

Both Property and Pauper: Slavery, Old Age, and the Inverted Logic of Capitalist Exchange

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Every year in the antebellum South, in every city, county and state, on every farm and every plantation, every slave grew older. In the context of slavery, the biological imperative of aging translated into a key ideological, economic, and material concern: what to do with slaves when, over time, they became a source of burden rather than profit. A labor system at its core, the institution of slavery was built – physically as well as ideologically – on the productive and reproductive capacity of its work force. Thus the problem of old age raises the question of what happened when slaves lost their market value – when they became, for all practical purposes, not workable and not salable.

This paper argues that old slaves came to constitute a yet unexamined class of human chattel: persons who were at once property and paupers. Despite legal prohibitions against manumitting slaves and legal requirements to care for the superannuated, slaveholders found ways to rid themselves of their unproductive property – starving them, abandoning them in the woods, or dropping them off in urban centers. These old, discarded slaves – though legally still human chattel – took on the form of the wandering poor, drifting along the countryside or throughout cities, begging for relief, but vulnerable to recapture and abuse.

All the while, proslavery spokesmen contrasted their supposed care of old slaves with the discarding of free laborers in the North. "What a glorious thing to man is slavery, when want, misfortune, old age, debility and sickness overtake him," boasted George Fitzhugh in 1854. Thus while the ethic of accumulation pervaded the Southern mentality, the survival of slaves into old age inverted the logic of acquisition, leading slaveholders to try to rid themselves of their unproductive property even as they pointed to their care for the elderly as a defining feature of their benevolence.