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Chapter Author: Stephen Crawford

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The Slave Family

A View from the Slave Narratives

Stephen Crawford

The slave narrative collections of the Work Projects Administration and Fisk University contain over 2,200 interviews with aged ex-slaves taken primarily in the late 1930s. Although the interviews were largely unstructured and vary greatly in quality, they have rightly come to be accepted as important sources for the study of slavery.¹ There has been a growing realization during the past fifteen years that the narratives can provide quantitative evidence for research on slave historiography.² These quantitative uses must take into account the considerable biases inherent in a source that consists entirely of the memories of aged ex-slaves. But, if these biases are reported and corrected for, the resulting quantitative measures are extremely useful summaries of this vast body of information.

One of the most important issues that can be quantitatively studied with the narrative source is slave family structure. The vast majority of the ex-slaves talked about their family experience under slavery, providing a snapshot of slave family structure in the immediate antebellum period. By examining the data and cross-tabulating family type with relevant variables, such as plantation size and location, it is possible to observe how slave family structure was altered by both slaves and masters.

The nature of the ex-slave interviews makes the narrative sample a unique data source. Because few of the ex-slaves reached adulthood before emancipation, the sample consists of children reared under various family types. More important, each ex-slave did not provide information for just a single

1. See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York, 1976), and George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, 1972).

2. Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill, 1979).

cross section but, rather, a chronological history of his or her family. To illustrate, consider the case of a slave child born into a family containing both parents but whose father was subsequently sold away. The informant was then sold from his mother and on the eve of emancipation was living without family, alone in the slave quarters. To quantify this information requires two family distributions. The first is given here by the family at the time the informant was taken away from the family (or at the time of emancipation, if the slave were not separated from the family of origin). It is a history of the marriage, in all but legal terms, of the slave's parents. The example given would be coded as a female-headed family created through sale of the father. The second distribution focuses on the informant at the time of emancipation. The example would be coded as a child living alone in the quarters without family owing to sale or transfer.

I term the first distribution the "Family of Origin." It summarizes all the information in the narratives about the marriages of the informant's parents. The second distribution I term the "Slave Household Type." This distribution is a snapshot of slave households that contained children just prior to emancipation.

Developing the two distributions requires accurate coding of often sketchy qualitative information. The narratives did not come from structured question-and-answer sessions designed to generate easily quantifiable data. Interviewers were encouraged to cover important topics, such as family life under slavery, but, more often than not, the aged informants simply reminisced about their experience as slaves. Thus, the family-type categories have been created out of numerous individual coding decisions, the possible biases of which will be discussed.

Table 11.1 presents the Family of Origin distribution. This distribution focuses on slave marriages by categorizing the ex-slave's family type either when he or she was separated from the family of origin or at the time of emancipation. Roughly two-thirds of the ex-slaves grew up in families defined as "two-parent consolidated," meaning the family lived together on the same plantation, or "two-parent divided residence," meaning the father lived on a different plantation from his wife and children.³ The remaining third were raised for at least part of their childhood in a single-parent family, almost exclusively female headed. To understand this distribution requires an examination of the individual family types.

Half of the ex-slaves who provided information belonged to two-parent consolidated families. These families were easy to categorize because ex-slaves often reminisced about mothers and fathers and their relationships during slavery. In general, these were enduring relationships that began under slavery and extended into the post-emancipation period. Less than 2 percent

3. I will use words like "wife," "husband," and "marriage" throughout to describe relationships in the terms the ex-slaves did.

Table 11.1 Distribution of Family Type for Slave's Family of Origin

Family Type	Absolute Frequency	Percentage within Sample
Two-parent, consolidated	694	51.1%
Two-parent, divided residence	168	12.4
One-parent, female headed	451	33.2
One-parent, male headed	24	1.8
Orphan	20	1.5
Total	1,357	100.0%

Note: Family of Origin is given by the structure at the time the slave was sold from the family or at emancipation.

of these two-parent consolidated families were voluntarily broken when slavery ended.⁴

A surprising feature of the two-parent consolidated households is the virtual absence of stepparents, especially stepfathers. Only 2 percent of the category identified the fathers as a step, as opposed to a biological parent. Apparently, once a slave marriage was broken by death or sale it was rarely reformed, at least not in the eyes of the slave child. Thus one explanation for the high percentage of female-headed families is the lack of remarriage, rather than an absence of marriage altogether. For some reason, be it the availability of potential new spouses or reluctance on the part of the slaves, few women re-established two-parent households through remarriage.⁵

The second category in Table 11.1 comprises families defined as two-parent, divided residence. Such families are inferred when the slave said that his or her father lived on a nearby plantation but visited often enough to maintain the family bond. More often than not, the father spent Saturday afternoon through Sunday night with his family. In a minority of cases, a weekday visit was allowed. A small minority of less fortunate fathers were allowed only irregular, infrequent, or merely seasonal visits.

The separation of divided-residence families undoubtedly placed strains on the marriage and the family. For instance, Jane Sutton's parents lived on farms that were geographically near, but the father's absence seriously endangered the relationship between the father and his children.

My pappy's name was Steve Hutchins. He b'lon to de Hutchins what live down near Silver Creek. He jus' come on Satu'day night an' us don' see

4. The low level of voluntary disruption suggests that slave marriages were largely by choice. If slaveowners forced slaves together, I would expect higher levels of separation when there was no longer a slaveowner to require that parents stay together.

