Laboring In the Dark: the Lives and Work of Blind Slaves in the South 1800–1880

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SETH CLARK
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Approved:

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Chair's Name, Chair (or Co-Chair)

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Member's Name

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Member's Name

Committee in Charge

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This dissertation analyzes the lives and work patterns of blind enslaved Blacks in the antebellum South. It asks three main questions; how did stigmas that maintained the blind were weak and helpless effect how owners thought of and employed blind bondspeople? Conversely, how did blind bondspeople, who contrary to stigmas were capable of physical labor, adapt and shape their daily tasks to compensate for their blindness? Finally, how did emancipation affect blind Blacks' chances to support themselves through meaningful employment? The study draws on a wide range of primary sources such as slave narratives, plantation journals, court cases, newspaper articles, letters, and census data. It employs an interdisciplinary approach that combines disability and slavery studies. Blindness was a random, but regular occurrence in bondspeople. Although old age was the leading cause, infections, accidents, and genetics also took younger bondspeople sight. In everyday discourse and legal proceedings, slaveholders classified blind slaves as useless and unsound. These descriptions drew from wider stigmas that maintained the blind were weak, immobile, and helpless. Despite slaveholders' declarations, the chattel principle caused them to contradict themselves and incorporate blind slaves into their workforces. Blind bondspeople most often labored on a plantation's support side, which were the operations that maintained the property, served the personal needs of residents, and facilitated faster work by bondspeople engaged in producing cash crops. They performed a variety of skilled and unskilled touch-based tasks, jobs completed by hand, that ranged from cook, washer, boatman, and cooper. While enslaved, blind Blacks lived, ate, and worked like other bondspeople. After emancipation, however, stigmas dictated that blind Blacks would live and work like the broader White blind population, who mainly subsisted on charity.

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their families' accomplishments. I am glad to have helped continue and strengthen the legacy they have created. I have always proudly looked up to my sister, Dana Clark, and my brothers, Joel and Adam Clark. In their own fields, they are incredibly successful individuals that are smart, driven, and down to earth.

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INTRODUCTION

On Sunday, October 5, 1986, at the age of 13, while at a friend's house watching the television broadcast of the Dallas Cowboys' 24–7 loss to the Denver Broncos, my friend shot me at point-blank range in the face with his mom's "unloaded" .38 caliber handgun.[1] I was lucky: if the chamber had contained a regular bullet, it probably would have killed me instantly; instead, the gun was loaded with a buckshot shell. Rather than a single projectile, 127 small metal pellets crashed into my face from less than a foot away. Obviously, I suffered serious injuries. My left eye was immediately obliterated, and my right eye was damaged beyond repair. Put simply, in a fraction of a second, I went from being completely sighted to totally blind.

Many years later, as I prepared to receive my undergraduate degree in history from the University of California Davis, Dr. Clarence Walker introduced me to antebellum slave narratives in a seminar about the institution of slavery. I read all the narratives I could get my hands on, as I felt they offered critically important insights into American slavery. As I worked toward my master's degree at San Francisco State University, Dr. Christopher Waldrop and Dr. Eva Sheppard Wolf opened up my understanding even more by exposing me to a greater number of primary and secondary sources on the topic. However, one day it hit me: what happened to those enslaved Blacks who were blind like me? I had not heard anyone, whether an eyewitness to slavery or a historian, discuss blind slaves and how they fit into the institution.[2] I knew that blind Blacks must have been present in the pre-emancipation South, but what were their lives like?

When I asked myself, and ultimately the historical record, what happened to blind Blacks who were caught up in America's system of slavery, three important factors based on my own

[1] I use the term "unloaded" sarcastically, though he claimed not to know it was loaded.
[2] I had missed some references, most notably in Charles Ball's *Fifty Years in Chains*.

experiences immediately presented themselves. First, my interactions with sighted people in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries familiarized me with the strong negative prejudicial beliefs most sighted people hold about the blind. Sighted people's ideas, which are so widely accepted that they are neither noticed nor questioned, maintain that vision is the critical element that allows people to accomplish any type of task. This belief casts those who lack sight as lesser than sighted people and unable to participate in regular activities. As one scholar in 2015 explained, "They (the blind) are regarded as wholly incompetent for performing the tasks of everyday life, including living, working, and raising children."[3] I refer to these beliefs as stigmas due to the commonly held perception that blind people are naturally less than others.[4] In fact, sighted people's desire to offer help upon seeing a blind person is no less paternalistic and demeaning than the late nineteenth-century idea of the White man's burden.

Sighted prejudicial beliefs about the blind play an important role in excluding blind people from the workforce. Today, 30 years after the United States Congress passed the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act outlawing discrimination on the basis of physical or mental disability, blind Americans still face a rate of unemployment far higher than their sighted peers.[5] A 2019 Mississippi State University study investigated the main reason for this. After

[3] Susan Donaldson James, "Baby Sent to Foster Care for 57 Days Because Parents Are Blind," *ABC News*, July 27, 2010, https://abcnews.go.com/Health/missouri-takes-baby-blind-parents/story?id=11263491; Angela Frederick, "Between Stigma and Mother Blame: Blind Mothers' Experiences in USA Hospitals," *Sociology of Health & Illness* 37, no. 8 (November 2015), https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.12286. Accessed November 29, 2020.

[4] The classic work on this concept is Irving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963). Goffman identifies two types of stigma: one that drives how "normal" people view those who are considered "abnormal," and one held by those who are considered "abnormal" based on "normal" people's ideas. When I use the term "stigma," I am only referring to "normal" people's thoughts, beliefs, and actions.

[5] According to the American Foundation for the Blind, between 2013 and 2017, the blind unemployment rate was at least double that of sighted people. "Key Employment Statistics for People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired," American Foundation for the Blind. https://www.afb.org/research-and-initiatives/statistics/archived-statistics/key-employment-statistics. Accessed November 30, 2020.

questioning 1,000 sighted employers from across the employment spectrum, researchers found that "employers automatically associate competence with sighted people and incompetence with blind people."[6] Certainly, today's deeply held stigmas are not a recent phenomenon. Indeed, sighted slaveholders in the antebellum period displayed a version of it themselves. The question is how these stigmas affected how slaveholders thought of and treated their blind bondspeople.

Second, as a blind person, I know that most negative stigmas about the blind have no basis in reality. I can remember being a sighted kid and watching in amazement as blind people walked down the street, wondering, "How does the cane tell them where to go?" However, once I was blinded, I realized that it was the blind person's own mind and senses that did the navigating. In fact, after I left the hospital, I still knew how to do the tasks I had known how to do in the moments prior to being shot. To be sure, my blindness forced me to develop different strategies to accomplish new and old tasks, but this presented a challenge rather than an insurmountable barrier. The blind, like every other demographic group, includes individuals with a wide spectrum of mental and physical abilities; crucially, the inability to see is not a determining factor.[7] Vision has no bearing on one's strength, stamina, or ability to learn. Sight represents a sensory avenue that the brain uses to collect information, but people have more than one sense. The blind simply collect information with the senses they do have. In short, I knew

[6] Michelle McDonnall and Jennifer Cmar, "Blind People Have Increased Opportunities, but Employers' Perceptions Are Still a Barrier," The Conversation, October 14, 2019, https://theconversation.com/blind-people-have-increased-opportunities-but-employers-perceptions-are-still-a-barrier-124977#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20most%20common,blind%20is%20negative%20employer%20attitudes.&text=Implicit%20attitudes%20refer%20to%20subconscious,would%20be%20unable%20to%20report. Accessed November 30, 2020.

[7] This is my firsthand experience, but the same point is made in "The History of the Blind" by Frances Koestler, The Unseen Minority: A Social History of the Blind in the United States (New York: AFB Press, 1973), 5.

there was nothing about blindness that automatically disqualified someone from completing physical or mental tasks or, in this case, from being a bondsperson.

Finally, as I studied the slave system and its practice of assigning monetary values to Black bodies, I realized that if my story took place in the antebellum era, the physical traits I possessed while sighted would have caused owners to confront how strongly they believed in the idea that blind people could not work. In the moments before I was shot, I was a fully sighted, highly athletic, 13-year-old Black male who stood 6'1" tall and weighed 180 lb. Throughout the history of American slavery, a bondsperson with those physical characteristics would have generally been sold or appraised at the price scale's higher end.[8] What if an owner purchased a sighted slave with similar physical traits to myself who then, out of the blue, was blinded? Would an owner's monetary investment alter how they viewed their newly blinded property? Ultimately, the question was what drove slaveholders more: their adherence to capital accumulation or their belief in the negative stigmas surrounding blind people's abilities?

Despite how slaveholders may have viewed their blind bondspeople, historians and the public at large have ignored their presence within Southern workforces. For many sighted Americans, the very idea of a blind slave laboring in the antebellum South seems oxymoronic. Most sighted people automatically associate blindness with helplessness and the inability to work. The blind beggar has not just been an image passed down through Western history; begging for handouts has also represented the main occupation open to the blind over the same

[8] Slave prices were subjective and could be affected by behavior, but age and size played an extremely important role. Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Slavery (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 181; Walter Johnson, Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 66; Daina Ramey Berry, The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved from Womb to Grave in the Building of a Nation (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017); Richard K. Fleischman and Thomas N. Tyson, "Accounting in Service to Racism: Monetizing Slave Property in the Antebellum South," Critical Perspectives on Accounting 15, no. 3 (2004): 376–99, https://doi.org/10.1016/S1045-2354(03)00102-3. Accessed December 3, 2020.

time span.[9] The sighted, then, have rarely expected the blind to engage in labor or contribute to their communities' advancement. Nevertheless, Americans are familiar with the physical contributions that enslaved Blacks made to the South's growth and expansion. Bondspeople planted, maintained, and harvested all of the South's crops, from rice to cotton. Blacks' work not only allowed the South to thrive but fueled the North's burgeoning manufacturing industry, while the value placed on their bodies helped build a credit market that enriched Whites on both sides of the Atlantic. In the end, no one seriously doubts that bondspeople were expected to, and did, contribute labor to the society around them. This fact is hard to reconcile with the idea that their ranks included those who were only capable of receiving handouts.

Blind slaves' experience of living and laboring alongside other bondspeople across the antebellum South radically breaks with the general understanding of blind people's social and economic role within history and historiography. Although slavery was based on the extraction of labor from individuals, it represents one of the only systems in Western history where the blind did not find themselves separated or excluded from the material conditions and expectations of those around them. In A History of Disability (2019), Henri-Jacques Stiker explained how early Christian teaching considered blindness a blemish; as a result, those with eye problems were excluded from entering the temple and receiving sacraments.[10] He further explained that in the Central Middle Ages, hospice foundations were nonspecialized hostels that provided care and protection for the needy by feeding, supervising, and housing (in particular the blind).[11] In A Social History of Disability (2013), Irina Metzler observed that "the Florentines enacted a piece of legislation as early as 1294 whereby the poor blind were sent out of the

[9] Moshe Barasch, Blindness: The History of a Image in Western Thought (New York: Routledge, 2001), 95–99, 116–21. Mental Image in Western Thought (New York: Routledge, 2001), 95–99, 116–21.
[10] Henry Jacque Stiker, A History of Disability (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).
[11] Ibid.

city."[12] As public education became more common in the late 1700s and 1800s, schools for the blind opened across the United States and Europe. These schools generally housed blind children between 8 to 21 years of age on residential campuses, separating them from their families and sighted peers for months on end.[13] By the beginning of the 1900s, the institutionalization of blind people of all ages had emerged as the norm.[14]

In contrast, the slave system did not exclude blind bondspeople from the slave quarters or the obligation to work. Unlike most other blind people throughout Western history, an economic value was associated with blind slaves' bodies. All bondspeople outside of the very young and very old carried a real or potential price that could be converted into money in a sale or credit transaction.[15] Even when not engaged in a sale, owners were extremely aware of the day-to-day value of their enslaved property including their 'blind slaves. Caitlin Rosenthal pointed to slaveowners' adoption of Thomas Affleck's annual account books in order to demonstrate slaveholders' economic self-awareness and sophistication. These account books provided owners with a systematic manner of recording and categorizing a plantation's yearly economic activity, including daily work logs, days missed due to sickness or injury, and products received and shipped, as well as annual lists of the enslaved. As Rosenthal noted, "By consulting the balance sheet and comparing it with prior years, planters could assess their overall profitability and identify the cause of their success or failure: improvements made to their property, sales of

[12] Irina Metzler, A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2013), 173.
[13] Kim E. Nielsen, A Disability History of the United States (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).
[14] Ibid.
[15] Berry, Cost for Their Pound of Flesh. For prices associated with children, see Chapter 1. On page 25, Berry quotes an Alabama slave trader who explains that for every year a child was alive, starting at zero, their value increased by $100. For prices associated with the elderly, see Chapter 5. See also Wendy Warren, "Thrown Upon the World: Infants in the Eighteenth Century North American Slave Market," Slavery and Abolition 39, no. 4 (2018): 623–41.

cotton, or changes in the value of slaves."[16] This financial knowledge, combined with the desire to turn a profit, led slaveholders to expect all workers to produce or contribute in some manner. The creation of the designation "prime slave," which represented an individual with the potential to yield the maximum amount of daily labor, was accompanied by the designations "three-fourths," "half," and "quarter-hand," which set the standard for what labor output could be expected from those who were not prime hands.[17] Owners viewed bondspeople who did not work as a charge to their annual bottom line, and they sought to keep the number of yearly charges to a minimum. This led them to put blind slaves to work much like other bondspeople.

The limited number of bondspeople an owner possessed also incentivized them to employ blind slaves. Although a slaveholder could theoretically purchase, hire, or sell laborers at will, in practice enslaved workforces remained relatively stable from year to year. Unlike free-labor employers, who could choose not to hire a blind worker or fire a sighted one who lost their vision, owners generally had to keep a blind bondsperson until they died or were sold.[18] Owners operated with a limited number of available bondspeople, and the fewer bondspeople a slaveholder held, the more limited their workforces were. This lack of surplus labor caused owners to employ all available workers rather than automatically exclude an otherwise healthy

[16] Catherine Rosenthal, "Slavery's Scientific Management, Masters and Managers" in Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of America's Economic Development, eds. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockmen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 65.
[17] Ibid., 72. For other discussions of the rating system, see Daina Ramey Berry, "We'm Fus' Rate Bargain: Value, Labor, and Price in a Georgia Slave Community," in The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas, ed. Walter Johnson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 58; Charles Joiner, Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community, 25th anniversary ed. (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 61–63.
[18] Although the internal slave trade certainly displaced many slaves, bondspeople represented much of a slaveholding family's wealth, which led to the long-term holding of individual slaves as well as their inclusion in wills. Herbert Gutman points out that not only did most black children grow up around both their parents, but most marriages for blacks were long-term, again illustrating the stability of black workforces. Herbert Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925 (New York: Random House, 1976), 10–25.

blind bondsperson, especially considering that the blind slave in question would be available on a daily and yearly basis.

Blind slaves' work patterns are an underappreciated and under-studied part of the plantation system. Much like an army, the ability of a plantation to function properly relied on logistics.[19] Raising birds and livestock, packing and transporting products, building and repairing tools, gardening, cooking, caring for children, and, of course, nursing represented only a small number of the tasks that required regular attention. These support-side jobs, as I term them, incorporated both skilled and unskilled tasks but were not directly centered on producing cash crops for market. As all slave plantations and households required these jobs to be done, owners who did not think a blind slave could work in a cotton field or rice swamp simply tasked them with one of these less profitable but still important jobs.

Nevertheless, slaveholders' thoughts and actions toward blind bondspeople present a contradiction. On the one hand, when sighted slaveholders discussed a blind slave's potential sale price, work performance, or legal custody with other sighted individuals, they adhered to sighted stigmas that emphasized blind people's helplessness and inability to work. Southern courts even defined all blind slaves as unsound, giving any purchaser the right to nullify a transaction if they found that the slave in question had a vision problem.[20] However, when

[19] Although scholars mention tasks that bondspeople did outside of productive work, they rarely connect those jobs to a slaveholding household or plantation's ability to produce goods for market. The major exception to this trend is older and disabled slaves caring for young children while their parents worked in the field.

[20] For a specific discussion of blindness as a source of unsoundness, see Dea H. Boster, African American Slavery and Disability (Dallas: Taylor: 2013), 40–41. For a more general discussion, see Sharla M. Fett, Working Cures: Healing Health and Power on Southern Plantations (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 18–20; Juriah Harris, "What Constitutes Unsoundness in the Negro?" Savanna Journal of Medicine 1 (September 1858): 147. For a discussion of unsoundness and how Southern courts viewed the relationship between seller and buyer, see Thomas D. Morris, Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619–1860 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 104–113.

sighted owners and overseers across the South had an otherwise healthy blind bondsperson in their workforce, they generally contradicted their protestations of uselessness and found ways to use them as laborers around their plantations or homes.

Slave studies generally employ an implied (but rarely explicitly stated) imaginary archetype of all slaves as strong, healthy, and in the prime of life.[21] The reality was quite different. The natural aging process – combined with genetics, disease, the environment, intentional brutality, and accidents – ensured that large and small workforces alike included those who fell outside the definition of an optimal laborer. Rosenthal quoted one overseer on the number of prime full-hands he had on his plantation: "On a rice plantation in North Carolina, the whole number of Negros was two hundred, reckoned to be equal to about one hundred prime hands."[22]

My work highlights those individuals who did not qualify as prime hands. Although blind slaves were rarely considered an owner's most valuable commodity, their lived experiences were no less controlled by the slave system than the able-bodied bondspeople who lived and worked around them. Of course, blind bondspeople's numbers were small, and they were not always considered the most important or productive workers in a household or on a plantation. Nevertheless, they remained one of the most employed and productive groups of blind people in Western history until the modern era.

This work integrates slave studies with disability studies. Two opposing theoretical models have influenced disability studies over the decades. The medical model dominated before the 1980s. This model viewed disability as a problem that existed within the individual who

[21] Katherine Cudlick pointed out that most types of histories assume an able-bodied norm. Katherine Cudlick, "Why We Need Another Other," American Historical Review 108 (June 2003): 763–93.
[22] Rosenthal, "Economics of Slavery," 76.

possessed the specific mental, physical, or sensory impairment in question.[23] The limitations a disabled person faced due to their disability could only be addressed by fixing the individual's mental or physical issue. Accordingly, works employing this model mainly focused on rehabilitation or medical repairs to the individual disabled person.[24]

Following the 1970s disability rights movement, the minority or social model of disability emerged as the preferred method for scholars to understand and address disability. The minority model advances the idea that disability, like race and gender, is a socially constructed category.[25] On this view, able-bodied individuals created the expectations and limitations that disabled people live with daily. These scholars argued that for disabled people to achieve their full potential, society's negative attitudes needed fixing more than disabled people's bodies. In his 2003 text Why I Burned My Book, Paul Longmore, a quadriplegic, described his fight with the Social Security Administration. The agency had ruled that the less than $50 he earned through book royalties made him ineligible for the government funding that would allow him to purchase the oxygen tanks he needed to live. As he explained,

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[23] Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umanski, The New Disability History: American Perspectives (New York and London: New York University Press, 1990), 4.

[24] Countless books and articles have employed the medical model. Some examples include Rab Houston and Uta Frith, Autism in History: The Case of Hugh Blair of Borgue (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000); Howard I. Kushner, A Cursing Brain? The Histories of Tourette Syndrome (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); J. C. Rothman, "The Challenge of Disability and Access," Journal of Social Work in Disability and Rehabilitation 9, no. 2 (2010); C. Ong-Dean, "Reconsidering the Social Location of the Medical Model: An Examination of Disability in Parenting Literature," Journal of Medical Humanities 26, no. 2–3 (2005).
Some historians argue that the medical model should not be abandoned but rather incorporated into the social model; see Beth Linker, "On the Borderland of Medical and Disability History: A Survey of the Fields," Bulletin of the History of Medicine 87, no. 4 (Winter 2013).

[25] The social model had its earliest roots in Irving Goffman's work on stigma. Others have since applied it specifically to disability. For a discussion of stigma, see Colin Barnes, "Understanding the Social Model of Disability," in Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies, ed. Nick Watson and Simo Vehmas (London: Routledge, 2012). Longmore and Umanski's New Disability History is a classic work that follows the social model over a wide variety of topics and time periods in U.S. history. Recently, some scholars have questioned the social model's effectiveness; see Tom Shakespeare, "The Social Model of Disability: An Outdated Ideology?" Research in Social Science and Disability 2 (2002): 9–28.

> The new conceptualization of disability grew out of the efforts of activists to address the problems and obstacles faced by people with disabilities. Those advocates have recognized that for most people with most kinds of disabilities most of the time the greatest limitations are not somatic but social: prejudice and discrimination.[26]

Although the social model had its roots in activism, it was quickly applied to historians' work on disability. In his 1990 book The New Disability History, Douglas Baynton explained that "disability is everywhere once you look for it."[27] In Baynton's 2016 work Defectives in the Land, which tracked the role of disability in United States immigration policy between the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1924 National Origins Act, he further observed, "In the same way that all people are defined in part by race, class, gender, and sexuality, everyone is defined in some way by disability, by its presence or ostensible absence."[28] Crucially, Baynton added, "The concept of disability has been used to justify inequality for not only disabled people but virtually every other group that has faced stigma or oppression."[29]

Disability studies scholars often take a wide view of the category "disability" and group all types of impairments together in a single work. This framework assumes a common experience of disability that is shared to a certain extent by all individuals with physical or mental disabilities.[30] Although this approach has its benefits, each individual disability has its own unique challenges and, importantly, its own social construction. For example, while the accessibility needs and experiences of a paraplegic in a wheelchair differ from those of a blind

[26] Paul Longmore, Why I Burned My Book: And Other Essays on Disability (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 3.
[27] Douglas Baynton, "The Justification for Inequality in American History," in Longmore and Umanski, New Disability History, 52.
[28] Douglas Baynton, Defectives in the Land (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 4.
[29] Ibid., 5.
[30] Longmore and Umanski, New Disability History.

person with a white cane, each also faces different public perceptions and attitudes. Therefore, for the social model to gain its greatest probative value, it is necessary to examine the social construction of each specific impairment.

In his 2001 book Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought (2001), Moshe Barasch examined sighted attitudes toward the blind from classical antiquity to the Enlightenment. Drawing evidence from representations of the blind in a wide range of texts and paintings covering 2,000 years of Western history – including the Bible, Oedipus Rex, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Diderot's Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who Can See – Barasch explained that "while blindness as such remains unchanged our (sighted people's) understanding of blindness or views concerning its 'meaning 'are matters of culture."[31] He further commented, "The attitude toward the blind is largely a result of what people believed that blindness meant."[32] Barasch identified two main archetypes that dominated depictions of the blind in painting and texts, both of which show the blind person on the outside of society. One centered on the mysterious, unknowable blind person. He examined the blind seer Tiresias who, in the Oedipus Rex story, knew the truth about Oedipus' s relationship with his mother while everyone else was in the dark.[33] A second representation of the blind appeared in the Bible and paintings representing it.[34] These portrayed the blind person as a beggar, dependent on others for their survival. Both these archetypes placed the blind on the outside of society and made them alien to the sighted world.

This work falls squarely within disability's social model. However, it focuses on the blind to the exclusion of other disabilities. The blind's construction by the able-bodied is not

[31] Barasch, Blindness, 3.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 30–32.
[34] Ibid., 107–108, 116–21.

only unique but extremely negative and dismissive. How the sighted thought about the blind, as well as the limitations they imagined and constructed for them, represent obstacles more difficult to overcome for those without sight than their lack of physical vision. Nevertheless, this work complicates the social model by showing that slaveowners only sometimes followed blind stigmas logic. Much like the contradiction demonstrated by Thomas Jefferson – who claimed in the Notes on the State of Virginia that Blacks were "a distinct species" yet managed to have sexual encounters, and five children, with Sally Hemings – slaveowners spoke about, and valued, blind slaves based on the idea that they were physically unable to labor, yet still assigned them work-related tasks. This fact, however, illustrates the social model's validity since blind bondspeople proved that the blind could physically engage in labor. This points to sighted stigmas as a main reason for their exclusion from other workforces.

Blind slaves have only recently become more noticeable in works on slavery. Before 2000 and the rise of disability history, blind slaves were virtually invisible in the historiographical debates outside of occasional mentions of individual blind bondspeople. Two broad stages of slave studies occurred before disabled slaves entered the picture.

The focus of the first historiographical stage was on White slaveowners and how they acted on Blacks. In 1918, Ulrich Bonnell Phillips delivered the opening historical interpretation in his text American Negro Slavery. Firmly planted within the early-1900s resurgence of antebellum proslavery ideology, Phillips examined conditions on several Southern plantations and made claims that framed debates on slavery for decades. Besides arguing that slavery had not been economically profitable, he claimed that Black Americans had retained no African traditions or culture, making slavery "the best school yet invented for the mass training of that

sort of inert and backward people."[35] Phillips saw slavery as a mild institution where owners treated slaves with moderation and Blacks were contented and happy.[36]

Although Black historians such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson refuted Phillips's arguments before World War II, in the 1950s, Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution* (1956) and Stanley Elkins's *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959) emerged as the main rebuttals to Phillips's work. Stampp reexamined the slave system with a more critical eye toward owners' treatment of slaves and Blacks' responses. Instead of a mild system, he found that owners routinely brutalized Blacks while generally providing scant food, clothes, and housing and continually overworking them. Stampp contradicted Phillips's characterization of slaves as contented and happy, highlighting bondspeople's acts of resistance such as physically rebelling, breaking tools, refusing to work, and running away.[37] Elkins put forward a more controversial thesis. He followed in Phillips's footsteps by arguing that Blacks' experiences during the Middle Passage and slavery had destroyed all that had been African in America's Black population. Elkins argued that the trauma that Africans experienced left the new Black population demoralized, causing them to develop a Sambo personality that led Blacks to mimic their White masters.[38] In Elkins's opinion, the Middle Passage had rendered Blacks a blank slate that White slaveowners filled in at will – though unlike Phillips, he did not cast this as a positive aspect of slavery.

The second stage of slavery historiography was marked by an interest in understanding how enslaved Blacks acted both within and on the institution. Many historians produced

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[35] Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime (New York: Appleton, 1918).
[36] Ibid., 343.
[37] Kenneth Stampp, The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South (New York: Vintage, 1989), 338–43.
[38] Elkins, Slavery.

scholarship that, contrary to previous scholarship, showed that Blacks were not passive actors with no power and no connection to their ancestral past. In *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1972), Charles Blassingame looked at slavery from the slaves' perspective and found that they played a large role in shaping their own community. Moreover, he highlighted social activities such as dances, music, and stories that could be traced back directly to West Africa. At the same time, Blassingame employed a psychological lens and identified three personality types: Sambo, Jack, and Nat. He argued that Sambo was a creation of the White mind; Whites had created the personality because they found that focusing on the idea of passive and docile Blacks was more calming than focusing on Nat. The latter was based on Nat Turner, who was anything but docile and passive.[39] In *Slave Religion* (1979), Albert Raboteau applied an international lens to understand slaves' religious practices. He found that slaves in the American South, like other Blacks across the Americas, learned Christianity from Whites but combined its teachings with their own traditional religious practices. As an example, he noted that Blacks often performed the West African ring shout in Christian ceremonies that they controlled and organized when beyond the owner's watchful gaze.[40] Charles Joyner's *Down by the Riverside* (1984) demonstrated the retention of African traditions throughout Black life on low-country South Carolina plantations. He connected the animal-based trickster tales Blacks shared with each other to stories told in West Africa. Moreover, he argued that the Gullah

[39] John Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).
[40] Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Mechal Sobel, Trabelin 'On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979).

language, widely spoken along the Southeastern coast, represented a Black lingua franca that borrowed words, phrases, and sentence structures from several West African language groups.[41]

In *Roll*, Jordan, Roll (1974), Eugene Genovese rejected the idea that owners possessed unchecked dominance over the enslaved. He argued that even though owners had the upper hand, their adherence to paternalistic benevolence allowed slaves a space in which to force them to modify their demands and expectations through acts of active or passive resistance. Genovese maintained that White owners and Black bondspeople engaged in a reciprocal relationship based on informal negotiations. White owners attempted to squeeze as much labor as they could from Blacks but also allowed Black slaves to shape some terms of their captivity, such as how much work they did and when they did it.[42] In 1985, Deborah Grey White thrust the experience of female slaves into the spotlight. Her book *Ar'n't I a Woman?* made an important contribution to slave studies by noting that unlike male slaves, women were involved in both the production of crops and the reproduction of future slaves. Colonial laws dictated that children followed the mother's condition, which imposed the added burden on women of knowing that their offspring would be used to fill their owners' pockets and plantation workforces. Scholarship on women's relationship to slavery has grown remarkably over the decades.[43] Still, outside of works centered on the topic of slavery and medicine, the new scholarship has almost never mentioned blind bondspeople.[44]

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[41] Joiner, Down by the Riverside; Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: African American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[42] Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).
[43] Deborah Grey White, Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: Random House, 1985).
[44] Eye diseases and injuries were one of the problems owners and doctors treated in bondspeople, which results in brief mentions of individual blind slaves as patients. The classic work on healthcare in the South is Todd L. Savitt, Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Healthcare of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia

The fullest treatment of blind slaves has occurred as part of the small but growing historiography on disabled slaves in the Americas. Two full-length monographs, Dea Boster's African American Slavery and Disability and Stephanie Hunt Kennedy's Between Fitness and Death on slaves in the Caribbean, represent the only full-length works on disabled slaves.[45] Boster's pioneering book takes a wide perspective on the category of disability and examines individuals with a range of mental and physical impairments, such as epilepsy, disfigurement, and blindness.[46] She takes a similarly wide perspective on topics within slavery and discusses disabled slaves' work patterns and monetary values. Boster also discusses subjects only secondarily related to disability, like how able-bodied bondspeople faked, or performed, disability to get out of work or, in the case of Ellen Kraft, to aid her and her husband William's escape. She explores the medical field's use of disabled slaves as experimental subjects and highlights how proslavery medical thinkers invented the diseases of Drapomania and Rascality to explain away Blacks' desire to run away or avoid work.[47] Blind slaves are discussed as a subset of disability.

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978). See also Katherine Kemi Bankole, Slavery and Medicine: Enslavement and Medical Practice in Antebellum Louisiana (New York: Darlin Publishing, 1998).

[45] Dea Boster, African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property and Power in the Antebellum South, 1800-1860 (Dallas: Taylor, 2013). Recently, two books have been released as part of a disability history series edited by Kim E. Nielsen: Jennifer L. Barkly, The Mark of Slavery: Disability, Race, and Gender in Antebellum America (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021) and Stephanie Hunt Kennedy, Between Fitness and Death: Disability and Slavery in the Caribbean (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020). See also Deirdre O'Connell, The Ballad of Blind Tom: Slave Pianist (2009).
Several articles have also been published that focus on the general topic: James Forret, "Deaf and Dumb, Blind, Insane, or Idiotic: The Census, Slaves, and Disability in the Late Antebellum South," Journal of Southern History 82, no. 3 (2016); Jim Downs, "The Continuation of Slavery: The Experience of Disabled Slaves during Emancipation," Disability Quarterly 28, no. 3 (2008); E. Samuels, "Reading Race through Disability: Slavery and Agency in Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson and 'Those Extraordinary Twins.'"

[46] Boster, Slavery and Disability, 13.

[47] Boster, Slavery and Disability, 100.

At times, historians who discuss blind slaves allow their own stigmas about the blind to color their analysis. In Walter Johnson's collection of essays, The Chattel Principle (2005), Daina Berry discusses slaves' rates and prices in four Georgia low-country counties between 1830 and 1860. In an example she gives as part of this discussion, Berry identifies 25 slaves in their sixties, noting that 22 had no rating or monetary value listed. Her claim is clearly that slaves generally lost their overall value after the age of 60.[48] However, after making this point, she writes, "This sample also contained data about health and skill. For example, sixty-year-old John of Mulberry Grove Plantation was listed as having no value, but next to his name the owner wrote, 'blind 'to indicate why John had no value."[49] In her previous point, Berry had argued that slaves over 60 usually lacked a recorded rating or value, but in John's case, she points to his blindness rather than his age to explain the devaluation. Why would Berry make this assumption in John's case? The answer almost certainly lies in the sighted adherence to stigmas about blindness.

The present work builds on two of slave studies' historiographical traditions. First, it is clearly situated in the recent wave of studies that focuses on new, different, and previously overlooked aspects of slavery. Second, it tries to reflect the ideas of accommodation and agency introduced in the 1970s. To be sure, Black chattel slavery was a heinous system that visited innumerable brutalities on Blacks. Nevertheless, how bondspeople and owners interacted with each other and, in the case of the blind, adjusted to each other represents a critical way to understand the system and those involved in it. Almost by definition, blindness caused an individual bondsperson and an owner to respond and react to a new situation. Unfortunately, almost no firsthand accounts written by blind slaves exist with which to examine how they lived

[48] Berry, "Fus' Rate Bargain."
[49] Ibid. Also see Forret, "Deaf and Dumb."

day to day. No record yet uncovered explains how they navigated their environment, how they felt about being blind, or how those with sight treated them because of their blindness.

In the antebellum period, however, a handful of free White blind women and men managed to make themselves heard. They authored personal narratives explaining to the sighted world how they lived and functioned and how they viewed the sighted stigmas they faced. Two books were especially important to my understanding of how a blind person in the antebellum era adapted to blindness and interacted with the world around them. Benjamin Bowen's 1850 *A Blind Man's Offering* and Mary L. Day's 1859 *Incidents in the Life of a Blind Girl* laid out the perspective of two blind people who wanted readers to understand that blindness did not prevent them from wanting and attempting to be productive members of society. Both authors demonstrated that they were more than physically capable of work and travel in an age before concrete sidewalks, guide dogs, and white canes – and also that they were well aware of sighted stigmas that held they could do neither.[50]

As I hold the position that blind people are just as able to perform labor as anyone else, I do not cast their inclusion in slavery's labor regime as a negative. The fact that blind bondspeople worked in a variety of occupations across the South demonstrates that blind people's exclusion from free-labor workforces in the North was based more on stigma than ability. To be sure, the key to the different reactions of slaveowners and free-labor employers to blind workers lies in the chattel principle, which financially incentivized slaveowners to put blind slaves to work. Despite this fact, I do credit owners with discovering methods to engage the blind in jobs and tasks that did not require sight. This uncomfortable truth has, at times, led me to

[50] Mary L. Day, Incidents in the Life of a Blind Girl: Mary L. Day a Graduate of the Maryland School for the Blind (Baltimore: J. Young, 1859); Benjamin Bowen, A Blind Man's Offering (B. B. Bowen, 1850).

paint slaveowners (though not explicitly) as progressive and free-labor employers as regressive, leaving me feeling like a twenty-first-century proslavery cheerleader.

My argument, however, departs from antebellum proslavery ideologues' claims in a significant way. Southerners like Fitzhugh Lee praised the slave system by arguing that whereas Northern free-labor employers discarded blind and disabled workers to starve and die in the streets, owners took care of blind and disabled slaves' material needs until they died.[51] I freely acknowledge the truth behind Southern critiques of free-labor employers' treatment of blind and disabled workers. As I have previously illustrated, blind people in the twenty-first century still deal with the stigmas of their sighted employers, who view them as incapable and therefore not employable. However, I argue that rather than taking care of nonworking blind and disabled slaves out of a feeling of paternalistic benevolence (as Lee implies), owners housed, clothed, and fed blind slaves because they worked like other members of their workforce.

One important note: I do seek to separate blind bondspeople by chronological age. Two related things are true. As bondspeople aged, owners stopped using them in their workforces. Certainly, some older bondspeople still worked in some capacity, but at some point, owners stopped employing them. At the same time, old age is the main cause of blindness. Although I do not ignore older blind slaves in any way, when I am referring to the labor of blind bondspeople, I am generally alluding to those who would not already have been prevented by age from working.

[51] The classic articulation of this idea was George Fitzhugh's Cannibals All! Or Slaves Without Masters (Richmond, VA: A. Morris, 1857). See also Henry Wish, George Fitzhugh: Propagandist of the Old South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Press, 1943). For a general overview of proslavery thought, see Paul Finkelman, Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South, A Brief History with Documents (Boston: Bedford-St. Martin, 2003); Eric McKitrick, Slavery Defended: The Views of the Old South (Engel-Wood Hills: Prentice-Hall, 1963); David Donald, "The Proslavery Argument Reconsidered," Journal of Southern History 37 (February 1971): 3–17.

This dissertation follows a thematic structure with one major concession to chronology. Chapter 1 establishes the antebellum social construction of blindness. The 1830s witnessed an increased interest in blind Americans' welfare as part of the growing benevolent empire. Private philanthropists such as Massachusetts's Samuel Gridley Howe established schools for the blind, and the federal government began to count blind Americans, both Black and White, as part of the decennial census. Stigmas of the blind underlay both efforts, as sighted people defined blindness as a physically and mentally debilitating condition that left people unable to support or care for themselves. The census, of course, counted not just free Americans but those who were enslaved as well. As a result, the attempts of the federal census to provide an accurate count of the number of blind slaves in the South inserted Black blind people, both enslaved and free, into the emerging sectional fight over slavery. Northern abolitionists and proslavery ideologues both employed discourse based on negative notions of blindness for their own purposes. The census count highlighted another question with important implications for this dissertation: who counted as blind? No single definition of legal blindness existed during the antebellum era, and census workers, like all other antebellum Americans, had to judge for themselves who was and was not blind. This was a decision I also had to make about people with one functional eye; I decided to use one-eyed people as part of my evidence even though I know that only possessing a single eye does not necessarily make an individual blind or visually impaired.

Chapter 2 turns to the medical side of blindness. In this chapter, I do not seek to follow a medical model of disability but rather to acknowledge that an individual's loss of sight, whether due to aging, disease, or accident, is usually an extremely important – if not the most transformative – event in their lives. I examine the various causes of blindness enslaved people experienced to highlight their "middle passage" from sighted to blind, even in the cases of those

who were born without sight. The wide variety of ways in which bondspeople became blind demonstrates the random nature of blindness and the different types of individuals who experienced it.

I also discuss how the sudden occurrence of blindness often triggered a response from the plantation's medical system in an effort to reverse the condition. Professional medical help remained outside the reach of most individuals in the South, which often left the care of slaves' eye problems to White and Black laymen who lived on or near the plantation. These healers relied on traditional remedies drawn from European, African, and Native American customs as well as the emerging medical field.

Chapter 3 focuses on blind slaves' labor patterns. Slaves with vision problems generally worked jobs associated with what I call a plantation's support side. These jobs and tasks aimed to maintain and support the owners and their families' material needs, such as food, clothing, or entertainment, as well as helping the enslaved workforce to be more efficient in producing products for market.

I then present two micro-histories based on blind slaves from Georgia. The first centers on March Woodruff, who worked on George Kollock's large cotton plantations along the Georgia coast. A full-hand in 1831 who worked on the plantation's production side, he had mysteriously lost his sight by 1850. As a blind half-/quarter-hand, he was moved to the plantation's support side, where he stayed until the Civil War. The second micro-history focuses on Thomas Greene Bethune, better known as Blind Tom, who was the most famous blind slave in American history. Born blind in 1849, Blind Tom was a famous pianist who not only toured the nation but played at the White House in 1859 at the age of 11. Tom had a successful traveling show built around his ability to hear songs once and immediately recreate them on the piano. In

addition to showing owners' willingness to employ blind slaves in any way they could be productive, Tom's life demonstrates how the stigma attached to his blindness blunted and eliminated one of the most insidious features of racism: that of Blacks as a threat to Whites and Whiteness.

The final chapter examines a case study of how emancipation changed experience by examining North Carolina after slavery's demise. During the 1868 Constitutional Convention, North Carolina's Republican Party paved the way for the first school for Black blind children in the South. The "Colored School" of the North Carolina Institution for the Deaf, the Dumb and the Blind opened its doors on January 7, 1869. It remains open today as an integrated school under a new name. The institution represented Black North Carolinians' commitment to educating all children across the state. Although the individual who originally conceived of the school is lost to history, the former slave James A. Harris and other influential Blacks willingly partnered with Whites to establish it. These White figures included Willie J. Palmer, the principal of the White part of the school, and S.S. Ashley, an 1868 Constitutional Convention delegate and the first State Superintendent of Schools. Black North Carolinians believed deeply in education and were unwilling to provide schools for some Black children but not others.

