

HIDING, HUNTING, AND HABITAT: AN ENVIRONMENTAL RE-ANALYSIS
OF THE SLAVE NARRATIVES

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis conducts an environmental analysis of narratives written or dictated by fugitive American slaves in the early to mid-nineteenth century. It re-examines previously studied information from a different perspective—one that incorporates people’s interaction with their surrounding natural environments, both cultivated and uncultivated—which reveals new information and leads to some new potential conclusions. Specifically, this re-analysis of the slave narratives shows that the rural enslaved population of the antebellum South had an intimate and cooperative relationship with the natural world, one that enabled them to develop critical skills that maximized their chances of successfully escaping slavery permanently. Further, the southern plantation owners had increasingly removed themselves from the land and had a much more remote relationship with the natural world, a factor that made it more difficult for them to control their slave labor and to find fugitives once they had escaped.

This analysis, based on the primary source slave narratives and on information previously compiled and analyzed by slavery and environmental historians, shows that such factors as the structure of the southern plantation, the strictures of the institution of slavery itself, and the day-to-day lifestyles of the rural enslaved people, combined to provide slaves with the opportunity to develop skills that would help them successfully escape. Consequently, in addition to clearly revealing *how* rural field slaves were able to survive in the uncultivated environment after leaving a plantation or farm, this analysis also leads to a

reasonable conclusion that more slaves may have escaped slavery and the South prior to the Civil War than is currently generally accepted by historians.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In all the thorough historical studies and analyses of slavery, antebellum society, fugitive slaves, and environmental history, the fundamental and causal connection between rural slave life and a slave's ability to escape slavery has not yet been examined. Several historians have studied different pieces of this connection, but no magnifying glass has been put over the core irony that it was the institution of slavery itself that put southern field slaves in the position of obtaining the knowledge and tools that enabled many of them to run away, temporarily and permanently. The same institution that restricted their movements, limited their food, and structured their labor gave field slaves the experience, knowledge, and ability to escape it. Further, the more tightly the slave owners tried to control their labor forces, the more their slaves—particularly their field slaves—were inclined to, and had the ability to, escape, temporarily or permanently.

This juxtaposition between the slave owners and the slaves parallels the different relationships that segments of southern society had with their surrounding environment. The more the plantation owners tried to control their land—the more they tried to eke one more harvest of a commodity crop out of the depleted soil of their fields, for example—the less successful they were. Also, ironically, at the same time the planters were trying to control nature, they were also removing themselves from it, and the more that happened, the more distance they also created from their field slaves. This distance reduced their

effectiveness in controlling their slaves and decreased their chances of finding fugitive slaves in the uncultivated landscape.

Uniquely, this thesis applies concepts of environmental history to the universe of information about slaves and fugitive slaves that has already been studied by many scholars. The application of these concepts sheds new light on the studied information and reveals a new perspective about slave life and slaves' attempts to escape from it. By looking at southern social structure and slave life in the context of people's relationship with nature, new conclusions can be made, including: that slaves were able to overcome some of the effects of slavery, even if they never left the plantations; that the institution of slavery created the circumstances for field slaves to develop the skills and experiences they needed to escape; and, therefore, that previous estimates of the actual number of fugitive slaves that successfully escaped slavery and the South might be too low.

To put the matter of fugitive slaves in historical context, it is important to remember that slaves did not start running away from their owners in the years immediately prior to the Civil War. Along with the institution of slavery itself, the issue of fugitive slaves was a part of American life from the beginning.¹ It was a sufficient enough issue in the colonial era that it was specifically addressed twice in the Constitution in 1787.² Also in 1787, in relation to the newly annexed Northwest Territory (an area mostly including the present-day states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois,

¹ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 653.

² For example, Article 4, section 2, of the Constitution provides, "No person held to service or labor in one state, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service or labor, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due."

Michigan, and Minnesota), the Northwest Ordinance provided that “There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in the punishment of crimes whereof the party shall have been duly convicted: *Provided, always, That any person escaping into the same, from whom labor or service is lawfully claimed in any one of the original States, such fugitive may be lawfully reclaimed and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labor or service as aforesaid.*”³ Within six years, Congress passed the first Fugitive Slave Law. This 1793 statute empowered owners of “fugitives from labor” to seize or arrest fugitives, take them before local magistrates or judges, and present oral testimony demonstrating they are owed labor by the fugitives. Anyone who hindered the seizure or arrest was subject to a fine of \$500.⁴

As the northern states had increasing concerns about keeping slavery legal within their borders, slavery gradually became exclusively a southern institution. By 1805, Rhode Island, Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey had made slavery illegal in their states. As slavery became restricted to the southern part of the United States, the trend of slaves attempting to escape slavery by running away from the South increased. Fugitive slaves used a variety of means and methods to escape, including smuggling themselves onto boats or other conveyances, mailing themselves, getting forged papers, earning their freedom from willing owners, disguising themselves, or getting help from the Underground Railroad. Robert the Hermit, for example, prior to living for many years in a cave near Providence,

³ Northwest Ordinance, July 13, 1787, <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc> (cited to National Archives Microfilm Publication M332, roll 9) (emphasis added). This provision applied not only to slaves, but also to indentured servants, which were more numerous in the seventeenth century than they were later at the height of the plantation slave society.

⁴ Fugitive Slave Act, 1793.

Rhode Island, managed to travel from Charleston, South Carolina, to Philadelphia by sneaking on board a sloop and hiding between two casks in the hold.⁵ Henry “Box” Brown, with the help of some friends, had himself mailed in a box (two feet, six inches by two feet by three feet, one inch) from Richmond to Philadelphia, a trip that took 27 hours.⁶ Frederick Douglass, the famous abolitionist and noted anti-slavery speaker, escaped slavery by traveling in the open on public conveyances under someone else’s papers from Maryland to New York.⁷ William and Ellen Craft undertook what was probably the boldest escape of all using forged passes on public transportation and traveling that way for over a thousand miles. Ellen was very fair-skinned and could “pass” for white. She disguised herself as a man traveling up north with his slave (her husband, William). She wore men’s clothes, cut her hair, and wore spectacles. Since she could not write, she wrapped her arm in a sling, as though she had rheumatism, so that she would not be expected to sign anything on the journey. Also, to hide her smooth skin, and to have an obvious excuse to not talk much, she wore another sling around her chin, as though she had a toothache. In this way, the two traveled from Georgia to Philadelphia, on various modes of public transportation (and staying in various inns),

⁵ *Life and Adventures of Robert, the Hermit of Massachusetts, Who has lived 14 Years in a Cave, secluded from human society. Comprising An account of his Birth, Parentage, Sufferings, and providential escape from unjust and cruel Bondage in early life--and his reasons for becoming a Recluse. Taken from his own mouth, and published for his benefit.* (Providence, RI: H. Trumbull, 1829). This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

⁶ *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself.* (Manchester: Lee & Glynn, 1851). This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

⁷ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,* (1845; New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003), ix.

with William riding in the slaves' area and Ellen traveling with the rest of the white gentlemen.⁸

All of these different methods of escape notwithstanding, the most common way that rural slaves escaped was to run away into the surrounding uncultivated landscapes. It is this manner of escape that is the focus of this thesis, not only because it occurred more frequently, but also because it is the manner that most clearly demonstrates how closely the rural slaves' ability to escape was tied to their relationship with the natural world and was interconnected with their lives as field slaves.

Slaves', and consequently, fugitive slaves', relationship to their natural world was shaped both from external and internal influences. The external influences included the overall structure of antebellum southern society—including each social group's identity and relationship to the land—and the strictures of the institution of slavery that were forced on the slaves. The internal influences consisted of the cultural view the slaves had of nature and the practical knowledge that enabled the fugitive slaves to use and maneuver within nature, knowledge that came directly from their experiences and lives as plantation slaves. The evidence to support this view of southern society, slavery, and fugitive slaves is found in the many narratives written or dictated by slaves and fugitive slaves that have been compiled.⁹ Scholars of slavery, southern society, and southern

⁸ William Craft, "Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom, or the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery," *Great Slave Narratives*, ed. Arna Bontemps (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 271-314.

⁹ See <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>, a University of North Carolina website that has compiled and digitized a substantial number of slave narratives. Additional arguably primary source information from former slaves and fugitives slaves is contained in the many interviews that were done through the Federal Writers Project in the mid 1930s, interviews which have since been transcribed and/or summarized, digitized, and uploaded onto the web at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/>. Since most of this information consists of summaries of the interviews by the interviewers, a review of these latter sources revealed little information

environmental history have studied these narratives extensively. Moreover, historians have written remarkable works on slave society, plantation life, fugitive slaves, southern society, southern environmental history, and African American environmental thought based, at least partly, on the information contained in these narratives. The use of these narratives to explore the underlying relationship—both practical and ideological—between nature, the lives of plantation slaves, and the slaves’ ability to abscond, however, has not been done to date. Additionally, the comprehensive use of the slave narratives to determine how fugitive slaves survived once they did escape has also not been published. The goal here is to investigate and analyze the information contained in the slave narratives and interviews—directly, through reviewing the narratives themselves, and indirectly, through reliance on factual research of other historians—and to demonstrate how slavery itself provided southern field slaves with the ability to escape their bondage and to show how southern society’s relationship with nature resulted in this irony.

specific enough to be helpful in this analysis. Thus, the environmental review of primary sources undertaken here is done exclusively on the slave narratives themselves.

CHAPTER TWO: DISCUSSION OF SOURCES

The Primary Sources and Answers to Concerns about Reliability

As indicated, the slave narratives and interviews are the primary sources of information about the slaves and their lives, experiences, and knowledge. Some scholars have voiced concerns, however, regarding the accuracy of the information contained in these slave narratives and interviews. One criticism is that those former slaves who wrote their own narratives, or who were unusually articulate—Frederick Douglass, William Craft, and Charles Ball (described in more detail below), for example—were men who were so unique that the general applicability of their narrative is questionable. Another concern raised is that, since the slave narratives were often written to provide fodder for the abolitionists, the information contained within them might not be accurate or may be exaggerated. A third challenge to the reliability of these primary sources is the argument that some of the narratives may be composites of the experiences of multiple people, and therefore, not be fully a primary source based on the personal knowledge or experience of the purported author.¹⁰ Fourth, Franklin and Schweninger, two historians who studied fugitive slaves extensively, voiced concern that the previous scholars' exclusive use of plantation records, planters' journals, the testimony of prominent whites, slave reminiscences, slave narratives, and slave autobiographies risked relying on information from people who were "far removed in time and space from the South they

¹⁰ Gilbert Osofsky, *Puttin' On Ole Massa* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 10-12, and fn; *see also* the writings of Ulrich B. Phillips.

describe, or, due to conventions, or the purpose of a diary, are less than candid in their observations.”¹¹ Finally, another concern that could be levied against the narratives and interviews is that, since most slaves were illiterate, many of the narratives were dictated, or were the result of interviews, and, therefore, contain the additional bias of the transcriber or interviewer.

Each of these concerns will be addressed in turn. With respect to the first criticism, it is not unreasonable to suggest that men like Douglass, Craft, and Ball were remarkable for their intellect and perspectives. But, scholars would not discount the writings of white men to which that same description would apply—men such as Henry David Thoreau, William Lloyd Garrison, or Abraham Lincoln, for example. Therefore, to discount the remarkable because it is remarkable risks losing the valuable information contained therein. As Gilbert Osofsky, who studied and wrote extensively on many of the slave narratives, concluded, “To eliminate the ‘exceptional’ is to eliminate all strong autobiography as a distortion of the events of its time.”¹²

The two bias concerns—i.e., that they were abolitionist propaganda and that they likely reflect the bias of the transcriber—are a little more problematic. Many of the narratives were published prior to the Civil War to generate support for abolitionism. The risk that the arguments presented here rely on any of the biased information, however, is greatly reduced in three different ways. First, much of the information obtained from the narratives and interviews for this thesis is information regarding practical day-to-day living—duties performed, food eaten, activities engaged in, knowledge obtained—and

¹¹ John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 295.

¹² Osofsky, 11.

specific experiences from fugitives' journeys while escaping. Little likelihood exists that the authors would exaggerate or misstate such information as what the slaves grew in their gardens, what animals they hunted, or how often they did so. In fact, since many of these narratives were written and published prior to the Civil War, it is more likely that these former slaves would *understate* such activities in order to minimize the chance of reprisal by plantation owners against those who remained enslaved. This conclusion renders much of the data used here more reliable, rather than less so. In short, the facts on which this thesis relies are not the type of information that would be exaggerated or fabricated in order to further the efforts of the abolitionists. Thus, the risk of bias is reduced.

Second, much of the evidence is self-validating; that is, the fact that the information is contained in the narrative proves its validity. For example, as argued later, field slaves obtained substantial agricultural knowledge by virtue of doing the work they were required to do. Part of the support for this conclusion is the proof that many slaves did indeed have such extensive agricultural knowledge. The narratives of former slaves Charles Ball and William Green contain numerous pages of very specific details on growing cotton, tobacco, rice, sugar cane, corn, and other crops. Such detailed discussions of crops shows that the authors knew a lot about crop cultivation. The complete accuracy of data is irrelevant; rather it is the simple fact that the narratives contained this specific agricultural information that lends validity to the conclusions herein.

Third, most of the evidence obtained from the narratives to support the arguments in this thesis is found in multiple places. Very little of the data relied on is found in only

one or two narratives. The suggestion that fugitive slaves could feed themselves in the uncultivated environment by hunting, for example, is supported not only by Ball's account of the animals he killed and ate while on the run, but also by the accounts of other many other fugitives as well. This consistency throughout multiple narratives adds to the validity of the supporting facts and reduces the risk that one or two of the authors may have exaggerated the specifics.

The third challenge to the reliability of the slave narratives, which is the concern that several of the narratives, though written or dictated by one man, are really composites of events and experiences that happened to multiple people, is also of minimal concern here. While there would certainly be times in scholarly research when this possibility of composite narratives would be problematic, that is not the case for this analysis. The important information for purposes of this analysis is not necessarily whether it was actually Charles Ball that killed opossums with his walking stick while on the run, for example, but the fact that *someone* did.¹³ It is the conduct that is important in this analysis, not necessarily the specific actor, and it is unlikely that the general conduct of the slaves in these situations would be fabricated or exaggerated. This same counter applies to the final challenge as well, i.e., the concern that distance from the sources risks unreliability. The details that are important for this environmental analysis are not the types of information that lose reliability if the timing sequence is unclear. It is the basic data that is important, and, while events may be missing from narratives because they

¹³ Moreover, even if some of the individuals included such anecdotes in their narratives to prove themselves resourceful, or for some other reason, it is unlikely that they would make up an unheard of event, and more likely that they would claim a skill or task that they knew or had heard someone else accomplishing. Thus, the validity of the basic information itself still stands.

were forgotten over time, the evidence about which this thesis is concerned is unlikely to be rendered unreliable, even if some of the specifics are inaccurate.

Most of the primary source data contained herein has been pulled directly from the narratives. Some of it, however, while still primary source information, was cited from secondary sources. While reliance on primary source facts from other scholars has been minimized, it was necessary to some extent for two reasons. First, to date, no other historian has brought together the scattered anecdotal evidence in the narratives and the many different arguments raised by scholars. The fact that the primary evidence has not been previously compiled meant that, in order to present a complete analysis, some reliance on the secondary sources for primary evidence was required. Second, because the arguments of other scholars are integral to the analysis presented here, it was imperative that the primary source information on which they relied also be considered and discussed.

Secondary Source Historiographies

The primary source documentation contained in the slave narratives and interviews is not the only source of evidence for the arguments presented here. Studying the environmental aspects of fugitive slaves also requires a study of historians' works from different genres of American historical study. The first category is that of the study of slavery itself. Noted scholars in this area of study include Eugene D. Genovese, John W. Blassingame, Peter Kolchin, and John Hope Franklin.

Eugene Genovese, a scholar with decidedly Marxist leanings who became an expert on the slave south, published his book on slavery in 1971.¹⁴ His book is, more than anything else, a social history. He focused on what he called the “black nation,” and he argued that slaves laid the foundations for a separate black national culture that was uniquely American, despite its African origins.¹⁵ His book concentrated on the culture that developed as a result of the slaves’ struggle to carve out “a livable world for themselves and their children within the narrowest living space and harshest adversity.”¹⁶ Although his writings did not focus on an environmental analysis, Genovese’s book demonstrated how pervasive and fundamental the field slaves’ relationship with the natural world was. He noted, for example, how the rhythm of work, and, therefore, slave life, followed seasonal fluctuations, stating that, “[n]ature remained the temporal reference point for the slaves.”¹⁷ Additionally, he is one of the first slavery historians to discuss in detail the extent to which slaves engaged in hunting to supplement the food they were provided on the plantations.¹⁸

Based on the evidence Genovese was considering, he was comfortably able to render the conclusion that runaways, even temporary ones, were mainly able to survive because they received help from other slaves.¹⁹ When an environmental perspective is used to view the information, some additional conclusions can be made. Genovese, for example, clearly showed the continued interaction the field slaves had with the

¹⁴ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).

¹⁵ Genovese, xv.

¹⁶ Genovese, xvi.

¹⁷ Genovese, 291, 293, quoting Frederick Douglass.

¹⁸ Genovese, 486-7.

¹⁹ Genovese, 654.

surrounding uncultivated landscape.²⁰ Adding an environmental analysis to Genovese's information and conclusions leads to a suggestion that field slaves were better able to escape by relying on the skills they had developed as slaves to obtain food and other resources from the surrounding landscape, or by relying on other slaves who had developed those same skills.

John Blassingame focused his attention on slavery and on editing the papers of Frederick Douglass. Blassingame wrote his book on slavery in 1972.²¹ His goal was to present a complete picture of the life of the American slave. He explored information regarding culture, family, acculturation, behavior, religion, African heritage, and the personality of the slave.²² He based his analysis on slave narratives, contemporaneous travel writings, and planters' journals, as well as a good dose of psychological theory. When discussing the evidence surrounding fugitive slaves' interaction with the natural world, Blassingame, like Genovese, recognized that slave life provided the slaves with many opportunities to go out into the uncultivated landscape—to meet, pray, hunt, fish, work in remote fields, clear land, or join fugitive (also called “maroon”) communities. Also like Genovese, his scholarship can be relied on and added to in order to show, under an environmental analysis, how substantial a role nature played in shaping the lives of the slaves and in providing them skills and experience to successfully maneuver through uncultivated terrain.

²⁰ Genovese, 650-2.

²¹ John W. Blassingame, *Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford Univ. P., 1972).

²² Blassingame, xi-xii.

Peter Kolchin published his comprehensive study of slavery in 1993.²³ His goal was to present an interpretive survey of American slavery, including an analysis of the evolution of slavery itself, as well as discussions of historical controversies over slavery.²⁴ Kolchin sought to center the pendulum of historical study that had swung from viewing slaves as passive objects acted upon by others to viewing them as independent beings defying slavery and leading their own lives. His solution was a balanced approach that recognized the strengths and weaknesses of each view.²⁵ Kolchin's coverage of fugitive slaves mirrored his coverage of slavery in general—as a survey of the different issues, without extensive interpretation.

