NEGROES FOR SALE: THE SLAVE TRADE IN ANTEBELLUM KENTUCKY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Notre Dame
in Partial Fulfillment for the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Notre Dame, Indiana
December 2008
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This cultural history examines slave trading in Kentucky from 1820 to 1860. I argue that instead of slavery declining in Kentucky during the antebellum period, the state’s system of intrastate slave speculation, which included the practices of slave hiring and slave catching, provided Bluegrass masters with a profitable and flexible system of circulating enslaved black labor throughout communities and within the state. Slavery in Kentucky existed in a diverse agricultural economy, not a cotton producing economy as in the Lower South and this type of slavery characterized by masters who possessed five or fewer slaves shaped the practice of slave speculation in Kentucky. White Kentuckians were involved in the slave market not just as professional flesh traders but also as hirers, auctioneers, executors, sheriffs, and slave catchers. This study of slave speculation in Kentucky expands our existing definition of slave trading in the antebellum South to include the practices of slave hiring and slave catching and also reveals how the speculation in human beings affected the potency of antislavery movements in the Upper South.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my dissertation committee for all of their support and feedback while writing this study. Gail Bederman, Richard Pierce, and Thomas P. Slaughter provided me with insightful comments at various stages of the writing process. I give special thanks to David Waldstreicher, who as my advisor for the dissertation was instrumental in my completing this work. My gratitude to David goes beyond the dissertation though. I will always be deeply indebted to David for his unwavering support and for sharing his keen historiographical observations with me.

I also benefited greatly from the experience and expertise of the many archivists and librarians that I encountered. I would like to thank the special collections at the University of Kentucky, Eastern Kentucky University, and Berea College for their assistance. I am also indebted to the archivists at the Kentucky State Libraries and Archives in Frankfort who helped me to locate circuit court cases and other records. I would like to thank the Filson Historical Society in Louisville for awarding me a Filson Fellowship, which I received at the early stages of writing the dissertation. I would like to especially give thanks to reference specialist Pen Bogert who shared his expertise and love of Kentucky history with me over lunch while I was a fellow at the Filson. I am also indebted to Mrs. B.J. Gooch special collections librarian at Transylvania University in Lexington. She guided me to court cases in the collections regarding diseased slaves that had either been underutilized or not used at all by previous historians.
And last but not least I have to give a special thanks to my wife Penny and my son Jonathan. Although they had to often contend with an absentee husband and father through much of the dissertating, their love and support for me was indefatigable.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is a cultural history of slave speculation in Kentucky from roughly 1820 to 1860 and explores both formal and informal transactions in the flesh trade. The existing historical records—newspapers, court documents, letters, and speeches—indicate that the intrastate slave trade in Kentucky was a flexible system where white Kentuckians encountered the traffic as buyers, traders, hirers, auctioneers, executors, sheriffs, slave catchers, and sometimes, as opponents to slavery. People from all strata of Kentucky society, not just professional slave traders and masters, found themselves involved in the tangled web of the slave traffic.

Readers may ask why should scholars be concerned with a study of the slave trade in a single state and why Kentucky? What made the flesh commerce in the Bluegrass state different than other southern states? An examination of the slave commerce in Kentucky is needed because in Kentucky slavery and the slave traffic existed in a diverse agricultural economy characterized by masters who owned five or fewer slaves. This scenario is in contrast to the dominant paradigm of the slave trade that is founded on the study of the culture and political economy of the Deep South. Large plantations and the production of cotton did not characterize slavery in Kentucky. Kentucky slaves resided in circumstances that were typical for the majority of slaves. Over half of southern slaves
lived on small farms with five or fewer slaves. If the cultivation of cotton helped to shape the practices of the interstate slave trade, then the particular economic conditions of Kentucky helped to shape the practices of intrastate slave speculation there.

Michael Tadman, in his seminal Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South, argues that after the close of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808, Kentucky and other states in the Upper South acted as a “stocking raising system” that supplied the markets of New Orleans and Natchez with excess slaves for cotton cultivation. Because of this incredible need for labor in the Lower South, slaves in the Upper South had a greater chance of ending up being sold down the river. Tadman asserts that nearly one out of every three slave children residing in the upper South in 1820 was sold away by 1860. However, an examination of the intrastate slave trade in Kentucky reveals a flexible slave market that allowed masters to profit from slave labor without selling excess slaves to the Lower South. Slave brokers from Lexington, Louisville, and other cities scoured the surrounding countryside searching for likely slaves to sell out of the state, but also to sell or hire within the state. By 1840, for Kentucky masters hiring out slaves to local entrepreneurs, rope manufacturers, steamboat operators, and railroad companies, was just as profitable as selling them down the river to New Orleans or Natchez. Newspaper editors, merchants, and even county officials acted as middlemen in the intrastate traffic facilitating the movement of slave labor in the community and across Kentucky.

Kentucky’s black population experienced the slave trade simultaneously as

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commodities and as human beings. Sometimes, blacks found themselves in the position as buyers either negotiating prices for their own freedom or of loved ones. Many Kentucky slaves who were allowed to hire out negotiated better lives for themselves and their families by finding more humane masters. Many black families felt the sting of the slave market as the demand for labor in both the Lower South and in Kentucky increased throughout the antebellum period. One scholar has calculated that at least half of all slave families in the Upper South were destroyed because of a sale of loved one through the interstate slave trade. If the number of slaves sold in the interstate commerce was taken into consideration then the preceding figure would surely be higher.\(^2\) Those slaves who fled for their freedom experienced the slave market from a different vantage--as fugitives. Although they were outside of Kentucky, fugitive slaves were still commodities in the state’s slave market just as their fellow slaves who were still in bondage. Kentucky masters acknowledged the importance of an effective system of catching runaways in maintaining the value of their slaves by demanding that neighboring free states such as Ohio establish laws to return accused blacks to Kentucky. With the laws stacked against them and the value placed on black bodies by slave markets in Louisville and Lexington, the freedom of many free blacks who resided in the Ohio River borderland in southern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois was endangered by kidnappers and slave catchers. Despite being on the run, the rewards on their heads along with the system of spies, slave catchers, and government officials that vied for their retrieval verified their status as commodities. After 1830, as this study suggest, more often Kentucky slaves found themselves negotiating for wages, shelter, and other

\(^2\) Tadman, 146-54.
necessities in the slave market as hired out slaves rather than as fugitives or victims of kidnappers. As the fugitive narratives, runaway advertisements, and other sources reveal, black humanity could never be extinguished by the slave trade. Slaves experienced the slave traffic as anguished husbands, wives, brothers, and sisters, who were either sold or hired away from their loved ones or, as fugitives seeking their freedom.

In contrast to previous studies of the slave trade where the interstate trade and the lower south, with its plantation economy are the dominant focal points, this dissertation also explores the intrastate slave trade from the perspective of the Upper South.3 The majority of the scholarship on the history of slavery has ignored the career of the peculiar institution in the northern tier of slavery states. The intrastate trade has been, for the most part, neglected but existing scholarship has acknowledged the importance of slave sales within states. Thomas D. Russell in his study of the frequency of state-sponsored slave sales concluded that the state government was the “largest slave auctioneering firm” in South Carolina, while Judith Schafer in her study of slave sales in New Orleans discovered that over half of the slave sales in the city in 1850 were court ordered.4 More recently, Steven Deyle has convincingly argued the local sale of slaves in conjunction with the interstate trade was a part of the everyday life of southerners and essential in

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3 Most scholars of the domestic slave trade have focused on the interstate traffic while giving the intrastate commerce little attention. See Frederic Bancroft, Slave Trading in the Old South 1931; 403-4 Michael Tadman, Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); 118-20; 136-40; Walter Johnson, Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); 6-7; Robert Gudmestad, A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003).

4 Even in what is considered by many to be the seminal work on the quantification of the domestic slave trade Tadman’s Speculators and Slaves makes no mention of the intrastate slave trade. For studies on the impact of the intrastate slave sales see Thomas D. Russell, “South Carolina’s Largest Slave Auctioneering Firm, Chicago-Kent Law Review 68 (1993), 1241-1282 and Judith K. Schafer, “New
maintaining the peculiar institution. Slaves were key ingredients in the economy of the Bluegrass and the intrastate slave trade was the primary mechanism by which black labor was moved about the local community and the state. The skill sets of slaves, in many ways, reflect the nature of the diverse economy of Kentucky. In 1820, a slave named James fled his Kentucky master hoping to find freedom in either Ohio or Indiana. According to his master, Nathaniel Owens, James understood “geography,” and he was a good “shoemaker, tanner, cook, waiter, and fiddler.” Runaway advertisements showed slaves and their skills outside the Bluegrass economy and no longer under the control of their masters or hirers.

Due to Kentucky’s diverse agricultural economy and small slaveholdings, the practice of slave hiring gave Bluegrass slaveholders the flexibility they needed to keep slavery a profitable institution. For two decades prior to 1860, slave hiring had grown in Kentucky and other Upper South states, especially in urban areas. As slave hiring became more prominent in the 1840s and 50s, masters were able to hire out their bondsmen annually, seeing 12 to 15 percent of the slave’s value in returns. For employers, hiring a slave was less costly than either owning a slave or hiring white labor. The economic conditions in cities such as Lexington and Louisville were fertile soil for this form of slave speculation. Many of the state’s largest slaveholders resided in the

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5 For an in-depth examination of local sales see chapter five of Steven Deyle, Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

6 Louisville Public Advertiser, January 29, 1820.

7 In 1850, Kentucky slaveholders averaged 5.5 slaves per owner, the second smallest number of slaves per owner of any southern state. See Table 1.1 in the appendix for a comparison of slaveholders, slaves, and average number of slaves per master for the South in 1850.
Bluegrass Region and for those masters who prided themselves on not selling slaves, leasing slaves to local farmers, ropewalks, turnpike and steamboat companies offered them a way to reconcile their images as benevolent masters with the profit-oriented world in which they inhabited. Also, for those white Kentuckians who were antislavery yet needed black labor, hiring slaves offered them a moral solution. As Keith Barton has shown in his study of the hiring of domestic laborers in central Kentucky, slave hiring allowed masters to adapt slavery to the state’s economy while simultaneously giving families the ability to live up to the standards of the middle class. In addition to hiring out their slaves, many masters practiced a variant of slave hiring by allowing their slaves to self-hire or to find someone to hire them. Despite the fact the self-hiring was illegal in Kentucky, masters continued to thumb their nose at the Kentucky legislature since profits were high. In many cases the practices of slave hiring and self-hiring provided slaves with a degree of freedom that they did not experience working on a plantation or farm in close proximity to the master. This practice of the slave market, which was so important to make slavery in Kentucky profitable, became slavery’s Achilles’ heel. Ironically, slaves used the experience and knowledge that they garnered while being hired out to later facilitate escapes from bondage. While crisscrossing county lines searching for masters, blacks learned whom they could trust in the community, which roads to use for their departure, and more importantly they gained trust in their own abilities to negotiate both the physical and social terrain of the Ohio River borderland.

The growing scholarship dealing with the domestic slave trade has challenged the

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dominant paradigm of slavery in Kentucky that historians have stubbornly clung to for generations. The literature on the interregional slave trade has brought the cotton boom and the subsequent forced migration of nearly one million African Americans during the antebellum period to the forefront of historiography of the South, including Kentucky’s. Michael Tadman in his study of the domestic slave trade argues that two-fifths of slaves in the Upper South were either sold or forced to migrate with their masters to cotton country with the majority being sold. Both Michael Tadman and Steven Deyle have argued that after the discontinuation of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808, the Upper South became prime breeding ground for the exportation of slaves to the New Orleans, Natchez, and other Lower South slave markets. Because of the need for labor, the chances that a slave born in Kentucky, Missouri, Virginia, and other upper South might end up on the domestic slave market increased. By 1860 nearly one in three slave children born in the Upper South had been removed to the Lower South. Indeed, the domestic slave trade changed the dynamic of slave families in the border states. Brenda Stevenson argues that slave families in Virginia were headed primarily women due to the interregional slave traffic.

This dissertation analyses the bigger issues that Kentucky’s involvement in the domestic slave trade raise. The second chapter examines the different dimensions of slave trading in Kentucky. Prior to 1840, the intrastate slave trade and not the interstate traffic was more important to Kentuckians. During this twenty year period before the Civil War, slave hiring had come to compose an important component of the intrastate

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9 Tadman, 19-20.
slave trade along with the buying and selling of blacks at traditional venues such as court
days and in newspapers advertisements. Slave trading agents and brokers facilitated the
movement of black labor from the mountains of eastern Kentucky to the Bluegrass
Region and along the counties of Ohio River to spur economic development.
Entrepreneurs and industrialists either purchased or hired blacks, many of them children,
to work in ropewalks, on steamboats, and turnpike construction. After 1840, more
Kentucky blacks found themselves on steamboats or walking in coffles to be sold in the
cotton lands of Louisiana or Mississippi; but usually after they had circulated numerous
times on the intrastate slave trade.

The third chapter analyzes how Kentuckians, ironically, defended their state’s
slave commerce through their antislavery activity. Unlike other slave states, Kentucky
maintained an active antislavery movement throughout the antebellum period.
Kentucky’s dominant antislavery ideology was marked by its conservative tone: gradual
emancipation with colonization. After 1830, abolitionists gained some ground with
converts in Kentucky; the two most famous coming from the ranks of the state’s
slaveholders, James G. Birney and John G. Fee. The immediatism of both Birney and
Fee marked a turn in the antislavery movement in Kentucky. Despite the efforts of
abolitionists to rid the state of slavery, the majority of white residents clung to the belief
that slavery was a necessary evil that Kentuckians had to live with until the black
population could be released and then relocated. Leading antislavery men such as Cassius
Clay undermined the abolitionists’ attempts to end the state’s slave commerce by
proposing and supporting inadequate and enforceable slave nonimportation laws, which

10 Tadman, 5, 45, 70, 122; Gutman, Black Family, 151; Stevenson, 112-18.
prohibited slaves from being brought into Kentucky for sale, but did nothing to stop the estimated 77,000 Kentucky slaves from being sold down the river between 1820 and 1860. Clay and his slaveholding cohorts did nothing to address the intrastate trade in blacks that occurred everyday under their noses. The spotty and ambiguous results of nonimportation legislation were congruent with slaveholding ideology. Kentucky masters felt pressured to defend their rights in human property, especially with abolitionists living in their midst. Kentuckians denounced the buying and selling of slaves but only in the name of maintaining the stability of their own peculiar institution and society. Antislavery ideology in Kentucky then turned out to be far too conservative to negatively affect the domestic slave trade.

The fourth chapter examines what Harriet Beecher Stowe called the “locomotive tendencies of human property,” or the phenomenon of runaway slaves. During the antebellum period about 1,000 blacks annually invested in themselves and fled their masters. The hundreds of runaway advertisements that filled the columns of Bluegrass newspapers reveal individuals who were simultaneously being treated as commodities while trying to assert their humanity. This glaring paradox in the fugitive notices creates insight miniature biographies of Kentucky’s slave population and the ordinariness of state’s market in human beings. However, by running away slaves still remained a commodity, but this time on what might be called the “fugitive market.” This chapter argues that the practice of capturing fugitive slaves connected the Ohio River borderland, including Kentucky, southern Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio together in a network of spies, slave catchers, government officials, and common men that engaged in capture of fugitive blacks. The market for fugitive slaves was just as lucrative as the buying,
selling, and hiring of blacks. It was so lucrative that many times free blacks in southern Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio found themselves kidnapped and sold into on the slave markets in Kentucky as fugitives. Just as with the buying and selling of slaves, the state governments were some of the biggest dealers of this traffic. In addition to the federal fugitive slave laws both Kentucky and free states passed fugitive slave laws of their own to make the capture and kidnapping of blacks possible. An effective system of retrieving fugitive slaves was an important component of Kentucky’s slave trade in the same way as high cotton prices in the Lower South. As long as Kentucky masters could rely on other white men on either side of the Ohio River to respect their rights in human beings, the value of their slaves would remain steady and continue to grow. In fact some men had so much faith in the fugitive slave market that they were willing to buy slaves who were on the run.

The fifth chapter examines the cultural consequences that Kentucky’s slave trade had in creating Americans’ image of southern slavery, especially as depicted in the highly successful abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The narratives of former Kentucky slaves such as Lewis and Milton Clarke, Henry Bibb, and others were important propaganda tools for the abolitionist movement.\(^{11}\) Their tales of Kentucky bondage were a deep contradiction to the interpretation of benign and benevolent Bluegrass slavery espoused by the states’ proslavery men. The experience of the Clarke brothers and other slaves reveal a brutality that many Americans associated only with slavery in the Black Belt. Their lives also revealed a flexible intrastate slave market that allowed for black

labor to move easily about the community and state. Former slaves recalled being constantly hired out, bought and sold, or auctioned off to pay their masters’ debts. On the hand, the power of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* rested in the perception of Kentucky as a middle ground for the spread of slavery throughout the transappalachia west via the interstate slave trade. The dual plots of the novel illustrated to readers that not only did Kentucky provide slaves for the cotton country of the Old Southwest (Uncle Tom), but fugitive slaves (Eliza), slave catchers, and masters were turning free territory into hunting grounds for slaves, blurring the dividing line between slave and free territory. Due to the social and political strife caused by the Compromise of 1850 and the new fugitive slave law, Stowe believed that northerners would no longer be able to stand by while blacks were kidnapped on their own soil; instead fence-straddling Americans would have to make a choice of whether or not they would take part in the spreading slave trade.

Kentucky’s slave commerce possessed a deadly pedigree, an offspring of the transatlantic slave trade that began in the late fifteenth century. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, European slavers had transported hundreds of thousands of Africans to the North American mainland. During the fifteenth century, the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, and later the French and English in the seventeenth century established factories on the West Coast of Africa where they traded cloth, guns, rum, and other manufactured goods for African captives. In the 1650s, when sugar production became important in the West Indies and later tobacco and indigo in the southern colonies on the British mainland, European countries competed with each other to
monopolize the lucrative flesh trade. The transatlantic slave trade corresponded with the
ebb and flow of staple crop production in the New World--sugar, indigo, rice, tobacco,
and later cotton production. It would eventually be the British who seized control of the
African slave trade in the 1700s. Government protected trading companies, such as the
Royal African Company, were established to engage in the transatlantic slave trade. The
triangular trade brought rum and manufactured goods from New England; slaves from the
West Coast of Africa; sugar and molasses from the West Indies. Mighty British ports
such as Bristol and later Liverpool rose to prominence because of slave trading. In the
American colonies, tiny Newport, Rhode Island became synonymous with the colonial
slave trade by the middle of the eighteenth century.12

From 1700 to 1850, approximately ten to eleven million Africans made the
dreaded Middle Passage to the New World.13 Hundreds of black captives were tightly
packed below the decks of slave ships where the living conditions made death a constant
companion of the slave. Nearly one in twelve of the captives did not survive the dreaded
three week journey across the Atlantic on what amounted to floating factories. To ensure
that their commodities arrived in good selling condition, sailors brought slaves on deck
and made them dance to exercise their muscles. Usually women were kept on deck since
slavers did not consider them a risk for rebellion. Those who were too sick to make the
journey were often thrown overboard for the sharks to consume. Since most slavers

70-84; 132-141; 247-260; 284-294; Robin Blackburn, The Making of New World Slavery: From the

13 The number of eleven million slaves comes from Patrick Manning, Slavery and African Life:
Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades (Cambridge, 1990), 37; Rawley, 428.
carried insurance on their cargo, they could still collect for slaves that “drowned.”

The United States Constitution called for the end of the importation of African slaves in 1808. However, the ban on the transatlantic slave trade did not mean the end of the trafficking of black people in America. American slavery, unlike slavery elsewhere in the New World, was not characterized by high mortality rates and low birth rates. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the American slave population was successfully reproducing itself. Westward movement across the Appalachians and the expansion of cotton culture into the Old Southwest in the late eighteenth century was accompanied by the forced relocation of African-American slaves from the Chesapeake. Between the ratification of the Constitution in 1789 and the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, approximately one million slaves were forcibly removed from the upper South to the “slave country” of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Nearly two-thirds of these slaves were sold in the domestic slave trade. White Kentuckians sold roughly 77,000 slaves to the Lower South.\(^\text{14}\)

By the time settlers began moving into Kentucky, the interstate slave trade was still unorganized and sporadic. In the 1790s, slave coffles were probably common sights on the roads leaving Virginia and Maryland as planters sold their excess slaves to trans-Appalachian markets in the frontiers of Kentucky and Tennessee. Early Kentucky slaveholders found the economic versatility of their human property a major asset in a frontier economy where specie was in short supply. Kentucky masters with excess slaves were more likely to barter black and brown bodies on the local market for land and goods

\(^{14}\) Gudmestad, 6-34; Deyle, 40-62; Tadman, 12, 133-178. Although scholars disagree, most historians estimate that of the one million blacks relocated to the Lower South from 1820 to 1860, perhaps a third moved with their masters instead of being sold on the market.
when short on cash or other commodities than ship them out of state. For example, in October of 1779, after arriving in Harrodsburg from Virginia, John Floyd was offered “six fine young Virginia born negroes,” in exchange for 1,400 acres of land that he had recently purchased. Or when finished clearing the land, masters often sold unwanted slaves to freshly arrived settlers who needed black muscle to settle their own land. 15

Although the slave trade between Kentucky and the Deep South began in earnest in the first decade of the nineteenth century, Bluegrass masters turned to the slave markets of Spanish controlled New Orleans in the late eighteenth century. The first known sale of a Kentucky slave in New Orleans occurred on September 3, 1787, when General James Wilkinson of Fayette County sold his slave, John, to Juan Josef Duforest for 350 pesos. Other sales of Kentucky slaves followed. As scholar Pen Bogert as illustrated, the early slave trade from Kentucky to the Lower Mississippi Valley was still not a separate enterprise as yet, but a part of a larger effort on the part of Kentuckians to persuade the Spanish government to open up the Mississippi River to foreign commerce. In the late eighteenth century, it was more profitable for farmers to ship their goods down the Mississippi River, through the Gulf of Mexico, and around the Atlantic Coast to eastern markets. Also, Kentucky masters wanted access to Lower South markets for their crops and other goods, including tobacco, flour, livestock, cheese, butter, and tallow. Between 1787 and 1791, Kentucky flatboats shipped forty-nine African-American slaves to the Deep South. The Kentucky slave trade to the Lower Mississippi Valley during the late eighteenth century demonstrates the state’s role in creating both the cultural and

economic connections that would make the mature slave trade of the nineteenth century work.\textsuperscript{16}

After the war of 1812, the international demand for cotton and the dislodging of Native Americans from the Old Southwest began to shape the character of the domestic slave trade. Slaveholders saw the new states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana as a cotton kingdom and argued that the economic viability of the region depended upon the importation of black labor. Throughout the antebellum period, slaves and cotton would be closely connected. The prices of cotton on the international market determined the prices of slaves throughout the South. To meet the demand for labor, the interstate slave trade became more organized and less informal. The focal points for the trade became Upper South cities such as Washington, D.C., Baltimore, St. Louis, and in Kentucky, Lexington and Louisville. In Kentucky the flesh trade became professionalized with slave trading firms replacing the gentlemen traders of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From their slave jails and hotels in Lexington and Louisville, slave traders advertised for the purchase of “likely” slave men and women, while simultaneously sending their agents into the countryside and neighboring counties to buy blacks for the market. After gathering enough slaves, slave traders then shipped their human cargoes to Lower South markets such as Natchez and New Orleans either by coffle or steamboat.

African Americans found themselves in precarious positions due to the fact that they were both producers and commodities in the antebellum American economy. As

\textsuperscript{16} Gudmestad, 22-25; Bogert, 4.
Nell Irvin painter has astutely pointed out, “Enslaved black people were not simply likened to money, they were a kind of money.” With values created by the market, black and brown bodies circulated throughout Kentucky as field hands, hemp hacklers, rope makers, domestics, and often times as fugitives.

By the late eighteenth century, tales of the land south of the Ohio River known as “Kentucke” with its rich soil, plentiful game, and navigable waterways had captured the imaginations of Anglo-Americans living in the backcountry of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Carolina for nearly a quarter of a century. Beginning in the early 1760s, hunters and adventurers began in earnest to cross the Appalachian Mountains to hunt for valuable furs in this fabled earthly paradise. Land speculators floated down the Ohio River or came through the Cumberland Gap on foot and horseback. Early explorers were not disappointed with what they saw, and they immediately understood why, for centuries, Native Americans had prized Kentucky as a hunting ground. Just south of the Ohio River, explorers gazed upon immense thickets of cane growing in excess of ten feet. For those who ventured further down the river, past what would later become Louisville and into the interior of western Kentucky, they encountered a vast prairie created by Native Americans who hoped that the grassland would attract buffalos. Settlers passing through the Cumberland Gap traversed the rugged Appalachian Mountains and its rocky

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soil, but for those who continued to travel to the northwest beyond the mountains encountered the majestic central portion of Kentucky which was covered with lush bluegrass and forests of oak, walnut, ash, and beech trees.¹⁹

The combination of the migration of Chesapeake gentry, large landholdings, and slavery shaped the settlement patterns of Kentucky. Central Kentucky, or the Bluegrass Region, became the economic and cultural heart of the state’s slaveholding aristocracy due to the large concentration of slaveholders and slaves that resided there. The region was dominated by the slaveholding class and thanks primarily to the work of Henry Clay and advocates of the American System, it was linked to the larger national and international economies through internal improvements and government protection of the region’s hemp industry. The Bluegrass Region is about 8,000 square miles and still to this day contains some of the most fertile land in the Ohio Valley. The region is half-mooned shaped with the Ohio River acting as the northern boundary. From there, the area is shaped by Lewis County in the east, sweeping southwestward to Lincoln County in the South, and northwestward to Jefferson County. For Chesapeake planters seeking a second chance at economic success Central Kentucky proved the perfect location. However, the planters and gentry who migrated to Kentucky in the late eighteenth century were aware to avoid making the same mistakes that had occurred in Virginia, namely relying only on the cultivation of tobacco. Unlike their slaveholding counterparts elsewhere, wealthy masters in the Bluegrass diversified their investments, becoming slaveholders, merchants, and manufacturers. At the beginning of the nineteenth century,

former New Jersey resident, John Wesley Hunt arrived in Lexington and opened a ropewalk in 1803. At the time at least five ropewalks already existed in the town. By the 1820s, at least thirteen hemp factories existed in or around Lexington. As Lexington newspapers indicate, the Bluegrass area was well suited for the cultivation of hemp and companies advertised to buy hemp for the factories. The Bluegrass Region diverged from the old Dominion in that a more diverse economy came to dominate. Fertile ground in conjunction with access to commerce along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers made the Bluegrass economy a mixture of agriculture and manufacturing with ropewalks, linen factories, livestock breeding, and eventually the exportation of slaves to the Lower South. Although the concentration of slaves in the inner Bluegrass Region would come closely to resemble that of the Black Belt, the lack of arable land in other parts of the state, particularly in the east lessened the need for slave labor in those regions. Only in the western part of the state, notably in Todd, Trigg, and Christian counties where the cultivation of tobacco would become important, did the concentration of slaves come close to that in the inner Bluegrass Region.²⁰

For historians, the low percentage of slaves in Kentucky’s overall population has been a primary point in their arguments that the institution did not play a large part in the state’s society and economy. An examination of the numbers in the federal censuses

²⁰ The Bluegrass Region covers roughly 8,000 square miles. The city of Lexington in Fayette County sits at the center of the region. The region is semicircular with the Ohio River serving as the northern boundary, with Lewis County in the east, sweeping southwestward down to Lincoln County in the South, northwest to Jefferson County. Eastern Kentucky is defined as extending from Lewis County in the northeast to Clinton County in the southern portion of the state extending eastward to Pike County. In addition to eastern Kentucky, few slaves resided in the northern counties of the Bluegrass Region, bordering on the Ohio River. See Lucas, xvii; in eastern Kentucky, the percentage of the slave population also declined in the antebellum era. For more on slavery in eastern Kentucky see Wilma Dunaway, Slavery in the Antebellum Mountain South (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 18; Ivan McDougle, “Slavery in Kentucky, 1792-1865” (Ph.D. diss., Clark University, 1918), 6-7.
certainly bares this point regarding the numbers of enslaved blacks. In 1820, 126,732
slaves composed roughly 23 percent of Kentucky’s total population. By 1830, that
percentage reached its peak for the era at 24 percent. Over the next thirty years, the
percentage of slaves in the aggregate population declined. By the eve of the Civil War,
the state’s 225,483 African-American slaves composed approximately 20 percent of the
total population.\textsuperscript{21} Kentucky historians have attributed this decline to the state’s diverse
agricultural economy which did not require a large slave labor force to operate. Because
of this Kentucky masters had no need to import slaves. Even if masters wanted to buy
slaves from out of the state, the 1833 non-importation law prohibited the importation of
slaves for resale. The forced migration of slaves to the cotton states also contributed to
the decline of slaves in the state’s population. Finally, the number of whites migrating to
the state outstripped the black population.

However, this decline in percentage of slaves in the total state population masks
the overall importance of slavery in the Bluegrass Region which throughout the
antebellum period contained the highest concentration of the state’s black inhabitants.
The majority of Kentucky slaves labored on small farms often times shoulder to shoulder
with their masters. This condition was in sharp contrast to that of the Lower South where
a quarter of the slave population resided on large plantations that contained fifty slaves or
more. Most white Kentuckians never entered the master class due to the lack of arable

land in parts of the state, especially eastern Kentucky and the northern fringe of the Bluegrass Region and also due to the high prices for slaves. Throughout the antebellum period, African Americans continued to compose a substantial part of populations in some Bluegrass counties, particularly those in the inner Bluegrass. In 1820, slaves made up 40 percent of Fayette County’s population, 48 percent in 1840, and twenty years later 43 percent. In Bourbon County in 1820, 29 percent of the population was enslaved, 44 percent in 1840, and 45 percent in 1860. The percentage of slaves in some Bluegrass counties dropped. In Jefferson County in 1820 African American slaves composed 33 percent of the total population in 1840, 24 percent in 1840, and 11 percent by the eve of the Civil War. In Boone County, slaves composed 20 percent of the population in 1820, reached 22 percent in 1840, and dipped to 16 percent of the population by 1860. Some of the decline can be partially explained the increasing settlement of whites in the region. The economies of Kentucky’s river towns were attractive to many whites seeking better economic opportunities. The decline of the slave population in the outer Bluegrass may also be explained by the increasing traffic in slaves to the Deep South. Kentucky counties located close to the Ohio River, one of the main arteries of transportation in the West, were ideally situated to send excess slaves to the Lower South. Although statistics of the numbers of slaves sold from the Outer Bluegrass to the Lower South do not exist, anecdotal evidence gives us an idea of the traffic in slaves that could be found on and near the Ohio River. 22

With the rise of the steamboats in the 1830s, Louisville’s geographical proximity to the mighty Ohio River paid off, leading the Falls City to replace Lexington as the

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22 See appendix, Table 1.1 for slave populations of Kentucky counties.
region’s economic entrepot and center for slaveholding. From Louisville, Kentuckians exported bacon, tobacco, cotton bagging and baling rope, and slaves to the Lower South. Along with becoming an important river port, Louisville also boasted a significant amount of manufacturing as well. Tobacco factories, soap factories, slaughterhouses, and ropewalks operated in the city. An examination of Louisville newspapers indicates that slaves, in addition to the steamboat, played an important part in allowing Louisville to overtake its Bluegrass rival Lexington. The growing commercial houses of the city turned to the slave trade to procure slaves for their businesses. In 1820, W.F. Peterson and Co, a dry goods company advertised for the purchase of “10 healthy Negro Men and 6 women for whom cash will be paid.” According to historian Richard Wade, Louisville, as other major southern cities experienced a cycle of instable slavery characterized by early growth, stagnation, and lastly declension. Statistics from the censuses support Wade’s arguments. By 1830, blacks made up 25 percent of Louisville’s population. Over the next two decades, the city’s African-American population dwindled leaving about 10 percent of the population enslaved. However, further analysis reveals that a decreasing population of slaves in Louisville did not necessarily mean declension for the institution. There is an oddity that exists in the story of slavery declension in Kentucky. In 1860, Jefferson County contained the most slaves in the state with 10,304,

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23 Isabella H. Trotter, *First Impression of the New World*, 84 Project Gutenberg. access May 29, 2007

24 *Louisville Public Advertiser*, January 1, 1820

while Lexington was second with 10,015 bondsmen. Instead of viewing slavery in
Louisville and other major southern cities as one of declension, historians should
understand slavery as one of adaptation to a changing economy of the nineteenth century.
The slave population in Jefferson County continued to grow, but could not keep pace
with the increasing influx of whites.

The author has attempted to achieve a three-dimensional analysis of slave
speculation in Kentucky by examining a variety of sources including fugitive slave
narratives, newspaper advertisements, antislavery tracts and pamphlets, antebellum
medical journals, and the business records of Bluegrass slaveholders. A great part of the
study relies on narratives of runaway slaves from Kentucky. Because the slave narratives
were a vital weapon in the arsenal of the abolitionists, historians have been cautious
about using them when examining slavery. Early historians such as U.B. Philips, outright
dismissed the slave narratives as abolitionist propaganda that could not be trusted to
reveal the workings of slavery. However, due to the scholarship of historians such as
John Blassingame and others, the slave narratives have been brought into the mainstream
of American history.

