

ENSLAVED AFRICANS' RIVALRY WITH WHITE OVERSEERS IN PLANTATION CULTURE An Unconventional Interpretation

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Conventional wisdom about the Old South excludes slaves from the ranks of plantation overseers. However, a preference for restrictive types of evidence and a race-sensitive system for assigning titles in plantation culture raise questions about the accuracy of conventional wisdom. Reexamining conventional scholarship and supplementing it with slave narratives and legal resources suggest that slaves served as overseers more frequently and more competently than previously reported. First, an analysis of both Black and White narratives across the Old South reveals many instances where slaves performed the duties of overseers without carrying that title. Second, drawing on a comparison with the rivalry between Black and White urban workers, an analysis of salary data for White overseers suggests that their competition for work with slaves contributed to other factors that depressed their value to planters.

Keywords: Old South; overseer; slave; rivalry

Conventional wisdom about plantation culture in the Old South minimizes the enslaved Africans' opportunity and competence to work as overseers, but influential scholars who have collected and assessed relevant evidence have viewed it through restrictive if not race-sensitive filters. Early 20th-century historians reported that White overseers had a reputation for incompetence but that enslaved Africans were inherently unable to supplant them. Phillips (1918/1959) observed that planters derided overseers generally for their "dishonesty, inattention and self indulgence" (p. 283); however, he also concluded that plantations were schools

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for the "civilizing of Negroes" but that enslaved Africans had little chance to earn a "diploma . . . which would send them forth to fend for themselves" (p. 279). Similarly, in the first book-length study of overseers in the Old South, Bassett (1925) observed that the majority of overseers lacked imagination, education, sobriety, and ambition, but he restated proslavery ideology when he insisted that enslaved Africans were not eligible for positions of authority because they lacked the knowledge of "marriage, religion, the use of language, treatment for disease" (p. 7) as well as "ideals of industry and private property" (p. 21). In the mid-20th century, Scarborough (1966) restated planters' typical criticism of overseers for "dishonesty, inefficiency, incapacity, and self-indulgence" (p. 6), but he ultimately rehabilitated the majority of them, in part because of the "ignorant, and often hostile, labor force" (p. 5) they supervised. More recent, in a study of South Carolina plantation management that mentions enslaved Africans only in passing, Steffen (1997, pp. 753-802) reported planters' difficulty in finding a skillful overseer and their enthusiasm for publicly rewarding exceptional discoveries. All of these scholars cautioned against sweeping generalizations because of the myriad of differences between times, places, and people, but their conclusions have formed a durable base of conventional wisdom that "black men slaves might serve as 'drivers' over other slaves, but they never served as overseers" (Jones, 1998, p. 210).

The superstructure of this conventional wisdom is buttressed by a preference for restricted types of evidence and a peculiar system of nomenclature. Generations of scholars have conventionally distrusted the recollections of enslaved Africans who actually experienced plantation culture and have rarely investigated legal records that counterbalance the self-reporting bias inherent in census data and other survey data. Instead, scholars have relied on the letters and diaries of planters and politicians who shared membership in the Old South's elite class and spoke with one mind about the plantation system. Moreover, although several conventional distinctions among titles in the plantation hierarchy are indisputably accurate, assigning different titles to the same managerial role based on the race of the manager is potentially misleading.

Enslaved Africans narrated their competition with overseers for managerial positions, but many of these narratives are dismissed, and properly so, as unreliable or fictional. However, the authentic 19th-century autobiographical accounts publicized aspects of slavery that had been obscured for decades. Their authors' efforts to secure a wide audience by satisfying readers' tastes for lurid tales detract only slightly from their plausibility. Twentieth-century narratives composed during the Federal Writer's Project of the 1930s affirmed some conventions about overseers and rebutted others, and the clash between truly grief-stricken or bitter recollections and apparently candid affection for the slavery days renders these narratives forever perplexing. They must be screened for biased phrasing in the questions used by interviewers as well as wariness in respondents' answers. Nonetheless, slave narratives in the form of autobiographies and interview responses constitute rich, personal testimony (Bailey, 1980, p. 404; Blassingame, 1975, p. 492).

White narratives—diaries, journals, and letters—do not conventionally draw skepticism about their accuracy. Rather, scholars merely caution their readers about the proslavery ideology embedded or expressed in these resources. Yet White narratives merit the same scrutiny as slave accounts if for no other reason than these narratives provide deliberated reflections on White experiences rather than spontaneous declarations. Conversely, discourse about overseers in case law provides less controversial evidence. In fact, legal discourse provides especially trustworthy facts and figures because of the standards of evidence to which it was originally subjected. Terms in the contract between a planter and an overseer, as well as the overseer's effectiveness and salary, withstood cross-examination before being officially reported. Although Morris (1996, pp. 2-3) has deftly argued the opposite, these types of resources are not conventionally cited because critics dismiss them as reciting extreme cases irrelevant to everyday life in the Old South (Breen & Innes, 1980, pp. 23-26; W. Jordan, 1968, 587; Wiecek, 1977, p. 34).

