

## **The Auction Block – How Slaves Were Sold**

Sylvia Cannon, a freed slave, described slave auctions this way:

I see 'em sell plenty colored peoples away in them days, 'cause that the way white folks made heap of their money. Course, they ain't never tell us how much they sell 'em for. Just stand 'em up on a block about three feet high and a speculator bid 'em off just like they was horses. Them what was bid off didn't never say nothing neither. Don't know who bought my brothers, George and Earl. I see 'em sell some slaves twice before I was sold, and I see the slaves when they be traveling like hogs to Darlington. Some of them be women folks looking like they going to get down, they so heavy.

The slave auctioneers spoke of their business as though they were, in fact, buying and selling hogs. The callousness is clear in this July 10, 1856 letter from slave trader A.J. McElveen to Charleston slave merchant Z.B. Oakes:

I offered Richardson 1350 [equal to 27,000 in 1998] for his two negros. He Refused to take it. The fellow is Rather light. He weighs 121 lbs., but Good teeth & not whipped. The little Girl he was offrd 475 [9,500, 1998]. I thought the boy worth about 850 [17,000, 1998] and at that price they would not Sell for cost, but I Supposed the fellow would bring 9 to 950 [18,000 to 19,000, 1998] &c and the little Girl 500 [8,300] at best.

Edmund L. Drago's book, *Broke by the War: Letters of a Slave Trader*, includes additional letters describing the nonchalance of those dealing in "the bodies and souls of men." (University of South Carolina Press, 1991)

## **The Separation of Families**

Yet Southern dealers and plantation owners defended their practices, claiming that separations of families were rare and that when they did occur, there was little hardship. South Carolinian Chancellor Harper argued that blacks lacked any capability for domestic affection and showed, "insensibility to ties of kindred." In other words, African-Americans really didn't mind being bought and sold since they were naturally promiscuous and lacked the ability to achieve stable family life. This, of course, was simply paternalistic racism.

As an old former slave, Jennie Hill, explained

Some people think that slaves had no feeling – that they bore their children as animals bear their young and that there was no heart-break when the children were torn from their parents or the mother taken from her brood to toil for a master in another state. But that isn't so. The slaves loved their families even as the Negroes love their own today and the happiest time of their lives was when they could sit at their cabin doors when the day's work was done and sang the old slave songs, "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground," and "Nobody Know What Trouble I've Seen." Children learned these songs and sang them only as a Negro child could. That was the slave's only happiness, a happiness that for many of them did not last.

And another ex-slave, Savilla Burrell, remembered the heartache this way:

They sell one of Mother's chillun once, and when she take on and cry about it, Marster say, "Stop that sniffing there if you don't want to get a whipping." She grieve and cry at night about it.

How many slaves were sold away from their families? One study, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* by Michael Tadman, suggests that one out of every five marriages was prematurely terminated by sale and that if other interventions are added, the number rises to 1 in 3. In addition, slave trading tore away one in every two slave children under the age of 14.

<http://www.sciway.net/afam/slavery/flesh.html>