Nevertheless, slave narratives cannot be taken at face value. The writings of
former slaves were shaped by their experiences in bondage and also by their relationships
with Northern abolitionists. Most of the slave narratives were written by male slaves
who often possessed one or more of three ingredients needed to make a successful
escape--job skills, literacy, and a light complexion. The voices of unskilled males and
females still remain hidden. Therefore, the narratives left behind by former Kentucky
slaves are just one piece of the historical record that historians need in order to
understand the state’s slave trade.

This study also examines newspapers since print did a considerable amount of cultural work during the nineteenth century. Advertisements for fugitive slaves comprise one portion of the evidence. As the fugitive narratives, runaway notices have to be read carefully by the historian since they are limited by the prejudices of the slaveholders and editors who created them. Some of the more general objective observations about the slaves such as physical characteristics can be taken at face value since notices were created in order to facilitate the capture of the slaves. There was no reason for masters to lie about the height, weight, age, or occupation of the fugitive. But the historian must be more discerning regarding the master’s depiction of a slaves’ personality and reasons

Descriptions of slaves as “insolent” or “sultry,” may have fitted the mentality of the master rather than the slave. Also, by no means were descriptions of the fugitive’s skin color objective. Race, as slavery itself, must be studied in time and place. As Michael O’Malley pointed out in his study of the connection between race and money in the nineteenth century, whites believed that blacks could “never be ‘self-made,’ could never erase racial differences and make themselves over into white people.”26 However, by examining the runaway notices we realize that African American slaves did attempt to invest themselves, with the masters sometimes acting as their unwitting accomplices. The advertisements are a cornucopia of knowledge, providing numerous details about the lives of voiceless slaves from their job skills to personal quirks (at least as viewed by the master). Ironically, the runaway notices, intended to facilitate the capture of fugitives,


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also acted as pseudo-fugitive slave narratives that simultaneously revealed to the readers the foundation of brutality on which slavery rested and the humanity of African Americans. Although fugitive notices were not slave narratives per se, they shared a common trait with those narratives. If the genre of the slave narrative was, as some scholars insist, the bondsman’s try to “write themselves into being,” then advertisements for runaways presented blacks performing analogous acts of self-creation. Essentially, in the fugitive notices, we discover African Americans undoing the process of commodification (a process that took place on auction blocks, in slave pens, and in slave-for-sale notices) with masters and newspaper editors acting as their unwitting amanuenses and publishers.

*America,*” *The American Historical Review*, 391.
CHAPTER 2:

“CASH FOR NEGROES”: KENTUCKY’S INTRASTATE SLAVE TRADE

By the start of the nineteenth century, the buying and selling of black Americans in the interstate slave trade had become a part of the everyday life of both black and white Kentuckians. Historians have primarily focused on the interstate commerce because it played a prominent role in the memories of former slaves and in abolitionist arguments against slavery. But the domestic slave trade that shipped nearly one million Upper South slaved down the river to markets in the Lower South during the antebellum period was only one aspect of the domestic slave trade. Slave sales in the local market also constituted an important part of the commerce in flesh. These intrastate transactions were conducted between neighbors, by slave brokers, by court order slave sales, and as the chapter argues through the practice of slave hiring as well.¹ Contrary to arguments that slavery started to decline in Kentucky and other states of the Upper South after the 1820s, this chapter argues that white Kentuckians’ reliance on the institution strengthened. An examination of the intrastate slave commerce in Kentucky, including

slave leasing shows that slavery did not erode the economic and cultural significance of slavery but allowed the institution to flourish, giving Bluegrass slaveholders a flexible slave system that could adapt to the mixed agricultural economy of the state. Indeed, the practice of slave leasing became an important visible component of Kentucky’s intrastate slave trade and was a critical part of the Bluegrass System, Henry Clay’s economic plan that came to exemplify the state’s economy in the antebellum period.

According to Steven Deyle in his study of the domestic slave trade in antebellum America, of the two million slaves sold between 1820 and 1860, more than half were sold in the intrastate trade. Kentucky historians concur with this argument that the intrastate commerce, or the sale of slaves within the state, was responsible for a large proportion of slave sales in the Bluegrass state. In his study of Kentucky blacks, Marion Lucas argues that prior to the 1840s, the majority of the state’s slaves were sold in the intrastate trade “by neighbors, or to someone in town; or sheriffs, county commissioners, or estate administrators.” Overall, local sales of bondsmen have not received much attention from scholars of the domestic slave trade. Instead, historians have focused primarily on the interregional trade and the transactions of professional slave traders. Unfortunately, this focus has shifted attention away from the ordinariness of local sales and their importance in transferring slave property among the local white population. In a border state such as Kentucky, which possessed a diverse agricultural economy and small but vocal antislavery movements, local sales spread needed slave labor among entrepreneurs, artisans, and middle class farmers while simultaneously tightening support for the

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institution among the nonslaveholding white population.

Even before the organization of the interregional slave trade and the rising prices of slaves in the 1830s, Kentucky masters perceived and spoke of their slaves in terms of the market economy, indicating how ubiquitous the buying and selling of black men, women, and children had become in Kentucky. In an interview former bondswoman Amelia Jones recalled the ordinariness of slave sales in eastern Kentucky a region with a paltry slave population compared to central Kentucky. Jones recalled that her master did not “hesitate to sell any of his slaves, he said, ‘You all belong to me and if you don’t like it, I’ll put you in my pocket …’” In 1829, one subscriber to the Kentucky Reporter informed readers that he was selling slaves because he had “too great an increase in stock.” In 1851, abolitionist Calvin Fairbank gave a scathing report of slave trading activity in Louisville, which by the eve of the Civil War had replaced Lexington as the major slave trading city in the state. While in the Falls City, Fairbank noted seeing four busy and popular slave pens in the city where “men, women, and children are sold like

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5 Kentucky Reporter, Sept. 2, 1829.
Mattie Griffith, in her fictionalized account of a life a slave girl living in Nelson County in the 1850s, revealed the precarious existence of slaves who lived in central Kentucky. In the novel, the young Mattie, along with several other slaves is sold for $1200 to a flesh trader to satisfy her master’s debts. “A tall, hard-looking man came up to me …bade me open my mouth; examined my teeth; felt of my limbs; made me run a few yards; ordered me to jump,” Griffith writes. Although the novel can be categorized as sentimental, Mattie Griffith came from a wealthy Bluegrass slaveholding family and was well aware of the familiar sites and buying rituals of slave traders and their agents circulating throughout the region searching for “likely” slaves.7

The ordinariness of Kentucky’s slave trade contributed to what Walter Johnson has aptly described as the commodification of African-American slaves in the domestic slave trade. According to Johnson’s study of the practices of slave traders in antebellum New Orleans, flesh traders had to “guide” potential buyers to select the specific slave that suited their own needs and desires out of the many slaves that composed a particular category. “This daily dialectic of categorization and differentiation,” Johnson says, “was the magic by which the traders turned people into things and then into money.”8 In his study, Johnson was concerned with the commodification process as it happened in the slave pens of New Orleans, the most profitable market for slaves in the Lower South, but slave pens were not the only common sites in Kentucky towns and villages where the process of commodification took place also.

6 Liberator, November 7, 1851.


Central Kentucky slave pens surpassed those in other parts of the state for their
grandeur, and southerners looking to purchase first-rate black men and women often
visited the slave pens in the region. While visiting Lexington, Will Carr kept an eye out
for a male slave for a friend back in Missouri. Carr wrote to his friend in St. Louis that if
“you should want one with his wife and two small children I think I know of such that
might be purchased much below their value of and that are said to be exceedingly fine
slaves.”9 In Lexington and Louisville, slave pens were a source of pride for residents
and were labeled as points of interests for visitors. In 1854 while visiting Lexington,
Senator Orville Browning of Illinois had dinner with infamous slave dealer Lewis
Robards. After dining, Browning accepted Robards’ offer to visit his slave jail that held
his “choice stock” of fancy maids.10 Louisville contained many prominent slave trading
firms as well. Some of the Louisville traders that advertised to buy slaves were William
F. Talbott, John Clark, William Kelley, Thomas Powell, and John Mattingly. Jordan and
Tarlton Arteburn operated a slave pen at 12 First Street.11 In 1854, English woman
Isabella Trotter and her father were steered to local slave pens by the owner of a
Louisville hotel. Expecting to see the horrors of slavery, Trotter and her father were
surprised to find the pen had been “cleared out” the day before with only a “cheerful and
satisfied” female slave and her six children there.12

The pleasant “surprise” of Trotter and other visitors who observed slavery in

9 Quote taken from Deyle, 164.
10 Lucas, 89.
11 Kentucky Statesman, January 2, 1857; Louisville Democrat, January 1, 1859.
12 Isabella Trotter, First Impression of the New World on Two Travelers from the Old (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longman’s and Roberts, 1859), 241-245.
Kentucky helped to create the image of Bluegrass slavery as the most benevolent in the antebellum South. Even well into the twentieth century some Kentucky historians such as Thomas Clark and J. Winston Coleman have argued unconvincingly that the buying and selling of slaves in the state did not occur often and when it did it was due either to the slave’s incorrigible behavior or due to some incredible financial strain on the master. Placing the blame of the sale on the misbehavior of the slave or the forces of the invisible market economy were parts of the myth that Kentucky masters were more benevolent than their other southern counterparts. An examination of antebellum Kentucky newspapers with their ubiquitous advertisements for court-ordered slave sales undercuts the argument that masters only sold unruly slaves. This mythology of a benign Kentucky slavery where “the yoke of bondage rested lightly” on the necks of black men and women got its start in the antebellum period at roughly the same time as the domestic slave trade in the South was taking shape, and the myth continued to hold sway with historians and scholars who continued to perpetuate it well into the twentieth century. 13 But an examination of the intrastate commerce in Kentucky shows that what Walter Johnson called the process of commodification occurred in other areas of southern society as well, outside of the trader’s slave pens and jails. In every Kentucky county slaves were bought, sold, and leased in different venues from the slaveholder’s parlor to the public auction block. Indeed, the practice of slave hiring, not considered by historians to be a part of the domestic slave commerce, shared common characteristics with the buying and selling of slaves and often times shared the same public spaces.

13 J. Winston Coleman, Slavery Times in Kentucky (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 173.
Masters participated in the intrastate slave trade because it offered them a flexibility to acquire labor needed to participate in Kentucky’s mixed agricultural economy. For potential masters with little cash, slaves could be acquired on lenient terms of credit from three months to a year. Philip Swigert who was the master commissioner of the Franklin Circuit Court advertised in 1838:

“Look at This !!
Public Sale of Land & Slaves
On Monday the 8th day of December next, at the Court-House door, in the town of Frankfort. Slaves to sold on a credit of one year. All of them likely, and some of the boys have been accustomed to working in a hemp factory.
Philip Swigert, Comm’r.”

In Kentucky’s towns, public sales of slaves often offered the audience the option to lease blacks as well. At an 1836 public sale, George Brown of Nicholasville sold his ropewalk factory and all of the accoutrements of his business, including twenty-four “likely slaves” who had worked in the factory and were “experienced hands in the manufacturer of hemp.” However, Brown was not ready to sell all of his slave property and lose their potential profits. Brown also offered at the same time to “HIRE till Christmas, about 12 or 14 NEGRO MEN and BOYS” to the highest bidders. We cannot know for sure but perhaps George Brown was one of the many Bluegrass regions hemp rope manufacturers who was hit hard by the declining prices for hemp in the late 1830s and needed to sell his business. Nevertheless, the practice of slave leasing mingled with the buying and selling of slaves on the local slave market, adding another dimension to the dispersal of black

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14 Handbill for slave sale found in Coleman, 120.


16 Ibid.
labor in the community.

Slave hiring and slave buying also shared another common characteristic. Masters consigned their slaves to a class of men who acted as agents to sell or to lease bondsmen. Often these brokers acted as commercial jacks-of-all trades in the community, doubling as merchants, operating auction houses, or selling real estate. Because of Louisville’s access to the Ohio River, the Falls City became a major center for shipping slaves to the Lower South. By the 1830s, Louisville contained almost fifty merchants, brokers, and others who sold or leased slaves.\(^\text{17}\) The brokers arranged yearly contracts for the slaves, while ordinarily collecting “7 1/2 per cent for hiring out, bonding … and attention during the year in case of sickness. Medical attention can be had at $3 each—medicine gratis.”\(^\text{18}\)

In 1855, a slave-hiring agent in Louisville reassured masters that their slaves would be in good hands, as he boasted that “experience of many years business with the citizens of Louisville and vicinity render[ed them] competent of judging and picking good homes and masters.”\(^\text{19}\) Slave hiring agents stationed in Lexington and Louisville played an important role as middlemen distributing needed slave labor from region to region. An agent in Lexington who specialized in hiring out slaves acquired blacks from as far away as eastern Kentucky to work as laborers on ships and levees for Mississippi River steamboat companies.\(^\text{20}\)

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18 Quote taken from Bancroft, 151.

19 *Louisville Daily Democrat*, December 20, 1855; *Louisville Daily Journal*, December, 28, 22, 1855

20 Information about the Lexington slave-hiring agent was taken from Dunaway, The African-
More often in the local slave market masters sold and hired out slaves through private transactions to small farmers and entrepreneurs in the community. In 1856, when J.W. Skinner and John Kelso visited John Hunt Morgan in Lexington to examine Morgan’s twenty-four-year old slave named Abram who was for sale, they, like thousands of other potential slave buyers in the antebellum South, were looking for a “likely” slave. Masters used the word “likely” to describe a slave that was of prime age, of physical and mental “soundness” and a probably a good investment for the future. By 1856, when Skinner and Kelso arrived in Lexington to inspect Abram, prices for “likely” slaves were at an all time on the market. By the eve of the Civil War, slave traders sold both prime male and female slaves for $1,500 to $2,000. Although Kentucky was not a cotton cultivating state, the prices for slaves on the state’s intrastate market followed the prices for cotton nationally. In the late 1840s, when the nation began to rebound from the financial panic of 1837, prices for cotton rose and so too did the prices for slaves throughout the South. The increasing prices of slaves over the twenty years prior to the Civil War meant that fewer and fewer white Kentuckians entered the master class. In 1850, 59 percent or 22,528 of the state’s 38,385 slaveholders owned five or fewer slaves. In 1850, of the southern states, only Missouri possessed fewer slaves per owner (4.5) than Kentucky, which possessed 5.4 slaves per master. Since slaves were a major financial investment, potential buyers wanted to make sure that they were receiving a

American Family in Slavery and Emancipation, 40.

21 Lucas, 85; Deyle, 57-60.

sound commodity for a sound price. In a fictionalized version of a private sale, Harriet Beecher Stowe illustrated how the physical and mental “soundness” of slaves were put on display for potential buyers. In the opening chapter of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe described how the slave trader Haley and the master Mr. Shelby transformed the parlor of the Shelby home into an auction floor as effective as any slave yard or auction block found in the Bluegrass. After the young Harry pokes his head through the parlor door, Shelby has the “small quadroon boy” perform for himself and Haley: “The boy commenced one of those wild, grotesque songs common among the Negroes, in a rich, clear voice, accompanying his singing with many comic evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body, all in perfect time to the music.”

After little Harry’s performance, Haley is struck with the boy’s physical soundness and mental vitality and recognizes the high price that such a slave could garner if that same vitality could be recreated before spectators in the slave pens of New Orleans. “Fling in the chap,” Haley said, “and I’ll settle the business--I will.”

Slave performances of physical vitality whether in the slave yard or in the parlor were rituals put in motion by slave traders and masters via enticements of better treatment, threats of violence, or actual acts of violence.

In addition to an open display of Abram’s physical vigor, Kelso and Skinner would have also conducted a physical examination of the slave in order to determine his “soundness.” At central Kentucky slave pens and auction blocks, white “spectators” rubbed slaves’ arms and legs, felt their chests and abdomens, and examined their teeth and gums. For potential buyers, the slave’s teeth and gums were indicators of health. In

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24 Ibid, 7.
his narrative, William Webb, who labeled Kentucky a slave breeding state because so many of its slaves were sold on the interregional market, saw the congruency of slave trading and horse breeding in the slave pen practices of whites. “When they sold any of the slaves,” Webb stated, “they examined his teeth and mouth, just like they do horses.”

As buyers examined the slaves, they calculated their “likely” potential productivity while simultaneously looking for signs of past accidents and diseases. Although slaveholders used the all-encompassing word “likely” to describe a first-rate slave investment, there were no objective criteria for what “likely” meant. For those men who could not read the bodies of slaves for signs of disease, a venture into the slave market could be a financial disaster. For example, in 1821 a Kentuckian named Minter purchased a slave woman and her child for $800. According to court records, shortly after the purchase, the woman died from complications from a venereal disease that, according to physicians she had for least six years. Buyers who were unfamiliar with the activity of the slave trade often brought more experienced men with them to help them to read the bodies of slaves. This appears to be the situation in 1856 when J.W. Skinner accompanied John Kelso to Morgan’s to examine Abram. In his deposition, Skinner stated that he acted as the firm’s agent in the transaction and had no interest in Abram himself. According to Skinner, he and Kelso physically examined Abram and “found him badly Scared above the Rump on.


26 Johnson, 140-41.

27 Helen Catterall, Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro Volume 1. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1926), 296-297. According to existing records, Minter sued a man named Samuel for the $800 and won the case. In 1821, the court ordered that Minter return the child and that Samuel repay Minter the $800 and a physician’s fee.
his back.”28 The interpretation of scars, bumps, bruises, and other disfigurements was mostly subjective and could mean different things to different buyers depending on their experience and expertise in the market. Despite the scars, Morgan “represented said boy as being perfectly sound,” and Skinner concurred, as he did not express any misgivings to either Morgan or Kelso about Abram’s physical health.29

Unlike purchasing a slave, hiring allowed local white men to obtain for a short period of time slaves with certain valuable skills in the local economy such as hemp hackling or rope manufacturing in central Kentucky. The records of C. W. Thurston who owned several ropewalks in Louisville show that he often hired young slave boys to augment existing slave labor in his factories.30 The local trade in hiring offered several benefits Thurston and other men sought in short term black labor. First, it was often cheaper to hire a slave than to purchase one. Second, hirers could wait until the end of the year to pay the slave’s wages instead of paying upfront for the bondsman.

Third, the local market cut down on the impersonality of the market economy by offering hirers the benefit of knowing the people with whom they were dealing. The local market provided masters with the benefit of either knowing the master or knowing someone who could give a testimonial about the slave’s character. Apparently, Morgan’s reputation in the Bluegrass community as an upstanding member of the slaveholding

28 Deposition of J.W. Skinner, December 1, 1857, Calloway County Circuit Court, W.L. Stewart and Ann Y. Stewart vs. Vancleave and Company, Special Collections, J. Douglas Gay Jr./Frances Carrick Thomas Library, Transylvania University, Lexington, Kentucky; Johnson, 137.

29 Ibid.

class was enough to satisfy Kelso and Skinner that his claims of Abram’s physical health were true. But in addition to a slave’s health, potential buyers also constantly worried about acquiring a slave that possessed some kind of moral defect. This sentiment was often expressed in slave advertisements. Individuals advertising to buy slaves reminded readers “none but those well recommended need apply.” An advertiser in Louisville would purchase only a young female “who can come well recommended for sobriety.” 31 For slaves who found themselves on the auction block, a bad reputation in the community meant few or no bidders on the local market. In Clark County, slave traders bought a slave named George who had a reputation for incorrigibility after no one in the community bid upon him. 32 Slaves who had reputations as reprobates in the community might be seen as bad investments but also those slaves who were perceived as having had too much freedom. When Lewis Clarke found himself on the auction block after his last master’s death, no one in the local community bid upon him.

There were two reasons in the way. One was, there were two or three old mortgages which were not settled, and the second reason given by bidders was, I had had too many privileges; had been permitted to trade for myself and go over the state; in short, to use their phrase, I was a “spoilt nigger.” 33

Although Clarke did not mention it here, a third reason that could also have contributed to buyers’ reluctance to purchase him was his light complexion. The fears of local buyers that Clarke was a bad investment because he had been allowed to hire himself out and therefore had garnered too much self independence turned out to be true. After his failure

31 Quotes taken from Deyle, 165.

32 Lucas, 94.

to sell at the auction, Clarke became determined to “make an effort, to gain …” his freedom across the Ohio River.  

Kentucky’s probate courts were responsible for a large number of intrastate slave sales and hiring activity. When creditors needed to be satisfied, courts often ordered that a debtor’s slaves along with other property be sold at public auction. Often sales ordered by the court took place on the courthouse steps instead of at the deceased’s plantation or farm.

SALE OF NEGROES. By virtue of a decree of the Fayette Circuit, the undersigned will, as Commissioner, carry into effect said decree, sell to the highest bidder, on the public square in the city of Lexington, on Monday the 10th of March next, being court day, the following slaves, to wit: Keiser, Carr, Bob, Susan, Sam, Sarah and Ben; belonging to the estate of Alexander Culbertson, deceased. The sale to be on a credit of three months, the purchaser to give bond with approved security. The sale to take place between the hours of 11 o’clock in the morning and 3 o’clock in the evening.

Sheriffs and officials most often sold slaves at what were known as court days that were monthly auctions held on the steps of county courthouses. Court days were major social events for Kentuckians, both black and white. For the majority of Kentuckians, court days were a place to see and to been seen, to consort with distant relatives and old friends, and to buy or sell a plethora of produce and goods. More importantly it was an important venue for the distribution of black labor among white residents. Recent studies have shown that state governments were some of the biggest sellers of slaves in the South. Thomas Russell in his study of the slave trade in South Carolina found that over half of the slave sales in the Palmetto state between 1820 and 1860 were due to court

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34 Clarke, 618.

35 Lexington Observer & Reporter, February 27, 1854.
orders to have slaves sold to settle debts. Judith Schafer in her examination of the New
Orleans slave trade has argued that the city’s newspapers show that 68 percent of sales in
the city were due to court action, while 78 percent of slave auctions were caused by court
order.36 Although more studies are needed to determine the prevalence and the degree of
Kentucky’s state government involvement in the intrastate slave market, evidence shows
that local state governments routinely sold slaves and also hired them out.

Often times on the wishes of the deceased, executors of estates also hired out
slaves. In 1831, Robert Tutt ordered in his will that before his two slaves John and James
were both emancipated at age thirty-one-years old they were to be hired out in order to
pay for the “schooling and benefit of Abel Stewart’s children.” However, Tutt placed
restrictions on the profitability of the slaves by placing a limit on their mobility. He
ordered that John and James must not be hired out of Bourbon or Nicholas counties, “my
intention being, that their services during their servitude, be applied for the benefit of the
Stewart’s children.”37 Masters often chose to have young slaves hired out after their
deaths and before granting them emancipation. In 1851, the executors of the estate of
David R. Gist of Montgomery County hired out twenty-seven slaves, many of whom
were children, to twenty-four separate hirers for a total of $1,205.38 The leasing out of
slaves gave administrators of estates and the families of the deceased an option to profit
from slave labor without having to resort to selling slaves on the market. Hiring out

36 Thomas D. Russell, “Sale day in Antebellum South Carolina: Slavery, Law, Economy, and
Court-Supervised Sales.” Ph.D dissertation Stanford University, 28; Judith K. Schafer, “New Orleans

37 Catterall, 320.

Valley Historical Review 46 (March 1960): 673.
slaves also seemed to serve as limbo status for slaves before they were emancipated. Even from the grave, masters could look after the economic well being of their family and loved ones through selling or hiring out slaves. The victims of local government policy were most often fugitive slaves who were taken up and later hired out by the sheriff in order to pay for the slave’s food and lodging. Also under the law, free blacks that demonstrated too much free will were also targeted for leasing out. Sheriffs could hire out free blacks for one year if they were convicted of harboring fugitive slaves, keeping a “disorderly house,” and vagrancy. Two free black men named Doram and Ryan were arrested for violating the state’s law against free blacks from migrating to the state. The two men were found guilty and subsequently hired out. 39

In conjunction with court days and auction blocks, newspapers acted as a forum in which the commodification of black and brown bodies occurred in Kentucky’s intrastate trade.40 As scholars Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone have asserted, advertising in antebellum American newspapers served as part of the “visual landscape of the newspaper” and “hailed ordinary people to the categories of consumer products on the market.”41 Slave advertisements shared space in newspaper columns with other

39 Morehead, C.S. and Mason Brown, eds. Digest of the Statute Laws of Kentucky (Frankfort: A.G. Hodges, 1834), .1221-1222; Both Doram and Ryan won appeals of their convictions of breaking the 1808 law against free blacks migrating to the state. The court stated the 1808 law was unconstitutional because it did not allow free men the opportunity of having a trial by jury. The men’s orders for hiring or selling were also set aside. For more on the case see Catterall, 324-325.


commodities on the central Kentucky market, such as hemp, tobacco, land, and horses.

Slave dealers, large and small, offered cash to masters for “likely” slaves in their advertisements. Edward Stone of Paris County advertised

**CASH FOR NEGROES!**

I wish to purchase TWENTY NEGROES, BOYS & GIRLS from 10 to 25 years of age. A liberal price will be given for those answering the description on early application to the subscriber.

EDWARD STONE.

Living on the Limestone Road, 4 miles from Paris leading to Millersburg.  

Perhaps Stone bought slaves to sell in the Lower South, housing blacks in the basement of his home, which he had converted into a slave jail, until he had enough to transport southward in the fall. However, even traders who gathered slaves for the interstate traffic would have sold extra hands on the local market when profitable. Slave advertisements show the fungibility of black labor in the Kentucky slave market as slaves were categorized as labor available for sale, for hire, and sometimes as commodities for exchange of other goods.

Masters wanting to hire out slaves used newspaper editors and their knowledge of the community as middlemen to filter out potential lessees who might place the slave in dangerous occupations or who perhaps had a reputation for abusive behavior towards slaves. Individuals seeking slaves to hire also used local newspapers. In 1820, a subscriber to the Kentucky Reporter sought to hire three house servants a boy and a girl of around “twelve to fifteen year of age” and a woman “who knows how to cook and wash.” The notice promised that only the highest prices would be paid “for those of

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42 *Western Citizen*, July 24, 1816; Lucas, 92-93.

43 *Kentucky Reporter*, January 4, 1820.
suitable qualifications and unexceptionable character, of which unequivocal assurances must be given."44

Contracts made by masters and hirers illustrate how the practice of slave hiring had become market conditioned. Local businessmen and entrepreneurs could hire slaves seasonally or annually. In 1854, Mary Breckinridge hired out her slave man, Thomas, for $135 to S.D. Bruce who owned a hotel in Lexington.45 Men who owned factories that required skilled labor could lease slave labor for a few months, a few weeks, or even a few days to fit their needs. In 1846, one brick maker in Lexington hired fifteen slaves—most of them males—from fifteen different masters.46 Seasonal hiring was not out of the ordinary for Kentucky’s mixed agricultural economy. Often, individuals advertising for slaves to hire in newspapers did not specify the length of time they wanted to lease a slave. The length of hire was just one of the many details that were worked out during contract negotiations between masters and hirers. However, most of the contracts examined for this study show that slave hiring was done primarily on an annual basis.47 Masters and hirers clearly negotiated all the terms and obligations of the contract, even down to miniscule obligations. For example, many contracts stipulated that the hirers would pay taxes on the slaves. One lessee promised to provide for a slave woman

44 Ibid.

45 S.D. Bruce contract with Mrs. Mary H. Breckinridge for slave hire, December 25, 1854, Papers on slavery in Kentucky, 1780-1940, 1M46M53, Special Collections and Digital Programs, University of Kentucky.

46 Jesse Boyle mortgage to Richard Pindell, July 18, 1846, Papers on slavery in Kentucky, 1780-1940, 1M46M53, Special Collections and Digital Programs, University of Kentucky.

47 Kentucky Reporter, April, 24, 1826; March 14, 1827.
named Mary “with good suits of summer and winter clothes, blanket and hat.”

Beginning with Kentucky’s frontier period, slave hiring had been an option for white men to acquire black labor and by the beginning of the nineteenth century, Kentucky law began regulating the hiring of slaves. The courts attempted to protect the master’s rights in property by defining the responsibilities of the lessee and the lessor in cases of escape, injury, and of course death. Most of the laws were established to protect the master from irresponsible hirers. For example, if a slave died before a contract expired, the hirer was still held accountable for paying the master “however hard it may seem to be upon him to have to pay hire for a negro after he is dead.” As slave hiring became more common, men with experience in slave hiring foresaw the effects that a slave’s unexpected demise might have on hirers and attempted to nullify this phenomenon in the contracts. A contract made in 1854 between S.D. Bruce and Mary Breckinridge stipulated that if Thomas (owned by Breckinridge) died, Bruce was no longer responsible for payments. Irresponsible hirers were not the only threats to slave property that lessors faced though. Slaves resisted the hiring system with its consistent removals and strict work regimes by running away from their hirers. Some slaves fled from their hirers so often that the hirers took the masters to court to seek compensation for the slave’s lost work. In August of 1853, Alexander and John McCoy filed suit against Edward McAlister in Fayette County Circuit Court claiming that McAlister had fraudulently claimed that his man Henry Buckner whom they had hired was well behaved.

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48 Catterall, 294, 298.

49 Catterall, 308-309.

50 Slave hiring contract between S.D. Bruce and Mrs. Mary H. Breckinridge, Dec. 25, 1854, J. Winston Papers, 1780-1940, University of Kentucky, Margaret I. King Library.
and would not abscond. The McCoys claimed that Henry was on the run most of the time he was in their employment. At one point Henry had escaped to Greenup County where he was taken up and placed in the county jail. The McCoys stated that they went to great expense to retrieve him and that McAlister should reimburse them for their expenses. In addition to being a constant runaway, the McCoys argued that Henry was a drunkard and “often nearly worthless” because of it. The McCoy’s petition was dismissed and the court ordered them to pay McAlister the remainder of the contract and his court costs.\footnote{Alexander and John McCoy vs. Edward McAlister, Fayette County Circuit Court File 1265 August 23, 1853, Transylvania University Special Collections; Quote from Hill letter taken from Eaton, 667.}

The record is silent on Henry’s fate. Clearly, McAlister had falsely represented the character of Henry to the McCoys, but the court’s primary concern was protecting the master’s right to property and the sovereignty of the slave hire contract.

The laws of redemption also protected the rights of the hirers as well. Often slaves had diseases and illnesses such as “asthma or rheumatism” which could not be “ascertained by observation at a public hiring” by the untrained eye.\footnote{Catterall, 315.} In those cases when slaves fell ill or died shortly after being hired, the hirer could seek relief from the hiring contract.

Just as the buying and selling of slaves, the practice of slave hiring required that black labor be mobile in order to be profitable for whites. Therefore, many of the laws concerning slave hiring were geared toward controlling the mobility of hired out slaves. If the growing economy of the early nineteenth century facilitated the flow of slave labor through buying and selling, it made regulating the practice of slave hiring tricky for Kentuckians since the entire northern border of the state rested adjacent to free territory.
As steamboat travel became more ubiquitous on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, so too did the role of Kentucky’s slaves in river commerce. In the 1840s, Lexington and Louisville newspapers routinely carried advertisements from steamboat companies looking to hire black muscle to fuel their vessels. Steamboat companies were willing to pay masters $15 to $20 to hire first rate male blacks. In 1850, the Louisville trading firm of Caldwell and Ernest sought to hire for one year “FIFTEEN OR TWENTY GOOD NEGROES, AS FIREMEN”53 The company reassured masters that their human property would be safe because they were “trading in a healthy section of the country.”54 Often slaves were hired out as firemen, waiters, and stewards on the hundreds of steamboats that moved goods between Kentucky and the Lower South. Milton Clarke hired himself out as a musician entertaining passengers on steamboats that plied the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. “I was a very good bass drummer, and had learned to play the bugle,” Milton said. Milton Clarke’s skills as a musician were desired by the growing steamboat economy that was taking place along Kentucky’s northern and western borders.55 Therefore for many slaves who were hired out being sold down the river (or in the case of Milton Clarke being sold up the river) did not necessarily mean being purchased by a flesh trader for the Lower South slave market.

By the 1830s, white Kentuckians began to formulate laws to regulate the matrix of black mobility, slave hiring, and steamboat commerce. To control the hiring of slaves in the river commerce, Kentucky law made it illegal for steamboat captains to remove

53 Louisville Daily Journal, December 3, 1850.
54 Ibid.
55 Clarke, 641; 643.
blacks from the state without express permission from their master or the possession of freedom papers. The law obviously reflected whites’ concern with the freedom of mobility that accompanied the practice of hiring out by requiring that all blacks, slave or free, produce either passes or freedom papers. Despite the law, blacks used their freedom of mobility that their masters entrusted them with and their familiarity with steamboat captains and crews to make their escapes across the Ohio River. In 1839, a slave named Preston finally escaped to Canada via Cincinnati after crossing over from Covington, supposedly on business for his master. According to court records, Preston had “been in the habit of passing from Covington to Cincinnati, on the business of his master.”

Lawmakers were also concerned that hiring out would foster too much self confidence in slaves, making them a danger to society. The state’s slave code made it illegal for slaves to hire out their own time and make contracts and to “trade as free” persons. The fear of black autonomy was expressed in the punishments for violating the law as masters who allowed their slaves to seek their own hirers faced a fine and possible jail time, while the slaves faced corporal punishment of “ten lashes.” Despite the restrictions on the use of hired black labor aboard steamboats, blacks continued to seek employment on vessels and captains continued to hire them without the master’s consent.

