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Family Life, Sexuality, and Marriage

Family

The family proved a principal source of strength to black and white women, but it also placed some of the greatest demands on their emotions, time, energy, and health. At its best, a family provided solace, support, love, and companionship; at its worst, it meant domestic violence, heartbreak, separation, and pain. High mortality affected black and white family stability. For many enslaved women, the family offered shelter against the brutality and oppression of slavery, but the family was also vulnerable to the whims of slave owners. No laws protected slave marriages. Sales broke up an estimated 20 percent of all slave families. Nevertheless, the family played a key role in enslaved women's struggles to combat oppression and gave them a sense of purpose. For white women, the family was the central institution in their lives, and family members were often their dearest companions.

The emergence of a more advanced plantation system by the late eighteenth century fostered larger and more stable slave communities. With the ending of legal slave importations in 1808, which had brought more males than females to this country, a

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more balanced sex ratio emerged. By the early antebellum period, many enslaved lived within a nuclear family structure. Finding a marriage partner and creating a family became easier, especially for those living on large plantations. Yet the enslaved could never ensure family stability. The greatest disruption to such stability was the death of an owner or reduced financial circumstances, often prompting the need to sell slaves. A downswing in the economy, a drop in crop prices, or gambling debts could require the need for cash. Slaveholders might rent or sell a slave to minimize expenses, earn money, or rid themselves of a truculent worker. When planter families migrated to start life anew, they might take only a portion of their slaves with them, ignoring family cohesion by splitting up enslaved partners, children, or siblings to fit their needs.

It is important not to oversimplify the structure of enslaved families or to rely on a white model as the norm. The enslaved family was never a fixed institution, and a variety of patterns defined it. Studies of slaves on large plantations reveal multiple family forms and a range of household types, including nuclear, single parent, solitary, and extended. Perhaps typical of those living on large plantations were some 160 slave families residing on sizeable Louisiana plantations. A study shows that nearly three-quarters of these enslaved lived in parent-child groups. Two parents were present in half these families; a single parent, usually the mother, headed 16 percent of these. Slightly less than 20 percent of all slaves lived alone, and nearly all of them were men. These structures could change throughout an individual's lifetime, and a family might incorporate some, or even all, these forms. Family type also varied by the size of the plantation or farm, slaves' economic activities, slave sales, an owner's character, and the type of cash crop grown. Whatever its form, for enslaved women, the family was the institution that provided moments of joy amidst daily oppression. Home was the setting where they could function, away from the constant scrutiny of their owners.

Enslaved families usually lived in single cabins, although another family, an elderly relative, or a single person might share

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Figure 1.1 Family of slaves at the Gaines House, Hanover County, Virginia. Source: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC [reproduction number: LC-DIG-ds-05506].

these quarters as well (Figure 1.1). Masters encouraged slaves to live in family units. They perceived this as a means to provide greater stability in the black community, discourage runaways, and enhance owners' wealth when slave infants were born. While the nuclear family was important, the enslaved also received support from extended family members. Evidence of this was the value that slaves placed on perpetuating family names. Parents retained a remarkable knowledge of genealogy and often named their children after grandparents, aunts, and uncles on both the maternal and paternal side.

In the slave community, kin or friends might share parenting duties. Older enslaved women or young girls often watched infants while parents labored in the fields. Relatives and friends often assisted single mothers with child-rearing. If mothers had been sold or had died, leaving an enslaved child without a biological parent, aunts, sisters, grandmothers, or women in the slave community helped to raise the youngster. One enslaved woman

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recalled that with her mother living on one plantation and her father on another, female relatives raised her. Frederick Douglass, former slave and abolitionist, scarcely remembered his mother, for she was hired out to work on another plantation when he was an infant and died when he was seven. Douglass, raised by his grandmother and an older woman, related that he saw his mother no more than four or five times in his lifetime and only at night when she could leave the plantation to visit her son.

White families also depended on broad kin networks. Since family members never lived with the threat of sale, white households were, of course, more stable than slave families were. The extended family was probably less essential in the daily lives of whites but did provide opportunities for sustenance, companionship, business ventures, socializing, and child-rearing. For instance, the Petigru (also spelled Pettigrew) families included a wide assortment of aunts, uncles, cousins, and stepchildren. Spread across two states, some Petigru kin lived in the upcountry near Abbeville and others in Charleston and Georgetown, South Carolina, as well as Lake Phelps in North Carolina. They visited one another sporadically and often summered together on Pawley's, Sullivan's, or Kiawah Islands. Petigru women corresponded frequently, sharing advice, joys, sorrows, as well as family gossip. They sent one another home-produced goods and food; attended family weddings, parties, and debutante balls; and assisted with childbirth and nursing the sick.

Most white families like the Petrigrus existed as nuclear households but expanded to draw in kin, friends, and visitors. The composition of a family could change quickly. Mary and Charles Colcock Jones of Liberty County, Georgia, who were enjoying the tranquility of middle age and an empty nest, unexpectedly took charge of raising their infant granddaughter when their daughter-in-law died in childbirth. After her mother died, three-year-old Virginia Tunstall was sent from North Carolina to Alabama to be raised by her aunt and uncle. When white families moved west, their migration was often in response to the urgings of relatives already settled on the frontier. Frequently groups

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of families migrated together. The Lides moved to Alabama, and the extended family, including parents, six children, six grandchildren, and a number of slaves, went with them.

Family members helped to offset life's vicissitudes and to provide affection and assistance in times of need. Letters among family members requested and offered advice, shared gossip, updated family members on children's physical growth and delightful antics, and detailed family activities and health. At every age, southern women understood the importance of personal ties to their families. Family bonds among whites sometimes also helped to ameliorate the class divide. Rich and poor relatives might live near one another, and the wealthy might assist their less fortunate relatives. For instance, Gertrude Thomas and her husband Jefferson, living on a plantation near Augusta, Georgia, hired a cousin as their overseer and a poor female cousin as their seamstress. Shared or familial surnames created strong associations in the South, offering comfort and acceptance in a place where friendships were often difficult to establish or maintain and outsiders and strangers were regarded with a wary eye.

Despite the importance of family, relationships were not always harmonious, and family members and kin did not always get along. While southern women rarely aired publicly the details of marital troubles, tension and misunderstanding existed in a number of households. Court and church records reveal that couples quarreled, men drank and gambled, and children fought or fled home. Men and women committed adultery; men fathered or women bore children out of wedlock. Family members who misbehaved could publicly shame an entire family. South Carolinian Thomas Chaplin proved a continuous disappointment to his mother. Females in the Petigru family had no use for the new wife of a nephew, feeling that her common background, poor manners, and bad teeth were well below their standards. They all but snubbed her when she came to visit.

Slave families no doubt also experienced disharmony. It is easy to understand how the enslaved, enduring so much oppression and hardship and living within the close confines of a tiny cabin, might turn their exasperation or anger on family members.

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Husbands or wives might take out their frustration on a spouse or on their children. Domestic violence and alcoholism in both white and slave families led to troubled familial relationships.

Courtship

Despite a married woman's narrow legal standing and the challenges marriage could bring, most southern women, both black and white, were eager to marry. Southern society expected them to do so. Enslaved women living on large plantations usually had an easier time finding a mate than did the enslaved residing on small farms. On the former, young black men and women interacted on a daily basis as they worked and often socialized during their limited free time. Josiah Collins of Lake Phelps, North Carolina, allowed his slaves frequent opportunities to interact with slaves living on the adjacent Pettigrew plantation, which meant they had additional choices of friends or partners. At church, slaves from several plantations gathered to worship and socialize. Young women dressed gaily, donning their single cotton dress and clean handkerchief, fixing their hair, and primping to attract a man's attention. The enslaved on small farms had limited choices in finding a partner, and bondmen often courted women on nearby farms. Some male slaves crept out at night to woo a young woman. More likely, though, they traveled once a week with their owner's permission slip in hand to court someone living elsewhere.

A number of free black women living and working in southern cities faced a limited selection of eligible men, since fewer free black males lived in urban areas than did females. New Orleans, as one example, had 100 free women of color for every 57 free black men, eliminating marriage for many females. Similarly, free black women in Charleston comprised approximately 61 percent of the population of free blacks there. State laws forbid interracial marriages, and many free black women were unwilling to marry a slave. Yet in some instances, a free black woman formed a liaison with a male slave and might eventually earn enough money to

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purchase his freedom. Even that became increasingly problematic over time as southern states passed laws requiring manumitted slaves to leave the state. Some free black women preferred not to marry so that they could remain independent agents and claim their wages and property.

Courtship in the slave community varied significantly, from the casual to the ritualized. Practices could be romantic as men pursued a comely woman. Men sometimes solicited the assistance of a conjurer to place a spell on the desired young woman to improve their chances of winning her. Yet many slaves had no time, energy, or use for formal rituals. Jane Johnson, an elderly former slave, testified “Dat courtin’ stuff is what white folks does, no nigger knows what dat fancy thing is.” Far more typical were casual interactions enhanced by the tug of mutual attraction.

Prior to marriage, young enslaved women enjoyed relatively open sexual relationships with black men, especially compared to the moral behavior prescribed for and expected of southern white women. Slave babies born out of wedlock were welcomed into the mother’s family; the child’s parents might or might not eventually marry. Usually by the birth of a second child, a young woman had found a permanent mate. The black community did not condemn premarital sex or the birth of an infant to a single woman. Adulterous relationships, however, were less acceptable.