Some slavery historians have focused exclusively on fugitive slaves. In 1939, Herbert Aptheker, a prolific author and scholar of many areas of works on America and the South wrote an article on the fugitive slave communities and maroon camps in the South. He discussed not only the characteristics of the camps themselves, but also the impact that these communities had on the surrounding region—as a source of insubordination for plantation slaves, for example.²⁶

John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger published their extensive study of fugitive slaves in 1999.²⁷ Their book is considered the authoritative work on fugitive slaves and contains many valuable conclusions and much-cited data and insights. These

²³ Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery: 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

²⁴ Kolchin, x. Contained within the pages of Kolchin's work is an extensive historiographical discussion of the various scholarly writings on slavery, which is one of the reasons that only a quick survey of some of the more notable works on slavery is included here. See Kolchin, 134-7.

²⁵ Kolchin, 166.

²⁶ Herbert Aptheker, "Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States," *Journal of Negro History* 24 (1939), 167-84.

²⁷ John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford Univ. P., 1999).

two scholars studied the various ways slaves ran away, including being truant temporarily, forming or joining regional maroon communities, or permanently escaping to areas outside of the American South. They focused their attention to the time period from 1790 to 1860, and, in their words, they scrutinized “those who challenged the system; when, where, and how they ran away; how long they remained out; how they survived away from the plantation; and how and when they were brought back and punished. We examine the motives of absentees, or those who left the farm or plantation for a few days or weeks; the incentives of the outlyers, or those who hid out in the woods for months, sometimes years; and the activities of maroons, who established camps in remote swamps and bayous.”²⁸

To address concerns they had about the reliability of the slave narratives and to support the arguments they were making, Franklin and Schweninger collected data from runaway slave ads in southern newspapers and petitions filed by plantation owners in southern courts. They accumulated and analyzed substantial data and were able to identify the prevailing characteristics of a typical runaway slave. They compiled their data from multiple newspapers, in multiple states, over a seventy year period, and, based on that data, they compiled estimates not only about characteristics of the escaped slaves themselves, but also of the slaves’ destinations. According to their conclusions, less than half of the runaways on whom they collected information in this manner were headed to Ohio or another free state.²⁹

²⁸ Franklin and Schweninger, xiv.

²⁹ Franklin and Schweninger, 120.

Franklin and Schweninger determined the “typical runaway was a young, male plantation hand”³⁰ While acknowledging that there were exceptions, their research revealed that “[m]ost runaways were young men in their teens and twenties, black, usually were able to hide brands or scars from whippings that could identify them; and usually demonstrated self-confidence, self-assurance, self-possession, determination, self-reliance, resourcefulness, willfulness, focus, and purpose. They were often quick-witted, wily, and intelligent, and usually deceptive, calculating, and courageous.”³¹ Franklin also determined that this general profile remained consistent over the decades of slavery.

With respect to the prospect of escaping slavery by traveling to the northern United States or to Canada, they opined:

The dream of freedom in the North or Canada—the so-called promised land—went unfulfilled for the vast majority of runaways. Those who headed northward from plantations along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, the Black Belt of Alabama, or Mississippi and Louisiana faced a trek of hundreds of miles through uncharted and largely unknown territory. Even their counterparts in the upper states confronted numerous obstacles to making it to free territory. A few were able to find assistance from conductors of the Underground Railroad, Quakers, or antislavery whites. And a few others, traveling at night or hiding aboard sailing vessels and steamboats, made it to the North. But the chances of fugitives making it from the slave states into New Jersey or Pennsylvania or crossing the Ohio River were remote.³²

The evidence relied on by Franklin and Schweninger supports such a conclusion. Superimposing an environmental analysis onto their evidence, however, allows for the

³⁰ Franklin and Schweninger, 210. These two historians also note that the profile of a runaway was diverse, and included all ages, both genders, full Africans slaves as well as those of mixed race heritage, skilled and unskilled, and urban as well as rural. There was, however, a “norm,” that was the young, male field hand.

³¹ Franklin and Schweninger, 224.

³² Franklin and Schweninger, 116.

possibility that some additional conclusions may be drawn. When the connection is made between the field slaves' relationship with nature, on the one hand, and the skills the slaves developed that enabled them to survive in nature, on the other, the evidence suggests that more slaves may have escaped than previously thought. Additionally, conclusions regarding slaves who "layed out"—or hid in the uncultivated landscape near their plantations—and lived by hunting, fishing, gathering, and trading, can also be expanded. It is not a significant logical leap to go from acknowledging that thousands of slaves escaped from slavery and lived off the land self-sufficiently in the South to concluding that those same skills could have been and were used by slaves to travel away from the South as well.

The category of Underground Railroad history, even though it also involves fugitive slaves, is only tangentially related, at best, to the analysis in this thesis. Because of the overlapping topic, however, its historiography should at least be mentioned. With few exceptions, the major histories of the Underground Railroad were generated during three different and distinct eras, and these three groupings reflect unique aspects of their contemporaneous social and political climate. The first group of historians wrote prior to 1900, mostly in the 1890s, although there were some who wrote earlier. These historians were mostly—though not exclusively—white, northern academicians, writing during the post-Reconstruction period, and they include the Rev. W.M. Mitchell, R.C. Smedley, Marion McDougall, James Fairchild, and Wilbur Siebert.³³ The second big push of

³³ W.M. Mitchell, *The Under-Ground Railroad*, (Westport, CT: Negro Univ. P., 1970). (Originally published 1860.); R.C. Smedley, *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania* (Lancaster, PA, 1883); Marion Gleason McDougall, *Fugitive Slaves (1619-1865)* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1891); James Harris Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad* (Cleveland: Western

historical study of the Underground Railroad occurred in the middle of the 20th century and corresponded to the Civil Rights Movement. The noted historians from this era are Henrietta Buckmaster, who published *Let My People Go* in 1948 and discussed the Abolitionist movement generally; William Breyfogle, who wrote *Make Free: The Story of the Underground Railroad*, published in 1958; and Larry Gara, who wrote *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad*, published in 1961.³⁴ Finally, there is a modern group of Underground Railroad historians who have published in the last twenty years. These modern historians tend to be more comprehensive, addressing political, cultural, legal, governmental, racial, and social issues in their writings. Additionally, whether intentional or not, their timing mirrors an increased interest in the Underground Railroad on the part of Congress, the National Park Service, and other state and local entities and organizations. Noted scholars from this group include Nat Brandt, Ann Hagedorn, Keith Griffler, and Fergus Bordewich.³⁵

As indicated above, the extensive literature on the Underground Railroad is only tangentially related to this environmental analysis of the slave narratives because it focuses primarily on slave journeys north of the Ohio River, whereas this thesis is primarily concerned with journeys south of that river. Additionally, while some helpful

Reserve Historical Society, 1895); Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Dover, 2006) (originally published 1898).

³⁴ Henrietta Buckmaster, *Let My People Go* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941); William Breyfogle, *Make Free: The Story of the Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippencott Co., 1958); Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington: U. Kentucky Press, 1961).

³⁵ Nat Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1990); Ann Hagedorn, *Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002); Keith Griffler, *Front Line to Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2004); Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad, America's First Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).

information is contained in the many reminiscences, journals, and narratives that exist regarding the Underground Railroad, the environmental information on which to base an environmental analysis relevant to the arguments in this paper is limited.

In addition to scholarship on various aspects of slavery, another category of secondary sources that must be explored is that of environmental history, and, more specifically, African American environmental history. Much of the work on environmental history has focused on the western United States, although environmental history as a general area of study has expanded beyond the American West and has become international in scope. According to Mart Stewart, a noted environmental historian, the American South has had less coverage than the West, probably because its focus must, by its very nature, be different. Whereas the West is primarily arid and driven by “wilderness” concepts, the South is wet and driven by agrarian concepts.³⁶ The South consisted of long growing seasons, plenty of moisture, and a good river system that was used to move crops. These characteristics combined to make cash crop production possible, but they were counterbalanced by poor soils, which forced mobility in both land and labor, expanding the region and pushing the cotton frontier.³⁷ As Stewart noted, Southern environmental history has gone from viewing Southern environments as arenas in which planters worked out agricultural systems to exploring nature-culture relationships in a cotton- and slave-economy. Moreover, “the imprint of agriculture was deeper in the South, lasted longer, and almost from the beginning (at least after

³⁶ Mart Stewart, “If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian: American Environmental West and South,” *Environment and History* 11:2 (May 2005), 140; Mart Stewart, *What Nature Suffers to Groe*, (Athens, GA: Univ. Georgia Press, 1996), xiii.

³⁷ Stewart, *John Muir*, 141.

Europeans arrived) was driven by a set of relationships that gave landowners control over both land and labour.”³⁸

Stewart is one of the first scholars to study and write on the topic of African American environmental history. Stewart has theorized that, like the political culture, the fundamental character of African American environmental values can only be understood by looking at African Americans’ relationship with the environment from slavery onward. This theory acknowledges that African Americans acquired their environmental values through their own efforts, and—contrary to the structures of slavery itself—not through the dispensation of others. Thus, Stewart noted, “slaves who were African or African American developed their own uses of the environment that were a hybrid of African traditions and practices produced by the condition of bondage and that sometimes produced a struggle for access to shared resources; and slavery shaped the environmental attitudes and values of both masters and slaves.” Stewart’s analyses are based on the foundational axiom that, because slaves—particularly field slaves—spent virtually all of their time working on the land, they acquired an intimate and precise knowledge of the land that had “material, social, and political usefulness” to them. Stewart further argued that, because there is a close connection between social and environmental relations, many slaves developed a sense of loyalty to locale.³⁹ Moreover, the work slaves did accustomed them to a much closer view of both cultivated and uncultivated environments

³⁸ Stewart, *John Muir*, 141; *Groe*, 6-7.

³⁹ Mart Stewart, “Slavery and the Origins of African American Environmentalism,” *To Love the Wind and the Rain”: African Americans and Environmental History*, edited by Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 9-11, 16.

in the South.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the physical environment became, for the slaves, an integral part of their antebellum culture, and was “a place of potential deliverance as well as a site where family and community values could be affirmed.”⁴¹ In Stewart’s view, for the slaves, the uncultivated landscape of the South provided the possibility of healing and a connection to family members; it was a place where plantation rations could be supplemented, where slaves could worship, and where slaves could hide, or even escape, from slavery.⁴² It is this relationship with nature that, in Stewart’s view, provides the foundation on which the study of African American environmentalism is based.⁴³

In 1998, Stewart published “*What Nature Suffers to Groe*”: *Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920*, in which he analyzed rice agriculture in the American South in the context of Southern history and of African American environmental history. One of the main themes in the book is the connection between labor in a plantation society and the land on which the labor is performed. Stewart opined that, while historians have recognized the connection between labor and slave society, they “have not addressed the agency of nature in shaping the fate of plantation agriculture. Bringing nature back into the story does not dissolve human agency into environmental determinism but rather puts human agency into a context in which it belongs historically.”⁴⁴ For Stewart, slave labor itself was critical to the shaping of the

⁴⁰ Stewart, *John Muir*, 143.

⁴¹ Stewart, *Wind/Rain*, 16.

⁴² Stewart, *Wind/Rain*, 19-20.

⁴³ Stewart’s conclusions aid the analyses in this thesis in that the relationship that slaves had to the landscapes around them allowed them the opportunity to develop their necessary escape skills. However, the fact that the narratives are replete with examples of the willingness of many slaves to permanently leave their locales suggests that the miseries of slavery and their desire to leave it outweighed this attachment to locale.

⁴⁴ Stewart, *Groe*, xii-xiii.

institution of slavery and of slave society as a whole, and, since this employment was nearly always labor on the land, usually in close proximity to nature, then nature had its own distinct role in the society that needs to be considered.⁴⁵ Moreover, he concluded that, “The manipulation of the environment and the manipulation of the slaves were inextricably connected in this system.”⁴⁶

Additionally, when the relationships to nature of the many different facets of Southern antebellum society are considered, then the integral role that the environment played in that society becomes apparent. As Stewart noted, “[c]olonists, settlers, hunters, farmers, masters and mistresses, slaves and freedpeople, lumbermen, tourists, gardeners, and botanists used the land differently, and differently also at different times and places. The relationship between humans and the environment was similar to the relationships between different groups of humans: dynamic and always being remade through a multitude of experiences, it was always contingent on historical conditions.”⁴⁷

Stewart presented several arguments in his book. His main thesis is that both southern planters and slaves used the environment to reinforce their own class interests. He also posited the argument that the labor done on and to the land defined southern culture and perceptions of nature itself in plantation society. Thus, because nature constantly fought the efforts to cultivate and tame it, enormous investments of labor were required not only to build the plantations, but also to maintain them. In response to this battle, both planters and slaves developed strategies that were usually at odds with each other.

⁴⁵ Stewart, *Groe*, xii-xiii.

⁴⁶ Stewart, *Groe*, 174.

⁴⁷ Stewart, *Groe*, 8-9.

In 2002, Elizabeth Blum published an article that focused on perceptions of what she termed “wilderness” held by slave women.⁴⁸ She introduced her analysis by pointing out that time, period, race, class, and gender govern people’s perceptions of nature, and various segments of nineteenth-century American society were no different. During this time, for example, white men perceived nature as an entity that should be dominated, controlled, and exploited. She also noted that, in contrast to the white view of nature, slaves had a very different view. According to Blum, Africans’ view of nature was functional and focused on the concept of “good use.” Blum then argued that, within the African and African American perspectives of nature, slave women developed their own version of good use of the land and “developed a harmonious existence with their surrounding environment, using their knowledge to support and protect their families.” Blum also reiterated Stewart’s observation that, for many slaves, nature was a place of escape or refuge from the realities of their lives.⁴⁹

Stephanie H.M. Camp published work on slave women in 2002 as well. Her work focused on female slaves’ participation in the practice of truancy, or temporarily running away for a period of time.⁵⁰ Even though she narrowed her research to enslaved women who only ran away temporarily, she presented information regarding both male and female slaves, and her work made important contributions to the environmental analyses of slavery and slave life. As she articulated, many “enslaved women and men did run away on occasion throughout their lives. Called ‘runaways’ by Antebellum

⁴⁸ Elizabeth D. Blum, “Power, Danger, and Control: Slave Women’s Perceptions of Wilderness in the Nineteenth Century,” *Women’s Studies* 31(2002), 247-65.

⁴⁹ Blum, 248-50.

⁵⁰ Stephanie H.M. Camp, “‘I Could Not Stay there’: Enslaved Women, Truancy and the Geography of Everyday Forms of Resistance in the Antebellum Plantation South,” *Slavery and Abolition* 23:3 (2002), 1-20.

Southern blacks and whites, and termed ‘truants’ and ‘absentees’ by historians, they did not intend to make a break for freedom in the North, but sought short-term escapes from work, from planter and overseer control and from the prying eyes of family and friends.”⁵¹ Camp presented her analysis in a geographical construct. She argued that the slaveholders had created a “‘geography of containment’ that aimed to control slave mobility in space and time.”⁵² Slave owners controlled their slaves’ movement and activities on the plantation and forbade them to go off the plantation without express permission. Thus, she argued, when slaves ran away, even temporarily, they “withdrew their labour and they challenged the authority of their owners.”⁵³ Additionally, she emphasized that slaves created what she termed a “rival geography” both on and off the plantation.

Enslaved people’s rival geography was not a fixed spatial formation for it included quarters, outbuildings, woods, swamps and neighboring farms as opportunity granted them. Absentees’ movements to and between these places wove them together into an alternative mapping of plantation space. Where planters’ mapping of the plantation was defined by fixed places for its residents, the rival geography was characterized by motion: the movement of bodies within and around plantation space. Truancy, a practice that facilitated independent activity (thereby denying planters’ desire for control of bondpeople’s movements and their labour)[,] was the foundation of this rival geography.⁵⁴

Thus, Camp’s discussion is based on the fundamental idea that places and boundaries, i.e., geography, as well as movement, were central to antebellum slavery’s organization and, ultimately, its resistance.⁵⁵ Camp argued that truants moved within this

⁵¹ Camp, 1.

⁵² Camp, 2.

⁵³ Camp, 2.

⁵⁴ Camp, 2-3.

⁵⁵ Camp, 3.

rival geography; they “tended to move back and forth between relatively remote hiding places and the quarters, sometimes on paths with which only enslaved people were acquainted” making it very difficult to find them.⁵⁶

Also in 2002, historian Nicolas Proctor published a study of the social phenomenon of the hunt in the antebellum South.⁵⁷ Proctor argued that, “The hunt, like the church, courthouse, and family, played an integral role in the society and culture of the Old South. Regardless of color or class, southern men hunted; they shot, trapped, and ran their dogs after a great variety of animals.”⁵⁸ He also concluded that much of the hunt was about the white slave owners “act[ing] out their dramas of masculinity and mastery,” while the slaves did all of the work, including hauling, tracking, setting up camp, preparing meals, gathering firewood, cleaning the campsite, dressing and cooking the game, and looking after the horses and dogs.⁵⁹

In 2003, Carolyn Merchant, another noted environmental historian, published her article on environmental history and race.⁶⁰ Her contribution to the literature on the environmental history of race was an analysis of the perceptions of nature held by Native Americans and African Americans. Her focus brought up more issues of the connection between race and environmental justice than the previous authors had done. With respect to the specific issues raised by an environmental history of slavery, Merchant noted a correlation between the harm caused to slaves and the degradation of southern soil as a

⁵⁶ Camp, 9-10.

⁵⁷ Nicolas W. Proctor, *Bathed in Blood: Hunting and Mastery in the Old South* (Charlottesville, VA: Univ. VA Press, 2002).

⁵⁸ Proctor, 1.

⁵⁹ Proctor, 119-20.

⁶⁰ Carolyn Merchant, “Race and Environmental History,” *Environmental History* 8:3 (2003), 380-94.

result of slavery. The commodity-crop-based plantation system, which was dependent on the slaves, particularly the field slaves, “caused both the destruction of black bodies and the rapid degradation of southern soils, as tobacco, rice, sugar, and cotton became cash crops in an expanding world market.”⁶¹ Thus, in her view, the exploitation of slaves and the destruction of southern soil are inherently interconnected. Additionally, she raised the argument that, in spite of this interconnection, or maybe because of it, African Americans created unique ways of living on the land, ways that differed then and differ now from white society.

In 2006, Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll edited a series of essays on African Americans and environmental history.⁶² Included in the essays that covered the antebellum era was one by Scott Giltner that focused on hunting and fishing.⁶³ As a general statement, hunting and fishing had been a part of colonial and early-American life since the arrival of the settlers. The sport of hunting developed into a pastime enjoyed by southern elites, much the same way it developed in England—as a sport, rather than exclusively as a means to obtain food. Moreover, as with other aspects of southern society, slaves were brought along on these hunts to do all of the hard labor. Giltner pointed out that this type of hunting was yet one more way that white society exerted its mastery over the slaves. The slaves were used to support their armed white masters who were doing the actual killing. Many plantation owners used hunting and fishing in another way to maintain authority over the slaves and to further the interests of the

⁶¹ Merchant, 384.

⁶² Diane Glave and Mark Stoll, *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh, PA: U. Pittsburgh Pr., 2006).