Despite facing punishments for breaking the regulation, evidence indicates both that hirers and masters thumbed their noses at the statute. In 1827, a slave named Allen was taken up in Fayette County as a runaway. Even though Allen possessed two passes

57 Catterall, 345.
59 Catterall, 314.
from his master who resided in Livingston County to travel and “bargain and trade for
himself,” the judge ruled that both master and slave were in violation of the state’s 1802
law which prohibited slaves from going at large and trading for themselves. The pass
illustrated that Allen was acting on his own behalf with his master’s consent. For the
judge, Allen’s pass was essentially an “unlawful manumission.” 60

Allen’s case also highlights other important characteristics of slave hiring:

mobility. Slaves that hired themselves out crisscrossed the state seeking employment. In
the case of Allen, his master had given him permission to “pass and repass from
Livingston county, Kentucky, to the Monongalia county, State of Virginia, Morgantown,
and then to return home.” 61 From Livingston County to Morgantown in what is today
West Virginia is approximately six hundred miles. Allen’s master essentially allowed his
slave permission to travel the entire width of the state and even into the mountains of
Virginia to find employment. Allen was picked as a runaway in Fayette County, about
250 miles away from Livingston County.

In 1820, Leslie Combs was so frustrated by white residents of Fayette County
who illegally contracted with his man Tom that he placed a public notice in the Kentucky
Reporter to warn potential hirers. Comb’s notice tries to place the blame squarely on the
shoulders of unscrupulous whites, while trying to conceal Tom’s semi-autonomy and
entrepreneurship.

Public Notice

I have a man named Tom, by trade a post and rail maker. Persons wishing to
employ him, for any purpose, must make applications to me, are be punished

60 Helen Catterall, Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro, Volume I

61 Catterall, 308-309.
for dealing with a slave. I give this public caution in consequence of being
plagued of late, by individuals wishing me to comply with his contracts, made
without my consent or approbation.

Leslie Combs
Lexington, Dec. 21, 1819
P.S. New Fences made or old ones re-set, on the Cheapest terms--Also, one or
Two likely NEGRO MEN to hire for 12 months.62

The court’s ruling in the case against Allen and Leslie Comb’s advertisement
encapsulates white Kentuckians dilemma with the practice of slave hiring. Slave hiring
was an important component of the intrastate slave market and facilitated the
disbursement of the black labor in the local community and across the state, but laws
governing slavery had to strike a precarious balance between a master’s property rights,
the “safety” of the white community from semi-autonomous slaves, and the need for
mobile labor in a mixed agricultural economy. Although Combs was annoyed by Tom’s
semi-autonomy and demands from hirers he had never met before, the profits made from
his slave’s skills as a post and rail maker were enough to warrant keeping him on the
central Kentucky labor market. After warning readers about making illegal contracts with
Tom, Combs reminds them that Tom’s labor can still be obtained. Comb’s advertisement
served as a reminder to other white men that Tom’s labor was not his own to contract but
instead had to be negotiated, had on the “Cheapest terms” through contractual obligations
made with the master.

Although the labor of slave women was a valuable commodity on the Kentucky
slave market sometimes masters encountered problems hiring out their slave women. In
1842, Samuel Williams confided to his son John that slave women hired for “less than
half what they did last we could not get a cent for Lucy this year and therefore have to

62 Kentucky Reporter, 4 January, 1820.
keep her at home although we had more before than we had room or use for. Polly was sent home to us the next day after you went away."\textsuperscript{63} The rising prices for slaves on the hiring market mirrored those prices for slave sales during the antebellum period. In 1825, a first-rate slave male hired for anywhere from $60.00 to $250.00 annually.\textsuperscript{64} By 1850, the average price for leasing a field hand was $125 and skilled slaves $250 annually.\textsuperscript{65} The prices for hiring slaves rose so sharply in the 1850s that Mrs. Joseph R. Underwood of Bowling Green complained in 1851 that she could not hire enough slave girls for hire, except at “extortionate” rates. This increase in prices came after the previous year when she had rehired a slave girl for less than her market value.\textsuperscript{66} Also, as the increasing prices for slaves pushed the prospect of entering the slave holding class out of reach of most people, middle class people sought to hire female slaves for their domestic chores.

\begin{center}
WANTED TO HIRE

A NEGRO WOMAN for family service and a boy 12 or 15 years old.

APPLY TO THE PRINTER\textsuperscript{67}
\end{center}

Slave-for-hire and for sale notices could be found side-by-side with advertisements for French brandy, fine leather goods, carriages, and other commodities that designated the growing consumption habits of the middle class. Masters who hired out their slaves could expect big profits, anywhere from 12\% to 15 \% percent of the slave’s value. With the

\textsuperscript{63} Letter from Samuel Williams to John Williams, January 9, 1842, Samuel Williams Papers, 1836-1850, 87W3, Special Collections and Digital Programs, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky.

\textsuperscript{64} Catterall, 305; 306.

\textsuperscript{65} Eaton, 668, 673, 676.

\textsuperscript{66} Eaton, 668.

\textsuperscript{67} Kentucky Reporter, December 20, 1824.
lessee responsible for providing the slave with food, shelter, clothing, and health care, masters garnered huge profits while often suffering no losses. In 1838, one Louisville master made over $600 in profits hiring out three of his slaves. In 1854, Fayette County slaveholder, Samuel G. Jackson made $922.50 in profit by renting out his ten slaves. In 1856, Augustus Woodward recorded in his diary of hiring out three of his bondsmen to a railroad company for $51 plus board. In 1838, Samuel Williams wrote to his son John living in Arkansas that he had “hired out Adam and Sandy for 130 Dollars each” which would enable him to send his other son Frank “between 15 and 20 Dollars a month” to, ironically, hire free labor to work on his farm in Indiana.

By the 1840s and 1850s, slave hiring had become such an important part of slave trading in Kentucky that a Frankfort newspaper in 1857 could tote “There are more men able to own slaves in Kentucky who do not own them, than there are slaveholders.” This writer’s observations about the prevalence of slave hiring in Kentucky jives with the experience of many former Kentucky slaves who recounted in their narratives and autobiographies the many times that they were hired out by their masters. Of the slave narratives studied for this work, over half of the slaves had been hired out by their masters in addition to being sold in the intrastate trade. Being hired out composed a majority of the memories for many Kentucky slaves. Many of the slaves recounted

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68 Eaton, 663; Lucas, 103.
69 Acedote about Samuel Jackson comes from Coleman, 123.
70 Eaton, 676.
71 Letter from Samuel Williams to John Williams, January 7, 1838, Samuel Williams Papers, 1836-1850, 87W3, Special Collections and Digital Programs, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky.
72 Frankfort Commonwealth, March 10, 1857.
working at least a year if not more as hired slaves. J.C. Brown’s master hired him out fifteen to a Captain George Smith who had raised a company of Kentucky volunteer soldiers to go fight Tecumseh and his Indian warriors in Indiana Territory in 1811. The young Brown served as a fifer for the company of Kentuckians.\textsuperscript{73} Born in Louisville, Henry Carawhion was also hired out by his master as soon as he was able to work. “I was hired out on a steamboat,” Henry later recalled “and have mainly followed steamboating.”\textsuperscript{74} Keith Barton in his study of slave hiring in Bourbon County argued that during the 1850s approximately 120 slaves were hired out annually to roughly 100 families with “many new hirers each year.”\textsuperscript{75}

For lessees, renting a slave cost less than hiring white labor. Hiring was also less expensive since the rising prices of prime slaves throughout the antebellum period placed purchasing a slave out of reach for most men. Furthermore, the practice of slave hiring allowed nonslaveholders to keep their own economic flexibility since they could hire slaves whenever they needed labor; therefore, they did not have to worry about the annual maintenance of a slave. In 1849, a Louisville newspaper estimated that a “likely field hand” worth roughly $600 cost on the average just under $170 annually to upkeep. The estimate included not just the tangibles of slaveholding, but also the unforeseeable costs of the humanity of the bondsmen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest on the cost of the slave</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average insurance…</td>
<td>21.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diet….</td>
<td>36.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lodging …</td>
<td>5.00</td>
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\textsuperscript{73} Drew, 239.  
\textsuperscript{74} Drew, 256.  
Although it is impossible to know for certain the exact number of slaves hired out in proportion to the total slave population in Kentucky, existing studies indicate that the practice was an important component of the state’s urban slave markets. A study of Louisville’s tax rolls in 1833 reveals that 20% of the Falls City’s slave population was hired out. A study done on the manuscript census returns of 1850 and 1860 reveals that approximately 7% of Lexington’s slave population was hired out, while 16% of Louisville’s slaves were leased. The former figure is in line with that argued by Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman who have asserted that roughly 7.5% of the entire slave population was hired out “at any moment of time” in the South. However, Louisville’s 16% coincides with figures from other studies which illustrate that Kentucky masters in other regions hired out their slaves at high rates. Wilma Dunaway in her study of the African-American family in the southern Appalachian Mountains found that masters in eastern Kentucky counties hired out “two-fifths to one-half” of their slaves annually. This is an outstanding figure considering that eastern Kentucky held few slaveholders and

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76 *The Examiner*, Louisville, August 14, 1849.


few slaves.

Of all the regions, it is not surprising that Central Kentucky or the Bluegrass Region was particularly conducive to the practice of slave leasing. The region contained the state’s two largest cities, Lexington and Louisville, and the manufacturers located there included tobacco factories, rope walks, railroad and turnpike companies, and steamboat companies which often sought to hire slave labor. Throughout the 1820s during the height of Kentucky’s hemp industry, Lexington newspapers often carried advertisements seeking to hire slave boys and young men to work in bagging factories.

NEGRO BOYS WANTED
I wish to hire a number of NEGRO BOYS, from 10 to 20 years of age, for a term of three, four, or five years to work in Bagging Factory, three miles north of Lexington, for whom a liberal price will be given.

DAVID SUTTON.

Moreover, central Kentucky more than any other section of the state contained the largest number of slaveholders and consequently the most slaves. Masters with surplus slaves residing in Bourbon, Fayette, Jefferson, Woodford, and Shelby counties were more than willing to hire valuable skilled slaves out rather than sell them in either the intrastate or interstate markets.

The records also show that white women, a demographic not usually associated

79 Kentucky Reporter, December 20, 1824.

80 See Table 1 in Appendix for the counties with the largest slave populations in 1820 and 1860.

81 Keith C. Barton, “ ‘Good Cooks and Washers’: Slave Hiring, Domestic Labor, and the Market in Bourbon County, Kentucky,” The Journal of American History (Sept. 1997), 438-439. Barton argues that that slave hiring was a common practice among residents in Bourbon County. Using court records and newspaper advertisements, Barton estimates that between 1845 and 1861 Bourbon County masters hired out at least 120 slaves per year.
with the interstate slave traffic, often engaged in the intrastate trade as both buyers and sellers. Although court documents site W.L. Stewart as co-plaintiff in the lawsuit against Vancelave and Company, it is clear from witness testimony and from the bill of sale that Mrs. Ann Stewart had purchased Abram. The fact that Mrs. Stewart and not her husband bought Abram was extraordinary since the slave trade was a “patriarchal provision,” a public arena where white men visited the slave pens, inspected slaves, and bought slaves.\textsuperscript{82} White women were not supposed to be actors in the slave traffic, but from an examination of the intrastate trade, white women appear to be common actors in the slave especially when buying female slaves for domestic duties. In 1821, one Kentucky father designated in his will that his daughter Ann be allowed a “a negro wench, to be purchased and raised out of that part of my estate not already bequeathed.” In 1821, Maple Hardwick bought a young slave girl named Rachel from the local constable at a court-ordered sale.\textsuperscript{83} Perhaps for Ann Stewart the purchase of Abram realigned the patriarchal relationship of marriage, making her an equal partner in the household economy. After all in the petition filed before the Calloway County Circuit Court, her husband W.L. Stewart was designated as a co-plaintiff. Mrs. Stewart was not the only white woman who found herself giving testimony in court proceedings regarding slave warranties. In May of 1852, the notorious Lexington slave trader, Lewis Robards traveled to Garrard County where the sold a two-year old “copper colored” girl named Isva to David Smith for $100. Shortly after Robards left the Smith home, Jane Smith conducted a physical examination of the child and went no further in her exam than

\textsuperscript{82} Johnson, 95.

removing a handkerchief from Isva’s head before she noticed the child had trouble breathing. Jane Smith’s physical examination of Isva was part of her duties as a mistress and manager of the household.

African Americans were also buyers in the state’s intrastate trade. The majority of blacks entered the slave market in order to purchase their own freedom or that of family members. Aby Jones’s brother, after being emancipated by his Madison County master, stayed on with his master working for wages as a miller. Aby later recalled, “His good opportunities enabled him to advance nearly money enough to free myself and a younger brother,—the deficiency we borrowed, and afterward paid up.” Aby would have bee the legal owner of his younger sibling since Kentucky state law forbade him to free his brother. In 1833, Alfred T. Jones, a Madison County slave, found himself in the position of making arrangements for his purchase when his master reneged on the deal. Unfortunately masters often used this sort of deception with slaves. Slaves who believed that they too would be afforded the same kind of protection in the slave market as white purchasers were more likely to comply with orders and cause less trouble. Alfred had made arrangements to buy his freedom for $350, when he discovered that his master was “negotiating with another party to sell me for $400.” Soon afterwards, Alfred fled Kentucky for Canada.

J.C. Brown finally had to purchase his freedom for $1800 from his master after repeatedly being promised that he would be emancipated after having

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84 Deposition of Jane Smith, David Smith vs. Lewis Robards, Fayette County Circuit Court, File 1213, June 7, 1852.
85 Johnson, 181-82.
87 Drew, 152.
served as a fifer for a company of Kentucky volunteers during the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811. Slaves who possessed job skills could hire out their time and earn the money to purchase their freedom. Using his blacksmithing skills, Henry Blue purchased his freedom. The reason for Aby and other blacks to participate in the slave market was to maintain the integrity of their families and to prevent the sale of loved ones. Although blacks willing engaged in the slave trade appears to be an acceptance of the system of slavery, their participation should be viewed as an effort to acquire freedom through what was the only legal means of freedom—freedom papers.

Kentucky factories were some of the most significant employers of hired slaves and ironically factories were some of the most important places where slaves exploited their limited freedom. Often times, hired slaves in factories labored under the task system, were the slave was paid a cash bonus for overwork. In ropewalks and bagging factories, slaves could earn two to three dollars per week for overtime work. Some hirers even promised to pay slaves extra money for good behavior. John Coleman, a hemp manufacturer in Woodford County, promised to pay his hired slaves five dollars a year if they behaved. Many slaves used their bonus money to enter the slave market to buy their own freedom or that of a loved one. In addition to earning extra money, hired out slaves also encountered other more educated bondsmen who taught them writing or reading skill or sometimes passed on knowledge about the best escape routes to the freedom. William Hayden for example met a slave while working in a factory in

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88 Drew, 239.
89 Drew, 270.
90 Hopkins, 135-37.
91 Eaton, 671.
Lexington who taught him the rudiments of writing.  

Freed from the watchful eye of the master, hired-out slaves used every tactic at their disposal to take advantage of their situations. Some slaves feigned submissiveness to their condition. After collecting clothing or wages, some slaves fled from their hirers the day before the hiring contract expired and they were to be returned to their masters. Slaves tried to fake illnesses with hirers who were unfamiliar with their medical histories. Samuel Williams of Bourbon County, who leased his man Sandy to his son John in Arkansas, wrote to him warning him about Sandy’s penchant for avoiding labor. “Don’t let Sandy impose on you,” Williams warned, “about his back he has as Sound a Back as any hand you got.” Some slaves tried to manipulate their hirer by intimating that they would runaway if a demand was not met such as visiting a spouse. In 1843, J. Cogswell, wrote to Brutus Clay that he was having problems with one of Clay’s slaves named Matt. The problem was that Matt wished to see his wife but for reasons not revealed in the letter, Cogswell could not allow him. Cogswell wrote:

Matt is at me every opportunity To make some arraignments for him to go to his wife. I have explained to him that nothing could be done…he appears to be distracted almost to the point of not going. I have sent him to you and if you and if you have time I would be glad if you would explain more particular to him as he says he understood you to say he could go.  

As a young boy Henry Bibb was so well versed in the art of running away that many of

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92 Eaton, 669.  
93 Catterall, 321.  
94 Letter from Samuel Williams to John Williams, January 9, 1842, Samuel Williams Papers, 1836-1850, 87W3, Special Collections and Digital Programs, University of Kentucky.  
95 Letter from J. Cogswell to Brutus Clay, September 24, 1843, Clay Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.
his hirers “sick of their bargain” returned Bibb to his owners.96

As slave narratives and interviews with former slaves indicate, masters often threatened to sell unruly slaves down the river if they did not conform to discipline. Slaves who illustrated too much independence frequently found themselves on the auction block, at first circulating throughout the local community, then finally being placed in the interstate trade if they remained incorrigible. The runaway advertisement of a Pulaski County slave named Sam illustrates this point:

$25 Reward

Ranaway from the subscriber at Nashville, on the 7th inst. a negro man named Sam, a low set fellow, is tolerable bright to be really a negro, has a round face, appears to be about 34 years of age, his fore teeth are sharp and uneven, his left fore finger has been injured, which causes the nail to twist downwards, has a large scar on his left foot, which he says was cut with an axe, he had on a blue home-spun pantaloons, a round a bout jacket with white and blue stripes, a wool hat, with a sharp crown, that appeared to fit badly, and also a pair of old shoes. I expect he will endeavor to get to Somerset, Pulaski County, Kentucky, as I understand he has a wife there. He formerly belonged to James Smith of Pulaski County, and I bought him of John Sally, of Somerset. I had not owned him but a few days until he made his escape. Any person apprehending and securing him, So I get him again shall receive the above reward. Any person obtaining any information respecting said runaway negro, will be good as direct a letter to the subscriber at Mobile, Alabama.

ROBERT CHAPMAN.

September 10, 1824.

N.B. I understand that Sam has left Pulaski County, Ky in company with a white woman by the name of Cynthia Ross, who is in a forward state of pregnancy, and was see in the neighborhood of Lancaster, Garrard county, Ky. About the first of October, and they are endeavoring to get to the state of Ohio. In a previous attempt to runaway he went in company with the same Cynthia Ross, who he claimed as his mistress. I also understand he has a free pass.97

96 Bibb, 14.

97 Kentucky Reporter (Lexington), 10 Sept. 1824.
From Sam’s runaway notice we can gather that he practiced what fellow Kentucky slave Henry Bibb called the “art of running away.” Sam wasted little time escaping from Chapman who had only owned him for a couple of days. Although slave traders usually placed slaves in gangs or coffles while moving them to lower South markets, we can infer from the advertisement that Chapman traveled to Kentucky to buy slaves as a private individual. Therefore, perhaps not as well guarded, Sam found an opportunity to escape while on the road to Nashville.

Sam’s penchant for running away probably explains why he changed hands at least twice during his residency in Pulaski County and eventually was sold to Chapman, who was, according to the advertisement, taking him to Mobile, Alabama. Furthermore, Sam’s ongoing illicit sexual relationship with the white woman Cynthia Ross also made him a target to be sold in the slave market. If the information that Chapman received was correct that Cynthia Ross was pregnant at the time of the escape and she was Sam’s mistress then Sam threatened not only the order of the farm or plantation but also the racial social order of Kentucky’s society by having a child with a white woman.

Kentucky masters often hired out slaves that proved to be discipline problems. In January of 1821, an unusually honest for hire advertisement, Theodore Talbot offered to sell or to hire a “young, good looking and healthy Mulatto WOMAN without children. A first rate cook—offered for sale with reluctance, and on account of one fault only, and that one easily cured.”98 We can only speculate on what her “fault” was and what Talbot believed was the “cure.” Perhaps she as Henry Bibb practiced the “art of running away” or she was belligerent and spoke her mind too often. Despite her character defects, the

98 Kentucky Reporter, January 15, 1821.
woman’s skills as a cook were valuable enough to Talbott and the community for him to place her on the local market. In January of 1855, William Pratt a Baptist minister in Lexington encountered problems making his slave Joe remain with hirers who resided outside the city limits. It appears that Joe had fallen into bad company and bad habits residing in Lexington and Pratt hoped that living in the country would free Joe from “town temptations.” Pratt threatened to sell Joe if he did stop running away from his hirers, but the slave replied that he would rather “be sold than live there.” Even after Pratt returned Joe to the hirers, the slave followed him back to Lexington, where the minister then had him whipped “for the first time.” And in 1827, a slave named Solomon was banished from his master’s plantation due to his unruliness. Solomon’s master determined that “he should be hired, and should not again return to his plantation. He requested a friend to take him off for that purpose.” 99 It appears that slave hiring then was not only a way for masters to profit from slave labor but also a disciplinary measure, a first course of action before resorting to actually selling the slave down the river. 100

Without a doubt hired slaves faced physical abuse and over work despite contracts that guaranteed good treatment. Henry Bibb remembered being hired out as a young boy by his master for at least a decade in which time he experienced all of the deprivations of slavery. 101 Being hired out might also meant that slaves were not able to purchase clothing, housing, or food despite being paid wages since a portion of their wages went to the master. In a letter Matthew Watts pleaded with his owner, Elizabeth Brown, then

99 Catterall, 314.

100 Entries from Pratt Diary taken from Eaton, p. 667.

living in Kentucky, to send for him and his son Harrison who were still residing in
Virginia waiting for her to send for them. Watt stated that he was getting too old to find
hirers and that because of this he was “not able to buy me no Summer clothes and at this
time no winter clothes.” 102

Clarke’s narrative reveals that black families struggled to maintain family
connections against the intrastate slave trade as in the interstate trade. 103  For Clarke, the
most horrific and deplorable part of slavery was not the barbarity and cruelty of his
masters and mistresses, but it was being separated from his family and loved ones.

Clarke said:

But all my severe labor, and bitter and cruel punishments, for these ten years of
captivity with this worse than Arab family, all these were as nothing to the
sufferings I experienced by being separated from my mother, brothers, and sisters;
the same things, with them near to sympathize with me, to hear my story of
sorrow, would have been comparatively tolerable.104

Perhaps, Clarke’s pain was made even worse since his family was “distant only

102 Blassingame, Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and

103 Johnson, 41.

104 Clarke, 614. Although slave marriages were often times destroyed by the slave trade, some
slaves did not want to marry and move to their spouse’s farm or plantation. This was the case for a young
slave girl named Louisa who belonged to the father of James G. Birney. Louisa fell in love with a slave
named Milo, who lived on the plantation of George Thompson. Thompson, fearing that Milo would be
corrupted by the “notions of liberty” that many of the Birney slaves held, refused to allow Milo to marry
Louisa unless Birney’s father sold her to him. In regards to the situation, Birney wrote in his diary, “I am
brought to reflect upon the horrible power which slavery gives to one man over another’s happiness. Here,
for mere convenience, or from an apprehension that Milo would be impaired in value by hearing something
of liberty, two persons young and loving each other are perhaps forever separated. Louisa objects to going
to Major T’s because of the number of slaves on his farm.” See James Gillespie Birney, Letters of James
Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857, Volume I, ed. Dwight Dumond, (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966), 142-
145.
thirty miles.” Despite this short distance, Clarke saw them only three times in a decade. Stories such as Lewis Clarke’s became part of an “indigenous antislavery ideology” for the slave population which revealed the character and nature of the slave commerce. The slave trade could potentially carry one to a plantation in Louisiana or a neighboring farm or a ropewalk in Lexington, or on steamboat plying the Ohio River. Nevertheless, the outcome was the same: destruction of the black family and often individual isolation. Kentucky’s position as an upper South state placed it in a position to play both the role of slave importer and slave exporter in the antebellum era.

Also, as Kentucky slaves recognized but their masters ignored, being hired out was just as effective as separating slave families as being sold. This may exactly be what Nathan, a slave in Louisville, had mine in 1841, when he had Garnett Duncan, a friend of his mistress, to negotiate a sale for his wife who belonged to lawyer and newspaper editor Orlando Brown. Duncan acted as Nathan’s mouthpiece in letters to Brown, requesting that Brown consider selling Nathan’s wife Letitia to a buyer in Louisville rather than hiring her out. Duncan wrote:

Nathan has come to me and begged me to write to you in his name. He says now that a new year is about to commence he is anxious to know what disposition is to be made of his wife. He says to avoid the necessity of changing about as hired servants have to do he would look for a good master and prevail some of his friends to buy his wife if you are willing to sell her.

105 Ibid.

106 Johnson, 42-43.

107 Blassingame, 28-29.
Duncan was apologetic to Brown and reassured him he was not trying to interfere with Brown’s rights to use Letitia’s labor as he saw fit; instead, he was helping “a servant that I consider a very honest fellow.” However, Nathan’s insistence on finding a buyer for Letitia might also have been a veiled threat that he might runaway if someone in Louisville did not purchase his wife instead of being hired out. Garnett wrote, “My own impression are that he would run a very great risk in [illegible] to a sale to any boy and that it is very doubtful whether in these hard times he could find a purchaser at a good price.”\(^{108}\) Nathan’s insistence on finding a purchaser instead of a hirer for Letitia and the economic hard times increased the possibilities that she could not find a buyer in Louisville. Nathan’s was only one example of how enslaved blacks attempted to manipulate the hiring market to their or their loved one’s advantage.

As Walter Johnson has persuasively asserted, slaves who found themselves in the interstate slave trade often times were able to shape their own sales: the same holds true for the intrastate trading and hiring markets. If a slave became too troublesome by running away from his hirer, some masters gave in to the slave’s demands. This appears to the case with Joe and the Reverend Pratt in Lexington. Although Pratt had Joe whipped for fleeing his hirer a second time, the beating did not stop Joe’s behavior. Joe fled again this time he was taken up by the sheriff, and Pratt had to pay to get Joe released and returned to the hirer. Although Pratt believed the problems with Joe sprang from the fact that as a master he had been too “indulgent” and that Joe was “spoiled” by residing in Lexington, he still did not sell the slave. Instead, by January of 1856, Pratt noted in his

\(^{108}\) Ibid.
diary that Joe had been hired to the city of Lexington for $105 for the year.\textsuperscript{109}

When questioned by potential hirers, some slaves revealed “character failings” that they believed would make them undesirable on the market. One observer at a slave auction in Mount Sterling remembered a slave telling potential hirers that he was “spoilt” and would be of “no use to anybody.”\textsuperscript{110} The slave illustrated that he understood what characteristics made slaves valuable or a terrible risk for potential hirers. “Spoilt” slaves were not just slaves that had been treated well by their masters, but they could also be blacks who were used to an unusual degree of freedom, traveling about as hired out slaves.

The aspect of slave mobility was a paradox of the intrastate slave market. Slaves that had been hired out by their masters and who exercised an unusual degree of freedom in order to make them valuable could be rendered undesirable by potential buyers when placed on the market. When Lewis Clarke was put up for auction, he too was rejected by potential buyers because he had been hired out and allowed to travel freely about the state. Oddly then the flexibility that hiring out brought to slavery might also act as a deterrent for the purchase of a slave.

Some slaves were unable to shape their own sales and had to rely on the good graces of white men in the community. In 1858, Rev. Elisha Green’s wife and children wound up on the auction block after their master became insolvent. Desperately desiring to prevent his family from being sold away but unable to acquire the $850, Green received help from a group of white men in Maysville who acted as his benefactors. They took a loan from the bank in their names. In this way, Elisha Green, while still enslaved,

\textsuperscript{109} Entries from Pratt diary taken from Eaton, 667.

\textsuperscript{110} Quote taken from Lucas, 102.
kept his family from being separated. Green later repaid the bank.

Despite the fact that some slaves were able to shape their own sales or received aid from open-minded whites others were not so lucky. When Henry Bibb married Malinda he was determined to keep his family together despite the laws of Kentucky. After deciding to move to Missouri, Bibb’s master sold him to William Gatewood, Malinda’s master. According to Bibb, his constant running away forced his master’s hand. It was better to sell Bibb now while in Kentucky than try to pay to hunt him down later.\textsuperscript{111}

In some cases, former slaves entered the slave markets as buyers in order to rescue their families. In 1854, Robert Brown who apparently had fled from Kentucky to Canada wrote back to enquire if “Mr. Brown will sell my wife and child for $750 I will give it to him willingly and want him to answer this letter as soon as possible and let me [know] if he will take that for her …”\textsuperscript{112} Robert Brown’s willful engagement in the slave market should not be seen as an approval of the practice, but instead as a necessary act to protect his family from the slave traders, slave catchers, and greedy individuals who saw black bodies as money. Rather than be separated from family and loved ones some slaves decided to deprive their masters of their bodies by committing suicide. Such was the case in 1836 when Samuel Williams purchased a male slave from John Black for $900. Williams placed the slave in the Bourbon County jail for “safe keeping” until his son Frank could transport the slave to Arkansas where he apparently was set to work for Samuel’s other son John. However, when the “Jailor went to visit him he found him dead

\textsuperscript{111} Bibb, 25.

\textsuperscript{112} Blassingame, 29.
hanging by the neck.”

Local sales, including the practice of hiring out, made up the majority of slave trading in the American South. As an examination of the intrastate trade in Kentucky as illustrated, for African Americans, whether they found themselves on a steamboat sold to New Orleans or in a wagon hired out in the next county over, the consequences of the transaction were identical—the break up of the black family, overwork, abuse. The intrastate slave trade complimented the interstate commerce, making the exchange of black labor possible among whites and also ensuring the survival of slavery in the Bluegrass. Although the intrastate slave trade played a role in uniting whites by redistributing black labor in the community, the commerce had little affect in forming opposition to slavery in the state. Instead, the Kentucky’s antislavery men ignored the traffic in their own state and focused on the interstate slave trade and how Kentucky was being corrupted by the influx of slaves being brought into the state. To some scholars the institution of slavery in Kentucky seems to have become less important to the state after 1820. However, this assertion does not take into account the intrastate slave traffic and the practice of slave hiring. The slave hiring market was not peripheral, but allowed both slaveholders and nonslaveholders flexibility in circulating black labor in a state with a mixed agricultural economy. Contrary to the views of white southerners and some historians today, the practice of leasing slaves was a significant dimension of the domestic slave trade, and just as the buying and selling of slaves, the practice of slave hiring allowed for the easy transfer of slave property among the white community. Early

113 Elisha Green, *The Life of the Rev. Elisha Green* http://docsouth.unc.edu p.11-12; Letter from Samuel Williams to John Williams December 14, 1836 University of Kentucky Special Collections Margaret King Library.
settlers had practiced slave hiring, leasing slaves on an informal basis to neighbors who needed extra muscle to clear the land and cultivate crops. But by the first decade of the nineteenth century as cities such as Lexington and Louisville began to grow and Henry Clay’s vision of the manufacturing centered Bluegrass System became a reality, hired slave labor became a central component of Kentucky’s society and economy. The labor needed to work in tobacco factories, ropewalks, railroads, and steamships was filled by hired out slave labor that could be acquired by entrepreneurs when needed. But the hiring out system also had more than just economic consequences, but it also effected how slaveholders interacted with their slaves because the practice gave slaves more freedom. In fact if a slave had exercised too much mobility and freedom it could, in some cases, bring down his or her value on the intrastate slave market. Slaves who hired themselves out became more experienced with negotiating with their master and other whites in the market. The experience of negotiating on their own led slaves to try to shape as often as possible the terms of their sales or hires. Many slaves became engaged in the intrastate slave market in order to prevent their loved ones from being sold down the river or even sold to another county. Some of the slaves even became enthralled to the life of urban areas where they encountered the “scourge” of southern society, free blacks. Slaves’ connections with free black led to a breakdown in slave discipline, but not enough to stop masters from hiring out their slaves.
CHAPTER 3:

“PROUD AND NOBLE SPIRITED KENTUCKY”: SLAVE SPECULATION AND KENTUCKY’S ANTISLAVERY MOVEMENT

Kentucky, throughout the antebellum era, possessed a small, but vocal antislavery movement. Despite their final failure at the state constitutional convention in 1849 to put a legal end to slavery, antislavery men remained a thorn in the side of Kentucky’s slaveholders until the eve of the Civil War.1 The purpose of this chapter is to understand the role that the arguments against slave speculation played in the ideology of Kentucky’s antislavery movements, and why ultimately, the state’s antislavery forces failed to stop or even hamper slave trading activities. It would be a mischaracterization to say that the state had one coherent antislavery movement. Instead the men who opposed the institution in Kentucky sought different means to end slavery and therefore, their opposition to the slave trade varied according to their particular point of view. This chapter argues that early antislavery voices such as David Rice and David Barrow in the early nineteenth century perceived the domestic slave trade as a terrible evil for Kentucky and for the nation in general, but it was an extension of the earlier transatlantic

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commerce. These men did not directly tackle the intrastate slave commerce or perceive Kentucky’s growing importance as a net exporter of slaves to the Lower South. By the 1830s, however, Kentuckians were major suppliers of slaves in the interstate slave traffic as tens of thousands of blacks were sent to the lower South in coffles and steamboats. Although Kentucky did not plant cotton, central Kentucky’s economy still relied on the plant’s cultivation. Hemp farms and ropewalks supplied baling rope and bagging for cotton cultivation.

After 1830, there were two major voices in the state’s antislavery movement. Antislavery Kentuckians failed to take aim at the slave trade and the practice of slave hiring. As we will see it took an Ohioan though to thrust the state’s slave trade into the national spotlight for good. Although neither a native Kentuckian nor part of the state’s antislavery movement, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* illustrated that the state’s domestic slave trade was neither an unfortunate by-product of the trans-Atlantic commerce nor a small part of Bluegrass slavery.

