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Skilled Slave Labor in Florida: 1850-1860

by CHRISTOPHER E. LINSIN

WRITING of the two weeks she had just spent in “oppression and misery” in Florida, Mary Chestnut, the opinionated South Carolina aristocrat, saw her trip through Fernandina to Charleston in 1860 as a return “to the world” – her world of the *civilized* South.¹ While Florida towns such as Fernandina did not offer the fine cultural characteristics of Charleston, the peninsular state – especially the five counties comprising “Middle Florida” – was as much a part of the political, social, and economic world of the South as was South Carolina. Like the older state, Florida became one of the first members of the Confederate States of America – ready to fight for the survival of a way of life, which included the institution of racial slavery. Favorable geographic and climatic conditions helped to encourage in Middle Florida what had become by 1861 an entrenched system of racial control. Beyond its similarity to the older South, Florida had its own long tradition of slavery which could be traced back to the Spanish colonial era.² Because of differences in local conditions, however, there were variances in the way the institution of slavery operated in Florida as compared to its older neighboring states. One of the most notable differences was in the way skilled slaves were used in frontier Florida. In the older states, urban centers, such as Richmond, with its Tredegar Iron Works, or New Orleans, with its extensive port facilities and worldwide commerce, employed large numbers of skilled slaves who were “hired out” from their owners and whose work

Christopher E. Linsin is a doctoral student at Florida State University. He would like to thank Joe M. Richardson for his assistance in this project and the Tallahassee Museum for a grant in support of the research.

1. C. Vann Woodward (editor), *Mary Chestnut's Civil War* (New Haven, 1981), 3.
2. Thelma Bates, “The Legal Status of the Negro in Florida,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 6 (January 1928): 160; Edwin L. Williams, Jr., “Negro Slavery in Florida,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 28 (October 1949): 93; Larry E. Rivers, “Slavery and the Political Economy of Gadsden County, Florida: 1823-1861,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 70 (July 1991): 3.

experiences differed greatly from that of slaves on the plantations.³ Except for the cotton port of Apalachicola and the thriving river town of Jacksonville, Florida was still largely a rural, agricultural state where plantations were the focal points of economic production and social life.⁴ Nevertheless, skilled black slaves contributed in important ways to the development of Florida— both before and after the Civil War. Black carpenters, blacksmiths, cooks, domestic servants, and midwives, among others, added immeasurably to the mosaic that was Florida. But, during the 1850s, when cotton was highly profitable, Middle Florida planters found it more advantageous to work their male slaves, whether skilled or not, in the field. Work which had often been performed by skilled male slaves was increasingly left to white workers. This was not the case, however, with women— and a few of the men— who continued to be highly valued by Florida slaveholders as domestic servants.

Whether they were used as skilled workers or field hands, there was additional ambivalence on the part of owners toward their slaves. The bonded servants were above all property, and their treatment reflected that reality.⁵ Valuable as property as well as laborers in the prevailing economic system, slaves existed in a complex paternalistic context. Slave-holding Middle Floridians continually affirmed their duty and patrimony, declaring that their work involved more than mere economic considerations. Their paternalistic actions were a civilizing function— or so they maintained.⁶

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3. See Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge, 1979), 27, 86, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within The Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1988), 70; Jerrell H. Shofner, *History of Jefferson County, Florida* (Tallahassee, 1976), 122-23.
 4. On the cotton trade in Apalachicola see Lynn Willoughby *Fair to Middlin': The Antebellum Cotton Trade of the Apalachicola/Chattahoochee River Valley* (Tuscaloosa, 1993).
 5. Comte de Castelnau, "Essay on Middle Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 26 (January 1948): 220; James T. O'Neill Papers, "Correspondence: 1860-1867," box 4, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.
 6. Regarding the notion of slavery emerging as a school of civilization, see Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (1919; reprint, Baton Rouge, 1989); Caroline Mays Brevard, *A History of Florida: From the Treaty of 1763 to Our Present Times*, Volume 2 (Deland, 1925), 221, 223-24; Ellen Call Long, *Florida Breezes; or, Florida. New and Old* (1883; reprint, Gainesville, 1962), 65; *Southern Cultivator* 12 (August 1854): 233-35, and 16 (September 1858): 368.