Unlike most Black-led Reconstruction projects, the "Colored Department" ran into little resistance from White conservatives. Stigmas surrounding blind helplessness and harmlessness allowed the school to receive continual funding increases, even after Democrats took back the state starting in 1870. In fact, by the turn of the century, the Democratic Party would claim credit for starting the school, completely writing Black Republicans out of the institution's history.

Blind Blacks' experiences in and out of slavery in the 1800s demonstrated not only the power of long-held sighted stigmas about blindness but also the chattel principle's power to alter

the degree to which those stigmas were adhered to. The stereotypes associated with blind Blacks' bodies conflicted with each other, which left Whites free to pick when, where, and under what circumstances blindness or blackness would be emphasized. Accordingly, while slavery attached a monetary value to blind Blacks, they worked, ate, and slept much like other Blacks around them. However, after emancipation removed their value, they were seen and categorized with the rest of the blind population.

The study of blind bondspeople dramatically changes the common understanding of blind people and their history. The fact that Black blind individuals worked in various jobs and tasks as slaves demonstrates that blind people's exclusion from other workforces is driven more by sighted discrimination than an individual's physical lack of sight. To be sure, social stigmas about blindness caused owners to impose a general monetary devaluation, attempt medical treatments to reverse it, and restrict the tasks blind people were assigned. In the end, however, none of those efforts meant that blind slaves' work was not profitable or important to individual owners and tedious, brutal, and resistance-generating for blind bondspeople.

Although blind slaves did not make up a major portion of the enslaved community, their presence in the South forces historians to grapple with those bondspeople who did not fit the profile of a prime or even desirable worker. Whether based on financial considerations, a recognition that the blind could indeed labor, or a combination of both, slaveowners displayed a degree of adaptation not reproduced by other types of employers.

CHAPTER 1

"So Many Weak and Helpless Ones"

In 1839, the abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld published his antislavery text *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*. Intent on disproving proslavery assertions that the institution was benevolent and mutually beneficial for Blacks and Whites, Weld put Southerners' claims on trial: "Reader, you are impaneled as a juror to try a plain case and bring in an honest verdict. The question at issue is not one of law, but of fact—'what is the actual condition of the slaves in the United States?'"[52] Weld argued that slaveholders and their apologists "are flooding the world with testimony that their slaves are kindly treated; that they are well fed, well clothed, well housed, well lodged, moderately worked and bountifully provided for."[53] He promised to present evidence drawn from Southerners' own words demonstrating that the opposite was true. "We will prove," Weld explained, "that their (bondspeople's) ears are often cut off, their eyes knocked out, their bones broken, their flesh branded with red hot irons; that they are maimed, mutilated, and burned to death."[54] Weld specifically pointed to blind slaves as a subset of bondspeople who lived in a heightened state of mortal danger.

Combining stigmas common among sighted people about blind people's inability to engage in work-related activities with his belief in slaveholders' greed and brutality, Weld asserted that blind slaves, being a continual "tax" on owners' profits, would make it in "his interest to shorten their days."[55] Weld felt that the contradiction between blind people's

[52] Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), 7.
[53] Ibid., 9.
[54] Ibid., 8.
[55] Ibid., 136.

helplessness and the masters' desire to extract every ounce of labor out of their workers was simply too much. In his opinion, Southern slaveholders would murder blind slaves rather than incorporate them into their workforces. To demonstrate the problem's urgency, he informed readers that information provided by the United States' 1830 census led him to believe that at least 1,275 blind bondspeople were in jeopardy of losing their lives.[56]

In issuing his warning about the mortal danger that blind slaves faced, Weld was confident that he and his sighted readers shared an understanding that the blind were helpless and physically unable to labor. Although the claim that slaveowners killed blind bondspeople was dubious, the underlying argument of this chapter is that Weld correctly judged the sighted attitude: antebellum Americans in both the North and South held a set of beliefs that cast blind people as isolated, sedentary, and unable to labor. Blindness was even connected to mental illness, a belief expressed in the antebellum Censuses wherein the blind were grouped with the "insane and idiotic."[57] This shared attitude about those without sight created, reflected, and reinforced a web of discriminatory stigmas as powerful and enduring as racism. In fact, blindness was a condition that, in the sighted mind, tended to overshadow an individual's other mental and physical characteristics.

A key argument in this chapter is that when sighted antebellum Americans discussed the blind (both free and enslaved) in public settings such as speeches, articles, books, court cases, and slave sales, popular stigmas about blind people's helplessness almost always colored the conversation.[58] The fact that these attitudes were widely held in both free and slaves states is

[56] Ibid., 138.
[57] Margo Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 55–57; Jeff Forret, "Deaf and Dumb, Blind, Insane, or Idiotic: The Census, Slaves, and Disability in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History* 82, no. 3 (August 2016): 503–48.
[58] Irving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

even more significant when it is realized that only in free-labor situations did ideas of blind people's unfitness for work prevent the blind from actually working. Nevertheless, public mention of the blind generally conjured up feelings of pity or scorn for individuals who, it was thought, could only beg or otherwise take from their communities.

This chapter maintains that in the antebellum era there were two connected but distinct public constructions of blindness, both largely dictated by the sighted. The first was the social construction of blindness, which was built by and around stigmas.[59] This construction consisted of how the sighted thought the lack of vision would affect an individual mentally, physically, and functionally. The fact that the sighted generally dismissed a blind person's ability to engage in physical activity, especially labor, highlights a hypocrisy within the slave system, as owners' ideology did not match their everyday practices. Second, the legal construction of blindness rested on who was properly labeled as blind. In other words, how limited did someone's vision need to be for them to be classified as blind?[60] This standard changed and expanded over the decades, and it played a role in which individuals antebellum Americans, as well as contemporary historians, considered blind. This chapter combines both these constructions in a single presentation to reflect the reality that once an individual was identified as blind, the stigmas related to blindness were attached to them.

The federal census's efforts after 1830 to count the number of blind people in the United States play three important roles in this chapter. First, the 1850 census is the best official count of the nation's blind bondspeople. Although the population numbers it produced were surely an

[59] Discrimination and negative beliefs about the blind go back to ancient times. See Moshe Barasch, *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Henry Jacque Stiker, *A History of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).
[60] Peter John Brownlee, *The Commerce of Vision: Optical Culture and Perception in Antebellum America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 31; Hyman Goldstein, *The Demography and Causes of Blindness* (New York: American Foundation of the Blind, 1968), 20–25.

undercount, its results provide a baseline from which to estimate. Second, the census demonstrates that even though the stigmas attached to those without sight remained fairly stable, the legal definition of blindness changed and expanded over time. In fact, a uniform standard for blindness was introduced only after slavery ended. Finally, the census played an important role by introducing blind bondspeople into the public discourse. Since blind stigmas accompanied any discourse surrounding the blind, abolitionists and proslavery thinkers alike incorporated blind slaves and negative views of blindness into the sectional fight.[61]

This chapter has three main parts. It begins by examining the antebellum social construction of blindness as presented in public discourse such as books, articles, speeches, court cases, and sectional attacks over slavery. Beyond a physical state, blindness brought with it a host of negative assumptions. Sighted people viewed the blind as physically inactive, isolated, weak, mentally deficient, and unable to perform basic activities. As a consequence, when sighted antebellum Americans discussed the blind, their language transmitted images and ideas that reflected those negative stigmas.

I then move to the federal census and the inclusion of the blind in the count. The antebellum reform movement's focus on identifying and helping those who could not help themselves made an accounting of the nation's blind people—and especially blind slaves—possible. Although the 1830 and 1840 Censuses produced questionable numbers, the 1,387 blind bondspeople recorded by the 1850 census represented the most accurate enumeration performed in the antebellum era.

Finally, the census numbers raise an important question: Who did marshals, or slave owners, consider blind? The legal definition of blindness changed over time, moving from an

[61] Anderson, *American Census*, 57; Patricia Klein Cohen, *A Calculating People: The Spread of Numeracy in Early America* (1982; repr., New York: Routledge, 1999); Forret, "Deaf and Dumb."

informal folk understanding that emphasized near-to-total blindness in the antebellum period to a twentieth-century scientific standard that recognized a wide range of visual impairments. Since blindness was a fluid category, which slaves were considered blind and by whom became contested questions that were decided in antebellum courts. Finally, historians must make a judgment call when presented with antebellum evidence on one-eyed slaves. Even with today's expansive definition of blindness, a one-eyed person whose other eye has no issues is not legally blind; this subject concludes the final section.

Stigma

Blindness has long conjured up powerful negative images within the sighted mind. Perhaps a reaction to imagined problems one might face without vision or a reflection of a simple fear of the dark, sighted people's beliefs about blindness—and, by extension, the blind—created a dominant negative social construction that cast the blind as immobile, isolated, and incapable.[62] Antebellum Americans often used adjectives like "pitiful," "poor," "unfortunate," "helpless," and "useless" to describe the blind, which both mirrored and sustained negative attitudes. Even today, to many sighted people, normal everyday activities such as traveling, playing, working, worshipping, and parenting all seemed to be beyond a blind person's capabilities.[63] Consider the view of Samuel Howe, who in 1831 helped found Boston's Perkins

[62] Goldstein, Demography and Causes, 5-7.
[63] Susan Donaldson James, "Baby Sent to Foster Care for 57 Days Because Parents Are Blind," *ABC News*, July 27, 2010, https://abcnews.go.com/Health/missouri-takes-baby-blind-parents/story?id=11263491; Angela Frederick, "Between Stigma and Mother Blame: Blind Mothers' Experiences in USA Hospitals," *Sociology of Health & Illness* 37, no. 8 (November 2015), https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.12286; Michelle McDonnall and Jennifer Cmar, "Blind People Have Increased Opportunities, but Employers' Perceptions Are Still a Barrier," *The Conversation*, October 14, 2019, https://theconversation.com/blind-people-have-increased-opportunities-but-employers-perceptions-are-still-a-barrier-

Institution for the Blind, the first school for the blind in the United States (the school was later renamed the Perkins School for the Blind, a name it maintains to this day). Howe described the public images attached to a blind person's life prospects: "The post of the blind has always been by the highway, in the humble attitude of the beggar," while "their dwelling place has been the alms house."[64]

Howe, an antebellum reformer and eventual husband to Julia Ward, was born in 1801 to a well-to-do New England family. In 1821, at the age of 20, he graduated from Harvard Medical School. After graduation, he traveled to Greece, where he provided medical aid to the Greek army during the 1822 revolution and served with distinction. During the 1850s, Howe edited an antislavery paper named *The Boston Commons*, financially supported John Brown's efforts in Kansas, and participated in the failed attempt to break the fugitive slave Anthony Burns out of a Boston jail.[65]

In 1833, however, Howe was engaged in finding greater philanthropic support for the nation's blind. In that year, he published "*Educating the Blind*," wherein he discussed a wide range of topics relating to those without sight. Though Howe worked with and on behalf of the blind, he reflected and projected prevailing antebellum stigmas. He argued that although a proper

124977#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20most%20common,blind%20is%20negative%20employer%20attitudes.&text=Implicit%20attitudes%20refer%20to%20subconscious,would%20be%20unable%20to%20report; Edward Bell and Natalia Mino, "Employment Outcomes for Visually Impaired Adults," *Journal of Blindness Innovation and Research* 5, no. 2 (2015). Accessed November 29, 2020.

[64] Samuel Gridley Howe, "Education of the Blind," *North American Review* (July 1833), retrieved from https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/issues/education-blind-1833/. Accessed October 20, 2020.

[65] James Trent, *The Manliest Man: Samuel G. Howe and the Contours of Nineteenth-Century American Reform* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); Harold Schwartz, *Samuel Gridley Howe, Social Reformer, 1801–1876* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957); Milton Meltzer, *A Light in the Dark: The Life of Samuel Gridley Howe* (New York, New York: Crowell, 1964); Ernest Freeberg, *The Education of Laura Bridgman: The First Deaf and Blind Person to Learn Language* (New York, New York: Crowell, 1964).

education could help an individual, left alone, the lack of physical activity caused by blindness would necessarily stunt mental and physical development:

> The effects of blindness upon the physical man, whatever they may be upon the intellectual, are decidedly pernicious; not directly and necessarily, but, nevertheless, almost inevitably. The mind is not called into action, the muscular power is not developed by exercise and labor, the sufferer dares not run about and play with his comrades; he cannot work in the open air, nor get the healthful movement which is necessary to bring the frame to the temper, that will enable it to wear well in after life; and it consequently soon wears out. Hence we see so many of the blind, who were comparatively intelligent and active in childhood, gradually drooping through youth into premature old age; becoming first inactive, then stupid, then idiotic, and finally going down to an early grave with the light of intellect completely extinguished, and enveloped in both physical and intellectual darkness. This is purely the effect of physical inaction; and this inaction always must have this effect; hence so few strong men are found among the blind; hence so many weak and helpless ones.[66]

Howe gave voice to the prevailing attitude of the day: blind people were prevented by their lack of sight from engaging in physical activities for fun or work. His argument implied that the blind suffered from a paralyzing fear of the outside world that kept them rooted in place. In Howe's opinion, this constant state of apprehension and immobility led to a group of dependent individuals unable to fend for themselves. In an America that valued mobility and ruggedness, blind people's image was the opposite.

Antebellum newspapers and journals often highlighted and reinforced the notion of blind isolation and immobility. "The Blind Boy," a poem reprinted in various antebellum publications, used rhythmic language to paint a picture of Howe's argument. The author creatively illustrated the divide that sighted society believed existed between themselves and those without sight as it related to physical activity. The poem's subject is a blind, presumably White, boy, who sat inside "dejected and alone" and cried while listening to sighted children playing outside: "He could not join their play; he could not run about the fields, and by the brook-side stray; The rolling hoop –

[66] Howe, "Education of the Blind."

the bounding ball – The kite borne by the wind – The acorn hunt were naught to him, For he, alas was blind."[67] The message is clear: those who could not see, regardless of desire, lacked the physical means to participate in the outside world as others did. This deeply held conviction contributed to the sighted public's overall belief that blind people were fundamentally different.

When Howe wrote about the "blind," he did not overly emphasize gender, race, or class within his description. Although the blind belonged to other demographic categories, such as female, male, Black, White, slave, and free, these tended to be secondary considerations to the sighted. The seeing public viewed the blind as a single group who all suffered from the same limitations. For example, consider Mary Day, a totally blind, White, free, teenage girl, who in 1858 authored *Incidents in the Life of a Blind Girl*, and Tom Bethune, a totally blind, Black, enslaved, teenage boy who in the 1850s toured the nation playing the piano with his master. Although these two blind people found themselves in drastically different life circumstances, the general public attached blindness's negative stigmas to both. Day, who attended a school for the blind in the slaveholding state of Maryland, discovered how fleeting her White, female, and free status was at a public demonstration put on by her school. After she and her White classmates had been poked, prodded, and teased by the gathered White crowd, Day bitterly commented, "They appeared to regard us as a race distant from themselves."[68] The sighted crowd's preconceived negative social stigmas about the blind created the divide Day acknowledged through her use of the terms "they" and "us."

Again, the image of the weak and helpless blind person painted by Howe and others represented a set of beliefs that sighted culture applied to visually impaired people as a group.

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[67] *The Blind Boy," in Rural Repository, vol. 10–11 (W. B. Stoddard, 1834).*
[68] Mary L. Day, *Incidents in the Life of a Blind Girl: Mary L. Day, a Graduate of the Maryland Institution for the Blind* (Baltimore: J. Young, 1859), 171.

The small number of blind Americans meant that most sighted people never encountered a blind person, which allowed long-standing societal stigmas to go unchallenged. To be sure, antebellum blind schools reached out to the public in an attempt to reverse these perceptions. They often held demonstrations like the one recounted by Day, wherein blind children played music, recited poems, solved math problems, and at least at Howe's Perkins School, rode horses.[69]

Blind authors, who were generally graduates of schools for the blind like Day, wrote and published autobiographies to refute the public's negative stigmas. The texts generally recounted their education, work, and, significantly, travels with the aim of presenting the blind as capable, intelligent, and mobile. These autobiographies included James Champlin's *Early Biography: Travels and Adventures of Reverend James Champlin Who Was Born Blind, Written by Himself 1846*; Benjamin Bowen's *A Blind Man's Offering* (1850); Abram Courtney's *Adventure of a Blind Man and His Dog: A True Narrative of His Eventful Wanderings by Land and Sea* (1856), and, of course, Mary L. Day's *Incidents in the Life of a Blind Girl* (1859). These firsthand accounts challenged prevailing attitudes about the blind, but their limited circulation and the persistence of long-standing negative stigmas gave the texts little chance to change many minds.

Although antebellum Americans in both the North and South engaged in discourse that involved the blind, the financial transactions inherent in the slave system insured that the value of blind slaves—and therefore blind stigmas—were discussed in unique ways in the South. The two major expressions of this were the designation of blind slaves as "unsound" and a reduction in their financial value. Historians have long noted that blind, disabled, and otherwise "damaged"

[69] *Samuel Gridley Howe, Letters and Journals of Samuel Gridley Howe (Boston: Dana Estes, 1909), retrieved from* https://www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=1683&print=1. Accessed November 12, 2020.

slaves generally sold for less than their able-bodied counterparts.[70] Given that enslaved property Bell vs. Jeffreys generally constituted slaveholding households' most valuable and liquid investment, an owner's bottom line could be adversely affected if a slave was judged to be blind.

In the 1858 case of *Bell vs. Jeffreys*, the North Carolina Supreme Court relied on the same stigmas Day had observed in Maryland to rule that all blind bondspeople were inherently unsound. Southern slave sales followed the practice used for livestock and designated "sound" as the term indicating that a bondsperson was fit and able to perform normal duties.[71] Southern courts held a seller's warranty of soundness, which applied whether it was expressly given or not since "when an owner charged a fair price, he or she was swearing to deliver a fair, or sound, product.", The North Carolina case centered on a female slave sold by William Jeffreyss to Bushrod Bell. According to court records, Jeffreys explicitly warranted that the woman was both "sound and healthy." Although the latter was true, Bell discovered that she was "very nearsighted" after taking possession of her.[72] The original jury sided with the plaintiff, but the decision was appealed to the North Carolina Supreme Court.

Chief Justice J. Pearson wrote the majority opinion upholding the jury's ruling. He explained that for someone or something to be unsound it had to be "unfitted for the services ordinarily expected." He understood that expectations were subjective and therefore no perfect, one-size-fits-all model existed. Pearson used the example of someone buying a horse: "Some are

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[70] Dea H. Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South 1800–1860* (New York: Routledge, 2013*), 75–80. For a general discussion of how age and physical condition affected sales and prices, see Daina Ramey Berry, The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation (New York: Random House, 2018).*

[71] Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 104–113; Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability*,40–41. For a more general discussion of soundness, see Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing Health and Power on Southern Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 18–20.

[72] Bell v. Jeffreys, 35 N.C. 356 (N.C. 1852), casetext.com. Accessed March 20, 2012.

so formed to fit them for speed with light weight; others for heavy burden at a slow pace. Some are thick through the chest; others thin…. Some are white, others bay, and so on through all the varieties of forms." Black bondspeople were no different in the justice's opinion: "A slave may be tall, or low stature, or bow legged, or knocked kneed, or stooped shouldered; therefor, the rule of *caveat emptor* applies, and purchasers are to consult their own taste or judgment, for there is no model of perfection." However, the justice believed that an eyeball was different: in an eye as a functioning mechanism, "there is perfection, and if there be a defect in it, so as to make it unfit for ordinary purposes the animal is unsound. Nearsightedness, therefor, is an unsoundness because it is a defect in an important organ."[73] Pearson missed the subjectivity of his standard of "ordinary purposes." Clearly, nearsightedness was different from perfect sight, but depending on the specific purpose or task for which an owner purchased or hired a bondswoman—wet nurse, for example—nearsightedness might have no effect on her performance. Pearson overlaid the fact that poor vision is different from perfect sight with his negative view of blind people's inability to perform simple tasks. In the process, he crafted a ruling that rendered all slaves with visual problems caused by "nature, disease, or other" as inherently unsound and less than other bondspeople.[74]

Mortimer Thompson, a Northern reporter, learned how stigmas affected a slave's pricing when he witnessed the massive auction held by South Carolina's Pierce Butler, where 429 bondspeople were sold on March 2, 1859. The plight of two male slaves, Guy and Andrew, brought his attention to the dollar value placed on an eye. Thompson explained the scene to his readers:

> Guy, chattel No. 419, a prime young man sold for $1,280 being without blemish; his age was 20 years, and he was all together a fine article. His next door

[73] Ibid. 20. Howe, "*Education of the Blind";* Forret, "*Deaf and Dumb";* Barasch, *Blindness,* 145.
[74] *Ibid.*

> neighbor, Andrew, chattel No. 420, was his very counterpart in all marketable points, in size, age, skill, and everything save he had lost his right eye. Andrew sold for only $1,040, from which we argue the market value of the right eye in the Southern country is $240."[75]

A 19% drop in price for an otherwise young, healthy slave signifies the drastic effect that beliefs about blindness had on value. To be sure, prices depended on the specific bondsperson's various physical and mental characteristics, but blindness represented a factor that generally triggered an automatic reduction in price.

If Andrew was on one side of a price spectrum, the experience of a female bondswoman owned by William Headly dramatically demonstrates the opposite extreme. When Headly died in 1860, he was "possessed of a very considerable property real and personal." Headly had no wife and no will, but he did have four adult children who inherited his possessions. Nine slaves were counted as part of Headly's estate. This group had to be divided and distributed between the four heirs. Court records are not specific, but an uneven division was proposed which would have divided the nine bondspeople into four lots before giving each heir one lot. The four parties explained to the court that the commissioners tasked with overseeing the estate had found a better solution. After examining the nine slaves, the commissioners had identified a female slave who was "blind and otherwise defective." If she were eliminated, the bondspeople could be divided into four equal groups of two and evenly distributed among the children. The heirs sought and received the court's approval to authorize the commissioners to "turn

[75] Mortimer Thompson, "The Great Slave Auction," *New York Daily Tribune*, March 9, 1859, Library of Congress, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030213/1859-03-09/ed-1/seq-5/. Accessed November 10, 2020.

(the woman) over to a personal representative to be sold to the lowest bidder, which was done accordingly."[76]

Unlike a regular slave auction, where the seller sought the highest possible price for their bondsmen, in lowest-bidder auctions, the sellers actually ended up paying the bidders. The individual wishing to rid themselves of a blind slave took bids on how much another individual would charge to house, clothe, and feed the blind person. The person who made the lowest bid would be awarded the slave. Far from generating any positive cash flow for owners, this type of sale was a recognition that blindness and the stigmas that accompanied it rendered the blind slave valueless.[77] Bondspeople deeply felt the pain of the auction block as they were ripped away from their friends and family, but one can only imagine the horror—not to mention the deprivations and hardships—that the female slave must have experienced in the service of an owner that pledged to spend as little as possible to keep her alive.

Starting in 1830, as will be discussed in more detail below, the United States collectively acted on the idea that the blind were different and in need of help, including them in the census's decennial canvas. Since the count had always covered both free and enslaved inhabitants, blind slaves entered the public eye just as the sectional crisis was intensifying. Both abolitionists and those who defended slavery examined the existence of blind bondspeople and crafted stigma-based arguments to attack their opponents, though the two groups did not deploy stigmas in the same way. Abolitionists intent on demonstrating slavery's brutality and portraying bondspeople as victims provided accounts of blind slaves that painted them as helpless and out of place in a

[76] Race and Slavery Petitions Project (RSPP), "PAR 21686022, 1860," University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
[77] Lowest-bidder auctions were an English tradition set up for the poor that migrated across the Atlantic. J. W. Eli Jr., "'There Are Few Subjects in Political Economy of Greater Difficulty': The Poor Laws of the Antebellum South," *Law & Social Inquiry* 10, no. 4 (1985): 849–79; Benjamin Klebaner, *Pauper Auctions: The New England Method of Public Poor Relief*. 1955.

society based on work and movement. In response, proslavery ideologues shifted the discussion away from individual bondspeople to the entirety of the Black blind population. Defining blindness as a negative and unwanted physical trait, proslavery thinkers used the numbers produced by the census to argue that blindness occurred in Blacks much less frequently when they were enslaved. Although each side opposed the other's position on slavery, there was little disagreement over casting blindness in a negative light.

The federal government's 1830 decision coincided with the emergence of the modern abolitionist movement and its use of moral suasion. The Massachusetts Antislavery Society (MAS), headed by William Lloyd Garrison, spearheaded the tactical shift away from the Pennsylvania Antislavery Society's model, which had focused its efforts on individual freedom claims and gradual emancipation legislation.[78] Instead, the MAS argued that the slave system represented an evil insult to the Constitution that needed to be immediately dismantled. The group filled books, speeches, songs, tracts, poems, and petitions with vivid scenes of brutality, unpaid labor, and family separation aimed at demonstrating the cruel and dehumanizing acts that Blacks endured. Although these presentations sought to humanize bondspeople, they also portrayed Blacks as helpless victims unable to prevent slave masters' vicious exploits. Since the public already viewed the blind as a helpless group to be pitied, blind bondspeople represented a natural subject.

Weld, though an outlier among abolitionists in his claim that owners killed blind slaves, was the first to incorporate this group into an antislavery attack. Weld approached blind slaves as an economic problem. He assumed that a blind person would not be able to work and took for

[78] See Richard Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Many blacks believed in immediate abolition before Garrison; see David Walker, *The Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, 1829.

granted that any community the person lived in would have to bear the financial cost and effort necessary for their survival. Although he believed that an enlightened free society would absorb the loss of caring for this burdensome population, Weld was doubtful that slave owners would accept this "tax," as he called it. He laid out several categories of slaves that he considered to be unprofitable and that masters would "treat with barbarous inhumanity": old slaves, worn-out slaves, those with their constitutions broken, the incurably diseased and maimed, the deaf and dumb, and feeble infants. Weld followed the antebellum pattern of grouping the "blind" and "idiots" together and concluded that "all would be a tax." The blind, in other words, were a group that always took, or drained, a community's resources: "Now it is plainly for the interest of the 'owners' of these slaves, or those who have the charge of them, to treat them cruelly, to overwork, underfeed, half clothe, half shelter, poison, or outright kill."[79] Weld wanted to play on his readers' pity while igniting their anger toward slaveowners, who would murder a blind bondsperson as a cost-saving measure.

Whereas Weld attacked slavery from his home in Boston, other Northern abolitionists went to the South to report on the institution firsthand. This move brought them face-to-face with blind bondspeople whose descriptions they included in their reports back to the North. These portrayals generally combined ideas of helplessness, immobility, and isolation with familiar antislavery themes of brutality, family separation, and piety. In fact, abolitionists' argument that slaves could be exemplary Christians seemed to be strengthened when the bondsperson was also dealing with the burden of blindness. Horace Cowles, in his book *Incidents of a Southern Tour or the South Seen through Northern Eyes,* related his conversation with "an old blind worn out slave" in South Carolina: "I asked, why do you love God? Cause he first loved me, and gib his

[79] Weld, American Slavery, 136.

Son to die for me. How much do you pray? Night and day, every hour. I constantly thinks how good God is." Cowles saw in the slave an example of Christian goodness that free Whites could learn from. "In the testimonies quoted above," he stated, "we have, certainly, the language of Canaan, of the true, experimental Christian. And may we not charitably believe, that having so little to hope for from earth, that many have become truly wise and have laid treasure in Heaven."[80] Cowles hoped that the devotion to God displayed by an individual who lived with the burdens of both blindness and slavery would dramatically humanize bondspeople and draw Christians to the abolitionist cause.

The Reverend Edward Hitchcock likewise incorporated blind stigmas of immobility and isolation into his description of a blind, Christian slave working in a Virginia mine. He argued that blind slaves were doubly cursed because, in addition to being subjected to all the degrading and dehumanizing aspects of slavery, they also had to live without sight. In 1848, while in Eastern Virginia, Hitchcock toured a Southern mining operation. After descending a thousand feet into darkness and wandering through "passageways numerous enough to form a subterranean city," he and his companion heard faint singing. "We perceived it was sacred music," reported the Reverend, "which, the concluding sentiment of the hymn [was] 'I shall be in Heaven in the morning.'" As they approached the singer, their way was blocked by a ventilation door, and "sitting by this door, we found an aged blind slave."[81]

Hitchcock employed the ideas of blind sedentariness and unhappiness to paint a picture for his readers. His imagery, though about a Black slave, mirrored that of "The Blind Boy"

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[80] Horace Cowles, Incidents of a Southern Tour: or The South as Seen with Northern Eyes (Boston: J.P. Magee, 1857), 97.

[81] "The Blind Slave in the Mine," *North Star*, November 24, 1848. Also in Edward Hitchcock, *Reminiscences of Amherst College, Historical, Scientific, Biographical and Autobiographical: Also, of Other and Wider Life Experiences* (Northampton, MA: Bridgeman and Childs), 381.

poem, demonstrating blind stigmas' power to cut across racial lines. Hitchcock explained that the slave sat "buried beneath the solid rocks. In the expressive language of Jonah, 'He had gone down to the bottom of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about him forever. 'There, from month to month, he sat in total darkness. O, how utterly cheerless his condition."[82] Although the playing children and singing birds of "The Blind Boy" are absent from Hitchcock's account, the blind bondsman and the blind boy shared the same unhappy physical, mental, and social isolation. Hitchcock even used the image of blind sedentariness to imply that the blind slave never moved or left the mine, creating a horrific picture for Northern readers.

Hitchcock admired and emphasized the slave's Christian devotion. Neither his blindness nor slavery had resulted in him turning against God. Despite his problems, he still believed in a happier time to come. "It was one of the most affecting scenes I have ever witnessed." Hitchcock reminded readers that, after all, "he was a slave—and he was blind—what could he hope for on Earth?"[83] Hitchcock knew that his readers would understand that the former was bad, but the latter was almost unbearable.

Abolitionists often sang at gatherings to inspire and sustain their passion. "The Blind Slave Boy" was a song that combined blind stigmas with the image of an enslaved child separated from his mother. It was published and distributed in antislavery song books for use at meetings.[84] The story behind the song was based on a slave sale that divided a mother and her child. Wilson Armistead relayed the background details in his book *Five Hundred Thousand Strokes for Freedom*. In Kentucky, an owner tried to sell a mother and her blind child to a slave

[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.
[84] "The Blind Slave Boy" in *Anti-Slavery Harp: A Collection of Songs for Anti-Slavery Meetings*, ed. William Wells Brown (Boston: George A. Curtis New England Type and Stereotype Foundry, 1848), 114.

trader. Although he wanted the mother, the trader refused to purchase the child. He claimed to be stocking a plantation and said that "blind ones were useless to him." This jeopardized the sale; The owner was willing to part with the mother, but he had no interest in being left with the "helpless child." "Thus, both parties were much perplexed," Armistead explained, "until finally a third person stepped forward, and offered a dollar for the boy, and the bargain was closed."[85] A lady in Cincinnati heard the story and wrote the song. The verses alternate between the child's perspective and the mother's and highlight the blind child's isolation and separation from those around him:

> Come back to me, mother! Why linger away
> From thy poor little blind boy, the long weary day
> I mark every footstep, I list to each tone,
> And wonder my mother should leave me alone!
> There are voices of sorrow and voices of glee,
> But there is no one to joy or to sorrow with me;
> For each hath of pleasure and trouble his share,
> And none for the poor little blind boy will care.
> My mother, come back to me![86]

The imagery in the song mimics both "The Blind Boy" and Hitchcock's account of the blind slave in the mine. Once again, a blind individual—in this case, an enslaved blind child—finds themselves divorced from the world around them. The only person the blind boy could count on to interact with, in good times and bad, was his mother. Now that his mother is gone, the rest of the sighted world, like the children playing outside in "The Blind Boy," takes no interest in the solitary and sedentary blind child:

> Oh Mother! I've no one to love me. No heart
> Can bear like thine own in my sorrows a part;
> No hand is so gentle, no voice is so kind!

[85] Wilson Armistead, *Five Hundred Thousand Strokes for Freedom: A Series of Antislavery Tracts of Which Half a Million Are Now Issued by Friends of the Negro* (London: W. and F. Cash, William Tweedie, 1853), 26.
[86] Ibid., 27.

O! None like a mother can cherish the blind![87]

The song then changes perspective to show not only the mother's anguish at being separated from her child but also the devaluation of blind slaves in financial terms:

Poor blind one! No mother thy wailing can hear,
No mother can hasten to banish thy fear;
For the slave-owner drives her, mountain and wild,
And for one paltry dollar hath sold thee, poor child!
Blind, helpless, forsaken, with strangers alone,
She hears in her anguish his piteous moan,
As he eagerly listens but listens in vain,
To catch the loved tones of his mother again![88]

The final lines describe the proposed punishment for a slaveowner so wicked they would orphan a helpless blind child:

The curse of the broken in spirit shall fall
On the wretch who hath mingled this wormwood and gall,
And his gain like a mildew shall blight and destroy,
Who hath torn from his mother the little blind boy![89]

Proslavery Southerners' attention was also captured by the census's post-1830 move to count blind slaves. Although racism and paternalism have been identified as important foundations of the positive good argument, a negative view of disability also played a key role in its justification.[90] Proslavery thinkers countered abolitionists' claims about slavery's horrors by insisting that bondspeople were well treated and happy. Stigmas were key to this particular proslavery argument, as they transmitted the idea that disability in general and blindness in particular were unwanted and abnormal societal features. Each person who was blind—and, in this case, Black—represented a physically unproductive body that burdened rather than

[87] Ibid., 27.
[88] Ibid., 27.
[89] Ibid., 27.
[90] Recently, Calhoun's historical monuments have come under attack due to his racist beliefs. See Christian K. Anderson, "Dismantling John C. Calhoun's Racist Legacy," *Yes Magazine*, July 3, 2020, https://www.yesmagazine.org/opinion/2020/07/03/john-c-calhoun-racist-legacy. Accessed May 16, 2021.

improved society. Moreover, proslavery thinkers argued (following the logic of Darwinistic natural selection) that census data showing that blindness occurred with less frequency among the South's enslaved population than within the North's free Black population, proved that Blacks preferred life under slavery. Put simply, Southerners argued that the happier Blacks were with their environment, the rarer blindness would be.

John C. Calhoun politically embodied proslavery thought. He cared and thought little about blind slaves; they and other disabled slaves only entered his mind when he defended the institution of slavery. Far from an evil, he explained from the Senate floor in 1837, slavery had been a benefit, or a "positive good," for Blacks. In his opinion, the Middle Passage had been a small price for Africans to pay for the spiritual education and moral guidance they had been given by White Christians once in America:

> The Black race from Central Africa from the dawn of history to the present day has never obtained a condition so civilized and so improved not only physically, but morally and intellectually. It came among us in a low, degraded, and savage condition, and in the course of a few generations, it has grown up under the fostering care of our institutions…. This with rapid increase of numbers is conclusive proof of the general happiness of the race.[91]

To Calhoun, Blacks' physical condition represented the first sign of advancement. He sought to convince his listeners that all slaves were healthy, unblemished, and certainly not blind.

Although raw numbers were important when antebellum thinkers analyzed blind populations within any given community, blind-to-sighted population ratios were the statistical markers they used to examine a society's overall health. These ratios were calculated for a particular area by comparing the number of blind and sighted inhabitants. In his 1833 article, Howe explained the process's fundamental principles: "In every age the proportion of the blind

[91] John Calhoun, "Speech on the Acceptance of Abolition Petitions, February 6, 1837," in *Union and Liberty: The Political Philosophy of John C. Calhoun*, ed. Ross Lens (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), 473.

to the whole population is about the same," and since the general law of nature, by which a certain portion of the human race will be born with but four senses" is unfailing in its operation, the ratio should be fairly constant."[92] According to this line of reasoning, blindness was natural to all societies and equally proportioned; therefore, areas that had a higher frequency of blindness were themselves defective.

Although Howe eventually joined the abolitionist movement, his 1833 article on blind education was not intended as an attack on the slave system. He did, however, cast the first stone in the demographic argument, perhaps unwittingly. When discussing the 1830 census numbers, Howe took for granted that Blacks would suffer from blindness more than most people. Howe noted that the 1830 census data showed that the nation's blind population was racially imbalanced. "In the whole population of the United States," he stated, "there is a considerable excess in the proportion of the blind among the blacks over that among the whites. It being among the blacks 1 to 1,584; among the whites 1 to 2650." If Howe had any proslavery readers, he would have offended their sense of honor with his explanation of this difference. Although he did not fully trust the numbers, Howe believed that the fact "that the proportion of the blind among the blacks should be greater than among the whites, is perfectly natural and in accordance with the general principle which we have laid down, that the poor are more exposed to the causes of blindness than the rich; the blacks being generally poor."[93] Southerners vehemently disagreed with Howe's assertion and insisted that they amply provided good lives for their bondspeople, a fact they believed was clear when the rates of blindness between enslaved and free Blacks were compared.

[92] Howe, "Education of the Blind."
[93] Ibid.

Whether an internalized lie or a sincere conviction, many Southerners fervently believed and argued that the Black race fared better under slavery than freedom. As abolitionists' moral assaults intensified over the antebellum period, proslavery Southerners countered with census data that showed that more blind Blacks lived in the North than the South. As will be seen below, the psychiatrist and statistician Edward Jarvis believed that the 1840 census had been altered to inflate the number of blind and mentally ill Blacks in the North. Nevertheless, the disparities observed by Jarvis apparently continued, as proslavery thinkers still used data collected by the census after 1840 to argue their point.

On August 7, 1858, the editor of *The Chattanooga Times*, Reverend Michael Brownlow, traveled to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to debate the question "Ought slavery to be perpetuated in the United States?" with the abolitionist Reverend Abram Prime. Intent on "contrasting the morality and consistency of the North with that of the South," Brownlow relied heavily on the 1850 census data to show that enslaved Blacks enjoyed better health and fewer disabling conditions than free Blacks. He explained to the assembled audience, "In New England one free Negro is blind for every 807; while in the Southern states, there is only one blind slave for every 2,645." Abolitionists might have their horror stories, but Brownlow had his numbers. "Can any man believe with these facts before him," he asked, "that freedom in New England has proved a blessing to this race of people, or that slavery is a curse to them?"[94]

Following the war, ex-Confederates refused to let the demographic comparison die. The Lost Cause ideology was an extension of proslavery thought and sought to glorify a happier time when master and slave adored each other, and Blacks lived happy and healthy lives. Ex-

[94] W. G. Brownlow, *Ought American Slavery to Be Perpetuated? A Debate between Rev. W. G. Brownlow and Rev. A. Pryne Held at Philadelphia, September 1858* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1858), 155.

confederates dusted off the United States' own prewar census numbers to demonstrate that slavery—and, by extension, the war—had been justified on humanitarian terms.

In 1866, General D. H. Hill released the first volume of *The Land We Love; a Monthly Magazine Devoted to Literature, Military History, and Agriculture*. An article titled "Mistaken Sympathy or Mistaken Figures" was devoted to refuting Northerners' claims that slavery had harmed Blacks so deeply that they were frequently found to be disabled. He believed "The South should be able to defend herself against this charge in front of the entire universe" and claimed that "this attempt at self-justification should not be construed as an act of disloyalty or an attempt to insight rebellion." To keep from being charged with anything treasonous, the author pledged, "We will confine ourselves to extracts from a loyal book 'The preliminary report of the Eighth Census' edited by a thoroughly loyal man Joseph Kennedy, ESQ., under the direction of the equally loyal Secretary of State."[95]

The article's theme was once again based on blind slaves' population ratios. Where the author differed was in his scope. No longer content to compare blind enslaved Blacks to blind free Blacks, the author compared blind enslaved Blacks to blind free Northern Whites: "by dividing the number of slaves in these 12 states [he eliminated the border states of Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri] 3,008,299 by 1,300 the quotient will be 2,703 (to one). And by dividing the inhabitants of the New England states 3,185,283 by 1,275, the quotient will be 2,459 to 1." The author smugly added, "So then, the sharp sighted down easter is more subject to blindness than the maltreated slave." In the author's opinion, this was even more remarkable since "99 out of every 100 slaves were engaged in agriculture and this has been found to be unfavorable to vision." Not content with his examination of Northern free society, he expanded his comparison

[95] D. H. Hill, "Mistaken Sympathies, or Mistaken Figures," *The Land We Love; A Monthly Magazine Devoted to Literature, Military History and Agriculture* 1 (May–October, 1866).

to England, noting, "The wealthy and highly favored subjects of her majesty are nearly three times as liable to blindness as the poor slaves of the South."[96]

Counting Blind Slaves

The federal census brought blind bondspeople to the antebellum public's attention. However, neither blind slaves nor the blind in general were part of the original demographic groups counted in the first census. Although the Constitution's framers mandated that a national census be taken once a decade, they left it to successive generations of federal officials to work out the canvas's details. As a matter of course, every ten years the federal government passed legislation determining the questions to be asked in the census. This process allowed the canvas to expand from a population count for allocating representation in 1790; to the collection of economic data during the nation's financial expansion in 1820; to slaves' elevation to individual, yet nameless, features during the sectional crisis in 1850. This continual renegotiation of what demographic and economic data was to be collected produced a system that tracked not just the population but also trends and shifts in national priorities. National events influenced politics; politics, in turn, created the census's questions. In 1830, the government acknowledged the antebellum era's reform impulse to help America's disabled population by expanding the census's demographic categories to include the blind and other groups.[97]

America's antebellum reform impulse had been sparked by the Second Great Awakening's emphasis on perfecting the nation before Christ returned. Fearful of God's judgment, antebellum women and men flooded into movements intent on enacting a moral

[96] Ibid.
[97] Goldstein, *Demography and Causes*, 30–35; Frances A. Koestler, *The Unseen Minority: A Social History of the Blind in America* (New York: D. McKay, 1978), 53. The Census stopped counting the blind in the early 1900s due to problems with the count's accuracy; Koestler, *Unseen Minority*, 54.

transformation. They launched persuasion campaigns, funded philanthropic foundations, created aid societies, published newspapers, and delivered speeches, all in an effort to heal the world. Although abolition and temperance represented the main movements, reformers tackled a wide range of causes including women's rights, education, and prison reform.[98] Americans' stigmas about blindness in general and blind people specifically made the blind one more societal problem to be fixed. As a result, antebellum reformers pushed for the creation of schools devoted to the education of the nation's blind.[99]

Howe embodied the antebellum reform impulse. His life's work demonstrated the interconnectedness of antebellum reformers and movements.

