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Slavery in North America

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The Rise of the Planter Class

Although Africans, both slave and free, shared some similar experiences in the North American colonies in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, by the 18th century their lives were largely determined by the geographic area and period of time in which they lived. This essay focuses on how the planter class, dominant in social and governing spheres, shaped the lives of enslaved Africans in North America. By contrasting the slave experience in different geographic regions, I will prove that the rise of a planter class in the Chesapeake and the lowcountry was responsible for the increasing depravity of slave life in the 18th century.

The rise of a planter class was engendered by the enormous profits of the tobacco, rice, and indigo industries. In the 1600s, agricultural work was done by both master and slaves, who usually did not number more than a few. However, this changed as cash crops came to dominate the Chesapeake and lowcountry. By the mid to late 18th century over one third of slaves in the lowcountry worked on plantations with more than fifty slaves, and in the Georgetown District this proportion was over half (Berlin 2003, 63, 67-71). Plantations became fewer and larger as smaller planters were pushed out of business, creating a class of planters who controlled a majority of land and slaves.

The profitability of southern agriculture led to a massive increase in the demand for slaves, which was satisfied through importation from Africa. The period of 1701-1725 saw the arrival of 5,806 slaves. A century later, the same 25-year period saw a tenfold increase to 59,441 imported slaves (TSTD, Eltis et al 2017). As the numbers of slaves on each plantation increased, owners had to devise ways to prevent rebellion and reap maximum labor from each individual. This resulted in a “social order based on bondage, which required raw power to sustain it” (Berlin 2003, 60).

Planters used both legal and more dubious methods to enforce discipline among their slaves. Seventeenth century slavery laws in Virginia paved the way for the creation of a slave society. In 1662, the Virginia Assembly passed the simple yet hugely consequential law that “all children born in this country shalbe held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother” (Rose 1999, 19). A 1680 law aimed at combatting insurrection prevented slaves from carrying any sort of weapon, and additionally required them to carry permits when they left their master’s property (Rose 1999, 20). South Carolina followed Virginian precedent when in 1690 it enacted a law freeing slaveholders from legal responsibility in the murder of a slave (Berlin 2003, 73-74). In 1778, Benjamin West remarked that “a man will shoot a negro with as little emotion as he shoots a hare” (Rose 1999, 55-56).

Increasingly harsh punishment and working conditions followed these laws as planters faced no legal consequences for their treatment of slaves. Masters made sure newly arrived slaves were aware of their lowly status by giving them new names, separating them from kin and countrymen, and physically isolating them from free people. Overseers devised grotesque punishments to discourage disobedience. Slaveholders maximized the value of their property by increasing work hours, reducing days off, and preventing slaves from dedicating time to their own personal crops (Berlin 2003, 57-62). Benjamin West described the cultivation of rice as “very destructive” to slaves, as the labor was physically difficult and disease was rampant in the rice swamps (Rose 1999, 55-56).

The wealthiest planters took deliberate actions to create a social hierarchy with themselves at the top. Through marriages, business deals, and political alliances, these men developed a “paternalist ideology” and a “vision of social relations that emphasized deference and authority” (Berlin 2003, 63). This consolidation of power angered free poor whites, who rose up, unsuccessfully, against the planters in 1676 in Bacon’s Rebellion. As a result of this tension, planters further stripped the rights and opportunities of blacks in order to artificially elevate the status of free whites. This marginal difference in social status became the “basis of allegiance among the lower ranks” and the key to placating poor whites (Berlin 2003, 55-59).

More than any other factor, the existence of a plantation economy and the resultant planter class dictated the lives of blacks in the Chesapeake and the lowcountry. Slaves were a part of agricultural production, so every aspect of their existence was geared toward profitability. To see the full extent of the planter regime’s impact on slave life, it is necessary to contrast it with the economic and social conditions of the North and the Lower Mississippi Valley at the same time.

Although slaves in the North experienced worsening conditions in this time period, they would never experience the large scale depravity that existed in the south. Northerners followed the southern model of enacting legislation that increased the power of slaveholder over slave. They also gave slaves new names and isolated them from free people (Berlin 2003, 83-85). However, northern slaveholders never worked together in the same way that southern planters did in order to control the social hierarchy.

The primary difference between slave labor in the North and in the South was caused by the economic diversification that existed in the north. Whereas slaves in a given region of the south all worked basically the same job, northern slaves were often skilled at multiple jobs. The plantation system never came into being in the north, and as a result, labor was not segregated in the same way it was on a plantation (Berlin 2003, 87-88). There was no unified class of slaveholders because there was no one dominant industry. Without that class, the harshness of slave laws and dominance of the severe slaveholder ideology that existed in the south never fully emerged in the north. The success of northern slave owners was not completely reliant on slaves in the same way that it was for their southern counterparts.

The Lower Mississippi Valley presents a sharply contrasting case of eighteenth century slave life. The French government halted the importation of slaves into the region in 1730 after a violent Native American revolt. Slaveholders had to give concessions to their slaves, black and indigenous, because the labor supply was finite. Tobacco exports from this region failed to produce the same profits as exports from the Chesapeake, and as a result, slaves moved to the port city of New Orleans. In this city their lives began to resemble those of free people, as they were hired out for different types of labor, formed families, and were able to travel freely. After the Spanish took control of the area in 1769, they enacted a law enabling slaves to purchase their freedom, which many did using profits from their independent slave economy (Belin 2003, 88-95).

Two factors in the Lower Mississippi Valley worked together to prevent the formation of a planter class: plantation crops did not produce sufficient profits, and there was no importation of slaves. Slaves proved their ability to create their own economy without the restrictions of the planter class. The plantation economy laid bare one of the most abhorrent aspects of human nature, but the success of slaves in Mississippi proved how people could survive and succeed in the most hostile of conditions.

Works Cited

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