W. S. Jett,” in *ibid.*, 243.

⁹³Bolsterli, *Remembrance of Eden*, 85.

their mother who was taking food and coffee to the hidden man, somewhere beyond the field. She narrowly escaped injury.⁹⁴

Despite the hard work and dangerous tasks, Strayhorn's mother stayed with the mistress, even after being encouraged by federal soldiers to leave. She knew her best hope of being reunited with her husband was to stay where he had last seen her, fearing they would never be reunited if she left the area. She decided to take the oath of future loyalty to the Union in order to secure safety in the area, making the 12-mile trip to town. Strayhorn recalled, "I know mother was scared but she was determined to take de oath so she could stay on wid old Miss Tessie." But when they returned, bushwackers had burned the place to the ground and the mistress went to stay with her daughter. Strayhorn's mother took the girls to live in a cabin on the side of the mountain. But when the master showed up, Strayhorn's mother and sister went with him and the mistress to Texas. "We found father and we was all happy again." Strayhorn's mother's strategy was to stick close to the white family so that she could be reunited with her husband. Although her "loyalty" may have had some bit of sincerity, it is clear that she went to great lengths to put her own family first. And it worked.⁹⁵

Navigating the treacherous landscape of Civil War Arkansas was difficult, but Moses Mitchell summed up the attitude of bondspeople during the war when he stated: "Here's the idea, freedom is worth it all."⁹⁶ Little Rock fell to Union forces in September 1863, and Arkansans lived in various degrees under one or the other of two state governments: the Union-controlled government in Little Rock (Pulaski County) and the

⁹⁴Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 224-227.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 29.

Confederate one now based out of Washington (Hempstead County). Slaveholders tried desperately to keep the institution alive as slaves destroyed it. One Union officer wrote from Helena describing the reluctance of white Arkansans to let go of the institution as late as December 1863:

It is said that the state of Arkansas is ready to come back into the Union. It is not true. Every slaveholder sticks to the institution as his only hope for fortune respectability and means of living. The non-slaveholders are afraid of negro equality and feel as savage a hostility to the Race as animals that by nature devour each other. In my vicinity a few of the slaveholders contrive to live on their plantations, and feed and clothe their negroes though the [sic] produce nothing, in the hope that slavery will be restored, while the greater portion of them have removed their slaves to the southwest part of the state, or into Texas, Mississippi, and Alabama. No one yet submits to the idea of its abolishment.⁹⁷

Confederate Arkansas fell into disarray in the spring of 1865, and the Trans-Mississippi South officially surrendered to the Union on June 2, 1865.⁹⁸

The seams between farms and plantations—formerly the domain of runaways, truants and their pursuers, or of slaves’ covert religious meetings or parties—became flooded with whites who now found reason to hide. Federals, rebels, guerillas, and opportunists took to the cane and brush. But bondspeople did not give up those spaces. Fugitives from slavery traversed Arkansas’s forests and river bottoms in their treks for freedom and security behind Union lines. Men and women still held by the chains of slavery were hastened into the uncultivated zones of cotton country by whites looking to keep them out of reach of Union soldiers who wanted to free and arm them, and of Confederates who wanted them to dig trenches and build breastworks. While the roads were marched and towns occupied by soldiers, Arkansas’s forests and canebrakes became

⁹⁷Big. Gen. Buford to Hon. Sec. of War, December 11, 1863, CN 299 District of Eastern Arkansas, series 4664 (Letters Sent), vol. 37/96, District of Arkansas, pp. 240-242 (#80, 1863).

⁹⁸Whayne, *Arkansas: A Narrative History*, 203-204.

populated with Arkansans with many different motivations. This shifting landscape required slaves to make hard choices. Some were able to increase their autonomy and occupy public spaces like never before, while others had to lay in wait until the time was right.

