

An Urban Slave Community: Little Rock, 1831-1862

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IN CONSTRUCTING THE HISTORY of an overwhelmingly rural society, the temptation is to ignore life in the towns or to dismiss urbanization as insignificant. Antebellum Arkansas was indisputably dominated by the country. The federal census of 1860 listed nineteen towns for the state, with a combined population of 15,502, or 4.8 percent of the state total. Little Rock had more urban pretensions than any other place, but it existed primarily to serve the few political and mercantile needs of the agrarian order and still had not attained a population of 4,000 by 1860. Rural conditions also prevailed for slaves, as the vast majority of black Arkansans toiled on farms and plantations, with only 3,799 of the state's 111,115 slaves residing in town, 846 of these in the capital.¹

However few in number, the urban slaves should not be overlooked or relegated to insignificance. Their life was different enough from

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¹The census data should not be accepted as precise. Some of the Arkansas towns were hardly large enough to be villages, thus inflating the urban population. On the other hand six of the nineteen towns' population included no slaves; this undoubtedly occurred because census takers failed to differentiate between rural and town dwelling slaves in some counties. If these towns averaged the same percentage of bondsmen in their populations as other Arkansas towns, the state actually had 823 additional town slaves (for a total of 4,622) and a total urban population of 16,326. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Population of the United States in 1860* (Washington, 1864), 16, 19; cited hereinafter as *Eighth Census, 1860: Population*. The information on the early development of Little Rock is from Ira Don Richards, *Story of a Rivertown, Little Rock in the Nineteenth Century* (Benton, 1969), 9-19.

their rural counterparts that understanding of the slave experience in Arkansas remains incomplete without reference to them. The social environment of Little Rock presented opportunities for a variety of quasi-freedoms which the slaves eagerly seized. Because the masters' controls loosened in this town setting, the slaves gained an opportunity to create a somewhat more complete life for themselves. The world they forged provides insight into slave attitudes and aspirations as well as a preview of their future development as freedmen. Essentially, the slaves of Little Rock struggled to create and maintain a separate slave community — they gained valuable skills which allowed them to advance economically and to provide for their families; they sought to work and live outside the immediate supervision of their owners; they founded autonomous black religious bodies; they discovered fulfilling recreation independent of white oversight; and they resisted white attempts to force them into servile modes of behavior or to eliminate the gains which they had made.

Bondage in Little Rock forced blacks into work situations from which they acquired a multitude of talents. Advertisements for the sale of slaves suggest that many labored at a variety of pursuits.² One local slaveowner testified to the versatility of the town slaves in writing about his hand Tom who, when “pressed into service” because of the illness of a domestic servant, “proved to be about the best cook on the Place.”³ Despite their residence in town, a fairly large number of Little Rock slaves actually worked at agricultural jobs. The 1860 census enumerated eleven farmers owning 123 slaves (almost 15 percent of the town's total); other city slaves either worked on nearby plantations or alternated between the town and country establishments of their owners.⁴ While an

²This evidence somewhat exaggerated the talents of the slaves because of the salesmanship motives of the owners. Little Rock *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, February 22, 1850; Little Rock *Arkansas True Democrat*, September 21, 1852.

³William E. Woodruff, Jr. to William E. Woodruff, Sr., June 21, 1860, Family Correspondence, William E. Woodruff Papers (Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock, Ark.).

⁴The number of Little Rock residents who were farmers was derived by cross-referencing between slave schedules (which list only name of slaveowner and number, age, and sex of slaves) and free schedules (which list occupation, wealth, and other data about those enumerated). Manuscript Census Returns, Eighth Census of the United States,

atypically large number of urban dwelling slaves in Little Rock labored in the fields, few toiled in factories. A brickmaking business employing between 10 and 25 slaves in 1832 seemed to promise a future for the development of industrial slavery, but subsequent years brought few additional plants. Only an iron foundry and a few small-scale industries owned or hired black labor.⁵

Most Little Rock slaves worked primarily in one of the two occupations which slaves dominated—domestic service and the building trades. For whites the ownership of black house servants provided both convenience and prestige. In 1831 a transplanted New Englander in Little Rock noted this tradition with disgust: “It is not the custom for the women to work in this over-civilized and refined country. Slaves do everything here.”⁶ The age and sex distribution shown in Table 1 indicates a preponderance of females in all age categories, but especially in youths and those of “prime” age. This suggests that the rural market for field hands siphoned off young males, whereas the urban demand for domestics kept large numbers of females in town. It appears from these figures that a majority of the slaves in Little Rock worked in a domestic capacity.⁷

1860, Pulaski County, Arkansas, Schedule 1, Free Inhabitants, National Archives Microfilm Series No. M-653, roll 49, and Schedule 2, Slave Population, National Archives Microfilm Series No. M-653, roll 54, seen on microfilm at Texas Tech University Library, Lubbock; cited hereinafter as Eighth Census, 1860, Pulaski County, with proper schedules, microcopy and roll numbers, and dwelling numbers if applicable. Individual cases of city dwelling farmers are noted in Orville W. Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas* (Durham, N. C., 1958), 53-54, 143; Margaret Smith Ross, “Sanford C. Faulkner, Pulaski County Pioneer,” *Pulaski County Historical Review*, II (June 1954), 2; Federal Writers Project, *Slave Narratives* (1936-1938), published in George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (19 vols., Westport, Conn., 1972), Vol. VIII, Pt. 1, p. 54. The *Arkansas Narratives*, published in seven parts in volumes 8, 9, 10, and the first half of volume 11 of the series, will be cited hereinafter as *Arkansas Narratives* with proper volume, part, and page numbers.

⁵Eighth Census, 1860, Pulaski County, Schedule 1, M-653, roll 49, dwellings 312, 313, Schedule 2, M-653, roll 54, p. 4; Little Rock *Arkansas State Gazette*, August 1, 1832; Little Rock *Arkansas Advocate*, July 3, 1833; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, August 2, 1850, March 26, 1852.

⁶Ross, ed., “Letters of Hiram Abiff Whittington: An Arkansas Pioneer from Massachusetts, 1827-1834,” Pulaski County Historical Society, *Bulletin*, III (December 1956), 25.

⁷The data on Little Rock was computed from the manuscript census returns. Manu-

Since most Little Rock slaves worked for masters who owned few additional bondsmen, the slaves generally toiled at all kinds of household chores. Hotels, boarding houses, and large slaveowners employed black servants at more specialized tasks. Chester Ashley, for example, owned a plantation-like household and maintained a far-flung domestic establishment that included stableboys, a blacksmith, gardeners, cooks, maids, and nurses.⁸ A slave of a less affluent owner found himself or herself laboring at all these and many other duties as well. The legend that

TABLE 1
PERCENTAGE OF MALE (FEMALE) SLAVE POPULATION BY AGE

Age	1850		1860	
	Little Rock	State of Arkansas	Little Rock	State of Arkansas
0-9	10.4 (15.3)	15.9 (16.4)	10.3 (15.5)	15.7 (15.7)
10-19	11.5 (15.3)	13.0 (12.6)	10.7 (14.7)	12.6 (12.7)
20-39	15.2 (17.9)	15.8 (15.5)	16.9 (18.1)	16.6 (15.6)
40-59	4.8 (6.0)	4.4 (4.3)	4.9 (6.1)	4.6 (4.5)
60	1.3 (2.3)	1.1 (1.0)	1.2 (1.6)	1.1 (1.0)
All Ages	43.2 (56.8)	50.2 (49.8)	44.0 (56.0)	50.6 (49.4)

household slaves experienced only light conditions of labor disappears with a glance at the case of Charlotte, an "old woman" hired out for domestic labor by the family of United States Senator William S. Fulton. Describing her as "very much disappointed" with her employment, the senator's brother wrote, "Charlotte has a just right to complain, [her

script Census Returns, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Pulaski County, Arkansas, Schedule 2, Slave Population, National Archives Microfilm Series No. M-432, roll 32; hereinafter cited as Seventh Census, 1850, Pulaski County, with proper microcopy and roll numbers; Eighth Census, 1860, Pulaski County, Schedule 2, M-653, roll 54. The figures for the state of Arkansas are from *Eighth Census, 1860: Population*, 16; and U. S. Census Office, *Seventh Census of the United States* (Washington, 1853), Book 1, Pt. 2, pp. 528-35.