> It has long been to us a matter of surprise that the blind have been so much neglected. Our age, compared with those that have passed away, is truly a humane one; never has more attention been paid to individual man than now; never has the imperative duty of society to provide for the wants of those whom nature or accident has thrown upon its charity been more deeply felt….That this spirit of humanity has not always been well directed; that extraordinary efforts and great expenses have been lavished upon one class of unfortunate persons, while others more deserving and afflicted have been left neglected is apparent in the case of the blind.[100]

On March 3, 1830, the Twenty-first Congress reacted to the times and included in the census act orders to question all heads of households as to the number of blind, deaf, and mute people presently resident in the home.[101] Though Congress's action was not necessarily a direct effort to count blind slaves, it accomplished exactly that. As per established practice, slave owners were to consider all their enslaved property as household members and report their totals.

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[98] John Cumbler, *From Abolition to Rights for All: The Making of a Reform Community in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
[99] Howe, *Letters and Journals*, 3.
[100] Howe, "Education of the Blind."
[101] Goldstein, *Demography and Causes*, 20.

From this point until slavery's collapse, the federal government counted America's blind slaves every ten years.

However, the first two Censuses that counted the blind produced controversial numbers. Local experts who worked with the disabled recognized that the numbers did not agree with what they knew to be true. According to Howe, the 1830 canvas undercounted blind Whites. Moreover, following the release of the 1840 numbers, Edward Jarvis thought he saw a proslavery conspiracy that overcounted blind and mentally ill free Blacks. Although neither issue centered directly on blind slaves, the controversy, especially after 1840, resulted in a new process for counting bondspeople. This process led to the most accurate antebellum count of blind slaves in 1850.

Howe's work in the blind community gave him access to population numbers gathered by the Massachusetts legislature and the New England Society for the Blind. After reading the 1830 census numbers compiled by a Philadelphia newspaper, he declared that the published "population table bares inaccuracy on the very face of it." As Howe explained, according to the 1830 census, 223 blind people lived in Massachusetts. However, two years earlier, the state's legislature placed the number at 245 even though "only 140 of the state's 300 towns made any return." Howe believed that a pattern of undercounting took place across several states, leading him to conclude, "The return made by the general estimates are far too low."[102] One issue was that in 1830, the government made no effort to tabulate marshals' field results in a central location or publish the results in a uniform way. While this is not to say that marshals failed to collect accurate statistics about the blind, the number of free Whites counted failed to match up with what experts like Howe knew to be true.

[102] Howe, "Education of the Blind."

Ten years later, Edward Jarvis even more brutally attacked the federal government's census data in the pages of the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*. He had analyzed the data from the 1840 census while homebound recuperating from a broken leg. Jarvis did not know whether to blame the marshals who had questioned the people or those who had tallied the count, but he believed that without a doubt, "No reliance whatever can be placed on…that fallacious and self-condemning document the 'sixth census of the United States.'"[103] While Howe had questioned the numbers of Whites counted, Jarvis exclusively focused on the nation's reported Black population. Jarvis and other professionals had looked forward to gaining a fuller demographic picture of the nation's disabled population, and he was angered by what appeared to be a slave power plot to alter the results.

The 1840 census clearly showed that disabilities such as blindness and mental illness were more frequent among Northern free Blacks than among enslaved Blacks. Like Howe, Jarvis had access to contradictory demographic data collected by a variety of entities ranging from state legislatures to philanthropic organizations and medical societies. While Jarvis worked with and mainly focused on mental illness, he believed that "the Census is equally inaccurate respecting the blind."[104] He never questioned the count as it related to Southern slaves; rather, the problem Jarvis identified centered on free Blacks in the North. Put simply, he believed their numbers had been inflated.

Jarvis drew on his personal resources to compare Black population data for various Northern localities with the reported census numbers. His investigation revealed that in some of the areas that the census identified as containing physically and mentally disabled Blacks, the

[103] Edward Jarvis, "Insanity among the Colored Population of the Free States," *American Journal of Medical Sciences* (January 1844): 1–15.
[104] Ibid.

evidence showed just the opposite: “these disorders exist there in a state of abstraction.” Jarvis found that the count fluctuated wildly from location to location, explaining, “Fortunate for humanity where they (disabled blacks) are said to be present, there are no people. But in others, the entire colored population is overwhelmed with these calamities. And now and then they are all afflicted not with one, but with both blindness and insanity.” Jarvis presented charts to graphically demonstrate the errors. These charts listed the total Black population of towns throughout Pennsylvania and Massachusetts next to the census’s count of blind and mentally disabled Blacks. In area after area, the numbers fluctuated with no regard to what was even possible.[105] The controversy put pressure on those in charge of the next census to produce a different, more accurate method of counting.

The 1850 census stands as perhaps the most accurate count of the nation’s blind slaves. The census take process was updated for that year’s canvas. Joseph Kennedy, who originally had charge of the 1850 census, changed the focus from the household to the individual. No longer would marshals simply question the head of household about the number of blind people then resident in the house. Instead, they would ask every person (in theory) about his or her vision and record the answers. Individual bondspeople, whose names were omitted, had their own sheet that recorded specific demographic information such as their age, race (Black or mulatto), and any physical or mental disabilities. The census’s instructions brought marshals’ attention to the latter categories, with Section 8 expressly stating, “The assistant should ascertain if any of these slaves be deaf and dumb, blind, insane, or idiotic; and if so, insert opposite of the name, or number of such slave, the term deaf and dumb, blind, insane or idiotic, as the fact may be.”[106] Of course,

[105] Ibid.
[106] The 1850 instructions can be found at “History: 1850 Instructions,” U.S. Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the decades/census_instructions/1850_instructions.html. Anderson, *American Census*, chapter 2. Accessed November 30, 2020.

individual slaves were not expected to fill out their own sheets; nevertheless, the creation of a personal record, though perhaps second- or third-hand, made the statistical data gathered more reliable.

The 1850 census recorded 1,387 blind slaves in the 15 slave states plus the District of Columbia. Blind bondspeople's numbers fluctuated in relation to a state's total enslaved population. For example, Virginia had both the most blind slaves (299) and sighted slaves (472,227), while Delaware and District of Columbia were at the other end of the scale. Delaware failed to record a single blind bondsperson among the 2,290 slaves in the state. The District of Columbia only record 1 blind slave of 3697 bondspersons. Six of the eight states with sighted populations greater than 300,000 contained more than 100 blind bondspeople, including Alabama (138), Georgia (129), Kentucky (113), Louisiana (122), North Carolina (155) and South Carolina with 134. Mississippi and Tennessee were just short of the trend with 93 and 82, respectfully. Six states with sighted slave populations below 100,000 had no more than 50 blind slaves a piece: Arkansas (13), Maryland (45), Missouri (38), and Texas (11) and Florida with 14 blind bondspeople.[107]

Tables LXXI and LXXXIX, 1850 Census Results for Sighted and Blind Bondspeople.[108]

Population >200,000			**Population <100,000**		
	Sighted	Blind		Sighted	Blind
Alabama	342,706	138	**Arkansas**	47,087	13
Georgia	381,553	129	**Columbia, District of**	3696	1
Kentucky	210,868	113	**Delaware**	2,290	0

[107]U.S. Census Bureau, "The Deaf and Dumb, Blind, and Insane of the White and Colored Population," in *The Seventh Census of the United States* (1850), li, https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1850/, 93. Accessed November 30, 2020.
[108] Ibid, 93.

Louisiana	244,687	122	**Florida**	39,296	14
North Carolina	288,393	155	**Maryland**	90,263	45
South Carolina	384,850	134	**Missouri**	87,384	38
Mississippi	309,785	93	**Texas**	58,150	11
Tennessee	239,377	82			
Virginia	472,277	299			
TOTAL	2,276318	1,265	**TOTAL**	237,903	122

The historian Jeff Forret studied the numbers of disabled slaves in the 1850 census across the f\our states of Virginia, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana. He found that J. D. B. De Bow, the federal official who had ultimate charge of compiling marshals' raw statistical data in the 1850 census, failed to count many individual bondspeople who had been listed in multiple categories such as blind and deaf, dumb and blind, and so on. Regardless of this oversight, De Bow concluded that blindness was the most prevalent disability in his count.[109]

Standards of Blindness

Although the 1850 census represented the fullest accounting of the nation's blind slaves, an important question remains: Who exactly did the marshals count? Just as specific racial categories evolved over time, the definition of legal blindness changed as well. Blindness as a classification expanded from a narrow or folk standard centered on total blindness to one based on the scientific measurement of an individual's still usable vision.

During the antebellum decades, the federal government lacked a written or formal definition of blindness, leaving it to individual marshals to rely on their own folk

[109] Forret, *Deaf and Dumb.*

understanding.[110] This folk definition of blindness tended to mainly cover those with severe to total vision loss. Accordingly, when antebellum Americans described or quantified a person's blindness, they used "blind" to indicate a total loss of sight. If the person in question had some vision, a modifying word was added. Accordingly, antebellum Americans used various terms to refer to the visually impaired, including the following: "blind in one eye," "one-eyed," "near sighted," "nearly blind," "mostly blind," "entirely blind," and "perfectly blind."[111] These descriptions appear to emphasize more severe cases of blindness. However, with the exception of the latter two, it is impossible to determine the correlation between the person's level of sight and the description. As a consequence, when an owner replied to the census question with "nearly blind," it is unknown if every marshal would have recorded the same answer. Without a uniform standard, the determination of who was and was not blind was left to the individual and their best judgment.[112]

Following the Civil War, the federal government introduced the nation's first uniform standard of blindness. The 1870 Census represented the first since the war's brutality. Federal and state governments had a large number of newly disabled individuals to care for. The instructions that the federal government devised and issued to marshals limited how many of those individuals could be counted as blind; "Total blindness only," stated the instructions, "is intended in this inquiry."[113] It is unclear whether this standard for blindness simply codified the previous folk bias toward severe cases or set a new precedent; in any case, the new standard

[110] 1850 Instructions.
[111] The examples are numerous. Forret does provide some descriptions that 1850 census workers wrote down for visually impaired respondents. Forret, *Deaf and Dumb*.
[112] Goldstein, *Demography and Causes*, 35–37.
[113] The 1870 instructions can be found at "History: 1870 Instructions," U.S. Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/census_instructions/1870_instructions.html. Accessed November 30, 2020.

clearly centered on the extreme. Now, as a matter of official policy, only those with no sight (rather than limited sight) were considered blind.

The medical and scientific revolutions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led professionals studying vision loss and its associated problems to identify and recognize a broader spectrum of visual impairments. Their research demonstrated that visual impairments other than total blindness could limit and hinder an individual's functionality. Gradually, this new understanding gained traction, and the definition of blindness was expanded to include a greater number of visual problems.[114]

In 1935, the Seventy-first Congress codified an expanded the definition of legal blindness.[115] No longer would total blindness be the standard. Instead, total blindness would be one extreme of a visual spectrum. The nation's new definition considered an individual to be legally blind when one of the following visual qualifications was met:

> Central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with corrective glasses or central visual acuity of more than 20/200 if there is a visual field defect in which the peripheral field is to such an extent that the widest diameter of the visual field subtends an angular distance no greater than 20 degrees in the better eye.[116]

In other words, far from total blindness, the government's new definition determined that a person was legally blind if the best-seeing eye saw either 1) an object that was 20 feet away as if it were 200 feet away or 2) the person had only 20 degrees of what would be a 180-degree field of vision for a fully sighted person.

By today's expanded definition of legal blindness, the 1850 census most certainly undercounted the total number of visually impaired slaves. Narrow folk standards meant that marshals most likely overlooked and failed to record bondspeople who possessed diminished but

[114] Goldstein, *Demography and Causes*, 44.
[115] Koestler, *Unseen Minority*, 51.
[116] Quoted in Koestler, *Unseen Minority*, 50.

still usable sight. In fact, according to a recent study of the current blind population of the United States, 7% of the roughly 325 million people living in the United States in 2015 had some degree of visual impairment. The 100,000 totally blind were the smallest group, followed by the 1.2 million legally blind; the largest group by far was the 7 million Americans who used corrective lenses or modern surgery to solve their visual problems.[117] Considering that slaves in the last group had virtually no path to corrective help during the antebellum era, it can be assumed that a significant portion of slaves lived with vision loss that would be correctable today. These individuals could see, but where, when, and exactly what they could see fluctuated. Applying the 2015 figure of 7% to the 1850 total enslaved population, the number of blind slaves residing in the antebellum South skyrockets from 1,387 to more than 200,000, moving blind slaves from a small segment of the total slave population to a significant portion.

Census workers' jobs were probably complicated by the fact that owners' beliefs about which of their bondspeople were blind was often subjective as well. Before eye charts and a standard scientific definition of blindness, they mainly based their decisions about which bondsperson was and was not blind from the appearance of their eyes. Many common eye diseases such as cataracts and glaucoma cause discoloration or marks on the eyeball, especially on the iris. Likewise, traumatic blinding virtually always leaves scarring on the eye unless the eye is completely destroyed. In the antebellum period, these marks of blindness signaled to the sighted world that a problem existed, but they did not carry with them a definite answer as to how well the eye worked. In the end, except in the case of a bondsperson who lacked eyes, an owner needed to watch how well a slave functioned to judge their visual ability. If the bondsperson could move around and perform tasks, there was less reason to believe that a vision

[117] "Statistics on Blindness 2015," National Federation of the Blind, 2015, https://nfb.org/resources/blindness-statistics. Accessed September 28, 2020.

problem existed. However, this fact meant that a bondsperson who was identified as blind by one owner might not be viewed the same way by another. Slave sales were often the event that put owners' different perceptions into conflict.

In 1855, a Georgia jury heard a case involving two owners' clashing perceptions of a one-eyed bondswoman. A year earlier, in September 1854, Augustus Sharp had approached William Williams about purchasing a female slave for his Georgia farm. Sharp had a number of young Black children in need of a wet nurse and caretaker. Williams offered him Cresy, who he described as blind in one eye but otherwise sound. He swore that despite her vision problems she could both care for children and perform spinning work. They agreed on a sale price of $200. However, Sharp testified that once he got Cresy home and put her to the task he had purchased her for, it became "immediately" apparent that she was "entirely" blind. Sharp argued that since Cresy could not care for children, she was "useless" to him. He had attempted to return her to Williams, but her former owner refused to take her back.[118]

Although either Sharp or Williams may have been attempting to cheat the system, the possibility exists that they simply held different opinions about Cresy's functionality that led them to different conclusions about her blindness. Williams, by virtue of his previous ownership, had a greater familiarity with her. He would have observed Cresy working in and navigating her immediate environment. Importantly, Cresy would have also been more familiar with the physical layout of Sharp's land. Blind people, like their sighted counterparts, navigate their surroundings by creating and following mental maps. However, blind people construct mental maps consisting of permanent or semi-permanent tactile landmarks rather than visual images. These landmarks can be felt by feet, hands, or an instrument such as a stick or cane.

[118] RSPP, PAR 20685609.

Although both free and White, Benjamin Bayon, a totally blind male, described in 1850 how he was able to travel from place to place without vision. The thought process he employed would not differ from any other antebellum blind person, whether male or female, Black or White, slave or free (though the person's chances to travel would be limited by their individual circumstances). Bayon explained the learning process he used to move around his hometown: "By observing the irregularities of the ground over which I walked; by noticing every permanent object that would serve as a landmark; observing the turns of the road and carefully remembering the number of streets I passed through in going from one place to another."[119] The more familiar a blind person is with nearby tactile landmarks, the faster and more confidently they can travel. The record is silent as to Sharp's specific reasoning for believing that Cresy was blind, but it is possible that a new and unfamiliar landscape limited her ability to move around quickly and easily, leaving him with the belief that her sight was worse than Williams had warranted.

Historians must also make a subjective decision when it comes to one-eyed bondspeople like Cresy. Even using today's expanded definition of legal blindness, a one-eyed person whose remaining eye is not damaged is considered sighted.[120] Unfortunately, antebellum observers often noted and remarked on a bondsperson's blind eye but rarely mentioned how well the other eye functioned. To be sure, some antebellum sources mention one-eyed slaves who were actually sighted, while other slaves described in this way were definitely blind. This work applies an expansive definition of blindness and views one-eyed slaves as blind unless there is evidence suggesting the person had normal sight in the other eye.

[119] Benjamin Bowen, *A Blind Man's Offering* (Boston, Published by the Author, 1847), 15.
[120] The standard for visual impairment relates to the better eye. If the better eye has no impairment, then the individual is not visually impaired, regardless of the other eye's acuity. Koestler, *Unseen Minority*, 53.

Antebellum runaway advertisements are excellent resources for studying disabled bondspeople. When owners looked for a runaway slave or local jail wardens sought the owners of fugitives in custody, they placed advertisements in various newspapers. These runaway ads generally included detailed physical descriptions, as any unique features, such as a single eye or scars on the body, represented a way to identify a specific individual. As a result, these ads generally included descriptions of any disability the bondsperson might have. John Worral, a New Orleans jail warden, ran an ad on August 20, 1853, describing a group of slaves that displayed a range of physical disabilities: "EDMUND MURRAY, a light griffe, 5 feet 6 1/2 inches high, 20 years old, has a scar on the left arm says he is free, but supposed to be a runaway slave. JOHN WESLEY, a light griffe, 4 feet 10 inches high, 15 years old, blind of left eye says he belongs to Mr. Huntington. JOHN WILLIAMS, a black, 4 feet 5 inches high, about 13 years old, has both arms cut off, and several small scars on forehead says he is free, but supposed to be a runaway slave."[121]

Two other runaway ads demonstrate the possibilities for interpretation when it comes to one-eyed slaves. Both bondspeople in question are described as having one eye, but subtle details indicate that they may not have had equal vision in the other. In the first example, the bondswoman in question appears to see very well, while in the second, a question exists as to how well the bondsman can see. On December 2, 1859, James Glass placed an ad seeking Hannah, "A dark mulatto, medium size, aged about 35 years, blind in one eye," though he wanted people to know this fact was "scarcely perceptible."[122] The last line is important.

[121] Louisiana runaway slave advertisements (LRA), *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 20, 1853, Library of Congress, http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015753/1853-08-20/ed-1/seq-2. Accessed May 17, 2020.
[122] LRA, *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, December 12, 1859, Library of Congress, http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015753/1859-12-02/ed-1/seq-5. Accessed May 17, 2020.

Although Glass mentioned Hannah's one functional eye, he believed that most people would never notice. The eye probably had little to no marks of blindness; further, Hannah most likely functioned and navigated much like other sighted people. On the other hand, a close reading of an advertisement for John, a fugitive from South Carolina, suggests that a greater visual problem may have existed. On May 5, 1854, an ad ran, "John about 35. Has one eye. When he walks he throws his head back."[123] The fact that John threw his head back when he walked might indicate a problem with his good eye. Certain conditions restrict sight to various segments of the visual field. For example, someone may lack central vision (in other words, they may have a blind spot directly ahead) but they still may be able to see objects that lie in their periphery. To compensate for these blind spots, individuals with such visual impairments frequently hold their heads at angles that allow them to better see what is in front of them. The inclusion of this detail in an advertisement means it was a regular enough occurrence that a stranger would notice. Unfortunately, the record yields no more information about the two bondspeople's vision. In the end, it is possible that both bondspeople were "sighted" or that either or both fell along the visually impaired spectrum.

If the historian takes all reported one-eyed slaves to be visually impaired and, therefore, properly labeled as blind slaves, William Wells Brown's book *My Life in the South* provides an extraordinary account of one such slave. Brown recounts the story of Dinky, a "one-eyed" enslaved voodoo man who lived on the Poplar Farm in Missouri.[124] Dinky's story, though

[123] North Carolina Runaway Slave Notices Project, https://dlas.uncg.edu/notices/notice/574. Accessed 09/09/2020.
[124] William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home: Or the South and Its People* (Boston: A. G. Brown, 1880), 70.

different in significant ways, echoes Fredrick Douglass's fight with Mr. Covey, as he faced down an overseer intent on breaking him.[125]

Brown explains the one-eyed bondsperson's role on the farm: "Nearly all large plantations had one who laid claim to be a fortune teller, and who was regarded with more than common respect by his fellow slaves." Brown described Dinky as "a large full-blooded African who claimed to be from royal lineage…about 50 years of age, and had lost an eye, and to say the least, was a very ugly-looking man." All in the area, Black and White, knew he was deeply involved in voodooism and fortune telling. Dinky never engaged in forced labor but only in tasks he liked: "If he felt like feeding the chickens, pigs, or cattle he did so." The community's fear allowed him a life very close to freedom. "He hunted, slept, was at the table at mealtime, roamed through the woods, went to the city and returned when he pleased." Because of his reputation, no one impeded his travels. In fact, while on the move, "The whites throughout the neighborhood tipped their hats to the old one-eyed Negro, while the police or patrollers permitted him to pass without a challenge."[126] Whether through fear or conjuring, Dinky had the grudging respect of all in the area; however, change came in the form of a new overseer.

Mr. Gains, the owner of Poplar Farm, hired Grove Cook to be his new overseer. Cook had a reputation for hardness. Brown explains that for weeks before he [Cook] arrived, bondspeople talked about his arrival with dread. On Cook's first morning in charge, he called the slaves out for inspection and to assign them their daily tasks. As he finished and the bondspeople went to the field, Dinky emerged from his cabin. As Cook stood with Dr. Gains, his attention was immediately drawn to the one-eyed slave:

"Who is that Nigger?" inquired Cook.

[125] Fredrick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1855), 241–46.
[126] Brown, *My Southern Home*, 69.

"That is Dinky," replied Dr. Gains.
"What is his place?" continued the overseer.
"Oh, Dinky is a gentleman at large," was the response.
"Do you have any objection to his working?"
"None, whatever."
"Well," said Cook, "I will put him to work tomorrow morning."[127]

Cook instructed Dinky to be in line with the other bondspeople the next day ready to work. However, when Cook surveyed the assembled bondspeople the following morning, Dinky was not in attendance. The other Blacks explained that he was still asleep in his cabin. Cook went over to Dinky's cabin just as the one-eyed slave emerged. Cook demanded that Dinky follow him to the barn for a whipping, saying, "Now Mr. Dinky they tell me that you have not had your back tanned for many years and that being the case I shall give you a flogging that you will never forget." Meanwhile, the driver went to his cabin for his whip.[128]

Dinky, unconcerned, "gave a knowing look to the other slaves, who were standing by and said, 'if he lays the weight of his finger on me, you will see de top of dat barn come off.'" The assembled bondspeople waited with anticipation as Dinky and Cook entered the barn. "Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes passed and the usual sound of 'oh pray massa oh pray massa 'heard on the occasion of a slave being punished had not yet proceeded from the barn." Finally, "The barn door flew open and the overseer and the conjurer came out together, walking side by side and separated when half way up the walk. As they parted Cook went to the field and Dinky to his cabin."[129] Although their confrontation had not been seen by his fellow bondspeople, Dinky had beaten Cook and gone about his day.

From Brown's description, it is difficult to determine whether Dinky truly had a visual impairment. Of course, the answer depends on which definition of blindness is employed: the

[127] Ibid., 69, 70, 82.
[128] Ibid., 69, 72–73.
[129] Ibid., 73.

narrow antebellum conception or today's expanded standard. Brown appears not to think of Dinky as blind. He refers to him as one-eyed throughout the book, while clearly labeling a female fortuneteller as "blind" earlier in the same text.[130] The text suggests that Dinky hunted and traveled unimpaired; however, if his one good eye was toward the higher end of today's scale of visual impairment, any struggles with mobility might have been infrequent and not always noticeable. If Brown described the circumstances surrounding the loss of Dinky's eye, maybe a clue could be teased out, but he writes only that "he had lost an eye."[131] From the activities Dinky engaged in, it appears that he was functionally a sighted slave with one eye.

What would have happened, though, if he had been forced to relocate like Cresy? Would he falter in unfamiliar territory, revealing himself to be a blind slave after all? Unlike marshals, owners, or juries, the historian cannot ask questions or observe real-time actions to decide the status of a one-eyed slave's best eye. Of course, even deciding whose definition of blindness should be adhered to is problematic. If Brown did not label Dinky as a blind slave (as he did others), is the historian at liberty to reverse his judgment and employ a modern definition of blindness? Unfortunately, the lack of available sources to check and cross-check an individual's visual acuity, combined with the relatively small number of blind slaves—both physically present in the antebellum era and in the physical records of that time—requires the historian to be more liberal with the label. From the twenty-first century, it is easy to overlook blind bondspeople; this problem can only be mitigated by casting a wide, though measured, net.

Conclusion

[130] Ibid., 55
[131] Ibid., 72.

The number of blind Blacks who were slaves in the South at any one time is impossible to accurately estimate. The antebellum counts performed by federal census workers, though the best available guide to the actual number, are perhaps more helpful to historians in demonstrating the fluid definition of blindness and how ideas about who counted as blind changed over time. Nevertheless, it is clear that many blind bondspeople lived in homes and on plantations throughout the South.

The knowledge that blind bondspeople lived and worked in the South allowed those involved in supporting or fighting against the slave system to employ their own stigmas related to the blind in attacks against their opponents. Antebellum discourse about blindness and blind slaves generally took the idea of blind people's helplessness and immobility for granted. Southern owners and state courts regularly categorized blind bondspeople as "useless" and "unsound." Meanwhile, abolitionists like Theodore Dwight Weld rested their arguments on the same foundation by claiming that Southerners would kill blind slaves rather than keeping them in their workforces.

The census data's introduction of blind slaves into the emerging fight over slavery generated public discourse based on blind stereotypes. Abolitionists and proslavery thinkers arrived at different conclusions regarding slavery's effect on the blind, but they both relied on similar attitudes. While abolitionists emphasized blind slaves' helplessness, isolation, and general unfitness for employment, proslavery thinkers compared census numbers from the North and South to argue that the relatively low incidence of blindness among the enslaved population proved that Blacks were happier under slavery than freedom.

Blind stigmas colored sighted opinions about the blind, but individual blind people were not necessarily bound by those limitations. There is no reason to believe that free White blind

people like Mary Day and B. B. Bayonne had a special power to move around and work that the Black blind enslaved population did not possess. In short, public beliefs about the blind and blind slaves dominated transactions and conversations about them, but those beliefs were usually based on ignorance and false information. Blind bondspeople were born, lived, and worked in the South, even though the sighted did their best to deny their existence and experience.

CHAPTER 2

"One of My Small Negros has a Very Bad Eye,"

In 1822, the British Parliament's investigation into the African slave trade revealed details about the murder of 39 newly blind Africans aboard the Portuguese slave ship *Le Rodeur* in 1819. The evidence presented included the daily journal of the ship's scribe. This contemporaneous record recounts the captain's thoughts, actions, and orders as he employed the ship's doctor in an unsuccessful attempt to reverse the captives' blindness and eventually had the 39 blind Africans thrown overboard. The journal recounted that the ship had experienced a slave revolt, after which the Africans were "confined closely in the lower hold."[132]

The crowded conditions below led to the outbreak of an infectious disease. The scribe identified the infection as "Ophthalmia, which," he understood, "produced blindness." The journal captured how quickly the situation deteriorated; men who had gone below deck "[reported] that the disease [was] spreading frightfully." The captain recognized that his cargo's value was threatened, and he asked the ship's doctor how best to proceed. "Today at dinner," recorded the scribe, "the captain and the surgeon held a conference on the subject. The surgeon declared that, from all he could learn, the cases were already so numerous as to be beyond his management." Unwilling to give up on a profitable Atlantic crossing, the captain declared, "Every slave cured was worth his value and that it was better to lose a part than all." The doctor thought there might be cause for optimism, explaining, "The patient is at first blind; but some escape, eventually, with the loss of one eye or a mere dimness of vision." Intent on salvaging his

[132] George Francis Dow. *Slave Ships and Slaving* (Courier Corporation, 2002),
The Parliamentary Debates, 1822. Written testimonies for a parliamentary committee investigating the slave trade around 1819, VII. The scribe is identified as J. D. Romaigne in Kim Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), 44.

human cargo for the slave markets, the captain ordered that the blind Africans be transferred "to the upper hold," where they could be "attended by the surgeon." This move, however, only created more problems.[133]

Once the enslaved Africans were moved out of the lower hold, the infection gained access to new potential hosts. The disease quickly migrated from captive to captor, and soon, everybody aboard the ship, both Black and White, found themselves totally blind. The scribe's journal goes silent at this point, as the scribe lost his vision and with it the ability to write. The ship drifted aimlessly for eleven days. After this period, the journal resumes with a happy report from the scribe: "This twenty-first day of June 1819. I am myself almost well. The surgeon and eleven more are irrecoverably blind; and five are able to see, though dimly, with both [eyes]. Among the slaves, thirty-nine are completely blind and the rest blind of one eye or their sight otherwise injured." With enough of the crew recovered to pilot the ship, she once again set course for Guadeloupe's slave markets.[134]

With the journey's resumption, the captain returned to pondering the financial problem posed by the blind slaves. If he attempted to sell them on the open market, he was virtually guaranteed to take a major financial hit. However, the captain knew that the ship carried an insurance policy that paid for cargo lost at sea. As he approached the island, he weighed his options: gamble that purchasers would spend top dollar for blind slaves or take the sure money offered by the insurance policy. The captain, whose business was to turn Black bodies into the greatest profit possible, decided on the sure thing. The journal records the scene:

"This morning, the captain called 'All hands on deck, Negros and all.'" Distancing himself from the captain's actions, the scribe added, "I thought he was going to return God's thanks publicly for our miraculous return." Instead, the scribe witnessed an economic decision

[133] Parliamentary Debates, VII.
[134] Parliamentary Debates, XI.

that ended 39 African lives. The journal recounts the captain and first mate's final conversation, in which they confirmed the financial facts before they threw away any chance to turn a profit.[135]

The scribe reports that the first mate asked, "Are you quite certain the cargo is insured?" The captain answered in the affirmative, "I am. Every slave that is lost must be made good by the underwriters. Besides, would you have me turn my ship into a hospital for the support of blind Negroes? They have cost us enough already. Do your duty."[136]

The scribe described the final deadly act that took place after this financial discussion: "The mate picked out thirty-nine negroes who were completely blind, and with the assistance of the rest of the crew, tied a piece of ballast to the legs of each. The miserable wretches were then thrown into the sea."[137]

The tragedy that took place on *Le Rodeur* possesses several important elements that relate directly to the lives of blind bondspeople and their Southern owners in the antebellum period. First, and most importantly, all the Africans had been sighted before they boarded the ship. This fact reflects the reality for most blind people, as the majority could see before losing their sight. All blind slaves' histories included a physical ailment or specific event that caused their blindness; while these events may not have been important to the general public, they certainly were to the individual. Second, blind bondspeople usually became part of their owner's workforce while they could still see. Accordingly, owners generated potential prices or expected production values for slaves when they were sighted, and they viewed newly blind slaves in light of these expectations. Although an antebellum Southerner may not have been engaged in the specific act of selling slaves like the captain of *Le Rodeur*, both believed that the loss of sight

[135] Parliamentary Debates, XI.
[136] 5. Parliamentary Debates, XI.
[137] Parliamentary Debates, XI. Africans disabled on the voyage from Africa were sold for lower prices. See Nielsen, *A Disability History*, 44; Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1490–1870* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 431–439.

diminished an individual bondsperson's ability and value and, therefore, their own bottom line. This economic calculation caused both the captain and antebellum owners to seek medical help with the hope of mitigating or reversing visual problems in bondspeople.[138] Finally, bondspeople and owners alike would recognize the ineffectiveness of available antebellum medical remedies.[139] Despite being treated by the ship's doctor, 39 Africans failed to recover any sight whatsoever. Importantly, it is at this point that the owners' and the captain's economic calculus diverged. Whereas the captain tried to reduce his perceived losses by murdering the blind Africans, owners put their blind bondspeople to work (a topic covered in the next chapter).

The main aim of this chapter is to explore the ways in which individual bondspeople lost their vision. The transformative magnitude of losing one's sight tends to elevate that event to one of the single most important experiences in an individual's life, even if the loss is gradual. I do not intend to present these events as tragedies, but rather as one life experience that often shaped a bondsperson's personality and circumstances. Unfortunately, given the available records, almost all of the following events are presented from the perspective of sighted people's observations rather than bondspeople's experiences. However, this fact should not discourage the historian from trying to understand a critical event in a bondsperson's life. Beyond this aim, I argue that sight was so important to an owner's bottom line that an attempt to save a slave's vision had to be attempted if possible. To be sure, this fact may have aligned the interests of owners and bondspeople in some cases. Regardless, the cure was more important than who

[138] Dea Boster has claimed that eyesight was owners 'most urgent disability-related concern. Dea Boster, African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South 1800–1860 (New York: Routledge, 2013), 55.
[139] Charolett M. Fett, Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Todd L. Savitt, The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia (Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1978); Katherine Bankole, Slavery and Medicine: Enslavement and Medical Practices in Antebellum Louisiana (New York: Garland, 1998).

actually performed it. As a consequence, the plantation health care system included both Whites and Blacks, men and women, and professionals and lay practitioners.[140]

This chapter first explores the various causes of blindness during the antebellum era. A range of factors played roles in vision loss, including genetics, aging, accidents, disease, and nature. It is often difficult to pinpoint the cause of an individual slave's blindness. Often, the specific reason a slave lost his or her sight was only recorded as an afterthought if it was recorded at all. Causes of vision loss can be placed into three groups: age-related, disease- or trauma-related, and blindness present from birth.

The chapter then turns to the plantation healthcare system. When blindness struck, a variety of entities were present, available, and willing to attempt a medical cure. I first examine the professional options available to individual owners. The medical profession grew over the antebellum period, and though it remained limited, doctors, hospitals, and medical colleges made their services available in ever-greater numbers. Regardless, the main people who dealt with bondspeople's eye diseases and injuries were White owners and their wives. To be sure, Blacks worked to reverse the effects of blindness using nursing or African healing practices, though generally outside of owners' supervision. Regardless, plantation healers, both White and Black, employed a trial-and-error-based empirical system that used roots, plants, animals, and medicine to combat vision loss. Most of the time, cures were completely ineffective, and they were often worse than the original problem. Nevertheless, sight was such a valuable commodity that an effort to reverse blindness had to be made.

This chapter connects the medical causes of blindness with the medical responses that blindness generated. While owners rarely sought a medical cure for blindness caused by old age,

[140] Modern medicine still struggles to deal with issues related to blindness. No reliable cure for total blindness exists.

the economics involved with younger bondspeople did generate medical intervention. The main argument of this chapter is that blindness was a random occurrence, which meant all sighted bondspeople had the potential to become blind and owners never knew when blindness would adversely affect their workforce and bottom line. It should also be understood that the snapshots taken by the census once a decade missed many cases and incidents of blindness that occurred on a daily, monthly, or yearly basis.

What the Blind See

From a blind person's perspective, blindness manifests in many different ways. Vision problems run the gamut from total blindness to partial sight, and each aspect of visual acuity has a specific meaning to the individual. Even if vision problems have the same cause, similar impairments affect different people differently. Total blindness is a partial exception, as it is generally constant across experiences. Nevertheless, even total blindness has certain variations. Totally blind individuals have described their experience of their own blindness as roughly equivalent to looking into the blackness of space without stars. At times, however, totally blind people describe seeing colors or lights that appear and move across a Black background. These lights and objects are not generated by, nor representative of, anything physically present around the totally blind person. Instead, they are mental illusions created and projected by the individual's brain. Some totally blind people also have light perception, which allows them to make out shadows that lack detail.[141]

While those with low vision have a variety of visual experiences, their vision is often marked by a general fuzziness. They might see objects that lack detail. For example, they may

[141] Much of this information has been gathered through discussions with various blind and visually impaired individuals. Also see Francis A. Koestler, *The Unseen Minority: A Social History of Blindness* (New York: D. McKay Company, 1976), 5–8.

see a face but not a smile. Some visually impaired individuals have compared low vision to looking through wax paper. Those with peripheral vision loss describe their visual field as being like peering through a tiny hole, and those with central vision loss often perceive a disk blocking the middle of their visual field.[142] Finally, nearsightedness is the inability to see details as an object gets farther away, while farsightedness means that details are harder to see the closer they get. The lower a person's vision falls on the visual spectrum (e.g., 20/1,000) the fewer details that person will discern; likewise, the higher a person's vision falls on the spectrum (e.g., 20/200), the more details that person will be able to see.[143]

Causes of Blindness

Unlike many other demographic categories of difference, blindness was generally determined after a person's birth. In other words, most blind bondspeople began their lives with vision. However, a person's age plays an important role in the frequency of blindness, as infants that are born blind make up the smallest portion of the blind population, while the elderly make up the largest.[144] The causes of blindness fall into four broad categories: disease, infection, trauma, and aging. The first three categories account for blindness's random nature, as they all affect those who were previously sighted.

The causes of congenital blindness can be placed into two broad disease categories: hereditary and developmental. Hereditary causes are passed down from parent to child, while developmental blindness is specific to the individual fetus's growth. Examples of hereditary

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[142] Ibid.

[143] The Dutch ophthalmologist Herman Snellen created the standard letter-based eye chart and the idea of 20/20 vision in 1862. Daniel Azzam and Yasmine Ronquillo, "Snellen Chart," Statpearl Publishing, last modified May 9, 2021, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK558961/. Accessed October 11, 2021.

[144] "Statistics on Blindness," National Federation of the Blind, 2015, https://nfb.org/resources/blindness-statistics, accessed December 1, 2020. Also see Goldstein Hyman, *The Demography and Causes of Blindness* (New York: American Foundation for the Blind, 1968) 22–27.

diseases that cause blindness are albinism, which usually causes low vision rather than complete blindness, and retinitis pigmentosa, which causes the retinas to degenerate over time. This condition, in fact, is today's leading cause of congenital blindness.[145] Optic nerve hypoplasia is an example of a developmental problem; this condition prevents the proper growth of the optic nerve and can lead to either low vision or total blindness. While many diseases were discovered and named after the antebellum period, limiting historians' ability to identify them, the fact that congenital blindness affected bondspeople is indisputable.

The most famous blind bondsperson, Blind Tom Wiggins, was born totally blind on May 25, 1849, near Columbus, Georgia. No contemporary record suggests the specific condition that caused Tom's blindness, but a sketch of his life written in 1865 states, "From his earliest infancy he has been blind; totally so until a few years since, when the habit of pressing his fingers into his pupils let in a ray by which means he can discern an object imperfectly." After Tom's owner, James Bethune, discovered the three-year-old's ability to play the piano, he "[s]ecured the services of the ablest physicians that the state of Georgia could produce. The examination of these gentleman pronounced the case one of hopeless blindness, with no prospect of any future advantage." The sketch describes the vision he did possess: "His right eye is not totally devoid of sight. If a visitor were to ask him the nature and composition of any object Tom would take it in his hand, ask to be led to a strong light and then holding the object between the light and his eye he could most likely describe his subject." Although this passage points to Tom having some sight, the fact that someone needed to lead him indicates that it was almost unusable.[146]

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[145] For a description of childhood eye problems, see https://www.childrenshospital.org/conditions-and-treatments/conditions/v/vision-problems/symptoms-and-causes. Accessed December 2, 2020.
[146] *A Sketch in the Life of Thomas Greene Bethune (Blind Tom)* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Ledger Book and Job Printing Establishment, 1865), 4–5.