Conclusion

What Reuben Johnson began in stolen moments in the woods of central Arkansas lived on in his efforts to educate the next generation of African-Americans there. Like enslaved people across Arkansas and the South, Johnson had taken advantage of the opportunities of wartime. During the upheaval of those years, he seized both freedom and education. He had secretly learned to spell and read some under slavery, but joining the Union Army in 1864 allowed Johnson to take charge of his own emancipation as well as pursue his studies in the open. When he was able to write his first letters to his wife and father (who he had not seen in twenty years), he finally enjoyed the reward of the years of hard work and sacrifice that he had begun under slavery. Johnson's studies allowed him to take a job as a teacher at a "pay school" outside of Little Rock after he mustered out of the army in 1865. He recalled that although he worried his lack of formal education might hinder him as a teacher, "I pitched in to do the best I could and I got along very well for a while, and kept the people in good spirits." By the time he told his story of persistence to the *Christian Recorder* in 1878, Reuben Johnson was a successful educator and clergyman in Arkansas.¹

The premise of this dissertation has been that the picture of slavery in the American South is incomplete without a fresh new monograph on slaves' experiences in Arkansas. But what do we understand better about American slavery when we figure Arkansas bondpeople more prominently into the story? First, that thousands of people were forced out to and held in a region of the South where, although the system of slavery had already hardened and matured, the physical terrain remained little developed. As in other rural parts of the South, whites struggled

¹Johnson, "My Struggles for Education."

to balance the principle of restricting slaves' activity and movement with the convenience that could come with allowing slaves some autonomy. In Arkansas, those calculations were made on ground overwhelmingly covered by forest and brush. Slaves suffered under difficult labor demands of clearing and developing that land for cotton and corn while simultaneously producing profits from the harvests of those crops. However, bondspeople took advantage of the abundant "wild" swaths of land in Arkansas to resist whites' demands on their energy and time. Examining slavery in Arkansas reveals the centrality of uncultivated space to the lives of those in bondage on the edge of the South.

The experience of slavery on the periphery is also that of people moving to, through, and around the region. Arkansas slavery was not a contained unit, but a crossroads. Enslaved families in Arkansas came from somewhere else and might easily be forced to move again. Tens of thousands of men, women, and children from older parts of the South were marched out to the periphery as chattel, inheritances, gifts, and merchandise. The domestic slave trade as well as the migration of white families pushed and pulled enslaved populations out to the margins of the South. This process tore families apart and destroyed relationships. It required long treks in rough conditions. It caused some enslaved farmers to have to adjust to a new agricultural routine and other slaves to take up farming for the very first time. It threatened and destroyed the health of people who endured the initial process of "seasoning," as their bodies adjusted to their new environment. When white slaveholding families looked to start fresh on the cheap fertile acreage of the trans-Mississippi, slaves paid the price.

This migration was not limited to one single event, but took place as a protracted process. Men and women arrived in waves throughout the antebellum period. The coming of the Civil War only intensified the trend, as whites drove their slaves westward out of the way of Union

forces. These migrations brought even more newcomers to the state, as well as through and out of Arkansas to Texas and northern Louisiana as whites sought to protect their slave property for as long as possible. Thus, a major aspect of the upheaval of the Civil War on the edge of the South was the even greater mobility of an already dynamic slave population. The forced migration of slaves into Arkansas remained a consistent force at the center of the slave experience there, and only stopped when the war came to an end.

Arrival on the cotton frontier ushered Arkansas slaves into the steady march of converting the wide expanses of uncultivated space into productive fields. The cotton routine on the edge of the South, as in other regions, ruled the days and seasons of enslaved farmers. Bonded pioneers carved corn farms into hillsides, drained cotton plantations along rivers, and built homes, barns, and roads. The clearest differences between the work routine in Arkansas and older, longer-settled parts of the South relate to the condition of the land. Slave farmers in Arkansas worked under great pressure to both produce profits from existing acreage while creating new farm acreage. The cycle of planting, cultivating, harvesting, and clearing increased in scale from year to year as enslaved Arkansans put increasingly more acreage into production each year.

Like slaves all over the South, Arkansas bondspeople struggled to take charge of their own mobility and work. However, they undertook that resistance on much less developed terrain, where opportunities were more likely to be related to utilizing forests and uncultivated space in the contest with whites. They crisscrossed the Old Southwest as fugitives for freedom, hid in the woods as truants, and assisted each other in the effort to use the woods, brush, and swamps as cover for both temporary and final escapes. While most slaves did not attempt flight to the North and even fewer succeeded, the reality of fugitives from slavery passing from and through

Arkansas helped define the possibilities for enslaved people. Slaves followed traces through the forests and along river bottoms. Fugitives hid in caves and brush as they rested from their sojourns. Rivers, especially the Mississippi, served as highways. While whites moved newly purchased slaves upriver and shipped the fruits of their labor downriver, slaves used those very same channels to escape their bondage.

