Oppression breeds rebellion: herbal contraceptives and abortifacients and the role they fulfilled in allowing African American women to maintain their reproductive autonomy during slavery

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ABSTRACT

HISTORY

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OPPRESSION BREEDS REBELLION:
HERBAL CONTRACEPTIVES AND ABORTIFACIENTS AND THE ROLE
THEY FULFILLED IN ALLOWING AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN TO
MAINTAIN THEIR REPRODUCTIVE AUTONOMY DURING SLAVERY

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Thesis dated December 1997

This study examined the phenomena of herbal contraceptives and abortives and their use among enslaved women in the United States and the Caribbean. The conclusions that can be drawn from the research are that some women did choose to use herbal birth control and abortives. There is evidence to suggest that this use may have been directly used as a uniquely female means of resistance to slavery. It is also indicated that the more African cultural retentions there were in other areas of the lives of these women, the more likely that this phenomena would be employed as well. The profession of healer as a means of gaining respect and authority in the plantation community and in reference to how they aided women seeking abortions is discussed as well.

The paper uses many historical sources as well as many science texts to authenticate the availability and properties of the flora and fauna of the regions in which women were enslaved. The author also postulates that this phenomena was aided by African retentions of these methods as well as additions by Native Americans upon arriving in North America and the Caribbean. Birth and death rates from a plantation are also used with three reproductive case studies of the women who lived on the plantation. Many slave narratives as well as contemporary sources were used in the research and writing of this paper.
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A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
DECEMBER 1997
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Richard Morton and Dr. Janice Sumler-Edmond for their constant encouragement, patience and influence in their criticisms and suggestions for this thesis. I would also like to thank Ginger Gould for her help, historical documents, inspiration and lunch. Last, but not least I would like to thank Alice Day, DVM who shares the same interest which I do in herbal medicines and their historical uses. Your helpfulness and openheartedness in the writing of my thesis was greatly appreciated as were your suggestions for additional reading.
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Chapter 1:

Introduction

This is an examination of enslaved women of African descent and how they were able to use herbal birth control and abortifacients in order to maintain control over their reproductive lives. A commonly overlooked area, the control offered by these methods allowed women to exercise autonomy over a very personal part of their lives. Healers and midwives not only facilitated the transmission of this knowledge, they also developed a career which brought them respect among plantation dwellers, both black and white.

Slavery, and the lives of the people who were affected by it, must be examined closely in order to ensure that the information presented is precise. Previously, information which pertained solely to the male experience in slavery was often generalized and accepted as the truth about slavery as a whole. While the experience of both men and women during slavery was appalling, there were gender-related distinctions which developed. If one assumes that the male experience in slavery is universal, and disseminates the history of that paradigm accordingly, then the story of enslaved women is lost. In order to properly document and portray the establishment which so affected the reality of people of African descent during this period, we must reexamine the information which was readily accepted in the past. This query is especially important today; in order to succeed in the future, one must understand the past.

This study incorporates works from several disciplines. Moreover, historical data has been tempered by the use of women’s studies materials. In
addition, to understand fully the biological aspects of this topic, anatomical and physiological information about the human body have been included. References to the botany of the southeastern United States and Caribbean and the effects that those plants have on the body are also documented. Finally, an examination of the role of healer throughout history, especially during slavery, is essential to the study of this profession as a means of power and prestige among the members of the plantation community. The inclusion of information from these related fields provides a complete historical portrait while simultaneously offering an analysis of the scientific aspects of this topic.

Most of the texts which are considered to be definitive works of African American history include at best an abbreviated mention of several of the topics discussed in this thesis. In *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South*, Kenneth Stampp discusses reproduction and motherhood in the slave community as well as providing a brief mention of the medical treatment of slaves. Stampp refers to the numerous reproductive problems of women, drawing strongly from the memoirs of plantation owners. "Eliza had a child born dead last night," a South Carolina master noted. "This makes five miscarriages this Spring and but two live births." According to Stampp:

> Painful or irregular menses, suppurative infections of the generative tract, and prolapsus uteri were extremely common; sterility, spontaneous abortions, still births, and death in childbirth occurred two to three times as frequently among slave women as among white.

Stampp also refers to the healing profession of which African American women were a part. Masters ultimately shouldered the responsibility of medical care for their bondsmen. However, if a slave was reputed to be a skilled healer, many masters allowed them to provide remedies for their fellow workers. The most important motivating factor to planters was money. Unfortunately, this factor frequently contributed to the poor health of African Americans. If a slave fell ill and required a visit from a doctor the master would
be charged for the doctors' care. However, if a healer who lived in the area visited the ailing slave and provided herbal cures there would be no charge. This simple economic consideration seemed to influence the decisions of most planters. The most inexpensive cure, as opposed to the most effective countermeasure, seems to have been the most influential consideration for slaveowners.

While *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* by John Blassingame does not deal directly with the topic of abortion or contraception as means of resistance by women, the text does discuss one of the impetuses for these reactions. Blassingame offers a thorough and open discussion of forced miscegenation during slavery. Gleaning his information from several primary sources, the author offers numerous examples of these unwanted connections, concluding that "few slave parents could protect their pretty daughters from the sexual advances of white men."5

*Ar'n't I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Antebellum South* by Deborah Gray White includes a great deal of information relevant to this study. White addresses with the differences between the work experiences of men and women under slavery, the personal danger which women faced due to the nature of chattel slavery in the western hemisphere and the alternatives to pregnancy which women employed in order to avoid bearing children who would be enslaved. The author utilizes many primary and secondary sources in order to inform the reader as to the particulars of the lives of women under slavery. She includes not only qualitative but quantitative information in order to create a well-rounded picture for the reader.6 With her inclusion of historical anecdotes and case studies, which are supported by the statistics which White quotes she is able to illuminate a topic which has remained in the shadowy recesses of historical research for too long.
Maryse Condye in her historical novel *Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* tells the story of Tituba, an enslaved Bajan woman who learned a great deal about plants and their medicinal uses from her African mother. When Tituba becomes pregnant she decides that she does not wish to bear a child who will spend its life in slavery. Condye writes of the following incident in which Tituba contemplates her method of abortion as well as the feelings which caused her to choose this alternative to motherhood.

There is no happiness in motherhood for a slave. It is little more than the expulsion of an innocent baby, who will have no chance to change its fate, into a world of slavery and abjection. Throughout my childhood I had seen slave kill their babies by sticking a long thorn into the viscous-like egg of their heads, by cutting the umbilical cord with a poison blade, or else by abandoning them at night in a place frequented by angry spirits. Throughout my childhood I had heard slaves exchange formulas for potions, baths and injections that sterilize the womb forever and turn it into a tomb lined with a scarlet shroud.

After finding an abortifacient in the woods outside Boston, Tituba ingests the plant without disclosing its name. Later that night she miscarries her pregnancy. Although she knew she made the right decision, Tituba was obviously disturbed by the loss of her child. Condye details the torment faced by Tituba after inducing her abortion.

That night, my baby was carried out of my womb in a flow of black blood. I saw him wave his arms like a tadpole in distress and I burst into tears. John Indian also cried. I had not confided in him and he believed it to be another blow dealt by fate...I had trouble getting over the murder of my child. I knew that I had acted for the best. Yet the image of that little face whose actual features I would never know haunted me.

While this book is clearly a work of historical fiction and not a personal narrative by an enslaved woman, the inclusion of information on herbal abortifacients underscores the importance of this topic in the daily lives of women. The author's portrayal of the conflicting feelings of Tituba as a pregnant woman is very accurate as well. Enslaved women did not blithely sacrifice their children. They were tormented by guilt but realized that they had to make a
choice between bearing a child into enslavement, or inducing miscarriage through the use of herbal abortifacients.

While the topic of abortion and contraception as a means of resistance has been touched upon by many historians such as Deborah Gray White and Barbara Bush, as of yet there is no definitive work on the subject. The topic of healers, the reproductive options which they offered to women under their care, as well as the prestige of this profession and the relative freedom associated with it is also a major part of this phenomena of empowerment. The knowledge of contraceptives and abortifacients were commonly hidden from slaveowners, overseers, traders, physicians and anyone else who had a vested interest in the rate of natural increase among African American slaves. In addition to the conscious deception involved in this situation, there is another factor which accounts for the scarcity of sources on this topic. Most slaves could not read or write. Therefore, there is a paucity of written evidence from African American slave women. There are a few diary entries, confessions and interviews which discuss the matter after the end of slavery. As a result, primary sources are difficult to obtain. This is yet another reason for the interdisciplinary nature of this work. By combining botanical and biological proof that this phenomena was not only possible, but thoroughly accessible to enslaved women in the southeastern United States and Caribbean, the claims made by slave women and the healers who treated them are substantiated.

By examining the botany of the region in which slavery occurred and determining which plants had contraceptive or abortifacient properties, the sources of methods of reproductive resistance can be determined. After analyzing the potential plants and herbs to be used, one must then examine the personal accounts to be sure that there was an awareness of the usage of those
same plants. Occasionally, a reference to the abortive properties of a specific plant is given in a slave narrative. One can then be sure that women knew how to use the plant in order to achieve the desired effect of preventing or ending a pregnancy.

How did these women learn the properties of the flora of their region? This question can be answered by thoroughly examining the history of healing in Africa and the rigorous training which healers received. Scholars are aware that this profession and the knowledge it entailed survived the Middle Passage and thrived in the United States and Caribbean. Thus, they can begin to understand how female healers were able to assist women with their reproductive concerns. Examination of the lives of these women also reveals that their interaction with Native American women helped to diversify their herbal knowledge. This cooperation also acquainted them with the botany of the region. The herbal knowledge and practices of African American and Native American healers are so similar that it is often difficult to determine their original derivation. This interaction benefitted all of the women who were recipients of this knowledge.  

This thesis will briefly examine the patterns of life during enslavement. The reader will be given a synopsis of many of the aspects of enslavement. Beginning with a concise mention of the time period and region to be discussed, topics such as shelter, clothing, food and daily life will be discussed. The second chapter "The Private Lives of Enslaved Women" will narrow in its focus, so as to give the reader a look into the lives of these women. It offers a view of their lives at work as well as at home. In addition, the unique situations they confronted as enslaved women under the system of chattel slavery will be discussed. Chapter three examines botany, biology and the effects which certain plants have on the female reproductive system. Also discussed is the African tradition of healing and how it was transferred to the
United States. The effect of herbal healing on the early medical community, as well as how the herbal knowledge of Africans, African Americans and Native Americans influenced the medical profession during the antebellum period is included as well. Finally, in chapter four the information from the preceding chapters is juxtaposed with the records and journals of two Jamaican plantations. The overseers and owners of the Egypt plantation and the Mesopotamia plantation kept detailed accounts of life on the plantations. The birth and death records corroborate the primary sources. The journals of the plantation owners refer to women who discussed their use of abortion and contraception as well as the biological information regarding both human and plant pathology. The conclusion summarizes the author’s findings. The following information is the synopsis of the daily life and conditions of the people of African descent who were enslaved in the Western hemisphere.

Between 1619 and 1865, the Western hemisphere developed both culturally and economically as a society which was based (at least in part) on the system of chattel slavery. Although the southern United States, the Caribbean Islands, and South America are primarily recognized as the areas in which the effects of enslavement were most pervasive, slavery also existed in the North. No part of the continent was left untouched by the culture which slavery promoted, or unaffected by the influence that slavery directly, or indirectly wielded. However, the effects of the ravages of slavery, differed as much as the varying geographic regions in which slavery occurred.¹⁰

One of the determining factors in the conditions of slavery was the type of work performed.¹¹ The work, as well as the crop which was cultivated, was often determined by the geographic location in which slaves lived and worked. In the northern section of the United States, where agriculture did not take precedence, slaves often toiled in factories or on subsistence farms.
Sojourner Truth, who later became an abolitionist and feminist, was enslaved in Ulster County, New York during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. She worked on a family farm, helping both with the crops and general housekeeping. Some Northern masters hired their slaves out to industrial facilities, and kept the slaves' earned wages. In the Southern states and the West Indies, agricultural production was the primary basis for the inception and perpetuation of slavery. Although there were slaves who lived and worked in the major cities of the South, such as New Orleans, Louisiana, most slaves worked on farms and plantations, fueling the machinery of agriculture in the region. Even within the South, there were many differences in the crops raised, and therefore in the work involved in cultivating the harvests. While southern slavery is often characterized by the production of cotton, yields of tobacco, rice, indigo, and sugarcane were also products of African American slave labor.

Another element which often determined the quality of life which slaves experienced was the size of the farm on which they worked. Small family farms which constituted ninety percent of the agricultural settings, sometimes fostered a more benign environment. Living in close proximity provided opportunities for masters and slaves to become familiar with one another. On the larger farms and plantations, particularly those which employed a manager, and/or had an absentee master, life was generally harsher, particularly for field hands, who were constantly at the mercy of the overseer. Unfortunately, the relationship which was afforded to the hands on small farms may have put women, especially female house slaves, at a disadvantage by facilitating the occurrence of sexual abuse.

Slavery, and its conditions were also affected by the enslavers as well as those who were enslaved. The cultures from which slaves were brought,
as well as the culture of slaveowners, greatly affected the quality of life for all of those involved. During the colonial period, English slaveowners had originally tried to utilize European indentured servants as they preferred to associate with people who they deemed more like themselves.\textsuperscript{17} However, there were declining numbers of people who were willing to serve the necessary seven years of servitude. When confronted with the relative cost of an African who would be a lifelong possession, as compared to an indentured servant who would only be indebted for a few years of service, English planters and masters soon began to adjust to the growing trend toward lifelong servitude of Africans. Spanish slaveowners had long had contact with the nearby Moors of Northern Africa and were more accustomed to associating with and living around different types of people. They did not tend to view their African slaves as differently from themselves as the English did.\textsuperscript{18} The English view of other cultures affected the quality of life of those in their command.

The ethnicities of the enslaved also contributed to their relationships, both with their owners and fellow workers. Although the population of slaves was overwhelmingly African in origin, there were many different ethnic groups, cultures, and languages among them. Although it seems that Akan, or Coramantine slaves tended to dominate in the Caribbean, there were enslaved men and women from ethnic groups throughout western Africa. Some slaveowners bought only Africans from certain groups. Others preferred to purchase slaves who had a great variety of cultures among them in order to ensure a language barrier and preempt a revolt.\textsuperscript{19}

Dr. Collins, (no first name given) was a physician in the Caribbean who specialized in the treatment of slaves. His book, \textit{Practical Rules for the Management and Medical Treatment of Negro Slaves in the Sugar Islands}, was used by planters in the Caribbean during the eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries in order to care for their slaves' medical concerns. In *Practical Rules*, Dr. Collins makes sweeping generalizations as to the temperament and attitudes of the people whom slaveowners and traders imported from different African cultures. He attributed suicidal tendencies to the Ibo culture of present day Nigeria, while praising members of the Coramantine, or, Akan group, who came primarily from Ghana for their work ethic. While these stereotypes were based upon the limited perception of eighteenth and nineteenth century planters, they represented the buying habits of others like them and affected the settling patterns of Africans in the colonies.

African cultural survivals were also affected by the demographic patterns which developed during the settling of the colonies in the United States and Caribbean. American culture as a whole developed from the European, African and Native American peoples who populated the continent. In particular, Southern culture and Caribbean culture both drew heavily from the many different African cultures represented in the area. Language, religion, foods, architecture, folk traditions, music, and medicinal treatments which developed within the region all retained a strong West African influence. Not surprisingly, the areas with the highest rates of African cultural retentions were the regions in which the numbers of enslaved Africans were either equal to or greater than the white population. In South Carolina, Louisiana, the Caribbean, and parts of Mississippi there was a greater occurrence of African cultural influence.

