

## **African American Trade and Property Ownership in Antebellum West Tennessee**

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One particular institution in the history of the United States permanently mars its image and, to this day, remains a cause of shame and disgrace. An institution and theme that remained in the background of our country's conscious, ignored and unspoken for far too long. An institution that was partly responsible for driving Americans into a bloody and devastating Civil War. This institution shaped our country, while simultaneously driving it apart. The institution of Slavery and the accompanying racial segregation played a major role in the development of the United States, especially the Southern region. Many cities of the South may well have been founded by slave labor. Memphis, a city that still struggles with racial issues and tension, flourished when slavery and the trading of humans became a major industry. The institution of slavery is one of the most important and uncomfortable factors that shaped our nation and brought the country to its current position. As such, it should be studied, researched, exposed, and uncovered. Scholars must examine and expose the lives of these slaves. To truly understand our country and more specifically the city and state in which we live, it is crucial to study and devote time to these thousands of men and women who persevered and survived even under the harshest of circumstances. It is important to take regions like West Tennessee, a cotton and slave district in the Antebellum South, and expose its still hidden slave history.

The region of West Tennessee had a very large slave population, and by 1860 slaves accounted for over a little over one-third of Shelby County's total population.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Beverly G. Bond and Janann Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White* (Charleston, SC; Arcadia Publishing,

Shelby and Fayette Counties, counties in West Tennessee and the home to the city of Memphis, were some of the most heavily populated slave counties in West Tennessee. Memphis was also the largest inland slave trading market in the Southern United States. Men like Nathan Bedford Forrest, rumored first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and head of a very successful slave trading industry, made their homes in Memphis and West Tennessee.<sup>2</sup> This region is inextricably linked with slavery and cotton, racial segregation and prejudice. This irrefutable history makes it impossible to believe just how little information is available regarding slaves in West Tennessee. The region of West Tennessee is severely lacking in information regarding the slaves and Antebellum African American populations. While other states are amassing a great deal of information regarding slaves, their lives and their economies, West Tennessee is an area wide open for exploration. The evidence exists; however, it has yet to be fully studied and explored. Why is there such an information gap regarding the slaves of West Tennessee? Whatever the reason for this lack of knowledge, it is essential that scholars uncover the history of the slaves, as well as the free blacks and any African American who contributed to the development of West Tennessee, whether by force or by choice.

One way in which these enslaved individuals fought to develop a sense of self and worth was through property ownership and informal economies based on trade and production of small goods, livestock, and produce. Property ownership by enslaved African Americans is becoming a well researched and documented phenomenon throughout the South, with the exception of West Tennessee. Preliminary evidence strongly suggests that a large number of slaves in West Tennessee owned property and

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2003), 26.  
<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 26.

created small, informal economies; utilizing similar types of evidence as that used by scholars in other Southern states it is possible to create a comparison between property ownership and slave economies in West Tennessee and other Southern states.

Before Tennessee was admitted to the Union as a state, it was part of the state of North Carolina. Between 1777 and 1788 six counties in Tennessee, including Washington, Sullivan, Greene, Davidson, and Sumner, were established as western counties of North Carolina. However, following the American Revolution, North Carolina had difficulty governing its remote settlements. The western settlers had two main demands that were largely ignored by the government of North Carolina; protection from the Indians and the right to navigate the Mississippi River.<sup>3</sup> The neglect by North Carolina led aggravated residents of East Tennessee to form the State of Franklin in 1784, which functioned as an unrecognized, but independent, government. These revolutionary actions forced North Carolina to reassert control over its counties in the West. The government of North Carolina established new policies intended to curb the independence of these counties, and the State of Franklin disappeared in 1788. North Carolina's control over Tennessee finally ended in 1790 when the state ratified the Constitution of the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Along with ratification, North Carolina ceded its western territories to the Federal government. However, the state kept the right to further land claims in Tennessee, establishing a strange relationship.<sup>5</sup> In the meantime, Congress divided the area into three districts and named it the "Territory of the United States, South of the River Ohio," otherwise known as the Southwest Territory. A new government was established, and in

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 20.

1795 a census proved that there was a population large enough for statehood. The Southwest Territory was the first Federal territory to request admission into the Union, and while there was some opposition to statehood, Tennessee officially became the sixteenth state on June 1, 1796.<sup>6</sup> Tennessee's long history with North Carolina would at first influence Tennessee law on important matters such as slavery and the liberties and rewards allowed slaves.

On October 19, 1818 West Tennessee was opened to settlement by the Chickasaw Treaty. In the treaty the Chickasaw Indians ceded all the land included in the limits of West Tennessee to the United States for \$300,000.<sup>7</sup> Settlers from Virginia, Middle Tennessee, Kentucky, and the Carolinas began to flood the area. Shelby County was created soon after the signing of the treaty, on November 24, 1819, by an act of the Tennessee General Assembly.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Fayette County was created in 1824 from the former Indian lands.<sup>9</sup> One large plantation in the Fayette County area is Ames Plantation, which was established shortly after the Chickasaw Treaty and the ensuing flood of settlers. The area of the Ames Plantation was settled in 1829 when John T. Patterson built a homestead by the North Fork of the Wolf River. The Ames Manor house was constructed by John W. Jones in 1847.<sup>10</sup> First on the minds of the settlers in West Tennessee and at plantations like Ames was the production of cotton, which thrived in the area from the 1830s until the Civil War. Thousands of acres of land were cleared

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>7</sup> Bell Irvin Wiley, *Cotton and Slavery in the History of West Tennessee*, Thesis (Lexington; University of Kentucky, 1929), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Rose-Anne Cunningham Bray, "Shelby County, Tennessee Genealogy and History," April 6, 2006, <http://www.wdbj.net/shelby/>.