Race-sensitive nomenclature presents another problem related to choice of evidentiary sources. An overseer was typically not a steward who represented the planter's business interests and did not

directly supervise slaves at work. And yet Candis Goodwin remembered things differently in her 1930s interview. She insisted that overseers were sometimes called stewards, that some of these were "colored," and that her Uncle Stephen was a "kinder overseer fo' some widow 'omans" (Virginia Slave Narratives, 1936-1938). Customarily, when Whites commanded slave labor under the supervision of another White, they were called suboverseers. Arguably just as clear is the distinction between all of these Whites and any slave with supervisory duties who toiled directly under their supervision as a driver. Yet a driver also might be called "foreman, overlooker, leading man, head man, boss, whipping boss, crew leader, overdriver, underdriver, or straw boss" (Van DeBurg, 1979, p. 3). Although working at identical jobs, some White supervisors were called overseers, whereas Black supervisors were called overlookers. Whites were called bosses, whereas Blacks were called leaders. Anna Baker insisted that planters put slaves in charge of laborers using hoes, whereas "White mens" supervised the plow hands (*Aframerindian Slave Narratives*, n.d.). Slaves did not customarily distinguish between an overseer who was White and an overseer who was a Native American, a Mexican, or another slave. Many slaves, although identified conventionally as drivers or foremen, performed the same duties as an overseer (Genovese, 1974, pp. 366-367, 381). Using racial distinctions in nomenclature is conventional but potentially misleading.

Reexamining conventional sources of evidence, adding conventionally neglected sources, and adopting a racially neutral measure of managerial competence all raise the question of whether African slaves served as overseers in plantation culture more often and more competently than previously reported. Indeed, raising this question highlights the leading theory about why White overseers hated the peculiar institution. As Franklin and Moss (1999) have phrased this theory, White overseers "were of the opinion that slavery was responsible for their own unfortunate economic plight" (p. 147). They were the slaves' rivals, competing with them for a livelihood, and this contest, along with more conventionally recognized factors, prompted abusive and vicious behaviors. Overseers' angry struggle with slaves, clearly disadvantaged in the contest by their

bondage, merely heightened perceptions of overseers as contemptible.

Slaves' competition with Whites for overseers' positions remains obscure, despite the fame of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe, 1852/1994). Harriet Beecher Stowe's (1852/1994) fictional character managed Mr. Shelby's farm in Kentucky before being sold down the river, eventually becoming the property of Simon Legree. Legree did not employ White overseers and relied on two slaves named Sambo and Quimbo to manage his Louisiana plantation. He eventually bought Uncle Tom to become "general overseer in his absence" (Stowe, 1852/1994, pp. 1-2, 294, 299, 304, 308, 357). Josiah Henson (1879), the flesh and blood model for Uncle Tom, claimed in his autobiography that he was "practically overseer" (p. 23) for one of his Maryland owners:

My situation as overseer I retained, together with the especial favor of my master, who was not displeased either with saving the expense of a large salary for a white superintendent, or with the superior crops I was able to raise for him. (p. 40)

An impressive variety of narratives by planters and slaves attest to the scope of slaves' competition with Whites for managerial positions.

In the upper South, custom rather than law often dictated the employment of overseers, and outspoken planters devalued this custom. They published tracts in which they reported their successes without overseers and lauded this simple, honest remedy for the problem of plantation management ("Character of Tennessee Cotton," 1859, p. 27; "True Remedy for the Embarrassment of Cotton Planters at the South and South-West," 1846, p. 436). Yet as a Virginia planter pointed out, any owner of a large farm "will find it a difficult task to manage his Negroes unless assisted by an overseer" ("Remarks on Overseers," 1837, p. 301). Only the rare planter of means did without an overseer for very long. These planters more frequently adopted a strategy that had the unintended effect of fomenting rivalry between slaves and overseers. For example, after Maryland's Charles Carroll dismissed one of his White overseers

in 1780, he relied on slaves to manage that quarter of his plantation. "I must in a great measure," Carroll confided to one of his sons, "trust to the gang Leaders who have promised to do their duty well" (Hoffman & Mason, 2000, p. 238). Carroll's only explicit reason for his strategy, the "great measure" of his decision making, was a slave's promise to manage the work as well as a White overseer. A late antebellum contributor to the *Southern Cultivator* spoke for like-minded planters in the Deep South who relied solely on an enslaved foreman for general supervision over all the servants. Dick, the planter's most trusted foreman, earned the kind of praise that highlighted the planter's rhetorical skill:

His kindness of heart, his impartial justice, his great liberality and devotion to his master, have made him a great favorite with his fellow servants; and so highly do I estimate this rare specimen of Nature's nobility, that should he live a thousand years, I hope that in my descendants he may find friends and protection. ("Management of Servants," 1853, p. 301)

Planters did not generally trust or respect slaves, but they exploited every opportunity that presented itself to use an enslaved overseer. Their strategy succeeded when, in their eyes, they found a rare specimen of nature's nobility.

Prominent in this strategy, the Black overseer competed with his White rival from the beginnings of plantation culture. Mid-17th-century Virginia litigation involving Hannah Warwick, an indentured servant, was extenuated because her overseer was Black (Re Warwick, 1669/1924, p. 513). During the mid-18th century, Virginia planters continued to experiment successfully with Black overseers. For 2 years, a slave named Cromwell supervised tobacco production for Edmund Bagge more profitably than the White overseer who succeeded him (Morgan, 1998, p. 220). Nicholas Wythe profited from the good work of a slave who was an "excellent leader and indeed a good Overseer" (Phillips, 1937, p. 223); Robert Downman enjoyed similar success when assigning managerial duties to a slave named Tom. Landon Carter no longer relied on White overseers following a succession of failures in the late 18th-century, and John Hartwell Cocke relied exclusively on