Most of Florida's slave population was concentrated in five counties comprising Middle Florida. These counties— Jackson, Gadsden, Leon, Jefferson, and Madison, all organized between 1822 and 1827— held about two-thirds of antebellum Florida's total population by 1830, including most of the slaves.⁷ Of the five counties, Leon had the largest number of slaves, more than 8,100 in the 1850s. Most were the property of a few large owners.⁸

With its slave culture and cotton production system, Middle Florida dominated the state's political, economic, and social life. Ambitious Americans, mostly from the older southern states and seeking inexpensive, fertile land, began moving into Middle Florida early in the territorial period.⁹ In 1824, the Marquis de Lafayette was offered a township of free land as partial reward for his services in the American Revolution. His friend Richard Keith Call advised him to select his land in Middle Florida.¹⁰ Although he could have chosen his land wherever he wished, Lafayette followed Call's advice.

One of the most serious hardships facing enterprising individuals seeking to raise crops on a large scale in Middle Florida was the labor shortage. Planters such as Benjamin Chaires of Leon County found the area suited to working large numbers of slaves in the production of cotton.¹¹ But there were few slaves for purchase in Florida; most had arrived with their masters from older states.¹² Although it took some time, through natural increase, illegal importation, the domestic slave trade, and the importation by immigrating owners from other states such as Benjamin Chaires, Middle Florida slavery had become institutionalized and was thriving by

7. William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (1913; reprint, Gainesville, 1964), 17.

8. Other county slave populations at the time were: Jefferson, 5,816; Gadsden, 4,193; Jackson, 4,297; and Madison, 3364. Florida State Archives, Record Group 350, Series 28, Comptroller's Tax Records, boxes 40, 60, 66, 72, 73, 81.

9. Larry E. Rivers, "Slavery in Microcosm: Leon County, Florida, 1824 to 1860," *Journal of Negro History* 66 (Fall 1981): 236 and "'Dignity and Importance': Slavery in Jefferson County Florida— 1827 to 1860," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 61 (April 1983): 406.

10. Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, 1971), 135-36.

11. Chaires owned 107 slaves as early as 1829. FSA, RG 28350, Series 28, box 72.

12. Rivers, "'Dignity and Importance,'" 405, "Slavery in Microcosm," 231; Julia Floyd Smith, *Slavery and Plantation Growth in Antebellum Florida, 1821-1860* (Gainesville, 1973), 5.

1861.¹³ Just as in the older sections of the South since colonial times, the ownership of land and slaves was significant in determining social, political, and economic status of white Floridians.¹⁴

The historiography of slavery has correctly portrayed a system that encompassed a high degree of labor specialization: carpenters, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, cobblers, weavers, seamstresses, house servants, cooks, and valets. Florida had its share of skilled bondsmen. Listed among the personal property of Jefferson County slaveholder Eldridge Simkins, for example, were Adam, a carpenter, and Nero, a blacksmith.¹⁵ Slaves such as Adam and Nero emerged from slavery with what Eugene Genovese has identified as a “much wider experience than their masters usually realized or had intended.”¹⁶ While slaveholders benefited from the training these people received, so did the slaves. According to Randall W. Miller:

[wise] planters never relaxed their search for talent among the slaves. The winnowing process of the well-arranged southern plantation sorted out the ambitious, intelligent, and proficient from the dull and the weak, and recruited the former for positions of trust and responsibility. These privileged slave-artisans, house servants, and drivers served as intermediaries between the planters and the rest of the slave community, they exercised varying degrees of power, they learned vital skills of survival in a complex, hostile world.

But such slaves also constituted a potential threat. By working more closely with the masters than ordinary field hands did, some became adept at reading the masters' weaknesses. Many of these bondsmen— notably, seamstresses, cobblers, mechanics, or carpenters— were held in high esteem by their peers in the quarter com-

13. Frances J. Stafford, “Illegal Importation: Enforcement of the Slave Trade Laws Along the Florida Coast, 1810-1828,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 46 (October 1967): 124-33; Rivers, “Slavery in Microcosm,” 237; Smith, *Slave and Plantation Growth*, 27.

14. Rivers, “Gadsden County,” 47, “‘Dignity and Importance,’” 408-10, and “Slavery or Crops,” 239.

15. Florida State Archives, Jefferson County Probate Records, Reel 4, Will of Eldridge Simkins, “Inventories, Appraisements, and Accounts of Sale.”

16. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 367.

munities. But many house servants and drivers were not.¹⁷ Slaves linked so closely to the masters probably seemed, in the minds of many other slaves, to have divided, or at the least, mixed loyalties.

The Florida record brims with evidence of skilled rural slaves who exercised a high degree of autonomy. Winston Stephens of Welaka, Florida, relied heavily on his head slave, Burrel. Assigned important tasks requiring responsible, often independent, behavior, Burrel kept Stephens' small East Florida plantation operating while Stephens fought in the Civil War.¹⁸ He hauled cotton to market, negotiated corn prices, and served as a personal liaison between Stephens and his future wife, Octavia Bryant. After Stephens died in battle, Octavia Bryant Stephens moved to stay with relatives near Thomasville, Georgia. While she resided there, Burrel continued his services for the young Mrs. Stephens. Other slaves in Middle Florida worked in such diverse occupations as gardeners and purchasing agents, as well as overseers.¹⁹ In short, skilled slaves managed to forge an identity for themselves within a system that sought the opposite. By learning a skill that often allowed them a good deal of autonomous action, slaves threatened to erode the wall of separation between the institution of slavery and the free world beyond— a reality not lost upon some masters. As South Carolinian J. H. Hammond warned in 1850, the danger of allowing slaves to become skilled reflected the very real possibility that the slave could become “more than half free.”²⁰ The sense of worth and self-esteem to be derived from learning a craft threatened the foundations of the peculiar institution.

The decade of the 1850s in Middle Florida witnessed a decline in the use of skilled slaves by planters— a decline indicative of the entire cotton-growing region. As slave prices continued their steady rise, and as the production of staple cotton remained a profitable enterprise, most Middle Florida planters sought to use their

17. Randall Miller, ed., *“Dear Master” : Letter of a Slave Family* (Ithaca, 1978), 139; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1979), 311.

18. “Ledger,” Box 2b, Folder 2, Bryant-Stephens Papers, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

19. Winston Stephens to Octavia Bryant Stephens, November 15, 1862, Box 1A, Folder 3, Bryant-Stephens Papers; Susan Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years* (Macon, 1926), 162-63, and *The Negro of the Old South* (Chicago, 1925), 28-39; and George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Volume 17, *Florida Narratives* (Westport, CT, 1972), 300.

20. *De Bow's Review* 8 (June, 1850), 518.

slaves, skilled or otherwise, in field work.²¹ Eugene Genovese has argued that slave craftsmen were in decline by 1860 throughout the South because of “the decreasing opportunities which accompanied increased reliance by the plantations on the products of northern industry, and secondarily, in the discriminatory [labor] pressures arising in the southern cities and towns.”²²

Improved transportation and increased reliance on staple production prompted planters to purchase goods of northern manufacturers and to employ the labor of white craftsmen instead of skilled slaves. Richard C. Wade agreed that by 1860 skilled slaves were being used less in the cities. But he argued that this decision made by urban slave owners had little, if anything, to do with economic motives.²³ The decision to limit the use of skilled male slaves in the South’s cities and towns, Wade argued, reflected the aim of white social control, that is, control over what was seen as a restive segment of southern society. In effect, Wade agreed with Herbert Aptheker that whites lived in constant fear of slave uprisings—especially in urban areas where it was believed a more fertile ground for revolt existed. Similar sentiments prevailed in rural Middle Florida, along with a growing concern over the dissemination of abolitionist literature.²⁴

In Middle Florida there is some evidence that supports Genovese’s contention. A number of Middle Florida planters chose to farm out their blacksmith, cobbler, or wheelwright work, while keeping the bulk of their male slaves laboring as field hands. But their reasons were economic rather than social apprehension. This does not suggest that there were no skilled slaves in Middle Florida in the 1850s. On the contrary, they were there in sizable numbers and the historical record attests to their contributions within the plantation system.²⁵ Male slaves in antebellum Middle Florida, as one white overseer wrote, were kept busy

21. Rivers, “Slavery in Microcosm,” 241, “Gadsden County,” 11, and “Dignity and Importance,” 416-17.

22. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 398.

23. Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860* (New York, 1964), 244-45.

24. Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943; reprint, New York, 1987); Rivers, “Dignity and Importance,” 413-15; Jonathan Walker, *American Chattelized Humanity* (Boston, 1847).