Factors such as location, type of work performed, and the ethnic descent of both master and slave caused variations in the severity of treatment under slavery, but there were some universal truths. Chattel slavery by nature was a dehumanizing system. It was dependent upon one human being owning another, with the owned having little control over their own destiny. Moreover, there were other factors which made the situation even more debilitating.
Emotional denigration was used to make both those of African descent and Europeans believe that Africans were inferior. Frequently, this resulted in self-hatred and shame for many Africans and often compounded racism in Europeans. The sheer fact that field hands and house slaves worked endlessly with minute personal benefit or satisfaction was both physically and mentally exhausting for the enslaved. The economic advantage for planters in providing their labor force with the bare minimum in living conditions also exacted a psychological toll on slaves. Although the experience of slavery differed from individual to individual and region to region, overall, it was by any standard a difficult experience.\textsuperscript{23}

Even as early as childhood, enslaved African Americans had poorer health than that of their playmates, the children of the master.\textsuperscript{24} If there had been a rampage of communicable diseases raging in the slave cabins, the slave children surely would have passed it on to the master’s children who in turn would have spread it to the family in the “big house.” The white family would also have been at risk from contracting communicable diseases from their house slaves and as a rule this did not occur. This indicates that most of the diseases that plagued the slaves were not contagious. These diseases, including cholera, pellagra and dropsy were caused or at least intensified by the poor conditions in which African Americans were forced to live, under the economic circumstances imposed by slavery.

There are almost as many differing opinions as to whether the diet of the slave was adequate as there are accounts of slave nutrition. The evidence offered by Todd Savitt in “Black Health on the Plantation” is most thorough and convincing. He has considered both the nutritional needs of a field laborer and the supplies from which they were expected to get these nutrients.
Based on current dietary standards, the typical daily ration, one quart of whole ground, dry, bolted cornmeal, prepared from white corn (the South's favorite) and half a pound of cured medium-fat ham with no bone or skin, could not have provided enough essential nutrients to sustain a moderately active twenty-two year old male or female, much less a hard working laborer or a pregnant or lactating woman. Field hands fed this diet alone (with water) would soon have become emaciated and sickly and would have shown symptoms of several nutrient deficiencies. It is highly unlikely that any slave could have survived very long on a diet consisting of pork and cornmeal.25

According to the ledger from a plantation near Augusta, Georgia owned by Nathaniel Raines Mitchell, bacon was the most frequently named provision issued to the slaves in his care. On average, most slaves received three-quarters to a pound of bacon apiece. In many cases this was the only food supply issued to each slave.26 Mitchell may have been one of the many plantation owners who expected slaves to grow their own vegetables to add to their diets.

Most masters provided supplements to the basic hogmeat and cornmeal, a practice most urgently recommended by agricultural writers throughout the South. Vegetables topped the list of required additional foods. Planters could, if they planned ahead, have a ready supply of at least one or two varieties throughout the year. These writers also suggested adding, when available, fish, fresh meat, molasses, milk, and buttermilk to slave diets.27

As a rule, plantation owners set aside a small plot of fertile land for each slave cabin or family, so that they might grow vegetables and supplement their own diets. Some generous masters gave an amount of land sizable enough to grow vegetables, and to raise a few chickens or a pig. Unfortunately, many slaves had to sell the fruits of their labors and the purpose of the plots was defeated. As a result of this lack of vegetables, "slaves received sufficient amounts of carbohydrates [for energy] and calories, but they generally lacked some amino acids, Vitamin C, riboflavin, niacin, thiamine, Vitamin D, calcium, and iron."28 Because their diets lacked these very important vitamins and minerals, slaves tended to have lowered immune systems. Subsequently, the enslaved population were especially susceptible to the diseases which
seemingly plagued African Americans disproportionately when compared to the rest of the population.

Food was not the only material need which was lacking due to the economics of chattel slavery. The profit margin of the planter depended upon low operating costs and high crop yields. It made economic sense to provide only the bare minimum in supplies for the care of the enslaved. Clearly, these economic decisions were not in the best interest of the enslaved work force. The evidence suggests slaves suffered due to a lack of adequate nutrition, clothing, shelter, and medical care, while their owners reaped the profits from their exertions. The primary resource of the planter was his work force, yet in most instances he did not deem it necessary to spend a sufficient amount of money to provide properly for their material needs. It was this constant ravaging of the labor of the enslaved with no tangible reward which was so emotionally damaging. Physically, there were other consequences.

Masters usually made a yearly clothing allotment of a summer and winter outfit for their slaves. These clothes had to be made to last throughout each season, and typically would not be replaced. Although clothing varied from region to region, this was the standard allocation in the South.

Usually the men wore only a single shirt and trousers, and the women were scantily clad. In winter the outfit was somewhat more elaborate, consisting of a jacket, trousers, and shirt for the men or older boys, and a chemise, petticoat, and frock for the older girls. Heavy shoes, known as brogans, were provided in winter, while in summer the custom of going without prevailed. Ordinarily, woolen hats were worn by the men in winter and in some cases even in summer, although straw hats were the rule in the lower South, while the women wore kerchiefs and sunbonnets. Until they reached puberty, children of both sexes, as a rule, wore long smocks, which were referred to as dresses for young ladies and shirts for young men, but which were essentially the same garment. When they were considered adults at the age of twelve or thirteen, they began to receive a regular
allocation of clothes in addition to the increased rations and other benefits of adulthood.

The housing situation for enslaved African Americans was deplorable. The average number of people living in one house was five. A house consisted of three rooms, built from wood, moss, or whatever materials were available. These houses were drafty and overcrowded, and the living conditions left much to be desired. This is not hard to understand when one considers the prospect of five people who have done backbreaking work all day long, living together within three rooms, dividing approximately six hundred square feet. Frederick Law Olmsted, while traveling through the South during the early 1850s, described the poor conditions of slave cabins across the southeastern United States. One particular cabin in eastern Texas was made from logs and planks and used corn cobs and other like objects to fill in the areas where the sides did not meet.

Although enslaved people were able to incorporate personal preferences and styles into their daily lives in ways such as making their hair, clothing, or headwraps unique, on the whole, slavery was designed to strip autonomy from the lives of the people trapped in its grasp. One could not choose where they wanted to live, the type of work they wanted to do, nor whether or not they remained in close contact with their families. While most men and women could choose their own mates, there was no guarantee that they would remain together and be able to raise their own children. Some men and women were assigned their partners by masters who were overzealous in trying to raise the birthrate among their slaves. A few women lived out their lives unable to be a part of a loving, stable, equal relationship, as at the wishes of their owners, they became concubines. Every aspect in the daily life of an enslaved individual was affected by the rules and designations of their owners.
From before dawn each morning to after dusk each night, or from "cain’t see to cain’t see" enslaved people of African descent were forced to work throughout the southeastern United States and the Caribbean. In fields of cotton, sugarcane, corn, rice, indigo, and tobacco; in average houses and luxurious antebellum mansions; in factories and artisan shops; marketplaces and city squares, African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans were forced to do the work that their owners set forth for them. The methods of coercion ranged from subtle threats to possible death for disobeying. This was the life lived by enslaved people. They were forced into work which was assigned to them, not by their own choice, but under the threat of severe punishment. Day after day until the crop was harvested, or one's period of servitude or apprenticeship to someone else ended, slaves completed the tasks at hand. For house slaves, who were often envied as their work was perceived as not as strenuous, there was no seasonal end to their toils, as there is always something or someone to tend to in a household. It was in these environments that the unique phenomena of female slavery developed.

While their work was monotonous, the duties which female slaves were expected to perform varied depending on their age. If the plantation was large enough to have a nursery, young girls helped the older women take care of the infants and younger children. As children, enslaved girls often served as handmaids for young white women, or playmates of the white children in the household. At puberty an enslaved woman's future work was determined. She would either persist working in the house, or she would begin her work in the field as a part of the trash gang. This work would continue until a woman began to bear children. When women began families their work load was reduced while they were pregnant and later when they were nursing their children. Following the lactation period, the workload resumed its normal pace.
Only during pregnancy and lactation, or the change of seasons, did the workload of a female slave ever lessen or change. Life continued on in this manner until the women died or were unable to work any longer. Women who were no longer able to carry on in their work in the fields were relegated to somewhat easier tasks such as spinning, cooking, and looking after children on the plantation. They also worked as midwives, nurses for the sick, or continued on in their duties as a healer, if they had the kind of specialized knowledge which that role required.42

Because most African American enslaved women spent twelve to fourteen hours a day working, the majority of their waking hours were spent among the people with whom they worked. Female house slaves spent most of their time working under the direction of the mistress and in close proximity to the white family (who were often their relatives). Women who worked as field hands, and as part of a trash gang, spent their days in the company of other women who ranged in age from puberty to beyond menopause. Because of the amount of time spent at work in the presence of either group, interpersonal relationships which reached beyond the boundaries of work developed.43

There are not many sources to support any sort of positive rapport which developed between enslaved women who worked in the household and the mistresses who supervised them.44 Although they worked in constant contact with each other in completing household chores and other domestic activities, such as laying out patterns and sewing slave clothing allotments, there does not seem to be much evidence to support relationships which developed beyond that of mistress and maid. While there were a few exceptions, this seems to be the case in most circumstances.45 Women had to look to other slaves employed within the household for friendship and support during working hours. If there was only one slave employed in the house, as
was the case on many smaller farms, she could have lead a lonely existence.46

Despite the apparently low incidence of positive relationships, let alone friendships, which occurred between mistresses and the women who worked in their households, domestic workers of the enslaved female population spent the majority of their time in the "big house." The duties of, and expectations for the house slaves in completing their tasks for the white family kept them away from their own families much of the time. Nursing, caring for, and raising the white children took time away from the raising of their own children. However, when married women were not required to be in the house, they spent much of their time building solid relationships with their husbands and children. Slave marriages tended to be more egalitarian in nature than the marriages of their masters and mistresses.47 Since both enslaved marriage partners were trapped by the limitations inherent in American slavery, there was less reason to maneuvers for power within interpersonal relationships in the ever present environment influenced by that institution.

If house slaves were not married or did not have close-kin networks on the same farm or in the immediate area, life could be very lonely. When Harriet, an enslaved woman in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, resigned herself to becoming the lover of her owner's son, Francis, it was because no male slaves would dare to show any interest in her. No one, male or female, had dared to show enough courage to help her resist the attacks of the other son, Sidney, or reached out to her afterward.48 She was utterly alone in the world and had no choice. House slaves may have had better access to food, clothing and medical care, because of their proximity to the white family, but it is clear that they did not receive the physical and mental support that women who worked in the fields did.
Women who worked as field hands were usually part of a "trash gang." This was the term for workers who cleared the field after the men were finished harvesting the crop itself. While during times of intense activity they harvested crops as well, for the most part women were relegated to raking, pulling weeds and hoeing. Although work of this nature is essential in agricultural production, it is not highly valued, or fully appreciated. The trash gang was made up of women from nearly all ages, ranging from puberty to beyond menopause. This grouping of women served an educational purpose for the younger women. It was a source of support, as well as a transmitter of culture for all ages. These women spent more time together each day than they were allowed to spend with their own families, and therefore became a family of sorts to each other, offering not only advice and opinions, but lending moral support as well.

This succor carried over into the slave quarters. Women with families could go home to their husbands and children at night and return to the insular cocoon which their family made against the harshness of fieldwork. Women who were not married and did not have children lived closely enough to their coworkers in the field that they could associate after work and relax together, building close friendships and fictive-kin networks. The evidence suggests that while the work was undoubtedly more strenuous and physically taxing than the work done by house slaves, field hands had a support system which, it appears, women who worked within the plantation households just did not seem to have within the immediate work environment. It is not known whether this isolation at work carried over into their personal lives as well.

Some type of buttressing for women who were enslaved was necessary for their psychological health. They needed a respite not only from the strenuous work which they performed daily, but also from the notion that they
could be breeders as well. Masters saw female slaves not only as a source of labor, but also as a source of new slaves. This was the most despicable aspect of enslavement which came from chattel slavery as it was practiced in the United States and most of the Western Hemisphere. Masters sought to increase the slave population through such methods as arranging marriages, and hiring men for the sole purpose of impregnating a woman (similar to the siring of livestock). Others tried impregnating their workers themselves, or turning a blind eye while their sons, an overseer, or a neighbor fathered children by slave women.

Young, single women seemed to face the greatest danger, but no African American woman was completely safe from the threat of sexual abuse. Black and white women agreed that there was no greater hardship on a slave woman than beauty. While usually physical beauty is an asset, it frequently became an African American woman's downfall. Linda Brent, the author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, escaped from slavery after she was forced to marry a white man to temporarily protect herself from the advances of her master. Harriet Smith, the aforementioned woman who was a maid for the Smith family resigned herself to becoming the concubine of her master's son, as he and his brother eliminated any choice for her.

Frances Kemble was a stage actress in England who married into a prominent Philadelphia family. Although they settled in the North, the family had southern roots. Upon the death of his grandfather, Fanny's husband inherited a Georgia plantation. The season which she spent there prompted her to write her famous *Residence on a Georgia Plantation*, a scathing attack on the institution of slavery. Even Roswell King the overseer on Butler's Island who was famous for his evil torture and hatred of African Americans, fathered a son by one of the women under his command on Cumberland Island. As Mrs.
Kemble, who briefly lived on the plantation where Roswell King presided, duly noted:

Nobody pretends to deny that, throughout the South, a large proportion of the population is the offspring of white men and colored women.... Mr. ----- (and many others) speaks as if there was a natural repugnance in all whites to any alliance with the black race; and yet it is notorious, that almost every Southern planter has a family more or less numerous of illegitimate colored children....If we are to admit the theory that the mixing of the races is a monstrosity, it seems almost as curious that laws should be enacted to prevent men marrying women toward whom they have an invincible natural repugnance.  

A few masters took advantage of "stud services" in order to encourage new births on the plantation. This arrangement, not unlike today's livestock fertilization business, furnished a male with desirable physical characteristics in order to impregnate a female whom the master wished to reproduce. Some masters just arranged marriages or living situations where a man and woman he thought would be a good match were paired together as husband and wife in order to produce children. Whatever the measures used, removing from one the choice in their life partner, in bearing children, or maintaining a stable family unit, was yet another part of the omnipresent environment of sexual abuse in which women had to live. Many times masters did not meddle in the personal affairs of their slaves. They allowed them to court and to determine for themselves whom they wanted to marry. But even marriage did not guarantee that a woman could live free from the fear of sexual abuse. As it was illegal for a slave to defend himself or testify against a white man, a husband was powerless if his wife was raped or molested by a white man. Even if a master let nature take its course and allowed his workers to reproduce naturally, he still reaped the profits of this natural increase when he sold the young slave, utilized the labor of the child created, or used the product of this union to create more slaves upon maturity.
It would appear that there was nothing a woman could do to protect herself from the effects of this system. Whether a woman was sexually abused or allowed to choose her own mate, she was still at the mercy of her master when the decision to keep or sell her child was to be made. This in addition to the low status that women were afforded due to the nature of their work, and their position in society, combined to denigrate women. This combination of factors placed most women in a seemingly powerless position on the antebellum plantation.