⁶³ Scott Giltner, “Slave Hunting and Fishing in the Antebellum South,” *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*, (Pittsburgh, PA: U. Pittsburgh Pr., 2006), 21-36.

plantations. Often, plantation owners used slave hunters to procure meat for their tables. This latter type of hunting and fishing differed from the former in three significant ways. First, the slaves themselves did the hunting and the killing. Second, they hunted for food. Third, the hunting they did was typically out of the presence of the plantation owners.⁶⁴

In addition to hunting on behalf of and at the behest of the owners, slaves also engaged in hunting and fishing on their own, when permitted by their owners, and often, even when not. In addition to providing the slaves with food, the chance to go hunting or fishing enabled slaves to obtain items to exchange in trade or to sell for money. It also gave them opportunities to spend time with other slaves and with family, including the chance to teach hunting and fishing skills to their children. Thus, hunting and fishing enabled slaves to supplement the often inadequate rations supplied to them by the plantation owners, gave them an opportunity to obtain money or goods, and provided them with one means of asserting familial and community camaraderie. According to Giltner, this hunting and fishing that was performed by the slaves allowed them to create “physical and psychological distance between master and slaves, and the cultivation of opportunities to resist the conditions of slavery.”⁶⁵ Thus, while Merchant saw the race struggle occurring in the growing soils and cultivated crops of the South, Giltner saw the race struggle occurring in the southern swamps, forests, and streams, because it is those “contested arenas wherein key tensions in antebellum southern life were played out.”⁶⁶ By engaging in hunting and fishing activities, which provided slaves with independent

⁶⁴ Giltner, 23-4.

⁶⁵ Giltner, 21-2, 30.

⁶⁶ Giltner, 22, 29.

means of obtaining some food, money, goods, and family time, slaves were able to create even more distance between themselves and their owners, or between themselves and the institution of slavery.⁶⁷

Giltner's article contained another set of conclusions, which is particularly relevant to this thesis. As he observed, the activities of hunting and fishing provided the slaves with the most obvious form of resistance, which was that of running away, either temporarily or permanently. Giltner opined that "[o]pportunities for flight and hunting and fishing complemented each other well. From hunting and fishing, slaves acquired knowledge of a region's woods, fields, and waterways, as well as contact with nearby slaves—all useful for escape. In addition, these activities gave slaves tools for the journey, including the ability to provision a flight and the chance to own dogs or weapons to catch game and protect themselves from patrols."⁶⁸ Thus, Giltner's scholarship laid the foundation for the argument made herein that the lives that slaves carved out for themselves, based on the way they were forced to live, gave them skills not only to survive slave life, but to survive on the run as well. The prevalence of evidence on which Giltner relies, evidence that slaves frequently engaged in hunting, is also one basis for the additional suggestion that more slaves may have successfully escaped than previously thought.

In 2007, Kimberly Smith wrote the first full-length book analyzing the concepts, background, and historiography of African American environmental history.⁶⁹ She

⁶⁷ Giltner, 22, 29.

⁶⁸ Giltner, 35.

⁶⁹ Kimberly Smith, *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (Lawrence, KA: Univ. P. Kansas, 2007).

started by defining environmental thought as “a set of ideas concerning the relationship between humans and the natural environment, including the norms that ought to govern that relationship.” She then enumerated the various agrarian-based arguments offered by abolitionists and Christian agrarians during the antebellum era and by black theorists before and after the Civil War.⁷⁰

One important perspective that Smith discussed in her book is that of environmental justice. As she articulated it, humans’ relationship with nature is affected by the justice or injustice of their social surroundings. Many black theorists have focused on how human-environment relations can be affected and distorted by racially oppressive practices. Smith lists several black writers, from before and after the Civil War—including W.E.B. DuBois, Henry Bibb, Martin Delaney, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, and others—who all argued that slavery and other racial oppression had a direct impact on black Americans’ relationship to and interaction with nature. These arguments have melded into many of the fundamental tenets of environmental justice.⁷¹

Specifically on the topic of black environmental thought, Smith opines that it evolved from many different sources, including, “elite intellectual traditions, folk traditions of white and Native American communities, and the folk traditions and experiences of black Americans themselves.” Her focus, for purposes of her analysis, stayed primarily on the arguments and ideas of black intellectual leaders and writers.⁷² She noted that a central question in black environmental thought is how black Americans

⁷⁰ Smith, 3,6, 42, 43.

⁷¹ Smith, 3,6.

⁷² Smith, 6.

could overcome the negative effects of slavery and create a home for themselves in a land tainted by the oppressive tactics of that institution.

As made clear in these writings on slavery and environmental theory, it was the planter class that sought to exercise dominion over the land and that controlled the slave labor force. Controlling nature was necessary for the planters' political power and social standing, as well as their economic success. Further, in order to control nature, the planters had to control the slaves that worked the land.⁷³ Conversely, despite these attempts at control and dominion, the slaves, especially the field slaves, lived their lives in a manner that put nature to good use, especially when they were engaging in their own community and working to feed and clothe themselves. Thus, if they did exercise the ultimate resistance to slavery and absconded, they were much more able to successfully maneuver in the uncultivated and unfamiliar landscapes.

⁷³ Smith, 18.

CHAPTER 3: ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS OF SLAVERY AND ESCAPE

Valuable Information in the Slave Narratives

Analysis of the slave narratives reveals that internal and external influences shaped fugitive slaves' relationship to their natural world. The external influences included the general overall structure of antebellum southern society—including each social group's identity and relationship to the land—and the strictures of the institution of slavery that were forced on the slaves. The internal influences consisted of the cultural and spiritual perceptions the slaves had of nature and the practical knowledge that enabled the fugitive slaves to use and maneuver within the natural world, knowledge that came directly from their experiences and lives as plantation slaves. Many of the slave narratives contain varying degrees of evidence of these perceptions and knowledge. Charles Ball's writings, for example, are particularly informative, and his narratives provide a great springboard for an environmental analysis of the information contained in other slave narratives, as well.⁷⁴

Charles Ball was born into slavery in Maryland around the turn of the nineteenth century. His grandfather had been brought to America from Africa, his mother had been owned by a Maryland tobacco planter, and his father had been owned by a nearby family.

⁷⁴ Ball's narrative was published two different times. The first, in 1837, was titled, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, as a Slave Under Various Masters, and was One Year in the Navy with Commodore Barney, During the Late War*. The second narrative was published in 1859 under the title, *Fifty Years in Chains, or, The Life of an American Slave*. Both narratives can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/> and are the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

When Ball was four years old, his owner died and many of the slaves, including Ball and his mother and siblings, were sold to separate purchasers. Ball was the only member of his mother's family to remain in Maryland and he never saw his mother after she was sold. Ball's father and grandfather were still nearby and he continued to interact with them for a time, but, shortly after the family had been separated, Ball's father ran away and "was never seen or heard of in Maryland from that day."⁷⁵

When Ball was twelve, he became a field hand and began working on his owner's plantation. Ball briefly described the living conditions during that time in his life:

As I was always very obedient, and ready to execute all his orders, I did not receive much whipping, but suffered greatly for want of sufficient and proper food. My master allowed his slaves a peck of corn, each, per week, throughout the year; and this we had to grind into meal in a hand-mill for ourselves. We had a tolerable supply of meat for a short time, about the month of December, when he killed his hogs. After that season we had meat once a week, unless bacon became scarce, which very often happened, in which case we had no meat at all. However, as we fortunately lived near both the Patuxent River and the Chesapeake Bay, we had abundance of fish in the spring, and as long as the fishing season continued. After that period, each slave received, in addition to his allowance of corn, one salt herring every day.⁷⁶

When Ball was about twenty, his owner hired him out to work as a cook on a navy frigate. Towards the end of that period, he met a free black man from Philadelphia who had arrived at the Navy Yard on a ship delivering iron to the Yard. This man's impact on Ball was profound. As Ball recounted, "His description of Philadelphia, and of the liberty enjoyed there by the black people, so charmed my imagination that I determined to devise some plan of escaping from the frigate, and making my way to the

⁷⁵ Ball, 1837 narrative, 16-21.

⁷⁶ Ball, 1837 narrative, 26.

North.” After two years in the Navy Yard, Ball was returned to plantation work and he worked as a field hand for approximately the next six years. During that time, Ball married a slave from a nearby farm and they had several children together.⁷⁷

One day, Ball was seized by a man he had seen talking to his owner. The man informed him that he was Ball’s new owner and he was taking him to Georgia. Ball was never given the opportunity to see his wife or children before he left. An iron collar was placed around his neck and he was chained by it to thirty-one other male slaves. These men remained chained together by the iron collars and handcuffs until they reached South Carolina on foot, four weeks later. Ball revealed in his narrative that he paid attention to landmarks, towns, and rivers on the journey southward, so he could use them to help direct his journey north when he escaped.⁷⁸

Ball and the other Maryland slaves were sold at a slave auction in Columbia, South Carolina. Ball was purchased by a southern plantation owner who lived about twenty miles away. Before leaving Columbia with his new owner, Ball met another slave who raised the idea of escape in Ball’s mind. This man intended to escape and return to his native Virginia and, for several hours, the two men discussed means and methods of escape. According to Ball, the man “felt confident, that by lying in the woods and unfrequented places all day, and traveling only by night, he could escape the vigilance of all pursuit; and gain the Northern Neck, before the corn would be gathered from the fields. He had no fear of wanting food, as he could live well on roasting ears, as long as the corn was in the milk; and afterwards, on parched corn, as long as the grain remained

⁷⁷ Ball, 1837 narrative, 27-30.

⁷⁸ Ball, 1837 narrative, 36-42.

in the field.” Of that conversation Ball stated, “This man certainly communicated to me the outlines of the plan, which I afterwards put in execution, and by which I gained my liberty, at the expense of sufferings, which none can appreciate, except those who have borne all that the stoutest human constitution can bear, of cold and hunger, toil and pain. The conversation of this slave aroused in my breast so many recollections of the past, and fears of the future, that I did not lie down, but sat on an old chair until daylight.” Despite this motivation, however, Ball did not escape until several years later.⁷⁹

This part of Ball’s story brings up an important issue with respect to knowledge the slaves in the South may have had of the North, of Canada, and of other information of interest to potential fugitives. Slaves were in frequent contact with other people from other places—be they white travelers and visitors, or slaves traded or purchased from other regions. The slave narratives contain many examples of slaves obtaining valuable information from others, information they often ultimately used in their escape.⁸⁰ This type of information not only sets the stage for an environmental analysis of the narratives

⁷⁹ Ball, 1837 narrative, 130-32. The phrase “corn is in the milk” typically refers to the stage of growth just before the corn has ripened, when the kernels retain a lot of liquid, i.e., “milk.”

⁸⁰ See eg., Ball, 1837 Narrative; John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England*, edited by Louis Alexis Chamerovzow (London: W. M. Watts, 1855), 70, 122; Andrew Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson, of Kentucky; Containing an Account of His Birth, and Twenty-Six Years of His Life While a Slave; His Escape; Five Years of Freedom, Together with Anecdotes Relating to Slavery; Journal of One Year's Travels; Sketches, etc. Narrated by Himself; Written by a Friend*, (Syracuse: Daily and Weekly Star Office, 1847), 15; Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson, a Fugitive Slave*, (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848), 34; John Jackson, *The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina*, (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1862), 24; Jacob Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, a Runaway Slave, from Kentucky, Containing an Account of His Three Escapes, in 1839, 1846, and 1848*, (Huddersfield, Eng.: Henry Fielding, Pack Horse Yard, 1864), 8. These works are the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

themselves, but it also contravenes the suggestion that slaves did not know where to go or how to get there once they left their plantations.⁸¹

Ball's new master was one of the wealthiest planters in South Carolina. He grew cotton, rice, indigo, corn, and potatoes, and he owned 260 slaves. Ball lived in the loft of a slave cabin occupied by a slave couple and their five children. After a short time, he contributed to and lived as a member of that family; he did so for the entire time he lived on that plantation. He carved wooden dishes and platters—for use by the family and to sell—and he contributed to the family table by supplying it with game that he hunted and trapped in nearby woods and with fish that he caught from nearby rivers and swamps. On the plantation, Ball was a field hand and worked in the fields of various crops. The workday extended from daybreak until dark, with two meal breaks during the day. A specific amount of food was allotted to the slaves: "Each person was entitled to half a bushel of ears of corn, which was measured out by several of the men who were in the crib. Every child above six months old drew this weekly allowance of corn; and in this way, women who had several small children, had more corn than they could consume, and sometimes bartered small quantities with the other people for such things as they needed, and were not able to procure. . . . In addition to this allowance of corn, we received a weekly allowance of salt, amounting in general to about half a gill to each person; but this article was not furnished regularly, and sometimes we received none for two or three weeks."⁸²

⁸¹ See e.g., Franklin, 109; Osofsky, 16.

⁸² Ball, 1837 Narrative, 136-7, 142-5, 188-94.

This is another area of information from Ball's and several other slaves' narratives that contributes to the environmental analysis. The meager food rations typically extended to the slaves—evidence of which is borne out in many of the narratives—resulted in slaves being forced to find food in other ways. While some of the slaves stole from the planters, others developed hunting, fishing, and food gathering skills in the surrounding uncultivated landscapes, skills that often enabled them to feed themselves when they were on the run.

Ball, in fact, actually discussed the hunting he did to get extra food while he was a field slave:

I had, by this time, become in some measure acquainted with the country, and began to lay and execute plans to procure supplies of such things as were not allowed me by my master. I understood various methods of entrapping rackoons [sic], and other wild animals that abounded in the large swamps of this country; and besides the skins, which were worth something for their furs, I generally procured as many rackoons, opossums, and rabbits, as afforded us two or three meals in a week. The woman with whom I lived, understood the way of dressing an opossum, and I was careful to provide one for our Sunday dinner every week, so long as these animals continued fat and in good condition.⁸³

Ball lived in South Carolina and Georgia for years, long enough to learn about the different crops grown by the different planters and become familiar with the surrounding landscapes. He was often put in charge of plantation projects and even made decisions about crop placement and size in establishing a new plantation.⁸⁴ Once again, Ball's narrative exemplifies another point brought up in this environmental analysis. Ball's agricultural experience shows the degree to which many planters relied on slaves not only

⁸³ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 262-3, 274.

⁸⁴ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 367.

to work the land, but also to maximize productivity of the land—a fact that supports the conclusion that slaves lived closer to, and had more knowledge of, the natural world, both cultivated and uncultivated, than most of the plantation owners did.

External Aspects of Slaves' Relationship to the Natural World

As outlined above, both external and internal influences existed and shaped the relationships that field slaves had with the natural world generally, and with the uncultivated environments around their plantations specifically. The external forces were the overall structure of southern society and the institution of slavery itself.

The South was much more agricultural than the North and its agriculture focused on commodity crops to sell to the northern states and overseas in Europe. In short, with the help of the institution of slavery, the South worked extremely well as a classic plantation system.⁸⁵ The *plantation* is a settlement type designed to produce staples efficiently and cheaply on a large scale for a substantial nondomestic market. The combination of agricultural staples for suitable land, labor supplies, and markets favors the location of plantations so as to minimize cost while maximizing access to markets.⁸⁶ The South's staple crops varied from region to region and included tobacco, hemp, cotton, rice, and sugar.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Sam B. Hilliard, "Plantation and the Molding of the Southern Landscape," *The Making of the American Landscape*, Ed. Michael P. Conzen (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 107.

⁸⁶ Kenneth Lewis, "Plantation Layout and Function in the South Carolina Lowcountry," *The Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life*, ed. Theresa Singleton (Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1985), 37.

⁸⁷ Hilliard, 106.

As some of the environmental historians, particularly Merchant and Smith, articulated, the South's push to grow commodity crops in soils insufficient to repeatedly grow the nutrient-draining crops had two significant results—the expansion of the area of the plantation acreages and more focused attempts by planters to control their surrounding environment. The slave labor force gave the Southern landowners the means to exercise that dominion. So, both slavery itself and the structure and goals of southern agricultural society were linked to each other and to their relationships to the surrounding natural world. In fact, as Smith observed, southern society's approach to the natural world was to try to control it completely. Thus, from an environmental history perspective, southern plantation culture was framed around the white southern elite's need to control not only the natural world surrounding them, both cultivated and uncultivated, but also, by necessity, the slave labor force that worked the land.

When this environmental view is used to look at southern landowning society, it becomes clear that different classes or social groups in the rural south defined themselves and each other in the context of the relationship each had with the land. Because the possession of political and social power was so intertwined into these relationships with the land, the most powerful group in southern society will be discussed first. This group is the elite white landowners. As fugitive slave Charles Ball noted in his autobiography, the property that was used to measure wealth in southern society was the extent of the ownership of land *and*, because they are so closely tied together, slaves.⁸⁸ Those that possessed the land and the slaves were the rich aristocracy of the South. Ball was not alone in this observation. Francis Fedric, for example, a man who served as a slave for

⁸⁸ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 285.

fifty years in Kentucky and Virginia said, “The principal badge of distinction among the Southerners in America is the possession of slaves. A very nice young gentleman, whose father had no slaves, but yet was wealthy, came to pay his addresses to a young lady of similar fortune to his own. She wished him to discontinue his visits since his father, she said, had not the toenail of a nigger in the world.”⁸⁹

The ownership of both property and slaves was important, because, to be among the elite, one must own land, but not actually have to work it. A very clear demarcation was made between those southern whites who owned both land and slaves, and those who did not. In fact, not only did the southern elite not work their own land, but they also had a disdain for engaging in any such work. As Charles Ball characterized, “So it happened in Virginia—the young men spend their time in riding about the country, whilst they ought to be plowing or harrowing in the cornfield; and the young women are engaged in reading silly books, or visiting their neighbours’ houses instead of attending to the dairy, or manufacturing cloth for themselves and their brothers.”⁹⁰ Other slave narratives contain similar descriptions. Henry Bibb’s description of this upper class of white southerners was that they were “generally rich, aristocratic, overbearing; and they looked with utter contempt upon a poor laboring man, who earns his bread but by the

⁸⁹ Francis Fedric, *Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky; or, Fifty Years of Slavery in the Southern States of America* (London: Wertheim, Macintosh, and Hunt, 1863), 73-4. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

⁹⁰ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 54-5. This situation is an example of where Camp’s discussion of a “rival geography” can clearly be seen. While these young people are indeed riding about the country and becoming familiar with their surroundings, they are not becoming aware of the landscapes the same way that the slaves are and, correspondingly, are not developing the knowledge and awareness of the landscapes possessed by their field slaves. See e.g., Camp, 2-3.

‘sweat of his brow,’ whether he be moral or immoral, honest or dishonest.”⁹¹ Ball observed that if the children of these elite families engaged in actual work on the land, “the honor of the family would be stained, and dignity of the house degraded.”⁹² In fact, such labor was prohibited of the sons and daughters of the planters by universal custom. Their exemption from working the land was the “badge of gentility.”⁹³ John Brown, a slave who lived in Georgia prior to his escape to England, noted, “in the Slave States labour is made shameful, and a man does not like to go to work in his own fields for fear folks should look down on him.”⁹⁴ Francis Fedric observed, “A contempt for workers characterized every one in any way connected with slavery. Nothing seemed so degrading to them as to do the slightest menial office [. . .]. Slaves do everything.”⁹⁵ Henry Watson, a slave who lived in different regions of the South, including Virginia and Mississippi, summed it up, “Slavery had made labor dishonorable to the white man.”⁹⁶

One result of this social demarcation was that, as the plantation economy progressed, the rich, wealthy, and powerful owners of the land on which their slaves worked became more and more removed from it. Since working the land was a social stigma, they relied on their slaves, their overseers, and their slave drivers to run the plantations. Their lack of involvement in the detailed workings of their holdings, and their increased reliance on slave labor to control land on and around their property,

⁹¹ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, (New York, 1849), 69. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>. Bibb was born in 1815 and raised in Kentucky. He first ran away at the age of ten, but was not successful in permanently escaping until he was an adult.