25. Ulrich B. Phillips and James David Glunt, eds., *Florida Plantation Records from the Papers of George Noble Jones* (St. Louis, 1972), 207-328.

beuilding, repareing, making coffins and gates, repareing plowstocks and plows, hewing logs, working on the gin house, repareing wagons, working on stables, getting sills for Negro houses, repareing cart wheels, making looms, and rebeuilding corn cribs.²⁶

Slave women engaged in spinning, weaving, cooking, sewing, and household work. Slave children, especially girls, were trained for personal service as chamber maids and attendants.²⁷ Despite the availability of such slaves, economic concerns drove some Middle Florida masters to hire white craftsmen to perform the tasks which male slaves working in the fields no longer could.²⁸

Middle Florida planters hired out their slaves— both skilled and unskilled. Even though male slaves remained highly valued as field hands and as skilled craftsmen, many female slaves remained locked in domestic service. Presaging New South developments whereby black women found ready employment as house servants, numerous black males during the 1850s saw their skills squandered. An examination of the 1870 Gadsden County census revealed 128 black females engaged in domestic service and 53 black males working in a variety of skilled positions— as carpenters, wheelwrights, teamsters, blacksmiths, and in domestic service.²⁹ Black men were also employed on Florida's railroads in the post-war years, with 151 in Gadsden County alone. While the great majority of these freed people worked as farm laborers, the concentration of women working as domestics, as opposed to other skilled fields, fits the antebellum pattern. After emancipation, skilled male slaves throughout Florida proved their vital significance. Few whites possessed the skills of black carpenters, mechanics, or blacksmiths. But by 1900, as more Florida blacks became urbanized and

26. Phillips and Glunt, *Florida Plantation Records*, 207-328.

27. Fox-Genovese, *Plantation Household*, 152-53; Murat, *North America*, 99; Florida State Archives, Leon County Probate Records, Reel 1, Will of C. Summersett, Richard Whitaker, and James Warring, Jackson County Probate Records, Reel 4, Will of John Pratt, Madison County Probate Records, Reel 1, Will of William Taylor, Gadsden County Probate Records, Reel 8, Wills of J. Gregory and Caroline Kyle.

28. Bills, September 15, 1853, and December 2, 1852, Box 513, Folder 8, Hollingsworth Papers, Strozier Library Special Collections, Florida State Library, Tallahassee.

29. Joe M. Richardson, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida, 1865-1877* (Tallahassee, 1965), 66-69.

as white racism was augmented by the idea of Social Darwinism, black craftsmen faced circumscribed economic opportunities.

Slave men remained too valuable as field hands to be used in many other situations. And the alternatives offered by the white southern labor force— especially in urban areas— allowed slave holders to keep their male slaves at work on staple production. But not all male slaves worked in cotton production. A number of them worked in saw mills.³⁰ Similar employment patterns can be found in Jackson, Jefferson, and Leon counties. M. M. Neel worked nine slaves in his Jackson County saw mill, while John S. Brett employed 17 in his. In Jefferson County, Adam Wyrick worked his slaves in a saw mill as did Robert Lavenden in Leon County.³¹

Slave women who worked as domestics were often valued for their capabilities.³² They remained in houses as cooks, as chambermaids, and as servants and attendants.³³ While slave women also labored in the fields, skilled domestic service remained essentially gender-specific. A skilled house slave, Lucy, owned by James M. Wilson, was highly valued for her domestic talents. In Jackson County, slave holders such as W. P. Barnes, Elizabeth Henry, and John Pratt all placed high premiums on their skilled female slaves. A similar situation existed in Gadsden County in the cases of owners Caroline Kyle, William MacCulviry, and J. Gregory. While male slaves remained valuable for their work as field hands, the females commanded values comparable to, and sometimes surpassing, those of male slaves.³⁴

30. Florida State Archives, Comptroller's Tax Rolls, Box 81.

31. *Ibid.*, Boxes 60, 66, and 73.

32. Uncatalogued Slave Papers, bill of sale, January 3, 1863, Black Archives, Florida A & M University, Tallahassee; Florida State Archives, Jackson County Probate Records, Reel 4, estate of John Pratt, Gadsden Count Probate Records, Reel 8, estate of James P. Hargrove; Listing of Slaves (n/d), Box 509, Folder 5, Winthrop Papers, Strozier Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee; Jerrell H. Shofner, *Jackson County, Florida: A History* (Marianna, 1985), 148.

