

THE SLAVE POPULATION ON THE PLANTATION OF
JOHN C. COHOON, JR.
NANSEMOND COUNTY, VIRGINIA, 1811-1863

Selected Demographic Characteristics

by C. G. HOLLAND*

At the present time new data adding to our knowledge of slavery in Virginia most likely will come from plantation journals, or other like records, kept by individuals who owned slaves. One such record, a ledger kept by John Cowper Cohoon, Jr.¹ of Cedar Vale plantation in Nansemond County, supplies a variety of information on approximately two hundred slaves during the half century from 1811 to 1863. Of particular interest are the vital statistics Cohoon kept on his Negroes.²

Cohoon kept his records in a 12¾ by 8¾ inch cardboard-backed ledger now reduced to eighty pages by loss. The first twelve pages were step cut with an index at the edge. The back and approximately the last forty pages are missing except for nine pages taken from the back and inserted inside the front cover. The scarified, water-stained front cover is titled: "Estate (?) book [illegible] Ages [illegible] Negroes/ [illegible] at page 120/ & / [illegible] their / [illegible] C. Cohoon." The initial page lists: "B(r)own, Adeline—pg. 1/ Brown, Ann est:—pg. 4/ Brewer, John est:—pg. 9/ see four sheets on." Attached to this page by glue is one third of a page with these notations: "Names of my ____/ negroes beginning at page ____117/ ditto ages beginning at page ____124/ deaths ____115/ June 29th 1837 Brot. from a sheet of paper therefore used/ to keep their ages and births/ [signed] Jno. C. COHOON."

Pages numbered 1 and 2 following the index concern the administration of the estates of Miss Adeline S. Browne (1817-1833) 1833-1836; page 3, Luke Ramsey & al., and Jeremiah Godwin; page 4, Mrs. Ann Browne's estate 1833-1835; pages 5-7, John Hargroves, Jr: estate 1834-1838; page 8 is blank; pages 9-10 John Brewers (1793-1858) estate; page 12, John Har-

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¹Fillmore Norfleet, editor, "Suffolk in 1843: Letters from Archibald Allen of 'Rose Hill,' Nansemond County, to William G. Driver," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, LXIV (1956), 91. John Cowper Cohoon, Jr., (1789-1863) was also known as "Captain."

²The data are on microfilm in Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Manuscripts Division, No. 8868.

groves, Jr est: negro hires; page 13 is blank; page 14, John Bowers estate 1835-1836; page 15 is blank; pages 16-18 William Dardens est:, with page 18 the negro hires. There are no more entries in the neat handwriting of John C. Cohoon. However, pages 6, 8, 9, and 10 following John C. Cohoon's last entry are penciled accounts of his son Willis Everett J. C. Cohoon (1823-1880) which are dated 1869 on the sixth page but the year is not specified for the other accounts. Finally there are two blank subscription application forms used by agents for *The Peoples Illustrated Journal*.

The information on slaves of particular interest here is under four headings.

1. "Deaths of my servants since 1st June 1813 the time of myself & wife's³ marriage" (page 112), also entitled "Deaths of Negroes since 1st June 1813 the time our & (wife's) marriage" (pages 115-116). This list gives the slaves name on the left hand side of the page and each is sequentially numbered on the right hand side. Between each name and number there is a variety of notations: age: "Lizzie—90 years old"; from whom the slave was bought: "Jesse Holland"; whose child: "Josephine (Lizzie's child) —58"; personal feelings about a particular individual: "Robert (or Big Bob) a valuable servant, died 17th June 1853 aged 42 years and 2 months"; and the cause of death: "Betsey died Septr: 1855 in her thirty eight year of yellow fever."⁴

2. "Names of my Negroes (now living) and how I came by them," above which is written "Brot: here June 29th 1837 (& all them living)." This list, like the first, has the name on the left and number on the right of each entry. Not only is the source of acquisition ("from Genl: Cohoon est:");⁵ "born my property"; "from my wife") but there are also numerous remarks: "sold for attempting to become a Yankee"; "given to Willis"; "given to my son by Colo: Minton" (1795-1830).

3. Pages 120-127 are a remarkably detailed vital statistical record. It is entitled "Ages of Negroes" but gives the mother and most often the father of each child born to a particular mother. Each birth gives the name of the child, the date and time of birth. For example, under "Fanny and Jacobs children" an entry would be "Henry born the 2nd of October 1811

³ Norfleet, "Suffolk in 1843," *VMHB*, LXIV, 91. John C. Cohoon's wife was Mary Louisa Everett (1792-1837). They were married June 1, 1813.

