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## SLAVETRADING IN ANTEBELLUM FLORIDA

by JULIA F. SMITH\*

**M**UCH OF THE slave trade in Florida centered in Tallahassee, the heart of the cotton belt. New Orleans was perhaps the largest southern slave market.<sup>1</sup> Negro-traders, characters looked down upon by all, purchased slaves there "from the block" at public outcry. Most of the supply for Florida planters was brought in by these traders. They came to St. Marks by ship and then on to Tallahassee to dispose of their cargoes. The blacks were kept in the public jail or in "slave pens," special buildings designed with cells, until time of sale. The auctions were widely advertised in advance, and bidding was usually spirited.<sup>2</sup>

The increasing demand for slaves by Florida planters is evidenced by the increase in the Negro population from 7,587 in 1830 to 26,526 a decade later. This was far in excess of the normal increase. The rapid growth continued, though it was not so pronounced during the 1840s. By 1850, there were 39,310 slaves in the state, and 61,750 by 1860. The total population of Florida in 1860 was 140,424.<sup>3</sup> They were mostly concentrated in the cotton belt counties—Alachua, Gadsden, Jackson, Jefferson, Leon, Madison and Marion.

To supply the Florida demand, blacks were also purchased from markets in Virginia, Maryland, and Georgia. In 1838 John Finlayson paid \$600 at Annapolis, Maryland, for a Negro woman, Dinah, and her child, with a guarantee that "bouth [*sic*] were sound in body and mind and a slave for life." At another time, Finlayson paid \$1,100 for a blacksmith and \$1,150 for "Fanny, a woman about 24, and her son Francis, about 5." Negroes were purchased separately and in groups. In 1850,

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1. Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (New York, 1959), 315. According to Bancroft, New Orleans was a larger market than Richmond and Charleston combined.
2. Susan Bradford Eppes, *The Negro of the Old South* (Tallahassee, 1925), 53.
3. *Fifth Census or Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States*

Finlayson purchased a group of nineteen Negroes at Richmond, Virginia. They were sent by ship to Darien, Georgia, and then by wagon to his Jefferson County plantation.<sup>4</sup>

The demand for Negroes from the older states of the South to supply the newer plantation belts was a normal development since under Constitutional provision the African slave trade was abolished in 1808. With this supply cut off, domestic trade increased rapidly. A striking aspect of this domestic trade was the rapid shift in slave population to regions of the lower South and Southwest. Virginia ranked first among the upper South-selling states; between 1830 and 1860, she exported approximately 300,000 blacks.<sup>5</sup> Virginia planters had so impoverished their soil, they no longer received profitable returns from tobacco (except their best, "Virginia leaf"), and many now depended upon the sale of their "surplus Negroes" to "maintain a semblance of their former hospitality."<sup>6</sup>

Virginia legislative records for 1831 and 1832 refer to "surplus Negroes" or "slave-breeding" as a profitable enterprise for the state. Thomas R. Dew, president of William and Mary College, and noted for his pro-slavery writings, referred to Virginia as "a negro raising state for other states. She produces enough for her own supply and six thousand for sale" annually to other states.<sup>7</sup> Antislavery writers frequently commented upon the system of rearing slaves for market as a source for income in Virginia and other southern border states. The desire for profit from increase in birth also motivated lower South slaveholders. One Florida resident declared: "The climate is peculiarly adapted and fitted to the constitution of the negro. It is an excellent and cheap climate to breed and raise them. The offal of the Sugar House fattens them like young pigs."<sup>8</sup>

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(Washington, 1832), 157; *Sixth Census or Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States* (Washington, 1841), 456; J.D.B. De Bow, *Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington, 1854), 206; *Agriculture of the United States in 1860*, 225, 247. The rise in slave population can be attributed, in part, to natural increase.

4. Manuscripts in possession of Edwin H. Finlayson, Ashville, Florida. John Finlayson also purchased Negroes from the slave market at Louisville, Georgia.
5. Lewis C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, 2 vols. (Washington, 1933), II, 651.
6. Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South*, 69.
7. *Ibid.*, 71.
8. *Southern Cultivator*, XVIII (1860), 324.