Prior to 1830, Kentucky clergymen primarily provided the core of leadership and resistance against slavery. In the late 1790s Presbyterian minister David Rice led antislavery Kentuckians in their fight to prohibit slavery and the further importation of slaves at the first constitutional convention. Called the father of Presbyterianism in the West, David Rice, became one of the most influential leaders of antislavery in Kentucky. Rice graduated from the College of New Jersey in 1761, migrated to Kentucky from Hanover County Virginia in search of fertile farm land and to win souls for the Presbyterian Church. In 1783, “Father” Rice settled in Danville where he established a number of Presbyterian churches in Mercer County. In 1784 Rice also established the
first grammar school west of the Appalachian Mountains before taking a teaching position at the Transylvania Seminary in Lexington in 1787.\(^2\) In addition to his reputation as an advocate for education, he also quickly won the admiration of antislavery proponents with his publication of the state’s first antislavery pamphlet entitled “Slavery Inconsistent with Justice and Good Policy” which published using the pseudonym “Philanthropos” in 1792.\(^3\)

At the constitutional convention, Rice and his antislavery allies had to counter proslavery men who argued that any emancipation plans endangered their rights as property holders. John Breckinridge, one of the state’s leading slaveholders wrote, if “they can by one experiment emancipate our slaves the same principle pursued will enable them at a second experiment to extinguish our land titles.”\(^4\) Breckinridge and other proslavery men accused antislavery agitators of possessing ulterior motives. They feared that if plans for gradual emancipation were put in place then titles to land, which were constantly under dispute in Kentucky during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries could also be placed in jeopardy. Therefore, any gradual emancipation plan could be used in conjunction with land reform as a social leveling devise in favor of the common white man.

According to the slaveholder’s ideology, the law had made Africans property; and

\(^2\) Harrison, 19.


\(^4\) Quote taken from Harrison, 24.
masters--whether they had purchased or inherited their slaves--had a legal claim to their bondservants and their offspring. To deprive them of their slaves was paramount to the government confiscating an individual’s horses, cattle, and other personal property. The argument that the law and not the everyday practices and customs of the domestic slave trade had transformed black bodies into commodities provided Bluegrass masters with a convenient excuse for their own lackadaisical efforts to curb Kentucky’s slave traffic. The grounding of the origins of slavery in the legal past also placed the blame for American slavery on the shoulders of the British who introduced African slavery into the American colonies. Proslavery forces argued that white Kentuckians then were the reluctant inheritors of a labor system from their Virginia and ultimately British forefathers.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Rice’s leadership was replaced by Baptist ministers David Barrow and Cater Tarrant who later established the Kentucky Abolition Society in 1808. Later Presbyterian preachers James Duncan, John Rankin, and John Finley Crowe would play important roles in the society as well. From the beginning, stopping the buying and selling of blacks was a top priority for these antislavery men. The constitution of the Kentucky Abolition Society declared that the organization would work to obtain a constitutional means to abolish the domestic slave trade. While it can be safe to label these early activists as assertive in their fight against proslavery men, their ideology can be described as conservative at best. These early antislavery proponents sought a constitutional end to the slave trade and slavery in

5 Bishop, 399-400.

6 Allen, 169-173; Coleman, 291-293; Harrison, 19-21.
Kentucky, with the state legislature implementing a gradual emancipation plan.\textsuperscript{7}

In 1808, the same year as the founding of the Kentucky Abolition Society, David Barrow published the organization’s most significant pamphlet called *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery Examined on the Principles of Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy and Scripture*. In his essay, Barrow tested the proslavery argument against natural law, reason, and divine revelation and found it lacking on all counts. As David Rice before him, Barrow believed that slavery was contrary to God’s natural order. The Baptist minister distinguished American slavery from other types of bondage, including criminal transportation and indentured servitude, because those forms of forced labor possessed limitations. American slavery, however, was involuntary and hereditary. Barrow asserted that masters deliberately conflated the words servant and slave to give American slavery the appearance of a direct descendant of biblical slavery and therefore justification. According to Barrow, reason and justice dictated that Africans could not be transformed into property because God did not give man license to enslave his fellow man. Barrow stated, “The earth and waters with their various productions, were given to man as his possession, but not a word of one man’s being given to another man as his property.”\textsuperscript{8} Barrow rejected the argument that contemporary masters deserved to be compensated for their slaves since it was the British who had introduced slavery into the colonies. The pecuniary link between past and future generations of Africans should not be allowed to continue because past masters would had spent

\textsuperscript{7}Gray, 42-43.

“inconsiderable sums of their for their parents [slaves] several generations past, has no foundation in reason and justice.” Barrow also attacked the commodification of slaves on the grounds that scripture did not support the practice of perpetual bondage.

Barrow attacked the legal argument for slavery by arguing that all men a natural right to freedom and to liberty. Writing in the wake of the American Revolution, Barrow was influenced by the ideas of the Declaration of Independence and discourse on rights. Barrow reprimanded Kentuckians for forgetting the declarations of liberty and equality for mankind that had been made during the revolutionary war. “The idea [equality] of it seems of late, to be very much obliterated from the minds of many Americans. But alas! How different our declarations then, from our conduct since, to our poor wretched slaves!” The emancipation of Kentucky’s slave population would right a great historical wrong by investing blacks with their liberty.

Barrow’s attack against slave trading was two fold. First he took aim at the transatlantic slave trade. His denunciation of the international trade should not be surprising since America’s pipeline to the commerce was still open and delivering Africans to the South. Also, in the late eighteenth century, the domestic trade was still inchoate and unorganized. Barrow’s comparison of masters with monarchs was a stern reminder to his readers of America’s unique position as a young republic, which had fought a long bloody struggle with the British for the idea that all men were created equal. In order to escape the shadow of the British monarchy, Kentucky had to follow the lead of northern states and free itself from the slave trade to rid itself of the vestiges of

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9 Barrow, 13.
10 Barrow, 19.
colonialism. Barrow denounced the slave trade as a “horrid and unnatural practice” that was in vogue during ancient times, but the inherent evil of the trade could be taken from the example of Joseph whose brothers sold him to the “Ishmaelite … and they to Potipha ‘an Egyptian.’” Barrow went on to warn white Kentuckians that slaveholders could just as easily transform them into commodities as masters had their own slave children.

> do not rest your invaluable liberties on the sandy foundation of the colour of your skins, or the fantastical declarations of some of our noisy patriots, and published politicians …that he who will enslave a black man, or his own, or son’s, nephew’s, or fellow citizen’s children begotten on a black woman, or slave, even if she were seven eighths white (which is sometimes the case) would not spare you, if he had you legally in his power.”

Although Barrow was concerned with the adverse affects of slavery on blacks, he also based his arguments against the domestic slave trade on the damage the commerce would do to the future of white Kentuckians through the continuing trading of slaves in the state. Barrow argument that converting black men and women into property only made them “dangerous to the community” was reinforced by stories published in newspapers of slave rebellions perpetuated by desperate blacks who fought back and, many times, killed slave traders or their masters while on the road or the river to a slave market.

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11Barrow, 32-33.

12 Barrow, 21.

13 Barrow, 19; Historians have often focused on the 1839 case of the slave rebellion on *Amistad* to illustrate how the demand for labor in the lower South drove the black market for slave labor. However, there were many such cases of rebellion in the domestic slave trade. As the interstate slave trade began to pick up after the 1820s, Kentucky newspapers reported incidents of slaves attacking their masters or slave traders who were attempting to take them to either a local slave market or out of the state to the Lower South. One such incident happened on Sept. 26, 1826 when seventy-seven slave sown their way by flatboat to New Orleans from Louisville attacked slave dealer Edward Stone and his crew, killing all four men, and then dumping their bodies in the Ohio River. The fugitive slave then made their way to Indiana where they were later captured and brought back to Kentucky for trial. Five of the slaves were convicted of murder and hanged; the rest were charged with lesser crimes and either sold down the river or again or sold in Kentucky. See *Western Citizen*, September 30, 1826, October 11, 1826; *Western Luminary*, September 30, 1826.
By denouncing the slave traffic as detrimental to the slave family, Barrow fell in line with his predecessor David Rice, and later abolitionist writer Harriet Beecher Stowe, in perceiving the evil that slavery perpetrated against the home. In the early republic the family was considered the cornerstone of society. It was poor public policy, Barrow argued, to interfere with the black family. Black families should be afforded the same protection as whites. For Rice the domestic slave trade was inconsistent with the laws of natural order because among other things slavery disrupted black family life. In his argument, Rice asserted that the “conjugal love” between a man and a woman and a “sense of duty in children” toward their parents were parts of the natural order, “inscribed there by the finger of God.” Divine law stated that no man could separate a couple that God had joined, while the law of slavery did not respect the sacred tie of black men and women. Children were supposed to honor and respect their parents, but under slavery, black children were to ultimately obey their masters. In Kentucky, as other slave states, slave marriages were not recognized under the law.\footnote{Bishop, 389, 390.} Regarding slaves then, the laws of man undercut the laws of heaven. The master’s power interfered with blacks’ abilities to perform their duties as family members. Slave speculation illustrated the harmful effects of transforming human beings into commodities. Black men, women, and children were caught up in the cash nexus of the growing market economy, where slaves served as malleable forms of capital investment that could be quickly liquated when masters needed money to pay their debts or purchase other valuable commodities such as land. In a frontier economy as Kentucky’s where specie was hard to find, excess slaves were valuable assets for recently arrived whites.
Although early antislavery proponents took a hard line with seeking to protect the black family from the slave trade, their approach to ending slavery was still conservative due to two imperatives of their ideology: gradual emancipation and colonization. Abolishing the importation of slaves into Kentucky was central for implementing a successful gradual emancipation plan. The conservative nature of this plan would have later consequences for the state’s lackluster attempts to deal with the domestic slave trade. The Kentucky General Assembly passed laws outlawing the importation of slaves into the state for sale; despite these restrictions on the importation of slaves into Kentucky as commodities, the general assembly never prohibited individuals from carrying slaves into the state for their own personal use. The line between using slaves for personal use and for sale was indeed very thin, and government enforcement of the nonimportation laws was very poor throughout the antebellum period.

Although the goal of the colonizationists was to remove those free blacks who were willing to resettle on the West Coast of Africa, plans did not always call for blacks to be shipped back to their “native” land. As early as 1814, David Barrow suggested that free blacks be removed across the Mississippi River. It was an ominous plan that presaged the removal of Native Americans to the Oklahoma Territory in the 1830s. In October of 1822, The Abolition Intelligencer and Missionary Magazine, the newspaper of the Kentucky Abolition Society, suggested a two-pronged approach to colonization by transporting some free blacks from the Upper South to western portions of the United States. “A portion of the Blacks might be colonized in some remote part of the Territory of the U. States. These [slaves] might be taken from the western part of Virginia, and
The second part of the writer’s plan called for other blacks to be shipped to Africa, where the writer connected the success of colonization with the abolishment of the domestic slave trade:

Some might also be sent to Africa. If a colony should be established there Under proper regulations, they might furnish facilities to the powers of American and Europe in crippling the Slave Trade. But nothing of very Great importance could be expected to result from this, for I repeat it is As my decided opinion, that IT WILL BE UTTERLY IMPOSSIBLE TO PUT A STOP TO THE FOREIGN TRAFFIC IN SLAVES, WHILE A MARKET CONTINUES OPEN FOR THEM ON THE AMERICAN CONTINENT AND ISLANDS.

The 1830s marked a radical turn for the abolitionist movement in the United States. The conservative nature of Kentucky’s antislavery forces provided individuals with antislavery views to speak out against the institution without associating themselves with northern abolitionists. Radical northern abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison attacked the policies of both gradual emancipationists and colonizationists believing that they did not go far enough or fast enough to end slavery. By the late 1820s, increased racial prejudice and the spread of cotton cultivation both of which were aided by the rise of Jacksonian democracy had forced abolitionists to move into a new phase. Garrison and his forces incorporated a new tactic against slaveholders called “moral suasion.” Through the Liberator, pamphlets, lecturers, and the American Anti-Slavery Society, Garrison and his followers established local antislavery organizations across the North. As part of the “moral suasion” argument, the radical abolitionists

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15 Harrison, 30-31; Allen, 189; The Abolition Intelligencer and Missionary Magazine, October 1822.
16 The Abolition Intelligencer and Missionary Magazine, October, 1822.
17 Dillion, 24.
focused on what they believed were the horrors of slavery: family separation, physical violence, the rape of black women, and the slave trade.\textsuperscript{18}

The majority of white Kentuckians (as other whites who resided in the border states) remained committed to perceiving slavery as a necessary evil, while rejecting the “instantaneous abolition” of northern antislavery organizations. However, there were some Kentuckians who eschewed the traditional conservative antislavery thinking that had marked the state’s movements since the late eighteenth century for the more radical stance.\textsuperscript{19} James G. Birney was one of those men. James Birney was born in 1792 to an aristocratic slaveholding family in Danville Kentucky. Birney grew up in an environment of contradictory messages about slaveholding. His father was a merchant who owned twenty slaves; yet, Birney’s father and grandfather had supported David Rice’s efforts in 1792 to include gradual emancipation in the state constitution. In the Birney household the issue of slavery was discussed often and openly as was the exploits of David Rice to make the state free. In addition to being exposed to the teachings of David Rice, Birney was also exposed to the antislavery teachings of several teachers while attending Princeton, and later while practicing law in Philadelphia Birney became friends with well-known black abolitionist James Forten and Abraham L. Pennock a Quaker abolitionist.\textsuperscript{20}

Early on Birney limited his antislavery activity to supporting the colonization

\textsuperscript{18} Virginia Heumann Kearney, “Illustrating Slavery : Graphic Art in William Lloyd Garrison’s \textit{The Liberator},” \textit{Rutgers Art Review} 18, 57.


movement as did many of his fellow Kentucky slaveholders. In 1832, Birney became an agent for the American Colonization Society and left Kentucky as an agent for the society’s southwest district composed of the states of Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee. It was his work in the Old Southwest that led to his disillusionment with the principles of colonization as a viable answer for abolishing slavery. When Birney first arrived in the region, he believed that the principles of colonization would flourish in the Old Southwest if citizens could be convinced that the society promoted both benevolence toward the slave and self interest for white southerners. However, after watching the failure of colonizationists societies to grow in Huntsville, Alabama, and New Orleans, Birney became convinced that colonization held no “principles, or quality, or constituent substance fitted so to tell upon the hearts of men as to ensure continued and persevering action.”

Instead, he turned his sites on the upper South and his home state as the best locales to implement gradual emancipation and colonization. In a letter Sept. 14, 1833, Birney prophesied that the only way to ensure the unity of the country was to put an end to the interstate slave trade:

What I would now suggest would be to press with every energy upon Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky for emancipation and colonization. If one of those States be not detached from the number of the slaveholding States, the slave question must inevitably dissolve the Union, and that before long. Should Virginia (or Maryland or Kentucky) leave them, the Union will be safe, though the sufferings of the South will be almost unto death. Indeed, I am by no means certain but that the Lower Mississippi and the country bordering on the Gulf of Mexico will ultimately be peopled almost entirely by blacks.

When Birney returned to Kentucky, he formed an organization called The

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Kentucky Society for the Relief of the State from Slavery. The group started with nine members and grew to almost seventy by 1834. Members pledged to emancipate all their slaves when they reached the age of twenty-five years of age and also their children. The organization was short lived, however. Although the society asked for the voluntary emancipation of the state’s slaves and members could withdraw at anytime, Kentuckians feared that both Birney and the organization were too closely associated with abolitionists. Even the name of the organization which attempted to shift the focus away from slaves themselves to the social and economic betterment of Kentucky could not provide enough distance from the northern abolitionist movement. 23 The majority of white Kentuckians throughout the 1830s and 1840s clung to their beliefs that slavery was a necessary evil needed to control the black population and to maintain social order. Nevertheless, the efforts of Birney and other antislavery men had unintended consequences for the state’s slave trade. Because of the fear of the spread of abolitionism to Kentucky, many of the state’s proslavery men were willing to compromise and implement nonimportation laws that curbed the transportation of slaves into Kentucky for sale.24

On March 19, 1835, after the destruction of the gradual emancipation society, Birney formed the Kentucky Antislavery Society in Danville. By this time, Birney regarded gradual emancipation as an untenable option for ending slavery, and he became committed to immediate emancipation. He had even turned against Henry Clay, whom

23 Martin, 69-72.

he had earlier in life deeply admired. In 1834, after meeting briefly with Clay regarding
the future of gradual emancipation in Kentucky, Birney characterized Clay’s views on the
topic as “very little beyond the standard of vulgar reflection on the subject.” Birney
believed that Clay possessed “no conscience” about emancipation and would safely
“swim with the popular current.” In a letter to Lewis Tappan, Birney pledged that he
would use the Philanthropist to attack Clay and the state’s colonization movement.
“Friend as I have been of him [Clay], I am more a friend of liberty and righteousness,”
Birney stated. “I shall deal with him according to the truth, and not very tenderly.
Slavery will rob him of the fame (ill-founded, I fear) that he has acquired as a friend of
liberty.” By the mid 1830s, Birney’s disillusionment with the Clay and the traditional
conservative antislavery was complete.

In 1836, Birney published The Philanthropist to accompany the society. Using the
slaveholders’ own words against them, Birney republished slave advertisements from
southern newspapers. In doing so, Birney preceded Theodore Dwight Weld and Harriet
Beecher Stowe in using slave advertisements in antislavery propaganda. Birney and
Weld knew each other and spent time together planning the best course of action to
bolster the antislavery movement in Kentucky. Weld believed that Birney was a great
asset for the American Antislavery Society because of his southern heritage, his

26 Ibid.
Dwight L. Dumond (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966), 297.
28 The Philanthropist (New Richmond, OH), 25 March, 1836; Dwight L. Dumond, ed. Letters of
James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857 Volume I (New York: American Historical Society, 1938; reprint,
Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1966), 189-191.
experience as a slaveholder, and his experience as an agent for the colonization society. 29

Initially, the citizens of Danville appeared to tolerate Birney and his arguments for immediate emancipation. Even after fully disclosing his antislavery views, Birney even hope to land a temporary teaching position at Centre College. However, with the announcement of the publication of the *Philanthropist*, the mood in the community, and from across the state, transformed from one of tolerance to intolerance. To ensure that Birney did not print his paper, a committee of men bought the business of the Danville printer who was supposed to print the paper. Furthermore, the postmaster of Danville announced that he would prevent the delivery of the publication. 30 By September of 1835, Birney realized that it was impossible to operate in Kentucky, so he moved to Cincinnati to continue his work. His move across the Ohio River spelled the end for the Kentucky Antislavery Society. Birney’s retreat from Kentucky widened the scope of the debate about Kentucky slavery and the slave trade.

Even after the legal termination of the America’s participation in the African slave trade in 1808, Birney’s *Philanthropists* linked the continuing international slave trade with America’s domestic commerce. The former slaveholder did not find any “material difference” between the two trades despite the fact that America had stopped importing slaves after 1808. In fact, Birney, along with other antislavery foes, saw little to rejoice about in the nation’s abstinence from the African slave market. Birney’s antislavery publication—*The Philanthropist*—argued that the perpetuation of American


30 Martin, 74-75; Fladeland, 92-93.
slavery formed an “inviting” black market in southern ports for slaves from Africa.\textsuperscript{31} According to the paper, “that as long as there are slave-holding governments, the slave trade will exist, and be difficult to control.”\textsuperscript{32} The writer continued that any successful attempt at ending slavery started with more effective enforcement of the transatlantic slave trade and the “abolition” of the domestic slave trade, and for Birney that meant starting with the abolition of slavery in Kentucky and other Upper South states that were shipping a large number of blacks to slave markets in the lower South.

Birney called the United States government to task for its hypocritical stance of outlawing the transatlantic slave trade, while allowing for powerful slave traders such as John Armfield to continue to establish profitable slave trading operations in “Alexandria, a port in the District of Columbia, where the Congress of these United States has exclusive jurisdiction.”\textsuperscript{33} Birney saw no difference between the two traffics: they both caused the forcible separation of black families, and both contributed to the growth of the plantation economy since the final destination for the captives was New Orleans. “And we ask in the name of justice and humanity,” the \textit{Philanthropist} asked, “wherein consists the difference of the slave trade between the District of Columbia and New Orleans, or between the Bassa Cove and New Orleans?”\textsuperscript{34}

To compare the two traffics, the \textit{Philanthropist} weaves fictitious scenarios of slave trading on the West Coast of Africa and in Washington, D.C., with slave trader

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Philanthropist}, 6 May, 1836; Clay, 120.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Philanthropist}, 6 May, 1836.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Philanthropist}, 25 March, 1836.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
John Armfield as the protagonist in each story. In the first scenario set on Africa’s West Coast, Armfield is portrayed as an international flesh trader who works with “a savage chieftain” a deal for black captives. The chief and his soldiers attack an unsuspecting village, a scenario played out thousands of times during the transatlantic slave trade, where they kidnap “here a husband and there a wife, here a son, and there a father.” These unfortunate Africans find themselves packed on Armfield’s slave packets which then bring the slaves to the nation’s largest slave market, New Orleans. However, the enterprise goes sour once the slaves are sold in New Orleans and Armfield’s exploits are uncovered. Because the importation of slaves to the United States had been banned after 1808, Armfield would have been tried and then hanged since “Congress has pronounced such a transaction—piracy.”

In the second scenario, Armfield is presented as he was, an established domestic slave trader. This time Armfield is located in Virginia conducting his business. The *Philanthropist* then goes on to transpose the infrastructure of the international traffic—the slave factories, complicate African chiefs, etc—onto the American South. Armfield sets up an office and builds a slave pen, while advertising in the newspapers that he is looking for “likely” slaves to purchase. Maryland and Virginia stand in for the West Coast of Africa with white slaveholders playing the role of the “savage” African princes who instead of raiding neighboring territories raid their slave quarters to find victims to sell to Armfield. Once again as in the international traffic, families are torn asunder and then packed onto ships bound for New Orleans. But this time, Armfield will not find himself dangling from the end of a hangman’s rope. Instead, his “trafficking in the flesh,

35 Ibid.
and sinews, and bones of his fellow-men” has violated no laws.\textsuperscript{36} To add insult to injury, this insidious commerce goes on in the shadow of the nation’s capital. Coffles of black men and women are “driven down Pennsylvania Avenue” to Armfield’s slave pen. The fact that the slave trade went on in the nation’s capital had always been a sore spot for American abolitionists. This can be seen clearly in the leading abolitionist publication of the period, William Lloyd Garrison’s \textit{The Liberator}. The masthead of \textit{The Liberator} contained a drawing depicting a scene of national embarrassment as slaveholders separated black families at auctions literally in the shadow of the capital.

The middle men in the domestic slave trade were not merchants, but instead it was slaveholding politicians who sat in Congress witnessing the coffles of slaves pass through the streets of Washington D.C. Birney’s anger towards upper South slaveholders and the region’s substitution as American slave “factories” in his writings should come as no surprise. Birney had spent his early life in Kentucky among the slaveholding class and their adherence to the “Code of Honor” almost certainly bred contempt as well. Birney had also served in the Kentucky state legislature. Also, the ambivalence and lack of commitment by antislavery men such as Henry Clay also fostered bitterness in Birney. According to the article, when proslavery politicians were finished delivering speeches about liberating Greece, Poland, and South American countries, they rushed down to Mr. Armfield’s slave pens where they informed the trader that “the overseer on his sugar or cotton plantation, in Louisiana or Mississippi, is greatly in want of one or two dozens slaves.” The proslavery politician speculated in slaves to make a profit, but also used the slaves as political capital on the floor of the Congress. After purchasing the slaves, the

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
politician rushes back to the floor of Congress where he denounces as “traitors” those
who petition for the end of slavery and the slave trade in the District of Columbia.”

Although Birney was a native Kentuckian and a former slaveholder he had no
patience for masters who claimed that they were forced by the ancestors to deal with
slavery. Instead Birney claimed that they were the victims of their own greed and their
involvement in the slave market. Criticizing Henry Clay in an open letter to the Liberty
Party in 1845, Birney states:

It was enough for me, that Mr. Clay was a SLAVEHOLDER: that he had become
one, not by the accident of having had slaves “entailed” on him—which
slaveholders affect to consider as a sufficient excuse for their oppression—but
deliberately —by purchase--;—and this, too, after he had publicly for a time, yielded
up his mind to the generous impulse of emancipation.38

In his Vindication of Abolitionists written in 1836, Birney blasted the idea that slave
traders were the sole blame for the slave trade and that masters were willing participants
in the practice. “Again,” Birney asks, “has it never once entered into your minds, whilst
attending the marts for human flesh, established in your towns and villages, that the
slaver who supplies them is but your agent.” Birney goes on with his indictment using
the powerful imagery of the slave trade and the havoc it brought on the slave family39

And while he [the slave trader] recounts to you his horrible adventures—of
husbands without a moment’s warning torn from the wives of their bosom, and
loaded with chains and driven like cattle for a thousand miles, on the high-ways
of this Christian land; of the wife and mother, in the phrenzy of separation,
calling on heaven and earth to restore to her husband and children of her love,
and to blast the wretch who is tearing her from them forever…Have you seen

37 Ibid.

38 Birney to Liberty Party, Letters, 901.

Documents (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1836; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1972), 21-22. References are
from reprint edition.
this, and has not conscience, stifled and sepulchered as it has almost been, still wrung from you the acknowledgement, *this is my work*.\(^{40}\)

Despite their efforts, radical abolitionists in Kentucky such as Birney were too few to make a true difference in the debate over slavery in the 1830s and 40s. Emancipationists and their conservative ideology still dominated the antislavery movement in Kentucky as they had in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The most prominent of these conservative antislavery men was Cassius Clay. In the late 1830s and early 1840s, Clay arrived on the antislavery scene in Kentucky and became one of the staunchest supporters of the Non-Importation Act of 1833. Born in 1810 in Madison County, his father General Green Clay was one of the state’s most prominent slaveholders. After attending Transylvania University in Lexington, Clay was introduced to antislavery views while attending Yale, where he was influenced by the radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. After two years at New Haven, Clay returned to Kentucky and tossed his hat into the political arena, where he openly espoused his antislavery views. Clay’s argument against slavery was that it was detrimental to Kentucky’s “Anglo-Saxon” population constituted a central them of his Kentucky System. Cassius borrowed liberally from his cousin Henry Clay’s American System for his economic ideology.\(^{41}\) According to Clay, without slavery, both white working men and Kentucky’s economy would both prosper. Slavery prevented Kentucky from becoming an economic powerhouse. Clay believed that Kentucky contained the best characteristics of both the North and the South. He envisioned Kentucky having a diverse

\(^{40}\) Ibid, 23.

\(^{41}\) Sears, 30.
agriculture accompanied by a robust manufacturing sector. He also wanted the Kentucky state government to invest in the construction of internal improvements that would connect the different regions of the state. Despite his recollections of Mary, Clay’s speeches reveal that he was unconcerned with how slavery affected blacks and found African Americans do be inferior to whites. “To make way for this most glorious consummation, our free white laborers are to be driven out; our manufactories, already too inconsiderable, are to be destroyed; our cities are to crumble down; our rich fields are to grow sterile; our frequented places to be deserted.”

Clay denied allegations that he sought immediate emancipation for Kentucky’s slave population. Instead, Clay argued that he advocated gradual emancipation.

Interestingly it was the sale of a slave girl that formed one of Clay’s earliest memories of slavery. According to Clay, a young beautiful mulatto girl owned by his father was attacked by a drunken overseer and other men. Presumably the attack was an attempted rape, but we cannot know for sure. What we do know is that Mary defended herself and in the process killed one of her assailants with a butcher knife. Due to his influence, Green Clay was able to spare the young woman’s life. Perhaps a slaveholder of lesser standing would have lost their slave property to the gallows. Despite being saved from the hangman, Mary is sold away from White Hall after Green Clay’s death as he requested in his will. Cassius’s brother, Sidney—himself an emancipationist—has to perform the deed.

Clay explains that he never forgot the day that Mary was “tied by the wrists and

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42 Clay, 119; Harrison, 49; Coleman, 300-301; Tallant, 94, 97; Sears, 27.
43 Harrison, 49.
sent from home and friends, and the loved features of her native land — the home of her
infancy and girlish days — into Southern banishment forever.\footnote{Quote taken from Richard Sears, The Day of Small Things: Abolitionism in the Midst of Slavery Berea, Kentucky, 1854-1864 (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986), 8.} Although influenced by
William Lloyd Garrison. Clay’s recollection of Mary’s sale at White Hall appears as the
turning point for his antislavery views. Clay’s account of the event and his telling of the
event should certainly be called into question. It was in his autobiography, after all,
published after the end of slavery. Clay may have wanted to make himself appear to
have always been a champion of the antislavery cause from an early age. It was
Garrison’s enthusiasm that tapped into Clay’s already smoldering feelings against
slavery. Clay’s inconsistency as a slaveholder, while a committed emancipationist, did
not place him in the same ideological camp as Garrison. Instead, perhaps it best to
interpret Clay’s inconsistency as a byproduct of being a resident of Kentucky and a
member of the state’s slaveocracy: two aspects that Garrison did not have to contend with
intellectually. Cassius Clay’s inconsistency as a slaveholder and emancipationist were
reflected in a letter written to him by his former slave named David Clay in January of
1850. By this point, Cassius had released some of his slaves, but still possessed some
slaves, including David’s sister Hannah. In the letter, David Clay, says that he
sympathizes with his former master for all of the troubles that Cassius is encountering
due to his antislavery views. But David Clay’s letter also has two other purposes: to
facilitate David Clay’s business as a plow maker and to see his sister, Hannah. David
Clay states it would give him “great pleasure” to send his former master one of his plows
to test in the “Hocaday field” where he would find it effective removing the briars and
roots. The former slave closes with “Remember me to your good family, and to the
colored people; and it would afford me much satisfaction if you would permit my sister Hannah to visit me during the next summer. The plows can be sent to any point you my desire.\footnote{Blassingame, 88; Sears, 28-29.}

Nevertheless, Clay’s account of Mary gives the reader insight into how Clay viewed the domestic slave trade and Kentucky’s role in the traffic. His description of Mary’s sale as “Southern banishment” seems to give the appearance that the slave trade was exclusively connected with the cotton fields and sugar plantations of the Deep South not the “loved features” of Kentucky. Yet, in 1843, the “Lion of White Hall” would sell a black woman named Emily, her mother, and her brother down South as punishment for Emily’s suspected role in the poisoning death of Cassius Jr.

Although nonimportation restricted the influx of slaves brought into the state for sale, the policy actually strengthened the value of slaves already residing in Kentucky, working in the favor of slave masters. By stopping the flow of out-of-state slaves, masters residing in central Kentucky and along the Ohio River with large slave holdings could keep the values of their slaves high on the intrastate slave market. Furthermore, nonimportation would protect the existing social order from the chaos that would surely ensue from the influx of disorderly slaves brought into the state. Many whites believed that unruly slaves from out of the state ended up in the slave trade and would contaminate the existing black population in Kentucky. In 1841 on the floor of the Kentucky House of Representatives, Cassius Clay, representing Fayette County, illuminated the dual purpose of the nonimportation law and the connection between maintaining high prices for slaves in Kentucky and maintaining social order:
For as the owner of ten thousand and twenty-six slaves, valued at three millions seven hundred and forty-three thousand one hundred and twenty-three dollars, there is none so blind as not to see that the free importation from abroad, by all the laws of trade, reduces the value of her home population, in proportion to the increase from abroad; while on the other hand, the far-reaching eye of patriotism will discover, in the increase of the whites over the blacks, security, wealth, and progressive greatness to the whole state.\(^{46}\)

Pressure from advocates for nonimportation persuaded the state legislature to tighten the law once again on February 2, 1833. The stronger non-importation law punished individuals who either imported slaves for themselves or individuals who knowingly purchased, sold, or hired imported bondsmen with a fine of $600 per slave.\(^{47}\)

These types of restrictions on the importation of slaves were common in most southern states since white citizens feared that “foreign degraded slaves,” and other recalcitrant blacks would be added to their existing slave population.\(^{48}\) However, even citizens could not import slaves into the state for their own use. The revamped law of 1833 was also an acknowledgement of the growing importance of slave hiring in the Kentucky slave market. Kentucky’s noticeable increase in the exportation of slaves to the Lower South also played a hand in the non-importation law of 1833 as coffles of slaves marching through the streets of Lexington and a slave traders’ advertisements in local newspapers were a constant reminder of the state’s participation in “SOUL-PEDLING.”\(^{49}\)

\(^{46}\) Clay, 69.

\(^{47}\) Harrison, 47; C.S. Morehead and Mason Brown, *Digest of the Statute Laws of Kentucky* (Frankfort: Albert B. Hodges, 1834), 1482-1484.


