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SLAVE UNREST IN ARKANSAS

by  
Carol Linville

Research Seminar

Dr. Ray Granade

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## SLAVE UNREST IN ARKANSAS

Arkansas, unlike some slave holding states, was never the scene for actual mass uprisings or armed revolts by slaves. Actual acts of resistance and rumors of insurrections did occur in the state. The universal fear of insurrection that was present throughout the South also plagued the mind of the Arkansas slave owner. The fear was not new; since the beginning of slavery, the fear was present and as early as 1672, fear was expressed by the colonists of a slave uprising.<sup>1</sup> Part of the fear was stemmed from conditions of slavery in Arkansas that were inducible to slave unrest.

Arkansas owners fed and clothed their slaves using the same logic one planter set forth in his rule which stated: "good, sufficient, and comfortable clothing, a sufficiency of good wholesome and nutritious food for both man and beast being indispensably necessary to successful planting."<sup>2</sup> The amounts and kinds of foods varied from one region to the other. Unlike some Southern states, Arkansas had no laws regulating the types and quantities of food for slaves.<sup>3</sup> The food varied from one season to the next, but the basic year-round staples were meat, cornmeal, and molasses. Pork was most often the meat.

The three "M's" of slave food: meat, meal, and molasses, were grown on the plantation, and only when the supply ran out did owners purchase food for their slaves. The amount of food a slave received depended upon the abundance. However, many owners did believe that over-fed slaves did not work well. Phillips stated that the "basic food allowance came to be somewhat standardized at a quart of cornmeal and a half a pound of salt pork per day for each adult and proportionally for children..."<sup>4</sup>

Little is known about definite preparation methods and serving of food to slaves in Arkansas. It is reasonable to suppose that the practices which were common in other Southern states were also used in Arkansas. The majority of owners usually held slaves responsible for the preparing of their own food.<sup>5</sup> Tin buckets and other cooking utensils were sometimes issued to slaves. Some plantations followed another plan of preparation. On small plantations, one cook prepared the meals for the slaves and the master. Food preparation on larger plantations required at least two cooks, one for the slaves' meals and the other cooked strictly for the master's household.

Just as there was no standard amount or quality of food required for Arkansas slaves, neither was there a definite type of dress. Most historians do feel that as a whole, slaves were better fed than they were clothed. Stamp stated that: "Carelessness, indifference, and economy---a desire

to reduce annual expenditures for clothing which, unlike food, usually involved cash outlays--these were the chief reasons why a large proportion of the slaves wore shabby and insufficient apparel made from some variety of cheap "Negro cloth."<sup>6</sup>

Some of the best sources of information about the clothing of Arkansas slaves comes from lists of purchases by planters and advertisements of stores found in newspapers. Notices of runaway slaves were sometimes helpful in describing Negroes' clothing but also at times misleading because runaways were often wearing stolen clothes. Appearing frequently on lists of purchases by planters and in the newspaper advertisements was osnaburg, a coarse cotton cloth used primarily for making slave clothing.<sup>7</sup> Osnaburg was by far the most common type of cloth used to make slaves' clothing. There were other types of cloth purchased also. Kerseys and lindseys were used quite frequently.<sup>8</sup> In 1834 Picklin and Napley in Little Rock advertised "Heavy negro shirting" for sale.<sup>9</sup> Slaves were usually issued "two suits of cotton for spring and for summer and two suits of wool for winter".<sup>10</sup> Arkansas slaves were generally dressed similarly as ill strated by an add in the Gazette for Jack, a runaway, "who had on common negro clothing when he left."<sup>11</sup>