Importantly, hereditary blindness could produce small pockets of blind bondspeople in one location. When one or both parents carried genes related to vision loss, their children were likely to be born with the same gene. In certain cases, individual children would exhibit the trait and be born visually impaired or without sight. Blind brothers and sisters led to blind aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Again, hereditary blindness was rare, but where it did appear within a family line, it could do so in clusters.[147] In 1868, Ned and Ellen Cox successfully applied for admittance to the North Carolina School for the Colored Blind. The brother and sister were 16 and 17, just a few years younger than Blind Tom, and both were visually impaired. In fact, an examination of the school's register of students reveals that several groups of siblings were in attendance between 1868 and 1878.[148] Despite hereditary blindness's tendency to create pockets of blind bondspeople, the fact remains that those who were born blind made up a small portion of the total population.

In contrast, the aging process has historically caused most cases of blindness. Over time, the eye's delicate and critical parts begin to work less efficiently or fail altogether. A 2017 article published by the National Federation of the Blind reported that those over 64 comprise the largest percentage of today's visually impaired population—a fact that holds despite all the benefits of modern America.[149] Cataracts, today's leading cause of blindness, are a gray film-like substance that develops on the lens of the eye and blocks portions of the visual field. Although they affect people of all ages, cataracts tend to worsen as one gets older. A picture in the family album of Charles Manigould, a slaveholder from South Carolina, prominently displays a

[147] For a reader-friendly overview, see https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/17130-eye-disease-inherited--genetic. Accessed December 1, 2020.
[148] North Carolina State Archive, *Enrollment Book*.
[149] National Federation of the Blind, "Statistics on Blindness.

photograph of an elderly bondsperson who clearly has a cataract on his right eye.[150] While cataracts in the antebellum period may not have been the primary cause of blindness like they are today, they likely impaired the vision of many bondspeople. Other leading causes of age-related blindness, like macular degeneration and diabetes, likely caused some cases given their prevalence today. [151] Of course, the most common type of blindness or visual impairment related to age was near- and farsightedness. Although these conditions are correctable in many instances today, they were an expected part of the aging process in antebellum America.[152]

The correlation between age and bad sight was so strong that Chief Justice Pearson of the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled in *Bell v. Jeffreys* (see Chapter 1) that elderly bondspeople were sound regardless of their vision. The case centered on a young but severely nearsighted bondswoman. In the dissent, Justice Moore challenged the majority's opinion that the slave in question was unsound by asking, "Considering this slave could see as well as many old Negros, would the court hold a slave is unsound who can't see as well as he did in the prime of life?" Pearson responded in the negative. He answered that an old and blind bondsperson was sound if, and only if, their eyes were impaired by the "wear and tare of age." He then laid out the common antebellum understanding of the connection between age and vision problems: "Courts, juries, purchasers and everyone are presumed to know the laws of nature. If someone purchased an older slave, it is reasonable to expect the purchaser to know vision problems are frequent after a

[150] Charles Manigould, "Family Album 320" in Boster, African American Slavery and Disability, 127.
[151] National Federation of the Blind, "Statistics on Blindness."
[152] Although nowhere near as effective as today's treatments, corrective glasses did exist in the antebellum period. Thomas Jefferson developed a pair that used four different lenses depending on a person's age. From "Thomas Jefferson to Charles Bellini, 25 July 1788," *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-13-02-0299. Accessed October 15, 2020. Original source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, vol. 13, March–7 October 1788*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 415–416.

certain age." [153] In other words, Pearson believed that slaveowners should expect that bondspeople would have problems with their vision if they lived long enough. The single slave narrative authored by a blind slave—*The Blind African Slave* by Boyrereau Brinch, published in 1810—did nothing to challenge the court's assertion.[154]

Despite the sensational title of Brinch's narrative, the book did not recount the life of a blind slave. Born fully sighted in 1742 to a royal family in Africa, Brinch retraced his childhood in the Kingdom of Bow-Woo, the horrors of the Middle Passage, life on a Virginia plantation, and even his service in the Patriot cause during the American Revolution before describing himself on the text's final page as "old and blind." [155] The reader is left to wonder what caused his blindness, as he never recounted any infection or traumatic event that affected his eyes. In this case, the absence of any explanation (which would have been expected in a book with "blind" as the title's first word) makes age-related vision loss a virtual certainty.

The Works Progress Administration's (WPA) slave narratives, though conducted after slavery's end, also show that many elderly former bondspeople had visual problems. The former bondspeople who spoke to interviewers in the 1930s were necessarily elderly, and many reported themselves to be blind. Solomon Pattillo, a 76-year-old man from Arkansas, had been a "farmer, teacher, and small dealer" while he was sighted, but his vision was gone by the time of the interview.[156] Walter Rim from Texas, aged 81, remembered being a "stout man" who was employed as a cook after emancipation. Rim regretted the "help" that he needed now that he did

[153] Bell v. Jeffreys, 35 N.C. 356 (N.C. 1852).
[154] Boyrereau Brinch, as told to Benjamin F. Prentiss, Esq., The *Blind African Slave, or Memoirs of Boyrereau Brinch, Nicknamed Jeffrey Brace* (St. Albans: Harry Whitney, 1810).
[155]Ibid, 201.
[156] *Federal Writers 'Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 5, McClendon-Prayer*. 1936. Manuscript/mixed material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn021. Hereafter cited as BIS. Accessed November 21, 2020.

not have sight.[157], Prayer McCloud, a female Arkansan aged 88, explained, "Sometime I can see some out of one eye. Always seen things when my sight was good."[158] Annie Page, a fellow Arkansan aged 86, explained, "My eyes been going 'bout six years till I got to where I can't discern anything."[159] This small sample hints at the possible numbers of bondspeople who lost their sight as they got older. Pattillo, McCloud, Rim, and Page had all been born into slavery. There is no reason to believe that the development of their vision loss would have been different had emancipation never occurred.

Although age-related blindness was a slow process, infectious diseases could strike bondspeople of all ages blind in mere days or hours. Sickness and disease were everyday features of life in the South. In some cases, common infections damaged sighted slaves' vision. To be sure, many diseases like yellow fever and smallpox that were endemic to the South could threaten bondspeople's lives and only secondarily attacked their eyes. The waves of highly infectious diseases that continually swept through Southern states, especially the frontier and low-country areas, found numerous hosts within the slave community. While White elites could retreat to a healthier summer climate, the bulk of their bondspeople remained stationary targets.[160] Although numerous infectious diseases could directly or indirectly result in blindness, antebellum sources often name scrofula, ophthalmia, and smallpox.[161]

The term "sore eyes" was an antebellum catchall phrase for all painful infections that affected the eyes. Often, though, sore eyes were linked to ophthalmia, which was distinguished

[157] BIS, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn163.24. Accessed November 19, 2020.
[158] BIS, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn025.
[159] BIS, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn025. Accessed November 20.
[160] Todd Savitt, Fevers, Agues, and Cures: Medical Life in Old Virginia (Richmond: Virginia Historical Society, 1990
[161] Christopher T. Leffler, "Ophthalmology in North America: Early Stories 1491-1801," published online July 26, 2017, 10.1177/1179172117721902 PMCID: PMC5533269, PMID: 28804247. Accessed May 1, 2020.

by the extraordinary pain it inflicted on its victims. In 1856, Dr. Robert Dean treated an individual who suffered from the infection. He recorded the patient's symptoms and reactions. The description provides firsthand insights into what those aboard the slave ship *Le Rodeur* experienced (discussed in the opening of this chapter). Dean began by describing the eye's appearance: "The whole left eye seemed enlarged, and its coverings swollen; the cornea was dim, as if covered with fine dust, and was the seat of a suppurating ulcer; the conjunctiva was blood-red from crowded blood-vessels." The doctor then recorded the patient's physical response to the infection, which included "intolerance of light; constant aching pains about the whole circumference of the orbit, increased to a frightful degree by moving the eyes, or exposure to sunlight, even when the lids were closed." The pain was so intense, Dean observed, that the patient was almost driven "to despair."[162]

The infection was spread by flies as they landed on different people's eyes. Once an outbreak occurred, the flies' large numbers and relative mobility assured that the virus would spread. Samuel Howe warned readers in 1831 that "the nation faced an epidemic of blindness" due to ophthalmia's prevalence.[163]

Bondspeople's housing and diets were often deficient, which made their bodies susceptible to contracting hard-hitting infectious diseases. Southern advice manuals for owners can be seen as either a blueprint for successful slave management or a counter-explanation and inditement of masters' actual neglectful treatment. In 1847, J. D. B. Debow offered planters advice about the most effective way to maintain their workforce's health. "Houses for Negros," urged Debow, "should be elevated at least two feet above the earth, with good plank flooring,

[162] William Postel, *The Health of Slaves on Southern Plantations* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1951), 144–145.
[163] Samuel Gridley Howe, "Education of the Blind," *North American Review* (July 1833), https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/issues/education-blind-1833. Accessed October 30, 2020.

weather proof with capacious windows and doors for ventilation." Living quarters should "never be crowded," and owners needed to understand that "good water is far more essential them many suppose." As for food and clothing, he explained, "The point is to provide enough." Far from many slaveowner's infrequent issuing of these necessary items, Debow argued that "Proper nutrition, and adequate clean clothing were essential in maintaining the health of the slaves." He reminded owners that they benefited from a healthy workforce, so they should provide clothes and shoes "appropriate to the season of the year and food that included the portions and salts necessary for a healthy body." Of course, if this were the norm, Debow's advice would not have been necessary. Most bondspeople lacked these essential items and generally found their bodies physically compromised.[164]

Germs, not officially recognized until the 1890s, easily spread in slave communities and potentially threatened bondspeople's vision. The close living conditions in slave quarters that Debow warned owners about were perfect for transmitting disease, but bondspeople who lived in more urban settings were no less vulnerable. Although blinding infections struck slaves of all ages, young children were particularly susceptible. The experience of Larken Standard and two young, enslaved boys demonstrates the speed at which these infections moved. On April 5, 1821, Standard requested help from Dr. James Carmichael. His communication contains a sense of panic that reflects the infection's speed:

> There are two of my brother Robert's Negros very ill. They are boys. They are both affected in the eyes. One of them in both eyes. I never saw such a sight. His eyes are swelled so they appear to be wrong side out. They discharge very much and is very soar [sore]. His face is swelled and very much broke out in large ulcers and it appears to be getting all over his breast… It appears if he is not received in a short time he will be blind or die as the breaking out is getting all over him. He is about four years old. The other

[164] Debow's Review, *Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial Progress and Resources* 3 (May 1845): 420. http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moajrnl/acg1336.1-03.005/432. Accessed April 29, 2020.

> boy is only affected in one of his eyes, which is very bad. He has no breaking out. They are in both such a situation I cannot describe it. [165]

Standard described symptoms consistent with the antebellum understanding of scrofula; he indicated that at least one of the boys had open sores, which generally accompanied the disease. While the record is silent as to the boys' ultimate fate, their condition clearly shook him. His concern with seeing the boys' swollen eyes was only rivaled by his dismay at how quickly the condition had progressed. The historian can only wonder whether Standard was concerned about how others in the house felt, not to mention the boys themselves.

Very few antebellum sources provide a firsthand account of a blinding infection, and the few that do were generally written by Whites.[166] However, in 1868, an escaped 33-year-old bondsman from West Virginia named Henry Parker recounted his experience. Parker published his brief autobiography in an effort to support himself after losing his sight to a rapid infection, explaining, "Accept this, my friends. It is one of the means I have to support myself. Buy this and you will have the blessing of a blind man."[167] Parker had been enslaved in Virginia until 1859. At the age of 24, he escaped to Michigan along with his mother and two sisters. Although Parker had made it to freedom, the intense yet voluntary labor regimen he kept up to support his family showed how labor could weaken the body.

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[165] Larken Standard to Drs. Carmichael & Son (18 February 1823), "Patients 'Voices in Early 19th Century Virginia: Letters to Drs. Carmichael & Son," *Dr. James Carmichael Papers 1816–1832* and n.d. (Charlottesville: Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library), http://carmichael.lib.virginia.edu. Accessed April 29, 2020.

[166] See, for example, Mary L. Day, Incidents in the Life of a Blind Girl: Mary L. Day, a Graduate of the Maryland Institution for the Blind (Baltimore: J. Young, 1859), 41–42.

[167] Henry Parker's narrative was an eight-page unpublished pamphlet written in the late 1860s. Henry Parker, *Autobiography of Henry Parker*, 6. https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/parkerh/parkerh.html. Accessed December 3, 2020.

Parker described his working conditions during his first winter in the North. He had been able to secure a small farm for his family, and though Parker was his own boss, he still labored long and hard hours under brutal conditions. "During the cold winter I was compelled to get up at four AM," Parker recalled, "and feed 18 head of cattle; and the snow was about two feet deep…; and also 14 head of horses; and 150 head of sheep, and had to be preparing wood to run two fires and this wood had to be prepared from trees that were standing in the woods 2 miles from the house."[168] Driven by his family responsibilities as if they were an overseer's lash, Parker maintained this schedule throughout the winter despite the toll it took on his health.

Parker struggled through, "but when the cold winter gave way to the ever more welcome spring, I began to feel the terrible effects of the colds that I had taken." He described the first disease or ailment he experienced as burning of the feet. He continued to work: "By toiling constantly without any rest the misery in my feet grew greater and greater. Many nights after a hard day's labor, I would lie in misery with my feet unable to close my eyes for the rest I so much needed." Parker kept working, and for two years experienced symptoms associated with "cold and rheumatism."[169]

The blinding infection Parker experienced should be seen in the context of his previous work and his weakened condition. Parker reported that nothing strange or out of the ordinary had happened in the days before he lost his sight. On the "morning of the 12 of June 1862," he explained, "I arose with my eyes feeling somewhat heavy and very hot but I still went round until about eleven o'clock A.M. when all at once the hot water began to run out both my eyes. This was the indication of a powerful inflammation and by night I could not see my own

[168] Parker, Autobiography, 6.
[169] Parker, Autobiography, 6.

way."[170] Although Parker obtained medical help, he never regained his sight. In the span of a day, Parker had gone from fully sighted to totally blind. The frequency and unpredictability of blinding infections signals that an unknown number of bondspeople had their sight damaged or destroyed altogether.

While data does not exist to track the frequency of blindness caused by traumatic events in the antebellum South, trauma-based blindings are generally statistically less frequent than old age or disease. Here, such blindings are defined as an external injury that damages the whole or part of the eye. The rural South had both natural and manmade features that, under the right conditions, could quickly take an otherwise sighted bondsperson's vision. An exhaustive list of trauma-based blindings experienced by bondspeople is of course impossible to compile. There is no limit to the number of different ways these events could take place, and it is unknowable how many occurred without generating a written record. The plethora of natural and manmade hazards threatening bondspeople's vision most certainly resulted in many blinding events that (perhaps remarkably) were never remarked upon. The following examples simply demonstrate the range of possibilities.

The everyday environment contained many threats to a bondsperson's sight. Wooded areas with underbrush, wild animals, inclement weather, and lack of roads were all environmental elements that slaves operated in daily. The former bondsman Charles Ball in his narrative *Fifty Years in Chains* described the difficulties present while trying to move through a South Carolina swamp: "We became entangled in Briers, and vines, and mats of bushes, from which the greatest exertions were necessary to disengage ourselves. It was so dark, we could not

[170] Parker, Autobiography, 7.

see the fallen trees; and missing these we fell into quagmires, and sloughs of mud and water."[171] Normal, everyday occurrences and activities could turn into a life-threatening or disabling event in an instant.

Freak accidents occurred regularly, though not all affected a bondsperson's sight. Three examples provide a glimpse of some of the natural hazards of the South that could take bondspeople's vision. They all speak to the randomness and speed with which a blinding event could occur. In 1870, a 17-year-old boy in North Carolina described the cause of his blindness on a questionnaire with a single word, "Lightning."[172] Thunderstorms occurred regularly in the Carolinas, but unfortunately, it was not recorded whether he lost his vision due to a physical strike or by looking into the lightning's brightness. In addition, the use of fire for heating, cooking, or lighting always came with hazards. A nine-year-old boy owned by John Shaw of Louisiana had his vision damaged by sparks. According to court records, the boy had been seated near an open fire when burning embers landed directly in his eyes.[173] Finally, a North Carolina runaway advertisement included a one-eyed 15-year-old who had been "kicked in the eye by a horse."[174]

While unpredictable natural threats left otherwise sighted bondspeople blind at an unknown rate, by no means did they have a monopoly on traumatic blindings. Unintentional and intentional acts committed by Whites and Blacks could also cause bondspeople to lose their

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[171] Charles Ball, Fifty Years in Chains; or The Life of an American Slave (New York: H. Dayton, 1859), 172.
[172] North Carolina State Archive, Governor Morehead School, Container 1, Box, 1 Folder 7, *Enrollment Book of the Negro Deaf and Blind 1873–1893*. Benjamin Franklin noted that "lightning has often been known 'to strike people blind.'" See Leffler, *Ophthalmology in North America*.
[173] Race and Slavery Petition Project (RSPP), "PAR #20886110, 1861." University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
[174] North Carolina Runaway Slave Advertisement Digital Collection, "Committed." http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/ref/collection/RAS/id/4676T0. Accessed December 5, 2020.

sight. The common use of firearms represented another source of potentially devastating eye injuries for bondspeople. Whether accidental or intentional, wounds to the face had a significant chance of striking one or both eyes and damaging important nerve and brain functions necessary for sight. Shotguns loaded with buckshot were especially likely to cause blindness from a facial wound. These rifle-style guns did not shoot a single bullet but rather a large number of small pieces of shrapnel, or BBs, that spread out as they traveled away from the muzzle. The tiny pieces of metal could easily puncture and destroy the eye's soft, unprotected tissues, impairing an individual's sight. The circumstances surrounding the blinding of two bondspeople illustrate the threat posed by firearms in general and shotguns in particular.

In 1855, the Louisiana Supreme Court heard an appeal in the case of *McCutchen v. Angelo* after the latter shot and blinded John Hall, one of the plaintiff's bondspeople. McCutchen sued Angelo for $3,000: $2,000 for Hall's drop in value and $1,000 for the future costs associated with his care. The blinding occurred after Hall had trespassed on Angelo's property in an attempt to steal chickens. Hearing Hall, Angelo grabbed his shotgun and gave chase. Eventually, the pair came face to face, at which point Angelo shot Hall. At trial, a doctor testified that Hall had been struck "[e]ight times including one shot in one eye and two shots in the other."[175] Testimony did not disclose whether Angelo was aiming at Hall's face, but regardless, the buckshot's spraying action made it possible for both eyes to be damaged.

McCutchen's desire to be compensated by the shooter created a legal record of events. If finances had not been at stake, however, or if the shooter had made a verbal agreement to pay, Hall's story would never have been preserved. One can only guess how many other instances like this occurred but were never recorded in the well-armed society of the antebellum South.

[175] RSPP, PAR #21138250.

Intentional acts of violence based on anger also accounted for trauma-based blindings. The slaveholding class maintained their institution through the constant use of threat and force. Although bondspeople's eyewitness reports made it clear that owners were not a monolithic group, many slaveholders relied on physical punishments not only for perceived infractions but also to drive maximum production and to control a potentially rebellious population. Whippings, beatings, and burnings were some of slaveholders' preferred ways to inflict pain. Although heinous, most of these assaults were not aimed at permanently disabling bondspeople.

Southern states generally had laws on the books meant to restrain owners from inflicting disabling punishments. Georgia, for example, gave the following decree constitutional force in Section 12 of the 1798 Constitution: "Any person who shall maliciously dismember or deprive a slave of life shall suffer such punishment as would be inflicted in case the like offense had been committed on a free white person."[176] Of course, malicious intent was virtually impossible to prove; slaves were prohibited from testifying against Whites, and it was extremely unlikely that a White person would take the stand on behalf of a bondsperson.

Although in some antebellum narratives former bondspeople recorded instances of owners slicing slaves' hamstrings or cutting off an individual's foot to permanently limit their ability to run away, no author described an owner putting out one of their slave's eyes as punishment.[177] It is probable that antebellum owners considered vision so critical to a bondsperson's economic and productive value that they refrained from taking such a drastic step. Theodore Weld, however, pointed out that owners did not always act in their own best interest. He argued, "even if love of money were the strongest human passion, who is simple enough to

[176] Section 12 of the Georgia 1798 Constitution, http://founding.com/founders-library/government-documents/american-state-and-local-government-documents/state-constitutions/georgia-constitution-of-1798/. Accessed December 16, 2020.
[177] It is, of course, possible that there is an example that I have not yet found.

think that it is all the time so powerfully excited that no other passion or appetite can get the mastery over it?"[178] In a 1938 interview, an 86-year-old former slave named Annie Patterson explained how her former master, William Jimmerson, had blinded her in a fit of rage. Page was tending to her mistress:

> One afternoon she was laying down and I was sitting there fanning her with a peafowl fan. Her husband was laying there too, and I guess I must have nodded and let the fan fall down in his face. He jumped up and pressed his thumbs on my eyes until they were all blood shot and when he let go I fell down on the floor… My eyes went out.[179]

George Kollock, a South Carolina planter, rebuked his overseer in 1829 for a whipping he had performed on Grace, one of Kollock's slaves. During the beating, the overseer delivered a blow that resulted in "an accidental cut to the eye." The extent of the damage is impossible to gauge, though Grace did go to the doctor. In any case, the laceration must have been significant enough for Kollock to rebuke the overseer and "take the side of a slave," in the words of the overseer, against his own employee.[180] While it appears that masters blinded their own bondspeople only rarely, it is certain that more than the two sighted slaves above went through the experience.

At times, violence between bondspeople broke out in the slave community. In at least some of these disputes, sighted Blacks lost their vision. The frequency and number of such assaults in slave quarters and their ultimate consequences remain unknown. Individual owners controlled their own plantation justice systems and therefore were outside of the formal legal system. In some circumstances, however, financial compensation rather than criminal justice (as

[178] Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, 2011), 27.
[179] BIS, Annie Patterson, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn025. Accessed November 20, 2020.
[180] Letter to Kollock from Overseer 1839, George J. Kollock Plantation Journals, #407, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

in the two shooting cases above) was at stake, allowing records to be generated in civil court. A case argued in the Louisiana Supreme Court in 1819 provides a glimpse into the possibilities of conflict between bondspeople.

According to court records, in 1818, Elizabeth Patton hired Elizabeth Jourdain's one-eyed slave Mange to work on her Washington Parish estate. One evening, a fight between Mange and Jourdain's slave, identified only as James, took place. Court records do not include the fight's cause, but they state that James damaged Mange's one remaining eye during the fight. Although Patton employed a doctor to treat the injury, Mange eventually lost all vision in the eye, leaving him totally blind.[181] As the practice of eye-gouging was an often-used fighting tactic in the Old South, it is probable that James employed it against Mange. Considering that Annie Patterson and, most likely, Mange lost their sight as a result of gouging, it is likely that they were not alone.[182]

Many Blacks attributed an individual's blindness to supernatural forces. West Africans believed in a cosmology that held that the spirit world interacted with and affected people's everyday lives. Angering one's ancestors or other deities could cause misfortune or disaster. Likewise, witches or others immersed in the spirit world were thought to cast curses or charms on those in the community. When a child was born blind or an individual lost their sight, the cause was generally believed to be a curse or a negative action by a spirit.[183] As a result, bondspeople who adhered to some form of African spirituality felt that their blindness, or that of

[181] Jourdain v. Patton, 5 Mart, (o.s.) 615, 1818 La. LEXIS 56 (1818). For a general discussion of violence between bondspeople, see Jeff Forret, *Slave Against Slave: Plantation Violence in the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Press, 2015).
[182] Forret points out that eye-gouging was a common type of violence in the South for lower-class whites. Forret, *Slave Against Slave*, 2.
[183] For a discussion of African views of blindness, see Deidre O'Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom, Slave Pianist: America's Lost Musical Genius* (London: Duckworth, 2009), 45–63.

those around them, resulted from the malevolent actions of spirits or curses placed on them by conjure doctors like Dinky (see Chapter 1).

The proslavery theorist Samuel Cartwright recognized and attacked the power that Black conjure doctors held across the South: "On almost every large plantation, there are one or more negros ambitious of being considered in the character of conjurers to gain influence, and to make the other slaves fear and obey them." A plantation's slave population, "particularly those past the age of puberty, have all been kept in constant terror and dred by the conjurers. These imposters, like all other imposters, take advantage of circumstance to swell their importance and inculcate a belief in their miraculous powers to bring good or evil upon those they like or dislike."[184] Regardless of Cartwright's dismissive attitude, bondspeople believed this power extended to blinding an individual if they offended the doctor in some way.

Rosanna Frazier, a former slave from Mississippi, blamed her loss of sight on a conjure doctor during her 1930 WPA interview. Although Frazier lost her vision after slavery's end, her strong conviction about the doctor's role in her blinding illustrates what bondspeople believed was possible: "The conjure man one them old hoodoo niggers. He gets mad at me the last plum ripening time and he make up powdered rattle snake dust and pass that through my hair." After the encounter, Frazier left a friend's house, "I ain't walked more than 15 or 16 yards when I hear something say 'ain't you ought,' I say 'ho lord no.'" The strange voice told her, "'You done something' then the voice say 'Something going to happen to you' and the next morning I was as blind as a bat and I ain't ever seen since." Frazier explained that "some people try to tell me it

[184] Samuel A. Cartwright, "A Report on the Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race," *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*, 209–227. For a broader discussion of Cartwright's beliefs, see James Guillory, "The Proslavery Arguments of Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright," *Louisiana History*, IX (Fall 1968).

was snow or sweat or smoke the reason but that ain't the reason."[185] Frazier was convinced that her blindness resulted from a curse, and the "some people" who argued to the contrary did not shake her convictions. For Frazier and many others, the traditional beliefs that had been passed down for generations endured in the decades following emancipation.

The Southern use of slave labor across the occupational spectrum also contained hazards for bondspeople's sight. In addition to the immediate dangers of rice swamps, sugar mills, and cotton fields, these settings exposed bondspeople's eyes to long-term environmental damage. Sun, smoke, and dust all helped to wear down the eyes' physical structures, a process accelerated by slaves' diets. The historian Kenneth Kibble explains that bondspeople's diets were low in Vitamin A, which tended to create tiny cracks on their eyeballs. As bondspeople worked outside, dust settled into these cracks, causing "infections, which accounted for many slaves' complaints of sore eyes and stinging eyes."[186] With prolonged exposure to the elements, bondspeople's eyes worsened over time.

Owners also employed slaves in dangerous or hazardous occupations that directly jeopardized their sight. Coal mining represented one of the most dangerous jobs a worker, whether free or enslaved, could be engaged in. Of the many occupational hazards associated with extracting a mineral from deep beneath the ground, blasting rock was particularly dangerous to a person's vision. In 1848, the Reverend Hitchcock met a blind slave when he toured the Midlothian coal mine in Virginia. Hitchcock, surprised to encounter a bondsperson without sight, asked the slave how he had become blind. The unnamed bondsman explained that he had been a sighted laborer in the same mine years before. One day, while working with explosives below

[185] BIS, Rosanna Frazier, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn162/. Accessed November 20, 2020
[186] Kenneth K. Kiple, Another Dimension to the Black Diaspora: Diet, Disease, and Racism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 118.

ground, his "eyes were destroyed by a blast of gun powder."[187] In a similar event above ground, a Kentucky bondsman who had been hired out to a firm engaged in building a turnpike was injured by an explosion, and "[o]ne of his eyes was put out and his hands severely damaged." The bondsman's original owner sued the firm. Judge Turley ruled against the defendant, in part because he personally believed that working with explosive materials was too dangerous for a slave.[188]

Medical Responses to Blindness

When blindness struck a bondsperson, it not only distressed the individual and his or her community but also interfered with the owner's finances. As a consequence, several types of lay and professional healers were involved in the prevention and treatment of slaves' vision problems. Medical practices were drawn from bondspeople's traditional African practices, slaveowners' and their wives' European-based home remedies, and a growing professional medical field. Each of these medical traditions introduced different approaches and motives, and all played roles when a bondsperson faced a blinding disease or accident. Although professional medical care in the South expanded over the antebellum period, trained doctors and hospitals remained beyond most White Southerners' reach, both financially and geographically. Instead, those in the immediate area—slaveowners, plantation wives, bondspeople, and free Blacks—made up an informal plantation healthcare system.[189] These groups developed medicines and applied treatments in an effort to heal bondspeople's blindness and associated problems.

[187] "The Blind Slave in the Mine," *North Star*, November 24, 1848.
[188] Louisville and Nashville Railroad Co. v. Yandell, 56 Ky. 586, 1856 Ky. LEXIS 62, 17 B. Mon. 586 (1856).
[189] Todd L. Savitt, Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Fett, Working Cures.

While professional medical treatment able to respond to a medical event involving the eyes was always difficult to find in the South, it became easier after 1845. Before that time, only five medical schools in four states offered programs in medicine: the Louisville Medical Institute and the Transylvania Medical College (both in Kentucky), and the Medical College of South Carolina, Louisiana State University's Medical College, and the University of Richmond's Medical Department. These schools offered one or two years of study that resulted in a degree. After 1845, however, the number of medical schools increased rapidly. For example, Georgia added four schools, while Louisiana went from one to two. Likewise, the number of stand-alone segregated infirmaries and hospitals that admitted bondspeople grew. Often located near urban areas or locations involved in slave transport and trading, hospitals servicing bondspeople opened in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. These private facilities offered medical and surgical care for slaves for a fee.[190] An advertisement in the July 1828 issue of the *South Carolina State Gazette* announced the opening of an infirmary: "Dr. M. H. De Leon, at the suggestion of many of his patrons, has established a hospital for negroes in an airy and healthy situation, and he has made such arrangements as will insure comforted convenience for the sick." The ad was quick to reassure owners that their Black property would not be left without White supervision: "The personal services of an efficient white person have been engaged to superintend the internal regulation of the house." As the ad took pains to clarify, "This superintendent will live on the spot as to at all times be with the patients." The hospital offered separate buildings for male and female bondspeople and

[190] Cited in Boster, *African American Slavery*, 88, 78; John Warner, "A Southern Medical Reform: The Meaning of the Antebellum Argument for Southern Medical Education" in Ronald Numbers and Todd L. Savitt, *Science and Medicine in the Old South*, 206–225; Charles Rosenberg, *The Care of Strangers: The Rise of America's Hospital System* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). The first hospital in America was opened in 1751 by Benjamin Franklin. Leffler, *Ophthalmology in North America*.

"received patients from the town or country at a cost of .50 cents per week."[191] The advertisement's overture to the town and country belies the steady patronage hospitals received from slave traders, who needed medical care for their bondspeople but had limited treatment options.

In his 1852 narrative *Twelve Years a Slave,* Solomon Northup recounted his confinement in a New Orleans hospital where he temporarily went blind. As New Orleans was the main hub in the antebellum domestic slave trade, it offered several hospitals for bondspeople, including the Hotel Dieu, the Louisiana Lock Hospital, and the Touro Infirmary. The city's mosquito-infested bayous and large mobile population produced a dangerous disease environment. Several locally based slave-trading firms even signed contracts with local hospitals to provide services for bondspeople who became sick after arriving, like Northup.[192] Northup had been kidnapped in New York, taken to Washington, DC, and shipped to New Orleans with his fellow captives. Shortly after their arrival in the city, Northup and several other bondspeople fell ill with smallpox. The traders quickly sent them to a large local hospital for treatment. Northup recounted going to a room on one of the building's upper stories. "I became very sick," he wrote, and "for three days I was entirely blind."[193] Of course, Northup's blindness was short lived. It is possible, though not likely, that the hospital's doctors helped him to regain his sight and prevent any long-term effects. However, Northup failed to recount (or perhaps remember) any details about what treatments the doctors performed. Nevertheless, the trader's relationship with the hospital was rewarded, as Northup was soon sold.

[191] Weld, American Slavery, 173.
[192] Boster, African American Slavery and Disability, 75; Walter Johnson, Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).
[193] Solomon Northup, 12 Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup (Buffalo: 1853), 83.

The growth in the Southern medical system owed its expansion in no small part to slavery. Southern medical schools and hospitals drew medical professionals and students to their areas by offering them something Northern schools could not: the chance to practice surgery and treatments on live and dead subjects in the form of bondspeople collected from the local community. An advertisement trumpeted the South Carolina Medical College's access to enslaved patients for its students: "No place in the United States offers as great opportunities for the acquisition of anatomical knowledge, subjects being obtained from the colored population in sufficient numbers for every purpose."[194] One such purpose was the medical investigation and treatment of eye problems. Dr. Dougas of the Medical College of Georgia took full advantage of the opportunities to practice surgical procedures on enslaved people. In the June 1838 *Southern Medical Journal*, he published an article based on six eye surgeries he had recently performed, five of which had been performed on bondspeople.[195]

To be sure, Southern proslavery thinkers concerned with medicine and biology argued that Blacks were distinct from Whites. In his 1851 article *A Report on the Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race*, Samuel Cartwright laid out the Southern position. "It is commonly taken for granted that the color of skin constitutes the main and essential difference between the black and white race, but there are other differences more deep, durable, and indelible in their physiology than that of mere color." Cartwright listed a variety of bodily functions and features with the aim of demonstrating that Blacks physically resembled children more than adult Whites and were, therefore, developmentally inferior.[196]

[194] Weld, American Slavery as It Is, 171.
[195] Quoted in Boster, African American Slavery and Disability, 76.
[196] Cartwright, "Physical Peculiarities," 692, 693.

For Cartwright, the ability to see represented one of the only biological functions that worked better in the Black body. Cartwright claimed that Black people's "sight was stronger and they seldom wear spectacles." He described their vision and attributed its higher function to an animal-like keenness, ultimately turning it into an implied argument for Black fitness for outdoor manual labor. "The field of visions [is] not so wide in the negro's eye as in the white man's. He bares the rays of the sun better because he is provided with an anatomical peculiarity in the inner head, thus contracting the field of vision and excluding the Sun's rays—something like the Membrane Nictitans, formed by a preternatural development of the Plica Lunaris, like which is observed in the ape."[197]

Cartwright admitted that "blacks, whites, [and] Asiatic people," within which he included Native Americans, "all descended from Adam." All three lines, however, had distinct histories that fitted them for their places in the world. Cartwright urged doctors to perform more medical research on bondspeople. This would serve three functions: first, to better diagnose, understand, and treat Blacks' distinct sicknesses, which would increase their overall contentedness; second, to boost owners' wealth through a more productive workforce; and finally, to prove once and for all that Blacks were inferior beings.[198]

Medical schools, hospitals, and individual doctors actively sought to purchase blind bondspeople for experimentation and study on the eye. The entire population faced eye problems, and doctors clamored to pioneer medical breakthroughs and advancements. On October 12, 1838, Dr. T. Stillman ran an advertisement in *The Charleston Mercury* seeking 50 sick slaves to experiment on. The first two diseases he listed—suggesting that he was highly interested in them—were ailments connected to blindness. "To PLANTERS AND others," the

[197] Cartwright, "Physical Peculiarities," 693, 698.
[198] Cartwright, "Physical Peculiarities," 698.

headline read, "wanted, fifty negroes. Any person having sick negroes, considered incurable by their respective physicians, and wishing to dispose of them, Dr. S. will pay cash for negroes affected with scrofula or king's evil…The highest cash price will be paid on application as above."[199] Similarly, the South Carolina Medical College opened a hospital for bondspeople, publicly promoting their intention to allow doctors and students to experiment on enslaved Blacks. An ad placed in *The Charleston Mercury* presented the new hospital's advantages: "[a]n infirmary for Negros was last year established in a building adjacent to the college, where the faculty and such members of the society who desire it, will place their patients and pursue their own mode of treatment." [200]

Despite the opportunities to learn and practice medicine in the South, trained doctors were somewhat rare. In 1850, Alabama had a doctor-to-patient ratio of 1 to 610, while Georgia's ratio was 1 to 697, Louisiana's was 1 to 567, and Mississippi's was 1 to 470. Clearly, not all doctors worked on slaves, but even if most did, the numbers of physicians available were lower than those ratios stated.[201] This situation did mean, however, that doctors who were willing to work on slaves could make a good living. Dr. Richard Arnold highlighted the role of money as an incentive to practice in the South: "He [the doctor] stands some chance of making his bread while he has teeth to chew it."[202] Relative scarcity and the South's large number of potential patients combined to keep doctors' fees lucrative. Some physicians charged owners by the

[199] Weld, American Slavery as It Is, 17. For the King's Evil, see Leffler, Ophthalmology in North America.
[200] Weld, *American Slavery as It Is*, 171; Todd Savitt, "The Use of Blacks for Medical Experimentation and Demonstration in the Old South," *The Journal of Southern History* 48, no. 3 (August 1982): 331–348.
[201] Edward Halperin, "Lessons from a Slave Doctor of 1841," *The Pharos of Alpha Omega Alpha* 76, no. 1 (2013): 10–6.
[202] Letter from Richard D. Arnold to Heber Chase (13 October 1836), cited in Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability*, 44.

procedure, while others signed contracts to provide services for a set period. Some doctors even gave discounts, as they expected to see more Blacks than Whites.

In 1854, Rowan Medical Society published a Tariff of Fees that set standard charges for various medical services, including eye issues. These fees provide an example of the money doctors received when their patients suffered from eye problems:

> For a visit in the country under 3 miles $1.00
> For a visit in the country at night, per mile, $1.00
> For ordinary consultations, $5.00
> For extirpation of Polypus, the eye, $50.00
> For operation for Cataract 25.00 to $100.00
> For other operations on the eye and it's appendages $1.00 to $20.00.[203]

The society's statement did not include a separate list of prices for enslaved patients. However, if they did intend for doctors to charge a separate price for slaves, it can be assumed that the cost was somewhat less.

After losing his sight, the former slave Henry Parker recorded his experience when a nineteenth-century doctor attempted to treat his vision problems. Following his infection (described above), he hired a doctor who claimed he could restore Parker's vision. Although the events Parker recorded took place three years after slavery's end, his brief story provides a Black patient's perspective on doctors' treatments. In fact, Parker believed that his doctor's efforts prevented him from regaining his sight. "I employed a doctor who recommended himself as a great eye doctor, but whom I found, when alas! Too late, to be nothing but a quack. He in his extreme ignorance by using hot poultices and other poisons to the eye, has, I greatly fear, made me to grope my way in blindness until I shall receive sight in the spirit world." He had advice for

[203] Tariff of Fees, Rowan County Medical Society, Salisbury 1854, University of North Carolina, Doc South https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/tariff/tariff.html. Accessed November 30, 2020.

his readers: “I would here warn all who behold me in my hopeless condition to beware of quack doctors. Employ no doctor unless you have good proof of his qualifications.”[204] Unfortunately, before the war, bondspeople could not override their master’s decision as to which doctor provided his or her treatment. In the end, most bondspeople’s medical care came from those already present at the plantation or in the home.

Slaveholding households generally relied on themselves and lay practitioners to meet their medical needs. Indeed, the relative isolation of most homes provided very few professional options. Men and women, both Black and White, were left to their own devices and ingenuity. Literate slaveowners often purchased medical manuals to aid them in providing home treatments. Published by doctors or other medical organizations, these reference guides were written for the layperson. They contained instructions for preparing herbal and nonherbal medicines and described various afflictions and treatments. For example, Dr. Collins, a professional planter, published *Practical Rules for the Management and Medical Treatment of Negro Slaves* in 1803. He devoted several pages to “Sore Eyes.”