Like bondspeople elsewhere, Arkansas slaves punctuated the farm cycle with truancy and other forms of resistance. They tested new overseers in January and expected a break come December. They pushed back against claims on their labor during peak times of the year when the demanding crop routine became more than they were willing to bear. This was true for picking season in particular, both because whites became increasingly energetic in extracting slaves' labor at that time and because withholding labor, even temporarily, hurt whites most during the harvest (on farms of any size). Bondspeople who were forced to build a plantation while they worked it, like at Wagram, might be especially likely to rebel during labor-intensive portions of the season. As agricultural workers, Arkansas slaves knew their environment. They worked close to the ground. Their work about the farm familiarized them with their immediate space, while foraging, washing clothes in springs, or other tasks taught them the contours of the surrounding forests and cane. Driving wagons to towns or rivers provided wider knowledge. All such intelligence aided in resistance on the southern margins.

Bondspeople focused their energies on their own interests, however, when they performed the work of constructing and maintaining social ties. This is the portion of slavery in Arkansas that has been neglected most by historians. A vibrant sociability thrived on the frontier. The effort to create and maintain family and community ties interlaced slaves' time at forced labor but was also undertaken outside of fields and kitchens. Slaves' family life marched across

milestones, such as births, marriages, and deaths, regardless of the phase of the crop. They marked these occasions the best they could while negotiating demands on their labor. In Arkansas, multiple generations of a slave family living on one place was unlikely, and neighborhoods were consistently injected with newcomers. Slaves carefully crafted and protected their relationships.

Slave sociability in Arkansas was connected to the use of uncultivated space as bondspeople used the forests and cane to pray together, party, share news, and relax. Slaves who were unable to freely worship built their faith communities in the wild spaces between farms and fields. They also used those zones in their neighborhoods to meet with friends and sweethearts. The woods and brush also served as the conduit for bondspeople's news and rumor networks. Slaves forged ties in resistance when they hid out in the woods together and when they snuck out to provision truant friends and family. Even chores such as washing clothes brought enslaved people together as community under the canopy of uncultivated space.

Friendship and kinship between slaves were also cemented through the sharing of food, material goods, and personal property. Opportunities to engage in the slaves' economy, however, were not easy to come by for those held in bondage in Arkansas. Chances to make cash through open market activity such as picking extra cotton on Sundays or selling eggs in town were rare, according to the sources available. Slaves were more likely to enjoy a measure of economic autonomy in towns like Little Rock or Helena, but most did not live in close enough proximity to take advantage of those opportunities. This is not to say that the slaves' economy did not matter in Arkansas. On the contrary, the difficulty of access probably made such victories that much more uplifting and slaves' sharing of that success with family and friends all the more meaningful.

After only a generation, the war upended the ways in which slaves and whites in Arkansas had been negotiating space on the edge of the South. Wartime opened new opportunities for bondspeople in open, public zones, but often created increased danger in uncultivated ones. For many people, the upheaval of war completely reversed the use of cultivated and uncultivated space as whites took to the woods while slaves might more freely run errands in town. Guerilla warfare and the mobility of soldiers on both sides of the conflict prevented the old rules from applying. Whites who feared Confederate claims on slave labor and Union designs on freedom took to driving slaves out into the same places where slaves used to hide from *them*. Slaves who sought to stay close to loved ones or avoid troops on either side complied. Fugitive slaves continued to trust the woods and river bottoms for their getaways, only now with greater danger, yet increased hope.

After being settled and protected by whites as a haven for slavery, freedom both came to and was seized by African Americans in Arkansas. Some slaves were able to flee to Union lines to claim freedom, and, often, their place to fight for it as soldiers, too. Most had to bide their time until the opportunity for freedom safely reached them. Families like Mittie Freeman's did the best they could to navigate their neighborhoods for the duration of the conflict. Freeman was fishing with her father in Ouachita County when cannons in the distance fired to signal the fall of Richmond. Decades later she recalled, "Pappy jumps up, throws his pole and everything, and grabs my hand, and starts flying toward the house. 'It's victory,' he kept on saying, 'It's freedom. . .'"²

The peculiar institution on the periphery did not differ fundamentally from slavery elsewhere. The essentials of the system remained the same in Arkansas. State lines did not mark

²Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 428.

off a new or unique type of slavery. But for people on the ground on the edge of the South, the relative ruggedness that characterized Arkansas mattered. The terrain offered both hardship and opportunity. For Arkansas's imprisoned pioneers, opportunity to resist labor and dehumanization, more often than not, was most readily found in the "wild" spaces found in vast forests, in canebrakes along the river, and in the brush between fields.

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