⁸Taylor, *Negro Slavery*, 112; advertisements for the sale or hire of bondsmen and women sometimes indicated the duties of domestic servants. *Arkansas State Gazette*, November 11, 1840; Little Rock *Arkansas State Democrat*, June 9, 1848; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, March 8, 1850.

employers are] exacting more labor from her, than a woman her age can possibly accomplish." The elderly servant washed, cooked, set table, carried wood, and otherwise attended ten boarders, at least two of whom were invalids. "The old woman can scarcely refrain from tears when speaking on the subject," concluded the sympathetic correspondent. In the future Mrs. Matilda Fulton, who had difficulty supervising the family slaves in the absence of her husband, used the old slave's unpleasant experience as a means of discipline. "I could not make Charlotte hush," she once explained to her husband, "until I told her I would send her off the place; she is so much opposed to being hired out that I suppose that frightens her."⁹ Urban domestic labor was also unrelenting: town slaves did not have Sunday off as was the custom for field hands. For a brief period during the 1830s, a Little Rock ordinance prohibited slaveowners from working their chattels on Sundays, but even this restriction did not apply to "ordinary household" duties.¹⁰

Labor as a "mechanic" provided the most important occupation for male slaves. Charlotte E. Stephens, a Little Rock native whose skilled slave father came to town in the 1840s, recalled the presence of a large class of slave artisans. To an interviewer's question, "What did they work at?" she responded:

Few of the trades workers were white. [Negroes worked as] brick makers and brick layers, stone masons, lathers, plasterers, — all types of builders. . . . You must remember that slaves were the only ones who did this work. Their masters had used their labor as a means of income. The slave owners of the towns and villages had their slaves learn skilled trade occupations and made a great deal of money by their earnings.¹¹

Advertisements for slave sales confirm the existence of many highly skilled workers and suggest that carpenters and blacksmiths were most numerous. Other trades besides those listed above included butcher,

⁹John T. Fulton to William S. Fulton, January 9, 1842; Matilda Fulton to William S. Fulton, August 17, 1842, William S. Fulton Collection (Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock).

¹⁰Little Rock *Arkansas Gazette*, December 29, 1835.

¹¹*Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. X, Pt. 6, p. 227.

house painter, shoemaker, and even one steamboat engineer.¹²

The slaves of Little Rock found ways of transforming their economic skills into social and cultural advantages. Frequently repeated newspaper advertisements suggest a high demand for the purchase or hire of slaves with the required skills and character; in 1832 a local slaveowner wrote, "I find it impossible to hire a hand of any kind."¹³ The scarcity of servants with the qualities sought by masters, and the profits which could be made by ownership of artisans, induced slaveholders to grant concessions to placate their slaves. Of a particularly able but independent-minded bondsman, William S. Fulton wrote, "His good conduct will stimulate me to do anything I can for him."¹⁴ An increased amount of control over their own destinies was the price which slaves exacted for their "good conduct." "Hiring their own time" proved especially appealing to these town slaves. Under this system, master and slave made an informal contract, with the slaves finding employment and frequently providing their own food, clothing, and housing in return for a fixed payment to the owners. Despite potential unemployment and other economic vicissitudes, many slaves sought this self-hiring privilege; some experienced enough success to be able to gain this status for their entire family.¹⁵ This arrangement, which provided masters with the profits of slaveownership without the accompanying managerial responsibilities, became customary in Little Rock. Local ordinance made it illegal from 1832 on, but in 1858 a labor organization listed as its primary grievance that "it has become a settled practice with resident and non-resident owners to permit their slaves to go at large, hiring their

¹² *Arkansas Gazette*, February 2, March 8, 1836, June 6, 1838, January 31, 1851. That Stephens exaggerated the degree of black dominance in the crafts is suggested by the small number (under 5 percent) of runaway advertisements which noted that the slave had a skill. In 1850, 15 percent of New Orleans runaways were artisans. For a more complete methodological and comparative explanation of the data on runaways, see notes 55 and 57 below.

¹³ *Arkansas Gazette*, October 27, 1835; *Arkansas State Democrat*, July 28, 1848, August 3, 1849; Matilda Fulton to William S. Fulton, February 9, 1832, Fulton Collection. The price of hired slave labor was higher in Arkansas than in most southern states. Taylor, *Negro Slavery*, 88-89.

¹⁴ William S. Fulton to Matilda Fulton, January 24, 1843, Fulton Collection.

¹⁵ *Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. X, Pt. 6, pp. 128-33, Vol. XI, Pt. 7, pp. 109-15.

own time."¹⁶

Slaves frequently came to prefer urban conditions to the rural alternative. Runaway notices often mentioned a desire to regain life in the city as the motive of escaped slaves, who were often suspected of "lurking" about the town. John, for example, fled two different rural owners in apparent efforts to prevent his removal from Little Rock.¹⁷ The ex-slave narratives of Henry Blake, Charlotte Stephens, and Julia White all suggest slave preference for the city and point to the above average treatment and opportunities accorded to their families in Little Rock. Speaking to a white interviewer in the latter 1930s, Stephens in particular testified to the paternalistic qualities of the system:

From the standpoint of understanding between the white and colored races, Little Rock has always been a good place to live. The better class families did not speak of their retainers as slaves; they were called servants. Both my parents were educated by their masters . . . [and] had peculiar privileges. The Ashley family were exceptional slaveowners; they permitted their servants to hire their time.¹⁸

These approbations notwithstanding, the town environment did not create a benign system of slavery. Other firsthand accounts reveal cases of overwork, neglect, and family destruction.¹⁹ For slaves the great ad-

¹⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, February 1, 1832; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, October 16, 1858.

¹⁷ *Arkansas True Democrat*, March 16, 1858, May 25, 1859. Altogether fourteen different runaway slave advertisements appeared in local newspapers which indicated that the slave's goal was to re-establish himself in Little Rock.

¹⁸ *Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. VIII, Pt. 1, pp. 175-78, Vol. X, Pt. 6, pp. 226-28, Vol. XI, Pt. 7, pp. 109-15. These WPA narratives were taken while the ex-slaves were at advanced ages and under conditions which to some degree encouraged emphasis on the more benign features of the institution. Nevertheless, they are the only testimony from ex-slaves of Little Rock and thus provide a valuable supplement to the written materials left by white observers. On the strengths and weaknesses of the WPA narrativess, see John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History*, XLI (November 1975), 473-92; David Thomas Bailey, "A Divided Prism: Two Sources of Black Testimony on Slavery," *ibid.*, XLVI (August 1980), 381-404.

¹⁹ David Fulton to William S. Fulton, July 20, 1841, John F. Fulton to William S. Fulton, January 26, 1842, Matilda Fulton to William S. Fulton, February 6, 1843, Fulton

vantage of city life derived not so much from the paternalistic indulgence of some owners as from the chance to create a varied and meaningful slave community. Economic skills and opportunities meant for slaves a greater chance to care for themselves and their families independent of white supervision; the presence of a large number of blacks resulted in a widened circle of friends; a more complex social setting created more freedoms from the surveillance of their owners.

Several aspects of slave life reveal this urge to provide for themselves and the tendency to create a separate community. Housing conditions varied enormously in type and quality. Slaves owned by financially successful masters like Chester Ashley or William E. Woodruff lived in purposefully constructed plantation-like "negro quarters" adjacent to the main dwelling. Other masters provided shelter for their slaves in makeshift fashion, in outbuildings which functioned primarily as a kitchen or stables. Many domestic servants found lodging in some portion of the residence of their owners which, no doubt, they viewed as distressingly close to the masters' whimsy.²⁰ The housing arrangement that most attracted the slaves was "living out," away from the immediate oversight of their owners. The appeal of this form of housing derived not from superior physical surroundings but from an opportunity for a kind of quasi-freedom and family unity. The William Wallace Andrews family chose to live not in the apparently commodious quarters of the Ashley mansion but in housing which the skilled slave himself could provide. Because of the liberties which accompanied separate housing, whites feared these "disorderly" "pest houses," and the city authorities in 1856 legislated against allowing self-hiring slaves to live apart from "the homestead of their owners."²¹

The slaves of Little Rock appear to have taken care in their personal

Collection; Ted R. Worley, ed., "At Home in Confederate Arkansas: Letters from Pulaski Countians, 1861-1865," Pulaski County Historical Society, *Bulletin*, II (December 1955), 36-41.

