BLACK, WHITE, AND SUNDAY SCHOOL: THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG RELIGION, THE PLANTATION MISTRESS, AND THE SLAVE IN REALITY AND IN MEMORY

by

KATHERINE ELIZABETH ROHRER

Under the Direction of Diane Batts Morrow

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the relationships among antebellum southern slaveholding women, their bondmen, and religion—considering that experience both in reality and in memory. It considers these relationships across the South in settings of various sizes and economic complexities. In particular, it describes the plantation mistress role as religious educator and the frustrations related to it as well as the slaves’ receptions to, and opinions of, these efforts. This thesis argues three broad points: 1) antebellum slaveholding women felt morally and socially obligated to evangelize their slaves despite many difficulties, 2) antebellum bondmen generally identified negative relationships with mistresses with regard to religious instruction, and 3) both ex-slaveholding women and ex-bondmen remembered their shared religious experiences more positively than they described them in their antebellum sources. Findings are based upon: mistress diaries, nineteenth-century slave narratives, post-bellum mistress memoirs, and the Works Progress Administration slave narratives.

INDEX WORDS: plantation mistress, slave, religious instruction, Bible, slavery, South
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KATHERINE ELIZABETH ROHRER

Major Professor:       Diane Batts Morrow
Committee:             John C. Inscoe
                        David D. Roberts

Electronic Version Approved:
Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2007
DEDICATION

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INTRODUCTION

To anyone who knows me only superficially, this thesis topic, one which examines the relationship between the plantation mistress and her slaves concerning religion, may seem an odd choice. Why would a young white woman, reared in suburban Washington, D.C. within a white collar family, choose a study which focuses, in large measure, on African Americans? Furthermore, one could ask, why would someone like myself, acknowledging such an interest, be capable of writing about African Americans and their history? Although my background may suggest that I have had little or no interaction with African Americans and their culture, I beg to differ.

Diversity has always been a part of my life. I was born in a city that was 75% black; I grew up in a county that was, and still is, very racially/ethnically mixed. I was aware from an early age of a rich cultural palate, one which contained a multitude of shades and of a landscape filled with faces of many different descriptions. When I entered my kindergarten classroom on September 5, 1988, I found it filled with five year-olds of all colors: white, red, yellow, brown, and especially black. So personally delivered, this encounter with diversity was a new experience, one that left an indelible impression. With that event-- although I had always lived in an “United Nations” microcosm-- race became yet another one of the many lenses through which I processed my world. Thus, as just a fledgling, I became very aware of, and interested in, these “other,” especially black, people. I wondered as a very little girl how these people, apart from the obvious, differed from me. Were their families like mine? Did they celebrate the same
holidays? Did they tell a lot of family stories in their homes? Did they attend the same kind of churches?

By upper elementary school, I had become quite attracted to history, especially the history of Virginia and the South. Then, I visited Mount Vernon, Monticello, Colonial Williamsburg, Gunston Hall, and many other historical sites. Although at that age I admittedly was the most taken with the architecture, furnishings, and gardens of those properties, I distinctly remember on one such occasion having my focus significantly redirected. At Monticello that day, a good family friend questioned the interpreter about the slave experience, and in so doing, brought into my mind a new dimension. His question initiated a lively conversation and such inquiries as: Where were the slave cabins? How did slavery exactly impact the southern economy in this location? How was the slave family treated as a unit at Monticello? Of course, at age ten, I was too young to have real understanding of the significance of either the questions or the answers raised in that conversation. However, frequently in the years following, prompted by a variety of incidents and interchanges, my mind returned to that verbal exchange, forcing me to ponder time and again different components of the African American experience in American history.

In middle school and high school, southern history, including that of the African American, continued to play a part in my academic life. A highlight of that period occurred during my freshman year in high school. I was asked to prepare an entry for a writing contest sponsored by the *Montgomery (MD) Journal* and the City of Gaithersburg. In recognition of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday, I prepared an essay which considered his legacy. Several weeks later, during a ten-day hiatus from school due to a major blizzard, I received at home a phone call from my English teacher informing me that I was the winner. Subsequently, I
delivered my piece before my entire school, before the city council in my hometown, and before a packed auditorium at the local community college on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. As I stood with the attendees, all black except for the newspaper editor, the mayor, the county executive, and my parents, at the community college celebration and sang with them “We Shall Overcome,” I was cognizant of my relationship, albeit limited and adolescent, with the African American experience. I realized on that afternoon that my interest in the black community would not end with the benediction delivered there; rather it would continue into my life to come. I believe that this experience, in particular, played a seminal role in placing me on my present path in southern history.

Thus, this thesis, which examines the relationship between the antebellum plantation mistress and her slaves with regard to religion, required that I have a substantial understanding of the historiography of: 1) antebellum slave religion and its participants, 2) antebellum southern elite women, and 3) to a lesser extent, antebellum southern religion. Before I can address how my thesis “fits” into the preexisting historiography of these three sub-fields of southern history, it is necessary that I briefly review the arguments which already exist within them.

Those scholars who have studied African American religion in the antebellum South emphasized that slaves turned to religion in an escape from the physical and psychological pain of their daily lives. Albert J. Raboteau’s *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (1978) is still today the most significant and the most often cited study of slave religion. At the time of the publication of Raboteau’s volume, very few books existed which examined the black religious experience in the antebellum South, and those that did exist focused upon the “visible” institutions, including the independent black denominations and their churches. Prior to Raboteau, there was virtually no scholarship that dealt specifically with black
religion during slavery. *Slave Religion* revealed that the African American slave community possessed a thriving religious culture. Syncretism characterized this culture and, by so doing, created an environment in which slave religion contained elements both of the African experience and Anglo-American societal influences. Slaves, as reported by Raboteau, in cleaving to their African identity, vigorously kept alive various aspects of their African/animist/Muslim religions, particularly retaining their traditions of oration and storytelling. To this, they added artifacts of their Anglo-American experience when they converted, in very large numbers, to Christianity in the years directly following the Second Great Awakening. Slave owners responded to that movement in various ways, including the orchestration of Christianization of their slaves. This activity was especially prevalent between the 1820s and 1850s. Central to Raboteau’s thesis is the theme of slave resistance.

To a marked degree, historians writing on this topic since Raboteau have upheld much of his thesis. Such historians as Margaret Washington Creel and Mechal Sobel, for example, arrived at conclusions similar to his; however, they based their writings on more confined geographical and/or denominational samples. Mechal Sobel, for example, argued in *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* that elements of an African sacred cosmos in the late eighteenth century melded with an emerging white, evangelical Baptist view, resulting in what Sobel called a coherent and distinct African American religious faith. Margaret Washington Creel, who certainly upheld Raboteau’s findings, examined one distinct population, specifically antebellum Gullah slaves, slaves who were especially successful in preserving their African/Muslim roots. Nevertheless, Creel discovered that even the Gullahs, who lived in relative geographic isolation in lowland South Carolina and Georgia, did not completely escape influences of Anglo-American Christianity.
At the inception of my research, I believed that, in the manner of Sobel and Creel, I would not discover evidence that would deviate significantly from Raboteau and those in his camp. My investigation confirmed my assumption. In the tradition of the previously cited historians, I identified several antebellum slaves who possessed noticeable agency. This agency took several different forms including, for example, the power to affect/change mistresses’ religious beliefs and the choice to reject their mistresses’ religious teachings. In this same arena, I also found evidence of plantation mistresses who religiously shaped their slaves, at times even in profound ways. The evidence I found strongly supported the argument surrounding syncretism.

It is painfully obvious that scholars were slow to embrace the topic of antebellum southern elite women. As one would have expected, those historians, primarily white women, who did embrace this new sub-field characterized elite southern women in a number of different ways. Nevertheless, it is easy to formulate generalizations from that existing literature. For example, several scholars, including Anne Firor Scott and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, characterized elite southern women as “ladies,” persons whose lives were structured by purity, morality, subservience, decorum, leisure, and civility. Additionally, historians of this camp stressed that the hegemony of patriarchy considerably bounded the lives of the typical elite southern female. Fox-Genovese took the “extra step” and portrayed these women, despite their “breeding,” as often duplicitous, mean-spirited, untrustworthy, and occasionally categorically cruel to their slaves.

Others, most prominently Catherine Clinton, rejected the portrayal of elite women as meek and pampered, arguing instead that many slave-owning women led physically-challenged and demanding lives. Often, they had burdensome responsibility in their own right. Still, other
historians, Elizabeth R. Varon and Christie Farnham being two in particular, have assigned to some southern elite women a degree of agency, maintaining that some of them sought to “better” themselves by means of educations, religion, and/or politics. And finally, among the historians of the antebellum female, a few, notably Victoria E. Bynum, discovered surprisingly deviant/unruly behaviors which defined some of those privileged women of that race, time, and place. In short, over the past 35 years, those historians who studied antebellum southern elite women have produced wide-ranging conclusions with regards to this population. Critics have received most of the previously cited scholars relatively well; however, after having read the theses of many of them, I am unable to completely embrace or reject the conclusions of any of them. Scholars cannot consider slaveholding women as a single unique entity. Nor can I report that, as a population, its members behaved in completely prescribed and predictable ways. As in all social groups, there was a great deal of individualization among slaveholding women, resulting from numerous differences in life experience and varied geographies.

The sub-field of southern religion has grown a great deal during the past three decades. John B. Boles, one of the most prolific scholars in southern (primarily, but not exclusively, white) religion of this generation, along with others, including Christine Leigh Heyrman and the “now” Eugene Genovese, recently metamorphosed as an evangelical Roman Catholic, examined the role of the Second Great Awakening, analyzing how it affected the politics, the social customs, the gender roles, and the everyday lives of the master class, including women, and society in general, both black and white. An understanding of the religious and social/cultural effects of the Second Great Awakening provided me an essential guiding light which revealed: 1) those reasons which prompted slave-owning women to bring God and his word to her slaves, and 2) those particular elements of Christianity which plantation mistresses deemed necessary to
convey. The results of my research indicated that the role of the Second Great Awakening, although an important element, could not be a defining force in this thesis.

I find it remarkable, considering the numerous studies that have been completed in the last quarter century or so on slave-mistress relationships, that no scholar to date has published either a full-length narrative or significant article which examines the relationship between the slave community and their mistresses with regard to religion. Several historians, Marli F. Weiner included, have written articles and book chapters that have examined the moral dilemma of slave-holding, but surprisingly few scholars have included more than a long footnote that touched upon the subject of slave-holding women as religious educators. Likewise, historians writing primarily from the antebellum African American perspective, Deborah Gray White to mention one, have tended to downplay the slaves’ interactions with plantation mistresses, or have sought to emphasize the very negative relationships between these two groups. This thesis begins to fill this void, and in so doing, it addresses, as equitably as possible, both the African American slave community and slave-holding mistresses in the arena of faith.

Several questions drive this thesis: 1) To what extent did society require antebellum slave-holding women of the middle and upper classes to live up to the nineteenth century idealized image of the morally superior “lady,” and to what extent were they successful in doing so? 2) To what extent did such antebellum slave-holding women feel it their moral responsibility to act as a “religious educator” to their slaves? 3) What aspects of Christianity did these women attempt to teach to their slaves? 4) To what extent did slave communities embrace plantation mistress teachings? 5) To what extent, if any, did slave-owning women influence slave religious beliefs and practices? 6) To what extent did slave communities influence the mistress in the realm of her own religion and beyond? and 7) What evidence does exist within primary sources
generated by the slaves which reflect the role/impact of religion in their daily lives? In this analysis, I did not examine any one particular region of the South, nor did I look at plantations of a specific size. I developed materials pertaining to many and varied areas of the South and to acreages ranging from huge to relatively small, so small that slaveholding equated to owning three to five persons. I ultimately discovered that many factors, among which are region, farm or plantation size, financial standing, mistress age, mistress education, mistress religiosity, and mistress relationship to her white family, influenced how, when, and to what extent slaveholding women brought Christ and Christianity into the lives of their slaves and to what extent slave communities accepted or rejected their efforts.

Chapter I examines the mistress/slave religious relationship through the eyes of the mistress. It considers some of those reasons why antebellum plantation mistresses believed it to be their responsibility to provide meaningful religious instruction to their bondmen. Next, chapter II looks at bondmen and how they conceptualized their religious relationships with their mistresses. Bondmen typically revealed negative relationships with their mistresses, but, in some cases, identified genuine and meaningful relationships. Finally, chapter III further plows new ground and raises new questions by considering how both former slaveholding women and ex-slaves reflected upon their antebellum religious experiences.

I examined a variety of sources in my efforts, relying primarily upon: 1) roughly 150 published and unpublished plantation mistress diaries housed at the University of Georgia libraries, particularly the Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, and others housed in the Southern Historical Collection at the Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina, 2) roughly 75 book-length slave accounts published in the nineteenth century, and 3) thousands of Works Progress Administration slave interviews (1930s). Although I relied primarily upon slave
narratives and plantation mistress diaries, I must acknowledge other important primary materials. These include: 1) church documents, ie. *Duties of Christian Masters*, and similar publications which discuss slaveholder practices relative to the religious education of their slaves, 2) antebellum ladies’ magazines, including the *Southern Literary Messenger*, *Southern Ladies’ Companion*, and *Southern Quarterly Review*, and 3) travel accounts written overwhelmingly by northerners and occasionally by foreigners. Although my thesis generally considers the period from 1830-1860, the sources which allowed me to craft my argument were produced over a century of American history and in many ways reflect that period of time as much as they explain the antebellum South.
CHAPTER I:

“Lord Keep and Teach Me what I May Teach Her”: Plantation Mistresses’ Pursuits to Evangelize their Slaves as Revealed by their Antebellum Diaries

Antebellum plantation mistress diaries reveal that their authors considered it their responsibility to care for their slave families, particularly by tending to the sick and by training their members to perform domestic tasks. These sources further reveal, especially after about 1830, that many mistresses expanded these expressions of “benevolence” to include religious education. As the years passed, also according to these sources, they appeared to have felt increasingly more committed to the evangelizing of their slaves. The first half of this chapter will examine some of those reasons why antebellum plantation mistresses believed it to be their responsibility to convey benevolence and to act charitably toward their slaves, in general, and to provide meaningful religious instruction, specifically. Some southern elite women of that era successfully internalized society’s expectations that they behave in prescribed ways. However, many of those women felt frustration and often encountered obstacles in their efforts to live up to an arguably idealized model. As a result, as they expressed in their diaries, it was not unusual for such women to feel inadequate and lost in the specific role of religious educator. The second half of this chapter will examine specific frustrations and obstacles faced by antebellum

plantation mistresses in their role as religious educator. Among these frustrations and obstacles were: 1) disappointment with the realization that slaves rejected the religion which they taught and the lifestyle which it assumed, 2) their inner conflicts related to the moral issues surrounding the institution of slavery, including the realization that their efforts as religious educator were not to bring her slaves to God, but rather to insure personal salvation, 3) discomfort in the knowledge that mistresses and their slaves did not always agree about some Christian concepts and practices, and 4) anger directed at their husbands, emanating from their position which allowed them little or no decision-making power.

After about 1830, antebellum plantation mistresses commonly expanded their definitions of “benevolence” to include religious education. Some of them recorded that they felt increasingly committed in helping their bondmen forge meaningful relationships with God. Why did this occur? Historians, particularly Marli Weiner and Anne Firor Scott, have considered this question, concluding that this expanded definition of “benevolence” evolved logically from an ideology of paternalism and was identified with, and perpetuated by, the elite southern white male. Men characterized as paternalistic viewed bondmen as dependents in need of protection and guidance, much in the same way as their own children. Within the confines of such paternalism, slaveholders were materially, morally, and spiritually responsible for slave welfare. However, in practical terms, white plantation owners, by virtue of the demands of the plantation and the social system it spawned, were seldom willing or able to attend personally to the material care and religious guidance expected of them by their paternally-driven social order. Instead, those duties typically fell to their female family members who regularly found themselves charged with their slaves’ material, moral, and spiritual needs.
Slaveholding women’s diaries which have preserved the observations, thoughts, and feelings of their authors are more useful to scholars who are exploring the daily lives of southern women, including their acts of benevolence, than are some of the other types of sources. For example, among those other sources which many consider flawed, pre-Civil War slave narratives typically projected an abolitionist agenda. Likewise, other black and white sources, written after the Civil War, whether they be the products of the Works Progress Administration Slave Narrative Project or mistress memoirs published concurrently with the U.B. Phillips era of southern apologia, also lack objectivity. Slaveholding women’s diaries, however, are unique in that these women did not write them for an outside audience; thus, readers can presume that their authors, who in essence were having a conversation only with themselves, were relatively candid in what they wrote. Repeatedly, the opening passage in diary after diary attested its author’s commitment to honesty and candor. Interestingly, New Year’s Day was a predictable and popular time for a mistress to reaffirm written veracity.² For example, Lucilla McCorkle wrote in 1858: “May this old account book witness my honesty and sincerity in this transaction and may it ever remind me of the Great Day of Accounts--where the Judge of Quick and Dead will sit upon the great white Heaven and open the Lord’s Book of Life!”³ Similar sentiments appeared throughout antebellum mistress diaries.

² Although many such sentiments were seemingly genuine, at least at the moment they wrote them, it is impossible to know to what extent such entries were mere New Year’s resolutions or to what extent they reflected high-minded intentions.

