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FREE BLACK OWNERS OF SLAVES

A REAPPRAISAL OF THE WOODSON THESIS *

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Carter G. Woodson founded the Association for the study of Negro Life and History in 1915. John Hope Franklin has described that accomplishment as "launching the era of 'The New Negro History'." Franklin wrote further, "Dr. Woodson and his associates went about the task of exploiting the myths of Negro history and of putting the Negro in his rightful place in the history of this country."¹ It is indeed true that Woodson exposed many myths about black history. However, he may also be the creator of a myth.

Undergraduate history students are usually amazed to learn of the large number of free blacks in the ante-bellum period. Graduate students are often surprised to learn that some of these free blacks owned slaves. History professors are frequently skeptical when they hear the number of free black slaveholders and the numbers of slaves they owned. Indeed, in 1905 Booker T. Washington wrote, "My own personal recollections bring no case in mind of free black men owning slaves, nor am I able to refer you to any books making reference to this phase of slavery, in case it did exist."² Yet, at one time or another, free blacks owned slaves in each of the thirteen original states and later in every state that countenanced slavery.

Where did these free blacks come from? Some had never been slaves. They had been indentured servants who had become free. Some had purchased their freedom. Others were born of free parents while some were born free by miscegenation. Slaves were also emancipated for meritorious military duty, for faithful service, by last will and testament, saving a life, advanced age or infirmity and other reasons.

* A research paper read at the 56th anniversary meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in Washington, D. C., in 1971.

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¹ John Hope Franklin, "The New Negro History," *Journal of Negro History*, XLIII (April, 1957), p. 93.

² Calvin D. Wilson, "Black Masters: A Side-Light on Slavery," *North American Review*, CLXXXI (November, 1905), p. 686.

Moreover, runaway slaves constantly swelled the ranks of freedmen. Free blacks were slaveowners for more than two hundred years.³

Black owners obtained slaves by inheritance through white and black relatives and by gifts and purchase. Many blacks had been accustomed to slavery in Africa. Many of the slaves in this country had previously been slaves there. Others had been owners of slaves in Africa. "It did not therefore seem to them unnatural for a Negro in America to hold his brethren in bondage, when he had become free and able to buy his fellows."⁴

Free blacks became slaveowners early in our history. Indeed, one of the first known legal sanctions of slavery—other than as punishment for crime—involved a black owner. In 1654 Anthony Johnson and his wife Mary—in a court suit—gained the services of their black servant, John Casor, for life.⁵ Actually, ". . . slave owning by free Negroes was so common in the period of the Commonwealth as to pass unnoticed and without criticism by those who consciously recorded events of the time."⁶ John H. Russell in his *The Free Negroes In Virginia, 1619-1865*, wrote "The most remarkable property right possessed by free Negroes was the right to acquire, own, and alienate slaves. Indeed, for more than twenty years from the time when free Negroes first appear in the courts there was no legal restriction upon their right to own indentured white servants [in Virginia]."⁷ There were black slaveholders in Boston as early as 1724; in Connecticut by 1783, and in Alabama by 1797. Among the earliest records in the "deed books" of St. Augustine, Florida, is a document recording the sale of a black slave to a free black—by a free black. By 1790 forty-eight Maryland black owners possessed 143 slaves. Nat Butler, a free black who lived near Aberdeen in Harford County, owned a small farm and regularly purchased and sold Negroes for the Southern trade.⁸ Some considered black slaveowners "Hard taskmasters" and claimed ". . . free black owners were as a usual thing much more severe on their slaves than the white owners."⁹

³ "Negroes Who Owned Slaves," *Popular Science Monthly*, LXXXI (November 1912), p. 484.

⁴ John H. Russell, "Colored Freeman As Slave Owners In Virginia," *Journal of Negro History*, I (July, 1916), p. 235. Free blacks in other "New World" nations also owned slaves.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Wilson, "Negroes Who Owned Slaves," pp. 484-87, 90.

⁷ John H. Russell, *The Free Negro In Virginia, 1619-1865* (Baltimore, 1913), p. 91.

⁸ Wilson, "Black Masters: A Side-Light on Slavery," p. 689-90.

⁹ Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (Baton Rouge, 1966), pp. 435-36.

There were approximately 319,599 free blacks in the United States in 1830. Approximately 13.7 per cent of the total black population was free. A significant number of these free blacks were the owners of slaves. The census of 1830 lists 3,775 free Negroes who owned a total of 12,760 slaves.