²⁰ Taylor, *Negro Slavery*, 112, 149; Ross, "Absalom Fowler and His Home," *Pulaski County Historical Review*, V (June 1957), 19; "The William E. Woodruff Home," *ibid.*, X (December 1962), 53-55; *Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. XI, Pt. 7, p. 123.

²¹ Clara B. Kennan, "The First Negro Teacher in Little Rock," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, IX (Autumn 1950), 196-97; Little Rock City Council Records, Book B, October 27, 1856 (Office of the City Clerk, City Hall, Little Rock).

appearance. With obvious exaggeration but some truth a local newspaper recalled after the Civil War that "The negroes were the best, or richest dressed among us. On Sunday, a visit to the negro church would enable one to see more silk, satin lace and broadcloth than could be found among a congregation of so many whites. The merchant who got the negro trade was lucky."²² Newspaper notices of runaways confirm that slaves sometimes obtained what one owner described as "a good many clothes." These included wool hats, dress boots, calf skin pumps, cassette pants and coat, striped hickory shirt, satin vests, an alpaca coat, and various accouterments such as ribbons, pins, and watches. One slaveowner wrote revealingly of his "genteel" looking runaway: "As she had a variety of wearing apparel, I cannot describe her clothing."²³ Far more of the escaped slaves dressed plainly than expensively. Males usually wore "common" shirts of linen, cotton, flannel, or linsey; "home-made" or "hard-time" pants cut from cotton or jeans fabric; "coarse" coats from jeans, woolen, and kersey material or fashioned out of old cloaks and blankets; and "good stout," "heavy," "common," or "russet" shoes, boots, or brogans. The basic apparel of females consisted of simple plaid dresses and handkerchiefs.²⁴ Still, the slaves of Little Rock clearly managed in some manner to dress themselves in a reasonable amount of decent clothing and some finery. The concern for proper dress reveals in the Little Rock slaves an unservile degree of self-pride. "Our servants," complained a white labor organization, "have attained such elevation in their own estimation, that they regard a gentle correction . . . as a high personal indignity." Occasionally local slaves demonstrated this attitude by violating the prevailing concept of racial etiquette. Ely and Nester, for example, received a sentence of ten lashes from the corporation court

²² Little Rock *Daily National Democrat*, January 9, 1865, quoted in Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 78.

²³ *Arkansas Gazette*, December 13, 1862, November 10, 1841; *Arkansas State Democrat*, October 27, 1848; *Arkansas True Democrat*, May 26, 1860.

²⁴ *Arkansas Advocate*, May 9, 1832; *Arkansas Gazette*, April 12, May 17, 1836, August 8, 1838, October 30, 1839, November 10, 1841; Little Rock *Arkansas Banner*, August 21, 1844, May 7, 1845; *Arkansas State Democrat*, December 4, 1846, February 8, 1850, January 31, 1851, October 15, 1852, April 11, 1857, October 30, 1858; *Arkansas True Democrat*, June 30, October 27, 1857, December 15, 1858, June 29, 1859; Little Rock *Old-Line Democrat*, April 19, 1860.

on the charge of “using insulting language to a white person.”²⁵

This self-esteem carried over in various social practices. A strong sense of family pervades the recollections of those who had been slaves in Little Rock. These narratives reveal families fragmented by the urban tendency to hire out slaves, often from Little Rock to rural areas, and by the frequency with which slaves married someone owned by another master. At the same time slave husbands hired their wives' time from their owners, and parents worked to bring as many of their children as possible into the household. “We smaller children stayed in the house with mother,” Julia White recalled, while her older brothers and sisters worked on a plantation near the city.²⁶ The work and sacrifices which slaves made out of a sense of family were paralleled and perhaps stimulated by the efforts of local free blacks to purchase and manumit their kinsmen.²⁷ With this option closed to slaves, other avenues had to be attempted. Manuel made a tearful but unsuccessful plea that the Fultons acquire his wife, whose owner was leaving town and had already refused to make the purchase required to keep the marriage from being broken.²⁸ Information from runaway slave notices also confirms the strength of these ties. Several slaves ran away for the supposed motive of reuniting families; moreover, these fugitives were overwhelmingly young (89 percent being between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five), a figure which suggests that the family bonds of older slaves restrained their desire to flee.²⁹

²⁵ *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, October 16, 1858; Corporation Court Records in Little Rock City Council Records, A, May 19, 1841, March 31, 1842.

²⁶ *Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. XI, Pt. 7, p. 122.

²⁷ Pulaski County Deed Book, Q, 250-52, 381, S, 247, T, 346, X, 122, Z, 358 (Office of the Circuit Clerk, Pulaski County Court House, Little Rock).

²⁸ Matilda Fulton to William S. Fulton, February 6, 1843, Fulton Collection.

²⁹ *Arkansas Gazette*, May 29, October 30, 1839; Little Rock *Arkansas Star*, October 21, 1840; *Arkansas State Democrat*, November 16, 1849; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, February 8, 1850, January 31, May 6, 1851; *Arkansas State Gazette*, July 12, 1862, July 11, 1863. The age of Little Rock runaways was determined by analyzing data from over seventy local newspaper advertisements. The Little Rock figure of 89 percent between the ages sixteen and thirty-five compares with the estimate of the premier scholar of the slave family that “perhaps as many as 80 percent” of all runaways were in this age bracket; this suggests that the strength of the family tie was at least equally powerful in this urban setting. Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York, 1976), 265.

While many records testify to the depth of family emotion, town conditions clearly accelerated the degree of family instability. Table 1 compares age and sex patterns in Little Rock with those of the state of Arkansas, revealing that town owners regularly destroyed slave families by selling young bondsmen to rural masters. In contrast to the state as a whole where over 28 percent of all slaves were young (under age twenty) males, in the capital city only about 21 percent fell into this category. The most dramatic differential was among those from birth to nine years old, an age group in which Little Rock had 35 percent fewer than the state average; this figure suggests that local owners sold from their slave families a large number of the male children born in Little Rock. There was also a disproportionately large percentage of females from age ten to nineteen. This fact probably resulted from rural purchases and means that many bondswomen had also been torn from their families at a young age. These statistics suggest that the slave family in Little Rock suffered from extraordinary trauma. Yet, for those fortunate enough to survive the high rate of family destruction caused by selling and hiring practices, the town offered the possibility of a meaningful sense of family and one in which kinsmen responded to each other's needs in a variety of ways seldom permitted on the farm or plantation.³⁰

The slaves of Little Rock created other meaningful social attitudes and relationships besides the family. Charlotte Stephens recalled that many slaves cultivated such social graces as nice manners, proper language, and "good form" in receiving guests. There was even "class distinction, perhaps to a greater extent than among the white people," according to this witness.³¹ Development of a hierarchy among bondsmen, who according to the ideology of the masters occupied a social position where all ranked equally in their dependence on whites, has

³⁰ Recent revisionist scholarship on the black family gives scant attention to the urban as opposed to plantation scene, although John Blassingame alludes to the possibility that the infrequent surveillance of owners in the urban setting strengthened the authority of the male slave as head of the family. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972), 92. This factor may have been offset by the dearth of adult males in many cities. This sexual imbalance existed in Little Rock (see Table 1), but to a lesser degree among adult slaves than in most cities.

³¹ *Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. X, Pt. 6, p. 228.

only recently been discovered by historians. Using slave sources, John Blassingame has constructed a model of the plantation slaves' class structure in which status derived from the contribution made to the slave community. Here leadership devolved on those with folk skills and physical talents — rebels, conjurors or preachers, doctors, adept hunters, storytellers — who provided help and inspiration to other slaves. In this proto-nationalist structure, those close to the masters occupied a lowly position.³² In Little Rock, and probably other towns and cities as well, the class system appears to have differed a bit from that of rural slaves. Status derived again from what one contributed to the growth and well being of the slave community, but in town this often meant a slave who could serve as a liaison to whites in obtaining, protecting, and extending customs, privileges, or knowledge on which a relatively free social life was based. This meant in practice that house servants, self-hiring and "living out" slaves, and blacks with contacts with businessmen provided much of the leadership, for they helped spread literacy, establish churches, promote recreation, and purchase liquor and other commodities. The basic similarity with the social structure of rural slaves was that status came not because of a close relationship with whites *per se* but because of the way in which one served or related to his fellow slaves.