George Noble Jones, writing from El Destino, his Jefferson County plantation, boasted that his force of 120 Negroes increased itself more than ten per cent in 1854. He attributed this to proper care and management. "I pay the highest wages in hopes of obtaining good overseers. That my negroes have not been seriously injured by the punishment they have received may be evidenced in their general appearance and in their natural increase."<sup>9</sup> James Whitehead of Leon County thought land and Negroes "constituted the best and safest property for young men of the South." Whitehead directed in his will that his son be given "six additional working hands," three young males and three young females.<sup>10</sup> Benjamin F. Whitner took pride in the fact that his blacks were contented and happy, "as manifested by the rapid increase" in their numbers.<sup>11</sup>

During this early period of cotton culture in Florida, the average price of a good slave was \$500, while the price of cotton ranged from ten to twenty cents a pound. Elsewhere in the South, cotton prices more directly determined the price of slaves. For instance, in Alabama between 1830 and 1840 if cotton was selling at ten cents, the price of a prime field hand was \$1,000, if at twelve cents, \$1,200.<sup>12</sup> During the 1840s, healthy field hands in Florida continued to average \$500, while cotton averaged eight cents a pound. An appraisal of slaves and other personal property belonging to William Bellamy's estate in 1846, shows that field hands were valued at from \$400 to \$650, and, at the same time, 125 bales of cotton were sold from his plantation for eight cents a pound, or \$32.00 a bale.<sup>13</sup>

In 1852, Simeon L. Sparkman of Hillsborough County paid \$1,500 for "Grace, a woman servant, age about nineteen years, and Ned, a male servant, age about sixteen years, both slaves for life and sound in body and mind." At another time, Sparkman purchased a seven year old boy, "Lewis," who was "sound both in body and mind," a guarantee carried in many bills of sale. Slaves, individually or in groups, were used as collateral

9. Ulrich B. Phillips and James D. Glunt, eds., *Florida Plantation Records* (St. Louis, 1927), 124.

10. *Record of Wills*, Book A, 113-17, Leon County Courthouse, Tallahassee.

11. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, February 5, 1850.

12. Charles S. Davis, *The Cotton Kingdom in Alabama* (Montgomery, 1939), 73.

13. *Inventories, Appraisements and Accounts*, Book A, 15, 16, Jefferson County Courthouse, Monticello.

to secure loans. "Winney and her child Hester" became the property of John Mercy when Madison Post defaulted on his loan of \$417. Ten slaves, six adults and four children, two of whom were mulattoes, became the property of the firm of Clark and Ferris when Franklin Branch defaulted in his payment of \$3,527. In another transfer of slave property, a Negro mother, Charlotte, with her two small children, Augustus, six, and Henry, eighteen months, were sold to John I. Hooker for \$900.<sup>14</sup>

After 1850, the average price of skilled slaves in Florida was \$1,000. As the Civil War drew near, prices increased at an accelerated rate, ranging from \$1,500 to \$2,000, while the price of staple cotton remained fairly constant at from ten to thirteen cents a pound. Sea Island cotton brought more. For instance, in 1850, the field hands on James Whitehead's plantation in Leon County were valued at slightly less than \$1,000, while his cotton sold at various times throughout the year ranged from twelve and one-half to fourteen and one-half cents a pound.<sup>15</sup> In 1858, Whitehead's cotton averaged from ten to eleven cents a pound, while the average price of good Negroes was considerably higher.<sup>16</sup>

As the demand for slaves became greater than the increase in supply, thus creating a labor shortage, the price of slaves rose out of all proportion to the increase in cotton. By 1860, with cotton prices remaining constant, the cost of good Negroes had doubled and sometimes tripled. As an example, William E. Kilcrease, at the time of his death in 1860, owned a "No. 1 blacksmith, Dennis" valued at \$3,500, another blacksmith valued at \$1,800, a carpenter valued as \$1,800, two cooks valued at \$1,200 and \$1,500 each, besides other blacks ranging in value from \$1,000 to \$1,500.<sup>17</sup> The ratio of increase in price between slaves and cotton was altered during the Civil War when cotton soared to an average of seventy-five cents a pound. Short staple cotton sold by Sarah A. Lines from her Gadsden County plantation in 1863 brought fifty-three and one-half cents a pound

14. *Deed Records*, Book B, 19, 30, 61, 74, 135, Hillsborough County Courthouse, Tampa.

15. *Books of Sales of Personal Estates, 1846-1860*, 78-81; *Inventory and Appraisements*, Book C, 125-28, Leon County Courthouse.

16. *Books of Sales of Personal Estates, 1846-1860*, 266-74, Leon County Courthouse.