Collins detailed his preferred remedy and treatment plan. “When a Negro is attacked with sore eyes, if the inflammation be slight, it will be proper to put him in a room where there is neither fire nor smoke and but little light. Let his eyes be covered with a piece of linen rag bound round the forehead… and bathe the eyes frequently with warm water.” No scale was provided to help readers decide what constituted “slight.” This was an important omission since the next level of treatment relied on the nineteenth-century practices of bleedings and purges: “[I]f the inflammation be very considerable, draw half a pint of blood from the arm and give one of the following purges. Three quarters of a pint of salt water. Or ten drachms of Epsom salts, dissolved

[204] Parker, Autobiography, 5–6.

in half a pint of boiling water." Owners were to repeat the purges every three days if the infection failed to subside. The eyes were to be "bathed with milk and water" while a "bread and milk poultice" was applied. If those measures had no effect, even more drastic actions needed to be taken. "Lay aside the Poultice and apply wraps, dipped in the following Collyrium, a few drops of the same may also be dropped into the eyes after the lids have been drawn back for that purpose." The latter procedure must have inflicted immense pain on enslaved patients since Dr. Collins's "Collyrium" was made by combining vitriol (sulfuric acid) and water. Finally, "If the eyes grow worse and the negro be of a robust constitution, it might be necessary to draw 6 ounces more of blood from the arm and to apply blisters either on the shoulders or behind the ears, and to continue the discharge for a considerable time."[205] These instructions were intended for those in charge of bondspeople's medical care, which most often was the owner or his wife.

Women often took the primary responsibility for bondspeople's healthcare within the slaveholding household. While this position was usually driven by considerations surrounding childbirth, it encompassed all aspects of health care including vision problems. Circumstances compelled women to treat many types of ailments and injuries. If they were privileged and literate, these women might find useful cures and medicines from the medical manual. However, it is more likely that most women relied on family traditions and word of mouth from the local community. This allowed Native American, European, and African traditions to be incorporated into the medicines and treatments administered to patients.[206] The resulting empirical-based system comprising trial and error along with observation met with both success and failure.

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[205] Dr. Collins, *Practical Rules for Medical Management of Negro Slaves in the Sugar Colonies By a Professional Planter* (London: Printed by J. Barfield, Wardour Street. Printer to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales for Vernor and Hood; in the Poultry, 1803), 333–336.-

[206] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Katherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*

In her 1937 WPA interview, Victoria Adams fondly remembered her mistress's efforts. "Missus Martha, she did look after the slaves good when they was sick. Us had medicine made from herbs, leaves, and roots. Some of them was Cat Nip, Garlic root, Tansi, and root of Burdock."[207] These women tried various cures and built on their successes.

In 1936, Owen Smith recounted how a plantation mistress worked to restore his sight. His memory highlighted not only the trial-and-error-based medical work that females engaged in but also the effectiveness of the informal exchange of medical knowledge between nonprofessionals. Smith recounted how he and other children lost their sight during a cholera outbreak in Little Rock, Arkansas: "A terrible soreness of de eyes come. I couldn't see. I was so blind." Although the head of the household was a male doctor, the wife had primary control of all the children's care. Smith continued, "The doctor's wife was workin with us. She was tryin to work up a cure, first using one remedy and den another. A old herb doctor told her about an herb he had used on de plantations to cure the slave soar eyes. Day used white cloth. Ay boiled de herb and put it on our eyes." One day, while Smith and another child waited for the wife, he explained that he "tore dat old rag off my eyes," and said, "Little boy I see you…I was the first one Who had his eyes cured."[208] Instead of the wife simply providing aid to her husband, she doubled as the primary caregiver and head of research and development. Notably, her cure relied on plants rather than an acid-based treatment like the medical manual prescribed. Moreover, she was not assisted by her husband but rather an old herb doctor.

Black women also played roles in caregiving. Often, an older bondswoman who had children of her own and had achieved a level of respect within the community was respectfully

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Woman's World in the Old South (New York: Pantheon, 1982). For Native American treatments and female healers, see Leffler, *Ophthalmology in North America*.

[207] BIS, Victoria Adams, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn141. Accessed November 20, 2020.

[208] BIS, O.W. Green, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn162/. Accessed November 19, 2020.

called Granny and assumed nursing duties.[209] This role covered a wide range of tasks from tending to the ill to delivering babies and making medicines, and the women both assisted plantation mistresses and worked on their own. The combination of traditional African and European medical knowledge owed a great deal to this connection, as Black women brought their own traditional and learned healing practices.

Women also took control over a plantation's "sick house." Slaveowners set aside a room or (if they were well-to-do) a stand-alone building that housed sick bondspeople while they recovered. These sick houses served as tiny plantation hospitals where Black and White women oversaw their patients' care. A former bondsperson from Mississippi demonstrated how the plantation healthcare system functioned. "De slaves was well treated when they got sick. My marshier had a standing doctor what he paid by de year. Dey was a hospital near de quarters and a good old granny woman to nurse de sick. Dey was five or six beds in a room. One for the mens and One for the womens."[210]

At times, male owners and overseers took charge of slaves' health care. When his brother's two young slaves came down with their infections in 1821 (discussed above), Larken Standard attempted several treatments before calling the doctor: "I have given him several doses of calomel and salts and have blister plasters put behind his ears and his eyes washed with different things."[211] Standard failed to explain what substances he used to clean the eyes, but the fact that he called in a doctor points to their ineffectiveness.

Often, slaveholders simply sent for medicine and advice even when a doctor practiced in the area. On February 18, 1818, Willie Jackson, a Virginia slaveowner, desperately wrote to his

[209] Fett, Working Cures, 112–141.
[210] Quoted in Halperin, Lessons from a Slave Doctor.
[211] Larken Standard to Drs. Carmichael & Son (18 February 1823), "Patients' Voices," http://carmichael.lib.virginia.edu. Accessed February 16, 2020.

local doctor for help with a three-year-old boy possibly suffering from scrofula. In his letter summoning the doctor, Jackson explained that he had done what he could but now needed help. "One of my small Negros has a very bad eye," Jackson reported. "[H]is mouth and face, 8 or 10 days ago, broke out very much, we gave him a dose of salts; soon after his eyes inflamed and one of them is very bad. I am afraid it might burst. It matters very much and he is entirely blind in it as he cannot open it." He implored the doctor, "If you think it can be saved you will please send the necessary medicine by the barer with instructions."[212]

Most Blacks preferred Black healers, perhaps in response to the belief that doctors would experiment on them or Whites' reliance on purging and bleeding. Often, a bondsperson who became sick or injured would approach those within the enslaved community first. African tradition generally blamed blindness on actions performed by evil spirits or curses. As discussed above, West African traditions taught that the spirit realm and the world of the living frequently interacted. Like bad luck, sickness and disease resulted from unseen malevolent forces. To effectively combat the myriad spirits and curses, it was necessary to draw upon both incantations and the resources of the natural world. Healers, herb doctors, hoodoo men, and conjure doctors all claimed to understand how the spiritual and natural worlds interacted and how best to devise cures and protections for various problems.[213]

In her 1929 WPA interview, Patsy Moses described the diverse range of ailments and cures that conjure doctors applied: "[F]or smallpox he used Polk root; for mumps de rind ob de bacon; for whooping cough he used sheets wool tea; for snake bite he alum of saltpeter and blue stone mixed with brandy." To combat curses or spells placed on someone by another, "He gives

[212] Willie Jackson to Drs. Carmichael & Son (5 April 1818), "Patients 'Voices," http://carmichael.lib.virginia.edu. Accessed February 16, 2020.
[213] Wilbur Watson, Black Folk Medicine: The Therapeutic Significance of Faith and Trust (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988); Fett, Working Cures, 84–110.

them broth to drink. He takes his kettle and puts in splinters ob pine hickory just so they have bark on them; ter make steam cover dem wit water put in de conjure salt; de broth; the salt would break charm and dis was sure cure for de conjure spells cast on de patient."[214]

Much like real doctors, conjure doctors charged for their services. Moses recalled a charm bag that could be purchased to prevent blindness: "In a red flannel bag, place, 'Frog bones and a piece of snake skin and some horse hair and a spoonful of ashes.'" The person seeking protection was to wear the bag around his or her neck for the charm to be effective.[215]

Janie Landrum, another former slave, detailed other treatments healers used for issues that could cause vision problems. As she recalled in 1931,

> If you git scrofula and want to cure hit, git a lot of china berry roots, and poke roots, and blue stone, and boil them all together, strain, and make salve to rub on the sores. Then anoint them with a black chicken feather dipped in pure hog lard. This brings the sores to a head then you can press out the core and you are cured.[216]

She further explained that "white sassafras tea is good for blindness," though unfortunately, she did not elaborate on what type of blindness the drink cured. Landrum recounted a rather involved ritual to get rid of a sty on the eye: "Steal somebody's dish rag and rub your eye with hit, then a throw the rag over your left shoulder at a cross road at midnight, but hits best to throw it over your left shoulder over a bridge at midnight."[217] To be sure, regardless of how effective bondspeople might have found their healers, slaveholders usually dismissed these efforts. In some cases, however, owners sought out Black healers on their own.

Most antebellum communities' small size made it possible for word to travel about any effective treatments for blindness. A small number of Black bondspeople achieved a noteworthy

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[214] BIS, Patsy Moses, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn163/. Accessed November 20, 2020.
[215] Ibid.
[216] Quoted in Herbert Covey, African American Slave Medicine: Herbal and Nutritional Treatments (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 42.
[217] Ibid.

status and were elevated by the White community for a variety of reasons. In 1828, Wallace Trent, a Virginia slaveholder, wrote an open letter endorsing a Black healer's treatment for blindness. "My servant Jack has become almost blind, thought from being poisoned. He has been under Dr. Moore C. Faunteroy for 4 or 5 weeks. And has been growing worse till almost blind." Trent explained, "This day I have sent him to an old negro named Lewis White, living at White's Mill in king city who says he can cure him. I will see if he can make a cure." Several weeks later, Trent wrote with an update. "The old man Dr. Lewis (a colored man belonging to Andrew Stephenson the property of John White, deceased)," a fact that needed to be included since Trent provided the slave with the formal title of doctor, "Brought my man jack home. He has been under him to be cured of being poisoned and to all appearances has effected a cure […] Jack went over to him the 5th of June, I believe almost blind. His sight seems as good as ever. He is to continue taking a concoction of herbs for some weeks yet." Trent was pleased with how economical the solution was: "I paid the old man $8 today and $2 when he first went over to him. In all 10.00."[218] To be sure, Whites would not generally turn to an outside Black doctor or healer to solve a problem, but sight was so important that exceptions could be made.

Conclusion

Most blind bondspeople began their lives sighted. As in the free population, most blind slaves were not born blind but had become blind at some point in their lives.

The manner and mode in which sighted bondspeople became blind was no small thing to either the bondsperson or their owner. Although it can be difficult to identify individual reasons for a bondsperson's blindness from the perspective of the twenty-first century, the causes of blindness fell into four major categories: disease, accidents, genetics, and the aging process.

[218] Quoted in Postel, The Health of Slaves on Southern Plantations, 315–316.

While aging was the most prevalent cause, all four had the power to unexpectedly damage sighted slaves' vision. The importance that owners placed on sight almost always resulted in a medical response aimed at stopping or reversing vision loss.

After 1820, a growing professional medical system emerged in the South that focused on treating the enslaved. However, plantation mistresses, male owners, overseers, and Blacks themselves constituted the frontline medical workers. When blindness hit, it was these groups that attempted to apply old treatments and develop new ones in an effort to return an individual's sight. To be sure, most of their efforts were unsuccessful and painful to the patient. Some treatments, especially medically based techniques that involved dropping liquids in a patient's eyes, also had the potential to make the problem worse. Doctors certainly engaged in experimentation on enslaved patients, which, along with owners' ineffective treatments, made Blacks seek out their own healers from the enslaved population. Blacks' natural remedies and rituals, though no more effective than Whites' techniques, were generally less painful.

Blind bondspeople were tied together by the physical experience of blindness. Although the slave system limited blind people's ability to see themselves as a group, vision loss and often medical intervention provided a lived reality that was different from that of most people around them. In this way, the blind were indeed separate from the sighted; however, the ever-present chattel principle that masters followed connected them to the rest of their enslaved contemporaries.

Chapter 3

Do It as Fast as If I Had a Head of Keen Eyes

In 1936, the former slave "Uncle" William Baltimore was interviewed as part of the federal government's Works Project Administration Slave Narratives project. Baltimore, an Arkansan, had been born in 1836, making him 100 years old when the interview occurred. "You say I don't seem to see very well," he laughed in response to his interviewer. "I don't see nothing at all. I have been plumb blind for 23 years."[219] Baltimore had grown up on a large plantation and then escaped to Union lines during the Civil War. Following emancipation, he received training as a blacksmith, explaining that he had built various items ranging from small tools to a wagon. Although the interviewer's polite question about his vision had provoked a chuckle, Baltimore displayed a keen awareness of social stigmas regarding blind people's inability to work. "I can't see nothing," he went on, "but I's patches my own clothes. Look here."[220] Baltimore then showed the interviewer a needle threader, which was a small tool he had made to help him sew. The interviewer recorded the scene:

> I asked him to let me see his needle threader. He felt around in a drawer and pulled out a tiny little half arrow which he had made of a bit of tin with a pair of scissors and a fine file. He pushed this through the eye of the needle, then hooked the thread on it and pulled it back again, threading his needle as fast as if he had good eyesight.[221]

Baltimore explained, "This is a needle threader. I made it myself. Watch me thread a needle." He wanted to impress the interviewer with his skill, and he compared himself to a sighted person:

[219] Federal Writers 'Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 1, Abbott-Byrd. November–December, 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn021/. Accessed November 30, 2020.
[220] Ibid.
[221] Ibid.

"Can't I do it as fast as if I had a head full of keen eyes?" He added, "My patches might not look so pretty but they sure hold."[222]

Baltimore had lived his life as a fully sighted, strong, and active individual. When the interviewer brought up his lack of vision, Baltimore immediately assumed that the sighted questioner dismissed his ability to continue to perform physical tasks. Unwilling to pass up the opportunity to memorialize his rejection of a stigma he had faced for more than 20 years, he showed off the needle threader as proof of his continuing ability to design and build tools. Baltimore was also confident in the threader's functionality, which he felt allowed him to compete with the sighted. Although his patches and needle threader were small, they were significant: he wanted it known that blindness did not prevent him from working and being self-sufficient.

This chapter uncovers the types of tasks blind slaves performed, the way in which they performed them, and the role their work filled in the broader plantation system. Although Baltimore had lost his sight after slavery's demise, the show he put on for the interviewer highlights several important aspects of blind bondspeople's experience of work. First, and most importantly, despite sighted stigmas, antebellum blind people—both enslaved and free—were physically and mentally capable of working. At 100 years old, Baltimore was still so sensitive about this topic that, as soon as the interviewer brought up his blindness, he countered with his ability to do needlework. Baltimore had not forgotten the knowledge of tool fabrication he had compiled over his lifetime. Furthermore, his blindness in no way prevented him from learning, adapting, and wanting to improve. Baltimore's sense of ability was developed while he was sighted and reinforced after he became blind, and this process occurred independently of

[222] Ibid.

emancipation. If he had lost his sight in 1856 at the age of 25, his sense of ability may not have been much different, though he would have been physically stronger and more active.

Second, the jobs that blind bondspeople performed centered on touch-based tasks involving direct hand-to-object contact. Baltimore used his threader to aid him, but regardless of whether one could see or not, sewing involved using one's fingers and hands to manipulate the needle and cloth. This is not to say that blind bondspeople could not use tools such as axes and hoes, as both visual acuity and natural ability varied; still, physically touching an object was easier. In any case, the two factors of actual ability and adaptation meant that blind bondspeople would share in slavery's work-related burdens alongside their sighted counterparts.

Although blind slaves did not always work in the field to produce crops for market, their labor filled necessary roles within a plantation's support and maintenance system. Plantation jobs fell into two groups: production and support. The jobs on the production side of a plantation household generally focused on planting, harvesting, and processing a particular cash crop that was then sold at market. The support side, on the other hand, centered on maintaining slaveholders' households and workforces. Raising livestock and preparing food, making and cleaning clothes, and caring for White and Black children were just a few of the daily jobs completed by the support side of the Southern workforce. Most slaveowners and abolitionists, as well as historians, have devoted their energy toward slaves engaged in the production side.[223] However, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* tried to correct this oversight. Her text highlighted women's roles, but the group of bondspeople who participated in the support side was much wider and often included blind and disabled female and male slaves.[224]

[223] Edward Baptist, The Half Has Never Been Told (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Larry Hudson, To Have and To Hold: Slave Work and Family Life in Antebellum South Carolina (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2016).
[224] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Published for the Author, 1861).

Blind slaves' inclusion in the Southern workforce represented another contradiction inherent in the "peculiar institution." Sighted social stigmas held that those without sight could not labor or even be physically active. However, despite the acceptance of this belief, owners regularly put blind slaves to work. The historian Dea Boster noted this contradiction in her 2013 study on disabled slavery, noting that "in their account books, owners listed their disabled slaves as useless and then wrote down all the jobs they actually performed."[225]

This chapter analyzes the type and variety of jobs that blind slaves performed. Most often their tasks could be completed by touch, which took advantage of the senses the blind still maintained. The chapter's first section examines the types of jobs that blind bondspeople completed on the support side. Of course, the examples discussed do not represent all the support tasks that these bondspeople performed, but rather provide an overview meant to demonstrate the various ways a blind bondsperson could be employed. Then, the section uses court records, letters, and abolitionists' accounts to highlight some of the touch-based tasks that blind bondspeople carried out within a plantation's support side. It demonstrates that even though blind bondspeople's work patterns did not directly fall on the productive side, owners used their blind slaves' labor to streamline and make more efficient the work of other bondspeople engaged in productive tasks. Finally, the section discusses the possibilities for those bondspeople who lost their sight later in life. Much like Uncle Baltimore, these bondspeople could bring their previous abilities to the work they performed. This allowed for a wider variety of jobs and work experiences.

The chapter then turns to two micro-histories of blind bondspeople. These two micro-histories, both from Georgia, are featured because the records surrounding their lives are more

[225] Dea Boster, African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South, 1800–1860 (New York: Routledge, 2013), 55.

extensive and complete. First, March was a sighted bondsperson who lost his sight while laboring for George Kollock along the Georgia coast in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Some mystery surrounds how and when March lost his vision; this is an important consideration because it relates to the jobs he did, and it is accordingly dealt with in some detail. March's work patterns demonstrate what happened when an otherwise healthy bondsperson lost their sight; he worked in the field on the production side of the plantation while sighted, then became a boatman and corn grinder on the support side once blind. The chapter closes with an examination of Blind Tom Wiggins, who performed and played the piano—roles which, in most situations, fell squarely on the support side of the labor divide. Tom was born blind and became a famed musician whose career continued after emancipation. His notoriety generated official records, making it possible to explore his life more fully than those of other blind slaves. In fact, the records on Blind Tom allow for an examination of the interplay and conflict between Black racism and blind stigma. Two of Tom's antebellum original songs have been preserved; they possibly represent the only known product produced by a blind bondsperson. For this reason, an analysis of Tom's song commemorating the Battle of Manassas concludes the chapter.

Blind Support-Side Workers

Antebellum owners who had blind bondspeople in their workforces did not kill them—as Theodore Weld had claimed or the captain of *Le Rodeur* had done—but rather incorporated them into their workforces. Most often, owners assigned blind bondspeople to the support side of a plantation's labor divide rather than the production side. The occupations within the two sides operated much like a military unit: the production side corresponded to soldiers who carried guns, wore armor, and fought, while the support side corresponded to those who supplied the fighting men and their commanders with food, water, bullets, blankets, and health care. On a

plantation, the production side plowed, planted, and picked cash crops that were sold on the free market. In contrast, the support side included skilled slaves with specialized jobs like driver, blacksmith, or cooper, along with nonskilled slaves who cooked, nursed, fished, sewed, and performed a host of other tasks.[226] While support-side workers did not labor in the field, their work was not constrained to the house.

Blind slaves' support-side jobs often involved tasks that required touch. Although many immediately think of hearing as the main compensation for the lack of sight, touch is just as important, though it should be noted that a bondsperson's reliance on touch increased as their sight worsened. Touch-based tasks required a visually impaired bondsperson to manipulate an object or product by hand. Many jobs within a plantation's support side included tasks completed through touch, whether a bondsperson had sight or not. In the 1851 South Carolina case of *Sharp vs. Williams* over the female slave Cresy (Ch. 1), who Williams claimed was "useless," the one-eyed bondswoman's original owner testified that she performed both "spinning work" and "wet nurse" duties. Williams[227] never specified what roles she filled in these processes, but as Uncle Baltimore demonstrated, spinning and knitting require only touch. Although vision may aid an individual in the task, sight is not required; a blind person merely needs to learn how to complete it.[228] The other job, wet nurse, required a woman to pick up a baby and bring it to her chest. Countless women throughout human existence have demonstrated that this particular task can be performed in the dark or with one's eyes closed.

[226] Only owners with sufficiently large workforces could follow this pattern.
[227] Race and Slavery Petition Project (RSPP), "PAR #20685609, 1856." University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
[228] Mary L. Day, Incidents in the Life of a Blind Girl: Mary L. Day, a Graduate of the Maryland Institution for the Blind (Baltimore: J. Young, 1859), 72.

Gardening was a touch-based task that represented another important support-side job that blind bondspeople filled. Both slaveholders and bondspeople usually maintained small plots of land that produced food for home consumption. Growing food and flowers often called for the careful use of touch. The hands-on technique required for gardening dictated a slower pace, causing owners to assign those bondspeople who they did not think were capable of fast work in the field. In 1869, John Mercer from Natchez, Mississippi wrote to a friend about a blind bondswoman named Hannah who had worked as a gardener before the war. He had decided to keep her on after emancipation and continued to "give her work about the house and in the garden."[229] Mercer was not alone: one of his neighbors had two blind slaves, both of whom he employed as gardeners after the war.[230] Charles Manigault of South Carolina also employed a blind gardener.[231] Gardening was one of the necessary touch-based tasks that nearly all Southern households, large and small, required an individual to perform.[232]

A runaway ad placed by Emsley Armfield in the *Greensborough Patriot* described a blind slave and the touch-based tasks he performed. The ad identified Bill, who had the vision issue, as part of a group of three bondspeople who had liberated themselves from their support-side jobs: "Runaway from the subscriber Sunday night the 24th instant three negro men Dick,

[229] Memorandum, March 1, 1865, in James A. Gillespie and Family Papers, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Louisiana State University; William (Shields) to Doctor (William N. Mercer), November 8, 1869, in Mercer Papers, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Louisiana State University, as quoted in Jim Downs, "The Continuation of Slavery: The Experience of Disabled Slaves after Emancipation," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2008).
[230] Memorandum, March 1, 1865, in James A. Gillespie and Family Papers, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Louisiana State University; William (Shields) to Doctor (William N. Mercer), November 8, 1869, in Mercer Papers, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Louisiana State University, as quoted in Downs, "The Continuation of Slavery."
[231] "Louis Manigault Family Record, 1756–1887", South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, 0177.1.01.02 (p. 320); included in Boster.
[232] Jeff Forret, "Deaf and Dumb, Blind, Insane, or Idiotic: The Census, Slaves, and Disability in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History* 82, no. 3 (August 2016): 503–48.

Frank, and Bill."[233] The advertisement made it clear that Bill was Armfield's lowest priority, though whether that was due to the bondsperson's blindness or his focus on housework can never be known. Armfield was clearly interested in the look of people's eyes, as he described the appearance of all three bondspeople:

> Dick is aged 45 or 50 about 6 feet high small whiskers under the jaw, bad teeth, is tall and spare made, small eyes, is a good farm blacksmith and can work well on plow stocks…Frank is about 18 very black, high forehead 5 feet 9 or 10 inches high, walks brisk, stands erect, large white eyes, very likely, rather impudent looking. Has been striking in the shop for Dick…Bill is about 20 years of age, 5 feet 4 or 5 inches high, weighs about 135 LBs, black, cross eyed, nearly blind in one eye, from scrofulous affection, mark of scrofula under his jaws, looks sour and grim when spoken to, raised in the house and is a good cook and washer…A reward of 100 dollars each will be given for the apprehension of Dick and Frank and 50 dollars for the apprehension of Bill.[234]

Although Armfield painted a negative picture of Bill and only offered half as much for his return, he was forced to admit that Bill was a "good" cook and washer. All these support-side jobs—knitting, wet nurse, gardener, cook, and washer—could be done by touch, as owners recognized, despite any stigmas they held, by continually assigning blind bondspeople to these tasks.

Owners and overseers created and assigned some support-side jobs for blind bondspeople in an effort to facilitate and accelerate the work of slaves on a plantation's production side. Charles Ball, in his narrative *Fifty Years in Chains*, recounted a blind slave's role in providing food and water to bondspeople tasked with picking cotton in the field. In this case, the bondsman was not engaged in a touch-based task. Instead, the slave controlled an ox-drawn cart, though it is possible that he performed a touch-based task earlier in the process. Ball was sold from his

[233] "$500 Reward," *Greensboro Patriot*, April 28, 1864. North Carolina Runaway Slave Advertisement Digital Collection, http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/RAS/id/2570/rec/20. Accessed December 19, 2020,
[234] Ibid.

home in Maryland to a plantation in Georgia. The estate included over 250 slaves whose main job was to grow and harvest cotton. On his first morning lining up, Ball noted the division of labor between the plantation's production and support sides: "When I joined them, I believe we counted in all 263, but of these, only 170 went to the field to work. The other were children too small to be of any service as laborers; old and blind persons, or incurably diseased." Of this number, "10 or 12 were kept around the mansion and garden."[235] Ball and the other 169 field hands then walked nearly a mile to the cotton field to commence the day's work. What he did not see, however, was that the 10 or 12 slaves left behind at the mansion and garden had also started their daily labor.

Ball found himself in a highly regimented gang labor system. Eleven Black drivers took charge of companies of bondspeople. Each man, woman, and child in the company had a certain number of rows for which they were responsible. Simon, the main driver, set the pace for himself and his company, which all other drivers and companies were expected to match. At the end of the day, the overseer weighed each slave's cotton sack and administered whippings if it failed to contain the expected weight.[236] This work represented the plantation's productive side and was based on maximum yield and speed. Ball soon witnessed how the support side fit into the system:

> About seven o'clock in the morning, the overseer sounded his horn and we all repaired to the shade of some persimmon trees…to get our breakfast. I here saw a cart drawn by a yolk of oxen, driven by an old black man nearly blind. The cart contained three barrels filled with water and several large baskets full of corn bread that had been baked in the ashes. The water was for us to drink and the bread was our breakfast.[237]

[235] Charles Ball, Fifty Years in Chains; Or, The Life of an American Slave (New York: H. Dayton, 1859), 117.
[236] Ibid., 121.
[237] Ibid., 120.

In this case, the blind slave's job was to bring food and water to those in the field. He was clearly one of the 10 or 12 bondspeople who had stayed back at the mansion.

Ball explained that the corn cakes were a time-saving idea devised by the overseer. Previously, everyone had received his or her own corn and "had to grind this corn and bake it for him or herself." To eliminate the time individual field hands spent cooking, the overseer "had made it the duty of an old woman who was not capable of doing much work in the field to stay at the quarter and bake the bread of the whole gang." When she finished, "it was brought to the field in a cart as I saw."[238] Despite Ball's nonchalant tone when describing these arrangements, the support side engaged in physical labor in order to accomplish their tasks. The old woman had to mix, shape, and bake individual corn cakes for roughly 175 people. The cakes then needed to be packed into baskets. Ball estimated that each cake weighed about three-fourths of a pound. Someone had to lift the baskets onto the wagon as well as the barrels of water. If the barrels were stationary and remained on the wagon, someone needed to fill them.

Carrying, lifting, and filling were all touch-based tasks that could be easily accomplished without vision and were only limited by one's strength. The need for a team of oxen demonstrates that the baskets, and especially the three barrels of water, were heavy. As the overseer had only left a handful of individuals behind, it is quite plausible that the blind bondsman completed, or helped with, the job. As driving the food and water cart was not a touch-based task, the blind bondsman's method of guiding it is not totally clear. He may have had enough sight to recognize important landmarks; if not, he may have known the route and let the oxen function like guide dogs, watching for obstacles while he directed and monitored the cart's progress. The blind driver followed the field hands with his cart throughout the day,

[238] Ibid., 121.

providing water every hour or so when the overseer permitted breaks.[239] The owner and overseer may not have considered the blind slave's work, as well as that of the other support bondspeople laboring in the mansion and garden, as directly engaged in harvesting cotton. Nevertheless, his labor facilitated a more efficient system.

In 1847, the Reverend Edward Hitchcock witnessed a blind bondsman performing a support-side task meant to assist the production side when he visited a coal mine in Virginia. Following his descent into the Midlothian Pit, Hitchcock and a companion encountered a blind slave seated next to a pair of metal doors. All mines were subject to the build-up of dangerous gases. The door was installed "In order to give a different direction to the currents of air for the purpose of ventilation," Hitchcock reported, "yet, this door must be opened occasionally to let the rail cars pass loaded with coal." Fumes could suffocate workers or cause devastating explosions. When closed, however, the doors straddled the rail tracks and prevented the coal cars from moving freely. As a result, someone had to periodically open the doors to let the cars pass. Hitchcock wrote that "to accomplish this task, we found sitting by that door an aged blind slave."[240] The slave listened for the approach of the coal cars and opened the doors, closing them again after they passed. This job creatively combined the bondsman's ability to hear with the touch-based labor needed to physically manipulate the doors.

The blind slave in the mine had lost his sight in a work-related accident, which highlights the fact that most blind bondspeople had not been blind for their entire lives. In fact, as discussed in Chapter 2, most individuals considered to be blind either had some degree of remaining vision or had sight at some point in their lives. As a result, bondspeople who lost their sight later in life

[239] Ibid., 121.
[240] "The Blind Slave in the Mine," North Star, November 24, 1848. Also in Edward Hitchcock, Reminiscences of Amherst College, Historical, Scientific, Biographical and Autobiographical: Also, of Other and Wider Life Experiences (Northampton, MA: Bridgeman and Childs 1845), 382.

might already have an established trade or skill that shaped their labor patterns once blind. For example, the blacksmith trade belonged to a plantation's support side, though it was also a skilled trade. At first glance, blacksmithing would appear to be a difficult task for a blind person, as the high heat and tools necessary to shape metal would seem to prohibit close physical contact. However, if a bondsperson had held this profession for many years before becoming visually impaired, they would understand the trade's techniques and have a better chance of maintaining their position as a skilled support-side worker.

In 1844, "Blacksmith Harry," a bondsman who belonged to President James K. Polk, wrote to the president-elect. He had been hired out to a Mr. Kimbro for some time, but his age was causing him to slow down: "I am getting ould & my Eye sight getting so bad and I am so badly afflicted with the rheumattis Pain that I can't do as well as I would like to do."[241] Harry understood that Kimbro paid a high price for his particular services, and he wanted Polk to know that his failing eyes and joints might put his employment—and, therefore, his physical wellbeing—in jeopardy:

> I do not Know whose hands I may fall into the next year as Mr. Kimbrough sayes that he can't hire me any more if he has to give near the Price that he has had to give heretofore. I would like to live with him if the Price is so as to Jestify him in hiring me.[242]

In fact, Kimbro retained Harry for the following year, demonstrating two things. First, despite his worsening sight, Harry could still perform a blacksmith's duties. Second, he did so efficiently enough to command a good price. Harry's experience, knowledge, and muscle memory no doubt aided his ability to adapt the task to his worsening sight. In fact, Harry continued to work and

[241] Blacksmith Harry's letter is part of the James Polk Collection at the Library of Congress, Image 403 in the James K. Polk Papers: Series 2, General Correspondence and Related Items, 1775–1849; 1844, Nov. 18–1844, Dec. 11, Library of Congress. Accessed January 15, 2021.
[242] Ibid.

earn for the Polk family until 1855, when he was sold, further demonstrating his economic value despite the likelihood that his sight continued to deteriorate.[243]

It must be emphasized that when slaveholders or any other Southerner paid money for a blind slave, either as a purchase or a temporary hire, they expected some type of work to be performed. Kimbro certainly did not sign an annual contract so Harry could sit idle and correspond with the president. A price paid for a blind slave, including for a previously sighted slave like the bondsman Hitchcock encountered in the Virginia mine, functions for the historian much like a positive reading on a beach-combing metal detector. Such transactions uncover the existence of an object or an idea whose exact dimensions remain hidden.

For example, in Louisiana, Mange, Elizabeth Jourdain's one-eyed skilled bondsman, offers an intriguing case. Mange had a single eye. No information has been found that indicates how he lost his eye or how well the remaining eye worked. Despite being blind in one eye, his skill allowed him to be hired out as a cooper for $4.00 per month. In 1816, Elizabeth Patton hired Mange. Again, it can be assumed that he made barrels since that was the task Patton paid for. While working for Patton, a fight with her slave James left Mange totally blind. Jourdain sued Patton, arguing that Mange was "useless" and demanding damages in the amount of $1,250: $1,000 for his value, $50 for the annual lost wages, and $200 for doctors' bills and his "future upkeep."[244] The Louisiana Supreme Court sided with Jourdain and awarded her damages. The court then took the extraordinary step of transferring Mange's ownership from Jourdain to Patton. In essence, Patton, through no choice of her own, had just purchased a very expensive totally blind slave.

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[243] Adam Rothman, "My Dear Master: An Enslaved Blacksmith's Letters to a President," https://blogs.loc.gov/kluge/2019/02/my-dear-master-an-enslaved-blacksmiths-letters-to-a-president/#. Accessed January 15, 2021

[244] "Jourdain v. Patton, no. 304, 5 Mart. (o.s.) 615 (La. 1818)."

As Mange had previously mastered the cooper's trade with one eye, it is possible that he did the same with no eyes. His work experience provided him with a visual memory that he could use to perform any number of jobs. The money Patton had paid as a result of the lawsuit would have made it in her interest to explore such options. No records exist of how Patton or Mange adapted his work patterns. Nevertheless, if Patton followed the example of other slaveholders in her position, she surely found some type of work for him to perform.

In 1824, Elijah Weeks paid Evan Mitchell $1,350 for James, a skilled one-eyed blacksmith. Weeks owned a shop and needed another worker. However, the bondsman's sight was worse than advertised, which prevented him from working in the shop. Rather than accepting the financial loss, Weeks moved James to field work. Court records generated by Weeks lay out the story. Mitchell had assured Weeks that James was an "excellent Smith" and that his "partial loss of sight did not in any manner disqualify him from working at his trade." As a result, Weeks agreed to pay the substantial price that Mitchell asked despite James's vision. Weeks testified that a White man had run his smith shop but had left at some point. Weeks then discovered that "James was not able to make a tool with a straight edge or put on the eye of an axe or hoe straight," blaming James's sight for these shortcomings. Weeks told the court that he wanted to reverse the sale but had turned James into a "common field hand" in the meantime.[245] He would wait for the wheels of justice, but Weeks thought his $1,350 investment still had abilities that he could put to use. James might not have been able to make a metal tool, but that did not mean he was useless. Though an unusual case, this change from a skilled blacksmith to an unskilled field hand still represents the adaptation at the heart of blind bondspeople's labor. Presented with a slave who was otherwise physically capable of laboring, like the blind slave in

[245] RSPP, PAR #21682416.

the mine discussed above, owners found jobs that did not require—or at least de-emphasized—vision.

March Woodruff

March Woodruff was a blind bondsman who lived and worked on George J. Kollock's plantations on the Georgia coast in the decades before the Civil War. Kollock's more than 30 years of plantation records provide invaluable insight into the birth, growth, and operation of several large-scale antebellum cotton plantations.[246] The detailed logs also allow a view into March's life as he went from a sighted full-hand in 1837 to a visually impaired quarter-hand by 1855. Significantly, when studied closely, the records demonstrate that the change in March's visual ability was accompanied by a switch in labor patterns from the plantations' production side to the support side.

Kollock, a lawyer by trade, purchased the Coffee Bluff and Rose Dew plantations on Georgia's mainland in 1837. In 1847, he acquired a third plantation at the south end of Ossabaw Island. Kollock's annual account books, which Kollock himself kept in the plantations' first years but were later maintained by various overseers, tracked all aspects of the cotton plantations' business and maintenance. The account books were generally divided into sections, including "List of Negros," annual sick lists, births and deaths, general statement of work, articles handed out, allowances, and daily statements of work.[247] Of these, the list of

[246] George J. Kollock Plantation Journals, #407, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; hereafter cited as Kollock Plantation Journals. For slave life and cultures, see Charles Joiner, Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2009); Julia Smith, Slavery and Rice Culture in Low County Georgia (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985); Phillip D. Morgan, African American Life in the Georgia Low Country: The Atlantic World and the Gullah Geechee (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press in association with the Georgia Humanities Council, 2011).
[247] Caitlin Rosenthal, "Slavery's Scientific Management: Masters and Managers," in *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of America's Economic Development*, ed. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockmen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 62–84.

bondspeople, the sick list, and the daily statements of work are important for the reconstruction of March's history.

The annual list of bondspeople is the only source indicating that March was blind. Some mystery surrounds March's vision. No record yet discovered describes March as losing his sight; rather, he simply begins to be listed as "blind" beginning in 1850.[248] This is puzzling because one would expect Kollock's records to include a reference to a full-hand losing any portion of his or her sight. At the same time, Kollock's records are so detailed that one would not expect one of his original bondspeople to be improperly labeled for more than a decade. This, of course, is not a trivial matter. It is possible that March was always blind and simply not listed that way; alternatively, he may have been improperly labeled after 1850 and remained fully sighted. However, because this chapter relies on the available evidence, it is assumed that March's ability to see changed at some point before 1850, with the most likely candidate (as discussed below) being 1845. This would mean that he was either improperly labeled for several years or that the effects of what occurred in 1845 had worsened by the time the 1850 list was created. Regardless, determining when March lost his sight is important because it provides a point in time from which to examine how blindness affected his position on the plantation's support or production side.

March first appears as one of the main field slaves on the 1837 inventory list for the Coffee Bluff and Rose Dew plantations.[249] According to the 1870 Census, he was born in 1810, making him 27 years old at the time of the inventory.[250] This original list grouped bondspeople in family units. March appeared alongside his father, Big Jim, and brother, Little Jim, who were

[248] 1850 List of Negros, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[249] 1837 List of Negros, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[250] 1870 Census, Year: 1870; Census Place: District 6, Chatham, Georgia; Role: 238A, Page: 238A, hereafter referred to as 1870 Census.

held at the Coffee Bluff plantation, while his mother, Ranger, and brother and sister, Bob and Phyllis, were enslaved at the retreat. Both March and his father, Big Jim, were rated as full-hands, while Little Jim was rated as a half-hand.[251] Kollock had just purchased the plantation, and this was the only time the list of slaves was grouped by families. Nothing on the list, though, indicated that March was anything but sighted, a situation that continued until 1850.

Between 1837 and 1849, March appeared on every annual list of Kollock's slaves. The lists included Kollock's main groups of bondspeople, beginning with Coffee Bluff, then Rose Dew in 1843, and finally including Ossabaw Island starting in 1849. The 1849 list, the first that recorded bondspeople on Ossabaw and the last that failed to list March as blind, counted March as part of a group of 21 adult male slaves.[252] Although March received no special designation that year, neither did any other individual. The situation changed the following year.

The year 1850 represents the first year of the new Haversham recordkeeping system. That year's "List of Negros" included 17 adult male slaves, of which four received special designations: Harry, driver; Billy, carpenter; Tumbler, bird minder; and March, blind.[253] Although the 1850 census failed to record any blind bondspeople among Kollock's holdings, Kollock's annual "List of Negros" listed March as blind until slavery's end.[254] "Patty Cripple" was the only other disabled bondsperson who was ever listed.[255] It is not clear what changed in 1850 outside of a new, more formal, recordkeeping system, as nothing in the plantation sick lists or daily work log indicates that March ever experienced an eye problem in 1849.

[251] 1837 List of Negros, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[252] 1849 List of Negros, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[253] 1850 List of Negros, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[254] 1850 United States Census, The National Archive in Washington DC, NARA Microform Publication M432; Title: Seventh Census of the United States, 1850.
[255] 1855 List of Negros, Kollock Plantation Journals.

Kollock and his overseers tracked bondspeople's sick days on both the annual sick list and the daily work logs. The sick list represented an annual overview that recorded who was sick on each day of the year, while the daily work logs comprised the more detailed documents from which the annual sick list was derived. Often, names and ratings accompanied the number of sick bondspeople recorded in the daily work logs. In 1849, the annual sick list recorded only one bondsperson with an eye problem. On March 13, the overseer wrote "Jenny sick with her eye."[256] The daily work log for that day also recorded her as sick but included no reference to the cause.[257] One month later, Kollock's overseer sent Jenny to the doctor in town with "sore eyes." Significantly, however, no mention of sore eyes reappeared though she appeared on both the annual sick list and the daily work log during the middle of April.[258] Jenny's eye problem was the only one recorded in 1849, the last year March was not listed as blind.