Nor were plantation owners very disturbed by open sexual behavior in the slave community. Planters accepted slave children born out of wedlock (a number of whom they had sired) since each newborn increased the plantation labor pool and the owner’s wealth. On the other hand, someone like John Hartwell Cocke, an unusually paternalistic and moralistic master who hoped to elevate his slaves and send them to the African colony of Liberia, was shocked when he discovered his Alabama slaves living in what he deemed a “state of moral depravity.” Several enslaved couples who were not married were cohabiting, mulatto children were running everywhere, venereal disease was rampant, and several black girls were living with white men. Cocke immediately built additional slave cabins, hired a Baptist preacher to instill

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Christian morals in the enslaved, and offered wayward slaves a choice of marriage or punishment.

Whites, in reacting to the sexual behavior of their enslaved, often publicly accused black women of being sexually active and provocative, creating the image of temptresses enticing men into illicit relationships. This charge no doubt helped to assuage white male guilt over their own behavior when they had sex with or raped slave women, or was uttered by white women to excuse their husbands' predatory wanderings. Yet sexuality in the black community was more restrained than whites assumed it to be. Black women exhibited some control over their sexuality and reproduction, for on average, an enslaved woman bore her first child two or three years after her first menstrual period (which, on average occurred when girls were about 15). Many anxious mothers warned their daughters about the sexual nature of black and white men.

Among elite white women, finding a husband could become a full-time pursuit, and families spent a great deal of time, energy, and money on courtship rituals such as balls and parties for teenage daughters. Meeting eligible men often demanded effort, for finding a husband was not always easy, especially for those residing on isolated plantations and in rural settings. With the exception of girls living in cities such as Charleston or New Orleans, where young men and numerous activities created a social whirl, contacts with single men were infrequent. Young people might meet at church, at a party or ball, or at the home of school friends or relatives. Such locations were safe meeting grounds; they attracted young men and women of the same social class who understood proper social boundaries and behavior. For instance, Mary Boykin's future husband, James Chesnut, was the brother of a schoolmate, and they met in Charleston where she was attending school. Though James's wealth and social standing made him a suitable choice, Mary was only 14. Her parents became so concerned about a relationship developing between the two that they pulled Mary out of school and sent her to live on their Mississippi plantation. The two did marry—but later.

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Family connections often played a part in the choice of a partner. Most southern white women, whether privileged or poor, had little opportunity to meet men living beyond their county unless they, like Mary, went away to school or visited friends and family far from home. Marrying a first cousin or someone from the same county was common among southerners. Unlike in the North, cousin marriages were legal in the South. Such relationships developed naturally, since social interactions with extended family and neighbors were common. Cousin marriages made sense, for they cemented future family and business ties and could consolidate land holdings. There was no doubt something comforting about marrying a man you knew well. Mary Jones married her first cousin, Charles Colcock Jones, creating a family united by land, tradition, common relations, and deep affection. Even distant family ties could be important. Robert E. Lee married Mary Anna Randolph Custis—the two shared the same great-great grandfather. Three of the eight children in the Thomas Lenoir family of North Carolina married first cousins. Isabella Fraser of South Carolina married her first cousin, and when he died, she wed her second cousin. Among North Carolina planter families, one in ten marriages among that state's elite were between first or second cousins. Other southern states may have exhibited a similar pattern.

Several marriages might occur between two white families, such as two brothers in one family marrying two sisters in another. When Thomas Chaplin of St Helena Island, South Carolina, married Mary McDowell, her sister Sophy moved in with the couple. Mary was bedridden after bearing four children, and Sophy became a surrogate mother to the children as well as a companion to Thomas, accompanying him to church and on shopping trips and listening to his endless woes. Ten months after Mary died at the age of 29, Thomas and Sophy married and remained together for 40 years. Sometimes, however, marrying the sibling of a deceased spouse might arouse criticism, as happened when Moses Mordecai of North Carolina, whose wife Margaret died in childbirth, married her sister Ann.

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Courtship rituals varied significantly among white women, depending on the individual, the family's social status, religious principles, and degree of parental control. Young men and women, who might have interacted closely and played together as young children, typically separated during adolescence as they pursued their own activities and schooling. Reuniting during courtship often led to intense interaction between the sexes. For wealthy women, especially those living in or near southern cities, courtship became the stuff of myths about the Old South, some of which persist today. Debutante balls, horse races, parties, dances, and teas contributed to an endless round of social activities with several eligible suitors pursuing urban girls.

This was probably a rare time in young women's lives when they held some power over men who were courting them, especially females who were rich, attractive, and highly desirable as future wives. Visitors to the South often remarked that southern belles were true coquettes. They learned their lessons well and knew how to flirt with men. Competing for a man's attention could resemble medieval courtship practices, as men sought a beautiful girl's affection. Some young women measured their success by the number of marriage proposals they received. Such an exhilarating experience was short lived, however, for once married, southern wives were to be compliant and submissive. On the other hand, when courting couples lived far from one another, they likely carried on a sedate courtship via correspondence rather than frequent social interaction. Robert E. Lee pursued Mary Custis for nine months by letter, always making sure his thoughts and penmanship reflected his elite status and character as he formally professed his feelings for her. Interestingly, during their long engagement, Lee shared with Mary his immersion in Savannah's lively social scene and his flirting with two sisters at several dances and dinners. (Perhaps because of the double standard, Mary excused his behavior and revelations.)

Like Lee and Custis, not all courtship was coquettish and frivolous, even among the well-to-do, for religious precepts encouraged female meekness and piety. Frances Webb met the

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scholarly Rev. Sidney Bumpass after he heard her read for her final exams at school, and apparently her mastery of Greek literature charmed him. However, being an itinerant minister, he was too poor to support a wife and family. Two years passed, and Bumpass received an appointment to a Raleigh church, a position that promised him a decent salary. He then began to woo Webb, first by sending her a white leather New Testament, which he marked with his favorite passages for her to read. A year later, he asked for her hand, and she accepted. Another example of restrained behavior was that between Bessie Lacy and Thomas Dewey. They met through one of her schoolmates and became engaged in 1851. Theirs was a distant courtship, both geographically and emotionally, carried on through correspondence. Bessie's letters reflected the various phases of the relationship. During the initial stage, Bessie's penmanship, elegant stationery, and formal diction reflected her concern with proper behavior. A second period became more casual and intimate as she revealed details about her personal character and daily activities. In the final stage, Bessie expressed uneasiness about their forthcoming wedding but adopted a submissive, rather helpless demeanor as she realized that the man she had chosen could not match her dreams of lifelong happiness and intimate companionship.

Bessie was hardly alone. Many antebellum white women dreamed of a companionate relationship, expecting that in marriage they would find a man who would be their friend, lover, and soul mate for life. Yet companionship, then as now, implies equality. Men ordinarily possessed greater physical strength and held economic and legal control over their wives. Few men willingly accepted the idea of gender equality, whether married or not, for it would have demanded enormous sacrifices and created a change in the law or in well-entrenched ideas about male honor and proper gender relationships.

Perhaps women like Bessie worried, knowing that their choice of a husband was the most important decision they would ever make. A good man could lead to a lifetime of happiness and fulfillment; a bad one, to violence and misery. Most marriages fell between the extremes. Few women ever found that perfect

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man, though prescriptive literature and the profusion of sentimental novels being published and read offered them that fantasy. Winning a divorce was expensive and meant exposing personal details of an unhappy marriage. It was actually illegal in South Carolina. Because home and family would consume women's future life and opportunities to create an independent life were few, their choice of a mate was critical.

Although information about yeoman farm girls is sparse, what little there is indicates that few courtship rituals defined their prenuptial relationships, though apparently many country girls engaged in freer sexual behavior than did elite women. The number of scantily clad young women openly parading along the street of one North Carolina village startled one visitor. Yet parental and religious constraints may have imposed limits on their behavior. Like privileged women, most farm girls married men from their local area whom they met at church or through family and community activities.

While marriage seemed an imperative goal for most southern white women, some adolescent girls expressed fears about the institution and a desire to remain single. A teenager, Martha Crawford of Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, confessed, "I am continually haunted with the idea of being married." She was not alone. One can imagine impressionable girls observing married women and how childbearing, child-rearing, and domestic chores circumscribed their lives, causing exhaustion, poor health, and premature aging. Compared to adolescents' relatively carefree lives and the joy many girls found in their female friendships, marriage might not have seemed appealing. For most, however, love and perhaps social pressure carried the day. Young women like Crawford who expressed such fears did find a decent man and wed. She married in her twenties and accompanied her missionary husband to China.

Parents played a limited role in the selection process. The characteristics they sought in suitable mates for their daughters did not necessarily parallel the girls' desires. From a father's or a mother's perspective, financial security, family background, and status helped to determine a man's acceptability. Young women

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would have included affection as well. While parents rarely could influence their daughter's choice, instances of elopement show that some must have tried but failed. Parents often had a more subtle impact on a daughter's choice of a partner through the manner in which they raised her, including characteristics they taught her to value, their responses to a suitor, and what gifts they bestowed on the newlyweds. Parental consent was not essential for marriage, though most well-mannered men went through the motions of requesting a woman's hand from her father as a gesture of courtesy.

Though it would have been unseemly for a woman to discuss openly a suitor's finances, a man's monetary well-being influenced his chances to woo and to win the woman of his choice. An elite woman might turn down a suitor because he could not support her in the manner to which she was accustomed. For slave women and poor farm women without dowry or wealthy relatives, money had little or nothing to do with their appeal as future mates; character, appearance, behavior, and ability to work hard were what counted.

