

"WE SHO WAS DRESSED UP" SLAVE WOMEN, MATERIAL CULTURE, AND DECORATIVE ARTS IN WILKES COUNTY, GEORGIA

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ON 26 AUGUST 1834, SLAVEHOLDER DAVID MURRAY PLACED AN ADVERTISEMENT in a local newspaper from Wilkes County, Georgia, referring to two female runaway slaves: thirty-five- to forty-year-old Beck and her twenty-two- to twenty-three-year-old daughter Mariah. Though he provided adequate physical descriptions of the two women in terms of their height, hair, teeth, complexion, scars, and mannerisms, Murray made special notation of their clothing. Beck left in "plain white homespun," but Mariah "was more dressy than usual for a servant" because she had on "fine articles of clothing of almost every description." He added that "in addition to her own clothing, which were numerous, she carried off five of my daughter's dresses viz: Shady, black Silk plain; figured Swiss Muslin, richly trimmed with thread lace insirting; two French Muslin; plain rich Gold Ear-Rings; hair brade' [and a] silk Apron trimmed with velvet."¹ Whether Mariah stole clothing made from fine cloth for herself or for her mother is unclear; however, it is certain that these articles represented a valuable commodity during the antebellum slavery period, or she would not have absconded with the quality and quantity of goods she deliberately took on her journey.

In the midst of their desperate attempts to become free, Mariah and Beck made room for these dresses, which indicates the importance of material culture to slave women. Yet, material culture in this context contains a dual meaning. Although more traditional definitions indicate that material culture represented the creation, production, and/or sale of luxury items during slavery, it is clear that a literal definition of material culture also emerged in the Savannah River Valley. This culture evolved from the skills, pride, and pleasures slave women experienced when working with different types of material at quilting parties, in their cabins, or on wash days. Viewing material culture from this perspective draws attention to female-centered work settings, social events, and networks. These networks supported the development and maintenance of specialized crafts such as dressmaking, quilting, and dyeing cloth.

A focus on the "leisure" activities and the material culture of slave women in Wilkes County, Georgia, from the Colonial period to 1865, reveals that they created a space to explore their artistic abilities through the production of clothes, quilts, and dolls. In some cases, women boasted about their skills, expressed pride in their physical appearance, and found pleasure in perfecting their crafts, in spite of planter class efforts to suppress, control, and sanction their behavior. Studying the material culture and the culture of working with different materials in this community indicates that slave women found unique ways to express their creative talents.

CLOTHING RATIONS

In order to understand the culture of materials and the impact of material culture on slave women, it is important to first consider the gendered nature of slave clothing distribution.² Slaves typically received clothes two times per year, once in the winter and once during the summer months. Boys and girls under the (approximate) age of ten received smocks; men received trousers and shirts; and women received dresses, aprons, and occasionally undergarments. Although gender-specific clothing distribution did not occur until adolescence, male slaves in Wilkes County testified about the transition from "shirtz what looked lak dresses" to "britches" when they were old enough to work in the fields. Willis Cofer noted that "boys wus mighty proud when dey got big enough to wear pants."³ Whereas male clothing clearly delineated a shift from youth to adulthood, the clothing transition of slave girls to women was not as drastic.

Females of all ages wore dresses, petticoats, or long skirts with white aprons used as outer garments. In his narrative of slave life in Georgia, John Brown said, "The women wear a shirt similar to the men's, and a cotton petticoat, which is kept on by means of braces passing over their shoulders."⁴ They often covered their heads with straw hats, handkerchiefs, or various forms of head wraps when working in the fields, and bonnets, mob caps, or turbans in domestic settings. The description of "A Young New Negro Wench," who appeared in a Colonial newspaper as a runaway, provides a firsthand account of female slave attire. She "wore a blue negro cloth gown and [petti]coat, a new onzaburg shirt, a cheque handkerchief on her head and another about her neck."⁵ Although it was common for women to keep their heads covered with hats, along with shoes, blankets, and coats, were more costly, and planters distributed these items sparingly. Former slave Emma Hurley, for example, recollected that she received two garments each year, but that she "never had no shoes 'til after freedom come."⁶ Some planters from Wilkes County chose to provide shoes for their slaves, while others, such as Hurley's owner, did not. Although the decision to purchase shoes for their slaves depended on each individual planter, nearly all slaveholders agreed on the quality of material used for slave clothing.