However, not all women were completely entangled within this web of abuse. Some women were able to escape the monotony of the trash gang, or the drudgery of house work, at least temporarily, and simultaneously counteract the effects of sexual abuse. The women who served as healers on the plantation commanded the respect of blacks and whites alike. These women helped to deliver the children of all women, not only on their own farms, but on plantations in the surrounding areas as well. Their knowledge of herbs and medicines allowed them to treat common illnesses and maladies which developed during the course of life on the plantation. Their use of these herbs, roots, and plants led to another type of doctoring as well. Healers were able to offer women a choice in whether or not they wanted to bear children. There is substantial historical evidence that both contraceptives and abortives were known and available to African American slave women through healers and other women who had this information. With these measures, a woman could avoid conception, or if she became pregnant she did not have to bear the child and raise it. The knowledge and practice of this phenomena had to remain a secret as they thwarted the profit margin of the planters. Although planters did become aware of this training, they were hard-pressed to control the covert actions of the women who were enslaved.
Enslaved women had access to herbal contraceptives and abortifacients and were able to use these methods in order to maintain control over their reproductive faculties. Whether the knowledge was handed down from mothers to daughters and from generation to generation, or it was imparted by a female healer within the community, women had choices in whether or not to bear children into slavery. The healer, in her care of these women and other patients who sought her assistance, created a position of authority for herself in the plantation hierarchy and commanded a good deal of respect from everyone on the plantation, both black and white.
Chapter 2:
The Private World of Enslaved Women

Slavery, and its circumstances permeated every aspect of the lives of those who were held in its grasp. From birth to death, the experiences of those who were enslaved were determined by the conditions of their servitude. Although rations were usually increased and work somewhat lessened, pregnant women were still expected to produce in their standard field of expertise. Whether weaving, a relatively light task, or caning, an extremely arduous activity, typically slaves were expected to work through the very last stages of their pregnancies. ¹ Children were born into enslavement after surviving what was usually not an ideal pregnancy. Mothers returned to work soon after giving birth.² At this point, infants became a part of everyday plantation lives, being taken care of by older children and women in nurseries. Even at a young age, enslaved children began to perform tasks in order to prepare them for their lives of work.³ As adolescents young men and women learned their appointed careers, as well as being educated as to how they were to behave in order to survive slavery.⁴ Women had to learn to subsist in an economic system which profited from their fecundity. It was during adolescence and early adulthood that noticeable differences began to occur in the lives of men and women. These changes and the developments which occurred constitute the private world of enslaved women.

The condition of enslavement affected the lives of even the very youngest slaves. Women did not have the luxury of an extended period of rest
during or after their pregnancy. On smaller farms, women simply brought their children to work with them, either in the house or in the field. However, on most large plantations, infants were left to the care of elderly nurses or slave children after a protracted period spent with their mothers immediately after their birth.

The babies were taken to the negro house and the old women and young colored girls who were big enough to lift them took care of them. At one o'clock the babies were taken to the field to be nursed, then they were brought back to the negro house until their mothers finished their work then they would come for them.

Only the labor of the very young and the very old could be spared in order to supervise the infants and toddlers. This was the duty to which older women were relegated when they became too frail to perform heavy labor in the fields or continue working in the house. Young children were introduced to the duties and responsibilities of slavery through caring for infants while their mothers were in the field.

Although the most taxing of the manual labor, heavy field work, was reserved for older adolescents and adults, slave children were still expected to serve in some capacity, either around the farm or in the house. In addition to caring for infants, older children were expected to tend livestock, run errands, do yard work, or learn from adults a trade or chore which they performed. Laundering clothes and household linens was a chore dominated by female workers despite the great effort involved. Young girls would assist the washerwoman by performing small necessities for her while she busied herself with the laundry. Candlemaking was another activity which slave mistresses and their maids executed together. While the mistresses and adult slave women actually dipped and molded the candles, children could gather bayberries, waxberries and other ingredients as well as otherwise assisting with the creation of the candles which were made.
Young slaves were often apprenticed during this time so that they might learn a trade. Many children performed personal services for their masters and mistresses, effectively learning the duties that went along with the station of handmaid. Other children simply played with the children of the master, amusing and occupying the white children as well as themselves. Youngsters who performed well in the house and whose labor was not needed elsewhere, often remained as house slaves throughout their lives. This coveted position had to be earned, and could be lost due to an indiscretion which was perceived as serious enough for dismissal.

As puberty began and children grew into adolescents and young adults, they began to assume the responsibilities which went along with the work assigned to their position. Adolescent house slaves no longer watched and learned while others performed their work. They were assigned tasks of their own to complete. Young women who had previously pulled weeds, or performed other light field work, began to harvest the crop themselves, although their expected yields were lower than those of adult women.

Enslaved parents had an unusually heavy responsibility, for they not only had to survive, but they also had to ensure that their children survived under conditions that were tantamount to perpetual war between slaveholders fighting to control their chattel while the bond servants were struggling to free themselves from control of others.

Mothers and fathers who chose to bear children, despite knowing that they would spend their lives enslaved, attempted to prepare their progeny as best they could for the life of work which lay ahead. Although many slaveowners did not allow their slaves to marry bondsmen or women on other plantations, the practice did occur. Abroad marriages, breeding, and forced sex with plantation authority figures contributed to the notion that slave households were always headed by women. While this was often the case, it was by no means an absolute truth. Nor was it necessarily an indication of a woman’s immorality or
promiscuous behavior. This situation was merely a fact of life for many women under chattel slavery.

Parents readied their children for a life made more difficult, not only by work, but disease as well. If enslaved children lived beyond the age of ten, the chances were much greater that they would survive to adulthood. Thirty-one percent of deaths of children nine and under were African American slaves. The heavy work load of the mother during pregnancy, improper and insufficient nutrition and poor prenatal health all combined to result in low birth weights which put slave infants at a disadvantage from the very beginning. SIDS, or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome was also a contributor to infant mortality rates. In addition to the cholera, pellagra, fevers, intestinal parasites, whooping cough and measles which affected members of the slave population regardless of age, children had their own treacherous enemies. "Tetanus, teething, and lockjaw" were all childhood diseases which afflicted African Americans who were enslaved four times more often than white children in the same age group. Wilma King, who has studied the lives of enslaved women and children, attributes healthier lives after age nine to the increased amount of food which slaves received after becoming full-fledged members of the plantation workforce. Rations increased significantly once it was determined that an adolescent could do the work of an adult.

Once older slave children and adolescents entered the workforce, they soon became accustomed to the culture of plantation agriculture. Raised from infancy to defer to elders and authority figures, new workers were now under the direct scrutiny of an overseer, master, or mistress. If work was not performed to the expected standard, whether in the house or the field there would be a price to pay. The experience of Ann (no last name given) sadly illustrates this point. Ann was washing dishes in the kitchen with Lindy, who was
another slave woman. Upon being passed a saucer by Ann, Lindy allowed it to fall to the floor, where it broke. Lindy immediately blamed Ann for dropping the plate when their master Mr. Peterkin, who heard the shattering china inquired as to whose fault it had been. Although Ann offered to pay for the plate with the fifty cents which she had received from her purchase, the master replied that he would rather take it out of her hide.18

Without delay, both Mr. Peterkin and Mr. Jones, the overseer, dragged Ann to the whipping post and told Lindy to remove Ann's clothes. Ann was completely naked as her owner and overseer whipped her mercilessly. A crowd of onlookers from the plantation gathered and cheered the chilling spectacle as Ann was whipped into unconsciousness. (See Appendix 1 for the entire account.) When Ann regained consciousness four days later, she found herself in the care of Polly, the cook. Polly, whom Ann had claimed for her mother shortly before the incident described, had removed Ann's body from the whipping post after she had been left for dead. While Polly was trying to cleanse Ann's remains and prepare them for burial, Ann briefly regained consciousness. Polly nursed Ann back to health.19 After this experience the two women developed a fictive mother-daughter relationship. Ann had been sold away from her mother, and Polly's son had been sold down the river.20 The fictive-kin interconnection which they formed effectively restored the missing relative for each, providing comfort and solace to both women.

From the very beginning, the fictive-kin network which was developed to maintain a form of mutual support for the slaves, encompassed slave children as well. Raised, at least in part, by the nurses and slightly older children who worked in the nursery, there was always an extended system of concerned caretakers.21 Even during apprenticeship, supervisors kept a close eye on their enslaved charges in order to ensure that they were learning their work correctly.
When young women joined the trash gang they became members of the intricate web which wove together the female members of the slave community and bonded everyone despite generational differences.22

Joining the other field hands, or house slaves was a very important experience for an adolescent. Becoming a "full hand" meant receiving a full clothing allowance, a full amount of rations, and admittance to the adult life of a slave. Women could now wear dresses, or full skirts instead of simply wearing a long shirt split up the sides.23 And with the onset of maturity, young ladies could begin to court in order to select or be selected by a mate. Now that they were full-fledged members of the slave community, they could benefit from the advice of their mothers, fathers, and other female relatives, both fictive and real, as well as all of the women whom they came in contact with on a daily basis. This web of support and advice was important, especially now. As young women discovered the responsibilities of adulthood and both the pleasures and pitfalls of courtship and love, there was a predatory danger which lurked closer than ever. Women were very aware of the hazards which could befall young girls who were entering puberty. Mothers attempted to warn their daughters and protect them as best they could. Other women could offer suggestions and listen to their concerns. However, excepting physical violence in self-defense, no real means existed to deter the sexual abuse which became an inherent part of this particular system of chattel slavery.

It was clear that the specter of sexual abuse loomed large in the minds of enslaved women. One anonymous mother confided, "My heart was heavier than it had ever been before... ...when they told me my newborn babe was a girl."24 Apparently the woman had been forced to contend with sexual abuse or had witnessed another woman's experience. From infancy mothers were aware that their daughters could fall prey to the physical and economic
desires of their master or overseer and tried their best to forestall or prevent this occurrence.

There is evidence to suggest that the clothing of adolescent girls, and the necessary alterations made by girls and women who worked in the field visually stimulated the male authority figures of the plantation. Budding adolescent females were expected to wear nothing more than their dresses, (which were, in reality, long shirts) until they became full hands. Adult women who worked in the field had to hitch their skirts up to just above their hips in order to work without ruining their clothes or becoming entangled in the crops, weeds, and mire of the fields. In addition to this modification, workers in the field necessarily spent most of their time bent over, pulling, picking, weeding, or hoeing the crop. This combined to create a position for the enslaved woman which made them appear to be sexually uninhibited to their supervisors. Planters found this to be just another justification for their belief that all black women were promiscuous. This was one of the impetuses of the Jezebel stereotype. Despite this, African American women attempted to maintain their dignity and protect their loved ones. Lucy McCullough recalled that when she was a young woman her mother spied her crossing the field one day. Lucy’s mother tore the hem out of her dress on the spot in order to lengthen it. Later, she added more material to the garment. Mothers went to great lengths to ensure the modesty of their daughters in attempts to protect them from rape, spurred by lust, economic profit, or a combination of the two.

It was in this climate of caution and fear that young women grew to maturity and found their life partners. Mothers attempted to constrain the early courtship process in order to ensure that their daughters became fully acquainted with their suitor before becoming seriously involved. They also discussed the sanctity and sacredness of motherhood as a survival from West
Africa. This was no doubt an attempt to prevent premarital sex, or ensure that a pregnancy would be accompanied by marriage. Some mothers assumed that intercourse would be the penultimate goal of courtship, forgetting that the couple might just enjoy each other's company and conversation.

As Sarah Fitzpatrick who was a house slave in Alabama described her experience with courtship, it was a relaxing period of socialization for people who, more often than not, could not relax or socialize.

Talkin' 'bout courtin', we use'ta court by tell'in riddles. Boy set an' look at'cha an' laff an' den he'd say, "Ef ah had two strings cross de sea, one black an' one white, which one would you choose?" Co'se ya know ef de boy wuz black, de gal would say ah choose de black'un. Ef her comp'ny wuz yaller she'd say I choose the yaller'un. White folks ax us "What do yo'al say when ya court?" We tell 'em we jes laff an' talk. Cey ax us if de boys ever ax us to kiss 'em an' marry dem. We say, "No, ma'am." Dey say, "Yo'al don't know how to court", den dey tell us how to court.

Eventually courtship usually turned serious, couples married and began families. Slaves apparently knew the value of becoming familiar with one's life partner before committing to marriage. Many couples lived together for a brief period before jumping the broom, in order to be sure of their compatibility. Most women married the father of their first child, but some went on to more fulfilling relationships, and married the father of their second child. Regardless, marriage was encouraged both from within and outside the slave community. While Mary Boykin Chestnut, a South Carolina slave mistress, believed that bearing children out of wedlock was completely acceptable among African American slaves, it is clear she was mistaken. Her comment that, "These negro women have a chance here that women have nowhere else. They can redeem themselves--the impropers can. They can marry decently and nothing is remembered against these colored ladies," is completely refuted by the testimony of an African American slave woman regarding motherhood and marriage. She stated that a woman's status fell once she became a mother, until she secured a marriage partner. There was definitely pressure from within
the slave community to marry and raise one's child or children with a father. This attitude seems more in keeping with the West African heritage of marriage, motherhood, and childbearing.\textsuperscript{34}

The institution of marriage was strongly encouraged by slaveholders who did not participate in breeding or forced miscegenation as a means of increase. In one plantation manual it was stated that matrimony, "added to the comfort, happiness, and health of those entering upon it, besides ensuring greater increase."\textsuperscript{35} When one considers that reproduction and childbearing on the farm accounted for five to six percent of the master's profits, the impetus for this seemingly indulgent, nurturing attitude becomes clear.\textsuperscript{36} Slaveowners wanted to ensure a larger workforce and a surplus of labor which could be sold for profit. Through encouraging marriage and commitment among one's slaves all of this could be accomplished, supposedly by God's will, under the guise of Christianity. "Be fruitful and multiply," could have been the credo for many planters. This was surely the motivation behind the actions of "Mammy Harriet's" mistress. The day after her wedding, the Georgia slave was awakened by her mistress singing to her, "Good morning, Mrs. Bride. I wish you joy and every year a son or a daughter."\textsuperscript{37} The very nature of this event demonstrates the reliance which planters had on the fecundity of their slaves.

Whether or not women married, or were involved in serious relationships, they were never quite free of the shadow of forced sex. Some women were fortunate. They lived on plantations where the owner did not participate in, nor allow any miscegenation, or "ugly living" as one planter called it.\textsuperscript{38} The women on these farms were afforded some degree of security. Less fortunate women, whose masters and overseers did seek to gain economic wealth by impregnating the women under their command had four choices, fight, leave, seek an intervening factor, or submit. All except the last could result in
severe punishments, violence, or even death. Whenever a woman resisted the will of an authority figure, there were always negative consequences which could befall her.

Sukie Abbott was a Virginia slave woman who chose to resist the advances of her master. One day as she prepared to wash clothes, Mr. Abbott, her master attempted to rape her. He had pulled her dress down and attempted to push her onto the floor when...