<sup>9</sup> Rose-Anne Cunningham Bray, "Fayette County, Tennessee Genealogy and History," January 21, 2006, <http://www.wdbj.net/fayette/>.

<sup>10</sup> Robert H. Fray and Oliver A. Spalding, "History and Genealogy, 19 June, 2007, <http://www.amesplantation.org>.

for new plantations. It was the rapid settlement and stream of settlers, combined with the perfect setting for cotton production that provided a fertile medium for the growth of a strong system of slavery in West Tennessee.<sup>11</sup>

Shelby and Fayette counties have long had an intertwined history of slavery and agricultural production. The first slave was most likely brought into Tennessee in 1776, and it is certain that slaves were living in the state of Tennessee by 1788, when court records show that slaves were part of a Washington County estate.<sup>12</sup> Washington County was the first county established in Tennessee. In 1796 the national government administered the census of the Southwest Territory, of which Tennessee was still a part, to determine if the land contained enough inhabitants to be admitted into the Union as a state. By this point Tennessee had a population of 77,262, of which 10, 613 were slaves.<sup>13</sup> In particular, the population of West Tennessee was composed of twenty percent slaves. The number of slaves in Tennessee continued to increase as cotton production also increased.

Fayette and Shelby Counties, and especially the city of Memphis, thrived on slavery and agriculture, specifically corn, wheat, tobacco, and, most importantly, cotton. Almost 400,000 bales of cotton were shipped out of Memphis each year, making it the biggest inland cotton market in the world by the 1850s.<sup>14</sup> Slave trading was another major aspect of the Memphis economy that also affected the surrounding counties. Since Memphis was the biggest inland slave trading market in the south, this encouraged the

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<sup>11</sup> Bell Irvin Wiley, "Cotton and Slavery in the History of West Tennessee"(Ph.D. diss, Lexington; University of Kentucky, 1929), 24.

<sup>12</sup> Caleb Perry Patterson, *The Negro in Tennessee, 1790-1865* (New York; Negro Universities Press, 1968) , 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Beverly G. Bond and Janann Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White* (Charleston, SC; Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 26.

growth of cotton plantations and agriculture in surrounding areas like Fayette County. In 1860 Fayette County was the leading cotton county, and ginned 35, 281 bales of cotton.<sup>15</sup> As a direct result of this growth and economic development the slave population in Shelby county went from 103 in 1820 to 16,953 in 1860.<sup>16</sup> Most of this increase took place in the rural areas outside of the city of Memphis. In 1860 Fayette county had 15, 473 slaves, all of whom had been acquired since 1830. This growth mirrored the growth of slavery in West Tennessee as a whole. The number of plantations and slaveholders increased dramatically, especially in West Tennessee. In 1856 there were 13,536 slaveholders in West Tennessee. There were 85 people in the area who owned more than one hundred slaves, as compared to one person in East Tennessee and 25 in Middle Tennessee.<sup>17</sup> The plantations in West Tennessee were also larger and greater in number. In Fayette County there were seventy-four plantations with between 500 and 1,000 acres each, and fifteen with more than 1,000 acres each.<sup>18</sup> As the number of slaves and plantations increased, laws were developed and put in place to regulate the activities and daily life of the slaves.

To fully understand the evolution of Tennessee laws regarding slavery it is necessary to examine the status of the slave in North Carolina. According to Chase Mooney, scholar of slavery in Tennessee, “The legal status of the slave in Tennessee was determined by North Carolina and Tennessee legislation, as well as by such ordinances

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<sup>15</sup> Bell Irvin Wiley, “Cotton and Slavery in the History of West Tennessee”(Ph.D. diss, Lexington; University of Kentucky, 1929), 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Caleb Perry Patterson, *The Negro in Tennessee, 1790-1865* (New York; Negro Universities Press, 1968), 62.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

and regulations as were made from time to time by local government agencies.”<sup>19</sup> There were important laws regarding the traffic of slaves, the liberties permitted slaves, and the traffic of goods and property ownership among slaves. There were a number of laws regarding the trafficking of goods with and among slaves, as well as regulations concerning the ability of slaves to own property, move about freely, and produce their own goods and products. However, despite the existence of such laws, it was custom that dictated exactly what slaves were and were not allowed to do. Custom often outweighed law when it came to slavery. For example, with regards to livestock, slaves were permitted by custom, not law, to own livestock. They were also protected from professional traders by law. These customs allowed slaves additional freedoms, which white owners saw as threats to the system of slavery. These customs also often allowed slaves to have more contact with outsiders, like poor whites and the smaller population of free blacks present at the time. Also, the plantations on which slaves were forced to live and work were typically located near water sources, and “The accessibility of plantations by means of creeks, bays, and rivers stimulated illicit trade.”<sup>20</sup> All of these factors combined led to laws prohibiting slaves from owning property and limiting their contact with the outside world.