5. An alternative explanation is that the reforming of families by stepparentage was so easy that the new parent was completely accepted. This seems unlikely given both the explicit mention of stepparents by ex-slaves and the lack of any discussion of the loss of parents by death or sale among those in two-parent families. Even if the new parent were completely accepted, I would expect that there would be some discussion of the loss of the natural parent.

much of 'im. Us call him 'dat man'. Mammy tol' us to be more 'spectful to 'im 'cause he was us daddy, but us aint care nothin' 'bout 'im. He aint never bring us no candy or nothin'.⁶

More often, however, the ex-slaves' stories demonstrate the strength of the family bond. Charly Davis's parents lived on adjoining plantations and Charly's father avoided patrollers during extra visits with his wife and family.

My mammy and pappy got married after freedom, 'cause they didn't git de time for a weddin' befo'. They called deirselves man and wife a long time befo' they was really married, and dat is de reason dat I's as old as I is now. I reckon they was right, in de fust place 'cause they never did want nobody else 'cept each other, no how.⁷

That fathers and husbands clandestinely, and under threat of punishment, made extra family visits demonstrates the cohesiveness of these families. Samuel Boulware remembered that his father came to see the family even though he faced a whipping if caught.

My daddy was a slave on Reuban Bouwawe's plantation, 'bout two miles from Marster Hunter's place. He would git a pass to come to see mammy once every week. If he come more than dat he would have to skeedaddle through de woods and fields from de patrollers. If they ketched him widout a pass, he was sho' in for a skin cracklin' whippin'. He knowed all dat but he would slip to see mammy anyhow, whippin' or not.⁸

The most important quantitative measure of the strength of divided-residence families is the extent to which they voluntarily reunited after freedom. Information on the post-emancipation history is available for half of the families. In 80 percent of this subsample, the family reunited. The importance of the father's role in these divided families is revealed by where the family reunited after emancipation. The sample is very small, but, in the twelve cases with information, eleven reported the family reuniting on the father's plantation and, in the other, on neither the mother's nor the father's plantation.

Given all the indications of cohesiveness in the two-parent divided-residence families, it seems correct to group these families together with the two-parent consolidated families to obtain a measure of families with strong, unbroken bonds between the parents. Fully 62 percent of the ex-slaves were raised by parents who had an unbroken marriage. What of the remaining ex-slaves?

The single-parent-family category is more difficult to code than either of the two-parent categories. When the family was never formed because the father was unknown or when it was broken due to parental death or sale,

6. Rawick, vol. 7, *Mississippi Narratives*, p. 151. Note that all references are cited by abbreviated reference to George P. Rawick, editor, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 19 vols. (Westport, 1972).

7. Rawick, vol. 2 (1), *South Carolina Narratives*, p. 252.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

coding was straightforward. It was also straightforward when the ex-slave talked about the father not being present. In roughly 20 percent of the cases, however, the father was mentioned as having a different owner from the rest of the family, but the father did not visit. Although it might be argued that some of these families were really two-parent divided residence, I have chosen to code them as single parent. These families clearly exhibit a weaker or possibly nonexistent bond between the mother and children and the absent father. To include them in the divided-residence category could call into question the aggregation of two-parent consolidated and divided residence into an overall two-parent category.

Single-parent families were created by four factors, two of which were unique to slavery. The general causes were parental death and bastardy. The causes unique to slavery were the sale of a parent and the existence of a white father.⁹

Nine percent of the female-headed families resulted from death of the father. If we add orphans to this figure, the total percentage of the ex-slaves providing family information who reported their fathers as dead is 4.5 percent. Most of the father-headed families were created by the death of the mother. Taking these together with the orphans leaves a total percentage of dead mothers of 3 percent. Parental death was not a major cause of single-parent families in the slave narrative collection.

The number of children with unknown fathers is difficult to investigate using the narratives. A two-parent family could well have been composed of children with different fathers who were simply accepted into the family. If "illegitimacy" is defined as ex-slaves who said that they did not know the identity of their father, 9 percent of the children in the mother-headed category could be defined as illegitimate. This group can be further divided in two segments: one in which the child was clearly illegitimate and another in which the parents were separated before the child knew his or her father. Henderson Perkins fell into the former category: "In dem days, 'twarnt so particular 'bout gettin married, and my mammy warn't before I'se born, so I'se don' know my father."¹⁰ John Finely told a somewhat different story but one that also indicates his mother and father were never "married": "My pappy an on dat plantation but I don't know him 'cause mammy never talks 'bout him 'cept to say. He am here."¹¹ In the other group were children such as Easter Wells who was very young when she was separated from her father.

I never saw my father; in fact, I never heard my mammy say anything about him and I don't guess I ever asked her anything about him for I never thought anything about not having a father. I guess he belonged to another

9. White parentage is treated as a separate category from bastardy because of legal issues regarding slavery. Whites could not form a legal family with blacks even if they chose to.

10. Rawick, vol. 5 (3), *Texas Narratives*, p. 180.

11. Rawick, vol. 4 (2), *Texas Narratives*, p. 35.

family and when we moved away he was left behind and he didn't try to find us after de War.¹²

Parental death and unknown fathers were common to both slave and free populations. But the reasons for the absence of fathers in slave families also includes sale and the fact that some fathers were white. Six percent of the ex-slaves in the white-interviewer sample and 10 percent of the ex-slaves in the black-interviewer sample claimed to have had white fathers. Put another way, between 15 percent and 25 percent of the mother-headed households were formed because the father was white.