³ Lucilla Agnes Gamble McCorkle Diary in the William Parsons McCorkle Papers, 1 January 1858, University of North Carolina, Southern Historical Collection (hereafter referred to as UNC-SHC).
Paternalism was only one source of motivation for those mistresses who embarked upon slave religious education. Slaveholders across the South, church publications, including *Duties of Christian Masters to their Servants*, and selected northern-authored travel journals also supported slaveholding mistresses’ efforts to bring God to their slaves. Church publications, in particular, by their paternalistic language and male authorship, challenged elite southern women to take on an evangelizing role and to establish Sunday School activities into which they would bring their bond people. The Reverend Francis Hanson, Rector of St. Andrew’s and St. Michael’s Episcopal Churches near Demopolis, Alabama, praised several plantation mistresses of his acquaintance who “devoted much time and care to the religious instruction of [their] servants.”

In addition to the men, there were a few women, including South Carolinian Louisa S. McCord, whom Mary Boykin Chesnut described as possessing the “intellect of a man and the perseverance and endurance of a woman,” who were particularly vocal in their support for plantation mistresses who assumed roles of Christian educators. McCord, an accomplished playwright and poet, best-known for her drama, *Caius Gracchus: A Tragedy in Five Acts*,

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4 In 1849, the Baptist State Convention of Alabama offered a premium of $200 for the best essay on the duties of Christian masters to their servants; other states copied this practice. Slaveholders probably held copies of these and mistresses may have taken suggestions from their contents. See Holland Nimmons McTyeire, D.D., *Duties of Christian Masters* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Methodist publishing house, 1855), 10-11.

associated freely with the faculty at South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina), married at a then-unconventionally advanced age, and held property in her name after her marriage. This unorthodox female, despite her status as the only white antebellum southern female essayist and intellectual, passionately supported conventional ideas about the submission of women, marriage and motherhood, paternalism, and slaveholding women’s roles as “parent” and “teacher” of their slaves. McCord substantiated her conviction that the role of plantation mistress and the role of care-taker went hand-in-hand in her writing of “Woman’s Progress,” which contained the following stanza:

Sweet sister! Stoop not thou to be a man!  
Man has his place as woman hers; and she,  
As made to comfort, minister, and help,  
Moulded for gentler duties, ill fulfils  
His jarring destinies. Her mission is  
To labour and to pray; to help, to heal,  
To soothe, to bear; patient, with smiles, to suffer;\(^6\)

Further into the poem, she continued:

She is a living sermon of that truth,  
Which ever through her gentle actions speaks,  
That life is given to labour and to love,  
Through this rough world her angel ministry to all,  
Like sweetest water bubbling through the sands  
Of arid desert, cheers the weary heart,  
And leads the restless soul which cursed its fate  
To pause, to think, and learn to love that God  
Who, midst the parching waste of suffering,  
Has dropped this comfort like a boon from Heaven

To bid him drink and live.\textsuperscript{7}

One hundred and fifty years after the writing of this poem, one cannot declare absolutely that McCord included slaves in her vision of a woman’s informal Christian ministry. However, I believe, knowing about this southern woman and by her inclusion of the line “through this rough world her angel ministry to all,” that McCord did not exclude bondmen from her model for elite white women as evangelizers. Additionally, I believe that McCord did not intend that white women use her words in efforts directed toward white persons because they would have had access to the formally-trained clergy.

Although few women spoke publicly about these topics, many slaveholding women did specifically address the topic of mistresses as religious instructors and moral examples. Some of those diarists, while pupils at elite finishing schools in such places as Baltimore, Charleston, Nashville, and New Orleans, wrote essays that discussed their impending obligations as wives in a privileged class. In them, they identified those duties expected of them: obedience to God and to men, industry, cheerfulness, and being moral examples for both their white families and their slave communities. Ella MacKenzie’s (nee Noland) essay, “On Obedience,” is one such example. From a Baltimore female academy, MacKenzie of Leesburg, Virginia, wrote in 1849 that as an adult she would “embrace with constant devotion her duties as a virtuous Christian woman, always mindful of her duties to her family and servants and that she pitied the woman

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 152. “Woman’s Progress,” published in the \textit{Southern Literary Magazine} in November 1853, reached a fairly large readership among southern elite women. McCord’s piece appeared shortly after the Seneca Falls Convention (1848), the first meeting of significance which discussed women’s rights. McCord’s contentions about the white female role were antithetical to most of those advanced by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.
who did not obey God or men.” Had MacKenzie read McCord, she would have felt reassured by McCord’s philosophies. There were many slaveholding women who, like MacKenzie and McCord, defended the ideologies of domesticity and paternalism which partially defined the antebellum South. Detractors of antebellum southern elitism, however, are quick to identify these ideologies as mechanisms that controlled both the black race and the female gender.

In the tradition of the MacKenzies and McCords, some slaveholding women exhibited evidence of their devotion to the higher calling by affixing, in their diaries, clippings taken from various publications. These clippings outlined in detail the requirements of propriety, religious propriety included. For example, between 1846 and 1858 Lucilla Agnes Gamble McCorkle of Talladega, Alabama, the wife of a Presbyterian minister who founded a religious-affiliated college for women, filled a journal with material which she both quoted and clipped from newspapers and periodicals that defined those virtues to which proper women should aspire. In particular, McCorkle’s material included citations from northerner Catherine Maria Sedgwick’s writing as well as those written by other champions of the ideology of domesticity. Various southern periodicals frequently reprinted such pieces. Those works, which emphasized patience, tenderness, and firmness, offered tangible directives which slave religious educators could incorporate into their own efforts. One of the pieces which McCorkle attached to her diary contained the following instruction: “Perhaps one of the most indispensable and endearing qualifications of the feminine character is an amiable temper with servants.” Seemingly, plantation women, McCorkle included, frequently assessed their own successes and failures in


9 Lucilla Agnes Gamble McCorkle Diary, no date (p. 1), UNC-SHC.
living up to those ideals presented to them by such publications. Although slaveholding women often revealed that they worried about falling short of their goals, they also wrote of their efforts to improve themselves, especially in the role of religious educator.

Thus, antebellum plantation mistress diaries indicated that most elite women felt obliged to provide religious instruction to their slaves and that they appeared to be fairly committed to doing so. Predictably, the more religious the mistress, the more apt she was to structure a religious framework consciously and conscientiously from which she hoped her slaves would benefit. Faith played a central role in the daily lives of religious mistresses, and many such women thoroughly recorded their religious instruction of slaves. Many of them had attended religious academies as teenagers, and those experiences provided them with both the knowledge and confidence to proceed in that undertaking. In some instances, especially in the non-cash crop regions of the South, the more religious mistresses recorded in their diaries having held morning prayer services for their slaves before breakfast and having observed Sunday as a strictly religious occasion, one that prohibited the performance of most physical tasks.10 Maria Southgate Hawes, the wife of one of Kentucky’s governors, wrote during a visit to Shreveport, Louisiana, during the Civil War: “The young ladies taught some of the brighter ones among the house servants to read from the Bible; every morning several little colored children would gather for their lessons.”11

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10 It is impossible to estimate the frequency of such reported Sunday plantation behavior which prohibited work. In reality, masters would have granted very few slaves complete, or even partial, rest on the Sabbath Day.

11 Maria Southgate Hawes Diary, 8 March 1863, UNC-SHC.
Unfortunately, however, slaveholding women recorded very little about the actual content and form of their religious teachings. Bondmen and women complained in their nineteenth century slave narratives that those white preachers and mistresses with whom they had contact were often selective in their biblical teachings, maintaining that those persons typically emphasized teachings that reinforced slave subservience. Mistress entries regularly acknowledged that they their introduced slaves to the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, various catechisms, and the concepts of heaven, hell, and salvation, but they rarely acknowledged discussion of specific Biblical figures, other than Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and those patriarchs’ servants. Acknowledging that Protestants and especially evangelical Protestants, which a significant number of these mistresses would have been, were New Testament/Jesus-centric, one can question the lack of acknowledgement to some of the major New Testament figures. Evangelical mistresses, however, were particularly fond of the Gospel of John.

Regardless of the way in which she viewed herself religiously, how well or not well the mistress viewed her bondmen largely determined to what extent she instructed her slaves. One can infer after examining Mary Eliza Eve Carmichael’s diary that she was not one of those mistresses who remotely felt obligated to provide religious instruction to her slaves. Not only did she make no reference in her diary to having done so, the following quote indicated that it was highly unlikely that she did: “When I returned from church I found my husband and boys in great despair as they had just found out we had been robbed of a great deal of money say from 1 to 2 hundred dollars by one of our servants.”

12 Mary Eliza Eve Carmichael Diary, 8 April 1838, UNC-SHC.
The mistress’ view of slaves ranged from godly to almost inhuman. In her eyes, were her slaves worthy of deliverance and possessing of souls, were they almost animal-like in their lack of humanity, or were they positioned at some point between these two extremes? While some slaveholding women viewed all her slaves to be unworthy of, or unsuitable for, religious instruction, many of them believed that they could be successful in evangelizing them. Often, mistresses perceived house slaves to be more suitable candidates than field hands. This may have been the function of the mistress’ greater familiarity with the house staff and it with her.

Maria Baker Taylor, of Beaufort, South Carolina and Osceola, Florida, was a plantation mistress who believed that the finding of the road to salvation was as much the right of a black person as a white person. Although she affirmed that the Holy Scriptures clearly established the right of men to own slaves, she also believed that religious education of bondmen was an obligatory duty of slaveholding women. In substantiating this, Taylor cited Colossians 4:1: “Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal, knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven.” She reasoned, as did other benevolent mistresses, that although slaves were property, they were also human beings, guilty of sin but worthy of deliverance. They had immortal souls and were thus capable of obtaining their reward for eternity. Taylor was an impassioned, “born again” Baptist, who as wife, mother, and plantation mistress, served for many years as the secretary of the Female Missionary Society, a large regional charitable organization. In that capacity, she made repeated reference to her grandfather, Richard Furman, a founder of several southern colleges, president of the South Carolina Baptist State Convention, and creator of plantation “preaching stations” for his slaves. Maria Taylor borrowed heavily from her grandfather’s ideas, particularly from his enlightened philosophies concerning slavery, when conceptualizing her own religious program. That included frequent, sometimes daily,
slave-attended religious meetings, open to all, in which she incorporated some of her grandfather’s beliefs, some of her own, and those of two slave preachers.\textsuperscript{13}

Some antebellum mistresses sincerely worried about their slaves’ spiritual welfare. A few, expressing an evangelical zeal that as many as possible be brought to God, went so far as to convey a desire that they would be with their bondmen in the world to come. Often, slaveholding women recorded genuine joy, reporting that their slave students were making good progress on their journey as Christians. It was especially meaningful for those mistresses who perceived themselves as instruments in “civilizing” those whom they classified as pagan slaves. Caroline Elizabeth Burgwin Clitherall, a school teacher, later plantation mistress who, with her husband, owned slaves in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Alabama, described many steps in the spiritual journey of one young slave adolescent. Clitherall wrote with considerable pride: “My little servant is, I think, striving to be a Christian.”\textsuperscript{14}

North Carolinian Mary Jeffreys Bethell was another mistress noteworthy for her degree of religiosity and dedication to slave religious education. Bethell was unusual, having been educated at a religiously conservative Moravian academy in Salem, North Carolina where she first established her personal relationship with God. A frequent attendee at evangelical camp meetings, Bethell repeatedly wrote in her diary about her on-going efforts to maintain her


\textsuperscript{14} Clitherall, 1 January, 1854. A reading of Clitherall’s diary, which is readily apparent as the writing of a devout woman who certainly has a personal relationship with God, convinces a reader from today’s world that the meaning of “Christian” is different than it is for many believers in contemporary society.
covenant with her Lord. Like Caroline Clitherall, Bethell reflected upon, with genuine gratitude, the spiritual advancement of her slaves. In November 1856, she wrote:

All at once Betty, the nurse (13 years old), broke out to saying Oh! Miss Mary I believe God will have mercy on me. I was astonished I told her yes that God would bless her if she would believe after she got home, she professed religion. I felt very thankful, I hope God will convert all of my Negroes. I am praying for it. I read the bible to them Sunday nights and instruct them, and sing and pray with them, some of them listen attentively but all my labor will be in vain without the help of God. Abi has professed religion. Little Tommy Torian professed religion last winter 1856 thanks to God.\textsuperscript{15}

As a researcher, I find it difficult to evaluate whether, or to what degree, slaves agreed with their mistresses’ assessments of their own purity of motive in their attempts at religious education and in their mistresses’ effectiveness in bringing them to God. In the case of Mary Jeffreys Bethell, testimony exists in which some of her ex-slaves attest her uplifting influence in their lives. For example, ex-slave William Bethell, a W.P.A. interviewee, reminisced that he “was quite a pet of the mistress, and [that] every morning and night my mistress would put her hand on my head and pray.”\textsuperscript{16}

Many slaveholding women, especially those more evangelically-inclined, embraced missionary roles and executed them with conviction. Mary Jeffreys Bethell wrote in 1857: “I feel a determination to love and serve God as long as I live, I want to be instrumental in bringing many sinners to Christ. I want to do everything with an eye single to the glory of God. I want to

\textsuperscript{15} Mary Jeffreys Bethell Diary, 31 November 1856, UNC-SHC.

be heavenly minded, and have the spirit of Christ, and grow in grace and in the knowledge of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”17 Another southern plantation woman disclosed to a northern governess who visited her plantation that she [the mistress] felt more greatly the weight of responsibility for elevating her slaves than she did for elevating her own biological children. “I tremble,” the travel journal reported, “at the reflection that God will ask their soul’s lives at my hands!”18 Corroborating these sentiments, Caroline Clitherall remarked on her relationship with a young house servant: “What a responsibility upon me— who am her only friend and the only one she has to lead her and instruct her in the right way of her duty. Lord keep and teach me that I may teach her.”19 Many slaveholding women across the antebellum South expressed similar feelings of accountability for their slaves’ souls; some even felt psychologically burdened by this moral duty. Contributing to their “burden” was the irreconcilable inner conflict held by some plantation mistresses that deliverance of persons to God was antithetical to the keeping of those same persons in bondage.

Examination of this subject revealed that many slaveholding women, according to their diaries, believed it necessary and obligatory to instruct their slaves personally in religious matters. There were a very few antebellum plantation mistresses, especially ones who might be classified as intellectuals, who adhered to an almost secular humanist philosophy and in so doing instructed their subservient subjects

17 Mary Jeffreys Bethell, 4 October 1857.


19 Caroline Clitherall, 29 January 1854.
with very literalistic biblical messages, those “secular humanist” mistresses attempted to enlighten their slaves spiritually by presenting them with a more ethically-based religious approach and point of view. The planter husband of one such woman, Everard Green Baker, of Jefferson County, Mississippi, recorded in his journal a conversation, in which he and his wife, Laura Lavinia Alexander Baker, were in agreement.20 Together, they reasoned that the slave “who had never read or heard of God, & all his works as revealed to us in the Bible, -- would nevertheless, if he conformed to the moral laws which every nation has in kind, for the promotion of good & repression of evil, -- go to that Heaven which the Saints & good people in Civilized countries, --find their abode.”21 Nevertheless, the Bakers, who as sincere Christians, frequently discussed religion, especially the weekly sermon, passionately supported the religious instruction of their bondmen and their confidence that those bondmen deserved a place in heaven.22 Baker’s sentiments were atypical of his time and his region, and whether his wife came to these opinions independently is, of course, unknown. Although antebellum diaries revealed that slave-directed religious instruction was a priority, it is obvious from those sources that the majority of mistresses would not have concurred with the quite revolutionary beliefs of Everard and Laura Baker concerning the possible paths to salvation.

Many antebellum slave narratives contended, however, that plantation mistresses who conducted Sabbath Schools did not do so out of a genuine concern for the spiritual welfare nor

20 I am not positive if Laura Baker ever kept a diary. It is certainly plausible that she did, but I could not locate one.

21 Everard Green Baker Diaries, 1 June 1849, UNC-SHC.

22 Ibid.
the ultimate salvation of their bondmen. Slaves complained about difficult mistress/slave relationships and the inability and/or unwillingness of mistresses to contemplate those cultural differences which separated them from the black population. Some slaveholding women’s antebellum diaries addressed some of those reasons which may have contributed to the criticism of mistresses put forth in slave narratives. Mistresses often expressed feelings of inadequacy and frustration in their role as religious educator. In some cases plantation mistresses either made no reference whatsoever to their efforts to Christianize their bondmen or they plainly indicated no interest in doing so. Many of those women who chose not to do so were candid in revealing their reasons. Some plantation mistresses professed little interest in religion in their own lives and thus had little or no interest in it in the lives of others. Other women viewed slaves as mentally incapable of receiving the knowledge that she may have wanted to convey. And finally, still others feared for their own physical safety in settings where they could be alone with a group of black men. If, however, a mistress were very religious, especially evangelistically religious, she would probably have tried to transcend negative feelings and/or fears because of the importance that she placed upon bearing witness. This corroborates the observations of slaves as reflected in the W.P.A. slave narratives as well as those authored by African Americans in the nineteenth century. Many white plantation women acting as religious educators throughout the antebellum South experienced considerable inner turmoil themselves. Religion placed many mistresses in uncomfortable positions that required them to reconcile their proselytizing of Christianity with their negative feelings about another race. Good intentions did not often translate as good feelings about oneself or one’s conduct. In a society that expected elite white women to be level-headed, calm, abounding in patience, and role models for others, it was difficult for such women
not to express negative feelings about husbands, family members, chattel, and their lives in general. The diary provided the only safe outlet for many frustrated and conflicted women.

