
“A MOST UNPRECEDENTED ROBBERY”

On June 13, 1865, Eva Jones, a former slave owner from Georgia, penned a letter to her mother-in-law in which she bemoaned emancipation. “I suppose you have learned,” she wrote, “even in the more secluded portions of the country that slavery is entirely abolished—a most unprecedented robbery, and most unwise policy.” The end of slavery left Jones with the daunting task of reconstructing her life from “a heap of ruins and ashes.” For Jones, abolition was nothing short of a criminal act committed on such a grand scale that it would result in a “joyless future of probable ignominy, poverty, and want.” She believed that a life without slaves would be “a life robbed of every blessing” for her and similarly situated people living in the South.¹

Jones was not alone in her thinking. As the Civil War came to a bloody close in the late spring of 1865, Ella Gertrude Thomas reflected deeply upon how she would reckon with the economic impact of the conflict and its aftermath. Initially, she was optimistic: “I am not the person to permit pecuniary loss to afflict me as long as I have health and energy,” she wrote in her diary. Thomas recognized that emancipation would hurt her financially, but she also saw slavery as a burden, an encumbrance she was glad to rid herself of. “As to the emancipation of the Negroes, while there is of course a natural dislike to the loss of so much property in my inmost soul I cannot regret it—I always felt that there was a great responsibility—It is in some degree a great relief to have this feeling removed.” It only took four weeks for her disposition to change. By June, she had come to “heartily dispise Yankees, Negroes, and everything connected with them.”² Over the next four months, the reality of Thomas’s financial loss and its cataclysmic impact upon her way of life made her bitter, shook her resolve, and weakened her religious faith. Before the war, she and her husband had owned

ninety slaves collectively, and she stood to inherit many more from her father's estate. But with abolition, she predicted that her family's "state of affluence" would devolve into one of "comparative poverty."³ Thomas was particularly upset by the personal losses she would inevitably suffer as a consequence of emancipation: "So far as I individually am concerned," she calculated, she was reduced "to utter beggary," for the thirty thousand dollars her father had given her when she married was "invested in Negroes alone—This view of the case I did not at first take, and it is difficult now to realise it. . . . I did not know . . . how intimately my faith in revelations and my faith in the institution of slavery had been woven together. . . . Slavery was done away with and my faith in God's Holy Book was terribly shaken."⁴

Many former slave-owning women found the realization of what a slaveless world would mean for them equally painful. Despite evidence to the contrary, many had been unwilling to believe that the government would simply do away with slavery. In the first two years of the war, the United States Congress had enacted laws that weakened the institution of slavery, and President Lincoln had further compromised slavery with the Emancipation Proclamation. As early as March 1864, slave owners confronted further evidence of slavery's vulnerability when southern states began amending their constitutions to abolish slavery. Before the year ended Arkansas, Louisiana, and Maryland had done so. In January and February of 1865, respectively, Missouri and Tennessee did the same. Perhaps slave-owning women held on to hope of a Confederate victory because the Confederate government continued to act as though the South had a chance of winning the war; only a month before Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox, Virginia, on April 9, 1865, the Confederate Congress passed an act to "increase the military force of the Confederate States." One of the ways the Congress hoped to achieve this was by enlisting enslaved troops. The act further revealed the Confederate government's dogged commitment to the preservation of slavery; it called for the organization of "slaves into companies, battalions, regiments, and brigades," but it explicitly refused to change "the relation which the said slaves shall bear toward their owners," unless their owners or the states in which they lived altered those relationships. These enlistment efforts never came to pass.⁵

Slave-owning women's knowledge of this news was far from complete or consistent across the South, but they soon began to experience the economic effects of abolition upon their lives. While a few were able to hold on to some of their antebellum wealth despite the substantial postbellum devaluation of their assets, many faced poverty and starvation. Some women responded by denying the people they once owned their rights and liberty and sought to

coerce them to work as they had under slavery; others adapted old management methods to accommodate new labor arrangements.

Amid the jubilant screams and quick-footed two-steps of enslaved people who had just learned they were free, slave-owning women wept. In April 1865, shortly after the Union forces infiltrated the community where Tiney Shaw was enslaved, she overheard her mistress, Susy Page, crying, because “she wuz a widder ’oman; and her crops wuz jist started ter be planted.” As Shaw guessed, the presence of federal troops brought home the economic realities that were to come. When Page laid eyes upon those Union soldiers, “She knowed dat she wuz ruint.”⁶ Shaw was just guessing about the source of her mistress’s distress, but J. W. Terrill’s mistress left no doubt about the precise cause of her grief. As her former slaves “jumped up and holler[ed,] and dance[d]” after they learned they were free, she mustered enough resolve through her tears to tell them that she hoped that they would “starve to death and she’[d] be glad, ’cause it ruin[ed] her” to lose them. Although he was only six when the war ended, Tom Haynes remembered the day that his female owner, Becky Franks, approached his mother, Addie, told her, “You is free this morning,” and “commenced cryin’.”⁷ Some women reacted even more strongly. Emma Hurley described the response of her master’s mother on learning that the more than two hundred slaves she owned in her own right were free: “She sho’ did take on when they wuz all freed. I ’members how she couldn’t stay in the house, she just walked up an’ down out in the yard a-carrin’-on, talkin’ an’ a’ravin’.”⁸

Enslaved people were as alert as their owners to the economic changes that abolition would bring. On being told that she would soon be freed, Betty Jones’s grandmother ran seven miles to her mistress’s home, walked up to her, “looked at her real hard,” and exclaimed, “I’s free! Yes, I’s free! Ain’t got to work fo’ you no mo’. You can’t put me in yo’ pocket now!” Her mistress “started boo-hooin’ an’ threw her apron over her face an’ run in de house.” As an enslaved person, Jones’s grandmother had lived under the constant threat of sale—of being put in her mistress’s pocket. With slavery gone, her mistress would not only lose her investment in human property; she could no longer use the threat of the slave market against her former slaves.⁹

Southern slave-owning women had existed in a world in which slavery and the ownership of human beings constituted core elements of their identities. Faced with the prospect of losing their slaves, some expressed the wish to die. Four days after Lee’s surrender, Lucy Rebecca Buck was “almost tempted to envy poor Aunt Bettie lying cold and still in death.”¹⁰ Before the war, Polly Brown lived with her daughter and “made her living by taking in sewing,” but

she was by no means poor. She owned at least eleven slaves, including Annie Wallace, and other property in Eggsbornville, Virginia. Wallace later recalled that her mistress took the news of the Confederacy's surrender and emancipation particularly hard. She "was so hurt that all the negroes was going to be free. . . . She was so mad that she just died."¹¹ During the course of one slave-owning couple's conversation about the "war to free the niggers," an enslaved woman overheard her mistress declare that she did not "want to live to see the niggers free." When Ella Wilson's mistress laid out her plans for the enslaved people she owned to her husband, he replied, "'T'aint no use to do all them things" because "the niggers'll soon be free." Wilson's mistress exclaimed, "I'll be dead before that happens, I hope." Both mistresses got their wish: they died before the war ended. The deaths of these women were probably caused by illness or the trauma brought about by the war. But as formerly enslaved people remembered it, their mistresses' deaths were directly linked to the loss of property—that is, enslaved people—that came with abolition.¹²

Death was not a practical option for most women who lost their slaves. But that did not stop them from dwelling on their past situation and lamenting the things they could have done differently had they known that slavery was coming to an end. Failing to seize upon earlier opportunities to sell their slaves ranked high among many women's list of regrets.¹³ Three years after the Civil War ended, Ella Gertrude Thomas had a conversation with her former slaves during which she told them that she would have sold them before the close of the war if she had had the opportunity to do so.¹⁴ Liza Jones's mistress refused at least one offer to sell her eight slaves to a speculator and may have refused others. But when the war was over, she bitterly regretted her choice, believing that her former slaves would leave her. Jones recalled her mistress telling them, "Now I could a sold you and had the money, and now you is goin' to leave." Her fears of abandonment were unfounded however; most of her former slaves chose to remain on her estate. Jones's mistress was fortunate in this regard because many other formerly enslaved people walked away from their mistresses without hesitation, at least when they were capable of doing so.¹⁵

When they were not bewailing their lack of foresight, former slave-owning women actively resisted the implementation of emancipation. Their motives were mixed. Grace Brown Elmore, for example, vehemently opposed emancipation because she did not think that African Americans possessed the intellectual or moral capacity to live on their own as freed people. For Elmore, African Americans were "the most inferior of the human race, far beneath the Indian or Hindu": they were "poor, uneducated, stupid . . . lazy, self indulgent." So deficient did she consider them that she prophesized that they would simply

cease to exist once the ties between master and slave were dissolved. As Kay Wright Lewis has shown, the belief that African Americans would disappear after slavery was one of many vicious predictions that circulated among whites in the postbellum South.¹⁶

Other women felt entitled to formerly enslaved people's unpaid labor and questioned the authority of the federal government to rob them of it. Their resistance to abolition did not surprise Union officials such as Lieutenant Colonel Homer B. Sprague, who expected such recalcitrance. To Sprague the idea that a slave owner could wholeheartedly accept emancipation was preposterous. He considered it equally incredible that people would assume that "a sincere believer in the rightfulness of slavery" would "look with any complacency upon the freemen." They simply would not do it, Sprague argued, because they had made up their minds that "if they cannot have the negroes subject to them," they wished "to have nothing at all to do with them."¹⁷ Using this same logic, white women sought out ways to control the bodies and labor of the people they once owned, even after the federal government declared it illegal to do so. To all outward appearances, their ideological and sentimental ties to the institution of slavery were the key factors influencing their decisions. But the pecuniary losses they had suffered often underlay their responses, emotional or otherwise.