The narratives are an important source for exploring sexual relations between female slaves and white men. Table 11.2 cross-tabulates the incidence of white fathers on large and small plantations. A slave child was twice as likely to have a white father if the child's mother lived on a small plantation than if she lived on a large plantation. The increased risk was undoubtedly due to the increased contact between master and slave on the smaller plantations.

The risk from close contact is confirmed by the cross-tabulation of white parentage by the mother's job in Table 11.3. Slave children whose mothers worked in a house-related occupation were twice as likely to have a white father than those whose mothers worked in the field. The risk of interracial sex was strongly related to the level of day-to-day interaction between white men and black women, and slave women working as domestics and on small slave holdings faced the highest risk. While the size of the plantation can be treated as exogenous, a master may have brought a female slave who attracted his attention into his house.

Roughly half the ex-slaves who were children of white fathers did not comment on their mothers' experiences. The remainder told of events ranging from brutal rape to a long-term relationship with obvious affection. Mary Peters related that her mother was raped at fifteen by all three of the master's sons.

My mothers mistress had three boys, one twenty-one, one nineteen, and one seventeen. . . . While she was alone, the boys came in and threw her down on the floor and tied her down so she couldn't struggle, and one after the other used her as long as they wanted for the whole afternoon . . . that's the way I came to be here.¹³

Victor Duhan's mother was also forced to have sex with the master's son.

I didn't have brothers or sisters, except half ones. It is like this, my mama was a houseservant in the Duhon family. She was a hairdresser. One day she barbered master's son, who was Lucien. He says that he'll shave her head if she won't do what he likes. After that she his woman till he marries a white lady.¹⁴

12. Rawick, vol. 7, *Oklahoma Narratives*, p. 316.

13. Rawick, vol. 10 (5), *Arkansas Narratives*, pp. 328–29.

14. Rawick, vol. 4 (1), *Texas Narratives*, p. 307.

Table 11.2 The Race of the Ex-slave's Father Cross-tabulated by the Size of the Plantation

Race of Father	Plantation Size (in number of slaves)	
	1-49	50 or More
Black	196 (92.5%)	188 (96.7%)
White	16 (7.5%)	7 (3.6%)
Total	212	195

Table 11.3 Cross-tabulation of the Race of the Ex-slave's Father by the Job of the Ex-slave's Mother

Race of Father	Mother's Job	
	House-Related	Fieldwork
Black	261 (92.9%)	135 (96.4%)
White	5 (7.1%)	5 (3.6%)
Total	281	140

Entirely different are cases where there was a lasting affection between the white father and the ex-slave's mother. Thomas Ruffin reported that his father was his master: "He never married. Carried my mother around everywhere he went. Out of all the niggers, he didn't have but one with him. That was in slavery time and he was a fool about her."¹⁵ Betty Brown's white father and black mother also clearly cared for each other.

Our daddy; he wuz an Irishman, name Millan, an' he had de bigges' still in Arkansas. Yes'm, he had a white wife, an' five chillern at home, but mah mammy says he like her an' she like him.¹⁶

About 8 percent of the slave families were broken by the sale of one of the parents. But the 8 percent figure is probably a lower bound estimate, because the sample is weighted toward ex-slaves who were very young when slavery ended, and thus may have been spared the sale of a parent. Looking only at the group who reached age 15 before emancipation, the proportion who experienced the sale of a parent rises to 11 percent. It is also likely that parental sales are disguised by such responses as "my father had a different master."

15. Rawick, vol. 10 (6), *Arkansas Narratives*, p. 97.

16. Rawick, vol. 11, *Missouri Narratives*, p. 52.

Adding this factor puts an upper limit on the proportion of slave children who saw their parents' marriage broken through sale at 23 percent.

To assess the disruptive forces working on the slave marriage, having a white father must be grouped with parental sale. Using the black-interviewer sample, 10 percent of the ex-slaves had white fathers and 11 percent of those age 15 or under experienced the sale of a parent. Thus at minimum 21 percent of slave children in the narratives lived in families that were broken because of forces peculiar to slavery. Slavery strongly affected the permanence of slave marriage, creating a dual family structure with roughly two-thirds of the slave children experiencing two-parent families and one-third experiencing single-parent families.

The number of siblings might be expected to vary across the three main family types presented in the Family of Origin distribution. Although the ex-slaves were not directly asked about the size of the family, they often mentioned the number of siblings. Since ex-slaves may not have known about siblings who died or were sold, the family-size information is potentially measured with error but probably not systematically so across family types.

The average number of children in different family types is presented in Table 11.4. As might be expected, the number of children was larger in two-parent than in single-parent families. The difference, however, is smaller than one might anticipate. Female-headed families still averaged almost six children. This large family size could indicate either that the father was separated from the family after a considerable time or that the ex-slave's mother continued to have sexual relations with other slave men after the father left.

Some ex-slaves reported that when their father left, their mother stopped having children. Other ex-slaves were just as clear that the loss of their father was not the end of the mother's sexual activity and childbearing. As Emma Watson related in her story of life under slavery:

My paw, I don't know nothin' bout. My sister Anna and me, us have de same paw, but my mammy's sold out of Miss'sippi 'way from my paw 'fore my birthin'. My maw kept de name of Lucindy Lane, but Martha and Jennie, my other sisters, had different paws.¹⁷

Continued sexual activity was part of the explanation for large female-headed families, and only infrequently did new two-parent families form. Female-headed families lacked an adult male on a continuing basis. Thus for continued sexual activity to explain most of the family size, the ex-slave's mother would have had to raise children whose father did not become a continuing part of the family.