Another thorny issue which negatively influenced the mistress/slave religious experience was the comfort level, actual or perceived, that a mistress felt with her slaves. Often, a mistress was reluctant to, or even refused to, attempt to educate a bondman whom she had not known from his early life. A slaveholding woman, acknowledging her duty to bring God to her slaves, frequently accepted the idea easily when she was able to begin the process with a young child whom she perceived as both more pliable and more pure. In those cases when a plantation family acquired teenaged or adult slaves, the mistress often was less eager to try to evangelize them because she expected them to have “minds of their own.” Many slaves of that category were more likely to exhibit resistance, having formed ideas of their own generated by their experiences both with other white people and by their interaction with members of their own cultural group residing on other plantations. The racial baggage of their time and place with which these women functioned would not have translated well for the slave population. Among the specific difficult issues which slaveholding women cited were: 1) disappointment with the realization that slaves rejected the religion which they taught and the lifestyle which it assumed, 2) discomfort in the knowledge that they and their slaves did not always agree about some Christian concepts and practices, 3) their inner conflict related to the question of the morality of slavery which often put them in a position 167 hours a week of being critical of slaves while putting them in the position one hour a week of imparting God’s teaching to them, and 4) their anger directed at their husbands, emanating from their placement into a role which allowed them

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23 Younger slaves also possessed more leisure time and were perhaps more educable.
little or no decision-making power; they felt considerable greater anger if their spouse had fathered mulatto children.

A mistress’ diary often offered to its author an avenue by which she could express frustration, not infrequently because no other avenue was available. In these private realms, white plantation women dealt with frustration over their realization that members of their slave community openly chose to reject their “brand” of religion and the lifestyle which that religion assumed. Sometimes such slaves formulated a Christianity more to their own liking. In other instances, they denied Christianity entirely. In reaction to these rejections, mistresses were not reticent about condemning the inferior nature of various African American religious practices. Furthermore, many mistresses believed that, because their bondmen were of an inferior race, they were incapable of being good practicing Christians…in their definition of the word. Susan Cornwall, of Burke County, Georgia, in 1857, repeatedly cited in her journal manifestations of the uncivilized nature of her bondmen: “Their very religion seems to consist of feelings or impulses, more than principles. They have no law for the governance of their passions higher than the dread of punishment for an offense, or glimpses of a tangible reward for a correct course of conduct.”24 Later, she added: “their examples of chastity are the exception not the rule. They see this themselves, know that it is wrong, but at the same time yield to their temptations and laugh at their disgrace.”25 Finally, she added: “And if this is the condition of the Negro after so

24 Susan Cornwall Diary, May 1857, UNC-SHC.

25 Ibid.
long a residence among a cultivated people enjoying, as most of them do, opportunities of learning what is right, what prospect is there of improvement if left to themselves?”

Slaves, in the view of their mistresses, often possessed incorrect knowledge about Christianity and were incorrect in their practices of it. These phenomena frustrated many mistresses and made them defensive about their efforts as Christian teachers. Mistresses frequently concluded that bondmen exhibited flawed ideas about Christianity and about some of the behaviors it expected of its faithful. They further believed that slaves were often overly superstitious, overly emotional, or that they retained in their religious rituals elements of their animistic African religions and even Islam.

Although many antebellum slaveholding women expressed disapproval and ridicule of some slave religious practices, a few who did possess a wider world view, including frequently cited Mary Boykin Chesnut, expressed interest in, and even admiration for, their bondmen’s forms of belief. Chesnut recorded:

Jim Nelson, the driver…was asked to lead in prayer. He became wildly excited, on his knees, facing us with his eyes shut. He clapped his hands at the end of every sentence, and his voice rose to the pitch of a shrill shriek, yet was strangely clear and musical, occasionally in a plaintive minor key that went to your heart. Sometimes it rang out like a trumpet. I wept bitterly… The Negroes sobbed and shouted and swayed backward and forward, some with aprons to their eyes, most of them clapping their hands and responding in shrill tones: ‘Yes God!’ ‘Jesus!’ ‘Bless de Lord, amen,’ etc. It was a little too exciting for me. I would very much have liked to shout, too. Jim Nelson when he rose from his knees trembled and shook as one in a palsy, and from his eyes you could see the

26 Ibid.
ecstasy had not left him yet. He could not stand at all, and sank back on his bench.27

Slave preachers constituted a crucial component of slave Christianity throughout the antebellum South. Plantation mistresses were well aware of them, many having personal interaction with them, in some cases witnessing their religious services. It is impossible to assess the impact these slave preachers may have had on elite white women, but evidence indicates that it was minimal.28 Some such women did, in their diaries, report that black preachers were intensely emotional in their delivery of uplifting sermons. Those plantation mistresses who were particularly evangelically-inclined were probably those who most appreciated the typical African American sermon and the service of which it was an element. Those women likely, because of their evangelism, felt more comfortable with the deeply personal and emotional ideas and expressions of Christianity. Consequently, the intense crying, the shouting, and the physical activity associated with the slave religious meeting would have seemed less extraordinary and would have been less uncomfortable for them to witness than those expressions would have been for a less evangelical woman.

Conversely, for those mistresses who resided in the earlier settled areas of the South, such as Virginia and Maryland, who tended to be Episcopalian, Presbyterian, or even Roman


28 Those mistress diaries which did specifically reference slave preachers included passages in which the author certainly acknowledged her awareness of them and their activities. This is not to say that mistresses described religious interaction between themselves and slave clergymen, but rather a horror that the slave clergy directed expressions and practices very different from their own.
Catholic, the structure and the content of the slave religious service probably would have seemed alien to the more staid, more predictable, and more ritualistic worship to which they were accustomed. At the end of the day, white slaveholding women, despite the few cases of those who tried to understand slave religious beliefs and practices, cleaved to the superiority of their own religious traditions, believing it their duty to bring their brand of Christianity to their inferiors. This disconnect significantly contributed to the almost universally difficult relationships between mistresses and slaves.

There was a group of antebellum slaveholding women who used the diary as a place to explore their feelings very candidly regarding the implications of slavery on their personal lives, feelings so upsetting that they were unable to function as religious educators to their slave populations. These strong negative feelings took different forms; all influenced mistress behavior dramatically. Some white females hated the institution of slavery because it provided sexual partners for their male relations, often straining their marriages. The plantation system which based itself on slavery created a lifestyle in which white elite women were often husbandless for large portions of the year. Male spouses frequently left home for extended periods of time to “attend to business,” usually in one of several urban areas of the South, especially Charleston, Savannah, New Orleans, and Baltimore. As a result, such females were without suitable companionship, typically leaving them in positions of great responsibility. In case after case after case, mistresses, in their diaries, began their daily entry with the lament “I am alone again” or with some sentence to that equivalent effect. From UNC-SHC: Clara Compton Raymond, Katherine Polk Gale, Emmaline Eve Smth, Mary Southgate Hawes, and others.
slaveholding women, including Mississippian Susan Dabney Smedes, maintained that, in the final analysis, the mistress “was the most complete slave” of them all.\(^{30}\) Thus, white women’s reasons for loathing the implications of slavery were multiple and complicated, frequently removing them from the Sunday circle in the parlor with the Bible in hand. That chosen behavior created feelings of guilt and doubt as women fought a moral battle within themselves. Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard, of Columbia, South Carolina, described her conflicted feelings about her bondmen and their access to religion on the eve of the Civil War: “Oh I wish I had been born in a Christian land & never seen or known of slaves of any colour. A degraded population is a curse to a country. Negroes are as deceitful & lying as any people can well be--Lord give me better feelings towards them. (Forgive me Lord, for unkind thoughts & have mercy on me!).”\(^{31}\)

Ann R. Page, of Frederick County, Virginia, religious almost to the point of obsession, committed to her diary thoughts not dissimilar to Brevard’s:

Ah! Thou hast seen that I should have gone to work in my own strength, and long ere this have given over through faintness and the discouragements which arise from the perverseness and ungrateful behavior of those whom I desired to serve. Look upon those of my fellow-creatures in servitude in my family, who this day has given way to the temptation of their situation in murmuring and rebellious language toward me. Thou canst enlighten them and show them the error of their way. Thou canst convince them of sin, and subdue their spirits to bear with patience the trial of being under the guidance of one, who only from necessity, as they well know, is enduring, and that for their


sakes, the task of urging them to such duties, as will lead to their temporal and eternal freedom.32

Some historians, notably Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, have faulted slaveholding women for their inability or unwillingness to consider the reasons for bondman behavior, especially the dynamics which resulted in miscegenation. She argued that behaviors that mistresses often deemed unacceptable or sinful were not within the control of the slave. Mistresses found it difficult to divorce such behaviors totally from the realm of religion. Scholars have discovered diary quotes which support the assertions that mistresses consistently expressed, both by word and by deed, disapproval of the slave population’s conduct. However, researchers must remain cognizant of the complexity of mistress/slave relationships, which were difficult at best. They produced within the mistress a wide range of emotions, similar to those parents felt for their children. The problematic quality of the typical mistress/slave relationship fueled the anger that mistresses vented; diaries were one of the few avenues available to elite white women who needed to “vent” often otherwise suppressed emotions. Susan Cornwall, of Burke County, Georgia occasionally expressed frustration and anguish over her slaves’ spiritual/moral status. Despite her conflicted emotions, Cornwall exhibited compassion for her slaves with respect to their religious experience: “I lift my voice and cry ’Teach me to be useful O Lord’ for I am an unprofitable servant.”33 Thus, despite irritation and feelings of inadequacy, Cornwall valued the welfare of the bondmen and committed herself to making her teaching methodology more effective.

Mary Eliza Eve Carmichael of Augusta, Georgia also expressed ambivalence about slave conduct. Carmichael, like Cornwall, projected both scorn for aspects of her slaves’ behaviors

33 Susan Cornwall, 1 May 1857.
and anxiety about her slaves’ needs for and rights to religious education, all within a single journal entry. Writing in March 1842, that mistress described being deeply moved by an “excellent sermon about charity,” expressing her desire to incorporate her minister’s sentiments into those sermons that she delivered to her slaves, while at the same time, discussing the distress she felt when one of the house servants burned the new imported carpet.34

Occasionally, mistresses were not reluctant to invest time and effort with older slaves. A notable example involved a transplant from Pennsylvania to the Deep South. Emily Wharton Sinkler was born in Philadelphia but relocated to the Santee River of South Carolina and lived as a mistress on a large cotton plantation. A devoutly religious person in her own right, Sinkler refused to give up on achieving religious salvation for her slaves, regardless of their ages. She viewed it as one of her primary missions in her earthly life to correct the religious knowledge and beliefs of her bondmen. Sinkler, referring to her religious efforts with her son’s newly purchased maid, wrote: “I taught her a prayer which I made her say every night and gave her some general ideas. I found she had some previous ideas on the subject but as you can imagine it was a hard thing for me to preserve suitable gravity when listening to her answers.”35

Finally, an overriding theme directly related to mistress frustration in her role as religious educator was the way she perceived the role of the elite white male, particularly, but not exclusively, her husband. The reality of mulatto children significantly contributed to this deep-seeded and on-going anger that plantation mistresses directed toward their spouses. Mary Boykin Chesnut wrote: “like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives

34 Mary Carmichael, 6 March 1842.

& their concubines, & the Mulattos one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children-
& every lady tells you who is the father of all the Mulatto children in everybody’s household,
but those in her own, she seems to think drop from the clouds or pretends so to think.”36

Although most mistress diaries did not explicitly discuss the family’s mulatto offspring,
Chesnut’s cutting quote acknowledged mistress hostility which was always just below the
surface. This reality undoubtedly was a major player in mistress/slave relationships. This would
have undermined many mistress efforts at slave Christianization.

Emily Wharton Sinkler observed that her husband markedly limited her role as a
religious educator of her slaves by virtue of his strict control over the content of her teachings.
She believed that black children deserved both religious instruction and conventional education.
Furthermore, Mr. Sinkler discouraged his wife from establishing a school on her plantation
which would address both needs. Disappointed, Sinkler wrote in December 1842: “I wish I
could do what Frank [Wharton, her brother, of Philadelphia] says with regard to the black
children or frogs as he calls them but it is impossible. It is entirely forbidden by the laws of
South Carolina and it would be very wrong for me to attempt to instruct them especially as Mr.
Sinkler entirely disapproves of it.”37

Pierce Butler, a well-known South Carolinian planter, who married frequently cited
Frances “Fanny” Anne Kemble, a British-born actress, also reined in his wife in her efforts in
Christian education. Like Sinkler, Kemble complained that her husband derailed her attempts to
educate the slaves. Both women expressed frustration about their husbands’ controlling roles;

36 Woodward, 30.
37 Ibid., 22.
Kemble, in particular, pointedly criticized the white elite southern male establishment for their self-serving and paternalistic agendas. Elements of that elite white male establishment within the South during the antebellum period had produced pamphlets, largely intended for plantation mistress use as Christian educators. Those documents presented slaves as a population in need of Christian “enlightenment” and presented white plantation women as elite white men’s instruments to accomplish it. Kemble, who viewed slaves more humanely than mere “inferiors” who were candidates for elevation, caustically mocked this elite white male paternalistic view in her diary:

‘Christian enlightenment,’ say they; and where shall they begin? 'Whatever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye also unto them'? No; but 'Servants, obey you masters'; and there, I think, they naturally come to a full stop…“If these heaven-blinded Negro enlighteners persist in their pernicious plan of making Christians their cattle, something of the sort must be done, or they will infallibly cut their own throats with this two-edged sword of truth, to which they could in no wise have laid their hand, and would not, doubtless, but that it is now thrust at them so threateningly that they have no choice. Again and again, how much I do pity them!”

Additionally, Kemble attacked the elite white male recommendation that slaveholding females use a separate catechism and a slave version of the Bible in their teachings. Kemble strongly implied that those suggestions put forth by these pamphlets both assumed and perpetuated the phenomenon of subservience, subservience both of the wife/white female family member and all of the black slaves.

Emily Wharton Sinkler and Fanny Kemble were both outsiders, but by virtue of their

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39 Ibid., 126.
transplantation, became women who society expected to conform to the dictates of the society that they joined. Both of these newcomers voiced hostility toward male family members and toward the white male-generated pamphlets, all of which imposed a framework for slaveholding women wishing to conduct Sunday Schools for the slave population. Perhaps this was not surprising when one considers that Sinkler and Kemble grew up in environments alien to the American South. Unlike their southern sisters, many of whom, at least outwardly, accepted the structure of southern society, those two women, and other transplants like them, felt constrained by southern elite society’s expectations of them. As outsiders, they felt greater isolation on the plantation than did their native counterparts. Kemble, for example, left bustling London for a life on a remote, sparsely populated Georgia sea island; Sinkler departed Philadelphia for a plantation in South Carolina. Both women, accustomed to social lives in thriving metropolises, experienced profound feelings of isolation, geographically and psychologically, in their new settings. Cut off much of the time from peer conversation and formerly accustomed to urban activity and easy exchange of ideas, these women found the role of mistress and all it entailed suffocating and unappreciated. In part, as a reaction to their “life situation,” Sinkler and Kemble…and others, although not abolitionists, professed more enlightened views about the nature of a biracial society and its implications than many, but not all, southern mistresses. These views found their way into their attempts to provide religious instruction for their slaves, and they took a small stand against male society in order to promote the greater good.

Thus, antebellum plantation mistress diaries, collectively, reveal that most of those women considered it their Christian and moral duty to provide their bondmen with religious instruction, in whatever form this may have taken. Generally, it would appear that many slaveholding women took this responsibility seriously and genuinely cared about their slaves’
spiritual welfare. These journals, however, also reveal that many of these women anguished in this role and responded to their frustrations in a variety of ways.
Antebellum plantation mistress diaries certainly indicate that away from the physical confines of the traditional church, white plantation women oversaw the basic religious training of their slaves. Such white women, as revealed by their written record, generally were practicing Christians, at least in an orthodox sense. Typically, they attended church on as regular a basis as their lives permitted, they read the scripture in the sanctity of their home, they led family prayer services, they performed charitable acts, they assumed prominent roles at the time of a death, and they were, as a rule, conscientious in trying to provide some religious instruction for their slaves. Despite the impression painted by plantation mistress diaries, nineteenth-century slave narratives indicated that not all white plantation women were high-minded, kind, and supportive in their efforts as religious educators. Specifically, many slaves who published narratives, primarily during the three decades prior to the Civil War, typically described their ex-mistresses negatively, applying such adjectives as “cruel,” “indifferent,” “bored,” “tired,” and “superficial.”

Commonly, such former bondmen and women cited: 1) disturbing contradictions between

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mistress instruction and mistress behavior, 2) the complete lack of religion, in some instances, in mistress lives, and 3) mistress decisions, also in some cases, to deny her slaves access to religion intentionally or unintentionally. Not surprisingly, many enslaved African Americans, consequently, chose to create and practice their own “brand” of Christianity, one that typically incorporated aspects of their African religions with no input from their mistress.