The opposite held true when the woman's wealth or family status made the difference to a man. Important to a man was the dowry or inherited wealth a young woman might bring to her marriage. Some southern white men, such as Robert E. Lee, significantly improved their economic standing by marrying a wealthy woman who brought substantial land holdings and slaves to their marriage. Mary Anna Custis was an only child and heir to both the Custis and Fitzhugh fortunes, while Lee claimed only a modest inheritance from his bankrupt father. James Henry Hammond, whose father was a schoolteacher, had ambitions that far surpassed his middle-class upbringing, and he purposely courted wealthy women. He eventually set his sights on Catherine Fitzsimmons, a homely young woman with significant family connections who was sole heir to her Charleston merchant father's fortune. Hammond pursued her relentlessly and finally succeeded, despite strong objections from Catherine's relatives who correctly recognized a fortune hunter. When they refused to allow the marriage, Catherine went into a state of decline, and

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they finally relented. On the other hand, the lack of a sizeable dowry could bring disappointment. Sarah Hicks Williams, a New York woman who married a North Carolina planter and physician, felt the unending disapproval of her mother-in-law, who criticized Sarah for not bringing slaves to her son as part of her dowry.

Miscegenation and Sexuality

Any type of premarital relationship was meaningless when, all too often, white men raped or threatened enslaved women or forced them into marriages or relationships against their wills. Enslaved women were always sexually vulnerable to both black and white men, whether they were single or married. Sexually assaulting an enslaved woman and interracial sex between a white man and black woman were not illegal. Miscegenation, or sex between different races, was, as historian Joshua Rothman claims, “ubiquitous” throughout the South and one of the system’s greatest wrongs against black women. As one bondswoman commented on sexual predation, “Dat wus a general thing ‘mong de slave owners.” Masters and slaves lived in close, physical intimacy. Slavery meant ownership and dominance, and to many southern white men, that meant their right to force sex on black women. A Mrs. Douglas of Virginia saw miscegenation as the “one great evil hanging over the Southern Slave States,” and she claimed, “the practice is more general than even the Southerners are willing to allow.” Historian Brenda Stevenson writes, an enslaved woman’s body was a “location of pleasure, production, and procreation as well as a site of exploitation, alienation, loss, and shame.” Sexual contact between slave masters and enslaved women ran the gamut: rape, sodomy, obsession, single encounters, concubinage, or affectionate, meaningful relationships. Historians estimate that by the Civil War, approximately 10 percent of the southern black population was mulatto, the result primarily of forced relationships between white men and black women. Observers of the South noticed this lightening of the black population, especially in the Upper South.

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Rape defined most miscegenous relationships between white men and enslaved women, often initiated by a plantation owner, his son, an overseer, or a stranger. Wealthy planter David Dickson of Hancock County, Georgia, raped one of his slave girls, Amelia, when she was 14 years old. The child of that forced encounter, Amanda America, was raised in the Dickson home. Dickson never married. In 1865, Amanda married her white father's nephew. (They had to wed in another state.) Her situation, at least economically, was perhaps better than most, though her mother suffered intense heartbreak, for she was never allowed to raise her own child. Dickson willed her his entire fortune when he died, leaving Amanda a wealthy woman.

In a tale related by Pauli Murray about her own family, the wealthy Smiths of Orange County, North Carolina, purchased Harriet, a 15-year-old slave, in 1834 to serve as maid to their daughter, Mary. Five years later, Harriet married a free black, Reuben Day, and in 1842 bore a son. Tragedy intervened when Mary's two brothers, Frank and Sidney, returned from college. They both pursued and competed for Harriet, despite her married state and the horrified reactions of the rest of the Smith family. In 1843, the brothers severely beat and threatened Reuben, and he fled the county, leaving Harriet unprotected. One evening, Sidney broke into her cabin and raped her. This soon became a nightly ritual, and despite Harriet's cries for help, no one could defend her. Frank's jealousy intensified, and one night he attacked Sidney and left him lying in the yard unconscious. Sidney suffered a severe head injury, began to drink heavily, and never again bothered Harriet. Frank took his brother's place, eventually fathering three daughters over the next eight years. Harriet's anguish and helplessness must have been profound. The three mulatto girls were raised in the Smith household (they were, after all, family members), and the entire Smith family suffered deep embarrassment. Neither Mary, Sidney, nor Frank ever married. Yet in her later years, interestingly, Harriet spoke with pride about her white relations.

The experience of another Harriet, Harriet Jacobs, detailed in her highly edited account, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is

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one of the best-known cases of sexual predation. Born around 1813, Harriet became the slave of Dr. John Norcom, a prominent physician of Edenton, North Carolina. Norcom subjected Harriet to unrelenting sexual threats, eager for a physical relationship with the attractive mulatto woman. Harriet resisted his advances and turned to a prominent white lawyer and Congressman living nearby, for protection. Harriet established a liaison with him and eventually bore him two children, both of whom, following the status of their mother, were enslaved. Norcom continued his pursuit, threatening Harriet and her children's future if she did not submit. Harriet feared for her children and finally fled, hiding for nearly seven years in her grandmother's attic, according to her dramatic, emotional account. Eventually she was able to escape to the North and later secured the freedom of her two children.

Yet ownership was not always a factor in men having intercourse with an enslaved woman. Rape was common in the domestic slave trade. On the long journey, enslaved women faced the possibility of a white man or male slave raping them as slave traders forcibly transported them to the place where they would be sold. Isaac Franklin, a partner in one of the most profitable slave trading companies, held one of his enslaved girls for his sexual pleasure and was determined that his business partners would not have a relationship with her. He impregnated another enslaved girl, Lucindy, but then passed her on to a male friend in Louisville, realizing that this situation might create problems because of his impending marriage.

Resisting a man's sexual advances was all but impossible for enslaved women, for if they tried, they might be whipped, mistreated, or tortured. Solomon Northrup in his account of his enslavement, *Twelve Years a Slave*, described an enslaved woman whose master whipped her repeatedly because she tried to resist his sexual advances. Minnie Fulkes of Virginia recalled the suffering of her enslaved mother when she refused to have sex with the overseer. He then brought her into the barn, had her stand on a block, and pulled her arms up over her head and tied a rope around them. He kicked away the block so she dangled from the

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rope and then beat her with a leather strap until blood covered her body. She never told her master, fearing the overseer would kill her.

Some enslaved women fought back, though invariably the results were dire. Celia Bryan's biological white father and master, Jacob Bryan, of Duval County, Florida, raped her. Ultimately, she bore him four children. In 1847, the two got into a fight, and she struck him dead with her hoe. An equally dramatic incident involved a 14-year old enslaved girl, Celia. Robert Newsome, a 60-year-old Missouri farmer, purchased her as a domestic servant. On the way home, he raped her. He built a cabin for her and appeared at night to rape her. Celia eventually bore two children by him. But she developed a relationship with George, a slave on the farm, who urged her to end their master's sexual assaults. One night when Newsome appeared at her cabin, Celia struck him with a blunt stick and killed him. Burning his clothing and body parts in her fireplace and burying the large bones outside, Celia hoped to avoid detection. Apparently when questioned by authorities, George implicated her, probably to save himself, and Celia was brought to trial. Though defended by two white lawyers, who argued that she had a right to defend herself, the court found her guilty. While white women could use the law to defend themselves against sexual predators, a slave woman like Celia lacked that same right. Ultimately, she was hanged in 1855.

In some instances, however, interracial sexual liaisons did reflect affection and even love between a black woman and a white man (and in some cases, between a white woman and a black man). One can't help but wonder whether a slave system could foster relationships of true affection when power between black and white partners was so uneven. Yet a few former enslaved women spoke or wrote lovingly of close relationships with their masters or other white men. Plantation owners sometimes fell in love with bondwomen, and such feelings could have been reciprocated.

Louisiana law, which evolved from French and Spanish legal systems, recognized and allowed miscegenous relationships well into the antebellum period. The state's civil code, based on

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the Napoleonic Code, allowed white men to leave money and possessions to their enslaved mistresses and mulatto children. Some white men in the state admitted the paternity of their offspring from these relationships and willed them a portion of their estates. A man sometimes left a beloved enslaved woman money or land; in some cases, he set her and their children free. But that changed in the 1850s. White family members, who hoped to enjoy large inheritances from their fathers or male relatives, challenged the law. A new law passed by the legislature stated that mulatto children fathered by their slave masters could receive no more than a quarter of deceased men's fortunes.

While southerners knew that interracial sex was common, white men tried to conduct such relationships discreetly. One example involved Susan Hunt, a free woman of black, Cherokee, and white heritage, who had a long, presumably loving relationship with Judge Nathan Sayre of Alabama. Onto his beautiful plantation home, Pomegranate Hall, he added an apartment for Hunt and their three children. For 20 years he appeared as a bachelor in public, a "husband" and father in private. Federal census takers never noted the presence of Hunt or her children in the data they collected, though the community knew. Family legend and documentation suggest that these two shared a private, meaningful life together. A white male like Sayre could cross the South's sexual boundary of color as long as he did not flaunt it. The same must have been true of Charlestonian Henry Grimké, brother of abolitionists Sarah Grimké and Angelina Grimké Weld. He carried on a relationship with his enslaved mistress, Nancy Weston, for 19 years. She bore him three sons.

Couples like Sayre and Hunt never married because marriage between different races was illegal, though, especially in rural areas, such laws were rarely enforced. In a sense, their long relationship created a common-law marriage (when a couple lived together for several years), had that been legal. Biracial relationships might involve a poor white farmer and a former slave or free black woman. Relationships between a slave father and a free white mother complicated the status of any offspring she bore. Their mulatto children were free. What is surprising is that

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antebellum white society apparently evidenced a degree of tolerance or indifference toward such relationships, unlike the violent responses that took place in the postbellum South.