One way former slave-owning women held on to their former slaves was to keep them uninformed about their free status. This proved to be an easier task in some parts of the South than in others. Florida, Texas, "western parts of Arkansas and Louisiana, eastern Mississippi, much of Alabama, southwestern Georgia and the western sections of North and South Carolina" remained relatively untouched by the physical destruction of the war and the presence of Union troops. And within five months of Lee's surrender, the Union forces that occupied the South were drastically reduced. At the war's height, one million Union soldiers occupied and fought in the South; by October 1865 a little over two hundred thousand remained and 36 percent of them were African American. Together, the wartime absence of Union forces and their postwar withdrawal from significant portions of the South made it possible for slave-owning women to hold legally free African Americans in captivity.¹⁸ Violence by whites against blacks also intensified as Union troops evacuated the region. The federal government sought to address these kinds of issues when Congress passed an act that created the Freedmen's Bureau.

The Freedmen's Bureau, or the "bureau of refugees, freedmen, and abandoned lands," was charged with the "supervision and management of all abandoned lands, and the control of all subjects relating to refugees and freedmen

from rebel states.” As a bureau within the War Department, it was responsible for providing “provisions, clothing, and fuel, as [the secretary of war] may deem needful for the immediate and temporary shelter and supply of destitute and suffering refugees and freedmen and their wives and children.” The act that created the Freedmen’s Bureau also authorized the president to set aside tracts of land of no more than forty acres “for the use of loyal refugees and freedmen . . . within the insurrectionary states as shall have been abandoned.”¹⁹ Two of the Freedmen’s Bureau’s more important functions after the Civil War were assisting former slave owners and formerly enslaved people in their transition from slave to free labor and helping freed people resolve matters related to employer mistreatment and physical abuse.

The Freedmen’s Bureau, however, was designed to be a temporary entity, and it was unfunded and grossly understaffed. These factors made it close to impossible for the bureau to carry out its mandate. When legally free African Americans lived beyond the reach of Union forces or Freedmen’s Bureau agents, their female owners might refuse to tell them that they were free and continue to work them as they had before the war. Ben Lawson, for example, was the only slave whom Jane Brazier owned. As a boy Lawson worked 160 acres of Brazier’s land alongside her son and the impoverished white laborers she hired. The nearest plantation was at least fifteen or twenty miles away, and Lawson never knew the Civil War was going on. After it ended, Brazier never told him that he was free, so Lawson kept working as he always had.²⁰ Albert Todd suffered a similar fate. Todd was enslaved in Kentucky, and his mistress took him with her when she refugeeed to Texas. Sometime afterward, Todd changed hands from one mistress to another. Though in his later recollection he was not explicit about the details, the transaction he described could have been an apprenticeship, which allowed his new “mistress,” Mrs. Gibbs, to keep him in conditions that mimicked slavery for three years after the federal government freed him. She also deprived him of the sustenance he needed to do the work she commanded, and she beat him when he tried to supplement his diet with food pilfered from her. In the end, Todd’s sisters found him and took him away.²¹

Trying to keep the news about emancipation from enslaved people was not a foolproof strategy. To the chagrin of many a slave owner, other white southerners, who may have had economic motives, often passed this information along. Fannie Berry said that she “wuz free a long time fo’ I knew it,” but one day the white woman to whom she had been hired out declared, “Fannie, yo’ ar’ free an’ I don’t have to pay your master for you now. You stay with me.”²² Whether the woman told Berry she was free because she believed that keeping

this information from her was unjust or whether she did it in order to better position herself to negotiate directly with Berry for her labor is unclear. Notwithstanding, her choice to disclose the news to Berry betrayed the chasms that often existed between those who owned slaves and those who did not.

Under favorable circumstances, women negotiated directly with freed parents when they sought to retain their children and their labor for a while longer. Freed parents persistently and vehemently fought to reconstitute their families in the postwar period, but they struggled financially.²³ Few had the means to care for themselves, and even fewer could care for their children as well. In light of these circumstances, some freed mothers and fathers entrusted their children to their former mistresses in hopes that they would receive proper care. After the war, Martha Orr candidly told James Barber's mother, Caroline, that she was free and advised her to go into the local town and hire herself out for wages. She also suggested that Caroline leave her children behind so that she herself could "take care er 'um." Her reasoning was that without a husband Caroline would not be able to care for the children properly. And after some consideration, Caroline left James and his siblings in her former owner's care.²⁴ Caroline Barber faced the same formidable circumstances that awaited the majority of newly freed people after the war, but the realities of life for a freed-woman in the South were particularly bleak, especially if she had children. She undoubtedly weighed her options carefully when considering her former owner's proposition and realized that Martha Orr might be able to care for her children in a way that she could not at the time. James's reflections suggest that his mother made a wise choice. He related that Orr treated him and his siblings as though they were her own. They slept on a mattress in her bedroom, and she would tuck them in at night. He even called Orr "mother" well into his teenage years, something that proved so disagreeable to her kin that they called upon the sheriff to banish James from the town. He remained with his mistress for nine years before they were able to persuade the sheriff do so.²⁵

Deeming themselves entitled to the bodies and labor of freed children and adolescents, former slave-owning women routinely exploited the chaotic familial circumstances that slavery, antebellum migration, the war, and refugeeing had brought about in order to extend their access to these young people's labor. Women like the mistresses who owned Ben Lawson, Albert Todd, and Fannie Berry often took advantage of parents' absences to coerce children and adolescents into exploitative labor arrangements. One Natchez, Tennessee, woman, for example, called the freed child she still had in her possession her "little Confederate nigger." She proudly told Whitelaw Reid, an Ohio journalist, politician, and diplomat who traveled through the South in the year following the

war, that this young girl was “the only one I have been able to keep, and I only have her because her parents haven’t yet been able to coax her away.”²⁶ When children were isolated from their parents or other African Americans more generally, it was easier for white women to manipulate and deceive them because they could prevent them from knowing about their changed status. These circumstances also made it possible to bind freed children to them through apprenticeship laws.

After the war, many southern states crafted such laws to contend in part with the large number of allegedly orphaned freed children under the age of eighteen.²⁷ What often remained unsaid and unrecognized was that many of these children were not orphans at all but had been separated from their parents through their owners’ estate divisions, interstate relocations, and sales. Parents tirelessly searched for their children and attempted to reconstruct their families for years after the war, but were often unsuccessful. Even when they could find their children and provide for them, their former mistresses often appealed to courts and military officials to leave the children with them for “maternal” reasons, relying (usually successfully) on these officials’ gendered and racist assumptions to help them maintain legal control over freed children. Henry Walton’s former mistress, Susan Walton Miller, seized the opportunity to have him bound to her before his father could return from the war. Miller petitioned the court to enforce Walton’s apprenticeship and found the judge amenable. The court bound Walton to her until he turned twenty-one. Her legal victory was short-lived, however. When Walton’s father returned from the war, he sought nullification of the court’s order and won.²⁸