Carter G. Woodson in "Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830," in the *Journal of Negro History*, states:

The census records show that the majority of the Negro owners of slaves were such from the point of *philanthropy*. In many instances the husband purchased the wife or vice versa. The slaves belonging to such families were few compared with the large numbers found among the whites on the well-developed plantations. Slaves of Negroes were in some cases the children of a free father who had purchased his wife. If he did not thereafter emancipate the mother, as so many such husbands failed to do, his own children were born his slaves and were thus reported to the enumerators.

Some of these husbands were not anxious to liberate their wives immediately. They considered it advisable to put them on probation for a few years, and if they did not find them satisfactory they would sell their wives as other slaveholders disposed of Negroes. For example, a Negro shoemaker in Charleston, South Carolina, purchased his wife for \$700; but, on finding her hard to please, he sold her a few months thereafter for \$750, gaining \$50 by the transaction. The editor personally knew a man in Cumberland County, Virginia, whose mother was purchased by his father who had first bought himself. Becoming enamored of a man slave, she gave him her husband's manumission papers that they might escape together to free soil. Upon detecting this plot, the officers of the law received the impression that her husband had turned over the papers to the slave and arrested the freedman for the supposed offense. He had such difficulty in extricating himself from this complication that his attorney's fee amounted to \$500. To pay them he disposed of his faithless wife for that amount.¹⁰

It is at least questionable whether the above examples constitute proof of *benevolence* or *philanthropy*. In 1913, John H. Russell wrote, "In the exercise of their legal right to own slaves black masters did not always confine themselves to the purchase of their kindred for beneficent purposes. Some Negroes purchased and held slaves with the same considerations of profit in view as governed the actions of white owners

¹⁰ Carter G. Woodson, "Free Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830," *Journal of Negro History*, IX (January, 1924), p. 42. Author's italics.

of slaves."¹¹ Nevertheless, most historians evidently have acquiesced with the *philanthropy thesis* advanced by Woodson. John Hope Franklin in *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, stated that, "The extent of slaveholding among free Negroes has been a matter of only recent concern to the student of history." However, "The majority of Negro owners of slaves had some personal interest in their property." He does concede that "There were instances, however, in which free Negroes had a real economic interest in the institution of slavery and held slaves in order to improve their economic status."¹²

Ulrich B. Phillips in *American Negro Slavery*, published in 1918, stated, "It is clear that aside from the practices of holding slave relatives as a means of giving them virtual freedom, an appreciable number of colored proprietors owned slaves purely as a productive investment. It was doubtless a group of these who sent a joint communication to a New Orleans newspaper when secession and war were impending:

"The free colored population (native) of Louisiana . . . own slaves, and they are dearly attached to their native land, . . . and they are ready to shed their blood for her defense. They have no sympathy for abolitionism; no love for the North, but they have plenty for Louisiana. . . . They will fight for her in 1861 as they fought in 1814-15."¹³

In 1929 Ulrich B. Phillips in *Life and Labor In The Old South*, stated that "A few [free blacks] became slaveholders of plantation scale. . . ." In a footnote on the same page, he stipulated, "In the main, however, the slaves owned by free Negroes were their own kindred, bought and held merely because the laws forbade manumission without exile." Phillips cites Woodson as documentation for his statement.¹⁴

Kenneth M. Stamp in *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*, stated, "The great majority of these [free] colored slaveowners had merely purchased husbands, wives, or children and were unable to emancipate them under existing state laws." Stamp cites Woodson for documentation.¹⁵

¹¹ Russell, *The Free Negro In Virginia, 1619-1865*, p. 93.

¹² John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York, 1967), p. 224.

¹³ Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 436.

¹⁴ Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor In The Old South* (Boston, 1963), p. 172.

¹⁵ Kenneth M. Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1956), p. 194.

Clement Eaton in *A History Of The Old South*, stated, "The year 1830 marks the zenith of the ownership of slaves by free Negroes, most of such slaves being purchased in order to protect relatives, but others for exploitation as agricultural labor."¹⁶ Eaton provides no citation for his statement. He does mention that "An interesting case of the ownership of slaves by free Negroes was the purchase of an eloquent slave preacher by the Pleasant Green Baptist Negro Church of Lexington, Kentucky. When the slave preacher was put up for auction in the settlement of an estate, a friendly white Baptist congregation purchased him for their black brethren, who, in turn, paid for him on the installment plan by taking the Sunday collections to the white deacons."¹⁷

William B. Hesseltine and David L. Smiley in *The South in American History*, stated, "A few Negroes were slaveholders. . . . Some claimed ownership only of members of their families, in order to keep them out of the insecure status of the free persons of color, but others possessed slaves whom they worked as did their white neighbors."¹⁸ Hesseltine and Smiley provide no citation for their statements.

