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ERA III · REVOLUTION, EXPANSION & CIVIL WAR (1776–1865)

TRACK: CONTRIBUTION · LENS: SACRED & POLITICAL · 250 YEAR MARKER

They Kept the Names

How enslaved families preserved kinship, identity, and memory across the forced dispersals of the domestic slave trade — and the extraordinary reunification efforts that followed emancipation.

Entry: 10B

Paired With: Entry 10 — Sold South: The Domestic Slave Trade

Year: c. 1800–1865

Track: Contribution

Lens: Sacred & Political

ERA: ERA III — Revolution, Expansion & Civil War

250 Badge: Yes — peak period falls within 1776 window

NC Connection: Yes — Harriet Jacobs · Fayetteville Freedmen's Bureau

Research Status: Needs Citation

OVERVIEW

The domestic slave trade separated an estimated one million people from their families between 1790 and 1865. Traders deliberately severed the relationships that gave enslaved people identity — separating husbands from wives, children from mothers, and kin networks from one another across hundreds of miles. But the people who were sold, and the people left behind, fought this erasure with every tool available to them. They kept the names. They passed family histories through oral tradition. They memorized the faces of the sold. They sent letters when they could not travel and traveled when they could not send letters. They rebuilt families in new places without forgetting the families they had lost. This entry documents the strategies through which enslaved people preserved kinship, identity, and memory across the forced dispersals of the domestic slave trade — and the extraordinary reunification efforts that followed emancipation.

FULL RECORD

What the Trade Tried to Take

The domestic slave trade was designed, among other things, to destroy identity. The slave trader's economy depended on the convertibility of human beings into fungible commodities — and commodities, by definition, have no kin. To sell a person away from their family was not incidental to the trade; it was structural to it. A person with strong family ties was a person with reasons to run, reasons to resist, reasons to grieve publicly in ways that disturbed the order of the plantation. The deliberate separation of families was not a byproduct of the market. It was a feature of it.

Planters understood this. Traders understood it. The documents of the trade are full of the logic of severance. Auction advertisements described people without naming their kin. Bills of sale recorded the sold without recording what they left behind. The geography of the trade — from the Upper South to the Deep South, from the Atlantic coast to the Mississippi River valley — was designed to make reunion impossible. Distance was a weapon. The sale of a child to a buyer in New Orleans while the mother remained in Virginia was not a transaction that left open the possibility of repair.

And yet the people who were sold, and the people who remained, refused to accept that the sale was the end of the relationship.

Naming as an Act of Memory

The most intimate and most durable form of resistance to the trade's erasure was the practice of naming. Enslaved families across the American South developed and maintained naming traditions that encoded kinship, preserved memory of the dead and the sold, and connected children to grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins they might never meet. Scholars of African American naming practices — Herbert Gutman's foundational work in *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* most prominently — have documented the systematic transmission of names across generations even when families were separated.

Children were named for sold fathers to preserve the paternal line. Grandparents' names were given to grandchildren when the grandparents themselves had been sold away. Siblings sold to different buyers gave children the same names — a practice that, when discovered in family records, reveals

that separated kin were tracking one another's children and coordinating naming even across distance and without direct contact. The name was the thread. When everything else was taken, the name could be carried in the body of a child.

In the Fayetteville region of North Carolina, enslaved families followed these same practices. The naming records that survive in Freedmen's Bureau documents, church registries, and the testimonies of formerly enslaved people in the WPA Slave Narrative collection reveal families that had maintained naming traditions across multiple generations of forced separation. A child named Pompey in Cumberland County in 1850 might carry the name of a grandfather sold to Georgia in 1820 — a grandfather the child never met, whose existence was preserved only in the name his descendants refused to let disappear.

The Letter That Crossed the Distance

Where literacy was possible — and the suppression of Black literacy in the antebellum South was itself a measure of how threatening enslaved communication was understood to be — letters became instruments of kinship maintenance across the distances the trade created. The documentary record of enslaved correspondence is fragmentary because most enslaved people were legally prohibited from learning to read or write, and because the letters that were written were frequently intercepted, confiscated, or destroyed. But the letters that survived reveal families in active communication across hundreds of miles.

Harriet Jacobs, enslaved in Edenton, North Carolina — approximately 150 miles northeast of Fayetteville — documented in her 1861 narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* the specific strategies enslaved people in her community used to maintain family contact when physical reunion was impossible. Her account describes a community in which information about sold family members circulated through informal networks, in which the identities of the sold were preserved in community memory, and in which the hope of reunion was maintained not as sentiment but as practical organizing principle.

Rebuilding on New Ground

The people sold into the Deep South did not simply grieve the families they had left. Where possible, they reconstituted family structures in their new locations — creating households, building kin networks, and establishing the relational foundations that the trade had been designed to prevent. Historians of the antebellum South have documented the creation of what scholars call 'fictive kin' networks — relationships of mutual obligation and care that replicated the functions of biological family when biological family had been taken away.

