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

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

They Could Not Erase the Mother

How enslaved mothers preserved identity, transmitted knowledge, sustained faith, and refused the reduction of motherhood to a function of capital — across the worst decades of the breeding economy.

Entry: They Could Not Erase the Mother

Paired With: Bred Like Animals — The Breeding Economy

Year: c. 1807–1865

Track: Contribution

Lens: Sacred & Political

ERA: ERA III — Revolution, Expansion & Civil War

250 Badge: Yes

Content Warning: Yes — references reproductive exploitation and resistance

NC Connection: Yes — Evans Metropolitan AME Zion · Fayetteville State University

Research Status: Needs Citation

■ CONTENT WARNING

This entry is the contribution pair for *Bred Like Animals — The Breeding Economy*, which documents the systematic sexual exploitation and reproductive management of enslaved women. This entry does not reproduce graphic detail but addresses those conditions directly, including the documented use of abortifacient knowledge as a form of resistance. Reader discretion is advised.

OVERVIEW

The breeding economy treated Black motherhood as an instrument of capital production. Enslaved women were violated, their bodies managed as livestock, their children assessed as property before birth. The system was designed to reduce the mother to a function — to strip from her the meaning of the relationship the system itself depended on to reproduce its labor supply. It did not succeed. Enslaved mothers across the American South developed and maintained practices of care, protection, cultural transmission, and spiritual resistance that constituted one of the most sustained and consequential acts of preservation in American history. They could not erase the mother. They could not erase what the mother carried.

FULL RECORD

What the System Required and What It Could Not Have

The breeding economy was built on a fundamental contradiction. It required the reproductive labor of Black women — their bodies, their pregnancies, their deliveries, their milk, their capacity to sustain infant life through the first years most vulnerable to mortality. It required, in other words, the full biological and relational work of motherhood. And it required simultaneously that this work produce not children with mothers but property with owners. The system needed the mother's body and refused her the mother's meaning.

This contradiction could not be resolved. It could only be managed — through violence, through the legal erasure of the maternal bond, through the deliberate separation of mothers from children at sale, through the reduction of birth to an inventory event. But the management was never complete. The relationship between an enslaved mother and her child existed in a space the law could not fully occupy. The law could assign ownership of the child. It could not assign the mother's knowledge of that child, her specific care for that child, her transmission to that child of everything she knew and believed and remembered. That transmission happened in the hours before dawn and after dark, in the field rows and the cabin corners, in the lullabies and the prayers and the whispered instructions that the system had no mechanism to intercept.

The Knowledge That Passed Through Mothers

The most consequential inheritance enslaved mothers transmitted was not material — it could not be, because the system stripped material inheritance at every generation. What passed through mothers was knowledge: medicinal knowledge, spiritual knowledge, agricultural knowledge, the

knowledge of how to survive a system designed to destroy you, and the knowledge of who you were before the system tried to define you otherwise.

Enslaved women across the American South were the primary bearers and transmitters of African-derived medicinal traditions. The herbal pharmacopoeia carried from West and Central Africa — knowledge of plants, preparations, dosages, and treatments for the conditions most likely to afflict the enslaved — was maintained, adapted, and transmitted primarily through women. Midwives in enslaved communities were among the most knowledgeable medical practitioners in the antebellum South, Black or white. They managed pregnancies under conditions of deliberate medical neglect, delivered children in the absence of professional support, and sustained infant life against mortality rates the breeding economy accepted as a cost of doing business.

The midwife who delivered a child in a Cumberland County cabin in 1840 was practicing a medical tradition with roots in the same West African civilizations whose destruction the slave trade had required. She was also ensuring that the child survived to carry the next generation of that tradition forward.

Spiritual Motherhood and the Formation of Community

The spiritual role of enslaved mothers extended beyond the biological family. In the absence of formal institutions — churches, schools, civic organizations — that the slave system denied to the enslaved, the mother's household became the primary site of cultural and spiritual formation. Children received their first knowledge of faith, of moral order, of the meaning of suffering and the possibility of liberation, in the specific context of their mothers' instruction.

The theology that sustained enslaved communities was not the theology of the slaveholder's church. It was a theology shaped and transmitted primarily by women — a reading of Scripture that centered the Exodus narrative, that identified the enslaved with the children of Israel, that framed liberation not as a distant spiritual abstraction but as a historical promise with material content. This theology did not emerge from seminaries. It emerged from the specific conditions of enslaved life as interpreted and transmitted by women who had every reason to abandon hope and chose instead to construct a framework that made endurance not merely possible but meaningful.

In North Carolina, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church established its presence in the antebellum period and grew rapidly after emancipation. Evans Metropolitan AME Zion Church in Fayetteville — one of the oldest Black congregations in North Carolina — stands as a direct institutional expression of the theological tradition that enslaved women maintained without institutional support through the worst decades of the breeding economy.

