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TEXTILE TRIBUTE IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

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The involuntary immigration of African slaves to America in the early nineteenth century had a secondary impact on the slaves as well as slaveholders related to the possession and use of clothing and textiles in daily life. The slaves were not allowed to bring their clothing, or other attributions of their native culture to America. Rather, the slaveholders were required by law to provide for their slaves' adequate "clothing and basic needs." These requisitions were influenced by the slaveowner's philosophy of slave management, wealth, and temperament. Dependency for these basic necessities of life on the slaveowner reinforced the dichotomy of power in the slave system and the allocations of these goods were ritualized to dramatize this aspect of the established economic and social order.

Recently published women's diaries and letters of the nineteenth-century South contain numerous references to the clothing and textile allowances or provisions made seasonally to each slave on the plantation in the antebellum South. Detailed descriptions and enumeration of the type and amount of these allotments are well chronicled as well as the writers' evaluations of their suitability and, at times, scarcity. Acquisition or production supervision and record keeping related to textile provision procurements for the extended plantation population were major responsibilities for these women. The importance of this function and officiousness of the textile presentations belies these simple textiles as a symbol of economic and social power.

This study focuses primarily on references to textile presentations and allotments found in the published diaries of three prominent women in the early 19th century South: Floride Clemson; Mary Chesnut; and Frances Ann Kemble.

The rural fiefdom of a rice, cane, or cotton plantation drew its order from the economic purpose of the unit. The paternalistic society, well protected by the legal system, channeled land, wealth and power through the elitist white family structure. The black slave population was the means of production; acquired, maintained, and evaluated as they increased crop output. Paramount in all decision making concerns was preservation of the slaves as productive units. Hiring immigrant workers was a common practice for especially hard and/or dangerous work. An overseer noted: "It was much cheaper to have Irish do it, who cost nothing to the plantation if they died, than to tie up good field-hands in such severe employment" (Campbell, E.D.C., 1991:41).

The distribution of clothing and textile supplies to the slaves was a matter of plantation policy, strictly supervised by the plantation mistress, and usually was accompanied by a formal presentation. The allotments were typically bi-annual, a summer and winter supply.

Frances Kemble evaluated the summer allotment on her South Carolina plantation favorably:

This request for summer clothing by-the-bye I think a very reasonable one. The allowance of clothes, made yearly to each slave by the present regulation of the estate is a certain number of yards of flannel, and as much more of what they call plains -- an extremely stout, thick, heavy woolen cloth of a dark gray or blue color, which resembles the specie of carpet we call drugget. This and two pair of shoes, is the regular ration of clothes, but these plains would be intolerable to any but Negroes, even in winter, in this climate, and are intolerable to them in the summer. A far better arrangement, in my opinion, would be to increase their allotment of flannel and underclothing, and to give them dark chintzes instead of those thick carpets, which are very often the only covering they wear at all. I did not impart all this to my petitioners, but disengaging myself from them, for they held my hand and clothes. I conjured them to offer us some encouragement to better their condition by bettering it as much as they could themselves -- enforced the virtue of washing themselves and all belonging to them, and at length made good my retreat (Woodward, 1981:88).

Similar documents in South Carolina yield comparable requisites.

"each male received each autumn one cotton shirt, one pair of woolen pants and one woolen jacket. Each Spring they received one shirt, two pair of cotton pants. Slave women in a year got six yards of woolen cloth, six pair of cotton drilling and six yards of cotton shirting. Each Spring or Fall each woman received one needle and six buttons" (Campbell, E.D.C. 1991:5).

Slave narratives of the period reveal these garments were literally worn often without a single wash, , until they hung in shreds or fell apart. Sam Polite, a South Carolinian slave recalled:

You have straw in your mattress and they give you a blanket. Every year, in Chrismus, you gets four or either 5 yards cloth, according to how you is. Out of that, you have to make your clote (clothes). You wear the same clote till the next year. You wear it winter and summer. Sunday and every day. You don't get no coat but they give your shoe (Hurmenace, 1989:93).