⁹² Ball, 1837 Narrative, 54.

⁹³ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 286-7.

⁹⁴ Brown, 53.

⁹⁵ Fedric, 73.

⁹⁶ Watson, 26.

caused the southern aristocracy to be more and more disconnected from their natural environment. Support for this conclusion can, once again, be found in slave narratives. Josiah Henson, a slave and later a successful fugitive, who became well-known for being the inspiration for Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous character, Uncle Tom, related information demonstrating his owner's reliance on him for plantation business matters. He said, "Gradually the disposal of everything raised on the farm, the wheat, oats, hay, fruit, butter, and whatever else there might be was confided to me, as it was quite evident that I could, and did sell for better prices than anyone else he could employ, and he was quite incompetent to attend to the business himself. For many years I was his factotum, and supplied him with all his means for all his purposes, whether they were good or bad."⁹⁷ Ball, too, in the degree his owners relied on him to make plantation decisions, demonstrated a complete reliance on slaves, and a resulting distance from the fields by the owners. True to their desire to stay removed from the land, the southern elites used the slaves to interact with the natural environment. Their superficial involvement thus failed to convey to them the same kind of detailed knowledge of cultivated and uncultivated areas that the slaves had. Ironically, this fact resulted in a reduction of some owners' control over their slaves, which came into play when their slaves escaped, either temporarily or permanently, into the undeveloped parts of the South.

One example of the increased removal of the aristocracy from the land is the layout of a plantation. Architectural historian Dell Upton dissected the typical southern

⁹⁷ Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself*, (Boston: A. D. Phelps, 1849), 19. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

plantation.⁹⁸ Upton observed that plantation owners designed their plantations and arranged all of the structures to demonstrate their status. They intended that their acreage would be hierarchical. The typical plantation, for example, was organized around the master's residence, which was often built on a hill so that it was higher than the rest of the estate. It was also surrounded by gardens and terraces—groomed, controlled sections of land with formal, ornamental landscaping to show the owner's wealth and taste, and to set off the house from the surrounding countryside.⁹⁹

This description of a plantation—which demonstrates the southern elites' attempts to distance themselves from the uncontrolled natural landscape around it—is supported by Charles Ball's description of one of his owner's plantations in the Carolinas. His master's two-story brick house was surrounded by five acres of formal landscaping:

There was a spacious garden behind the house, containing, I believe, about five acres, well cultivated, and handsomely laid out. In this garden grew a great variety of vegetables; some of which I have never seen in the market of Philadelphia. It contained a profusion of flowers, three different shrubberies, a vast number of ornamental and small fruit trees, and several small hot houses, with glass roofs. There was a head gardener, who did nothing but attend to this garden through the year and during the summer he generally had two men and two boys to assist him. In the months of April and May this garden was one of the sweetest and most pleasant places that I ever was in.¹⁰⁰

Another example of this distance that grew between the southern elite and the surrounding uncultivated landscape is the hunt. As demonstrated in both Nicholas Proctor's book and Scott Giltner's article, hunting had developed as a sport in the South,

⁹⁸ Dell Upton, "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," 1985, *Cabin, Quarter, and Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, Ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. P., 2010).

⁹⁹ Upton, 128.

¹⁰⁰ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 137-8.

similar to the activity of foxhunting in England, in the sense that, for the southern aristocracy, hunting became about the process as opposed to the result. The focus of the activity was not on obtaining needed food but rather on the sport of the hunt itself. Moreover, the planters relied on their slaves to do all of the work on these outdoor excursions except, of course, the actual killing.¹⁰¹ Thus, while it is true that both the owners and the slaves were out in the uncultivated landscapes together, they were interacting with that landscape differently and learning different information as they did so. Under an environmental analysis, it is reasonable to conclude that the slaves' increased involvement with all of the work of the hunt increased their ability to maneuver undetected in, and obtain resources from, the untamed environment. These were skills the elite whites had less opportunity to develop, partly because of the social distain for performing labor, and partly from the resulting impetus to create a distance between themselves and the land.

The other white people in the South—the non-elite white classes—fell somewhere in the social structure between the aristocracy and their labor force. They were in this category based on their lack of ownership of both land and slaves, and on their corresponding need to either work their own land, or work in some other manner to support themselves. While this group comprised a substantial portion of the southern population, and while some of the yeoman farmers were quite comfortable financially, they failed to attain the elite status of the southern plantation owners for two reasons: they did not own slaves and they themselves worked the land.¹⁰² As Ball noted, “The

¹⁰¹ See Giltner, Proctor.

¹⁰² Ball 286-7, 289; Kolchin, 180.

only line that divides the gentleman from the simple man, is that the latter works for his living, whilst the former has slaves to work for him. No man who works with his hands can or will be received into the highest orders of society, on a footing of equality, nor can he hope to see his family treated better than himself.”¹⁰³

Importantly, the slave chasers and road patrollers came from this other class of southern whites. As Genovese noted, “Although some observers claimed that a fortune could be made at slave catching, poor and dissolute white men probably did most of this work.”¹⁰⁴ This conclusion is supported by Underground Railroad historian James Fairchild’s observations regarding slave chasers. Fairchild noted that the men who undertook to bring back fugitive slaves “generally lived apart in solitary cabins where they could train a pack of bloodhounds for the loathsome hunt.”¹⁰⁵ From an environmental perspective, they worked closer to the land than the plantation owners and had a better set of skills to potentially catch the runaway slaves. Understandably, the slaves had a low opinion of these men, but notwithstanding this bias, several of the narratives reasonably suggest that the slave chasers were from the non-elite class of white southerners, a group less removed from the cultivated and uncultivated natural landscapes than the slave-owning aristocracy. Lewis Clarke, for example, a fugitive slave who was ultimately successful in finding his way to the Underground Railroad, described slave chasers as “the sons of run-down families.[. . . T]hey are the offscouring of all things, the refuse, the fag end, the ears and tails of slavery; they are emphatically the servants of servants, and slaves of the devil; they are the meanest and lowest and worst of all

¹⁰³ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 286.

¹⁰⁴ Genovese, 651.

¹⁰⁵ Fairchild, 94.

creation.”¹⁰⁶ One interpretation for the existence of the profession slave chasing is that, because of the distance that the white aristocracy created between themselves and the natural world, when their slaves absconded, many of the owners needed the help of these men—men who were more familiar with the uncultivated landscape.

The final group that made up Southern society was, of course, the slaves. In terms of demographics, by the 1800s, a vast majority, but not all, slaves in the South lived and labored in the rural, agricultural settings. Those agricultural settings varied tremendously, however. Approximately half of all rural slaves lived on farms and plantations that had from 10-49 slaves, 25% lived on holdings using fewer than ten slaves, and the rest lived on plantations with more than 50 slaves.¹⁰⁷ Most slaves worked under the eyes and whips of overseers and drivers, but others worked side-by-side with their masters; some saw their resident masters daily, and others worked for absentee landowners.¹⁰⁸ Some worked on cotton plantations, others grew sugar, rice, tobacco, wheat, corn, hemp, or some combination thereof.¹⁰⁹ There was also a distinct segment of the slave population that was put to work in urban areas where they worked as craftsmen, traders, shipbuilders, preachers, carpenters, blacksmiths, waiters, house servants, and drivers.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Clarke, *Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clarke, During a Captivity of More than Twenty-Five Years, Among the Algerines of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America*, (Boston: David H. Ela, 1845), 114. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

¹⁰⁷ Smith, 17.

¹⁰⁸ Kolchin, 99.

¹⁰⁹ Kolchin, 99.

¹¹⁰ Smith, 40; Kolchin, 99.

Slave culture varied depending on the region. In addition to the above differences in demographics, climate varied from region to region and the disposition of the owners varied from plantation to plantation and farm to farm.¹¹¹ Several similarities in slave society did exist, however. One generalization that can reasonably be made about slave culture overall pertains to slaves' relationship to their cultivated and uncultivated surroundings and the parallel of that relationship to the one they had with their owners. As Stewart pointed out, "slaves were not simply passive participants in an economic relationship; neither did they commonly defy the domination of their masters by massive acts of resistance. Instead, they actively negotiated small portions of independence and autonomy from the master-slave relationship. Often, the small freedoms they acquired—the right to grow gardens, hunt in the surrounding woods, keep livestock, or market some of their own goods, for example—were achieved in part by way of their knowledge of the environment in which they worked."¹¹²

The slave narratives clearly demonstrate that the slaves had an intimate relationship with their surroundings, much more so than their owners. Environmental sociologist Cassandra Johnson called it "a legacy of working and living in close proximity to forested wildlands."¹¹³ Stewart called it living closer to the ground, which gave the slaves a better understanding of southern crops and environments than the landowners. He pointed out that their labor "gave them knowledge of the land that was

¹¹¹ Kolchin, 99.

¹¹² Stewart, *Wind/Rain*, 11.

¹¹³ Cassandra Johnson and Josh McDaniel, "Turpentine Negro," *To Love the Wind and the Rain*, Ed. Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh, PA: Univ. Pittsburgh P., 2006), 51.

intimate and precise, and in turn had material, social, and political usefulness.”¹¹⁴

Smith’s articulation of this idea was that the slaves were forced “into an intimacy with the immediate natural world.”¹¹⁵ Most importantly for purposes of this analysis, Camp explained this idea in terms of a “rival geography,” both on and off the plantation.¹¹⁶ It is Camp’s concept that gives credence to the information analyzed and the arguments presented here because it is this rival geography that enabled the field slaves to develop various skills, including the skill of stealth, to survive successfully off the plantations.

The design and layout of a typical plantation, which was discussed above in the context of the white aristocracy’s distance from the land, also supports this characterization of slave culture. As articulated by historical geographer Sam B. Hilliard in Michael Conzen’s book, *The Making of the American Landscape*, “the antebellum southern plantation encapsulated two of the most potent forces in the South—the tremendous Agricultural system that was that region’s lifeblood, and the most disturbing element of southern life, the institution of slavery.”¹¹⁷ Regardless of location, plantations were differentiated from farms in that they were operated for profit, typically relied primarily on a single crop that would be used outside the region, were usually very capitalized, and used a large unskilled labor force, that is, slaves.¹¹⁸ Also, whereas on farms, the workers were usually family members of the owner, on plantations, “there existed a sharp distinction between owner, who was sometimes both operator and

¹¹⁴ Stewart, *Wind/Rain*, 10-11.

¹¹⁵ Smith, 14.

¹¹⁶ Camp, 2-3.

¹¹⁷ Sam B. Hilliard, “Plantation and the Molding of the Southern Landscape,” *The Making of the American Landscape*, Michael P. Conzen, Ed. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 104.

¹¹⁸ Hilliard, 106.

overseer, and the labor force.”¹¹⁹ The plantations themselves—whether they were located in the tobacco growing regions of Virginia, Kentucky, and the northern parts of Tennessee and North Carolina; the rice regions of coastal Georgia and South Carolina; the cotton-growing states of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, southern Arkansas, Northern Louisiana, and western Texas; or the sugar-growing area of southern Louisiana—were typically laid out with the manor house occupying the most prestigious position on the plantation, often on a hill that overlooks the land, and typically near the road or waterway that provided access to and from the plantation.¹²⁰ The slave quarters were usually located some distance from the main houses.¹²¹

In contrast to the neat, cultivated, and organized gardens and terraces, which were close to the master’s house, field slaves’ quarters were built away from the main house, usually with the other agricultural outbuildings. They were part of the “working landscape.”¹²² The following diagrams of the Floewood River Plantation in Mississippi are demonstrations of this idea, even down to the inclusion of the slave quarters in the “Work Space” of the plantation (see Figure 1).

¹¹⁹ Hilliard, 106.

¹²⁰ Hilliard, 106, 109, 112, 118-20.

¹²¹ Hilliard, 115; 106.

¹²² Upton, 127.

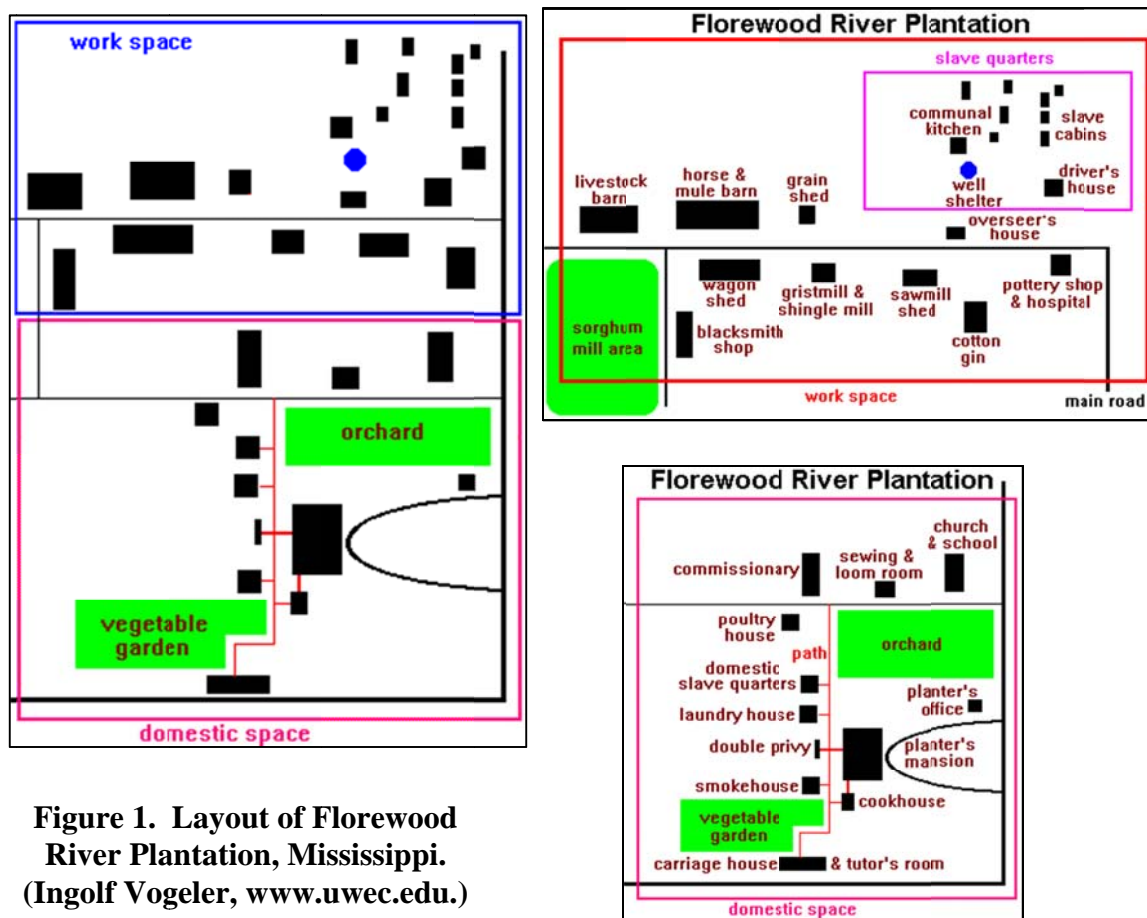


Figure 1. Layout of Florewood River Plantation, Mississippi.
(Ingolf Vogeler, www.uwec.edu.)

Additionally, most plantation owners allowed their slaves to cultivate their own gardens.¹²³ Frequently, these gardens were located adjacent to the slaves' quarters. According to slave James Williams, each house of the slave quarters had a piece of ground attached to it for a garden.¹²⁴ Ball, who had been on many different plantations in different states, wrote that, on every one of them, the slaves had been able to have their own gardens, sometimes in remote or unprofitable parts of the plantation.¹²⁵ These gardens were used to grow food and material for tools and household goods. Charles

¹²³ Hilliard, 119.

¹²⁴ James Williams, *Narrative of James Williams, an American Slave, Who Was for Several Years a Driver on a Cotton Plantation in Alabama*, (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), 45-46. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

¹²⁵ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 166-7.

Ball grew lettuce and sweet potatoes, among other things.¹²⁶ Other slaves grew corn, potatoes, pumpkins, melons, and other vegetables for themselves.¹²⁷ James Pennington's narrative pointed out that, "The men had not hats, waistcoats or handkerchiefs given them or the women any bonnets. These they had to contrive for themselves. Each laboring man had a small 'patch' of ground allowed him; from this he was expected to furnish himself and his boys hats, &c. These patches they had to work by night; from these also they had to raise their own provisions, as no potatoes, cabbage, &c., were allowed them from the plantation."¹²⁸

Usually, however, slaves' gardens, if they existed, were an extension of the slaves' lodgings. As Upton noted, "[t]he quarter extended beyond its walls. The space around the building was as important as the building itself."¹²⁹ The slaves spent much of their free time in these exterior spaces. Historian Garrett Fesler observed that one of the pervasive features of African culture is the tendency to spend much of their time in the yards and other exterior space around their houses and this extended to the slaves as well.¹³⁰

A hierarchy also existed within slave culture that paralleled southern white culture. Once again, the slave narratives are a rich source of support for this observation. Fugitive slave Henry Bibb noted, "[t]he distinction among slaves is as marked, as the

¹²⁶ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 319.

¹²⁷ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 166-7.

¹²⁸ James Pennington, *A Narrative of Events of the Life of J. H. Banks, an Escaped Slave, from the Cotton State, Alabama, in America*, (Liverpool, Eng.: M. Rourke, 1861), 66. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

¹²⁹ Upton, 127.

¹³⁰ Garrett Fesler, "Excavating the Spaces and Interpreting the Places of Enslaved Africans and Their Descendants," *Cabin, Quarter, and Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, Ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. P., 2010), 31.

classes of society are in any aristocratic community. Some refusing to associate with others whom they deem beneath them in point of character, color, condition, or the superior importance of their respective masters.”¹³¹ Ball grew up viewing the station of waiter as a high point of honor and greatness.¹³² William Grimes, a field slave in North Carolina, was entrusted with house keys, which made other slaves jealous.¹³³ James Watkins, when he was growing up as a slave on a Maryland plantation, “was taken from field labour, and made errand boy, or ‘body slave’, in the house, and afterward promoted to the office of ladies’ maid. My duty was to wait upon them and travel with them, to fan them, hand them in and out of their carriages, and do all such like services. During that time I was as well fed as the young ladies themselves, had good meat and delicacies just the same, was dressed well, and very well treated.”¹³⁴ John Thompson, who was born in Maryland and served as a slave for twenty-five years, recollected his view of slave hierarchy that developed when he was only a child when he said, “Being a gentleman’s body servant, I had nothing more to do with plantation affairs, and, consequently, thought myself much superior to those children who had to sweep the yard.”¹³⁵

¹³¹ Bibb, 75, fn.

¹³² Ball, 1837 Narrative, 25.