Apprenticeship was probably what Annie Huff’s owner also had in mind when she “returned from a trip to Macon and called all the children together to tell them that even though they were free, they would have to remain with her until they were twenty-one.” Many of the South’s apprenticeship laws established periods of indenture that lasted throughout the children’s adolescence. Boys served until they were twenty-one years old, while girls served until they were eighteen. Frequently against the wishes of their parents, and often despite a mistress’s inability to demonstrate her fitness to care for the children, Freedmen’s Bureau agents and southern courts often granted the mistress’s requests. Beyond ignoring the often tragic reasons for a freed parent’s absence and placing a white southerner’s need for labor over a black parent’s love, these decisions also dismissed bonds of kinship between children and extended family members who were capable of giving them safe and comfortable homes.²⁹ To be sure, not all formerly enslaved adults sought to reclaim these children solely because they loved them; they often wanted additional laborers who

could contribute to their households. And so the former owners and the formerly owned fought a battle over freed children that was partially economic in scope. Even still, apprenticeship laws and decisions related to them invalidated the fictive and extended kinship ties that the institution of slavery necessitated.³⁰

Individuals within southern communities recognized the purpose of these laws and why former slave owners were seizing the opportunities that apprenticeship afforded them. Former slave owners wanted a bound labor force that was legally obligated to submit to their will, and the apprentice laws provided them with one way to secure it. But neighbors who witnessed the injustices they committed against their apprentices and the freed parents of these children might plead with officials “in the Name of Humanity” to stop what they considered the involuntary enslavement of freed children. A southern Unionist, Thomas B. Davis, wrote to the judge of the Baltimore Criminal Court to report a woman who he believed was perpetrating gross violations of the apprenticeship law. The woman, whom Davis referred to as “Yewel,” not only forced freed-women off her land, she also refused to give them their children. Furthermore, Yewel sought to have the freed children bound to her despite her lack of means to care for them or even herself.³¹

Women like Yewel cared little for the rights of African American parents or their desperate attempts to reconstitute their families; they were more concerned about their own financial well-being and stability. They continued to deny freed parents the chance to love and care for their children by claiming those children’s labor for decades after slavery ended. But no matter how strongly former slave-owning women held on to African American children after emancipation, the children’s kin were equally unwavering in their efforts to reclaim them.

Many freed parents appealed to the Freedmen’s Bureau for help when their attempts to take possession of their children failed, but others chose to take matters into their own hands and “steal” their loved ones back. In a period when legal slavery was dead, many freed people had to surreptitiously take their loved ones from women who had no legitimate legal or economic claim to them. When Rebecca Jane Grant was fifteen years old, her uncle Jose Jenkins stole her from her mistress and took her to his home in Savannah, Georgia, approximately fifty miles away. Her father had also been searching for her, but when he finally located her mistress, he learned that the child was no longer there. He consulted with her grandfather Isaac, who finally tracked Rebecca down and took her back to her father. Isaac and Rebecca walked sixty-four miles to the town where their family was finally able to reunite.³² Annie L. Burton’s mother, who had run away during slavery, came back to her mistress’s plantation after

the war and “demanded that the children be given up to her.” Her mistress refused to hand them over and “threatened to set the dogs” on Burton’s mother if she did not leave at once. Undaunted, she left, but waited nearby. At dinner-time she asked a boy to call her eldest daughter, Caroline, to the place where she was hiding. When Caroline arrived, she instructed her to go back to the plantation, get Annie and her younger brother Henry, and bring them to a specified location. Once she had done so, Annie’s mother carried Henry, and Caroline loaded Annie onto her back. They ran as fast as they could to the small hut that Annie’s mother had secured on a plantation some distance away. Discovering their absence, Annie’s mistress directed her sons to find them, but when they did, Annie’s mother refused to give her children back. She offered to “go with them to the Yankee headquarters to find out if it were really true that all negroes had been made free.” Clearly, the young men knew that the government had liberated their mother’s slaves because they left, and Annie and her family remained undisturbed.³³

Jane Turner Censer argues that white southern women harbored fears about the “social disorder” that they believed newly freed people would bring about, and that this and “their longstanding dislike of the isolation of plantations” encouraged them to move away from the countryside. Some women stayed put, however, and adapted to the new order on southern farms and plantations.³⁴ Reconstructing the South called for the implementation of a free labor system, and white women joined other former slave owners and planters who made contracts with their former slaves and agreed to compensate them for their labor.³⁵

Some women adapted poorly to postbellum free labor systems, and they complained that freed people were unwilling to work for them under the same conditions that had existed before the war. But others proved to be well prepared for their new role as employers, particularly in regard to negotiating terms of labor with freed people. Before the war, slave-owning women had routinely negotiated with enslaved people who hoped to hire themselves out so they might purchase their freedom.³⁶ They had also contracted with other whites who sought to hire their slaves. These were complex transactions that educated both white slave-owning women and the people they owned in the intricacies of labor negotiations. But now that the conditions under which these negotiations were conducted had changed so drastically, white women had to adapt their tactics accordingly.

Before the Civil War, slave-owning women held the upper hand in labor transactions. When slaves wanted to hire themselves out so they could buy their

freedom, their female owners could always renege on the agreement or later choose to simply pocket the wages they earned. Additionally, as slave owners, these women held legal title to the men, women, and children that other white people hoped to hire. Their slave ownership granted them extraordinary leverage in prewar hiring arrangements, but this changed when they negotiated with freed laborers after the war. So although former slave-owning women did not lack the skills to negotiate labor agreements with freed people, emancipation required them to modify their prewar strategies to accommodate the constraints which abolition imposed upon their ability to command enslaved people's labor.

It is also important to recognize that while some women might not have been able to own human property before the war, they frequently negotiated with enslaved laborers and others for such labor when they needed it. This may have given them an advantage in the postbellum free labor market, because even though slave-owning women had negotiated with other white southerners for the laborers they sought to hire, they had done so from positions of authority. Their knowledge of the hiring process had been limited, whereas non-slave-owning women had negotiated with slave owners *and* the enslaved people they hired, particularly those whose owners allowed them to hire out their own time and negotiate directly with prospective employers. Thus, non-slave-owning women gained valuable experience in negotiating and working directly with hired laborers, and such knowledge would have been highly advantageous in the free labor market of the postbellum South. The abolition of slavery evened the playing field, creating a market in which hirers and former owners had to negotiate with prospective employees if they hoped to secure the labor that they needed.

A white woman's earlier experiences with enslaved people and her prewar financial circumstances often determined whether she would be successful in her labor negotiations. If she had been able to acquire experience negotiating with free and enslaved laborers, a former slave-owning woman was likely to make an easy transition from owner to employer. Mrs. Sallie Rhett, the woman who owned Silvy Granville, is an example. She told her slaves that they were free at a time when they were "in the middle of a crop." She entered into negotiations with them, and rather than leaving immediately they "agreed to help her make that crop" in exchange for one-third of what they harvested.³⁷

On rare occasions, former slave-owning women went beyond negotiating with, employing, and compensating the freed people who cultivated their lands; sometimes they might give their former slaves money and property. Frances Van Zandt gave her former slave Amy Van Zandt Moore two acres of

land when she freed her. The woman who owned Mrs. Charles Douthit's mother not only gave her land when slavery ended, she built her former slave a home. Mrs. Douthit's mother gave birth to her in that house, she grew up in it, and she passed the house on to her son, who occupied the home at the time of her interview with a WPA employee.³⁸

Most white women, however, hoped to extend their tenure as slave owners, and such women chose a vastly different course when they used exploitative and coercive business practices to maximize their profits and deprive free African Americans of the compensation they deserved. They often embraced the argument Grace Brown Elmore made, that "the negro as a hireling will never answer," and like her scorned paid black labor: "Who would choose black, in any capacity except he be held as a slave, and so bound to be obedient and faithful?"³⁹ At a Union soldier's mere suggestion that she would "find white labor much cheaper and better," Mary M. Clanton rejected such a notion by proclaiming that she was a "southern woman . . . born and raised at the South, accustomed to the service of Negroes and liked them better." But as enslaved people left her estate and her extended family's households, their absences compelled Mary and the rest of the Clantons to try their luck with white and, eventually, freed African American labor.⁴⁰ Much to Grace Elmore's apparent dismay, she found free white laborers a miserable disappointment. When she hired an Irishwoman as a servant, she learned that the woman was incapable of performing any of her assigned tasks efficiently.⁴¹

