

Chapter 92 - The South's Second Cash Crop: Breeding And Selling Slaves

The Practice Of Breeding



Two Enslaved Women

From early on, astute planters understand that “breeding” more slaves is both a necessity and a crucial opportunity for financial growth.

With the 1787 Constitution banning further importation of Africans as of 1808, owners must rely on their current slaves to reproduce sufficiently to offset workers lost to aging or death. Beyond that, however, they also recognize that any “excess” slaves sold will bring handsome profits in the auction market.

Thomas Jefferson, who sells 110 slaves in his lifetime, announces the cold calculations associated with “breeding” excess slaves in his *Farm Book* entries:

Six Young Boys

I consider a woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable than the best man of the farm...What she produces is an addition to the capital, while his labors disappear in mere consumption.

So slave children become “additions to the capital!” The numbers are stark and revealing:

- Twenty-six child-bearing years per woman, from age 18-44;
- A minimum of thirteen potential pregnancies, with early weaning to restart ovulation;
- Perhaps 8-10 children each, given the 66% survival rate at birth;
- At an average sale price of \$300, these offspring add \$2500-\$3000 in capital;
- All from the womb of one woman slave, before even counting her likely next generation females.

Despite these forecasted “returns,” the harsh conditions of slave life – between hard work, physical punishment, and unhealthy housing and diets – seldom lead on to 8-10 surviving offspring per female.

Jefferson, for example, only records one instance (Minerva Granger and her husband, Bagwell) of nine maturing children among his 175 slaves at Monticello.

By 1840, however, the ex-President’s economic insights are becoming apparent to more and more plantation owners, especially as growth from the tobacco and rice crops along the Atlantic

coast states tapers off, and cotton sales begin to boom to the west. Production of the “white gold” jumps four-fold between 1820 and 1840, and the dollar value more than doubles, even at lower unit prices.

Value Of Cotton

Year	Cotton Lbs	Price/Lb	Total \$	% Ch
1820	142MM	\$.1658	\$235MM	
1840	587	.0900	526	+224%

Ransom estimates

Like clockwork, the demand for more cotton triggers the demand to “breed” more slaves, as attested to later recollections of freed blacks and owners alike.

Testimonials Of Slaves And Masters About “Breeding”

Recollections of “slave breeding” abound in letters and diaries from the pre-war period, collected from both victims and perpetrators.

The ex-Georgia slave, William Ward, compares the practice to breeding livestock:

Durin’ slavery if one marster had a big boy en ‘nuther had a big gal, de marsters made dem libe tergedder. Ef’n de woman didn’t hab any chilluns, she wuz put on de block en sold en ‘nuther woman bought. You see dey raised de chilluns ter mek money on jes lak we raise pigs ter sell.

Chris Franklin, from Louisiana, reports on the humiliating “process” used by owners to select slaves for mating and to then insure that impregnation has occurred:

On this plantation were more than 100 slaves who were mated indiscriminately and without any regard for family unions. If their master thought that a certain man and woman might have strong, healthy offspring, he forced them to have sexual relations even though they were married to other slaves. If there seemed to be any slight reluctance on the part of either of the unfortunate ones, “Big Jim” would make them consummate the relationship in his presence. He used the same procedure if he thought a certain couple was not producing children fast enough. He enjoyed these orgies.

Hilliard Yellerday of North Carolina tells of her futile attempts to avoid bearing children she doesn’t want:

I goes to de missy and tells her what Rufus wants and missy say dat am de massa's wishes. She say, "Yous am de portly gal and Rufus am de portly man. De massa wants you-uns for to bring forth portly chillen. I's thinkin bout what de missy say, but say to mysef, "I's not gwine live with dat Rufus." Dat night when him come in de cabin, I grabs de poker and sits on de bench and says, "Git "way from me, nigger, "fore I busts yous brains out and stomp on dem." He say nothin" and git out. De nex" day de massa call me and tell me, "Woman, I's pay big money for you and I's done dat for de cause I wants yous to raise me chillens. I's put yous to live with Rufus for dat purpose. Now, if you doesn"t want whippin" at de stake, yous do what I wants." I thinks "bout massa buyin" me offen de [auction] block and savin" me from bein" sep"rated from my folks and "bout bein" whipped at de stake. Dere it am. What am I"s to do? So I "cides to do as de massa wish and so I yields. . . .

Owners also add their perspectives on slave breeding.

One observation belongs to Francis "Fannie" Kemble, a British actress married for a decade to the infamous planter, Pierce Mease Butler. She writes that her female slaves exhibited a...

Distinct and perfect knowledge of their value to their owners as property...by bringing new slaves into the world....(declaring) look missis, little niggets for you and massa, plenty little niggits for you.

Failure to meet an owner's demands for more children are met with harsh retribution. Thus, Davison McDowell, master of "Exchange Plantation" in South Carolina notes in his diary on September 16, 1830:

Sibby miscarried, believe she did so on purpose. Stop her Christmas (gift) and lock her up.

Another South Carolinian, one David Gavin, reveals his own astonishing lack of compassion by reacting to the death of "Celia's slave child" with the same self-centered irritation expressed over the loss of his horses.

Celia's child, about four months old, died Saturday the 12th. That is two Negroes and three horses I have lost this year.

A good summing up comes from the testimonial of ex-slave John Cole of Georgia, who ends by wondering aloud how "Christian men" could allow this "breeding" to exist:

A slave girl was expected to have children as soon as she became a woman. Some of them had children at the age of twelve and thirteen years old. . . . Mother said there were cases where these young girls loved someone else and

would have to receive the attentions of men of the master's choice. This was a general custom. . . The masters called themselves Christians, went to church worship regularly and yet allowed this condition to exist.

The explanation, of course, lies in the allure of personal greed which can trump all feelings of human empathy. Thus the utter sickness of slavery, with innocent children diminished to “additions to capital.”

And, by 1840, the value of total “slave capital” is already estimated to be \$938 million – with demand for excess laborers just taking off, as aspiring plantation owners cross into the cotton rich lands from Alabama to Texas.

Value Of Slaves

Year	# Slaves	\$/ Slave	Total \$	% Ch
1820	1538M	\$393	\$604MM	
1840	2487	377	938	+155%

The Increase In Slave Pregnancies

In response to growing demand for slaves, “total pregnancies” among black women are exceeding their white counterparts by 1840.

The first indication lies in the relative “fertility rate” – the number of children alive between the ages of 0-4 per thousand females aged 18-44 years old. This rate is 6% higher among black women.

Children Aged 0-4 Per 1000 Women 20-44

Race	In 1840
Blacks	1154
Whites	1085
Ratio (Black/White)	106%

Michael Haines, Colgate University

While data on “death rates” in the 0-4 age range are not available, there is good reason to believe that more black children are lost early, given their sub-par birth weights (5.5 lbs. on average), the fact they are quickly weaned off mother’s milk, and that their replacement diets are starch-laden and lacking in the balanced nutrients to sustain health.

Finally there are “stillborn rates,” which show that black infants are 57% more likely than white infants to die at birth.

Stillborn Rates

Race	Per 1000 Births
Whites	217 deaths
Enslaved Blacks	340
Ratio (Black/White)	157%

Michael Haines, Colgate University

Taken together, the evidence shows that by 1840 Southern owners are already upping the rate of black pregnancies to build their “inventories of excess slaves.”