She took an' punch ole Marsa an' made him break loose an' den she gave him a shove an' push his hindparts down in de hot pot o' soap. Soap was near to bilin', an' it burnt him near to death. He got up holdin' his hindparts an' ran from de kitchen, nor darin' to yell, 'cause he didn't want Miss Sarah Ann [his wife and Sukie's mistress] to know 'bout it.39 Although she successfully avoided the attack, a few days later she was sold. The price she paid for defending herself was the loss of her home, friends, and family. However, Sukie's dispossession resulted in the safety of women on the Abbott farm. Mr. Abbott never attempted to molest another slave.40

As soon as Harriet Smith, the beautiful young slave woman in Chapel Hill, North Carolina began to sense that her owner's son posed a threat to her, she began her campaign of resistance. When Sidney Smith first approached and propositioned her, she not only declined, she made a scene in order to alert the Smith family to the situation. At night, she began nailing the door and windows of her cabin shut in order to prevent anyone from gaining access to her quarters without her knowledge and permission. Unfortunately, these measures were not enough. That night during the 1830s when Sidney broke down the door to Harriet's house, he nailed the door shut again, trapping her inside the cabin with him. Still, Harriet resisted. It was said that throughout that night and for every night thereafter, the sounds of her screams and the noises of their struggles could be heard for miles around.41 After being raped at night, young Harriet was still required to serve Sidney on subsequent mornings.
Obviously, physical resistance and self-defense did not necessarily guarantee the success or safety of the woman in avoiding her master's aggressions. In addition to having to overcome the greater size and physical strength of a man, if the intended victim did not succeed in her rebuff of his actions, she had to endure his increased ire during the onslaught. If the woman did defend herself successfully, she would have to endure the wrath of her spurned assailant.

Some women chose to flee their aggressors. Harriet Jacobs foreshadowed her flight from her overly aggressive master in the pages of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Reader, I draw no imaginary pictures of southern homes. I am telling you the plain truth. Yet when victims make their escape from this wild beast of Slavery, northerners consent to act the part of bloodhounds and hunt the poor fugitive back into his den, "full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness."42

Unfortunately, Harriet Jacobs' flight from her master resulted in her spending the next six years of her life in a coffin-like space in the shed of her mother's house. Caught between slavery and freedom, she was forced to watch her children grow up through a space between the boards. Yet, even this torture did not deter her from seeking her freedom.

Running away was not usually a viable option for women. Because of the responsibilities of motherhood, many women simply could not leave their situation. Female runaways constituted from ten to just over thirty percent of all runaways. The variable factor seems to be the location of the slaves and the opportunities for women in those areas.43 Some women sought help from someone with the power to intervene.

Eliza Stokes, an Alabama slave and an excellent character, said that she was a field hand, but her master had her brought to the house for a house servant that he might make her his concubine. This she refused to be; he had her beaten in an attempt to force her into submission. She told her mistress about it; the mistress believed the story and sympathized with her. Later the mistress went to Texas to visit a sister,
carrying the slave with her as a servant. Upon the mistress' return to Alabama, she left the slave woman with her sister, who was kind to her, teaching her to read and making her a cook.44

This rare occasion of solidarity, when women bonded despite the barriers of race and class, resulted in the improvement of the condition of both women and was truly a fortunate occurrence. The result for some women who had someone intervene on their behalf was a negligible difference.

When Sidney Smith continued his serial rapes of Harriet, his brother Francis interfered. One night after Harriet had become pregnant by Sidney, Francis violently attacked Sidney as he left Harriet's cabin. Francis cracked Sidney's skull and left him lying in the yard bleeding. In the morning a male slave found Sidney and took him to the house. He received medical attention, but was never the same. Although, he developed a heavy drinking habit, he never attempted to assail Harriet again. Unfortunately, since Francis had in effect, rescued Harriet from Sidney's attentions, he expected to take his place. Due to her appreciation, or great loneliness, (as no male slave would have anything to do with her) Harriet resigned herself to becoming Francis' concubine, as soon as she bore Sidney's child. Harriet eventually bore three children for Francis as well.45

Having watched the experiences of women who attempted to deal with unwanted sexual attention in these ways, some women decided it would be easier to submit to the will of their superiors. Owners and overseers were determined to increase their property holdings, but the results of these liaisons were as varied and diverse as the people who were involved. The miscegenation of the old South ranged from the calculated systematic deflowering of young field hands, to lifelong relationships where the participants lived as married couples. There was no rhyme or reason to the pattern of these assaults.
David Dickson, a wealthy Georgia farmer in his thirties, who plucked twelve year old Julia Dickson out of the field, and had sexual intercourse without her consent, clearly raped this adolescent. Yet he brought Amanda America Dickson, the product of this occurrence, into his house where she was raised by her paternal grandmother. The young girl was doted on, spoiled, and raised as any other daughter of a rich Southern planter, except that she was African American. Eventually, David entrusted the affairs of the estate to Julia who ran the plantation. The two were openly affectionate to each other, although it was said that Julia never forgave David for the rape. They maintained a friendship of sorts despite being involved in other relationships.46

On another plantation, one overseer had a reputation for despoiling the virtue of young women under his command.47 It seems he took pleasure in raping the female children on his plantation. These two examples are extreme. In one, a lifelong relationship developed. The latter is telling of a brief act of aggression which could economically benefit the planter if pregnancy resulted. The New Orleans "fancy girl" trade and balls were simply accepted forms of prostitution. This occurrence, coupled with breeding remained persistent forms of sexual abuse, or unwanted sex which many young women were forced to experience.

Slave breeding also occurred during the antebellum period.48 Although it is not often mentioned in standard historical texts, former slaves spoke of this phenomena within the Works Progress Administration narratives. Masters treated their human chattel much like livestock in their efforts to increase their slave holdings. They selected a male slave who was strong and possessed other desirable qualities. He was then forced to have intercourse with and attempt to impregnate each female the master wanted to conceive. These men were also hired out to other farms and owners, where there was an
imbalance of the sex ratio, in order to increase their slave holdings as well. In addition to treating human beings like farm animals expecting them to mate on command, masters also practiced another form of eugenics. Smaller, frail men, whom masters did not wish to reproduce were castrated in order to ensure that they did not generate weak offspring. A slave woman in North Carolina remembered that "dey operate on dem lak dey does de male hog so's dat dey can't have runty chilluns."49 This practice vividly portrays the attitude of masters toward their slaves. Some masters believed that their slave holdings were no different from their livestock holdings and treated their slaves accordingly. Fortunately, treatment this extreme was somewhat rare and was not widely recorded.

More frequently, masters attempted to encourage increase by arranging marriages among their slaves, without the opinion or consent of either party. Men and women were simply declared married and told to make babies. Rose and Rufus Williams' of Texas were not even given those crude instructions. The master moved Rose and Rufus into the same house, assuming that the couple would know what to do. Rose presumed that she was only supposed to keep house for Rufus and resisted his advances. When she went to her mistress to complain about the situation, her mistress informed her, "Yous am de portly gal and Rufus am de portly man... ...De massa wants 'you-uns for to bring forth portly chillen."50 Her experience during slavery was enough for Rose, who never married after the Civil War. "Aftah w'at l'se do fo' de Marster, l'se never want any truck wid any man."51 The sacrifice which Rose Williams made for her master affected the rest of her life.

No matter what the details surrounding the act itself were, the situation remained the same. Women who were forced by members of the plantation hierarchy to have intercourse and bear children had absolutely no
alternative but to suffer the consequences of someone else’s actions. They had no control over the man’s use of force, the emotional and physical damage which they suffered, nor the quality of the lives of the children whom they were expected to bear. Yet when conception did occur, women did have several factors to take into consideration.

If a woman was impregnated by her master and bore a child who resembled him, both mother and child would be subject to the wrath of the mistress. Unless the woman was already married, or, she could find a husband willing to overlook her pregnancy and the circumstances which surrounded it, she would be censured by the slave community as well as the mistress. Most women were not as fortunate as Eliza Stokes, the woman from Alabama whose mistress rescued her from the advances of her master. Much more common was the fear of an unprovoked attack by a jealous wife. The threat imposed by this situation was a terrifying reality for a woman who was to bear, or had already given birth to the offspring of a married master.

Lucendy Hall, a Kentucky slave girl—a house girl—was overpowered by her master, who was a lawyer. As a result she gave birth to a baby girl, whose father was the master. The master’s wife often tantalized the slave mother and child. The little slave girl’s hair was cut short because they did not want it to be long like the mistress’ little girl’s hair.

Lettie Monsoon described a situation on the plantation she lived on which made the experience of Lucendy Hall pale in comparison. Despite the fact that the master was not the infant’s father, the mulatto child’s appearance was enough for the mistress to seek revenge from the youngest victim of all.

There was a woman on the plantation who was to become a mother. The mistress thought that her husband was the father of the slave woman’s girl because he did not beat the woman, nor did he allow anyone else to whip her. Whenever the master left, the mistress abused the slave woman. Finally the baby came. It was a little white baby. However, its father was a white man of an adjoining plantation. The mistress always believed that her husband was the father. By the time the baby was six month’s old, the mistress had beaten it to death.
It was clear that the life of a woman and her child could be endangered by the violent act of the master.

The members of the slave community were slightly more understanding of the situation. Nonetheless, the products of miscegenation were not looked upon with pride. If adultery had any bearing on the position of the woman, it compounded an already difficult situation within both the black and white communities. These were two of the most immediate reasons not to bear children who were the products of rape. However, there were many other deeply-rooted psychological reasons not to bear any children into slavery. Masters attempted to encourage reproduction among slaves by any means necessary. For some women, however, the material benefits of childbearing were outweighed by the emotional burdens.

Many enslaved mothers and fathers alike dreaded bringing a child into the world who would spend his or her life in enslavement. Henry Bibb, a former slave and author of *Narrative of The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, swore to himself after his wife Malindy bore their daughter that he would never bring another child into a life of enslavement. Restricted childbearing was a real and identifiable act of resistance for some slaves. Parents did not want their masters to profit from the labor, nor the sale of their children.

The physical violence of rape, as well as the psychological damage which followed could cause a woman great trauma. This was evidenced by the fits of anger which Harriet Smith would express each time she encountered Sidney following the start of the serial rapes. Bearing and raising the product of these acts of sexual violence could only intensify the damage which was done to the victim. One woman, who was acquitted in the murder of her child, offered the excuse that she would not have killed a child of her own race. The child she bore was the product of a forced union with her master. By firmly
placing the guilt for her rape and ensuing murder of the product at the feet of her master, this woman avoided prosecution.

Some women were simply not ready to have children. Due to their age, maturity level, or the extensive time-consuming responsibilities of enslavement, some women realized that they did not have the time to raise a child. Other women, who realized that they might be separated from their children decided not to endure this tragedy, by not having children. The reasons which masters offered to have children could not fully outweigh these considerations. The promise of a new dress, or silver dollar for the life, of a child could not have been successful tools of manipulation for planters. These trinkets were used to reward the women who would have had children anyway, those who might not have realized the seriousness of their actions.

Still, some slave women welcomed the birth of a child. "My child him is mine," is a quote often used to illustrate the desire by slave women for children and a family. Yet, these women must have known that their offspring could be sold from them at any time. They had experienced life under slavery for themselves and knew the evils which could befall their children. One can only speculate about the motivations of these women. Did they give full consideration to the quality of life which their children would have?

Harriet Smith was sold away from her family as a child, and did not have much interaction with other enslaved women on the farm. Women who were isolated, for reasons such as Harriet's, or other reasons, might not have believed that they had any choice in the matter. Birth control was not publicized and the act of abortion was taboo among Southerners. Despite the taboo, planters kept information about reproductive controls from their slaves as they were aware that this knowledge could play havoc with their profit margins. But there were many means by which women could gain control of their
reproductive faculties and exhibit some degree of autonomy. On the other hand, women who had access to healers, or the knowledge and experience of other women, knew that there were many ways by which pregnancy could be overcome. These methods were kept a secret from owners and plantation managers. Passed by oral transmission from healer to patient, woman to woman and mother to daughter, some of these confidences have been discovered by historians, but much of the knowledge remains buried. It is clear that enslaved women had access to herbal birth control and abortifacients in order to inflict some control over this most intimate part of their existence.

The African tradition of abstinence during lactation provided a form of birth control for some women who had already born one child into slavery and did not wish to repeat the experience. As they were not sexually active during this period, this proscription of their culture acted as an effective means of birth control. Women in Guyana and Martinique utilized a douche made from the essence of mahogany husks and lemon juice. The combination of the astringent action of the mahogany with citric acid caused the pH level of the vagina to change, acting as an effective spermicide. By chewing the seeds of the Daucus carota, also known as the wild carrot or Queen Anne's Lace, women were able to keep a fertilized egg from implanting on the uterine wall, thereby effectively halting pregnancy. While it did not prevent conception, the action of the seeds acted somewhat like an IUD, or Intrauterine Device, restricting implantation and further growth. All of these were viable options for women who had access to the necessary ingredients.

Herbal abortifacients were much more widespread and widely used despite both African and Southern taboos on the practice. Barbara Bush found many abortive techniques utilized in the Caribbean.

...In traditional African societies, various techniques are commonly used to induce abortions in culturally prescribed circumstances. Major
abortifacients used include infusions from herbs, leaves of special shrubs, plant roots, and the bark of some trees. Common plants used include manioc, yam, papaya, mango, lime, and frangipani. Mechanical means are less popular and rely mainly on the insertion of sharp sticks or stalks into the vaginal canal...67

These were by no means the only abortifacients available to women. There were plants whose purgative qualities affected the reproductive system which grew throughout most of the Western Hemisphere. These plants thrived in the temperate zone of the southeastern United States and Caribbean where slavery occurred. These plants offered women who knew of their properties a viable option to bearing children who would be enslaved for a lifetime. They were a means by which women could assume control over their own reproductive organs and exercise a degree of autonomy over their lives.

The world of enslaved women seems to be contradictory in many ways. Women toiling in fields was a common sight in the Old South, but just how much was known about these women who were so visible? They were clearly viewed differently from their white counterparts. White womanhood was placed on a pedestal and worshipped in the antebellum South. Black women were stripped and placed on an auction block for public inspection. Although women of African descent were supposedly distasteful to white men, many masters chose to replenish their slave holdings with their own seed. These women who were supposed to bear children for the master were also supposed to have no free will. Nevertheless, some of these women chose not to reproduce for the economic gain of their owner. The use of herbal contraception and abortives was to be held in strictest confidence, lest plantation authorities the means by which women could control their reproductive faculties and thereby affect the planter's profit by not replenishing his supply of slaves.

In the final analysis, most enslaved women were not able to exercise a great deal of control over most aspects of their lives. Still, some women
chose to implement methods which not only thwarted their masters' attempts to impregnate them, but also provided a means of power to them. These techniques enabled the women who used them providing them a degree of autonomy over their own lives.
The growth and use of various plants and herbs, necessarily played a large role in the lives of enslaved women throughout the African diaspora. The crops which were harvested for the economic gain of the planter, were not the only yield with which African American women concerned themselves. There were many plants that were not considered cash crops, which women sought in the wild and grew in their own gardens. These personal caches were used secretly by women in order to govern their reproductive lives. By controlling this most personal aspect of their lives, women could exercise authority over their own bodies.

The ability to control the fertility of the female reproductive system is not a new concept. Although many assume that birth control is a relatively modern invention, actually it is a concept which dates nearly from prehistory.\footnote{1} As both humanity and the profession of medicine began in Africa, it makes sense that the earliest evidence of birth control techniques comes from there as well. It seems that the Egyptians developed both spermicidal and barrier methods in order to prevent pregnancy.\footnote{2} The Petri Papyrus, thought to be one of the oldest artifacts recovered from Egypt, quite clearly portrays a man unclothed except for a sheath on his penis. It is on this papyrus as well that the use of crocodile dung, and later elephant dung, as pessaries was revealed. This particular piece dates back to the reign of Amenemhat III.\footnote{3} A more palatable combination of honey and natron, or sodium carbonate, could be used as a spermicide as well as a barrier technique to avoid pregnancy.\footnote{4}
Ebers Papyrus, which dates to 1550 B.C., describes the use of the tips from the acacia tree, which contain gum arabic. When gum arabic is fermented it releases lactic acid which, when combined with honey acts as an adhesive, barrier, and spermicide. Some women fumigated their vaginas before sex with an herbal mixture. These kinds of natural methods of contraception were known and used by women of the diaspora throughout history.