The Acts of 1741 and 1787, passed by the colony and state of North Carolina, laid the foundation for the regulation of traffic with slaves. It became a serious violation for slaves and whites to traffic goods. By 1799 trade between slaves and whites was strictly forbidden unless a slave had a permit from their master that included both the time and

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<sup>19</sup> Chase C. Mooney, *Slavery in Tennessee* (Bloomington, IN; Indiana University Press, 1957), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Caleb Perry Patterson, *The Negro in Tennessee, 1790-1865* (New York; Negro Universities Press, 1968), 14.

place of the intended transaction.<sup>21</sup> If this law was violated those non-slaves involved could be fined ten dollars and slaves could be corporally punished at the discretion of the Justice of the Peace. The merchandise that they had intended to trade would be taken and sold, with the part of the profits going to the town and the rest to the individual who intercepted the illegal transaction. An excerpt from the Nashville Board of Commissioners on June 7, 1805 details the necessity of a permit.

“Resolved, that it shall be the duty of the town sergeant to inspect each slave he may discover trading in town, and require of them a permit from their master or mistress, or the person under whose care they are, specifying the commodity which they may have for sale. And if such slave has no permit, the town sergeant shall immediately seize on the commodity he may have for sale, and take it with the slave before some justice of the peace, and make oath that such slave had transgressed the by-laws for the regulation of the town in the manner above described. The town sergeant shall then immediately expose to sale such commodity to the highest bidder for cash at the market house; one-half of the amount of such sales to go to the use of the town, and the other half to the use of the sergeant for his services.”<sup>22</sup>

More specific laws also existed, one stating, “No master of a vessel was allowed to entertain a slave on board, who did not hold a pass from his master of a justice of the peace. Such harboring of a slave indicated either an illicit trade relation, or an intention of stealing the slave.”<sup>23</sup> They were fined 5 pounds and then 10 pounds for each consecutive offense. These laws would only grow more stringent.

In 1803 trading with slaves in North Carolina became even more serious. Passes for the trafficking of goods were now required to include the articles the slave would be trading. Finally, in 1806 it became “unlawful for a white person, free Negro, or mulatto to be in the company of a slave for any purpose without the consent of the owner.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 46.

However, in 1813 the restrictions on trade with slaves loosened. The fine for violations was reduced and, more importantly, slaves were allowed to trade articles that they produced without a pass from their master.<sup>25</sup> Despite the loosened rules there were some aspects of trade, like the trafficking of liquor, that were still heavily regulated. Liquor traffic was of extreme concern for masters and whites. They feared that liquor would incite violence and uprisings among their slaves, and therefore did as much as possible to regulate the trade. Liquor traffic was also the most difficult part of trading with slaves to regulate. In 1813 Tennessee made it punishable by a fine of between five and ten dollars to sell whiskey to slaves. By an act of 1829 a slave could be given lashes for either having whiskey in his possession or for selling it to another slave.<sup>26</sup>

Trade between slaves and whites was so heavily regulated because owners and prejudiced whites believed that relations of social equality between the groups would undermine the caste system firmly in place in the South. To allow slaves to stand on equal footing with free individuals was considered absurd and even dangerous. Masters also thought it was too dangerous to allow their slaves to trade with and connect with whites and free Blacks because it would breed dissent and rebellion. Too much freedom would cause the slaves to question their place and fight for a change. However, despite their fear of slaves trading with whites and free blacks, they allowed their slaves to produce goods and trade with each other. They allowed these activities to continue because they assumed that no harm could come of the seemingly pointless slave economies. These assumptions were incorrect, because these economies allowed their slaves to earn goods and very small sums of money, as well as allowing them to develop

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 47.

a sense of independence and freedom. These internal slave economies helped the slaves maintain their humanity and a sense of culture in a society where their oppressors attempted to totally suppress these ideas.

Despite the harsh regulations and strict laws, slave economies and property ownership were relatively common practices. Property ownership, in particular, was common among slaves. According to Dr. Loren Schweningen, scholar of African American history, “During the nineteenth century property ownership among slaves expanded significantly, not only in the low country of the Carolinas and Georgia, but on plantations and farms, in towns and cities, in both the Lower and Upper South.”<sup>27</sup> Slaves often produced small goods that they were able to sell, agricultural products, and small livestock, and a small number were even skilled workers whose crafts were in high demand. According to Dylan Penningroth, a scholar of African American history with a focus on the history of slavery, property ownership, and family, “Slaves’ ability to own and trade property was part of fundamental processes in the slave system.”<sup>28</sup> Their ability to work overtime and hire themselves out greatly enabled the slaves to hold property. However, the success of these internal economies and the ability of the slaves to own land depended on the amount of free time they could devote to their own needs. Therefore, their economies were largely “founded on an economy of time rather than an economy of land.”<sup>29</sup> Their time mainly depended on the system of labor under which they were required to work.

There were two labor systems commonly found on Southern plantations. The

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<sup>27</sup> Loren Schweningen, *Black Property Owners in the South 1790-1915* (Chicago; University of Illinois Press, 1997), 30.

