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Food and Slave Communities in the Antebellum South

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I. Introduction

In 1805 Charles Ball was separated from his wife, children and Maryland home. Sold to a slave trader, Ball travelled from Maryland to South Carolina with fifty-one others, mostly on foot and chained to another captive. The slave trader was outnumbered and afraid of assault or escape. As a result Ball and his companions were closely watched, making communication difficult. The monotony of travel was broken by brief breaks when the prisoners were allowed to consume their rations, typically some combination of cornbread, mush, herring or bacon. After crossing into South Carolina, and taking in the expansive fields of cotton plants and swampy rice fields, Ball realized he was “now in a country where the life of a black man was no more regarded than that of an ox, except as far as the man was worth the more money in the market.” After months of travel and a lengthy time fretting sale, Ball was sold to a planter and joined a conscripted work force of two hundred and sixty three men, women and children. Shortly after arriving on the plantation, Ball was assigned to a cabin that was the home of a couple and their five children and given his evening ration consisting of a half pound of bread. Inside the cabin, the mother and her oldest child busied themselves boiling leaves in a pot and readying old cornbread in preparation for dinner. Once the food was ready, Ball was invited to join the family. They ate their meal together.¹

References to food, or lack of food, are common in slave narratives. Frequent reference to and vivid descriptions of cooking and cuisine have made Charles Ball’s narrative, *Fifty Years in Chains or the Life of an American Slave*, a popular source for histori-

¹ Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains or The Life of An American Slave* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003), 16-87.

ans interested in examining food supply in the old south. Both historians and anthropologists have analyzed slave diets; however, little attention has been given to the significance of food in shaping slave communities. Ball's description of his first meal on a South Carolina plantation raises several questions. Given their limited resources, why did the family choose to share their meal with Ball if they knew he was provided with rations upon arrival? Why did the mother and her oldest child prepare the meal? What did the other household members do while the meal was being prepared? How did the household obtain a pot? Where did the leaves and cornbread come from? Were utensils used, and where did they eat?

This paper will begin to fill a gap in the literature on slave life by using food as a tool for analyzing the daily lives of enslaved Americans, especially their relationships. I argue that the cultivation, preparation and consumption of food was central to establishing and maintaining relationships. A variety of primary sources, including travelogues, planter journals and the first-hand accounts of enslaved men and women, provide substantial evidence for the significant roles of food in the lives of slaves. While historians have expressed less skepticism about planter journals, they have, at times, questioned and felt compelled to justify the use of both the antebellum slave narratives and Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews with formerly enslaved men and women. Some antebellum critics and contemporary historians have dismissed the published narratives of enslaved men and women who escaped to northern states where slavery had been abolished as abolitionist propaganda. Fear that the texts were altered by abolitionists to appeal to their audience, coupled with concerns that escaped slaves altered their stories to satisfy

abolitionists who were often their sponsors, have cast doubt on the authenticity of the documents.

In addition, some have argued that these narratives are not representative. Those who were able to escape bondage were often male, better educated and in closer proximity to free states. Likewise, some historians consider the WPA narratives unreliable. Conducted at the height of the Depression, many of the black men and women were offered compensation for their interviews, calling into question the integrity of the documents. The questions posed by the mostly white journalists (and sometimes descendants of slave owners) often reveal the interviewers' prejudice or were framed in such a way as to encourage a specific answer. At the time of the interviews, many of the interviewees were advanced in years and the accuracy of their memories has been called into question. Moreover, it has been argued that their memories are not representative of the slave experience because the participants would have been children when they experienced slavery.²

Despite the criticisms surrounding these sources, the words of enslaved men and women should not be ignored. A careful reading of the documents positions us to better understand their lives. These sources are valuable, and as long as the reader maintains a critical eye, meaningful insights can be gained from them about slaves' lives. Using an approach similar to that of Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eisanach, authors of *What the Slave Ate: Recollections of African American Food and Foodways From the Slave Narratives*, I will examine slave narratives and interviews for references to slave food.

² Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eisanach, *What the Slaves Ate: Recollections of African American Foods and Foodways from Slave Narratives* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009) vii, Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 8, and Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 9-11.

Yet this paper contributes important insights that depart from the work of Covey and Eissach, and other historians. While Covey and Eissach are more interested in identifying culinary traditions, researching frequently referenced dishes, and analyzing the nutritional value of slave diets, this paper will look at food within the context of kinship.³ Although one's location influenced the types of food and the quantity of certain items that were available, this study will not take a regional focus but will instead serve as a broad study of the antebellum south to examine community building in general. Food and kinship have never been linked in historical scholarship and as a result a broad focus is justified because it demonstrates the value in considering the intersection of food and community. Moreover rejecting a regional focus highlights similarities seen across the pre-war south. This study will engage historians of the old south and attempt to improve our understanding of the experiences of bondsmen and -women and the communities they formed by exploring this most basic and intimate part of daily life.

To argue the centrality of food cultivation, preservation and consumption in establishing and maintaining kinship networks between enslaved African Americans, this paper must first demonstrate that community among enslaved African-Americans was not a given. After establishing this premise, I will then argue that food cultivation was critical to creating ties between enslaved individuals on neighboring plantations, specifically romantic relationships, and equally important in maintaining relationships with older generations and incorporating children into the greater community. Finally I will analyze the role of food in fostering bonds between enslaved people and landless whites.

³ Covey and Dwight Eissach, *What the Slaves Ate*, vii-xi.