Francis Butler Simkins in *A History Of The South*, makes no mention of free black ownership of slaves.¹⁹ The massive ten-volume series, *A History Of The South*, being published by the Louisiana State University Press, surprisingly does not mention free black ownership of slaves.

James G. Randall and David Donald in *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, wrote that ". . . in some cases [free blacks] held slaves of their own. . . ." ²⁰ They cite John Hope Franklin for documentation.

In a footnote they include the quotation "Frequently the husband purchased his wife or visa versa; or they were other relatives or friends who had been rescued . . . by some affluent free Negro. There were some instances, however, in which free Negroes had a real economic status."²¹ Franklin did not document the quoted statement. The bibliographical notes for the chapter in which it appears, however, contains Woodson's work—plus other research which also cited Woodson.

¹⁶ Clement Eaton, *A History of the Old South* (New York, 1966), pp. 257-58.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ William B. Hesseltine and David L. Smiley, *The South In American History* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1960), p. 196.

¹⁹ Francis Butler Simkins, *A History of The South* (New York, 1961).

²⁰ J. G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston, 1961), p. 60.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Luther Porter Jackson in his *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia*, indicated that free black slave ownership was temporary and benevolent with owners serving as intermediaries for eventual manumission. Nevertheless, Jackson stipulated “. . . some free Negroes held slaves as permanent property.”²² Indeed, in 1830 the free blacks of Virginia held more wealth in slaves than in real estate. Approximately 21 per cent of the free black heads of families of Petersburg were slaveowners. The figure in Richmond was 26 per cent and the percentage was similar in other Virginia cities.²³ Moreover, Jackson stated that slave hiring by free blacks was a common practice. Free black owners were also known to hire out their slaves. Moreover, former slaves—after gaining freedom—sometimes became slaveowners themselves.²⁴

A careful examination of the census figures in 1830—the same data Woodson used to formulate his *philanthropy* thesis—reveals evidence which at least casts suspicion upon the validity of that premise. The census year of 1830 was selected for the following reasons advanced by Woodson.

There were several reasons for selecting the census of 1830. In the first place, the earlier reports do not give as much information as the census of 1830. At that time, moreover, the free Negroes had about reached their highest mark as a distinct class. The reactions which set in earlier in the century restricted their freedom and in many cases expelled them from the South. This census, then, evidently, reports the names of a larger number of representative free Negroes than any other census prior to their debasement to a lower status or their migration from the South. This trek reached its highest point between 1830 and 1835. Most of the free Negroes in the North in 1830, therefore, had been there for some years.²⁵

The following table lists the number of blacks who owned slaves, their place of residence by state and the number of slaves owned.

²² Luther Porter Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia*, (New York), 1942), p. 200.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 212, 210, 207, 221.

²⁵ Woodson, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<i>Place Of Residence</i>	<i>Number of Free Black Slave Owners</i>	<i>Number of Slaves Owned by Free Blacks</i>
Alabama	48	197
Arkansas Territory	1	8
Connecticut	1	1
Delaware	9	21
District of Columbia	133	243
Florida	15	92
Georgia	61	207
Illinois	7	11
Kentucky	120	271
Louisiana	965	4,206
Maine	1	1
Maryland	653	1,175
Mississippi	17	74
Missouri	4	6
New Hampshire	3	3
New Jersey	16	22
New York	21	41
North Carolina	192	624
Ohio	1	6
Pennsylvania	23	50
Rhode Island	23	50
South Carolina	464	2,715
Tennessee	69	153
Virginia	948	2,235
	3,775 Total Black Owners	12,760 Total Slaves

Nearly all the free black owners of slaves lived in the South and border states. At this time, 92.8 per cent of the total black population resided in that region. Only 85 owners of 159 slaves lived outside that region—an average of 1.87 slaves per owner. Consequently, the South and border states were home to 3,690 black owners of 12,601 slaves—an average 3.41 slaves per owner. Slightly more than 2 per cent of the free blacks in the South and border states owned slaves. Woodson's

thesis that free blacks owned slaves for *benevolent* and *philanthropical* reasons appears to be based principally on the contention that it was always difficult and often impossible to emancipate them; and that most free blacks owned just a few slaves and they were frequently relatives.

It is true that approximately 42 per cent of the black slaveowners, in the South and border states, possessed only one slave. It is also true, however, that more white slaveholders of that region possessed one slave than any other number. Only a small proportion of these owned substantial numbers.