Bondmen and bondwomen (slaves) wore clothes made from coarse cotton referred to as "osnaburg," or "Negro cloth," which was selected for its durability and low price.⁷ Some planters provided their slaves with better quality fabrics and, thus, purchased material so skilled seamstresses could make the garments they desired. Jane Harmon, for example, remembered receiving material to knit stockings, socks, and gloves.⁸ Of the nearly two hundred Georgia slave narratives collected by the Works Project Administration during the 1930s, thirteen testimonies reflect Wilkes County bondmen and bondwomen.⁹ Ten of the thirteen narratives note that sewing, spinning, and weaving represented a female-specific occupation that sometimes crossed racial barriers.¹⁰ "My mother spun an' wove de cloth, an' dye hit," testified Jane Mickens Toombs, "but our Mistess made our clothes."¹¹ Likewise, Willis Cofer noted that his mother "wove de cloth for our cloth and de white folkse had 'em made up."¹² Clearly, clothing production on Southern plantations crossed class and racial barriers.¹² Plantation mistresses managed the textile production of clothes, blankets, and table linens, and assigned slave women weekly spinning and weaving tasks. On some estates

slaveholders required bondwomen to spin one "cut" (about three hundred yards) of thread per night, which meant that the average task was six or seven "broaches per week."¹³ Slave women completed this labor at night after working in the fields, and they were punished with a "severe beating" if they failed to meet the weekly requirement.¹⁴



1. "Rachel" a female slave of the Callaway Family. Courtesy of the Georgia Division of Archives and History.

TEXTILE PRODUCTION

Viewing textile production as "women's work" suggests that a culture, which encompassed working with different materials, strengthened female networks and bonds. Historian Deborah Gray White suggests that the nature of women's work during slavery allowed for the development of a female consciousness that produced "self-reliance," "self-sufficiency," and "interdependence."¹⁵ Expanding on White's thesis, this study suggests that the "female slave network" in Wilkes County created a clandestine space, removed from their owners' jurisdiction, for women to express their aesthetic talents.¹⁶ Wilkes County slave women enjoyed working in female networks so much that their male counterparts and children recognized the time they spent completing their nightly tasks. Former slave Henry Rogers recalled that his mother used to weave on the loom that sat "in one corner of the kitchen" and that she worked "way into the night."¹⁷ Likewise, Manuel Johnson felt guilty because he never appreciated how much time and effort women placed in clothing manufacturing. "De nigger wimmens spun an' wove, but I never paid dem much mind when I wuz er comin' on," he stated. "I 'member hearin' dem talk 'bout dyin' de cloth out er bark an' things dey got out'n de woods," he continued. But he "never tho't how hard dey had ter wuk ter make it."¹⁸ Regardless of how much time women spent at the spinning wheel or how many former slaves appreciated their efforts, it is clear that producing luxury items required special skills.

County newspapers indicate that planters recognized female slaves for their various skills. An advertisement in the *Wilkes County Republican* requested the sale of "A valuable Negro Woman, about 32 years of age—a first rate cook,

Washer, and Ironer and house servant."¹⁹ Clearly, this woman had multiple skills, which was common among non-agricultural slaves. The same advertisement also placed "An old woman, a good Cook, Washer, Weaver, and Milker" up for sale.²⁰ The owner of these women recognized their ability to do specialized work, and advertised them accordingly. Some female slaves were so good at their craft that they were called upon to make uniforms during the Civil War. "My Ma wuz a 'spert spinner an' weaver, an' she spun an' wove things ter be sont ter de soldiers in de War," explained Jane Harmon.²¹