The second explanation for the relatively large number of children in female-headed families is that fathers were sold away from already large families. The narratives include many profoundly sad descriptions of fathers being sold away which, by virtue of their detail, could only have come from

17. Rawick, vol. 5 (4), *Texas Narratives*, p. 147.

Table 11.4 The Average Number of Children Per Slave Family

Family Type	Number of Children
Two-parent, consolidated	7.2
Two-parent, divided residence	8.0
One-parent, female headed	5.7

children old enough probably to have younger brothers and sisters. Thus both continued sexual activity and the sale of fathers with numerous children help explain the relatively large size of female-headed families. Nonetheless, these families were smaller than their two-parent counterparts, so slaveowners who interrupted a union forfeited some of their female slave's fertility.

Family size was even smaller when the ex-slave claimed to have had a white father. Although the sample size is small, the average number of children in these families is approximately 4.5. This smaller family size, compared with regular female-headed families, indicates that black women who bore a child by a white man tended to bear fewer children.

Two-parent consolidated-residence families tended to be somewhat smaller than their divided counterparts. This finding confirms the regularity of visits between the divided husband and wife. Overall, the comparison of family size among the three major family types shows that female-headed families were one-to-two-children smaller than either consolidated or divided-residence two-parent families. On average, breaking up a slave family had a real economic cost to the slaveowner. Slave women separated from their husbands often continued sexual activity, but the absence of a husband led to smaller families.

The Family of Origin distribution focuses on the slave marriage and how slaves came to reside in a dual- or single-parent family. The narratives have, however, much more information on the slave family. The Family of Origin distribution has limited relevance because it does not allow for one of the most disruptive influences of slavery, the sale or transfer of slave children from their parents. The importance of the slave family can only begin to be understood if we know the age at which slave children were taken from their families. And the overall effect of slavery can only be known by understanding the conditions under which children lived away from their families.

Table 11.5 presents a complete distribution of the households in which slave children lived just prior to emancipation. At the time the snapshot was taken the ex-slaves varied in age from small children to young adults. The distribution includes the family types already discussed plus three new categories: living in the master's house or in the quarters without parents, and married in own household.

Roughly 5 percent of the ex-slaves were raised for at least part of their childhood in the master's house away from their parents. These slave children were largely, but not exclusively, female. They ended up in the master's house

Table 11.5 Slave Household Types

Household Type	Absolute Frequency	Percentage within Sample
Two-parent, consolidated	624	42.9%
Two-parent, divided residence	151	10.4
One-parent, female headed	328	22.5
One-parent, male headed	16	1.1
Living in master's house	69	4.7
Living in quarters without parents	186	12.8
Married in own household	82	5.6
Total	1,456	100.0

Note: Based on the ex-slaves' actual living situation at emancipation.

primarily because they were transferred to a relative of the slaveowner or because they lost their natural parents through sale or death. The distinction between sale and transfer within the slaveowner's family is important. Rarely were slave husband and wife separated by transfer. Children were transferred from their families but, unlike children sold from their families, rarely ended up alone in slave quarters. For example, Eliza Scantling told the following story about being given to her master's daughter as a wedding present.

Both my missus wuz good to me. De last missus I own treat me jes' de same as her own child. I stayed right dere in de house wid her, an' if I wuz sick or anything she'd take care of me same as her own chillun. I nurse one of her chillun. An dat child would rather be wid me than wid her own mother.¹⁸

Many of the ex-slaves who grew up in the master's house were separated from their parents by such an intrafamily transfer. Other children were taken into the slaveowner's home when their parents were sold away or died. Lola Chambers, who grew up in Kentucky, had such an experience.

I ain't never seen my mother enough to really know her, cause she was sold off the plantation where I was raised, when I was too young to remember her, and I just growed up in the house with the white folks dat owned me, . . . I fared right well with my white masters. I done all de sewing in de house, wait on de table, clean up de house, knit and pick wool, and my old miss used to carry me to church with her whenever she went.¹⁹

While most of the children who lived in the big house were permanently separated from their parents, some had family members on the farm. In certain cases the slave child performed household chores and slept in the master's house until he or she was old enough to work in the field. In other cases the split with the slave family was more permanent.

18. Rawick, vol. 3 (4), *South Carolina Narratives*, p. 80.

19. Rawick, vol. 11, *Missouri Narratives*, pp. 79–80.

My young marster married a Miss Nannie Long, and then he give me to her for a maid. They taken me from mother on Christmas, and I was not six years old until March. I never lived with my mother; I lived right in the house with the white folks. I carried a white child on my arm most of the time. Of course I had company, but at nine o'clock I had to go into the house.²⁰

The narratives suggest that slave children in the master's house experienced an improved standard of living. In contrast, the 13 percent of the ex-slaves who lived without their parents in slave quarters experienced a harsher lifestyle. The distinguishing characteristic of these children is the lack of narrative information about their day-to-day living arrangements. The information on the family of origin and the tales of separation are extensive. After the separation, however, the information stops. This suggests that rather than joining a new family, the slave had to fend for her- or himself in the slave quarters. The narratives do not indicate that slaves moved easily from their biological family to a new protective family.