The color barrier in the Old South was less absolute and rigid than one might imagine, even though whites might publicly condemn interracial relationships. Responses from the white community varied considerably, depending on the circumstances. In the mountain South, where people lived far from settled areas, a number of couples were of mixed race. No one seemed to question these violators of miscegenation laws unless someone committed a crime or engaged in behavior that attracted attention. Some interracial couples lived in towns or cities. David Isaacs, a Jewish merchant living in Charlottesville, Virginia, carried on a relationship with Nancy West, an African American, for more than 40 years. They had seven children and lived together for a number of years in a home on that town's main street. They never married. While interracial marriage was illegal, interracial sex was not. At one point, charges were brought against the couple for cohabiting, but the charges were dismissed. For the most part, the public left them alone. Because she was not married, West was able to own property, and by her late 50s, she had become the richest nonwhite in Albemarle County.

As court records show, a number of white husbands and wives engaged in adulterous interracial sexual relationships, though they were far more common and accepted behavior in men than in women. White men had the right to take advantage of slave women; white women did not. Interracial sex between a white woman and a black man was considered truly disgraceful and one of the South's greatest legal transgressions. Nonetheless, some women misbehaved. Several divorce petitions reveal husbands who sued for divorce by charging their spouses with adultery and sex with black partners. A few husbands who presented cases to state legislatures or to the courts received a complete divorce (meaning both partners could remarry), based on accusations of interracial adultery. Such behavior threatened the South's social, racial, and gender order, male honor, and the institution of marriage.

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Because of society's double standard, a woman charging her husband with interracial intercourse might not win a divorce. Louisiana planter Jacob Bieller carried on a long-term relationship with his "bright mulatto" slave. When his wife complained, he threatened to beat her. Ultimately, she fled home and sued for divorce on grounds of physical abuse and adultery. While a husband had a chance of winning a divorce when he charged his wife with interracial adultery, she had to present a litany of complaints: physical and verbal abuse, failure to support her and the children, drunkenness, as well as interracial sex. Despite what seemed to be serious charges, courts did not always support supplicants. In 1824, a Virginia white man accused his wife of carrying on an adulterous relationship with a black man for several years. He demanded an end to his marriage. Because he had behaved violently toward her, the court refused to grant him one.

Some black women knowingly used their sexuality to serve their purpose. They might flirt with their masters and encourage sexual relationships with white men in order to improve their situation, whether or not affection entered the equation. Enslaved women used their feminine charms to gain what they could. Sexual favors with a white owner or overseer could be exchanged for articles of clothing, better food or housing, a lighter workload, and perhaps freedom for herself and for their children. Enslaved women, who otherwise had little power over white men, could achieve momentary control through sexual attraction. James Whitehead became totally "infatuated" with a beautiful young slave woman he had purchased. Though married for 17 years and the father of five children, he and the slave girl openly shared "undisguised fondness and caresses" in front of his family. No divorce was needed, for within a year, the slave girl was gone. But a few divorce petitions reveal a true reversal of authority in white households. In rare instances, a planter's slave mistress moved into his home and exerted power over the white household, giving orders to family members and domestic slaves. In such cases, a victimized, humiliated wife turned to the courts seeking a divorce.

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Of course, many white men disapproved of interracial relationships. Some critics feared a “bleaching” of the black race, raising concerns that physical differences between blacks and whites might fade. The impact of evangelical Christianity on the South in the early antebellum period may have imposed some restraint or at least heightened men’s guilt if they raped or had sex with black women. Ministers decried sexual misconduct and criticized male parishioners who indulged, feeling it reflected poorly on the region and on their churches. Others expressed outrage. The Rev Charles Colcock Jones was livid when he discovered that an acquaintance who had visited his plantation had impregnated one of his slaves. Certainly not all men misbehaved. Slave owner Rachel O’Connor was relieved when she learned about the character of Germany, the man whom she hired as an overseer. “There would be no danger of Germany’s behaving as overseers commonly did amongst the Negroes; that he was too fond of his wife to behave in that way,” she wrote. Her assessment was correct; the man proved to be an excellent, well-behaved overseer.

The double standard victimized black and white women alike. Although rarely the victims of sexual assault, white women often perceived themselves to be the injured party rather than slave women who suffered assaults. Sometimes out of jealousy they accused enslaved women of welcoming physical intimacy. White men were not always discreet about their liaisons. But black and white women did not unite to denounce the perpetrators. Because white men held all the power, wives and enslaved women were helpless to protest publicly. Occasionally, white women confided their despair in their private writings. Mary Boykin Chesnut observed widespread miscegenation on her father-in-law’s South Carolina plantation. “Like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines,” she wrote, “and the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children.”

Harriet Jacobs aroused the jealousy of her mistress, especially when her master requested that she sleep in his bedroom, under the pretext of needing Harriet to care for his four-year-old daughter. James Henry Hammond had sexual relations with an enslaved

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woman and her 12-year-old daughter, Louisa. Wife Catherine discovered her husband's involvement with the young girl. Hammond pushed his wife to the brink by bringing the adolescent into their home to share his bedroom. Catherine, who had been extremely patient over the years with her husband's sexual indiscretions, packed up their children and went to live with relatives near Charleston. After two years, Henry agreed that Louisa would leave if Catherine's relatives found the enslaved girl a position in Charleston. Catherine and the children returned home, but within a few months, so did Louisa. The ultimate resolution and Louisa's reactions are unknown. Jealousy, racism, and feelings of racial superiority aroused strong reactions in white wives, but they often took out their feelings on the victims rather than on their husbands.

White women were often silent, not wanting to undermine their social standing or embarrass their families and communities should the situation become public. Plantation mistresses might treat cruelly an enslaved child they knew their husbands had fathered or insist they sell the child. For instance, John Hunter raped an enslaved woman, Elizabeth, who bore a daughter two weeks after Hunter's wife also bore a child. His wife noticed an obvious family resemblance between the two infants and demanded that the enslaved mother and her baby be sold.

Incredible as it may sound, some spokespersons publicly defended miscegenation as beneficial to the South. In his *Memoir on Slavery*, published in 1838, William Harper insisted that the availability of black women for sex was a social good, saving the region from the pernicious effects of prostitution that was so widespread in the urban North, affording "easy gratification of the hot passions of men." According to Harper, men could expend their sexual appetites through liaisons with black women, and white women could preserve their virtue and delicacy. He believed black women placed little value on their chastity and were, by nature, sexually provocative. It is doubtful that southern women, black or white, saw it this way, but his argument helped to justify male behavior and assuage men's guilt. (Harper was wrong, since prostitution in southern cities was widespread.)

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Forced sex, of course, also had an impact on slave marriages, but rarely could a bondman protect his wife and daughters against rape without risking his own life and perhaps further endangering his wife and children as well. Most enslaved women never dared mention a sexual liaison until years after the fact. Some scholars argue that miscegenation was another effective means by which white men increased their power over black men by claiming access to their women.

A more unusual type of relationship involving white men and young mulatto women was the “fancy girls” of New Orleans, Charleston, and other port cities. This practice, often called “plaçage,” was condoned in the Crescent City. Plaçage evolved from a practice begun during the French colonial period when European settlers in the Louisiana territory, facing a shortage of European women, established relationships with attractive black women. These “quadroons” or “octoroons” (defined specifically as women with one-fourth or one-eighth black blood, though the terms often applied to light-skinned mulatto women) were often so light complexioned that they were hard to distinguish from white women.

Frederick Law Olmsted, while visiting New Orleans, described these women as educated, accomplished, well dressed, and attractive. He also observed that “crime and heart breaking sorrow” could result from plaçage. Planters, gamblers, merchants, and visitors desired these young women to serve as their mistresses or concubines. Not allowed to marry them, a white man lived two lives: as husband and father to his white family and partner of an octoroon woman, often supporting her and their offspring for years or even for a lifetime. The public tolerated the system if couples did not openly flaunt their behavior. These women, desiring a life of ease and prestige, traded sexual favors and companionship for decent housing, nice clothing, money, and gifts for their families. As for the wives of these men, either they did not know, denied the situation, or resigned themselves to what seemed to be inevitable.

At annual quadroon balls, or *bals masqués*, men typically met these women. After paying an entrance fee, a man could

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socialize and dance with light-skinned, eligible young women. Though these dances became highly romanticized in film and fiction, apparently they were often bawdy, at times even violent, events, with drunken men engaging in unbecoming behavior. Advertisements warned participants that any weapons they carried would be confiscated. If a man and young woman felt some mutual attraction, the man would pursue her, sometimes even signing a contract whereby he promised to support her and any offspring. Despite the material advantages, quadroons were still identified as free blacks and thus forbidden to gather in public places when white women were present, punished for committing certain transgressions, unable to interact publicly with whites, and often forbidden to travel freely in the city at night.

Black Women and Marriage

Although slave marriages were not legal, according to white law, in the black community relationships were fully sanctioned and legitimate. The failure to have legal unions brought both advantages and disadvantages to enslaved women. Slave owners encouraged black couples to live together and to bear children. Some held wedding ceremonies for couples, on occasion even celebrating in their parlors. Planters regarded slave marriages as a positive, believing that those who married and bore children tended to be more responsible and less likely to run away. One might conclude then that legalizing these relationships would have made sense. But if slave marriage had been legal, that would have prevented their dissolution and interfered with owners' right to sell married slaves at will. Slave relationships were never to trump planters' economic needs. By the late antebellum period, however, some owners allowed black or white ministers to marry slave couples, creating a union that was at least sanctioned in the eyes of God. Gertrude Thomas of Georgia mentioned attending several slave marriages performed by ministers, and her mother had cakes baked for the celebrations that followed. Even with a

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religious ceremony, owners retained the right to dissolve slave marriages, and few ministers protested.