enslaved managers at Recess plantation for a decade early in the 19th century (Coyner, 1961, pp. 63, 70). Founding fathers, such as Thomas Jefferson, assigned an overseer's duties to a trusted slave named Jim. Indeed, in Edmund Bacon's recollections of the years he spent overseeing for Jefferson, Jim actually carried the title of overseer (Bear, 1967, p. 51). Edmund Ruffin held a dim view of overseers, getting along without them for 7 years during the 1850s. Instead, he relied on an enslaved foreman for whom he retained "high esteem & regard" (Scarborough, 1972-1989, Vol. 2, p. 449). In 1857, for several reasons unrelated to this slave's performance, Ruffin decided to hire a White overseer. However, he hesitated to execute this decision because "ill feelings were to be looked for between the overseer & the negro who had so long filled something like equal duties & position" (Scarborough, 1972-1989, Vol. 2, p. 449). Ruffin's language signals a reluctance to equate the slave's "duties & position" with those of an overseer; although, as he admitted, they were "something like equal" (Scarborough, 1972-1989, Vol. 2, p. 449). Not all of these slaves formally held the title of overseer, and few scholars use this title for them. Conventional wisdom only awkwardly accommodates the notion of enslaved overseers. However, slaves were apparently entrusted with the duties of overseers frequently and performed these duties competently.

Former Virginia slaves occasionally embellished conventional wisdom by making racial distinctions in the roles played by plantation managers. Elizabeth Sparks refused to comment on the horrors of slavery for the Federal Writers Project, but she did explain that planters "had colored foremen but they always have a white overseer" (Virginia Slave Narratives, 1936-1938). Cautious in the presence of her White interviewer, this former slave formally distinguished Black from White in describing plantation management. Yet during the 19th century, a kind of jealous rivalry evolved on Virginia plantations when overseers felt their authority eroding in the face of slaves' relentless and clever resistance. Robert R. Moton's enslaved father enjoyed "the confidence of his master" (Moton, 1921, p. 8), John Crowder, and used it to "the disadvantage of the overseer" (Moton, 1921, p. 11). Ultimately, when faced with

the decision of whether to sell his favorite slave or dismiss his overseer, Crowder discharged the overseer. Holding the title of overseer was little consolation for Whites who lost their contest with Blacks.

Former North Carolina slaves also used titles carefully in describing plantation management to White interviewers. According to Adeline Crump and Ria Sorrell, enslaved foremen tended plantations where the owner eschewed White overseers and "all got along mighty fine" because the other slaves following the foreman's orders (North Carolina Slave Narratives, 1936-1938). Anthony Dawson very carefully defined the management position on Levi Dawson's plantation 18 miles east of Greenville: "We called a white man boss the 'overseer,' but a nigger was a overlooker" (*Oklahoma Slave Narratives*, 1937-1938). His master had no White overseer, instead employing Anthony Dawson's uncle as the overlooker. Slaves on large plantations frequently toiled as foremen or drivers for a White boss or overseer, but Fannie Dunn claimed to recall "both white an' colored overseers" on Isaac Sessoms' plantation in Wake County (North Carolina Slave Narratives, 1936-1938). Indeed, the life and death of one of these Black overseers contrasted sharply with the conventional ignominy of White overseers. According to Fannie Dunn, her master had "always favored" a slave named Charles and "always listened to what Charles said . . . even 'fore he made him overseer" (North Carolina Slave Narratives, 1936-1938). When Charles died, the scene was dramatic: "Marster jest boo-hooed an' went to de house, an' wouldn't look at him no more till dey started to take him to de grave. Everybody on de plantation went to his buryin' an' funeral an' some from de udder plantation dat joined urn" (North Carolina Slave Narratives, 1936-1938). The life and death of Charles was doubtlessly unusual in North Carolina, but the lack of comparable wakes for White overseers in local records indicates that they would not have appreciated the elaborate mourning over Charles's demise.

The accounts of enslaved overseers in North Carolina contain sufficient detail to suggest a reasonable degree of accuracy. Henry Clay described vividly three generations of his enslaved family on

the plantation of an "awfully kind and religious" (*Aframerindian Slave Narratives*, n.d.) master who was his namesake. Claiming that "Old Master Clay" owned "nearly two hundred slaves," the former slave recalled that "the overseer was a Negro too" (*Aframerindian Slave Narratives*, n.d.). Similarly, Joe High remembered "one overseer, a Negro, Hamp High and another Coff High" (North Carolina Slave Narratives, 1936-1938). Members of the Pettigrew family, late 18th- and 19th-century planters in North Carolina, wrote letters that corroborate former slaves' recollections. Charles Pettigrew explained to one of his sons in 1799 that he could not readily leave his Belgrade plantation because he had "no Overseer at Home" (Wall, 1974, p. 171). He later wrote that slaves named George, Pompey, and Anthony supervised the work at the Bonarva plantation in the absence of White managers. Moreover, Pettigrew described a neighbor's overseer "as much of a negro in principle as e'ra one of them" and complained to a friend that he saw little "*Difference between white (overseers) & black (slaves) as our natural partiality for the former would persuade us*" (Wall, 1974, pp. 181-182). William Pettigrew employed slaves named Moses and Glasgow as plantation managers during the 1850s. Moses impressed Pettigrew with his work on the Belgrade plantation so much that his cousin, Glasgow, succeeded him in the management of the plantation on his death. At this time, Pettigrew described Glasgow's qualities of being "honest, industrious, not too talkative (which is a necessary qualification), a man of good sense, a good hand himself" (Starobin, 1974, p. 35) as ideal. Planters in the Pettigrew family did not always employ a White overseer, but they felt the pinch of doing without plantation managers. Their reliance on slaves to execute related duties, regardless of whether these slaves carried the title of overseer, confirms 20th-century recollections by former slaves that Blacks competed with Whites for these positions.