II. Community and Customs

In January of 1807 the United States Congress voted to abolish the international slave trade. The legislation went into effect the following year. It was the existence of a self-sustaining African-American community that made the legislation possible. Advocates of slavery moved swiftly to point out that this was indicative of the benign nature of American slavery. Supporters of the peculiar institution were quick to juxtapose the practice of American slavery to what they considered the malignant system of the Caribbean and Latin America, where slaveowners continued to rely on the forced migration of Africans to staff their plantations. By the nineteenth century most of America's enslaved men and women were several generations removed from the middle passage and memories of bodies folded into one another like spoons in a drawer were relayed not by the survivors but by their descendants. Of course the end of the African trade did not mean an end to the lucrative slave trade. The domestic trade in black men, women, and children was refueled as increasing amounts of land was appropriated from Native Americans and made available for white-American settlement. After what would come to be considered modest gains in indigo, tobacco, rice and sugar cultivation, the nineteenth century's westward expansion coincided with the rise of King Cotton, which led to massive wealth for some planters and the reinvigoration of the domestic slave trade. Traders turned their backs on the citadels lining the West African coast in favor of American slave markets.

In contrast to the individuals brought from Africa, the African-Americans displaced by the domestic slave trade were generally familiar with American customs but they still faced substantial obstacles to community formation. Unlike the coffles brought from the African continent's interior and the slave ships dotting the coast where an untold

number of languages were spoken among captives, English was the lingua franca in the American slave market. Undoubtedly the first Africans arriving in the New World found their dismal conditions exacerbated by their lack of familiarity with English but once these individuals grasped the language they were able to educate those that came after them, thus helping them adapt to their new surroundings.

A common language, however, did not guarantee community formation among the people whom slaveowners bought and sold. In his novel study of the antebellum slave market, Walter Johnson points to the dangers inherent in trusting other captives. It is important to recognize that “mistaken confidence could be life-threatening. The community of slaves in the trade had to be carefully built.”⁴ This reality was not confined to the slave market. Once on a farm or plantation, enslaved men and women had to be wary of those they toiled alongside as well as their closest relations. Charles Ball narrowly avoided death after being falsely accused of crimes he did not commit by his fellow bondmen while Harriet Jacobs lived in a secret attic for seven years without telling her two children out of fear they would accidentally disclose her whereabouts.⁵

Sabotage was not the only threat to community formation. Some slaveholders chose to hire out members of their enslaved labor force when the planting season ended for anywhere from several weeks to a year. The potential for a parent or child to be permanently removed from a household by sale to settle a debt or as a reminder of the racial hierarchy hung heavy in the air at all times. The sundering of family ties often happened and rarely with much warning. Decades after being separated from her father, Laura

⁴ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 67.

⁵ Paul Negri, Editor, *Harriet Jacobs: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2001), 80-129 and Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 141-146.

Smiley vividly recalled the details of the abrupt division of her family when her mother and siblings were loaded into wagons bound for Texas and her father left behind.⁶ Indeed when her interview turned to the sale of slaves, Deelia Garlic was unsettlingly frank in her response: “I could tell you ‘bout it all day, but even den you couldn’t guess the awfulness of it.”⁷

In spite of these obstacles African-Americans developed expansive kin networks.⁸ Kin networks were the centerpiece of slave communities, and this term describes the dense network of individuals linked to each other through both blood and friendship across broad swaths of land. Marriages, children, and platonic relationships tied bondmen and -women to one another not only on their plantation or farm but also to neighboring plantations and farms as well as across county lines. In the wake of separations like the Smileys, some newly single individuals remarried or had more children while distant relatives, friends and sometimes strangers took responsibility for orphaned children. Mingo White, for instance, was taken from South Carolina to Alabama at the age of four or five and was reared by John White, a stranger on the Alabama plantation.⁹ The ability of bondmen and -women to adapt by rebuilding relationships and absorbing newcomers was critical to the survival of African-American communities, but the process was challenging and should not be taken for granted.

⁶ Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, editors, *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experience of Slavery and Emancipation*, (New York: The New Press, 1996), 157-160.

⁷ Berlin, Favreau, and Miller, *Remembering Slavery*, 8.

⁸ Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 352-371.

⁹ Berlin, Favreau, and Miller, *Remembering Slavery*, 161-64.

Despite consistent brutality, the peculiar institution was not impervious to change and this reality had a meaningful impact on the ability of enslaved men and women to build communities. Negotiations between the enslaved and slaveholders were constantly underway. As Joseph P. Reidy argues “the rules governing labor, subsistence and exchange were continually revised... Through subtle and overt means both master and slave communicated their interests and preferences, as an operations consensus gradually emerged.”¹⁰ This “operations consensus” represented a series of customs, such as pay for work on Sundays or time off in observance of Christmas. It is important to note that these customs were not a given nor were they universal. Some enslaved men and women found themselves sold to slave owners who did not observe the same customs that were accepted on their former plantations or farms while some slaveholders rejected common practices in their entirety. These customs were considered basic rights and were thus fiercely guarded by those held in bondage. Attempts to disregard or circumvent these customs were met with truancy, work slowdowns, the destruction of plantation implements and occasionally murder. Of these rights, provision grounds was one of the most revered.¹¹

Many planters set aside provision grounds or garden patches for the use of enslaved men and women. Often times these plots of land, which varied in size from plantation to plantation, were adjacent to the cabins but they could also be away from the slave quarters.¹² Emanuel Elmore, who experienced slavery in upcountry South Carolina, be-

¹⁰ Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, Editors, *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 138.

¹¹ Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2003), 56.

¹² Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk*, 48-49.

lieved, like many other enslaved individuals, that providing land for independent cultivation was a sign of a good slaveholder.¹³ These provision grounds were important for several reasons. Access to land provided individuals with an opportunity to make claims to property. One of the pillars of slavery was the notion that enslaved men, women and children were nothing more than chattel therefore the right to land claimed by many bonded African-Americans at the very least challenged some of the tenets of slavery by indirectly affirming that enslaved people had rights, albeit in custom and not law.¹⁴ These gardens also provided enslaved Americans with an opportunity to generate revenue. They often sold these food crops to the residents in the plantation household as well as at markets, and they typically kept the profits for themselves and their families.¹⁵ In addition, provision grounds also enabled households to supplement their rations, which were often low quality, meager and lacking in variety.¹⁶ Reflecting on his time in bondage, James Bolton recalled collards, cabbage, turnips, beets, English peas, beans, onions and garlic being grown in slave gardens.¹⁷ The garden patches tended by enslaved people provided an opportunity to make claims to property as well as supplemented the diets of bonded people.