33. Uncatalogued Slave Papers, estate of Jesse Wills, and list of slaves hired out by George A. Croom, Black Archives, Florida A & M University; Florida State Archives, Jackson County Probate Records, Reel 4, Wills of Edwin Whitehead, Richard Shackelford, George Brett, John Smith, and Elizabeth Henry; Gadsden County Probate Records, Reel 8, Will of Shepard Adams; Madison County Probate Records, Reel 1, Will of William Taylor.

34. Florida State Archives, Madison County Probate Records, Reel 1, Will of William Taylor; Jackson County Probate Records, Reel 4, Wills of W. P. Barnes, Elizabeth Henry, and John Pratt; Gadsden County Probate Records, Wills of Caroline Kyle, William MacCulviry, and J. Gregory

In most cases, skilled house slaves worked under the close scrutiny of the masters and mistresses.³⁵ Some of them worked in sewing, spinning, and weaving groups. According to one owner, slave women engaged in sewing came under a good deal of scrutiny:

[E]very garment was cut under the supervision of the mistress, and the seamstresses, eight in number, filled their baskets with the many bundles and brought them back ready to wear; this was repeated week after week, year in and year out.³⁶

While close scrutiny did exist in such situations, groups of seamstresses often benefited from an experienced older slave who passed her skills on to the young. White women also benefited. After freedom, when emancipated men and women left the plantations, white women were forced to assume for themselves tasks formerly undertaken by the slaves.³⁷ The experience gained from their skilled domestics then proved a valuable asset.

Whether they worked as cooks, nurses (actually child-care), chambermaids, or personal servants, slave women also benefited by acquiring skills that enhanced their status and labor value in the closing decades of the 19th century. While black men ultimately faced dwindling employment opportunities during these decades, black women saw their employment potential enhanced well into the 20th century.³⁸ But there was also an adverse side. Black women became typecast as domestic servants— often unable to break free of their restricted economic status.

Middle Florida planters were generous in providing personal attendants for family members. According to probate records, they frequently willed “slave girls” to be used as attendants for their children. Males were sometimes included. In 1846 Margaret Cotton of Leon County left her son, Frederick, “one slave boy aged six” to be

35. John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge, 1977); Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 328; Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 55; and Eppes, *Negro of the Old South*, 5-6.

36. Eppes, *Negro of the Old South*, 5-6.

37. Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years*, 162; Phillips and Glunt, *Florida Plantation Records*, 562-71; Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 137, 158; Fox-Genovese, *Plantation Household*, 137; and Shofner, *Jefferson County*, 132.

38. Eppes, *Negro of the Old South*, 7-17, 64-72; Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 94, 347; and Phillips and Glunt, *Florida Plantation Records*, 207-328.

trained as a valet.³⁹ But despite a few such cases, most personal attendants were women. For a number of reasons, slave women were considered more suitable for household service than men. Their cooking talents, their dependable service as nursemaids, and the value accorded to their service by white women tended to favor them over men for such service. But, perhaps most important of all, there were the fields. While some men worked as butlers, coachmen, footmen, and valets, most were needed for field work.

Reflecting what Kenneth Stampp called “troublesome property,” some female slaves were temperamentally unsuited to household work. Complaining of one such individual, the mistress of Bradford plantation just north of Tallahassee wrote her daughter, Susan Bradford Eppes, that

I have a great deal of trouble with Emeline. She is so lazy—and when she used all my cologne and searches my drawers. . . . She [also] ruined a brown linen cover. I will send her to jail to be whipped if she does not alter her course soon.⁴⁰

But, according to a subsequent letter, the problem with Emeline was resolved. It was decided that the recalcitrant slave would be hired out to some unsuspecting town woman to be trained as a laundress. One other owner was willing to use this remedy should the need arise. John Parkhill in his will instructed his wife, Lucy, to keep her house servants. But he also added that should any of them “behave badly,” they could be replaced through the plantation supply or hired out.⁴¹

Despite these examples, hiring out as a disciplinary matter was exceptional. Economic considerations usually motivated the widespread practice throughout antebellum Middle Florida. And those most often hired out possessed skills which made them marketable.

39. Florida State Archives, Leon County Probate Records, Reel 1, Wills of Margaret Cotton, Richard Whitaker, James Warring, and C. Summersett.