Slaves developed their own customs to symbolize their unions, based on African traditions and rituals adapted from European culture. Sometimes couples laid two blankets next to one another as a symbol of their union. Others jumped over a broomstick. Often they merely moved into the same cabin together. Yet no slave marriage was secure, whatever the ritual or ceremony.

Some slave owners selected the mates whom their slaves would marry and discouraged any partners they found unacceptable. Charleston planter Mordecai Cohen sent his house servant Mary-Ann to an upcountry plantation to perform fieldwork, for he disapproved of the "rascally fellow" courting her. Other planters took a negative view of their enslaved "marrying abroad" (a cross-plantation marriage) because of possible disruptions to work and the time it took for male partners to visit their wives. One South Carolina slave owner decried these relationships because he felt that traveling to visit wives and children gave enslaved men "a feeling of independence from being ... out of the control of their master for a time." Furthermore, masters who owned male slaves lost any increase to their enslaved population since children belonged to the owner of the enslaved women. Size of plantation made a difference on this issue as well. On farms with only a handful of slaves and few choices of partners, it made sense for masters to be more lenient toward abroad marriages. On large plantations, owners encouraged bondmen to marry slaves living there.

Two of the most dreaded practices that enslaved women endured were forced marriages and the use of a stud for procreation. Virginian Lizzie Grant recalled that she was 17 when her master put her together with the man he wanted to be her husband. "They never cared or thought about our feeling in the matter," she reflected. Mary Gaffney of Texas had no choice in selecting her husband, and this left her with bitter feelings about marriage. "I just hated the man I married, but it was what Maser said to do," Mary recalled years later. Bondwomen knew that owners encouraged slave marriages to serve their own economic

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needs. To some planters, the increase of their labor force was more important than the feelings of enslaved couples.

In a few instances, owners practiced a primitive kind of eugenics in which they selected strong young men and women to mate. The case of Rose Williams reveals such a practice. Mr. Hawkins of Texas owned Rose and her parents. He was apparently a relatively kind master, providing adequate food, limiting his slaves' work hours, and allowing them some freedom. But Hawkins insisted that 16-year-old Rose share a cabin with Rufus, a burly field hand. Initially she failed to understand the implications of this arrangement. The first night Rufus startled Rose by trying to get into bed with her. She pushed him onto the floor and then hit him with a poker. Rufus left but attempted the same thing the next night. Rose again rebuffed him and appealed to her mistress. She was told that Hawkins wanted these two portly slaves to produce children. Hawkins warned Rose that he would whip her if she failed to cooperate. Realizing that she had no choice and feeling some gratitude for her master's relative kindness, Rose complied. This forever soured her on marriage, "'cause one 'sperience am 'nough for this nigger. After what I does for the massa, I's never wants no truck with any man. The Lord forgive this colored woman, but he have to 'scuse me and look for others for to 'plenish the earth."

Rare was the use of stud men whom owners encouraged to impregnate several slave women, but it did happen. These men had no family ties or responsibilities. The children of such liaisons often were unaware of their father's identity. As one enslaved North Carolina woman stated, "I specks dat I doan know who my pappy wuz, maybe de stock nigger on de plantation." Though perhaps exaggerated, one male slave reported that his father had sex with more than 15 enslaved women and fathered at least 100 children.

Marital relationships of the enslaved differed from those of southern whites because sales could split apart families at any time. While planters encouraged slave marriages, they were the prime cause of marital dissolution when they sold their enslaved. Also, bondmen, without economic and political power, had few of the traditional masculine ways of protecting and asserting control

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over their families. While many tried to improve living conditions by engaging in such traditional male tasks as building furniture, chinking cabins, and gathering or hunting food to supplement a monotonous diet, slave husbands were not the ultimate family providers. White masters provided their enslaved with food, shelter, and clothing, limited though they might be. Slave husbands could not protect their wives and children against mistreatment, punishment, rape, or sale.

The issue of the term “matriarchy” frequently arises when studying slave relationships and observing the diminished role of men within the family. Some sociologists and historians once defined the African American family as matriarchal, based in part on the husband-wife relationship that evolved during slavery. The controversial Moynihan Report, released decades ago, asserted that modern African American families seemed unstable and disorganized, just as its authors felt slave families had been. Households headed by females, the report argued, apparently symbolized the troubled state of black families. Some scholars looked to the past to try to explain why many black fathers were absent or powerless, causing problems for their families and for society. They concluded that slavery, by weakening marital bonds, presaged modern social problems.

Recent studies have shown that the concept of matriarchy is inappropriate for defining the structure of enslaved and African American families. Researchers have pointed to the egalitarian relationship between black men and women, a situation worthy of note because it did not parallel the white experience. The power and strength of black women were striking, especially in comparison to antebellum white women, who held so little power. Like many others, historian Suzanne Lebsock argues that “matriarchy” improperly describes slave families and a black woman’s role:

It needs to be understood from the beginning that the term “matriarch” would never have been applied to black women in the first place were it not for our culture’s touchiness over reduced male authority within the family. It is a telling fact that matriarchy has most often been used as a relative term. That is, women are called matriarchs when the power they exercise relative to the men of

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their own group is in some respect greater than that defined as appropriate by the dominant culture. Given this standard, women need not be the equals of men, much less men's superiors, in order to qualify as matriarchs.

Because white women held little power in their families, situations in which bondwomen seemed powerful, or at least the equals of husbands, resulted in a misapplication of the term "matriarchy." Scholars prefer the term "matrifocal" when describing enslaved families in which mothers had primary responsibility for children. The relationships that evolved between enslaved men and women created more equitable interaction within their marriages than those between white wives and husbands.

Black women often had no choice but to become strong, independent, and resilient, many living free of the dominance of black men, though, of course, dominated by white men. Enslaved women's power derived, in part, from African tradition. Lineal descent often passed through the mother's side of the family in African cultures, and women customarily played an important role in family survival. When enslaved fathers were absent, black mothers raised their children on their own. On southern plantations, black girls and boys interacted together and rarely separated as adolescents. Both slave men and women labored in the fields, and black women, like men, were expected to be strong and hardworking. While gender defined some work tasks, especially on large plantations, overseers and masters expected enslaved women and men to perform almost any job.

While family and community were important in the lives of enslaved women, not all was rosy, nor did all women wield power within the family. Slaves lived under an inordinate amount of stress, and black men and women resented the constant oppression and servitude they endured. Men might take out their frustration and anger on those closest to them: their wives and children. Mothers might do the same and lash out at their children or husbands after a particularly trying day. Instances of domestic violence were rarely aired in public. Black women typically suffered in silence, not wanting to expose their fragile lives to additional

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stress. They internalized bad behavior and carried on. Sometimes they did take extreme cases of abuse to their masters or to church disciplinary committees that monitored and punished communicants' behavior in domestic disputes.

Despite their strength and position within their families and communities, enslaved women had little power. They had no legitimate right to claim their children and no means to hold the family together or to prevent physical or sexual abuse by black and white men. Owners could punish and sell them on a whim. Yet enslaved women were not pawns, and as we shall see, they found means to protest their oppression. They also knew when to comply with a "Yes, Massa," when to resist, and when to play dumb. Within the black community and in their personal relationships, black women could wield influence comparable to black men, a strength and resilience passed down to subsequent generations.

The degree of satisfaction and happiness in enslaved marriages can only be suggested, for comments are few. Many relationships offered support and affection. Yet one should not over-romanticize slave marriages, however central they were in black women's lives. Some involuntary—and even voluntary—marriages must have been difficult and filled with tension, antipathy, and sometimes violence. Marriage, even under the best of circumstances, requires compromise, patience, and understanding. Few slaves had the opportunity to pursue and forge an ideal union. As one Alabama slave recalled, "I 'members dat de overseer use ta whip mammy an' pappy, 'ca'se dey fight so much." Slave unions sometimes ended because of quarreling and domestic violence. Yet slave master John B. Miller, whose plantation rules stated that "no man must whip his wife without my permission," reminds us that in the antebellum South—and in the nation—a certain level of domestic violence was deemed acceptable.

Slaves could voluntarily dissolve their marriages since they had no legal basis. This was a freedom made difficult or denied to whites. Couples merely parted if one or the other partner was unhappy. When long distances interfered with marriages and visitations proved impossible, partners might remarry, a practice white owners encouraged. A Georgia freedwoman, Amanda

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McDaniel, related that her mother had married and bore two daughters while enslaved in Virginia. When she was sold to another planter, she married again and bore more children. The ease of dissolution could be empowering, for the enslaved did not have to put up with difficult relationships.

Though there is limited information about free black women, laws enacted during the antebellum period increasingly circumscribed their lives and their relationships. Increasingly, southern whites saw free blacks as a threat, and several state legislatures passed laws to limit their freedom of movement. As one Memphis journalist wrote in 1843, free blacks in that city were “demoralizing and ruining our slaves, and endangering the lives of our families.” To him, they were worse than abolitionists. Some states passed guardianship laws that required free blacks to find a white person to vouch for their character. Laws imposed curfews on free blacks, limited their public gatherings by time and place, and prohibited their assembling with slaves. Some communities prohibited free blacks from operating stalls at local open-air markets. Even if they were free and had a place to live, all people of color lived with the fear that they could be forced back into slavery. In a number of states, slaves who gained their freedom had to leave the state within a certain period or be re-enslaved. Virginia passed such a law in 1806, though for decades, enforcement was lax, evidenced by the many blacks freed after that time who lived there. Some northern and southern states refused to admit free blacks who wanted to move there from another state. In 1813 Lucinda, a newly freed woman of color, was required by law to leave the state. She petitioned the Virginia General Assembly asking to be re-enslaved and purchased by her slave husband’s master. As she wrote in her petition, the “benefits and privileges to be derived from freedom, dear and flattering as they are,” could not induce her to live apart from her husband.