Arkansas slaves were not only clothed in the simplest manner they were also housed in crude dwellings. A typical slave cabin was made from logs and usually had one fairly

large room. A cabin would most likely have a fire place that served as a place to cook and to produce heat. Almost all the cabins had dirt floors which made cleaning the cabin a difficult job. One traveller to the South after spending the night in a slave's cabin remarked: "no sooner was the light withdrawn than I was attacked by bugs. But what to do? There was no use in making a disturbance about it; doubtless every other bed and resting place in the house was full of them."<sup>12</sup> Not only were the cabins unsanitary but they were often over-crowded. In 1860 one plantation in Chicot county was listed as having 234 slaves and thirty dwellings.<sup>13</sup> On the basis of this and other figures, the average number of slaves living in each house was 5.74.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to living a somewhat uncomfortable life, the Arkansas slave had reason to be discontent because of poor health. Slaves in Arkansas suffered from a variety of diseases. Malaria was especially prevalent in the lowlands of the southeastern part of the state. This disease was probably the greatest year-in, year-out menace to the slave. Slave owners gave many different names to malaria. Common ones were "ague, shakes, chills and fever, miasmatic fever, and autumnal fever."<sup>15</sup> Cholera, although less prevalent, was even more dreaded than malaria. Like malaria, cholera was most present in the Arkansas River Valley. The news of a cholera epidemic caused something not short of

panic on most plantations. Smallpox was quite common among the slaves. Advertisements of runaways often had descriptions such as "he has some smallpox marks on his face..." told of the effects of the disease.<sup>16</sup>

Generally speaking, Arkansas slaves suffered from a great deal of sickness. Entries from Dr. Henry Pernet's account book shows the considerable frequency in treatment of slaves.<sup>17</sup> These are typical entries from Pernet's account book:

M. R. Foster, June 1, 1852.	To visit (black girl) prescription, millage (mileage) (ammonia)	3.00
	J. Bostick	
June 6, 1853	To prescription, vial drops; black girl	3.00
June 14, 1853	To pills, prescription, (black girl) blind of one eye.	1.25
June 24, 1853	To vial drops prescription (black girl) Josiah Foster Senior	1.25
July 11, 1855	To visit, mileage, examining of black girl for the clap William Houser	5.00
August 12, 1854	To quinine powders (black child)	1.75
August 23	To visit pres; quinine (Black woman Margaret)	2.75 <sup>18</sup>

A combination of time and place made Arkansas and the South especially vulnerable to epidemic diseases and other sicknesses. First of all, the medical knowledge of the day was inadequate; secondly, the South had an abundance of undrained swamps and ponds. Thirdly, the warm climate was very unfavorable to the growth of insects.<sup>19</sup> The Arkansas slave was unaware of these reasons for the sickness he often endured but the discontent for the life he led that kept sickness a constant reality was ever present in his mind.

The hardships of bad health and poor living conditions were secondary to the unrest the slave labor system produced. Slaves rose early to the sound of a bell and by dawn they were headed toward the fields. Before the slave left, he usually had a number of other chores to do. Wood had to be chopped and the animals had to be fed. The slave might even be responsible for preparation of his mid-day meal to be eaten in the field. Individual masters worked their slaves differently. How hard the slaves were actually worked depended on the master's demands and the ability to carry those demands out. Mammy Harriet, a domestic slave at the Mississippi estate of Thomas S. Dabney, had nostalgic memories of slavery days:

Oh, no, we was nebber hurried. Master nebber once said, "Get up an' go to work," an' no overseer ebber said it neither. Ef some on 'em did not git up when de odders went out to work marster nebber said a word. Oh, no, we was nebber hurried.<sup>20</sup>

An Arkansas planter described life on his plantation to be less leisurely:

We get up before day every morning and eat breakfast before day and have everybody at work before day dawns. I am never caught in bed after day light nor is any body else on the place, and we continue in the cotton fields when we can have fair weather till it is so dark we can't see to work, and this history of one day is the history of every day.<sup>21</sup>

The difference between the two accounts was probably because Mammy Harriet served as a house maid and the other slaves mentioned were field hands. Living conditions were



different for the two types of servants. The house-servants receiving better care naturally were better content with their lot.