⁴ Windham B. Blanton, *Medicine in Virginia in the Nineteenth Century* (Richmond, 1933), Chapter XII. Periodic outbreaks of yellow fever or other epidemics cannot be correlated with the slaves' deaths.

⁵ Norfleet, "Suffolk in 1843," *VMHB*, LXIV, 91. John Cowper Cohoon, Sr., who died in 1823, was a general in the Virginia State Militia.

on Wednesday A. M." As with the other lists there are remarks about the slaves: "dead"; "Given to Willis"; "I have given the above Negroes (to wit) Farley & her 5 children to my son Willis (E. J.?) C. Cohoon as also Negro man Elijah & negro woman Adeline making in all eight negroes [signed] JOHN C. COHOON."

4. In the administration of various estates entrusted to him, John C. Cohoon, Jr. provided the names of the slaves, by whom hired and the amounts of their hire. It is obvious from these records there was a marked differential of yearly hire as shown by the following: a. from John Brewer's estate "Jack to Joseph Mosely \$66.00"; b. "Sally to Harriet Brewer \$20.50"; c. "Old Jane and child Jane to Harriet Brewer \$1.12½"; d. from the William Darden estate Elizabeth Darden was paid \$29.75 for keeping Luke and Daniel, and Randolph was assigned to her for "victuals and clothing." This fourth section is mentioned here for the record and is not used in the analyses that follow.

The fact Cohoon was meticulous in his bookkeeping seemed to present an opportunity to investigate selected demographic aspects of the slave population at Cedar Vale during a fifty-year period. The selections are dictated in part by the available information and in part to obtain analyses of slave populations seldom attempted. The Cohoon sample can not be said to reflect a general trend since there were nearly four hundred thousand slaves in Virginia east of the Blue Ridge Mountains between 1800 and 1865 and this sample is less than two hundred.

The record "Names of my Negroes" (pp. 117, 118, 119, 113, and 114, now in that order) lists 141 persons. Cohoon did not number three of them and made other mistakes so that his final count falsely ends at 160 persons. This corrected list is referred to later as "Names." The roster of deaths (pp. 115, 116, and 112) has 97 names, is accurately numbered and is referred to as "Deaths." The account labeled "Ages of Negroes" (pp. 120-127) shows 116 births, but two names are obliterated by a tear and loss of a portion of the page. This account is called "Ages." These three lists overlap one another in part. For example some slaves in "Deaths" do not appear in "Ages," necessitating a careful cross check.

One biological aspect of a population, preferably on a synchronic basis, is the male to female ratio. This analysis can be done from the Cohoon data by the names on the three lists. There were three categories: a. males like Charles Edward, Robert, etc., b. females like Hulda, Lizzie, etc., and c. those equivocal as a sex determinant such as Easter, Missouri, or Africa. To the third group are added those children who died at, or shortly after,

birth and were unnamed. The last two categories are not used in the counts but are given to account for all the names.

With these considerations as guides, in "Ages" there were 54 male and 50 female names, not counting mothers and fathers. The unidentified group had 6 "unnamed," 2 illegible names, 2 Easters, 1 Missouri, and 1 Jerusha. In "Names" there are 66 male names, 64 female names with a residuum of 6 "unnamed," 2 Easters, 1 Africa, 1 Missouri, and 1 Jerusha. The "Deaths" list has 36 male and 40 female names with 17 listed as "unnamed," 2 Easters, and 1 Africa. The first two lists are relatively consistent, but the third deviates markedly. Of the three lists "Ages" is the most accurate.

In a human population at birth more males are born than females, although the ratio varies. "Ages" essentially gives this information since

