"We'm Fus' Rate Bargain"
Value, Labor, and Price in a Georgia Slave Community

DAINA RAMEY BERRY

In 1859, while standing on the auction block, a slave named Elisha pleaded with potential buyers to purchase his family as one unit. Each time prospective buyers approached, he encouraged them to buy his wife Molly, son Israel, and three-year-old daughter Sevanda ("Vardy"). "Look at me, Mas'r," he claimed, "am prime rice planter; sho' you won't find a better man den me; no better on de whole plantation." Elisha continued promoting himself, assuring potential buyers that he was "not a bit old yet" and that he could "do carpenter work, too." In the same breath, he spoke for his wife, Molly, claiming that she was a "fus' rate rice hand; mos as good as me." Then he instructed her to step forward so that they could inspect her. "Stan' out yer, Molly," he requested, "and let the gen'lm'n see. . . . Show mas'r yer arm . . . she do a heap of work mo' with dat arm yet. . . . Let good Mas'r see yer teeth, Molly. . . . teeth all reg'lar, all good—she'm young gal yet." After Elisha presented his children, he gave one final plea: "Better buy us, Mas'r, we'm fus' rate bargain."1

Slaves such as Elisha developed a keen understanding of their value, going to great lengths to negotiate their sale in such a way as to maintain family ties. They understood the importance of the monetary value assigned to them and used this knowledge to persuade buyers to purchase their entire families. Some boasted about their muscular physique, while others assured interested parties
that a long-term investment in them would bring quality offspring in the future. Yet beneath the bargaining and sometimes begging, a slave’s primary objective was to maintain familial ties. This family went to the auction block on March 2 and 3, 1859, in Savannah, Georgia, when their owner, Major Pierce Butler, had to sell all 429 slaves to settle his debts. According to several accounts, this auction represented the “largest sale of human chattels” in American history. Although Elisha’s testimony is unusual, the details of this sale provide compelling information regarding the role of price, gender, and skill among U.S. slaves.

Scholars agree that slavery was an economic institution that utilized human chattels as property. This system placed values on nearly everything from plantation tools, silverware, furniture, linen, and livestock to slaves. In addition to purely economic aspects of slavery, the system had important social implications as well. It is difficult to examine slave sales without acknowledging that a human being was being poked, fondled, bartered, traded, or sold to the highest bidder. Herein lies the social aspect of slave prices, auctions, and ultimately sales. Studying slave prices from the perspectives of both slave and master makes it possible to personalize the story behind the numbers. Although planters and traders considered age, sex, health, temperament, and skill, among other factors, in determining slave prices, it is clear that the priority of those being sold was to keep their family units intact. Slaves such as Elisha, who actively participated in their sale, sought to avoid physical separation from loved ones because family represented the primary source of emotional, material, and physical stability.

This study explores slave prices on eight plantations in Glynn County, Georgia, during the years 1830, 1841, and 1859. The primary purpose is to create an economic and social perspective on slave prices. In order to accomplish this, a wide variety of primary documents—estate inventories, bills of sale, census records, newspaper advertisements, slave narratives, and letters—have been examined. This research is unique because of its original data set and its strategy of encompassing economic, social, and gendered aspects of slavery. The goal of this study is twofold: to determine how planters priced their slaves and to explore slaves’ interpretation of their own values and sales. More specifically, it attempts to answer the following questions: What factors did planters consider when pricing their slaves? Were slaves aware of their monetary value? Did age, gender, and plantation have an impact on a slave’s value? Or did planters consider strength, skill, and sickness the primary determinants? By analyzing a handful of plantations in one community, this study uses statistical tests on quantitative data to determine the “peculiar” monetary value of slaves within the plantation economy of low country Georgia. It also reinforces the traditional analysis of more narrative texts.
**Historical Context: The Emergence of Slave Prices**

