



Born a Child of Freedom, Yet a Slave: Mechanisms of Control and Strategies of Resistance in Antebellum South Carolina

Norrece T. Jones Jr.

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Born a Child of Freedom, Yet a Slave explores the diverse strategies employed by Southern slaveholders to keep their slaves under control—from threats of sale, shackles, screw box, or treadmill, to a peck of corn a week, a dram of whiskey, a pound of tobacco, the bribe of freedom, and the promise of heaven. It explores also the counterdefensive strategies employed by the slaves to resist control—among them, arson, theft, poison, subterfuge, murder, escape, and rebellion.

Norrece Jones, himself a descendent of South Carolina slaves, has written a powerful book based on intensive research in the archives of antebellum South Carolina. He has studied slave testimony, legal records, folklore, spirituals, autobiographies of whites and blacks, newspaper accounts, church records, and many other sources. He challenges views of slavery as an interdependent paternalistic system; he sees it instead as a harsh and unceasing conflict, with most slaves refusing to accept their masters' dictates and most slave owners struggling to keep slaves servile and devoted.

Means of control were both subtle and brutal. For example, there were festive holidays and gifts of liquor but also sadistic punishment: recalcitrant slaves—men and women alike— were staked to the ground or trussed from rafters with “nigger cord” to be whipped; some were branded; others were hanged or torched. Many of the same masters who provided a sick room for slaves also maintained a private jail.

But of all the means of control, the most sinister and the most effective was the threat of sale and separation from family. Troublemakers were routinely sold. The weak, the sick, the malingering, the disobedient, the impudent, the “incorrigible” were disposed of on the block. Slaves often aided and abetted runaways, although some, in hope of favor, were informants—every antebellum conspiracy in South Carolina was betrayed. Yet self-respect and pride survived nonetheless. “You no holy,” slaves told one mistress, “We holy.”

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