In both town and country black religious figures played leadership roles in the slave community. In the early years of Little Rock, slaves attended either the regular or special services of the white dominated churches; at one point the Methodist denomination had enrolled only fifty whites but seventy blacks. A few slaves, repelled by the unrewarding doctrine and lack of true black expression in these bodies, withdrew completely from participation in organized religion.³³ More chose to identify with one of the independent black congregations which soon developed. A Negro Baptist church of Little Rock had a sporadic history before it emerged permanently in 1858, when it claimed forty-two mem-

³² John Blassingame, "Status and Social Structure in the Slave Community: Evidence from New Sources," in Harry P. Owens, ed., *Perspectives and Irony in American Slavery* (Jackson, Miss., 1976), 137-51.

³³ S. G. Miller, *The History of Presbyterianism in Arkansas 1828-1902* (Little Rock, n. d.), 11; *Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. X, Pt. 6, p. 227, Vol. XI, Pt. 7, p. 174; *Arkansas Gazette*, November 25, 1856.

bers headed by Elder Wilson Brown.³⁴ Founded a decade earlier, the black Methodist church known as Wesley Chapel became the leading slave-led body in town. It grew to over two hundred members by 1851, though back taxes threatened its destruction that year. The head of Wesley Chapel was William Wallace Andrews, a slave of the Ashleys who had instructed him in some educational basics and allowed him access to their library. Under Andrews's leadership this black church provided both meaningful worship and a Sunday school which taught reading, writing, and spelling to other slaves. Though tolerated by whites and technically affiliated with the Methodist Episcopal church, South (until emancipation allowed it to associate with the northern branch), this essentially separate black institution enriched slave life, broadened visions, and promoted freedom in Little Rock.³⁵ Whatever militancy these churches failed to provide came from what an editor once described with alarm as "secret meetings, under some pretense of worship."³⁶

A number of other cultural activities also attracted local slaves. Racially mixed audiences attended performances of touring showmen and concerts by groups such as the Ashley slaves who played brass and stringed instruments for both public and private occasions.³⁷ Slave-owners in Little Rock did not provide daily entertainment for their slaves as a routine matter, but the bondsmen seemed to seize a certain amount of free time as their right. One Little Rock resident wrote revealingly that his slaves "claimed the week of Christmas as their own and acted accordingly." Their celebration included "frolicking [*sic*] to its fullest latitude, [and] having nightly revels from [the holiday's] commencement."³⁸ The slaves of course did not confine their recreations to the holiday season; Little Rock provided many irrepressible, if illegal,

³⁴J. S. Rogers, *History of Arkansas Baptists* (Little Rock, 1948), 170; *Arkansas State Gazette*, March 27, 1847.

³⁵Taylor, *Negro Slavery*, 168; Kennan, "First Negro Teacher," 196-97; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, November 7, 1851; *Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. X, Pt. 6, p. 227.

³⁶*Arkansas Gazette*, December 1, 1841.

³⁷*Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, June 13, 1857; Taylor, *Negro Slavery*, 112; Ross, "Nathan Warren, a Free Negro for the Old South," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, XV (Spring 1956), 64-67.

³⁸John T. Fulton to William S. Fulton, December 31, 1841, Fulton Collection.

forms of social life, often centered around liquor-dispensing “groceries.” Addressing the city council in 1850, Mayor David J. Baldwin called “very particular attention” to these establishments where “drunkenness, gambling, and other abominable vices are carried on” with the result that “domestic and laboring slaves are rendered worse than useless.” Slaveowners worried about the violent mood and other rebellious tendencies of those who gathered at these places,³⁹ and advertisements for runaway slaves suggest that such concerns were justified. A large number of these notices describe the fugitive as “addicted to drinking and gambling” or “fond of liquor.”⁴⁰

Little Rock slaves took advantage of their leisure to seek the company of other blacks, often meeting in small groups. These separate gatherings, made possible by the ease of sneaking off under the protection of darkness and by the absence of an effective night police, offered slaves a respite from the stifling scrutiny of their masters’ oversight. Whites gained only occasional glimpses of these “unlawful assemblies” but reacted with alarm because of a suspicion of incendiary or other rebellious planning which transpired there.⁴¹ The slaves’ quest for an independent social life seemed to be led by those who hired their own time and lived in houses apart from their owners. This “worse than free class,” wrote one critic, had an “exceedingly pernicious influence upon servants who are kept at home in their proper places — where all negroes ought to be.”⁴² The freedoms enjoyed by some slaves seemed contagious. As one newspaper warned, “a few bad and reckless negroes in a community may do a great deal of mischief.”⁴³ This underground slave community included some blacks who owned firearms and many others who had become literate, an ability which alarmed one citizen who pointed out that local papers contained excerpts from northern journals. These slaves

³⁹ *Arkansas Gazette and Democrat*, October 20, 1854; Little Rock City Council Records, A, April 2, 1850.

⁴⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, July 3, 1839, November 10, 1841; *Arkansas Banner*, August 21, 1844, May 7, 1845, February 18, 1851; *Arkansas State Democrat*, February 9, May 18, 1849.

⁴¹ *Arkansas Gazette*, December 1, 1841; *Arkansas State Democrat*, September 14, 1849; Little Rock *Arkansas Whig*, March 2, 1854; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, June 14, 1850, May 17, 1856.

⁴² *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, October 16, 1858.

⁴³ *Arkansas State Gazette*, April 14, 1841.

who read these abolitionist “ravings” would absorb antislavery principles and spread them to others, he warned.⁴⁴ Accounts of night-time burglaries also blamed the “lax discipline” exerted over local slaves, resulting in a set of “loafers” who resorted to this dishonest means of living.⁴⁵

Records left by slaveowners reveal individual slaves challenging controls and stretching rules of conduct in efforts to experience the freedoms available in Little Rock, especially the social relationships with other blacks. The correspondence of Senator Fulton and his family and friends living in or near the capital city yields valuable information on the slave community. The slaves probed for disciplinary weaknesses and took advantage of any lapses in authority; conversely, the masters worried about the thieving tendencies of their servants, complained of their surliness, and, most significantly, found it impossible to limit their recreational pursuits. David Fulton, father of the senator, resigned himself to his slaves’ determination to celebrate Christmas but insisted that they also perform the elementary household tasks. But Frank, sent into the woods from Little Rock to gather enough fuel for the night, failed to return with the provisions. Instead, according to one account, “Frank retired to the chamber of his *dulcinea del tebosa* and there sank into the armes [*sic*] of morpheus where he remained until 4 o’clock p. m.” David found his house “entirely out of wood[,] the ground covered with snow and the atmosphere freezingly cold and no tidings whatever of Frank.” Fulton worried that the slave had run away, a fear which became prophecy. A few years later Frank escaped from his next owner who sold the fugitive “in the woods” to a speculator.⁴⁶

Joseph had been handpicked in Washington by Senator Fulton, who sent the slave to Little Rock “confident,” he explained to his wife Matilda, that “you will be pleased with him.” In fact, though “affable, polite,” and literate, Joseph like so many town blacks had acquired a taste for alcohol. For a while he worked at the Anthony House hotel

⁴⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, March 21, 1838.

⁴⁵ *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, June 14, 1850, October 31, 1851, October 16, 1858.

