

## Breeding of Slaves

Abolitionists claimed that planters systematically bred slaves for sale. Although scholars have debated the precise meaning of breeding, it traditionally involved systematic control over reproduction both by selection of fertile partners who would produce desirable offspring and by the rearing of children for sale. In the slave community, as in the livestock industry, the process was presumably guided by economic incentives.

Slave owners were placed on the defensive by these claims because they were impossible to disprove. The law of slavery undeniably gave owners considerable latitude in the control of their chattel: slaves could not legally marry (although informal plantation marriages were common); slaves were bought and sold at auction; and owners could apply force to achieve work and discipline. Individual owners and southern apologists could deplore the idea, but there was always the possibility that someone practiced slave breeding as a business.

Scholars of the twentieth century have taken a more sophisticated view, considering evidence and arguments. No serious scholar has claimed that breeding in its traditional meaning was common—or indeed anything but unusual. Actually, most scholars deny that it was even a rare practice, although a few have offered economic arguments and circumstantial evidence to suggest that it might have existed in parts of the South under particular situations.

One piece of circumstantial demographic evidence cited is the ratio of children to women of childbearing age. Unlike the situation for whites, this ratio was higher in the older slave states of the East relative to those of the West, and—consistent with the breeding thesis—large numbers of slaves were shipped from East to West. Moreover, slavery was less profitable on the older, exhausted soils of the East, which might have created an incentive for owners to engage in breeding and sell surplus labor. In addition, the slave population in the United States grew at rates that were remarkably high by worldwide historical standards.

However, this circumstantial evidence alone is weak when it is placed in perspective. The American white population also grew at a similarly high rate, and both the black and the white populations were significantly below a biological maximum, as revealed by

age at menarche and microlevel study of evidence on age at first birth, child-spacing patterns, age at last birth, and the proportion of women who ever had children. Contradicting a breeding model, birthrates of slaves declined while prices roughly doubled from 1840 to 1860. Also, many slaves would have objected to forced mating, expressing their discontent in costly ways, such as shirking field labor, that would have lessened profits. In addition, proponents have yet to find such historical records as stud books or diaries to document breeding procedures.

Scholars generally agree that owners indirectly encouraged childbearing because a spouse and children promoted social stability. Owners established separate living quarters for families and, following a birth, gave clothing or household items. However, fertility on plantations was reduced by other aspects of management, such as discouraging marriage by slaves who lived off the farm.

*See also* DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF SLAVES AND SLAVERY; DEMOGRAPHY OF SLAVES IN THE UNITED STATES; PLANTATIONS.

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