The Second Great Awakening influenced the plantation mistresses of the early to mid-nineteenth century, causing them to ponder their religious lives to a significant degree, especially in the confines of their own journals. However, bondmen and women often cited instances in which there were apparent “disconnects” between mistress preaching and mistress behavior. Bondmen often noted what they construed to be a contradiction between God’s Word and mistress cruelty and inhumanity. For instance, former slave William Wells Brown declared that “slaveholders hide themselves behind the Church,” adding that “a more praying, preaching, psalm-singing people cannot be found than the slaveholders of the South.”41 The Reverend William H. Robinson, another former slave, substantiated Brown’s observation by mocking his white family’s prayer which included the line, “grant us all a large increase of slaves…” In the same vein, he mocked his mistress’ sermon to her slaves in which she included the line, “God’s wisdom is displayed in the system of slavery.”42

Consequently, it is justifiable and understandable that slaves typically rejected those religious guidelines professed by their mistresses in those instances when they hypocritically

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41 Reverend William H. Robinson, *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit, or, Fifteen Years in Slavery, 3rd ed* (Eau Claire, Wis.: Published by Author, 1913), 86.

42 Ibid., 87.
conducted themselves in ways alien to their teachings and/or when they selectively taught the Bible in self-serving ways. Within such confines, duplicity on the part of the mistress and distrust on the part of the slaves, was there really any likelihood for either party-- particularly the slave-- to benefit from mistress-delivered religious instruction? One significant exception to pronounced slave rejection of mistress religious instruction, however, were those instances when some enslaved African Americans outwardly appeared to accept such imposed Biblical instruction in order to, they hoped, “appease” their mistress to such an extent that she would prevent, perhaps successfully, perhaps not, their sale off the plantation and consequent separation from blood family members. Such attempts to “appease” the mistress did not always work to the advantage of the slave. North Carolinian Harriet Jacobs-- who published under the pseudonym Linda Brent-- bitterly described her own very personal and disheartening experience which befell her at about age twelve upon her mistress’ death. She wrote:

when the will of my [her] mistress was read, we learned that she had bequeathed me to her sister’s daughter, a child of five years old. So vanished our hopes. My mistress had taught me the precepts of God’s Word: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.” But I was her slave, and I suppose that she did not recognize me as her neighbor.  

The act by Jacobs’ mistress to bequeath her to her niece was only one example of contradictions between mistress teachings and mistress behavior. Jacobs was particularly offended knowing that her new mistress, Mrs. Flint, was a church member who made time every week to introduce Christianity to her slaves selectively, including the regular partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Jacobs’ pointedly noted that the “benevolent” Mrs. Flint was not by the act of

\[43 \text{ Jacobs, 6.}\]
“partaking of the Lord’s Supper put into a Christian frame of mind.”\textsuperscript{44} At such a time, according to Jacobs, if her mistress’ supper, as opposed to the Lord’s Supper, were not served at the exactly requested hour, she would station herself in the kitchen, would remain there until a servant plated the food, and “then [would] spit in all the kettles and pans that had been used for cooking.”\textsuperscript{45} By this hateful act, Mrs. Flint eliminated any possibility that her black cook and her hungry children might benefit from any scraps left from the meal, however sparse they may have been.

Many slaves of the antebellum South would have easily supported Harriet Jacobs’ observations about the hypocrisy of the mistress as religious educator. Two commonly criticisms, both consistent with Jacobs’ complaints, were: 1) “gentle” mistress teachings were often at odds with those women’s violent displays of temper and 2) mistress religious instruction frequently was self-serving and even hypocritical. Bondman Thomas Lewis Johnson, of Rock-Rayman, Virginia, who later achieved modest fame in the African American community as a missionary to Africa, found fault with his mistress. Consistent with Jacobs’ observations, Johnson reported that his mistress both physically victimized him and psychologically damaged him by emphasizing those portions of the Bible that both reinforced and religiously justified his subservience. Johnson emotionally described his mistress’ requirement that he say his prayers, repeat the Apostles’ Creed, and internalize those Old Testament stories in which the servants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were always expected to obey the commands of their masters.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 10
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 11. Interestingly, Johnson—at least in his narrative—did not recognize that his mistress had avoided more “subversive” stories of Joseph, Moses, and Daniel.
Some contemporary Christians-- especially liberal ones-- intensely dislike self-proclaimed cross-wearing evangelicals who consistently express, implicitly or explicitly in their speech and body language, their moral superiority while in their private lives repeatedly violate Christian teachings and ignore the Ten Commandments. In a somewhat similar vein, slaves on some plantations abhorred slave mistresses who outwardly exhibited religiosity when it served their purposes but conveniently ignored Biblical teachings in their interactions with their slaves in which they did not express any love “of their neighbor as themselves.” Octavia V. Rogers Albert, who grew up in an isolated area of middle Georgia, commented that “them beads and crosses we saw everybody [white women] have was nothing.”47 Albert added that she “never wanted them beads I saw others have, for I just thought we would pray without anything, and that God only wanted heart.”48 Albert opined that “people must give their hearts to God, to love him and keep his commandments.” She further believed that her mistress certainly did not live up to these requirements. As a result, Albert deemed it unnecessary to regard anything as valid that her mistress imparted to her.

In addition to being the innocent victims of inconsistencies between mistress teaching and mistress behavior, slaves also felt manipulated and betrayed when the mistress chose to educate them religiously for purposes other than the delivery of their souls unto God in heaven. Kentucky-born house servant William Brown, who later resided in St. Louis, remarked that it


48 Ibid., 13.
was not uncommon if one were passing by an auction-stand there to hear the auctioneer--in his efforts to maximize profits--call out that servant “X,” then on the blocks, was a good cook, a good laundress, an obedient servant, and thus was a good buy because of her “having religion.”

Furthermore, according to Brown, in his home state of Missouri, and in other slave states about which he had knowledge, religious instruction consisted of “teaching the slave that he must never strike a white man; that God made him for a slave; and that, when whipped, he must not find fault, --for the Bible says that “He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes!”

Thus, bondmen and women commonly saw through the transparency of mistress intentions and consequently rejected, in varying degrees, mistress religious teaching when they realized that it was for her and for her white family’s financial advantage. As a result of this behavior, slaves resisted objectification.

Religion was often either entirely absent from or minimally visible in the lives of plantation mistresses, specifically, and in white plantation inhabitants, in general. As a result, little, if any, mistress-directed religious instruction occurred in such settings. Instead, in those locales, worshipping slaves opted practices exclusive to, and directed by, their own community. Some may have regretted the lack of religious direction put forth by a mistress, although many preferred to orchestrate their own religious experiences. These likely would have been more syncretic in content and in form than those they would have received in the “Big House.”

Religiously disaffected mistresses were especially common in the frontier areas of the antebellum South, such as in Florida’s panhandle and upland Alabama, Mississippi, and

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Arkansas. Slaves in those regions have cited high rates of illiteracy among whites there, even among those who owned as many as thirty-five slaves.\textsuperscript{50} Often such illiterate white slaveholders were former yeoman farmers who--by virtue of effort and/or luck--were enjoying upward economic mobility and, as a result, viewed themselves as aspiring “great” planters. In that new role, they often perceived themselves to be too busy to bother with religion and with other trappings of what society may have considered high culture. In today’s world, society would characterize such individuals as “new money” and associate with them the vulgarities that accompany it. Those new frontier aspiring “great” planters thus were in no way members of a class typified by such families as the Carters and Lees of Virginia, families who were long-standing and involved members of an established church and a defined social order.

In some areas of the South--particularly in the more recently settled regions--few churches existed and those which did were often not easily accessible, a problem cited by both mistresses and slaves. Furthermore, circuit riders, who were yet another source of religious guidance for both black and white populations, were a relatively rare fixture in outlying districts. Thus, slaves faced with such impediments often relied upon some older individual within their own community, a person, who had received religious instruction earlier in an eastern seaboard state. Octavia Rogers Albert of Oglethorpe, Georgia lovingly recalled the positive position that

\textsuperscript{50} The substantiation for my analysis here came almost exclusively from the WPA slave narratives. In general, the majority of nineteenth-century slave narratives produced came from slaves who lived in the earliest settled areas of the South. It is no surprise, then, that some of the most oft-cited nineteenth-century slave narratives were published by African Americans who experienced slavery in Virginia, Maryland, and Kentucky. Very few nineteenth-century slave narratives were ever published documenting the slave experience in the Deep South, like Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, as well as the “frontier” areas of the South, including portions of Arkansas, Missouri, and Florida.
one such elderly African American bondwoman played in the religious lives of her fellow slaves:
“Aunt Jane was the cause of so many on our plantation getting religion. We did not have any
church to go to, but she would talk to us about old Virginia, how people done there. She said
people must give their hearts to God, to love him and keep his commandments; and we believed
what she said.”

There is certainly evidence which suggests that frontier slaves received little or no
religious instruction. This same evidence characterizes all southern slaves who entered
adulthood before the 1830s-- the decade which historians identify as a period of mass slave
Christianization-- as poorly tutored in Christianity by their owners. To a large degree,
slaveholders chose to evangelize bondmen during the 1830s and beyond in response to growing
abolitionist sentiment in the North in which abolitionists specifically charged the religious
neglect of slaves. Scholars acknowledge that slaves prior to the 1830s were not typically
recipients of Christian education, either by clergy, masters, or mistresses. Commonly, slaves
complained that religious instruction was denied them during the early nineteenth century
because mistresses felt that to do so was a waste of their time and feared that such behavior could
place them in a position of physical danger should religion empower slaves to resist their

51 Albert, 13.

52 I must acknowledge again that I relied almost exclusively on the W.P.A. slave narratives, not the nineteenth-
century slave narratives, to make the assertion that frontier slaves received little or no religious instruction.

University Press, 1978) and Christine Leigh Heyrman, Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt (Chapel
masters. James W.C. Pennington--an early-nineteenth century slave from Maryland’s Eastern Shore who subsequently earned a revered place in African American history as a high profile Presbyterian clergyman and abolitionist--lamented his mistress’ decision to ignore the spiritual lives of her slaves, writing that he “never knew her [the mistress] to say a word about us going to church, or about our obligations to God, or [about] a future [spiritual] state.”\(^{54}\) He further noted that he was not alone in such regret, citing numerous other pious souls in his social group who were also desirous of spiritual instruction. William Grimes, another slave, born in King George County, Virginia, in 1784, likewise asserted that his mistress taught him virtually nothing about Christianity during his tenure as her slave. In freedom in 1824, he wrote: “there [was] a holy-day which our master and mistress gave us, called Easter Sunday, or Monday. On one of those days I asked my mistress to let me go and see Miss Jourdine, a mulatto girl who was brought up with me and sold by Doct. Steward, to Mr. Glassel.”\(^{55}\) This quote suggests that not only were the religious holidays not observed by the slaves, neither did the slaves apparently know the significance of them. Slaves frequently identified this lack of awareness in numerous locales. Harriet Jacobs corroborates the Pennington and Grimes observations about mistress behavior prior to 1830 regarding slave religious education. Although Jacobs acknowledged that her first mistress taught her some of the basic tenets of Christianity, including the Ten Commandments, she complained that hundreds of slaves and former slaves with whom she had

\(^{54}\) James W. C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1849), 146.

\(^{55}\) William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave; Written By Himself* (New York: Published by the Author, 1825), 193.
come into contact claimed to have been “thirsting for the water of life”… religion. Tragically, in her eyes, the law forbade it, and the church withheld it. Jacobs was especially bitter about missionary efforts which sent “the Bible to heathen abroad, but neglect[ed] the heathen at home.” Jacobs and other African Americans who shared these feelings acknowledged that it was acceptable for Christian missionaries to travel to the far “dark” corners of the earth in search of followers, but not at the expense of the “dark” corners at home. Beginning in the 1830s, this tide began to change; missionaries and slaveholders, especially mistresses, began to consider the value to them of bringing some religion into the lives of their slaves.

Although many mistresses expressed impatience and/or boredom concerning their responsibility to provide slaves with religious instruction, some bondmen suggested that white plantation women occasionally chose not to assume such responsibility, even in those instances when their slaves were eager to avail themselves of their knowledge of Christianity. One explanation for this was that public opinion was often at odds with the mistress-led Sabbath schools. In some extreme cases, white men, perhaps an overseer, a neighbor, or even kin, would physically punish a white slaveholding woman who attempted to bring the Bible and its teachings into the daily lives of her slaves. This extreme behavior, however, typically occurred only if the mistress exceeded the minimum boundaries of basic religious education, in other words if she attempted to teach her slaves how to read and write. Bondman Henry Bibb of Kentucky substantiated that this was the case. He suggested that he and most of the slaves of his acquaintance had personal religious desires based in Christianity that they hoped white plantation women would fulfill. Despite their slaves’ high-minded longings, many white plantation

56 Jacobs, 113.
women, in the opinion of Bibb, were far too concerned about their own and their children’s safety to initiate religious instruction for their bondmen within the confines of their domicile. He cited one instance in 1835 when a Miss Davis arranged an on-site Sunday school for her slaves as well as slaves from neighboring plantations. Conscientiously, she planned a “curriculum,” acquired a class set of Bibles, and commenced with her little school. This behavior raised the ire of her male white neighbors; they assembled themselves into a posse, proceeded to the Sunday School class, broke up the assembly, and roughed up some of the attendees, Miss Davis included.  

Some white plantation women refrained from evangelizing their slaves because they knew about previous failed attempts. James W.C. Pennington reported one related incident which occurred on Maryland’s Eastern Shore around 1830: “The Methodists held a Camp Meeting in the neighborhood, where many of the slaves attended. But one of their preachers for addressing words of comfort to the slaves, was arrested and tried for his life.” Such behavior by the white males had a curtailing effect on some white plantation women’s intentions to become religious teachers of their black chattel.

Similarly, bondmen mentioned that religious instruction of slaves by mistresses subsided significantly during the first few years following the 1831 Nat Turner insurrection. Turner was a remarkably learned slave and a man who had acquired recognition and respect, both within and outside of his native Southampton County, Virginia. Before his insurrection, he was a gifted

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57 Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, Written by Himself* (New York: Published by the Author, 1849), 16.

58 Pennington, 146.
preacher, having earned the esteem of his own people and of his mistress and master. However, despite Turner’s stature as a man of God, his celebrated act of resistance dramatically alerted the slaveholding class that excessive slave knowledge about God’s Word threatened the institution of slavery, suggesting its possible annihilation and the disappearance of the way of life it supported. Harriet Jacobs and some of her contemporaries suggested that after the immediate alarm to the white community subsided, many masters and mistresses concluded that it was in their best interest to give their slaves at least some religious instruction; they believed that if their slaves were more godly that they would be less likely to abuse them physically.59 Thus, mistress reaction to the Nat Turner insurrection included their coming to the conclusion that it was necessary to educate their slaves religiously, albeit in a very selective manner. They acknowledged the need to choose the content of their instruction with extreme care, believing that such behavior, on their part, would translate into more benign behavior on the part of their slaves. In this vein, a few nineteenth-century slave narratives cite examples of blacks receiving instruction from either mistresses or white clergymen about Old Testament figures, especially ones who had suffered at the hands of their oppressors. This was unfortunate due to the fact that any person in bondage could identify with the Old Testament martyrs.60

Finally, there was a significant population of antebellum slaves who professed a preference to worship in a manner of their own choosing, which typically excluded the mistress. Historians Albert J. Raboteau, Margaret Washington Creel, and Mechal Sobel have asserted that

59 Jacobs, 105.

slaves very often wished to preserve elements and/or themes of their own African religious heritage. These African religious practices included ring shouting, dancing, ecstatic trances, spirit possession, folk singing, and the performance of African music. In addition, nineteenth-century slave narratives revealed that folk beliefs in hags, witches, haunts, conjuring, and sorcery also found their way into African American religion as slaves practiced it in the American South. These beliefs and practices formed the core of this African American alternative worldview, one which identified the religious expressions of slaves as different from those of their owners. In some other cases, slaves accepted portions of the Christian faith of the white population and transformed it in such a way as to make it their own. It is not clear in all of these circumstances, however, if slaves chose to worship in ways different from their white mistresses and masters because they chose to maintain their traditional African ways or if slaves were categorically defying “white Christianity.” When slaves directed the course and content of their own worship, they generally suffered mistress disapproval. This ranged from relatively benign mistress ridicule to abusive physical punishment; in extreme cases, owners sold off offending slaves.

Thomas Lewis Johnson, Lunsford Lane, William Brown, Jacob Stroyer, and Charles Ball all discussed instances in which slaves actively preserved their own African religious traditions, despite exposure, in varying degrees, to Christianity. These bondmen particularly cited white reaction to native African religious expression, displaying their displeasure at the mistress characterization of their practices as mere superstition and not as legitimate forms of worship. However, these men and others like them fervently believed that slaves were absolutely justified

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in preserving any and all African cultural traditions. Johnson iterated that “superstition [was] characteristic of the race in Africa” and that “having been brought to America, not permitted to be taught to read the Bible, and having every avenue to education closed against us, it was natural [that] we should retain the superstitions of our fathers.”62 Charles Ball-- resident of plantations in Maryland, South Carolina, and Georgia, along with his fellow slave community--revered his grandfather. He prayed to God in his “mysterious, yet stirring” mellifluous voice, conjuring memories of African roots, while soothing and exciting his brothers in bondage.63

Other slaves did not, and would not, accept the teachings of their mistresses, which they often criticized for their obvious selectivity. Nineteenth-century slave narratives reflect slave animosity towards their mistresses, especially for their failure to teach them about the expulsion of Jews from Canaan into Egypt, a primary component of the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament.64 Bondmen criticized this omission because enslaved American blacks often identified with those ancient Semites as fellow sufferers who hoped one day to be delivered by


64 It is plausible to assume that slaves learned much about Christianity from slaves who had lived previously on other plantations and farms.
God. The authors of slave narratives were not typical of the general slave population. Their abilities to read and write and their proclivity to exhibit some verbal sophistication separated them from the majority of their race and class. This is not to say, however, that illiterate bondmen and women had not pondered the religious curricula and the motivations of their mistresses. Lunsford Lane, one such author and a resident on a large spread near Raleigh, North Carolina, passionately resented his mistress’ habitual message to her slaves that they were the beneficiaries of good fortune as an indirect result of her devout faith. He refused to accept that his mistress had “improved” and uplifted his fellow bondmen as an extension of her religiosity. Many fellow slaves agreed, angered by the mistress act of “ramming” her brand of religion down their throats. Lane, in criticism of his mistress, wrote that she repeatedly reminded them “how good God was in bringing us [slaves] over to this country from dark and benighted Africa, and permitting us to listen to the sound of the gospel.”\textsuperscript{65} With sarcasm, he added, “God also granted temporal freedom, which \textit{man} without God’s consent, had stolen away.”\textsuperscript{66} These and many other examples produced by the slave community reveal that many bondmen and bondwomen in no way viewed their mistresses as benevolent figures who selflessly tried to elevate the African race. Rather, many of them seemingly saw through the transparency and hypocrisy of their mistresses’ attempts, which they often viewed as the amelioration of guilty consciences. Was it

\textsuperscript{65} Lunsford Lane, \textit{The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N.C.: Embracing an account of his early life, the redemption of purchase of himself and family from slavery, And his banishment from the place of his birth for the crime of wearing a colored skin.} (Boston: Published by the Author, 1842), 19.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 20.
so outrageous that slaves saw religious teaching directed toward them as a means by which their mistresses could get off the “moral hook” for their role in the perpetuation of slavery?