Moreover, Woodson stipulated that the majority of black owners lived in urban areas. Urban slaveholders of all races owned fewer slaves *per capita* than rural owners. Furthermore the purchase of slaves always represented a sizeable capital outlay and free blacks were seldom affluent. Blacks who owned no other property seem to have held no slaves. However, blacks who did own other property frequently did own slaves. John Hope Franklin, in an article in the *North Carolina Historical Review*, reprinted in *Free Blacks In America, 1800-1860*, states: "The enterprising free negro owners of slaves can usually be identified because of their extensive holdings of real and personal property and because of their inactivity in the manumission movement."²⁶ It appears logical therefore that free blacks would not individually possess large numbers of slaves regardless of their motivation.

Ulrich B. Phillips stated that ". . . the laws forbade manumission without exile."²⁷ Exile may not be the proper term for leaving the state—as some states, indeed, did require. But is leaving the state too dear as the price for freedom? Kenneth M. Stampf stated that free black owners ". . . were unable to emancipate them [slaves] under existing laws."²⁸ This appears to be a broad generalization that was sometimes true in some states, but was never true in all states. Moreover, these restrictive emancipation laws provided a convenient rational or excuse for not freeing slaves.

Hesseltine and Smiley state, "Some claimed ownership . . . in order to keep them [slaves] out of the insecure status of the free persons of color. . . ." ²⁹ Would those 12,760 slaves have preferred the "security"

²⁶ John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, Elliot Rudwick, *Free Blacks In America, 1800-1860* (Belmont, California, 1971), p. 55.

²⁷ Phillips, *Life and Labor In The Old South*, p. 172.

²⁸ Stampf, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

²⁹ Hesseltine and Smiley, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

of their slavery more than the "insecurity" of freedom? None of the advanced reasons for not freeing slaves applied to those 85 owners of 159 slaves who lived in the North. Also manumission would have been relatively easy for the 910 owners of 2,095 slaves in Washington, D. C., and in the border states.

It appears illogical to assume that free blacks would not desire to own slaves. African blacks had been practicing slavery for centuries. The vast majority of American blacks have consistently attempted to emulate white middle class society. Southern white attorneys, clergy, merchants, physicians, professors and politicians—as well as the aristocratic planters—invested in slaves for profit and status. Many blacks did likewise while still others probably would have if they had possessed the means. The free black could elevate his status to a greater degree by owning slaves than in any other way—and status was desired. Though it should not be construed as majority opinion, Ulrich B. Phillips stated, "many of the well-to-do colored freedmen tended to prize their distinctive position so strongly as to deplore any prospect of a general emancipation for fear it would submerge them in the great black mass."³⁰

In *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860*, John Hope Franklin states "At no time during the ante-bellum period were free Negroes in North Carolina without some slaves. The motives for such ownership were perhaps as benevolent as they were in other groups. Without doubt, there were those who possessed slaves for the purpose of advancing their [owners] well-being. With such a view in mind, these Negro slaveholders were more interested in making their farms or carpenter-shops 'pay' than they were in treating their slaves humanely." Franklin continued, "No doubt . . . there was some effort to conform to the pattern established by the dominant [white] slaveholding group within the State in the effort to elevate themselves to a position of respect and privilege."³¹

It would be a serious mistake to automatically assume that free blacks owned their spouse or children only for benevolent purposes. Purchase was a sure method to obtain a young, handsome, talented or exceptional spouse. Black ownership of a relative did not constitute *prima facie* evidence of benevolence or philanthropy. A free black in Trimble County, Kentucky, ". . . sold his own son and daughter South,

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860* (New York, 1971), pp. 159-61.

one for \$1,000, the other for \$1,200.”³² There are many instances in which fathers sold their children. A Maryland father sold his slave children in order to purchase his wife.³³ A Columbus, Georgia, black woman—Dilsey Pope—owned her husband. “He offended her in some way and she sold him. . . .”³⁴ Fanny Canady of Louisville, Kentucky, owned her husband Jim—a drunken cobbler—whom she threatened to “sell down the river.”³⁵ At New Bern, North Carolina, a free black wife and son purchased their slave husband-father. When the newly bought father criticized his son—the son sold him to a slave trader. The son boasted afterward that “the old man had gone to the corn fields about New Orleans where they might learn him some manners.”³⁶

ALABAMA

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3	4	5	6	10	14	16	24	27
Number of Free Black Owners	20	10	3	5	1	3	1	2	1	1	1

Alabama had 48 free black slaveholders with 197 slaves.