The questions regarding a slave's value and the profitability of the institution are not new ones. Scholars expressed an interest in slave prices as early as the first decade of the twentieth century and continue to study this subject today. A careful review of the literature indicates that most discussions of slave prices and value appeared in the context of three larger issues: the slave trade including international, domestic, regional, and local markets; the economic profitability or rationality of slaveholding; and the expansion of slavery into new territories. Some studies explored all three issues, whereas others focused on one in great detail. In the first instance, the literature on the slave trade often addressed the value of slaves. This literature suggests that price fluctuations occurred when the markets shifted owing to legal restrictions, to increases in the supply of or demand for additional workers, or to labor specialization. The recent work of Edward Baptist, however, brilliantly moves this discussion to explore issues of rape and commodification in the domestic trade, a direction that will certainly change the way scholars think about slave trading in the United States. Those interested in the economic profitability and rationality of slaveholding often compare slave prices to the amount invested to care for each slave or, as Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman term it, “the rate of return on an investment in slaves.” Studies of the expansion of slavery into new territories draw comparisons between buying and selling states, slave breeding, and whether territorial expansion was a solution for planters. The historian Walter Johnson adds to this discussion in his recent study of Louisiana slave markets by claiming that the trade represented the institution of slavery as a whole.

The fact that discussions of slave prices are embedded in historical literature focused on larger contexts and themes suggests that internal and external factors affected planters' decisions about the value of their laborers. Several studies focus solely on prime males and skilled artisans between the ages of eighteen and thirty, and many altogether overlook price patterns for females (with the exception of Baptist's and Johnson's work). Gender bias is not the only shortcoming in the literature, because age distinctions were not always clear, either. Part of this problem rests largely on planters because many did not specify the age of their workers; thus historians are not solely at fault for this omission. Some inventories and bills of sale do identify slaves as “man,” “woman,” “boy,” or “girl,” making it difficult to discern the importance of age. Finally, with the exception of Baptist and Johnson, few scholars have explored the impact of slave sales on the slaves themselves, in particular, females. The present study seeks to address the shortcomings in the literature by adding slave testimonies to a statistical analysis of data concerning
slaves who were appraised and sold in Georgia during the thirty years prior to the Civil War.

**Anatomy of a Sale: Evidence of Slave Prices**

Evidence of slave prices appears in a variety of extant documents. Some of the more complete sources include bills of sale, estate inventories, newspaper advertisements, wills, diaries, and personal letters. Bills of sale represent the actual price of an individual slave or group. They were not always formal. Some bills of sale contained a short handwritten note between a buyer and seller that confirmed the transaction.\(^6\) Others administered in court proceedings were much more formal transactions.\(^1\) Estate inventories, on the other hand, contain lists with data about the human workforce ranging from birth and death dates to physical characteristics. Some planters kept meticulous records of their slaves, listing their names, ages, sexes, skills, and appraised values. Others listed them in family groupings with an overall price for the family unit. The appraised price of slaves, however, did not always reflect the amount an owner received for his or her slave.\(^1\)

Although bills of sale and estate inventories serve as excellent sources for an examination of slave prices, newspaper advertisements, letters, and wills provide useful documentation as well. Local newspapers in cities with large slave markets, such as Savannah, New Orleans, and Charleston, were rich with notices of upcoming sales. In a Savannah newspaper, J. Bryan, a prominent auctioneer, announced the sale of “138 Negroes, Accustomed to the Culture of Rice,” which took place from 15 to 20 January 1860.\(^1\) This descriptive list contained the names, ages, and field rates for each slave as well as remarks about them. Field rates represented appraised values or classifications of work ranging from quarter hands to full hands (rate x). Rate increments increased by quarters and created four different categories of workers (quarter, half, three-quarter, and full). Remarks included information about health, skill, and temperament. Bryan also indicated familial relationships by listing slaves in family groupings. One family included Jimmy the slave driver, whom he described as a full hand, “strong, prime and tall, ploughman.” Jimmy’s wife, Fatima, also rated as a full hand, was described as a “hearty prime woman.” Jimmy and Fatima had two “fine” children, Tira and Cain. According to handwritten notes, it is inferred that this family sold for $2,340.\(^1\)

Other slave families on this list had specific skills worth noting in the “remarks” column. Janvier, a fifty-seven-year-old male half hand, was described as a “Fair Carpenter — House builder — Hearty old man,” while his wife, Han-
nath, aged forty-eight and also a half hand, appeared as “Delicate, but well disposed—good for light work.” They had six children. Handwritten notes suggest that the entire family cost $5,175.\textsuperscript{15} Although the fate of these two families and the other slaves described in this advertisement is unknown, their ages, health, family ties, and skills are clearly depicted. The prices handwritten in the margins, however, do not necessarily reflect the amount each family cost.\textsuperscript{16} These figures could be the notes of a potential buyer computing what he or she would pay for the described slaves or it could be the appraised value of these families. Without confirmation it is difficult to determine whether these figures were representative of actual slave prices. The records of planters in Glynn County, Georgia, offer more complete evidence of appraised slave prices.