Although these methods were somewhat effective, it is clear from the sheer number of abortifacients, that the contraceptives were not always successful. When birth control failed and conception occurred, women were forced to make a choice. They had to decide whether to carry the child to term and bear it, or to abort the child in the early stages of pregnancy. This is the dilemma of every woman whose birth control method has failed, but for enslaved women there were other factors to consider. Since under the American system of slavery, the child followed the station of the mother, the child would be enslaved as well. Masters who capitalized on this system offered many incentives to encourage their female slaves to reproduce in abundance. During a woman's pregnancy, and after birth while still lactating, most masters reduced somewhat the work load of their field hands and house slaves, as well as increasing their rations. They were well aware of the economic profit these minor concessions could bring. Women were forced to weigh the short-term advantages of pregnancy with the long-term impact of bringing a child into a life of enslavement. Those who decided against childbearing had many herbal abortives available to them in order to end their pregnancy prematurely.

Healers of African descent came from a long tradition of artisans who were well versed in the many methods by which herbal abortions were available. Many of the abortifacients which were known and used in Africa grew freely in the southeastern United States and the Caribbean as well.
knowledge was easily transferred across the middle passage with the women who made the voyage.

It would appear that one of the most effective, well-known, readily available abortifacients was also the major product of Southern agriculture. Ghanaians, and members of the KoreKore, Ndebele, Tawana, Shangana, and Kololo groups already knew of the abortifacient properties of *Gossypium herbaceum*, the preferred cotton variety in America and its African cousin, *Gossypium arboreum*. The bark of the root of the cotton plant was used by enslaved women throughout the South in order to induce abortion. While the favored method was to drink a tea brewed from the root, some women simply chewed the root itself and achieved the same effect. This particular herb’s result was very powerful, yet it was not harmful to one’s general health. The suggested dosage was twelve teaspoons to be dissolved in one quart of water. The desired effect could be achieved by drinking one-half to a quart of the mixture within a day.

In an 1872 article, entitled "The Detection of Criminal Abortion and a Study of Foeticidal Drugs," Dr. Ely VanDeWalker relates his experimentation and investigation of the physical effects of the internal use of the cotton root bark decoction. As abortion was illegal, Dr. VanDeWalker's subjects included a stray male dog and a young lady (whose race was not mentioned) who had attempted to induce an abortion with this herb without professional supervision. The dog was injected with the mixture at frequent intervals throughout a day. He suffered from an increased heart rate, labored breathing, exhaustion, and a great thirst. However by the next morning he had returned to his normal behavior, ate a "hearty" breakfast, and escaped from the lab. The girl used an extract every two to three hours over a period of several days. While she was "drowsy," it was not until the end of the week that she began to experience
headaches, a pain in her back, and a need to urinate frequently which was accompanied by a burning sensation.\textsuperscript{16} Clearly the young lady did not consume enough of the herb to expel the fetus, or she did not take enough of the medicine during the suggested time period. Regardless of the reason, the experiment did not result in an induced abortion. While in neither case was abortion achieved, all of the attending symptoms reported are the effects of the properties of similar herbs, which are not only abortifacients, but also diuretics, stimulants, and diaphoretic medicines.\textsuperscript{17} (Diaphoretic means to relax the body while increasing perspiration.)

The brief amount of time necessary for this particular method to take effect would have made both the process and the recovery much easier for a woman who did not wish to have her condition known. The secrecy surrounding the use of these abortives was an absolute necessity. The easiest and least expensive way for a master to increase his slave holdings and therefore his wealth was through the reproduction of his own slaves. This was much more cost-effective than purchasing new slaves.\textsuperscript{18} These abortifacients stood in the way of the profits to be reaped from trafficking in human lives.

Unfortunately, the use of this plant was so well-known that slave owners were aware of the cotton root cure for pregnancy.\textsuperscript{19} They developed their own antidote to the abortifacient which they forced upon the women under their command. Black haw tonics were used by midwives and slave owners alike in order to discourage threatened miscarriages.\textsuperscript{20} The use of this particular herbal antidote by slave holders ensured progeny, even against the will of the mother. It was to the benefit of women, that there were so many abortifacients, and so few countermeasures available.\textsuperscript{21} Although some masters employed the black haw tonic to ensure that a pregnancy would be carried to term, there were many other means by which an abortion could be obtained.
There were many other plants which were known and found in both Africa, the Caribbean and the United States which shared the same properties as the cotton plant. *Phytolacca decandra*, or the African variety *Phytolacca dodecandra* may not sound familiar, but most Southerners have heard of poke weed, or poke root. In contemporary times, most people are not aware of the abortifacient properties of this plant. While it grows throughout the eastern United States, the weed is most common in the South.\(^{22}\) It was known in Africa as well, and was fairly widespread, as it was known by the Chagga, Tanganyika, Abyssinia, Masai, Luo, Kikuyu, Juluo, Ndorobo, Shambala, Sukuma, and throughout Ghana. The leaves, berries, and roots of the plant are both purgative and emetic aiding in the abortive effect.\(^{23}\) However, the shoots are commonly used as a substitute for asparagus or served as table greens.\(^{24}\)

While their scientific names differ (*Asclepias tomentosa* and *Colotropis procera*) their common name, milkweed, was listed as an abortifacient among the Sukuma, Mkalama, and the Masai peoples of Africa, as well as in Ghana, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, the Sudan, and the United States. Different species of the asclepias genus are found worldwide and all seem to have similar medicinal properties. However, it is the roots of the *tomentosa*, and *procera* species which contain abortive characteristics.\(^{25}\)

Parsley, or *Apium graveolens* and *Apium petroselinium* grows throughout parts of the United States, North Africa and South America and is widely recognized as a topical abortifacient.\(^{26}\) This particular herb was not to be ingested. As a vaginal insert, it encourages menstruation.\(^{27}\) It was very important that the directions for this particular herb were followed carefully, and that a skilled and knowledgeable person collected the plant. The root is dangerous when ingested.\(^{28}\) There is also a very similar looking plant called fool's parsley, which is very toxic. Both the leaves and roots of this plant,
Aethusa cynapium, can be easily mistaken for parsley it is suggested that it should only be gathered by a professional, or someone who is well-versed in botany.\textsuperscript{29}

*Daucus carota*, which is also known as the wild carrot, or Queen Anne's Lace, was known throughout the United States, North Africa, South America and by the Portuguese.\textsuperscript{30} It was both a contraceptive and an abortifacient. The seeds of this plant are chewed in order to evoke a medicinal effect on the reproductive system. It works by preventing implantation of the fetus in the womb.\textsuperscript{31} This particular plant also must be gathered by a trained healer as there are many similar looking plants which are extremely poisonous.\textsuperscript{32}

Marjoram, or *Origanum vulgare* was known throughout North Africa, the United States, and by the Portuguese as an abortifacient. While it was originally a European plant it has been introduced into the warmer climate of the United States. It functions as an emmenagogue, helping the body to expel the contents of the uterus, through increasing the flow of blood to the reproductive organs. It's properties and effects are very similar to those of cotton as it is also a stimulant and a diaphoretic.\textsuperscript{33}

*Leonurus Leonurus*, or motherwort, was known and available not only in the United States, but to the Zulu, Shona, Xhosa, Lunyaneka and Sotho groups throughout Africa as an abortifacient. The plant is not only an emmenagogue, but a purgative as well.\textsuperscript{34} The active ingredients, leonurine and stachydrine, promote contractions of the uterus, expelling the contents within.\textsuperscript{35} As labor was actually induced due to the properties of this herb, pregnancies could be effectively terminated much later than with a standard emmenagogue.

*Aframomum sulcatum* may not sound familiar and it's Ghanaian common name, red plumbago, is not any more well-known, but the American
The common name of this abortifacient is very familiar. The roots of the laurel plant produce an abortifacient effect, when they are taken internally. However, the leaves of this plant are safe and used worldwide in food preparation. The members of the *lauraceae* family are considered tropical and subtropical plants and grow in most parts of the southern United States as well as in North Africa.

In Ghana, healers used *Heliotrope indicum*, or Indian heliotrope, in order to induce abortions. They mixed the whole plant with clay and applied it locally in order to encourage the expulsion of the fetus. A close cousin of the plant was available in cooler regions of the southeastern United States. *Hellebore viridis*, or Green hellebore, is a very powerful emmenagogue. In addition to the desired effect, ingestion of this plant causes roaring in the ears, violent sneezing, oral burning, profuse salivation, abdominal noises, profuse, painful diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, fever, and a decreased heart rate. Clearly, this was an herb with violent side effects. While there were abortifacients which could be taken that did not cause these painful side effects, if this was the only abortifacient option available, women had to endure the consequences of the procedure. Effects such as these had to be taken into account when a woman decided whether or not to terminate her pregnancy.

Some contemporary scholars such as Dr. Maurice Iwu, an expert on West African cultures, the botany of that region, and how the two affect each other, claimed that African healers viewed abortion as sacrilege. He felt that it was tantamount to murder, yet, the practice continued to occur. Throughout Africa, midwives and healers were able to address the needs of pregnant women who did not wish to carry their pregnancies to term. This phenomena is discussed in detail in George Devereaux's *A Study of Abortion in Primitive Societies: A typological, distributional, and dynamic analysis of the*
prevention of birth in 400 preindustrial societies, which was written in England in the 1960s. Although Devereaux demonstrates an extremely Eurocentric viewpoint, he manages to bring forth and examine a wealth of information on abortion. When combined and compared with other sources, Devereaux's information supports most evidence on abortifacients available in Africa, especially West Africa, where most of the people abducted in the Atlantic Slave Trade were from.

The women of the Bakongo were still forced to procure their own abortions as late as the mid-twentieth century, as visits to a medicine man could draw attention to their plight.

They resort mostly to the juice of manioc leaves, or to a large dose of common salt, or to a small piece of nsele-nsele root, powdered and drunk with water or palm wine, or to eating manioc leaves that have been soaked in water for many days. The leaves are astringent, and the root causes severe diarrhoea (sic).42

In contrast, the women of the Dahomean group, or present-day Benin, are able to obtain abortions by drinking lime juice, which is then steeped with akamu, a yellow, stonelike substance. They drink about a cup of the concoction daily for two or three days until menstruation begins again. This method should only be used between the second and third month of pregnancy, as it is ineffective after the third month.43

Among the Masai abortion is rare, but they do employ several very effective ways of ending unwanted pregnancies when they occurred among the women of the group.

The abortion is procured with a special stick, which can only be obtained from medicine men. This stick is inserted into the vaginal passage and is said to be absolutely effective...

...In order to produce an abortion, the woman drinks a decoction of dried goat dung or a strong decoction of os segi (Cordia quarensis) or of ol durgo' roots. During the next two or three days of convalescence she partakes of a weak decoction of the ol mokoton bark or of the ol oilale (Columbrina asiatica) bark....

...The pregnant girl chews four finger-sized pieces of the root of os segi (Cordia quarensis Gurke) in order to obtain an abortion,
whereupon the fetus allegedly dies and is expelled very rapidly....

...Approximately three finger-sized pieces of the root of ol durg'o' are
chewed, in order to induce an abortion.\textsuperscript{44}

Although abortions were performed both in Africa and among women
of the diaspora, the phenomena was not taken lightly. As contemporary
historian Barbara Bush duly noted:

...Abortion is used when taboos are broken through adultery or in
polygynous relationships where there is jealousy between co-wives. An
almost universal reason for abortion is unsanctioned pregnancy during
the lactation period; it is also common to abort girls regarded as too
young for pregnancy. Abortion allows women the only real choice in
societies where female reproduction is subject to strict patriarchal
control. A stronger influence of African retentions among African born
women may thus explain fertility differentials. This operated perhaps
on two levels: the psychological, where the impact of slavery weakened
the desire to have children; and the practical, where the transmission
of cultural knowledge about contraception and abortion came into
play...\textsuperscript{45}

African healers, midwives and some African women were knowledgeable in the
means which were necessary in order to induce miscarriage and cause an
abortion in a woman who no longer desired to carry her pregnancy to term.
While these methods are helpful to African women who seek to end their
pregnancies, they did not always provide solace for the African American
woman in the United States who wished to alleviate the same condition.
Enslaved women in the United States who inherited the medical knowledge of
healers from generations before did not have access to all of the same plants
and herbs.

Because of the associations between Native American and African
American women, new methods became available to both groups.\textsuperscript{46} Many
healers of African descent adopted the Native American knowledge concerning
the plant life in their new surroundings.\textsuperscript{47} The knowledge and use of African and
Native American herbal reproductive controls combined and became nearly
indistinguishable from each other. As with so many other aspects of cultural
survivals and shared aspects of culture, the beneficiaries of the blended wisdom
profited from the transmissions between Africa, the United States and the Caribbean. This endeavor enabled African American and Afro-Caribbean women by creating alternatives to the prospect of attempting to raise a child during enslavement. Herbs and plants which were not available in Africa, but which grew freely throughout the region in which slavery occurred, were adopted and used by African healers as well. It becomes clear that Native American and African medical knowledge became intertwined at some point. They used many of the same herbal medicines and were aware of the symptoms which each would treat. Even their name for the person who acted as healer and/or midwife was the same. African Americans, Native Americans and whites alike all referred to these women as grannies.

The following group are the plants that both Native American and African American women in the United States and Caribbean had access to and employed in order to induce abortion. While Native American women originally had more experience with the herbs of this region, it did not take long for African women to familiarize themselves with the botany of their area, and begin to employ those herbs, replacing the herbs which did not grow in both Africa and America. These herbs supplanted the plants and herbs which had been left behind in Africa. (For a listing of the natural abortifacients available and employed among certain groups in Africa which were not available in the United States, see Appendix 2.)