There is a rich scholarship exploring both barriers to community formation and the customary rights of slaves; however, historians have yet to investigate the intersection of food cultivation and community ties among bondmen and -women. The courting rituals of enslaved men and women is a useful place to begin an analysis of the significant

¹³ Berlin, Favreau, and Miller, *Remembering Slavery*, 115.

¹⁴ Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk*, 45-46.

¹⁵ Berlin and Morgan, *Cultivation and Culture*, 281.

¹⁶ Covey and Dwight Eisanach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 74-75.

¹⁷ Berlin, Favreau, and Miller, *Remembering Slavery*, 187.

role food played in creating and maintaining relationships.

III. Cultivating Kinship

The right to work private garden patches was a right fought for and preserved by enslaved African-Americans. While slaveholders saw these plots of land as a means to cut costs, the individuals that worked them used them not only to sustain themselves but also their communities. The food that was grown on provision grounds did not go straight from garden to table. These crops crossed plantation lines and were used to court potential suitors. They were bartered for other ingredients that would be used to prepare special meals for weary husbands. The provisions were also a means to reaffirm the place of the superannuated and erode the parental claims of slaveholders over enslaved children. Slave narratives and interviews make numerous references to food and when we follow the evidence it becomes clear that food should not be viewed exclusively as a source of sustenance. Food fostered community among enslaved Americans, allowing them to overcome the countless obstacles to its formation.

A critical reading of post-emancipation testimony points to the central role of food in shaping courting practices. African-Americans were opposed to entering into romantic relationships with those in their immediate family.¹⁸ Given the restrictions placed on the movement of enslaved men and women and the often small number of slaves living in the average southern household this was problematic for individuals looking for romantic partners. While bondmen and

¹⁸ Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 374.

-women on large plantations had more prospects to choose from, those on small farms and plantations could only hope to find a partner by looking beyond their immediate surroundings.¹⁹ Despite slaveholders' preference to keep their labor force in place, enslaved Americans found ways around the various restrictions that emerged and developed relationships with individuals on neighboring plantations, thus expanding their communities.

Rules governing courtship were developed over centuries in bondage to facilitate liaisons between enslaved men and women. Men were expected to initiate courting; however, "women controlled the pace through their response to their male suitors."²⁰ When courting took place across plantation lines, which post- emancipation testimony suggests happened with great frequency, men were also expected to begin the process.²¹ The interest of slaveholders in the courting rituals of enslaved African-Americans ranged from encouraging marriage, like Tempie Herndon's master who allowed her to marry on the front porch of the big house and provided elaborate food and decorations for the occasion, to attempting to dictate partners for their workers, like one Georgia planter who quickly paired people off once he discovered they were courting.²² Slaveholders generally adhered to strict gender roles when it came to their slaves' courting. Adherence to gendered traditions meant that slaveholders almost exclusively gave passes to men for trips off the plantation to visit friends, family and love interests.

¹⁹ For insight into life and labor on small farms see John Solomon Otto's case study of western Arkansas, "Slaveholding General Farmers in a "Cotton County," *Agricultural History* 55 (1981).

²⁰ Daina Ramey Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 55.

²¹ Anthony E. Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 52.

²² Berlin, Favreau, and Miller, *Remembering Slavery*, 123-124 and "Old Slave Story": Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938. https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?mesn:2:./temp/~ammem_gH8z: (accessed April 28, 2016)

An important part of the courting ritual was exchanging gifts and these presents were often food items. Given the limited resources of bondmen and -women, it makes sense that these gifts typically took the form of foodstuff. The prominent role of food in the courting process is evidenced in a song relayed by ex-slave Marshal Buttler from Georgia:

If you want to go a courtin', I sho' you where to go
 Right down yonder in de house below,
 Clothes all dirty an' aint got no broom,
 Ole dirty clothes all hanging in the room.
 Ask'd me to table, thought I'd take a seat,
 First thing I saw was big chink o' meat.
 Big as my head, hard as a maul;
 Ash-cake, corn bread, bran an' all.²³

Where Buttler sang of being offered a humble meal by his love interest, John White recalled using food to win over the many women he courted. A lifelong bachelor, White served as a cook and washer in the big house. Reflecting on his experiences in bondage, White recalled taking advantage of his access to food supplies to procure gifts for women: “Sometimes they’d borrow, sometimes i’d slip something from out the kitchen. The single women folks was bad that way. I favors them wit something extra from the kitchen. Then they favors me.”²⁴ White’s statement speaks to the use of food gifts in courting. It also reveals that enslaved women engaged in their own calculations to determine compatibility. Their calculations involved taking stock of resources possessed by a

²³ “Slavery Days and After” Joseph E. Jaffe, Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938. [https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=170&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Butler,+Marshal\)\)](https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=170&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Butler,+Marshal))) (accessed March 29, 2016)

²⁴ “John White. Age 121 years. Sand Springs, Okla.” Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938. [https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=330&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(White,+John\)\)](https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=330&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(White,+John))) (accessed March 29, 2016)

suitor, including their access to food supplies as well as a willingness to engage in independent cultivation of crops and other food items. While Marshal Butler was quick to sing about receiving food gifts from women, he clearly expressed disdain for men who engaged in the practice of giving gifts to women.²⁵ Perhaps Butler and other men were resentful of not having resources to share and felt bitter about being at a disadvantage. Enslaved men brought products from their garden when courting women and also bragged about their produce to their neighbors. Dylan Penningroth has argued that boasting was an important way to establish and affirm claims to property in the slave quarters.²⁶ I posit that boasting also helped build the reputation of single men and, as a result, enhanced the possibility of finding a mate as well. Boasting about one's property, whether it be foodstuff or articles obtained by bartering items cultivated in a garden patch, boosted one's reputation. These claims may have been statements of fact but they also doubled as a personal advertisement. Gloating about property was a means to establish oneself as a provider and therefore as a desirable partner.