It should come as no surprise then, that even as these women pragmatically embraced free labor, they held fast to their sense of entitlement as former slave owners who could command enslaved people to labor tirelessly for them without pay. Former slave-owning women used coercive labor contracts in order to re-create the conditions that had characterized slavery. The labor contract Mary S. Blake devised was so exploitative that Colonel Samuel Thomas, the commander of the 64th U.S. Colored Infantry and provost marshal general of freedmen who was charged with the care and support of formerly enslaved people in Tennessee, objected and refused to allow her to hire laborers under the terms she specified. She complained to a family friend, Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas, who then wrote to the Freedmen's Bureau on her behalf. Placing all the blame on Colonel Thomas, the adjutant general stated that despite the colonel's objections, the freed people were "perfectly satisfied and desire to remain with her and . . . refuse to go." The colonel, he claimed, was meddling and interfering with a perfectly amicable relationship between an employer and her employees. Colonel Thomas countered that the freed people he had consulted with did not even know the terms of their contracts,

but after they had found out they had been upset about the agreements they had signed. When the colonel reviewed the contracts, he discovered that Blake's terms "would not feed and clothe them" and would have given them "less than they received when slaves." In Colonel Thomas's estimation, "Mrs. Blake wished to retain her servants as she always had them," and he refused to approve her contract.⁴²

Other female employers contracted with freed people to cultivate and harvest the crops on their lands and then forced their employees off their property without any pay after they completed the work. When the former slave owner and planter Sally V. B. Tabb requested government assistance in forcibly removing her former slaves from her estate, she rationalized her decision by accusing them of failing to perform their required duties. They had refused to work hard, were insolent, and gave her all kinds of trouble; under the circumstances, she could no longer provide for them or pay them for their subpar labor. Yet when W. H. Bergfels, the Freedmen's Bureau assistant superintendent for Mathews County, Virginia, investigated the case, her allegations proved to be false. Furthermore, he discovered that she had not provided her freed workers with the implements they needed for the job. Even her overseer agreed that the tools Tabb expected the workers to use were "more than worn out 2 years ago," yet "she expected these poor people to accomplish wonders" with them. Bergfels concluded that Tabb was "the oppressor and not the oppressed as she would fain make it appear."⁴³

The freed people who worked for former slave-owning women did not willingly accept the labor conditions their employers sought to impose. They appealed to Freedmen's Bureau agents and lodged their complaints against their employers in Freedmen's courts. On August 20, 1865, Sealy Banks claimed that Mrs. Estes, her employer and former owner, had refused to give her "any payment, save victuals & clothes, and is not certain about giving her the clothing." Banks further stated that she had "worked for Mrs. Estes all her life," and her former mistress had given her "no clothing for 3 years except one cotton dress, one yarn Dress, Shoes & stockings." The Freedmen's Court ruled in Banks's favor, summoned Mrs. Estes to appear to answer the complaint, and demanded that she pay Banks four dollars for "one month's work" and provide her with summer clothes.⁴⁴

Daniel Baker, Frank Johnson, Lewis Wright, and Timothy Terryl collectively filed a complaint against former slave owner Mary Cowherd on August 28, 1865. She had not only refused to pay them for their work; she demanded that they continue to work for her with no compensation other than "their board & clothing." If they were unwilling to "accept these terms they must leave

the plantation & never return." The Freedmen's Bureau directed her to settle with the men or explain why she would not do so.⁴⁵

Beyond denying workers wages, food, and clothing, employers also made threats of violence, and these too led freed people who worked for them to file complaints. On the morning of August 27, 1865, Alfred Goffney approached his employer, Mrs. Strange, for wages she owed him for a month's labor. Strange "got a pistol," pointed the weapon at him, and threatened to "blow his brains out" if he did not leave her land immediately. Escaping with his life but not his wages, Goffney submitted his grievance to the bureau. Strange eventually paid Goffney the \$5.20 she owed him, but only after the Freedmen's Bureau ordered her to do so.⁴⁶ In a postwar climate characterized by white southerners' unchecked violence against and murder of freed people, it took enormous courage for these formerly enslaved men and women to take such legal actions.

The white women who were in a position to employ freed people on their lands could count themselves among the lucky ones; many others did not share their good fortune. Women who had once owned slaves suddenly found themselves destitute, without property or any means of surviving. A formerly enslaved man named John Smith remembered such women: "Some of de missus had nigger servants to bathe 'em, wash dere feet an' fix dere hair. When one nigger would wash de missus feet dere would be another slave standin' dere wid a towel to dry 'em for her. Some of dese missus atter the war died poor. Before dey died dey went from place to place livin' on de charity of dere friends."⁴⁷ Even for women who did not live as extravagantly as this in prewar times, the loss of their economic investment in slaves posed significant financial problems and difficulties.

As many of these women faced poverty and destitution for the first time, they tried to re-create their past lives with the labor of newly freed people. These women assumed that freed people would serve them in the same ways they had before the war. But freed people frequently disappointed them.⁴⁸ One former slave owner "came to Beaufort" because "she thought some of her Ma's niggers might come to wait on her," but her mother's former slaves had different plans. Although they refused to work for her, they offered her "food, money, and clothes." In the end, her circumstances compelled her to earn a living with her own hands and "to become a dressmaker for the negroes."⁴⁹

Sometimes life became so difficult for former slave-owning women that they were reduced to beggary among the people they had once owned. Two young women visited their father's former slaves "pleading their poverty" and begging for help. These freed people gave them "grits or potatoes . . . plates and spoons

. . . and money.” One enslaved woman even “took the shoes from her own feet and gave them to her former mistresses.”⁵⁰ The tables had officially turned: former slave owners found themselves at the mercy of those they had once owned. After a lifetime of servitude and abuse, these freed people might have retaliated against their former owners, thereby legitimating slaveholders’ concern about “negro rule.”⁵¹ Instead, many of them demonstrated their humanity and gave their former mistresses what little they could reasonably spare. To be sure, the racial hostility and violence, as well as the psychological intimidation that characterized the region during and after the war, encouraged many freed people to be magnanimous toward their former owners.⁵² But others behaved kindly toward former slave owners because they believed God was inflicting enough punishment upon “white folks.” Lillian Clarke used that argument when she spoke to interviewer Susie R. C. Byrd on October 15, 1937: “De way white folks used to treat us,” she said, “God has whipped some of ’em worse dan dey beat us.”⁵³

The spectrum of economic loss among former slave-owning women was broad. A German seamstress whose only slave was emancipated as a consequence of the war lost the equivalent of what would have been a life savings for most: “I worked with my needle, and six months before the war broke out, I bought Jane for twelve hundred dollars in gold, I had earned at the end o’ the needle, but now she’s free an’ I aint a carin’ for that, but thar’s my hard work gone.” The twelve hundred dollars that she paid for Jane would have the purchasing power of approximately \$36,500 today.⁵⁴ At the other end of the spectrum, Irene Smith, who pleaded with the secretary of the treasury to protect her property during the war, saw her personal estate worth \$678,000 in 1860 reduced to \$70,000 a decade later.⁵⁵ Even women who retained ownership of considerable amounts of land and other property after the Civil War continued to grapple with the pecuniary impact of federal emancipation policies and the financial losses they incurred because of them. For slave-owning women like Irene Smith, the ramifications struck “a blow from which [they] never recovered,” and they described those losses in their applications for presidential pardon and amnesty.⁵⁶

When historians write about white southern women’s experiences during the Civil War and after, they tend to foreground their human loss, rather than the direct, economic losses that these women suffered. Certainly they grieved for lost family and friends. And they suffered from the loss of slaves their husbands and male kin owned. But the applications of former slave-owning women for pardon and amnesty make it clear that losing the enslaved people they owned in their own right was no small part of the trauma wrought by the war.

On May 29, 1865, President Andrew Johnson issued the first of three proclamations that granted former Confederates amnesty and pardons if they swore oaths of allegiance to the United States. Abraham Lincoln had issued two such proclamations during the war, but few southerners had heeded his call to rejoin the Union. After all hope for a Confederate victory was lost, however, thousands of southern men and women swore oaths of allegiance to the United States and submitted petitions for pardons and general amnesty. The Johnson administration kept the oath simple. Rebellious southerners simply had to state the following: "I, _____, do solemnly swear or affirm, in presence of Almighty God, that I will henceforth faithfully support and defend the Constitution of the United States and the Union of the States thereunder. And that I will, in like manner, abide by and faithfully support all laws and proclamations which have been made during the existing rebellion with reference to the emancipation of slaves, so help me God."⁵⁷ As straightforward as the oath seemed, saying those words was far from simple for former slave-owning women such as Catherine Ann Edmonston—and meaning them was even more difficult. In Edmonston's opinion, the oath of loyalty was an act of humiliation that brought about "hate, contempt, & rage" in the breast of "every true Southron." The only reason why so many southerners swore the oath, she surmised, was "to protect themselves against Yankee & negro insolence & to preserve the remnant of [their] property." She made it clear that many who swore the oath did not mean it and had no intention of keeping the promises they made. "Who considers it binding?" she asked. "No one. Not one person whom I have heard speak of it but laughs at and repudiates every obligation it imposes. It binds one no more than a promise at the pistols point to a highwayman!"⁵⁸ But white southerners humbled themselves, swore their oaths, and applied for pardons and amnesty nonetheless.