Lane and others recounted instances in which slaves ardently resisted Christianity in those forms offered to them by their mistresses. Jacob Stroyer-- a bondman on a large South Carolina cotton plantation-- argued that slaves who toiled on large cash crop plantations deserved and needed a day off each week to do as they pleased. In his view, leisure time did not typically include spending Sundays in a mistress’ parlor, dutifully memorizing the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. Describing the slave experience, he remarked that if one traveled to large cotton and rice plantations on a Sunday, he should expect to observe slaves “dancing on Sunday, while others would be in the woods and fields hunting rabbits and other game, while still some others would be killing pigs belonging to their masters or neighbors.” Stroyer added that those slaves whom he knew on his South Carolina plantation engaged in “Sabbath-breaking” because of the physical and psychological pain which their back-breaking day-to-day lives caused them. After the Civil War, however, Stroyer witnessed a significant change in ex-slave behavior. It was then, according to Stroyer, that some bondmen, for whatever reason, abandoned their “rebel-rousing ways,” choosing to embrace Christianity instead. He wrote: “But thank God, the year of Jubilee had come, and the Negroes can return from dancing, from hunting, and from the master’s pig pens on Sundays and become observers of the Sabbath, of good moral habits.”

Henry Bibb described similar pre-Civil War behavior on the several Kentucky plantations

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67 Jacob Stroyer, *My Life in the South.* (Salem, Mass: Newcomb & Gauss, 1898), 46.

68 Ibid., 46.
on which he was a slave. He corroborated Stroyer’s observation that slaves engaged in hunting, dancing, fighting, and other irreligious activities on the Sabbath in blatant resistance to their mistresses’ efforts to indoctrinate them religiously. Despite engaging in such inappropriate Sunday behaviors, in reality, at least according to Bibb, slaves yearned for moral instruction, which they wished not a mistress but a competent clergyman to deliver to them in an upright, even-handed, non-self-serving, and non-manipulative way. The mistress could not dispense impartial moral instruction because she was incapable as a preacher/religious educator, and, more importantly, because she was probably a proponent of slaveholding.69

Many of these same bondmen went to considerable lengths to worship clandestinely and in forms of their choosing, away from the disapproving eye of their mistress. Often, these forms took on characteristics of secret societies, and manifestations of them were hidden away within slave cabins or far from the Big House in the backwoods or near swamps, locales seldom visited by the white folks. Octavia Rogers Albert described secret religious meetings on her Georgia plantation where slaves “would put a big wash-tub full of water in the middle of the floor to catch the sound of [their] voices while [they] sung.” She added, “when we all sung we would march around and shake each other's hands, and we would sing easy and low, so mistress and marster could not hear us.”70

It is entirely too simplistic to suggest, however, that all slaves in the early to mid-nineteenth-century South held such negative feelings about, and impressions of, their mistresses. Despite their documented intense hatred for the institution of slavery, many former bondmen

69 Bibb, 16-17.

70 Albert, 13.
who wrote prior to the end of the Civil War recounted positive experiences surrounding their religious education provided by white plantation women. Regardless of the fact that white women ruled their slaves with supreme authority, some of those in bondage reported—even touchingly—genuine humanity within the character of their mistresses. In this regard, former slaves cited and gave credit to white plantation women’s participation in slave baptisms, slave weddings, and slave funerals…in their variety of manifestations and locations. Some slaves were able to acknowledge that, although the mistress was of an entirely different class and race, they considered her, in some ways, to be a victim also. Similar to the enslaved African American, she was often powerless. In this light, Frederick Douglass, who enjoyed a relatively positive relationship with his mistress, Mrs. Auld, wrote: “We were both victims to the same overshadowing evil—she, as mistress, I, as slave. I will not censure her harshly; she cannot censure me, for she knows I speak but the truth, and have acted in my opposition to slavery, just as she herself would have acted, in a reverse of circumstances.”

The transfer of religious knowledge was not always a one-way street, flowing from the mistress to the slave. In some instances, slaves contributed to the spiritual development of their mistresses. One such example is antebellum slave Nat Turner, who in his capacity as a preacher, influenced the ways by which his mistress practiced her faith. Turner confessed: “Knowing the influence I had obtained over the minds of my mistress, in particular, and my fellow servants, (not by the means of conjuring and such like tricks—for to them I always spoke of such things with contempt) but by the communion of the Spirit whose revelations I often communicated to

them, and they believed and said my wisdom came from God.” Slave preachers on a number of plantations, especially larger ones, did exert considerable influence on their own slave community, and, to a lesser degree, on the household of their white owners.\textsuperscript{72}

Thomas Lewis Johnson provided another example. Johnson, who resided on a large Virginia plantation and whom both black and white people regarded as “having religion,” exerted significant influence, not only on his fellow slaves but also on the white population. Johnson boasted that he confronted his master, questioning his master’s ability and sincerity as a religious leader. In criticism of his master, Johnson wrote that he had “never gone to Him and asked Him from the depth of his heart.” Johnson added, also in criticism, that he had never \textit{really} heard his master preach in the way that God expected.\textsuperscript{73} The master responded, as reported by Johnson, “well, don’t I preach the same doctrine you preach?”\textsuperscript{74} To this, Johnson answered “no sir; you preach ‘servants obey your master.’ You are a servant to whom you obey: if you obey God, you are his servant; but if Baal, then you are his servant. You are a servant to whom you obey.”\textsuperscript{75} Johnson bragged that in his case he was God’s servant and that “His voice I have heard, and I obeyed the call; for that voice was sharper than any two-edged sword.”\textsuperscript{76}


\textsuperscript{73} Johnson, 21.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 21.
moved by Johnson’s words, Johnson then alleged that his master encouraged his bondmen to avail themselves of Johnson’s gifts and that he, because of his prowess as a preacher, successfully brought many slaves to God.

Johnson’s passion, his impressive oratory skill, and his genuine love of God dramatically attracted Louisa, his owner’s teenaged daughter. In Louisa’s assessment, Johnson’s sermons were vastly superior to the uninspiring ones delivered by her parents. Louisa confided to her parents that “if that’s the way they get religion, I would like to get it, too.” Referring to one of Johnson’s black female disciples, Louisa added: “Rose has got religion; I would like to have it, too. She talks so pretty about heaven and all good things.” Supposedly Louisa’s parents expressed disapproval of her attraction to Johnson, despite their reported beliefs that Johnson was a positive element in his community. The relationship between Johnson and Louisa was certainly not common in the antebellum South, but neither was it totally unknown. Younger white plantation women, especially ones not yet in significant “management” roles, were probably somewhat more open to the culture and practices of their slaves. Nevertheless, although there is some evidence that slave preachers moved white plantation women with their message and their fervor-- more often than not-- any slave preacher who suggested, within earshot of the mistress, that the gospel supported the concept of equality would certainly have been poorly received by white plantation members, especially males.

Although slaves were not reluctant to criticize both their mistresses and their mistresses’ religious instruction, some nineteenth-century slave narratives cited their people’s positive

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77 Ibid., 21.

78 Ibid., 22.
spiritual experiences with white plantation women. Not surprisingly, those who acknowledged positive religious experiences with their mistresses were typically the so-called mistress “favorites” and frequently were house slaves rather than field hands. Sometimes such “favorites” filled voids left by the death of one of the mistress’ biological children. A fortunate “favorite” thus often enjoyed comforts and attention unknown in the slave community at large. Not uncommonly, s/he slept and ate in the Big House and lived in the white world, perhaps even more so than in the black world. With this elevated status came other privileges: a respectable wardrobe, larger and more varied meals, a warm bed, and the position of object of his or her mistress’ attention and genuine concern. The mistress objectified favorite enslaved individuals far less than she did the general slave population. Although many slaves received no instruction at all, some, especially the favorites and/or the house servants, identified their mistresses as having been the primary religious influence in their lives, both during and after slavery. In some cases, especially evangelical mistresses were more important in their favored slaves’ religious lives than any black preacher or fellow member of their own black community.

One such example of the latter involved Blind Diana. Blind Diana, whose full identity is not known, was a former house slave in Virginia who spent old age at the Colored Home in New York City. In an interview conducted around 1850, she identified her very evangelically-driven mistress as a seminal influence in her life. For that black woman, her mistress was the conduit between herself and Jesus Christ. Diana reminisced about her mistress “who sang the Ten Commandments in verse, and who told her that ‘He who gave us those Commandments would be her friend, if she would trust in Him’.” She added: “I have always, since that time trusted in
Him, and I will still trust.” Interestingly, whereas some slaves proposed that their mistress’ teaching of the Ten Commandments was solely to insure their subservience, Blind Diana, conversely, suggested that mistress religious teaching was high-minded and intended that salvation be the ultimate goal. Although little is known about Diana’s life, especially after she left the plantation, it is important to report that her interviewer was a Northern abolitionist and thus a sympathetic listener. Both the location of the interview and the political persuasion of the interviewer suggest that Diana would not have felt compelled to exaggerate her mistress’ positive influence in her life.

Harriet Jacobs provided another example of a slave’s positive religious experience related to her mistress’ religious efforts. According to Jacobs, immediately prior to the mistress’ death, she and those slaves surrounding her, prayed. The mistress, voicing her final words on earth, said: “I have tried to do you good and promote your happiness; and if I have failed, it has not been for want of interest in your welfare. Do not weep for me; but prepare for the new duties that lie before you. May we meet in a better world.” Moved by these words which had been reported by her friend, Jacobs wrote: “the colored people will long bless the memory of that truly Christian woman.”

Relationships between white antebellum plantation mistresses and their slaves, according to the nineteenth-century slave narratives, varied significantly from property to property, often being complicated and challenging for the various parties involved. This dynamic shaped many

79 Mary W. Thompson, Sketches of the History, Character, and Dying Testimony of Beneficiaries of The Colored Home, in the City of New York (New York: John F. Trow, 1851), 56.

80 Jacobs, 110-111.
aspects of life, including religious education-- in particular-- and the religious experience-- in general. Written documentation provided by members of the African American community reveals that the mistress/slave religious experience was typically an unsatisfactory one for both bondmen and bondwomen. This picture emerges in part due to the very abolitionist postures conveyed within these narratives. Ex-slaves published most of those accounts prior to the Civil War in attempts to elicit support from sympathizers in the North whom they hoped could influence the national debate about slavery. The testimonies of a few former slaves certainly softened this portrait by affirmation of positive religious relationships with mistresses and the comfort that those relationships afforded them. This chapter further confirms that, at the end of the day, whether slaves identified a negative or a positive relationship with their white owners, they sought to create a Christianity that was uniquely their own.
Those plantation mistresses who did record in their antebellum era diaries their impressions, thoughts, and feelings about their respective roles as religious educators to their slaves were seldom reticent to discuss personal frustration—be it with themselves, with their slaves, or with their husbands, often filling their works with feelings of impatience and boredom. This is not to say, however, that such mistresses primarily expressed negative attitudes about this particular chosen role in their journals. Some indicated that at least some of their relationships with slaves in the religious arena were satisfying to them. Later mistress sources, most commonly those memoirs published as many as five decades after the Civil War, overwhelmingly represented such mistress/slave relationships in a positive and nostalgic manner. However, in assessing the tendency of former plantation mistresses to revise their personal histories, one much acknowledge that such women, then older and at quite different points in life, often chose to remember selectively and/or to revise many of their life experiences,

including that of religious educator. It is necessary to interject here that I was unable to find any
instance in which there is an existing antebellum diary and post-bellum memoir authored by the
same white woman. In consequence, I am basing my comments and analysis upon genre versus
genre and not upon specific works written by the same mistress during two different historical
periods.

Significantly, a representative sample of mistress memoirs complements, and in some
cases even echoes, the contents of the then-burgeoning literature of southern apologia published
in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a manner similar to the now-discredited
historian U.B. Phillips, whose works repeatedly praised plantation owners, denied their brutality,
and consistently argued that such persons did, in fact, provide adequately for the physical and
spiritual needs of their slaves, mistress memoirs likewise chronicled enlightened relationships
between owner and bondman, including those of plantation mistress and slave in the religious
setting. Just as Phillips portrayed the plantation as a school whose mission it was to “civilize”
and “enlighten” a vast “lowly” slave population, many slaveholding women reflected upon their
seemingly tireless efforts decades before to evangelize their slaves, hoping to broker for them a
personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Although a sizeable number of plantation mistresses had
described in their antebellum accounts their sincere relationships with slaves as well as the
dedicated religious instruction which they had provided them, in their post-Civil War records,
they habitually portrayed themselves as lofty benefactors and elevated spiritual leaders, who
imported their slaves from darkest Africa and carried them into an enlightened and civilized
western society. Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle, a former South Carolina mistress, reflected upon
advice imparted to her by her mother:

It is a very noble life, if a woman does her full duty in it. It is the life of a missionary, really; one must teach, train,
uplift, encourage--always encourage, even in reproof. I grant you it is a life of effort, but, my child, it is our life; the life of those who have great responsibility of owning human beings. We are responsible before our Master for not only their bodies, but their souls; and never must we for one moment forget that. To be the wife of a rice-planter is no place for a pleasure-loving, indolent woman, but for an earnest, true-hearted woman it is a great opportunity. Pringle’s words mirrored the writings of other former mistresses.

The degree to which former mistresses revised their personal histories takes on particular meaning when one examines plantation mistress self-portrayal as revealed in their diaries during the years directly after the Civil War. In many cases, those self-portrayals either did not corroborate or only loosely corroborated those which such women produced during later Reconstruction and during the final years of the nineteenth century. During the first few post-Civil War years some ex-slaveholding women continued to express frustrations, disappointments, and hostilities-- all of which were consistent with those expressed in antebellum diaries. Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas of Georgia, still distraught over the outcome of the Civil War, recorded in October 1865: “I did not know until then how intimately my faith in Revelations and my faith in the institution of slavery had been woven together--true I had seen the evil of the latter but if the Bible was right then slavery must be-- Slavery was done away with and my faith in God’s Holy Book was terribly shaken. For a time, I doubted God.” This quote, which is atypical of mistress comment recorded during the 1870s and beyond, reflected great anger within the heart of the mistress. One should not be surprised about the intensity of feeling; white southern families in 1865 were only just beginning to assimilate the effects of a

82 Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle, Chronicles of Chicora Wood. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 77.

devastating event. In countless cases, elite whites were facing life with vastly diminished resources and in a vastly different social order.

Those reasons why such aging former slaveholding women chose to remember and thus portray themselves in a “better” light after the Civil War than before are not always definitively clear, but are nevertheless open to speculation. Were such women wishing to preserve in memory a life and a culture which were irrecoverable? Were such women attempting to justify slavery and indirectly to attempt to uphold the sharecropping and tenant farmer systems that succeeded slavery, but that continued to disadvantage African Americans? Were such women hoping to justify their former “privileged” existences and in so doing perhaps to ameliorate their guilt? Were such women trying to discover proof that their own lives had counted for something in the lives of others? Were these women wishing to validate their antebellum lives in the eyes of their grandchildren and other descendants? Were some such women so naïve and so unaware of the feelings within the African American community that they believed that they could paint any picture, regardless of its accuracy, and not be censured by it? Were some such women so impoverished by the war that they needed to publish memoirs which would appeal to the widest possible commercial audience, sometimes at the expense of veracity? And finally, to what extent for these women, did time warp, or even destroy, memory, which resulted in self-portrayals which were more fiction than fact? One can reasonably assume that in the case of nearly every post-war plantation mistress memoir, one or more of these questions came into play during the course of its writing. These sources are of tantamount importance for what they reveal about the post-war psychology of plantation mistresses regarding their antebellum roles. Historians must not disregard this collection of documents just because it is relatively small in number,
significantly smaller in number than the known array of antebellum diaries.84 Researchers should remember that society frowned upon Victorian ladies who published personal writings. Thus, this mentality accounts for the scarcity of known post-Civil War memoirs.