Among other inconveniences the Arkansas field hand was subjected to the close supervision of the plantation overseer. The overseer was responsible for all phases of work done on the plantation. Included in his responsibilities were insuring that the slaves were properly fed and reasonably clean. He was also held responsible for the labor the slaves performed. And as one book stated: "to a large extent, the security of the whites against uprisings of slaves," depended on the overseer.<sup>22</sup> Because the overseer was the man who punished the slave, worked the slave, and humbled the slave, he was often the man who the slave hated most. On August 11, 1859, a slave killed a plantation overseer near Helena "by crushing his skull with an axe." Incidences like this were not rare and punishment was usually severe for the Negro. As in the above case, the slave was hanged with no pretense of a trial, and the body was permitted to remain hanging for a day to serve as a warning.<sup>23</sup> Whether or not the overseer usually deserved the resistance the slave offered is a difficult question. Olmstead reported finding both good and bad overseers. More bad than good, however, as seen by his comment to a planter: "They (the overseers) are the curse of this country, sir; the worst men in the community."<sup>24</sup>

Overseers were often the target that the slave struck at but owners became victims, too. A grisly murder culminating in a lynching was committed in Hot Springs county in 1836. A slave who was with a group migrating to Texas murdered his master, another white man, and five fellow-slaves with an axe, and then attempted to burn the bodies in a campfire. He returned to his old home near Memphis and reported that his master and the others had been murdered by Indians, but informed of the circumstances of the case by a special proclamation of the governor of Arkansas, Tennessee law-enforcement officials arrested the slave and returned him to Hot Springs county.<sup>25</sup> A few weeks later the Gazette reported the conclusion of the episode:

'On Horror's head, let horrors accumulate'--We have been informed that the slave William, who murdered his master some weeks since, (Huskey), and several negroes, was taken by a party, a few days since, from the sheriff of Hot Springs, and burned alive! Yes, tied up to a tree limb, a fire built under him, and consumed in slow and lingering torture!<sup>26</sup>

For crimes such as murder the use of burning the slave was used frequently. The Arkansas State Democrat in 1849 reported that two slaves guilty of killing their master, Henry Yerby from Helena, were burnt to death.<sup>27</sup> Whites so feared the possibility of violence from the Negro slaves that the punishment for such crimes were used to discourage any future action.

Unrest among Arkansas slaves was evident in other ways besides the killing of whites. The slave at times would

purposely destroy farm equipment or crops. A recent article from The Journal of Southern History suggested that the Negro slave was not as ignorant as he pretended but instead used the ignorance as a weapon against his white oppressors.<sup>28</sup> A more drastic form of unrest was arson. No record of arson by slaves was found in Arkansas but other Southern states experienced the effects of unhappy slaves. The Charleston fire of 1861 destroyed six hundred buildings and caused seven million dollars' damage. The fire was attributed to slaves.<sup>29</sup>

Less dramatic than burning down a town but just as effective was the use of poison by slaves. This possibility always became more probable around Christmas and other celebrations. No actual reports of such poisoning was found but an Arkansas law passed in 1835 was possibly prompted by such an incidence. The law stated: "If any negro or other slave, shall prepare, exhibit or administer any medicine, whatsoever, he or she so offending shall be judged guilty of felony and suffer death without benefit of clergy."<sup>30</sup>

Unrest among Arkansas slaves did not always include the murder of white men or fellow-slaves. At times the institution of slavery became impossible to live under for some Negroes. One recaptured runaway slave committed suicide as he was being returned to his home. While being taken back across the Mississippi on a ferry, he leaped over the side with thirty pounds of iron tied to his body and drowned

without coming to the surface.<sup>31</sup> Suicides were rare among Arkansas slaves but runaways were not. Desperate to express his discontent the slave often ran away in search of other family members. Tom, a runaway from Arkansas Post, left in search of his wife near Batesville.<sup>32</sup> Attempts to capture runaway slaves were usually met with little or no resistance. A few runaways felt very strongly about being taken back to a life of servitude. Such resistance often ended in tragedy. In March of 1842, Mr. Isaac Jones of Pulaski county set out with a group of men to capture a slave belonging to Colonel Thomas Thorn of the same county. They came upon the Negro in the swamps and were about to take him when he drew a knife. Mr. Jones calmly shot him down rather than risk the life of one of his companions.<sup>33</sup>