The risk a slave child faced of being sold from his or her family can be calculated from the narrative sample. Looking at the narrative collection as a whole, somewhat more than one hundred, or roughly 5 percent, of the slaves said they were sold away from their family at some time in their lives. The 5 percent is a lower bound since many narratives did not touch on family history. Restricting the sample to only those who provide family information increases to 7.5 percent the estimate of children sold from their family. Either figure, however, is significantly biased by the age distribution of the narrative sample at the time of emancipation. What is needed to evaluate the risk of sale away from the family is the probability at different ages.

The probability of sale at different ages for slave children can be estimated by using the exact ages at sale provided by 42 of the 109 ex-slaves who reported being sold. Table 11.6 outlines the computation of the probability of sale for slave children, with the results reported in column 5. Through age sixteen, the slave child faced roughly a 20 percent chance of being sold away from the family. Basing these calculations on the subsample of people who spoke of their family history would raise this probability to about 26 percent. The table also shows the relatively low probability of sale before age nine. Through age nine the cumulative probability of sale was just 5 to 7 percent. From age ten to sixteen the probability increased to 20 to 26 percent.

The probability of sale indicates that a significant number of slave children were sold from their families, a finding that may indicate the tendency of some slaveowners to break up slave families. There are indications, however, that slaveowners did not completely disregard the slave family when making decisions on slave sales. If a slaveowner desired to sell a slave, he had the option of choosing from a group. If the decision were random, we would

20. Rawick, vol. 18, *Fisk University Narratives*, pp. 226–27.

Table 11.6 Probability of a Child's Sale from the Family of Origin, by Age

Age	% Sold ^a (1)	Expected Number Sold ^b (2)	Cumulative Number Sold (3)	Slaves at Given Age or Older ^c (4)	Cumulative Probability of Sale ^d (5)
3	4.8%	5.23	5.23	1,833.6	.0028
4	7.1	7.74	12.97	1,764.6	.0073
5	7.1	7.74	20.71	1,695.6	.0122
6	7.1	7.74	28.45	1,599.9	.0178
7	14.3	15.59	44.04	1,519.4	.0290
8	14.3	15.59	59.63	1,423.6	.0419
9	2.4	2.62	62.25	1,308.6	.0476
10	9.5	10.36	72.61	1,222.4	.0594
11	11.9	12.97	85.58	1,118.9	.0765
12	2.4	2.62	88.20	1,021.2	.0864
13	4.8	5.23	93.43	915.8	.1020
14	4.8	5.23	98.66	785.6	.1256
15	4.8	5.23	103.89	705.1	.1473
16+	4.8	5.23	109.12	561.4	.1944
Total	100.0	109.0			

^aDerived from the percentage of ex-slaves who reported being sold at that age among all who gave age at sale.

^bDerived by multiplying the percentages in column 1 by 109, the total number of ex-slaves in the entire sample sold from their families.

^cDerived by applying the age distribution of the subsample of ex-slaves who gave their exact age, 1,167, to the entire sample, 1,916.

^dColumn 3 divided by column 4.

expect the probability of sale to be equal for all slave children. A detailed look at the 109 ex-slaves sold from their families shows that 41 of them, or 38 percent, were subsequently sold at least once. Since the probability of sale within the entire sample was 5 to 7 percent, the probability of being resold once the slave child was initially separated from his or her family increased substantially. Correcting for the age distributions of the different samples would bring these probabilities somewhat closer together, but the fact remains that slaveowners showed a preference for selling slave children already separated from their families.²¹

Sale, transfer, and, to some extent, the marriage of the ex-slave are the added information that converts the Family of Origin distribution into the household distribution. The probability that a slave experienced any of these events increased with age. Table 11.7 cross-tabulates this household distribu-

21. An alternative explanation is that disobedient or naughty slaves were sold. If so, it would suggest that young slaves who were separated by sale from their parents did not become effectively socialized into the slave system.

Table 11.7 Cross-tabulation of Ex-slaves by Household Type and Age in 1865

Household Type	Age in 1865						
	0-3	4-7	8-11	12-15	16-19	20-25	25 +
Two-parent, consolidated	66.2%	55.8%	47.1%	42.2%	34.5%	31.5%	16.9%
Two-parent, divided residence	14.1	10.9	16.0	10.0	10.0	5.6	1.5
One-parent, female headed	18.3	24.2	23.5	26.5	20.0	12.4	14.9
One-parent, male headed	0.0	0.0	1.6	0.0	2.7	1.1	0.0
Living in master's house	0.0	2.4	3.7	6.6	10.0	9.0	3.0
Living in quarters without parents	1.4	6.1	8.0	12.8	14.5	27.0	25.4
Married in own household	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.9	8.1	13.5	28.4
Subsample size	71	165	187	211	110	89	67

tion by the ex-slave's age at the end of slavery. Roughly 80 percent of the ex-slaves were born into either a two-parent consolidated or a two-parent divided-residence family. The proportion of two-parent families steadily decreases as the age of the ex-slave increases. The decrease is due to the breakup of slave marriages through death or sale and the sale or transfer of the slave children. These two factors reduce the percentage of children living in two-parent families to 52 percent by age 12 to 15, and to 40 percent by age 20 and over.

The bottom three rows of Table 11.7 show the movement of slave children away from their families into the three special household situations: alone in the quarters or in the master's house, and married in their own household. The three categories increase steadily across the age distributions from only 1.4 percent who lived separately by age 0 to 3, to 33 percent living separately by age 16 to 29. The incidence of the three household types is best examined by looking at separate household-by-age cross-tabulations for male and female ex-slaves. These cross-tabulations are presented in Tables 11.8 and 11.9.