Several themes are common to the post-Civil War ex-slaveholding mistress memoirs, including: 1) the frequent use of such labels as “enlightenment” and “civilization” by ex-plantation mistresses in their reference to slave benefits from religious instruction, 2) the assumption by ex-mistresses that their former slaves were grateful for their efforts as their religious educators, 3) the habit of ex-mistresses to describe their relationships during slavery with their bondmen in much the same way as they described their relationships with their biological children, 4) the habit by ex-mistresses to relate in far greater detail their experiences as slave religious educators than they did in their pre-war diaries, and 5) the almost complete omission by ex-mistresses of any discussion of obstacles to their previous evangelizing efforts, many of which they cited in their earlier documents.

Former mistresses used the terms “enlighten” and “civilize,” or some variation of these terms, with great frequency. To some degree, these authors viewed blacks negatively in ways which mirrored those eugenic-driven late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century scientists who placed worthless, wanting Africans on the bottom rung of the evolutionary hierarchy. Such women lived during a time when many scientists upheld the ideologies of both social Darwinism and eugenics; these women often reflected these ideologies as they attempted to reconcile for themselves, and frequently for others, their slaveholding pasts. Nevertheless, these women, who

84 In contrast to the literally hundreds of antebellum slaveholding women diaries, both published and unpublished, there are relatively few post-bellum memoirs, either published or unpublished. I examined at least three dozen post-bellum mistress memoirs. Many of those, however, were not applicable to this topic.
readily identified themselves as sincere Christians, contended that as mistresses they felt divinely
directed to uplift spiritually and to ameliorate physically the lives of their slaves, hoping that
their efforts brought God to their bondmen for the duration of their lives. It was not uncommon
for ex-mistresses who wrote of their experiences as evangelizers of their slaves to exaggerate in
memory their significance in that role. Thus, in proclaiming their earlier dedication—real or
exaggerated—to religious education, some ex-mistresses expressed in their memoirs the hope
that some of their former slaves would in fact return to Africa and once there would be prophets
for Christianity and would coincidentally take to Africa white society’s “enlightened” western
values.85

A second theme of ex-mistress memoirs related to bondman gratitude. Post-Civil War
mistress memoirs emphasized the high esteem in which slaves regarded their mistresses because
of the religious education they received. Correctly or incorrectly, naively or not, ex-mistresses
reported that their former slaves believed that their mistresses had made significant Christian
inroads into their lives and that in most cases there had been little resistance and general
acceptance of such efforts. Margaret Pollock Devereux, of Raleigh, North Carolina, who
devoted her 1906 memoir to significant discussion of her “other family,” commented: “Despite

85 Interestingly, a significant group of African Americans—including Henry Highland Garnet, Martin Delaney, and
Henry McNeal Turner—in the antebellum days, Reconstruction era, and particularly in the years after that, who
advanced the idea that newly freed blacks should return to Africa as opposed to remaining in the United States,
commonly argued that a primary mission upon arrival in Africa was to bring civilization to that continent. Most
significantly, in 1858, prominent abolitionist Garnet founded the African Civilization Society (AfCS) which stressed
such ideas.
their superstitions, they are most grateful for all my teachings.”

86 Some memoirs even suggested, perhaps in artificial attempts to elevate former mistresses, that slaves perceived them as having been their personal saviors, sincere spiritual advisors, and individuals responsible for removing them from the “darkness” and “degradation” of Africa into the light of the white Christian world. Some slaves apparently were so grateful for their mistresses’ sacrifices, propelled by evangelistic zeal, that they would have chosen, during the antebellum era, to have remained with their mistresses rather than to leave had they been afforded the opportunity.

87 Ex-mistress Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle of South Carolina, reflecting upon a childhood experience with one “special” slave, wrote: “One day she [Maum Maria] sat on the ground weaving a rug. I was listening to her stories of her home in Africa, and in my little girl voice said with sympathy: “Maum ‘Ria, you must be dreadfully sorry they took you away from all that, and brought you to a strange land to work for other people”

88 Pringle continued, inserting some of the supposed literal words of Maum ‘Ria: “Maum Maria stopped her work, rose to her full height--she was very tall and straight--clasped her hands and said, dropping a deep courtesy as she spoke: ‘My chile, ebery night on my knees I tank my Hebenly Father that he brought me

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87 Pringle, 48.

88 Ibid., 54. This quotation was allegedly spoken to a child. I have no way of knowing if Maum Maria softened her reply because she was speaking to a non-adult, one who was white. I also have no way of knowing the degree of accuracy by which Pringle remembered this encounter.
here, for without that I wud neber hev known my Savior!” Pringle added: ‘Daddy Tom took his freedom, [and] Daddy Prince and Maum Maria said they were grateful to their beloved mistress, but they would rather remain just as they were; they had all they needed and were happy and loved their white family, and they did not want to make any change.”

Few scholars, if any, would concur with the rosy picture of slave plantation life that Pringle tried to paint. William Dusinberre, for example, author of Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps, described the Pringle, Allston, Manigault, and Butler plantations in coastal South Carolina and Georgia as inhumane “charnel houses” for slaves. Referring to their black inhabitants, Dusinberre wrote that “those black people, born slaves, who later referred to the era of slavery as “them dark days” spoke truly.” He added that for those in the rice-producing areas “slavery was even more horrific than is generally acknowledged.” Admittedly, Dusinberre did not discuss slave religious education, but one must wonder, if one accepts his characterization of those plantations, whether Pringle’s Maum Maria ever wished to remain on the plantation rather than to accept her freedom. Were slaves like Maum Maria, victims of a

89 Ibid., 54. It is again impossible for me to know the source of Maum Maria’s religious instruction. Pringle implies in her memoir as a whole that slave religious instruction emanated from her family home.

90 Ibid., 55.


92 Ibid., viii.

93 Dusinberre does, in fact, rely on the mistresses’ own words, albeit their sources from the antebellum years. Dusinberre draws heavily upon observations made by Fanny Kemble, Pierce Butler’s famous and oft-cited wife.
dangerous environment and an exploitative system, ever appreciative? Were they ever even recipients of mistress religious instruction and the salvation which it supposedly offered? If in fact Maum Maria expressed sentiments of appreciation, was it because she was a “favorite” house slave in a position very different from her counterparts in the fields? Especially, in light of the number of slaves on low country plantations, it is indeed unlikely that the majority of them would have been brought to God by their mistresses.

Despite Pringle’s claims, the nineteenth-century slave narratives did not remotely corroborate the content of mistress memoirs. Former bondmen and women consistently maintained that during slavery they much preferred to worship in ways and in places away from their white owners. Some slaves adhered to elements of African religions, other chose elements of Islam, still others fashioned worship in very Old Testament-centric ways, and many chose unique forms which incorporated aspects of some or all of the above. Interestingly, many of those African Americans who did publish slave narratives both before and after the Civil War, like Maum Maria, had served as house servants. Ex-house servants overwhelmingly authored slave narratives. They, who by virtue of the countless hours spent in and around the Big House, had more intimate relationships with, and more intimate knowledge of, the mistress. This interaction frequently translated into negative reportage about mistress-directed slave religious education. Those few narratives authored by ex-field slaves, who had very different relationships with the mistress than her house servants, portrayed even more negative feelings.

The author reports that Kemble was especially affected by the tragedies and tribulations of her husband’s female slaves whom she witnessed suffering multiple miscarriages, excessive mortality among their children, and serious, if not fatal, health problems, all of which, it can be argued, related to the rigors of their labor. Again, one must carefully consider to what extent Pringle “revised” her memories for her memoir.
Regarding white Christianity.

Post-bellum ex-mistress memoirs rarely indicated that slaves had received any religious instruction other than that which mistresses, masters, or white clergymen provided. Did ex-mistresses never mention any religious expression within the slave community because they were unaware of any or because they chose to ignore it in order to elevate their own religious function and status with their slaves? Did such women not accept that there was a rich African American culture, one which included religion, apart from white society? Or were some of these women completely unaware of the slave community culture and its values? In ex-mistress discussion of slave appreciation, it appears that omission played a very revealing role.

Ex-mistresses frequently discussed their slaves in much the same tone as they discussed their own biological children. In such instances, they were quick to emphasize that they were responsible and wished to provide materially and especially spiritually for the needs not only of their own children but also their slave children. In fairness, there are a few antebellum diaries in which mistresses were able to make a convincing case that they did have satisfying relationships with individual slaves, usually ones assigned to the house and/or small slave children. However, their memoirs almost universally glorify the mistress/slave relationship, often in very saccharine ways. It seems disingenuous that ex-mistresses described after-the-fact relationships with slaves as loving and familial.

In one such example, ex-mistress Victoria V. Clayton of Eufala, Alabama repeatedly represented her former plantation and its inhabitants as an Eden where everyone was a member of one big, happy, Christian family. She wrote in 1899: “We simply and naturally understood that our slaves must be treated kindly and cared for spiritually, and so they were. We felt that we were responsible to God for our entire household. We regarded slavery in a patriarchal sense.
We were all one family, and, as master and mistress, heads of this family, we were responsible to God.94 In this vein, the authors of several other post-bellum memoirs claimed that they had always made the spiritual welfare of their slaves one of their first priorities, as they had likewise done with their natural children. Commonly, these women reported to have experienced great joy when both their slave children and their biological children, because of their care and example, had developed meaningful relationships with Christ.

Because both the black and the white residents of a single plantation were all of one family, ex-slaveholding women argued-- although often not convincingly-- that bondmen, like their white brethren, deserved tender, loving care, both spiritual and material. Victoria Clayton, for example, boasted that her “dear” mother assessed, as conscientiously as she did for her own children, the health and safety of her slave children. Clayton’s mother had reminded her daughter that on “each Sunday morning [before Sunday School], the slave mothers brought their children to her, the mistress. She carefully checked the children to satisfy herself that they were being properly attended to, bathed, and dressed.”95 In a similar instance, Susan Dabney Smedes of Raymond, Mississippi praised her mother for the love and devotion, especially spiritual devotion, which she directed toward her “other children.” Smedes wrote: “She tirelessly extended over the whole plantation. She had a special eye and care for any neglected or

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94 Victoria V. Clayton, *White and Black under the Old Regime*. (Milwaukee, WI: The Young Churchman Co., 1899), 57. Victoria Clayton was the wife of a former Major General in the Confederate Army, a judge of the Circuit Court of Alabama, and a president of the University of Alabama.

95 Ibid., 59-60.
unfortunate or ill-treated Negro child, and would contrive to have such cases near her.”

Some ex-slaveholding women, in an attempt to convince their readers that the mistress/slave relationship was genuine and strong, described how they received calls to come and sit at the back of the bedside of their dying slaves. Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle recounted one such incident:

My mother called his name gently, “Pompey.” He opened his eyes and labored breathing; one could not but see that death was near. He appeared unconscious, with a look of great pain on his face. My mother called him gently, “Pompey.” He opened his eyes and a look of delight replaced the one of pain. ‘My mistus!’ he exclaimed. ‘Yu cum! O, I tu glad! I tink I bin gwine, widout see you once more.’

The Pringles owned hundreds of slaves; whether Pompey was really an object of family affection or only an anonymous field hand, we will never know. Thus, Pringle’s inclusion of this event is open to question. Pringle did go further, however, in her attempt to characterize her mother as an evangelistically-sincere woman who labored on Sunday to impart religion to her slaves.

Describing Sunday activities, Pringle wrote:

“Mamma every Sunday afternoon had all the children big enough to come assembled in the little church in the avenue, and taught them what she could of the great mercy of God and what He expected of his children. It was always spoken of as “katekism,” and was the event of the week of the children--their best clothes, their cleanest faces, and oh, such smiling faces greeted mamma when she arrived at the church! After the lesson a big cake was brought in a wheelbarrow by one of the house-boys, convoyed by Maum Mary, who cut it with much ceremony, and each child went up to the barrow, dropped a courtesy and received a slice, then passed to my mother with another

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97 Pringle, 64.
courtesy, filed out and scampered happily home as soon as safe from Maum Mary's paralyzing eye.”

“All her life mamma kept this up, and in later years we children were allowed to go on condition that we should sit still and listen to the catechism, and ask for no cake until every child had had his share. Then we were allowed a few scraps, which tasted nicer than any other cake.”

Assuming that Pringle represented reality, it does appear initially that Pringle’s mother made a sincere attempt to treat her bondmen similarly to her children. Interestingly, in opposition to common antebellum practice, when mistresses and clergy segregated blacks from whites in order to emphasize the concept of subservience, Pringle’s mother imparted her religious education to a racially-mixed audience. She believed that the message of Jesus should belong equally to all persons. Elizabeth Pringle’s reflections strain credibility, especially when one considers the almost universal characterization of lowland South Carolina slavery as having been excessively severe. Thus, one must wonder, again, if Elizabeth Pringle slid into that comfortable revisionist history trap in order to earn a place for herself among many of the elite white authors which the Old South spawned late in the nineteenth century. Within this context, historians during the past decade or so have extended the exploration of southern elite white women, considering exclusively their post-bellum experiences. For example, Jane Turner Censer published the now-definitive book, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895*, which portrays such women as fighters for some measure of self-reliance and independence in the late nineteenth century. Sarah E. Gardner has recently augmented this fledgling sub-field, publishing *Blood & Irony: Southern White Women’s Narratives of the Civil War, 1861-1937*, which argues that southern elite white women served as guardians of the collective memory for the antebellum and Civil War experiences, and, in so doing, helped to

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98 Ibid., 92.
Another commonality which ran through the ex-mistress memoirs is the discussion--significantly greater in length and specificity than in the antebellum diaries--of the contents of religious instruction. Comparisons of these two genres are significant because once again, they reveal considerable revisionism. For example, antebellum sources reported very little specific teaching except for three old standards: the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Ten Commandments. Antebellum mistress lesson plans relied upon those tried and true staples of Protestant doctrine at the expense of other also seminal elements, such as the story of creation, Noah and the flood, the exodus into Egypt, the Sermon on the Mount, and the resurrection into heaven. Post-Civil War ex-mistresses painted a different picture, claiming that they taught widely from both the Old and New Testaments, and that they indicated that in several instances theirs was not a traditional Sunday school. In particular, these women remembered long hours teaching about Judgment Day and the Prodigal Son. The lesson of Judgment Day was particularly powerful and one by which mistresses were especially successful in psychologically traumatizing their slaves. They knew that bondmen had been permanently marked by their witness of the 1833 meteor shower and thus called it into play in their presentation of their Judgment Day lesson. One Maryland ex-mistress recorded: “In 1833, when the stars fell, all the

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100 Although most southern states passed anti-literacy laws, these were difficult to enforce. In some instances, both for practical reasons and benevolence, members of some white families taught favored slaves rudimentary reading, writing, and arithmetic.
Negroes on the plantation were terrified; they hid under beds, in barn lofts, hay and straw stacks; they thought judgment day had come.”

Many former mistresses, Victoria Clayton among them, addressed, in considerable detail, both the content and frequency of their religious lessons, even citing the exact portions of the catechisms taught. Clayton recorded:

“As to their [slaves] religious training, every Sunday morning the mothers brought their little ones to see me. Then I could satisfy myself as to the care they gave them, whether they had received a bath and suitable clothing for the holy day. Later the larger children presented themselves to be taught the Catechism. I used the little Calvary Catechism, prepared by Mrs. D.C. Weston. The adults [slaves] were permitted to attend the different churches in town as they pleased, but when the sun hid himself behind the western hills, all were compelled to return home to feed and care for the horses, cows, etc. When the evening meal was over my dining room was in readiness for the reception of all the grown members of the family. They gathered there and took their respective seats. They were taught the Creed of the Holy Apostolic Church, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments; that is, all who could be taught, for some of them never could learn to repeat them, but understood the meaning sufficiently to lead a right life. Often, I would read a short sermon to them. They sang hymns, and we closed with prayer to our Heavenly Father:

“Glorious is the blending
Of right affections, climbing or descending
Along a scale of light and life with cares
Alternate.”

The degree of Clayton’s detail about the Sunday schedule was almost unheard of in the antebellum diaries, which rarely discussed Sunday’s regimen in such detail. Hymn singing,

101  Edmund K. Goldsborough, *Ole Mars An’ Ole Miss.* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), 77. This was reprinted from a copy in the Fisk University Library Negro Collection (first published in 1900).

102  Clayton, 58-60.
which ex-mistresses frequently noted, rarely appeared in the earlier diaries. Although some ex-mistresses chose to discuss in great detail the content of their lessons, others felt it more important to emphasize the frequency of their efforts. Women in the latter category professed that it was less important for their slaves to learn about specific Biblical events than it was for them to be reminded on a very regular basis that Jesus should always be close to their hearts.

The first portion of this chapter discussed those ways elite white ex-slaveholding women during Reconstruction and beyond had characterized themselves as religious educators during the antebellum era. Those same women discussed how they believed their slaves viewed them. Obviously, the mistress was not the sole chronicler of the mistress/slave experience. Former slaves, in addition to the body of their narratives written prior to the Civil War, revealed their past lives in a variety of post-bellum sources, including the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) slave narratives of the 1930s, a vast collection of slave testimony now widely cited by historians. As was the case with the mistress memoirs, post-Civil War ex-slave sources, when considered in their entirety, also enable scholars to identify several common themes relative to mistress education.