¹³³ William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave, Written by Himself*, (New York, 1825), 8. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

¹³⁴ James Watkins, *Struggles for Freedom; or The Life of James Watkins, Formerly a Slave in Maryland, U. S.; in Which is Detailed a Graphic Account of His Extraordinary Escape from Slavery, Notices of the Fugitive Slave Law, the Sentiments of American Divines on the Subject of Slavery, etc.* (Manchester, Eng.: A. Heywood, 1860), 12. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

¹³⁵ John Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave; Containing His History of 25 Years in Bondage, and His Providential Escape. Written by Himself* (Worcester, 1856), 25. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

Austin Steward, a Virginia slave who ultimately escaped to Canada, described that, when all the slaves congregated, the field slaves looked up to the house slaves for guidance on proper social behavior—proper, that is, based on the example set by white society. As he recalled, “House servants were, of course, ‘the stars’ of the party; all eyes were turned to them to see how they conducted for they, among slaves, are what a military man would call ‘fugle-men.’ The field hands, and such of them as have generally been excluded from the dwelling of their owners, look to the house servant as a pattern of politeness and gentility.”¹³⁶

W.E.B. DuBois, the noted sociologist and black activist, described the social distinction between house slaves and field slaves: “The house servants are now either lodged in the Big House or in trim cabins near. The mass of the slaves are [sic] down at the ‘quarters’ by themselves, under the direct eye of the overseer. This change was slight in appearance but of great importance; it widened the distance between the top and bottom of the social ladder, it placed a third party between master and slave and it removed the worst side of the slave hierarchy far from the eyes of its better self.”¹³⁷ In short, those slaves that served in closer proximity to the white family enjoyed a higher social status than the slaves who worked the land.

The distinction between house slaves and field slaves can be seen again in the plantation layout. Quarters for the house slaves were typically closer to the main house

¹³⁶ Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman; Embracing a Correspondence of Several Years, While President of Wilberforce Colony, London, Canada West* (Rochester, N.Y.: William Alling, 1857), 31-2. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

¹³⁷ W.E.B. DuBois, “The Home of the Slave,” 1901, *Cabin, Quarter, and Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, Ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg, (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2010), 21.

than those of the slaves that worked in the fields. They were usually organized into neat rows and their outsides were painted or whitewashed if the buildings could be seen from the main house.¹³⁸ As Kenneth Lewis, who studied the archeology of slavery described, “The slave quarters were generally situated near the agricultural buildings to one side of the main house. They were commonly arranged in rows facing a cleared space at one end of which the main house and its dependencies stood.[. . .] Often its relative proximity to the main house reflected the status of the structure’s occupants in the social structure of the plantation.”¹³⁹ In Ball’s description of one of the plantations where he lived, the slave quarters were about a quarter of a mile from the mansion. Within one hundred yards of the slave quarters were the overseer’s quarters and the buildings that contained the cotton gin and storage space for the cotton.¹⁴⁰ Thus, not only did the conduct of the different social groups of the South demonstrate the southern elite’s efforts to distance themselves from the work of the plantation and the cultivated and uncultivated landscapes around the plantation, but the living quarters of the different slave groups also reflected this effort.

This distinction on the plantations between house slaves and field slaves is important because it demonstrates that those slaves that interacted more with the white planter family, and lived closer to the main house, were less intimate with their natural surroundings than the field slaves, who typically lived at a distance from the plantation owner. Correspondingly, it was the field slaves—those interacting more closely with the cultivated and uncultivated environments of the South—who had a better chance of escaping slavery, a contention supported by several different types of evidence, including

¹³⁸ Upton, 127.

¹³⁹ Lewis, 33-65.

¹⁴⁰ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 138.

the slave narratives themselves and the evidence presented by Franklin and Schweninger that the typical fugitive was a male field slave.¹⁴¹

In addition to the structure of the different social groups in the antebellum South, the other main external force that impacted the lives of enslaved people and their relationship and interaction with their natural world was the institutions of slavery itself. In order to make the growth of the various cash crops economical, the massive slave labor force was necessary. As articulated by environmental historian Mart Stewart, control of the land and control of the labor force that worked the land were inextricably connected. Thus, the strictures that were placed on the daily lives of enslaved people was as necessary to the success of a plantation as was the meticulous planting, cultivating, and harvesting of the individual crops. From an environmental perspective, the uncultivated landscape surrounding the plantations represented the lack of control—over land and slaves—the same way that the cultivated plantations represented the enforcement of control. On the plantation, the white elite planters, through their subordinates and overseers, exerted control over all aspects of the lives of their slaves, from food and clothing distribution to time management to movement. The owners also attempted to control their slaves when they were off the plantations as well, by requiring them to receive permission to leave or by sending them on specifically designated tasks for the plantation owner.

When, however, the enslaved people were off of the plantation grounds, the owners had less control over them and it is during these times that slaves were able to

¹⁴¹ See Franklin and Schweninger, 210.

acquire many of the skills necessary to escape, despite—and often because of—the attempts to control them by the plantation owners. It is during these times, that is, that slaves were able to develop and perfect moving within their rival geography undetected and knowing how to successfully survive in those landscapes.

The Internal Aspects of Slaves' Relationship to Nature

In addition to the broad structure of southern society, other aspects of slave life and culture also influenced slaves' relationship to the surrounding natural world and their ability to successfully escape into those areas. These internal aspects include two different components. The first is the slaves' spiritual and cultural beliefs. The second is the practical knowledge that field slaves gained in living their lives on the plantations, knowledge that enabled them to use and maneuver within the cultivated *and* uncultivated landscapes once they made the decision to run away.

As the slave culture developed in America, many of the slaves' spiritual beliefs became a combination of beliefs, practices, and ideologies from several different sources, including African traditions, Native American beliefs, American folk values, Christianity, scientific theories, and herb lore.¹⁴² The African traditions, for example, came from the original slaves who had been brought over from West Africa. Typically, these slaves had some kind of belief system that held that a spirit world existed in nature.¹⁴³ Some of the older narratives from the first generation of Africans brought to America as slaves exemplify this conclusion. Ukawsaw Gronniosaw ("James Albert"), for example, was an

¹⁴² Smith, 14, 28-29.

¹⁴³ Smith, 1.

African Prince who had been transported to America and sold as a slave in the eighteenth century. According to his narrative, the sun, moon, and stars were the objects of his people's worship.¹⁴⁴ Another African native, Olaudah Equiano ("Gustavus Vassa"), stated, "As to religion, the natives believe that there is one Creator of all things, and that he lives in the sun."¹⁴⁵ As interpreted by Smith, Equiano's narrative shows a faith in magic and animism.¹⁴⁶ Often, slave religion consisted of the idea that the spiritual and material worlds were intertwined.¹⁴⁷ These beliefs infused the natural world with spiritual power and often created conflicting attitudes of fear of, and restoration from, the uncultivated environment.¹⁴⁸ Many also believed that ghosts haunted areas of the woods and swamps where someone had died.¹⁴⁹ Thus, as Smith noted, often slaves inscribed nature with social, political, and spiritual meanings.¹⁵⁰

Merged into this spiritual perception of nature was a more secular view of it that grew out of slaves' oppressed lives and the southern slave society generally. This perception stemmed from the experience and skills the slaves gained working on the plantations and living their lives as field slaves. As mentioned in general terms above, the field hands, who were more removed from the plantation house, worked and lived much closer to cultivated and uncultivated nature. It is estimated that about 75% of the

¹⁴⁴ James Albert, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (Bath: W. Gye, 1770), 1, 4. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

¹⁴⁵ Gustavus Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself. Vol. I* (London, 1789), 27. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

¹⁴⁶ Smith, 14.

¹⁴⁷ Smith, 33.

¹⁴⁸ Blum, 251.

¹⁴⁹ See e.g., Ball, 1837 Narrative, 260-3.

¹⁵⁰ Smith, 20.

slaves were field workers, while the remaining percentage did other tasks.¹⁵¹ This close contact with the surrounding environment manifested itself in two ways: the field workers had the opportunity to become extremely knowledgeable about both the agricultural, or cultivated, aspects of plantation life and the uncultivated areas surrounding the plantations.

With respect to the agricultural information, often it was the slaves who knew how to grow the crops. As Stewart described, “They were aware, from row to row, of the progress of the plants during the growing season. They put the seeds in the ground and covered them with their feet, stirred and tilled the earth when hoeing, and bent down over rice stalks or moved slowly down rows of cotton during harvest. The hands experienced the crop cultures from the ground up.”¹⁵²

In addition to cotton, sugar cane, and rice, slaves had intimate knowledge of how to grow and harvest tobacco, corn, indigo, sweet potatoes, and many other crops.¹⁵³ The slave narratives contain repeated references to agricultural information that support Stewart’s conclusion. Solomon Northup, a slave in Louisiana, provided extensively detailed descriptions of the workings of cotton and sugar cane plantations, showing the extent of agricultural knowledge of many of the slaves.¹⁵⁴ Charles Ball explained in detail the cultivation and harvest of rice, including descriptions of the different soil

¹⁵¹ Kolchin, 105.

¹⁵² Stewart, *Groe*, 135.

¹⁵³ Grimes, 56-7; Ball, 1837 Narrative, 193-4, Blassingame, 250.

¹⁵⁴ Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853* (Auburn, N.Y.: Derby and Miller, 1853), 312-19, 339. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

requirements.¹⁵⁵ William Green provided a detailed discussion of the cultivation of rice, cotton, and tobacco.¹⁵⁶

Additionally, slaves took care of horses and livestock, built fences, constructed dikes, built houses, worked in mills, unloaded boats, cut wood, planted fields, and managed plantations.¹⁵⁷ Most field slaves also engaged in work in the environs surrounding the plantation. They collected wood from the forests and swamps.¹⁵⁸ They went out into the woods and swamps to clear land for new fields.¹⁵⁹ Thomas Jones, a slave from North Carolina, reported, “In the month of November, and through the winter season, the men and women worked in the fields, clearing up new land, chopping and burning bushes, burning tar kilns, and digging ditches.”¹⁶⁰ The performance of their duties was not the only manner in which slaves developed experiences and knowledge of the surrounding natural world. Another way was the cultivation of their own gardens, as discussed above.

The other means that enabled slaves to develop knowledge of the surrounding natural world was to venture out into the uncultivated landscape beyond the borders of their plantations. Many slaves, particularly field slaves, went out into the woods, forests, and swamps surrounding the farms—with and without the knowledge or permission of

¹⁵⁵ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 203-4.

¹⁵⁶ William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green, (Formerly a Slave.) Written by Himself* (Springfield, MA: L. M. Guernsey, 1853), 171-90. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

¹⁵⁷ Grimes, 43, 56-7; Ball, 347; Blassingame, 250; Kolchin, 105.

¹⁵⁸ Leonard Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black, a Fugitive from Slavery. Written by Himself* (New Bedford: Benjamin Lindsey, 1847), 9. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

¹⁵⁹ Grimes, 43; Ball, 386; Blassingame, 250; Kolchin, 105.

¹⁶⁰ Thomas Jones, *The Experience of Thomas H. Jones, who was a Slave for Forty-Three Years* (Boston: Bazin & Chandler, 1862), 8. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

their owners—for a variety of reasons. One of those reasons was to attend religious meetings on the Sabbath. As historian Stephanie H.M. Camp articulated, “Much of bondpeople’s autonomous and semi-autonomous social activity depended on truancy, as Christian worshippers and secular party-goers alike produced rare moments of leisure by absenting themselves to congregate in the woods, swamps or in outbuildings.”¹⁶¹ Peter Randolph, a slave from Virginia whose published narrative was called, “Sketches of Slave Life,” stated, “Not being allowed to hold meetings on the plantation, slaves assembled in the swamps, out of reach of the patrols. They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place of getting together. This is often done by the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees, and bending them in the direction of the selected spot.”¹⁶²

Another reason slaves ventured into the undeveloped forests and swamps was to obtain resources, especially edibles, that were not provided to them by their owners. Thus, slavery itself forced the slaves, particularly the field slaves, out into the uncultivated landscape, and the slaves gained substantial knowledge and experience because of that. In gaining that experience, they also acquired the intrinsic understanding of how to interact and co-exist with nature, how to identify and avoid danger, and how to survive. Finally, also because of the structured social hierarchy of the South and the fact that slavery was such an inherent part of it, the slaves learned how to maneuver in the uncultivated landscapes undetected.

¹⁶¹ Camp, 6, *citing*, Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution’ in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

¹⁶² Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life: Or, Illustrations of the “Peculiar Institution”* (Boston, 1855), 30. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

The most common resource sought by the slaves outside of the plantations was food. Many of the slave narratives report that the owners did not sufficiently feed their slaves. Moses Roper, for example, stated that he was unable to do his assigned task of cutting trees in the swamp because he was “on a very short allowance of food.”¹⁶³ Henry Bibb reported that on arriving at a plantation in Louisiana, he learned that the food that was allowed the slaves was one peck of corn, and one pound of pork per week, with an occasional allowance of molasses.¹⁶⁴ As a result, the slaves were “half-starved.”¹⁶⁵ William Grimes had similar stories.¹⁶⁶ Charles Ball reported often “suffer[ing] greatly for want of sufficient and proper food.”¹⁶⁷

This lack of adequate food provided by the owners caused most slaves to seek supplementary food elsewhere.¹⁶⁸ Often slaves relied on stealing additional food from the landowners.¹⁶⁹ Many of the slaves, however, resorted to the knowledge they had

¹⁶³ Moses Roper, *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery. With an Appendix, Containing a List of Places Visited by the Author in Great Britain and Ireland and the British Isles; and Other Matter* (Berwick-upon-Tweed, Eng.: Warder Office, 1848), 16. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

¹⁶⁴ Bibb, 110.

¹⁶⁵ Bibb, 110.

¹⁶⁶ Grimes, 14.

¹⁶⁷ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 26. This is one of those examples where consistency suggests accuracy; the fact that such similar information is contained in so many of the narratives, from so many different regions, published both before and after the war, suggests that it is more likely than not that the information is accurate. Moreover, the accuracy of the specific details is not important for purposes of this analysis, it is the generally-accepted fact that slaves were frequently underfed or undernourished that is important. Whether it is entirely accurate, for example, that Henry Bibb’s fellow slaves were only allowed one peck of corn and one pound of pork per week, is not as important as the fact that the narratives are replete with examples and statements that support the general contention that slaves did not receive sufficient nourishment from the plantation owners. Moreover, historians have accepted this general contention that slaves were underfed. Both Blum and Genovese, for example, acknowledge this fact in their analyses. Blum, 260; Genovese, 486.

¹⁶⁸ Blum, 260; Genovese, 486 (“The slaves would have suffered much more than many in fact did from malnutrition and the hidden hungers of nutritional deficiencies if the man had not taken the initiative to hunt and trap animals.”)

¹⁶⁹ E.g., Grimes, 14.

gained of the natural world around them to supplement their diet in multiple ways.¹⁷⁰ In the uncultivated surroundings of their plantations, for example, slaves gathered edible roots, honey from beehives, nuts, and fresh fruit, such as grapes, dewberries, cherries, yellow plums, and blackberries.¹⁷¹

Another type of food that slaves got from beyond the plantation borders was fish. Many slaves fished to get extra food, both for their own diets and to sell for profit.¹⁷² Many of the historians of this era also found evidence of the frequency that slaves went out into their surroundings to fish.¹⁷³ Slaves used poles, nets, and traps for fishing, as well as canoes or small rafts.¹⁷⁴ John Jackson, a slave, also related that he himself made a fish trap in a stream that ran through the swamp.¹⁷⁵ Slave Peter Randolph also described fishing that was done by plantation slaves to get extra food.

There is another method that the slave takes to get his food. He makes what is called a fish-trap. This is made by cutting white oak wood into very small strips, which are tied together with a great deal of ingenuity. This trap is put in very deep water, and attended by the slaves at night, and on the Sabbath, (this being all the time they have to attend to their traps;) and very glad are they of this opportunity of getting some nice fish. Oftentimes the overseer will take what he wants for his own use, and the slaves must submit.¹⁷⁶

The other major food-gathering endeavor engaged in by the slaves was hunting.

All family members shared in supplementing the family food supply this way, including

¹⁷⁰ Kolchin, 113.

¹⁷¹ Smith, 37-8; Blum, 262.

¹⁷² E.g., William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South. Written by Himself.* (Cincinnati, 1846), 25; Northup, 335; Grimes, 29; Ball, 1837 Narrative, 42, 276-7. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

¹⁷³ Kolchin 113; Johnson 52; Giltner 27; Genovese 487; Proctor 161.

¹⁷⁴ Giltner, 27.

¹⁷⁵ Jackson (John), 30.

¹⁷⁶ Randolph, 20.

women and children.¹⁷⁷ The primary game they ate was rabbit, raccoon, and opossum.¹⁷⁸ Solomon Northrup reported that it was “customary” where he lived to hunt in the swamps for raccoon and opossum using dogs or clubs. Ellen Butler hid pens with brush to trap wild turkeys.¹⁷⁹ Slaves also hunted squirrels, pheasant, and to a lesser degree wild hogs, buffalo, bear, skunk, crow, hawk, turtle, panther, cougar, polecat, dove, and partridge.¹⁸⁰ John Jackson also had evidence of hunting in his narrative. He related that, in the swamp adjacent to the plantation where he and his family lived there was an abundance of wild turkeys. His father made a pen with which to catch the turkeys.¹⁸¹ In Peter Randolph’s “Sketches,” he discusses in detail the hunting and fishing that many slaves did while living on a plantation. He described different scenarios:

There are some animals in Virginia called raccoons, possums, old hares, and squirrels. The best of these is the possum, which lives in old trees and in the earth. The slave sets his traps in the swamps, where the possum usually lives. The traps are made by cutting down trees, and cutting them in short pieces about five feet long; then they raise the log on three pieces of sticks, like the figure four. These traps are made on the Sabbath. One slave will sometimes have fifteen or twenty of them, and will go at night, with his torch of pitch-pine, and see if his traps have caught anything for him to eat. Sometimes he finds a possum and a raccoon; and sometimes a squirrel and old hare.[. . .] Some of the slaves hunt these animals with dogs, trained for the purpose. They run them up the trees in the forest, where, as they are a harmless animal, they can be taken very easily. They do not fight very hard when caught, but are very easily overcome; but they are a very deceitful little animal. They will lie on the ground, and make you think they are dead; but if you leave them, they will creep off so soon, that you cannot conceive how the little animal got away so cute. The only way they can be kept safely is to be put in a bag, or in a basket with a

¹⁷⁷ Blum, 260-61. In fact, Blum suggested that children may have engaged in hunting even more frequently than the adults, mainly because they had more free time than their parents. Thus, slaves learned how to hunt at a young age, once more demonstrating how ingrained the slaves’ close relationship with nature was.

¹⁷⁸ Proctor, 150.

¹⁷⁹ Blum, 262.

¹⁸⁰ Ball, 324-5; Merchant, *Wind/Rain*, x; Giltner, 25; Blum, 262.

¹⁸¹ Jackson (John), 30.

cover. The slave knows best when to hunt these creatures. The best time is just at the rise of the tide in the rivers.¹⁸²

Randolph's discussion is not only valuable for the information he provides about hunting opossums, but also for his observation of slaves' proficiency at finding the animals. His comment lends credence and support for Camp's rival geography proposition and demonstrates that even the slaves themselves recognized that they had specialized knowledge of their surroundings that were not possessed by white southerners, despite the fact that they may have frequented the same geographical areas used by the slaves.

Only rarely were slaves permitted to use guns to hunt, it being illegal in the south to arm a slave. Thus, slaves had to be creative. They frequently used clubs, hidden pens, and dogs for hunting various wild game.¹⁸³ Also, they built snares and traps, set fires, or used blowguns made out of sugar canes.¹⁸⁴

Some of the evidence suggests that much of the hunting was done without the permission of the plantation owners, or, at a minimum, outside of their presence.¹⁸⁵ Other evidence indicates that slaves often hunted with their owner's consent and, sometimes, were expected to provide game for the planters' tables.¹⁸⁶ Either way, for this kind of hunting, it is clear that the slaves were acquiring knowledge of their surroundings and using their knowledge of nature every time they left the plantation. In Stewart's intensive study of the environmental impact of southern plantation agriculture in Georgia,

¹⁸² Randolph, 19-20.