Fear of unrest and anxiety from the murder of whites prompted Arkansas citizens to pass a number of laws restricting the slave's rights. One such law stated that, "all riots, unlawful assemblies and seditious speeches by a slave or slaves shall be punished with stripes at the discretion of a justice."<sup>34</sup> Slaves were generally considered a bigger threat to peace when they were in groups. Restrictions were placed on the slave's travels by an 1835 law that read: "no slave shall go from the tenements of his master, or other person with whom he lives without a pass or some other letter or taken whereby it may appear that he is proceeding by authority from his master or employee."<sup>35</sup> The work of white

abolitionist was feared and abhorred. Any white person found in the company with slaves at an unlawful meeting was fined three hundred dollars or given twenty lashes on the bare back.<sup>36</sup> The focus of all the above laws was summed up in an Arkansas that expressed the seriousness of slave unrest. The law read: "If any negro or other slave shall at any time consult, advise or conspire to rebel or make insurrection, or shall plot or conspire the murder of any person or persons whatsoever, every such consulting, plotting or conspiring shall be adjudged and deemed felony and the same slave or slaves convicted there of shall suffer death and be utterly excluded all benefit of clergy."<sup>37</sup>

Arkansas citizens not only relied on laws to control the slaves' desire to rebel. Religion was used to convince the slave of his inferiority and to insure passive servitude. Negroes in Arkansas were herded to church where the preacher would bellow out: "You colored people out there--listen to me! The way to be a good slave is to obey your Master and your Mistress! Obey them constantly."<sup>38</sup> The belief that religion help control the slave's activities was illustrated in a report from the Committee on the Colored Population, read at an annual meeting of the Mt. Vernon Baptist Association in 1854. The report read: "Your Committee is of the belief that if a correct system can be adopted to have the gospel regularly preached to this class of our population, that the owners would willingly, yes gladly themselves

support the missionary; knowing that religion makes slaves industrious, temperate, honest and obedient.<sup>39</sup>

To what extent the slave heeded such advice depended on the importance religion held in his life. The generalization of Negroes being a devoutly religious group is somewhat false. The actual number of slaves that were officially affiliated with churches was small compared to the total number of slaves in Arkansas. For instance in 1860, 20,000 slaves out of a total of 111,115 belonged to some church.<sup>40</sup> The reason for the low total was perhaps the result of the master's own attitude toward religion. If the church served as a controlling factor over his Negroes then he supported it; he was not concerned over the actual membership of his slaves in churches. A few owners did feel some responsibility for the souls of slaves and believed advice such as that from a report of the Arkansas Baptist Convention: "Give your slaves that which is just and equal knowing that you also have a master in heaven."<sup>41</sup> Slave-owners did express fear of allowing their slaves to assemble even for religious instruction. Such fear was the subject of a suggestion from an Arkansas Baptist Convention in 1854. The Baptists suggested: "that the churches (in the association) give the masters of slaves, assurances that the attendance of their servants upon the instituted worship of Jehovah will be under the immediate supervision of the aforesaid churches."<sup>42</sup> This fear was also reflected in the fact that there were few in any Negro churches in Arkansas before the Civil War.

Education, unlike religion, was discouraged for slaves. Not educating the slave was part of a philosophy from older slave states. The Arkansas slave holder believed that educating a slave would make him more dissatisfied with his lot and naturally more trouble.<sup>43</sup> No doubt there was some truth in this philosophy. A Northern traveller to the South expressed evidence of slave agitation because of education. The traveller wrote: They (the slaves) know very well the state of matters between the North and the South, they are evidently biding their time. Their owners are aware of this intelligence, and it makes them more suspicious and more severe.<sup>44</sup> Even though Arkansas masters generally did not allow formal education for their slaves, it was hard to keep intelligent Negroes from learning. House-servants had access to printed materials and small slave children often acquired the same knowledge their white companions did.