\(^{49}\) Harrison, 46-47; Tallant, 93; T.D. Clark, “The Slave Trade Between Kentucky and the Cotton Kingdom,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (December 1934), 331-342; Abolition Intelligencer, February 1823; *The Kentucky Reporter* 14, 1827.
The effectiveness of the Non-Importation Law of 1833 is debatable. As a young boy, Elisha Green remembered that “slave traders would go to Virginia and buy up the negroes.” One Sunday morning, Green saw a slave trader with “twenty-five or thirty colored men hand-cuffed and chained. There were three of four wagons within which were a host of women and children.”\(^{50}\) Although the percentage of blacks in the state population did begin to decrease in the 1830s, other factors such as the slave trade and the fact that newly emancipated slaves were forced by law to leave the state may account for the decrease.\(^{51}\) At best, the law was conservative enough (at least until 1849) to allow the state’s antislavery men and “conscientious” slaveholders to gather on a common ground against the domestic slave trade. Certainly not all Kentuckians were happy with the law. White farmers and entrepreneurs in the western part of the state badly wanted the law to be repealed in order to buy slaves from out of the state at cheaper prices.\(^{52}\)

However, the Non-Importation Law of 1833 allowed white Kentuckians to deflect some of their state’s role in the domestic slave trade. Defending the Non-Importation Law of 1833, Cassius Clay stated:

Proud and noble spirited Kentucky, after years of bitter and elaborate discussion, by continued and increased majorities, has solemnly declared to the world, that she would permit no more slaves to be brought within her borders; thereby giving the strongest assurances, that she looks upon slavery as an evil, that she would have no more of it; only permitted slavery to exist through necessity, in obedience to our Constitution and laws, and allowing the transportation of slaves out of the state, under the stern rule of self-defence, and social and political security.\(^{53}\)

\(^{50}\) Elisha Green, *The Life of the Rev. Elisha Green*, p. 2 online April 2, 2006, online.

\(^{51}\) Harrison, 47.

\(^{52}\) Tallant, 95.

\(^{53}\) Clay, 118.
Clay’s paean to the Non-Importation bill concealed more than it revealed about Kentucky’s antislavery movement and their fight against the slave trade. Kentucky had on the books a non-importation bill since 1794. Because enforcement of the law was so lax, the law was amended again 1815. According to Clay, slavery existed in Kentucky only because the United States Constitution guaranteed the right to human property not because master profited from slave labor. Finally, Clay excused Kentucky’s slave trade to the lower South as a form of protection from unruly and rebellious slaves, not as a vital part of the growth of cotton cultivation in the black belt.

By 1849, neither conservative antislavery men nor abolitionists could prevent the repeal of the nonimportation law of 1833 as the slave trade had become too valuable for Kentuckians to curtail any longer.

The dominant voice in Kentucky’s antislavery movement was conservative in nature. Unfortunately, the voices of abolitionists were too faint to be heard over the calls of the primary message of gradual emancipation and colonization. Although most of the foes of slavery, especially the clergy, rejected ideas of innate black inferiority, they refrained from proposing radical abolition plans. Instead, they insisted that slavery could be ended with gradual emancipation plans, and the presence of a free black population (which the majority of white Kentuckians feared) could be eliminated with colonization. Due to the fear of radical abolitionists, Kentucky’s antislavery forces wanted to distance themselves as much as possible from northern abolitionism, especially after 1830 with the rise of William Lloyd Garrison. James G. Birney and John G. Fee and a handful of other Kentuckians crossed the line and became fiery proponents of immediate
emancipation in the 1830s and 40s. However, their efforts were in vane. Their denunciations of the domestic slave trade and Kentucky’s role in the traffic did not sway audiences to abolish the traffic. The dominant antislavery movement was far too conservative to put an end to slavery or its handmaiden the domestic slave trade. Conservative antislavery men attempted to have the best of both ideological worlds so to speak by committing to gradual emancipation and colonization (a pipe dream) and still hold on to their valuable slave property. And in many ways, the impotent nonimportation codes fit nicely into this conservative thinking. Revisions of the nonimportation act that the Kentucky General Assembly created placed the blame of the slave trade on other states, while deflecting the responsibility of Kentucky in the traffic. The nonimportation acts were essentially feel good legislation at its best and ensured that the slave trade would continue uninhibited. It allowed for slave masters and other Kentuckians to maintain the myth of a benevolent institution of slavery while continuing the lucrative practices of buying, selling, and hiring black men, women, and children.

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54 Dillon, 11.
CHAPTER 4:
THE LOCOMOTIVE TENDENCIES OF HUMAN PROPERTY: BLUEGRASS
RUNAWAYS AND THE “CATCHING BUSINESS”

The goal of this chapter is to further our understanding of Kentucky slave speculation by examining runaway slaves. This chapter will argue that the practice of capturing fugitive slaves was an important facet of the domestic slave trade. Indeed, for Kentucky this was a central aspect in maintaining the health of the institution and of maintaining high prices for slave property. Since Kentucky shared a northern boundary with free territory, the retrieval of runaways became highly organized and an arm of the intrastate slave trade. Over time, Kentucky slaveholders, with the aid of northern state governments, created an elaborate system that was just as organized as the buying and selling of slaves to capture runaway property. The “catching business” was composed of slave catchers, patrollers or “patty rollers” as the slaves called them, sheriffs, jailers, judges, newspaper editors, and more importantly the average citizen both northerners and southerners. Unfortunately, historians have not considered the capture of fugitive slaves as a fundamental part of the domestic slave trade primarily because white southerners did not place the practice in the same category as the interstate commerce. Non-slaveholding whites who captured slaves did not see themselves as party to the flesh trade, but instead they perceived their actions as their civic duty or they may have just enjoyed the thrill of
the hunt or most often the monetary reward for capturing a fugitive was enough.

However, antebellum African Americans and their allies viewed slave catchers and slave traders as part of the same traffic that commodified black bodies. Indeed, as Harriet Beecher Stowe argued in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the line between slave catcher and slave trader in the Kentucky borderland was thin and permeable, with men participating in both practices.

There were several different factors that shaped the fugitive slave market in Kentucky, including the vulnerability of free blacks to slave traders and kidnappers. Free blacks residing in southern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois fell prey to kidnappers, slave catchers, and slave traders who had easy access to the slave markets in Louisville, Maysville, Paducah, and other Kentucky river towns, where black or brown skin was “generally considered *prima facia* evidence of slavery.”¹ Newly emancipated slaves, free blacks from southern states, and fugitive slaves all migrated to the Old Northwest in search of better economic and social opportunities causing an increase in the black population in the region. For example, the 1820 census counted only 1,420 blacks residing in Indiana; by the eve of the Civil War, 11,428 African Americans resided there.² Census figures illustrate that in Indiana the large portion of the black population lived in counties bordering the Ohio River.³ Free blacks traveling in the Ohio River

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¹ Quote taken from J. Winston Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 205.


borderland were especially susceptible to kidnappers. First, many of these men and women were either illiterate or did not possess free papers to prove their status if kidnapped. Second, if free blacks were kidnapped while traveling away from their communities, whites who knew them and could vouch for their freedom were miles away. And third, anti-black sentiment in the Old Northwest and fugitive slave laws worked against free blacks and fugitive slaves who sought refuge just north of the Ohio River.

Unfortunately, some of Kentucky’s own free black residents were kidnapped and then sold, some down the river to New Orleans. In 1827, a young man named John sued for his freedom after being sold in Louisiana by a group of Kentuckians. Fortunately, John was able to prove that he was in fact free and had been kidnapped. The state government was one of the biggest participates in the fugitive slave market. Unfamiliar black faces in Kentucky towns were routinely taken up by the sheriff. In 1816, William and James Delany were arrested in Livingston County, Kentucky as fugitive slaves. The jailer described the Delanys as having “yellow” complexions and being able to “read and write.” Despite their protests of being free, the Delanys were claimed by a Mr. McGee who lived in Natchez, Mississippi. If after advertising the capture of the suspected runaway the master did not show up to retrieve the “fugitive” from the county jail, the sheriff would then hire the black out to pay for his or her room and board. In this manner the market for fugitive slaves intersected with the local hiring market. Vagrant or unclaimed black labor in the form of suspected runaway slaves was distributed among the white community by the sheriff.

By the early 1840s the kidnapping of free blacks had become so common that many people residing in the Ohio River borderland characterized the snatching of blacks along the Ohio River as a legitimate arm of the domestic slave trade. As presidential candidate for the Liberty Party in 1844, James Birney denounced the traffic to his constituents.

Kidnapping is carried on this country to a great extent—in some parts of it, almost without the necessity of secrecy or concealment… This trade (for it now deserves that name), the legitimate offspring of slavery, finds large materials in the States North of the Ohio bordering on the slave regions …

The growing vulnerability of blacks to kidnappers and slave catchers along the Ohio River in the 1840s and 50s was reflected in the fact that many fugitive slaves kept going north to Canada where freedom was assured by British law. As early as the 1820s though antislavery advocate Jesse Torrey made the connection between the growing flesh commerce that was connecting the South with the kidnapping of blacks from the Ohio River borderland. Torrey blamed the naked capitalism of the domestic slave trade for the kidnapping of free blacks and asserted that both the federal government and southern state governments needed to hold slave traders accountable for the phenomenon of kidnapping. Torrey stated that every slave trader should be required to “report his slaves to a proper magistrate, in every township or county through which he passes; and to produce certificates, from some magistrate residing near the place in which they were purchased.”

Unbeknownst to Torrey, Kentucky, since the late 1790s, had prohibited the

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5 Letter from Birney to Joshua Levitt and others in Letters of James Birney, edited by Dwight Dumond (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1966), 651-652.

importation of slaves into the state explicitly for sale, but due to the lack of
documentation it is unclear how many people were actually prosecuted for the infraction
or how well officials even enforced the law.

In a strange twist of irony, slaves were also targeted by white kidnappers for the
fugitive slave market. Often lured away from their masters by white men who often
presented themselves as abolitionists, stolen slaves were then resold to unsuspecting
buyers or presented to sheriffs as fugitives. Despite gaining the animosity of the public
and the possibility of serving up to fifteen years in the Kentucky state penitentiary, many
men risked their freedom to make a profit in this manner. Kentucky newspapers often
carried notices warning the public to be on the lookout for “nigger stealers.” A
Shelbyville newspaper warned the public in 1849:

Look Out for a NEGRO STEALER! $25.00 REWARD! John Birch
sentenced to 2 years in the penitentiary for negro stealing in Trimble County,
escaped from the sheriff on the way to the state penitentiary.7

Although historians have been primarily focused on the slave trade from the Upper South
to the Lower South, evidence suggests that the trade also flowed in the opposite direction.
The Mississippi River also acted as a conduit for bringing kidnapped blacks to Kentucky
slave markets. In 1860, Marguerite S. Fayman at the age of ten was taken from her home
in Baton Rouge and sold on the market in Louisville. Marguerite remained enslaved in
Kentucky until 1864 when she was finally able to escape.8

Marguerite’s experience of being kidnapped at ten and then sold was not
uncommon for African-American children. Black children were some of the most

7 Shelby News October 25, 1849; Lexington Observer and Reporter February 15, 1845; Delia
Webster, A History of the Trial of Miss Delia A. Webster, (Vergennes, VT: E.W. Blaisdell Printer), 18.

8 Norman Yetman, ed. Life Under the “Peculiar Institution”: Selections from the Slave Narrative
Collection (Huntington, N.Y.: Robert Kreiger, 1976), 121.
vulnerable individuals to get caught up in the flesh traffic in the borderland. In 1821, a notice in The Louisville Public Advertiser stated that Ishmael Lemaster was taken from the farm of Abraham Lemaster and supposedly “sold down the river with a view of selling him as a slave.” In addition to Ish’s age, the case is also shocking because it appears that ten year old “Ish” was free because he was the “son of a white woman by a slave.”\footnote{The Louisville Public Advertiser, April 18, 1821.} Some slave children were reminded—sometimes with violence—to remain vigilant about their surroundings so that they did not fall prey to kidnappers. George Henderson, enslaved in Woodford County, remembered as a child that “I have seen old covered wagons pulled by oxen traveling on the road going to Indiana and us children was whipped to keep us away from the road for fear they would steal us.”\footnote{George P. Rawick, The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Vol. 16 (Greenwood Publishing Co: Westport, CT, 1972), 7.} Peter and Levin Still were kidnapped from their home in Philadelphia at the ages of six and eight, respectively. After accepting a carriage ride from a white man named Kincaid, the brothers were taken to Lexington, Kentucky where they were sold to a brick mason named John Fisher. The brothers later learned that Fisher paid $155 for Levin and $150 for Peter.\footnote{Kate E.R. Pickard, The Kidnapped and the Ransomed: The Narrative of Peter and Vina Still (1856: reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 28-29; pages refer to the reprint edition.}

Children were such vulnerable targets for kidnappers because they were easier to transform into commodities for the slave market than adults. If the abducted children were young enough, it made it easier for kidnappers to simply create histories for them or, depending upon the children’s ages, they might possibly forget that they had ever been free. In the case of Ish, the subscriber believed that the boy would be able to
“describe his parents and their place of residence” despite the fact that he was “rather
deficient in point of understanding.” In the case of Peter and Levin, they did not forget
their pasts and did their best to keep their histories alive. After being purchased by
Fisher, Peter and Levin still talked of returning to their home; however, they soon
learned, after threats of violence from Fisher, to not talk openly about it. As Peter and
Levin’s experience further illustrate, once children were enslaved they were easier to
control through intimidation and violence. 12

Masters also used a network of spies and informants to aid in the capture of their
slaves and to bolster confidence in the fugitive slave market. Because of the lack of roads
in antebellum America, slaves had limited avenues of escape. Masters also knew this and
had spies watching highly traveled roads for their absconded slaves. Henry Morehead
recalled, “I was pursued,—my owners watched for me in a free State, but, to their sad
disappointment, I took another road.”13 Interviewed only one year after escaping from
Louisville, Morehead was vague about his escape route because he used the underground
railroad to escape to Canada. Often times in the Ohio River borderland, slaves could not
tell who was a friend or a foe and slave catchers exploited this uncertainty by pretending
to be abolitionists in order to capture runaways. In Cincinnati, Henry Bibb was betrayed
by two white men who “told me not to be afraid of them, they were abolitionists.”14

12 Pickard, 28-29; Walter Johnson, Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 126-129; Carol Wilson, Freedom at Risk: The
Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780-1865 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 14-
15.

13 Benjamin Drew, A North-Side View of Slavery: The Refugee, or the Narratives of

14 Henry Bibb, Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave
Edited by Yuval Taylor. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 34.
After speaking to Henry and learning the whereabouts of his master, the men contacted Bibb’s owner and informed him of Bibb’s residence in Cincinnati.

Mr. Gatewood got two of his slaveholding neighbors to go with him to Cincinnati, for the purpose of swearing to anything which might be necessary to change me back into property. They came on to Cincinnati, and with but little effort they soon rallied a mob of ruffians who were willing to become the watchdogs of slaveholders, for a dram, in connection with a few slavehunting petty constables.15

Henry Bibb’s recounting of his capture in Cincinnati gives us some insight into the dynamics of the practice of slave retrieval. Bibb and other Kentucky fugitive slaves that were fortunate to make it across the Ohio River into Cincinnati discovered that the laws of Ohio did not provide them with much protection. In addition to the federal fugitive slave laws, many northern states passed their own fugitive slave laws. The Ohio state legislature passed a fugitive slave law in 1839 at the behest of neighboring Kentuckians who were frightened by the growing chorus of abolitionism in Ohio.16

Ohio’s willingness to enact a fugitive slave law in 1839 illustrates the immense level of anti-black sentiment that pervaded the Old Northwest, but it also demonstrates how fugitive slaves throughout the antebellum period unintentionally forced white northerners to deal with the issue of slavery. In fact, Kentucky masters needed neighboring states such as Ohio to enact fugitive slaves that made for the effective return of runaway slaves. A delegation of Kentuckians sent to Ohio to negotiate the deal explained that “Experience has shown that without the concurring legislation of our sister state, bordering on the north side of the Ohio river, our laws inflicting punishment for

15 Bibb, 34.

16 According to Bibb’s account he was captured in Cincinnati in 1838 before the passage of Ohio’s fugitive slave law.
enticing slaves to leave their lawful owners …cannot be effectually enforced.” Although abolitionists denounced the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 for its unfairness, fugitive slave laws passed by northern states were just as harsh and left no room for accused blacks with due process of the law. Ohio’s fugitive slave law bolstered master’s faith in the fugitive slave market and kept the prices for slaves high on the Kentucky slave market. After being informed that he had been nominated as the Liberty Party candidate for the presidential election of 1844, James Birney characterized the nation’s fugitive slave laws as tools used by slave masters to transform northern states into slave markets for southern states.

All this we do converting the free States into hunting grounds for human prey
And attempting to cover it from the world and even from ourselves, by calling
The slave, a “person held to service under laws,” and the slave catcher,
“the party to whom such service is due.”

The case of the kidnapping of Jerry Phinney, a free black man residing in Columbus, Ohio who was kidnapped and sold into Kentucky slavery illustrates how fugitive slave laws commodified African Americans. Phinney was kidnapped by two men named A.C. Forbes and Jacob Armitage. Forbes and Armitage claimed that Jerry was a fugitive slave and that they had received his mistress’s permission to capture and return him to Kentucky. Ohio’s fugitive slave law made it a misdemeanor to kidnap a free black from the state and sell him into slavery.

Just as the buying and selling of slaves had created new economic opportunities for white men so too did the fugitive slave market. White men from local communities in the Ohio River borderland were important in the retrieval of runaways. John Parker who

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17 Letter from James G. Birney to Joshua Leavitt and Others, in Letters of James Gilliespie Birney, edited by Dwight Dumond (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1966), 647.
resided in Ripley, Ohio, and was a conductor on the Underground Railroad, described how Ripley’s white population mobilized when news arrived that fugitive slaves might try to make their way through the city. “The whole countryside turned out, not only to stop the fugitives, but to claim the reward for their capture.” Parker continued, “Every ford was watched, while along the creeks and rivers, the skiffs were not only pulled up on shore, but were padlocked to trees, and the oars removed. There were dogs in every dooryard, ready to rundown the unfortunates.”

Although Parker’s account smacks of hyperbole, the importance of nonslaveholding participation in the capture of fugitive slaves should not be dismissed. The mass mobilization of white men in the community was important to securely guard the river and watch for unfamiliar blacks in the neighborhood.

The capture of a fugitive slave could earn a working man fifty dollars, a hefty sum for the time. Some times the slave’s value protected him from violence that might otherwise have been meted out by racist whites. Once again the experiences of John Parker shed some light on the participation of white men in the capture of fugitive slaves. After being apprenticed as a plasterer in New Orleans, Parker escaped on the Mississippi River via a stolen skiff. Parker was accosted by a white man who was standing on shore brandishing a shotgun. “As I paid no attention to him, he rushed down to the water’s edge, pointing his gun at men, threatening to shoot. I knew that a dead fugitive slave was of no value to him.”

To the chagrin of the white man, Parker continued down the river. Parker risked his life by not complying with the man’s orders. Many fugitives

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19 Parker, 48.
though were shot or killed for resisting their captors. Perhaps the man had no idea of Parker’s value and indeed wanted to capture him alive. Or, perhaps he did not want to be held financial liable if Parker was either hurt or injured during the encounter.

Often times masters who sought out fugitive slaves turned to their male relatives or other white men in the local community to help track down runaways. Sometimes these men were fellow slave holders, or professional slave catchers. Others appear to be ordinary men who exercised their entrepreneur instincts to profit from retrieving fugitive blacks. In 1827, one such Kentuckian named Mitchell hired out his services, offering the master the terms of either paying him a dollar per day or giving him the horse which the fugitive slave rode away. In 1829, one mistress promised to sell her fugitive black, Tom, to the slave catcher, William Ellis, for 100 pounds if or when the slave was captured. By essentially selling a slave that was on the run, a master saved face in the community while simultaneously ridding themselves of an unruly bondsman. No matter their relation to the master, white men who accompanied masters to retrieve runaways had a stake in securing slave property not just in their local communities but also in the nation. Andrew Jackson, enslaved near Bowling Green, understood that the retrieval of runaway slaves by nonslaveholdings whites was more than just a money making project, but is was also a way to ensure that the rights of all white men would be upheld.

If slaves were like money, simply transferable by the will of the owner, I presume it would be quite different. But in as much as it takes legs and runs away, it becomes a matter of mutual interest for each to protect his neighbors “rights” in order to render his own more secure.

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20 Catterall, 307.

21 Catterall, 313.

Kentucky passed its first set of laws concerning fugitive slaves in 1798 which were based on those of Virginia. The law encouraged citizens to engage in the practice of slave retrieval by authorizing “any person” to apprehend a fugitive slave and turn the said runaway over to authorities. The law transformed ordinary men and women of Kentucky—even blacks, according to the vague nature of the law—into slave catchers. The promise of a monetary reward furthered encouraged individuals to capture fugitive blacks. Whoever captured the slave would be reimbursed by the slave’s owner for ten shillings and one shilling for every mile traveled. Once a fugitive was captured, the county sheriff was authorized to release a take up notice to advertise the capture of the slave to the public in hopes that the master would come forward and claim his property. Take up notices bore a similar format to the fugitive notices in that they described the slave by name, physical characteristics, clothing, and finally the owner if that information could be ascertained. Fugitive slave laws allowed for the state to use fugitive blacks in the local slave trade. According to the law, if the slave went unclaimed, the sheriff was authorized to hire the slave out in order to pay for the slave’s room and board and other expenses. And, if the fugitive went unclaimed for a year, the sheriff could sell the slave with the proceeds going to the “use of the commonwealth.” Although no study has been conducted on the frequency of state-sponsored slave sales in Kentucky, studies of other southern states have shown that court-ordered slave sales made up a large portion of slave sales in the South.  

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23 Morehead, C.S. and Mason Brown, eds. Digest of the Statute Laws of Kentucky (Frankfort: A.G. Hodges, 1834), 1411-12. Thomas Russell estimates that nearly half of the slave sales in South Carolina between 1820 and 1860 were court ordered. See Thomas Russell, Judith Schafer, in her studies of 1850s New Orleans, argued that 68 percent of the city’s slave sales were instigated by the courts. See Judith Schafer, “New Orleans Slavery in 1850 as Seen in Advertisements,” Journal of Southern History 47 (Feb. 1981) : 33-56.
But Kentucky’s geographical position and the increasing agitation of abolitionists in the 1830s led the state’s law makers to change and tighten fugitive slave laws and those governing the movement of slaves. Over the ensuing decades, the rewards for capturing fugitives increased. In 1820, the general assembly passed a law making it illegal for either enslaved or free blacks to ferry other blacks across the Ohio River. This law, however, was not enough to prevent blacks from fleeing because just three years later, it was illegal for a steamboat captain to take a black across the river without free papers or the master’s consent. With the rise of steamboats, goods from central Kentucky could be carried to the lower South and to eastern markets faster than ever. However, steamboat traffic on the Ohio River also provided slaves with a better avenue for escape because if they could get across the Ohio they could then take a steamboat from smaller river towns such as Madison, Indiana to Cincinnati, Ohio where they could then find help to further their escape or blend into the Cincinnati’s black community. With the rise of roads and turnpikes, lawmakers became more concerned with restricting the movement of blacks within the state. In 1838, it was illegal for slaves to travel on mail coaches without written permission from their masters. These laws illustrate an increasing concern with the intersection of internal improvements and the mobility of slaves, many of whom were hired or owned by turnpike and steamboat companies. The capture of fugitive slaves was then carried out by a triumvirate of factors including fugitive slave laws and government officials, men from the local community, and masters and folks from the slave community who had an interest in the system that captured runaways working effectively.

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24 Bibb, 28.
In addition to hiring slave catchers or searching for fugitives on their own, masters also placed fugitive notices in local newspapers.\textsuperscript{25} The circulation of runaway advertisements did not stop at the Ohio River; indeed, they circulated in free states as well. An examination of advertisements for Bluegrass slaves reveals this interesting practice. Slave advertisements were often times printed and circulated in newspapers in Indiana and Ohio border cities. The advertisements circulated in hotels, taverns, and wherever people in the community congregated. Henry Morehead recalled seeing his advertisement offering $500 for him more than one hundred miles away from Louisville.\textsuperscript{26}

In order to catch their fugitives, masters had to be more honest about the lives of African Americans in fugitive notices than in other contexts. Slave advertisements’ descriptions of slave personalities, scars, clothing, skin colors, and histories offer the modern-day reader useful insight into the workings of the minds of the slaves, of the slaveholders, and of the nature of Kentucky slavery. Notices for fugitive slaves were ubiquitous throughout the South and performed a lion’s share of the job of commodifying African-American bodies. As a writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe understood the importance of print in creating the image of blacks as property, just as she had used images of domesticity to humanize African-American slaves. In \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, Stowe illustrated how the circulation of runaway advertisements in southern society created reinforced stereotypes of blacks as commodities. Stowe created a scene of a Bluegrass tavern with “raw-boned” Kentuckians gathered around the fireplace reading George

\textsuperscript{25} Franklin and Schweniger, \textit{Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 239.

\textsuperscript{26} Drew, 181.
Harris’s runaway advertisement

Ran away from the subscriber, my mulatto boy, George. Said George six feet height, a very light mulatto, brown curly hair; is very intelligent, speaks handsomely, can read and write; will probably try to pass for a white man is deeply scarred in his back and shoulders; has been branded in his right hand with the letter H. 27

Stowe’s fictional runaway advertisement for George Harris mirrored the reality of slavery in Kentucky in some ways. Historians estimate that between 1820 and 1860 roughly 1,000 slaves per year fled from Kentucky. J. Blaine Hudson in his study of fugitive slaves from Kentucky showed that the number of cases of reported slave escapes increased from 142 in the 1820s to 630 during the 1850s. 28 Hudson’s study also shows that many fugitive slaves fled from central Kentucky or the Bluegrass Region of the state which contained the largest number of slaves and slaveholders. It is reasonable to assume that the large population of slaves and slaveholders contributed to the region reporting the most fugitive slaves. However, the region was also at the heart of the state’s mixed economy which relied on black labor distributed by the thriving intrastate slave market. As the domestic slave trade increased after the 1830s, so did the number of escapees from Kentucky.

27 Franklin and Schweninger, 170; Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Live Among the Lowly. (Boston: John P. Jewett & Co; reprint, New York: Modern Library, 2001), 151 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

28 J. Blaine Hudson, Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland (McFarland &Company: Jefferson, N.C., 2002), 33-34. For his study, Hudson used the Kentucky Fugitive Slave Data Base which is composed of 1,196 references of escaped slaves covering the years from 1788 to 1863. The references come from a variety sources: newspaper advertisements, newspaper articles, court documents, and take-up notices. Any reading of Hudson’s analyses should be done with caution since many slave escapes were never reported; therefore, it is reasonable to surmise that the number of slaves who escaped was greater than those reported in the database.
Many of the actual slaves who fled from Kentucky shared similar characteristics with Stowe’s fictional George Harris. In the notices, we encounter “artful” and “cunning” bondsmen with varying degrees of literacy, job skills, and skin tones, who according to their masters, were capable of creating new identities and weaving credible stories. Inadvertently, southern masters and newspapers editors created these pseudo-slave narratives, public “tales” of black men and women rejecting the chattel principle and investing themselves with their own bodies. According to David Waldstreicher in his study of notices in Mid-Atlantic newspapers, the fugitive advertisements “differ from the later counter narratives of ex-slaves and abolitionists in that the advertisements attempted to use print to bolster confidence in slavery, rather than confidence in African American and their allies.”29 However, in the antebellum era, runaway notices did bolster the confidence and arguments of antislavery forces. Abolitionists such as Theodore Dwight Weld in Slavery As It Is and later Harriet Beecher Stowe in A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin used runaway advertisements as evidence in their respective indictments against slavery. Both the slave narrative and the runaway notices gave the lie to the theory of innate black inferiority and of the benevolence of master paternalism.30

As other writers have noted, runaway advertisements were formulaic, containing


numerous details about the escapees.\textsuperscript{31} In order to facilitate the capture of their slaves, masters had to be as accurate as possible about the lives of their slaves. As John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger have asserted, masters had no reason to lie about their slaves because that would not have guaranteed their return.\textsuperscript{32} The quantity and quality of information that masters provided in fugitive notices depended upon a number of factors including their direct knowledge of the slaves and the cost of advertising. Just as the for sale and for hire advertisements, fugitive notices commodified the bodies of slave especially for nonslaveholding white men living north of the Ohio River who kept a vigilante eye out for fugitives.

In the fugitive notices, masters attempted to differentiate their slaves by relaying a variety of information to readers by identifying six different characteristics: personality, clothing, scars, job skills, skin color, and the slave’s origins or history:

\textit{\$50.00 REWARD. Ran away from the subscriber on the 27\textsuperscript{th} of March last a negro woman named SARAH, about 6 feet high, and very slim; a very long face with black gums, long teeth, white eyes and platted hair. Had on a white linsey dress and took with her a red changeable silk, and black dress, also a white robe and striped gingham dress. Sarah is the biggest devil that ever lived, having poisoned a stud horse and set a stable on fire, also brunt Gen. R. Williams stable and stack yard with seven horses and other property to value of \$1500. She was handcuffed and got away at Ruddles Mills on her way down the river, which is the fifth time she escaped when about to be sent out of the country. I will give the above reward for said negro if taken out of the state, \$25 if taken in the state and...}


\textsuperscript{32} Walter Johnson argues that the dialectic of categorization and differentiation contributed to the process of commodification.
delivered to me or lodged in jail so that I can get her. Levin Adams.33

Ironically, as we can read from Sarah’s notice, while runaway advertisements simultaneously informed white readers of fugitives’ economic potentials, they also decommmodfied African-American bodies. This dichotomy was a paradox singular to fugitive notices. In other contexts where slaves were sold or hired out, differentiating slaves was an important part of packaging slaves and did not lead to the decommodification of the slave. However, in for sale and for hire advertisements, masters were attempting to either sell slaves or their skills. In fugitive notices, masters were attempting to catch slaves; these were two different acts of speculation. As the notices reveal, runaway bondsmen had broken out of the market and resuscitated their own bodies, (in the case of Sarah she had escaped from the clutches of slave traders at least five times) creating their own identities often with new names, different clothing, and forged passes. Fugitives also attempted to reclaim their histories by returning to old neighborhoods and family members from whom they had been sold. In other words, fugitive slaves forced their masters to tell stories about them that came closer to revealing their humanity than those stories told either in the pens by traders or in for sale advertisements by masters, which reflected priorities of the slave market.

While masters attempted to recover their slaves with the instruments and institutions that supported slavery and southern society, slaves usurped them, using them to facilitate their escapes and to create new identities. In a society were the word of a white person was honored and the word of a black was automatically considered suspicious, slaves on the run with a pass could usurp their masters’ names and the

33 Western Citizen, April 16, 1822.
creditability that it held in the slaveholding community to move about unmolested. The pass was a crucial instrument in the commodification of slave bodies because they governed and facilitated slave mobility in the Old South especially with the practice of hiring out. Kentucky’s slave code—adopted in 1798—attempted to restrict the movement of slaves by requiring them, when traveling, to possess a pass signed by their “master, employer, or overseer.” A slave found without a pass was brought before the sheriff, who could—at their discretion—administer the lash. As historian Marion Lucas has pointed out, despite restrictions on black mobility, “bondsmen in Kentucky were far more mobile than has been generally believed.” Evidence suggests that some masters gave wide berth to their slaves to travel freely—even into Indiana and Ohio—in order to maximize profit from their labor. In 1858, William Thompson of Harrodsburg wrote a certificate of travel for a slave that permitted him to “go to any free state and their remain.” It is unclear why Thompson allowed his slave such freedom; however, the slave may have become a financial burden since he was “about 47 years old and is lame.”

According to court records, John Norris of Boone County allowed his slaves John and Lucy Powell to spend a great deal of time across the river in Lawrenceburg, Indiana. Norris allowed the family to sell their produce in the community and since it was about a mile and half away, it was a short trip by wagon or foot once one traversed the river.

An examination of the runaway advertisements reaffirms the mobility of Kentucky

[34] Lucas, 29-33; C.S. Morehead and Mason Brown, Digest of Statue Laws of Kentucky (Frankfort: Albert Hodge, 1834), 1471; Ivan McDougle, “Slavery in Kentucky, 1792-1865” (P.h.D. diss., Clark University, 1918), 33.

[35] Certificate of travel for slave. June 8, 1858, Box 1, J. Winston Coleman Papers Slavery Papers, Special Collections, Margaret King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington.

slaves. However, it was the unauthorized slave mobility that caused masters to worry that their authority over their bondsmen was being diminished. In a letter, Brutus Clay informed his overseer to “rise early and to whip every slave that is missing or out of place without leave …”37 As one of the largest slaveholders in the state and a master who hired out a large number of slaves annually, Clay understood that controlling the mobility of his slave population was important to making his plantation work efficiently. In 1820, Leslie Combs warned individuals wanting to employ his man Tom that they had to “make application to me, or be punished for dealing with a slave. I give this public caution in consequence of being much plagued of late, by individuals wishing me to comply with his contracts, made without my consent or approbation.” Slaves moving about without passes also placed local Bluegrass officials on edge. In 1836, a Lexington city clerk warned slave owners that after July 1, “the State law requiring slaves leaving their master’s premises to have passes or permits from their masters to do so, will be enforced against all Slaves found within the city of Lexington.”38

The notices reveal that many of the fugitive slaves had experience traveling whether in the city or about the countryside. According to F. Montmollin, Jr. of Lexington, his man Harrison--before absconding in 1857--had “been in the habit of driving my wagon for delivering flour about the city.” Some slaves had been hired out far from home. In 1822, Charles, hired out from his master J.Y. Martin of Lexington, fled from the Shreve’s Ironworks at “Greenupsburgh,” near the Ohio River in northeastern

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37 Brutus Clay to Amelia Clay, January 26, 1840, Clay Family Papers, Box 6, Special Collections, Margaret King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington.