The federal government concluded that this simple oath was not enough for individuals who engaged in certain kinds of rebellion against the Union or for rebels who owned property valued at twenty thousand dollars or more. Those people had to apply directly to the president for amnesty and pardon, and he would determine whether they could reclaim their property. Over half the petitioners who requested special pardons were "excepted" from the general amnesty proclamation because of their large property holdings, and for them the restoration of their citizenship and property rights served as the ultimate goal of their petitions. By 1867, Andrew Johnson had granted special pardons to more than thirteen thousand men and women who sympathized with or aided the rebellion. While men constituted the overwhelming majority of the petitioners, more than four hundred married, single, and widowed women were among them.⁵⁹

The smaller representation of women among special pardon requests was probably due to at least two factors. First, their particular acts of rebellion did not render them ineligible for the general pardon. Many of the women who applied for special pardons admitted to actively aiding in the rebellion, primarily by providing food, shelter, and other necessities to Confederate soldiers. Second, they typically owned more enslaved people than land, and such property held no value after the war, which decreased the likelihood that they would need to request amnesty and pardon directly from Johnson.

Petitioners were not obligated to describe their feelings about the war or to enumerate the financial losses that emancipation brought about. But many former slave-owning women chose to touch on such matters. Though some “cordially accept[ed] . . . the abolition of slavery as a fixed fact,” their petitions often focused upon the enslaved people they had owned in their own right. The day that Andrew Johnson issued his proclamation, Carrie Lomax submitted her application for special pardon and amnesty. She wrote that “the largest portion of [her] estate consist[ed] of slaves now free” and, where it had been practicable her former slaves were “employed by petition as freemen under the regulations of the ‘Freedmans Bureau’ at Montgomery, Ala.” Eliza Grey wrote of equally devastating losses. In addition to the loss of “property destroyed by the army of the United States and . . . taken and destroyed by the armies and officials of the so called Confederate states,” she owned “one hundred and sixty negro slaves,” property that held no value at the war’s end. As Mary A. Hood of Meriwether County, Georgia, told the president, “In the beginning of the late rebellion, the most valuable portion of [my] estate consisted in slaves . . . but since that time, in consequence of the emancipation of the slaves, the improvident cultivation of [my] lands,” and the inability of her debtors to pay her, it had “greatly diminished in value.”⁶⁰

Things were much worse for Sarah J. Firth of Beaufort, South Carolina, who informed the president that she was “utterly destitute of all means of support” because the federal government refused to allow her to “regain possession of her property.” Her request for pardon conveyed her sense of double victimization. She and the southern people had lost the war, and now the government had implemented policies that “punish the innocent women of the country as aiders in the rebellion lately quelled.” Writing from Longwood plantation in Washington County, Mississippi, Irene Smith claimed that she too was “guiltless.” She had only remained in the South during the war because the enslaved people she owned would not have been able to survive without her. Her loyalty was to her slaves, not the Confederacy, she argued, and it was “her duty to protect and defend a large number of persons (then her slaves) who were, for the

time, dependent on her for sustenance and support.” Punishing women for their benevolence? This could not possibly be what the president intended.⁶¹

For women like Catharine Fulton, confiscation policies were more than punishment; they were insults. Over the course of 1865 and into 1866, Fulton applied for pardon and amnesty twice and wrote several letters to North Carolina governor Jonathan Worth and to General O. H. Howard, the provost marshal who witnessed her oaths of allegiance. She pled for their assistance in reclaiming property she owned in Charleston, which had been seized and had fallen into “the hands of the ‘Freedmen’s Bureau.’” It seemed hard, wrote Fulton, that she “should be deprived of it,” as she had “already suffered severely by the ‘Emancipation Act.’” An acquaintance, Commodore John A. Winslow, supported her application, attaching his own letter of appeal, in which he argued that Fulton had “suffered to great extent by the loss of slaves,” and “no good purpose” could be served by “refusal of the only means of livelihood she has.” He added that “Mrs. Fulton before the war, was worth more than \$20,000 but with the loss of slaves it is doubtful whether her property would reach that amount.” With their slaves free, the women who applied for pardons and amnesty could only hope to “obtain assured protection” of their “rights” to their remaining property and “enjoy undisturbed the remnant of [their] estate[s].”⁶²

These women’s petitions for pardons and amnesty reveal the complex roles former slave-owning women played throughout the South before the war and women’s diverse responses to the war’s end and abolition. When Caroline Alston of Choctaw County, Alabama, applied for a special pardon, she told the president that she had been “informed that the result of the late war, between the United States and the Confederate States, has been to deprive her of her slaves, and that she has nothing left her, but a little stock and her lands.” She was the only property owner in her household: her husband “had no property when she married him” and had “acquired none since” their marriage. Since he entered their marriage without property, the couple “secured all her property to her separate use, by a marriage contract, duly proven and recorded in the Probate Court of Marengo County, Alabama, where the marriage took place.” Furthermore, because Alabama law also secured her property “to her separate use,” her slaves, stocks, and lands had been “doubly secured.” She applied to Johnson for amnesty and pardon so that she could access her livestock and lands. Once she reclaimed her property, she could take care of her family, as she had done before the war. Mary L. Carter also appealed to President Johnson for a pardon because her husband, Jesse Carter, had “little property, and . . . the property and estate owned by her” was “the sole source of income for the support and maintenance of her family.” In spite of owning property worth twenty

thousand dollars or more, however, she complained that her assets had “been very much diminished by the war,” since she had “lost about thirty five slaves.”⁶³

Alston’s and Carter’s petitions make it clear that women who possessed the bulk of the slaves in their households and the majority of their families’ wealth did not necessarily assume *new* roles during the war or after it was over. Rather, they continued to use their personal estates to help provide for their families, but they, and not their husbands, were the hardest hit economically by abolition. Their wartime losses made that task difficult, if not impossible, to carry out during Reconstruction. Women like Alston and Carter hoped to resume the positions they had held in their households before the war, not as their husbands’ submissive dependents but rather as women who took care of their families’ material and financial needs as property owners in their own right. For the married women who still possessed property worth at least twenty thousand dollars, pardons and amnesty were all they needed to be restored to their “rights of citizenship and of property.” President Johnson routinely approved their requests.⁶⁴ Former slave-owning women were thus enabled to restore to their lives some semblance of the familiar. With their landed estates back in their hands, those women began to build their lives anew.

EPILOGUE: LOST KINDRED, LOST CAUSE

Within months of Lee's surrender to Grant on April 9, 1865, enslaved people began placing advertisements in "Information Wanted" and "Lost Friends" columns of southern newspapers. They were searching for their loved ones. In these ads, they described mothers, fathers, children, siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, many of whom they had not seen for decades: kinfolk who could be alive or dead. The ads were filled with yearning and despair, and the formerly enslaved people who placed them often named the white women responsible for their losses. In the immediate and not so immediate aftermath of slavery, formerly enslaved people traced their lineages through their losses and the separations brought about when their mistresses sold them, when other women bought them, when they were given to women as gifts or bequests, and when their female owners relocated from the Southeast to the Deep South and Southwest.¹

In the thirty years following abolition, the women who once owned enslaved people and their female descendants also wrote about enslavement and loss, but in a remarkably different way. They laid bare their thoughts about the system and how they perceived the roles they had played within it. Interwoven within their tales of privileged living, these women constructed preposterous narratives about slavery that omitted the trauma of separation, loss of self-determination, and violence that emerged in the "Lost Friends" and "Information Wanted" advertisements. When former slave owners wrote about slavery, their picture showed no brutality, no privation, no agony, no loss, no tears, no sweat, no blood. They portrayed themselves and their female forebears as forever sacrificing women who had played purely benevolent roles within a nurturing system. Enslaved people had only benefited from their mistresses' sacrifices and acts of benevolence, they

wrote, and often expressed their recognition and appreciation of that care through their unwavering loyalty and love. This incongruent “reciprocity” led some writers to openly grieve that their female descendants would “never know the tender tie that existed between mistress and servant.”²

Many of the female authors contended that this tie was bound up in moral obligation; God had ordained that their European ancestors buy, rule over, Christianize, and civilize people of African descent.³ Letitia Burwell believed that African Americans should be grateful for their enslavement and to show their appreciation might consider creating an “anniversary to celebrate ‘the landing of their fathers on the shores of America,’ when they were bought and domiciled in American homes.” Slavery benefited the enslaved, she and others surmised, but it was a heavy burden for their owners. This was especially the case for white women, whose conduct toward such barbaric people was especially commendable. “What courage, what patience, what perseverance, what long suffering, what Christian forbearance, must it have cost our great-grandmothers to civilize, Christianize, and elevate the naked, savage Africans to the condition of good cooks and respectable maids!” she exclaimed. After all, “They . . . did not enjoy the blessed privilege even of turning their servants off when inefficient or disagreeable, but had to keep them through life.”⁴