For much of the antebellum period, slaves in Louisiana whose masters had taken them to a free state or abroad (typically France) could sue for their freedom in that state’s supreme court. A 1792 French law in effect stated that slaves who had set foot on free soil could win their freedom. By the late antebellum period, however,

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concerns heightened over the presence of so many free blacks. The Louisiana law was more liberal than that in other southern states, and the legislature overturned it in 1846. Still, a number of enslaved women in Louisiana successfully sued for freedom. Those who could prove they had spent time on free soil before 1846 won their freedom, as did their enslaved children born before that year. Some women also won back wages they would have earned had they been free.

While the majority of free blacks were poor, some free black women enjoyed solid marriages and families and lived a comfortable existence. The color line was “porous” and “fluid,” as Kirt von Daacke describes the situation of free blacks in Albemarle County, Virginia. Relationships there often depended on a “culture of personalism” among free blacks, whites, and the enslaved. Especially in urban areas, lives intersected, and skin color might not serve as the barrier to upward mobility. Ann Battles Johnson, freed when she was 11 years old, married William Johnson, a free black with a thriving business as a barber and property owner in Natchez, Mississippi. Her life centered on their ten children and managing their nine slaves. Ann earned money through her sewing skills and by selling and trading items she made. Yet tragedy struck this family. A man killed William, and Ann then had to run the family businesses, raise their children, and manage slaves on her own.

White Women and Marriage

Southern white women generally married at a younger age than did their New England counterparts. Studies show that the average age for first marriages among elite southern white women was between 18¹/₂ and 20 years old. On average, northern women married at 24. Southern men were approximately six years older than were southern women, similar to the age of New England men when they wed. However, there were exceptions. Moravian women in North Carolina on average married at 27, men at 36. What is more striking was the many southern women

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who married as teenagers, some as young as 15 or 16, though parents usually discouraged daughters from marrying any younger. There were exceptions for men as well. Thomas Chaplin of South Carolina married right before his 17th birthday, perhaps because his mother wanted to rid herself of all responsibility for him. In second marriages, an older man often wed a woman several years younger, and they created another family.

Marital rituals in the Old South varied according to a white couple's status and personal situation; some customs resembled those of today. Engagements were often brief, providing just enough time to gather a trousseau and future needs, plan a ceremony, and establish a household (although many couples resided with their parents or boarded when first married). For the elite, weddings could be extravagant affairs involving the hiring of a female consultant who took charge of every detail. Hand-delivered invitations went out to more than 200 guests. A sumptuous dinner and all-night party marked these nuptial celebrations. Far more common were modest ceremonies performed by a judge or minister in front of family members and close friends, followed by a simple supper. Men and women on the frontier and those who did not want to bother with formalities might live together for years and become legally bound in common-law marriages. For others who lived miles from a minister or justice of the peace, it was almost impossible to utter any vows.

The level of satisfaction that white women found in their marriages is easier to detect than it is for black women. Expectations had risen by the nineteenth century as more women began to anticipate their dream of a truly companionate marriage. Such expectations outpaced social change, especially in the South, where a hierarchical, patriarchal social structure made equality among marriage partners difficult to achieve. Elizabeth and William Wirt, a Virginia couple, entered their marriage with a commitment to create a relationship of equals, but the demands of children, running a household, and William's professional career and personal ambitions made companionate marriage impossible to achieve. On the other hand, Martha Hancock, who married a man who shared her deep religious convictions, felt she had

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found her soul mate and equal. Martha wrote him affectionate poems for the next 20 years.

Another woman who felt she had achieved a companionate relationship was Sarah Haynsworth Gayle, who married before her 16th birthday. Her husband was a dozen years older. Sarah's writings expressed her adoration and respect for her mate. After seven years of marriage, she wrote him on their anniversary:

It was our wedding day, and they are talismanic words, to wake up all that is precious and hallowed in memory. Dear, dear period—if I had been asked to single out from the whole earth, a being exempt from care, and in possession of perfect happiness, I would have laid my hand on my own bounding heart, and said, "she is here."

As ill health and hardships aged Sarah beyond her years, she feared losing her husband's affection and dreaded the day when death would end their relationship. She counted her blessings, pitying female friends who had adulterous or alcoholic husbands. Unfortunately, Sarah's premonitions of death proved true, for she died unexpectedly when she was only 31, contracting tetanus after a dentist operated on her teeth. Her last message, written on her deathbed about her absent husband, stated, "I testify with my dying breath that since first I laid my young heart upon his manly bosom I have known only love and happiness."

Yet a number of marriages veered from the ideal. Personal writings, legal documents, and divorce proceedings reveal clues about troubled relationships. Violence, heartbreak, alcoholism, and adultery defined some marriages, showing that southern families did not always function well. Despite the wealth they enjoyed, the Petigru women did not achieve much success in wedding loving companions. Several Petigru husbands fell victim to alcoholism, engaged in adultery, or exhibited insensitivity or indifference to their wives' needs. Then, as now, marriages varied with each relationship. Some were harmonious and affectionate; others filled with tension and sadness; the majority fell somewhere in between. Neither husbands nor wives were saints; some engaged in behavior that exacerbated family tension. Charges of adultery were drawn against men and sometimes wives. Women

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ran away from home in order to live with someone else, and a few wives beat their husbands. Madaline Selima Edwards of New Orleans, raised in a prominent Tennessee family, endured two failed marriages but then fell in love and carried on a relationship with a married man for four years. When he finally called an end to it, she knew her reputation was ruined. She moved to California during the gold rush. Immoral behavior exacted a high social cost, especially among elite whites who had a family name to uphold.

Violence was all too common in southern marriages. Of the growing number of divorce petitions presented by southern women and their lawyers, physical violence and domestic abuse were the most common reasons wives cited when seeking to end a marriage. Many men drank an excessive amount of liquor, and alcohol often fostered abusive behavior. Alcohol was cheap, readily available, and often consumed at all three meals. Nancy Smith of North Carolina sought a divorce after 22 years of marriage, claiming that her husband was “constantly under the influence of alcohol.” She was hardly alone. A study of divorce in the antebellum South by Loren Schweningen reveals numerous cases of shocking abuse by husbands. They might beat and punch their wives, cut them with knives, strangle them, whip them, and threaten them with guns—often done in a drunken rage. Slavery likely had an impact on fostering such behavior, for elite white men had been raised to sense their unlimited power over their slaves and authority over all dependents. At this time, too, Americans in general believed that limited corporal punishment meted out to wives and children was acceptable.

A woman prone to romantic dreams about marriage might encounter disappointment. Rebecca Haywood Hall was a case in point. Rebecca apparently became sexually involved with her future husband, Albert Hall, before their wedding. Despite warnings about his questionable character and behavior, Rebecca thought she was in love. They married and lived on his plantation in rural North Carolina. Albert berated his wife and frequently was absent from home. Rebecca’s pathetic letters to her sister reveal the difficulties of her lonely, exhausting existence

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as she coped with young children, plantation management, and a husband with a wandering eye. Albert managed to be absent during her childbirth confinements. When one daughter accidentally fell into a fire and Rebecca severely burned her hand trying to rescue the youngster, Albert blamed her for being careless. It is not surprising that Rebecca died at a relatively young age. Virginian Laura Wirt also experienced deep sorrow. She married a man 11 years her senior, and the couple moved to Florida, far from family and friends. Giving birth to three babies in three years and suffering poor health, Laura became dependent on opium and laudanum and died following the birth of their fourth child.

The quality of most antebellum marriages remains hidden to historians, who often have to extrapolate beyond written evidence. For instance, Gertrude Thomas's detailed journals, which she kept for more than 40 years, never stated outright that her husband was an alcoholic and sexually involved with a slave woman, perhaps for as long as 25 years. She rarely mentioned him with affection and wrote more about her daily life, their children's antics, her health, and personal reflections than about her husband's activities. During and after the Civil War, Jefferson Thomas squandered the family fortune, much of it inherited or borrowed from Gertrude's family, creating tension with her siblings and forcing the couple to sell much of what once had been Gertrude's property in order to pay his debts.

What held antebellum relationships together is just as mysterious as what holds marriages together today. Many wives were economically bound to their husbands since property they brought to the marriage belonged to their husbands. A couple's outward public appearance did not necessarily reflect private conduct, though it could become so egregious that others found out. The Hammond marriage was a good example. Catherine's relatives had correctly pegged James Henry Hammond to be a fortune hunter. Once married, he took control of her 1,500 acres of land, 137 slaves, and farm equipment, and with them was able to create a substantial fortune. His relationship with the slave girl Louisa was merely one instance of James's infidelity and bad behavior.