A large number of ex-slaves who provided testimony to W.P.A. interviewers in the 1930s indicated that they had received no religious instruction, at all, be it from their mistress, master, or even a white clergyman. Persons enslaved in the “newer” areas of the South-- especially in the more sparsely populated regions of Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and other frontier areas-- were especially vocal on this subject. Chapter II of this thesis discusses those reasons for such a phenomenon. Aside from the fact that hypothetically hundreds of thousands of slaves either did not receive or did not appreciably benefit from white-imparted Christian education, those ex-slaves who did discuss their mistress-directed religious experiences characterized them
in a decidedly positive way. Only a few antebellum slave narratives identified kind-hearted, well-intentioned slaveholding women who labored to bring God to their bondmen. In contrast, former slaves reminisced about comfortable Christian relationships with their mistresses in the W.P.A. sources.

In her study of the general relationship between plantation mistress and slave, Elizabeth Craven surveyed both the nineteenth century slave narratives and the twentieth century W.P.A. interviews of ex-bondmen. She found that 75% of slaves who wrote nineteenth-century narratives discussed-- to varying degrees-- the mistress. In the twentieth-century interviews, by contrast, only 40% of ex-slaves mentioned her, some only in passing. Of the W.P.A. documents, 65% of references to the mistress were positive and 35% were negative. Among the positive responses, 55% of them elicited were from males and 45% of them elicited were from females.\textsuperscript{103}

Several factors could explain why former slaves described their antebellum mistress-directed religious experiences as positive. Significantly, most subjects at the time of their interviews were at a minimum of 80 years old. The vast majority of interviewed ex-slaves were born between 1845 and 1860, a period by which most slaveholders had proselytized their slaves. Hypothetically, a W.P.A. interviewer could have interviewed a slave who hypothetically was born in 1845, making him 92 years old in 1937. Factoring in the harsh reality of compromised life expectancy for African Americans in the 1930s, very few of the W.P.A. subjects would have been born any earlier than 1845. The testimonies of interviewees born before 1845 are subject to

\textsuperscript{103} Elizabeth Craven’s manuscript, as far as I can tell, was never published. Catherine Clinton cited Elizabeth Craven’s study in \textit{The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the South} on page 188.
question. Acknowledging that most interviewees were in fact born between 1845 and 1860, a large percentage of them would have been children or very young teenagers during their period of bondage. This is not to imply that the lives of slave youth were easy; certainly there were many physical, material, and psychological discomforts. But, in contrast to the lives of older teenagers and adults, slave childhood experiences were usually less difficult. As a group, children experienced fewer rapes, less frequent sexual harassment, certainly less pregnancy, fewer beatings, and joined in less arduous physical work. Slaves who were at least 80 years old, in reality may have reported a more tolerable experience in slavery because, by virtue of their age, they did in fact have a more tolerable experience. Their rather benign characterization of life on the plantation extended, implicitly and explicitly, to their characterization of their mistress-directed Christian instruction.

A small number of those persons interviewed claimed ages between 90 and 100, making them born between the mid-1830s and the mid-1840s. Their testimony was especially valuable because, unlike so many of the other interviewees, these ex-slaves had lived in bondage as young adults. By consequence, they would have experienced more of the realities, particularly the negative realities, of the slave experience than the bulk of the W.P.A. subjects. Regrettably, some of the responses of the excessively elderly were sometimes compromised either because of their incoherence due to dementia, an eventuality for members of all population groups, or their inability to recall many details from so long in the past. Thus, it is the interviews taken from persons born in that 15 year window (1845-1860) which comprise the most usable portion of the W.P.A. collection.

Additionally, ex-slaves may have presented a more benign characterization of the slave life than what it was in reality because they spoke as aged victims in the Great Depression of the
1930s. That decade challenged virtually all of American society, but particularly those on the
lowest economic rungs. Thus, for ex-slaves, slavery in memory may have been—especially
because so many of them were still children—a more “secure” experience than the 1930s present.
They presumably then had housing, food, clothing, an extended family, and adults who took care
of them. Extreme poverty in old age for many would have been a terrifying experience against
which they were measuring the circumstances of their youth. Other factors shaped the responses
in the W.P.A. narratives: 1) whites interviewed blacks and, in so doing, created an unequal
social situation in which blacks probably felt compelled to defer to whites, 2) some blacks may
have hoped that by “impressing” white interviewers whom they hoped had benevolent outlooks,
that they would in turn become connected with a white charitable organization\textsuperscript{104}, and 3)
memory at every stage of life is a complicated phenomenon—and during the final years of life—
it is especially complicated. It is human nature that individuals work to find meaning in their
lives before leaving this world; this process frequently employs considerable individual
revision.\textsuperscript{105}

In the W.P.A. interviews, many ex-slaves identified the mistress as being only second to
the white clergy as the individual who had most instructed them about Christianity. Most ex-

\textsuperscript{104} This is certainly not to suggest that all interviewers were white. In the case of every state, there was a limited
number of interviewers, typically ranging from about 10 to 35. Every state employed at least one black interviewer;
some states employed several. In particular, Virginia and Florida employed a black majority number of
interviewers. Racial identification does not exist for many of the W.P.A. interviewers, suggesting that even more of
them could have been black. See Paul D. Escott, \textit{Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave

\textsuperscript{105} George P. Rawick and Paul D. Escott, in some cases, made similar arguments.
bondmen portrayed the mistress more positively than either white clergymen or their evangelical masters; often they painted both the clergymen and the masters as manipulators who saw Christianity and their efforts to impart it as devices to control an inferior population. The mistress, conversely, often received positive or neutral comments from ex-slaves, both in general and more specifically in her role as a religious educator. Ex-slaves described their own experiences in numerous southern locales and cited former slaveholding women’s genuine good intentions and patience as well as the significant amount of time and attention that they had devoted to slave religious instruction. Callie Washington, an ex-slave born about 1858 in Red Fork, Arkansas, for example, praised her ex-mistress’ benevolent qualities by saying: “They [her owners] didn’t have no children so old Miss took me in the big house to be her little nigger. Ole Miss tried to learn me to read and write and count on my fingers. Ole Miss, also learned me to say my prayers. Every night she would go over “Our Father” with me till I could say it by myself.”

As there are identifiable themes within the genre of the mistress memoirs, so too are there identifiable themes within the W.P.A. slave narratives. Four are particularly prominent and due to the constraints of the W.P.A. interviewing format, these themes revealed more about social interactions than they did about religious ideology. The W.P.A. provided their interviewers with a set of specific questions because they were seeking standardization. Interviewers rarely deviated from those prescribed items. These questions asked for specifics, not for a discussion

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of a person’s religious/ideological beliefs. I have identified the following themes in the W.P.A. narratives: 1) the mistress commonly worked to provide skills, such as reading and basic arithmetic, in addition to religion when attempting to elevate their slaves, 2) the mistress made special effort to join the company of her slaves on the occasion of special religious events, such as baptisms and funerals, 3) the mistress’ sincere encouragement of her slaves both to accept Jesus as their personal Savior and to live by the commandments of His faith, 4) the slave’s appreciation for the efforts of the mistress extended on his behalf, and 5) the ex-bondman’s negative religious experiences with his mistress in her efforts to evangelize him.

Although at the end of the Civil War in 1865 most slaves were either illiterate or semi-literate, a number of ex-slaves interviewed by the W.P.A. noted that their mistresses had taught them rudimentary reading, writing, and arithmetic, along with their religious lessons. This practice appeared to be especially common in the older areas of the South-- especially in Maryland and Virginia-- as well as in regions of the Upper South where, in the 1840s and 1850s, the slave system was suffering a slow death. Recognizing that abolitionism was gaining strength in the North, mistresses of the Upper South may have been more inclined to educate slaves,

107 The W.P.A. explored three main areas: “conditions of life in slavery, including work, food, clothing religion, resistance, care of the sick, and relations with one’s owners; experiences during the Civil War and Reconstruction, including contact with the Union army or the Ku Klux Klan, first knowledge of freedom, school attendance, and land; and, more sketchily, later patterns of life, including family history and religious activities.” See Escott, 5.

108 There were statutes that prohibited teaching enslaved and/or free blacks in the following states: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. See Heather Andrea Williams, Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
feeling that the plantation system was in jeopardy and that slavery very well could end. Many of those mistresses who presided over Upper South plantations and larger farms often owned considerably fewer bondmen than their sisters further south. Thus, for those Upper South white plantation women the actual task of educating slaves, religiously and practically, may have seemed more manageable and less time-consuming. Born in 1851 in Charles County, Maryland, ex-bondman Charles Coles revealed to the W.P.A. many positive aspects of his life in bondage, including the religious instruction imparted by his Roman Catholic mistress. He said, in referring to her:

Mrs. Dorsey conducted regular religious services of the Catholic Church on the farm in a chapel erected for that purpose and in which the slaves were taught the catechism and many learned how to read and write and were assisted by Catholic priests who came to the farm on church holidays and on Sundays for the purpose. When a child was born, it was baptized by the priest, and given names and they were recorded in the Bible. We were taught the rituals of the Catholic Church and when any one died, the funeral was conducted by a priest, the corpse was buried in the Dorsey’s graveyard, a lot of about 1.5 acres, surrounded by cedar trees and well cared for. The only difference in the graves was that the Dorsey people had marble markers and the slaves had plain stones.  

Gladys Robertson, also an Upper South ex-slave born in Montgomery County, Kentucky in 1843, corroborated Coles’ portrayal: “The darkies were deeply religious and learned much of the Bible from devout mistresses who felt it their holy duty to teach these ignorant people the word of God. They taught us how to read from the holy book.”

Ex-slaves from other regions of the South also referred to having received practical and spiritual educations from their mistresses. Although fewer in number than their counterparts in  


110 Ibid., 85.
the Upper South, ex-bondmen acknowledged the practice more frequently than did their predecessors in earlier sources. For example, interestingly, several W.P.A. interviewees in North Carolina claimed to have had Moravian owners who provided instruction to them which combined evangelism with English grammar and arithmetic. Betty Cofer, born in 1856 in Wachovia, North Carolina, praised her mistress for allowing slaves to attend school in a Moravian-constructed log church, remarking “my mistress always read the bible to us an’ tell us right an’ wrong.”111 In a few rare cases, the extent of the education that a slave received from his mistress and master was remarkable. Jimmie Johnson, born in 1847 and as a youth in Spartanburg, South Carolina, said:

Masser and Missus were Episcopalians, and I went to Sunday School where the rock church now stands (Church of the Advent). Miss Mary Legg was my teacher, and she was a saintly woman. She was a niece of old Masser. Old Missus used to come to the house where I lived and teach me the alphabet. After I got older, I use to take care of the Masser’s horse and buggy for him; used to hitch-up the horse for him and go with him on his way to see a patient. Bless his heart, he let me take my Webster’s blue back speller and my history with me when I would drive with him. I would study those books and Masser would tell me how to pronounce the hard words. That is the way I got an education. Masser would tell Missus that Jimmie was a smart boy, that he had no father nor mother and that they must be good to him. They sure was. I never wanted for a thing. Sometimes on our drives Masser would tell me some Latin words, but I never did study Latin—just English.112

The W.P.A. slave narratives also revealed that, in general, mistress religious instruction was also more frequently undertaken in the frontier areas of the South than it was in most areas of the Deep South. In those more remote locations, plantations, where they existed, were small by Deep South standards, the result being significantly smaller holdings of bondmen. It was

111 Rawick, American Slave, Supplement Series 1, Vol. 11, 19.

again more manageable for mistresses so inclined to indoctrinate and generally teach their slaves when the numbers were relatively small. One may also explain the greater number of mistress-directed religious efforts on the frontier by the distance from which families lived away from churches and also the related infrequent visits by circuit-riding preachers. B.C. Franklin, the father of renowned historian John Hope Franklin, was never a slave, but in a 1935 W.P.A. interview he spoke of his mother who was. She had been a slave of a Choctaw and lived in an isolated area of Mississippi. B.C. Franklin spoke highly of his mother’s benevolent owner who “allowed [his mother] every privilege of [her] people,” and of that devout Choctaw mistress who claimed his mother as her special “Bible student.” However, in some cases, frontier mistresses, by virtue of their own literary inadequacies, were not equipped to be the religious educator of anyone, black or white.

Another common theme in the W.P.A. slave narratives was that of the mistress’ participation in selected religious events, especially baptisms and funerals, in the slave community. Many ex-bondmen told their interviewers of their mistress-directed education specifically about John the Baptist and his baptism of Jesus Christ. In possession of such knowledge, ex-slaves described the emotional significance of plantation baptisms in their lives. The degree to which ex-slaves discussed this topic varied, but Esther Lockhart, for example, did expound at length about her special day. Lockhart, born around 1850 in Spartanburg, South Carolina, recalled:

All Saturday I prayed and Miss Bessie told me what I was going to do, and read to me from the Bible about baptizing and about John the Baptist baptizing Christ. Yes sir, the Bible say Christ went down in the water, in the waters of Jordan. Miss Bessie was telling my ma how to fix my clothes while she was reading the Bible to me. All

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my clothes was white but my shoes. In those day they did not have white shoes. I wore white cotton stockings. I had a white dress to wear to the pond and I took two pairs of white stockings. A crowd was to be baptized at 2:30 o’clock that evening. The sun was good and hot. I went with my folks, Miss Bessie went and all the white folks went to see their Negroes go under.\textsuperscript{114}

Apparently, mistress interest in slave baptism was not entirely confined to smaller plantations where white women typically had more personal relationships with their bondmen. Jane Sutton, born in 1853 in Harrison County, Mississippi on a large plantation containing several hundred slaves, fondly remembered her mistress’ attention in obtaining special Baptismal clothing:

My white folks wuz all Baptis’ and dey made us go to church too. De church wuz called de “Strong River Church.” Dey had big babtizing.” I ’members when I jined de church and wuz baptized. De white folks preacher baptized uz in de creek whut run from Mr. Berry’s pond. I wuz drest in a white ‘lowel’ slip made outer cloth we spin and weave. When we dressed up in our Sunday clothes we had caliker dresses. Dey sho wuz purty. I ’members a dress now dat old mistus got fer my granny. It wuz white and yaller, and it wuz de purtiest thing I thought I ever saw.\textsuperscript{115}

Ex-slaves also noted their mistresses’ roles at slave funerals, although seemingly white female attendance at such events was less common than it was at baptisms. In selected instances, however, not only did mistresses attend; they also delivered one of the eulogies. One can question the accuracy of those memories of mistress presence at baptisms more often than at funerals. One can perhaps explain it by the fact that a slave’s baptism was very much a rite of passage occasion and also by the fact that the ages of slaves at the time of such funerals were young enough that hypothetically those slaves perhaps would not have processed many of the details surrounding them. In addition, many of those ex-slaves may not have attended funerals

\textsuperscript{114} Rawick, \textit{American Slave}, Vol. 3, 108.

\textsuperscript{115} Rawick, \textit{American Slave}, Supplement Series 1, Vol. 10, 2087.
by virtue of their young age and/or because of the common practice of holding slave funerals in the evening.

A third theme prevalent in the W.P.A. narratives was the mistress’ sincere desire to bring her slaves to Jesus Christ and to give them-- by way of Biblical teachings-- a road map for a better life. It is true that some ex-slaves indicated in the W.P.A. slave narratives that their mistresses did have cruel, disingenuous, and/or manipulative intentions as they functioned as religious educators. Those particular mistresses I cited in this chapter-- in the opinion of their ex-bondmen-- did not exhibit the effects of a higher calling in their own lives. Another group of ex-slaves, in their interviews, stated that their mistresses had never broached the subject of Christianity with them. Still others remembered the terror imparted to them by their mistresses who threatened them with eternal damnation as punishment for their misdeeds. Despite those who remembered their mistresses negatively in regards to religious education, the majority of the W.P.A. interviewees identified positive religious experiences with mistresses.  

Some of them even expressed genuine affection for and gratitude toward those women, using such adjectives as “dutiful,” “angelic,” and “holy.”

Walter Long, born in 1852, remembered his slave days near Columbia, South Carolina and his mistress-- who by the example of her life and her own personal good deeds-- facilitated his life-long relationship with God. He said: “Mistress was mighty ‘ticular ‘bout our ‘ligion, ‘cause she knowed dere was no nigger any too good no how. Us slaves ‘sorbed all de good us had in us from our mistress, I really believes. She was so kind and gentle, she moved ‘mong us a

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116 Please refer to pages 77-78. Although the majority of the W.P.A. interviewees identified neutral and positive experiences, one should keep in mind those reasons why such interviewees answered in the ways that they did.
livin’ benediction, deliverin’ us to God.”¹¹⁷ By these words, Long credited his mistress with helping him to find salvation and with instilling in him the belief that he was worthy of it. Other slaves lamented the spiritual condition of African Americans in the 1930s, regretting that they did not possess the piety which mistresses had instilled in them during slavery. Minerva Wells, born about 1853 in Pinola, Mississippi, regretted in her interview that: “Now I thinks ‘o de slave days an’ ob my Ole Missus, she sho’ wuz a fine, holy purson. I wishes de young colored folks would settle down an’ think like we wuz by Ole Missus. I railly thought Ole Missus wuz an angel.”¹¹⁸ Thus, one cannot deny that at least in memory by the 1930s, many ex-slaves held up the mistress as a positive moral example in large part due to her attempts at religious instruction.

Additionally, my examination and analysis of the literally thousands of W.P.A. narratives indicated that the majority of respondents who mentioned religious instruction-- at least at that point in their lives-- expressed positive opinions concerning the religious instruction which they had received from their mistresses during slavery. Very few ex-bondmen allude, either implicitly or explicitly, to any desire at that time to resist or reject mistress-directed religious instruction. One must remember, however, that many ex-slaves, by virtue of their age at the end of bondage, would have been too young to have been successful in most acts of resistance. Regardless of their actual religious relationships with their mistresses, many ex-slaves in the presence of their white and black W.P.A. interviewers reflected fondly on their antebellum Sunday School experiences.