There were two other instances in the 1850s where eye problems were recorded in either the sick list or the daily work log. On April 23, 1855, the daily work log recorded "1 gone blind."[259] While no name was provided, this could not be March since he had been recorded as blind since 1850, including on the 1855 list.[260] The overseer recorded "1 blind" in the daily work log for four more days before the notation disappeared.[261] Later that same year, the annual sick list noted "blind Lee Myrah" on November 1.[262] Unfortunately, no information exists to clarify

[256] Annual Sick List, March 13, 1849, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[257] Daily Work Log, March 13, 1849, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[258] Annual Sick List, March 13, 1849, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[259] Daily Work Log, April 23, 1855, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[260] The List of Negros was compiled at the beginning of the calendar year. 1855 List of Negros, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[261] Daily Work Log, April 23–27, 1855, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[262] Annual Sick List, November 1, 1855, Kollock Plantation Journals.

the entry, though Myrah was March's wife.[263] Again, however, both entries occurred after March was officially listed as blind. The fact that Jenny was sent to town with "sore eyes," but no note was made in the daily log illustrates that the log did not always record a bondsperson's eye problems.

March's rating as a half-hand in 1850 confirms that some sort of physical deterioration had occurred that negatively affected him. Slavery's hand rating system provided Southerners with a common language with which to communicate and understand an individual bondsperson's productive value and physical ability. Ratings judged bondspeople as either full-hands, three-quarters, one-half, one-quarter, or no rating. Ratings were gender-neutral, at least for adults, but demonstrated an extreme bias against age and disability.[264]

March had been rated as a full-hand in 1837 and 1840, yet the 1850 list rated him as a half-hand.[265] It should be noted that the 1850 list included specific designations for bondspeople but did not record their actual rating. Instead, the list provided a total rating for all bondspeople working in the field—in other words, those who were not part of the permanent support side. The list consisted of 17 men with a total "rate in field 12 and 1/2."[266] After subtracting the three support-side bondspeople, Harry, Billy, and Tumbler, who were each rated as one, the remaining 14 men had a cumulative rating of 12.5. The daily work log shows that out of these 14 men, 10 were rated as full-hands, two had ratings of three-fourths, and two were half-hands—specifically,

[263] The spelling of "Myrah" changes over the years and within different documents. The yearly allowance list in 1855 connects March and "Myra," while the 1870 Census list labels "Elmira" (Myrah) as March's supposed spouse. 1855 Yearly Allowance List, Kollock Plantation Journals; 1870 Census.
[264] For discussions of the hand rating system, see Rosenthal, "Slavery's Scientific Management," 75–78.
[265] List of Negros, 1837, 1840, 1850, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[266] 1850 List of Negros, Kollock Plantation Journals.

March and Old Prince.[267] While age may have factored into March's demotion (he was 40 years old), his father Big Jim and other contemporaries such as Andrew and Davey were still rated as full-hands. The combination of the notation of March as "blind" and the reduction in his rating makes it virtually certain that he was indeed blind in 1850, even though neither the annual sick list nor the daily work logs indicate that he had any eye problem in 1849. However, by working backward from 1850 and examining the daily work log, it can be seen that March did have a significant sickness or injury in 1845.

March was fairly healthy throughout the 1840s. Indeed, there were several years when he did not appear on the sick list. Importantly, Kollock's records only track one location at a time, covering Coffee Bluff (1837–1842), then Rose Dew (1843–1848), and finally Ossabaw Island (1849–1865). Kollock owned other property during these periods and also hired out bondspeople, which raises the possibility that March's eye problem occurred while he was away from where the records were being kept. Alternatively, his absence from the sick lists in some years may simply be due to a strong constitution. In 1841, he spent seven days out sick, while in 1842 he only had two sick days. March did not get sick in 1843 or 1844; likewise, he had no sick days in 1846, 1847, 1848, or 1849.[268]

The year 1845 marked a departure for March's health records. According to the sick list and daily work logs, 1845 stands as the most probable year for March's vision loss. On April 7, 1845, the daily work log listed March and Minty as sick. The log's notation read, "2 sick March

[267] At times, the work logs included names indicating who was assigned to what task. Also, the sick lists sometimes included ratings instead of names. Through an examination and comparison of many days ' worth of work logs and sick lists, a chart could be constructed showing the hand ratings for each of Kollock's slaves.

[268] This information was gathered by reading all the daily work logs between 1840 and 1850, which covered the period from the time when March was clearly marked as a full-hand to the time when he was clearly marked as blind.

and Minty."[269] Unfortunately, neither the daily work log nor the annual sick list noted what illness befell either of them. It was clearly serious, as March and Minty remained listed as sick until April 21. On that day, things changed. The daily log for Monday the 21st read, "1 sick, 1 in town."[270] The phrase "1 in town" is significant. For years, Kollock used this designation to indicate that a bondsperson had been sent to Savannah to see a doctor. This phrase predated Kollock's move to the island. For example, on May 17, 1838, while living on the mainland, Kollock noted in the daily log, "Grace has been laying up since Tuesday with a bad foot having seen a pine splinter in it which caused it to swell."[271] Seven days later, after it failed to heal, he wrote "Grace is still in town with a bad foot."[272]

It is likely that Kollock's older brother, Phineas Miller Kollock, provided medical treatment to Kollock's slaves. A graduate from Harvard Medical School who practiced in Savannah, Dr. Kollock was a slaveholder himself. His brother's overseers often contacted him when they had an urgent need and George Kollock was out of town. Moreover, Kollock's bondspeople regularly traveled to Savannah for treatment, though Dr. Kollock also made home visits, especially to Ossabaw.[273]

The 1845 "sick" and "in town" notations were written on the same line, further demonstrating their connection. The sick log listed Minty as ill for several more days, which suggests that March was the individual "in town." Whatever condition March suffered from must have been serious, since he remained "in town" from April 21 until June 5.[274] Interestingly, on

[269] Daily Work Log, April 7, 1845, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[270] Daily Work Log, April 21, 1845, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[271] Daily Work Log, May 17, 1838, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[272] Daily Work Log, May 24, 1838, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[273] Edith Duncan Johnson, "The Kollock Letters," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (September 1946): 218–58.
[274] Daily Work Log, April 20, 1845, Kollock Plantation Journals.

May 27, the number of bondspeople marked as "in town" increased to two; and on June 3, it rose again to three. On June 5, however, it dropped to one, indicating that two bondspeople had returned to the plantation.[275] Could this possibly have been a sighted escort and guide for March? It is impossible to know, but March suddenly appears on the daily work log's sick list on June 7, where he stayed until June 11.[276] Apparently, March regained his good health; he only returned to the sick list once, on September 16.[277] Although speculative, the logs suggest that March was out sick for close to two months, much of which was spent with the doctor. If March did indeed experience an eye problem, either through disease or accident, 1845 represents the best candidate year for his vision loss. Therefore, the search for the type of labor March performed as a blind bondsperson should begin sometime after that year.

The daily work log's cryptic structure makes determining March's specific job difficult. The annual lists of bondspeople and the sick lists often use individuals' names and are therefore generally straightforward. However, the daily work logs are usually anonymous. Instead of matching specific names with jobs, the work logs listed the type of tasks that were performed each day and the number of bondspeople assigned to them. For example, the daily work log for February 18, 1839, records "9 planting corn, 9 listing, 1 cook."[278] Who was doing what remains a mystery. In certain circumstances, however, names were included and can be matched to jobs.

In the first years on Coffee Bluff, Kollock kept the records himself. He tracked the work being done by counting tasks. On May 31, 1838, Kollock wrote, "Hands doing 2 and half tasks this is working the cotton thoroughly."[279] Later that June, he was extremely pleased with

[275] June 5 is an estimate based on the available evidence in the daily work logs during the last week of May and the first week of June; Daily Work Log, May 27–June 5, 1845, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[276] Daily Work Log, June 7–11, 1845, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[277] Daily Work Log, September 16, 1845, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[278] Daily Work Log, February 18, 1839, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[279] Daily Work Log, May 31, 1838, Kollock Plantation Journals.

bondspeople "working at three tasks to the hand."[280] Every day, Kollock added up the tasks each bondsperson had performed. March regularly performed 2.5 or three tasks, which made him one of the most productive and consistent workers. The week of May 22, 1838, contained similar entries; the bondspeople and the work they did changed little. On May 22, Kollock recorded, "4 plowing, 2 thinning cotton, 1 minding birds, 2 planting corn, 8 hauling cotton." The number of tasks performed by each bondsperson also followed that day's pattern: March, 2.5; Andrew, 2; Jim, 2.5; Davey, 2.5; Bell, .5; Juno, 2; Grace, 2; Beck, 2; Suky, 2; Clairicy, 2.[281] Again, determining the particular tasks that March performed that day is impossible, but he clearly represented one of Kollock's most productive workers.

In 1850, Kollock entered a business relationship with Robert Haversham through marriage. Haversham was a large cotton distributor who operated out of Savannah.[282] From that time on, the daily work log assumed a more formal structure. Most interestingly, the ledger physically separated the daily work into the production and support sides; Kollock called the latter the "jobbers list." Hand ratings also became a regular feature of the logs. Kollock counted the number of hands assigned to jobs as a way to allocate and track the potential labor output for specific tasks. Each day, bondspeople were assigned tasks based on the growing cycle as well as the plantation's needs.[283] The production side generally received most of the full-hands in the work force, while those with lesser ratings were placed on the "jobber" side. On July 21, 1854, for example, 25 bondspeople were listed as working in the field with a total rating of 22: eight hoeing up cotton rated at 6.75, 13 pulling up corn rated at 11.25, and four plowing corn rated at

[280] Daily Work Log, June 17, 1838, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[281] Daily Work Log, May 22, 1838, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[282] Johnson, "Kollock Letters."
[283] For more information on the task system, see Phillip Morgan, "Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700 to 1880," *William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (October 1982); Joiner, *Down by the Riverside*, 42–60; Pruneau, "All the Time is Work Time", 3–14.

4. On the support side, there were 10 "jobbers" rated at 5.25: two carpenters, one nurse, one tending the garden, one minding turkeys, two thinning cotton, one driving the wagon, one shucking corn, and one cook. Kollock's carpenters usually carried a rating of a full-hand, which meant the "jobber" list included eight bondspeople with a total rating of 3.25.[284]

In 1850, the first year March was listed as blind and ranked as a half-hand, a list of cotton pickers displayed the daily units of cotton picked for the year. Although the two three-quarter hands, Christmas and Lee, and the other half-hand, Old Prince, appear on the list, March's name does not.[285] Unfortunately, the anonymous daily work lists for 1850 do not describe a definite task March performed. However, in 1855, he can definitely be tracked to the plantation's support side.

On January 11, 1855, the overseer included a note in the daily work log that reveals the type of support-side work March did. He explained, "the day was damp and foggy with a westerly wind," and followed up his weather report with, "March went up in boat to town."[286] The next day's work list included a regularly recorded job, "1 boatman back from town March."[287] This placed March on the anonymous "jobbers" list as a boat hand, and the only one who had made the trip. A further notation explained a reason for the trip and why it was not officially recorded but rather added in the remarks section: "Eleanor had a child."[288] In all likelihood, an unexpected complication caused the overseer to send Eleanor with March to the doctor in town after recording that day's work. However, on January 12, the overseer already knew the location of March and the boat and could note this information accordingly.

[284] Daily Work Log, July 21, 1854, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[285] 1850 List of Cotton Pickers, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[286] Daily Work Log, January 11, 1855, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[287] Daily Work Log, January 12, 1855, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[288] Ibid.

Kollock's plantation was located on Ossabaw Island, approximately 20 miles from Savannah. Therefore, a boat was needed any time people or products traveled to or from the island. Shipping was critical not only for Ossabaw but for the entire Sea Island economy. Different types of vessels operated in the maze of rivers around Savannah and all the way to the Atlantic. Steamers and sloops, as well as small vessels like flats, pole boats, and rowboats, constantly traveled the rivers and went to and from the islands.[289] Kollock owned a flat and another personal craft of unknown description. Both poling and rowing are touch-based tasks, though March would have needed to be familiar with the shifting shores around Savannah and the other islands. In fact, the tides would have provided much of the power needed to move to and from the mainland.[290]

In 1858, another note written by the overseer confirmed that March worked as a boatman. On December 24, 13 bondspeople, including March's brother Jim and sister Phyllis, traveled by boat to the mainland for the Christmas holiday. Written under the list of absent slaves was the following notation: "Following hands went to bring back boat, Cyrus, Little Ned, and March."[291]Recognizing March as a boatman allows for the identification of some of his work patterns. In 1855, March usually worked as part of a three-man crew. Though he had taken Eleanor to town on his own on January 11, this was rare. In March, when Catie went to "town" to give birth to her child, "3 boatman" took her.[292] The boatmen recorded on the "jobbers" list seemed mainly to transport people, both enslaved and free, rather than products. For example, in

[289] Charles Pearson, "Captain Charles Stevens and the Antebellum Georgia Coasting Trade," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (1991): 485–506.
[290] Oral interview with Docent from the Osaba Visitors Center, May 22, 2020.
[291] 1858 List of Negros Who went to Town for Christmas Day, December 24, 1858, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[292] Most entries simply state the number of boatmen, with no names included. Daily Work Log, March 14, 1855, Kollock Plantation Journals.

April, the boat most likely took a bondsperson to be punished. The daily log recorded "4 boatmen" and "1 in stocks."[293] This group of five remained away from the plantation for the next four days. The records indicate that the boatmen often stayed overnight when they sailed to "town." Only once was the boat crew specifically described as carrying products rather than people: on April 4, the daily log noted "3 boatmen boating cotton."[294] Finally, the boat was also Kollock's main means of traveling to and from the island. He and his family never actually moved to Ossabaw, due to its reputation for causing poor health. Instead, they lived on the mainland at his White Bluff holding. On July 3, a boatman picked him and the family up for a three-day visit.[295]

Most entries simply note the day and number of boatmen: Jan 4, three boatmen; March 17, three boatmen; June 6, four boatmen; July 18, two boatmen; September 17, three boatmen.[296] The frequency of trips ebbed and flowed. At times, the boat crew was busy, making several trips a week, but they might also spend two or three weeks without traveling anywhere. The plantation's island location meant that boat travel occurred continually, and March can be tracked working as a boatman all the way up until the breakout of the Civil War, when he was engaged on Kollock's pole boats moving people and products from the island to the mainland.[297] When not working on the boat, Kollock's records connected March to the task of grinding corn. In 1839, March was recorded as grinding corn while he was still a sighted full-hand: "1 grinding corn March."[298] Corn was an extremely important part of a plantation's food supply. In 1839,

[293] Daily Work Log, April 17, 1855, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[294] Daily Work Log, April 4, 1855, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[295] Daily Work Log, July 3, 1855, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[296] Daily Work Logs, January 4, 1855, March 17, 1855, June 6, 1855, July 17, 1855, and September 17, 1855, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[297] Daily Work Log, February 1, 1861, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[298] Daily Work Log, September 13, 1839, Kollock Plantation Journals.

March had been rated a full-hand and was still assigned to this crucial job. The entry demonstrates that March had experience with the task prior to the loss of his sight. In 1859, the overseer James Rec wrote a note to Kollock. He explained that March wanted the corn he had ground:

> March says he wants to set you have 3 bushels of corn you will please see him measure it as you will be about this jim house. I told him and Christmas to shell 2 bushel more.[299]

Although March was probably not totally blind when he was first assigned this chore, grinding corn was a touch-based task. First, an individual needed to remove the cob from the leaves that surrounded it. Next, the corn kernels had to be taken off the cob. Bondspeople generally accomplished this by hand, but a device did exist that employed a blade to scrape the cob. Finally, a grinder was used to break the kernels up into a powder. A bushel of corn weighed between 50 and 60 lb., which meant that after March added another three bushels to his original two, he would have ground approximately 250 lb. of corn.[300] In 1861, March appeared on a list of hands who had recently ground corn. Although it is not clear what unit of measurement was recorded, March had ground 150 units, which placed his level of production above most of his fellow bondspeople.[301] Moreover, the 1858 daily work logs show a general pattern: when an entry for grinding corn appears, none appears for boatmen, and when an entry appears for boatmen, none appears for grinding corn. Suggestively, at times, the corn grinder was rated as a quarter-hand, which matches March's rating after 1855. The information in the records strongly suggests that March, after working for years as one of Kollock's main field hands, lost some

[299] Note from James Rec to George Kollock, 1859, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[300] The most common weight listed in this table is 56 lb., with one state, Missouri, listing 52 lb. Georgia is not represented, but their weight would not be radically different. "Table of Weights: A Table of Weights obtained by us from the Secretaries of the several states showing the number of pounds which their laws recognize as a bushel for the following articles, Raymond and Ward, Chicago, Ill. 1854," Library of Congress.
[301] List of Units of Corn Ground, 1861, Kollock Plantation Journals.

portion of his vision and was moved from the plantation's production side to its support side, where he worked as a boatman and a corn grinder.

Evidence also indicates that March tended land for his personal use, as bondspeople often had small fields that they managed on their own time. Corn, besides providing food for human consumption, was also transformed into fodder for animals. After the corn was picked, the tops of the corn stalks were removed and dried in the sun before being fed to the livestock. The 1855 yearly allowance list recorded that "March + Myra" received credit for producing fodder.[302] The total amount of credit they received was 348, which compared favorably with the allowance provided to other couples, though the unit is unclear. It is also difficult to discern how often each bondsperson worked in the "fodder field," but the fact that they did work there is not in question. In 1865, March and Myra were recorded as farmers living together at the south end of the island.[303]

March's life, though shrouded in some mystery, demonstrates that a blind bondsperson could be an integral part of a plantation workforce. The fact that, after 1850, he did not pick cotton like other bondspeople on Ossabaw but rather worked on a boat and ground corn demonstrates the work-related flexibility inherent in the southern slave system. Owners, unlike their Northern free-labor counterparts, had physical control over their workers, which allowed them the ability to quickly alter or shift workers' duties to whatever job or task was required or to tasks that matched the physical skills of an individual bondsperson like March. At the same time, March's life illustrates that blind bondspeople were capable laborers despite the stigma surrounding their blindness. March did not work in the house even though he toiled on the plantation's support side, which points to the variety of potential jobs involved in the slave

[302] 1855 Yearly Allowance List, Kollock Plantation Journals.
[303] According to the 1870 Census, March and Elmira lived together with their children.

economy. In fact, just a few months after March moved to Ossabaw in February 1849, a blind child was born in Columbus, Georgia who would become the most famous blind slave in American history.

Blind Tom

Blind Tom Wiggins stands as the most famous blind bondsperson in American history. However, he never set foot in a cotton field or a rice swamp, instead working with pianos and in concert halls. Although his performances generated large sums of money for his owners, in the context of the plantation or slave household, entertainment fell on the support side of the labor divide. Further, whether a blind bondsperson played an instrument or sang, musical performances did not require any visual ability. Even in the modern United States, the most well-known blind people are those who earned fame through music. Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, and Ronnie Millsap are examples of totally blind individuals who entertained millions. A century before they gained popularity, however, Blind Tom Wiggins performed for James Buchanan at the White House in the summer of 1860, becoming the first blind musician to play for an American president.[304]

Due to Tom's celebrity, the evidence regarding his history and work is far more extensive than that of any other blind slave on record, allowing for a more detailed look at his life, blindness, and treatment. It is critical to note that blindness was not Tom's only disability. He was what might be called an autistic savant today. His autism, however, manifested itself in a particular way that enhanced his musical ability. Put simply, Tom could hear a sound and

[304] See https://www.whitehousehistory.org/blind-piano-prodigy-thomas-greene-bethune. Accessed January 7, 2021.

reproduce it perfectly. Deirdre O'Connell, in her biography of Blind Tom, described his condition in this way:

> Tom's blindness had triggered a rewiring of his brain. Functions that would ordinarily support the eye, were now redirected to the ear and magnified his sensitivity to sound. Coupled with this was a memory that was founded not on words, but sensory information, oral pictures and sounds.[305]

Tom's disabilities allowed him to perform auditory feats that both troubled and amazed those around him. Although these differences ultimately led to Tom's fame as a performer and his owner's wealth, they put his life in jeopardy before they were adapted to his musical exploits.

Tom was born on May 25, 1849, in Columbus, Georgia to Domingo Greene (also known as "Mingo") and Charity Wiggins. Tom was the last of Charity's 12 children. The pair considered themselves married, though they had different owners; Domingo belonged to Paul Greene, while Charity belonged to Willie Jones. The practice of slave status passing from mother to child meant that Tom was the property of Jones. Charity feared for her son's life when she recognized his blindness immediately following his birth. Although blind bondspeople of working age had a value attached to them, blind newborns did not. In an attempt to protect him and endear him to the family, Charity offered Jones's teenage daughter Kelly the opportunity to pick the baby's name. Kelly chose the name Thomas.[306] As Tom grew older and his blindness became noticeable to all, Jones made it clear that he wanted to be rid of him. By January 1850, Jones had decided to put the entire family up for auction.

Bondspeople were all too familiar with the auction block's unpredictability. They understood that slave owners generally bought and sold Blacks with little regard for bondspeople's family ties or desires. Josiah Henson, the Black ex-slave who served as the model

[305] Deirdre O'Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom: Slave Pianist* (New York: Overland Duckworth Group, 2009), 7.
[306] Ibid., 5.

for Harriet Beatrice Stowe's Uncle Tom character and who himself was physically disabled by a slave owner's beating, remembered the devastating scenes of his own family's dismemberment:

> The crowd collected around the stand; the huddling group of terrified negros; the examination of muscles, teeth, and limbs, and the exhibition of agility; the look of the auctioneer; the agony of my mother.[307]

Josiah looked on as his mother and five brothers and sisters were sold to different owners. Finally, it was his turn to step up to the block. He watched as his mother desperately "pushed through the crowd…to where Riley, her new owner, was standing." She then fell at his feet and embraced his knees, entreating him in tones which only a mother could command, and with many tears, to buy her baby" as well as herself and spare to her at least one of her little ones." However, Riley "not only turned a deaf ear to the agonized suppliant, but disengaged himself from her with curses and blows and kicks and sent her creeping out of his reach."[308] Not willing to face the same fate with their children, Charity and Mingo took the extraordinary step of approaching General James Bethune, a local slaveholder, about purchasing their family when they went up for auction.

Then a colonel, General James Bethune was a former army officer, lawyer, newspaper editor, and member of the Georgia House of Commons. A prominent figure in Columbus society who owned a small farm named Solitude, he was aware of Charity, her family, and Jones's intention to sell them. According to Bethune, Charity and Mingo waved him down as he traveled down Columbus's Stage Coach Road in late 1849. The pair asked Bethune to purchase the entire family. The meeting ended without Bethune committing one way or the other. However, in January 1850, when Jones put the family up for sale at C. H. Harrison's auction house, Bethune

[307] Josiah Henson, Truth Stranger Than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1858), 12–13.
[308] Ibid., 13.

was in attendance. In an 1865 interview given to a Cincinnati newspaper, he recalled, "I attended the sale and purchased the whole family." At that time, he had little to no hope of making a profit through the blind child, remarking, "Tom at that stage was eight months old and simply regarded as an encumbrance."[309]

It is unclear what motivated Bethune to make the purchase. He may have been the rare example of a Southern slaveholder who actually lived up to the proslavery ideals that so many professed. In 1855, he published an editorial countering abolitionists' charges that slaveholders mistreated their slaves. "Masters do not wish to break up the family ties [of blacks]," Bethune explained four years after saving Charity's family from that exact fate, "and often make large sacrifices rather than do it." He argued that the fundamental relationship between owner and slave was superior to that of boss and worker, writing that "the laborer may receive $40 per year, but how does this compare to wholesome food, comfortable clothing, lodging, medical attention and nursing?" His next point demonstrated a lack of awareness of blind slaves' lives, claiming that "the wages of other laborers stop when they get sick."[310] This point was true; Northern workers' wages indeed stopped when they fell ill and stopped working. But Bethune failed to lay out the Southern reality: when slaves got sick—for example, when they lost their eyesight—they did not stop working. Regardless, Bethune appears to be the unique Southerner who tried to mitigate slavery's most egregious horrors.

After the sale, Tom, Charity, and his two young sisters moved to Solitude, which was already home to General Bethune, his wife Francis, their seven children, and at least eight bondspeople. The Bethune's home was a cheerful place. Importantly for Tom's future, the Bethune children enjoyed singing and playing music. Several of the daughters received regular

[309] Cincinnati Daily Commercial, July 21, 1865.
[310] Justice of Free Trade and Direct Taxation," *The Corner Stone*, February 3, 1859.

music lessons. Tom, however, was disruptive. As a toddler, he was free to move around the house. Unfortunately for Charity and the other occupants, he often knocked over tables, dragged chairs across the floor, invaded the chicken coop to harass the birds, and on two occasions attacked his siblings, one of whom he severely burned. After these incidents, Charity started locking Tom in a wooden box to protect him and prevent him from doing anything that might result in Bethune getting rid of him.[311]

What Charity did not understand at that time was that Tom's behavior was aimed at producing sounds rather than causing havoc. Banging, clucking, and screaming were all noises that excited Tom's unique mind and imagination. Charity and the other slaves also noted another of the toddler's dangerous quirks. Although he could not speak on his own, Tom repeated conversations he overheard throughout the day word-for-word. According to Charity, these recitations sometimes went on "for hours."[312] This particular ability carried with it extreme danger, since White owners had no interest in their bondspeople publicly repeating private conversations. Nevertheless, it was exactly this activity that launched Tom's musical career.

The origin of Tom's musical ability is shrouded in layers of memory and commercial promotion. Several publications in the early 1860s presented a brief biography of his life, but they were generally meant to pique interest in Tom and increase attendance at his concerts. In 1865, Bethune published a pamphlet titled *A Sketch of the Life of Thomas Greene Bethune (Blind Tom)*. Despite its promotional language, the article presents a plausible narrative. The pamphlet explained, "When a mere infant, he [Tom] strolled with a license that is sometimes granted to the 'people 'of the field." This short phrase supports two of my main arguments. First, blind bondspeople, despite sighted stigmas, had the ability to travel confidently within their

[311] Songs: Sketch of Life of Blind Tom, New York, 1874.
[312] O'Connell, The Ballad of Blind Tom, 14.

environments just as the young Tom "strolled" around the Bethune farm. In fact, Tom may have displayed more willingness to travel freely than an older bondsperson who had recently lost their sight, as not being able to see would have already been natural for Tom by the time he could walk. Second, stigmas about blindness had the power to undercut, though not totally dismantle, racism. The Bethune family did not hold Tom to the same restrictive racial norms regarding movement that governed other children his age. In fact, Tom would routinely transgress racial lines throughout his life and career. "It was on one of these sauntering expeditions," the publication continued,

> that he showed his remarkable talent for singing. One day Bethune's daughters were sitting in the family's parlor, singing a popular air, when upon closing they thought they heard a voice at a short distance repeating the chorus. They could not particularize the person. For mere amusement they repeated one stanza of the song. Again, the strange voice echoed the words, but this time not in soprano but alto.[313]

The girls could not figure out who the anonymous participant was until "upon looking out the window Blind Tom, then a youth scarcely three years of age, was seen lying flat upon his back, his sightless orbs bathed in a flood of tears, not of grief, but of ecstasy."[314] No reason exists to contradict this version of events. The behavior matches the descriptions that Charity provided of Tom mimicking people's conversations. From this point forward, the entire family took an interest in Tom's musical ability.

Several months later, a critical event in Tom's musical career occurred. The Bethune daughters continued to periodically include Tom in their singing performances. When the youngest daughter received a piano, however, things changed. The biography included in the

[313] *A Sketch of the Life of Thomas Greene Bethune (Blind Tom)* (Philadelphia: Ledger Book and Job Printing Establishment, 1865), 6.
[314] Ibid., 6.

programs handed out at Tom's performances laid out an origin story wherein Tom's disabilities provided him with an innate ability to play the piano. According to the legend:

> he was little less than four years of age when a piano was brought to the house. The first note that was sounded of course brought him up. He was permitted to indulge his curiosity by running his fingers over and smelling the keys, and then was taken out of the parlor.[315]

The next episode in the story constitutes a key part of the legend of Blind Tom: "one night the parlor and piano had been left open, his mother had neglected to fasten her door, and he had escaped without her knowledge." This last fact matches up with Charity's descriptions of Tom's evening wanderings, though any mention of a box was omitted. The story continued:

> Before day, the young ladies awoke and to their astonishment heard him playing one of their pieces. He continued to play until the family at the usual time arose and gathered around him to witness and wonder at his performance, which though very imperfect, was marvelously strange; notwithstanding this was his first known effort at a tune, he played with both hands, and use the black as well as the white keys.[316]

Several different versions of this story exist. In the less romantic version, Tom never broke into the family parlor, waking everyone up with his music; instead, the family progressively discovered his abilities and taught him to play.[317] Regardless of how he learned, eventually General Bethune realized Tom's financial potential. To entertain family friends, he would hold small musical demonstrations where family and guests would play songs for Tom to reproduce on the piano.

When Bethune purchased Tom, he had seen the blind child as an encumbrance, yet his attitude quickly changed after Tom demonstrated a marketable skill. This perspective underscores slaveholders' relationship to their blind bondspeople. The close proximity between owner and slave made it more likely that a blind bondsperson would demonstrate, or an owner

[315] Songs: Sketch of the Life.
[316] Ibid.
[317] "She is the Mother of Blind Tom," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 6, 1898.

would discover, a useful ability that could be employed. This is what allowed the owners of March Woodruff and of the blind slave in the mine to move them from the production side of their workforces to the support side.

Musical entertainment qualified as a task on the support side of a plantation household, as it was not strictly necessary for production. Few forms of easily accessible entertainment existed in the antebellum era, and the job of entertaining slaveholders and their guests often fell to a talented bondsperson. While such performances rarely turned a profit, Blind Tom was not the only musical act developed by an enterprising slaveholder.[318] In 1858, Bethune hired Tom out to Perry Oliver, a P. T. Barnum-style promoter, who devised the structure of Tom's performances and marketed him to the public.[319]

It was critical to ensure that audiences viewed Tom as blind above all else in order for his performances to be successful. To be sure, stigma lowered the expectations of sighted audiences, and therefore increased the buzz and excitement when those expectations were exceeded. More importantly, however, Tom's blindness allowed him to challenge racial lines in ways a sighted slave could not. Audience participation was a major part of Tom's stage performances. At his shows, an audience member was invited to come up and use the piano to challenge Tom's ability to identify pitches and repeat musical selections. Tom usually defeated all his sighted, White challengers. When he accomplished these victories, Tom stood on stage alone: a young, Black slave who had just demonstrated superiority over a Southern White man or woman in front of an

[318] The case involved three enslaved musicians who escaped from their Kentucky owner while in Ohio. Christopher Graham, the owner, had allowed the three to travel to Ohio and Indiana to play musical shows. Strader v. Graham, 5I U.S. (10 How.) 82 (1851).
[319] William Palmer was a musician and sleight-of-hand magician hired by Perry Oliver to work with Tom. "Blind Tom," *Louisville Courier Journal*, June 16, 1908. O'Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*, 68.

audience of their White peers. In other circumstances, such an action on the part of a Black slave could be a death sentence.

A testimony written by a piano teacher named Mrs. Routt Manning Johnson about her experience of challenging Blind Tom shows how his performances crossed racial lines. In a Georgia newspaper, Johnson explained how she had come to be on stage "before a capacity audience in the Macon Georgia Opera House" in the first place: "I was coerced into this predicament by insistent requests from students at Wesleyan, as well as its president and faculty — several hundred of whom were present." She claimed that they had compelled her to "respond after Tom's manager's usual invitation for some musical to come forward." Johnson betrayed her racial animosity, describing how she "went to the sacrifice, allowing myself to be seated at the piano behind the grotesque negro, who stood facing the crowd delightfully twisting his enormous light hands which contrasted singularly with his black face." Johnson had to admit, though, that Tom was no fraud: "First I was asked to test 'absolute pitch 'on any part of the keyboard. I quickly dashed with both hands into a gramatik progression of intricate cords." Tom, "with lighting rapidity," however, "named each note as struck. Never before or since have I seen anything like it."[320] Although Johnson was amazed by this feat, she was shaken by what happened next:

> I played a novel selection for the left hand (with my) right hand behind me. No word was spoken save the manager's explanation to the audience that this was something never before attempted. It must have been understood that no one approached the blind negro. I expected him to imitate me with both hands according to the sound of the piece as in the others. Tom didn't. He rushed to the piano almost pushing me from the stool and paralyzed us by playing it with his right hand behind him. I was so frightened at this uncanny climax. I left at once. When the deafening applause ceased, I was safely hidden among my college crowd of presidents, teachers, and school girls.[321]

[320] Mrs. Routt Johnson Manning, cited in Louise Calhoun Barfield, *History of Harris County Georgia, 1827–1961* (1961).
[321] Ibid.

This situation might have turned out very differently for a sighted Black male. Not only did Tom sniff out Johnson's trick of only using one hand when she had used two before, but he almost shoved her off the bench in his eagerness to demonstrate his victory. The White crowd, far from showing displeasure toward Tom or racial allegiance to Johnson's White womanhood, wildly cheered Tom's actions. Tom's blindness—or more to the point, the stigmas that the sighted applied to his blindness—provide the key to their pleased reaction. Although the crowd racialized Tom, they never forgot that he was, above all, a helpless and unfortunate blind person. This view of Tom negated one of the foundational elements of racism: the idea that Blacks posed a physical danger to Whites and Whiteness.

It should be remembered that slavery's growth in Virginia in the 1600s established the ideological foundations of America's system of racism.[322] The laws passed in the first century of the colonies' existence conditioned White Virginians to believe that Blacks represented a real and present danger to Whites by their mere presence. For example, the 1680 Act to Prevent Negro Insurrection, enacted on Jun 1, 1680, by the Virginia General Assembly, legally mandated that White colonists view all "Negros" and slaves as threats to Whites and White spaces. Ordering that the law be published once every six months in county courts and parish churches, it stated the following:

[322] or recent overviews on race in Virginia, see Ericka L. Coleman, That the Blood Stay Pure: African Americans, Native Americans, and the Predicament of Race and Identity in Early Virginia (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), and Anthony S. Parrot, Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Early Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). On the role of gender in creating race, see Cathleen Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). Classic works are Edwin Morgan, American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia (New York: History Book Club, 2005), and Winthrop Jordan, White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550-1812 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). On the origins debate, see Alten Von, "The Origins Debate: Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," The Virginia Magazine of Biography and Memory, 97 no. 3 (1989): 311–354, and Rebecca Goetz, "Rethinking the Unthinking Decision: Old Questions and New Problems in the History of Slavery in the Old South," Journal of Southern History 75 no. 3 (2009): 599–612

> It shall not be lawfull for any negroe or other slave to carry or arme himselfe with any club, staff, gun, sword, or any other weapon of defense or offense, nor to go or depart from of his masters ground without a certificate from is master, mistris, or overseer or such, and such permission not to be granted but upon perticuler and necessary occasions.[323]

Under this law, the mere appearance of an unfamiliar Black person, armed or not, was to trigger an automatic demand on the part of White colonists to see written proof that the Black individual had the right to be in that area. Moreover, the law not only permitted but required all Whites to stop every Black person they encountered and demand their papers. This mindset, held over decades and centuries, served to make the idea of a physical threat and danger to Whites a key component of the racial construction of blackness. Tom's blindness, however, blunted this particular racial construction.

As shown in Chapter 1, sighted Americans stigmatized blind people as sedentary and weak. These beliefs were the exact opposite of the physical threat that Whites insisted blackness carried. Put simply, the sighted thought the blind were harmless, no matter which race they were. While White audiences certainly viewed Tom and his performances through a racial lens, the Black stereotypes attached to him were of the nonthreatening, nonviolent variety. Most often, Tom found himself compared to a harmless animal. Two stories dramatically demonstrate this point. The first accompanied the musical programs handed out at some of Tom's performances:

> The first effort to teach him (Tom) was made one evening when the family was at supper, (Tom, as usual at meal times, being present) when his owner upon being informed his (Tom's) mother as an excuse for not teaching him something had said he had not sense enough to learn anything, replied, "that is a mistake. A horse or a dog may be taught almost anything, provided you always use precisely the same terms to express the same idea. Show him what you mean and have the patience to repeat it often enough. Tom has as much sense as a horse or dog, and I will show you that he

[323] The text for Virginia's 1680 law can be found at https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/an-act-for-preventing-negroes-insurrections-1680/ (Accessed January 16, 2021); see also Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,2003).

> can be taught." He there upon arose from the table and approaching Tom said to him, "Tom sit down." Tom, of course not knowing what was expected stood still and repeated the words. He repeated the order and sat him down upon the floor. He then said to him, "Tom get up." Tom sat still and repeated the order. He then repeated the order and lifted Tom to his feet. He then ordered Tom to sit down which he did promptly—to get up and Tom sprang to his feet. From that time on there was new matter of interest about Tom.[324]

Although Bethune's efforts at teaching Tom might have been viewed as effective or as the best that could be expected at the time, the biography's equating of Tom's mental abilities to a dog or a horse reflects a particular strain of racist attacks on Blacks. The writer Mark Twain picked up this animal stereotype in an 1875 speech in New York. He and Tom had met on a train in 1868, and the writer attended several of Tom's performances over the years:

> Now there is Blind Tom, the musical prodigy. He always spells a word according to the sound that is carried to his ear. And he is an enthusiast in orthography. When you give a word, he shouts it out — puts all his soul into it. I once heard him called upon to spell orangutan before an audience. He said, "o, r-a-n-g, orang, g-e-r, her, oranger, t-a-n-g, tang, orangger tang! Now a body can respect an orangutang that spells his name in a vigorous way like that."[325]

Twain's racial imagery constituted an important aspect of how the public viewed Tom. He was viewed as talented, but also as an uncivilized animal. Twain's comments also hinted at the stereotype of Blacks as happy and naturally rhythmic. In fact, Oliver designed Tom's shows to feature him dancing, clapping, and gesticulating wildly. "The antics and follies of the negro race were more than present in Tom," the 1865 *A Sketch of the Life of Thomas Greene Bethune* remarked, "who laughed and danced with many a shout—his saddening deformity being his least care."[326]

[324] Songs: Sketch of the Life.
[325] Hartford Courier, May 13, 1875.
[326] A Sketch of the Life of Thomas Greene Bethune, 4.

Despite Tom's regular public victories over White challengers, Whites never viewed him as a threat to the White race or White womanhood. Indeed, blind stigmas allowed White audiences to marvel at his ability to simultaneously play one song on the piano's Black keys, another on the White, and sing a third, secure in the knowledge his demonstration did not challenge the racial order. After all, as one reviewer wrote in 1858, Tom was a "blind idiot."[327] In this way, the inclusion—and therefore the constant reminder—of the word "blind" in Tom's stage name was as protective of his bodily wellbeing as Charity's decision to name him Thomas in the first place.

Tom did not labor in the traditional way, but he certainly labored. From the time Tom was five, he traveled around Georgia and the neighboring states giving performances. By the age of 12, he had played in every Southern state. Although fear that abolitionists would steal Tom generally kept his owners from traveling to free states, he did visit New York in 1861 for several shows; however, these were ultimately canceled due to Oliver's concern that abolitionists might attempt to kidnap Tom.[328] Although the Bethune family publicized the promotional story that God taught Tom to play, Tom was taught first by the Bethune children and then by professional instructors. A theater program from 1880, after slavery's end and when Tom was much older, listed over 150 songs he might play that evening.[329] In 1857, Perry Oliver hired a sleight-of-hand magician to work with a young Tom on playing different songs with each hand. It is not clear how these sessions unfolded. No evidence exists that suggests that Tom was ever beaten or severely punished; however, he regularly spent 12 hours a day laboring in front of a piano.

[327] Songs: Sketch of the Life, 7.
[328] O'Connell, The Ballad of Blind Tom, Chapter 9.
[329] Songs: Sketch of the Life.