<sup>28</sup> 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), 46.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

gang system, which was often considered the harsher of the two labor systems, typically prevailed on large plantations because it was the most productive. Under this system, based on physical capabilities and skills, slaves were divided into three groups. The strongest group was responsible for planting and harvesting the crops. The second group was responsible for caring for the crops, weeding and fertilizing them. The third group typically made up of the elderly and children were responsible for the remaining tasks, like watching the fields for pests and running any errands. The fields on these plantations were planted in consecutive rounds, so once the gang had finished one field they had to move on to the next. Those forced to work under the gang system had much less time for themselves or to devote to hiring out and earning money or producing goods. Despite the difficulties associated with this system the slaves still managed to find some spare time to engage in personal work. By the early nineteenth century slaves were usually not required to work on Sundays. Some even received parts of Saturday off as well. The other labor system, known as the task system, was easier and more conducive to earning the money necessary to own property.

The task system allowed the slave economies to flourish, because it provided the opportunity for far more spare time. It was a labor system under which slaves were assigned a number of specific tasks each day. As soon as those particular tasks were finished the slaves were allowed to take the remainder of the day for themselves. It was often the case that cotton plantations ran on the task system, as did slaves who worked in skilled labor positions. This system benefited the slaves because they were under less supervision, and had a great deal more autonomy and free time. Under these two systems there were three avenues utilized by slaves to accumulate property.

The first avenue was the task system. Those on the task system were able to work quickly to complete their tasks, so they could devote the extra time to accumulating the money necessary for the purchase of property.<sup>30</sup> The second avenue used by slaves involved earning money by working beyond their expected hours as well as on Sundays and holidays to accumulate extra money intended for the purchase of such property. This practice was known as overwork.<sup>31</sup> Finally, while less common, development of a skill or trade was a valuable asset that could generate income. Some slaves developed professional skills that fit the demands of their locale, making them valuable workers. These three systems combined to assist the slaves in earning extra money.

Those slaves on the task system, as well some on the gang system fortunate enough to have time off, found several ways to earn what little extra money they could. In some states, and especially under the task system, slaves practiced overwork. Once a slave reached their quota they could earn money for work that exceeded that quota. Overwork was generally practiced in the cotton belt. Factories and mines that used slave labor also allowed overwork, and in addition they hired slaves on off days. In the 1840s mine owners in Virginia were even running newspaper advertisements aimed at enslaved people seeking extra work. According to Penningroth, “Only a minority of slaves ever worked in mines and factories, but the fact that these places had overwork payments and a customary definition of work quotas lends further support to the argument that the economy of time and opportunities for slaves to accumulate property were intrinsic to the system of slavery.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>32</sup> 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), 53.

Cornelia, a former slave from Eden, Tennessee, described her experiences watching her family earn extra money through overwork. Cornelia was owned by a Master Jennings, who owned a small farm that cultivated corn, oats, hay, and fruits. Eden, a tiny town that Cornelia describes as relatively close to Memphis, had no more than four hundred people and is no longer in existence in West Tennessee. Jennings owned only a few slaves; most of his were hired out.<sup>33</sup> Cornelia recounts that “Master Jennings allowed his slaves to earn any money they could for their own use. My father had a garden of his own around his little cabin, and he also had some chickens.”<sup>34</sup> Cornelia also details how Master Jennings would allow her father to take the wagon each Sunday and sell watermelons, cider, and ginger cookies at a nearby Baptist church. Her father was allowed to keep any money he earned. The family also ran a secret restaurant in their cabin, arranging specific times for free Negroes in the area to meet at their cabin and purchase a chicken or barbeque dinner.<sup>35</sup> The slave’s ability to pick up overwork was, however, greatly threatened during the harvest season, because slaves were expected to work overtime without pay in order to harvest the valuable crops in time.

Another way in which slaves earned extra money was working on hire. “Working on hire was a significant part of the black experience under slavery. On any given day in the South in 1860, about 6 percent of all rural slaves and about 31 percent of urban slaves were working on hire, and over a lifetime, their chances of being hired out increased,”<sup>36</sup> writes Penningroth. By the 1850s slave hiring was an extremely familiar practice in

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<sup>33</sup> Ed. Andrea Sutcliffe, *Mighty Rough Times I Tell You* (Winston-Salem; John F. Blair, Publisher, 2000), 12.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>36</sup> 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), 53.

many of the major industries in the South, like textiles, tobacco, hemp manufacturing, and iron production.<sup>37</sup> The only downside to working on hire, however, was that the master always got a cut of the meager profits earned by the slave. Many slaves earned a pittance, especially because they had to give a portion of their earnings to their masters. However, a few managed to buy their own freedom before the Civil War. One Tennessee turnpike owner called this system of working on hire for extra pocket money “Stimulant and Reward Money.”<sup>38</sup>

Slave hiring worked in two ways; some slaves were hired out and their master and the hirer agreed upon schedules, times, and payments, while a small number of slaves were allowed to hire themselves out, taking the responsibility of negotiating payment and times, and paying their master.<sup>39</sup> Slave hiring was central to the economy of Memphis. For example, in 1836 U.S. Army Engineers hired slaves to help construct the military road between Memphis and the St. Francis River.<sup>40</sup> Some self-hired slaves were members of the skilled elite, like blacksmiths, but others were simply farmers with no particular skill who worked on tasks in the garden or chopping wood. In several cases, slaves were only allowed to self-hire themselves if their master considered them past their prime for working. If their so-called productive years were coming to a close, it was considered safe to allow the slaves to hire themselves out.<sup>41</sup> Many slaves viewed self-hiring as a way to work for and save money towards purchasing their own freedom. This

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<sup>37</sup> Loren Schweningen, *Black Property Owners in the South 1790-1915* (Chicago; University of Illinois Press, 1997), 37.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 36

<sup>39</sup> 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), 53.