As the age of the ex-slave increases, the pattern of children leaving the family differs significantly. Female slave children were more likely to be separated from their families and more likely to live in the master's house than were male slave children. For instance, in the 12-15 age group, 12.5 percent of the males compared with 30 percent of the females were alone either in the quarters or the master's house. This substantial difference was due to the larger number of females living in the master's house, with close to 15 percent of females 12 to 15 years of age in the master's house compared with almost none of the males. The percentage for males and females in the master's house and quarters does not become the same until the 20-25 age group when roughly 35 percent of both the males and females were apart from their families. The proportion of male slaves in the master's house increased dramatically for slaves aged 16 to 25. For the female slaves, the proportion in the

Table 11.8 Cross-tabulation of Male Ex-slaves by Household Type and Age in 1865

Household Type	Males, Age in 1865						
	0-3	4-7	8-11	12-15	16-19	20-25	25 +
Two-parent, consolidated	61.5%	61.4%	49.5%	47.1%	35.6%	39.0%	26.8%
Two-parent, divided residence	15.4	9.6	14.7	9.9	11.9	3.4	0.0
One-parent, female headed	23.1	18.1	22.0	28.1	28.8	15.3	9.8
One-parent, male headed	0.0	0.0	1.8	0.0	3.4	1.7	0.0
Living in master's house	0.0	1.2	2.8	0.8	6.8	8.5	2.4
Living in quarters without parents	0.0	9.6	9.2	11.6	11.9	25.4	36.5
Married in own household	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.5	1.7	6.8	24.4
Subsample size	39	83	109	121	59	59	41

Table 11.9 Cross-tabulation of Female Ex-slaves by Household Type and Age in 1865

Household Type	Females, Age in 1865						
	0-3	4-7	8-11	12-15	16-19	20-25	25 +
Two-parent, consolidated	73.3%	51.3%	43.6%	34.8%	33.3%	14.8%	23.1%
Two-parent, divided residence	13.3	12.5	17.9	10.1	7.8	11.1	3.8
One-parent, female headed	10.0	31.3	25.6	24.7	9.8	7.4	23.1
One-parent, male headed	0.0	0.0	1.3	0.0	2.0	0.0	0.0
Living in master's house	0.0	3.8	5.1	14.6	13.7	11.1	3.8
Living in quarters without parents	3.3	1.3	6.4	14.6	17.7	25.9	11.5
Married in own household	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.1	15.7	29.6	34.6
Subsample size	30	80	78	89	51	27	26

master's house peaks among the 12-15 age group and then falls off steadily. Slave girls who nursed, cooked, and cleaned were useful at a younger age than were slave boys who acted as personal servants and coachmen.

Tables 11.8 and 11.9 include information from the narratives regarding the age at which slaves married. The sample is small because few of the ex-slaves interviewed had reached marriageable age during slavery. After all, a slave twenty years old in 1865 would have been a 92-year-old ex-slave informant in 1937. The reported incidence of marriage among the ex-slaves who did reach marriageable age was low in the narratives. This might reflect the lack of interviewer interest in the subject or the ex-slave's focus on initial family life. Even if the absolute levels are suspect, the movement in the percentage-married at different ages provides information on the age at which males and females tended to get married.

Female slaves were married at a significantly earlier age than males, although very few females were married before fifteen years of age. The first large group of female slaves to marry was in the 16-19 age group where 16

percent reported being married. The percentage married doubles between the 16–19 and the 20-and-older age groups. Slave girls began marrying after age 16, but the largest percentage waited until they were 20 or older. The first jump in the percentage of male slaves married does not come until the 20-and-older category. In fact, the small number who said they were married suggests that many male slaves probably waited until their mid to late twenties before getting married.

The household information together with the previously discussed estimates of sale can be used to provide a view of the permanence of slave families. Roughly 75 to 80 percent of the slaves in the narratives were born into two-parent (consolidated and divided-residence) families. By age nineteen, close to 50 percent of the slaves were still members of such families. Thus roughly 40 percent of the slave children born into two-parent families experienced the loss of a parent by death or sale or were themselves sold or transferred from the family. Roughly 20 percent of slave children never experienced life in a two-parent household—because they had a white father or a slave father whom they never knew, their family was never fully formed. To grossly simplify the slave family structure, 80 percent of the children were born into two-parent households and 40 percent of these would experience a disruption from death, sale, or transfer, by age twenty. Twenty percent of the slave children never experienced life in a two-parent family.

The analysis of the family thus far groups all ex-slaves together regardless of location, plantation size, or job of their parents. By cross-tabulating either the family of origin or household distribution with these important factors, subgroups in the slave population can be examined in detail.

Arguments about the families of fieldhands and houseservants have existed since the pioneering work of W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois thought that it was only among the houseservants that a strong family existed. Although it is difficult to determine whether Du Bois believed that the relationships within families were weak or that no nuclear family structure existed among fieldhands, his statement implies different family distributions among houseservants and fieldhands. Table 11.10 presents a cross-tabulation of family type

Table 11.10 Cross-tabulation of the Family of Origin by the Job of the Ex-slave's Mother

Family Type	Mother's Job	
	House-Related	Fieldwork
Two-parent, consolidated	56.1%	58.1%
Two-parent, divided residence	14.1	14.1
One-parent, female headed	29.8	27.7
Sample size	326	191

by the job of the ex-slave's mother (given the low percentage of male-headed families, a comparable analysis is not possible for the job of the father). Quite clearly there was no difference between the family structure of houseservants and fieldhands. It is possible that the family relationship differed in other ways, but there was no significant difference in the proportion of two-parent and one-parent families.