Although the common names sound similar, black cohosh, blue cohash, and red cohosh are three completely different plants. Respectively, *Cimicifuga racemosa, Caulophyllum thallictroides, and Actaea rubra*, each of the plants are well-known emmenagogues. Black cohosh is known to have an antispasmodic effect. However, in women who are not experiencing spasms, it encourages uterine contractions which work to expel the fetus. The amount of
the plant needed in order to produce the desired effect is three teaspoons per cup, to be taken four times daily until the chosen result is achieved.\textsuperscript{51} Blue cohosh works in the same way as the former variety. The irritating dust from this plant causes contractions and spasms of both voluntary and involuntary muscles. Like black cohosh, it is also an antispasmodic, yet has the opposite effect if the muscles are not experiencing spasms.\textsuperscript{52} The dosage is similar to black cohosh as well. The user should take three teaspoons per cup, and drink three cups daily until abortion is achieved.\textsuperscript{53} Red cohosh acts as an emmenagogue as well, but seems to be a bit more dangerous. It is a purgative, affects the nerves, and like many other abortifacients can be poisonous.\textsuperscript{54} Although all three grow throughout the upper southeastern region of the United States, blue cohosh seems more adaptable. It grows near the coast and in mountainous areas of the locality. The others thrive in the cooler climates within the same region.\textsuperscript{55}

Two members of the \textit{Juniperus} genus, \textit{communis} and \textit{virginiana} are both emmenagogues. Both trees are hearty and grow throughout most of the United States. The fruit of the juniper is the effective abortifacient component in \textit{Juniperus communis}. But, it is the leaves of the cedar which cause the expulsion of the fetus in \textit{Juniperus virginiana}. Both are also diuretics and stimulants, and cure both internal and external complaints. The juniper bush is also capable of healing snake bites.\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Thuja occidentalis}, or the white cedar is also an emmenagogue, but it is not quite as closely related to the other two plants. It is also a diuretic and a stimulant, and has a variety of uses. The body's reaction to the plant is not as tractable as with the cedar and juniper. White cedar causes "flatulence, distention of the abdomen with rumbling and colic, excessive chilliness, heat, profuse sweat" upon ingestion.\textsuperscript{57} One African American woman who attempted to induce abortion used a mixture of oil of
savin (a cedar extract), ergot and aloes. She died from pelvic cellulitis after finally successfully aborting herself during her sixth month of pregnancy. She had been taking the herbal mixture for three months.58

Catnip, or *Nepeta cateria*, which is found across much of the eastern United States and Canada is an effective abortifacient. The entire plant is used in achieving the desired effect.59 It is said to smell and taste very similar to other members of the Mint family.60 The *Labiatae* family includes catnip, penny royal, thyme and horse mint. All of the aforementioned herbs have abortive properties. Penny royal, or *Hedeoma pulegioides*, produces an oil which is widely known as an abortifacient.61 The oil should only be used externally in order to encourage the fetus' expulsion from the womb. It is toxic when swallowed. The plant itself can be boiled in a tea and then consumed in order to end a pregnancy. One cup of herb should be boiled in a quart of water and taken daily for no more than six days.62 *Monarda punctata*, commonly called horse mint, is commonly found throughout the eastern United States. It is a stimulant and diuretic in addition to having abortive properties.63 *Cunila origanoides*, or thyme, is found throughout the United States. Its properties are so powerful that it is used to expel dead fetuses in women whose pregnancies will otherwise end in stillbirth.64 It works in the same way as other emmenagogues, by increasing the blood flow to the reproductive organs, and urging uterine contractions.65

Within the Lily family and *trillium* genus there are several species which produce an abortive effect.66 *Trillium cernum*, or nodding wake-robin, grows in higher elevations with adequate rainfall.67 It can be poisonous, but it is also an effective emmenagogue.68 Ill-scented wake robin, or *Trillium erectum*, grows in shady, wooded regions as well. The roots are the effective abortifacient agent, but the root stocks are toxic. *Trillium grandiflorium*, which is
commonly called large-flowered wake robin, grows in the woods and mountains of the southeast. The roots are both abortifacient and toxic. The use of this particular plant was a great risk to a woman who sought to end her pregnancy. *Trillium sessile*, which is commonly called sessile-flowered wake robin, grows in fertile, shady areas of cooler regions of the southeast. The roots of the plant are a violent emmenagogue. Painted wake-robins, or *Trillium undulatum*, grows in mountainous regions of the southeastern United States. Like the many other varieties of this genus, the roots are the part of the plant which have an abortifacient effect. All of these plants are well-known for their properties. In women who are in labor, the plant speeds the birth process and aids in the expulsion of the infant from the uterus. This quality has resulted in derivatives of the term birthroot, being applied to each of these members of the Lily family. They are employed by midwives in order to aid their patients' labor.69

*Myrica carolinensis*, or waxberry, grows in many different environments. Women who lived in areas with sandy soils, or in swampy marshes had access to the abortive properties of the leaves of this bush. The shrub has many uses and can be used not only to cure internal conditions, but it was also used by enslaved women and their mistresses to make candles.70

Both *baptisia alba* and *villosa*, respectively white wild indigo and hairy wild indigo were abortifacients available to women in the low areas of North and South Carolina and Georgia.71 It is ironic that varieties of two of the main crops which fueled the machinery of slavery also helped women who were enslaved to end their pregnancies. Planters relied on natural increase among their own slaves in order to enlarge their holdings. However, the yield from the agricultural harvest could be used in order to decrease the yield from the human harvest. The abortifacient properties of both indigo and cotton
allowed enslaved women to control whether or not they brought children into the world who would live their lives as slaves. (For more abortifacients available in the southeastern United States and the Caribbean, see Appendix 3).

Healers taught women about the plants which could be used as medicines, how and where to find those varieties, and even administered the herbs to women who wished to end their pregnancies. However, this was not the sole purpose of the medical knowledge of these women. They were members of a long, healing tradition stretching back to Africa. The role of the healer in the communities of slaves of African descent in the southern United States and in the Caribbean was a very important one. These people were not just healers, they were also chemists, pharmacists, herbologists, psychics, and mediums. Healers were able to cure many physical ailments of all slaves, but they were especially important to female slaves. To women in the slave communities of the South and the West Indies, healers served a dual purpose. Healers allowed female slaves to gain control of their reproductive lives; healers also occupied a profession with a place of importance in the plantation community.

Because there is no counterpart to the healer in our mainstream Western culture, it is important to develop an understanding of the role of this person. Due to the passage of time, modernization, and the prominence of European culture, within the United States and Caribbean, the healer does not constitute a significant part of the common medical culture in the United States today. The exploration of the roots of medicine and healing are essential in understanding the role of the healer in many African societies. Africa, the birthplace of civilization, as well as medicine, has had a long history of healers, which began thousands of years before the birth of Christ. Imhotep, who lived about 2980 B. C. is considered the father of medicine and the first
African physician, "although the history of healing arts in Africa can be traced back to 3200 B.C." Healers are seen as essential in African communities as a whole. As one modern healer said "healing in Africa is a composite activity that may not easily conform to the Western concept of health, disease and treatment." Western doctors are not trained in these matters, and did not need to have these skills in order to cure their patients. But in many African cultures, all of these areas are interrelated and they affect one's health and quality of life, thereby influencing the healer's approach to healing. If one is not in equilibrium with the spirits, gods or ancestors, it is believed that their health may suffer. Therefore poor health is not just a sign of physical infirmity, it is an indicator of overall welfare.

Since these healers played such an important role in the lives of Africans, it is easy to understand why only certain individuals could become healers. In fact there were only three ways by which people could become "native doctors."

One can acquire the specialized skills of a healer by three methods: first, by training and a long period of apprenticeship; second, by divine selection and an answer to a call by a powerful spirit to be his chief priest or messenger; and third as a family inheritance. In any case the magical powers are acquired through ritual offerings and living in a prescribed manner, but the knowledge of efficacious herbs comes mainly from training and sometimes from revelations in dreams and trances.

Once these healers-to-be were singled out, they had to begin a long and rigorous training process. This training included strenuous mental work in learning plants, herbs, and root combinations for prescribing to the sick. As healers they also had to cleanse and purify themselves so that they would be worthy of the gods' consideration. While men were in training they were to have no sexual contact with women. Men and women were trained separately, and midwives were trained as a group by themselves.
When these chosen healers were finished with their training, they were ready to help the sick of their own, as well as nearby villages. This pattern of healing was carried across the Middle Passage and survived in the United States and Caribbean as well. Healers in the colonies and the West Indies were expected by fellow slaves and masters as well, to take care of physical illnesses caused by natural occurrences within and surrounding the slave community. "Healers are recognized and named by every society as people who may be approached by any sick person who needs their help." Many women visited healers in order to obtain birth control or information on that subject, as well as to learn a means by which to encourage a spontaneous abortion, or miscarriage.

Becoming, or inheriting the role of healer was a means by which a woman could earn the respect of the community. Many owners and managers often knew who the healers were within the slave community and relied on them for their midwifery skills, both for slave births and occasionally births of the white family, as well as being called away from work to treat an ailing slave. The necessity of these healers afforded the women who filled these roles a degree of prestige not usually given to, or allowed for a woman of African descent.

Although the rituals and selection process involved were greatly simplified, women continued to learn the particulars of the profession from older women experienced in the arts of healing and midwifery. As healers and midwives, women had to be knowledgeable about the medical conditions which could occur, as well as different medicines and herbs which could be used to treat these conditions. The women who possessed this expertise gained a reputation, not only on their own plantations, but among the farms and plantations in the surrounding area as well. Women who were healers gained
prestige and mobility due to their station, and were in some ways able to escape the reign of their masters.

The wisdom of these women influenced one of the first modern medical associations. When the Medical College of South Carolina was established in Charleston in 1824, it was one of the premier medical schools in the country. The physicians who graduated from this institution played a great role in the founding of the American Medical Association when it was formed in 1847. Dr. Francis Peyre Porcher, a graduate of the Medical College of South Carolina and one of the first members of the AMA helped to develop one of the standing committees, the Committee on Indigenous Botany. Dr. Porcher was born on Ophir plantation in St. John’s Parish in Berkeley, South Carolina and raised around the African American slaves who worked on the plantation. Although both Porcher’s father and grandfather were botanists, whenever attributing use and knowledge of plants, Dr. Porcher always referred to them as being "used extensively" by "the negroes." Porcher’s thesis Medico-Botanical Catalog of the Plants and Ferns of St. Johns Berkeley, South Carolina, also included the medical knowledge and practices of Native American healers as well as the works of Europeans who documented the medical knowledge of slaves of African descent in the Caribbean. It is this combination of cultures which composed the background of the medical knowledge recognized by enslaved African American women.

While some would like to dismiss the herbal and medical knowledge of African descent as folklore, Dr. Francis Porcher’s work and its acceptance and distribution by the American Medical Association helps to confirm the validity of the knowledge of these women. In his work, Porcher listed many of the plants with medicinal uses which are indigenous to South Carolina. He notes the conditions which remedies made from these plants treated, as well as how they
should be administered. The publication of these remedies for common ailments, undoubtedly advanced modern medical science and the fledgling profession of medicine. However, for the sake of their benefactors, a portion of the information might have been better left unpublished.

Enslaved African American women in the United States and Caribbean had always carefully guarded the herbal wisdom they possessed, regarding natural controls for a woman's reproductive system. Because of the nature of chattel slavery in the Western Hemisphere, the owner of a female slave profited from her pregnancy. As the child followed the station of the mother, any child born to a mother was a new slave for the master. For this reason, masters offered incentives to slaves in order to encourage reproduction. Some women recognized that their children would have to live their lives in enslavement and implemented both abstinence and contraceptive measures in order to ensure that conception did not occur. If these efforts failed there were many natural abortifacients known to African American healers which would prevent carrying a pregnancy to term, thereby increasing the holdings of one's master. Because these actions affected both the profit margin as well as the present and future work force of slaveowners, they were kept a secret which was to be shared only among the enslaved women.

The secrecy involved in the usage of abortifacients was a necessary evil. While it prohibits the study of the phenomena today, this wisdom had to remain shrouded in order to ensure that the use of these herbs could continue. Ultimately, doctors who attended slave women and who worked with African American and Afro-Caribbean women, through apprenticeship, or as a female helper, discovered the secret that healers tried so hard to keep. In August 1860, Dr. John H. Morgan published "An Essay on the Production of Abortion Among Our Negro Population" in the Nashville Journal of Medicine and
Surgery. In this article he stated that slave women will "often attempt to bring all the aids into requisition that they can ascertain that will increase the parturient effort, either by medicine, violent exercise, or by external and internal manipulations."91 Deborah Gray White added,

Morgan was relatively certain that black females declined the use of mechanical implements to effect miscarriage but he was convinced that they used abortifacients. Among those he listed were the herbs of tansy and rue, the roots and seed of the cotton plant, pennyroyal, cedar berries, and camphor, either in gum or spirits.92

Dr. E. M. Pendleton reported in his 1849 article "Diseases of Hancock County" that the rate of abortions among African American slaves was nearly five times the rate of abortions by whites. Pendleton’s research sets the rate of abortion among whites at .08, while he found that abortions among enslaved African Americans occurred at a rate of 3.9%.93

Along with the release of this information came an antidote to the primary abortifacient which was used by slave women. Planters sought to stop women from using the root of the cotton plant as an abortifacient. Independently, some planters had earlier administered a black haw tonic to their female slaves whom they believed were pregnant in order to prevent miscarriage.94 Then, a doctor in Georgia not only developed, but also publicized and marketed the decoction which he made from witch hazel leaves that also prevented induced herbal abortions.95 Planters wanted to ensure that their slaves would reproduce and thereby replenish their holdings. Their frustration was not unfounded. Across the slavery states women were relying heavily on cotton roots in order to keep from bearing children.

Mary Gaffney was a slave residing in Missouri who wanted to remain faithful to her first husband who was in Kentucky. Her master wanted her to have children and forced her to marry. Therefore, she married a man whose health was too poor to impregnate her. After her master figured out her ruse, he
placed her with a man she detested. After she refused to have sex with her new mate, he complained to their master who whipped Mary. She then resigned herself to having sex with this man, but chewed cotton roots secretly in order to keep from carrying the pregnancy to term. According to historian Thelma Jennings, a Texas slave woman named Anna Lee claimed that female slaves had started chewing cotton roots to keep from having babies. "If slavery had lasted much longer there would have been only old ones left as 'we had done quit breeding'." Another Texas woman (who went unnamed) mentioned that slaves could induce miscarriage by taking calomel, turpentine, and indigo. Many women resorted to methods such as these in order to end their pregnancies.

Some women were not as fortunate as the aforementioned women. They aborted themselves as well, but were caught by members of the plantation management. In 1819, a New Orleans woman was severely whipped when her overseer realized that she had induced abortion in order to end her pregnancy. The overseer, Dorville, related the incident to Ste. Geme, the owner of the slave. The woman gave birth to an infant within the following year, obviously chastened from the experience with the preceding pregnancy. While some enslaved women across the South continued to take their reproductive health matters into their own hands, others turned to the services provided by midwives. These well-trusted members of the community provided a valuable service to women who did not wish to continue their pregnancies.

Midwives, whose specialty was the care of pregnant women, those in labor, and lactating new mothers, bore the brunt of the responsibility for assisting women who wanted to prematurely end their pregnancies. These women were torn between their duties as a nurse, and employee of the master, and their responsibility as a woman in doing what was best for the life of the
patient and child. In addition to this web of mixed feelings, midwives had to deal with their own personal views on abortion. A midwife named Mollie recalled her emotions when reflecting on the women whom she helped to abort their pregnancies.

When she embraced Christianity it was the first thing for which she asked forgiveness. As she recalled: I was carried to the gates of hell and the devil pulled out a book showing me the things which I had committed and they were all true. My life as a midwife was shown to me and I have certainly felt sorry for all the things I did after I was converted.100

The constant battle of conscience must have been a difficult challenge to endure for these women. This raises the issue of the effect of Christian beliefs on the choices women made upon facing an unwanted pregnancy. As with the knowledge of the herbals themselves, this aspect may also have been affected by the strength of a woman's ties to Africa and the survivals which she retained.