This rivalry took on similar dimensions elsewhere in the upper South. Sam Kilgore insisted that the chief overseer was White on John Peacocks's plantation near Memphis, Tennessee, and that the second overseers were Black (Texas Slave Narratives, 1937-1938).

Henry F. Pyle recalled that during the war between the North and South, slaves readily replaced Whites as overseers on Tennessee plantations (*Oklahoma Slave Narratives*, 1937-1938).

In the Deep South, the competition flourished despite laws to the contrary. The authors and custodians of Carolina law clearly wanted White overseers to assist planters in controlling slaves, but as Morgan (1998) has observed, planters often relied on their slaves because they valued them "for their ability to take decisive and independent action" (p. 343). John Graham, John Thomas, and John Green, all 18th-century planters, described their enslaved managers respectively as "most valuable," a "capital Fellow," and "the only Slave [Green] could place Confidence in" (Morgan, 1998, pp. 343-344). In a direct 18th-century comparison of the management on adjoining plantations, Henry Laurens assessed his White overseer as "wretched" and not "the tythe in virtue" of his slave driver (Morgan, 1998, pp 343-344). As a result, planters such as Ralph Izard were advised to shift managerial responsibilities from Whites to Blacks. Whether contrary statutes were seldom enforced or these planters saw themselves beyond the reach of law enforcement, slaves usurped Whites in the management of some Carolina plantations.

Nineteenth-century planters followed the same advice given to Ralph Izard. While traveling through the Carolina uplands, William Faux spoke with a planter who insisted that his slaves needed "no taskmaster, no overseer" (Faux, 1823, p. 68). A more famous travel writer and equally famous landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted (1856/1904), observed Richard Arnold's operation of his rice plantation and found that "the advice of the drivers is commonly taken in nearly all the administration, and frequently they are, de facto, the managers" (pp. 504-505). Arnold apparently bypassed his overseers in the chain of command. In fact, according to Olmsted, overseers were "frequently employed as a matter of form, to comply with the laws requiring the superintendence or presence of a White man among every body of slaves" (pp. 504-505). Referring formally to a slave as an overseer was rare in South Carolina, and slaves such as Randall Lucius Cooper used alternative titles, such as overlooker (*Texas Slave Narratives*, 1937-1938).

Unlike their slaves, planters doubtlessly used this linguistic scheme to sustain their assumptions about White superiority. Alternative titles for enslaved overseers were also likely to be aimed at defusing tensions between the Whites and Blacks filling these positions.

In his 19th-century autobiography, Jacob Stroyer attested to a rivalry built on the overseer's resentment of slaves' skills and the slaves' pride taken in mastering a trade beyond the overseer's ability. "At times," Stroyer reported, "the overseer, who was a white man, would go to the shop of the [enslaved] blacksmith, or carpenter, and would pick a quarrel with him, so as to get an opportunity to punish him" (Katz, 1969, pp. 15-16). Slaves recognized the perils in quarreling with overseers and normally remained silent. But as Stroyer recalled, a particularly determined overseer would try to bait a slave by saying: "Ye think because ye have a trade ye are as good as ye master . . . but I will show ye that ye are nothing but a nigger" (Katz, 1969, pp. 15-16). An underlying rivalry and related feelings of anger or fear occasionally rose to the surface, prompting overseers to insulate themselves against slaves.

These racial tensions and smoldering passions are fundamental to conventional wisdom about the Deep South, yet the rivalry between Black and White overseers in Georgia remains largely unnoticed. If W. W. Hazzard's 1831 report in the *Southern Agriculturist* is accurate, then this Georgia planter trusted his driver to act as "an executive officer" in the punishment of fellow slaves ("On the General Management of a Plantation," 1831, p. 353). Hazzard adopted this policy to clarify for his slaves that their punishment was not malicious but a dispassionate instrument of plantation discipline. However, unlike the majority of planters, Hazzard did not employ a White taskmaster to wield this instrument. A former slave alluded to this type of policy in recounting his youth on a Madison County plantation. "Doc" Daniel Dowdy described his overseer as a "tall, black man" whose duties included guarding the plantation against "plenty poor white neighbors" who caused the "biggest troubles" (*Oklahoma Slave Narratives*, 1937-1938). These same troublemakers would apply for an overseer's position, prompting Dowdy's master to rely on one of his own slaves for plantation management.

Former slaves' narratives provide what little is known about Black overseers in Georgia and Florida. Andrew Moss claimed that his uncle was "the colored overseer" on a plantation near Danbury, Georgia (Tennessee Slave Narratives, 1936-1938). Susan McIntosh explained that Judge William Stroud ("Marse Billy") had a White overseer until wartime and then "picked out a reliable colored man" (*Aframerindian Slave Narratives*, n.d.). William Curtis recalled a policy similar to that adopted by W. W. Hazzard, whereby Hugh McKown had colored overseers administer whippings to the slaves with a ferocity unmatched by White overseers (*Oklahoma Slave Narratives*, 1937-1938). Although policies and procedures in Florida appear more complex, this intricacy arises from nomenclature rather than reality. Claude A. Wilson and Louis Napoleon remembered a White driver on the Dexter and Randolph plantations, but Douglas Dorsey recalled that his driver was Black (Florida Slave Narratives, 1936-1938). Randall Lee insisted that his master would not allow any "overseer, white or colored" to whip slaves until they received a full hearing (Florida Slave Narratives, 1936-1938). Most poignant of all, the story of Cato Smith involves a free Black from Connecticut who traveled south to "see how other Negroes in the country lived" (Florida Slave Narratives, 1936-1938). He arrived in Florida, worked as an overseer, and eventually indentured himself for 7 years to buy the freedom of the woman he loved (Florida Slave Narratives, 1936-1938). These narratives vary in dramatic quality, but they consistently describe a system in which Blacks competed with Whites for the same types of managerial posts. The advent of war changed the contest, leaving slaves in charge of many plantations.