The two most important factors affecting the household distribution were the size and location of the ex-slave's plantation. The plantation-size cross-tabulation is presented in Table 11.11. The percentage of children in two-parent, consolidated households was lower on farms with one to fifteen slaves than on those with sixteen or more slaves. The lower percentage is offset in part by the higher incidence of two-parent divided-residence households on small farms. Taking all of the two-parent households together, however, only 35 percent of the children on farms with one to five slaves and 52 percent of those on farms with six to fifteen slaves were in two-parent households. On slaveholdings of sixteen or more slaves, 67 to 73 percent were in two-parent households. The smaller slaveholdings had a higher incidence of one-parent households and of children separated from their parents. Twenty-eight to thirty-five percent of the households on small farms were one-parent compared with only 14 to 19 percent on the larger units. There was also a higher percentage of children living apart from their parents on the smallest farms. There thus appear to be two household distributions, with the separation coming at roughly fifteen slaves. Below that level, the slave farm may have been too small to provide marriage partners. More likely, small farms had grown or decreased through purchase or sale with resulting breakup of marriages and the separation of children from their parents. On plantations with sixteen or more slaves the two-parent family predominated, although even on these plantations the percentage of slave children living apart from their parents averaged 10 to 20 percent.

Table 11.11 Cross-tabulation of Ex-slaves by Household Type and Size of the Plantation

Household Type	Plantation Size (in number of slaves)				
	1-5	6-15	16-49	50-99	100 +
Two-parent, consolidated	16.3	27.5	59.4	52.8	55.6
Two-parent, divided residence	10.2	19.6	8.5	11.1	6.8
One-parent, female headed	28.6	26.5	16.0	13.9	18.5
One-parent, male headed	6.1	2.0	0.9	0.0	0.6
Living in master's house	6.1	6.9	3.8	4.2	5.6
Living in quarters without parents	24.4	12.7	6.6	15.3	6.8
Married in own household	8.2	4.9	4.7	2.8	6.2
Subsample size	49	102	106	72	162

After plantation size, it has been assumed that the most important factor affecting the distribution of slave households was location. The story of the movement of the locus of slavery from East to West is well known. This movement separated the South into slave-importing states (Deep South and Southwest) and slave-exporting states (Southeast).

This movement did not, however, create two distinct household distributions. Table 11.12 shows that in both regions, 55 to 60 percent of slave children lived in two-parent consolidated or divided-residence households. The only real difference is the split between these two household types. In the slave-exporting states roughly 15 percent of the slave children grew up in two-parent divided-residence households compared with only 5 percent in the importing regions. The percentages in all other categories are similar.

The differences in the divided-residence household percentages in exporting and importing states could in large part be due to the effect of plantation size. Tables 11.13 and 11.14 present cross-tabulations of household type by plantation size within the two slave regions. Some of the differences already noted in the discussion of plantation size are again present. The proportion of two-parent consolidated households in both regions is much higher on slave-holdings of more than fifteen slaves. Two-parent divided-residence and one-parent residence show significant differences in the two regions. The divided-residence households were more prevalent in the longer settled exporting states and within the region on small farms. Divided-residence households were comparatively rare in the importing region, owing, at least in part, to the greater geographical distance between slave farms in the new regions.

The higher percentage of female-headed households raises some questions about family formation on small farms in the importing region. These households were the result of fathers unknown to the slave child or, more probably, breakup by sale or transfer. Slaves on small farms in the importing region either migrated with their masters from the exporting states or were purchased

Table 11.12 **Cross-tabulation of Ex-slaves by Household Type and Location of Plantation**

Household Type	Plantation Location	
	Slave-exporting States	Slave-importing States
Two-parent, consolidated	39.4%	46.5%
Two-parent, divided residence	14.7	5.2
One-parent, female headed	22.3	23.2
One-parent, male headed	0.8	1.3
Living in master's house	5.3	4.4
Living in quarters without parent	11.8	13.9
Married in own household	5.6	5.3
Subsample size	620	640

Note: Based on the ex-slaves' actual living situation at emancipation.

Table 11.13 Cross-tabulation of Ex-slaves by Household Type and Size of the Plantation for Ex-slaves from Slave-exporting States

Household Type	Plantation Size (in number of slaves)				
	1-5	6-15	16-49	50-99	100+
Two-parent, consolidated	23.1%	25.0%	54.4%	51.6%	45.5%
Two-parent, divided residence	38.5	23.1	15.8	9.7	10.6
One-parent, female headed	15.4	25.0	14.0	22.6	18.2
One-parent, male headed	0.0	1.9	0.0	0.0	1.5
Living in master's house	7.7	7.7	5.3	6.5	9.1
Living in quarters without parents	15.4	13.4	5.3	9.7	7.6
Married in own household	0.0	3.8	5.3	0.0	7.6
Subsample size	13	52	57	31	66

Note: Based on the ex-slaves' actual living situation at emancipation.