The birth of babies meant an expansion of capital or economic growth and were ceremoniously acknowledged by the formal presentation of flannel. Frances Kemble reported:

Since I have been on the plantation I have already spent considerable time in what the French call "confectioning" baby bundles, i.e. the rough and very simple tiny habiliments of coarse cotton and scarlet flannel which form a baby's layette here, and which I have run up some scores (Scott, 1984:199).

Shortly after that time Frances wrote:

The fame of my peculiar requisition has, I find, preceded me here (Hampton Point) for the babes that have been presented to my admiring notice have all been without caps; also, however, without socks to their opposite little, tortured extremities (Scott; *op. cit.*).

Many presentations of the bundles are recorded in her journal.

I had a visit from one of our Diana's today -- who had done her task in the middle of the day, yet came to receive her flannel -- the most horribly dirty human creature I ever beheld, unless, indeed, her child, whom she brought with her, may have been half a degree dirtier (Scott, *ibid.*; 31).

The hearing of petitions for additional flannel or supplies absorbed a great deal of the slaveowner's time. Special provisions for the ill, aged, and injured are common, but always on appeal, carefully reviewed and at the discretion of the mistress. Mary Chesnut reported, "In one of the huts I went to leave some flannel, and rice, and sugar for a poor old creature called Nancy, to whom I had promised such indulgences (Woodward, 1981: 268).

But Mary, like many a plantation owner looked at the allotments as an onerous and expensive task. She sympathetically recalled a neighboring planter's frustration:

He said his Negroes owed him about 50 thousand dollars for clothes and food...(they) steal all my hogs and yet I have to buy meat for them. They will not make clothes. If they do not choose to make cotton - spin it and weave it - they may go naked for me. There are plenty of sheep too. Let them shear the sheep and spin that too. (Woodward, *ibid.*: 261).

Mary had her own concepts of slavery:

I might say the same thing. I never would (own slaves). Mr. Chesnut does, but he hates all slavery, especially African slavery. What do I mean by African? I use that to distinguish that from the inevitable slavery of the world. All women, all children and especially spinsters who live in the houses of their fathers are all slaves. (Woodward, *ibid.*: 729).

The wives of the planters in these biracial protectorates became the conscience of the realm and keeper of its culture. Clinton perceives the plantation mistress as a symbol of refinement, "requisite of chauvinistic stereotypes embracing those qualities slaveholders wished to promote even though the protocol needs of plantation life cast her in quite a different role. The clash of myth and reality was monumental" (Clinton, 1982:17).

In effect, the planter's wife, was in charge of problems related to the organization, supply, and control of all activities that were not crop related. They were responsible for tasks including: gardening; dairy production; salting pork; preservation of fruit and vegetables; care of the sick; procurement and administration of medicines; making of candles, soap, pillows, bedding and clothing for the extended plantation community; and the spiritual nourishment and well-being of all. Susan Dabney Smedes in Memorials of a Southern Planter commented, "The mistress of a plantation was the most complete slave on it" (Clinton, *ibid.*: 16).

Certainly the personal accounts of many planters' wives discuss their overextended role, particularly asserting that slavery placed a disproportionate and unfair burden on them as a caretaker. Within this context, the production of clothing and textile products was singled out as the single most overwhelming task (Clinton, *ibid.*: 21).

Employment by the needle was often a daunting challenge to the well-bred young women the planters chose for brides. Younger than their Northern bride counterparts by about seven years, most Southern brides were still teenagers. The women's academy movement that swept the nation in the early/mid part of the nineteenth century encompassed the affluent South. Aspects of the eighteenth century concept of "ornamental education" were retained to a greater degree in Southern "finishing schools," but formal education was a highly desirable trait. "Even in hard times, the education of a daughter was not considered a dispensable item. Parents, however pressed, felt boarding school was absolutely necessary. With no dowry, the education might secure a good match" (Scott, 19084: 135).

The practical application of female education of the period was dubious. Catherine Clinton noted, "young girls are seldom taught practical skills. When females were taught such rudimentary skills as sewing, they concentrated their effort on samplers and other ornamental needlework, rather than on the practical application of such ladylike accomplishments. Few brides were accomplished seamstresses" (Clinton, 1982:26).