Food, specifically a willingness to share food items, was an important factor that distinguished romantic relationships among bondspeople. Where "sweethearting," a temporary, non-monogamous relationship, and "taking up," a temporary relationship for older couples that required submission to community guidelines, were not considered serious enough to require the sharing of food, living together and marriage were.²⁷ In con-

²⁵ "Slavery Days and After" Joseph E. Jaffe, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. [https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=170&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Butler,+Marshal\)\)](https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=170&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Butler,+Marshal))) (accessed March 29, 2016)

²⁶ Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk*, 91-96.

²⁷ Anthony Kaye describes these four categories used by enslaved individuals to classify romantic relationships in Kaye, *Joining Places*, 51.

trast to White and other individuals who chose to exchange food and other gifts while courting, some men, like Willis Benfield rejected the practice in favor of waiting until they were involved in a serious relationship. Benfield is representative of an untold number of men who were more frugal when sweethearting or taking up. Prior to his marriage, Benfield courted his wife but when asked if that included bringing presents he was explicit: I “never give her nuthin’ till I marry her.”²⁸ Benfield’s statement suggests that while some men thought it was to their advantage to share their meager bounty when looking for a wife, others chose to wait until marriage to share their limited possessions. Courting was an important part in the lives of enslaved individuals but marriage occupied a more revered place in the relationship hierarchy and food assumed a more prominent role.

Many of the courting practices of enslaved Americans carried over into marriage. The distinction of slave versus free was conferred by the status of one’s mother. Thus all children born to an enslaved mother shared her status and were the property of the mother’s owner. Eugene Genovese argues that these laws created an important opportunity for negotiation between masters and bonded individuals. Abroad marriages, or the union of men and women on different plantations, were often discouraged because the economic advantage fell to the masters of the slave women since children followed the status of their mother. That said, masters recognized that “a man who fell in love with a woman

²⁸ “Willis Benfield” Maude Barragan, Edith Bell Love, Ruby Lorraine Radford, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=044/mesn044.db&recNum=240&tempFile=./temp/~amme_m_HLCT&filecode=mesn&next_filecode=mesn&itemnum=1&ndocs=100 (accessed March 29, 2016)

off the place would be a poor and sullen worker, and probably soon a runaway, if deprived of his choice.” In return for the planter condoning abroad marriages, enslaved men had to work especially hard to avoid upsetting the planter, which could result in a loss of visiting privileges.²⁹ Married men were responsible for traveling between plantations to visit their wives and children on holidays as well as on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The fact that these journeys were miles long and were done on foot after days spent laboring in the fields is a testament to the value black men placed on family. While it was common for husbands and wives to live apart, the home was always considered to be the place where the wife resided. As a result all of the couple’s valuable items were stored in the wife’s cabin.³⁰

Similar to the calculations made during courting, when selecting a partner to live with or marry the ability to provide was an important consideration for both parties. In addition to obtaining passes to visit once or twice a week on Wednesdays and/or Saturday, men were also expected to contribute to the household.³¹ Contributions could take the form of money or crops, and provision grounds were critical to the maintenance of households and providing a modicum of comfort to one’s wife and children. Men were interested in establishing households with women who would be able to contribute to the domicile once they transitioned to living together and/or marriage. Men who were only able to see their wives once or twice a week had expectations. When alone, a man had to prepare his own meals or eat in a communal kitchen. When he visited his wife; however,

²⁹ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1974), 473.

³⁰ Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk*, 103.

³¹ Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*, 58.

he looked forward to special meals prepared by her.³² Daina Ramey Berry's research on gender and slave labor in Georgia demonstrates that by reevaluating our definition of "skilled labor" it becomes apparent that women who worked in the field did much the same work as men and regularly did skilled field labor.³³ The statements of formerly enslaved African-Americans suggest that while they were aware of the lack of major gender distinctions in field labor, they welcomed a division of labor within the household. Men were expected to do the hunting while women were expected to prepare meals.

The division of labor not only dictated what food related tasks were done by whom in the household but it was also used to assess one's fitness as a spouse which also shaped how individuals were viewed by the community at large. This idea is best captured in Charles Ball's narrative where he and the male head of the house where he resided took responsibility for hunting and fishing while the female head of the home assumed responsibility for the preparation of the food.³⁴ Failure of one party to abide by these unofficial rules for the household could have grave consequences. One's fitness as a spouse was tied to these measures as we see from Ball's reflection on Lydia, an enslaved woman in poor health "whose husband procured little or nothing for the sustenance of their family." Ball's observations are worth considering in full.

[Lydia's husband] was compelled by the overseer to work, with the other hands, in the field, but as soon as he had come into his cabin, he took his seat, and refused to give his wife the least assistance in doing any thing. She was consequently obliged to do the little work that was necessary to perform in the cabin; and also to bear all the labor of weeding and cultivating the family patch or garden...I pitied this woman greatly, but as it was not in my power to remove her from the presence and authority of her husband, I thought it prudent not to say nor

³² Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 474.

³³ Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*, 16-17.