Table 11.14 Cross-tabulation of Ex-slaves by Household Type and Size of the Plantation for Ex-slaves from Slave-importing States

Household Type	Plantation Size (in number of slaves)				
	1-5	6-15	16-49	50-99	100+
Two-parent, consolidated	14.8%	27.5%	81.5%	59.4%	66.3%
Two-parent, divided residence	0.0	12.5	0.0	9.4	2.5
One-parent, mother headed	37.0	32.5	23.1	6.3	18.8
One-parent, father headed	7.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Living in master's house	3.7	12.5	7.7	15.5	5.0
Living in quarters without parents	29.6	12.5	7.7	15.5	5.0
Married in own household	7.4	7.5	5.1	6.3	5.0
Subsample size	27	40	39	32	80

Note: Based on the ex-slaves' actual living situation at emancipation.

after the move. The uprooting of a small slave farm was much more likely to break up a slave family because of the higher incidence of divided-residence families on small farms in the slave-exporting regions. As Josephine Howard who grew up in Texas related, "One mornin' we is all herded up and mammy am cryin' and say de gwine to Texas, but can't take papa. He don't 'long to dem. Dat de lastes' time we ever seed papa."²²

The second factor affecting the level of one-parent families was the extent to which owners of small farms, especially in the importing states, purchased slaves. The higher level of slave purchase and transfer is suggested by the 25

22. Rawick, vol. 4 (2), *Texas Narratives*, p. 164.

to 30 percent of slave children on the small farms in importing states who resided alone in the quarters or the master's house. The tendency to acquire slaves by sale or transfer undoubtedly led to the purchase of slave mothers and some or all of her children. These purchases, along with the breakup of divided-residence families when small farms moved, fueled the growth of one-parent households in the slave-importing region.

Analysis of the factors affecting slave household structure shows that the integrity of the family was most secure on large plantations in both importing and exporting regions. Because small farms grew by slave purchase and, if they moved, were more likely to disrupt divided-residence families, the slave child was much more likely to face family disruption if he or she lived on a small farm.

It has been widely accepted that the slave family was characterized by a dual structure of two-parent and female-headed families. The narrative sample suggests a two-to-one ratio of these types. While there has not been as much discussion of the importance of the divided-residence family, its existence does not alter the accepted interpretation of a strong slave family.

The narratives also provide some quantitative measures of the permanence of slave families. Slavery disrupted the family through the separation of husband and wife and the sale of slave children. On the latter issue, it is important to note the existence of a group of slave children separated from their families who were repeatedly sold. The disproportionate sale of these slave children could indicate that owners tended to avoid disrupting families if possible.

It is in the controversy over how a stable dual family structure came into existence that the narratives have been less helpful. Because of the nature of the source, it can support many interpretations. And even the quantitative data are open to numerous interpretations when combined with other primary and secondary sources on slavery.

The study of the slave family shows that slave owners benefited from encouraging the family through increased fertility. It is also possible, but unsupported by the narratives, that stable family life encouraged higher productivity. The effect could operate through the positive incentives associated with families or the negative incentive of the threat of selling family members. The role of strong, viable, and effective family life has been inadequately studied. It is key to what I believe is the proper interpretation of the development of the slave family structure. Stable families grew out of the economic interaction of the slaveowner's desire for the growth and productive use of his labor force and the slave's desire to improve the living conditions for kin.

Elsewhere I have examined the effect of family type on diet, housing, clothing, and the probabilities of sale and punishment to show that slave children fared differently across family types.²³ The differences are most pronounced

23. See Stephen Crawford, "Quantified Memory: A Study of the WPA and Fisk University Slave Narrative Collections" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1980), chap. 6.

when comparing children alone in the quarters to all other children. A slave child living separately from his family and alone in the quarters faced the greatest risk of harsh treatment. And a slave child was less likely to be sold away from a family that had two parents, even if the parents resided on different plantations.

The two-parent family, whether consolidated or divided-residence, also tended to provide the basic necessities of life more effectively than did one-parent families. While the differences are not always large or statistically significant, two-parent families have lower levels of inadequate treatment. The similarity among the three family types is, however, more surprising than the differences. The slave narratives suggest that slave women effectively provided for their families. The quality of life in their families might have been marginally below that of a comparable family with two parents, but their children lived at levels far above those of children alone in the quarters.

Both slaveowner and slave had incentives to create and maintain the family structure identified in this study. The master may have encouraged two-parent families because of their higher fertility or, possibly, because their members were more productive in the field. The slave's incentive was the higher living standard obtained by those in two-parent families. Slaveowners did sell husbands from wives, but they did so, I believe, only after weighing the penalty of such actions. Slaves chose not to create or maintain two-parent families but, again, they may have done so knowing the consequences. This essentially economic interaction created a dual family structure of two-parent and single-parent families. The sheer volume of information about the family in the narratives attests to the importance ex-slaves placed on family in recalling and defining their slave experience. The reader of the narratives cannot help but recognize the bonds of many slaves to their families and the horrible emotional loss slaves endured in trying to hold family together. Quantifying the narrative information brings solid measure to both sides of this equation. One facet of slavery's inhumanity was that it added to the normal strains of family through the fear—and often reality—of family breakup and through sexual relations between white men and black women. While slaveowners, we may presume, were inclined to maintain slave families because of increased fertility and productivity, there were other conflicting incentives that often rendered the slave family vulnerable and fragile. A history of the slave family reveals the struggle between the slave's desire and need for a viable family with the too-often-present economic necessity of slavery to ignore the family.