Regardless of the precautions the Arkansas citizens took to prevent slave insurrections, the state was periodically hurled into panic by such plots. The very thought of owning a "Denmark Vesey" or a "Nat Turner" was enough to give Arkansas slaveowners sleepless nights.<sup>45</sup> Kenneth Stampp stated in his book, The Peculiar Institution, that the shock of Nat Turner caused Southerners to take preventive measures, but these never eliminated their apprehension or the actual danger.<sup>46</sup> The most acute and widespread insurrection panics occurred after the Turner rebellion in 1856 and 1860. Arkansas

was reported as being one of the states effected by the slave insurrections of 1856.<sup>47</sup> In that same year trouble in two Arkansas counties, Ouachita and Union, involved some three hundred slaves and several white men. The outcome was unreported.<sup>48</sup> John Brown's attempted Negro insurrection at Harper's Ferry in 1859, brought strong condemnation of Northern abolitionist by Arkansas slaveowners.<sup>49</sup> They claimed that Brown was not only supported by the abolitionist but that many Republican leaders had advance knowledge of the plot.<sup>50</sup> The True Democrat nervously warned that such raids had been planned against several points in the South, and it alleged that some point on the Arkansas River had been included as a target of attack.<sup>51</sup> Each year seemed to bring new rumors of plots and insurrections. Tensions between the Northern states and the South made unrest even more probable. Abolitionists were always thought to be at the originators of disturbances among the slaves. On May 11, 1861 the Arkansas Gazette reported the following story:

We learn from a reliable source that a projected negro insurrection has been thwarted by the arrest of some fifteen negroes at Searcy, White County, where the plans have been made known. A Protestant Methodist Minister, Charles Cavender, was the originator and Captain of the organization. The Negroes were to start from Austin, Prairie County, and Hickory Plain, killing all as they went until reaching Searcy. There Cavender was going to take charge and conduct them to Memphis where there were to meet their friends.<sup>52</sup>

The outcome of the plot was the execution of Cavender and four slaves; the surrounding towns were placed under strict police control.<sup>53</sup> In that same year, 1861, another conspiracy



was uncovered in Arkansas that had both black and white members. "The plot was to have matured on July 4, and the Negroes had planned, after killing their enslavers to march up the River to meet Mr. Linkum."<sup>54</sup>

The above reports were somewhat rare because the news of insurrection was often not printed. This was done to keep the negroes from hearing of it and to avoid general panics. Silence on the topic was usually maintained as shown by this letter:

"Last evening," wrote a Charleston lady during the Denmark Vesey scare of 1822, "twenty-five of our citizens were under arms to guard our property and lives. But it is a subject not to be mentioned; and unless you hear of it elsewhere, say nothing about it."<sup>55</sup>

The subject of slave insurrections may have been silenced by the press on occasions but the people, especially the slaveowners, were well aware of the unrest. It was not necessary for Arkansas slave owners to read the printed word; they saw it in the black faces that were enslaved.

Slave unrest in Arkansas was the product of different conditions. The lack of proper nutrition, sufficient clothing, and sanitary living quarters each made the Negro resent and despise his position. In addition long work hours and the absence of personal freedoms resulted in the slaves discontent and unrest. In order to control the slaves' anger and hate the Arkansas white man constructed a system of patrols and developed a set of laws favorable to his position. The slaveowners manipulated the slave with religion and avoided

education of his Negroes. Some cases exist where the Arkansas slave struck back at the system that abused him. In frustration the slave turned to murder, arson, suicide and escape. Arkansas along with the rest of the South failed to realize that they would have no rest as long as slavery existed. Accordingly, the state has suffered and is still suffering from the deep ingrained fears and prejudices that slavery has produced. Hopefully, a better understanding of these ingrown feelings is brought about by studying the past.

## BACKNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, White Over Black, (Baltimore, Penguin Books, Inc., 1968), p.110.
- <sup>2</sup> William Desite Postell, The Health of Slaves on Southern Plantations, (Goucheater, Massachusetts, Peter Smith, 1951), p.31.
- <sup>3</sup> J. M. Cambell and J. Steele, Laws of Arkansas, 1835, (Little Rock, J. Steele, Esq., 1834), p.520.
- <sup>4</sup> U. B. Phillips, Life and Labor in the Old South, (Houston, Little, Brown, and Company, 1929), p.197.
- <sup>5</sup> Kenneth M. Stamp, The Peculiar Institution, (New York, Randon House, 1956), p.287.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.289.
- <sup>7</sup> Orville W. Taylor, Negro Slavery in Arkansas, (North Carolina, Duke University Press, 1958), p.140.
- <sup>8</sup> Kersey- coarse, lightweight woolen cloth, usually ribbed and with a cotton wrap. Lindsey-
- <sup>9</sup> Arkansas Gazette, December 23, 1834.
- <sup>10</sup> Postell, p.39.
- <sup>11</sup> Arkansas Gazette, January 6, 1854.
- <sup>12</sup> Frederick Law Olmstead, The Cotton Kingdom, (New York, Onason Brothers, 1861), p.88.
- <sup>13</sup> Census of 1860 (Population), p.27.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Stamp, p.300.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.289.
- <sup>17</sup> Henry Fernot, a Paris-born Frenchman who established a practice in Van Buren in 1852.

- <sup>18</sup> Account Book of Henry Pernot, M.D., 1852-1856,  
p.146-158.
- <sup>19</sup> Stampf, p.296.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.75.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.78.
- <sup>22</sup> William Kauffman Scarborough, The Overseer, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1966), p.68.
- <sup>23</sup> Arkansas Gazette, August 14, 1859.
- <sup>24</sup> Frederick Law Olmstead, The Slave States, (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), p.
- <sup>25</sup> Arkansas Gazette, November 1, 1836.
- <sup>26</sup> Arkansas Gazette, November 29, 1836.
- <sup>27</sup> Arkansas State Democrat, November 23, 1849.
- <sup>28</sup> Kenneth M. Stampf, "Rebels and Samboes: The Search for the Negro's Personality in Slavery," The Journal of Southern History, August 1971, p.367.
- <sup>29</sup> Herbert Aptheker, American Negro Slave Revolts, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1943), p.365.
- <sup>30</sup> Laws of Arkansas 1835, p.523.
- <sup>31</sup> Taylor, p.231.
- <sup>32</sup> Arkansas Gazette, September 7, 1842.
- <sup>33</sup> Arkansas Gazette, March 23, 1842.
- <sup>34</sup> Laws of Arkansas, 1835, p.521.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.520.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.522.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.523.
- <sup>38</sup> Taylor, pps.168-169.

- 39 Report of Committee on the Colored Population, Mt. Vernon Baptist Association, 1854. The Mt. Vernon Association encompassed Phillips, St. Francis, and Monroe counties.
- 40 Taylor, p.187.
- 41 Report of the Committee of Instruction of the Colored Population, Arkansas Baptist State Convention, September 21 and 22, 1848.
- 42 Arkansas Baptist State Convention, Red River Regular Baptist Association, September 14-16, 1854.
- 43 Winthrop D. Jordan, White Over Black, (Baltimore, Penguin Books, Inc., 1968), p.133.
- 44 James Stirling, Letters from the Slave States, (New York, Negro Universities Press, 1857), p.51.
- 45 Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner were leaders in attempted slave revolts that involved the murder of a number of whites.
- 46 Stamp, p.136.
- 47 Ibid, p.138.
- 48 Aptheker, p.346.
- 49 John Brown-(1800-1859) was an abolitionist who as a part of a plan for a general uprising among the slaves led a raid on a U.S. arsenal at Harper's Ferry, and was hanged for treason.
- 50 Jack Benton Seroggs, "Arkansas in the Secession Movement", (M.A. thesis, University of Arkansas, 1948), p.40.
- 51 Ibid., p.41.
- 52 Arkansas Gazette, May 11, 1861.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Aptheker, p.94.
- 55 "American Slave Insurrections before 1861," The Journal of Negro History, (Vol.XXII, July 1937).

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