⁴⁶ Matilda Fulton to David F. Shall, November 16, 1843, John T. Fulton to William S. Fulton, December 31, 1841, Matilda Fulton to William S. Fulton, August 14, 1842, Fulton Collection; *Arkansas State Gazette*, August 4, 1847.

where undoubtedly he came by liquor fairly easily, but even when he moved back to the Fulton home, "Rosewood," a mile or two from town, Joe found opportunities to drink. On one occasion Matilda wrote to her husband: "I regret to have to tell you I went to town yesterday afternoon with the children for a ride, it being Sunday, and our man Joseph got so drunk he could not drive me home." Following a bad hangover and a harsh lecture, Joseph professedly "joined the temperance," and worked diligently the next week; however, Mrs. Fulton continued to express cynicism about his future behavior. She announced an end to his career as a driver, but keeping Joe away from the carriage did not abolish his mobility entirely. Joseph eventually ran away and stayed gone at least a few weeks if not forever.⁴⁷

Manuel, despite verbal promises to the contrary, asserted by his actions that on certain matters he would govern himself. He took advantage of the frequent absence of Senator Fulton to gain virtual independence on issues such as residence in town and regularity of work. Manuel seemed to be the leader of the other slaves in challenging the authority of his principal managers, David and Matilda Fulton. Of the elder Fulton one observer lamented, "they have no fear whatever in disregarding his commands[;] the fact is they are wholly beyond his controle [*sic*]." Mrs. Fulton demonstrated a similar failure as slave taskmistress; her letters contained frequent admission of her problems. "I have not set eyes on Manuel since last Saturday night [over a week]. I suppose he will come home in the morning; he is indeed his own man," she wrote revealingly.⁴⁸ Though Manuel worked alternately between the family's suburban mansion and its town property, he considered himself a town resident. In fact, the threat of making him labor exclusively on the farm was one of the few successful disciplinary ploys. With unintended understatement Matilda described Manuel as "not fond of staying at [the farm]. . . . It seems if lock or nothing else will keep him at home."⁴⁹ One of the major attractions of the town was the presence

⁴⁷ William S. Fulton to Matilda Fulton, May 18, 1840, David Fulton to William S. Fulton, February 2, 1842, Matilda Fulton to William S. Fulton, January 1, February 6, 10, 1843, Fulton Collection; *Arkansas Banner*, May 22, 1849.

⁴⁸ John T. Fulton to William S. Fulton, January 3, 1842, Matilda Fulton to William S. Fulton, January 1, 1843, Fulton Collection.

⁴⁹ Matilda Fulton to William S. Fulton, November 17, 1839, *ibid.*

of his wife, with whom either by permission or by stealth he maintained a residence. His pursuit of family life led Manuel into serious conflicts with the law. In August 1841 city authorities tried him for "threatening to burn the house of E. Ames" who owned his wife, found him guilty, and barred him from the city limits. Scarcely five months later Manuel took a bridle and saddle from Ames and a horse from someone else, all of which he lost gambling. As a result of his conviction on charges arising out of these escapades, Manuel received three separate whippings and temporary incarceration in the penitentiary.⁵⁰

For a while these brushes with the law seemed to leave Manuel's rebelliousness undaunted as he continued to make "depradations" against whatever property he desired. But the discussion of Manuel in the Fulton correspondence concluded on a note of pathos, reaffirming that even the most independent spirited slave experienced the tragedy of bondage. About a year after the prison term, Matilda wrote: "the first thing I heard this morning, before I was up was Manuel at my door crying. I asked him what was the matter, he said his wife was going away." His efforts to accompany his wife had failed, and Mrs. Fulton observed without sympathy, "I hope he will stay at home as he has no wife." Her last mention of Manuel suggested that personal traumas and failing health had at last taken a toll on his previously indomitable spirit: "Old Manuel is complaint [*sic*] all the time, he says he won't last long."⁵¹

Some slaves sought the pleasures of the urban environment so doggedly that their owners sold them out of town.⁵² Many others ran away before their masters could take such a step. With some concrete evidence to support them, slaveowners blamed their runaway problem on kidnapers, especially in the 1830s.⁵³ This explanation soothed fears over the dangers posed by runaways since it implied no overwhelming alienation on the part of slaves, but more candid observers cited several funda-

⁵⁰D[avid] F. Shall to William S. Fulton, February 8, 1842, *ibid.*; Corporation Court Records in Little Rock City Council Records, August 28, 1841.

⁵¹Matilda Fulton to William S. Fulton, February 6, 10, 1843, Fulton Collection.

⁵²Little Rock *Arkansas Times and Advocate*, September 24, 1838.

⁵³*Arkansas Gazette*, February 11, 1834, March 3, 10, 31, April 7, 1835, August 8, 22, 1838, April 15, 1840; *Arkansas Advocate*, February 6, April 3, 10, 1835; *Arkansas State Democrat*, May 26, 1848; Taylor, *Negro Slavery*, 222-24.

mental reasons for the dissatisfaction of these rebels. The owners' guesses which accompanied their advertisements cannot be accepted uncritically in explaining runaway motivations. One master expressed uncertainty whether his slave had headed back to his wife or to the Indian country, but the description of the fugitive, whose "back is somewhat scarred from whipping" suggests that he may have been fleeing from physical cruelty.⁵⁴ Yet, the owners must be given a measure of credibility because they had a vested interest in making a realistic appraisal of their escaped slaves' goals. The advertisements for runaways identified three major destinations. Several fled in order to reunite with their families, but the largest number appeared to be seeking freedom in a free state or Indian territory. This western refuge attracted many runaways, particularly during the early years before the countryside had become densely populated, and served as a reasonably safe sanctuary despite recapturing expeditions and the existence of slavery there. The next largest group of slaves sought the quasi-freedoms of "lurking" in the pine forests or other hideaways around town or concealing themselves in the city itself. Some slaveowners suspected local residents of "harboring" "good looking" females who had disappeared. In contrast with plantation slaves, few escaped from Little Rock to avoid heavy periods of labor, since the town slaves did not normally work at seasonal tasks.⁵⁵ The major motive of the runaways was to attain, protect, or enhance the freedom which Little Rock slaves grasped with such tenacity. Critics of the urban slave style attributed the number of runaways to the degree of personal self-dignity attained by blacks in the town environment.⁵⁶

The following group portrait suggests that the runaways were for the most part typical town slaves. Their median age of twenty-six was

⁵⁴ *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, January 31, 1857.

⁵⁵ The collective description of Little Rock runaways is based on advertisements from eleven different newspapers, including at least two journals for every year from 1832 on and three separate papers for several periods. This analysis includes only slaves from Little Rock. Of the eighty-one runaway notices, about half (thirty-nine) state the slave's suspected destination — eighteen supposedly headed for Indian Territory or a free state, twelve apparently remained in or near town, and nine were believed to have set out for their families. By seasons, nineteen escaped in the winter, twenty-four in the spring, eighteen in the summer, and twenty in the fall.

⁵⁶ *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, October 16, 1858.

virtually the same as that of all adult slaves in Little Rock. Owners described two-thirds of the fugitives as “black” or “dark” in color. About the only exceptional quality of the runaways was that four-fifths were male, whereas a clear majority (56 percent in 1860) of the town slaves were women. Chronologically, the heaviest concentration of runaways was in the first decade after the city incorporated, but the pursuit of freedom by escape continued in only slightly diminished fashion through the Civil War.⁵⁷ The personality characteristics noted by the masters reveals a variety of behavioral attributes. Advertisements frequently alluded to a slave’s intelligence, and often a runaway had previously displayed bold, boisterous, or even “seemingly impudent” mannerisms. On the other hand one young escapee adeptly feigned accommodation (the notice explaining that “when spoken to [he] looks down, speaks low, shows his teeth and the whites of his eyes”) until he jumped a northern-bound steamboat. Town bondsmen from all kinds of backgrounds could and did flee from their owners.⁵⁸

Their methods of escape also reflect the impact of the urban environment. The literacy and self-assurance arising out of the wider literacy opportunities and more frequent contacts with whites emboldened several Little Rock runaways to attempt to pass for white or foist off forged passes and free papers, devices which frequently failed. Others adopted less sophisticated techniques but engaged in careful planning. Many improved the odds against them by taking food, horses, and other sup-

⁵⁷The number of mulattoes among Little Rock runaways was not exceptional for an urban setting, even though the best scholarly estimates of the proportion of mulattoes among the entire slave population of the South places the figure at between 13 and 20 percent. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 414. Little Rock advertisements place the number of runaways at thirty-four in the years 1831-41, twenty-three in the period 1842-52, and twenty-four in the last decade, 1853-63. Comparison of the characteristics of runaways from Little Rock and New Orleans advertisements suggests that those from the Arkansas capital were rather typical; for example, the two groups had the same median age, sexual ratio, and absence of seasonal variation. Judith Kelleher Schafer, “New Orleans Slavery in 1850,” *Journal of Southern History*, XLVII (February 1981), 44.