³⁴ Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 87, 222.

do any thing to provoke him further against her. As the winter approached, and the autumnal rains set in, she was frequently exposed in the field, and was wet for several hours together; this, joined to the want of warm and comfortable woolen clothes, caused her to contract colds, and hoarseness, which increased the severity of her cough.³⁵

Lydia died that winter. Published in the midst of the abolitionist fervor that marked the years before the Civil War, Ball's narrative was likely shaped by his audience and publisher. If this was the case, the inclusion of a lengthy aside detailing the tribulations of an enslaved woman likely served to galvanize support for the abolitionist cause. At the same time, Ball's account provides telling information on the important role of food in marriages. It is apparent that Lydia's unnamed husband is scorned by Ball for his laziness but this incident also points to the dangers of selecting a partner unwilling to contribute to the household. Lydia was at a severe disadvantage because she was left to work her household's provision ground on her own and we can assume the results of her labor were less than if she had the aide of her husband. It is likely that Lydia had to rely heavily on the meagre weekly rations provided by her owner where others, such as Ball, were less dependent on fluctuating rations. In addition, limited foodstuff meant that Lydia had less opportunity to barter with her neighbors or sell surplus goods leaving her exceptionally vulnerable. Perhaps this explains why she didn't have access to "warm and comfortable woolen clothes." Ball's allegory serves to demonstrate that having a partner was only advantageous if they were willing to contribute foodstuff to the domicile. Food played a significant role in the success of households and marriages.

³⁵ Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 163-165.

The relationship between the slaveholder and the enslaved varied based on age and this had the potential to influence one's access to food supplies. While men and women of prime working age received clothing allowances and rations, many slaveholders did not believe they were responsible for providing for children and the aged or at least not in the same way as they did for the able-bodied. Slaveholders struggled to incorporate these groups into the plantation labor force and as a result they were often considered to be a burden. Unlike children who would grow into adulthood, seniors had passed their prime and were largely shunned and treated as an expense that offered no return. Fanny Kemble, actress turned reluctant plantation mistress, shared her observations freely. According to Kemble the elderly on her husband's plantation resided in an infirmary where the conditions were abysmal.³⁶ Echoing this sentiment Harriet Jacobs relayed a telling anecdote where she observed her new mistress turning away an elderly man who attempted to procure his weekly ration. The mistress's rationale was that he was too old to receive an allowance and that "when niggers were too old to work, they ought to be fed on grass."³⁷ This event could be an accurate retelling or the result of an overzealous abolitionist editor's pen. Regardless of its origins, it points to fear and an acute sense of vulnerability among enslaved individuals about their status in old age and is supported by Kemble's claims. In addition, it suggests that the aged were more likely to suffer from starvation. Bondmen and -women were considered old at fifty years of age and in the 1850s could command no higher purchase price than that of an eight-year-old child. Genovese suggests that increasingly strict manumission laws may have benefitted super-

³⁶ John A. Scott, editor, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1984), 358-359.

³⁷ Negri, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 79.

annuated bonded people by making it difficult for farmers and planters to free them once they were no longer able to do heavy labor.³⁸ Despite the restrictions on manumission, it was not uncommon for slaveholders to emancipate aged African-Americans during their time of need to avoid providing care. Some planters continued to allow aged members of their labor force to remain on the plantation but refused to provide clothing or rations. In contrast to aged men, older enslaved women seemed to have been viewed as having greater longevity. These women were frequently assigned the role of cook in the plantation household such as Jefferson Franklin Henry's grandmother Caroline who was assigned to the plantation kitchen once she was too old to labor in the fields.³⁹ Scholars have argued that this was due in part to owners' perception of these older women as non-threatening but also because they were knowledgeable in food service and preparation.⁴⁰ In sharp contrast to planters, the accounts of ex-slaves suggests that in the slave quarters, enslaved people often found ways to equally absorb both aged men and women.

With the able bodied work force in the field all day, the superannuated took over household tasks, typically food related, that prime hands had to postpone during the day and on occasion at night when they may have been too tired after a day stooped over beneath a sweltering sun to do their own domestic work. Aged African-Americans played an important role in many slave households and the greater community by providing childcare along with helping with food preparation. Seniors tended provision grounds, hunted small game, and fished. Regardless of the crop worked on, agricultural labor was

³⁸ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 520.

³⁹ "Plantation life, as viewed by an ex-slave." T. Mrs. Sadie B. Hornsby, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=183&tempFile=.temp~ammemUKca&filecode=mesn&next_filecode=mesn&itemnum=1&ndocs=93 (accessed April 28, 2016)

⁴⁰ Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 55.

taxing. Whether one labored in a task or gang system, there were always additional tasks to be completed in the household and the work of superannuated relatives was greatly appreciated. Those with experience cooking could also contribute to the domicile by selling their goods. Harriet Jacobs' beloved grandmother Martha was known throughout the community for her cooking skills and was able to save a substantial amount of money from the proceeds of food sales.⁴¹ Traditional West African attitudes that venerate wisdom and experience may explain the willingness of enslaved Americans to embrace elderly members of the community. This is particularly important for food cultivation as the aged represented an invaluable source of knowledge. Recipes and techniques for trapping game were passed down from the oldest members of the household to the younger generations. Instead of being a burden on the community, seniors made important contributions.

Likewise, children played an essential role in feeding people on the plantation. Slave households were the primary beneficiaries of the labor of children. The tasks reserved for children, like those of the superannuated, were invaluable to the household.

Children provided indirect assistance to adults in the fields and direct assistance in the home. Before she was old enough to join the field laborers, Martha Spence Bunton recalled working with the other children on her Austin, Texas plantation to carry the dinner pails, containing meat, cabbage, biscuits and milk, to those working in the field.⁴² Numerous former slaves recounted similar tasks assigned to them in their youth. While

⁴¹ Negri, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 9.