¹⁸³ Proctor, 164; Johnson, 52; Blum, 262.

¹⁸⁴ Ball, 229-30; Stewart, *Wind/Rain*, 12-3; Giltner, 26.

¹⁸⁵ Proctor, 162; Giltner, 24.

¹⁸⁶ Giltner, 23-24.

he noted, “The proficiency with which the slaves procured game and fish on and off the plantation and used wild resources as raw materials for crafted piggins, pales, baskets, canoes, and other goods to sell in Darien demonstrated a knowledge of the physical environment that was precise, concrete, and verified by tangible successes.”¹⁸⁷

Further, and most important to this analysis, as Giltner noted, “When possible, slaves used hunting and fishing to facilitate the most obvious form of resistance—running away. Opportunities for flight and hunting and fishing complemented each other well. From hunting and fishing, slaves acquired knowledge of a region’s woods, fields, and waterways, as well as contact with nearby slaves, free men, and money—all useful for escape. In addition, these activities gave slaves tools for the journey, including the ability to provision a flight and the chance to own dogs or weapons to catch game and protect themselves from patrols.”¹⁸⁸ Giltner supported this observation from slave narratives. According to Giltner, Thomas Cole, a slave in Alabama, specifically sought out the opportunity to hunt with his master’s permission, in order to escape:

Aware that his master frequently employed slave huntsmen to restock supplies, Cole repeatedly asked for the privilege over a period of months. Finally, his master assented: “This is the chance I been wanting, so when we gits to the hunting ground, the leader says to scatter out, and I tells him me and ‘nother man goes north and makes circles round the river and meet ‘bout sundown. I crosses the river and goes north. I’s gwine to the free country, where there ain’t no slaves.”¹⁸⁹

The fundamental irony of this process of slaves feeding and healing themselves from the uncultivated environment is that, had the slaves’ nutritional and other needs

¹⁸⁷ Stewart, *Groe*, 178-9.

¹⁸⁸ Giltner, 35.

¹⁸⁹ Giltner, 36.

been fully met by the planters, the likelihood that the slaves would have developed these skills, and the knowledge of nature they acquired along with them, would have been greatly reduced. It was the institution of slavery's tendency to undernourish slaves that forced them to learn how to feed themselves and, by necessity, learn many other skills that enabled them to maneuver undetected in surrounding landscapes.

Supplementing their diet was not the only need created by slavery that sent the slaves out into the uncultivated landscape. Poor or insufficient medical care and the infliction of frequent and substantial injury is another aspect of slavery that resulted in slaves seeking resources directly from the natural world around them. As articulated by Stewart, "Slave knowledge of herbal medicine was akin to their knowledge of everything else in the plantation environment—discrete, detailed, and close to the ground. It was also conditioned by experience; slave women, especially, went out into the woods and wetlands to find supplies for household manufacturing and healing." Smith noted that the use of such plants and herbs was a ritualistic one, "to harness the spiritual power residing in the natural world," in addition to being a pharmacological one, to heal many ailments.¹⁹⁰ Many slave women possessed extensive knowledge of the medicinal uses for various herbs and plants in their local natural surroundings.¹⁹¹ They used herbs for teas, potions, and liniments for talismans to protect the bearer against disease or bad luck.¹⁹² Blum discovered that slaves utilized many natural substances because of their healing properties: snake root or red oak bark to chills, fever, or malaria; hot sassafras tea to cool the blood in the spring; red pepper tea to cure colds; a combination of turpentine from

¹⁹⁰ Smith, 29; Stewart, *Wind/Rain*, 15.

¹⁹¹ Smith 28; John Lee, *Folk Wisdom and Mother Wit* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993).

¹⁹² Blum, 257.

pine trees, bee honey, and onions to make cough syrups; white sassafras tea used in baths to help rheumatism; a liniment mixture of lard, poke root, and turpentine to speed the healing of sprains, bruises, and sores; alum, saltpeter, bluestone, and whiskey to aid in the treatment of snake bites; china berries, camphor strings, and elderberries to ease teething pain in children; and cotton root, tansy and rue, pennyroyal, camphor, and cedarberries to induce abortions or cause miscarriages.¹⁹³

Similarly, the scholars that founded the Underground Railroad Healing Garden, established at Oberlin College in 1998, conducted extensive research into fugitive slaves' uses for wild medicines. They often used: catnip for insomnia, hives, diarrhea, gas, menstrual cramps, and colds; evening primrose for tumors, coughs, colds, depression, and rashes; butterfly weed for insect bites and poison oak; bee balm for nausea, nervousness, and gas; and black cohosh for heart trouble and bronchitis, and, interestingly, as an aphrodisiac.¹⁹⁴ All of these herbs and medicines, and many more, were obtained in the surrounding uncultivated environment and their use by slaves not only demonstrates their intimate knowledge of local plant life, but also shows that the slaves frequently had to go out into the natural environment to obtain the plants. Also, the scholarly literature and slave narratives suggest that women, more often than men, were the members of the communities that were more knowledgeable about the medicinal properties of plants.

Harriet Ann Jacobs, who hid on her plantation undetected for seven years, included information about natural remedies in her narrative. Once, she had been bitten by a snake. She asked a friend to prepare "a poultice of warm ashes and vinegar, and I

¹⁹³ Blum, 257-60.

¹⁹⁴ Underground Railroad Healing Garden, established 1998, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio.

applied it to my leg, which was already much swollen. The application gave me some relief, but the swelling did not abate.[. . .] My friend asked an old woman, who doctored among the slaves, what was good for the bite of a snake or a lizard. She told her to steep a dozen coppers in vinegar, over night, and apply the cankered vinegar to the inflamed part.”¹⁹⁵ Harriet Jacobs also related that, when she was tormented—while in hiding—by hundreds of little red insects, fine as a needle’s point, that pierced through her skin, the old woman gave her herb teas and cooling medicines, and she was able to get rid of them.¹⁹⁶

The failure by plantation owners to supply their slaves with basic tools and living implements resulted in yet another aspect of the slaves’ creativity and necessity in using the resources in the natural world around them. Because of the prevailing treatment of slaves in the South, most of them learned to collect and create tools and household items directly from the surrounding natural environment. Probably the most obvious example of this is the gourd. As Solomon Northrup described, “the gourd is one of the most convenient and necessary utensils on a plantation. Besides supplying the place of all kinds of crockery in a slave cabin, it is used for carrying water to the fields. Another, also, contains the dinner. It dispenses with the necessity of pans, dippers, basins, and such tin and wooden superfluities altogether.”¹⁹⁷ Peter Randolph also talked about the use of the gourd as a tool.

¹⁹⁵ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*, (Boston, 1861), 151. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

¹⁹⁶ Jacobs, 175.

¹⁹⁷ Northrup, 316; *see also* Ball, 115.

There are some little fruits in Virginia, that are called "simmons"; they grow very plentifully, and are sweet and good. The slaves get them in the fall of the year, then they get a barrel and put the "simmons" into it, and put water there too, and something else that grow on trees, that they call "locusses," which are about ten inches long, and two across. They put the "locusses" and "simmons" into the water together, and let them stand for two or three days. Then the water is drained off, and the leaves are used as you would use coffee. The slaves put the liquid in gourds, and carry it to the field with them, and drink out of the gourds while they eat their bread.¹⁹⁸

There are many other examples, as well. Sea grass or strips of oak were used to make baskets; plants were used to dye cloth; logs were used as dugouts for fishing; Spanish moss was used to stuff mattresses; young white oak or hickory trees were used to make brooms; corn husks were used to make horse and mule collars, children's toys, and bedding; wood was used to make bowls, trays, and utensils; animal skins were used to make moccasins.¹⁹⁹ In going out into the natural world beyond the plantations to get these things, the slaves also learned other vital information. They acquired extensive knowledge of the dangers of the swamps and woods and of how to avoid them. When Charles Ball was attacked by a swarm of hornets that came from a nearby nest, he knew to lie face down on the ground until they calmed down and then stuff the opening of the hive with leaves. Blum acknowledged that many slaves likely developed a very sophisticated knowledge of the many different types of snakes that pervaded the South.²⁰⁰ The slaves gained an intimate understanding of the laws of nature and how to survive successfully within those natural surroundings—all of which, as proved by Ball's narrative, among others, could carry them successfully past the geographic areas with

¹⁹⁸ Randolph, 20-21.

¹⁹⁹ Ball, 190-1, 194-5, 270, 384; Stewart, *Wind/Rain*, 13; *Groe*, 136.

²⁰⁰ Blum, 252-3.

which they were familiar and help them as they got further and further away from their homes.

All of these different examples provide the foundational evidence to show that antebellum enslaved people had a heightened understanding of the natural world around them, both cultivated and uncultivated. Many of these examples, however, show the same kind of use of natural resources in which white southerners engaged, which could defeat the arguments presented herein that the slaves' relationship to the natural world that was forced on them by southern plantation society enabled them to develop the skills they needed to escape slavery. The counter to this argument however, lies in an additional skill that slaves were forced to develop as a result of their status as slaves—a skill that clearly encapsulates Stephanie H.M. Camp's rival geography idea—and that was the ability to move in the uncultivated areas of the South undetected.

Recognizing that some limited movement off the plantations was clearly permitted, or, at a minimum, not violently objected to by many slave owners, the development of the skill of stealth was still necessary for a couple of reasons. First, because of the rigid structure of southern society and plantation hierarchy, the slaves and the slave owners co-existed on the same ground while acquiring very different goals and skills in the process. As Stewart has opined, “Nearly every aspect of their experience put them into contact with the natural environment, and gave them a knowledge that was both detailed and practical.”²⁰¹ Second, as noted earlier, slaves were prohibited from traveling freely around their regions without passes or permission, another of the many

²⁰¹ Stewart, *Wind/Rain*, 17.

ways that slave owners exerted their mastery over their slaves. Many southern roads were patrolled by groups of men paid to check the passes of slaves they ran across and to return any runaway slaves they found.²⁰²

As Henry Bibb was well aware, many of the southern states, including Kentucky, Maryland, and Virginia, “which are said to be the mildest slave States in the Union, noted for their humanity, Christianity and democracy, declare that ‘Any slave, for rambling in the night, or riding horseback without leave, or running away, may be punished by whipping, cropping and branding in the cheek, or otherwise, not rendering him unfit for labor.’”²⁰³ Solomon Northrup reported that in his area there is a group of patrollers, who are compensated by the planters, based on the number of slaves they own, and who are charged with seizing and whipping any slave they find away from their plantation.²⁰⁴ Charles Ball reported, “No slave dare leave the plantation to which he belongs, a single mile, without a written pass from the overseer, or master.”²⁰⁵ Moses Grandy’s narrative also contained verification of the restrictions placed upon slaves to travel. “No coloured person,” he wrote, “can travel without a pass. If he cannot show it, he may be flogged by any body [sic]; in such a case, he is often seized and flogged by the patrols. All through the slave states there are patrols; they are so numerous that they cannot easily be escaped.”²⁰⁶ Austin Steward, a slave from Virginia, described the patrols. He said, “Slaves are never allowed to leave the plantation to which they belong, without a written

²⁰² Bibb, 123-4; Smith, 25.

²⁰³ Bibb, 75-6.

²⁰⁴ Northrup, 356.

²⁰⁵ Ball, 163.

²⁰⁶ Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America* (London: Gilpin, 1843), 60. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

pass. Should anyone venture to disobey this law, he will most likely be caught by the patrol and given thirty-nine lashes. This patrol is always on duty every Sunday, going to each plantation under their supervision, entering every slave cabin and examining closely the conduct of the slaves; and if they find one slave from another plantation without a pass, he is immediately punished with a severe flogging.”²⁰⁷ Thus, the need to be able to maneuver stealthily on and off the plantations was necessary for the slaves, not only to increase the likelihood of successful hunts and to avoid unpleasant interactions with the patrols, but also to avoid “stepping into their masters’ landscapes of control and domination.”²⁰⁸

Fugitive Slaves’ Use of Nature

Many of the historians and scholars discussed earlier reached the conclusion that relatively few slaves successfully escaped slavery permanently. Blassingame, for example, argued that in running away into uncultivated areas, “the black faced almost insuperable odds. As he plunged into nearby woods or swamps, the overseer, gun in hand, was close on his heels. Almost immediately, or certainly in a few days, he would hear the hounds as they picked up the scent of his tracks. Reaching the woods unscathed, he had to fight off the pangs of hunger as well as bloodthirsty wild cats, wolves, and white men. Avid hunters, his master and overseer might know the woods as well, or

²⁰⁷ Steward, 27.

²⁰⁸ Stewart, *Wind/Rain*, 12-3.

better than he did. Besides, any white man might stumble inadvertently onto his hideout.”²⁰⁹ Similarly, Genovese noted,

[i]f most slaves feared to think about flight to the North, many feared even to think of short-term flight to the nearby woods or swamps. The slaves faced particularly difficult conditions in the swampy areas alongside the great plantation districts of Louisiana and the eastern low country.[. . .] The slaves had good reason to fear their surroundings, for the dangers presented by their own ignorance and by nature accompanied those presented by a hostile and vigilant white community.²¹⁰

Another point made by many historians to support the conclusion that few fugitives successfully escaped the South is ignorance of geography. Franklin, for example, contended that many slaves would not have known where to go.²¹¹ Osofsky opined, based in part on Frederick Douglass’ narrative—wherein Douglass admitted that there had been a time in his early life when he had not even heard of the North—that most plantations slaves lacked a sense of geography.²¹² Other slaves had misinformation about the North: “Many slaves knew nothing of the Northern people, or had heard of Canada only as a cold, barren, uninviting country, where the negro [sic] must perish.”²¹³ According to Frederick Douglass, slaveholders exaggerated the expansiveness of slavery territory and reinforced feelings of powerlessness among the slaves.²¹⁴ Based on a variety of different evidence, including, but not limited to, the slave narratives, these scholars concluded that hunger, risk of detection and other dangers, and ignorance of geography all combined to decrease the likelihood that a fugitive from slavery could

²⁰⁹ Blassingame, 196.

²¹⁰ Genovese, 650-1.

²¹¹ Franklin, 109.

²¹² Osofsky, 16.

²¹³ McDougall, 56.

²¹⁴ Ginsburg, 60.

successfully escape. These conclusions are reasonable based on the evidence that these historians and scholars analyzed and evaluated.

This current study does not attempt to suggest that, based on the evidence relied on by these other scholars, their conclusions are incorrect or unreasonable. Rather, the analysis presented here seeks to show that, when additional information is also considered, other conclusions, ones not considered by the prior scholars, are also reasonable. The information presented herein attempts to lay the lens of the recently developed genre of environmental history over the numerous bits and pieces of information contained in the slave narratives and elsewhere to conclude that a different perception of the data suggests that more fugitive slaves may have successfully escaped slavery, and the South altogether, than previously thought. The first step in this analysis was to establish the unique relationship that slaves had with the natural world around them, both cultivated and uncultivated—a relationship that was formed out of their status as slaves in southern society. The next step, then, is to show, again with specific reference to the narratives, the ways that the various types of fugitive slaves operated within the natural world, a process that reveals the direct connection between fugitive successes and the knowledge and experience those fugitives had obtained as plantation slaves in the South.

Runaway or fugitive slaves fell into three broad categories. The first category, called “truants,” consists of those slaves who ran escaped for short periods of time, seeking only a temporary respite from slavery. The second group of runaways, the “maroons,” intended to permanently leave the plantations, but not the South. The final group consists of “escapees,” that is, those slaves who sought to permanently escape

slavery by leaving the South altogether. All three groups had several things in common. First, as argued herein, it was the lifestyle of slavery that had been forced onto the slaves through the structure of southern agrarian plantation society that gave them the knowledge, skill, and desire to escape. Second, all three types of absenteeism threatened the control the planters tried to have over them. As historian Stephanie H.M. Camp noted when discussing a particular example, “like many other antebellum planters, Sallie Smith’s Louisiana owner hoped to control his labour force and to affirm his position as head of the plantation household by limiting the movement of enslaved people around and, especially, off his property.”²¹⁵ Notwithstanding these attempts at control, however, many slaves ran away, often repeatedly, for various periods of time.

Previous slavery historians have noted that more slaves were truants or maroons than escapees.²¹⁶ In their book on fugitive slaves, for example, Franklin and Schweninger estimated that “there were few sections of the South where farmers did not complain about vagrants in their vicinity who were lying out.”²¹⁷ Osofsky observed from his review of slave narratives, “The frequency of such stories in slave autobiographies makes it clear that running away was a common means of black protest and rebellion against slavery.”²¹⁸ The observation that a substantial number of slaves ran away temporarily, or stayed hidden in the uncultivated areas of the South for extended periods of time, is borne out by information contained in the slave narratives. Solomon Northup, for example, stated that the woods and swamps were “continually filled with

²¹⁵ Camp, 1.

²¹⁶ Kolchin, 158; Franklin, 42; Osofsky, 16; Bordewich, 115.

²¹⁷ Franklin, 100.

²¹⁸ Osofsky, 14.

runaways.”²¹⁹ William Grimes hid in a corn field for several days until he got too hungry to stay.²²⁰ Prior to his rebellion, Nat Turner left and hid for a month.²²¹ After his rebellion, when the entire countryside was looking for him, Turner stayed hidden for almost two months before a stray hunting dog accidentally discovered him. He found food and camouflaged his hideout with materials he had gathered up in the forest.²²² Moses Roper began temporarily running away when he was a teenager.²²³ Henry Bibb ran away so frequently that he created a list of fabricated reasons to be in the woods, reasons that he would use if he were discovered by a patrol or a neighboring plantation owner while he was hiding out.²²⁴ Moses Grandy ran away in order to improve his position by negotiating his own return with his master.²²⁵ John Brown, a slave from Georgia, recounted that, during certain times in his life, he had frequently hidden away in the woods and swamps, sometimes for a few days only, at other times for two weeks at a stretch, and once for a whole month.²²⁶ According to Osofsky, John Little hid out in the woods for two years, the slave known only as Aaron made it a year, William Street was gone for 8 months, and Aaron Siddles hid for five months.²²⁷ While some of these anecdotes ended in capture, hunger, or other problems, they still exemplify the idea that many slaves developed and used multiple skills to hide in and abscond into the natural

²¹⁹ Northup, 359.

²²⁰ Grimes, 12.

²²¹ Nat Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va.* (Baltimore: T. R. Gray, 1831), 9. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

²²² Turner, 22.

²²³ Roper, 15.

²²⁴ Bibb, 66.

²²⁵ Grandy, 24.

²²⁶ Brown, 69.

²²⁷ Osofsky, 16.

world, lending support to the conclusion that many more may have done so than are recorded in newspapers, court records, and even the slave narratives.

Slaves left the plantations and hid out in the woods and swamps for a variety of reasons. Many did it to visit spouses or family members on other plantations.²²⁸ They also did so to go hunting or fishing, to avoid work, or to drink whiskey. One of the most common reasons slaves temporarily ran away was to avoid punishment, hard work, or cruel treatment or simply to rest for a few days from the grueling work of the plantation.²²⁹ Henry Bibb articulated that the cruelty of one of his mistresses “kept me almost half my time in the woods, running from under the bloody lash.”²³⁰ Moses Grandy reported that, when he was a child, his mother used to hide him and his siblings in the woods to prevent her master from selling them.²³¹ Fear of being sold or transported to the Deep South was another motivation for temporarily running away.²³²

While gone, the slaves had different methods of survival. Some relied on aid from other slaves still on their own or nearby plantations.²³³ Interestingly, however, many of the narratives contain specific evidence to show that they, in fact, used the surrounding natural environment to survive, rather than relying exclusively, or even heavily on others. Moses Grandy, for example, recalled that during the times his mother hid him and his siblings in the woods, “When we wanted water, she sought for it in any hole or puddle formed by falling trees or otherwise: it was often full of tadpoles and

²²⁸ Franklin, 98.