17. William E. Kilcrease Estate (no file number), probate records, Gadsden County Courthouse, Quincy.

and her Sea Island brought \$1.25.<sup>18</sup> This same year, Negroes belonging to the Francis J. Ross estate of Hamilton County were valued at \$2,000, \$3,000, and \$4,000.<sup>19</sup>

Because of the large number of slaves in the labor market, it was not unusual to buy and sell Negroes already in the area. Deed records in county courthouses throughout Florida show transactions of this nature. In some instances, the complete plantation was sold, which included slaves, livestock, crops, farm equipment, buildings, and other accessories. Contemporary newspapers are filled with advertisements offering whole plantations for sale. A typical advertisement appeared in the Tallahassee *Florida and Journal* in 1856: "Will be sold on the premises at public outcry, LANIER'S PLANTATION, in Madison County, comprising 1,610 acres of first rate land . . . There are on the premises a comfortable dwelling, good out houses, 9 good negro cabins, good barn, gin house and screw; ALSO SEVENTY VALUABLE SLAVES including one Carpenter and Blacksmith, and a good house servant and seamstress." Livestock, crops, and farm equipment were also included in the sale.<sup>20</sup>

Various classifications determined individual prices for slaves. For instance, blacksmiths, carpenters, seamstresses, prime field-hands, brick masons, and house servants were more valuable than other blacks and they brought higher prices. Sex, age, temperament, physical condition, skill, and experience also were determining factors. Negroes recently imported from Africa were considered less valuable than "country" Negroes from an older state like Virginia.<sup>21</sup> Field-hands between eighteen and thirty years of age were worth more than older blacks,

18. *Inventory and Appraisements* (no volume number), 790, Gadsden County Courthouse.

19. "Petition for Partition of Personal Estate," December 17, 1863. Francis J. Ross Estate (no file number), Hamilton County Courthouse, Jasper.

20. Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, November 15, 1856.

21. Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 664-66, lists prices quoted in 1853 by a slave broker in Richmond, Virginia:

Best men (18-25)	\$1,200 to \$1,300
Fair men (18-25)	959 to 1,050
Boys, five feet in height	850 to 950
Boys, four feet	375 to 400
Young women	800 to 1,000
Girls, five feet	750 to 850
Girls, four feet	350 to 450

and male hands were more valuable than females. Children often were priced according to height and weight, and infants were valued by the pound. Attractive females and skilled workers sometimes sold for thrice their value, and in some instances the buyer would pay more for a group of Negroes with the understanding that the old and infirm would not be included<sup>22</sup>

At the time of William Bellamy's death in 1846, most of the 108 slaves on his "home" plantation in Jefferson County were appraised and classified as nineteen family groups, with the value of each family being given. "Moses, Molly, Parris, in a family" were valued at \$1,000, while another family, consisting of eleven Negroes, was valued at \$2,750. These included some small children. Elderly "Hannah" was considered "of no value."<sup>23</sup> In 1851, Reddin W. Parramore's slaves were valued separately: "Wash, a man about 30 yrs. \$600; Cherry, a young woman 16 yrs. \$600; Amanda, a woman 19, unhealthy, \$400," while "Mary," thirty years old and blind, had no value.<sup>24</sup>

A typical advertisement of slaves for sale in Florida newspapers noted: "A NEGRO WOMAN 26 years of age, and a Girl, her child, about 6 years of age. The woman is a good house as well as field hand— sold for no fault. For terms apply to John T. Myrick, Marianna."<sup>25</sup> Another woman was advertised "TO BE SOLD AT PRIVATE SALE, A first rate seamstress and house servant, aged 19 years. If not sold before the 1st of January, she will be sold at public auction."<sup>26</sup>

When planters died insolvent, leaving their estates heavily indebted, their slaves and other personal property were sold to the highest bidder at public auction by order of the probate court to satisfy creditors. Sales of this nature were advertised several weeks in advance, and purchasers were required to pay cash. Elizabeth Dulany sold twenty-eight Negroes in 1852 "at

22. *Ibid.*; probate records, Gadsden, Hamilton, Jefferson, Leon, and Madison County Courthouses. Inventories and appraisals of estates listing Negro slaves as personal property usually give their name, age, value, and sometimes their state of health.

23. *Inventories, Appraisements and Accounts*, Book A, 15-18, Jefferson County Courthouse.