DELAWARE

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3	5	6
Number of Free Black Owners	5	1	1	1	1

Delaware had 9 free black slaveholders with 21 slaves.

WASHINGTON, D. C.

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3	4	5	6	8	9
Number of Free Black Owners	91	15	8	9	3	5	1	1

Washington, D. C., had 133 free black slaveholders with 243 slaves.

³² Wilson, “Black Masters: A Side-Light on Slavery,” p. 695.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Wilson, “Negroes Who Owned Slaves,” p. 486.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 488.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 485.

FLORIDA

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3	4	6	7	12	39
Number of Free Black Owners	4	1	4	1	2	1	1	1

Florida had 15 free black slavesholders with 92 slaves.

GEORGIA

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	25
Number of Free Black Owners	18	14	10	5	1	6	4	1	1	1

Georgia had 61 free black slaveholders with 207 slaves.

ILLINOIS

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3
Number of Free Black Owners	4	2	1

Illinois had 7 free black slaveholders with 11 slaves.

KENTUCKY

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Number of Free Black Owners	55	26	17	13	1	3	3	1	1

Kentucky had 120 free black slaveholders with 271 slaves.

MARYLAND

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Number of Free Black Owners	333	123	81	36	32	16	10	8	3	1	2
Cont.	13	15	17	29	39						
Cont.	2	1	3	1	1						

Maryland had 653 free black slaveholders with 1,575 slaves.

LOUISIANA

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Number of Free Black Owners	302	179	129	114	62	45	21	23	13	14	6
Cont.	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	25	27	30	32
Cont.	1	3	4	5	1	2	1	1	1	1	1
Cont.	33	35	38	40	44	46	49	52	54	59	60
Cont.	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	1	1
Cont.	69	70	75								
Cont.	1	1	1								

Louisiana had 962 free black slaveholders with 4,206 slaves.

MISSISSIPPI

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3	4	5	6	16	17
Number of Free Black Owners	6	2	2	1	3	1	1	1

Mississippi had 17 free black slaveholders with 74 slaves.

NEW JERSEY

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3
Number of Free Black Owners	11	4	1

New Jersey had 16 free black slaveholders with 22 slaves.

NEW YORK

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3	4
Number of Free Black Owners	11	3	4	3

New York had 21 free black slaveholders with 41 slaves.

NORTH CAROLINA

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	10	14	18
Number of Free Black Owners	92	30	23	18	11	3	4	2	2	2	1
Cont.	24	36	44								
Cont.	1	1	2								

North Carolina had 192 free black slaveholders with 624 slaves.

PENNSYLVANIA

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3	4	5
Number of Free Black Owners	9	5	6	2	1

Pennsylvania had 23 free black slaveholders with 50 slaves.

TENNESSEE

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	11
Number of Free Black Owners	40	9	6	6	4	1	1	1	1

Tennessee had 69 free black slaveholders with 153 slaves.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Number of Slaves Owned	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Number of Free Black Owners	103	65	52	37	31	28	19	23	8	25	19
Cont.	12	13	14	15	16	17	20	22	24	30	38
Cont.	19	8	8	3	3	4	1	1	1	1	1
Cont.	41	44	46	47	84						
Cont.	2	1	1	1	1						

South Carolina had 464 free black slaveholders with 2,715 slaves.

VIRGINIA

Number of											
Slaves Owned	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Number of Free											
Black Owners	510	192	99	59	34	21	10	4	4	1	3
Cont.	13	15	18	22	23	28	32	45	46	71	
Cont.	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	

Virginia had 948 free black slaveholders with 2,235 slaves.

FREE BLACK OWNERS OF SLAVES IN SELECTED CITIES IN 1830

<i>City</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Number of Black Owners</i>	<i>Number of Slaves Owned</i>
Augusta	Georgia	12	41
Baltimore	Maryland	136	252
Charleston (and Charleston Neck)	South Carolina	394	2,105
Fayetteville	North Carolina	9	55
Georgetown	District of Columbia	37	60
Lexington	Kentucky	14	29
Mobile	Alabama	10	55
Nashville	Tennessee	20	36
Natchez	Mississippi	4	13
New Bern	North Carolina	9	61
New Orleans (and upper suburbs)	Louisiana	753	2,349
New York City	New York	8	17
Petersburg	Virginia	107	192
Richmond	Virginia	101	308
St. Augustine	Florida	7	58
Savannah	Georgia	29	84
Washington	District of Columbia	83	167
	Total	1,683	5,782