Many dismissed Blind Tom's musical abilities with the charge that he simply mimicked and never created original pieces. These attacks served as a delegitimizing narrative that echoed Thomas Jefferson's attacks on Phyllis Wheatley's poetry in the late eighteenth century. Jefferson believed that religion had made it possible for Wheatley to write a poem, but he argued that she lacked the necessary higher thought and imagination that would have incorporated emotional depth and artistic originality.[330] In 1857, Tom composed "The Rainstorm," and in 1862, "The Battle of Manassas." The sheet music for both has been recovered and preserved. These two songs represent the only two pieces of work of any kind that remain from a blind bondsperson. " The Rainstorm" was Tom's attempt to recreate the sound of a storm appearing, raging, and then disappearing. His love of the outdoors, and particularly of sitting under one of the Bethune's wooden sheds listening to the rain as it hit the roof and dripped into puddles, provided the inspiration for the piece.[331]

"The Battle of Manassas" told the story of the Civil War's first major engagement and demonstrated Tom's ability to interpret and create. It is unclear how he gained knowledge of the battle. His piece, however, was grounded in factual events. On the morning of July 21, 1861, United States troops under the command of Major General Irving McDowell attacked the Confederate army under Full General P. G. T. Beauregard at Manassas Junction, Virginia. The previous night, the Union forces had camped a few miles away from their objective, with General McDowell ordering them into motion at three in the morning. Once ready to attack, they launched their assault at 10 a.m. At that moment, General McDowell correctly believed that his army only faced half the Confederate force, with the other half, commanded by Full General

[330] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, (Boston: Lilly and Wait, January 1832), 147.
[331] For a detailed narrative of Tom's inspiration for the song, see O'Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*, 202.

Joseph Johnston, stationed miles to the west in the Shenandoah Valley. Unfortunately for the Union army and unknown to McDowell, Johnston had loaded his entire force onto trains two days earlier that were racing toward Manassas Junction and the Battle of Bull Run.

Between 10 a.m. and noon, the Union and Confederates fought a pitched battle, with the most intense fighting taking place in front of the Matthews's house. Finally, the Union army forced the Confederates to fall back; yet instead of pushing the advantage, McDowell halted the attack. For three hours, the Union army sat idle. During that time, train after train filled with Johnson's fresh Confederate troops whistled their way into Manassas Junction. At three in the afternoon, the Union renewed its assault, but by that time new rebel soldiers were able to rally behind Brigadier General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson at Henry House Hill and turn the fight in their favor. The exhausted Union troops were driven back, their retreat disintegrating into a stampede that continued all the way to Washington DC.

Tom's work must be understood as an effort to provide a history of the fight on the piano through sounds that one would hear on the battlefield, minus the cries of agony. In a sense, Tom gave a blind person's eyewitness perspective of the fight. Whereas a sighted observer of the battle might point out the opposing sides by the color of their uniforms or the flags they flew, Tom selected different melodies: "Dixie" for the Confederates and the "Star-Spangled Banner" for the Union. The piece begins with the armies' arrival at Manassas Junction. Tom signified this by gradually increasing the volume of each army's associated tune until they reached the battlefield. Next came the battle itself. He recreated bugles, gunfire, and cannons on the piano. The latter was signified by a low-note tone cluster, a musical construct that would not be invented for the wider world until 1914.[332] Tom then produced the sounds of a train whistle over

[332] https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-Cowell#ref29539. Accessed February 1, 2021.

the music, almost certainly with his own mouth. The train whistle's clashing sound over the piano gives the Confederate locomotives the prominence they deserve given the battle's history. The representational tunes and the train whistle were all historical interpretations Tom created. He finished the piece with a frantic and broken version of "Yankee Doodle" that increases in pitch until it disappears. This final section, of course, represented the Union's wild retreat.[333]

Conclusion

Blind bondspeople's presence in Southern workforces provides interesting insights into the blind and their ability to be productive workers. In the 1800s, sighted people freely spoke of the blind as helpless. They were convinced that those without sight had no ability to physically labor or provide the necessities of life. This supposed truth often left the blind isolated, reliant on charities or family members, or begging for food. Although Southerners were not immune to these beliefs when they contemplated the free blind population, owners' financial investment, and the difficulty of isolating an otherwise healthy slave for perhaps their entire life without killing them, caused slaveowners to imagine a more productive role for the blind.

To be sure, slaveholders certainly adhered to blind stigmas when assigning jobs. Blind bondspeople generally worked on a plantation's support side, laboring in skilled and unskilled tasks related to maintenance, upkeep, transport, and general comfort. Rarely did owners place blind bondspeople in jobs related to planting or harvesting cash crops. This arrangement generally moved blind bondspeople away from jobs for which speed and quantity translated to more money. Regardless, despite an overall negative view of blind slaves' productivity, owners assumed that all bondspeople, including the blind, would engage in some type of labor; a fact confirmed by the widespread use of the hand rating system.

[333] *The Battle of Manassas*, https://repository.duke.edu/dc/hasm/a9024. Accessed December 28, 2020.

In the end, Southern slaveowners' disregard of social norms in their efforts to extract every possible bit of labor from Black bodies is not shocking. More than one example of this phenomenon exists. Nevertheless, the novel aspect of this situation can be seen when looking at it from the perspective of blind bondspeople. Blind individuals, constrained by slavery but free from sighted stigmas, routinely demonstrated their ability to perform a range of occupations and physical activities despite centuries of dogma that held this to be impossible. As Blacksmith Harry's sight began to fail, he used his accumulated knowledge to continue his trade, which he then used to improve his own situation. After March Woodruff's vision was damaged, he transformed from a valued laborer into a boatman, demonstrating his adaptability. Finally, while Thomas Greene Bethune was born blind, he excelled at entertaining far past slavery's demise due to his owner's discovery that certain tasks require no sight.

It is one of slavery's paradoxes that blind bondspeople represent the most employed group, with the greatest variety of jobs, of blind people in American history. Although owners were incentivized to employ those without sight, blind bondspeople worked alongside sighted bondspeople and usually did the same jobs they did.

CHAPTER 4

Some Steps Should Be Taken to Educate These Unfortunate Ones

When the former slave Henry Parker published his short narrative in 1868, *The Autobiography of Henry Parker*, his main aim was not abolition or racial justice. Parker had recently lost his sight, and he needed a way to earn money. In the narrative, he recounted the moment "Dr. McCloud" told him his vision loss would be permanent: "After he had examined my eyes he stood as if in thought for a few moments and then said, 'My friend, I am sorry to be compelled to pass this decision, but by the help of God, I will speak candidly. I do not think you will ever see again until you see in the Kingdom of Heaven.'" Upon learning of his blindness, Parker's main concern was how he would support himself and his family. "Oh my friends, can you expect me to describe my feelings at that time? I, who was depending on my own labor for a living!"[334] He needed to clothe and feed himself, but he had very few options.

Like many former bondspeople during Reconstruction, Parker looked to education as the key to prospering and earning a living. In 1868, Parker resided in Ohio, a state that had opened a school for the blind before the war. Although Parker was 33 years old at the time, he applied to the school and was promptly rejected. However, it was Parker's race rather than his age that posed the greatest obstacle: "I was excluded from the blind asylum on account of my color, and, this being the case, I could not learn any trade, nor could I apply to the asylum to support me."[335] The fact that Parker was both blind and Black left him isolated with almost no options for surviving emancipation. Five hundred miles to the east, however, newly elected Black and White Republicans in North Carolina were in the process of founding the nation's first school dedicated

[334] Henry Parker, *The Autobiography of Henry Parker* (n.p.: 1868), 6, https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/parkerh/parkerh.html. Accessed December 3, 2020.
[335] Ibid., 8.

to teaching and training Black, blind young adults and children who had just emerged from slavery.

The North Carolina School for the Colored Deaf, Dumb, and the Blind opened its doors in 1869. As the *Raleigh Standard* had proclaimed in December 1868, "North Carolina is the first State in the South which has provided for the education of its colored deaf and dumb and blind."[336] With a group of six blind and 20 deaf children in its 1869 opening class, the Colored School, an all-Black institution, went on to educate thousands of North Carolina's disabled children until 1967. In that year, as part of the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling, the Black and White schools were combined. The school was renamed the Governor Morehead School for the Blind, and it remains open to this day as an integrated institution.[337]

The problem of supporting oneself as a free blind Black person was not trivial. Emancipation represented a monumental change in the lives of blind bondspeople. Although slavery was a brutal system, its commodification process created a productive economic role for blind slaves to fill. Blind bondspeople' support-side jobs provided them with access to the same food, clothes, and housing an owner provided to other individuals in their workforce. After emancipation, however, the blind competed with sighted workers for those jobs. Without access to employment or training, freedom offered former blind slaves very little besides a status shift from chattel to beggar.

In 1867, Black parents living in North Carolina who had blind or deaf children decided that the state needed to include their children in the post-emancipation plan to create a new

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[336] *Raleigh Standard*, January 9, 1869.

[337] North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program, Marker H-47, http://www.ncmarkers.com/Markers.aspx?MarkerId=H-47. Accessed July 19, 2021. Sources cited here are William S. Powell, ed., *Encyclopedia of North Carolina* (2006); Powell, *North Carolina through Four Centuries* (1989); and Manuel H. Crockett and Barbara C. Dease, *Through the Years, 1867–1977: Light out of Darkness; The History of the North Carolina School for the Negro Blind and Deaf* (1990).

inclusive school system.[338] Although the North Carolina Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) and religious groups had worked to educate Blacks in the state after 1863, the practice of segregating the blind from the sighted, as well as Blacks from Whites, left blind Black children with no chance to gain an education. Politically active Black and White individuals answered parents' calls and opened a school that represented the first attempt to prepare Black blind children for life under freedom.

This chapter argues that the opening of the Colored School represented a massive shift in the lives of blind Blacks from potential workers to charity cases. From its creation, the state, and therefore official policy, started to group and classify blind Blacks in terms of their blindness rather than their blackness. To be sure, race was an omnipresent factor in North Carolina during Reconstruction, and the Colored School was a segregated institution as a result. Nevertheless, the future living arrangements, educational options, and occupational paths envisaged and created for blind Black children during Reconstruction mirrored those of White blind children rather than sighted Blacks.[339] The efforts expended to obtain the building for the school and make it an effective facility for young visually impaired Blacks to learn illustrates this point in two important ways. First, the building represented the physical embodiment of blind Blacks' removal from their local communities to an environment based on their blindness. They would

[338] Robert Morris, Reading, Writing, and Reconstruction: The Education of Freedmen in the South, 1861–1870 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); John Bachelor, Race and Education in North Carolina: From Segregation to Desegregation (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015).
[339] The North Carolina school opened in 1869 and was followed by schools in Maryland in 1872, Tennessee (hearing impaired only) in 1881, Georgia (hearing impaired only) in 1882, Mississippi (hearing impaired only) in 1882, South Carolina in 1883, Kentucky (hearing impaired only) in 1884, Texas in 1887, Arkansas (hearing impaired only) in 1887, Missouri (hearing impaired only) in 1888, Alabama in 1892, Florida in 1895, Virginia in 1909, and Louisiana (visually impaired only) in 1922. While the main disability served at each school's opening is listed here, the schools may have educated people with other disabilities at another time or place. https://www.museumofdisability.org/disability-and-the-african-american-experience/. Accessed March 3, 2021.

now work, sleep, and play around other blind people 24 hours a day instead of interacting with their sighted peers. Second, although funding and opening a physical location for the school was a Republican project, these efforts faced almost no opposition from White conservatives. Seeing the students as primarily blind rather than Black—and therefore through the lens of sighted stigma—rather than racism, caused White conservatives to view the Colored School as fundamentally different from normal Black education. In fact, during the backlash that came with North Carolina's brutal Redemption, which resulted in school burnings and legislative reversals, the Colored School's building was never physically touched.[340] In fact, the Democrats increased the institution's budget to build a new and more modern building.

This chapter first explores the educational conditions present before Reconstruction. North Carolina had a history of educating both sighted and blind Whites. In fact, the principal of the White school, Willie J. Palmer (appointed in 1860), became a driving force for the Colored School's creation. Three Black North Carolinians also born in the antebellum period, George Horton, David Walker, and James Harris—the last being the only one of the three involved in the Colored School's operations, demonstrated the incredible reverence for education Black North Carolinians held before emancipation; it would be this idea that was translated into action on behalf of the Black blind during Reconstruction. Next, the chapter turns to the fight to find a building and secure funding for the Colored School. Palmer contacted the Freedmen's Bureau in the fall of 1867 about a building site, but it was not until Republican delegates met in Raleigh to rewrite the state's Constitution that the project was secured. Although not expressly stated, it was

[340] Campbell F. Scribner, "*Surveying the Destruction of African American School houses in the South*," 1864–1876, *Journal of the Civil War Era*, Volume 10 No. 4 (December 2020) P 469-494, John Hope Franklyn, Reconstruction After the Civil War Third Edition (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012) P 151, Steven Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration (Cambridge : Belknap, 2005) P 279, Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877 (New York: Harper and Row, 1988) P 154, 155.

here that the decision was made to officially place Black blind children in a school segregated by both vision and race. After the convention, the new board of directors of the combined blind institution made the Colored School into an operational institution. The board had deep connections to both the delegates at the 1868 convention and the Northern missionary organizations that were involved in the effort to educate the state's freedmen. The group found a building, hired staff, developed a curriculum, and welcomed its initial class of six blind students in 1869. The chapter's final section examines what is known of the original six students. The entrance forms filled out when they started school provide insight into their personal and family histories. Five of the six graduated after completing the school's seven-year course of academic and mechanical studies, though the layout of the school's original building made it impossible to teach Black males the limited trades deemed appropriate for the blind. These five lived the last few years of their school career in a new building built specifically to house the Colored School.

North Carolina started a trend that all Southern states eventually followed. Those individuals involved in bringing the Colored School to life waged a successful campaign to provide blind Black children with an educational option aimed at helping their transition into a post-emancipation economy. In the process, the children who attended the Colored School became the first to truly experience how the pity, fear, dismissal, and desire to help caused by stigmas would constrict the assumed abilities of blind Blacks when no longer counterbalanced by the chattel principal's economic incentives.

The North Carolina Context

If they were lucky, young blind bondspeople had a parent or elder who could teach them some skills. Charity Wiggins demonstrated this process with her son Blind Tom. When Tom was young, she taught him how to churn butter, a touch-based support-side task, which provided him

a potential avenue to productive work so he would not be sold or killed.[341] As blind enslaved children grew, they eventually found themselves working at some task just like their sighted counterparts. Regardless of the method that Blacks or Whites used to teach these young bondspeople, the blind and sighted slaves shared the same, generally limited, opportunities to learn. However, once the Northern war machine ended slavery, free society set the terms that would govern young Blacks' lives, which meant that the practice of dividing the blind from the sighted would be the new norm. Regardless, it was not a given that newly emancipated Blacks would have the chance to receive an education and, as Henry Parker discovered, even less so for those who were blind. Nevertheless, North Carolina led the way in educating blind Blacks due to its strong antebellum traditions of sighted, blind, and even Black education.

North Carolina declared its desire to educate the state's free children in its original 1776 Constitution.[342] Although the document made no provision for educating blind children, by 1816, the state had not progressed far in opening schools for anyone. In that year, Judge Archibald Murphy was elected governor and promised to establish a working school system. Murphy assigned school commissioners to every county in the state and charged them with creating local schools.[343] In 1841, to help finance the costs of buildings and teachers, the General Assembly created the Literary Fund through a tax on alcohol sales and parts of the shipping trade.[344] Once funded, the number of free children taught by the state expanded through the 1840s; according to the 1850 census, 104,905 White students were educated in over 2,000 schools.[345]

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[341] No Author, Songs: Sketch of the Life.
[342] Constitution of North Carolina 1776, Section XLI, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/nc07.asp. Accessed April 15, 2021.
[343] Cited in Charles L. Coon, ed., The Beginnings of Education in North Carolina: A Documentary History, 1790–1840 (Edwards & Broughton, 1908), 1:123–128.
[344] Cited in Coon, 1:280–282.
[345] The Census of the United States—1850, Table XII: "Population—Square miles, density, etc., of the United States in 1850," p. xxxiii.

After 1843, White blind and deaf children, who had been excluded from other educational opportunities throughout the state, received their own separate school. Governor John Motley Morehead had overseen the building and opening of the North Carolina Institution for the Deaf, the Dumb, and the Blind in the state capitol of Raleigh.[346] Over the school's first seven years, only deaf children attended, but the institution admitted its first two blind students in 1851.[347]

From the school's beginning, stigmas caused the state to treat the blind school differently than regular schools. Instead of the state classifying the institution as education, the school for the blind and deaf was considered a charity.[348] From the state's point of view, the blind school was a good deed, not a necessity. To be sure, those involved earnestly worked for their student's advancement, but they often held and displayed many stigmas about the blind at the same time. Moreover, the institution's classification as a charity meant that it was prevented from accessing the state's Literary Fund. As a result, in 1848, the assembly enacted an annual tax on counties that compelled them to support their "unfortunate" populations.[349] The school treasurer was authorized to accept private payments, but county and state funds supported the majority of students.

In 1860, North Carolina's governor appointed a new principal of the White school who eventually became a driving force in the Colored School's creation after slavery's destruction.[350] Twenty-three-year-old Willie J. Palmer had been born to a slaveholding family in Craven

[346] North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program, Marker H-47.
[347] Ibid.
[348] Ibid.
[349] Ibid.
[350] Palmer started teaching at the school in 1858. He was promoted to Vice Principal in 1860 before being promoted to Principal later that year. William S. Powell, *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County North Carolina, 1777–1977* (1977), 402–403.

County, North Carolina on May 1, 1837.[351] Assuming his position shortly before hostilities began, he remained the school's principal throughout the war; in fact, Palmer, his wife Sarah, and their three children lived together at the Raleigh campus in 1870.[352]

Palmer was a forward thinker who displayed an intense interest in education for the blind and deaf. He authored academic papers for his peers and traveled to other states' schools to observe their latest educational innovations.[353] Perhaps it was not a surprise, then, that when approached by a group of Black parents in the late summer of 1867 who wanted their children to attend school, Palmer enthusiastically threw his support behind the idea.

The belief in education that North Carolina's Black community developed during slavery was critical to the educational opportunities the state's blind Blacks received after emancipation. Reading and writing represented the most important educational goals for bondspeople who wanted an education. Although countless Blacks surely evaded the rules and laws created by North Carolina's slaveholding class to prevent them from gaining those very skills, most evidence of their successes are lost.[354] North Carolina, however, produced two Black pioneers, George Moses Horton and David Walker, who wrote landmark texts that demonstrated how strongly the state's antebellum Black population believed in, and valued, education.

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[351] According to the 1850 Slave Schedule, Palmer's father, Nathan Palmer, owned six bondspeople ranging in age from three to 28. *Seventh Census of the United States*, 1850, NARA Microform Publication M432, Record of the Bureau of the Census, RG 29, The National Archive in Washington, D.C.

[352] Year: 1870; Census Place: Raleigh, East Ward, Wake, North Carolina; Roll: M593_1162; Page: 280B.

[353] Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of North Carolina for the Year 1868(hereafter referred to as Annual Reports 1868) (Raleigh: M. S. Littlefield, State Printer & Binder, 1868), 101 .

[354] Heather Andria Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (); Janet Cornelius, '"We Slipped and Learned to Read: 'Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process, 1830-1865," Phylon 44, no. 3 (September 1983). For an overview of North Carolina, see Ethan Roy and James E. Ford, "Deep Rooted: A Brief History of Race and Education In North Carolina," https://www.ednc.org/deep-rooted-a-brief-history-of-race-and-education-in-north-carolina. Accessed December 21, 2020. John Hope Franklin argued that North Carolina's apprentice system provided many free blacks with access to an education. John Hope Franklin, *The Free Black in North Carolina*, cited in Roy and Ford.

George Moses Horton earned the distinction of being the first enslaved Black person in the United States to write a book while still in bondage. Born in Northampton County, North Carolina in 1798, Horton authored a book of poems titled "The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, The Colored Bard of North Carolina," published in 1845. Horton's path to literacy mirrored the efforts of many enslaved Blacks who taught themselves to read and write. Horton explained that he was "[f]aced with an owner who did not descend to the particularity of schooling his children at any high rate" and who "cared less for the improvement of the mind of his servants."[355] Despite his owner's blanket objection to anyone's education, Horton picked up clues and tools from the literate White world around him. At the age of 14, he explained,

> I took a resolution to learn the alphabet at all events; and lighting by chance, at times, of being in the presence of school children, I learnt the letters by heart and fortunately afterwards got hold of some old parts of spelling books abounding with these elements, which I learnt with but little difficulty.[356]

Once exposed to reading, Horton continually went against his owner's implied (if not expressed) stance against education: "Every Sabbath during the year," remembered Horton, "did I retire away in the summer season to some shady and lonely recess, when I could stammer over the dim and promiscuous syllables in my old black and tattered spelling book…Never the less, did I persevere with an indefatigable resolution."[357] Horton's simple desire to read had transformed into a silent, but outright, rebellion against his owner's authority. The covert nature of Blacks' self-taught education and slaveowners' resistance to their efforts served to cement the connection between freedom and education in Blacks' minds long before emancipation.

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[355] Although other Blacks wrote texts prior to Horton, none of them did so while they remained enslaved. Horton's text is about 90 pages long and consists mainly of poems. George M. Horton, The Poetical Works of George M. Horton: The Colored Bard of North Carolina, to which is prefixed the Life of the Author Written by Himself (Hillsborough: D. Heartt, 1845), IV.
[356] Ibid., V, VI.
[357] Ibid., V.

David Walker was born free in Wilmington in 1798. Although most associate Walker's text with its violent call to attack slaveholders and slavery, his broader plans to strengthen the Black community addressed education's important role. Released first in 1829, "An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World in Four Parts" laid out a plan to dismantle slavery and elevate the Black race. "It is expected that all colored men, women and children of every nation, language and tongue under heaven," he wrote, "will try to procure a copy of this Appeal and read it, or get someone to read it to them, for it is more particularly designed for them." Walker argued that White Christians in the United States treated Blacks worse than any other people in history, and even worse, Blacks accepted it. He wanted the Black community to draw on its own strength and resources to fight back against slavery and racism. To be sure, part of the fight would be violent, and Walker felt no qualms about killing slaveowners and their supporters: "It is no more harm for you to kill a man who is trying to kill you than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty."[358] Walker understood, though, that Blacks could not act against Whites until they shook off the ignorance slavery had imposed on their minds.

Walker addressed an entire article to Blacks' education: "Ignorance, my brethren, is a mist… in which our fathers for many centuries have been plunged." Walker spoke to both bondspeople and free Blacks and acknowledged that they faced very different educational circumstances:

> I have examined school boys and young men of color in different parts of the country in the most simple parts of Murray's English Grammar and not more than one in thirty was able to give a correct answer to my interrogations. If anyone contradicts me let him step out of his door into the streets of Boston, New York, or Baltimore (no reason to mention any more because the Christians are too charitable further south).[359]

[358] David Walker, Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World in Four Parts: Together with a Preamble to the Colored Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and very Expressly, to Those in the United States (Boston: David Walker, 1831) 2, 30.
[359] Ibid., 22, 38.

Free Blacks could obtain an education in the North, just not a very good one, while bondspeople were on their own. Walker called on literate Blacks to go out and spread knowledge of reading and writing to the rest of the race. "Let the aim of your labors, among your brethren, and particularly the youths, be the dissemination of education and religion."[360]

The North Carolina legislature understood the danger that Walker's revolutionary message carried for the state's slave system and beyond. When Nat Turner, a literate preacher from neighboring Virginia, led a violent rebellion against slaveholders' oppression two years after Walker published his appeal in 1831, North Carolina's legislature took the opportunity to legally codify the tradition that George Horton's owner already followed:

> Whereas the teaching of slaves to read and write, has a tendency to excite dissatisfaction in their minds, and to produce insurrection and rebellion, to the manifest injury of the citizens of this State: Therefor, Be it enacted by the General Assembly of North Carolina…that any free person, who here after shall teach or attempt to teach any slave within the state to read or write, the use of figures excepted, or shall give or sell to such slave or slaves any books or pamphlets, shall be liable to indictment in any court of record in this state having jurisdiction thereof.[361]

Slaveholders' preventive and reactive measures against Black education in the state did nothing to quell or deter bondspeople's desire for formal learning. In fact, when the Civil War destroyed the institution, many freedmen immediately sought out or created schools. Just as important for the Colored School, though, these individuals carried with them a belief in education as a universal right that belonged to all Blacks, regardless of whether they were young or old, girls or

[360] Ibid., 35.

[361] The North Carolina Assembly made it clear that abolitionists 'texts and their effects on bondspeople led to this law. See the explanation and law cited in Charles L. Coon, ed., *The Beginnings of Education in North Carolina: A Documentary History, 1790 to 1840* (Edwards & Broughton, 1908), 2:484.

boys, and even blind or deaf. In 1865 the Black North Carolinians finally had the opportunity to put their antebellum beliefs and desires into concrete action.

Although North Carolina's Black community partnered with the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern Missionary Societies after the war, the community relied heavily on its own resources and organizing abilities to open schools for blacks.[362] In September 1866, the Convention of North Carolina's Freed People met in Raleigh to lay out their desires for the state's government. Organized as a reaction to White Democrats' exclusion of Blacks from the state's Constitutional Convention, Black leaders met from September 29 to October 3 to lay out their vision for civil rights. James Walker Hood presided over the meeting. Hood was a preacher from Pennsylvania who came south to work for the American Missionary Society (AMS) and would eventually travel across the state to find blind students to attend the Colored School. The convention produced a document "[a]dvising all colored people to educate themselves and their children not alone in book learning but in a high moral energy, self-respect, and in a virtuous and dignified Christian life."[363] The following year, the convention met again in Raleigh. This time, James H. Harris was the convention's president.

Forged from the same antebellum North Carolina traditions that yielded Horton and Walker, Harris was born enslaved in Granville, North Carolina around 1830. A skilled carpenter, his owner manumitted him before 1848. He attended Oberlin College in Ohio for two years. In the late 1850s, Harris traveled to Liberia. However, he fell ill and returned to the United States,

[362] Ronald Butchart, *Northern Teachers, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1873* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980); Jaqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980). For a specific individual involved in North Carolina, see John L. Bell, "Samuel Stanford Ashley, Carpetbagger and Educator," *North Carolina Historical Review* 72, no. 4 (October 1995): 461.
[363] "State Convention of the Colored People of North Carolina, Raleigh, September 29, 1865," Colored Conventions Project Digital Records, https://omeka.coloredconventions.org. Accessed October 13, 2020.

settling in Indiana. After Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation permitting Blacks to enlist in the Union army, Harris sought and received an appointment as a recruiting officer on December 3, 1863.[364]

After the Confederacy's fall, Harris threw himself into North Carolina's Black political world. Besides prominent roles at the 1865 and 1866 Freedman's Conventions, he was elected a delegate to the 1868 Constitutional Convention and the 1868 House of Representatives Special Session; he spent three terms in the House. In addition, he was named a Teacher of Free People by the New England Freedman's Aid Society, worked with the Union League, and received an appointment as Raleigh City Commissioner. In 1868, he traveled to New England on a fundraising trip to solicit donations for North Carolina's indigent Black population. He carried letters of introduction not only from Governor William Holden and General Nelson A. Miles, but also from the famous abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner. Sumner wrote, "I am happy to join with others in recommending James H. Harris of North Carolina to the charity he represents. Mr. Harris has already done much for his race.""[365] Despite Sumner's praise, Harris went on to do much more for the Black blind and deaf in North Carolina. He served on the North Carolina School for the Blind's board of directors, the state's House committee overseeing the school, and spent three years as the Colored School's director.

At the 1866 Freedmen's Convention, also held in Raleigh, Harris presented the delegates with a constitution that created an organization focused on building schools and educating all Black children. The Freedman's Educational Association of North Carolina not only embodied Blacks' antebellum belief in the connection between freedom and education but also in

[364] For documents related to Harris's life and official actions, see https://civilwar150nc.wordpress.com/2012/04/02/james-henry-harris-papers/. Accessed October 11, 2020.
[365] "Letter of Introduction for James H. Harris from Charles Sumner, May 31, 1868," https://digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/collection/p15012coll8/id/10782/rec/2. Accessed October 22, 2020.

education's universality. The organization's Constitution stated, "The Object of this association shall be to aid in the establishment of schools, from which none shall be excluded on account of color or poverty." No mention of the blind occurred in the document, but the universality it expresses points to a system of schools that would exclude no one—not even those who could not see. Harris envisioned bringing together Black investors and activists that could be called on when Black parents and communities needed help: "It shall assist educational associations in counties, towns, or captain's districts to obtain teachers, and in all other matters that circumstances shall make desirable."[366] Harris assembled a group of Black individuals that understood how and where to find buildings, staff, and financing for those interested in creating Black schools—the precise expertise that those attempting to start the Colored School would ultimately need.

Constitutional Consensus

Information about the parents who first approached Palmer about educating their blind children, or about how they knew to contact him in the first place, was not recorded. To be sure, the connections between Blacks and Whites interested in advancing educational opportunities after the Civil War ran deep. Although no interaction between Harris and Palmer can be found before 1868, it would be a surprise if they did not previously know each other or at least know of each other. After all, they were both involved in education and lived and worked in Raleigh. The circumstances surrounding how and where the group of Black parents approached Palmer are a mystery, but what is clear is that Palmer took their request seriously. At the September 17, 1867, monthly meeting of the board of trustees for the North Carolina Deaf and Blind Institution,

[366] Minutes of the Freedmen's Convention Held in the City of Raleigh on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October, 1866 (Raleigh: Standard Book & Job Office, 1866).

Palmer explained that "[c]ertain black families had approached him about placing their blind and or def children at the school." Palmer did not elaborate on which families or the number of children but stated that "with the trustees' permission, he would make immediate arrangements for the students."[367]

The board of trustees did not kill the idea outright. Instead, they raised a critical issue the Colored School would deal with for many years: What building would serve as the school's campus? The trustees explained that the current school was already "overcrowded and it had no room with which to house black students."[368] Though apparently a practical question, this issue's salience for the trustees also reflects sighted attitudes toward the blind. Blind schools segregated students to learn, eat, and sleep on campus away from their sighted peers and family for the entire school year. Accordingly, the physical separation of blind students in a separate school demonstrated that Black blind children's future lay with their blind peers more than with their sighted Black ones.

It is not clear why the trustees believed that Palmer wanted to house Black and White students together. No record of Palmer expressing an interest in an integrated school exists. Regardless, the trustees told Palmer that they "[w]ould be willing to furnish teachers and supervise students' education as long as Palmer through the agency of the Freedmen's Bureau, made arrangements for the accommodations and support of the colored deaf and dumb and the blind."[369] In any case, it is probable that Palmer wanted only the board's permission, rather than their assistance, in finding a school site. After all, assuming that he knew Harris or had other

[367] Annual Reports, 1868, 101.
[368] Ibid., 101.
[369] Ibid., 101.

connections to his association, Palmer already understood who he needed to contact and what he needed to say.

On October 2, in an attempt to find a building for the Colored School, Palmer began an ultimately unsuccessful correspondence with the Freedmen's Bureau that lasted two months. He contacted Major General Nelson A. Miles, who headed the Freedmen's Bureau in North Carolina. Palmer's first task was to convince Miles of the need to educate the state's blind Black children. He explained to the general that his institution had "received several applications for the admission of colored deaf and dumb and blind persons as pupils." In an effort to illustrate the possible demand, Palmer directed Miles's attention to a Freedmen's Bureau report that stated, "More than 190 colored blind, deaf, and dumb now live in North Carolina. Of this number, 19 deaf and 31 blind were under the age of 21." Palmer assured Miles that the numbers were "probably much higher" since he had learned that "many counties had not been included in the count."[370]

Second, Palmer needed to convince the general that opening the school was the morally right thing to do. Palmer put forward an argument based on the universality of education that included an appeal to sighted stigmas. In this case, however, the reference to stigmas could have cut both ways; rather than approving the plan out of pity, the general could have decided that it was not worth the effort to educate a helpless population. Palmer argued, "As ample provision has been made for the education of the other colored children, it is obvious that some steps should be taken to educate these unfortunate ones." He then finally got down to the problem that the proposed school faced. The trustees had demanded that he find a separate building for the Colored School. He knew of "a location adjacent to the existing Raleigh campus," and he

[370] Ibid., 101.

believed "it could be purchased for between three and four thousand dollars."[371] Palmer promised to provide more details if the War Department wanted to help. It is not clear whom Palmer was in contact with at the school or how he learned these details, but this activity represented the exact type of network-building Harris's organization engaged in.

The Freedmen's Bureau contacted him eight days later requesting more information about the building's cost. On October 14, Palmer wrote back with the financial details. First, he reiterated that the location adjacent to the existing school could be secured for $3,000. "The property," he explained, "contains eight rooms, with a kitchen, two rooms, and about one-half acre of ground, and would accommodate from twenty-five to thirty pupils."[372] The building would need improvements as well as furnishing, which might cost another $2,000.

Second, Palmer addressed the cost of supporting the students and staff. Based on funding levels for the White school, "The board, clothing, &c., of each pupil would cost about twenty-five dollars per month, and the necessary attendants, housekeeper, cook and dining room help could be secured at from fifty to sixty dollars per month." Palmer noted that he did not include any estimates for teacher pay since the board had already committed to covering that cost. Palmer even considered possible expansion: "should the number of pupils be greater than above estimated, provision could be made for their accommodation by the removal of one of the buildings owned by the Government to the premises." He closed his letter to Miles with a promise: "If the Bureau should decide to make provision for the education and support of the colored deaf and dumb and the blind, I can assure you that I will do all in my power for their improvement."[373]

[371] Ibid., 101.
[372] Ibid., 101.
[373] Ibid., 102.

The proposed school for the state's Black blind children carried a heavy price tag. The purchase of the building and its necessary furnishing had a cost of $5,000 in its first year, while the recurring annual sum for students and staff, assuming Palmer's lowest estimate and a six-month school year, would tally another $3,900. Together, the total package would cost the Bureau close to $9,000, or roughly $182,000 in 2022. On November 17, Miles forwarded Palmer's letter to Major General O. O. Howard. Palmer received the response on December 2. Howard politely killed the idea by punting responsibility for the building's financing back to the board of trustees. As Miles reported, "The General, did not feel justified in expending so large a sum," but "if the Trustees will purchase the property, this Bureau can assist in repairing the building and can furnish rations to the colored pupils who are indigent."[374] After nearly two months of negotiation in person and through letters, Palmer had come to an impasse. The board of trustees would support a Black school for the blind only if the federal government paid for a site, but the government would support the school only if the board provided a site themselves. Palmer faced a seemingly intractable catch-22. However, even before opening Miles's letter, he knew that the state's politics had undergone a massive change. When Palmer approached the board of trustees on September 17, 1867, Democrats intent on reestablishing the prewar order controlled the state government. However, by December, when he received Howard's final rejection notice, voters had placed Republicans in charge of rewriting the Constitution and recreating the state's government.

On March 3, 1867, the Republican-controlled United States Congress passed the Reconstruction Acts. This legislation divided the former Confederate states into five military districts and placed all civil and political affairs under the charge of a military governor.

[374] Ibid., 102.

Congress ordered all Southern states except Tennessee to hold elections for delegates to state conventions to rewrite their individual constitutions. Just as significantly, the federal government employed its power to ensure that the election results reflected the will of the Black community, as Blacks had the franchise, but Whites with ties to the late Confederacy did not. With federal power opening North Carolina's political system to Black participation, Republicans won an overwhelming victory in the November election. The 120 elected delegates sent to the 1868 Constitutional Convention in Raleigh included 107 Republicans, 15 of whom were Black.[375] Out of the delegates in attendance, S. S. Ashley, James Walker Hood, Clinton Pearson, Bryant Lee, Cuffy Maio, and James H. Harris all eventually worked directly with the Colored School.

The Constitutional Convention convened in Raleigh on January 10, 1868. Those interested in creating the Colored School had a focused agenda. The school had failed to materialize the previous year due to the lack of funds for a building. However, those interested in the Colored School now had the chance to guarantee it received a share of the state's annual appropriation for the existing White school.

During the convention, sighted stigmas—for the first time but not the last—undercut White conservatives general 'hostility to Black education and rendered the Colored School noncontroversial. Much like Blind Tom, whose defeat of Whites who challenged him on the theater stage had not threatened the White crowd's belief in White supremacy, Democrats did not view the constitutional guarantee to educate blind Blacks as a threat to the state's racial order. As a consequence, they did not resist or obstruct its passage like they did for sighted schools. In fact, those interested in starting the school faced more opposition due to indifference caused by stigma than from hostility generated by racism.

[375] Leonard Bernstein, "The Participation of Negro Delegates at the Constitutional Convention of 1868 in North Carolina," *The Journal of Negro History*, 34, no. 4 (October 1944): 389–409.

While the extent to which Republican delegates and Palmer coordinated efforts behind the scenes of the convention to eliminate indifference remains unknown, their efforts appeared planned. The first move to sway the convention occurred two weeks after it convened. On January 20, the convention received an invitation from Palmer in which he wrote that "[he] hoped the delegates would come visit the school and observe its operations." As seen previously (Chapter 1), schools for the deaf and blind often held public events where students demonstrated to an assembled audience how well they had learned their various lessons. Children answered math and geography questions and played music in order to prove that their schools successfully educated students and remained worthy of public support. Ashley moved that the convention immediately answer in the affirmative, and their visit was set for the following Friday night, January 27.[376] No one recorded who made up the visiting delegation or what transpired during the trip, but the convention's actions suggest that the visit had its desired effect.

The following Tuesday, January 31, Clinton Pearson took to the convention floor to act on behalf of the Colored Department. Born in 1833, Pearson was part of both the 1865 and 1866 Freedmen's Conventions and now represented New Haven County. He chaired the convention's Committee on Prisons and Charitable Institutions. Pearson moved that "some plan be devised for admission of children of every race, endowed with the rights of citizenship, to public charitable institutions."[377] Pearson's citizenship argument echoed Palmer's reasoning in his original letter to General Miles three months earlier. If all Black children were now citizens, and the convention was going to arrange for the state's citizens to receive an education, blind and other

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[376] *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of North Carolina at its Session in 1868* (hereafter referred to as JCC) (Raleigh: Joseph Holden Printer, 1868), 43, https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/conv1868/conv1868.html. Accessed July 17, 2020. Daniel Whitener, "The Republican Party in North Carolina, 1867-1900," *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 39, no. 3 (July 1960) 382–396.

[377] *Raleigh Sentinel*, January 27, 1869. See also JCC, 73.

disabled children had to be included. Pearson's motion was unanimously adopted, and he and his committee set about crafting an amendment.

On March 3, the Committee on Charities presented their amendment for the full convention's consideration. Section 10 dealt with the Colored School, though not by name: "The General Assembly shall provide that all the deaf-mutes, the blind, and the insane of the State shall be cared for at the charge of the State."[378] To be sure, the provision did not allocate any money—the assembly would do that annually—but it gave the Colored School a constitutional claim to state financing. The proposal generated no debate on either its second or third reading, and the convention adopted the entire report on March 10 by a margin of 83 to 11.[379] The fact that Section 10 aroused no opposition in a convention where conservative delegates took every opportunity to enter into long-winded debates and offer obstructive amendments speaks to blind stigma's power to undercut the most hostile manifestations of racism. Their 'silence demonstrated their 'belief that blind Blacks represented a helpless and harmless burden that they could support or ignore without consequence.

Pearson's use of the word "all" covered up another truth behind the school's founding. Those who established the Colored School mirrored most other Black and White Republican delegates beliefs about sighted education and wanted a separate Black school for the blind. The twentieth-century image of Thurgood Marshall and his team of NAACP Legal Defense Fund lawyers fighting to end the separate-but-equal doctrine obscures the fact that such segregation is precisely what many Black and White Republicans wanted. When the Committee on Education released its report on March 10, it assumed a color-blind approach similar to that of Pearson's charity provision. No specific provision mandating segregated schools was included. However,

[378] JCC, 295.
[379] Ibid., 385.