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Several years prior to that discovery, scandal threatened Hammond's political career and marriage. He engaged in sexual improprieties with four nieces, who were all in their teens. They were the daughters of Catherine's brother-in-law, Wade Hampton Jr., a member of one of South Carolina's most powerful, wealthiest families. Hammond's kissing, fondling, and letting his "hands to stray unchecked over every part" of these "four lovely creatures" ended his public life—at least for a while. Hampton Jr. learned of the indiscretions and threatened to expose his brother-in-law's scandalous behavior to the public. Catherine stood by her husband and a few years later, bore another child. Interestingly, when Henry died in 1864, Catherine spoke lovingly of her husband and defended him to her death. Perhaps her affection was so deep she could overlook his transgressions; perhaps she recognized she had no choice but to accept the situation since divorce was impossible in South Carolina; or perhaps she found happiness through other channels. Interestingly, none of the four Hampton daughters ever married.

How much power wives achieved in the home is difficult to assess, for individual circumstances varied significantly. Some historians feel that by the nineteenth century, as the idea that men and women commanded separate spheres took hold, wives made significant gains toward achieving some power in domestic matters. They had charge of household management, their children's upbringing, the moral behavior of family members, and, for the elite, of domestic slaves. According to this idea, as men became busy in the public world, they relinquished control over the household. Proof of this argument comes in part from the significant decline in fertility throughout the nineteenth century, implying that a number of women took some control over their biological destiny. But this theory has dubious validity when applied to much of the Old South. The concept of separate spheres had less meaning for plantation women and no relevance for farm, mountain, and free black and enslaved women. Also undermining this theory of growing power in the domestic sphere, at least as applied to southern women, was that fertility rates in the region remained

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higher than the national norm, suggesting that women there did little to control their fertility.

Also, in an agrarian region, the roles of men and women often overlapped. Some southern fathers were surprisingly helpful in caring for and raising their children. They often aided in nursing a sick infant, and many fathers paid strict attention to their children's education, selecting the best schools and sending endless advice and many admonitions. Wives often undertook more traditional male roles, working alongside their husbands in the fields, gardening, tending orchards and livestock, and selling items they produced to help sustain their families. A few women took on specific male tasks, such as Elizabeth Wirt, who called herself "a woman of business." Though married women could not legally hold property or sign contracts, Wirt negotiated the sale of slaves and of the family's Richmond home in order to purchase a far grander one. She was well versed in family finances and expenditures, and her husband William depended on her financial expertise. Such skills proved useful to women, especially widows, who often had to administer their late husbands' estates and run farms or plantations.

Migration often had an impact on southern marriages. Men typically made the decision to move the family to a new territory or state such as Alabama, Mississippi, or Tennessee. Such a move could foster unhappiness and loneliness. Women tended to be reluctant participants, not wanting to leave behind family, friends, and everything they held dear. Young men living on the frontier, now freed from social and parental restraints and watchful eyes, might test their manhood, acting in an unrestrained manner. Patriarchal behavior may have intensified, for women were more isolated, and fewer social and family constraints held men in check.

Nevertheless, marriage was the desired goal for nearly all women. An indication of its importance and that of motherhood was the disdain and pity shown toward unmarried women in the Old South. Never marrying was a kind of social death, at least according to prescriptive literature. Perhaps some white women

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decided that it was better to compromise on a partner than never to marry.

Laws, Marriage, and Divorce

As noted above, the only law relating to enslaved women's marriages was that they could not create legal unions. The situation was far different for white women. While most women desired to marry, the legal sacrifices were great when they did so. In most areas of the South—and in the nation—women lost their status as independent beings when they married and, based on the precedents of British common law, became legally bound to their husbands. While considered desirable and proper for a woman to marry, the institution severely restricted them legally.

Common-law precedents did protect widows, ensuring them upon a husband's death, of a dower of at least one-third of their husband's estate for their continued support. Generally, a widow only held the dower during her lifetime, but state laws varied, and sometimes a woman could use the property as her own and sell or will it upon her death. Automatically giving widows a certain amount of property, however, was not done to foster female independence or reward wives for their contributions to the marriage, but rather to ensure against the family falling into poverty and becoming dependent on the public dole.

For privileged white women, equity courts softened the rigidity of common law. They were an alternative, kinder system of justice that developed in England and carried to the colonies. Equity courts exercised more flexibility than did common-law courts. Judges considered the spirit, rather than the letter or precedent, of the law. In other words, equity courts considered each case on its own merit through a set of principles that developed over time. Courts of equity were more likely to challenge the concept of "unity of person" (the legal doctrine that considered a married couple as being one person, with the wife subservient to her husband), while common-law courts rarely made

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exceptions. Equity courts offered better odds to women, and those who sought redress or access to their own property were sometimes successful. Under equity rulings, a written conveyance (a document identifying assets and transferring them from one person to another) could give women the right to own, manage, and convey their own property. Yet contracting such an agreement was rare in first marriages and financially out of reach to all but the wealthy. Women who had been married before, had children, or owned substantial property they wanted to protect, were most likely to seek such agreements, knowing how restrictive the *feme covert* status was. Thus, a woman could legally protect her property—much like prenuptial agreements do today—by turning to an equity court. While one might see this as an important legal advance for women, until well into the antebellum period, no statutes or legislative acts conferred this right on all women living in a state.

In Petersburg, Virginia, as one example, the number of separate estates (the practice of legally separating a wife's estate from her husband's and allowing her to keep control of her property) used by elite white women burgeoned during the antebellum period. At first glance, it might appear that husbands became more willing to relinquish control of their wives' property, seemingly a contradiction to normal male behavior. However, the appearance of more separate estates in Petersburg was not a liberating or humanitarian gesture to aid women; it was a step taken to counter the uncertainties of a fluctuating economy. If creditors closed in, demanding payment on debts accumulated during a period of declining fortunes, a separate estate guaranteed that a wife's property could not be seized. Only her husband's property could be used to pay off debts. Thus, the couple's losses were minimized—and perhaps more financial risks could be taken—without the family losing everything.

An increase in the number of "fee simple" estates (estates assigned to individuals without condition) awarded to Petersburg widows gave more women absolute control over the dower they received from their late husbands. Women could sell this property as needed, rather than merely living off the profits, and not

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worry about whether it eventually came to their husbands' children from a previous marriage or their children in entirety. With greater frequency, men also named their wives as executors if their estates were small. Those with large inheritances tended to name a male relative or trusted friend as executor.

State legislatures moved ahead during the antebellum period to pass new laws that brought about significant legal changes for southern white women. These statutes, primarily concerning property rights and divorce, reflected a nationwide spirit of reform but also rising concerns over the country's volatile economy. New laws made it somewhat easier for women in some states to obtain divorces, although even by 1860, few women took advantage of these statutes. Property laws were a different matter. In a region of the country that valued tradition and frowned on change, it is surprising that it was in the South where some states and territories made the earliest, most significant alterations in property laws affecting married women.

One of the major changes in women's legal status was the effort by southern states and territories to pass laws giving wives greater control over their own estates and property they brought into their marriages. Rather than relying on individual appeals to equity courts for exceptions, states considered a more democratic idea that all women in the state who held property should retain rights to it even when they married. In 1835, the Arkansas territorial legislature passed two bills of this nature. The first permitted married women to carry on independent legal action; the second proposed to "secure the property of females." The legislation stated that real property (land) and personal property (such as slaves) owned by any Arkansas woman at the time of her marriage or willed or given to her before the ceremony could not be used to pay debts that her husband incurred prior to their wedding. The intention of this law was to discourage the most blatant forms of fortune hunting. This law, however, failed to secure a woman's property if her husband acquired debts during their marriage. Further, any property she received after the wedding, such as an inheritance from a deceased parent, automatically belonged to her husband and could be seized by creditors.

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Louisiana's Civil Code was unique, for from its inception, it allowed married women some control over property they brought to the marriage, different from laws in other states. Louisiana law, based on the Napoleonic Code, was exceptionally liberal in protecting married women's separate estates. There, wives could sell, mortgage, donate, and will their personal and real property, though this assumed they had the approval of their husbands. A widow's dower rights usually were half of her husband's estate, rather than a third as was true in most states. Initially, Florida as well was somewhat of an exception until it became part of the United States in 1819. Because it had been under Spanish rule until then, Spanish civil law allowed married women rights to their own property. In 1824, a new law stated that women who had been married and living in Florida before 1818 could retain their own property. The legislature extended that to all married women in 1845, perhaps to encourage families to move to the state and women who were already living there to stay. Like Louisiana, a widow's dower right was half of the estate. Free black women in Florida initially had almost the same rights as white women, though their rights eroded after 1819.

Mississippi was the first state in the nation to allow all wives the right to hold property in their own name. The 1839 Act for the Protection and Preservation of the Rights and Property of Married Women granted more expansive rights to Mississippi women than did the Arkansas law and allowed poorer women to protect any property they might have. This Deep South cotton state seems an unlikely site for an ostensibly liberal statute. It made sense, however, when one considers the legal and economic reasoning behind the effort to protect married women's property. Mississippi in the 1830s was still a frontier state but one profiting enormously from the cotton boom. While it was a place to make a fortune, failure could hit suddenly, especially in the boom-and-bust cycle of antebellum America's economy. There was much land speculation in Mississippi, and some men became extremely wealthy; others accumulated huge debts. The fact that this law passed the state legislature only two years after the Panic of 1837 was no coincidence. Subsequent acts in 1846 and 1857 expanded women's

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marital rights there so that by the Civil War, Mississippi's married women could retain profits earned from their own property, sign contracts and deeds relating to their property, and operate their holdings without their husband's consent.

Other states followed. In 1851, Arkansas expanded the protection of its law of 1835 by preserving a woman's property even if her husband incurred debts during marriage. In 1845, the Republic of Texas created a provision allowing married women rights to their own property. Although Georgia relied on common law, the state demonstrated an increasingly generous spirit toward women, allowing married women in 1847 the right to establish separate estates by conveyance or by prenuptial trusts or agreements. After 1851, married women could apply to the Georgia legislature for "relief" to carry on an independent business as free traders.