⁴² Berlin, Favreau, and Miller, *Remembering Slavery*, 142.

they were too young to do demanding field work they could participate by bringing food and water to laborers. Within the slave quarters children did many of the daily, food-related tasks that kept the household running, such as fetching water and caring for hogs and chickens.⁴³ Their work in the garden plots, similar to that of the elderly, reduced the burden on their overworked parents.⁴⁴

However, some outside observers were perturbed by the jobs assigned to children in the slave quarters.⁴⁵ This is not to suggest that enslaved children spent their youth laboring for their parents before they came of age and their masters commanded their labor. When recalling their childhood, former slaves had vivid memories of playing with other children in the slave quarters and even the children of planters. Children typically spent their first few years nude but because they would eventually become full hands, planters occasionally took a special interest in their general wellbeing, paying particular attention to their diets.⁴⁶ Dairy products were not readily available to most enslaved individuals due to the difficulties plantations had producing milk but slaveholders often provided milk for bonded children.⁴⁷ Chana Littlejohn was about ten years old when union soldiers reached the plantation where she resided with what she estimates were one hundred other enslaved African-Americans. While Littlejohn recalls her family having a garden plot, she also remembers routinely receiving gifts of biscuits along with the other children on the plantation from her master's mother.⁴⁸ Littlejohn is not the only individual with

⁴³ Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk*, 83.

⁴⁴ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 503.

⁴⁵ Scott, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839*, 156-157.

⁴⁶ Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 25.

⁴⁷ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 508.

⁴⁸ "Littlejohn, Chana" T. Pat Matthews, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi->

memories of receiving special food treats from their slaveholders. This is a recurring theme in the WPA interviews. That said, salient in the interviews is the disdain adults felt towards how their meals were furnished as children.

How enslaved children were given their meals was one of the first ways their subordinated status was conferred. Frederick Douglass provided a vivid account of what mealtime was like for him and his peers during his youth:

We were not regularly allowed. Our food was coarse corn meal boiled. This was called *mush*. It was put into a large wooden tray or trough, and set down upon the ground. The children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush; some with oyster-shells, others with pieces of shingle, some with naked hands, and none with spoons. He that ate the fastest got the most; he that was strongest secured the best place; and few left the trough satisfied.⁴⁹

While some African-American children enjoyed the benevolence of slaveholders and their families like Littlejohn, this treatment was short lived. Enslaved parents had to begin teaching their children at an early age the rules governing their interactions with whites. Undoubtedly enslaved children noticed that the slaveholder's children, whom they often played with, never ate from a trough. This realization was likely one of the first and more potent signs of the racial hierarchy that children experienced and perhaps drew them closer to their parents. For Douglass at least, this difference represented one of the first cracks in the paternalistic image propagated by the planter class. This degrading eating practice, coupled with the food-related tasks that enslaved children performed, weakened the paternalistic ties planters attempted to exert over enslaved children and

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⁴⁹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 34.

helped assimilate them to the slave community on the plantation. The paternalistic claims of planters were further weakened by the willingness of enslaved Americans to exchange food items with poor whites.

IV. The Ties That Bind: Enslaved Blacks and Poor Whites

Conversations on the secession crises and the birth of the confederacy too often paint a picture of a monolithic southern population resolved to preserve slavery at all costs. Historians have done much to dismantle this damaging notion yet it maintains its firm grip on our imaginations. Numerous scholars have advanced our understanding of the dynamics that existed between various groups in the old south.⁵⁰ Some have corroborated claims of unbridled tensions while others have emphasized the potential for collaboration that existed and indeed appeared at intervals. Stephanie McCurry, for example, has argued that the Confederate States of America was far from a unified coalition. Given the relatively small number of large slaveholders and the unequal distribution of the burdens of war, secession was largely supported by the elite planter class and the war fought largely by the poor white farmers that represented the majority of the American south.⁵¹

The Civil War brought class tensions between southern whites to light but they were in place long before soldiers clad in blue and grey met at the First Battle of Bull Run. In fact southern courts, which were headed by elite planters, upheld white supremacy while expressing concerns that lower class whites, the majority of whom were unable to afford slave labor, were utilizing the same ideology to abuse their slaves.⁵² While

⁵⁰ Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2008), Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010) and Stephen A. West, *From Yeoman to Redneck in the South Carolina Upcountry, 1850-1915* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

⁵¹ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁵² Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 196-197.

Fanny Kemble's disdain for human bondage softened her pen when recording her observations of enslaved African-Americans, she was far less generous when it came to Georgia's poor whites or "pinelanders." Kemble believed Georgia's poor white population to be "the most degraded race of human beings claiming an Anglo-Saxon origin" and went on to describe them as "filthy, lazy, ignorant, brutal, proud, penniless savages, without one of the nobler attributes which have been found occasionally allied to the vices of savage nature."⁵³ Kemble was specifically speaking of Georgia's lower-class whites but unfavorable characterizations of lower-class, landless whites were common across the antebellum south. The term "poor white" is broad and is used here to describe small, independent farmers or yeoman as well as property-less whites. For the purposes of this study, "poor white" and "lower class whites" refer to landless whites and slave patrollers who, unlike their landholding neighbors, enjoyed less respect from planters and seemed to be in more frequent contact with bonded people.⁵⁴ Elite whites of the old south were aware of the tension between themselves and their poorer counterparts and, perhaps more importantly, the potential for collapse of the social order if collaboration between enslaved blacks and poor whites fermented. Tensions between poor whites and the planter class yielded an interesting dynamic between enslaved African-Americans and their property-less white neighbors. Enslaved Americans were quick to speak ill of the com-

⁵³ Scott, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839*, 181-182.

⁵⁴ For a comprehensive study of small farmers and power dynamics in the South Carolina low country see Stephanie McCurry's *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). While McCurry looks specifically at the South Carolina low country, she identifies many aspects of the yeoman experience that are representative of the old south.

munity's "white trash" or "buckra" residents and poor whites readily gathered their hounds in pursuit of runaway slaves and the promise of financial reward.

The fact that cooperation between enslaved Americans and poor whites took place in the face of these tensions enables us to consider the extent to which food helped ease friction. Perhaps most interesting is the fact that when we consider food, the evidence suggests that it was an important means for easing tensions and fostering meaningful relationships. Despite animosity, enslaved Americans and poor whites were known to enjoy each other's company at social events and welcomed trade from members of the other group. In the same way that food helped bondmen and -women transcend obstacles to forming communities, it also played a central role in creating relationships between enslaved blacks and poor whites across the old south despite the best efforts of planters.