24. *Record Book of Annual Returns*, 20, 21, Madison County Courthouse, Madison.

25. *Marianna Florida Whig*, July 15, 1858.

26. *Tallahassee Floridian and Journal*, September 19, 1857.

public action . . . at the Court House in Tallahassee” to satisfy her husband’s creditors.<sup>27</sup>

Owners sometimes stipulated in their wills that their Negroes be sold. Six slaves belonging to Jonathan Thomas of Gadsden County were thus sold. Since this transaction was not to satisfy indebtedness, terms were offered to the purchaser: one-fourth to be paid at the time of sale and the remainder in six months at eight per cent interest.<sup>28</sup>

When Negroes were sold in groups their average price was less than if they were sold separately. A group of fifteen Negroes, mostly adults, were auctioned at Quincy in 1856 and brought \$12,260. Another group, including sixty-five Negroes of all ages, brought \$43,900. These were sold on credit, to be paid for over a period of one, two, and three years, with a rate of eight per cent interest being charged. Other Negroes, sold separately, brought a higher price. For instance, “Jimsey, field-hand,” brought \$1,203, and Leonard another field-hand, brought \$1,300. A man, his wife, and four children brought \$4,002, while a woman and four children brought \$4,150. They were all field-hands.<sup>29</sup>

There were slaves on Florida plantations whose place of birth was Africa. Whether they had been smuggled into Florida and purchased from traders or whether they were purchased from slave markets outside the state is not known. At any rate, these “boughton” blacks were looked down upon by Negroes who had come to the plantation through inheritance. A slave caste system existed, and they rated their own status according to the position held by their owner.<sup>30</sup>

The owner sometimes developed a feeling of personal regard for his slaves; the plantation system, based upon a patriarchal arrangement, fostered such an attachment.<sup>31</sup> Occasionally, slave owners stipulated in their will that Negroes be freed. The 1827 will of William Oliphant provided that his Negro woman, Maria,

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27. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, December 8, 1851.

28. *Ibid.*, June 3, 1851.

29. Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, February 9, 1856; *Inventory and Appraisements*, probate records, Book C, 58-59, 125-27, Leon County Courthouse Inventories listing slaves belonging to the estates of John Parkhill and John Whitehead in 1856 and 1857 show their average value to be slightly less than \$1,000.

30. Eppes, *Negro of the Old South*, 48, 51.

31. Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 501.

and her four children be given the privileges of free persons of color and that \$250 be paid each of them to cover transportation costs to a free state of their choice.<sup>32</sup>

Owners sometimes directed in their wills that slaves be treated humanely and not be separated or sold. Richard J. Mays noted in his will in 1864 that "life is at best uncertain, and we should be prepared for its close by having our house 'set in order.'" He divided his slaves among his wife and children, requesting that they be treated "not as property, but as human beings, to be . . . cared for as such. They must not be neglected, it is a duty sanctioned by your interest and there [*sic*] welfare."<sup>33</sup>

Nancy Delaughter made her will in 1864, leaving her Negroes and other property to her children and grandchildren. She requested that her slaves remain in family groups and that her estate be kept together "until the expiration of two years after the date of the ratification of a Treaty of Peace between the Confederate States of America and the United States."<sup>34</sup> John Finlayson's will, dated 1865, stipulated that his slaves be divided among his children in family groups as nearly as possible.<sup>35</sup> Owners usually directed in their wills that their slave families be kept together when making property distributions to beneficiaries. Rather than separate families, when a division was to be made and the value of one family group exceeded that of another, land or other property was bequeathed to equalize the division.

Closely allied with slave trading was the practice of slave hiring. It was common practice throughout the plantation belt in Florida for slaves to be hired out. In certain instances when planters died, leaving a wife and minor children, they directed in their wills that Negroes be hired out, the proceeds to be used for education and maintenance of the children or for partial support of the family. In other instances estate administrators or guardians hired out Negroes as an investment. Blacks

32. William Oliphant's will, dated October 27, 1827, Florida State Library, Tallahassee.

33. *Wills and Letters Testamentary*, Book B, 85-87, Madison County Courthouse. Mays is the great-grandfather of Colin Kelly, World War II hero.

34. *Ibid.*, 80-91.