These networks were not substitutes for the families that had been lost. They were new structures built alongside the grief of loss — evidence that the capacity for kinship, for mutual obligation, and for the creation of community was not something the trade could permanently destroy. People sold from North Carolina to Mississippi built churches, named children, established burial practices, and created the institutional foundations of community in the same locations where they had been sent as commodities. The community they built was the refusal of the commodity identity the trade had assigned them.

The Search That Followed Freedom

When emancipation came, the first and most urgent priority for millions of formerly enslaved people was not land, not wages, not political rights — it was family. The Freedmen's Bureau records document what historians have called 'the search' — the massive, systematic effort by formerly enslaved people to locate family members from whom they had been separated by sale. Newspapers published in Black communities in the years immediately following the Civil War carried column after column of notices from people seeking sold relatives: names, approximate ages, last known locations, names of former enslavers, distinguishing physical characteristics.

The scale of the search is evidence of the scale of the preservation. People who had been separated for decades — some for thirty or forty years — were still searching because they had kept the names, kept the stories, kept the memory of who had been sold and where. The search

succeeded often enough to demonstrate that the preservation had been real: families separated by the domestic slave trade found one another through the Freedmen's Bureau, through newspaper notices, through the networks of Black churches, and through the simple, relentless refusal to accept that the sale had ended the relationship.

In Cumberland County, the Freedmen's Bureau field office in Fayetteville processed hundreds of cases involving family reunification, labor contract disputes, and the registration of marriages that had been legally impossible under slavery. The names that appear in those records are the names that enslaved families had kept — carried across the distances of the trade, preserved through the years of separation, and presented at the moment of freedom as evidence that the trade had not succeeded in its most fundamental purpose.

The Names Are Still Being Recovered

The work that began in 1865 has not ended. Genealogical research by descendant communities in North Carolina and across the American South continues to recover the family histories that the domestic slave trade deliberately obscured. The combination of Freedmen's Bureau records, WPA Slave Narratives, church registries, and genetic genealogy has made possible family reconstructions that would have been impossible a generation ago. People who were sold are being found. The names their families kept are being matched to the records the trade left behind.

They kept the names. The names kept them.

NC LOCAL LENS

North Carolina · Cumberland County · Fayetteville

North Carolina was both a source state and an internal market for the domestic slave trade. The Upper Cape Fear region — Cumberland County — was a significant point of origin for enslaved people sold into the Deep South, and the Fayetteville slave market was one of the more active trading centers in the piedmont South.

Harriet Jacobs's account of enslaved life in Edenton, NC — the most detailed first-person narrative of slavery in the state — documents the specific strategies North Carolina enslaved communities used to maintain kinship across forced separation. The Fayetteville Freedmen's Bureau field office records contain direct documentation of family reunification efforts in Cumberland County following emancipation.

WPA Slave Narratives collected from formerly enslaved North Carolinians provide testimony of naming practices and family memory preservation specific to this region and are available through the Library of Congress digital archive.

NC Figures

Harriet Jacobs (Edenton, NC — *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861; documented enslaved community kinship strategies in NC); unnamed enslaved families documented in Cumberland County Freedmen's Bureau records; unnamed formerly enslaved narrators in the North Carolina WPA Slave Narrative collection who described naming practices and family separation.

CITATIONS

Chicago Author-Date · Primary sources preferred

- 1 Secondary
Gutman, Herbert G. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.
- 2 Primary — Autobiography
Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. Edited by Lydia Maria Child. Boston, 1861.
- 3 Secondary
Johnson, Walter. *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- 4 Secondary
Stevenson, Brenda E. *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- 5 Primary — Archive
Freedmen's Bureau Records — North Carolina. Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture / FamilySearch digital collection. freedmensbureau.com.
- 6 Primary — Archive
Federal Writers' Project. *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves — North Carolina Narratives*. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1941.

EDITORIAL NOTES

The 250 badge is flagged true — the domestic slave trade's peak period (1800–1865) falls within the 250-year window from 1776. Harriet Jacobs is a North Carolina primary source and should be elevated in any NC-specific presentation of this entry. The WPA Slave Narratives for NC are available through the Library of Congress and should be added as a direct archival link when a specific Cumberland County narrator is identified. No content warning required — graphic violence is not the focus of this entry; grief and preservation are.

ACF FIELD REFERENCE

entry_year — 1800
entry_year_sort — 1800
entry_track — Contribution
entry_era — era_iii
entry_lens — Sacred & Political
entry_250_badge — true
entry_living_record — false
entry_content_warning — false
entry_present_day_nc — true

entry_research_status — needs_citation

entry_related — Entry 10 — Sold South: The Domestic Slave Trade

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