FIGURE 1

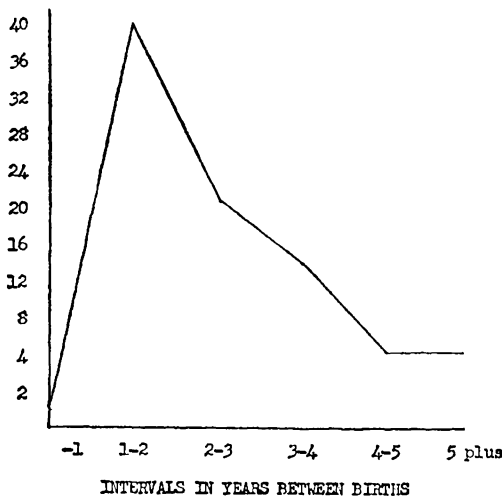
	1810	-14	-18	-22	-26	-30	-34	-38	-42	-46	-52	-56	-60	-64	
Fenny-Jacob				24											8
Margaret-Tom				23											10
Jinny-Dob				7											4
Nancy-Edmond				17											6
Chloe				3											2
Celia-Jack Beaman									16+						9
Mary-Bob							1								2
Farley									14						6
Betsy									16						6
Henrietta-Henry									22						15
Lizzy-Isaac Hodges										21					11
Huldah Junior-Little Dob										20					8
Huldah Senior-Lewis Forton									7						4
Rachel-Devid										12					6
Margaret-Max										11					6
Eliza										4+					5
Matilda										8					3
Emaline											.				1
Nancy											.				1
Mariah												3			2
Jenny													.		1

I have used only the recorded births. In the Virginia census for 1944⁶ there were 505 males to 495 female Negro births per thousand. The Cohoon data, apportioned in hundreds is 52 males to 48 females in "Ages" and 51 to 49 in "Names." This is so close to the present-day ratio the differences are not significant.

During the period from 1811 to 1863, twenty-one mothers gave birth to 116 children in "Ages." In order to obtain some idea of the years of fertility of the mothers as well as their fecundity the data were organized into a chart, Figure 1. The names of the mothers and fathers appear on the left and the number of children they had on the right. At the top are the calendar years during which the record was kept. The horizontal line opposite each parent reflects the period from first to last recorded birth. Single dots indicate only one birth and the dashes preceding Celia's and Eliza's lines indicate an unknown period from the time of the first child's birth to the first dated birth. For convenience the period of fertility of each mother is written above the line.

The maximum fertility period is between 20 and 25 years, and the average number of children per mother is 5.3 as the record stands. Beginning with Rachel-David and Margaret-Max in 1850 the fertility and fecundity drop off markedly and the record stops in 1862. This represents a bias in the data caused either by Mr. Cohoon's death in 1863, the Civil

FIGURE 2



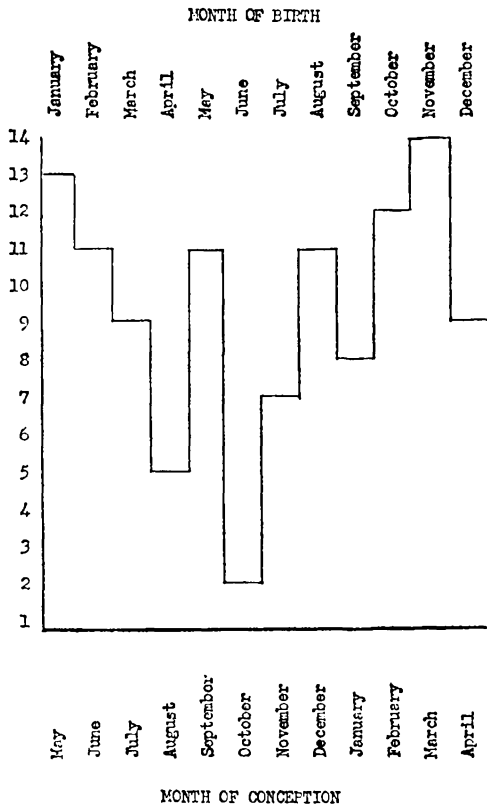
⁶ *Annual Report of the Bureau of Vital Statistics for the Year Ended December 31, 1944*, Virginia State Department of Health, Richmond, Virginia.

War, or some other factor. When this bias is eliminated and the average number of children is computed above this point in time, there were 13 mothers with 91 children or an average of 7 children per mother.

If the interval between successive multiple births is plotted on a yearly basis it is found that the shortest interval was 10 months and 8 days, the longest interval was 10 years, 7 months and 13 days. These data have been plotted in a curve shown in Figure 2. The curve is right skewed with 40 children born between 1 and 2 years, and 21 born between 2 and 3 years.