40. Mother to Susan Bradford Eppes, n/d, Pine Hill Plantation Records, Folder 2, Strozier Library Florida State University, Tallahassee; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (1956; reprint, New York, 1984), Chapter 3.

41. Florida State Archives, Leon County Probate Records, Reel 1, Will of John Parkhill.

White blacksmiths, carpenters, or brickmasons, struggling to improve their material situations in an economy dominated by staple cotton production, often resorted to leasing a slave as an assistant. The usual rate of hire spanned a year at about \$100 or \$120. The person hiring the slave remained responsible for providing material requirements in addition to agreeing that the hired slave would not be engaged in work that could prove damaging to the owner's investment. The Kilcrease estate in Gadsden County, a large entity with 150 slaves, hired from James Gilcrist a skilled slave woman, ostensibly for domestic service, at the rate of \$100 per year in 1859. In 1857 James W. Strange hired out a skilled slave girl at the rate of \$120.⁴² According to Julia Floyd Smith, hiring out "was common practice throughout the plantation belt," but slaves were also used as collateral for loans, extensions of credit, and assets to obtain cash. The Southern Life Insurance and Trust Company extended L. Rawls of Gadsden County a line of credit based upon his slave property.⁴³ Adamant defender of slavery and inept financial manager, Achille Murat, found it necessary on several occasions to mortgage his slaves.⁴⁴

Giving "hiring out" an urban cast, Frederick Bancroft qualified the phenomenon as a "restricted kind of slave-trading. . . common in all Southern States."⁴⁵ At times hyperbolic, Bancroft suggested that "many thousands" of slaves were hired as domestic servants in urban areas. He also maintained that most persons who hired skilled house slaves, as well as mechanics and blacksmiths, did so because purchase was beyond their means.⁴⁶ Genovese has argued that small farmers and overseers contributed to this fluid labor supply by hiring out the few slaves they owned.⁴⁷ John Evans, an overseer for George Noble Jones in Jefferson County, did precisely this while seeking another year's appointment as overseer. In order to extricate himself from a financial mire, Evans declared that he had

42. Florida State Archives, Gadsden County Probate Records, Reel 8, Wills of James Gilcrist and James W. Strange.

43. Julia F. Smith, "Slavetrading in Antebellum Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 50 (January 1972): 259; Listing of slaves belonging to L. Rawls, Uncatalogued Slave Papers, Black Archives, Florida A & M University, Tallahassee.

44. Florida State Archives, Florida Collection, Murat Personal Papers, Series 1, Folder 1, 1834 mortgage agreement with Union Bank, 1838 agreement with Union Bank, and 1839 agreement with James Gadsden.

45. Frederick Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (New York, 1931), 145.

46. *Ibid.*, 146.

47. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 391.

“come to the Conclusion to heir out my Negroes another year and go to overseeing again.”⁴⁸

While skilled slaves were those most frequently hired out, ordinary laborers were sometimes rented out in the same fashion.⁴⁹ Although slave women were usually assigned to the tasks for which they were hired, slave men faced a different situation. Ostensibly hired for their talents, some found that their skills were needed for only short terms. After fulfilling those short-term obligations, they were then employed as field hands. Jerrell Shofner has suggested that many of the larger plantations in Jefferson County had skilled blacksmiths, carpenters, or bricklayers. In addition, these plantations also had their share of semi-skilled grist mill and saw mill workers. Any of these slaves could be hired out on a temporary basis, and often were.⁵⁰

The historical record for Florida in the 1850s is filled with references to “hiring out.” The hire of Jim, a slave owned by Winston Stephens of Welaka, to N. M. Bradley showed that the practice extended beyond Middle Florida. Agreeing to provide for the hired slave from February 13, 1859, until February 13, 1860, Bradley also promised to pay Stephens \$108.⁵¹ Usually the disposition of slave property followed a path similar to the one employed by W. H. Clark of Savannah, Georgia, in his correspondence with James T. Ormond, a Fernandina lawyer. Regarding the disposition of a plantation in Georgia along with its slaves, Clark advised Ormond either to sell or to hire the latter out. Green Chaires of Leon County offered a similar suggestion about slaves inherited by Ormond’s wife, Elizabeth, the daughter of G. H. Chaires.⁵²