Frances Kemble complained:

As for the democratic daughters of America, who for many reasons might be supposed to be well up in such housewifely lore, they are, for the most part, so ignorant of it that I have heard the most eloquent preacher of the city of New York advise to their incapacity in the respect as an impediment to their assistance of the poor... I have known young American girls duly instructed in the nature of the parallaxes of the stars, but, as a rule, they do not know how to darn their stockings" (Scott, 1984: 142-143).

In contrast, she valued her own skills obtained in France:

Yesterday morning I amused myself with an exercise of a talent I once possessed... I cut out a dress for one of the women. My education in France - where in some important respect I think girls are better trained than with us- had sent me home to England, at sixteen, an adept in the female mystery of needlework.

I was an expert patcher and mender, darner and piecer, but the white cotton embroidery of which every Frenchwoman has always a piece under her hand pour les moments perdus which are thus anything but perdus, was as familiar to us as to the Irish cottagers of the present day; and cutting out and making my dresses was among the more advanced branches of the female accomplishments to which I attained (Scott: op. cit.).

Prepared or not, many a planter's bride found her most demanding task to be the production, provision and maintenance of clothing and textiles. In 1837 a North Carolina woman complained, "I have about two months of sewing to do. I never was so tired of sewing in my life. My fingers are worn out" (Clinton, 1982:26).

Self sufficient textile production had been accelerated when the colonies broke with England, but with the necessity of meeting the basic clothing needs of the ever-expanding legions of slaves, the task became industrial in nature. Slave clothing was strong, simple, and fast to construct by necessity; it was discriminating and uniform by design.

A runaway could be quickly spotted by his clothing. slave clothing was worn by no one else. It was usually meager to the point of immodesty and much of it was not truly wearable. A former South Carolina slave remembered taking his crocus shirt (his only apparel) and pulling it around a post to break down the sticks (Warner and Parker; 1990:85).

Fashion was not a concern in slave clothing. It was made big enough to fit anybody and the general cut vaguely reflected the period. Although it could be modified, independent thought was not encouraged; and the slaves were limited by their own skills, resources, and a total lack of experience with western European style clothing.

Frances Kemble described the lack of creativity in slave clothing:

One of my industries this morning has been cutting out another dress for one of our women... the material, as usual, was a miserable cotton. I ventured to suggest the idea of the possibility of a change of the nethermost as well as the uppermost garment. This, I imagine, is a conception that has never dawned upon the female slave mind on the plantation. They receive twice a year a certain supply of clothes and wear them (as I have heard some nasty fine ladies do their stays, for fear they will get out of shape) without washing, until they receive the next suit (Scott, 1984:271).

Distinction in dress was not exclusively a difference in slave and slaveholder dress. Inequity in dress existed between those working in the fields and those with more constant interface with the white household and family members. Better quality, more fashionable dress was worn in and around the Big House and hand-me-downs were often passed from the master's family to personal slaves, creating an inter-slave community caste system.

The economic function or business expense aspect of slave clothing was keenly regarded by the mistresses. Lest yardage be wasted or hoarded, the mistress recorded the distribution of each item and typically cut all garments herself, even if slave labor was used to construct them. An energetic South Carolina matron, Ann Cocke, advised her mother,

The sewing of the clothes is worse than the weaving them, we have nearly a hundred shirts to make beside other parts of dress -- these I am teaching to some women of the crop to make. We shall have our weaving house, a perfect work shop all next month, and a part of the month after (Clinton, 1982: 26-17).

On rainy days or after a morning in the field, some female slaves worked in weaving rooms or as seamstresses. On October 27, 1855 a Mississippi mistress, Minerva Black, whose husband owned 80 slaves, recorded the following inventory as being single-cut by herself and hand-sewn by her slave seamstress Jane in one week:

- 30 lovel shirts for men with felled seams
- 30 linsey dresses with all seams backstitched except the long skirt seams, sewn with double thread.
- 43 garments-- some pants, shirts small, boys
- 18 coats men--sacks styles of linen; 4 yds per coat, lined with lovel with large colers and 4 buttonholes

24 sacks for small boys--each 2 1/2 yards
 36 women's linen (chemises)--all felled seams
 36 men's pants without a side seam
 48 pants-- small boys or dresses--small girls
 (Lohrenz and Stamper, 1989:54).