⁵⁸*Arkansas Advocate*, May 9, 1832; *Arkansas State Gazette*, May 13, 1840, May 29, 1844, June 13, 1863; *Arkansas Banner*, August 21, 1844, May 7, 1845, May 22, 1849, February 18, 1851; *Arkansas State Democrat*, February 9, May 18, 1849; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, February 8, 1850, October 15, 1852, March 15, 1856.

plies to allow for more self-sufficient or speedier journeys.⁵⁹ The broadened social relationships and organizational experiences of the town slaves persuaded many to attempt collective escapes. An 1854 group flight comprised three different families. A few years later Jim, Sam, and Abram, slaves of three different Little Rock masters, pooled their weapons and other provisions as they attempted to strike for freedom as a group. Led by a literate blacksmith named Randal, seven bondsmen armed themselves with four guns and fled their owner Robert Liles in 1836. While their success ratio cannot be measured with certainty, the records reveal few cases in which slaveowners captured fugitives who had banded together.⁶⁰ The 1850s produced fewer group escapes out of Arkansas because by then the countryside had become more densely populated; however, in that decade a large number of Little Rock runaways secured a kind of semi-permanent freedom by fleeing into the dense woods around the town. Here, according to one report, they congregated “by the dozens” and were provided for by “the free negro and degraded whites, for years at a time.”⁶¹

Such collective movements clearly posed threats to the peculiar institution in the Arkansas capital, but individual runaways also helped to weaken the bonds of slavery. Rebelliousness was frequently infectious — some owners lost several different runaway slaves.⁶² Others became

⁵⁹ *Arkansas Gazette*, August 22, 1838; *Arkansas Banner*, August 21, 1844, May 22, 1849; *Arkansas State Democrat*, December 4, 1846; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, March 9, 1855, August 23, 1856; *Arkansas True Democrat*, May 29, 1855, June 30, 1857, June 29, 1859; *Arkansas State Gazette*, July 12, 1862, July 11, 1863.

⁶⁰ *Arkansas Advocate*, February 8, 1832; *Arkansas Gazette*, November 4, 1834, March 3, 1835, March 1, 1836, April 3, May 1, 1839, November 10, 1841, May 29, 1844, June 13, August 22, 1863. In spite of these apparent successes, fewer slaves adopted group methods after the 1840s, when the countryside began to fill with people. For a contrasting view of the meaning of urban group runaways, see Schafer, “New Orleans Slavery,” 47-48. This study found that group efforts were more common among rural runaways and suggests that urban conditions promoted individualism and acculturation rather than a sense of collective identity.

⁶¹ *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, October 16, 1858.

⁶² William E. Woodruff advertised for five different runaway slaves, Henry, John, Moses, Reuben, and Joseph. *Arkansas Gazette*, May 17, 1836, November 10, 1841; *Arkansas Banner*, August 21, 1844; *Arkansas State Democrat*, January 21, October 27, 1848. Jacob Reider had to recover fugitives four times. *Arkansas Gazette*, July 3, 1839, November 10, 1841; *Arkansas State Democrat*, December 4, 1846, July 20, 1849. On four occa-

habitual runaways, forcing their masters to bear a burden of ownership and providing models of alienation for other blacks. Twenty-year-old London escaped in 1858 only to be shot in the back, recaptured, and returned to his owner. He remained at home less than a year before again becoming a fugitive. Jacob, on the other hand, waited ten years before making his second runaway attempt. Others like Peter were undaunted by recapture in their repeated efforts to be free. Owner Roswell Beebe at first believed that his "smart active boy had no doubt been induced to leave me from the bad advice of others," but the slave refuted that idea by fleeing annually over a three year period, each time to a new destination. Some masters gave up the prospect of taming these rebels and sold them at considerable financial loss "in the woods" to speculating slavehunters.⁶³ Descriptions of these fugitives often testified to their intimidating personalities. Henry, despite being only five feet tall and slightly stoop-shouldered, bore marks of abuse and displayed remarkable determination. Described as a "bright Mulatto" with a long beard "considerably bleached from being some time in jail" and a scarred right leg from the ankle to the knee, Henry freed himself from his manacles and escaped from jail. He reputedly planned to remain near town long enough to find supplies for the journey north toward freedom. Others also literally broke their chains in order to escape from bondage. One of the most impressive of these was Ralph, a thirty-five-year-old bewhiskered, stout black man whose owner described him as "a very bad negro." Though literate and possibly holding free papers, Ralph faced considerable obstacles in his journey home to St. Louis, not the least of which being that "he had on when he left an Iron collar with a chain attached to it."⁶⁴ Jail breaks occurred remarkably often as fugitive slaves found

sions bondsmen escaped from Noah Badgett. *Arkansas Advocate*, April 15, 1836; *Arkansas Gazette*, August 8, 1838, November 10, 1841; *Arkansas True Democrat*, October 27, 1857. Anthony, Tom, and Sam all ran away from Ben F. Danley. *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, January 31, 1851, August 7, 1858, March 26, 1859.

⁶³ *Arkansas True Democrat*, December 15, 1858, December 21, 1859 (on London). *Arkansas Gazette*, July 3, 1839; *Arkansas State Democrat*, July 20, 1849 (on Jacob). *Arkansas State Democrat*, July 3, 1846, February 8, 1848, November 16, 1849 (on Peter). *Arkansas State Gazette*, May 1, 1847; *Arkansas State Democrat*, September 28, 1849; *Arkansas Banner*, October 23, 1849, November 26, 1850 (sale of runaways to slavehunters).

⁶⁴ Little Rock *Old-Line Democrat*, April 16, 1860 (on Henry). *Arkansas Star*, October 21, 1840 (on Ralph).

weaknesses in the county facility, a newly refurbished “city Calaboose,” and even the state penitentiary.⁶⁵ These militant runaways were often dangerous; in 1842 a slave who had lived for three years in quasi-freedom in the area forests was shot dead when he drew a knife and refused to submit to his captors.⁶⁶ For the black community these runaways provided an alternative mode of leadership to the practitioners of accommodation; historian John Blassingame has determined that other bondsmen generally admired the daring of fugitives and that these individuals acquired high status as a result.⁶⁷

Runaways, especially those with desperate or violent tendencies, invariably conjured up fears of insurrection in the minds of whites. Several other conditions contributed to a perpetual concern in Little Rock over the dangers of slave rebellion. First, some slaves did in fact engage in violent rebelliousness, including arson.⁶⁸ Secondly, town conditions corroded effective discipline and thus seemingly invited rebellion. Newspaper reports of insurrection plots invariably recounted for readers the deplorable degree of freedom present for blacks in Little Rock. An 1859 warning catalogued the most detailed list of danger signs: “Runaways are hid in the vicinity and are in the city every night. The patrol force of the city is too small. . . . Negroes traverse the streets at all hours of the night free from hindrance, . . . are permitted to carry knives and pistols[,] and in case of a quarrel they draw their weapons with as much bravado as Baltimore or New Orleans rowdies.”⁶⁹ Except for one additional factor — the emergence of northern abolitionism — this insurrec-

⁶⁵ *Arkansas Gazette*, August 18, 1841; *Arkansas Times and Advocate*, September 26, 1842; *Arkansas True Democrat*, August 4, 1857; *Arkansas State Gazette*, June 1, 1861; Little Rock City Council Records, B, April 5, 1853.

⁶⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, May 29, October 30, 1839, March 23, 1842.

⁶⁷ Blassingame, “Status and Social Structure,” 149.

⁶⁸ Some newspapers attributed nearly every unexplained fire to incendiarism and warned that blacks “lurking” about the city at night were especially suspicious. In 1852 a local slave attempted arson, and during the Civil War, Mary, a slave of Nancy Reider, received a sentence of 500 lashes for this crime, though a higher court overturned the conviction. *Arkansas Gazette*, February 17, 1835, May 5, 1841; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, July 23, 1852; Pulaski County Circuit Court, Criminal Record, C, April 23, 24, October 22, 24, 27, 28, 1863 (Office of the County Clerk, Pulaski County Court House, Little Rock).