There were few free blacks in Middle Florida in the 1850s. In any given year, no more than three or four “free men of color” (identified later in the decade as “free negroes or mulattos”) resided in any of the Middle Florida counties, with the exception of Leon where 12 “free men of color” lived in 1854. While specified

48. Phillips and Glunt, *Florida Plantation Records*, 166, 169.

49. Rivers, “Gadsden County,” 14, “Slavery in Microcosm,” 241, and “Dignity and Importance,” 417-20.

50. Shofner, *Jefferson County*, 130.

51. IOU pertaining to the hire of Jim, February 13, 1859, Box 3, Bryant-Stephens Papers, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

52. G. W. Call to James Ormond, n/d, 1856-1859 Correspondence, Box 4, and Green Chaires to James Ormond, March 19, 1859, Box 2, Ormond Papers, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

free individuals undoubtedly made important contributions to the web of life, with so few residing in the area, it is unlikely that their roles were decisive in the skilled trades.⁵³

John Hollingsworth provided in his will that specified slave women were to be left in trust for his children.⁵⁴ It is likely that these slaves would have been hired out in order to satisfy the demands set forth in Hollingsworth's will. Dorothy Parish of Leon County, in designating Theodore Turnbull executor of her will, authorized him to discharge her debt in any way he deemed necessary, including the hiring out of her slaves.⁵⁵ Hamilton Hudson, of the same county, charged his executors with the task of eliminating his debt by means of hiring out his man servant, Robert.⁵⁶

Larry Rivers has written that Middle Florida slaves were sometimes hired out for periods of less than a year. Rates of monthly hire averaged about 20 dollars, sometimes rising as high as 25 dollars.⁵⁷ Railroads during the 1850s were frequently in need of groups of construction workers on short terms. G. W. Call of the Florida Railroad Company sent James T. Ormond a note in 1859 confirming the temporary hire of "a group of Negroes at \$20 a month to be returned in good health and not involved in dangerous work."⁵⁸

It seems clear that hiring out filled a variety of needs. For Florida's owners of skilled slaves, hiring out provided a source of additional income on their considerable capital investments. Slave hiring also allowed some to rid themselves of the woes often associated with "a troublesome property." Petty-bourgeois white craftsmen benefited from the practice by obtaining vital, yet often temporary, labor. Overseers such as John Evans of El Destino reaped the benefits of slave hiring as it allowed such small slave holders the opportunity to invest their capital in slaves while simul-

53. Florida State Archives, RG 350, Series 28, Comptroller's Tax Records, Boxes 40, 60, 66, 73, and 81. For information about free blacks in Leon County, see Lee H. Warner, *Free Men in the Age of Servitude: Three Generations of a Black Family* (Lexington, KY 1992).

54. Will of John Hollingsworth, Box 513, Folder 7, Hollingsworth Papers, Strozier Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee.

55. Florida State Archives, Leon County Probate Records, Reel 1, Will of Dorothy Parish.

56. *Ibid.*, Will of Hamilton Hudson.

57. Rivers, "Dignity and Importance," 418, and "Gadsden County," 15.

58. Memo for hire of six slaves, 1860, Legal Documents, 1841-1874, James T. O'Neill Papers; G. W. Call to James Ormond, c.1859, 1856-1859 Correspondence, Box 4, Ormond Papers, P. K. Yonge Library.

taneously pursuing other economic ventures. Hiring of slaves also benefited rural and urban whites seeking trained house servants, attendants, and valets. The practice additionally served as a means of providing for loved ones in the wake of death.

But not all defenders of slavery appreciated the practice. Some whites feared that it would endow slaves with too much independence, and thereby confidence. And with highly-skilled slaves being allowed in some instances the right to negotiate their own terms of hire, the concern over black autonomy assumed an ever more virulent cast. But, despite such concerns, hiring of slaves met the needs of many white owners.⁵⁹

Skilled slaves made numerous, significant contributions to the tapestry of southern culture. Slave carpenters, blacksmiths, cooks, domestics, and overseers built houses, repaired machinery, tended livestock, directed the harvest, negotiated corn prices, encouraged the development of a distinctive southern cuisine, and cared for generations of white children. Whether employed in the big houses, the fields, the shops, or elsewhere, skilled slaves were integral to Middle Florida's economy and society in the 1850s.

59. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, especially chapters six and eight; *Southern Cultivator*, 12 (April 1854): 105-107, and 16 (June 1858): 378.