²²⁹ Grimes, 12; Turner, 9; Bibb, 67; Northup, 359; Blum, 263; Osofsky, 14-5.

²³⁰ Bibb 66.

²³¹ Grandy, 7-8.

²³² Osofsky, 14-5.

²³³ Grimes, 12, Genovese 654; Proctor 154.

insects: she strained it, and gave it round to each of us in the hollow of her hand. For food, she gathered berries in the woods, got potatoes, raw corn, &c.”²³⁴

Moreover, though they were not focusing on rural slaves’ interactions with their surrounding cultivated and uncultivated landscapes, the slavery scholars do recognize that slaves obtained skills while working the plantations that enabled them to successfully survive on their own in the uncultivated landscapes. Proctor noted, “Most relied on theft and gifts from friends and family remaining on the plantation grounds, but hunting provided some of these runaways with an important source of food.”²³⁵ Franklin noted that slaves who did hide out lived by fishing, hunting, stealing, trading, and looting.²³⁶ Osofsky, too, recognized the knowledge that fugitive slaves had of nature. In his book, he stated, “It was not only possible for slaves to escape and hide out for long periods of time, but the more skillful could also remain away almost as long as they chose. All the narrators are wise in the ways of nature, knowledgeable in animal lore and in techniques for foraging and living off the land.”²³⁷ Even the planters at the time knew that slaves developed skills they needed to survive on their own in the swamps and forests. Historian Giltner, for example, noted that a Georgia planter had reported, “Being accustomed to the use of boats and firearms, and knowing every little inlet through the marshes, which furnished all the fish and oysters they needed, these runaways could keep up their frolic of idleness and theft almost indefinitely.”²³⁸ While these other scholars acknowledged that such self-sufficiency happened when slaves left the farms and

²³⁴ Grandy, 7-8.

²³⁵ Proctor, 154.

²³⁶ Franklin, 100.

²³⁷ Osofsky 14-5.

²³⁸ Giltner, 35.

plantations, none of them focused on that information or discussed the reasonable inferences that can be drawn from how pervasive this ability to survive in the uncultivated landscape was in the rural slave community.

The ability to maneuver and find food and shelter in the uncultivated areas of the South was even more important for the maroons, the second category of runaway slaves. Sometimes, groups of maroons lived together deep in woods and swamps. The existence of these maroon groups was well known, even during the nineteenth century. Turn-of-the-century Underground Railroad historian Marion McDougall noted that many slaves—who, in her opinion, did not have either the courage or the knowledge to escape to the North—lived in the swamps and cane brakes of the southern rivers, living in caves or cabins, hunting and fishing, and, sometimes, raiding neighboring plantations.²³⁹ The most famous examples of this “*grand marronage*” are the slaves who lived in the Great Dismal Swamp, which extended from Virginia into North Carolina.²⁴⁰ Several maroon communities existed in the Great Dismal Swamp for decades, and some for centuries.²⁴¹ McDougall reported in 1891 that, in this swamp, “a large colony of these fugitive negroes was established, and so long was the custom continued that children were born, grew up, and lived their whole lives in its dark recesses. Besides their hunting and fishing, they sometimes obtained food and money, in return for work, from the poor whites and the negroes who had homes on the borders of the swamp.”²⁴²

²³⁹ McDougall, 56.

²⁴⁰ Kolchin, 158; Mitchell, 72-74; Franklin, 86; Herbert Aptheker, “Maroons within the Present Limits of the United States,” *Journal of Negro History* 24 (1939), 168.

²⁴¹ Hugo Prosper Leaming, *Hidden Americans: Maroons of Virginia and the Carolinas*, (New York: Garland Pub., 1995), 287.

²⁴² McDougall, 57.

Cultural historian Hugo Prosper Leaming engaged in a detailed study of all different races and types of maroons that lived in the swamps of Virginia and the Carolinas, including the Great Dismal Swamp. According to Leaming:

The Dismal Swamp is a tangle of confusion to any stranger who enters: pools, strips of wet land, higher ridges and islands, waterways, white pine, cypress, juniper and gum trees, reeds, canes, briars, bushes, vines and other vegetation thick at every hand. Fallen trees and other dead plants do not quickly decay, due to the special quality of Dismal Swamp water, and thus the natural obstacles to movement are multiplied. Cause for danger is ever present: ridges which suddenly end at vegetation-covered deep water; thick mud difficult to extricate oneself from; knee-deep holes covered with vegetation; quagmires held up only by the roots of plants which look no different from the solid land they adjoin.²⁴³

Dangers also existed from the plentiful game that lived in the Swamp, including wildcats, wolves, bear, and fierce wild cattle.

The fugitive slaves faced all of these dangers while living in the Swamp, but advantages existed as well. For one thing, they were secure from discovery by others because very few people outside of the maroons ever ventured very far into the Swamp. Fugitives typically lived either deep inside the interior of the Swamp or in the outer portions, closer to the edge. Those living deep in the Swamp had very little contact with the rest of society and lived in small self-sufficient communities. In addition to the dangerous game in the Swamp, the maroons were able to hunt opossum, raccoon, venison, wild pig, wild goat, duck, partridge, and pheasant. To hunt, maroons typically used bows and arrows, traps, and deadfall (traps designed to drop heavy weight on the prey that kills or maims it). The swamp itself was teeming with different species of fish

²⁴³ Leaming, 274-5.

the fugitives could eat. Because of the security of the interior swamp, maroons maintained small gardens on the drier land. They also gathered lupine, which could be used as a grain, and some of the swamp reeds yielded seeds, which were used as a substitute for wheat to make bread. The houses were built fairly close together into small communities and were typically made out of logs and built on stilts, possibly for protection from both flooding and wild animals. Furs and skins were likely used for clothing and blankets.²⁴⁴

Not all maroons inhabited the deep in the interior of the Swamp. Some resided closer to the edges of the swamp area and they faced some different challenges and risks of discovery than those living further in. These fugitives, too, adapted to their surroundings and the various risks they faced and lived differently than others. Those fugitives whose homes were closer to the edge of the Swamp had more contact with the outside world, had greater risk of discovery. Because of this increased danger, these maroons typically did not live in communities, but rather in isolation, with more distance between families.²⁴⁵ While each family's cabin was removed from the others, the areas that these maroons occupied was often a maze of paths that were well known to the inhabitants, but confusing to strangers.²⁴⁶

Franklin is another historian who recognized that maroon groups existed and often resided in heavily wooded or swampy areas and “maintained their cohesiveness” for many years, sometimes for generations. According to Franklin, there were groups like this in virtually every southern state. Blassingame also noted that there were many such

²⁴⁴ Leaming, 274-80.

²⁴⁵ Leaming, 277.

²⁴⁶ Leaming, 284.

maroon communities in the swamps and mountains in the South. According to Aptheker, there may have been as many as 50 such communities. Some of them, particularly the smaller ones, could continue, undetected and unmolested for years. Many of these groups performed raids on nearby white communities, either to obtain food and supplies, or to torment the community. But, many others did not. As Aptheker noted, “Such settlements [like the one in the Dismal Swamp] may have been more numerous than available evidence would indicate, for their occupants aroused less excitement and less resentment than the guerrilla outlaws.” Franklin admitted that, at times, these maroons were so numerous that it seemed impossible to limit their movements and activities.²⁴⁷

The slave narratives themselves also contain evidence of the maroon existence. Moses Grandy is one example, although his situation was somewhat unique. Grandy was not a maroon in the usual sense, but he did live like one for a time and his narrative contained a description of what that was like. During a time when he was forced to recuperate from a severe attack of rheumatism while he was earning money to buy his freedom, he lived in the Dismal Swamp. “I built myself a little hut, and had provisions brought to me as opportunity served.[. . .] The camp, like those commonly set up for negroes, was entirely open on one side; on that side a fire is lighted at night, and the person sleeping puts his feet towards it.” He lived there “among snakes, bears, and panthers” until he had sufficient strength to return to work.²⁴⁸ The evidence and the observations of the scholars and the narrating slaves themselves clearly show that many of these individuals and groups lived quite successfully in the swamps, woods,

²⁴⁷ Franklin, 86, 89, 103; Blassingame, 208, 210-11; Aptheker, 167-8.

²⁴⁸ Grandy, 39.

mountains, and forests, with very little outside aid. Their lives as field slaves provided them with the knowledge and experience to obtain food through hunting, fishing, and gathering, to build shelters to protect themselves, to make tools and necessary household items, to obtain items valuable enough to sell for other needed items. The undisputed existence of so many of these maroon communities throughout the South support the conclusions set forth in this thesis. The maroons demonstrated the fugitive slaves' abilities to live and survive undetected for extended periods of time, using many of the skills they were able to develop while working as field slaves on their plantations. Based on the plethora of information contained in the narratives that makes it so clear that these maroon communities were able to survive successfully in the undeveloped areas of the South, the conclusion that those same skills also aided the escapees when they sought to leave the South altogether is not so large of a logical leap.

The final group of fugitive slaves, the escapees, is the smallest group of fugitive slaves. Ball was this type of fugitive. He prepared for his escape by gradually collecting supplies, including a fire-box (a tin case containing flints, steel, and tinder), a great coat and a pair of boots given to him by his owner, a linen bag to carry parched corn, an old sword, which he hid in a makeshift pocket in the great coat. Ball ran away from the Georgia plantation in early August. He was familiar with his immediate surroundings from all of the work he did in the uncultivated environs around the plantation and he had made mental notes of landmarks and rivers in his continued journey south over the years. He headed towards Maryland, using the landmarks, the sun, and the stars to keep his bearings. It took him over a year to achieve his goal, but he did so by staying off the roads and moving through the uncultivated landscapes, traveling at night, eating what

food he could find or catch on the way, and, once in a while, getting help from fellow slaves or fellow fugitives. Occasionally, he got lost, and often, clouds and storms prevented him from getting his bearings from the skies. He swam across rivers, or paddled across them in stolen boats. He was even caught once and jailed for almost a month in Virginia before he was able to escape again and continue his journey. He spent several months during the winter hiding under cornhusks in an old barn during the night and staying hidden in the nearby woods during the day. More than a year after he left Georgia, after hiding in both cultivated and uncultivated spaces, he reached his wife's cabin in Maryland.²⁴⁹

As noted earlier, lack of knowledge of geography, risk of detection, and difficulty in finding food were the main dangers faced by the fugitive slaves that have led scholars to conclude that relatively few fugitive slaves successfully escaped. Each of these challenges will be addressed in turn and, when the evidence is viewed in the context of an environmental perspective, the information in the narratives suggests that these challenges may not have been as supremely difficult to overcome as previously surmised.

While certainly true that slaves had limited geographical knowledge, the slave narratives suggest that the assumption that slaves knew nothing about the North is overstated. Slaves had several ways of gaining information about places, near and far. First, several valid reasons did exist for slaves, particularly male slaves, to be outside of their plantation borders. As Stephanie H.M. Camp noted, "Men could have a plausible excuse for traversing roads and estuaries; enslaved men transporting letters, messages,

²⁴⁹ Ball, 1837 Narrative.

goods and materials and men visiting their girlfriends and families were an ordinary part of the landscape.”²⁵⁰ Moreover, those slaves who went out onto the environment talked about it to others. As Proctor pointed out, “When hunters brought in information about the local landscape, they complemented the knowledge that slave women acquired when they entered the woods and swamps in search of firewood and medicinal herbs. In turn, this familiarity with the local terrain aided slaves who took to the woods for other leisure activities like clandestine religious services or nighttime visits to neighboring farms and plantations.[. . .] Every slave potentially benefited from this knowledge, but no one needed it as much as the runaways.”²⁵¹

Second, slaves communicated with each other and with other people as they were sold and transported all over the South. The slave narratives contained many references to conversations that the authors had with others about where they had been. Andrew Jackson, a slave from Kentucky, revealed in his narrative that “[a]n opportunity occurred for me to obtain the information I needed from a gentlemen who had been north, and described the route through Kentucky, Ohio, Illinois, &c.”²⁵² Jackson also went into more detail in his narrative about how slaves learned about the north:

I am sometimes asked, how we learn the way to the free States? My answer is, that the slaves know much more about this matter than many persons are aware. They have means of communication with each other, altogether unknown to their masters, or to the people of the free states—even the route of some who have escaped is familiarly known to the more

²⁵⁰ Camp, 4.

²⁵¹ Proctor, 154.

²⁵² Andrew Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson, of Kentucky; Containing an Account of His Birth, and Twenty-Six Years of His Life While a Slave; His Escape; Five Years of Freedom, Together with Anecdotes Relating to Slavery; Journal of One Year's Travels; Sketches, etc. Narrated by Himself; Written by a Friend*, (Syracuse: Daily and Weekly Star Office, 1847), 9. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

intelligent ones.[. . .] The reasons why more do not follow it, are want of means and the fear of death if apprehended. Slaves watched and guarded [sic] like caged animals.²⁵³

South Carolina slave John Jackson included information in his narrative that demonstrated how slaves got information about the North. He said,

I may as well relate here, how I became acquainted with the fact of there being a Free State. The "Yankees," or Northerners, when they visited our plantations, used to tell the negroes that there was a country called England, where there were no slaves, and that the city of Boston was free; and we used to wish we knew which way to travel to find those places. When we were picking cotton, we used to see the wild geese flying over our heads to some distant land, and we often used to say to each other, "O that we had wings like those geese, then we could fly over the heads of our masters to the 'Land of the free.'"²⁵⁴

Jacob Green stated in his narrative that he had heard so much about the free States of the north that he became determined to be free.²⁵⁵ In his narrative, John Brown acknowledged that he was afraid to escape, but at the same time he was "always on the look-out for a fair chance of escaping and treasured up in [his] memory such scraps of information as [he] could draw out of the people that came to the plantation, especially the new hands."²⁵⁶

Third, it is not unreasonable to suspect that slaves paid attention to their surroundings while they were traveling. Many of the narratives relate tales of travel on foot from one location to another, usually to be sold. Henry Watson traveled extensive distances on foot when being sold or transported. His journey took him from Virginia to

²⁵³ Jackson (Andrew), 15.

²⁵⁴ Jackson (John), 24.

²⁵⁵ Green (Jacob), 8.

²⁵⁶ Brown, 70.

Mississippi.²⁵⁷ Later, Watson also had opportunities to travel as part of his duties to his master, often for the purpose of assisting him in purchasing other slaves.²⁵⁸ James Watkins, a slave from Maryland, was frequently sent 20 to 30 miles to Baltimore on his owner's business.²⁵⁹ William Green is another example of someone who traveled great distances while a slave. He traveled from Maryland to New Orleans with his owner.²⁶⁰ William Anderson, whose mother had been free, was kidnapped as a child and forced to walk in chains from Virginia to Tennessee.²⁶¹

Some of the narratives even contain evidence that the slaves were paying attention to their surroundings as they traveled. John Brown, who escaped from Georgia, noted in his narrative that, because of travel demands that had been placed on him as a slave doing his owner's business, he knew "every step" of the two hundred miles of road from Cassville [sic] to Millidgeville.²⁶² Also, Charles Ball's story specifically indicated that he made mental notes of the geography through which he traveled when he was sold or transported from one plantation to the next, and one region or state to the next, so that he could get his bearings if he ever escaped. He stated, "I had endeavoured through the whole journey, from the time we crossed the Rappahannock River, to make such observations upon the country, the roads we travelled, and the towns we passed through,

²⁵⁷ Watson, 10.

²⁵⁸ Watson, 32.

²⁵⁹ Watkins, 13.

²⁶⁰ Green (William), 3.

²⁶¹ William Anderson, *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson, Twenty-four Years a Slave; Sold Eight Times! In Jail Sixty Times!! Whipped Three Hundred Times!!! or The Dark Deeds of American Slavery Revealed. Containing Scriptural Views of the Origin of the Black and of the White Man. Also, a Simple and Easy Plan to Abolish Slavery in the United States. Together with an Account of the Services of Colored Men in the Revolutionary War--Day and Date, and Interesting Facts* (Chicago: Daily Tribune Book and Job Printing Office, 1857), 12. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

²⁶² Brown, 92.

as would enable me, at some future period, to find my way back to Maryland.”²⁶³ He was particularly careful to “note the names of the towns and villages through which we passed, and to fix on my memory, not only the names of all the rivers, but also the position and bearing of the ferries over those streams.”²⁶⁴

In regard to direction, the narratives are full of examples of fugitive slaves relying on the skies, and other aspects of the natural world, for direction. When Charles Ball ran away from Georgia, he repeatedly used the location of the sun and the stars to determine direction. As he reported, “I had long since learned to distinguish the north-star, from all the other small luminaries of the night; and the seven pointers were familiar to me. These heavenly bodies were all the guides I had to direct me on my way.”²⁶⁵ He got his bearings during the day by comparing the locations of the rising and setting sun.²⁶⁶ He knew his direction at night by the North Star.²⁶⁷ Several times during his many-month journey north, he was forced to remain in one location, sometimes for several days and nights because of his inability to locate the North Star due to overcast skies.²⁶⁸

James Williams, another successful fugitive slave, has similar information in his narrative. He, too, used the North Star for direction, and he also reported remaining in the same place for several days when clouds covered it up.²⁶⁹ Henry Bibb made similar reports. Bibb discussed his decision to travel at night, “guided on my way by the shining

²⁶³ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 48.

²⁶⁴ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 48.

²⁶⁵ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 399.

²⁶⁶ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 64, 410.

²⁶⁷ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 92-3, 428, 429, 444.

²⁶⁸ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 417-8, 420, 429, 441.

²⁶⁹ Williams, 92-3.

stars of heaven alone.”²⁷⁰ He admitted to having nothing to travel by “but the sun by day, and the moon and stars by night.”²⁷¹ William Wells Brown stated that he and his traveling companions were so dependent on the North Star for guidance that he called it “our friend and leader,--the North Star.”²⁷² Jim Pembroke and many other fugitives also attribute their only knowledge of direction to the North Star.²⁷³ Moses Grandy pointed out that the fugitives of which he knew were “guided by the north-star, for they only know that the land of freedom is in the north.”²⁷⁴

Andrew Jackson, a slave from Kentucky, noted that there was scarcely a slave who did not understand the position of the North Star, although that was about the extent of their knowledge of Astronomy.²⁷⁵ Jacob Green knew from others that the free states lay to the north, so he studied the North Star and astronomy to guide him to the free states.²⁷⁶ On the night that James Watkins escaped from his Maryland owner, he “made a start direct North, taking the ‘North Star’ for my guide, having been told that Canada lay in that direction. I travelled all night through woods and swamps, being afraid to take the high road even during the night.”²⁷⁷ Josiah Henson also talked about the North Star. “I knew the North Star--blessed be God for setting it in the heavens! Like the Star of Bethlehem, it announced where my salvation lay. Could I follow it through forest, and stream, and field, it would guide my feet in the way of hope. I thought of it as my God-

²⁷⁰ Bibb, 99, 130.