Former slaves suggest that they regularly sought out poor white people or were contacted by them to barter food that provided an incentive to steal. Theft is frequently mentioned in post-emancipation testimony and slave narratives. Capitalizing on their access, whether that be to the kitchen, corn cribs or smoke houses, enslaved men and women frequently helped themselves to their overlord's foodstuff. Theft was so rampant that during his travels Olmsted was bombarded with complaints and stories of slaveholders who fell victim to theft by bonded people.⁵⁵ Slave narratives and the WPA interviews provide ample evidence of food theft by bonded people. Indeed numerous former slaves shared vivid memories of sermons exhorting against not only theft but also food theft in particular. Richard Caruthers remembered white preachers visiting to warn bondsmen

⁵⁵ Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (New York, The New American Library Inc., 1969), 116-117.

and -women that “The good lord say: ‘don’t you niggers steal chicken from your missis. Don’t you niggers steal your master’s hogs.’”⁵⁶ It is clear that food stealing was a common occurrence and a nuisance to slaveholders who frequently had their slave work force listen to homilies on theft. It would be easy to dismiss theft of food items as the inevitable result of meager rations; however, as the earlier section on relationships within the slave quarters revealed, enslaved African-Americans’ interactions with food went beyond subsistence. It is important to recognize that bondsmen and -women did not exclusively secrete items away from slave holders for their individual use or to exchange amongst each other in the slave quarters.

Bonded people looked beyond the color line and often crossed it when it benefited them thus incorporating poor whites into their kinship networks through food. Bondpeople stole food items from their owners and sold them to poor whites in the vicinity. Despite the best efforts of slaveholders they were never able to completely isolate their slaves. Interviewed in Indiana at the age of 110 Rosaline Rogers discussed her master’s refusal to allow the slaves on his plantation to interact with poor whites in the area who had been born and raised free.⁵⁷ While slave patrols were represented as keeping communities safe by making it difficult for enslaved people to meet and plan revolts, poor whites were overrepresented in their ranks and were conscripted into service.⁵⁸ This system favored planters because they were able to avoid the tedious work but it also had the dual

⁵⁶ Berlin, Favreau, and Miller, *Remembering Slavery*, 193.

⁵⁷ “Folklore” Anna Pritchett, Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938. https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=050/mesn050.db&recNum=169&tempFile=./temp/~amme_m_ImAo&filecode=mesn&next_filecode=mesn&prev_filecode=mesn&itemnum=21&ndocs=100. accessed March 29, 2016.

⁵⁸ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll*, 618.

benefit of fostering resentment between the poor white and enslaved populations. This animosity is best captured in a popular song:

“Run nigger, run
De Patteroll git you!
Run nigger, run
De Patteroll come!
Watch nigger, watch-
De Patteroll trick you!
Watch nigger, watch
He got a big gun!”⁵⁹

Despite the salient animosity, it is apparent from slave narratives and interviews with ex-slaves that they often rubbed shoulders with poor whites. While many former slaves, like Clark Flemming who was interviewed when he was at least 74 years old, only mentioned low income whites in passing, others like Rosa Starke recalled with great detail distinctions between slave owning whites and their poor counterparts.⁶⁰ Theft of provisions is traditionally treated as a form of resistance by scholars but when we consider the extensive trade of stolen items between blacks and whites a more complicated picture emerges. In response to Nat Turner’s rebellion and the raids that followed, Harriet Jacobs detailed the behavior of poor whites in her community and both her disdain and sympathy shine through:

Orders were given, and the wild scouts rushed in every direction, wherever a colored face was to be found. It was a grand opportunity for the low whites, who had no negroes of their own to

⁵⁹ “Anthony Dawson. Age 105.” Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938. [https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=68&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Dawson,+Anthony\)\)](https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=68&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Dawson,+Anthony))) accessed March 29, 2016

⁶⁰ “Rosa Starke. Ex-slave 83 years Old.” Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938. [https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=144/mesn144.db&recNum=150&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Starke,+Rosa\)\)](https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=144/mesn144.db&recNum=150&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Starke,+Rosa))) accessed March 29, 2016

scrounge. They exulted in such a chance to exercise a little tried authority, and show their subserviency to the slaveholders; not reflecting that the power which trampled on the colored people also kept themselves in poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation.⁶¹

This duality in feeling is present in other reflections on poor whites. Octavia George's testimony suggests disdain for her poor white neighbors. She blamed them for encouraging bad behavior among slaves but at the same time acknowledged that enslaved people regularly sold stolen items to impoverished whites.⁶² While relations were strained between enslaved Americans and the poor whites that often served as patrolmen, George was not the only ex-slave to suggest that a lively trade, particularly in food, existed. Equally significant is the fact that enslaved individuals were willing to share their limited provisions with poor whites. Stephen McCray's father invited slave catchers into his home and offered them water one evening and in return was promised that they wouldn't bother him.⁶³ Whether McCray's father like Harriet Jacobs recognized that the patrolmen were being exploited by the elites or he was attempting to curry favor is unclear. What is apparent; however, is that food brought enslaved blacks and poor whites together at the expense of planters.

⁶¹ Negri, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 55-56.

⁶² Octavia George. Age 85 yrs. Oklahoma City, Okla." Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938. https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=116&tempFile=./temp/~amme_m_MiWb&filecode=mesn&next_filecode=mesn&prev_filecode=mesn&itemnum=19&ndocs=100. accessed March 29, 2016.