These legal changes for women varied by state, but overall, during the antebellum period the South made major adjustments to protect married women and their property. Nevertheless, these legalities failed to translate into greater power for women. It still took a bold or determined individual to address a state legislature or local judge to seek her rights. Few women took that step, either because they were indifferent, fearful of their husband's wrath, ignorant of the law, unable to afford the cost, or resigned to their situation.

The more intriguing question is why southern states showed such concern in protecting married women's property. Historians posit that during the colonial period, southern women may have had more legal rights than did their New England counterparts, in part because their limited numbers increased their value to southern society. This may have made it easier for southern women to gain property rights at an earlier date than women living elsewhere. Also, in the antebellum South, property had special meaning, and a woman's holdings could represent a considerable portion of the marital estate, especially the many slaves whom some brought to their marriages.

It is also true that such laws to protect women reflected southern paternalism. Male legislators often saw women as helpless

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and dependent. Some men concluded that their wisdom could assist women who were ignorant of financial and legal matters. These laws were designed not so much to benefit women as to protect their families. Because economic reversals could be disastrous and threaten a family's entire fortune, protecting a woman's property could prevent the family from becoming destitute. In addition, fathers worried about protecting their daughters' property from unscrupulous fortune hunters or spendthrift sons-in-law who might waste a family fortune. Under *feme covert* laws, nothing could prevent a husband from selling everything his wife brought into the marriage. Thus, married women gained control over their property, not to enhance their independence or assert their rights but to protect the estates their fathers or relatives had accumulated and passed on to them. Gaining such power, however limited, ultimately did aid women. New York and Pennsylvania became the first northern states to pass similar legislation, several years after Mississippi took action. Protective statutes regarding marital property eventually followed nationwide.

The antebellum South claimed the lowest divorce rate of any region in the country. This assertion, however, did not mean this was a golden time or place for marriage or that marriages were happier in the South than in other regions of the country. Obtaining a divorce was difficult, and options far fewer than what couples have today. The thought of ending a marriage disturbed some southerners, an institution they felt should last until death. Many believed the family should be protected at all cost, even at the expense of individual happiness. If a white woman was miserable in her marriage, she could live apart from her husband, though they remained legally married (a "bed and board" divorce). One judge characterized divorce as a true form of "madness." Major impediments to women wanting to divorce were that they usually lost custody of their children and had few options to earn a living and create a viable future on their own. Divorce carried a stigma, and the normal process of appearing before a state legislature or male judge and exposing marital problems was intimidating and often embarrassing. Equity courts sometimes granted alimony to

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an impoverished wife if her husband abandoned her, though he had to be willing to cooperate.

Legislators did become sympathetic to removing the worst abuses of marriage. Tennessee in 1799 became the first state to enact divorce laws—the reasons being impotence, bigamy, desertion, and adultery. Other states followed and passed divorce statutes, and over time expanded the reasons a wife or husband could sue for divorce.

South Carolina was an exception. There, marriages were legally indissoluble, placing virtually no limits on men's authority over their wives (though a couple could live apart—but not remarry). Judge Glover of South Carolina summed up this thinking, insisting the state could not permit a “divided empire in the government of the family.” If families fell into disorder, so too might the government—and the entire social order.

Antebellum white women who sought a divorce were the bold or desperate. It also took both time and money, so it is hardly surprising that women in the slaveholding class made up the largest percentage of wives seeking a divorce. During a period when men and women were accustomed to accept stoically their choices in life and to complain rarely, few considered an alternative. Most women counted their blessings if they had found a hard-working, respectable, and decent man. Marriage was not supposed to bring romance, endless devotion, and daily excitement into a woman's life. In many cases, marriage was a practical response to offset loneliness, form a family, and gain a partner for protection and help with household and farm chores. Unlike Sarah Gayle, the majority of southern women had little time, before or after marriage, to ponder life's joys and sorrows and to sustain their husband's adoration. They worried more about family survival and making it through each day.

The need to uphold slavery and preserve gender hierarchy in the family may have created more opposition and made divorce more difficult in the South than elsewhere. Pro-slavery defenders equated the subordination of women with the position of slaves, investing, as historian Stephanie McCurry writes, “the defense of slavery with the survival of customary gender relations.” Every

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white man, whatever his station, had a stake in defending slavery. A southern woman's role assumed political significance. Southern society glorified women's sphere and their secondary position and vilified any woman who stepped beyond its boundaries. "The legitimacy of male authority over women in the household was a cornerstone of the slavery edifice," argues McCurry. Slaves and women had to accept their inferior position, and white men had the right to command those they felt were innately subordinate. Social relations in the private sphere affected political ideas and institutions in the public sphere. Anything, such as divorce, that upset what seemed to be the rightful order of the family threatened the southern social order.

During the antebellum period, nevertheless, it became somewhat easier for white women to gain a divorce, and more women than men sought redress. Frontier states were the first to liberalize their divorce laws. Southern states broadened the causes for redress, which by the Civil War usually included consanguinity (marrying a blood relative such as a sibling or parent), insanity, impotence, bigamy, adultery, cruelty, and desertion. A few states added alcoholism, and many shortened the time required to establish desertion. States enlarged the meaning of cruelty to include not just the endangering of life but mental cruelty as well. Louisiana and Texas had community property clauses, but nearly all states awarded children to their father since men were more likely than were women to be able to support their offspring. A few southern judges chipped away at this precedent and occasionally awarded children to the mother, especially if the father was incompetent or violent.

The number of divorce petitions increased during the antebellum period. Some four out of five female plaintiffs who sought a legal divorce won one, though success was never certain. Typically, women and their lawyers offered more than one reason for seeking a divorce, such as physical abuse and adultery, or violence and alcoholism. They supported their suit with evidence and witnesses to corroborate a woman's story. In some cases, wives who successfully pleaded their cases before a state legislator or judge tended to be ladylike and wealthy, in part because they had the

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self-confidence and financial resources to seek a divorce. Judges might sympathize with a virtuous, delicate, and refined woman, seeing the wisdom in removing her from a degenerate husband. But women of more limited means sometimes sought and won divorces, for judges and juries carefully adhered to the letter of the law. Of course, few destitute and free black women could afford a divorce or had the time or energy to pursue legal options. Unhappy couples with few resources usually separated and lived apart, without any legal decree.

The majority of women put up with difficult husbands for several years before petitioning for a divorce. But in one instance, Evelina Gregory Roane was able to win an absolute divorce against her husband, Newman B. Roane, after less than two years of marriage. Both were from prominent Virginia families, but wealth was no protection against his abusive behavior. Married when she was 19 and he was 26, she bore a child ten months after their wedding. According to her account and corroborated by several witnesses, seven months later he brutally beat her when she was pregnant again, which may have caused her to miscarry. She accused him of cruel, violent conduct, of denying her access to her family and church, and of threatening her life. He had made a slave woman, Biney, mistress of their home, and Evelina was forced to undertake the work of a slave. She won not only an absolute divorce but also custody of their child. This ruling allowed her to remarry, which she did three more times, and for each one, she wisely drew up a premarital contract.

Sometimes, intolerable marital situations had to be endured. Women were economically dependent on their husbands, even if they were living under difficult circumstances. Many southern men drank excessively; some resorted to violence; and most asserted their patriarchal authority over the family. Women, lacking independence and political power and perhaps living far from home or supportive relatives, had no choice but to cope on their own.

Of course, not all southern women married, even though society believed a woman should have a male to protect her, and most women wanted to marry. The South had a number of single

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women and widows. Perhaps as many as ten percent of all slave owners across the South were women, the majority of them widows. Society was far less critical of widows than of single women, for they had proven their worth by marrying at least once. Single women often found it difficult to establish a comfortable role in a society where family was so central to everyday life. Some did develop close relationships with other women. Mary Telfair of Savannah was one woman who had no desire to marry. To her, married couples seemed like two birds in a cage, and she abhorred the idea of being confined.

Single women were more likely than were married women to work for wages, though they might elicit condescending reactions. If not needing to or unable to earn money, single women kept busy by creating a place for themselves in their extended families or communities, reading books and magazines, writing letters, sewing, performing charitable work, and visiting and caring for family members. Single white women rarely lived on their own and usually resided with parents or siblings, often moving from family to family, making themselves useful by assisting with domestic chores and caring for their nieces and nephews or aging parents. Mary Helen Johnston of Savannah moved into her brother-in-law's home after Mary's sister died. There she helped raise their five children. Harriett Tatnall Campbell looked after her three nieces and nephews after their parents died, and she set high standards for them when they went off to school. When Harriet's niece, Mary, returned home from school, she lived with her aunt in her beautiful Savannah home and enjoyed an active social life for years until she finally married when she was 32.

A number of single women enjoyed close, often intimate relationships with other women, both single and married, a circle that included sisters, cousins, former schoolmates, and friends. These friendships provided comfort, support, affection, and intellectual stimulation. While physical proximity helped to foster these relationships, the exchange of letters also kept in close contact many women who were former schoolmates. Two single women, Mary Few of New York City and Mary Telfair, carried on a correspondence throughout their lives. They had grown up together in

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Georgia, and when the Fews moved northward, Telfair lived with them while she attended school in New York City. There the two Marys solidified their relationship. Over the years, Telfair admitted that she had found her true soul mate in Few, though she enjoyed other close female friends in Savannah.

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