Some women went a step beyond facilitating early abortions through the use of an emmenagogue, and even inducing full-scale labor in women who were further along, yet did not wish to carry their pregnancies to term. In some instances a midwife would help, or at least support a mother's decision to commit infanticide in order to keep her children from becoming enslaved. In Georgia, on Charles Colcock Jones' plantation,

A woman name (sic) Lucy gave birth in secret and then denied that she had ever been pregnant. Although the midwife attended her, the midwife claimed to not to have delivered a child, as did Lucy's mother. Jones had a physician examine Lucy, and the doctor confirmed what Jones had suspected, that Lucy had indeed given birth. Twelve days later, the decomposing body of a full-term infant was found, and Lucy, her mother, and the midwife were all hauled off to court. Another woman, a nurse managed to avoid prosecution, but not suspicion. Whether Lucy was guilty of murder and whether the others were accessories will never be known because the court could not shatter their collective defense that the child had been stillborn.101

Lucy's case was not common. Enslaved women did not kill their children with impunity. Preventing a pregnancy or securing an early abortion
was one matter, but according to most sources, slave women did not, as a rule, murder their children. Earlier, (during slavery and until Michael Johnson’s groundbreaking study was published in 1981) it was generally believed that many slave women either accidentally or intentionally smothered their children. With "Smothered Slave Infants: Were Slave Mothers At Fault?," the article that Johnson published on this subject, it seems clear that most of these victims of smothering were instead killed by Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SIDS. Victims of SIDS today are often in similar situations to the slave infants who died. Poor housing, having an improper diet and living in poverty are all attributes which make an infant more likely to succumb to SIDS.\textsuperscript{102}

In any event, some enslaved women realized that no matter what the master offered it was not worth the body and soul of her child-to-be. A substantial number of women had access to both the medical knowledge and herbs that were available in order to avoid conception or carrying a pregnancy to term. They employed herbs and the advice of healers and midwives who facilitated their decision to wait until emancipation to have children. Although the secrecy surrounding the phenomena of herbal birth control and abortifacients, as well as the lack of primary sources on the subject (due in part to the oral transmission of most of this information between women) make the research of this occurrence difficult, the knowledge, means, and motivation clearly existed. Surviving plantation records support the evidence that women employed natural means of contraceptives and abortives in order to keep from bearing their progeny into slavery.
Chapter 4:

Life on Adjoining Jamaican Plantations and Conclusion

The previous chapters examined the reality of chattel slavery as it existed in the Western Hemisphere and how that paradigm shaped the lives of the women who were enslaved. Many herbal contraceptives and abortifacients were available to and used by women in order to gain control over a very personal aspect of their lives. We have also discussed the role of healer in some West African societies and how that profession was recreated in the southeastern United States and the Caribbean. The importance of the healer to women, both as a medical practitioner and a viable means to gain respect and recognition in the plantation community has also been developed within the paper. Finally, we will analyze the demographic statistics of a sugar plantation in order to conclude the study of whether or not some enslaved women did choose not to bear children in order to save their progeny from a lifetime of servitude.

African and Afro-Caribbean, or Creole (as they were often called) women were very knowledgeable in the means of controlling contraception and eliminating unwanted pregnancies.¹ Because of the constant influx of African slaves into Jamaica, African cultural survivals flourished. One of these survivals was the herbal knowledge which allowed women to regulate their reproductive systems. For some women childbearing was a choice to be made, not necessarily a fact of life.

In order to develop a well-rounded view of slavery as it existed in the Jamaica, as a model for the Caribbean, information about two adjoining
plantations will be analyzed. The supervisors at Mesopotamia Plantation did an excellent job of recordkeeping for the absentee owners, the Barhams, who lived in England. There are extensive listings of the workers on that plantation for the better part of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. They include many helpful statistics which can be examined in order to determine population data. Thomas Thistlewood, who owned and was a resident of Egypt Plantation, the adjoining farm, wrote a journal with detailed information about life on a plantation during the same era. In combination, the papers set forth a well-rounded view of Caribbean slavery from the perspective of a slaveholder.

Both Mesopotamia and Egypt were situated on the Westmoreland plain. Located between the Cabarita and Three Mile Rivers, both plantations were situated on extremely fertile land. Savanna la mar, the closest port and town was positioned about five miles away from the two plantations. The officials at Mesopotamia Plantation kept records concerning the workings of a sugar plantation. These included incredibly detailed descriptions about the birth and death histories and statistics, as well as information about the fertility of the women who lived and worked on the plantations. On Mesopotamia between the 1700s and 1800s, women who had more than one child were able to space the births out to a period of one every two years, rarely having more than three children. Obviously there was some extenuating factor at work in these incidents.

In many West African societies there is a taboo regarding sexual intercourse while breastfeeding an infant or small child. This social control acts not only as a means of enforcing abstinence, but also helps to space the births between children in a family to about one every three years. This proscription survived the middle passage and was often found to exist in the
regions where slavery occurred. The extended intervals between births among some enslaved women was often attributed to this prohibition. However, on Mesopotamia women did not have the option of breastfeeding their children. Their labor was needed in the field. A wet nurse was employed to care for and feed all of the infants. Therefore, the taboo was not adhered to by the women and men of Mesopotamia. Without the interdiction regarding intercourse and weaning, there should have been many more children born, and shorter spaces between each birth.

Historian Richard S. Dunn in his article "Sugar Production and Slave Women in Jamaica," provides a summary of the reproductive history of Mesopotamia over a period of fifty-seven years, and is fully illustrated in Table 1: Slave Motherhood at Mesopotamia Plantation.

There were 136 females on the estate during the years 1774 and 1831 whose complete birth histories can be charted... Of these women, 72 bore 250 children, while the other 64 had no recorded live births. It must be empowered that these statistics exclude all abortions, most miscarriages, stillbirths and neonates... half of the pregnancies at Mesopotamia terminated in miscarriages, stillbirths, or infant deaths within a few days of birth... nearly half of these Mesopotamia women never bore any children who survived long enough to enter the estate records.

Table 1: Slave Motherhood at Mesopotamia Plantation

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(The discrepancy between the number of field and nonfield women and the number of total women could probably be best explained by women who at some point served both in the fields and in the house and therefore were counted twice. Rarely, was a plantation so well staffed that house slaves did not have to serve in the fields during harvest time.8)

This low birthrate did not escape the eyes of the overseers and managers or the Barhams, who owned Mesopotamia Plantation. The first member of the Barham family to hold Mesopotamia was Dr. Henry Barham who controlled the estate from 1728 until 1746.9 He tried to raise the natural increase of the plantation by attempting to balance gender ratios and creating incentives for slave women to marry and become "breeders," or slaves who supplied the plantation with new slaves through reproduction.10 However, in 1736 the Barhams left Jamaica and returned to England. They retained ownership of the land, but entrusted overseers and managers with handling the affairs of the plantation. Subsequently, the quality of the administration suffered as did the enslaved work force under that regime. Workers became disabled and the average age of a hand increased by two decades.11 No longer were there young able-bodied hands in the field, but women and men who should have been commuted to less-demanding tasks. Managers and overseers took liberties with the labor force and with the female slaves that the owner, who had a stake in the success of the plantation, previously did not. Hands were overworked and unhealthy. The birthrate among enslaved women slowly began to fall.

After the birthrate dropped, managers began to purchase slaves from other plantations instead of encouraging births at Mesopotamia. Joseph Foster Barham (Dr. Barham's stepson) and Joseph Foster Barham II controlled the plantation between 1746 and 1789 and 1789 to 1832, respectively. Each
visited the plantation briefly while they were young adults, but continued the tradition of absentee ownership. Because the Barhams were so far removed from the daily business at Mesopotamia, they could not protect their slaves, particularly the women, from the gross negligence and willful misconduct of their overseers and managers. Enslaved women were left at the mercy of those who controlled their lives.

Forced miscegenation ran rampant. The relations between slave women and their plantation superiors were not long-term relationships based on mutual affection. Plantation officials raped and prostituted the women who were under their control. Thomas Thistlewood, the owner of Egypt, an adjoining plantation to Mesopotamia, recorded the following incident in his journal. "Just before, saw her and Mr. Smith, the overseer of Orange Grove estate, in the Morass. He gave her money, how much I can't say." The "before" that Thistlewood mentioned was before he had sex with the same woman, Maria, in a field. Thistlewood made a practice of paying for sex with his own slaves as well as those of his neighbors. He paid the slaves under his command "one bit" and his neighbors' slaves "two bits" for their sexual services. This was not an isolated incident for Thistlewood. He kept a diary of his violent acts toward the women under his command.

During 1765 he recorded having intercourse with his mistress one hundred times and with twenty-three other slave woman on fifty-five occasions. Several of the women he flogged he also raped during the course of this typical year.

The journal which has been published under the title *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-86* relates many details about the happenings on Egypt Plantation. His journal is an interesting history of slavery from the point of view of a planter in residence. He records events in his daily life as well as occurrences on the plantation. He was a stern disciplinarian and kept records of the punishments he meted out. In fact,
Thistlewood spoke a number of times and in great detail on some of his favored punishments. In July 1756, Port Royal, a male slave who lived and worked at Egypt had run away. When he was discovered and returned Thistlewood, "Gave him a moderate whipping, pickled him well, made Hector shit in his mouth, immediately put in a gag whilst his mouth was full & made him wear it 4 or 5 hours." The next day a woman who was caught breaking canes was given the same treatment without the gag. The punishments meted out during the summer of 1756 were extremely harsh. Less than a week after the aforementioned incidents, two more runaways and one slave who lost his tool were punished.

Friday, 30th July 1756: Punch caught at Salt River and brought home. Flogged him & Quacoo well, and then washed and rubbed in salt pickle lime juice & bird pepper; also whipped Hector for losing his hoe, made New Negro Joe piss in his eyes & mouth & c.

Thistlewood liked to record information which he found interesting or amusing. This habit resulted in the entering of a great many medical remedies of the time. As Thistlewood was constantly infected with venereal diseases, there were many treatments recorded in the text. In addition to these medicinal notes, he also recorded abortifacients which were being used. On Tuesday, January 24, 1749 he observed that," 2d [dram] of bitter apples, steeped in Beer and took at twice, it is said will cause abortion certainly." Some years later, on July 17, 1767, a Friday, Thomas Thistlewood recorded the abortion of Mountain Lucy. He was told that she had been drinking Contrayerva everyday for that purpose. Contrayerva, or bad grass, is an herbal drink which can be used as an antidote and remedy for stomach ailments, which had abortifacient properties as well. According to the journal, Mountain Lucy was not punished for her actions. Thistlewood recorded her induced abortion just as he did the spontaneous abortions, or miscarriages of other women under his command.
Slaveholders and managers knew that slave women in America and the Caribbean practiced contraception and induced abortion. But they could not understand that African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American women prevented or terminated their pregnancies as an alternative to a lifetime of slavery for their children. Plantation management considered these women savages for killing their children, however, they did not see their own role in this oppressive society that made this desperate deed a humane choice. Instead, Joseph Foster Barham II, owner of Mesopotamia plantation from 1789 to 1832, “charged them with destroying their health through promiscuity, and threatened to put any woman who had abortions or miscarriages into a special jobbing gang that would be hired out to perform especially taxing manual labor.”

Yet Barham was not in residence at Mesopotamia to observe the activities which took place. Although he chose to blame the infertility of their slaves on their promiscuity, Barham said nothing of the actions of his administrators. Although none of the Barhams maintained a residence and could observe the incidents of rape between the supervisors, the number of mixed-race children on the plantation greatly increased after the Barhams returned to England. This information was recorded and reported to the Barhams with the rest of the plantation business.

Although it is clear that slaves, their owners and overseers were aware that women of African descent had access to birth control and abortive measures, it is still not an accepted fact among contemporary historians. Detractors have argued that it was the poor nutrition and strenuous activities which enslaved women endured that was accountable for the low birthrate among slave women. This argument also does not address the similarities in birthrates among field and house slaves, who had fairly equivalent rates of
birth. A close look at the information from the population table and the case studies of three Mesopotamian slaves provides some evidence.

Poor nutrition and overwork are often considered as reasons for a low overall birthrate among slaves. But that does not explain the disparity between the high numbers of women having few or no children, and the ability of some women (who had the same access to food and necessary vitamins and minerals) to bear fourteen children. (See table.) Nor does it explain why slaves who did not work in the field, or, house slaves, had similar birthrates to those who worked in the sugarcane fields. Obviously, work in the house was much less strenuous and provided better access to food than caning in the fields. Yet the birthrate among these two groups essentially remained the same.

However, when one examines the birthrates of women who were born in Jamaica, as compared to those who were born in Africa, a trend begins to emerge. African women, as a rule had fewer children than their Creole counterparts. While the percentages are similar between the two groups when comparing women who had none, one or two children, African women were less like likely to have several children. Women who had been raised and initiated into African cultures had the necessary knowledge to control the number of children they had. While these traditions survived among Jamaican women, it is clear that the survivals were strongest among the women who were actually born and raised in West Africa. These women were not born into the reality of chattel slavery and were determined to protect their children from its effects.

Juliet (no surname given) was typical of many of the women who were born in Africa, kidnapped, and brought to Mesopotamia. She was about eleven when she was transported from West Africa to Jamaica in 1792. With her were eight other girls who were all listed as eleven years old as well. She was
not related to any of her companions, but at least she was able to remain with the members of her age-grade once they settled at Mesopotamia. Juliet was immediately put to work on the grass gang, but due to her efforts she quickly joined the second gang. With this progression came an increase in work, responsibility and prestige. She was twenty-three when she joined the first gang, the most important position for female field hands. After she had worked on the first gang for about eleven years, her health began to fail. The heavy work which she performed had taken its toll. She rejoined the gang at age thirty-six. Her health began to fail until she became an invalid at forty-seven. She was still alive at age fifty during the last annual documentation in 1831.28

Juliet never had any children. Of the nine little girls who were brought from the coast of West Africa with Juliet, six were childless. Of the three who had children, their progeny totaled twenty. Clarissa had one child, Clarinda had eight children and Matura produced eleven.29 Upon examining these statistics, one thing is clear. If a woman chose to bear children, nutrition, poor health, and overwork did not inhibit conception. However, if a woman chose not to bear children, she would have to seek herbal remedies in order to prevent conception, or prematurely end a pregnancy.

The lives and reproductive histories of Debby and Sophia were detailed in Richard Dunn’s article "Sugar and Slave Women in Jamaica" as well. Both women were born in Jamaica and raised in extended families. Both women had children each while they were in their twenties. They both were incapacitated in their early thirties, yet plantation officials continued to encourage them to have children. Debby was given a monetary incentive for raising her daughters to become field workers.30 Sophia’s children were all fathered by a member, or members of the plantation management. She
became pregnant again at forty-six, but she either miscarried or the child was stillborn.\textsuperscript{31} Both women were parts of strong kinship networks and probably would have had access to knowledge of herbal birth control and abortives had they chosen to use them. Sophia's mother, Betty, was a nurse on two different plantations and surely had the medical wisdom to procure herbal alternatives to pregnancy and childbirth.\textsuperscript{32} Sophia and Betty both chose to bear and raise their children in enslavement, despite the consequences. However, there were women who chose to forego childbearing until emancipation.

In 1834 slavery ended in the British Caribbean colonies. Thirty-one years later, the United States followed suit and chattel slavery in the Western Hemisphere perished.\textsuperscript{33} However, the ills of slavery continued although its victims were free. Poverty, illiteracy, homelessness, unemployment and underemployment plagued African American communities across the Southeast. As people adjusted to the change brought about by the Civil War and began to take responsibility for themselves and make their own decisions these problems were ameliorated to some degree. Even during the darkest hours of despair after the War Between the States, there was a shining beacon of the future for African Americans. The birthrate among former slaves finally began to rise, but only after they were free.\textsuperscript{34} Enslaved women already knew the actuality of living one's life as property. They had been raised from childhood as slaves, or indoctrinated into the culture as adolescents or adults. Regardless of their age at enslavement, they knew the danger and the nature of life as a slave. In addition to backbreaking work in the fields or the monotony of house work, enslaved women were also aware of the lifestyle which they led. Women knew that they had inadequate food, clothing and shelter.\textsuperscript{35} They were aware that whites considered them inferior. They knew the sting of the whip and lived within the
women also had their own special horror. Whether it was their own experience, or their sister, mother, friend or neighbor, women knew the abuse which could only befall another woman. Sexual abuse, intimidation and rape ran rampant on large plantations, small farms, and in the houses in which enslaved women toiled.