DYEING ARTS

In addition to being recognized for their sewing skills, women frequently boasted about the art of dyeing textiles an array of different colors. By using their knowledge of natural flora, slave women produced dyes to make their garments various shades of the primary colors. They used bark from elm, cherry, hickory, maple, pine, red oak, and walnut trees to make gradations of brown, purple, and red. Others "grew indigo" for the color blue and used cedar moss for yellow. Grapevines served as excellent hoops in skirts, and red berries created unique shades of red.²² Reflecting on her mother's skills as well as her own, Adeline Willis shared the following testimony:

[M]y mother was one of the best dyers anywhere 'round, and I was too. I did make the most colors by mixing up all kinds of bark and leaves. I recollect the prettiest sort of lilac color I made with maple bark and pine bark, not the outside pine bark, but that little thin skin that grows right down next to the tree—it was pretty, that color was.²³

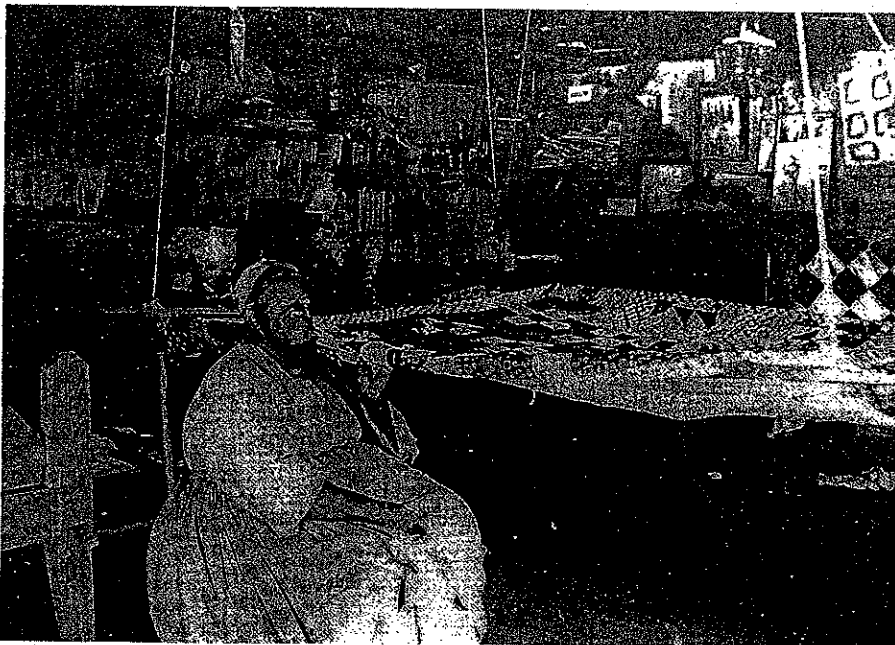
Adeline informed the interviewer that her colors represented some of the best shades because she selected bark that few others used—not simply bark found on the outside of the tree, but rather that found in the "thin skin" underneath. Certainly it took a special talent to recognize the aesthetic difference between external and internal tree bark, particularly as it related to dyeing cloth. Notice the pride in her testimony, and the satisfaction she found in being able to locate, identify, and use various types of tree bark to create colorful masterpieces. Likewise, Arrie Binns said that her mother "made pretty dresses too.... She dyed some blue and brown striped,... [and] growed the indigo she used fer the blue, right dar on the plantation." Finally, Arrie noted that her mother "used bark and leaves to make the tan and brown colors."²⁴

Hickory stripes found on clothes represented one such masterpiece that made slave women feel special. "When they [slave seamstresses] took a notion to give us striped dresses," Adeline explained, "we sho was dressed up." The striped pattern represented a pleasurable memory for Adeline. "I will never forget long as I live, a hickory stripe...dress," she continued. This dress was special because seamstresses placed brass buttons at the wrist, which made *this* particular dress stand out from the rest. "I was so proud of that dress and felt so dressed up in it I just strutted er round with it on."²⁵ One can almost imagine a nineteenth-century version of a slave fashion show as Adeline "strutted" about the plantation, hoping other slaves would recognize the beauty she saw in her "hickory stripe," "brass-buttoned" dress. Many of these pseudo-fashion shows occurred at dances or on Sunday afternoons when slave women displayed their best clothes. Eliza Andrews, daughter of