Plato Durham, a conservative delegate from Cleveland County, tried to insert one. He moved that "the General Assembly will provide separate and distinct schools for the black children of the State from those provided for white children."[380] William A. Graham, a delegate from Orange County, attempted a similar effort for higher education when he tried to amend Section 18, which dealt with the University of North Carolina. Durham and Graham were conservative obstructionists throughout the convention, and they predictably called for segregated schools. In fact, during the earlier debate on the executive branch, Durham had attempted to insert an amendment restricting the office of governor to White men only; James H. Harris responded with a motion that further restricted the office to White men who had not fathered mulattos.[381] Although Durham and Graham's attempts to segregate schools failed, their failure was due to Republicans 'belief in keeping racial distinctions out of the Constitution's text rather than a desire for integration. Indeed, Ashley rejected Durham's motion by claiming that there was no "necessity" for his amendment," mainly because very few delegates wanted to educate Black and White students together anyway. In a twist of historical irony, Republican delegate Albion W. Tourgee, who represented Homer Plessy in the failed 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case that established the doctrine of separate but equal, offered a surprising substitute amendment:

> Separate and Distinct schools may be provided for any class of citizens in the State provided that in all cases where distinct schools shall be established, there shall be as ample, sufficient, and complete facilities afforded for the one class as for the others, and entirely adequate for all, and in all districts where schools are divided, the apportionment to each shall be equal.[382]

North Carolina's Republican delegates did not want to enshrine racial divides into the state's fundamental law. However, this stance did not mean that they objected to segregated

[380] Ibid., 342.
[381] Ibid., 204.
[382] Ibid., 343, 345.

schools. In fact, the schools that then existed in the state were largely segregated, whether by design or by choice. An explanatory address included with the Constitution made the point clear: "Some persons have been so bold or ignorant as to allege that...white and colored children are to attend the same schools," but "all these assertions are false, as any reader of the Constitution can see."[383] During the legislature's first session, James Harris summarized the Black delegates ' feelings best when he stated, perhaps poetically, "I am for black churches with black preachers; and black schools with black teachers."[384]

The convention finished its work on March 15, 1868, and released the document to the public for their judgment. The election took place on July 2, 1868. North Carolina voters approved the new Constitution, elected William Holden as Governor, made S. S. Ashley Superintendent of Public Schools, and placed James Harris in the Republican-dominated 1868 North Carolina House of Representatives Special Session. When Palmer wrote his annual report on July 10, two days after the Republican-led Special Session adjourned in Raleigh, he reflected on the Colored Schools failure the previous fall and winter with a sense that it would ultimately meet with success. He noted how both the Freedman's Bureau and the board of trustees had balked at paying for a location to house the school, halting his and his unnamed allies' efforts since "we had no means to expend in the purchase of a building and the necessary furniture." Palmer understood, though, that new men with new beliefs now controlled North Carolina's levers of power. This left him with no doubt that "The legislature now in session would give their attention to this matter and that provision would be made for the establishment of a separate school for the education of the colored deaf and dumb and the blind."[385]

[383] Ibid., 485.
[384] *Weekly Standard*, July 14, 1868.
[385] Annual Reports, 1868, 104.

Republicans in the state government gave the Colored School legislative approval soon after they assumed control on July 8, 1868. Although the assembly faced a plethora of pressing issues, stigma still rendered the blind school noncontroversial, and it was dealt with quickly. For the school to become operational, the assembly had to take three steps. First, a new governing board needed to be nominated and approved. Second, the position of principal had to be filled. Finally, the annual appropriations bill had to be passed. On July 11, Governor Holden forwarded the legislature his nominees for the new board. Replacing the title of trustees with that of directors, the men demonstrated a remarkable interconnectedness between North Carolina's Black activists and the missionary groups that had previously worked on behalf of Black education. The slate included James Harris, Clinton Pearson, and from the American Missionary Association (AMA,) S. S. Ashley, W. M. Coleman, and Rev. Fisk P. Brewer. Robert B. Ellis and Thomas Coates rounded out the director positions.[386]

On July 22, the Senate brought Holden's recommendation for an integrated board to the floor. The Weekly Standard reported, "Mr. Rich introduced the bill, Mr. Wilson called for the yeas and nays." Like the Constitutional Amendment, the bill passed without debate.[387] The assembly had approved an integrated board to oversee both White and Black blind and deaf students. Although the confirmation of two Black men to oversee White children had not generated opposition, Palmer's nomination to continue as head of the institution became the first school-related vote to run into resistance. First, Mr. Lassiter, a friend of Palmer, spoke on his behalf in a speech the *Weekly Standard* described as "full of emotion and feeling." However, after two others spoke for Palmer, conservatives pushed back. Mr. Etheridge moved to table the nomination, while Mr. Cook tried to insert language to eliminate the principal position

[386] *Weekly Standard*, July 11, 1868.
[387] *Weekly Standard*, July 22, 1868.

altogether.[388] Neither the newspaper nor the Senate Journal published their reasoning. In any case, the Senate rejected both proposals and approved Palmer's appointment. The Colored School cleared its final hurdle in early August. On August 10, the legislature approved the blind and deaf institution's annual $38,000 appropriations bill with no restrictions.[389] The Department's advocates had finally secured not only men in official positions who wanted to see the school open but funding with which to secure a building to host it.

Creating a School

The first meeting of the new board of directors took place on July 25, 1868, at Superintendent Ashley's home. Robert Coleman, Fisk P. Brewer, Thomas Coates, Robert Ellis, and James Harris were intent on not only establishing the Colored School but on running both schools efficiently. They first created a command structure. They elected Coleman as the board's president, while Brewer was tapped to be treasurer. The group thought that Palmer had done an excellent job as principal and approved the legislature's recommendation.[390] The following month, Harris and Coates took spots on a two-man executive committee.[391]

The existing White school held two sessions per year; the first session began in October and the second in January. The board addressed the White school's needs first since it was simply continuing operations from the previous spring.

During their August 1, 1868, meeting, the directors approved staff and salary scales for the White school. Principal Palmer received $18 a month. Teachers John Simpson and Narcissa

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[388] Ibid.
[389] *Weekly Standard*, August 10, 1868. The Senate Journal of August 1869 records the approval of funding.
[390] State School for the Blind and Deaf. Superintendent's Office. Minutes of the Board of Directors file, 1849-1942. 1.8 cu. ft. (1 ledger box). Unprocessed. (MARS ID #134.2) Minutes of the Board of Directors. (Hereafter cited as Board Meeting Minutes.) July. 25, 1868.
[391] Board Meeting Minutes, September 3, 1868.

Dupree, both blind themselves, earned $30 and $20 per month, respectively, though the board increased Simpson's pay to $65 in the fall. The music instructor, Mrs. A. E. Slater, received $36.[392] The board convened two days later and voted to set the first Tuesday in October as the school's opening day.[393]

Although state and county funding paid for blind children's tuition if families lacked the means, North Carolina had no law mandating that visually impaired children attend school until 1908.[394] Accordingly, newspapers and word of mouth were the best ways to make the parents of blind children aware of the school's services. On August 25, 1868, Ashley authorized Palmer to run articles seeking students in local newspapers. The advertisement was simple and to the point:

> The next session of the North Carolina Institution for the Deaf, Dumb, and the Blind will commence Tuesday October 6. Applicants must be between seven and twenty-one years of age. All information in relation to the admission of pupils will be answered upon application by letter or otherwise. W. J. Palmer, Principal.[395]

Eventually, the White school welcomed 126 students, 40 blind and 86 deaf, to the fall term.[396] With the White school's teachers and students set, the board turned to the Colored School.

On September 3, Ashley created the position of Superintendent of the Colored School. President Coleman nominated James Harrison (not to be confused with James H. Harris) for the position, with a salary of $75 a year. During the October 7, 1868, board meeting, Palmer reported that Harrison had accepted the offer. That same day, Bryant Lee, one of the 15 Black

[392] Board Meeting Minutes, August 1, 1868, October 7, 1868.
[393] Board Meeting Minutes, August 3, 1868.
[394] Public Laws and Resolutions of the State of North Carolina passed by the General Assembly at its Session of 1913. P 21–30.
[395] *Weekly Standard*, September 1, 1868.
[396] Annual Reports, 1868, 110.

delegates at the 1868 Constitutional Convention, joined Ashley, Harris, and Coates at their executive meeting.[397]

As discussed above, the previous fall, the Colored School had faltered due to the difficulty of purchasing a location for the school. Palmer had a location in mind, but neither the board of trustees nor the Freedman's Bureau would provide the necessary funds. Lee attended the executive meeting to propose another arrangement for a school building to the new board. He explained that he believed the AMA could be persuaded to rent their Washington school location.[398] Interestingly, F. P. Brewer, the board's treasurer, had built the school the previous year. Located on East South Street between McDowell and Manly, it sat about a half-mile from the White school. The main building was a two-story wood-frame structure.[399] It is not clear whether this was the same building Palmer described during his discussions with the War Department the previous year. Regardless, Lee moved to authorize Ashley and Palmer "to secure the building." In addition, he wanted the Committee on Repairs to be allowed to "make such improvements as needed." The executive board immediately approved Lee's motion.[400]

Palmer acted quickly, as he had throughout the process. At the board's next meeting, he reported that he had contacted the secretary for the AMA and that they had agreed to let the board rent the Washington school. Financial terms still needed to be worked out. The board made an offer of $300 a year for three years, plus an option to rent the property for an additional five years. Eventually, the board settled on $325 a month and an option to rent the location until 1878.[401]

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[397] Board Meeting Minutes, October 7, 1868.
[398] Board Meeting Minutes, October 7, 1868.
[399] Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of North Carolina for the Year 1868 (hereafter referred to as Annual Reports 1869) (Raleigh: M. S. Littlefield, State Printer & Binder, 1869, 17.
[400] Board Meeting Minutes, October 7, 1868.
[401] Board Meeting Minutes, November 10, 1868.

The Colored School had generated little to no public criticism from conservative Whites during the Constitutional Convention, but that changed in August. The conservative press launched an attack aimed at Brewer. On August 4, the *Western Democrat* reported on a troubling development that had emerged at the board's first meeting. The article explained that "[t]his institution has organized by the election of Robert Coleman, Attorney General, President, and Reverend Fisk P. Brewer, Secretary. It is alleged by someone that Mr. Brewer determined to come south to establish in Raleigh a mixed school of whites and blacks." The article claimed that Brewer had "affirmed" the charge and expects to have such a school before he leaves Raleigh." It claimed to know nothing "as to the truth or falsity of the statement but "presumed that neither the President or Secretary would object to the mixture."[402]

Newspaper attacks on Brewer as an integrationist continued through the fall and winter. At the board's November 10, 1868, meeting, he pushed back. Brewer made a series of motions aimed at guaranteeing that the Black and White schools would stay separate. First, he moved, "Colored pupils for the coming year shall be taught in a separate premise known as the colored school." Second, the school would be "placed under the official management of one of the directors, who would call on the principal and board to assist him." Although the board had been pursuing two separate schools from the beginning, they aimed to blunt outside criticism by passing Brewer's resolutions.[403]

In November 1868, with the Colored School location finally settled, the directors turned their attention to finding the school's staff. Unlike the White school, the board had to interview and choose new people to fill positions. Maria Harrison (no relation to James Harrison) defeated Mrs. Sally Hayward, Mrs. Ruben Maio, and Mrs. William Maio (the last two related to Cuffy

[402] *Western Democrat*, August 4, 1868.
[403] Board Meeting Minutes, November 10, 1868.

Maio, another Black delegate at the 1868 convention) for the position of the School's matron.[404] All involved in the school's creation understood that Black blind students would represent the smallest subgroup. In fact, according to the 1869 Annual Report, only six blind children attended out of a total enrollment of 154. [405] As a consequence, the board only hired one teacher specifically dedicated to their education. Brewer nominated Molly H. Taylor, who was approved without comment. The board offered her $25 per month, including board. Notably, this salary was five dollars more than that of Narcissa Dupree, who taught more students. It is not clear if Taylor's job description included teaching both boys and girls, as the White school maintained a gender divide. Bryant Lee had ensured that John Simpson received a raise of $35 per year at the board's October 7 meeting, which perhaps meant that Simpson was expected to teach both races. Taylor, however, remained the only teacher officially hired to teach Black blind children.[406] Nevertheless, a glaring omission from the staff remained.

The North Carolina White blind school followed an educational model that had been in place since Samuel Howe and others established blind schools in the 1830s. This model included some type of mechanical training. Those in charge of educating the blind wanted to provide students with instruction and experience in specific skills and trades that they could apply after leaving the school. At the board's October 7 meeting, Palmer presented a report that described "broom making" and "cane chair production" as promising trades for male students.[407] Moreover, blind schools usually maintained a workshop whose finished products were either sold to the public or used by the institution. These closed workshops remained the model for

[404] Board Meeting Minutes, November 10, 1868.
[405] This is actually misstated by Palmer as seven, but one of the girls he lists is deaf. Annual Reports, 1869.
[406] Board Meeting Minutes, November 10, 1868.
[407] Board Meeting Minutes, October 7, 1868.

blind employment up through the twentieth century.[408] The narrow subset of jobs they provided offered no path for advancement or expansion into the broader workforce. Despite this type of training's ultimate failure to provide a long-term solution for blind poverty, in 1868, it was cutting-edge pedagogy. Regardless of this fact, the board did not hire a mechanical teacher to teach Black males any type of trade.

The reason for this omission was simple but profound. The Washington school building had no space for shops. Washington was designed with the educational needs of traditional sighted students in mind. Regular rooms could be converted into dorms and classrooms, but workshops were not practicable. Ironically, the speed and ease with which the board of directors had found a site to host the school set up an inherently unequal educational situation for Black blind males.

The Opening Class

The first class of blind students admitted into the school consisted of six children. To be sure, Blacks in North Carolina had been availing themselves of post-emancipation educational opportunities since the Federal Army Captain Austin Collier opened a school in New Bern for freedmen in 1863. Nevertheless, the six children were the first Black blind students to attend a state-sanctioned school anywhere in the nation. The six were born before slavery's end, though their status before emancipation is unclear. The group included four girls and two boys. Caroline Miller was born on December 13, 1853, in Mecklenburg; at age 17, she was the oldest student. Jane (Janie) Cox, who during her time at school underwent a name change to Burnett, had been born in 1855 and was from Wake. Virginia "Jennie" Washington had been born in 1858 and was

[408] Floyd Matson, "Sheltered Workshops and Blind Alleys" in *Hope Deferred* (University of California Press, 2020), 249–268. For a more positive perspective, see Kim E. Neilson, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 94–105.

also from Wake. The youngest, Elizabeth "Lizzie" Perkins, was nine years old. She was born in the autumn of 1859 and hailed from Chowan. The two boys were Jane's older brother, Edward "Ned" Cox, who was 17 years old and from Wake, and Ely Pearsal, who was born on August 30, 1860, and lived in New Hanover. Most of the information known about them was recorded in the school's personal history questionnaires. The forms were not specific to the Colored School and did not ask about students' previous status as enslaved or free. They addressed topics such as the duration and cause of blindness, family and medical history, and previous education. Unfortunately, only Caroline Miller, Jane Cox, Lizzie Perkins, and Eli Pearsal's forms remain in the Colored School's archives.[409]

The first series of questions, after name and birthdate, focused on the details of the students' blindness. Specifically, the form wanted to know if they had been "born blind." If the answer was no, the cause of their blindness was to be listed. Further, it asked, "What degree of blindness did the child experience?" Finally, "Had the child undergone any attempts to reverse blindness?" Out of the four students, Lizzie Perkins and Jane Cox were born blind, with Cox listed as "total" and Perkins as "nearly total." Miller was also totally blind, but she lost her sight at the age of four due to "scrofula." Eli Pearsal lost his sight when he was 18 months old. He was listed as "partial" with a cryptic description of the cause of his blindness: "cutting teeth." Pearsal's form failed to record if any "attempts to reverse his blindness" had been made, but both Cox and Miller's forms indicated that they had undergone some treatment—in Miller's case, twice.[410]

[409] State School for the Blind and Deaf. General records, 1843–1945. 0.4 cu. ft. (1 Fibredex box). 3.6 cu. ft. (18 volumes). 4 reels. (Hereafter cited as Entrance Forms.)
[410] Ibid.

The questionnaire included a short medical history. It asked whether the student had any other "physical or mental" disabilities and whether they had "previously received any vaccinations or contracted any diseases?" Although none of the students reported physical problems, Pearsal's answer to the question about mental problems was blank, while the others were marked "no." All but Lizzie had previously contracted the measles, while Jane had also had whooping cough. None had received any vaccinations.[411]

The questionnaire closed with a short family history. Parents were to be listed with their occupations, in addition to anyone living in the home. Although every one of the students was born while slavery still existed, as noted above, the forms did not ask about a child's or their parents' status before 1865. Unfortunately, the recorded parental occupations are ambiguous. Caroline's father Grandison worked as a "farmer," while Lizzie's father John had been a "blacksmith," though he died before 1869. For the other two, Eli's father Simon had no listed occupation, and Jane's answer was left blank. Caroline's mother Violet, Lizzie's mother Grace, and Eli's mother Araminta were all listed, but none of their jobs were included.[412] According to the 1870 Census, however, Araminta Pearsal worked as a laundress, and Morning Burnett (Cox) kept house.[413] The form also asked if any other family members were blind. Jane's form was mysteriously marked, as she—along with Caroline and Lizzie—indicated that they had no family members or ancestors who had been blind. Eli, on the other hand, had an "aunt with one eye."[414] The fact that the Colored School listed his one-eyed aunt as blind in a small part validates this

[411] Ibid.
[412] Ibid.
[413] 1870 Census for Morning Cox (Morning Irvin); Year: 1870; Census Place: Fork River, Wayne, North Carolina; Roll: M593_1165 Page: 33. For Araminta Pearsal, see Year: 1870: Census Place: Williamton, New Hanover, North Carolina; Roll: N593_1151; Page: 413B.
[414] Entrance Forms.

dissertation's interpretive decision to do the same when examining nineteenth-century sources as discussed in Chapter 1.

The six students embarked on an eight-year academic program. Like all other aspects of the school's administration, one board controlled both institutions. The only two texts that are known to have been used that year were the *North Carolina Primary Reader* and Sir Walter Scott's *Lady of the Lake*, both of which Palmer had transcribed into braille.[415] Over time, the school's principals changed, and its expectations evolved, but the two department's curricula mirrored each other. The 1872 annual report written by S. F. Tomlinson, who was appointed principal after Palmer departed, laid out the school's standards:

> The course of study pursued at the institution embraces all the English branches, consisting of spelling, reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, grammar, and the sciences, and ordinarily requires eight years to complete it. The blind are taught, in addition, vocal and instrumental music.[416]

The 1872 annual report highlighted Black blind students' participation in the school's public examinations. Tomlinson commented, "Our first annual examination of the classes began on Thursday, June 29th, and continued four days." In these public tests, local dignitaries connected to the school quizzed students, "Testing their accuracy and scholarship." Tomlinson explained that the students were "Examined on the studies they had pursued during the year, without any knowledge of what questions would be asked; in this way a very correct idea of what they had learned could be ascertained." To demonstrate the students' successful showing, Tomlinson included an article written by a local reporter who had witnessed the performances:

> We attended yesterday, the regular examination of the blind pupils of the above Institute. There are in this department nearly 50 pupils, male and female. The examination was conducted principally by the superintendent, who put the pupils to a

[415] Annual Report, 1869, 113.
[416] Twenty-sixth Annual Report of the North Carolina Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind from January 1st, 1871, to December 1st, 1871 (Raleigh: Printed at the press of the institution, 1871), 15.

> severe and critical test in their various studies, but they not only proved themselves adequate to the task, but exhibited a remarkable degree of proficiency highly commendable and complementary to the professors of the department. We witnessed the examination of a class in algebra who mastered the most difficult problems mentally with as much ease and accuracy as if they could have seen to write.[417]

Despite the reporter's stigma-based assumption that blind students would be academically behind their sighted counterparts, he clearly thought they performed well. To be sure, the June tests mainly consisted of White students, but those from the Colored School also participated. According to Tomlinson, "Most of the [black] classes exhibited a marked degree of success and improvement at the June examinations."[418]

The largest difference between the education provided to White and Black students was the lack of mechanical trades available to Black children at the Washington campus. Palmer believed deeply in the mechanical department's role in providing students with a means of support after they graduated. He lamented the school's failure to completely prepare all students in his 1869 Annual Report:

> I am firmly convinced that we do not pay sufficient attention and devote sufficient money to the mechanical instruction of our pupils, and I would earnestly recommend that steps be taken to increase the efficiency of this department and thus enable our pupils, when their education is complete, to go into the world with a good trade as a means of livelihood.[419]

Palmer's words glossed over the department's disparities. Mechanical education was divided by gender and disability. As Palmer explained, female students of all disabilities learned "[s]uewing, knitting, and other such work as is suited to them."[420] This work, however, did not

[417] Twenty-seventh Annual Report of the North Carolina Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind from December 1st, 1871, to November 1st, 1872 (Raleigh: Printed at the press of the institution, 1872), 18.
[418] Ibid., 18–19.
[419] Annual Report, 1869, 102.
[420] Ibid., 103.

require a workshop, which allowed Caroline, Janie, Jennie, and Lizzie to participate equally with White females, though in a different location. In contrast, male deaf and blind students performed different trades, with blind stigmas dictating that the blind were suited for fewer occupations. Regardless, all male Black students missed out on mechanical education. Whereas no workshops existed at the Washington school, the White campus housed a broom shop for blind students and shops devoted to shoe making, cabinet making, general woodwork, and printing for the deaf. In 1873, Tomlinson wrote with regret, "a few of the colored pupils, as yet, have been taught any trade. The premises now occupied by that department are so small and ill arranged that we have no room for shops."[421] While the Washington school building allowed the Colored School to open, it unintentionally prevented Black male students from gaining a full and equal education.

It must be noted that the trades that free society planned for the blind to perform (as expressed through the state's education system) were far fewer than those they performed while enslaved. Gardener, washer, field laborer, boat man, blacksmith, cooper, knitter, and musician were all roles that blind bondspeople played.[422] The fact that making brooms, sewing, and music were the only trades free society could imagine for newly freed blind Blacks speaks to the limiting power of stigmas rather than any inability on free blind Black people's part. If those in charge of the Colored School had engaged their students in a greater variety of trades and tasks, they may have better prepared them for life in free society—though to be sure, then as now, nothing could have been done to lessen a sighted employer's reluctance to hire a blind worker.

[421] Twenty-eighth Annual Report of the North Carolina Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind from November 1st, 1872, to November 1st, 1873 (Raleigh: Printed at the press of the institution, 1873), 15–18.
[422] See Chapter 3 of this Dissertation, which discusses these occupations.

The Republican Party's electoral success in 1868 caused a violent political backlash within North Carolina. In the November 3, 1870, election, White Democrats used brutality and intimidation to take back the General Assembly. They then used their legislative power to engineer Holden's impeachment and removal as governor. With the state government firmly back in Democrats' hands, they not only replaced the entire board of directors for the blind school but renamed it the board of trustees. Palmer also lost his job, though whether he was fired or left of his own accord is unclear; S. F. Tomlinson replaced him as principal.[423] However, the same stigmas about the disabled that allowed the school to move through the Constitutional Convention without debate prevented Redemption's negative effects from going beyond these changes. Throughout the 1870s, the assembly never reduced funding for the Colored School; in fact, it passed special appropriation bills that completed the work Republicans started.

In the 1872 annual report, the board of trustees included a plea for the assembly to fix the problem of Black male students not being able to learn any mechanical trade. They wanted the legislature to approve funding for an entirely new building. Although "the progress of the [black] pupils is highly commendable," the trustees felt, "there are many conveniences yet needed to facilitate their advancement in some of the branches of instruction, which the Board regrets it is not in their power to provide." The school's attendance had grown from 26 to 45, and even less space existed now. "They continue to occupy the building rented by the American Missionary Society of New York," explained the trustees, arguing that "as this part of the school is as likely to increase as the other, it becomes the duty of the state to provide suitable buildings for its accommodation and not be dependent on a foreign association." They appealed to the state's history as a trailblazer in blind education to urge the legislature to take the matter under

[423] Annual Reports, 1871, 17.

advisement: “As North Carolina was the first to lead in this branch of public charity, we hope she will be the last that fails to foster it.”[424] Despite resistance from some conservatives, the assembly listened to the trustees and passed the appropriation.[425]

As construction began in 1873, James H. Harris assumed the role of Director of the Colored School.[426] He served in the position for the next three years while the new building was constructed. The new principal, John Nichols, believed that with the planned improvements to the Colored Department, “It would be possible to teach the same mechanical branches that are taught the whites.”[427] The separate and equal school that Harris and other Republicans had envisioned in 1868 was finally within reach. However, a new problem emerged.

The building’s plans called for a two-story structure. The assembly had mandated that bricks from the state penitentiary be used in its construction, which led the trustees to assume that the building should be made of brick. A brick building, however, cost more to build than one made of wood. The trustees opened the contract up to public bids and received eight, but the cheapest and best plan came in at $12,500. As the assembly was not in session, the trustees acted on their own. “It was with great reluctance,” explained Nichols to the assembly in his 1873 annual report, that “your committee entered into a contract for the construction of a building costing more than the amount appropriated by the Legislature; but after a thorough canvass of the subject and a full consideration of the matter they felt justified in their action.”[428] Those who wanted to see the school built had committed the state to spend another $7,500 without

[424] Annual Reports, 1872, 12.
[425] Weekly Evening Post and Dispatch, May 6, 1873.
[426] James Harris Papers.
[427] Annual Reports 1873, 17.
[428] Annual Reports 1873, 18.

consulting anyone. But yet again, stigma outweighed race: the assembly relented and passed another special bill, though only for $6,500.

In the following year, 1874, Harris—the last member of the original group intent on opening the school who remained involved with its management—oversaw the process of moving into the new building. The move included the remaining students from the original 1869 class, as well as all other Black students. In 1875, the department hired another teacher for the blind and erected a building with a workshop specifically for their use.[429] In 1878, the principal described the school as a "handsome and commodious brick building erected at a cost of 15,000 dollars, heated by steam and with all the other conveniences of the institution for the whites. They are well instructed by teachers fully competent and are taught the mechanical branches as thoroughly as the whites."[430]

The question that Black parents of blind children had asked after the war—what about the education of their children?—had finally been addressed. Blacks and Whites like Harris and Palmer believed that every Black child deserved an education regardless of their ability to see, hear, or speak.

Almost all of the original six students graduated. Ned Cox left the school two years into the program, but the rest of the original six students, Caroline, Lizzie, Janie, Jennie, and Eli, all completed their course of study. Unfortunately, their education does not appear to have yielded many employment opportunities. According to the 1880 census, Lizzie Perkins moved to New Haven Connecticut with her mother, Grace. However, Lizzie did not live with Grace. Instead,

[429] Twenty-ninth Annual Report of the North Carolina Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind from November 1st, 1873, to November 1st, 1874 (Raleigh: Printed at the press of the institution, 1874), 17–18.
[430] Biannual Report of the North Carolina Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind from January 1st, 1877, to January 1st, 1879, 32nd and 33rd sessions. (Raleigh: Published by order of the Board of Trustees, 1879), 5.

she lived in a home run by Susan Hall that housed 19 other women and girls who had a range of physical issues, including blindness, fits, and lying in. Lizzie was the only Black female who lived on the premises.[431] Virginia "Jennie" Washington lived by herself in 1880. Though she was single with no listed occupation, it appears that she had married and been widowed by 1900. She lived in New Haven, Connecticut with three children and was listed as the head of household. The census listed her occupation as "Laundress."[432]

Conclusion

The end of slavery in 1865 marked a massive shift in the life of blind bondspeople. Although still Black, they emerged into a free world where disability, not race, was the main factor dictating their chances for self-support and advancement. Put simply, if begging represented the main occupation available to the White blind in the 1800s, how could Blacks expect any different?99 Personal experience with blindness made Henry Parker keenly aware of destitution's dangers. Besides the blind, the group that felt the problem's urgency most keenly were the parents of blind Black children, who pictured freedom as more than their kids having to beg for food as long as they lived. A number of these North Carolina parents refused to accept their children's destitution without a fight and began to advocate on their children's behalf.

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[431] Year 1880; Census Place: New Haven, New Haven, Connecticut; Roll: 106; Page 380B; Enumeration District: 096; Lizzie Perkins.

[432] Virginia must have also gone by the name Jennie, as that is her name in the 1870 Census taken at the school for the blind. Year: 1870; Census Place: Raleigh, West Ward, Wake, North Carolina; Roll: M593_1162; Page: 227A. In 1880, however, her name is written as Jane. The Census taker clearly marks down "blind," which distinguishes her from other "Jennies and Virginias." Year: 1880; Census Place: Williamton, New Hanover, North Carolina; Role: 974; Page: 55D; Enumeration District: 142; Jane Washington.

1900 Census. There is some question as to whether this is indeed Virginia Washington. There is no notation that she is blind. However, following her possible name changes through the Census—Jennie Washington (1870), Jane Washington (1880), and Virginia Bell (1900), which carries the additional notation "Alternate Record: Jennie Washington"—strongly points to a connection. Year: 1900; Census Place: New Haven, New Haven, Connecticut; Page: 12; Enumeration District: 0379; FHL microfilm: 1240146.

North Carolina's Black community, intent on transforming the political power they gained after emancipation into the ability for all people to openly obtain an education, rallied around the parents' cause. Palmer, along with political figures such as Harris, Hood, and Ashley, worked to establish and grow a school that could provide free blind Blacks a way to edify themselves intellectually and learn a useful trade. To be sure, the action of creating a separate school for blind children segregated blind Blacks away from sighted Blacks, as had been the general pattern throughout Western history. Moreover, the school failed to serve as a launching pad for widespread blind financial independence. Regardless of the school's ultimate results, those involved in opening the Colored Department worked in earnest to heed the parents' call and to give the blind the best chance they could.

The school began with a class of six blind students in 1869 (Elizabeth Perkins, Jane Cox, Caroline Miller, Virginia Washington, Edward Cox, and Eli Pearsal), who without emancipation might have lived their entire lives as blind bondspeople. From there, the student body had expanded to a total enrollment of 82 blind students in 1909; this class was housed in its own school. All students received an intellectual and mechanical education. That year's Annual Report claimed that "[m]ost of our graduates go on to support themselves."100 Regardless of the accuracy of this claim, the individuals who conceived of and realized the Colored Department in 1868 and 1869 led the way in attempting to bridge the gap between slavery and freedom. Without the chattel principle's perverse incentive toward blind employment, blind free Blacks faced a dire new challenge. Men like Harris and Palmer built the Colored Department so that, with training and education, blind Blacks would have the best chance freedom offered.

CONCLUSION

On July 2, 1867, four months after Congress passed the Reconstruction Acts, permitting Black men to vote for delegates to their state constitutional conventions, March Woodruff, now a free man, stood in front of a registrar in Chatham County, Georgia and swore a loyalty oath to the United States. To affirm the truth of his pledge, March signed his name with an X and officially registered to vote.[433] March's action marked a lifetime of transformation. Born in 1810 as a sighted slave, he went from slave to free, and from sighted to blind in the span of a lifetime. He lived his later years on the Georgia coast with his wife Myra and their three adult children.[434] Significantly, March's life as a blind slave reflected the experiences of many antebellum blind bondspeople.

Like most of the blind, March was born with sight. He learned to walk, run, work, and interact with those around him, all while he had vision. Some type of infection or accident damaged his eyes, after which his enslaver, George Kollock, sent him to be treated by a doctor. Woodruff's visit to a professional for medical care was certainly not the norm, as Black and White lay healers were more accessible financially and geographically. Regardless, the medical event that caused his blindness and the treatment he received represented a singular experience for him, but a common experience shared by all blind slaves. Once March was blind, Kollock reduced his hand rating and moved his daily tasks from the production side to the support side of the plantation.

When reading the Kollock papers and studying the lives, families, and work patterns of the various bondspeople they chronicle, one is struck by March's ordinariness. He was one of

[433] Georgia, Office of the Governor. Returns of qualified voters under the Reconstruction Act, 1867. Georgia State Archives, Morrow, Georgia.
[434] 1870 Census, Year: 1870; Census Place: District 6, Chatham, Georgia; Role: 238A, Page: 238A.

Kollock's original slaves and is mentioned consistently in all sections of Kollock's account book throughout the 24 years it covers. Despite being blind for at least eleven of those years, March's work and family patterns were virtually identical to those of the sighted bondspeople on Kollock's plantation. He received yearly allowances for tools and blankets, had a wife and children, communicated with the overseer, experienced sick days, and worked. The only evidence that he was different from his fellow bondspeople is the single word "blind" written on the Annual List of Negros.[435] Of course, that word and the meaning behind it suggest that March, like any other blind slave, would be anything but ordinary.

The word *blind* carries long-standing negative connotations. When used in everyday language—as in the statements "the blind leading the blind," "flying blind," or "blind to the fact"—it means the absence of knowledge or understanding.[436] In antebellum America, when applied to an individual who could not see, it also implied that one was weak, helpless, immobile, isolated, and, in the case of the enslaved, unsound and useless. The strength of negative beliefs among the sighted regarding blind people's physical and mental abilities cannot be overstated. Ironically, slavery, though based on physical labor, was one of the only institutions or systems in the Western tradition that contradicted these stereotypes and employed blind workers.[437] To be sure, Southerners used stigma-driven language and vocabulary when they discussed blind slaves, but they ignored their own words when it came time to assign daily tasks.

[435] The 1850 List of Negros was the first such list that recorded March as blind. The notation continued until the Civil War. George J. Kollock Plantation Journals, #407, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
[436] https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/blind, accessed 05/26/2022.
[437] The family-based labor system also fell into this category.

Slavery's hand rating system provided the discursive compromise that made this contradiction routine. This was a scale that owners and potential purchasers used to estimate how much physical labor any bondsperson could be expected to perform. It ranged from zero to one and progressed in increments of 0.25. Many factors led an owner to assign a bondsperson a reduced hand rating, with blindness and the stigma it carried being an important one. The sliding scale, however, demonstrated numerically that slave owners expected everyone, regardless of blindness or other physical limitations, to be part of the daily work schedule. In the end, the rating system allowed owners to express their belief in stigmas, while at the same time making it clear that they had every intention of taking advantage of the physical skills and senses a blind slave still possessed.

The chattel principle altered the normal relationship between sighted employers and blind workers. To claim a person as property and assign a dollar amount to their body represented an inherently devaluing act. This idea, however, takes for granted that a community would deem the individual to have a certain worth outside of captivity. In the case of blind bondspeople, the commodification process granted them societal value that the blind who lived in free society did not have. Even if the owner had not purchased a blind slave outright, bondspeople without sight were still part of an owner's permanent workforce and therefore represented an annual expense. As a result, owners considered a blind bondsperson who did not work a total financial loss, which drove them to ignore stigmas and find or create jobs for blind slaves. In the Northern free-labor system, however, where the blind competed with the sighted for jobs and pay, stereotypes that the blind were helpless, weak, and immobile virtually guaranteed they would lose out. Without an incentive, Northern employers would not hire a blind worker or retain a sighted one who suddenly lost his or her sight. This situation left the majority of free blind people, as Samuel

Howe stated, "(b)y the highway in the humble attitude of the bigger."[438] Put another way, the economic realities of slavery gave the sighted a direct interest in the potential physical abilities of the blind that was absent in free-labor situations.

In addition, blind slaves' actual physical abilities and owners' need to fill support-side jobs cleared the way for stigmas to be ignored. First and most importantly, blind slaves (and the blind in general) were not immobile, weak, or helpless. The physical and mental abilities of individuals, of course, varied but the blind generally adapted to the lack of sight and developed strategies to travel, work, and perform normal, everyday actions. Despite owners' impulse to reduce a blind slave's hand rating, it was literally blind slaves' hands that allowed them to complete the work that owners assigned. Touch-based tasks required a blind bondsperson to feel, grab, and move objects in certain ways. Using the hands to view an object and collect information about the world, though foreign to the sighted, was normal to the blind and did not represent a novel activity. A blind bondsperson might need to learn how to perform a new skill, but since blindness does not negatively affect an individual's mental functions, that did not present an intractable problem.

Second, since owners needed to produce a cash crop for the market and maintain a household at the same time, they had various jobs on the production and support sides of the plantation that they could assign to a blind slave. Production-side work centered on producing sellable crops; it was characterized by owners pushing slaves to work faster in order to yield ever-larger quantities of goods. Those in support-side jobs, on the other hand, maintained and cared for the house and groups of a plantation, as well as the Black and White residents. This work could be done at a slower pace and lacked the same expectations that owners had for those

[438] Samuel Gridley Howe, "Education of the Blind," *North American Review* (July 1833), https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/issues/education-blind-1833/ Accessed 03/03/2022.

on the production side. Support-side jobs covered a wide variety of skilled and unskilled occupations that ranged from cook, washer, seamstress, and gardener to blacksmith and cooper. The owners who had no intention of putting a blind bondsperson in the field found a job or task for them to perform on the support side. To this end, once March lost his sight, he longer worked with cotton but rather transported people to and from the island on which the plantation was located. This support-side job did not generate capital directly; instead, it filled a critical role, without which the island plantation would not have been possible.

Analyzing blind slaves' roles within the system of slavery drives home the point that slave owners were not simply focused on production and profit. On a daily basis, owners assigned a portion of their workforce to spend hours engaged in tasks that were never intended to make money. Far from being incidental, these support-side jobs allowed plantations and Southern homes to function. The fact that owners had a limited and relatively constant number of laborers resulted in slavery operating as a full-employment work system. As a result, owners assigned daily jobs and tasks in an attempt to ensure they had a zero or close-to-zero unemployment rate among their workforce. Blind slaves, who, if free, would have most likely fallen into the ranks of unemployed blind beggars, dramatically proved how easily owners overlooked their own ideals in an effort to squeeze every ounce of strength and physical ability out of their bondspeople.

Racism and stigmas shaped the limitations and opportunities blind Black people faced within and out of slavery. These ideologies, however, did not play equal roles in their lives at all times. Before emancipation, racism dictated that blind Black people's living and work conditions were aligned with those of the enslaved Black community. Regardless of a bondsperson's sight, their African ancestry meant that the institution of slavery controlled the terms of their lives. Put

simply, blind slaves shared the depredations, limitations, and demands of those around them. After emancipation, however, the lives of blind Black people became more aligned with those of the broader blind community. The opening of the North Carolina School for the Blind signaled the change. In free society, stigma dictated that the blind were generally separated from the sighted. Accordingly, the Colored School was residential and removed blind Black children from their local communities. Once on campus, they lived, ate, and slept around other blind children 24 hours a day and followed a specially-designed educational curriculum. To be sure, the Colored School was an all-Black institution, but it was also an all-blind institution. In fact, educational segregation based on race ended before the movement to mainstream or integrate blind students into sighted classrooms began.[439]

Analyzing the blind in the context of slavery allows long-held stereotypes to be shattered. Although forced and unpaid, the support-side work and touch-based tasks blind slaves performed demonstrated that they could use their hands, ears, and brains to function as productive members of a workforce. To be sure, blindness presented real obstacles for slaves, but the human capacity to adapt is just as real. This is a truth those without vision already know, but the persistence of stigmas about blindness makes it critically important that a broader audience understand the legacy of blind bondspeople.

When an individual loses his or her sight, there is always a physical or medical cause. Although I am not a medical historian, I have made an attempt to catalog some of those causes. This effort gestures toward a third approach to disability studies. The social model focuses on attitudes and perspectives, which leaves little room for the personal medical event that led to the

[439] In 1975, Congress passed the Education for Handicapped Children Act, reauthorized and renamed in 1990. This allowed disabled children to attend school in the least restrictive setting possible. https://sites.ed.gov/idea/IDEA-History. Accessed 01/03/2022.

loss of sight, while the medical model, though it acknowledges the physical event, treats it as a problem that needed to be solved. This realistic third approach to disability and blindness acknowledges the importance of blind people's stories of losing their sight but presents them as facts, not tragedies. In the end, these individual incidents tied this group of bondspeople together. For historians to properly represent their blind subjects, they must include these stories.

Shortly after deciding to pursue this project, I explained to some sighted friends that my dissertation would explore what happened to blind slaves in the South. One commented that it would be the shortest dissertation in history, remarking, "You will only need to write, 'They killed them.'"[440] I learned later he had simply restated, in a more active and concise sentence, Theodore Dwight Weld's 1839 claim, "It would be in the interest of the owners of these slaves to shorten their days."[441] Before researching the topic, I had no evidence that could prove or disprove his theory. After all, historians of slavery had basically left blind bondspeople out of their narratives. I understood the stigmas that led him to make the comment, though. The sighted rarely consider blind people workers; therefore, it made logical sense to him that slave owners, who he believed were simply focused on producing crops, would rid themselves of bondspeople who could not work. Although the sensational aspect of the wholesale murder of blind bondspeople across the South, like the killings that took place on the slave ship Le Rodeur, would have certainly warranted more than a single sentence, the historical evidence contradicts such a brutal conclusion. As this dissertation makes clear, the historical record demonstrates that instead of killing blind bondspeople, slave owners did something almost as radical: they put them to work.

[440] This was a conversation I had at a social event in Indianapolis, Indiana in August 2012.
[441] Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), 136.

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