⁶⁹ *Arkansas True Democrat*, November 30, 1859.

tion phobia might have remained dormant. Antislavery "scoundrels" reportedly infested the area from the early 1840s onward, and local journalists never ceased to provide reminders of the need for vigilance, especially during and just after rumors of revolt in 1856, John Brown's raid of 1859, and the Texas hysteria of 1860. Perhaps because of special precautions taken by individuals and city government, the threat of organized slave uprising did not materialize, and the city avoided the vigilante excesses which occurred elsewhere.⁷⁰

It did not take rebellion for the slaves of Little Rock to run afoul of the law, for local lawmakers regulated black conduct in intricate detail. At an early date the city recognized the special problems posed by slavery in the town setting; in fact, an embryonic black code emerged even before Little Rock achieved corporate status. In 1826, soon after the legislature granted a few powers to certain towns, Little Rock outlawed dances, riotous conduct, unguarded "assemblages," and gambling for both slaves and free blacks.⁷¹ During the course of the next decade the city engaged in incessant revision of its code, adding restrictions, altering punishments, refining languages, and plugging loopholes until it developed a complete and severe set of rules for local blacks. To the list of activities forbidden by the initial ordinance, Little Rock made the following additions: blacks (slave or free) could not purchase or sell liquor, stay out at night after the nine o'clock curfew, carry dangerous weapons, loiter idly, verbally abuse or strike a white person, harbor escaped slaves, congregate in unlicensed meetings, or even keep a dog. Economic activity also came under regulation as the laws forbade slaves from trading in stores without written permission, hiring their own time, or living in the corporate limits if their owners resided outside the city. Except for the addition of a law preventing slaves from living separate and apart from their owners, which officials passed in 1856, this code became virtually complete in 1835.⁷² After an 1848 codification, the local government con-

⁷⁰Taylor, *Negro Slavery*, 224, 229-30; *Arkansas Times and Advocate*, March 14, April 18, 1842; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, June 18, 1852. Both Chester Ashley and the city government hired special detectives to guard against an uprising during the holiday season of 1860. Little Rock City Council Records, B, December 21, 1860.

⁷¹Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 27; *Arkansas Gazette*, February 7, 1826.

⁷²*Arkansas Advocate*, February 8, 1832; *Arkansas Gazette*, January 12, 1836, April 10, 1844; *Ordinances of the City of Little Rock: as revised, amended and adopted, by the*

fined its changes largely to matters of enforcement and punishment. Laws became steadily more comprehensive and restrictive and penalties more harsh. The curfew law provides one illustration. Until the 1850s local ordinances set punishment at ten to twenty lashes on the bare back. After an 1852-1856 experiment with fining owners rather than beating blacks, the city returned to corporal punishment but increased it to thirty-nine lashes. Penalties against owners also stiffened — the maximum fine for allowing a bondsman to hire his own time doubled to \$100, the city demanded bonds from offending masters, and it even provided for a possible auction of the slave whose owner failed to pay these impositions.⁷³

The growing complexity and stiffness of the city black code should not obscure a consistent and basic weakness — it was poorly enforced. Until the eve of the Civil War, Little Rock depended primarily on an overburdened constable to police the entire town. In fact, according to one local ordinance this official had responsibilities as tax assessor and collector, street overseer, and night watchman in addition to his normal duties.⁷⁴ The city attempted to compensate for the excessive demands on this official by empowering other members of local government and even private citizens to arrest slaves for certain offenses. In 1840 Little Rock extended the public's burden for law enforcement by creating the City Patrol, an unpaid, self-armed, conscripted body required "generally [to] act as guardians of the peace and watchmen" with a special obligation of visiting "all negro quarters." As in other places in the South, the patrol system proved inoperable, due in Little Rock largely to the fact that the already overworked constable had total responsibility for its organization and leadership. The city council supplemented its law enforcement system with a Committee on Secret Police in 1854, but not until 1861 did it appropriate funds for a larger (four member) police force.⁷⁵

Mayor and City Council, May, A. D., 1848 (Little Rock, 1848), 124; Little Rock City Council Records, B, October 27, 1856.

⁷³ *Arkansas Gazette*, February 1, 1832, February 25, 1834, January 12, 1836; *Ordinances of Little Rock*, 80; Little Rock City Council Records, B, February 3, 1852, October 27, 1856.

⁷⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, February 25, 1854.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, June 24, 1840; *Ordinances of Little Rock*, 122-24; Little Rock City Council Records, B, February 10, 1854, January 19, 1861. Not until 1840 did local ordinances even indicate that the constable had a deputy.

Public criticism of the laxness of local government was fairly broad-ranging; the most frequent complaints centered on the inadequacies of the night watch. While some of this controversy reflected local political animosities and cannot be trusted as a gauge of law enforcement failures,⁷⁶ other sources confirm the existence of many policing problems. In 1849 the city council condemned the constable for being both inattentive to enforcement and even unfamiliar with the nature of the laws of the city. The next year incoming Mayor David J. Baldwin directed most of his address to violations of the ordinances against selling liquor to slaves, concluding "that the laws had better be repealed at once, or fairly enforced."⁷⁷ The city of course did neither, and in fact municipal government appears to have been less active in enforcing its edicts in the 1850s than in the previous decade. In the early 1840s the corporation court tried and convicted slaves for assault, arson, and using offensive language and fined a white resident for selling liquor to a slave. This separate court soon lapsed; though the city council as a body occasionally prosecuted slaves in subsequent years, more often it confined its activity to the rhetorical level. For example, in 1853 the council asserted its intention of "maintaining in their stringency the police regulations over a class of our population which it should be the duty of all, at all times, and at all places to aid in keeping proper subjection to the laws."⁷⁸ Other branches of government were similarly spasmodic in enforcing slave codes. The state circuit court in Little Rock tried many on the offense of selling liquor to slaves and sometimes inflicted large fines, but usually the authorities failed to obtain conviction or even to prosecute the cases to conclusion.⁷⁹

Many southern cities which experienced weaknesses in enforcement of their strict slave codes modified the laws in accommodation of the high degree of black freedom; these places enacted measures providing

⁷⁶ *Arkansas State Democrat*, September 14, 1849; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, October 31, 1851, May 17, 1856, January 31, 1857; *Arkansas True Democrat*, May 30, 1856.

⁷⁷ Little Rock City Council Records, A, April 23, 1849, April 2, 1850.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, A, May 19, October 30, 1841, February 5, March 31, 1842, B, May 3, 1853.

⁷⁹ Pulaski County Circuit Court, Criminal Record, B, December 12, 1849, February 26, December 3, 1850, August 1, 1851, December 13, 1853, C, July 1, 1857, May 2, 3, December 8, 1858, May 6, 1859, May 16, November 12, 1860, October 22, 1862.

for racial segregation in order to prevent the complete breakdown of urban slavery.⁸⁰ In Little Rock critics of the liberties enjoyed by the slaves fought back in an attempt to reinstitute slavery of a more severe variety. Organized labor launched the most broadly based attack against the exalted position of Little Rock slaves, criticizing them as pampered and recklessly out of control. Especially those who worked at nonmenial tasks and hired their own time had become, according to one propaganda statement, “depraved and untrustworthy.”⁸¹ From their first efforts at organization in the late 1830s, skilled white laborers had been only occasionally active politically, concentrating on such issues as convict labor. Controversy erupted in 1858 when the workers added objections to competing with slave labor to their list of grievances. Claiming that laboring alongside slaves was economically unfair and morally degrading, the union appealed to white mechanics in Little Rock to adopt political and economic pressure tactics. It urged defeat of all candidates who owned skilled black workers, boycott of all projects which employed slaves, and refusal to provide instruction to Negroes.⁸²

The labor movement split the white community. The mechanics had attempted to present a conservative ideology — they argued that blacks by nature were best suited to plantation labor and that the privileges tolerated in urban slaves threatened “southern interests and institutions in general” — but their radical methods allowed slaveowners to label the campaign as abolitionist. In the words of the *Arkansas True Democrat*, “the [labor] movement, carried out to its full extent, would abolish slavery in the south.” With sectional animosities so tense, this antislavery charge stung the labor organization into a swift retreat. Soon the mechanics group reduced its goal to eliminating competition with self-hiring slaves and withdrew its political and economic threats in favor of what it called “moral suasion and argument.”⁸³

Organized labor receded without accomplishing its most important

⁸⁰ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 266-78.