38 The Kentucky Reporter (Lexington), 4 January 1820; Observer and Reporter (Lexington), 29 June, 1836. Kentucky’s slave code barred individuals from conducting business with a slave without the master’s consent.
Kentucky. Some fugitives had ventured outside of the state driving pigs and other livestock to trans-Appalachian markets. According to Reuben’s master since he bought the slave thirteen years before he “had driven hogs as a hand to Georgia and South Alabama. He understands traveling.” Some Kentucky slaves worked on steamboats that plied the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. R. Morrison of Lexington in 1836 explained that his slave Pontiac “had been in the habit of running on the river between Louisville and New Orleans, as a firemen on a steamboat.” Morrison was confident that Pontiac would use that experience to make his escape.39 Hired out extensively as a boy, Henry Bibb credited his mobility as a Bluegrass slave as a key factor in his perfection of the “art of running away.” “I made a regular business of it,” Bibb said, “and never gave it up, until I had broken the bands of slavery.”40 The only thing which interrupted Bibb’s attempts to escape was his courtship and subsequent marriage to a young slave girl named Malinda in 1833.41 In the antebellum Bluegrass, where slaves were hired out extensively and the laws governing slave movement were irregularly enforced, a slave who understood “traveling” the roads or waterways could make good their escape.42

In Kentucky, unlike most slaveholding states, it was not illegal to educate blacks; however, most Kentuckians frowned upon the education of slaves.43 Henry Morehead recalled his Louisville master sending policemen to break up a night school for blacks

39 Marion Lucas, A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891 (Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 1992), 33; Blaine, 65; The Kentucky Reporter (Lexington), 24 March 1823; Observer and Reporter (Lexington), 3 October 1857; 5 October 1836; 1 June 1836; Aron, 128.

40 Bibb, 14.

41 Bibb, 19-20.

42 Lucas, 29-33; Observer and Reporter (Lexington), 29 June 1836.

43 McDougle, 79; Lucas, 140.
which he attended.\textsuperscript{44} Therefore, many slaves learned to read and write in secret from their masters. By using the skills that he had more than likely learned while working in an apothecary shop, Alfred Jones successfully fled from Madison County to Canada by writing his own pass that was “not spelled correctly, but nobody supposed that a slave could write at all.”\textsuperscript{45} It is impossible to determine how many Kentucky slaves were literate and could, therefore, forge their own passes. Many of the runaway notices cite literate slaves whom their master believed fled with forged passes. In 1827, J. Atchison of Fayette County advertised that three of his men, Jim, Harry, and Bill had fled from his Tate’s Creek farm. Jim, aged 23, could read and write and had “probably forged passes for all of them.”\textsuperscript{46} From his experience in bondage, Lewis Clarke encountered no more than “three or four [slaves] …could properly read at all, and I never saw but one that could write.”\textsuperscript{47} Clarke himself could neither read nor write; his narrative, published in 1847, was dictated to Joseph Lovejoy.

Despite slaves’ varying degrees of literacy, it appears that it was not necessary for them to be literate in order to acquire a pass. Illiterate slaves had their accomplices who aided them in procuring passes. Sometimes escapees relied on a free relative to acquire a free pass or free papers. In September of 1821, a slave named Lot fled from his Madison County master, W. Williams. Williams informed readers that Lot was probably

\textsuperscript{44} Drew, \textit{North-Side View of Slavery}, 181.

\textsuperscript{45} Drew, \textit{North-Side View of Slavery}, 152.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{The Kentucky Reporter} (Lexington), 29 August 1827. Although many of the runaway notices cite slaves with varying degrees of literacy, using the notices to gauge the number of literate slaves in the population would not be accurate. Fugitive slaves were a minority of the slave population and therefore atypical of the average bondsman.

\textsuperscript{47} Clarke, 654.
headed to Ohio and that “He has a brother named Toney, who is now free, that may afford him some assistance in getting off, either by accompanying him on the route, or furnishing him with some evidence of freedom, and passing for Toney.”

Literate slaves or blacks such as Lot who received assistance from others could create their own histories by forging passes or assuming an identity as a free black and therefore move about the community with little suspicion.

Also, the notices reveal that fugitives may have been aided by white allies in the creation of their new identities. Masters suggested that “unscrupulous” white men provided fugitives with free passes. When Willis fled from Robert Alston in October of 1821, the Georgia master informed the readers, “It is presumed he has been carried away to Tennessee or Alabama, or furnished with a free pass to make his escape, by some white man.”

In Kentucky, accusations that treacherous white men tricked slaves into fleeing might have held more credence than in states in the Deep South due to a couple of factors. First, the fact of the state’s close proximity to free soil. When the abolitionist movement became more radical in the 1830s, masters were on the edge about the activity of agents of the Underground Railroad who ventured into Kentucky from neighboring Ohio. In 1839, Kentuckians sent a set of resolutions to the Ohio General Assembly requesting that their northern neighbor establish a fugitive slave law. The resolutions were entitled “RESOLUTIONS RESPECTING THE ENTICING AWAY THE SLAVES OF THE CITIZENS OF KENTUCKY, BY THE CITIZENS OF OTHER STATES.”

For Kentucky masters, then, outsiders were behind the increase in runaway slaves; therefore,

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48 *The Kentucky Reporter* (Lexington), 24 September, 1821.

49 Ibid.
neighboring states should be held accountable for respecting Kentuckians’ rights in human property. Tensions often ran high between Kentuckians and their northern neighbors along the Ohio River. William Parker stated with pride that the city of Ripley, Ohio was “generally know throughout Kentucky as ‘the hell hole of abolition.’”

Secondly, Kentucky was the only slaveholding state to possess an active abolitionist movement and the fact of non-slaveholding Kentuckians’ ambiguous support for slavery frightened masters as well. Some Bluegrass masters manipulated the ignorance of their slaves and the fluidity of the borderland by painting abolitionists as part of the slave trade, as “nigger stealers” who enticed slaves away so they could sell them to the Lower South. “They told the slaves to beware of the abolitionists,” Henry Bibb said, that their object was decoy off slaves and then sell them to New Orleans.”

Masters’ increasing anxiety over “nigger stealers” was reflected in the law. In 1830, the general assembly passed a law fining an individual anywhere from $50 to $500 for either helping a slave to flee. Feed up with the increasing fiery rhetoric of abolitionists, lawmakers made the penalty of imprisonment for individuals who aided a slave’s escape.

Henry Bibb’s description of relations between poor whites and slaves in central Kentucky was one which surely frightened even the most benevolent master. According to Bibb, poor whites “associate much with the slaves; are often found gambling together on the Sabbath; encouraging slaves to steal from their owners, and sell to them, corn, wheat, sheep, chickens, or anything of the kind which they can well conceal.”

Antislavery forces in Kentucky continued to voice their opposition to slavery throughout the era

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50 Parker, 87.
51 Bibb, 33.
52 Bibb, 17.
before finally being silenced in 1859. Indeed, the stronghold of the antislavery movement was in Berea, Madison County, which is located on the southern edge of the Bluegrass Region, the slaveholding bastion of the state. The Rev. John G. Fee, who established the community of Berea in Madison County as an abolitionist stronghold in the heart of slave country, praised both fugitive slaves and whites who aided in their escape. Fee stated that the bible did not sanction slavery; therefore, a black man had every right to “assume himself … personal ownership, and walk off.”53 Often, masters such as Wm. L. McQuie of Jessamine County asserted that some sinister white man was behind his slave’s escape. In the disappearance of his own “bright mulatto boy,” James, McQuie believed that “some white man has persuaded this boy to leave me, and that an attempt will be made to run him off.”54 “Nigger stealers,” as slaveholders labeled these “devious” white men, lurked about the community, helping slaves to escape to free territory or tricking slaves to escape in order to sell them elsewhere.

To facilitate the capture of these “villains,” masters placed notices in the newspapers, offering rewards for the capture of the “thieves.” In 1820, David Ayers of Knox County Tennessee accused Samuel Merrill of selling him a stolen slave. For Ayers, Merrill was not just a villain because he sold him stolen slaves, but because Merrill also usurped the social and cultural trappings of the master class. Ayers warned the readers of the Kentucky Reporter that “Merrill is a very gentlemanly looking man and his appearance of being a man that has been well bred.” Merrill also had the “appearance


54 The Kentucky Reporter (Lexington), 30 June 1823.
of a pious man, and has with a hymn or music book.” The juxtaposition of advertisements for crafty slave stealers and artful runaways warned slaveholders of the danger that the cultural and geographical mobility of the antebellum era posed for their chattel.

Ironically, in many instances, masters unwittingly facilitated the escape of their slaves by providing them with passes which they needed to move about freely. Slaves with job skills, whom masters circulated throughout the community, by hiring out, possessed free passes. William Rice expected that Harry, “a good post-and-railer and shoemaker” possessed a free pass and would make his way to Cincinnati. A Fayette County slave named Billy belonging to Peter Gatewood used the chattel principle in his favor in order to escape. According to Gatewood, Billy was using as a pass a note which he had acquired from a Mr. Sagett of neighboring Scott Count. In the note, Sagett requested to purchase Billy Gatewood.

In addition to acquiring passes or free papers, slaves continued to decommodify themselves by usurping their master’s power by naming themselves. As Kenneth Greenberg pointed out in his study of the role of honor in the Old South, the master’s power to name was the power to give meaning. In a twist of comedy, masters named

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55 *The Kentucky Reporter* (Lexington), 4 Jan. 1820.

56 For more on masters attitudes toward “niggers stealers” see chapter eight of J. Winston Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940).

57 *The Kentucky Reporter* (Lexington), 20 June 1827. Rice believed that Harry was on his way to Cincinnati because he had the runaway notice posted in *The Cincinnati Gazette* as well.

58 *The Kentucky Reporter* (Lexington) 2 March 1831.

their slaves after powerful or important individuals in history to emphasize the slave’s powerlessness. In the runaway notices, masters acknowledged that the fugitive’s act of changing his or her name, along with acquiring a pass, was part of the process of creating a new identity. In 1820, Phill, a thirty-year-old slave from Fayette County fled from his mistress Lucy Young. Young acknowledged Phill “as an artful and sensible Negro—he can read and write and no doubt has a free pass in possession, and will probably pass himself by the name of Phill Lumpkin.”60 H. Rogers of Fayette County described Bill as “an artful fellow, can read and write a tolerable hand and no doubt has a pass and will attempt to pass as a free man by another name.”61 Sometimes slaves took names in honor of relatives or loved ones. After crossing the Ohio River, Lewis Clarke rechristened himself Archibald Campbell after an older brother named Archy.62 The fugitive slave’s act of discarding their slave name was an important part of refashioning their identity and reclaiming their bodies.

Fugitive slaves also used clothing to decommodify themselves. Some of the printing stereotypes that represented fugitives carrying bundles on sticks over their shoulders reflected whites’ understanding that runaways did not flee empty handed, but often took their possessions, however meager, with them, which most often included a variety of clothing. Despite the detailed lists of clothing that masters gave, they realized that fugitives could change their clothing as quickly as they changed their names and biographies for inquiring whites. Bluegrass masters, as other slaveholders, allotted slave

60 The Kentucky Reporter (Lexington), 7 June 1820.

61 Ibid.

62 Clarke, 622.
clothing on an annual basis. Although ready-made clothing for slaves was available for purchase, and widely advertised in newspapers, most slave clothing was homespun and made of coarse material.\(^6\) Although slave mistresses may have supervised the making of slave clothing, the actual burden of the work fell onto the shoulders of slave women.\(^4\) However, as the narratives of former slaves reveal, the making of clothing was not a strictly gendered task. As a young boy, Lewis Clarke found himself along with several other slaves “spinning hemp, flax, and tow, on an old-fashioned foot-wheel.” Elisha Green too as a boy “spun flax and yarn” and in conjunction with other “housework” as a slave in Mason County.\(^5\) According to Lewis Clarke, slaves were usually given a “pair of tow and linen pants, and two shirts of the same material” for the summer while in the winter “He has a pair of shoes, a pair of woolsey pants, and a round jacket.”\(^6\) For William Hayden, acquiring a suit of finer clothes was a significant moment in his life. Approximately six months before Hayden was to leave his job in a ropewalk in Frankfort, his mistress ordered him a “new suit of clothes … shoes, stockings and other necessary ‘FIXINS’.” “For the first time in my life,” Hayden said, “I had a suit of Sunday clothes.”\(^7\) In the slave pens, traders often dressed slaves in similar clothing as part of the

\(^6\) Observer and Reporter (Lexington) 3 September 1845.


\(^6\) Clarke, 656; Lucas, 16-17; White and White, 149-186.

process of commodifying black and brown bodies, masking the slaves’ differences in height, weight, and skin color. In the case of “fancy maids,” traders took young attractive mixed race women, styled their hair and dressed them in new silk gowns to please potential buyers. Lewis Robards took the “dressing” of his fancy maids one step further by placing them in genteel tableaus of “well carpeted & furnished” rooms to picque the desires of the “one-eyed men” who visited his Lexington slave jail.

After dinner visited a negro jail—a very large brick building with all the conveniences of comfortable life, including hospital. Tis a place where negroes are kept for sale—Outer doors & windows are protected with iron gates, but inside the appointments are not only comfortable, but many respects luxurious. Many of the rooms are well carpeted & furnished, & very neat, and the inmates whilst here are treated with great indulgence & humanity, but I confess it impressed me with the idea of decorating the ox for the sacrifice. In several of the rooms I found very handsome mulatto women, of fine persons and easy genteel manners, sitting at their needle work awaiting a purchaser. The proprietor made them get up & turn round to show to advantage their finely developed & graceful forms—and slaves as they were this I confess rather shocked my gallantry. I enquired the price of one girl which was $1,600.

However, from the notices, we can gather that slaves were not satisfied with being dressed by whites and took the liberty of clothing themselves. In November of 1820, John Nolan, could not recall some of the clothing that his slave Charles fled with because “he bought most of his clothes in town, all seconded handed.” Slaves with extra money earned on their own time or from vegetables sold from their gardens purchased finer clothing to wear. Because the majority of slaves possessed few clothes and of poor

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68 Clarke, 640; Johnson, 120-121.
69 Quoted in Lucas, 90.
70 Quote taken from Lucas, 89-90.
71 *The Kentucky Reporter* (Lexington), 4 January 1820.
quality, fugitive slaves who had access to finer clothing stole it when an opportunity arose. In 1826, John Steele wrote that his man, Jordan, had escaped with “a black Hat of my make, a blue cassinet roundabout, and grey casinett pantaloons, a pair of nearly new boots, and a pair of fine shoes.” Jordan resided in the opportune environment to procure a variety of fine clothing and shoes since John Steele was a tailor in Lexington.72 Being a hatter, Jordan understood the importance of finer clothing in making his escape.

Although the advertisements which cite slaves fleeing with “wallets” and “bundles” of clothing spark the historical imagination, the majority of notices reveal that slaves fled with only the clothing on their backs even if it was ill fitting and tattered. Wat fled from James Wade in 1836 wearing “a wool hat, with a hole eaten in it by the rats, tow pantaloons, and a rough jeans coat.”73 Andrew Jackson, who escaped from Kentucky bondage used his slave clothing as a central part of his ruse; however, the slave did not wear the cloths:

On Saturday night, early in August, I gathered my clothes together, and after selecting the best, which were not very good, I started off in the direction of a piece of woods, and there tore up those I desired least, and threw them down, besmeared with blood which I obtained to give them the appearance of having been torn from me by a wild beats, in order that I might prevent anyone from pursuing me until I could escape beyond their reach.74

Fugitive blacks illustrated that they were culturally adept at using clothing and other items to create new identities and to make their escapes. When finally deciding to flee for Canada in the fall of 1837, Henry Bibb left with a little over two dollars and “a

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72 The Kentucky Reporter (Lexington), 30 January 1826. Steele went on to say that Jordan would probably make his way to Canada and “pass for a Hatter.”

73 The Kentucky Observer and Reporter (Lexington), 10 August 1836.

suit which I had never been seen or known to wear before; this last was to avoid
detection.” Later after having spent the winter in northern Ohio, Bibb returned to
Kentucky to liberate his wife and child disguised in “false whiskers” as a traveling
salesman. After reaching Mays Lick in Mason County (about twenty miles from the
Ohio River), Lewis Clarke thought he spotted white men from his “part of the country”
who might recognize him and devised a simple disguise. To conceal his identity, Clarke
purchased a “pair of double-eyed green spectacles” from a local silversmith. “Some
people buy spectacles to see out of,” Clarke said, “I bought mine to keep from being
seen.”

Other slaves played more elaborate masquerades with clothing and the
accoutrements of free men. In 1830, John Brand’s slave named “white Tom,” fled from
Brand’s ropewalk in Lexington. Tom fled wearing “a pair of drab pantaloons, a stuff
colored frock coat, a yellow (or white) fur hat.” However, Tom also fled with two other
seemingly nonessential items, an “umbrella in his hand,” and “a watch in his pocket.”
Brand suspected Tom stole the watch a few days before his escape. The job skills and
work experiences that blacks possessed made them a valuable commodity on the
Kentucky job market. However, slaves also recognized that their job skills and work
experience were wanted on the job market, which encouraged them to flee. John Brand
informed the readers, “He may endeavor to pass as a free man, (and offer for work in a
rope walk, as he is a good twine spinner,) but on close examination it will easily be

75 Bibb, 27.
76 Bibb, 32.
77 Clarke, 621.
perceived he has a good deal of the negro in him.” It is clear that Tom intended to use his good clothing, umbrella and watch, in conjunction with his light complexion and job skills to pass for a skilled white man.

Fugitive slaves did not hesitate to steal clothing, watches, money, or anything else to aid in their escapes. However, one of the most interesting species of property that slaves absconded with was horses. The newspapers contain numerous notices citing slaves who fled with their master’s or a neighboring farmer’s horse. If a slave was unable to immediately procure a horse, they took bridles, intending to steal a good horse somewhere in route, or they concocted stories around the bridles for the ears of inquiring whites, saying that they were out searching for their master’s stray horse. Most slaves had access and experience working with horses since they primarily fed the animals and other livestock, plowed the fields, drove wagons of vegetables and flour to the town markets, and “broke horses and mules.” According to Lewis Clarke, who escaped on horseback, some slaves thought twice about escaping on horseback because if caught

78 The Kentucky Reporter (Lexington) , 5 January 1831.

79 William Hayden, who was a slave in Virginia before being sold to a Kentucky master, used this trick when he temporarily fled from his Virginia master to see his mother who lived on a neighboring farm. See William Hayden, Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South. Written by Himself [book online] Cincinnati, OH: 1846 Documenting the American South, 2001. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill accessed 12 August 2001 available from< http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/hayden/hayden.html>

80 Lucas, A History of Blacks in Kentucky, 3. In Kentucky where many blacks labored on small farms with either five or fewer slaves, many slaves conducted abroad marriages or relationships with slaves who lived in neighboring homes or distance farms. Often slaves stole the master’s horse to visit their loved ones in order to maintain long-distance family relationships. In a letter to James G. Birney, George Thompson complained that his man Milo had been “continually slipping off and riding my horses, and becoming vexatious and worthless” in order to visit a slave woman on Birney’s father’s farm. See George C. Thompson to Birney, 18 October 1834 in James G, Birney, Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857 Volume I, ed Dwight Dumond (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966), 142.
they feared being charged with stealing a horse, a charge worse than running away.\textsuperscript{81}

There are various explanations for why slaves fled on horseback. Many of the runaways had sustained broken bones or other injuries that left them lame, making it difficult for them to escape on their own locomotion. Some slaves absconded with their children riding on horseback which would have saved energy and time by not having to carry little ones.

When slaves left on horseback, masters advertised for the return of the slave and the horse in the same notice. Runaway slaves and horses comfortably shared space in the columns of newspaper advertisements. The language of commodification used in the horse and mule trade was similar to that used in the slave trade. In for-sale advertisements, groups of slaves and horses were labeled as stock or lots, and African Americans were often sold in conjunction with horses, cows, and other livestock to settle the debts of the recently deceased. Former slave Sonny Stovall stated that when slave traders came through his neighborhood they inquired were there any short headed mules, or slaves, for sale. Elisha Green, who was sold along with his sister by the Mason County sheriff, believed that the slave trade was as ubiquitous as the mule trade. “This act of selling colored people,” Green said, “was considered by many as being of a low character, while there were those who though it right, and to sell a negro was nothing more than selling a mule.” \textsuperscript{82} In the slave pens, masters inspected the bodies of slaves in

\textsuperscript{81}Clarke, 628.

\textsuperscript{82} Interview with Sonny Stovall, Box 1, J. Winston Coleman Papers on Slavery, Special Collections, Margaret King Library, University of Kentucky; Elisha Green, \textit{Life of the Reverend Elisha W. Green}. Maysville: The Republican Printing Office, 1888. Documenting the American South. 2004. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 2 April 2006 <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/greenew/greenew.html>
similar manner to horses; for example, a potential buyer opened the mouth of a slave to inspect his teeth and gums. According to antebellum southern medicine, the initial signs of “Negro Consumption” could be observed in the mucous linings of the slave’s gums and inside of the mouth.  

In the runaway notices, masters invited readers to inspect the mouths of their runaways by describing the condition of the fugitive’s teeth and the shape of their mouths. Creed Hoskins described Moses has having “very thick lips and wide mouth.” George Winn stated that Ben when “spoken to shows his teeth and gums very much, his teeth are very white, and his gums very dark.” When asked by crowds on the abolitionist lecture circuit what Kentucky farmers raised Lewis Clarke replied, “Corn, and hemp, tobacco, oats, some wheat and rye; SLAVES, mules, hogs, and horses, for the southern market.” Clarke recognized the close economic proximity of “likely” slaves and “well made” horses in Kentucky’s exports to the lower South.

However, to appreciate the significance of slaves fleeing on horseback, we must comprehend the cultural importance of horses in antebellum Kentucky. By the end of the eighteenth century, horses had been a social and economic necessity in the South for over a century. T.H. Breen, in examining the cultural significance of horse racing and gambling in colonial Virginia asserted that, “A horse was extension of its owner; indeed a man was only as good as his horse.” For southern gentlemen the possession of both

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83 Johnson, 142.

84 The Kentucky Reporter (Lexington), 2 February 1820; Observer and Reporter (Lexington), 6 January 1836.

85 Clarke, 661.


87 Breen, 249. For more on the migration of Virginia’s planters to Kentucky and the early
horses and slaves measured their worth. For William Hayden’s master, who desired to
visit his fiancée in Jefferson County in the manner consistent with his social status,
William, who recently became “the possessor of a horse, saddle, and bridle” was “an
indispensable appendage, in the capacity of waiter to him, on his journey.” And again
while traveling through Virginia with a slave dealer, Hayden turned the tables on the
dealer’s clerk: “As soon as he had mounted, instead of riding bringing up the rear, as
slaves are in the general habit of doing, I put spurs to my horse, and was soon caracoling
by his side--his equal--and in point of confidence, his superior.”

It was to the Bluegrass region of Kentucky that many of the scions of Virginia’s
wealthiest landowners migrated in the late eighteenth century, recreating the gentry
culture they had left behind. In central Kentucky, horse racing associations such as the
Lexington and Richmond jockey clubs advertised their races to the region’s sportsmen,
bringing together “race hoss” men with events of competition and conviviality.
Lexington’s first jockey club was formed in 1797 to provide the sport with rules and
structure after residents of the city complained of the horse racing that occurred on Main
Street. Breeding and betting on thoroughbreds’ abilities to win on the track was
analogous to being able to discern a “likely” slave and their impending value: both acts of

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88 Hayden, 42, 71-72.

89 Stephen Aron, How the West was Lost: The Transformations of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to

90 The Kentucky Reporter (Lexington), 23 October 1820, 27 August 1821; Lynn S. Renau, Racing
Around Kentucky (Louisville: Elite Publishing Inc., 1995), 30; Interview with George Scruggs, Box 1, J.
Winston Coleman Papers, Special Collections, University of Kentucky, Lexington.
speculation verified the word of southern men of honor.91

Whites who attempted to capture fugitive slaves had to able to discern forged passes from real one, fact from fiction in black explanations, and also able to “read” African-American bodies. Fugitive slaves attempted to control the appearance of their bodies by changing their clothing and other items. However, masters knew that slaves could never completely hide their bodies from white men. Men experienced in slave speculation understood the importance of reading black and brown bodies.92 In the slave pens, potential buyers often undressed, poked, and prodded slaves to inspect their health.93 In the notices, masters undressed the slaves for the readers, providing detailed information on the physical characteristics of slaves, including scars, disfigurements, and skin color. Slave notices were so detailed that in addition to arrest warrants and bills of sale, slave catchers often used runaway notices as evidence of a fugitive’s identity.94

African-American slaves suffered from a variety of diseases and their bodies bore the scars from their illnesses. In 1820, W.H. Tegarden informed readers that they would be able to identify his man David because he was “very black, and marked with small pox.”95 Many of the fugitive slaves who possessed job skills bore scars and injuries that corresponded with their trade. In 1855, twenty-two year old Madeline (or Adeline) fled H.H. Ferguson of Woodford County. According to Ferguson, a close inspection of

91 Greenberg, 141; Aron, 127.
92 Johnson, 117.
93 Johnson, 141.
94 Clarke, 646, 648.
95 The Kentucky Reporter (Lexington), 4 January 1820.
Madeline’s left hand would give her away because, “She is a seamstress by trade, and the fore finger of the left hand is marked with the needle.”

In addition to identifying a slave’s job skills and medical history, scars could also, according to white ideas about race divulge the “character” of a fugitive. According to Kenneth Greenberg, in the Old South, where honor was important, white men deciphered each other through the physical features of the exposed parts of their bodies as well. Gouged eyes and other mutilated body parts reflected a defect in the character of those who bore them. This attention to reading the body for signs of character, or lack of, also applied to African-American slaves. John Brand advised that his slave Tom had a “fresh scar on his forehead lately received, in an affray with another negro.” He acquired the scar in the slave quarters, where violence among bondsmen was common. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown reminds us, although male slaves had to repress their sense of honor in the face of white supremacy, “Male honor was richly prized in the slave quarters, and a defense of it established rank among fellow slaves.”

A slave who had scars from battling other blacks might signify a slave with a bad countenance, but one that bore the scars from a cow hide indicated a “bad nigger,” a slave that had been punished by the master. Despite protestations from Kentucky’s proslavery men that slavery in the state was mild and its slaves were “spoiled,” slave

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96 Observer and Reporter (Lexington), 13 January 1855.

97 Greenberg, 15.

98 The Kentucky Reporter (Lexington), 5 January 1831.

99 Wyatt-Brown, 1249.

narratives and fugitives notices tell different stories of violence perpetrated by masters against slaves. In an interview Addie Murphy stated that “Run away niggers were punished by tying them to the whipping post and lashed until the skin split then they put salt on them.” In runaway notices, masters undressed slaves verbally, revealing scars that would not have been visible otherwise. Charles who fled from his Shelbyville master in 1834 had the “marks of the whip on his seat.” Charles had been with his master, Pierce Griffin for roughly two months before he fled. Peter and his wife Prissa fled from their Lexington masters in 1826. The notice describes Prissa as “between a mulatto and right black, several scars across the shoulders.” Randol’s master stated that his slave’s back was “considerably marked with the lash.” Although Skinner and Kelso may not have detected anything wrong with Abram’s physical health when they arrived in Lexington, Kentucky to inspect him in 1842, the scars on his back would have certainly called Abram’s mental “soundness” into question. In the racial philosophy of white southerners, a slave scarred with the whip was surely an impudent slave and one perhaps stricken with what southern physician Samuel Cartwright called Drapetomania, a mental “disease” that caused African-American slaves to runaway. According to Cartwright and other southerners who believed that blacks and whites were physiologically different, it was a disease whose etiology was bound up in race. John Hunt Morgan explained to Skinner and Kelso that he had owned Abram for only a couple

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101 Interview with Addie Murphy, Box 1, J. Winston Coleman Papers, Special Collections, Margaret King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington.

102 Observer and Reporter (Lexington), 6 January 1836; The Kentucky Reporter (Lexington), 13 March 1826, 17 July 1826.

of days before he ran away, captured him and had him whipped for his actions. There was nothing in Abram’s past that indicated he practiced what fellow Kentucky slave Henry Bibb called the “art of running away.” None of the individuals who had hired or owned Abram prior to his sale to Morgan ever testified that he had runaway before. They all believed that Abram possessed a good character.

It is hard to say with certainty what changed Abram’s character after he arrived at Morgan’s, but it appears that Abram had been hired out extensively around central Kentucky throughout his life and the constant shuffling from master to master may have taken a toll on his family life. His work experience was typical for a young male slave residing in the Bluegrass Region. Hired out repeatedly in the community then sold, then as a fugitive slave with a price on his head.

Morgan also said that Abram was an “Extra Boy and that he bought him for his own use But the Boy had run away from him and he was going to Sell him.”104 Despite this disclosure of bad behavior, John Kelso still felt confident enough in Abram’s mental “soundness” to purchase him from Morgan. Time and again, slave sellers gave warranties of a slave’s title and mental and physical soundness in bills of sale. Buyers who purchased slaves with warranties paid a higher price, but the warranty guaranteed the buyer that the seller would take financial responsibility for any defect in the slave.105 Because the law dispossessed slaves of their own bodies, black men and women such as Abram, Charles, Peter, and Prissa did not have the power to prevent either their masters


or any white man from undressing them on either the auction block or in print.

Masters also attempted to differentiate their fugitive slaves through skin color. The discourse of race that antebellum white southerners used contained a range of words and phrases to describe the variety of African-American skin tones, including “nearly white,” “yellowish,” “copper,” “dark copper color,” “dark brown,” “light black color,” and “remarkably black.” According to Walter Johnson, this “descriptive language” brought order to the “restless hybridity, the infinite variety of mixture that was visible all over the South, into measurable degrees of black and white.” Yet, at times in the notices, slaveholders struggled to provide “accurate” measurements. Instead they provided readers with awkward and oxymoronic descriptions of their fugitive’s complexion. In 1820, Lucy Young of Fayette County described her slave Phill as having a “yellow complexion for a black Negro.” Although by the nineteenth century, African ancestry was firmly linked with slavery in the American South, both the runaway advertisements and the fugitive narratives reveal that race, meaning skin color for the antebellum Americans, was an unreliable marker for slavery since determining skin color was a purely subjective act, complicated by the presence of a rather large number of mixed race slaves. For example, in 1860, nearly 20% or 43, 281 of the 225,483 slaves in Kentucky were mulattoes.

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106 The Kentucky Reporter (Lexington), 12 September 1825; Observer and Reporter (Lexington), 9 April 1845, 3 February 1849, 13 January 1855.

107 Johnson, 139.

108 The Kentucky Reporter, (Lexington), 7 June 1820.

109 Eighth Census of the United States, 1860 Historical Census Browser. Retrieved May 21, 2007, from the University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html. However, this record, as the notices, comes with its owns et of problems and does not help us to ascertain the amount of race mixing that occurred in antebellum Kentucky
Despite the shakiness of the discourse of race, we can uncover how white southerners’ shared comprehension of race constructed stereotypes of blacks. For example, in 1820, G.R.C. Floyd of Jefferson County described Pollard who fled with his wife, May, as “somewhat blacker than ordinary negroes.”\footnote{110} How did Bluegrass masters define an “ordinary negro”?\footnote{111} Perhaps, S. H. Henderson of Fayette County spoke for other masters when he described Nelson, who fled from his Leestown Road residence after being caught burglarizing a neighbor’s house: “About 21 years of age, very dark complexion, thick lipped, heavy set and down look when spoken to--a real negro with a very bad countenance.”\footnote{112} According to Henderson, then, a reader experienced with reading the bodies of African Americans would recognize both the physical and personality characteristics of a “real negro” on the run: young, with “truly African” physical features, thick lips, dark complexion, powerful build, submissive (at least when confronted by whites), and a thief.\footnote{113}

The case of Abram provides us with interesting insight about how race and gender intersected in the slave trade to create the necessary imperatives to support slavery. Regarding the health of Abram, plaintiffs and defendants used the racial knowledge garnered from the intricate relationship between southern medicine and slavery to bolster

\footnote{110} The Kentucky Reporter (Lexington), 13 September 1820.
\footnote{112} The Kentucky Observer and Reporter (Lexington), 1 September 1847.
\footnote{113} Ibid; Stowe, 31; Observer and Reporter (Lexington), 2 August 1845.
their respective arguments. In their testimony doctors placed their expertise of identifying and treating “negro diseases” before the entire slaveholding community. Although the majority of doctors who examined Abram testified that he suffered from scrofula, one physician dissented from this diagnosis. Dr. Henry J. Fox, who was a practicing physician in Lexington in 1856 testified on behalf of John Hunt Morgan. It appears that Morgan employed the doctor to examine Abram at a slave jail after the slave had fled. When asked did he make a close physical examination of Abram’s entire body, Fox replied, “to make a close and critical examination of said boy—I accordingly stripped him naked and examined him as thoroughly as I could.”114 After his examination, Dr. Fox determined that Abram was physically sound. “His appearance indicated a condition of health,” Fox said, especially inconsistent with such a disease as scrofula or any disease affecting the glandular system.” Fox, who had recently graduated from medical school, perceived no signs of illness in Abram. Morgan and Fox raised a different explanation as to why Abram fell ill shortly after being bought by the Stewarts—mercurial poisoning. When asked were the symptoms of mercury poisoning similar to that of scrofula, Dr. Fox stated that “the symptoms of appearances are often the same. It is often very difficult to tell the one disease from the other.” Furthermore, Fox testified that the marks on Abram’s back came solely from the whipping he had received. However, Fox testified that Abram had a fistula at one time due to a small scar near his rectum. “The fistula,” Fox said, “I thought was perfectly cured and had evidently been so for some time.”115

But in the conclusion of several doctors, Abram had the symptoms of scrofula, a chronic

114 Deposition of Dr. Henry J. Fox, August 12, 1858. Unprocessed Slavery Papers, Special Collections, J. Douglas Gay Jr./Frances Carrick Thomas Library, Transylvania University.

disease which caused swelling of his spine and the glands in his neck. Abram’s body became an arena where the expertise and skills of southern doctors and the reliability of southern slaveholders where played out for other white men in the slaveholding community.