Wilkes County slaveowner Judge Garnett Andrews, noted that at church, Georgia slave "women were decked out in all their Sunday finery and looked so picturesque and happy."²⁶

QUILTS

In addition to clothing, slave women made quilts for comfort and for pleasure. Several scholars of decorative arts and crafts suggest the role slave women played in quilt making, noting that African Americans created different designs than other quilt makers.²⁷ Some found that the style and pattern of slave quilts resembled African textile patterns and quilts used in funeral processions to cover royalty on horseback, in homes as decorative wall hangings, and in bedrooms as blankets. Scholars Maude Wahlam and John Scully explain that "quilting has historically provided a creative outlet for individual artistic expression."²⁸ According to slave testimonies, women in this region spent many hours making quilts. Their memories of this craft often reflected positive emotions because they produced quilts at parties where groups of women worked together. Four narratives from the "Wilkes County Sample" express pleasure in making quilts. Former slave Arrie Binns recalled that quilting parties included singing hymns, laughter, and sometimes dancing afterward. Reflecting on these memories, Arrie said, "I kin dance yit when I hears a fiddle."²⁹ This testimony reflects another positive recollection of how slaves spent their "leisure" time. Understanding the aesthetic quality of slave quilts, as so many scholars note, provides a window into the private lives of slaves. It also suggests that the public display on beds in the owners' homes, as well as their own, gave bondwomen a sense of pride in their sewing talents.



2. Slave Seamstress in front of quilt (possibly Richmond County). Courtesy of the Hargrett Rare Book & Manuscript Library/University of Georgia Libraries.

DOLLS

Slave women and young girls utilized their sewing abilities beyond creating blankets and clothes. Some made rag dolls and played games with their owners' children, using the dolls as puppets. Jane Harmon shared the following testimony about the nature of work as a child: "I uster play dolls wid de overseer's

chillun, an' look fuh aigs [eggs], an' tote in wood an' pick up chips. Us had good times togeder, us all little niggers an' de little white chilluns."³⁰ Likewise, Jane Mickens Toombs remembered the material they used to make dolls: "Us had home-made rag dolls, nice 'uns, an' we'd git dem long grass plumes (Pampas grass) an' mak' dolls out'n dem too. Us played all day long every day."³¹ Mariah Callaway, another Wilkes County bondswoman, recollected her work as a child. "I was a pet in the Willis household," she explained, "and did not have any work to do except play with the small children. I was required to keep their hands and faces clean."³² It is clear that former slaves recognized the social boundaries between blacks and whites, yet many slaves had fond memories about these leisure activities particularly during childhood.

The family portrait of Dr. Robert A. Simpson and his children also reflects the division between blacks and whites, as well as the importance of dolls, even though this photograph was taken in 1903. Dr. Simpson is pictured with his daughter and son, all sitting on what appears to be a bear skin rug, and they have a miniature tea party set up with three dolls present. At one end of the table rests a white doll with a teacup and saucer, while a tall black doll stands at the opposite end in a rather servile position. Beneath the black doll is another small black doll, perhaps a child, resting awkwardly at the opposite end of the table from her white counterpart. Simpson's daughter is holding a pitcher as if she is about to serve the guests at her tea party. Although this photograph reflects the racial divide between blacks and whites, it also shows that playtime was important for children of both races. The picture reinforces social norms and confirms that black and white girls played with dolls that adhered to these standards of behavior. Looking at the clothing and overall appearance of the dolls, it is clear that the older black doll is dressed appropriately for a domestic servant, while the small black child is almost unrecognizable because of her size. Although it is unclear whether or not former slaves produced these three dolls, the use of such toys reflects the prescribed social boundaries between blacks and whites.