<sup>40</sup> Beverly G. Bond and Janann Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White* (Charleston, SC; Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 27.

<sup>41</sup> Loren Schweningen, *Black Property Owners in the South 1790-1915* (Chicago; University of Illinois Press, 1997), 40.

was, however, an extremely difficult goal to attain, and many masters held out on the promise of freedom, drawing up a contract that was nearly impossible to attain or simply choosing to go back on their word. Mary Carrol, a self-hired Tennessee slave who spent her life working as a chambermaid, signed an agreement that declared she would be advanced six hundred dollars (or her appraised value) in a mortgage note, and that she would not be free until she had paid the note along with accompanying interest, the premiums on a life-insurance policy and any and all health expenses she may acquire. Her attempt to purchase her freedom ended in failure, as after four and a half years Carrol still had four hundred dollars to pay on her purchase price.<sup>42</sup>

There is a diary entry regarding self-hiring and overwork that references the Holcombe family and their slaves in Fayette County, Tennessee. The Holcombe family owned land and a plantation on the Ames plantation base. Colonel Holcombe purchased a slave, Ned Hood, from a neighbor in La Grange, Tennessee. “Uncle Ned,” as he came to be called, worked as a butler for the Holcombes. Ned’s wife, Rhoda, still belonged to the neighbor who sold Uncle Ned. When the Holcombes moved to Texas, Rhoda and Ned were separated. Colonel Holcombe felt bad for separating the couple, and sent Ned back to Tennessee, alone, with eight hundred dollars to purchase Rhoda<sup>43</sup>. While he was unsuccessful in purchasing Rhoda, the trip to Tennessee demonstrates an exceptional freedom of movement allowed by the Holcombes. That Ned was allowed to travel from Texas to Tennessee alone demonstrates the ability some slaves had to move freely around, trading and participating in economic activities. In addition, “While he lived at Wyalucing, during slack seasons Col. Holcombe would lend him a wagon and team so he

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>43</sup> Jack Thorndyke Greer, *Leaves From a Family Album* (Waco, TX; Library Binding Company, 1975), 13.

could make extra money by going to Jefferson, Texas, eighteen miles distant, and hauling back supplies brought in by boat there for Marshall residents.”<sup>44</sup> Ned was allowed to participate in overwork during slow times on the plantation so he could earn extra money.

In a plantation society where a number of people owned at least one slave, why was it necessary to hire slaves for extra work? Who was responsible for hiring these individuals? Several different classes hired slaves to perform extra work. For white plantation owners and farmers, hiring slaves alleviated the arduous work associated with the cycles of farming. Hired African Americans helped with the amount of work required for crops like cotton, especially around the harvest time when many slaves were expected to work around the clock. For those whites that did not own slaves hiring others’ slaves provided access to a very cheap and easily accessed temporary workforce. According to Penningroth, “Hired slaves released white women and men from toilsome housework, enabling middle-class southern whites both to boost their household income and to mold their households into a separate ‘domestic sphere,’ where white women could be ladies and even slave-less white men could be masters of their own small worlds.”<sup>45</sup> White storekeepers and small farmers also participated with slaves in informal, sometimes illegal, trading networks. The same questions can be raised with regards to why the masters allowed their slaves to be hired out.

The slaves’ owners allowed them to be hired out mainly because it benefited them and their plantations economically. It was the responsibility of the master to provide his slaves with food, clothing, and, at the very least, the bare necessities of everyday life. Rather than pay for all of those things out of pocket and fully provision his slaves, the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>45</sup> 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), 53-54.

master allowed his slaves to bring in a tiny profit to supplement and help pay for the supplies they needed. Few owners required their slaves to meet all their own needs, but many did require them to assist in the provisioning. Hiring cut down on subsistence costs and allowed the master to save money that he would otherwise put into caring for his slaves. In addition to cutting subsistence costs for the slaves, hiring continued to bring in profits during sluggish periods of time when there was not enough work to keep the slaves busy. Since the master always received a cut of the profits, regardless of whether the slave was hired out or self-hired, hiring was always an option for supplementing the income. Masters could hire out their bondsmen and women and receive profits varying from ten to twenty percent of the slave's price per year.<sup>46</sup> Self-hiring also benefited the planters in a time sense, freeing them from the additional work of arranging a slave's hiring. A planter from Hardeman County, Tennessee, accounted for one of the benefits of self-hiring, explaining "I cannot now say whether the Negroes will be exposed in hire or no [*sic*], that is at public auction. I cannot possibly attend the hiring this year."<sup>47</sup> He was referencing the fact that he did not have time to attend the public auction and deal with all the legal matters involved in hiring his slaves out. Self-hiring, if the slaves were trustworthy, eliminated most of the inconvenience for the master and freed them from the responsibility of arranging matters.