To Dr. Fox, one of the indicators of Abram’s health was his complexion, which was, according to him, “dark” and “active.” In the slaveholding discourse of race, white men illustrated their expertise in reading slave bodies by deciphering the numerous shades of African-American skin complexions that they saw every day. An examination of the physical descriptions of fugitive slaves in runaway notices illustrates the litany of words and phrases that masters and mistresses used to categorize skin complexions. Fox had every reason to interpret Abram’s dark skin as an indication of physical vitality since southern medicine often correlated a slaves’ blackness with healthfulness. Southern physician Samuel Cartwright advised masters looking to purchase “likely” field slaves that the blacker a slave the healthier the slave.\textsuperscript{116} However, blackness did not always indicate physical vitality to white examiners. In their depositions, witnesses were always asked by the plaintiffs and the defendants to give a physical description of the slaves in question. Tom, a diseased slave purchased by Lewis Robards, was also struck with consumption. George W. Maraman, Robards’s agent in Louisville, when asked if he had noticed anything peculiar about Tom’s skin stated that the slave possessed a “copper complexion and was rather pale for that color.”\textsuperscript{117} Other men who examined Tom concurred with Maraman that Tom’s normal “copper complexion” appeared “ashy” and

\textsuperscript{116} Johnson, 139-40.

\textsuperscript{117} Deposition of George W. Maraman August 18, 1854, Lewis Robards vs. Thomas Shouse, Fayette County Circuit Court File 1288 July 17, 1853, Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, Frankfort.
“pale.” Everyone who testified about Abram described his as a “dark copper colour” or as possessing a “Dark Complexion.” Abram’s blackness was unaffected by his scrofula.118

Fox also based his judgment of Abram’s soundness on the slave’s masculinity. Again everyone who examined Abram described him as being “stout,” “heavy set,” “low and heavy bilt,” “low and chunky.” If he had scrofula, the disease had not diminished his physical stature. According to descriptions, Abrams stood somewhere between 5 feet and 5 inches and 5 feet 8 inches tall and weighed about 165 to 170 pounds and was between the ages of twenty four and thirty. On the slave market Abram was at the acme of the traders’ buyer-tracking table; his physical appearance indicated that he was a “strong healthy negro.”119

Because Abram was evaluated on his physical vitality, the doctors’ diagnoses were not just medical evaluations of a swollen spine or glands, but they were also appraisals of Abram’s monetary value and of slaves who shared Abram’s category in the slave trade. In the pens, it was the daily practices of categorization and differentiation that allowed slave traders to run black and brown bodies into commodities.120 The language of these practices could be found in the day-to-day correspondence of masters and slave

118 Deposition of Dr. Gunn, Lewis Robards vs. Thomas Shouse, Fayette County Circuit Court File 1288 July 17, 1853, Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, Frankfort; Johnson, 147-48, 150.

119 Deposition of Thomas Waters, January 23, 1858; Deposition of William Frazier, January 23, 1859; Deposition of John H. Morgan; Deposition of Roger Brooking, January 30, 1858; Deposition of J.W. Skinner, December 1, 1857; Deposition of James F. Mitchuson, Jr., December 15, 1857; Deposition of Dr. A. M. Bozarth, December 16, 1857, Unprocessed Slavery Papers, Special Collections, J. Douglas Gay Jr./Frances Carrick Thomas Library, Transylvania University; According to Walter Johnson, buyers preferred slaves with dark complexions for work in the fields and lighter complexioned slaves for domestic labor. Although Johnson’s work makes a good argument for these phenomena in slavery, buyers placed dark complexioned slaves in domestic situations as well. By 8162, Abram was alive and well living working as a servant in a hotel in Prentice, Mississippi which was owned by the Stewarts; Johnson, 140-41.

120 For more on the process of categorization and differentiation and how slave traders commodified slaves see Johnson, 117-134.
traders. In a letter from Palatine Robinson of Campbellsville to Lewis Robards in 1854, Robinson asks Robards to “let me know as near as you can what you would pay me for a likely Buoy [sic] 26 years of Age weighing 170lbs sound and healthy No.1 on 90 days time.”

Robinson’s brief description of the young man provided Robards with key words, such as likely and No.1, he would have used to compare the slave with other slaves in his category. Almost every doctor who examined Abram was asked to compare Abram’s value at the time that they examined him with if Abram had been a “sound” slave. Dr. McNary replied, “There is no comparative difference I did not think him of no value comparatively at that time, and have had not reason to alter my notions.”

Dr. Calvert testified that Abram’s condition made a huge difference in his value. “It would make all the difference in the price of a negro,” Calvert said, “or in other words I consider him worth nothing.”

According to Dr. Bozarth, if healthy Abram would have brought top dollar in the slave market. “In the condition which I found him I don’t think him worth anything,” Bozarth said, “if sound he would have been worth from eleven to twelve hundred dollars.” J.W. Skinner gave Abram two different prices based on whether Abram was

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121 Letter from Palatine Robinson to Lewis Robards December 1, 1854, Unprocessed Slavery Papers, Special Collections, J. Douglas Gay Jr./Frances Carrick Thomas Library, Transylvania University.

122 Deposition of T.L. McNary, December 10, 1857. Unprocessed Slavery Papers, Special Collections, J. Douglas Gay Jr./Frances Carrick Thomas Library, Transylvania University.

123 Deposition of Dr. J.D. Calvert, December 11, 1857. Unprocessed Slavery Papers, Special Collections, J. Douglas Gay Jr./Frances Carrick Thomas Library, Transylvania University.

124 Deposition of Dr. A. M. Bozarth, December 16, 1857. Unprocessed Slavery Papers, Special Collections, J. Douglas Gay Jr./Frances Carrick Thomas Library, Transylvania University.
sold inside or outside of the Lexington market. Despite the stripes on his back, Skinner believed that a sound Abram would have brought “from nine hundred to nine [hundred] fifty Dollars” on the Lexington market, and outside of Lexington Abram would have went for “about Eleven hundred Dollars.”125 Young Isva who was purchased by David Smith was diagnosed has having “Phthisick,” or asthma. Doctor A.B. Davis was asked whether Isva “was worth anything or would you have taken it as a gift.” “I suppose,” Davis replied, “that it worth something from my knowledge of the disease and child it is not worth more than fifty dollars.” Fellow physician Ava Shropshire declared that he would not have given “anything for such a child and risk it in its present condition.”126

If possessing “truly African” features and a dark complexion made one a real negro, then mixed race slaves resided in a slippery racial borderland, where skin color was an uncertain marker of freedom. Once a young man stopped at the Campbell household, Lewis Clarke’s owners, to call on one of the Campbell daughters. The young man mistook one of Lewis’s sisters for the young lady and conversed with her instead. Lewis Clarke said, “My sisters were as white and good-looking as any of the young ladies of Kentucky.”127 Clarke’s racial heritage illustrated the racial mixing that often occurred in master households. Clarke’s mother, Letitia Campbell, was a mixed race slave, the product of a relationship between her father/master Samuel Campbell and a

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125 Deposition of J.W. Skinner, December 1, 1857. Unprocessed Slavery Papers, Special Collections, J. Douglas Gay Jr./Frances Carrick Thomas Library, Transylvania University.

126 David Smith vs. Lewis Robards, Fayette County Circuit Court, File 1213, June 7, 1852, Deposition of A.B. Davis June 7, 1852 and Asa Shropshire, August 4, 1852, Unprocessed Slavery Papers, Special Collections, J. Douglas Gay Jr./Frances Carrick Thomas Library, Transylvania University.

mixed-race slave woman named Mary. The race mixing continued because Lewis Clarke’s father was Scottish, having fought for the colonists during the American Revolution and gaining the permission of Samuel to marry her. Lewis Hayden informed readers that his mother, driven to insanity by the sale of her husband and children, was “of mixed blood,--white and Indian.” As J. Blaine Hudson noted in his study of Kentucky and the Underground Railroad, “Fugitive slaves escaping from or through Kentucky were predominantly young and male, and more likely to be racially mixed than the overall African-American population.” So, in addition to being living representations of the slaveholder’s sexual promiscuity, light-skinned slaves were also a direct threat to slavery because of their ability to subvert the categories of race. Lewis Clark’s owner, still, seething over the earlier fiasco with the young man and Lewis’ sister, attempted to transform him into “a real negro.” Clarke said, “ ‘She would fix me, so that nobody should ever think that I was white.’ Accordingly, in a hot burning day, she made me take off every rag of clothes, go out into the garden, pick herbs for hours, in order to burn me black.”

While masters attempted to categorize slave skin tones to uphold the institution of slavery, slaves usurped those same racial categories, using white perceptions of skin color as a devise for escape. In August of 1845, two brothers named Lige and Jacob along with a “yellow or nearly white man” named Adda fled from their Frankfort masters. John McClauley, the owner of the brothers, warned the readers of the reverse minstrel show

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128 Blassingame, 695.

129 Hudson, 156.

130 Clarke, 614. Emphasis made by Clarke
that the fugitives might be playing: “Adda will most likely claim as his property the above named Lige and Jacob.”\textsuperscript{131} In August of 1841, Lewis Clarke, in conjunction with another slave named Isaac, devised a similar plan. “Isaac proposed to take the horse of his mistress,” Clarke said, “and I was to take my pony, and we were to ride off together; I as master, and he as slave.”\textsuperscript{132} Believing he could not fulfill the role of the master because of his illiteracy, Lewis turned back, leaving Isaac to travel alone. Unfortunately, the historical record and Clarke are silent concerning the fate of Isaac. However, had Clarke gone forward with the attempt his light complexion would have helped the pair to negotiate the slippery antebellum categories or race, as it did for Clarke two weeks later when he made good a second escape attempt this time alone. Henry Bibb used his light complexion to escape from Kentucky bondage on steamboat. Hidden in the shadows of the deck, Bibb’s complexion was just light enough to allow him to avoid detection by the boat’s crew. Bibb said of his mixed ancestry, “This was one of the instances of my adventures that my affinity with the Anglo-Saxon race, and even slaveholders, worked well for my escape.”\textsuperscript{133}

Some masters were willing to buy slaves that were on the run. In the fall of 1830, Louisville hemp rope manufacturer, Charles William Thruston purchased two fugitive slave men one named George and the other Cyrus for $200 a piece. The bills of sale for these fugitives resemble the form and tone of runaway advertisements, giving the reader descriptions of the slaves’ physical characteristics. William Shirley, George’s former owner described the twenty-one year old as “about five feet nine or ten inches high a

\textsuperscript{131}Observer and Reporter (Lexington), 3 September 1845.

\textsuperscript{132}Clarke, 619.

\textsuperscript{133}Bibb, 28.
yellowish complexion [sic] with Grey eyes … William Postlethwait, Cyrus’s former owner stated that he had not seen Cyrus for about four years and had supposed that he had made his way to Canada. The fact that both of the slaves were twenty-one-years old provides us with at least one clue as to why Thruston was interested in them. They were both “likely” slaves, in the prime of their productive and economic values. They would have been indispensable in Thruston’s Louisville ropewalk, where young hands labored at some of the most demanding work in the state, weaving the hemp fibers into rope, bagging, and bale rope for the Deep South. Also, in the 1830s, when prime hands sold for as high as $500 or $600, George and Cyrus were purchased cheaply. Despite the fact that both slaves had been on run for some time, Thruston had every reason to believe he could recover the slaves. He had the power of the federal government on his side. If that was not enough, slaveholders could tap into a network of spies and slave catchers that operated north of the Ohio River and were effective had capturing fugitives slaves and kidnapping free blacks. Therefore, if Thruston never captured them, $200 for prime fields although on the run was a speculation worth taking.

The fugitive notices in antebellum Lexington newspapers reveal a highly mobile demographic whether they were moving from master to master through authorized movements such as being hired out and, of course, through escapes. Ironically, Kentucky masters through their economic and social practices provided their slaves with not just the knowledge of the roads but also the social and cultural know how to escape. Slave mobility, the product of the slaveholders’ drives for profits, and mixed race slaves, the products of the masters’ sexual indiscretions, often combined, to make the recapture of

\footnote{Bill of Sale for George, Sept. 26, 1830, Charles William Thruston Papers, 1796-1865, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky.}
some fugitive slaves a difficult task. The fugitive notices in Kentucky newspapers provide extraordinary accounts of African-American agency during slavery. An analysis of the *Kentucky Reporter*, which later became the *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, reveals that a vast number of advertisements for slaves (runaways, slaves for sale, and slaves for hire, etc.) comprised an important part of the advertisement space in the newspapers. Editors charged masters to place an advertisement for a fugitive, and in many instances the editor acted as a middleman in the capture of the fugitive slave just as he did in cases of slave hiring and slave sales. Therefore, antebellum southern newspapers profited from both the lawful and unlawful circulation of African-American bodies. Because newspapers had wide circulations, they were an important part of the retrieval of runaways. Fugitive notices performed double duty by perpetuating the racist ideology that aided in the commodification of black and brown bodies, while simultaneously dispersing information that was needed to turn ordinary white men, on both sides of the Ohio River, into effective slave catchers. Hired out slaves took advantage of the absence of their owners and fled, but slave advertisements diminished the distance and time for the master and slave catchers. In other words, print was used to

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135 Most histories of slavery have dealt with either the Chesapeake or the lower South, eschewing Kentucky slavery and its relation to the growth of slavery in the Old South. The reasons for this neglect are many. The main reason is that Kentucky slavery is considered to be less significant to the economy and society of Kentucky than in the lower South. I believe that this is a mistake since Kentucky slavery possessed a flexible character, plus Kentucky held a central location geographically and culturally. For an interesting discussion on African-American agency see Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37 (2003) :113-124.

136 The evidence for this examination relies on runaway notices posted in the *Kentucky Reporter* and the *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, newspapers published in antebellum Lexington. Although slavery existed throughout Kentucky, the Bluegrass Region contained the majority of the state’s slaveholders and slaves, and Lexington was the region’s cultural and economic epicenter for most of the period. Because runaway advertisements were heavily tainted by the views of the masters, I have attempted to comprehend the experiences of Kentucky’s runaway slave by examining the advertisements in conjunction with narratives and speeches of former fugitive slaves from the Bluegrass state who shared similar experiences.
enforce the ideological and structural facets of the system of slavery.\textsuperscript{137}

However, as we observed, Kentucky’s fugitives (such as Lewis and Milton Clarke) who made their escapes, with the aid of abolitionists, usurped the printed word, writing narratives that presented their take on slavery in Kentucky. Fugitive notices, in addition to the slave narratives, created a collective anti-narrative of bondage in the Bluegrass state that precluded any claims of mildness, master benevolence, and black inferiority.

\textsuperscript{137} Waldstreicher, 268.
CHAPTER 5:

THE IMAGE OF THE KENTUCKY SLAVE TRADE IN *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

No study of the Kentucky slave trade would be complete without an examination of how the traffic was portrayed in popular antebellum culture. Many Americans both northerners and southerners believed that slavery in Kentucky was the mildest form of the institution and more humane that slavery in the Deep South. This chapter examines Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). In writing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* Harriet Beecher Stowe set out to disprove the myth that slavery in the border South was milder because of the region’s lack of a plantation economy. In order to illustrate the horrors of slavery, Stowe exposed the workings of the domestic slave trade with Kentucky as the starting point for the traffic.

The slave-trade is now, by American law, considered as piracy. But a slave-trade, as systematic as ever was carried on on the coast of Africa, is an inevitable attendant and result of American slavery. And its heart-break and its horrors, can they be told?¹

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s focus on the domestic slave trade in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was not a new weapon in the abolitionist arsenal against slavery. The domestic slave trade’s centrality in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was a dominant characteristic of the abolitionists’ moral suasion argument and became the foundation of radical antislavery thought at the start of

the 1830s. Abolitionists argued that masters in Kentucky, and other states of the Upper South, bred slaves specifically to be sold for the markets of the Lower South. This argument could be found in the pages of all antislavery publications. For Stowe, Kentucky was as a borderland where slaves were bought to be shipped to lower south markets. But with her writer’s imagination, Stowe expanded the domestic slave trade to include the practice of retrieving fugitive slaves. Stowe argued that as long as the nation’s laws continued to respect property in human beings, even in free states, the institution could never be contained in the South. Especially ominous was the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 which turned all of the nation into a bastion for slave traders and slave catchers. According to the multiple plots of the novel, Kentucky, as a border state, played a central role in the continuation of the commodification of blacks and the spread of slavery through the interstate slave trade and the retrieval of runaway slaves.

Published as a novel in 1852, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was perhaps the best abolitionist response to the myth that Kentucky slavery was inherently benevolent for blacks. The story first appeared as a serial in weekly installments in the antislavery publication the *National Era* from June 5, 1851 to April 1, 1852. Stowe wrote the story in reaction to the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 by Congress. For Stowe and other abolitionists, the most detestable requirements of the fugitive slave law was that citizens had to aid in the apprehension of fugitive slaves. If individuals refused they faced fines and even imprisonment. For Stowe, the fundamental evil of American slavery was that it transformed human beings into things, and her indictment against slavery in Kentucky rested primarily on the abolitionist argument that the Upper South acted as a “breeding” state for the interstate slave trade, sending thousands of slaves
annually to the plantations of the Lower South. Stowe was uncompromising in her
denunciation of the traffic. The original title of the novel was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or The*
*Man Who Was a Thing*; and throughout the novel, starting with the paternalistic
slaveholder Mr. Shelby negotiating for the sale of Uncle Tom and little Harry with the
loathsome slave trader Haley, Stowe continued to examine how the slave trade operated
and how the commerce stripped humanity from blacks.²

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Kentucky serves as the central setting for the multiple
plots of the novel. Stowe’s decision to make central Kentucky the setting of the novel
seems logical considering that Stowe’s only visit to the South was to Washington,
Kentucky in the autumn of 1834. The city of Washington, Kentucky is located in Mason
County, which borders the Ohio River. Her visit, however, was not sparked by an
interest to see firsthand how slavery or even the slave trade operated in Kentucky. Her
visit was purely social. In 1834, Stowe taught at the Western Female Institute, which was
headed by her sister Catherine Beecher. In the company of a colleague, Mary Dutton,
Stowe spent several days in Washington with one of her students who resided there.
Although that student’s family did not own slaves, evidence exists that Stowe did visit at
least one Mason County family that did own slaves. Thomas Gossett states that contrary
to Stowe’s later claims that she had traveled in Kentucky with her father, there is no
evidence to suggest that she made other visits to Kentucky or any other southern state.
Nineteenth–century critics who stated that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was rubbish because
Stowe possessed no experience of living in the South were then correct. But they were

²Joan D. Hedrick, “Commerce in Souls: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the State of the Nation,” in *Novel
History: Historians and Novelists Confront America’s Past (and Each Other)*, ed. Mark. C. Carnes (New
only partially correct in their criticism of the story.  

Mrs. Stowe lacked the credentials of fellow abolitionists James Birney and Mattie Griffith, who had been born into Kentucky’s slaveholding class and whose criticisms of the state’s institution were bolstered by their day-to-day experiences. Nevertheless, what Stowe’s critics failed to understand was the author’s experiences as a resident of Cincinnati, Ohio, a river city that underwent social turmoil over the issue of slavery during much of the antebellum period. For those readers who doubted her experience with slavery, Stowe advised, “The writer had lived, for many years, on the frontier line of slave states, and has had great opportunities of observation among those who formerly were slaves.” By the time Harriet arrived in Cincinnati in 1832, the city contained 30,000 people and was the nation’s third largest city. The city’s economic connections rested firmly with steamboat traffic on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, which meant maintaining good relations with slave states, especially immediate neighbor Kentucky. It was also a city that possessed a history of antipathy and violence towards African Americans. Although in 1804 and in 1807 Ohio had passed laws requiring free blacks who entered the state to post bonds to guarantee their good behavior and to produce legal evidence of their freedom, blacks continued to settle in the black parts of Cincinnati known as “Little Africa.” By 1829, African Americans, many of them fugitive slaves, composed roughly 10 percent of the Queen City’s population. The growth in the city’s black population ignited fear and anxiety among white Cincinnatians. This anger boiled over in 1829 when white Cincinnatians demanded that the city’s black population be in

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4 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 634.
compliance with the state’s black laws or leave the city. Over three days, crowds of angry whites then rampaged through Buckstown attacking blacks and their houses. To escape both the violence and the enforcement of the black codes, approximately twelve hundred blacks fled Cincinnati for Canada.⁵

In 1834, Stowe’s father, Lyman Beecher, was at the center of one of the city’s most significant controversies over abolition. At Lane Seminary in February 1834, where Lyman Beecher was president, Theodore Dwight Weld led the student body in a debate over antislavery versus colonization. After the “Lane Debates,” the entire student body agreed to the principle of the immediate end of slavery. The students also started to reach out to the local black community, visiting black families and treating them as their social equals. To squelch future antislavery activity, the trustees of Lane forbade students from holding abolitionists meetings. In protest Weld led the students in a walk-out of the seminary. Without a doubt, the students’ actions were dangerous in Cincinnati, a city that possessed strong anti-black sentiments and close economic ties with Kentucky. Former Kentucky slaveholder turned abolitionist, James G. Birney discovered this firsthand after he moved to the Queen City in 1836 to publish his antislavery newspaper the Philanthropist. After repeated warnings from proslavery men to stop publishing his abolitionist newspaper, a committee of thirteen “upstanding” citizens met on July 30, 1836 to demand that Birney stop the publication of his paper. After coming to an impasse with the Ohio Antislavery Society, which sponsored the Philanthropist, a mob attacked Birney’s press and disposed of it in the Ohio River. Although angered by Birney’s intention to print in the newspaper in Cincinnati, the mob may have also

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suspected that Birney was engaging in “nigger stealing,” aiding fugitive slaves to escape through Cincinnati. Birney wrote to Lewis Tappan:

Slaves are escaping in great numbers through Ohio to Canada. The Captain of a Steamboat said …that he would give $500 to any one would prove that I had any hand in persuading a hired hand on his boat to run off.—that he would forthwith go and take my life.6

The mob then moved on to “Little Africa” the black part of the city, where the city’s “men of property and standing” continued to vent their anger by destroying black homes. Stowe condemned the committee for voting “a mob.”7 At the time her brother, Henry Ward Beecher, was the temporary editor of the Cincinnati Journal. Writing under a male pseudonym, Harriet sent a letter to the paper in which she took on the personae of a man named “Franklin,” who defends Birney’s rights to print his paper. The Lane incident and the mob action against Birney were eye-opening experiences for Stowe on how brutality accompanied slavery and threatened to undermine America’s democratic institutions.

“The customs and practices to which it [slavery] gives rise to,” Stowe said later in A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, “are precisely those which despotisms in all ages have given rise.”8

In the same year as Birney’s press was destroyed, Kentucky slavery and its effects literally came home to Stowe. Harriet hired a black woman whom she believed was free. However this was not the case. The woman confessed to Harriet that she was a fugitive slave and that slave catchers were in Cincinnati and on her heels. To save the

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7 Hedrick, 106.
8 Harriet Beecher Stowe, A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin (London: G. Barclay, 1853), 273; Gossett, 58
woman from being returned to bondage, Calvin and Henry Ward Beecher spirited the woman away to the farm of a nearby abolitionist. The young woman was later removed to Canada. Although the characters and events of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* illustrate that Stowe certainly possessed a keen imagination and uncanny insight into slavery, she did not create those characters from an intellectual vacuum. Despite the fact that Stowe did not have any experience with living in the South, her experiences with slavery were garnered in Cincinnati in the forms of witnessing anti-abolitionist mobs rampage through the streets of the city and from fugitive slaves from Kentucky that sought refuge with Cincinnati’s abolitionists. 9

According to abolitionist arguments, Kentucky played a vital role in the perpetuation of slavery because it acted as a breeding state for the slave market. Stowe said, “Let us enter a little more particularly on them. The slave-exporting States are Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Missouri. These are slave-raising States, and the others are slave-consuming states.”10 People residing close to or traveling on the Ohio River often remarked on the shipments of slaves they witnessed from Kentucky that were destined to be shipped down the river. After viewing a steamboat of close to 150 slaves docked in Cincinnati, a writer to the *Cincinnati Journal* stated, “the traders pass through the Northern slave-holding states, and whenever they find …a master willing to sell his slaves to he knows not whom, to be carried he knows not where, a bargain is struck.”11 According to the writer, the steamboat of slaves

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9 The reader is told that the Shelby plantation is located in the town of P__, Kentucky; Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 3; Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985), 28-29, 42-43, 61-62;

10 Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 327.

11 Quote from the *Liberator* April 20, 1833.
was destined for Vicksburg, Mississippi, second in importance only to New Orleans as a lower South market for slaves. Kentucky’s image as a slave breeding state was a consequence of the development of the Cotton Kingdom beginning in the 1820s. Two of the defining characteristics of cotton production were its spread across the Old Southwest and also its reliance on enslaved black labor. Between 1820 and 1860, nearly one million slaves from the Upper South were shipped to the Lower South to feed the needs for cotton production. In his examination of the slave trade from the Upper South to the Lower South, historian Michael Tadman has argued that the commerce was so extensive that of those slaves who were under ten years old and resided in the Upper South in 1820, more than one in four were sold to the Lower South by 1860.¹² Due to this commerce in humanity, the South became divided into slave-exporting and slave-importing states. Although Kentucky’s economy did not rely directly on the production of cotton, the health of the domestic slave trade did connect Kentucky indirectly to the cotton production of the Lower South. The domestic slave trade then connected the economic well-being of Kentucky masters with the masters in Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, and later Texas.¹³

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Kentucky serves as the central setting for the multiple plots of the story, but it also symbolizes the fertile breeding ground of the Upper South where slaves were harvested by loathsome slave traders for the domestic slave trade. One of the most memorable parts of the novel is Eliza’s escape across the frozen Ohio River


with her son little Harry in her arms. However, Stowe introduces Eliza at the beginning of the novel, not as a courageous mother, but as a potential commodity for the fancy maid market in New Orleans. As Mr. Shelby and Haley negotiate for the sale of Uncle Tom and Harry, Eliza enters the room.

There need only a glance from the child to her, to identify her as its mother. There was the same rich, full, dark eye, with long lashes; the same ripples of silky black hair. The brown of her complexion gave way on the cheek to a perceptible flush, which deepened as she saw the gaze of the strange man fixed upon her in bold and undisguised admiration. Her dress was of the neatest possible fit, and set off to advantage her finely moulded shape;--a delicately formed hand and a trim foot and ankle were items of appearance that did not escape the quick eye of the trader, well used to run up at a glance the points of the fine female article.\(^\text{14}\)

As Walter Johnson argued, slave traders were not just selling laborers to masters but the slaves also represented for the master a sense of social status, honor, and in the case of fancy maids, sexual fantasy. White men routinely bought and sold light-complexioned women as concubines. Because of their light complexions these women were literally marked for the slave market. Although Haley envisioned the thousands of dollars that Eliza’s body could earn on the market in “Orleans,” this fictional scene hides the dynamic of Kentucky’s intrastate slave trade. Fancy maids could be found in southern cities where, as one writer said, “Horse-breeders, reckless turfmen, spendthrift planters, gamblers, and profligates” caroused.\(^\text{15}\) And antebellum Lexington was such a city. Lewis Robards, the infamous slave dealer from Lexington engaged in the fancy trade as part of his slave trading operation in central Kentucky. In downtown Lexington, Robards kept

\(^{14}\) Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 7.

\(^{15}\) J. Winston Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 158-159.
his “choice stock” of female slaves on the second floor of his brick slave jail and invited male guests after dinner to inspect his stock of fancy maids that sold for as much as $1600. The figure of the beautiful but tragic mulatto is a staple of the narratives of former Kentucky slaves. Lewis Clarke’s sisters were as beautiful and refined as any of the white women of the household and were sometimes mistaken as white by male visitors who lavished attention upon them.  

Masters also wished to physically dominate mixed race slave women. Although Mattie Griffith in her pseudo-slave narrative chose to assume the voice of a slave girl, she did not necessarily choose to trade whiteness for blackness. Griffith’s young female protagonist—Ann—is of mixed raced heritage. The product of a slave mother and a white father the girl is described as “very fair and beautiful” with a complexion that was “no perceptible shade darker than” that of white children.”

When her master dies, Ann is purchased by the brutal Mr. Peterkin, but not as a concubine but as a breeder and as an object for the master’s rage. “I want that gal,” Peterkin says, “she is likely, and it will do me good to thrash the devil out of her.”

Kentuckians vehemently denied being labeled as slave breeders. Slave masters boiled accusations of slave breeding down to mere abolitionist rhetoric meant to inflame public opinion in the North against the South. Nevertheless, former Kentucky slaves often leveled charges of slave breeding against Kentuckians. William Webb labeled

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18 Griffith, 15.
Kentucky a “sea-port where they raised colored people and shipped them to other States.” Although Webb did not provide the reader with statistics, his observations of slave exports from Kentucky jive with the observations of other mid-nineteenth century Americans who visited the state. Webb observed “great droves of colored people, that put me in mind of sheep or other cattle being driven to the market to sell them.”19 Despite abolitionist and former slaves’ accusations that masters bred slaves exclusively for the trade, no historian has every uncovered hard evidence of masters in Kentucky (or anywhere in the South) of engaging in that practice. That, however, does not mean that Kentucky masters did not recognize black women as an important part of their ability to reproduce wealth. Daniel Green, a slaveholder in Madison County, kept track of his slaveholdings in a memorandum book by listing the names and birthdates of his slave under their mothers’ names. Green did not list the fathers of the slaves; only the mother was important for recording the slave’s lineage.20 Despite masters’ protests that they did not breed their slaves as they did their livestock, masters in Kentucky were aware of the fact that the value of their slaves was determined by the prices slaveholders in the Lower South were willing to pay. Henry Clay, in a speech before the Kentucky Colonization Society in 1829, acknowledged that nowhere in Kentucky “would slave labor be generally employed, if the proprietors were not tempted to raise slaves by the high prices of the Southern markets, which keeps it up in their own.”21 Stowe too understood that


despite the popular image of the benevolent Kentucky master as benevolent, the value of Kentucky’s bondsman was established by prices that were paid in Vicksburg, New Orleans, and other lower South markets. After purchasing Uncle Tom, Haley takes him to Washington, Kentucky, where he plans to buy other slaves and to build a coffle that he can take to New Orleans, with Tom as the valuable centerpiece. Stowe wrote, “he [Haley] thought first of Tom’s length, and breadth, and height, and what he would sell for, if he was kept fat and in good case till he got him into market. He thought of how he should make out his gang; he thought of the respective market value of certain suppositious men and women and children who were to compose it …”22 Haley’s interpretations of Tom, Eliza, and little Harry were based on their potential value in the slave market in New Orleans. Clay would have been horrified to know that he and Stowe both understood the fallacy in Kentuckians’ argument that they did not specifically breed slaves for the market. Whether or not Bluegrass slaveholders bred slaves intentionally to be sold was not the issue, Stowe contended. The market value of slaves was such a draw for slaveholders that even the dying wishes of masters could not be recognized. Lewis and Milton Clarke’s grandfather promised to free Mary his daughter and her nine children, including Lewis and Milton upon his death. “But ten persons in one family, each worth three hundred dollars, are not easily set free among those accustomed to live by continued robbery,” Lewis Clarke said.23 Even in death, the slave commerce, not blood ties, determined the prices and the value of slaves.

However, Stowe’s understanding of Kentucky’s slave trade was not necessarily

22 Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 167.
23 Clarke, 608.
built on the moral suasion arguments of Garrisonian abolitionism, but also on contingency of the expanding market economy of the antebellum period. According to Stowe, Kentucky had not always been a slave exporting state, acting as the lynchpin of slavery. Earlier in the nineteenth century, Kentucky had been the best hope to eliminate slavery in the South. Stowe was well aware of the long-standing activities of Kentucky’s antislavery men to weaken the institution. Commenting on emancipationist activities, Stowe said Kentucky “came within one vote, in her legislature, of taking measures for gradual emancipation.” Stowe, however, gave Kentuckians too much credit when she stated that just as the internal slave market was beginning to spread in the 1820s, whites in Kentucky were starting to “look upon the slave as one who might possibly yet become a man … giving to him and his wife and children the inestimable blessings of liberty…”

People outside of the state watched with intense interest as Kentucky’s pro and antislavery forces continued to openly debate the issue. The *Niles Weekly Register* stated that the “the chief slave-holders have long feared to call a convention to alter the constitution… lest measures should be adopted that might lead to gradual emancipation.” However, as Harold Tallant has pointed out in his study of slavery and Kentucky politics, the efforts of antislavery forces in the state were hampered by their internal discord, their animosity toward northern abolitionists, and the conservatism of their emancipation plans. The implementation of emancipation plans was also hampered by the increase of the slave population.


movement in Kentucky did not calculate those factors. Fear of emancipating hundreds of thousands of slaves, even gradually, certainly did not appeal to the majority of white Kentuckians. Furthermore, the logistics of colonization were not feasible either. The opportunity for black freedom in Kentucky was never that close at anytime during its history with slavery. The majority of whites in Kentucky if they thought about the institution of slavery at all adhered to the necessary evil theory of slavery. Instead of making their state the origin of ending southern slavery, as Stowe and others would have wished, Kentuckians held on stubbornly to slavery until 1865 and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. According to Stowe and other abolitionist, the practice of slavery had already proven to be economically unfeasible in Kentucky and would “speedily run itself out in a community, and become as unprofitable as to fall into disuse” if it were not for Kentucky’s participation in the domestic slave trade. Kentuckians should have arrived at the same conclusion as their northern counterparts did immediately after the American Revolution and therefore gradually emancipated their slaves. Kentucky needed the production of cotton to continue in the Deep South as a market for their slaves. Because the price of cotton dominated the southern economy, the prices that masters in Vicksburg or New Orleans were willing to pay for slaves dictated the prices for slaves in Kentucky. Therefore even if masters in Kentucky had no intention of selling of their slaves, the potential prices for slaves in the lower South still kept prices for likely blacks high.