**Data: An Economic Perspective**

Slave prices occupy a central place in the estate records of planters and their correspondence with relatives and friends in Glynn County. This coastal community was approximately fifty-eight miles south of Savannah and contained a harbor in the city of Brunswick. Although trade took place here during the antebellum era, most slave owners went to Savannah, Augusta, or Charleston to trade their human property. Glynn County also contains St. Simons and Jekyll Island, the former the home of several prominent slaveholders. The data set used in the current study relies on the estate inventories of eight plantations: six from 1830, one from 1841, and one from 1859. The name, age, estate, and price of 1,046 slaves were examined to determine how planters placed values on human property (see table 3.1). Using a stepwise regression model, with price as the dependent variable and sex, age, estate, and race as independent variables, this study first generated the statistical significance of these variables. Other variables in the sample include the field rates of 437 slaves listed on four of the eight plantations, sex, determined by the author based on nineteenth-century slave naming patterns, and occasional references to a slave’s physical condition. Of the 1,046 slaves in the sample, 526 (50.3 percent) were female, 477 (45.6 percent) were male, and 43 (4.1 percent) were of indeterminate sex.\textsuperscript{17}

**Results: Slave Price Patterns in Glynn County**

Statistical tests demonstrate that these variables (race, age, estate, and price) were statistically significant at the .001-level and that together they determined 52 percent of a slave’s price (see tables 3.2 and 3.3). Rate, which
Table 3.1. Data Set for Glynn County Slave Plantations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estate</th>
<th>Estate Name</th>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Slaves</th>
<th>Used</th>
<th>Age*</th>
<th>Price*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cabbage Bluff</td>
<td>James Hamilton</td>
<td>1830</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>$312.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>James Hamilton Couper</td>
<td>1830</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>24.35</td>
<td>$305.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Harrington Hall</td>
<td>Raymond Demere</td>
<td>1830</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>27.65</td>
<td>$275.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Hopeton</td>
<td>James Hamilton</td>
<td>1830</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>26.24</td>
<td>$307.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Kelvin Grove</td>
<td>Benjamin F. Cather</td>
<td>1841</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>23.54</td>
<td>$352.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mulberry Grove</td>
<td>John, Lewis, &amp; Paul Demere</td>
<td>1830</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>24.50</td>
<td>$280.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Noddings Point</td>
<td>James Hamilton</td>
<td>1830</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>33.68</td>
<td>$253.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Retreat</td>
<td>Anna Matilda Page King,</td>
<td>1859</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>20.60</td>
<td>$612.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on an average of all slaves on the estate.

Slave owners calculated using an external judgment of the amount of work an individual could perform, accounted for the greatest amount of variance (66.5 percent). The best workers received a rate of 1, which indicated a “full-hand” or “A-1 prime slave.” Sex accounted for the least amount of variance according to this sample, suggesting that planters made little or no distinction between males and females in terms of their appraised values and work assignments. A bivariate regression on sex with price as the dependent variable, however, demonstrates that sex is statistically significant (p = .004) but only accounts for a variance of 1 percent.

Looking at a stepwise regression for estates 5 and 8 using age, estate, and sex as the independent variables demonstrates that sex was not a statistically significant predictor of price (p = .993) for the estates with data from the years 1841 and 1859. The age and estate, however, determined 23 percent of a slave's price according to this test (see tables 3.4 and 3.5). The fact that sex accounted for a minimal amount of variance in the first analysis and was not a statistically significant predictor in the second speaks volumes to the discussion of gender and slavery in this county. Sex was not a predictor of price unless rate was omitted from the regression. But whether slaves were male or female only represented a small percentage of planters’ decisions about the value of their workforce. Apparently, Glynn County planters were more concerned with the amount of work a slave performed than with maintaining the nineteenth-century gender conventions operating in the dominant society. Such observations encourage further studies on the role of gender in slave
Table 3.2. Regression for 1830 Estates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R^2</th>
<th>Adjusted R^2</th>
<th>Std. Error of the Estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.514^a</td>
<td>0.265</td>
<td>0.263</td>
<td>82.6559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.667^b</td>
<td>0.445</td>
<td>0.442</td>
<td>71.9028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.704^c</td>
<td>0.496</td>
<td>0.493</td>
<td>68.5804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.722^d</td>
<td>0.521</td>
<td>0.517</td>
<td>66.9444</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^aPredictors: (Constant), rate; ^bPredictors: (Constant), rate, age; ^cPredictors: (Constant), rate, age, estate; ^dPredictors: (Constant), rate, age, estate, sex.