Owners also allowed the hiring out because it allowed the slaves to purchase their own property, which occasionally included plots of land. Penningroth explains this "guarded the plantation business against the unpredictable cycles of nineteenth-century

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<sup>46</sup> Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South 1790-1915* (Chicago; University of Illinois Press, 1997), 36.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

plantation agriculture.”<sup>48</sup> During times of flood or drought and under the threat of starvation, and in general for a semi-balanced diet, slave’s gardens came in handy. “Slaves’ ability to earn, own, and trade property directly boosted the formal economy of the plantation, and that is why so many masters allowed it,”<sup>49</sup> writes Penningroth. Because slaves were allowed to own property, planters had the ability to shift some of the burden of feeding and provisioning the slaves onto the slaves themselves. This in turn lowered production costs and raised the plantation’s margin of profit. The average cotton plantation spent more than one-fifth of its total output on feeding and clothing the slaves, so any money that could be diverted by allowing the slaves to own property was appreciated.

Property was also used as a form of bribe to encourage good behavior. Masters would threaten to take away spare time or plots of land as a punishment. They also believed that owning property and having a semblance of independence would prevent the slaves from stealing. According to Penningroth, “The slaves on one plantation in Tennessee were actually required to raise chickens and vegetables, because local whites thought it would keep them from stealing.”<sup>50</sup> However, if the work or property owned, planted, or produced by the slaves infringed upon the plantation or factories goods or was at all similar to that made by the master, it became threatening to whites and had to be prevented. Finally, trading and property ownership among slaves was allowed because it was far too widespread and popular to contain. One of the only ways for a master to control his slaves’ economic activities was to purchase the slave products, produce,

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<sup>48</sup> 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), 56.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

livestock, etc. themselves.<sup>51</sup> This practice still allowed the system to continue and grow in popularity.

Overall, property ownership among slaves and system of working on hire and owning plots of land were part of an important informal economy in the South. “Slave-owned property and the arrangements of land and labor from which it came were part of an important regional informal economy within the more formal economies of the plantation and the city.”<sup>52</sup> Slaves were reasonably free to trade their property, and they exchanged money, labor, and goods with each other, masters, and non-slave owning whites. They often traded from their slave cabins, and roadside trading was also popular.

They traded with each other for horses, mules, rice, beehives and honey, hogs, dresses and clothing, and a number of other similar things. They also marketed their property and goods to the urban consumers in nearby cities. From the very beginning slaves had been allowed gardens of their own, a practice that spread with slavery because of its practicality. Slaves grew sweet potatoes, pears, pumpkins, okra, eggplant, corn, beans, collards, peas, turnips, tomatoes, and other fruits and vegetables, which they sold as cash crops to their masters, neighbors, and surrounding markets. “The internal economy permitted them to trade much closer to home for the things they needed,”<sup>53</sup> writes Penningroth. Enslaved blacks sold most of the small livestock and produce found in the markets of southern towns. “Black people nearly took over the trade in a few kinds of goods and services, like hauling, or baked goods, or chickens.”<sup>54</sup> Enslaved women,

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<sup>51</sup> Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South 1790-1915* (Chicago; University of Illinois Press, 1997), 34.

<sup>52</sup> 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), 60.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

especially, did a lot of the street trading in towns. Between 1755 and 1860 black women were the main conduit for goods between city whites and slaves.

The prevalence of African American women in metropolitan markets allowed them to claim property and use public language in ways that many enslaved men could not. Typically, most of what was said and done by black women in the markets was aimed at other black slaves and traders. Their banter and language was an important factor in establishing and guarding close relationships with other African American traders. Women in the markets and their unique system of language helped foster and support networks of slave trade in the South. However, while women ruled the marketplace, men were largely responsible for all the earning and trading that took place on rivers and creeks.

Waterways played a significant role in the informal slave economies. Rivers and creeks served as both a means of transport and a source of income and marketplace.<sup>55</sup> A select few slaves had enough money to independently purchase wagons and mules to transport their goods and products to market. However, the typical slave relied on waterways for transportation of goods and people to market. Some slaves were fortunate enough to own boats, and they made a profit by ferrying people, both black and white, across rivers. They even made their own decisions about whom and what they would carry across, and there are some records of denying white people. Other slaves worked as loaders and porters for steamboats. Of those slaves who did not own boats, many were allowed to fish in rivers and creeks on their master's property and sell the catches for profit. Those who lived by larger rivers could also earn small amounts of money by

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 64.

cutting and selling wood.<sup>56</sup> While these economic activities flourished, there remained opposition in the white community towards such actions.

While slave property ownership, trade, and economic activities were popular and opportunities for such abounded in the South, the white population remained very divided on the subject. Self-hiring, though often beneficial to both master and slave, did on occasion put further strain on the relationship between the two. Earning money and being responsible for their own hiring conditions gave slaves the ability to maintain a modicum of control over their own lives, and this fostered a feeling of independence and even power in the slave community. As a result of the ability to control an aspect of their own lives, self-hired African Americans typically displayed independence, self-esteem, and even, at times, arrogance that aggravated whites who believed that African Americans, especially slaves, should be humble, self-deprecating, and submissive at all times.<sup>57</sup> Whites faced a difficult dilemma; how could they instill a strong work ethic in their slaves without instilling a sense of ambition, initiative, and a strong desire for freedom at the same time. They sought ways in which to prevent their slaves from developing these attributes, attempting to prevent any growth of personal autonomy in the slaves and forcing them to bend to the will of their master. Some masters felt that if slaves were allowed any freedoms at all it would greatly destabilize the entire system of slavery in the South.