The rivalry between Black and White overseers emerged clearly in the Deep South when planters unintentionally fomented the contest. One Alabama planter wrote that he "never found it necessary to employ an overseer" (Breedon, 1980, p. 88), relying instead on an enslaved foreman. Another planter claimed to have trained his slaves "to obey implicitly whoever I put over them, whether white or black" (*Management of Slaves*, 1852, pp. 193-194). Hugh Davis was less enthusiastic about dispensing with an overseer but nonetheless relied solely on Black assistants when he could not hire a

suitable White manager (W. T. Jordan, 1948/1974, pp. 59-73). Eli J. Capell and L. M. Boatner, neighbors and progressive planters in Mississippi, "dispensed with overseers" as part of their agricultural experiments (Stephenson, 1936, p. 362). More famous were the innovations adopted by Joseph Davis on his "Hurricane" plantation. Jefferson Davis's older brother admired the utopian principles of visitors, such as Fanny Wright, and adopted a system of incentives rather than penalties to motivate his slaves. Benjamin Montgomery, a particularly successful slave, eventually became "business agent for the entire plantation" (Herman, 1990, p. 58). Along with the measures taken by his progressive colleagues, Davis's experiments had the collateral effect of giving slaves a portion of White overseers' power. Simon Gray, a Mississippi slave, provided perhaps the most dramatic example of Black managerial success. Originally hired by his master to the owner of a Natchez lumber enterprise, by 1845, Gray became a highly successful flatboat captain who ferried lumber to New Orleans, Louisiana. He demonstrated remarkable skills, was entrusted with considerable sums of money, and until 1862, commanded crews that included free Whites as well as slaves such as himself (Moore, 1962).

The ultimate sharing of power happened when slaves themselves became overseers, but this inverted arrangement was difficult for all parties to define. It is not surprising that former slaves, such as Stephen McCray and Lewis Jenkins, contrasted unfavorably the White trash in overseers' positions with enslaved relatives who performed the same jobs (*Oklahoma Slave Narratives*, 1937-1938). William M. Moore and Henry Freedman, former Mississippi slaves, pointedly recalled that their owners had occasionally replaced White overseers with Black overlookers (*Texas Slave Narratives*, 1937-1938). Sol and Liza Walton explicitly called their Black supervisors overseers (*Texas Slave Narratives*, 1937-1938). In contrast, Malindy Maxwell, Julia Ocklabary, and Harriett Miller adopted the perspective that appointing a slave to manage a plantation meant there was "no real overseer on de place" (*Aframerindian Slave Narratives*, n.d.). The formal rank held by slaves who were appointed to management positions in wartime was ambiguous, as recalled by Robert R. Grinstead: "[The planters] were oftener with-

out an overseer as with one, and therefore they used one of the Negroes as overseer for most of the time" (*Oklahoma Slave Narratives*, 1937-1938). The notion that a slave could be an overseer, or should be, was as confounding to Black observers as it was to Whites.

Across the Mississippi River, slaves took on managerial duties adapted to unique cultures and conditions. The multiethnic history of Louisiana cast Black overseers in special roles. Known as "commandeurs," slaves managed Louisiana plantations under Spanish rule during the mid-18th century, when there were as few as five White overseers in the region (Din, 1999, p. 13). From 1825 to 1842, John McDonogh experimented with self-government on his plantation near New Orleans and emancipated all of his slaves as payment (Phillips, 1937, p. 198). During the same period, Rachel O'Connor despaired of hiring a White overseer to her liking and elevated a slave named Leven to the position. She eulogized him in 1840:

But now my heart is nearly broke. I have lost poor Leven, one of the most faithful black men ever lived. He was truth and honesty and without a fault that I ever discovered. He overseed the plantation nearly three years and done much better than any white man ever done here and I lived a quiet life. (Webb, 1983, p. 224)

This plantation mistress developed almost as high a regard for Leven's successor, Arthur. "He has behaved himself extremely well," she wrote her sister in 1843, "and manages as well as any of their white overseers with a driver to wait on them" (Webb, 1983, p. 243). William Smith and William Stone, former Louisiana slaves, confirmed the extent to which Black overseers supervised their work (*Texas Slave Narratives*, 1937-1938), and Jane Montgomery extended these recollections to the period of Reconstruction (*Oklahoma Slave Narratives*, 1937-1938).

Likely prompted by the wartime transportation of slaves to the region, former Texas slaves narrated a complex story in which very many slaves held supervisory positions with very many titles. According to Mollie Kirkland and Andrew Goodman, planters installed Black overlookers both to share the work with overseers