Table 3.3. Analysis of Variance — 1830 Estates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>1072319</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1072318.833</td>
<td>156.955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>2978751</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>6831.997</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4051069</td>
<td>437</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>1802116</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>901058.200</td>
<td>174.286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>2248953</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>5170.007</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4051069</td>
<td>437</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>2009847</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>669949.046</td>
<td>142.443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>2041222</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>4703.277</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4051069</td>
<td>437</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>2110556</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>527639.106</td>
<td>117.736</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>1940513</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>4481.554</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4051069</td>
<td>437</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Price-dependent variable.
^aPredictors: (Constant), rate; ^bPredictors: (Constant), rate, age; ^cPredictors: (Constant), rate, age, estate; ^dPredictors: (Constant), rate, age, estate, sex.

communities, research that would focus on various contributions to the plantation regime.18

Although an economic analysis of slave prices indicates that sex did not matter, an examination of individual plantations tells a different story. General findings for slave prices based on age categories in increments of ten years illustrate that enslaved females carried higher prices than did males on some estates until the age of thirty. Four of the estates—Kelvin Grove, Mulberry
Table 3.4. Regression for Kelvin Grove (1841) and Retreat (1859)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>Adjusted R²</th>
<th>Std. Error of the Estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.418*</td>
<td>0.174</td>
<td>0.171</td>
<td>277.9328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.479†</td>
<td>0.230</td>
<td>0.222</td>
<td>269.1344</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Predictors: (Constant), estate; †Predictors: (Constant), estate, age.

Grove, Noddings Point, and Retreat—show age groups in which females carried higher prices than did males in the same age group. Data from these four plantations confirm this finding for those aged twenty and under. Perhaps women received higher values because of their unique skills or because of their capacity to give birth. Regardless of the reason, these trends had an impact on those in bondage. Awareness of this would have given females leverage or power within the hierarchy on their respective plantations. On Mulberry Grove Plantation, Sally, age four, received the value of $400, whereas most other slaves under ten (male or female) rarely exceeded $250. Why did Sally have a high value at such a young age? It could not have been because of her reproductive capacity, but perhaps she was the offspring of two prime workers and the owner justified this value based on the productivity and strength of her parents. Likewise, Sally may have displayed special skills or strength compared to others in her age group. Whatever the case, one thing is certain: Sally received an exceptionally high value for her cohort. Similar patterns occurred on the Noddings Point and Retreat Plantations. Fansey, a twenty-six-year-old woman at Noddings Point, carried a higher price than did males in her cohort. Enslaved women on Retreat also claimed higher values during childbearing years (defined as ages sixteen to thirty), but because these are such small samples further investigation in the records of other plantation regions is required to confirm these patterns.

Since rate, age, estate, and sex in this sample account for only 52 percent of the variance in slave pricing, it is clear that planters had other concerns beyond these variables. It is safe to assume that health, temperament, and physical attributes such as those Elisha described on the auction block represent important variables. Planters did not provide data about these factors in their records, however, so this requires some speculation and additional research. The data, particularly for the estates with rate information, reveal obvious trends relating to slave prices.

Rates were given to slaves beginning at age twelve and ending around age sixty with the exception of a few cases. Jeffrey of Hopeton Plantation was only
ten years old, rated as a three-quarter hand, and valued at $350. No other slaves under age twelve, male or female, received rates. Ironically, the oldest slave with a rate, Martin, also resided at Hopeton. At age sixty-seven he appeared on the list as a three-quarter hand worth $350, the same price as Jeffrey.22 Rates were not assigned to other slaves in their sixties with the exceptions of Jack and Lewis of Noddings Point, who were sixty-five and sixty-two, respectively. Jack was rated a three-quarter hand worth $200, and Lewis a quarter hand, was valued at $100.23 That these slaves had rates whether they were age ten or in their late sixties indicates that the planters' focus was on the physical capabilities of their slaves rather than their ages. One cannot make a direct correlation between the value of slaves and their ages, because physical strength and skill clearly played a role in determining their value.