However, the relatively rare ex-slave did report his desires as a youth to participate in


religious activities which were completely separate from the white world. Mississippian George Weathersby, born in 1852 in Simpson County, commented:

We wuz raised up wid-out no education ‘cetpin de white teachers taught us to read an’ write a little. We could go to meeting at de white folks church an’ sit in de back, bus us wanted to have worship in our own way. On Sundays us would collect at some ole’ vacant cabin an’ have our own services. In de summer time we would build big brush arbors off in de woods. At nite we would make big firs to see by, then we could sing prayer an’ shout all us wanted to.\textsuperscript{119}

However, also in that same interview Weathersby contradicted himself by saying: “Hit wuz bad fer us niggers to be enslaved, but us wuz cared for, mos’ times a heap bettern po’ folks is a faring these days. Our race has gained Civilazation an’ education by hit so I is satisfied an’ wants de good will on everybody.”\textsuperscript{120} Charles Hayes, born in 1849 in Clarke County, Alabama, corroborated Weathersby.

One who does not know the south, can form no conception of the extreme hardships some of the slaves had to undergo; the many peculiar situations that would arise, nor can he have the faintest idea of the deep regard, and at times, even real affection that existed between the master and the favored slave. It is a reflex for this regard that is the basis of all the helpful things the better class of southern white people are now doing to help the Negro better his condition to raise to higher planes of manhood.\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 2233

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 2235. To what extent Weathersby was sincere, researchers have no way of knowing. However, I interpreted “an wants de good will on everybody” to suggest that Weathersby had reconciled the experience of his childhood in bondage and took away from it guidance that aided him in the hardships of his life.

\textsuperscript{121} Rawick, \textit{American Slave}, Supplement Series 2, Vol. 1, 38.
Some ex-slaves who admitted to their W.P.A. interviewers that in their earlier lives they had criticized mistress efforts in religious education, by the 1930s had reevaluated their previous positions, voicing regret for not having exhibited better attitudes toward their mistresses’ efforts. South Carolinian Lincoln Watkins, born about 1850, is such an example. To his W.P.A. interviewer, Watkins expressed regret by saying, “Young Miss tried to teach me to read and write and gave me lessons but I wus too dumb to learn and didn’t have the sense to appreciate it.”

Finally, although in the W.P.A. narratives, slaves usually identified positive religious relationships with their mistresses, one would be remiss in not citing common negative religious experiences which those ex-slaves identified. Frequently cited complaints and/or frustrations were: 1) the complete omission of mistress-directed religious instruction and 2) mistress scare tactics, especially threats that heaven would not be attainable to those slaves who defied their owners.

A small minority of W.P.A. ex-slaves reported that they received no religious education from either the mistress or any other white individual. Mirroring information contained within the nineteenth-century slave narratives, the W.P.A. testimony indicated that—in some cases—the mistress expressed no interest in evangelizing slaves, and, in others, she was illiterate and thus incapable of Biblical teaching. Hamp Simmons—born in Pontotoc County, Mississippi in about 1854—told his interviewer that “Old Miss and Old Master couldn’t so much as write their own name. We didn’t know anything about religion. There wasn’t no church to go to, and we never as much as heared about the Bible or Baptizings. None of the slaves died to me memberence so I

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can’t say how a funeral would be held.”\textsuperscript{123} Others indicated no knowledge of the religious
holidays and certainly no understanding of their significance. Alice Alexander, born in 1839 in
Jackson Parrish, Louisiana, lamented that her fellow slaves “diden no any Crismas was in dem
days”\textsuperscript{124} Still others recalled that they never received religious instruction of any kind until after
the Civil War. Malindy Smith, born in 1860 in what is now Webster County, Mississippi,
remembered: “Us niggers didn’t never go to church ‘till I was at least twelve years old. Course
dat was after de surrender an’ we went to de white folks church den. In slavery days we wasn’t
‘lowed to read ‘an ‘rite. Didn’t even know there was a Bible.”\textsuperscript{125}

Also in the manner of the nineteenth-century slave narratives, some ex-slaves in the
1930s remembered how their mistresses used scare tactics—threatening them that disobedience
would prevent their ascension into heaven. Sallie Carder, born in Jackson, Tennessee, around
1854, told her interviewer: “me mistress would tell me to be a good obedient slave and I maybe I
would go to heaven.”\textsuperscript{126} Other slaves anguished that their mistresses refused to accept that they
possessed souls. Referring to his mistress, Berry Smith—born around 1821 in Sumter County,
Alabama—recalled: “Dey tol’ us we didn’t have no souls den, but I learned better since. Every
human bein’ got a soul.”\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{123} Rawick, \textit{American Slave}, Vol. 5, 1938.
\textsuperscript{124} Rawick, \textit{American Slave}, Vol. 12, 1.
\textsuperscript{125} Rawick, \textit{American Slave}, Vol. 5, 1994.
\textsuperscript{126} Rawick, \textit{American Slave}, Vol. 12, 97.
\textsuperscript{127} Rawick, \textit{American Slave}, Vol. 5, 1984.
In conclusion, chapter III argued: 1) ex-slaveholding women portrayed their roles as religious educators more positively in their post-bellum memoirs than they did in their antebellum diaries, and 2) ex-bondmen remembered their religious experiences with their ex-mistresses more positively in the W.P.A. slave narratives than they did in their nineteenth-century book-length narratives. This being said, it is essential for those who research these documents to proceed with caution when making generalizations based upon them for several reasons. One can fault ex-slaveholding women for the representation of themselves as more pure and high-minded than it was in their antebellum diaries. Furthermore, they allowed themselves to fall into the comfortable position of defending the Old South. Likewise, one can question the recollections of ex-slaves who were probably also guilty of incorrectly remembering their slave experiences; memory of their days in bondage was especially complicated. Interestingly, these sources-- both the post-bellum ex-slaveholding memoirs and the W.P.A. slave narratives-- reveal as much about late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century southern psychology-- both black and white-- as they do about the antebellum South. One can value them for this aspect as well.
CONCLUSION

As a child, I received a cast-off cedar chest into which, through the years, I stowed “my history.” Some of its contents recently reminded me that as a young child I wrote that I wished for a career in history. By the time I arrived at college, I had long forgotten those intentions. My undergraduate liberal arts education, however, took me full circle and I began graduate school having returned to the intention of becoming an historian. I then began to explore intensively the nineteenth-century American South and its historiography for the first time. My graduate courses exposed me to the triad of race, class, and gender and I decided that my research focus should incorporate all three of these elements. After one false start and after a fair amount of preliminary investigation, I ultimately chose a topic which evolved into this thesis: “Black, White, and Sunday School: The Relationship Among Religion, the Plantation Mistress, and the Slave in Reality and in Memory.”

Having chosen an area of study, I developed a number of questions which I hoped I would be able to answer, or be able to answer in part. These included seven major questions: 1) To what extent did society require antebellum slave-holding women of the middle and upper classes to live up to the nineteenth century idealized image of the morally superior “lady,” and to what extent were they successful in doing so? 2) To what extent did such antebellum slave-holding women feel it their moral responsibility to act as a “religious educator” of their slaves? 3) What aspects of Christianity did these women attempt to teach their slaves? 4) To what extent did slave communities embrace plantation mistress teachings? 5) To what extent did slave-
owning women influence slave religious beliefs and practices? 6) To what extent did slave communities influence the mistress in the realm of her own religion and beyond? and 7) What evidence exists within primary sources generated by the slaves which reflects the role/impact of religion in their daily lives?

As my research developed, I discovered that those sources, primarily the nineteenth-century slave narratives, the antebellum mistress diaries, the post-bellum mistress memoirs, and the W.P.A. slave narratives, that I examined provided me answers-- to a significant degree-- for six of the seven major questions. I was successful in garnering considerable information related to the plantation mistresses, their slaves, and their relationships with one another.

Chapter I discussed, among other topics, some of those reasons which compelled plantation mistresses to believe it their moral responsibility to act as religious educators for their slaves. Antebellum mistress diaries described various early life experiences in numerous settings, including the plantation, the church, the female academy, and in society, which collectively led this class of women to those roles prescribed by antebellum elite white southern society.

As revealed in their diaries, antebellum slaveholding women did, as a whole, try to live up to this nineteenth-century idealized image of the morally superior “lady.” Chapter I argued that plantation mistresses encountered numerous obstacles that threatened and undermined even the most conscientious of women in their attempts to live up to this idealized and often unrealistic image of moral superiority and, in turn, their duties, imposed by themselves and by others, to provide religious instruction to-- and moral examples for-- their slaves. My sources, especially the antebellum diaries, repeatedly identified several areas about which plantation

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128 I was less successful in answering question #3, although my sources did allow me to arrive at some conclusions.
mistresses expressed frustration. These were: 1) discomfort in expressing religious compassion for slave women who had born mulatto children, especially when the mulatto offspring was the flesh of their family member, 2) the occasional personal realization that their efforts as religious educators were self-serving vehicles to ensure their salvation rather than the uplifting of their chattel, 3) difficulties in resolving their role as perpetuators of the institution of slavery with their role as God’s representative on Earth, and 4) anger directed toward male family members, usually the husband, who afforded them little or no decision-making power in their relationships with their slaves. This lack of decision-making power often spilled over into a mistress’ conceptualization and implementation of religious education.

Many of the sources which I examined, as I prepared chapter II, revealed important aspects about the slave community and both its acceptance and rejection of mistress-provided religious instruction. Some of the sources, particularly the nineteenth-century slave narratives, demonstrated that many antebellum era slaves embraced their mistresses’ teachings and that some regarded their mistresses as their personal saviors on Earth, women who had facilitated their opportunities to forge loving relationships with their Creator. A few such bondmen may have perceived their life in bondage as the tradeoff for their personal relationship with Jesus Christ. A large number of the slave narratives which I reviewed, however, suggested that slaves did not consider the mistress to be God’s representative on Earth. Those bondmen and bondwomen seriously criticized their mistresses, caustically complaining that they had been manipulative, self-serving, and insincere. In particular, slaves recalled 1) disturbing contradictions between mistresses’ religious instruction to them and mistresses’ own moral behavior, 2) a complete absence of religion in the lives of some mistresses, and 3) mistress decisions either intentionally or unintentionally to deny religious access to her slaves. Not
surprisingly, and for a variety of reasons, as chapter II demonstrates, many enslaved African Americans, consequently, chose to practice their own “brand” of Christianity, one that typically incorporated elements of African religions into it and, in so doing, eliminated any leadership role of the mistress. Despite these criticisms, slave sources reveal that religion, whether it be that of the slave community, the mistress, or, more commonly, a combination of both, was a defining force in the life of most slaves. The number of slave documents that specifically mentioned religion, either giving specifics or only in general terms, was very significant.

Slave and mistress documents alike, as discussed in chapters I and II of this thesis, confirmed both slave acceptance of mistress religious instruction and slave rejection of mistress religious instruction. Their sources also presented evidence of slaves positively shaping their mistresses’ spiritual beliefs and practices. In some notable instances, the slave was a more significant agent in shaping his mistress’ religious persona than was her clergyman or her biological family members; in other cited cases, the religious relationship between mistress and slave functioned as a symbiotic relationship with each party imparting religious sustenance to the other. Some slaveholding women attended Sunday services conducted by and for slaves and, in a few documented cases, mistresses credited their slaves with introducing them to a more passionate and personal Christianity.

Chapter III addressed most of the primary questions which I posed at the beginning of this thesis, based on documents written after the Civil War. These primarily included mistress memoirs and the W.P.A. slave narratives. I concluded that: 1) mistresses, as a group, portrayed their experiences as religious educators for their slaves as more benevolent and successful than they did in their antebellum diaries and 2) ex-slaves remembered their experiences as the recipients of mistress-directed religious education less negatively than they did in the earlier
written sources generated in the nineteenth century. Both the sources used and the conclusions presented in chapter III meshed well with a significant, relatively new sub-field of history which examines history through the “lens” of memory. Completing this thesis reinforced in my mind the complexity of the complex of the concept of memory. Although all three of these chapters made me question constantly the veracity and usefulness of my primary sources, I became even more aware of this in the third chapter. Why former slaveholding women remembered their antebellum experiences in the ways in which they did are intriguing. My findings substantially supported Sarah E. Gardner’s research that southern elite white women actively sought to preserve those antebellum experiences that, in reality, were forever lost. In the process of “preserving” the past, such women—whether consciously or unconsciously—rewrote the past. Reasons why ex-slaves remembered their antebellum lives more positively than they did in their nineteenth-century narratives have been explored previously by several scholars, including George Rawick and Paul Escott. The reasons for their remembrance of a “gentler” bondage are more clear. Scholars will never know, for example, to what degree the Great Depression may have influenced the answers of the typical African American interviewees. What would their responses have been had they been interviewed in the 1870s? in the 1890s? or even in the 1910s?

Although the nineteenth-century slave narratives, the antebellum mistress diaries, the post-bellum mistress memoirs, and the W.P.A. slave narratives revealed much about the relationships, both in reality and in memory, between mistresses and their slaves, I was unable to answer, to my satisfaction, all of the questions which I established at the inception of this project. Furthermore, I did not find a single example of pre- and post-Civil War documents written by the same white woman. I view this fact significant. When formulating much of my argument, I had to compare antebellum diary contents as a composite body with post-bellum memoir contents,
also as a composite body. It would have been far more significant had I been able, for example, to measure Mary Jones’ 1850s writings against Mary Jones’ 1885 writings.

One final important frustration related to the plantation mistress sources was the fact that mistresses, in both their pre- and post-Civil War writings, were typically vague when they discussed those particular aspects of Christianity which they imparted to their slaves. Evidence revealed that mistresses commonly based their curriculum on the Ten Commandments, Apostles’ Creed, Lord’s Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, and a handful of other old standbys; mistresses, in their accounts, made painfully few references to other specific Biblical passages. Historians have argued that the antebellum white clergy stressed Biblical elements that encouraged slave subservience. By virtue of the fact that mistresses included the Ten Commandments, some historians would argue that they, too, in their religious efforts, stressed subservience. Others could argue that nineteenth-century American Christianity, which relied heavily on the precepts of the Ten Commandments, encouraged a belief system which placed all believers in at least some degree of fear-driven subservience. I, however, am unable-- based on that evidence that I have seen-- to expand this same claim to include mistresses; scholars may never know to what extent, if any, mistresses did in fact emulate antebellum clergymen in this respect. Thus, as a result of these seeming realities, this thesis is decidedly more secular/cultural in nature than I originally envisioned.

I found the slave/African American sources less frustrating and consequently felt more comfortable making arguments based upon them. This was primarily due to the dramatically higher number of recorded individual slave experiences than recorded individual mistress
experiences.\textsuperscript{129} Although I discussed my reservations about the black sources especially in chapter III, I feel compelled to reiterate that the W.P.A. interviews were flawed. Specifically, interviewers asked ex-slaves very prescribed questions-- many of which seemed only marginally useful-- often eliciting vague, disconnected answers. Simply, many W.P.A. questions hindered slaves from revealing data which they may have considered to have been seminal to their slave experiences. Consequently, much of the information regarding the slave experience was lost, either because interviewers did not ask follow-up questions or because they-- for a variety of reasons-- recorded only the most cursory of responses.

At the conclusion of my research, I realized that this project earned a unique place in the historiography of antebellum southern race relations. A considerable body of literature exists which begins to shed light on this very complicated, both historically and contemporaneously, issue. In creating an appropriate literature, historians first examined the broader topic of slavery, later considering the more specific topic of slave communities. Following shortly thereafter, other historians embraced gender; one of those literatures which that effort spawned is one which deals with antebellum elite white women. Finally, in the 1980s, academicians, including Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Marli Weiner, began to consider in earnest relationships between slaves and their mistresses. This thesis transports such a progression to a finer level of specificity by considering mistress/slave relationships as they related to one particular life experience, religion. Thus, in so doing, this piece of scholarship creates a unique place for itself in the historiography of the antebellum South. Unlike many of the articles and books which

\textsuperscript{129} One must keep in mind, however, that there were infinitely more slaves, who at least hypothetically could have written narratives, than there were mistresses.
address mistress/slave relationships, this thesis-- by virtue of the evidence which I examined-- takes a “middle road,” one which-- to varying degrees-- presents both populations as victims. Granted, the degree and effects of victimhood were far more acute in the slave populations, but, in many cases, the mistress lacked at least some control in her environment also. This is not to say, however, that within both populations there were not individuals who demonstrated agency, who attempted-- and in some cases-- succeeded in overcoming the hand that was dealt them.

It is not an overstatement that my having pursued this project with considerable intensity for the past twelve months will profoundly change my life. This experience impelled me literally everyday for a year to consider issues related to race, class, and gender, and particularly race. I now realize that for the duration of my life, I will have to examine practically every issue of significance through a lens which will refract these three categories.

My consideration of the mistress/slave relationship in the American South in the nineteenth century has made me exquisitely sensitive to the racial/ethnic issues as they play in the twenty-first century. My ear has been attuned to the subtleties of the ongoing discussion about race relations and my eye has become more finely focused on the many and various elements visible in contemporary American culture which account for many of today’s divides. My examination of the past has carried me to the present, to a present which has yet to resolve many of those difficulties which my research revealed about the past. Sadly, I must conclude that race relations are still a work in progress.
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