and to replace them (Texas Slave Narratives, 1937-1938); according to Fred Brown and Bert Strong, slaves might receive their daily orders from a Black foreman, leader, or driver (Texas Slave Narratives, 1937-1938). Black drivers, according to Charley Bowen and Will Adams, were not always welcome as replacements for White overseers because they could be equally brutal (Texas Slave Narratives, 1937-1938). Other former slaves, among them Allen B. Manning (*Oklahoma Slave Narratives*, 1937-1938) and Susan Merritt and George Austin (Texas Slave Narratives, 1937-1938), simply referred to their Black supervisors as overseers and seldom described them to be as brutal as drivers. Harry Johnson claimed this title for himself, although technically he had been kidnapped from Missouri and renamed by his kidnapper (Texas Slave Narratives, 1937-1938). Mary Glover, Darcus Barnett, Green Cumby, Emma Weeks, and Lizzie Farmer (Texas Slave Narratives, 1937-1938), the children, grandchildren, and extended family of Black overseers, described them favorably. Nancy Thomas and Sarah Ford (Texas Slave Narratives, 1937-1938) as well as George W. Harmon (*Oklahoma Slave Narratives*, 1937-1938) described Black overseers working alongside White overseers or Black overseers who matched drivers in their brutality. In fact, the conventionally odd notion of placing slaves in managerial positions became so palatable to Texas planters that state legislators tried and failed for several years to pass the 1862 statute that finally banned the practice (Campbell, 1989, p. 126). Similar to other rivals across the Old South, Black overseers vied with White competitors for livelihoods in Texas. The competition was apparently fierce.

This contest with plantation slaves invites further analysis of the White overseer as a rural counterpart of the urban laborer. For example, White overseers and their urban counterparts shared the same socioeconomic status in Abbeville County, South Carolina: 16 overseers owned between one and eight slaves, and their estates were valued between \$1,000 and \$13,100. Sanders Williamston lagged behind several other overseers by owning merely one slave and accumulating an estate worth \$1,000. On the other hand, Andrew I. Ferguson owned eight slaves, and John F. Kellar had amassed an estate worth \$13,100 (*Abbeville Co, SC—Enslavement*

Data and Queries, n.d.). These figures matched the range of data recorded for many merchants, skilled tradesmen and laborers, as well as several lawyers and dentists. Census data for 1,500 other overseers in 17 counties across four Southern states underscore the South Carolina upcountry records (Scarborough, 1966, pp. 51-66). Modestly successful at best, the rural and urban counterparts struggled for their fair share of prosperity. Salient in the present analysis is the "actual or potential threats to their own social and economic well being" (Glickstein, 1997, p. 142) that both urban laborers and overseers saw in slave labor, an assessment that clashes with more conventional judgments (Starobin, 1978, p. 52).

Landless laborers often became overseers in 17th-century Virginia's plantation system, many of them receiving no better treatment than the indentured servants and slaves they supervised (Breen, 1989, p. 18). During the next century, South Carolina planters prized indentured servants not for their labor but rather for their service as overseers for the rapidly increasing number of slave laborers. In this environment, overseers and slaves could be distinguished only by type and degree of bondage. The working conditions for slaves and White laborers were identical in this environment, and "cotton and tobacco fields were racially integrated worksites" (Jones, 1998, pp. 96). In more general terms, the labor shortage in several 17th- and 18th-century regions of the South made virtually interchangeable the work done by slaves and White servants, so that eventually in an even more profound integration, "the urban labor force brought together a number of overlapping groups competing for work, legal and illegal" (Roediger, 1991, p. 25). In fact, "there were no 'racially' exclusive jobs at the lower echelons of the labor force in any southern city" (Jones, 1998, pp. 210). From Baltimore to New Orleans, Louisiana, Whites struggled to gain an advantage over Blacks in finding and keeping jobs, and these White rivals became increasingly vocal (Spero & Harris, 1978, p. 43).

As slaves and free Blacks competed successfully for work, White laborers in cities such as Charleston might have lamented that they had not moved to the countryside like their predecessors in Virginia (Morgan, 1984). This competition has prompted one

analyst to characterize "the struggle for control of the labor process" ultimately as a melee in which "too many slaves were acting like free men, too many free men were burdened like slaves" (McDonnell, 1993, p. 126). Precursors of labor unions, the short-lived and loosely organized associations of Southern mechanics and skilled tradesmen denigrated the presence of competing Black workers in the 1850s. One of these associations in Portsmouth, Virginia, declared the very existence of Black competition as offensive; White mechanics in Rowan County, North Carolina, opposed the hiring of workers because they lacked "an honest name, and fair reputation" (Jones, 1998, pp. 216); and 200 Atlanta workers decried threats to "white citizens of the chance to make a living" (Goldin, 1976, pp. 28-31). In Richmond, Virginia; Charleston, South Carolina; Savannah, Georgia; and New Orleans, Louisiana, similar protests and petitions underscored the competition, which was based on slaves' success in skilled trades since the mid-18th century. However, despite otherwise compelling appeals for racial discrimination, none of these protests succeeded because slave labor was practically and economically competitive (Jernegan, 1920). As a result, abolition ultimately pleased many of these protestors because it meant that "labor organizations could no longer be threatened with replacement by slave labor" (Roediger & Foner, 1989, p. 87).

Similar to urban laborers, Whites competed with slaves for skilled positions on plantations. As noted above, for example, Eli J. Capell did not employ an overseer on Pleasant Hill plantation for many years, but he did engage skilled White laborers during that same period, including carpenters and brick masons. However, after he began using slaves in these jobs in 1853, "fewer white laborers were needed" (Stephenson, 1936, pp. 367-368). Of course, Capell's longstanding reliance on slaves to manage agricultural operations meant that overseers were not needed at all.

Overseers' salaries, especially the wide discrepancy in these salaries, offer an additional measure of the White rivals' discomfort. Analogously to his urban counterpart, the availability of talented slaves placed considerable pressure on a rural White laborer when he negotiated his compensation. This pressure constituted a largely

ignored motive to settle for relatively low wages, along with more conventionally recognized factors: variations in location of plantation, number of slaves to be managed, residence and wealth of employers, length of tenure, and professional experience. Although occasionally augmented with crop shares, bonuses, housing, and the personal services of a slave, these wages signaled that overseers were perceived as useful but not indispensable.