Despite all of the horror of chattel slavery, many women chose to bear children. Whether they wanted children of their own, or they were seduced by the master’s promises of trinkets, a lighter workload, or freedom, women had children. Some women, like Harriet Smith had no one to turn to and no other choice and simply resigned themselves to producing slaves for their master. Perhaps, like Malinda Bibb, Henry’s wife, some women were married to someone they truly loved and wanted to share this joy and create children. There were many different factors behind the reasons why women had children during slavery. However, during enslavement a woman’s child was never truly her own. Her progeny could be sold away at anytime, like so much property. Yet some women still had children and provided their masters with both a labor force and a source of income.

In spite of the incentives, trickery, forced intercourse, and all the intrinsic reasons for motherhood, there were some women who refused to bring their children into a life of enslavement. In the mid-1850’s two fugitive slaves from Georgia, Ellen Craft and her husband William waited until they were free and safely ensconced in England before beginning a family of their own. These women who wanted a better life for their children, employed many different tactics in order to avoid raising their posterity in slavery. Women who could, used natural contraceptives in order to avoid pregnancy. If contraception failed, or, if a woman was unable to employ any method of birth control, the pregnancy which resulted could be terminated through any number
control, the pregnancy which resulted could be terminated through any number of herbal abortifacients. Rarely, when a woman chose to carry her pregnancy to term and then decided that they did not wish to raise the child in slavery, mothers committed infanticide.

The evidence permits us to postulate that women who chose to employ these methods knew that not only were they making their own decisions regarding their bodies and the lives which their children could lead, they were also affecting their owner's profit margin and workforce. After 1808, when the United States officially stopped importing Africans to fuel the machine of slavery, planters had to rely on natural increase or purchase in order to increase their holdings. As it was much less expensive to encourage reproduction among one's own slaves than to purchase another worker, slaveholder's usually resorted to coercion to promote gestation among the women of their workforce. Although many African American and Afro-Caribbean women previously followed in the footsteps of their African ancestors in upholding and participating in the African tradition of healing and herbal medicines, this knowledge took on more significance. Women who were healers were revered by plantation residents, both black and white, yet a good deal of their knowledge and abilities had to remain secreted. It had become even more imperative that this knowledge remain within the African community, as was evidenced by slaveowner's use of the black haw tonic and other products which inhibited the amount of control a woman had over her own body. Many of those who held slaves wanted to be sure that their holdings would be replenished.

Unfortunately, the clandestine nature of the abortion process itself, hinders contemporary historians from attaining the entire account. The oral tradition, as inherited both from West Africa and women's lore also impedes
the study of this phenomena. But some information can be ascertained about enslaved women and their reproductive decisions. While some women did choose to have children, there were others who chose not to proliferate. Those women who chose not to have children were not limited to abstinence as a means of birth control. There were herbal contraceptives and abortives available to women. Some of these means were known to these women and their ancestors in Africa and had long been used in their cultures. Other available herbs were learned of through the interaction between African American and Native American women who were well-schooled in the properties of the flora of the Southeastern United States and Caribbean. These methods were used and were often effective in ending the pregnancy of those who utilized them. Some women took these herbs under the direction of healers who had been well educated in their application. Healers offered women a feasible alternative not only to motherhood, but also an alternative to the drudgery of working in the field or house. Women who became healers were well-known, appreciated, had special privileges and enjoyed a certain mobility that common hands did not. Both the women who chose not to have children and the women who aided them knew that this decision was construed as a means of resistance and took great pains to hide the evidence of this effort.

The exertions of these women were not without merit, even today there is a scarcity of evidence on the subject matter. It is lamentable that with all the information that is available about the public degradation and humiliation of enslaved women, that there is such a paucity in this area demonstrating their strength and relative power. While it is true that women of the African diaspora were casualties of slavery, they did have recourse. Many chose to refute the status of victim by asserting control over their own bodies.
They gained or maintained a sense of autonomy in a climate where self-sufficiency was nearly impossible. Enslaved women achieved this through the use of herbal birth control and abortives. These women rebelled against the unique nature of American slavery in one of the only ways available to them. They determined whether or not to bear children, and in so doing reclaimed their lives.
APPENDIX 1:

Excerpt from Autobiography of a Female Slave

I knew that resistance was vain; so I submitted to have my clothes torn from my body; for modesty, so much commended in a white woman, is in a negro pronounced affectation.

Jones drew down a huge cow-hide, which he dipped in a barrel of brine that stood near the post.

"I guess this will sting," he said as he flourished the whip toward me.

"Leave that thin slip on me, Lindy," I ventured to ask; for I dreaded the exposure of my person even more than the whipping.

"None of your cussed impedance; strip off naked. What is a... ...hide more than a hog's?" cried Jones. Lindy and Nace tore the last article of clothing from my back. I felt my soul shiver and shudder at this; but what could I do? I could pray--thank God, I could pray!

I then submitted to have Nace clasp the iron cuffs around my hands and ankles and there I stood, a revolting spectacle. With what misery I listened to obscene and ribald jests from my master and his overseer!

"Now, Jones," said Mr. Peterkin, "I want to give that gal the first lick which will lay that flesh open to the bone."

"Well, Mr. Peterkin, here is the whip, now you can lay on."

"No, confound your whip; I wants that cowhide, and here let me dip it well into the brine. I want to give her a real good warmin'; one that she'll 'member for a long time."

During this time I had remained motionless. My heart was lifted to God in silent prayer. Oh, shall I, can I, ever forget that scene? There in the saintly stillness of the summer night, where the deep, o'ershadowing heavens preached a sermon of peace, there I was loaded with contumely, bound hand and foot in irons, with jeering faces around, vulgar eyes glaring on my uncovered body, and two inhuman men were about to lash me to the bone.

The first lick from Mr. Peterkin laid my back open. I writhed I wrestled; but blow after blow descended, each harder than the preceding one. I shrieked, I screamed, I pleaded, I prayed, but there was no mercy shown me. Mr. Peterkin fully gratified and having quenched his spleen, turned to Mr. Jones and said, "Now is yer turn; you can beat her as much as you please, only jist leave a little bit o' life in her, is all I cares for."

"Yes; I'll not spile her for the market; but I does want to take a little of the d----d pride out of her."

"Now boys" -- for by this time all the slaves on the place, save Aunt Polly, had assembled around the post-- "you will see what a true stroke I ken make; but darn my buttons if I don't think Mr. Peterkin has drawn all the blood."
So saying, Jones drew back on the cow-hide at arm's length, and, making a few evolutions with his body, took what he called "sure aim." I closed my eyes in terror. More from the terrible pain, than the frantic shoutings of the crowd, I knew that Mr. Jones had given a lick he called "true blue." The exultation of the negroes in Master Jones triumph was scarcely audible to my ears; for a cold clammy sensation was stealing over my frame; my breath was growing feeble and feepler, and a soft melody, as of lulling summer fountains, was gently sounding in my ears; and, as if gliding away on a moonbeam, I passed from all consciousness of pain. A sweet oblivion like that sleep that announces to the wearied, fever-sick patient, that his hour of rest has come, fell upon me! It was not a dreamful sensibility, filled with the chaos of fragmentary visions, but a rest where the mind, nay, the very soul seemed to sleep with the body.

APPENDIX 2:
Herbal Contraceptives and Abortifacients Utilized in Africa

The root of the *Nauclea latifolia*, or African peach, is known as an effective abortifacient in Ghana. The roots of the African cucumber, or *Momordica charantia*, when combined with the root of a variety of cotton plant, and West African ebony, or *Diospyros mespiliformis* forms the internal dosing of a particular abortifacient. When that mixture is combined with the local insertion of the seeds of the African cucumber, it causes the uterus to expel its contents. Other decoctions known to Ghanaians, include the leaves of the *Carica papaya*, or papaya fruit, as well as the leaves of either *Mareya micanthra*, or *Necepsia afzelii*. The leaves of each of those plants have both an abortifacient and a purgative effect on the body. In addition to its use in Ghana, the Lulonga, Bemba, and Swahili also knew of the abortifacient effect incurred when *Entada africana* was applied locally with a "native soap."

The dried leaves of the sandpaper tree, or *Ficus asperifolia*, when combined with the seeds from the *Xylopiastrum villosum* and ground with oil and salt have an abortifacient effect which is known to healers in Ghana. Although the seeds are edible, in excess amounts the seeds of the *Sterculia foetida* have a purging effect on the uterus. Surprisingly enough, the seeds of the *Sesamum ordicum*, or sesame seeds, when crushed with the seeds of the oil bean tree, or *Pentaclethra macrophylla*, and combined with small brown ants, works as an abortifacient when taken internally. The seeds of *Turraeanthus africanus* produce an oil that is used as an abortive among the women of Ghana. The latex of the Sodom apple, or *Calotropis procera*, could
be used both internally and externally in order to prematurely end a pregnancy. Also referred to as the giant milkweed, *Calotropis procera* was very versatile and could be used as an arrow poison as well. The decoction of the juice or latex from *Parquetina nigrescens* and *Tephrosia vogelii*, or the fish poison plant, is also particularly dangerous, the effect could be both abortive and fatal.

A mixture including the bark of the *Maesobotru a barteri var sparsiflora* and the pulp of the *Trichilia monadelpha* causes the expulsion of the fetus and is used in Ghana. The bark of *Pterocarpus erinaceus*, or the Senegal rose wood tree, is an abortifacient as well. A combination of the bark or pulp from *Khaya senegalensis*, or dry-zone mahogany, the bark and/or the seeds from *Pleioceras barteri*, and honey creates a violently purgative abortifacient. A combination of *Waltheria indica*, *Microglossa pyrifolia*, and ground *Caliendra portoricensis* are used as an abortive as well. Not only the Ashanti of Ghana, but the Mayan indians of Mexico and Central America were aware of the abortive properties of *Alternathera repens* when combined with salt.

APPENDIX 3:
Herbal Contraceptives and Abortifacients Available and Used in the United States and Caribbean

*Asarum canadense, Liatris scariosa, Liatris spicata, and Eryngium aquaticum* all share several common names which include the term snakeroot, and their properties as emmenagogues. The rhizame and rootlets of wild ginger, which is yet another common name for *Asarum canadense* are the part of the plant which contains the properties of an abortifacient. There is no specific part listed which contains abortive properties in the button snakeroot plant, or *Eryngium aquaticum*. However, Native Americans were aware of and employed its effects. Rattlesnake’s master, or *Liatris scariosa* grows in most parts of the United States, and produces roots which have the ability to prematurely end pregnancy. The blazing star, or *Liatris spicata*, also has roots which produce an abortifacient effect, and is found in coastal and piedmont areas of the southeastern United States. These plants were also diuretics, stimulants, and were capable of curing many other conditions.

The plants of the Angelica genus, particularly the *atropurpurea, curtisii, archangel*, and *villosa* species all produce seeds which work to induce menstruation and purge the contents of the uterus when ingested. Respectively, American angelica, curtis angelica, archangel angelica, and pubescent angelica all grow in temperate regions throughout the United States. The roots of archangel and American angelica can be used as abortifacients as well. The decoction should be ingested as a tea with one-quarter cup of the herb to one quart of water.
Tansy, or *Tanacetum vulgare* can be used as a tea with four to eight teaspoons of the herb per quart of water to be taken throughout the day. The tea should be made from the leaves and the tops of the plant. The unfortunate side effects of the use of this abortifacient are convulsions and vomiting. Its effects are quite similar to those of the juniper family, yet it has other purgative qualities as well. This mixture will also purge the digestive tract of worms. Unfortunately, the body tends to build a resistance to the effects of tansy. After a few uses of the abortifacient, a dose strong enough to kill will no longer cause the abortive effect.

A common abortifacient can be found in almost every spice rack. *Ruta graveolens*, or rue, grows in very select locations, but can be found in Virginia and North Carolina, states where slavery was practiced. The leaves are the abortifacient agent in this plant. In large doses not only do the leaves of this plant induce miscarriages, they also act as a "narcotic poison." Another member of the same family, *Zanthoxylum americanum*, or American prickly ash, grows in temperate areas as far south as North Carolina. While it is used primarily for treating other conditions, it has been tested and has caused similar reactions to its abortifacient cousin, rue. Both are irritants to the nervous system and a stimulant to mucous membranes. With properties such as this, it is quite simple to understand how the use of this herb affected the abortive process.

The slippery elm grows throughout much of the southeast, but particularly in cooler regions of the coastal plain. When the bark of the tree is ingested it causes uterine contractions. It is powerful enough to aid actual childbirth and ease labor pains. This herb is much more powerful than the standard emmenagogues which simply stimulate nature's own cleansing system.
Pterocaulon pychostachyum, or blackroot, grows well on the same sandy soils which produce pine trees in the southeast. The root from this herb stimulated both menstruation and uterine contractions in order to end pregnancy. This is another herb which would have worked well even in the later stages of pregnancy. Emmenagogues usually simulated an abortive effect in the earliest stages of pregnancy, by flushing the uterus of its contents. In later stages, both the contractions and the purging effect of blood on the uterus were needed in order to end the pregnancy.

Artemisia vulgaris, or mugwort, is found along the Atlantic Ocean, the piedmont region of North Carolina, and in the cooler regions of the southeast and middle Atlantic region of the United States. The purgative effects of this plant were violent and possibly life-threatening, suggesting the level of desperation a woman would have to attain in order to use this herb to end her pregnancy.

It promotes perspiration, increases the flow of urine and menses... ...promotes, uterine evacuations, causes an increase of epileptic spasms, produces profuse sweat, contractions of the uterus, labor-like pain, prolapsus and rupture of the uterus, miscarriage, metromenorrhogia, and increase in lochieae discharges.

APPENDIX 4:

Facts Respecting the Case of Infanticide on Montevideo Plantation

The woman Lucy known to be in a family way by driver, midwife, and generally by all on the plantation. Directed driver and midwife to tell her to take care of herself and see that nothing happened to the child some three weeks before its birth. She denied strenuously being in that way and told the driver that if she was neither he nor anyone else should ever see the child.

Tuesday October 11th laid up in her house under color of having a bad bile. Manager directed the midwife and nurse to attend to her. Midwife several times in her house between 11th and 15th (from Tuesday to Saturday). Her mother was in the house with her (Lucy lived with her mother); said she saw and attended to the bile. Friday night (14th) midwife sent for; says she saw something, but not the child; never saw it. Her mother says she never saw it. Both endeavored to make the impression that she never had a child and could not have been in a family way. Monday morning October 17th examined the woman; clear evidence of having been delivered of a mature child. Woman positively denied it. Search ordered to find the child since 17th. Tuesday the 25th child found, tied up in a piece of cloth secreted in grass and bushes! Dead: in process of decompisition. Physician brought to see it; pronounces it a child come to its maturity. Sensible negro women and men saw it; said it was full-grown.

Confession. The wretched mother on the finding of the child confesses. She laid up Tuesday October 11th: had a bile in truth. Thursday (13th) midday, alone in her house, had the child: dead born! She then tied it up in the cloth, carried it down into the bottom and hid it. Was afraid to disclose it, as she had all along denied it. The child by her own confession of her peculiar situation last January or February proves the child to have come to its full time.

The question arises: Was the child dead or alive at its birth? If dead, why should she conceal it? The midwife she confesses was called to her Friday night by her mother, and saw what came from her, which she said was the afterbirth. And the midwife said it was—and that in presence of her mother. Midwife and mother acessories to the concealment and should be prosecuted as such.

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