3. Dr. Robert A. Simpson and children, "Tea Party." Courtesy of the Hargrett Rare Book & Manuscript Library/University of Georgia Libraries.



INFORMAL ECONOMY

The connection between material culture, trade, and Wilkes County slave women is important. Female slaves could use their textile production skills to acquire luxury items that helped improve their meager conditions. Although it was not as common for Upcountry slaves to participate in an informal economy as it was in the Georgia Low Country, some extant evidence suggests that slaves in this region found ways to participate in clandestine, market-related activities. The flexible nature of the plantation regime allowed slaves opportunities to trade goods with other bondmen and bondwomen at local markets in Washington, and as far away as Augusta.

A handful of Wilkes County planters gave plots of land to slaves to grow their own provisions, and both men and women tended to these gardens. Slaves belonging to the Alexander, Gilbert, Hillhouse, and Cumming families had garden "patches." In a letter written to her niece about the "plantation life," Harriet Cumming recalled that slaves "raised potatoes, peas, cabbages, or corn and cotton as they chose." She also remembered that "they all had some money from selling poultry, cotton, etc., or taking in a little washing."³³ Since washing was a female-centered occupation, it is safe to assume that this represents another example of slave women maintaining their craft. Reflecting on his mother's informal activities, Marshal Butler recalled that his master "gave mammy four acre of ground to till for herself and us childrens." "We raised cotton," he continued and "...our boss-man give us Saturday as a holiday to work our four acres."³⁴ Although this work represented a "labor of love," it also served as a survival mechanism as some families needed the extra items (food, clothes, or money, etc.) in order to live. Butler added that his mother acquired several "fine dresses—some of them were give to her by her missus."³⁵ That Butler's mistresses gave his mother fine dresses suggests two possible trends: slave women received "fine dresses" as a reward for doing good work, or slave women were able to *keep* the "fine dresses" *they produced* for their own material benefit. It was perhaps these types of dresses that females traded or sold at local markets.

Even though some members of the plantation community supported trade among slaves, the City Ordinances for Washington opposed it. On 18 November 1765, for example, members of the General Assembly passed "[a]n Act for the establishing and regulating patrols, and from preventing any person from purchasing provisions or any other commodities from, selling such to any slave, unless such slaves shall produce a ticket from his or her ownier, manager, or employer."³⁶ If a slave produced provisions on their own time, this act stipulated that "masters, managers, or employers" had to provide consent for the sale of these goods by signing a ticket or license. Residents such as S. G. Burnley tried to adhere to this legislation, and on 24 July 1840, he placed a notice in the local newspaper claiming that "All Persons are cautioned from trading, or having any dealings in any way whatever with my Negroes, ...as I will enforce the law against them for so doing, without my leave."³⁷ Whether or not these slaves traded their produce and clothes in the town of Washington is unclear, but the fact that slaves had gardens and money suggests some participation in an informal economy. One could argue that this underground economy served as the infrastructure that supported seamstresses' activities.

CONCLUSION

Looking at material culture, the culture of materials, and decorative arts among slave women in this region indicates that women worked as professional "fashion designers" who mastered the crafts of making dresses, quilts, and more. They took pride in their physical appearance when they had the opportunity to express themselves in the manner in which they chose. They held parties and informal fashion shows on holidays and Sundays when they put on their best outfits; they displayed their quilts in their cabins and on beds in their plantation homes; and they played with dolls to entertain their owner's children. More fortunate slaves took their creations to local markets and sold them for profit. By studying the creative activities of slave women during their "leisure time," this essay suggests that sewing represented a survival mechanism for some female slaves. In fact, the decorative art of dressmaking became such an important part of female slaves' experiences in this region that nearly sixty years after the abolition of slavery, former slave Jane Mickens Toombs made the following remark: "I'se hungry fer de sight ov a spinnin' wheel—does you know whar one?"³⁸ Arrie Binns had similar fond memories: "I did love to hear that old spinnin' wheel. It made a low kind of whirring sound that made me sleepy." Thus, black women not only took pride in their seamstress work, but they also found pleasure and peace in the sound, sight, and memory of the equipment.