²⁷¹ Bibb, 146.

²⁷² William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (London: C. Gilpin, 1849), 205. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

²⁷³ Bordewich, 120.

²⁷⁴ Grandy, 69.

²⁷⁵ Jackson (Andrew), 15.

²⁷⁶ Green (Jacob), 8.

²⁷⁷ Watkins, 15.

given guide to the land of promise far away beneath its light. I knew that it had led thousands of my poor, hunted brethren to freedom and blessedness.”²⁷⁸ Many followed animal traces or old Indian trails, as well.²⁷⁹

Some of the Underground Railroad historians also present other ways that the fugitives were able to find their way north. Mitchell, for example, pointed out that north can be ascertained, even on overcast days and nights, by looking for the moss on trees. “When the clouds intervene, and thus obscure the flickering light of this ‘beautiful star,’ Nature has a substitute. A smooth soft substance called moss, which grows on the bark of the trees[,] is thicker on the north side of the tree, and thus serves as a guide northward, till the heavenly guide again appears.”²⁸⁰ John Brown also talked about using moss as a guide during his escape. He related, “When morning broke I began to consider what I should do. I knew that I ought to go northwards, but having nothing to guide me, I began to look about for signs. I soon noticed that on one side of the trees the moss was drier and shorter than it was on the other, and I concluded it was the sun which had burnt it up, and checked its growth, and that the dry moss must therefore be on the south side. I examined a good many trees, and finding these signs on most of them, I set off in the direction towards which the long, green moss pointed, and went on, until late in the day.”²⁸¹

With respect to the risk of detection, the narratives and the writings of other scholars contain substantial information regarding ways fugitives camouflaged their

²⁷⁸ Henson, 102-03.

²⁷⁹ Ginsburg, 61.

²⁸⁰ Mitchell, 36.

²⁸¹ Brown, 73.

flight, some basic, some quite ingenious, and all of them supporting the idea that they were operating in a rival geography. One of the most basic methods used was to travel during the winter, when daylight was shorter and nighttime was longer. Also, most fugitives traveled during the night and hid during the day. Truants, and presumably fugitives as well, collected branches, moss, leaves, and twigs to make brush harbors to hide and sleep.²⁸² Andrew Jackson traveled near the roads at night and sought the woods for safety and rest during the daylight.²⁸³ John Joseph, a slave who ran away from New Orleans, also escaped by “travelling by night and remaining concealed by day.”²⁸⁴ John Brown spent much of his time during his escape keeping to the main roads at night and concealing himself in the woods or swamps during the day.²⁸⁵

The narratives also contain evidence of evasive maneuvers engaged in by slaves when they were being tracked by slave hunters. When running from a patrol after he had absconded, Andrew Jackson recalled chasing foxes and hunting minks when he was younger. He used what he had learned from those animals to aid his escape:

The foxes sometimes run back and forth and in circles, to confuse the hound. The minks dive into water. I tried the policy of each, running back and forth across the stream as often as I dared, and then along the edge of the stream to embarrass the dogs. In this way I kept the dogs off, and them men not being so well accustomed to running in the woods as I was, and being also hindered by their guns, I gained upon them in the flight, and escaped to the wood.²⁸⁶

²⁸² Camp, 8.

²⁸³ Jackson (Andrew), 12.

²⁸⁴ John Joseph, *The Life and Sufferings of John Joseph, a Native of Ashantee, in Western Africa: Who Was Stolen from His Parents at the Age of 3 Years, and Sold to Mr. Johnstone, a Cotton Planter, in New Orleans, South America* (Wellington: J. Greedy, 1848), 7. This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

²⁸⁵ Brown, 73.

²⁸⁶ Jackson (Andrew), 11.

By the time many of these enslaved people became fugitives from slavery, they had honed their skill of maneuvering in the uncultivated—and even cultivated—landscape undetected. Slaves' movements off the plantations were severely restricted, so they were forced to figure out ways to get the resources they needed and to go places they wanted to go without the knowledge or permission of the plantation owners. In short, the institution of slavery forced the slaves to learn the skill of stealth, a skill that they were able to use when they escaped from the plantations, either temporarily or permanently.

As for the final challenge raised by historians as a deterrent to successful escape, hunger, the narratives are again full of examples of successful endeavors while on the run. In fact, probably the most substantial and obvious example of the fugitives' ability to use the experience they gained in their lives as slaves to survive during their escape is that of obtaining food. Many historians focused primarily on the food fugitive slaves stole from white landowners while on the run or that was given to them by other slaves on plantations they passed. While this indeed did occur, and, in fact, was prevalent, the slave narratives make it clear that fugitives also obtained food by many other ways as well. John Brown ate raw corn and potatoes from fields, but he also ate pine roots and sassafras buds from the uncultivated landscape.²⁸⁷ Andrew Jackson picked blackberries while traveling near the roads at night and seeking the woods for safety and rest during the daylight.²⁸⁸ Austin Steward, a slave from Virginia, related a story of fugitive slaves who found roots to eat.²⁸⁹ Charles Ball's narrative, once again, is a rich source of information. While his narrative does reveal that he sometimes stole corn or fruit from

²⁸⁷ Brown, 138.

²⁸⁸ Jackson (Andrew), 12.

²⁸⁹ Steward, 205.

plantations he passed, it is also the case that he got most of his food himself in the uncultivated landscape. He found fruit from persimmon trees, he killed opossums and ground hogs by using his walking stick like a club, he killed a rabbit by throwing his walking stick at it, he picked chestnuts from trees, and he killed a wild pig with a stone.²⁹⁰ James Williams found fruit trees along the road.²⁹¹ Henry Bibb ate wild fruit such as pawpaws, persimmons, and grapes.²⁹² His companion killed a turkey.²⁹³ Moses Grandy's narrative sums up much of this information:

I am glad to say also, that numbers of my coloured brethren now escape from slavery; some by purchasing their freedom, others by quitting, through many dangers and hardships, the land of bondage. The latter suffer many privations in their attempts to reach the free states. They hide themselves during the day in the woods and swamps; at night they travel, crossing rivers by swimming, or by boats they may chance to meet with, and passing over hills and meadows which they do not know. . . . They subsist on such wild fruit as they can gather, and as they are often very long on their way, they reach the free states almost like skeletons.²⁹⁴

As these many-cited excerpts demonstrate, the slave narratives—inconsistencies and potential reliability concerns notwithstanding—contain valuable information that, combined with an environmental history analysis, sheds a different light on the lives of antebellum slaves than previous presented. The structure of society in the plantation-driven South, and the institution of slavery that was inextricably woven into that structure, put southern field slaves in a position to develop knowledge and skills necessary to escape slavery, temporarily and permanently. The elite plantation owners were increasingly removed from the land at the same time that they were trying to control

²⁹⁰ Ball, 1837 Narrative, 428, 429, 431, 433, 435.

²⁹¹ Williams, 31.

²⁹² Bibb, 124-6.

²⁹³ Bibb, 133.

²⁹⁴ Grandy, 68-9.

all aspect of the natural world around them. They relied on their slaves to work the land, and, as a result of the manner in which they did so, they gave their slaves more and more opportunities to interact with the natural world around them. As slaves repeatedly left the plantations and ventured into the surrounding uncultivated landscapes, with and without the planters' permission or knowledge, they developed more and more skills that enabled them to successfully hide, live, or travel in those landscapes undetected.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

All of the evidence agrees that slaves frequently ran away from the plantations for various lengths of time. Most slavery historians have concluded that, because of the difficulties associated with absconding, relatively few slaves successfully escaped slavery or the South permanently. These conclusions are bolstered by the numbers of newspaper ads and court petitions generated by slave owners seeking to locate their fugitive slaves. Newspaper ads and court petitions are relatively quantifiable and, if the assumption is made that plantation owners always took out an ad and/or filed a petition with the court, then rough estimates of successful fugitive slaves can be made. As one slavery historian noted, slave owners' "primary concern was to recover their absconded property."²⁹⁵ Some problems exist, however, with relying exclusively on ads and petitions to determine fugitive slave numbers. First, follow up is extremely difficult to ascertain, particularly with respect to newspaper ads. A plantation owner may stop running an ad after a certain period of time because of the cost of continuing to do so and not necessarily because the slave was returned. Additionally, some slave owners may never have run newspaper ads or filed court petitions because of cost, or poor plantation management, or embarrassment. Thus, plausible arguments exist that it is more likely than not that fugitive slaves were underreported in these ads and petitions.

When the environmental information from the narratives is added to the mix, it is not unreasonable to conclude that more slaves may have successfully escaped from

²⁹⁵ Freddie L. Parker, *Running for Freedom: Slave Runaways in North Carolina 1775-1840* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 65.

slavery than were reported in print or at court. This conclusion strengthens the suggestion contained herein that, based on an environmental history analysis of the slave narratives and other relevant information, it is possible that more slaves were successful in escaping from slavery by running away into the uncultivated environment than previous historians have surmised.

In terms of numbers, historians seem to agree and hold to the estimate that, during the late antebellum era, approximately one thousand runaways per year successfully escaped the South and tens of thousands temporarily escaped into the uncultivated landscapes or cities of the South.²⁹⁶ None of the historians who has posited these estimates, however, analyzed the environmental history aspect of slave life as presented here. Consideration of the additional environmental evidence of southern social structure, slave life, and the actions of the fugitive slaves themselves leads to a reasonable conclusion that more slaves may have escaped slavery than previously thought. The simple fact that many field hands could survive in the swamp or forest is suggestive. The slave narratives show that these fugitive slaves were better equipped than they have previously been given credit for. Additionally, taking into account the environmental history of the southern society, and the life of the slaves at the time, the proposition that they were well equipped to survive in the swamps and woods, and possibly a large number did so, becomes more viable.

Nothing in this analysis is intended to suggest that leaving plantations and maneuvering in uncultivated environments was easy. Nor is it the intention of this thesis

²⁹⁶ Those who hold the former view are: Kolchin, 158; Genovese, 648; Franklin, 116. For the latter perspective, see Franklin, 116 n. 49, 120-1; *see also* Franklin 101 (“Only a small portion of runaways remained out for indefinite periods.”)

to suggest that all field slaves, because of their lifestyle, had the skills needed to escape. The arguments presented here seek simply to add another perspective to the study of fugitive slaves. When data contained in the narratives is viewed through the lens of environmental history, new and additional evidence is revealed. The pictures of slave life that are revealed in those narratives verify a unique and close relationship with the natural world that historians such as Smith, Blum, and Stewart introduced into the myriad scholarly works on slavery and the South. Further, this relationship with nature was clearly defined by the social structure of southern society and the imposition of the institution of slavery onto the Africans and African Americans.

The slave biographies and autobiographies of those people who had worked as field slaves also show that this close relationship translated itself in knowledge for the slaves—knowledge of how to get what they needed from the natural resources in the swamps and woods, of how to avoid danger, and of how to maneuver through the uncultivated landscape undetected. To supplement insufficient nourishment typically supplied by the plantation owners, the slaves fed themselves through hunting, fishing, gathering, and gardening. Many of the slave women developed extensive knowledge of wild herbs and plants that had medicinal and restorative properties. The slaves constructed tool, utensils, and other household and farm items from their surrounding environment. In the performance of their duties as field slaves, and in collecting what they needed to live, the slaves developed their intimate relationship with nature, a relationship that enabled them to recognize and avoid danger, to learn how the natural world behaved, and to co-exist within it without having to exert mastery over it. Finally, because of the rigid social structure of southern society, the slaves learned how to

maneuver in the same natural world that was surrounded by white society, but to do so without being discovered. They learned how to move with stealth and they could move in the uncultivated landscapes often completely undetected.

The skills that slaves needed to maximize their chance of escape—sustenance, danger avoidance, navigation, and stealth—were built into the lives of the slaves who worked the fields and plantations of the South. Tens of thousands of slaves left their plantations for various periods of time without permission and were able to survive not only with help from fellow slaves, but also from exercising the skills and knowledge they had acquired by living their lives as field slaves. Those skills enabled maroon communities to live off the land for years.

When the slaves' relationship to their natural world is brought to the forefront of the analysis of slave life, the suggestion that more slaves escaped slavery and the South by running away into the uncultivated landscape becomes much more viable, particularly when the narratives clearly show exactly how successful escape into the uncultivated landscapes was accomplished. This analysis does not ignore the evidence that escape into the uncultivated world was difficult. It is true that the southernmost slaves had vastly greater geographical hurdles than those in the border states. It is also true that most slaves' knowledge of geography was limited, and that the use of trained dogs increased the chances that they would be recaptured. This analysis does, however, rely more heavily on concrete, verifiable evidence that previously has not been showcased. The field slaves had the skills they needed to escape; the life that was forced onto them gave them those skills. It is undisputed that many, many slaves used those skills to

escape temporarily, or to live for extended periods of time in the swamps and woods of the South.

What happened to those fugitives once they escaped the South is the subject of a different paper, as is an attempt to quantifiably *prove* the validity of the hypothesis presented here. It is possible that, because, as suggested here, there may have been more escapees than previously recognized, the Underground Railroad was even more effective than other scholars have suggested. Or, perhaps, because of the Fugitive Slave Laws and the predominant anti-black sentiment in much of the North, the fugitives continued their stealthy journeys through the uncultivated landscape in the North as well. Possibly, more escapees went south into Florida or west into the frontier than previously thought. These are all areas that would benefit from additional research. The conclusions in this paper are limited, but important. The field slaves of the South were clearly forced into a lifestyle that gave them the opportunity to develop skills needed to successfully escape, and the evidence in the narratives shows how they did it and suggests that many of them did so.

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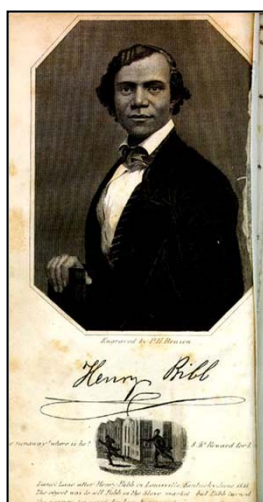
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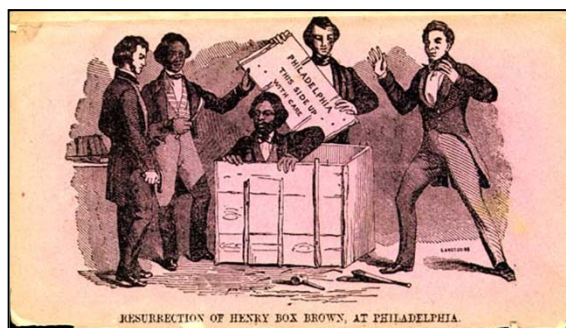
Appendix

Images of Enslaved People

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Henry Bibb



Henry "Box" Brown



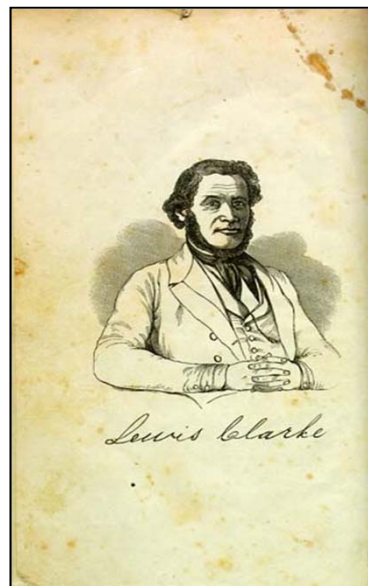
John Brown



William Wells Brown



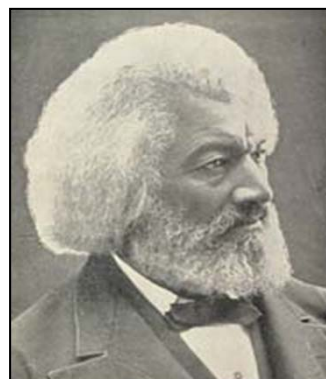
Nat Turner



Lewis Clarke



Ellen Craft



Frederick Douglass



The Author upon the Abolition Block.

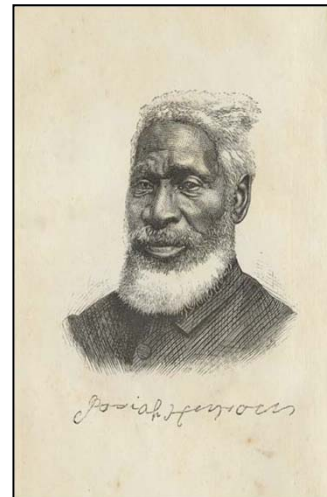
Henry Watson



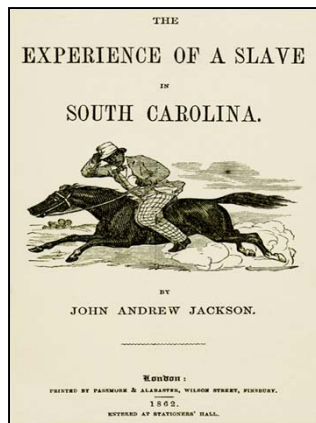
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William Hayden



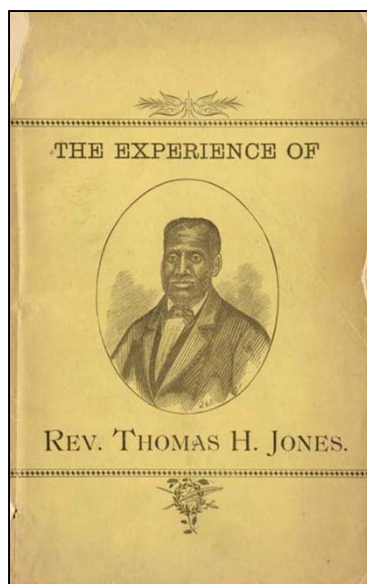
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John Jackson



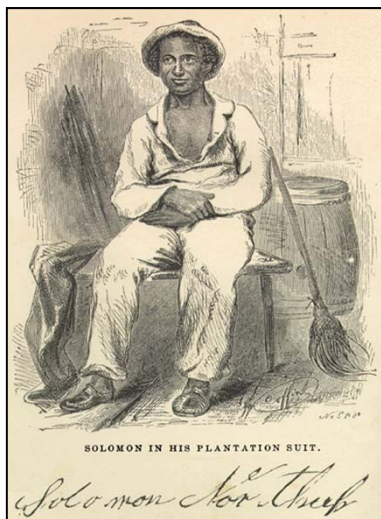
Robert the Hermit



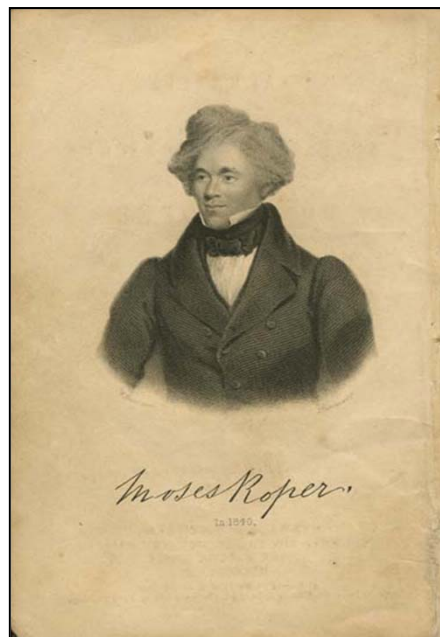
Thomas Jones



John Joseph



Solomon Northrup



Moses Roper



Austin Steward