Textile production was time consuming and most planters wanted slave time spent on cultivation not cloth, therefore a great deal of cloth was imported. Slave textiles were "ordered in huge quantities of several hundred yards up to 1000 yards at a time" (Baumgarten, 1992:26). Cloth thus obtained came mainly from England, Germany and the West Indies. It was cost efficient, different from fabrics used to make fashionable clothing worn by whites, and it served as identification of caste (Campbell and Parker, 27). Cloth was also commercially traded to the South from the North. Lohrenz and Stamper report, "Even in the 1830's-1850's most of the coarse cloth used for workers was commercially produced, and most of it came from the North (Lohrenz and Stamper, 1989: 48). Common fabrics included Welch Plains or Negro Cloth, unbleached Oznaberg, Cassinet, crocus, drugget and kersey (Montgomery, 1984: 373-374). Dyes were all natural until 1856 therefore not very fast, and most slave textiles were used in the natural or bleached state. Bales and barrels of unbleached cloth were ordered and the yardage strictly accounted for.

Knitted goods were seldom purchased, instead stockings were produced at home from home spun or purchased yarn. Sock production challenged even the most productive household, leading many to just dispense yarn or forgo any provision. The constancy of the sock requirements is reported by Ann Cocke:

My hands are as full as possible. We have completed 25 out of the number of 40 pair of sock which are necessary for the crophands. A stocking takes 185 stitches per row, on the average. I can manage to fit in 150 rows per day when knitting at a steady pace. At that rate a single sock takes 6 days or a pair of socks every 2 weeks. At the very least each slave required one pair of stockings each year (Clinton, 1982: 28).

The market economy supplied the planter and small farmer, free persons of color, and the slaves with equal indifference. Upon coming South, Frances Kemble rationalized:

Pricing must be infinitely higher than those of the Northern shopkeeper; but this we must expect as we go further South, for, of course, they have to pay double profits upon all the commonest necessities of life, importing them, as they do, from distant districts" (Scott, 1984: 41).

As she became more familiar with local practice, she was disgusted by the inferior quality fabric that was often purchased by the barter of eggs and collected moss by locals. On being told of a dress she helped a tenant cut that fell apart after a day's wear, she observed, "Of course, the rascally shopkeepers can cheat these poor wretches to any extent they please with perfect impunity" (Scott, *ibid.*: 276).

As the Civil War progressed, economic pressure clearly impacted prices and the availability of goods. Mary Chesnut reported September 19, 1864:

My pink silk dress I have sold for 600 dollars to be paid on installment, \$200 a month for 3 months. And I sell my eggs and butter from home for \$200 a month.

Does it not sound well -- \$400 a month, regularly? In what? 'in Confederate money' Hilar!" (Woodward, 1981: 643).

A year later (February 12, 1865), Floride Clemson despaired,

Everything is ridiculously dear and almost impossible to get. Common shoes from \$600 to \$1000. Coarse home spun from \$.06 to \$.10 a yard, butter \$7, beef \$1.50, pork \$3, bacon \$5 per pound. Gold is now 30 times Confederate money, and sometimes has sold at 60. Corn is \$15 a bushel, everything in proportion. chicken \$4 a piece. I pray God will be good enough to extend his help to us soon (McGee and Lander, 1984: 75).

A week later, Mary Chesnut wrote with anguish: "The Fonts piously wishing they had some sacred ashes to put on their foreheads--Ash Wednesday it is. Not even ashes. I have no wood to burn, cannot afford even sack cloth to wail in. We're below the buying of woe--sack cloth and ashes" (Woodward, 1981: 743).

The allotment system of clothing distribution was, in concept, designed to foster complete dependence and thus, instill loyalty of slave to slaveowner. Rather, it signified absolute control and reinforced a sense of inferiority. The cultural isolation that the prescriptive dress prolonged and the tendency for abuse the system afforded helped shape the slave experience and lay a bitter foundation for racial segregation.

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