These sentiments can be seen in documents from Maury County, Tennessee, slave owner Edward H. Chappin. In 1823 he complained that “As I have hired the boy Stephen, he is no longer authorized to trade for himself, or own any property in his own

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>57</sup> Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South 1790-1915* (Chicago; University of Illinois Press, 1997), 51.

name.” Stephen, without permission from his master, had obtained several horses and created a business renting the horses to slaves on nearby and neighboring plantations. This was unacceptably independent behavior from a slave, and according to Chapin, “I do hereby authorize the bearer of this note to take in possession and deliver to me all his horses or other property.”<sup>58</sup> Another instance of in which slave freedoms and property ownership came into question was in writings by Tennessee planter A. T. Goodloe. Goodloe was born in Maury County, Tennessee. He lived parts of the state of Tennessee, including West Tennessee. He was, from the beginning interested in medicine and religion, until his brother talked him into farming. He helped his brother farm for a period of time, but then moved on to practicing medicine, and, finally, serving as an itinerant Methodist Minister in Central Tennessee. He also lived in Arkansas for a number of years. He argued against lenience towards slaves, writing,

“what do slaves want with money? What good can it possibly do them? I can tell you what becomes of most of it. The proprietors of road-side groceries get it. There are several such filthy institutions in the country, and they are considered by the good neighbors to be great nuisances; but these neighbors, with scarcely an exception, allow their negroes to make what money they can for themselves, and give them the privilege of going wherever their inclinations may lead them at night and on Sunday.”<sup>59</sup>

Goodloe argued that slaves deserved to be rewarded, but that it was foolish to allow them such freedoms as money and independence of movement. He goes on to argue that masters should take their slaves out, or at least send them with the overseer, but never allow them to go alone, and allow them to pick “such things as suits their fancies, within a certain limit.”<sup>60</sup> Goodloe believed that rewards were important, but that slaves were

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>59</sup> Ed. James O. Breeden, *Advice Among Masters; The Ideal in Slave Management in the Old South* (Westport, CT; Greenwood Press, 1980), 320.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 320.

not intelligent or moral enough to have their own money and spare time. However, a great number of whites disagreed with these viewpoints, as evidenced by writings from other Tennessee inhabitants.

The other side argued that offering slaves incentives like the right to self-hire and own property would better the system and create a more productive work force. This idea can be seen in a letter by an unnamed Southern cultivator from Tennessee, who discussed his planter neighbor's habit of "paying his negroes so much per load (cash) for all the manure they can make or save, and the result, in an economical and sanitary point of view, is most gratifying...this admirable system brings productiveness to the fields of the planter, and encourages his negroes in habits of economy and industry"<sup>61</sup> This individual was very much in favor of providing slaves with opportunities such as this, for the mutual benefit of both the slave and master. In the same way, a minister from West Tennessee encouraged celebrations and rewards for slaves. He wrote in favor of holding celebrations for the slaves in honor of holidays like the Fourth of July or when the crop had been laid. He argues that these type of revels "would be to anyone a refutation to all the preambles, resolutions, reports, and speeches of abolition societies,"<sup>62</sup> because they provide a break, a rest, for the slaves. In addition he contends that these celebrations foster a sense of goodwill and gratitude toward the masters, which in turn results in increased production and willingness to work among slaves. This ongoing debate created a dichotomy of reactions from Southern whites. The faction of whites that felt the system of slavery was undermined by slave independence mounted an increasing number of complaints. Growers and others fought for a number of new, more restrictive laws that

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 262.

would curb the slaves' ability to own and trade property. While evidence in support of both sides exists in West Tennessee, it is sparse.

It is imperative to uncover more information about the slaves in West Tennessee and begin to form a comparison to other slave states in the South. This type of information is significant for several reasons: the subject remains an important part of West Tennessee history; West Tennessee is lagging behind East and Central Tennessee in such information; and it is necessary to compare slavery and its components to other areas and practices in the South. In beginning to piece together information regarding slavery in West Tennessee in a way that is comparable to other states, primary sources are vital. There are several primary source government documents and plantation records that do not deal explicitly with the slaves or even property ownership, but from which a great deal of information can be inferred. These types of documents are also the same or very similar to documents and records used by scholars studying slave property ownership and the attitudes surrounding the issue in other states. Utilizing similar sources and documents is necessary to form accurate comparisons to systems of slavery and its economic activities in other states. Close readings of these documents tell the reader about expectations placed on slaves, about property owned by slaves, and about money earned by slaves. One such Source that is extremely informative in examining and understanding property ownership and plantation economies is the Southern Claims Commission.

The Southern Claims Commission is an index of claims filed by Southerners from 1871 to 1873. More than twenty thousand claims were filed by the March 3, 1873, deadline, and some 3,929 of those were claims filed by Tennesseans stating that their

property had been taken by members of the United States military for use during the Civil War.<sup>63</sup> The supplies needed to keep the army going were extensive, and it became routine for soldiers to requisition whatever they needed from farms and residences during the war. The U.S. government started officially recognizing claims for reimbursement of necessities by citizens in 1864. However, it wasn't until 1871 that the government decided to establish a committee to deal with the large number of incoming requests for reimbursement. On March 3, 1872 an act of Congress created the Southern Claims Commission, also known as the Commissioners of Claims.<sup>64</sup>