Uniformly, modest salaries in the upper South sustained this perception. In Virginia, between 1827 and 1843, John Griffin earned an annual salary that never exceeded \$250 (Scarborough, 1966, p. 28). In North Carolina, from the 1840s through the mid-1860s, Grief G. Mason and Johnson G. Giles earned an average of \$200 to \$250 working for the same planter (Scarborough, 1966, pp. 28-29). Other North Carolina overseers earned the same amount or less. During the 1850s, Thomas H. Lane earned \$250 (*Lane v. Phillips*, 1859), Thomas H. Hendrickson earned \$150 (*Hendrickson v. Anderson*, 1858), and Edwin Hobbs earned merely \$125 (*Hobbs v. Riddick*, 1857). The demonstrable rivalry between slaves and overseers in this region might partially explain these relatively low salaries, especially considering length of tenure as well as the varied places and years of employment, but the uniformity in these amounts attests just as persuasively to frugal employers, customary standards, and a salary structure related to type of crop. In 1829, John Engleman earned \$200 working on his father's Kentucky plantation (*Engleman's Ex'rs v. Engleman*, 1833), and another Kentucky overseer named Sandifer earned \$399 in 1860 (*Whitaker v. Sandifer*, 1864). In Tennessee, R. J. Lacy commanded a salary of \$225 in 1841 (*Halloway v. Lacy*, 1844), but N. E. Cannon earned merely \$65 for 8 months of work on a tobacco plantation in 1851 (*Hughes v. Cannon*, 1853). Outstanding overseers who did not compete for positions with slaves may have commanded higher wages, but as a rule, salaries in the upper South remained modest.

Widely discrepant salaries elsewhere in the Old South provide more compelling evidence of White overseers' rivalry with slaves. During the 1820s and 1830s, White overseers on South Carolina rice plantations may have earned far less than conventional wisdom dictates in the rice-growing region (Sitterson, 1948, p. 198), as lit-

tle as \$100 annually (*M'Clure v. Pyatt*, 1826). John E. Moreton earned merely \$220 on one of the Ball family plantations (Schantz, 1987, p. 7). On the other hand, John Thompson proved in a Charleston, South Carolina, court that his employer promised him \$800 in annual salary in the early 1820s (*Thompson v. Ex'rs of Nesbit*, 1823). Yet neither the overseer earning \$100 nor Thompson exhibited special expertise, and they both failed to rebut evidence that they had abused their employers. The former may have been a poor negotiator, and the latter's employer may have been unusually generous, but the absence of a competition with enslaved rivals in John Thompson's case offers an equally plausible explanation of this discrepancy in the two overseers' wages. Upcountry, an overseer won merely \$56 in damages as a result of his 1820s lawsuit for unpaid wages of \$200 (*Eaken v. Harrison*, 1827). During the next decade, another overseer lost his award of \$200 when his employer appealed the judgment (*Saunders v. Anderson*, 1834). During the 1840s, in the same region, annual salaries remained modest. John D. Craig agreed to \$250 in wages (*Craig v. Pride*, 1843). Henry Suber and G. D. McCracken, although both were accused of outrageous conduct toward enslaved women, agreed to salaries of \$300 (*McCracken v. Hair*, 1843; *Suber v. Vanlew*, 1843). Caleb Boone, proven to be as violently disposed toward slaves as toward employers, was promised merely \$150 (*Boone v. Lyde*, 1848). These overseers possessed acceptable credentials when they were hired, suggesting that the motives for their brutality and viciousness as well as the reasons for their relatively low salaries might have been related to factors other than a penchant for misconduct, including a rivalry with slaves.

Further south, the discrepancy in wages raises similar questions about these motives and reasons. In Georgia, Thomas Oden increased his annual earnings from \$600 to \$1,000 between 1831 and 1836, as did William Couper between 1841 and 1854 (Scarborough, 1966, p. 27). However, in Talbot County, William F. Johnson worked for \$350 during 1858 (*Johnson v. Gorman*, 1860), compensation similar to that promised to Marcellus Jordan in Leon County, Florida (*Doggett v. Jordan*, 1849). These overseers agreed to work for half the compensation offered several years earlier to

Thomas Oden at the very beginning of his tenure. Conversely, William Couper might have earned even more during his longer tenure if not for his apparent kinship with his employer, James H. Couper. Scant consolation for lower paid colleagues, Couper's salary may have exacerbated their feelings of indignation and anger.

In Alabama, both the amounts of compensation and the discrepancy in these amounts attest to unusual pressures on overseers. On a plantation near Montgomery, Alabama, William H. Daily would have earned \$600 in 1839 if he had not died during March of that year (*Givhan v. Dailey's Adm'r*, 1842), yet an overseer named Bishop agreed to work during that same year for \$275 on a plantation near the Mississippi border (*Pettigrew v. Bishop*, 1842). During the next decade, two overseers named Roberts and Martin were promised \$300 in annual salary for their management of plantations near the Mississippi border (*Martin v. Everett*, 1847; *Roberts v. Brownrigg*, 1846), whereas another overseer named Hunter earned \$500, despite being "feeble, and unable to attend to business for four months" (*Hunter v. Waldon*, 1845, p. 754). The local tradition of using Black overseers should be considered among the many factors in analyzing these salaries. As late as 1859, Richard Falkner expected to earn merely \$150 for a year's work in south central Alabama (*Wright v. Falkner*, 1861), whereas John T. Stapleton expected to earn \$450 in a neighboring county (*Spiva v. Stapleton*, 1861). This salary structure is inconsistent with conventional wisdom.