⁶³ "Stephen McCray. Age 88 yrs. Oklahoma City, Okla." Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938. [https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=212&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(McCray,+Stephen\)\)](https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=212&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(McCray,+Stephen))). accessed March 29, 2016

Antebellum poor whites were also open to transcending the south's racial hierarchy when food was involved. Like enslaved blacks, poor farmers found no qualms in claiming foodstuffs from their elite neighbors as their own. Quoting a Charleston newspaper, Olmsted points out that three fourths of the individuals that engage in trade with slaves were too poor to pay the fine levied for this illegal act and rarely had property of their own.⁶⁴ Similar to bonded people, lower class whites crossed the color line to trade and barter when convenient and were willing to risk prison. They also actively sought out enslaved men and women to engage in the trade of foodstuff and were likely aware that they were receiving stolen goods. Anthony Dawson, another former slave, supported this claim. Speaking with an interviewer, Dawson explained that everyone on his plantation knew that if members of a slave patrol passed by, they were doing their job. If they loitered, it was to initiate some sort of trade.⁶⁵

Even when the south's most marginalized weren't engaged in direct trade, it is evident that an informal culinary exchange was taking place. As Genovese points out, African-Americans "contributed more to the diet of the poorer whites than the poorer whites ever had the chance to contribute to theirs."⁶⁶ For example, overcooking vegetables was common across the south. While enslaved Americans followed suit, they retained the liquid or "pot-likker" which happened to contain most of the nutritional value. The popularity of pot-likker is evident in WPA interviews. Interviewed in Arkansas but raised on a large Alabama plantation, Henry Green was one of many former slaves who

⁶⁴ Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, 441.

⁶⁵ Anthony Dawson. Age 105. Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938. [https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=69&itemLink=S?ammem/mesn bib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Dawson,+Anthony\)\)](https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=69&itemLink=S?ammem/mesn bib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Dawson,+Anthony))) accessed March 29, 2016

⁶⁶ Genovese, *Roll Jordan, Roll*, 549.

specifically mentioned pot-likker in his description of slave diets, specifically that of children.⁶⁷ While it was common for lower-class southern whites to disdain foods they associated with African-Americans, Genovese suggests that some also retained the liquid from boiling vegetables for consumption.⁶⁸ The similarities between the diets of enslaved Americans and poor whites is examined, among other things, in Sam Boward Hillard's classic *Hog Meat and Hoecake: Food Supply in the Old South 1840-1860*.⁶⁹ Far less common than garden plots, some enslaved African-Americans obtained the right to maintain their own livestock. Chickens were a popular animal kept by slave households because they yielded both meat and eggs. Another favored animal were pigs. Hillard argues that pigs represented the bulk of meat consumption across the south for both blacks and whites. While pork was a perennial presence on the tables of the planter class it was far less common for bonded people and poor whites. The fact that limited access to meat was an experience common to both enslaved Americans and lower class whites provided another instance for unity. Moreover the central role of vegetables and fruits in the diet of both groups yielded many dietary similarities that seemed to bring both groups together not only in collusion against planters but also in personal contact with one another as recipes were exchanged and provisions shared.

The work of culinary historians who have examined African-American foodways is most useful in pointing to West African food traditions maintained by enslaved Ameri-

⁶⁷ "Interview with Green, Henry". Watt McKinney. *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?mesn:3:./temp/~ammem_BpuX:: accessed March 29, 2016

⁶⁸ Genovese, *Roll, Jordon, Roll*, 548.

⁶⁹ Sam Bowers Hillard, *Hog Meat and Hoecake: Food Supply in the Old South, 1840-1860*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014).

cans and absorbed by southern whites.⁷⁰ Pot-likker is just one instance of the informal exchange between enslaved people and poor whites. Limited access to meat meant that vegetables were the centerpiece of most dishes for both enslaved Americans and poor whites. Genovese points to “Hopping John,” cowpeas prepared with pork and with or without rice, as a meal consumed by both groups.⁷¹ Lack of variety, a common complaint, likely encouraged enslaved Americans and landless whites to not only barter but also exchange tips for enhancing simple dishes. Frederick Douglas Opie Jr. argues that chitlins, collard greens, okra, and turnip greens were prepared in the heavily seasoned African-American tradition and eaten by both planters and lower class whites.⁷² Given the presences of enslaved Americans in the planter kitchens it is easy to understand how West African and African-American food became staples in the planter household. The fact that these foods and cooking practices found their way into the homes of poor whites is significant because it suggests meaningful, personal contact between the two groups. This claim is further supported by the frequency of theft of food items. Despite undeniable tension between both groups, it is apparent that a lively exchange was in place that brought enslaved blacks and poor whites together in culture and in informal opposition to the planter class.

⁷⁰ Frederick Douglas Opie, *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) and Jessica B. Harris, *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).

⁷¹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 548.

⁷² Opie, *Hog and Hominy*, 13.

V. Conclusion

After being separated from his family in 1805 Charles Ball, like many other enslaved men and women, made the decision to adapt to his new surroundings. Food played a central role in helping Ball assimilate to his new environment. After being assigned to a cabin that already housed a family, Ball demonstrated that he was willing to contribute to the household by contributing food obtained from hunting to the home. Instead of relying on rations, Ball established himself as a respectable member of the greater community by procuring his own provisions. While Ball's two successful escapes to freedom are not representative of the slave experience, the manner in which food was used to negotiate relationships is. Similar themes are found in other narratives as well as planter journals and, most noticeably, post-emancipation testimony. These themes are not unique to particular states and instead can be seen across the pre-war south. Historians have explored various aspects of slave life but the lack of meaningful analysis of the culture surrounding food within the slave quarters has neglected a critical facet of life for bondsmen and -women. In addition, emphasizing friction between enslaved peoples and poor whites makes it difficult to identify instances of collaboration and camaraderie. Additional research is needed to further explore the role of food in shaping African-American kinship networks in the old south. What is apparent, however, is the value of food in understanding interpersonal dynamics among enslaved people as well as with landless whites in the antebellum south.

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