⁸¹ *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, October 16, 1858.

⁸² *Arkansas Gazette*, August 29, 1837, January 2, 9, December 11, 1839; *Arkansas Banner*, June 11, 18, 1845; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, July 31, September 25, 1858.

⁸³ *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, September 25, October 16, 1858; *Arkansas True Democrat*, September 29, 1858.

goals, but in the process of suggesting means of curtailing black liberties, the white workers sponsored one proposal — the expulsion of all free blacks by state law — which had immediate and widespread support. Free blacks in Little Rock had always occupied a tenuous position. They had never been a sizable part of the population and had been declining in numbers from a high of fifty-six in 1842.⁸⁴ They faced active hostility from the white community, manifested in laws of both state and city government designed to prevent further entry of free blacks and to guarantee orderly behavior via a system of peace bonds. Beginning in 1839 the city council enforced the bond system sporadically but often enough to remind non-slave blacks of their unwelcome status, and the nearly prohibitive amounts (\$500) of the securities reveal a desire to eliminate the class altogether.⁸⁵ Free blacks also bore the brunt of the local black code which placed them in an impossible social position. Restrictions on social activities and “disorderly” conduct applied to all blacks equally, whether free or slave, but at the same time the law attempted to keep these two groups from intermingling. Naturally the authorities failed to force a complete compliance with the code, sparking numerous criticisms of free blacks for stirring up mischief among the slaves. Most of these charges remained unproven, as were allegations that they cooperated with abolitionists or otherwise incited slaves to

⁸⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, April 4, 1838, February 23, 1842, March 2, 1846; Seventh Census, 1850, Pulaski County, Schedule 1, M-432, roll 29; Eighth Census, 1860, Pulaski County, Schedule 1, M-653, roll 49. The free black population of Little Rock was as follows: twenty-five in 1838, fifty-six in 1842, forty-three in 1846, twenty-two in 1850, and none in 1860. The only blacks listed in the 1860 free schedules were prisoners.

⁸⁵ In 1843 the Arkansas legislature prohibited further migration of free Negroes into the state and established a bond system. The latter measure had already been enacted by the municipal authorities in 1835, though enforcement did not begin until four years later. In 1842 bonds were again collected and fines imposed on those who had not posted them on time; enforcement then lapsed until 1849 when the city recorded these securities for the last time. Thereafter, county authorities took over the task of prosecuting persons on the charge of “being a free Negro.” Taylor, *Negro Slavery*, 247-52; *Arkansas Gazette*, January 12, 1836; *Ordinances of Little Rock*, 80-82; Little Rock City Council Records, A, June 22, July 12, December 23, 1839, January 30, February 4, 17, 24, April 7, October 6, 1840, January 15, 1841, January 28, February 10, April 21, 23, 27, 28, 30, May 9, 1842, June 2, 1849. Pulaski County Circuit Court, Criminal Record, B, July 2, December 4, 1849, February 26, June 10, 1850, January 7, June 16, December 2, 1851, February 4, December 9, 13, 1852, February 4, 15, 1854, C, November 9, 19, 1858, May 3, 1859.

rebellion.⁸⁶ Whatever the “free persons of color” did or did not do, they inevitably aroused suspicion and hostility. Some criticized them as indolent; others maintained that free blacks took jobs that should have been reserved for white workers. Free blacks also received the blame for causing sexual promiscuity and miscegenation. When all these grievances were exhausted, there was always the concept that the very presence of this group was incompatible with slavery — that it provided a model of freedom, thus leading to discontent among bondsmen.⁸⁷

This long-standing prejudice against the free black class in the Arkansas capital allowed the criticisms of the labor organization to develop into a full-fledged expulsion movement. Actually the antifree Negro rhetoric had been a minor part of the white workers’ campaign to expel black labor from the skilled trades, but it proved a measure which nonslaveowner and slaveowner alike could support. Thus the free black scapegoat helped to reconcile a serious division in the white community. Other factors also contributed to the passage of the state’s eviction law of 1859,⁸⁸ but in Little Rock where the campaign centered, it was favored as a means of tightening the reins on urban slaves without sacrificing the economic interests of slaveowners or undermining the unity of the white community. Despite a few second thoughts in some quarters, the threat of the law and actions by authorities combined to eliminate the entire free black population from the capital city of Arkansas in 1860.⁸⁹ These victories of the slaveowners — rebutting the white labor campaign and eliminating the free black “menace” — suggest that

⁸⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, November 17, 1835, March 16, 1842; *Arkansas State Democrat*, March 16, 1849; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, December 27, 1856, October 16, 1858.

⁸⁷ *Arkansas State Democrat*, March 16, 1849; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, October 16, 1858; Taylor, *Negro Slavery*, 256-57. These charges were based mostly on exaggeration, flimsy evidence, or clear inaccuracies.

⁸⁸ The expulsion idea had been proposed in Little Rock twenty-five years before it passed. It was aided by the worsening sectional crisis, the deteriorating position of free blacks throughout the south, and the fact that the Dred Scott decision removed doubts as to its legality. Taylor, *Negro Slavery*, 248, 256; *Arkansas Gazette*, July 7, 1835; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, March 26, 1852, November 13, 1858, February 19, March 5, 1859; Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1974), 372-74.

⁸⁹ Fay Hempstead, *Historical Review of Arkansas: Its Commerce, Industry and Mod-*

the institution remained viable in the urban setting in spite of the subversive impact of the privileges gained by the slaves.⁹⁰

The slave experience in Little Rock presaged many developments of post-Civil War years. Under the regimen of slavery, these Arkansas blacks moved toward the establishment of a many-faceted community. They founded separate black churches, institutions which provided blacks with services and leadership, especially in their quest for education. In spite of their slave status, they established and clung to families with at least some capacity to further and defend their individual and collective interests. Many Little Rock slaves managed to provide for themselves economically and underwent both the vicissitudes of this privilege and the satisfaction of struggling toward self-improvement. They also gained much "freedom" socially — they met and befriended people of a variety of circumstances, gathered together for recreational purposes, tasted the tantalizing lure of a city's nightlife, and met with the repressions of the law when they stepped beyond the boundaries of what the white man considered proper for a dependent people. The slave community also had a lesson in paternalism — when working class whites threatened to take away the fundamental ingredients of their

ern Affairs (3 vols., Chicago, 1911), I, 198-99; *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, February 19, 1859; *Arkansas True Democrat*, May 4, 1859, January 18, March 7, 1860.

⁹⁰In his pathbreaking work on urban slavery, Richard C. Wade concluded that slaves in the cities gained so many liberties as to cause the institution to disintegrate. He emphasized that many southern cities were shedding slaves, especially young males who were most unmanageable, and that the cities resorted to racial segregation and tightening emancipation measures as stopgap efforts to prevent the imminent collapse of slavery. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 263-66, 274-78. More recent scholars have revised the concept that urban slavery was verging on collapse. Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York, 1970) found that the institution was being successfully adapted to manufacturing. Quantifying historians, most especially Claudia Dale Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820-1860: A Quantitative History* (Chicago, 1976) believe that forces of the marketplace rather than social disintegration pulled young male slaves out of the cities and caused the numerical decline noted by Wade. Several other studies of particular cities also emphasize the tenacity of the institution in spite of the strains placed on bondage in the urban environment. See especially William L. Richter, "Slavery in Baton Rouge, 1820-1860," *Louisiana History*, X (Spring 1969), 125-45; Terry L. Seip, "Slaves and Free Negroes in Alexandria, 1850-1860," *ibid.*, 147-65; and John T. O'Brien, "Factory, Church, and Community: Blacks in Antebellum Richmond," *Journal of Southern History*, XLIV (November 1978), 509-36.

clandestine freedoms (hiring their own time, living in separate housing, working at skilled jobs), it was their owners who came to the rescue. Thus, however much city life may have represented "freedom" for the slave, the essential liberties in part depended on privileges dispensed by the white power structure in return for the perpetuation of the system. And, as if they needed reminding, the slaves of Little Rock, in seeing the expulsion of their free black neighbors, witnessed how fundamentally antithetical the white community was to real black liberty.