White women did not have to rely on their imaginations to understand what kind of “savage Africans” their foremothers had had to contend with. In the early decades of the twentieth century, some of these women had firsthand encounters with native-born Africans, and they found it “perfectly appalling” that such people could be human beings. A friend of Nancy Bostick De Saussure visited Africa at the turn of the twentieth century and wrote to her describing her experiences there. Africans, she explained, were devoid of “any humanity” or “affection for anybody or anything.” She concluded that it was “an insult to a good dog to compare them to animals.” De Saussure, a proud southerner and former slave owner, agreed. In her estimation, the contemporary Africans her friend described resembled “the imported African before he was Christianized and humanized by the people of the South.”⁵

In writing these accounts, former slave-owning women offered three primary reasons why they had supported the institution of slavery. First, as noted, it was a positive good for the African savages, whom slavery had civilized. Second, slavery was “God’s own plan” for helping these inferior people, and white women were following His divine instructions in furthering it. And finally, they “were born to it, grew up with it, lived with it, and it was [their] daily life”; how could they help supporting it?⁶ These women did not express such ideas because they were the views of white men or because white men shielded them from

slavery's ugliness. They espoused such views because of their own experiences with the institution of slavery, and they arrived at their conclusions through their own line of reasoning.

As they wrote these reflections about southern life before the war, white women often distorted, obfuscated, and distanced themselves from the fourth reason they supported the system: their direct economic investment in slavery and their pecuniary interest in perpetuating it. Some women claimed that they and their families rarely, if ever, bought enslaved people. Nancy Bostick De Saussure, for example, readily admitted that her "father gave each of his children . . . a plantation with negroes and a house" when they married, but failed to mention that Louis D. De Saussure, the cousin-in-law whose home she occasionally visited, was a major Charleston area slave dealer.⁷

Nancy De Saussure was not the only woman who neglected to acknowledge her economic ties to the slave trade and the people who made their living buying and selling human beings. However, when white women did address the issue, they dismissed such trafficking as a necessary evil and vilified the individuals who traded human beings for profit. As Mary Norcott Bryan wrote, the business of "being bought and sold" was "the only objectionable thing about slavery," and the "class of men . . . who made a business of buying negroes" were "held in horror."⁸ Her characterization ignores the many slave-trading men whom southerners held in high regard, not in spite of but *because* of their extraordinary wealth, often accumulated in the slave trade. It also omits mention of the wives, daughters, and granddaughters of these men, whose lives were often sustained by the profits their kin accumulated while buying and selling human beings.

Bryan also claimed that slave-trading men bought slaves only when "an estate became involved" because "owners could not be induced to part with their negroes until . . . everything else had been seized by their creditors." Slave owners, she averred, preferred poverty over profit if it enabled them "to keep and provide for" their slaves. Slave sales could not be avoided, but they took place only as a last resort. Even then, slave owners detested the necessity of selling their human property, and they suffered intense anguish during such sales. None of these female apologists remarked upon the trauma such events caused for enslaved people. Perhaps they, too, drew the conclusion expressed by Letitia Burwell: such sales "turned out best for the negroes."⁹

Other documents that slave-owning women left behind, as well as those maintained by slave traders, southern court officials, and military officers, offer powerful evidence to challenge these fantastical postwar accounts of slavery and the roles their authors had played in sustaining it. In the days, months, and

years immediately following abolition, and in the most unlikely of literary media, formerly enslaved people gave the lie to white women's sanitized narratives and revealed former slave-owning women's involvement in marketing them and their families without regard to anything but profit. In the briefest of newspaper ads, freed people like Caroline Mason reported on the loved ones they lost because the white women who owned them had sold them, tearing them away from their families, friends, kin, and homes: "I have a sister, Sallie Summers," Mason wrote, "that was sold out of the Mason family. She was sold from [her] three children, two girls and one boy. . . . She was owned by Betsy Mason and was sold by her at Alexandria, Va."¹⁰ On November 20, 1879, John Colbert Skinner posted an advertisement in the "Lost Friends" column of the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* because he was looking for his brother Edward. The last time John had seen him was on October 12, 1860, in Georgetown, in the District of Columbia. Not long after the brothers crossed paths that day, John and his family were forced to leave Edward behind when their owner refuged to the Lower South and took them along. One year after John placed his initial "Lost Friends" advertisement, he still had not found Edward, so he placed another, this time offering more detail. Each advertisement made one point clear: Angelica Chew, the woman who owned him and his family, was responsible for their separation. She was the reason he and his family were still searching for Edward.¹¹

When African American men served in the United States military during the Civil War, they and their widows and children became eligible for pensions. The applications they later sent to the United States Pension Bureau contained details about their lives as enslaved people. Claimants would identify their female owners and touch upon the significant life changes, losses, and separations these women had brought about. Benjamin B. Manson provided a deposition when his son John White applied for a pension after he served in the 14th U.S. Colored Infantry. Manson stated that he "was born in the State of V[irginia] as the property of Mrs Nancy Manson of said state," and that when he was eleven years old, she "moved to the State of Tennessee, bringing her slaves with her."¹² Mrs. Manson had died, and Benjamin had been part of the division of her estate and later changed hands twice more as part of Manson family difficulties.

Sometimes the women who had owned the claimants and their family members added their accounts as well. The government would call upon individuals who knew the claimants intimately to provide depositions to support their claims. When Milley Hale submitted her application for a widow's pension, her former owner Olive (Ollie) Queener, her former owner's sister Ann Queener,

and the son of Tabitha Hunter, the woman who owned her former husband, provided depositions to support her claim.¹³

Scores of formerly enslaved people provided a different understanding of the institution of slavery, their female owners' knowledge of its workings, the part these women had played in their continued subjugation, and the reasons many white southern women were so adamantly opposed to its abolition. And the white women's economic investments in slavery lay at the heart of such accounts. The formerly enslaved narrators detailed the ways their mistresses' investments colored their actions both within and outside of slave-owning households. They also talked about female owners who procured their slaves from marketplaces and at auctions, not simply through gifts and bequests. They charted the movements of slave-owning women who conducted business with dealers and agents, and took part in economic activities that historians of slavery have either overlooked or alleged never happened. Time and again, with their slaves not far from hearing, white slave-owning women articulated their wish to remain invested in slavery and pass their financial legacies on to their children.¹⁴

Formerly enslaved people also recalled the marital relations of their owners in ways that challenge current assumptions about the patriarchal order of nineteenth-century households and the influence then-current laws had upon and within them. Married white women contended with husbands, male employees, community members, and officials about their ownership of slaves, as well as about how much control such men could exercise over their property and who else would be afforded the privilege of doing so. Slave auctions, courtrooms, the pages of local newspapers, military correspondence, and even formerly enslaved people's pension applications provided figurative and literal platforms upon which white slave-owning women paraded their economic ties to both the institution of slavery and the people they owned. They conveyed, over and over, the breadth of knowledge they truly possessed about the realities of slavery.

Of course, not all slave-owning women invested in the slave-market economy or exercised control over their own slaves or the slaves of others. Some sought to adhere as closely as possible to the ideals of womanhood that were proffered in the prescriptive literature of their time. They followed precepts that encouraged them to distance themselves from certain dimensions of slavery. But the slave-owning women discussed in this book deviated from these constrained notions of how proper ladies should behave. They fully embraced the institution of slavery and all the economic benefits that came along with it.

These women were not exceptional. They were, in many respects, similar to women in other parts of the world who benefited from the enslavement of

African-descended people. Whether the Englishwomen who invested in the Royal African Company at the height of the Atlantic slave trade, the female slave traders like Madam Efunroye Tinubu of Nigeria who sold captives along the coasts of Africa, the women whom George Pinckard was “shocked to observe” at a West Indian slave auction who had come for “the express purpose of purchasing slaves,” or women like the one Richard A. Wyvill saw in a Barbadian market examining enslaved “boys with all possible indelicacy” before she bought them, women who lived in regions that were tied to slavery and the slave trade took an active part in maintaining the institution.¹⁵ The character of slavery and the trade differed from region to region, and women adapted their activities to take full advantage of local and regional market conditions. But despite regional and cultural variations, all these women saw slavery as an economic system from which they could profit.