35. *Wills and Letters Testamentary*, Book B, 155-58, Jefferson County Courthouse.

were also hired to do construction work on roads or railways, and skilled Negroes were sometimes employed individually to work as carpenters or blacksmiths.<sup>36</sup> The usual period of hire was for a year, and the employer was expected to furnish the black with at least two suits of clothing, a hat, shoes, and a blanket. The rate of hire varied with the type of labor; the average annual rate in Florida prior to 1850 was less than \$100 and afterwards ranged from \$100 to \$400.<sup>37</sup>

In 1844, approximately forty Negroes, in addition to some children who were not counted, belonging to the estate of Hardy Bryan Croom, were hired out for a total of \$2,040. The following year, their hire brought \$1,920.<sup>38</sup> In 1853, twelve of the 109 Negroes that had belonged to the late S. H. Butler were hired out for his children's support, bringing in \$1,475. In 1854, fourteen Negroes belonging to the Butler children were hired out for \$1,990; six were employed by the Orange Mill Company, each for \$172.50. A notation on the accounting sheet by George W. Call, guardian for the Butler children, states that "The boy George is not included in the hire, being taken sick with the Small pox, and was necessarily sent to the hospital where the charges together with lost time, consumed his wages."<sup>39</sup>

Jeremiah D. Reid stipulated in his 1854 will, that twenty-seven of his Negro slaves could be hired so that his daughter Sally could be "clothed, educated, and boarded out of the proceeds." Sally also received her father's "notes and money" to assist "in her education, clothing, and board." The remaining property, two plantations, equipment, livestock, and slaves went to his wife and the other children.<sup>40</sup>

In 1860, William E. Kilcrease hired a Negro boy, Frank, from Julia F. Edmonds for \$200. This indenture dated January 1, 1860, stipulated that Frank was "to be furnished with a

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36. Deed and probate records, 1840-1860, Gadsden, Jefferson, Leon, Hamilton, and Madison County Courthouses; Weymouth T. Jordan, *Hugh Davis and His Alabama Plantation* (Alabama, 1948), 81.

37. Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 668. The rate of hire was roughly the same in other southern states. Gray states that in 1855 Negroes were hired out for \$200 a year in the Southwest and for \$300 and more in northwestern Louisiana by 1860.

38. *Book of Sales of Personal Estates, 1846-1860*, 15, Leon County Courthouse.

39. *Record Book of Annual Returns*, 127, 220, Madison County Courthouse.

40. *Wills and Letters Testamentary*, Book BB, 7-10, Madison County Courthouse.

good suit of Summar [*sic*] and Winter Clothing, Hat, Shoes, and Blanket, with interest at eight percent after maturity."<sup>41</sup> In 1864, nine Negroes belonging to the estate of Francis J. Ross were hired out for \$2,300 for partial support of his grandchildren. The group included eight women and a boy, Hanson. The latter was hired by Thomas Hunter for \$400.<sup>42</sup>

Inevitably there was some personal tragedy involved in the system of hiring because the place of employment might be far away from family and friends. Indentured slaves were often overworked since the period of hire was temporary and there was often little concern for their welfare. Sometimes hired slaves tried to run away, as evidenced by these newspapers advertisements: "Runaway from plantation of James Ormond, mulatto fellow. Was raised in Gadsden County where he has wife and relatives." Another was Sandy, who was trying to make his way to his wife: "Runaway from my plantation a few weeks ago. He is strong and active, a good carriage driver, fiddler and dancer and pretends to be religious. Was seen a few days since near Gov. Call's plantation where he has a wife."<sup>43</sup>

Anyone hiring a slave had authority over and obligations to him, including providing medical care if he became ill. If punishment was excessive and injury resulted, the hiring person was responsible to the owner for damages incurred. The slave's life was not easy; he lacked the security of the plantation and the protection of an owner concerned with his welfare. He was separated temporarily, and sometimes permanently, from his family, and his work was often more strenuous than would have been demanded by his owner.

Slave trading, whether it involved buying, selling, or hiring, had a stimulating effect upon Florida's antebellum economy. Slaves were property, and they were used as collateral for loans, as an extension of credit, and as an asset to obtain cash. When slaves were hired out, they served as income or accrued interest on investment for their owners. The system was profitable for those who owned slaves and for those who engaged in the business of trading.

41. William E. Kilcrease Estate (no file number), Gadsden County Courthouse.

42. Francis J. Ross Estate (no file number), Hamilton County Courthouse.

43. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, June 3, 1851; Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, January 15, 1859.