Similar variations on Mississippi cotton plantations partially confirm the rival's plight and raise additional challenges to conventional wisdom that annual wages between 1830 and 1860 were "as high as 600 dollars" in the Vicksburg region (Moore, 1954, p. 32). During the 1840s, Jordan Bailey earned an average of \$720 during his 8-year tenure as an overseer (Scarborough, 1966, p. 34). Robert D. Sale was promised \$650 on a northeastern plantation, and John Ely earned \$665 annually for 4 years on a southwestern plantation (*Hariston v. Sale*, 1846; *Pettibone v. James*, 1853). However, Benton Robeson agreed to an annual salary of merely \$300 on a north central plantation (*Hill v. Robeson*, 1844), and Francis Terry Leak's overseers earned as little as \$135 (Scarborough, 1966, p. 27). Other

contemporaneous overseers on southwestern and central plantations earned between \$350 and \$400 annually (*Prichard v. Martin*, 1854; Scarborough, 1966, p. 3). Type of crop and site of plantation provide little insight into this salary structure.

In the West, especially on the sugar plantations of Louisiana, identical crops and locations also fail to explain discrepancies in overseers' wages. Conventional wisdom confirms these discrepancies, from as little as \$500 in annual salary to as much as \$2,000, but does not offer a precise explanation (Scarborough, 1966, pp. 28-29; Sitterson, 1948, p. 198). Aside from the few instances in which location clearly made a difference—the difference between a \$500 salary in Louisiana's eastern judicial district and a \$1,000 salary in the western district during the early 1820s (*Noble v. Martin*, 1828; *Seal v. Erwin*, 1824)—overseers' bargaining power appeared to vary widely. Two demonstrably competent overseers named Martin and Garahan managed sugar plantations in the western judicial district during the mid-1820s, earning \$575 and \$600, respectively (*Allen v. Martin*, 1828; *Garahan v. Weeks*, 1829), whereas another overseer named McNutt earned \$1,600 in the same district at the same time (*McNutt v. Boyce*, 1827). Across the Mississippi River from Natchez, John E. Curtis agreed to work for \$600 in 1846 and 1847 (*Farrar v. Rowley*, 1848), whereas near Baton Rouge, Louisiana, a contemporaneous overseer named Darden uttered "the most grossly abusive and insulting language" to an employer who had promised him \$1,200 (*Darden v. Nolan*, 1849, 374). At the same time, a court ruled that "\$900 was a fair rate" for overseers on sugar plantations in Terrebonne Parish (*Welsh v. Shields*, 1844, p. 485). This salary structure for both competent and abusive overseers on plantations along the Mississippi River continued during the next decade. In a series of lawsuits, courts ruled that overseers would have been entitled to annual wages as low as \$300 to \$400 if they had not been so murderous toward slaves (*Miller v. Stewart*, 1857; *Taylor v. Paterson*, 1854), whereas overseers merited \$1,200 in St. Charles Parish and \$1,400 in Terrebonne Parish as long they controlled their murderous urges (*Garcia v. Garcia*, 1852; *Word v. Winder*, 1861). In fact, Warren G. Kennedy would have earned \$1,600 in Ouachita Parish, but he whipped a slave to death (*Ken-*

nedy v. Mason, 1855). Other overseers of varying skills and dispositions negotiated annual salaries between \$600 and \$1,000 (*Callehan v. Stafford*, 1866; *Davis v. Stone*, 1854; *Ford v. Danks*, 1861; *Holley v. Borland*, 1861; *Kessee v. Mayfield*, 1859; *Perret v. Sanchez*, 1856). The worst overseers murdered slaves. Their motives can be linked to a rivalry with their victims that cost them money as well as to the more conventional links of savagery and racism.

Conventional wisdom dictates that overseers in Arkansas earned between \$400 and \$800 (Scarborough, 1966, pp. 27, 31), as affirmed in the case of Thomas Trulove (*Wright v. Morris*, 1855). Yet Arkansas courts heard persuasive testimony that the usual price for overseeing plantations on the Red River "was from \$300 to \$400 per annum, none of them going higher than the latter sum" (*McDaniel v. Parks*, 1858, p. 673). Furthermore, overseers, such as Andrew J. Brown and George W. Davis, agreed to work in partnership with planters for as little as \$100 to \$150 per year (*Allen v. Davis*, 1852; *Rapley v. Brown*, 1851). Despite his brutality toward slaves in Missouri, Bird Posey earned slightly more: \$175 (*Posey v. Garth*, 1841). Texans, such as D. J. Cudd and Thomas P. Rutledge, who impressed judicial observers as competent and hard working, agreed to work for conventional wages of \$400 and \$600 (*Meade v. Rutledge*, 1853; *Nations v. Cudd*, 1858). Again, the murderous overseer agreed to work for less money than even-tempered colleagues. In view of the widespread use of enslaved overseers in this region, those White overseers who refrained from brutality and enjoyed comparatively high wages may also have escaped the rival's plight.

An analysis of overseers' salaries reveals only a small portion of their plight. They faced meager earnings and the threat of discharge, but their failure to balance agricultural productivity with conservation of slave resources was not the only reason for their precarious careers. Neither was their moral descent into vicious lifestyles. Rather, when all the evidence is considered—conventional and unconventional—the availability of Black replacements explains much about White overseers' attitudes and behaviors. Although custom and law sustained the employment of White

overseers, planters consistently resisted these implicit and explicit norms. By doing so, they intentionally or unintentionally gave slaves the opportunity to prove their worth as plantation managers and forced the overseer to enact the role of rival.

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