Former slave-owning women’s deeper and more complex investments in slavery help explain why, in the years following the Civil War, they helped construct the South’s system of racial segregation, a system premised, as was slavery, upon white supremacy and black oppression. Understanding the direct economic investments white women made in slavery and their stake in its perpetuation, and recognizing the ways they benefited from their whiteness, helps us understand why they and many of their female descendants elected to uphold a white-supremacist order after slavery ended. If we acknowledge that white women stood to personally and directly benefit from the commodification and enslavement of African Americans we can better understand their participation in postwar white-supremacist movements and atrocities such as lynching—as well as their membership in organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. Southern white women’s roles in upholding and sustaining slavery form part of the much larger history of white supremacy and oppression. And through it all, they were not passive bystanders. They were co-conspirators.

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72. One formerly enslaved woman, Rhody Holsell, believed that slave-owning women hated emancipation because it denied them the right to do as they wished to enslaved people. They “thought it was awful dat dey could not whip de slaves any longer,” Rhody surmised. See Aunt Rhody Holsell, in BS, vol. 10, *Missouri Narratives*, 192.
73. Henry Kirk Miller, in BS, vol. 2, *Arkansas Narratives, Part 5*, 79.
74. O’Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South*, 113.
75. For the prices of cotton in 1860 and 1865, see Watkins, *Production and Price of Cotton for One Hundred Years*, 10–11, and Dattel, *Cotton and Race in the Making of America*, 203.
76. See Downs, “The Other Side of Freedom,” 78–103.
77. John Seage to Brig Genl Fisk, October 4, 1865, in Hahn et al., *Land and Labor, 1865*, 641.
78. James M. Arvent to Brig. Gen. C. B. Fisk, July 27, 1865, *ibid.*, 623–624.
79. Interview with formerly enslaved woman, in *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 139.
80. Sarah H. Maxwell to Genl Wilson, May 21, 1865, in Hahn et al., *Land and Labor*, 86; entry for May 15, 1865, in Heyward, *A Confederate Lady Comes of Age*, 76.
81. Ripley, *From Flag to Flag*.
82. See entry for April 10, 1865, in Judith White Brockenbrough McGuire, “Diary of a Southern Refugee, During the War,” 351–353, and entry for April 11, 1865, in Emma Mordecai, “Diary of Emma Mordecai, April, 1865,” both in Marcus, *Memoirs of American Jews, 1775–1865*, vol. 3, p. 338.
83. Entry for April 13, 1865, in Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 319. For how slave owners adapted in postwar Virginia, see Morseman, *The Big House After Slavery*, 158–192.
84. Entry for May 8, 1865, in Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 264.
85. “N.” made this comment in a letter to Fanny James, who was charged with treason for smuggling supplies to Confederate soldiers. See “Charged with ‘Treason,’” *Sun*, May 12, 1863, 1.
86. Felton, *Country Life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth*, 92.

8. “A MOST UNPRECEDENTED ROBBERY”

1. Eva Jones to Mary Jones, June 13, 1865, in Myers, *Children of Pride*, 1273–1274.
2. Entries for Monday, May 8, 1865, and Monday, June 12, 1865, in Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 265, 275–276.
3. Entry for Sunday, October 8, 1865, *ibid.*, 276.
4. *Ibid.*, 276–277.
5. Congress of the Confederate States of America, “An Act to Increase the Military Force of the Confederate States,” in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion*, series 4, vol. 3, pp. 1161–1162.
6. Tiney Shaw, in BS, vol. 11, *North Carolina Narratives, Part 2*, 266–267.
7. J. W. Terrill, in BS, vol. 16, *Texas Narratives, Part 4*, 82; Tom Haynes, in BS, vol. 2, *Arkansas Narratives, Part 3*, 227.
8. Emma Hurley, in BS, vol. 4, *Georgia Narratives, Part 2*, 278.
9. Betty Jones, in Perdue et al., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 180.

10. Entry for April 13, 1865, in Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 319.
11. Annie Wallace, in Perdue et al., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 294.
12. Interview with an unidentified formerly enslaved woman, *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 113; Ella Wilson, in BS, vol. 2, *Arkansas Narratives, Part 7*, 203.
13. Slave-owning men engaged in similar self-recriminations. See Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 140–141.
14. Entry for November 1, 1868, in Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 293–296.
15. Interview with Liza Jones (Cookie), in BS, vol. 2, *Arkansas Narratives, Part 4*, 156.
16. Entries for March 1, 1865, and May 24, 1865, in Elmore, *A Heritage of Woe*, 106–107, 121; Kay Wright Lewis, *A Curse Upon the Nation*.
17. Lt. Col. H. B. Sprague to Brig General Davis Tillson, January 10, 1866, in Hahn et al., *Land and Labor*, 1865, 905.
18. Hahn et al., *Land and Labor*, 1865, 5, 16. For a more extensive discussion of this process, see O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South*.
19. U.S. Congress, “An Act to Establish a Bureau for the Relief of Freedmen and Refugees,” in Sanger, *The Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamations of the United States of America from December 1863, to December 1865*, 507–509.
20. Ben Lawson, in BS, vol. 13, *Oklahoma Narratives*, 177.
21. Albert Todd, in BS, vol. 16, *Texas Narratives, Part 4*, 106–107.
22. Fannie Berry, in Perdue et al., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 36–37.
23. For an eloquent discussion of these efforts see Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*.
24. James Barber, in Rawick, AS, Supplement, Series 2, vol. 2, *Texas Narratives, Part 1*, 151.
25. Ibid.
26. Reid, *After the War*, 568. On Reid, see Michael P. Riccard, “Whitelaw Reid,” American National Biography Online, <http://www.anb.org/articles/05/05-00653.html> (accessed February 2000).
27. For an example of such a law see “Mississippi Apprentice Law,” *New-Orleans Times*, December 10, 1865, 14. Tera Hunter discusses the impact of Georgia’s Apprentice Act of 1866, which placed freed children alleged to be orphans in the homes of southern whites until they reached the age of twenty-one. Through Hunter’s research in the American Missionary Association’s (AMA) papers, she demonstrates how “benevolent” organizations ignored, dismissed, and overlooked family members in order to avoid placing the children with their kin. The AMA also operated “orphan holding stations” where black orphans were held until apprenticed. See Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 21–43.
28. Interview with Henry Walton, in Rawick, AS, Supplement, Series 1, vol. 10, *Mississippi Narratives, Part 5*, 2168–2169.
29. See, e.g., Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood*, 314–360, Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground*, 140, and Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, esp. 229–247.
30. Mary Niall Mitchell discusses white northerners’ and southerners’ abuses of the apprenticeship laws at length in her *Raising Freedom’s Child*. See also interview with Annie Huff, in BS, vol. 4, *Georgia Narratives, Part 2*, 236, “Mississippi Apprentice

- Law,” *New Orleans Times*, December 10, 1865, 14, Scott, “The Battle over the Child,” and Catherine Jones, “Ties That Bind, Bonds That Break.”
31. Thos. B. Davis to Hon. J. Lanox Bond, November 6, 1864, in Berlin et al., *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South*, 512.
 32. “Ninety Two Year Old Negro Tells of Early Life as Slave,” in BS, vol. 14, *South Carolina Narratives, Part 2*, 179–180.
 33. Burton, *Memories of Childhood’s Slavery Days*, 8, 11–12.
 34. Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood*, 128. For a comprehensive discussion of the postwar adaptations to a free labor system see Glymph, “Freedpeople and Ex-Masters.”
 35. See Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 139.
 36. See Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, 4–20.
 37. Deposition of Silvy Granville, November 21, 1901, in Regosin and Shaffer, *Voices of Emancipation*, 44.
 38. Jerry Moore, in BS, vol. 16, *Texas Narratives, Part 3*, 122; Mrs. Charles Douthit, in BS, vol. 10, *Missouri Narratives*, 107.
 39. Entry for May 30, 1865, in Elmore, *A Heritage of Woe*, 122–123.
 40. Entry for Monday, May 29, 1865, in Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 274.
 41. Entry for July or August 14, 1865, in Elmore, *A Heritage of Woe*, 126–127.
 42. Adj. Gen. L. Thomas to Major Gen. O. O. Howard, July 19, 1865, in Hahn et al., *Land and Labor, 1865*, 373–374. As the number of enslaved people who sought protection behind the Union’s Tennessee lines grew, Major General N. J. T. Dana appointed Colonel Samuel Thomas, then commander of the 64th U.S. Colored Infantry, as the provost marshal general of Freedmen. He was charged with the care and support of the freedmen who would be resident on the “whole peninsula known as Davis Bend, including the three islands known as ‘Hurricane,’ ‘Palmyra,’ and ‘Big Black’ in Tennessee.” See Eaton, *Report of the General Superintendent of Freedmen*, 40–41.
 43. Miss. Sally V. B. Tabb to Major General Howard, August 15, 1865, and W. H. Bergfels to Capt. C. B. Wilder, September 7, 1865, in Hahn et al., *Land and Labor, 1865*, 517–521. Sally was the eldest daughter remaining in the household of Dr. Henry Wythe Tabb, a prominent Virginia physician. In his will he bequeathed to Sally his “woman Isabel and all of her children [along with] all of the children of [his] woman Sue who ha[d] lately died.” He left the bulk of his estate to his sons, yet by the close of the war, Sally had 101 of her father’s former slaves in her charge. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*, and last will and testament of Henry W. Tabb, May 16, 1860, Gilder Lehrman Collection, 1493–1859, GLIAH, Middlesex County, Virginia, documents, GLC03434.22.
 44. *Sealy Banks v. Mrs. Estes*, August 20, 1865, in Hahn et al., *Land and Labor, 1865*, 524.
 45. *Daniel Baker, Frank Johnson, Lewis Wright, and Timothy Terry v. Miss Mary Cowherd*, August 28, 1865, *ibid.*, 525. At the 1850 U.S. Federal Census Slave Schedule, Mary S. Cowherd owned thirty-six slaves ranging in age from one year to seventy-five years. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850*.
 46. *Alfred Goffney v. Widow Strange*, August 27, 1865, in Hahn et al., *Land and Labor, 1865*, 525. See also *Lucy Ann Johnson and Patsy Gordon v. Widow Ham*, August 29, 1865, *ibid.*