Since the children's births are given by month during 52 years, the question arose as to whether they were evenly distributed or were clustered

FIGURE 3



during certain periods of the calendar year. To solve this a bar graph was fashioned, Figure 3, for 112 children with the month of birth at the top and count on the left. It will be noted from these raw scores there is a decline in births from a peak of thirteen in January to a low of two in June

followed by a rise to a peak of fourteen in November. The number of children born in May is an exception to this general trend. If we allow nine months for gestation, this chart, by shifting the months backwards by nine, shows the month of conceptions. Thus a child born in January was conceived in the preceding May. This rearrangement of the graph from month of birth to month of conception is at the bottom of the graph.

The greatest number of conceptions were between December and July (December–May 66; January–June 67; February–July 68) and the lowest from June to January (June–November 45; July–December 45; August–January 44). This may be restated in terms of seasons of the year in the sense that, with some overlapping of the periods, conception was more likely in late winter, spring or early summer, and less likely in late summer, fall, and early winter. We do not learn from the Cohoon records what the disposition of the slaves was during these broad periods, that is the availability of the two sexes for intercourse, or some factor such as physical fatigue from work that might have influenced this pattern of conception. If, for example, the males were hired out to other plantations during late summer and the females remained at the Cohoon plantation and the two sexes had infrequent or no contact at all, this might account for the disparity between the two periods.

From the standpoint of a child's survival during its early months it is possible some advantage may have accrued to the children by the seasonal pattern that evolved. The lowest period of births was from February to September (February–July 45; March–August 45; April–September 44) and the highest between August and the following March (August–January 67; September–February 67; October–March 68). Thus the lowest birth rates correlate with the period when morbidity from gastro-intestinal diseases is highest where there is a lack of refrigeration and highest when respiratory diseases are more prevalent. However, this fluctuation in births through two seasons is more likely a cultural factor than biological, if the limited data are not deceptive.

Finally an attempt was made to determine the approximate ages at which most of the slaves died. It is not possible to make the names of the "Deaths" list correspond entirely to the "Ages" list as previously explained. For example, in "Deaths" there is "Fanny's children—Mariah, Jacob, Laura, Celia, Davy and Easter," but the only Fanny in "Ages" gave birth to Henry, Mary, Charles, Lucy, Rachel, Margaret, Jefferson and Matilda. On the other hand "Easter—Betsy's child" is listed in "Ages" but has no date of death. In spite of these recording lapses the two lists establish the relative

ages at death of 96 individuals that have been divided into four groups.

The oldest are those whose names are preceded by the adjective "old" or followed by "senior." The age at death of nine of thirteen individuals is between 65 and 110 years. For example in "Deaths" there is "Old Martha—over 100 years old," "Miles Senior—70 or more years old," and "Old Rose—aged over 110 years." I have associated the four individuals with these qualifying words but for whom the chronological age at death was not given as of this age class.

On the opposite age extreme are 18 listed as "unnamed," "no name," or "baby." "Ages" indicate they either died at birth or lived so short a time no name was given them. In one instance a child lived seven months and six days without its name being recorded.

Intermediate between these two extremes are two groups. For one there is no specific age given but on checking the age at death for similar individuals it was found they were adults. For example it was found that William was 22, Jefferson 19, Nancy 50, Betsy 38, and Robert 42 years and 2 months old at death. There were twenty-four names in this group. The last group are those listed as "child" or "children." Where these are listed in "Ages" and are associated with the date of death it was found they were either very young or juveniles. Thus "Cornelius (Celia's child)" was 10 years, 11 months, and 6 days old when he died; "Robert or Bob (Betsy's child)" was 2 years, 4 months, and 28 days old at death; "William (Emaline's child)" lived 7 months and 13 days; "Robert (Lizzy's child)" 1 month and 6 days; "Easter (Henry and Henrietta's child)" 9 years, 9 months, and 16 days. There are 41 in this group.

To summarize the four groups, those who died in adult life number 37, or 39 percent of the 96 persons for whom we have data, and 59, or 61 percent died either when a baby or juvenile. By present-day standards when two-thirds of a population die before reaching adulthood, we know the living conditions are extremely unhealthy. The Cohoon records unfortunately have only sparse information on the cause of these deaths. We find that Sara Ann died after 2 years, 9 months, and 21 days of "dropsy" as did Robert after living 2 years, 4 months, and 28 days. Scotland died in adult life (over 20 years old by the record) of relapsing pneumonia, and Anthony was supposed murdered in Juniper Swamp. Betsy died at 38 of yellow fever during the 1855 epidemic⁷ but there is no evidence others died of this disease.

⁷ See footnote 4.