There were various factors that account for Kentucky’s failure to implement gradual emancipation plans. However, as Stowe aptly portrays in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, it

28 Stowe, A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 325.
was America’s territorial and market expansion of the early nineteenth century which continued to make slavery in Kentucky profitable and further negate any plans for its abolition. “It is the extension of the Slave territory, the opening of a great Southern slave-market, and the organization of a great internal slave-trade, that has arrested the progress of emancipation,” Stowe said. Stowe’s recognition of Kentucky as a slave exporting state and as a central player in this expansion is illustrated in the action of the novel. Literary scholars have noted the centrality of Kentucky in the unfolding of the novel’s multiple plots and the manner in which Stowe used the geographical movement of her characters to illustrate the differences between the nation’s regions. Stowe takes the reader on a tour of America from central Kentucky across the Ohio River to Indiana and Ohio (and eventually to Canada and even Liberia) down the Mississippi River to the wealthy plantations of New Orleans and the frontier plantations on the Red River of Arkansas. In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, central Kentucky is the geographical and moral middle ground of the novel’s multiple plots. “Ultimately, there are only three places to be in this story,” explains Jane Tompkins in her examination of the novel, “heaven, hell, or Kentucky.” It is from this earthly purgatory, where “the mildest form of the system of slavery is to be seen” that the novel’s black protagonists start their journeys either to freedom or to death. Kentucky as earthly purgatory is a common theme in the narratives of former Kentucky bondsmen. Lewis Clarke’s depiction of slavery in central Kentucky is anything but a mild purgatory. Kentucky slavery was just as brutal as any found in the South. And family separation was just as violent as the physical brutality of Mrs. Banton. For both Clarke and Stowe and the movement of black people, whether as slaves for the

29 Stowe, A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 325.
market or fugitive slaves with a bounty on their heads, Kentucky is the starting point for the action.30

The power of Mrs. Stowe’s attack against slavery and the slave trade rested in her imagination as a novelist. Stowe’s apologia for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was called *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* published in 1853. In *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe amassed a mountain of evidence against slavery from first-hand accounts of people who traveled in the South, from former southerners, the testimony of former slaves, and slave advertisements. *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* follows the same pattern as Theodore Dwight Weld’s *Slavery As It Is*. Stowe, however, was able to achieve something that other abolitionist works were unable to which was take the evidence against slavery and bring it to life so to speak. Stowe places faces and names on Kentucky’s blacks who found themselves caught up in the nation’s economic expansion. The audience was able to access the characters and to sympathize with their struggles to escape the domestic slave trade which threatened to destroy their families.

To make her characters accessible to the audience, Stowe used stereotypes of slavery that were familiar to antebellum white readers. Stowe uses stereotypes of the Upper and Lower South. Stowe presents Kentucky to the reader as a state where perhaps “the mildest form of the system of slavery is to be seen” in the South. Kentucky is blessed with agriculture of a “quiet and gradual nature” that does not require Bluegrass masters to overwork their slaves at harvest time unlike the “more southern districts”

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where slaves are worked to death to satisfy the slaveholders greed.\textsuperscript{31} In Kentucky, “good
–humored” masters and mistresses gain the affection and loyalty of their black servants. On the Shelby estate, all of the comforts of the slaves are met. In stark contrast is the Deep South where Kentucky slaves such as Tom who were use to a “benign” form of enslavement, find their days filed with the never ending task of “field work” on cotton plantations with “day after day of pain and weariness, aggravated by every kind of injustice and indignity that the ill will of a mean and malicious” master could implement.\textsuperscript{32} Kentucky slaves feared being sold to the Deep South where they knew from word of mouth that slaves lived under harsher work conditions on sugar and cotton plantations. The narratives of some former slaves expound on this regional myth of benign Kentucky slavery. Mississippi and Louisiana slave masters had a bad reputation for violence against slaves. In his narrative William Webb recounted some the violence he witnessed while residing on a Mississippi plantation:

\begin{quote}
I have seen men and women tied down over a log, with their feet on one side and their arms on the other side, and they would whip them over the head to their feet, and their flesh was cut till they had to rub them with salt and red pepper to keep the flies from blowing them.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

As many other slaves, Webb found himself migrating with his master from Georgia to Mississippi to cultivate cotton. Later, Webb migrated again this time with his master’s son to live in Kentucky. Webb declared that the Bluegrass state was “better than any State I had lived in yet.”\textsuperscript{34} But Webb did not get to stay in Kentucky. His master,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{31} Stowe, \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, 13.
\textsuperscript{32} Stowe, \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, 553.
\textsuperscript{33} William Webb, 4.
\textsuperscript{34} William Webb, 7.
\end{footnotesize}
homesick for Mississippi, moved back shortly after arriving in Kentucky. Back in Mississippi, Webb lamented that “I began to think how much better the State of Kentucky was than Mississippi. It seemed as though people were free in Kentucky, when compared with Mississippi.” Fellow Kentucky slaves disagreed with Webb. Henry Bibb, born in Shelby County in 1815, spent most of his life living in the Bluegrass and denounced Kentucky slavery as just as brutal as slavery anywhere in the South. “I was brought up in the Counties of Shelby, Henry, Oldham, and Trimble,” Bibb said. “Or, more correctly speaking, …I was flogged up.” But for Bibb, violence was only one form of brutality put forth by Bluegrass slaveholders. Bibb criticized masters for not giving their bondsmen the proper religious training.

The Sabbath is not regarded by a large number of the slaves as a day of rest. They have not schools to go to; no moral nor religious instruction at all in many localities where there are hundreds of slaves. Hence they resort to some kind of amusement. Those who make not profession of religion, resort to the woods in large numbers on that day to gamble, fight, get drunk, and break the Sabbath. This is often encouraged by slaveholders.

According to both Stowe and Griffith, the “oft-fabled” legend of the benevolent institution of slavery in Kentucky could never be true. The shadow of the slave trade continuously loomed over both black and white Kentuckians. Masters could no more escape “the shadow of the law” that made the domestic slave trade legal than slaves could. Because of her beauty and light complexion, Ann is considered by her master and his sister to be the “child” of the family. Despite the fact that she is a slave, Mrs.

35 Webb, 9.


37 Bibb, 16-17.
Woodbridge, teaches Ann to read and write. However, Ann’s education was “a poor preparation for the life that was to come after!” Ann’s master suddenly became ill and died, leaving debts to be paid and the “residue” of the master’s property to be divided among the heirs. Eventually, Ann is sold to the brutal Mr. Peterkin. Even the most indulgent master succumbed to the whims of the market, to the consequences of unwise speculations, and of course eventually to death. It was on these occasions when assets needed to be liquidated to pay creditors and property divided among anticipating relatives that the market value of black and brown bodies took precedent over paternalistic pronouncements of slavery. The power of the slave trade to invade the home of even the most benevolent slaveholder is illustrated in the opening scene between Mr. Shelby, the ideal slave master and Mr. Haley the lowdown slave trader. In the opening chapter, young Harry, the son of Eliza, stumbles upon Mr. Shelby and Mr. Haley in the parlor while the two men are negotiating for the sale of Uncle Tom. After noticing the boy, Mr. Shelby coaxes Harry to dance and to perform some impersonations to entertain Haley. After watching the performance, Haley is so struck by Harry’s marketability that he makes an offer to buy the boy. Although Mr. Shelby is reluctant to sell Harry from Eliza, he is finally persuaded to include the boy in the deal. Stowe showed that little Harry’s performance had inadvertently turned the Shelby parlor into as effective slave auction house as could be found in Kentucky. Kentucky slavery, as slavery in general in the Upper South, was doomed to never live up to pronouncements of benevolence as long as blacks were considered property. Stowe also presented to the readers stereotypes of

38 Griffith, 11-12.

39 Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 14.
white southerners. Mr. Shelby and Haley symbolize the inconsistencies of the argument that Kentucky slavery was benign. Mr. Shelby is described as a gentleman. He is a humane man. Stowe describes Haley as a low and profane man who is pretending to belong to a higher rung of the social ladder than he actually belongs. To illustrate the baseness of the slave trader’s character, Stowe infuses the rhetoric of the market economy into Haley’s language as he weighs all of Tom’s characteristics in profits or loss, dollars and cents. Haley even views Tom’s Christianity as a selling point for the slave. Haley compares Tom to another pious slave he sold earlier for six hundred dollars in New Orleans. However, Haley does not compare sincerity of belief, but instead price. “Yes, I consider religion, a valuable thing in a nigger,” Haley says, “when it’s the genuine article, no mistake.” However, as a slave trader, Haley has to qualify Tom’s qualities in dollars and cents. Shelby and Haley then represent the Janus face of Kentucky slavery.40

For Stowe women were the primary defenders of domesticity. White women, with the exception of Mrs. St. Clair, are presented as the protectors of the home as opposed to their husbands (or other men) who readily accept the buying and selling of slaves as a legitimate market activity and the destruction of black families as a consequence. Mrs. Shelby is represented as a “woman of high class, both intellectually and morally,” but naïve concerning the nature of the liquidity of slave assets. After being questioned by Eliza about the possibility that Mr. Shelby will sell Harry, Mrs. Shelby reassures her servant that her master “never deals with those southern traders, and never means to sell any of his servants …”41 After learning the truth from her husband, Mrs.

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40 Clarke, 615.

Shelby, after trying for many years to reconcile herself with slavery, finally confronts the reality of being a slaveholder. She laments, “we care for no tie, no duty, no relation, however sacred, compared with money?” Using Mrs. Shelby’s voice, Stowe states that the slave trade is “God’s curse on slavery!” Stowe’s representation of Mrs. Shelby suggests that slave mistresses residing in the Upper South were unwitting about the traffic and their states’ roles in the market. In the end, slave mistresses are helpless to prevent the evils of the practice. Perhaps, Stowe’s benign portrayal of white southern women was an attempt on her part to persuade southern readers of the evils of slavery instead of denouncing all of southern society.

This is in stark contrast to the description of Kentucky slaveholding women given by former slaves. For Lewis and Milton Clarke, the “Algerines” of Kentucky produced the most wretched womenfolk. “Some of the slaveholders may have a wide house,” Lewis said, “but one of the cat-handed, snake-eyed, brawling women, which slavery produces, can fill it from cellar to garret…Of all the animals on the face of this earth, I am most afraid of a real mad, passionate, raving, slaveholding woman.” Milton described one of his mistresses, who was also his aunt, as a “half fool, besides being underwitted.” “There are a great many bears in Kentucky,” Milton said, “but none of them quite equal to a slaveholding woman.” For Clarke the distortion of the family was first manifested in the personalities of the white womenfolk. Mrs. Betsy Banton who was also his aunt acquired Lewis at the age of seven and immediately began to brutalize the

42 Ibid., 48-49.
43 Ibid., 50.
44 Clarke, 609.
boy. According to Clarke, Banton was an alcoholic and “swore like a highwayman.” 45“I cannot,” Lewis said, “tell all the ways by which see tormented me. 46 And according to Henry Bibb, it was the violent temper of his mistresses, Mrs. Vires and Mrs. White that “first started me to running away from them.” 47 Clarke’s contemporary Frederick Douglass would have agreed with his assessment of how slavery corrupted white southern women. For Douglass, Sophia Auld became the Janus face of slavery after her husband reprimanded her for teaching Douglass how to read. In their recollections of enslavement, slavery brought out the worst in masters and mistress. No one was immune from the corrupting influence of southern slavery.

In Kentucky, the stereotype of the slave trader as a low character and as an outcast of society was a common one often found in the public discourse on slavery. The stereotype of the evil slave trader served two purposes. First, the stereotype kept slave masters separate from the slave market. The slave trader was seen as responsible for the trade and took advantage of the deeply indebted master. Second, it maintained discipline among the slaves due to the threat of the separation of families. Sale or the threat of sale was just as an effective disciplinary tool as the cowskin. Slaves who ran afoul of their masters often found themselves sold away from family and friends. The sale of one slave from the farm was sometimes enough to instill discipline among the remaining slaves.

According to J. Winston Coleman, Jr., the majority of Kentuckians objected to the slave trade and to be known as a “‘nigger trader’ was about ‘the last word of opprobrium’ that

45 Clarke, 615.
46 Clarke 610-11; 638-39.
47 Bibb, 14.
‘could be slung at a man.’” However, Coleman accepts without question antebellum Kentuckians’ remonstrations against the slave trade. Evidence illustrates that in central Kentucky even wealthy slaveholders held few reservations about doing business with flesh traders who possessed even the worst of reputations in the local community. John Hunt Morgan, the grandson of John Wesley Morgan and Confederate cavalry leader loaned $1100 to Lewis Robards in order for the trader to expand his slave trading business in the 1850s.49

Stowe used the stereotype of the benevolent Kentucky slave master to illustrate the inconsistencies in the proslavery argument that masters did not willfully break up slave families through the slave trade. The conversation between Haley and Mr. Shelby illustrated to the audience what Stowe and other abolitionists had learned from reading slave advertisements, slave narratives, and from the mouths of fugitive slaves that they encountered in abolitionists circles: that the day-to-day economic realities of slavery threatened the sanctity of the slave family. Slavery distorted white family relations through the introduction of slave concubines. Likewise, the value of slaves overrode feelings that masters might have had through Christian duty to their slaves. In a scathing letter, Henry Bibb chastised his former master Albert Sibley for his professions of being a Christian and a leader in the Methodist church… “and yet you sold my mother from her little children, and sent them away to a distant land. Bibb continued, “you sold my brother George from his wife and dear little ones while he was a worthy member, and

48 Coleman, 147; Robert H. Gudmestad, A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 44.

49 Stowe, 4-5.
Clergyman, of the same church, to which you belong.”50 Because the shadow of the slave market followed slaves, every slave in Kentucky might potentially find themselves being sold down the river.

Stowe revealed her understanding of the centrality of domesticity and the home in antebellum America culture by humanizing the relationships of Kentucky’s slave families. Stowe was able to illustrate the terror that the slave trade caused in the lives of Kentucky slaves. Readers could sympathize with Eliza as she and little Harry flee the Shelby plantation and make a daring escape across the frozen Ohio River. Eliza was willing to face drowning both herself and Harry than see her son sold in the slave market. In the chapter entitled, “An Evening in Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” Stowe describes the life that Uncle Tom, Aunt Chloe, and their children built in Kentucky despite the fact that their lives belonged legally to Mr. Shelby. Stowe begins her description with the cabin’s garden:

In front it had a neat garden patch, where every summer, strawberries, raspberries, and a variety of fruits and vegetables, flourished under careful tending. The whole front of it was covered by a large scarlet bignonia and a native multiflora rose, which, entwisting and interlacing, left scarce a vestige of the rough logs to be seen. Here, also, in summer, various brilliant annuals, such as marigolds, petunias, four o’clocks, found an indulgent corner in which to unfold their splendors, and were the delight and pride of Aunt Chloe’s heart.51

Stowe goes on to develop a scene of domestic tranquility in Uncle Tom’s cabin, a domesticity that many middle-class white northerners readers would have been familiar with and working class ones striving to achieve. Stowe’s language conveys images of


51 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin,* 29.
Aunt Chloe as the matriarch of the cabin, who directs the work of the children in the kitchen while preparing Tom’s supper “with anxious interest.” And according to Haley, this indulgence by masters to allow slaves to possess even a resemblance of normal family relations was the Achille’s heel of Kentucky slavery. The slave market demanded that blacks not be given any expectation of having normal family relations.

S’pose not; you Kentucky folks spile your niggers…Now a nigger, you seem What’s got to be hacked and tumbled round the world, and sold to Tom, and Dick, and the Lord knows who,’ tan’t no kindness to be givin’ on him notions And expectations, and bringin’ on him up too well, for the rough and tumble Comes all the harder on him arter.53

Haley’s perverted sense of humanity toward the slaves was based on his business sense. Slaves that were attached to their families could be either physically or psychologically damaged by separation which consequently lower their value. Stowe’s humanization of Uncle Tom’s family serves to dramatizes his impending sale and emphasize the horrors of Kentucky’s so-called benevolent institution. Stowe illustrated how the slave trade commodified blacks and undercut masters’ pretenses of paternalism toward their slaves.54

The depiction of the domestic slave trade in Uncle Tom’s Cabin deals with the commerce between regions. The intrastate commerce and the hiring of slaves just as effectively separated families. Separated from his mother and brothers by only thirty miles, Lewis Clarke only saw his family three times in the ten years that resided with his aunt and owner, Mrs. Banton.55

As stated previously, Stowe’s experiences as a resident of Ohio provided her with

52 Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 29.
53 Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin 12.
54 Gudmestad, 55.
55 Clarke, 614.
insight into the spread of slavery throughout the antebellum Mississippi valley. Mrs. Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to protest the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which was a component of the Compromise of 1850. The Fugitive Slave of 1850 was a revamping of previous fugitive slave laws. The fugitive slave of 1850, however, made residents of free states responsible in the capturing of runaways. If individuals residing in free states refused to aid in the capture of runaway they could be fined or sentenced to jail. Under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, even free African Americans residing in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois were no longer free from the slave markets of neighboring Kentucky. Moreover, the act made life for free blacks particularly precarious since the Fugitive Slave Act made them vulnerable to kidnappers. After the passage of the act, Stowe was outraged that northern politicians continued to acquiesce to the demands of the Slave Power. However, what upset her even more was the fact that the act made all whites residing in free states potential slave catchers and therefore be a party to slavery. Now northerners would have to decide whether or not they would participate in the commodification of African Americans by aiding in the recapturing of fugitives.

The commerce connects central Kentucky to both the lower South and the Old Northwest. After overhearing of Mr. Shelby’s plan to sell little Harry, Eliza flees with Harry, seeking what she believes is freedom across the Ohio River. However, as Eliza’s conversation with Tom and Chloe reveal, she was also trying to save little Harry’s soul while simultaneously maintaining the integrity of her family. After revealing Mr. Shelby’s plan to sell Tom and Harry, Eliza states, “one soul is worth more than the world; and this boy has a soul, and if I let him be carried off, who knows what’ll become of
it?" In addition to referring to slave traders as man-stealers, abolitionists often referred to them as soul-peddlers as well. In 1822 a Bourbon County resident writing under the pseudonym “Philanthropist” condemned the “damning practice of SOUL PEDLING” that he witnessed growing in the streets of Paris, the county seat. “This is a kind of business commenced with at first on a moderate scale, in Kentucky, but now grown so enormously as to become truly alarming.” For those slaves sold down the river, the experience could be a psychological death sentence. Any number of factors could lead to the slow death of a slave’s “soul.” The journey to the lower South, either by coffle or steamboat, was harrowing experience that was often accompanied with the slave trader’s brutality and encounters with deadly diseases. In addition slaves were further harmed psychologically by being torn away from their families, friends, and familiar surroundings—their histories. However, Stowe’s interpretation of the effects of the domestic slave trade on slaves dealt with the concept of the Christian soul. Stowe gives the reader a couple of examples of what happens to the souls of Kentucky slaves that are sold to the Deep South. Topsy the slave girl in the St. Clare household is portrayed as never having the benefit of Christian training. Miss Ophelia, sets out to train the girl. If Topsy never received the gospel, Uncle Tom struggles to maintain his Christianity under the brutal ownership of Simon Legree. For Stowe, the evil of the Deep South is that masters attempted to replace God with themselves in the spiritual lives of their slaves. “I have

56 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 55-56.
57 Quote taken from Coleman, 146.
58 Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 64,
none o' yer bawling, praying, singing niggers on my place,” Legree warns Tom. “I'm your church now! You understand,—you’ve got to be as I say.”

The narrator tells us that Eliza viewed the frozen Ohio River as the river Jordan that she had to cross in order to enter the land of Canaan. However, the audience learns that due to the nation’s fugitive slave law, the states of Ohio and Indiana were not really free at all. Eliza and Harry are pursued into Ohio and Indiana by slave catchers with a price on their heads, a price that was just as genuine as if they had been for sell on the slave market in New Orleans. In Indiana, George Harris makes his stand in an outcropping of rocks, guns at the ready to defend against the pursuing slave catchers. The business of runaway slaves then not only brought slave catchers and the institution of slavery into free states but it also brought its handmaiden—violence. It is only after reaching Canada that the Kentucky fugitives are truly free. As David Rice wrote earlier, Stowe also warned her readers that the spread of slavery in the trans-Appalachian West via Kentucky was an ominous foreshadow of what would happen to the territories west of the Mississippi River if slavery was allowed to continue:

If all the broad land between the Mississippi and the Pacific becomes one great market for bodies and souls, and human property retains the locomotive tendencies of the nineteenth century, the trader and catcher my yet be among our aristocracy.

However, Stowe’s premonition of an American West dominated by an elite class of flesh traders and slave catchers seemed more ominous at the time of the publication of her novel compared to when Rice made his argument in 1792 at the first Kentucky state

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60 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 481.

constitutional convention. With the passage of the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Law, the spread of slavery immediately threatened the sovereignty of free states that bordered slave states such as Kentucky. In a letter to the Christian Antislavery Convention in 1850, James Birney warned that the issue of returning fugitive slaves would force northerners to make a moral choice—would they engage in the slave trade as amateur slave catchers?

I see from the newspapers that Mr. Clay is trying again to compromise the matter of Slavery between North and South. His skill and power, and his experience, too, in this respect, I would not underrate, but as it spears to me, no one can permanently compromise … a moral question.62

Stowe, too, advocated that citizens ignore the new fugitive slave law and not engage in the commodification of blacks. The character of Mr. Symmes, the Kentucky slaveholder who helps Eliza to escape once she crosses the Ohio River makes his stand on the issue of slavery clear. Although Symmes is a slaveholder and a neighbor of the Shelby’s, he believes that Eliza’s courageous sprint across the icy river has earned her and Harry their freedom. “I like grit,” Symmes says, “wherever I see it.” 63 However, as Stowe tells us, it is not just Eliza’s courage, but it is also the fact that Symmes made a moral choice. “If he [Shelby] catches one of my gals in the same fix, he’s welcome to pay back …Besides, I don’t see no kind of ‘casion for me to be hunter and catcher for other folks, neither.”64

Needless to say, the majority of Kentuckians did not hold to the same philosophy as the fictional Symmes. Indeed, white Kentuckians remained vigilante for unfamiliar blacks in

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62 Letter from Birney to the Christian Anti-Slavery Convention, Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1133-1134.

63 Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 86.

64 Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 87.
their neighborhoods and used their prerogatives as white men to question blacks about where they were going.

Despite residing in Canada, where safety from slave catchers and masters were more assured, slaves still felt the sting of the slave market as word reached them of loved ones that they had left behind had been sold. In 1854, Robert Brown residing in western Canada wrote to Mille saying “I have heard that you have been sold to a Man by the name of Harry Todd and have gone to the Mountains …”65 However, Brown’s letter to Mille also reveals that freedom was a double-edge sword. Just as slaves who had been sold faced separation from loved ones and leaving a familiar environment, so did fugitives. Brown states, “I wish to be remembered Kindly to Mason and Lander and hope they are well…Give my love to Emma Grey, Lucy Jane, Nancy, and Horace, Booker, and Harriet Campbell.”66 Although he enjoyed a “comfortable living” in Canada, Henry Bibb informed his former master William Gatewood that he “wished to be remembered in love to my aged mother, and friends …my prayer shall be to God that we may meet in Heaven, where parting shall be no more.”67 Eliza’s escape attempt is an appeal to the “maternal love” of white mothers. Even Mrs. Shelby, upon hearing that Eliza has fled with Harry says, “The Lord be thanked! I trust she is.”68 Stowe asks the readers what they would do if the slave trade threatened to take their child. How would they react if placed in Eliza’s position? “If it were your Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader, to-morrow morning,—if you had

65 Blassingame, 29.
66 Blassingame, 29.
67 Blassingame, 48-49.
68 Stowe, Uncle Toms’ Cabin, 58-59.
seen the man, and heard that the papers were signed and delivered…how fast could you
walk?”69 For Stowe everything in the Kentucky borderland was unclear, including skin
color. Stowe’s use of Eliza and Harry as fugitive slaves played on the maternal instincts
of the readers, but it also made a statement about the uncertainty of race. As Stowe
makes clear, the light complexions of Eliza and Harry, which made them “fancy articles”
and valuable on the slave market of New Orleans could also help them achieve their
freedom across the Ohio River. “As she was also so white as not be known as of colored
lineage,” the narrator says, “without a critical survey, and her child was white also, it was
much easier for her to pass on unsuspected.”70 Mixed race fugitive slaves using their
light complexions as an agent for escape was a common tactic. But Stowe was also
playing on the fears of a growing slave market that was by the mid-nineteenth century
threatening to spread across the country. If Eliza and Harry who possessed the same
complexion as whites could be taken up and returned to slavery then what would stop
unscrupulous slave catchers and slave dealers from kidnapping whites from free territory
and selling them into slavery in Kentucky. At first, this might sound like an unfounded
fear, but a couple of examples may bring this fear into a clearer light.

After the publication of the novel, Stowe’s critics--primarily Southerners--
lambasted the novel, claiming that Stowe knew nothing about the South’s domestic
institution. Although the characters of the novel are stereotypical and possess
exaggerated characteristics, the cultural setting in Stowe planted her characters is
believable. In response to Southerners and others, Stowe published her apologia for the
novel called A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin. The title was certainly befitting the content of

69 Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 72.
70 Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 74.
the book. *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* presents the evidence that Stowe used to build the characters and environments of the novel. As Theodore Dwight Weld before her had proven in his book, *Slavery As It Is*, the words of southerners, slaves, and former slaves made the bulk of the evidentiary base against slavery. The genius of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is that it eschews the episodic violence of slavery and instead focuses on the day-to-day routine of slavery.71 Through her focus on the everyday practice of slave speculation, Stowe proved to her doubters that she knew more about the South’s peculiar institution than they realized or wanted to admit. Residing in Cincinnati, Harriet Beecher Stowe understood the centrality of slave speculation in Kentucky for the maintenance of slavery throughout the rest of the South and for the turmoil in the upper Ohio Valley. The slave trade in the Bluegrass Region not only redistributed slave labor throughout the major slaveholding counties such as Bourbon and Fayette, it also provided slaves for the cotton plantations of the Deep South. Kentucky slave speculation also provided abolitionists such as Stowe with the experiences and images of southern bondage they needed to mount an attack against the institution.72

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71 Joan Hedrick, 169.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Although bolstered by the antislavery spirit of the late eighteenth century, Bluegrass antislavery forces were unsuccessful at preventing the spread of slavery into transappalachia. They faced considerable more odds than their northern counterparts. Since Kentucky had been a western county of Virginia, slavery arrived with the first settlers and was therefore more deeply ingrained in the culture and economy. Many of Kentucky’s earliest settlers came from the northern parts of the country where antislavery feeling was strong, but, the most influential settlers in the late eighteen century were from Virginia; and they would go on to shape the state’s constitution, which guaranteed property rights in slaves.

Contrary to arguments that slavery began to decline in Kentucky and other states of the upper South after the 1820s and the rise of the cotton economy, this dissertation has argued that white Kentuckians reliance on slavery strengthened. Flexibility was the key characteristic that ensured the life of slavery in Kentucky. The state’s intrastate slave trade reflected that flexibility with the practices of slave hiring and the retrieval of fugitive slaves. The practice of slave hiring was an important component in the intrastate slave market, allowing masters to effectively mobilize slave labor throughout the community in the same manner that buying and selling slaves accomplished. Skilled
laborers, who brought top wages, could be effectively allocated throughout the community as the market determined. Black men sold and leased on the local market supplied the needed muscle to work in factories, on steamboats, in hemp fields and other areas that fueled the Bluegrass System. Masters could also cut their maintenance cost for otherwise underemployed slaves since hirers were responsible for feeding, housing, clothing, and paying the taxes on the slave. Also, slaves hired out from estates were meant to provide economic security for widows and children. The flexibility of the Kentucky slave trade aided in the commodification of blacks that took place in a variety of places and public spaces. At public auctions, in newspaper columns, and on courthouse steps, the bodies of slave men and women were read for their potential profitability. In Kentucky’s mixed agricultural economy, white men were afforded a flexibility of slavery that allowed them to either purchase or hire slaves. Studies have shown that more blacks were sold locally on the intrastate slave market yet the practice of the intrastate slave trade has been understudied by scholars.

The catching business provided Kentucky masters with a way to profit from their fugitive slave investments while simultaneously maintaining order to the system of slavery. Prices for slaves could remain high because an effective system of retrieval existed to return blacks to the enslaved labor market. The system of retrieval mirrored that of the buying and selling of slaves with the involvement of local and state governments who enacted fugitive slave laws to enable masters to retrieve their slaves easily while denying the rights of accused blacks. Even white men north of Ohio River became major cogs in the machine of the catching business. For some white men living in Cincinnati, Ripley, and New Albany, capturing fugitive slaves was a manifestation of
the deep antislavery/anti-black sentiment that was a dominant characteristic of the Old Northwest. Other men engaged in the practice out of pecuniary need. The commodification of slaves did not either begin or end at the Ohio River, but moved easily from slave territory to so-called free territory. Nonslaveholding white men in the South also participated in the catching business as either professional slave catchers or as citizens concerned with enforcing the law. Enforcement of the fugitive slave codes ensured that the proper social order that rewarded property owning white men would remain unchallenged by mixed-race fugitive blacks who attempted to pass for white and their abolitionist allies would attempted to subvert the Constitution, as southerners saw it, and their right to own slaves. An effective system of retrieval of fugitive blacks then was essential for maintaining the value of slave labor in the South and the health of the domestic slave trade.

Yet, the flexibility of the state’s slave trade was not acknowledged by many contemporaries. White Kentuckians, perhaps sensitive to growing northern criticism of the slave trade, did not include slave leasing and the retrieval of fugitives as part of the slave trade. Kentuckians tightly defined slave traders as men whose primary source of income was through the trading of blacks. To include hirers, newspaper editors, and the assortment of other men who profited from slavery in the ranks of the slave trader would have acknowledged the observations of Harriet Beecher Stowe and other abolitionists who argued that slavery was founded on profit and not paternalism. The ideology of Kentucky’s antislavery movements illustrates white Kentuckians’ schizophrenia over the question of Kentucky and the existence of the slave trade.
## APPENDIX

### TABLE 1.1

TEN KENTUCKY COUNTIES WITH THE LARGEST SLAVE POPULATIONS,

1820 AND 1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Slaves</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Slaves</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Fayette</td>
<td>9,274</td>
<td>1. Jefferson</td>
<td>10,304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Jefferson</td>
<td>6,886</td>
<td>2. Fayette</td>
<td>10,015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Shelby</td>
<td>5,158</td>
<td>4. Bourbon</td>
<td>6,767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Logan</td>
<td>4,698</td>
<td>5. Shelby</td>
<td>6,634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Scott</td>
<td>4,620</td>
<td>7. Madison</td>
<td>6,034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Madison</td>
<td>4,154</td>
<td>8. Woodford</td>
<td>5,829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Washington</td>
<td>3,734</td>
<td>10. Scott</td>
<td>5,744</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

# TABLE 2.1

SLAVEHOLDERS AND SLAVES IN THE SOUTH, 1850

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>White Population</th>
<th>Masters</th>
<th>Slaves</th>
<th>Average Slaves Per Master</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>592,004</td>
<td>19,185</td>
<td>87,422</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>761,413</td>
<td>38,385</td>
<td>210,981</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>417,943</td>
<td>16,040</td>
<td>90,368</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>756,836</td>
<td>33,864</td>
<td>239,459</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>154,034</td>
<td>7,747</td>
<td>58,161</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>162,189</td>
<td>5,999</td>
<td>47,100</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>894,800</td>
<td>55,063</td>
<td>472,528</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>521,572</td>
<td>38,456</td>
<td>381,622</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Carolina</td>
<td>553,028</td>
<td>28,303</td>
<td>288,548</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>47,203</td>
<td>3,520</td>
<td>39,310</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>255,491</td>
<td>20,670</td>
<td>244,809</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>426,514</td>
<td>29,295</td>
<td>342,844</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>295,718</td>
<td>23,116</td>
<td>309,878</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Carolina</td>
<td>274,563</td>
<td>25,596</td>
<td>384,984</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2 Table was adapted from figures found in Ivan McDougle, “Slavery in Kentucky, 1792-1865” (Ph.D diss., Clark University), 12.
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