47. Interview with John Smith, in BS, vol. 11, *North Carolina Narratives, Part 2*, 278.
48. See Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 167–203, Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*, 187–233, and Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 27–43.
49. W. E. Towne to Brvt. Major General Saxton, August 17, 1865, in Hahn et al., *Land and Labor*, 1865, 159.
50. Ibid.
51. Thomas Dixon dwelt on this idea in his novels *The Leopard's Spots* and *The Clansman*.
52. For discussions of Reconstruction-era racial violence see Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me*, 17–54, Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, and Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 110.
53. Lillian Clarke, in Perdue et al., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 73.
54. Quoted in Waterbury, *Seven Years Among the Freedmen*, 28. Calculation from Samuel H. Williamson, “Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1774 to Present,” Measuring Worth, www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/ (accessed July 13, 2018).
55. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860* and *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870*.
56. See Kearney, *A Slaveholder's Daughter*, 23.
57. “President Johnson’s Amnesty Proclamation. Restoration to Rights of Property Except in Slaves. An Oath of Loyalty as a Condition Precedent. Legality of Confiscation Proceedings Recognized. Exception of Certain Offenders from This Amnesty. By These Special Applications for Pardon May Be Made. Reorganization in North Carolina. Appointment of a Provisional Governor. A State Convention to Be Chosen by Loyal Citizens. The Machinery of the Federal Government to Be Put in Operation. AMNESTY PROCLAMATION,” *New York Times*, May 30, 1865, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1865/05/30/news/president-johnson-s-amnesty-proclamation-restoration-rights-property-except.html>.
58. Entry for July 28, 1865, in Edmondston, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 716.
59. NARA-Amnesty Papers. Bradley R. Clampitt examines a sample of women’s applications for pardon and amnesty, and he finds that the overwhelming majority of women made their applications to regain their property rights. He does not discuss the fact that coverture should have precluded these applications, nor does he consider the profound implications these losses had for married, single, and widowed women. See Clampitt, “Not Intended to Dispossess Females.” See also McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 214–215.
60. Louisa M. Harris, Application for Pardon and Amnesty, Huntsville, Alabama, Submitted October 4, 1865, Carrie Lomax, Application for Pardon and Amnesty, Submitted May 29, 1865, Mrs. Eliza Grey, Dallas County, Alabama, Application for Pardon and Amnesty, Submitted August 4, 1865, Sworn and subscribed August 21, 1865, Mary A. Hood, Meriwether County, Georgia, Submitted August 1865, all in NARA-Amnesty Papers.
61. Sarah J. Firth, Submitted July 13, 1865, Barnwell District, South Carolina, and Irene Smith, Washington County, Mississippi, Submitted December 15, 1865, NARA-Amnesty Papers.

62. Catharine Fulton to His Excellency, Governor Jonathan Worth, Wilmington, NC, Submitted January 16, 1866, Catharine Fulton to General O. H. Howard, Wilmington, NC, Submitted March 7, 1866, and John A. Winslow to Andrew Johnson, Roxbury, Submitted April 7, 1866, Catharine Fulton, Submitted November 16, 1865, Julie P. Henderson, Submitted August 16, 1865, Natchez, Mississippi, Annie L. Davis, Submitted September 11, 1865, Richmond, Virginia, NARA-Amnesty Papers.
63. Mrs. Caroline Alston, Application for Pardon and Amnesty, Choctaw County, Alabama, Submitted August 4, 1865, and Mrs. Mary L. Carter, Application for Pardon and Amnesty, Mobile County, Alabama, October 30, 1865, both in NARA-Amnesty Papers.
64. Mrs. Eliza Grey, Dallas County, Alabama, Application for Pardon and Amnesty, Submitted August 4, 1865, Sworn and subscribed August 21, 1865, NARA-Amnesty Papers.

EPILOGUE

1. See Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 139–168, Michael P. Johnson, “Looking for Lost Kin,” and Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 229–247.
2. Bryan, *A Grandmother’s Recollection of Dixie*, 3. This kind of mythologizing was not the work of older white southern women alone. According to the historian Victoria E. Ott, young women also recognized their “responsibility in promoting this return to white supremacy, and their postwar reminiscences became the vehicle for articulating their vision of the New South’s racial order.” Ott, *Confederate Daughters*, 130.
3. Diane N. Captiani explores how this logic operated in white women’s writing at length in *Truthful Pictures*.
4. Burwell, *A Girl’s Life in Virginia Before the War*, 44.
5. De Saussure, *Old Plantation Days*, 19.
6. Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans*, 192. See also Burwell, *A Girl’s Life in Virginia Before the War*, 44–46.
7. De Saussure, *Old Plantation Days*, 80. An example of Louis’s advertisements as a slave broker can be found in the *Charleston Courier*, January 4, 1848. Nancy mentions her visit to Louis’s home in *Old Plantation Days*, 65.
8. Bryan, *A Grandmother’s Recollection of Dixie*, 23.
9. Burwell, *A Girl’s Life in Virginia Before the War*, 28–29.
10. Advertisement, *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, December 25, 1879.
11. Advertisements, *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, November 20, 1879, and June 10, 1880.
12. Excerpt from the Deposition of Benjamin B. Manson, July 1909, Civil War Pension File of John White, 14th USCI, RG 15, in Regosin and Shaffer, *Voices of Emancipation*, 21. See also Regosin, *Freedom’s Promise*, Shaffer, *After the Glory*, and Kaye, *Joining Places*.
13. Excerpt from the Deposition of Milley Hale, June 28, 1898, Excerpt from the Deposition of Sarah Clotfelter, July 1, 1898, Excerpt from the Deposition of Ollie [Olive] Queener, July 1, 1898, and Excerpt from the Deposition of J[ames]. C. Hunter,

- July 16, 1898, Civil War Pension File of Joseph Hale, 1st USCHA, RG 15, in Regosin and Shaffer, *Voices of Emancipation*, 127–129. Tabitha Marcum Hunter, James's mother, owned three enslaved females, aged forty-one, twelve, and ten, in 1850. See Entry for Sampson D. Queener and Tabitha Marcum Hunter, U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States*, 1850, Campbell, Tennessee, Schedule 2 (slave inhabitants).
14. For an example of an enslaved person who witnessed white women at a slave auction, see B. E. Rogers, in Rawick, AS, Supplement, Series 1, vol. 11, *North Carolina and South Carolina Narratives*, 55.
 15. Carlos, Maguire, and Neal, "Financial Acumen, Women Speculators, and the Royal African Company During the South Sea Bubble"; Biobaku, "Madame Tinubu"; Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies*, vol. 2, pp. 327–328. Pinckard even remarked upon the children who "were brought [to the auction] to point the lucky finger, and the boy or girl, thus chosen, was bought by papa at the request of superstitious mama, to give to young massa or missy!" (328). Richard A. Wyvill, *Memoirs of an Old Army Officer*, 24.