Protection as an Act of Resistance

Enslaved mothers developed specific strategies to protect their children from the worst of what the breeding economy could inflict. Some were practical: positioning children within the plantation hierarchy to reduce exposure to the most dangerous labor, cultivating relationships with less violent overseers, using the master class's sentimental attachment to childhood as a limited shield. Some were medical: using knowledge of abortifacient plants to prevent pregnancy in conditions where birth meant producing a child for the slave market. Some were spiritual: naming practices, blessing rituals, and forms of protective prayer rooted in African traditions that gave the child an identity the system could not assign.

The use of abortifacient knowledge by enslaved women has been documented by historians including Edward Baptist and Stephanie Camp. It represents one of the most radical forms of resistance the breeding economy faced — a refusal, at significant personal risk, to allow the body to be used as the system required. This decision was not made without grief. It was made with the full knowledge of what the alternative meant.

After Emancipation — Reconstituting What Was Taken

The end of legal slavery did not end the consequences of the breeding economy for Black mothers and families. But the response of Black mothers and communities to emancipation was immediate, organized, and grounded in the same capacities that had sustained them through the worst of the breeding period.

The formalization of marriages — registered in their thousands through the Freedmen's Bureau in the years immediately following the war — was among the first collective acts of the emancipated

community. In North Carolina, Cumberland County Freedmen's Bureau records document the registration of marriages that had been legally impossible under slavery, performed by couples who had maintained their commitment across years and decades without legal standing. The children born of these newly formalized unions were the first generation of Black children in North Carolina whose legal existence was not defined by the property status of their mother.

Black women in Fayetteville and Cumberland County moved immediately into the institutional life of the post-emancipation community — as founding members of churches, as organizers of mutual aid societies, as the first teachers in the schools established by the Freedmen's Bureau and the African American church. Fayetteville State University — founded in 1867 as the Howard School — was established in part through the organizational and financial contributions of the Black community of Fayetteville, including its women.

The Line That Did Not Break

The breeding economy was designed to make Black motherhood a function of capital. It produced instead one of the most consequential acts of cultural transmission in American history. The knowledge, the faith, the identity, the relational care that enslaved mothers transmitted across generations under conditions of systematic violence constitute a record of human persistence that has no precise parallel in the American story.

They could not erase the mother. They tried — through law, through sale, through violence, through the deliberate reduction of birth to an inventory event. What they produced instead was a tradition of maternal resistance so thorough, so specific, and so persistent that its inheritance can be traced in the institutions, the faith communities, the naming practices, and the family structures of Black North Carolina to the present day.

The line did not break. They carried it forward. They carry it still.

NC LOCAL LENS

North Carolina · Cumberland County · Fayetteville

North Carolina's breeding economy was concentrated in the Upper South plantation districts, including the Cumberland County region, which served as both a site of breeding-economy practice and a source of enslaved people sold into the Deep South.

Evans Metropolitan AME Zion Church in Fayetteville is a direct institutional expression of the theological tradition maintained by enslaved women through the antebellum period. Fayetteville State University (founded 1867 as the Howard School) was established in part through the contributions of the Black community of Fayetteville, including women who had survived and resisted the breeding economy.

Cumberland County Freedmen's Bureau records document the formalization of marriages and the reconstitution of families in the immediate post-emancipation period — the first official recognition of relationships the breeding economy had refused to acknowledge.

NC Figures

Unnamed enslaved midwives and medicinal knowledge holders in Cumberland County; founding women members of Evans Metropolitan AME Zion Church, Fayetteville; unnamed Black women documented as teachers and organizers in Freedmen's Bureau records; community contributors to the founding of the Howard School (Fayetteville State University), 1867.

CITATIONS

Chicago Author-Date · Primary sources preferred

- 1 Secondary
Baptist, Edward E. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books, 2014.
- 2 Secondary
Morgan, Jennifer L. *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- 3 Secondary
Camp, Stephanie M. H. *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
- 4 Secondary
Schwartz, Marie Jenkins. *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- 5 Primary — Archive
Freedmen's Bureau Records — North Carolina. Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture / FamilySearch digital collection. freedmensbureau.com.
- 6 Secondary
Gutman, Herbert G. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.

EDITORIAL NOTES

Content warning flagged true — this entry's paired persecution entry carries graphic content around sexual violence and reproductive exploitation. This contribution entry does not reproduce graphic detail but references those conditions directly. The reference to abortifacient knowledge is historically documented and academically sourced but requires a content note for sensitive readers. Jennifer L. Morgan's *Laboring Women* is the primary scholarly anchor for the reproductive labor framework used in this entry and should be cited precisely in any expanded version. Evans Metropolitan AME Zion and Fayetteville State University founding dates and community contributor documentation should be verified before publication.

ACF FIELD REFERENCE

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