Yet some planters questioned and commented on the physical ability or inability of slaves relative to their rates. Diana, advertised in a Savannah newspaper, was a forty-six-year-old three-quarter hand. The remarks next to her name indicate that she may have been feigning an illness to avoid being sold: "Complaining, but looks well."24 Molly, a female slave auctioned from the Butler estate in 1859, caused quite a stir among potential buyers. When it was her turn to step up on the auction block, the auctioneer announced that "Molly insisted that she was lame in her left foot." The auctioneer was not convinced that this was the case, however, and had a physician examine her. "Molly was put though her paces, and compelled to trot up and down along the stage," the report stated, but her "left foot would be lame." The report does not indicate why Molly was "complaining" about her left foot or why she resisted her sale. But one can easily imagine a myriad of reasons she feigned her injury, assuming that she was indeed in good health, as the witnesses
suggested. Perhaps Molly had a loved one already sold to another owner and
she sought to discourage all other potential masters from purchasing her. Or
maybe Molly knew that she could remain with the Butler family if the sale
were unsuccessful. She may have feared moving to an unfamiliar plantation
community and tried to do all she could to stay in the physical environment
to which she had grown accustomed. Many bystanders thought she was “sham-
m ing” her injury; Molly sold for $695 that day.25

Estates represented in this sample also contain data about health and skill.
For example, sixty-year-old John of Mulberry Grove Plantation was listed as
having no value, but next to his name the owner wrote “blind,” indicating the
reason John had no value.26 Others, such as Cudjo, a forty-five-year-old male
slave driver on Cabbage Bluff Plantation, and Sam, a twenty-five-year-old
carpenter listed in the Hamilton estate, received higher prices than did other
slaves in their age cohort because they had unique skills.27 Men were not the
only ones with special skills. Among the women at Kelvin Grove, Mary had
nursing skills, Chloe served as the estate cook, Peggy had the ability to sew,
and Pender served as the plantation housemaid.28 Again, gender alone was not
a significant factor in determining a slave’s value.

Social Impact: The Slave’s Perspective

Although statistical tests help explain economic trends in planters’ deci-
sions about slave values, bondmen and bondwomen had different thoughts
about their worth. Many former slaves recalled their experiences on the auc-
tion block and commented on their separation from family members. They did
whatever they could to discourage potential buyers from dividing their fami-
lies. To them, family represented the ultimate survival mechanism because
relatives helped each other cope with the hardships of slavery. The term “fam-
ily” is used here to describe persons related by conjugal, consanguine, fictive,
abroad (off-plantation), extended, or polygamous connections. By examining
the social impact of slave prices and sales on family unity, this study moves be-
yond prices to identify the effects of placing a monetary value on a human life.

Slave testimonies are replete with commentary about auctions, sales, and
prices.29 Esther Brown, for example, recalled the day she and her six siblings
got to “de block”: “All of us wuz sold,” she explained, and sadly she remem-
bered that “dey wuz all sold off to diffunt parts of de country, and us never
heared from ‘em no more.” Furthermore, Brown could not forget that she was
young at the time: “I wuz so little dat when dey bid me off, dey had to hold me
up so folkses could see me.”30 Clearly planters sold slaves of all ages and
ruined what little emotional, physical, and material stability slaves had by
destroying their family ties. Mary Ferguson, another Georgia slave, said she was only thirteen when her master separated her from her family. It was “a day I’ll never forget,” she avowed. After dinner with her entire family, Ferguson remembered that she felt “lak sumpin’ was gwine ter hapin’. . . . Or, I never has forgot dat last dinner wit my folks” she recalled, and when the speculators came to take her away she “c’menced [to] cryin’ an’ beggin’,” but that did not prevent the sale and separation. Sadly, she stated, “I ain’t never seed nor heared tell o’ my Ma an’ Paw, an’ bruthers, an’ susters from dat day to dis.” Ferguson may have found other slave adults at a new plantation who provided some of the affection and support she once received from her biological mother and father; however, “none would be the parents or relatives from whom market transactions had separated” her.32