There were three commissioners appointed by the president to take the claims. Each claimant had to carefully describe his losses, as well as prove his loyalty to the Union. In order to prove his loyalty and support his demands claimants called witnesses to give testimony to their allegations. The paperwork associated with each claim is often very extensive and detailed. All evidence in support of the claims, including testimonials, receipts, depositions and personal interviews had to be filed by March 10, 1879.<sup>65</sup> The commission had six years to review all the claims. Many of the claims were easily dismissed, and now they are called Barred and Disallowed Case Files. Of 22,298 filed claims, less than 7,092 fit the commission's requirements for loyalty and proof of possession. The amounts claimed totaled over \$60 million, but only \$4.6 million were approved.<sup>66</sup> It was often the case that those loyal to the Union were denied reparations, even when their claims were approved. Those claims that were approved are archived by state and county as Southern Claims Commission Approved Claims 1871-1880. The

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<sup>63</sup> National Archives, "Southern Claims," Footnote Original Documents, <http://www.footnote.com/page/71/>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

claims can be extremely helpful primary sources in research, as they include first-person accounts of average civilian life and property during the Civil War. The claims records for Tennessee are, just as of recently, becoming available on microfilm and online. It is possible to look through records for specific counties in Tennessee, like Shelby and Fayette. However, one pitfall in using the records of the Southern Claims Commission is that it can be difficult to tell whether the claimant was, at the time of and directly before the Civil War, a slave. Because the claims were filed following the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, there are no precise indications that the claimant was indeed a slave. For that reason it is important to cross reference the information filed in the claim with information from local court records and other primary source documents, like the Records of Antebellum Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War.

The Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War, edited by Kenneth M. Stampp, is the largest collection of plantation records that are quite easily accessible. These records are on microfilm and can be found in genealogical and university libraries around the United States, as well as many historical societies. Often called the Stampp collection, the Records are in a series. Each series has an accompanying guide to explain and help the user make sense of all the information. The first group in the series has over four hundred rolls of microfilm from 11 stores in seven states.<sup>67</sup> These records again do not always deal explicitly with slaves in the plantation system, but they can be examined carefully for information regarding the slaves. For example, when looking for evidence of property ownership, trade, and economy, the researcher can examine the records for mention of masters recording their

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<sup>67</sup> Martin Schipper, *A Guide to the Microfilm Edition of Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution Through the Civil War* (Bethesda; University Publications of America, 1989)

own trading with slaves, or censuring others for doing the same.<sup>68</sup>

Another source of evidence is local and county court records. Documents like these are most likely the nearest and occasionally the most accessible documents in the research process. However, local court records are often stored in county courthouses that are not used to dealing with researchers. It can take explaining and convincing to gain access to the documents. Once the documents are at one's disposal, files relating to topics such as "slave crime" or "crimes," or any similar headings may make mention of slave activity that could benefit the research.<sup>69</sup> Documents like Plantation owners' papers and runaway slave notices are also good places to look for mention of property ownership and trade. It may also be helpful to go through the petitions to the Tennessee General Assembly from the Memphis area.

Finally, it is slowly becoming a more standard practice to rely on "previously neglected primary sources-slave autobiographies, interviews, folktales, songs, narratives"<sup>70</sup> These primary sources and oral histories can be vitally important. There are a number of accounts relating to Tennessee and the Nashville area, but only a select few taken regarding West Tennessee. In 1936 the Works Progress Administration, or WPA, sent Federal Writer's Teams to interview former slaves living in Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.<sup>71</sup> The interviewers were given specific instructions for recording the interviews, and lists of questions. They were very concerned with accurately reflecting the spoken black dialects in the transcripts.<sup>72</sup> Over time the project

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<sup>68</sup> Dylan C. Penningroth, email to author, July 17, 2007.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South 1790-1915* (Chicago; University of Illinois Press, 1997), 29.

<sup>71</sup> Ed. Andrea Sutcliffe, *Mighty Rough Times I Tell You* (Winston-Salem; John F. Blair, Publisher, 2000), viii.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., viii.

extended to other states, including Tennessee. The project ended in 1938, at which point there were approximately two thousand interviews, a figure which represented only roughly two percent of the ex-slave population of the United States.<sup>73</sup> The collection was published as *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*. Out of the compilation of narratives, there were only twenty-six from Tennessee. These narratives, in addition to narratives left out of the official set and compiled by historian George P. Rawick in the 1970s, can be very beneficial in learning first-hand how life under the institution of slavery actually was. All of these documents are stepping stones in researching and understanding the lives and history of slaves in West Tennessee, and in forming a comparison to the institution of slavery in other Southern states.

African American history continues to draw the attention of scholars. It is a field still lacking in information, still demanding consideration. A great deal has been studied and examined in the field; however, a great deal remains to be found. Historians and researchers throughout the United States are putting time and effort into learning about slavery and the foundations of the South. They are working hard to understand the cultures, customs, and lives of enslaved African Americans. This is a positive trend that needs to continue, and spread to regions of the country like West Tennessee, which remains devoid of information regarding its slaves. West Tennessee has a rich history involving cotton, slavery, and a plantation mentality. The history of slavery in West Tennessee needs attention, needs to be brought to the forefront of research. It seems very likely that West Tennessee had a system of slavery comparable to the rest of the Southern United States. The evidence for activities like trade, hiring out, and property ownership

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., viii.

exists; it just needs to be sought out, revealed, and unburied.