Slave sales such as those described by Brown and Ferguson were quite common during the antebellum era. Their experiences of separation differed only in that Brown went to the auction block and Ferguson was literally taken from her family’s cabin. The 1859 Butler Plantation sale provides probably the best description of a slave auction in U.S. history. A reporter from the New York Tribune who attended the auction wrote about the event in great detail and, although some historians question the accuracy of his report, it serves as a good portrait of slave sales because of its detail.33 It took days to transport the 429 slaves to Savannah from McIntosh and Glynn Counties, and when they arrived the auctioneer placed them in horse stables at the Ten Broeck race-course.34 Prospective buyers had the opportunity to view the slaves for several days prior to the sale. The Tribune writer described the scene: “The Negroes were examined with as little consideration as if they had been brutes indeed; the buyers pulling their mouths open to see their teeth, pinching their limbs to find how muscular they were, walking them up and down to detect any signs of lameness, making them stoop and bend in different ways that they might be certain there was no concealed rupture or wound; and in addition to all this treatment, asking them scores of questions relative to their qualifications and accomplishments.”35

One woman named Sally caught the attention of a few bystanders. A man interested in her noted that she was the wife of “shoemaker Bill.” As he examined her and noticed that she was a “big strapping gal and can do a heap o’work,” he decided to pass and move on to the next slave because Major Butler said, “It’s been five years since she had any children.”36 This suggests that some planters valued female slaves for their reproductive ability. Yet the capacity to bear children added to the constraints of female slavery in ways unknown to males.

The story of Daphney exemplifies one of the challenges faced by enslaved
women. Along with her husband, Primus, and their three-year-old daughter Dido, Daphney stepped up to the auction block amidst a small controversy. Apparently Daphney had wrapped herself in a blanket, which prevented potential buyers from administering a thorough examination of her limbs. "What's the matter with that gal? Has she got a headache?" one person asked. "Who is going to bid on that nigger, if you keep her covered up?" another added. But when they took the blanket off, the bidders were surprised to find a three-week-old infant concealed in her bosom. Writing about this incident, the Tribune reporter made an appeal to female readers. "Since her confinement," he noted, "Daphney had traveled from the plantation to Savannah, where she had been kept in a shed for six days. On the sixth or seventh day after her sickness, she had left her bed, taken a railroad journey across the country to the shambles, was there exposed for six days to the questionings and insults of the Negro speculators, and then on the fifteenth day after her confinement was put up on the block, with her husband and her other child, and with her newborn baby in her arms, sold to the highest bidder." This family sold for $625 each, a total of $2,500. Although some slaves, like Daphney, tried to conceal their offspring, other slaves employed different methods to stay together. Several sources reported that slave families involved in this sale were to remain together, but it is difficult to ascertain whether the motivation behind this claim was political. One might argue that the goal to keep families intact at this sale represented a political strategy to minimize the appearance of inhumanity at such auctions. Although others might appreciate this historical interpretation because it encourages scholars to focus on the "good" in planters and traders rather than the "evil," this study, along with the work of Baptist, acknowledges that more slave families were separated by sale than historians have generally admitted. In other words, the pleading, begging, and crying by slaves to be allowed to stay together rarely resulted in intact families.

Consider the case of Jeffrey and Dorcas, slave partners separated by this sale. Because they were not married, there was no chance that they would be sold as a family. Thus, Jeffrey begged and pleaded with his prospective buyer to purchase them as a unit. "I loves Dorcas, young mas't; I loves her well an' true," he began, hoping that his new master would sympathize with him. Jeffrey then assured him that the two would marry and "be good savants." Jeffrey thought about long-term family stability and spoke of his future offspring with Dorcas, claiming, "de chillum will be healthy and strong mas't' and dey'll be good savants, too." Like Elisha, Jeffrey began showing off his love's physical strength in one final attempt to encourage his owner to buy her. "Young mas't', Dorcas prime woman — A 1 woman, sa. Tall gal, sir; long arms,
strong, healthy, and can do a heap of work in a day.” He even went so far as to place a monetary value on his loved one: “She is one of de best rice hands on de whole plantation; worth $1,200 easy, mas’r, an’ f’s’ rate bargain at that.” Playing on the financial interests of potential buyers, Jeffrey did all he could to speak their language by using descriptive words that planters understood so that the two of them could have the same master. Although the prospective buyer seemed touched by his remarks, Jeffrey and Dorcas were sold to different owners the following day. When the two learned of their fate, Jeffrey had “tears streaming down his honest face,” while Dorcas sat “motionless as a statue, with her head covered with a shawl.”

**Conclusions**

The findings presented in this study are important for several reasons. They offer an economic portrait of an antebellum slave community from the perspective of the slave. This research also provides a clear view of the value of slaves by analyzing pricing patterns on several plantations in one community. Moreover, it shows that the skill and health of slaves were directly related to price. Addressing this relation clarifies the social and work hierarchy in the slave quarters. Finally, the most significant contribution of this work is that it humanizes the economic study of slavery, particularly by showing that, in addition to planters and traders, slaves (as was the case of Jeffrey and Dorcas) attempted to use their monetary value to persuade prospective buyers to purchase them with their loved ones. Nevertheless, the testimony of Jeffrey and Dorcas reinforces what scholars already know—but some are afraid to acknowledge—that slavery was an economic institution and that the laborers were reduced to commodities.

Analyzing prices from plantation records on a micro level for Glynn County, Georgia, from 1830 to 1859 shows clearly the impact prices had on those in bondage. Glynn County planters determined slave prices by considering a slave’s age, rate, health, sex, and skill. Statistical tests demonstrate that gender was not as important as some believe. The skill, age, and estate of the slave received more consideration than gender in determining prices. Slave prices were well understood by slaves as well as by plantation owners and traders. Planters’ itemization of slaves in records such as estate inventories provide an excellent source for data. From the planters’ perspective, the decision to purchase a slave was based on economic interest. But from the slaves’ perspective the auction block was approached not only with trepidation and fear but also with overt manipulation and covert strategies to maintain family ties. Slaves knew their value, and they used their knowledge to try to keep relatives and
loved ones together. After all, according to Elisha and Jeffrey, purchasing them with their loved ones was indeed a "fus' rate bargain."

Notes

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1. Philander Doesticks, "Great Auction Sale of Slaves at Savannah, Georgia, March 2nd and 3rd, 1859" (New York, 1859), 10–11.


3. The terms "gender" and "sex" are used throughout this study with different meanings. "Gender" addresses broad social and cultural distinctions between the male and female slave experience, and "sex" refers to biological definitions of male and female used during statistical discussions.


9. Baptist, “Cuffy.” Although Walter Johnson examines slave sales and the impact on the enslaved, Baptist warns him for placing "emancipatory hopes on a process of marketing" more than "the evidence will bear." Ibid., 163, n. 41. Agreeing with Baptist, this study seeks to uncover evidence that supports the notion that slaves had little bargaining power, despite their desperate attempts to maintain family ties.

10. The African-American History Association compiled a list of transactions relating to slave sales that is available at the Georgia Archives in Morrow, Georgia, formerly the Georgia Department of Archives and History (GDAH). These documents contain not only descriptive information about the slaves, but they have the names of the buyer and the seller, the price of the slave(s) or slaves, and the location of the transaction. See Slave Bills of Sale Project (Atlanta: African-American History Association, 1986).


14. Ibid. Typically, slaves aged ten and younger did not have rates.

15. Ibid.

16. For the purpose of this study, "price" refers to the appraised value according to the planters' judgment. "Cost" represents that amount a person paid to purchase the slave or slaves.

17. A total of forty-three names in the sample were either illegible or unisex and therefore coded as "unknown." Thus, 96 percent of the names are gender-specific, which leaves a 4 percent margin of error. See Cheryl Cody, "There Was No 'Abolion' on the Ball Plantations: Slave Naming Practices in the South Carolina Low Country, 1720–1865," *American Historical Review* 92, no. 2 (1987): 563–596.


20. These estimations are based on average male price versus average female price, and in this case, Fansey was the only female in her cohort. The number of males totaled three. "Nodding Point Plantation," Glynn County Court of Ordinary, Estate Records, Wills, Inventories, and Appraisements, book D, 1810–1843, GDAH.


28. "Kelvin Grove Plantation Book, January 1, 1853," Margaret Davis Cate Collection, University of Georgia (microfilm).

29. In the 1930s the Works Progress Administration sent a team of interviewers, predominately whites, to various southern regions to interview the last generation of former slaves. These interviews represent one of the few extant sources for slaves' perspectives. Caution must be exercised in using these testimonies, however, because of racial bias evidenced by the questions asked as well as by the dialect and tone of these edited narratives. For a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of these sources, see John W. Blassingame, ed., Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), especially the introduction. See also Johnson, Soul by Soul, 9–11.


31. Ibid., 12:327.


34. Ibid., 329.


36. Ibid., 12.
37. Ibid., 20.
38. Such numbers are similar to those found on the list of 138 slaves advertised in the Savannah newspaper one year later. See “Descriptive List of 138 Negroes.”
41. Ibid., 24.