These positive memories suggest that female slaves found ways to deal with the harsh realities of slavery through their experiences with material culture, and by mastering the crafts of sewing, dyeing, and working with various materials. Clearly, they found ways to assert their humanity in the midst of an oppressive institution. However, further studies of how slaves dressed at wedding ceremonies, on holidays, and in their graves, will provide additional insight into their feelings when they "sho was dressed up."



4. Unidentified slave grave located in Wilkes County. Photograph in possession of the author.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 *The News*, Washington, Georgia, 28 August 1834.
- 2 For a thorough discussion of slave clothing, see Shane and Graham White, "Slave Clothing and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Past & Present* 148 (1995): 149-87. A revision of this essay appears in Shane and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). Also see, Patricia K. Hunt, "Clothing as an Expression of History: The Dress of African-American Women in Georgia, 1880-1915," in *We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible: A Reader in Black Women's History*, eds. Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King, and Linda Reed. (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1995), 393-404.
- 3 George Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, vol. 12, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972), 275. Note that all of the testimonies used in the paper are from former slaves who resided in Wilkes County during slavery or lived in a neighboring community. Although the bulk of the primary data used in this paper relies on slave narratives, the author acknowledges and is fully aware of the strengths and limitations of using this source outlined by historian John Blassingame. See John Blassingame, "Introduction," *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977). It was the author's decision to include these testimonies as evidence relaying the slave perspective. Wilkes County narratives include the following slaves: Volume 12, Arrie Binns, Alice Bradley, Marshal Butler, Mrs. Mariah Callaway, Willis Cofer, Wheeler Gresham, Jane Smith Hill Harmon, Robert Henry, Emma Hurley, and Manuel Johnson; and Volume 13, Henry Rogers, Jane Mickens Toombs, and Adeline Willis. Hereafter these testimonies are referred to as the "Wilkes County Sample."
- 4 F. N. Boney, ed., *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, A Fugitive Slave* (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1991), 8.
- 5 Lathan A. Windley, compiler, *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790*, vol. 4 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983), 10.
- 6 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 12, 203.
- 7 Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 551.
- 8 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 13, 36.
- 9 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vols. 12 and 13.
- 10 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 13, 32.
- 11 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 12, 204.
- 12 Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 124-28.
- 13 Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 30; Rawick, *The American Slave*, "Wilkes County Sample."
- 14 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 12, 276. See also, Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1985), 122.
- 15 White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 128.
- 16 White is one of the first historians to identify that slave women developed a unique

network with one another, and she notes that seamstress work provided an avenue "for self-expression and creativity." The art or expressive nature of these relationships warrants further exploration.

- 17 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 13, 220.
- 18 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 12, 339.
- 19 *The Wilkes County Republican*, Washington, Georgia, 16 April 1858.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 12, 101.
- 22 See, Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 550-61, and Rawick, *The American Slave*, "Wilkes County Sample."
- 23 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 13, 163.
- 24 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 12, 75.
- 25 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 13, 162.
- 26 Eliza Frances Andrews, *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl, 1864-1865* (1908; reprint, Lincoln, Nebraska: Bison Books, 1997), 69.
- 27 For literature on slave quilt making see for examples: William Ferris, ed., *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983); Eva Ungar Grudin, *Stitching Memories: African-American Story Quilts* (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Williams College Museum of Art, 1990); Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (New York: Studio Books in association with the New York Museum of American Folk Art, 1993); Gladys-Marie Fry, *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Dutton Studio Books in association with the New York Museum of American Folk Art, 1990); Cuesta Benberry, *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts* (Louisville: The Kentucky Quilt Project, 1992); Roy Sieber, *African Textiles and Decorative Arts* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1972); and John Michael Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in the Decorative Arts* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990); also Vlach, *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1991).
- 28 See Maude Wahlam and John Scully, "Aesthetic Principles in African American Quilts," in Ferris, ed., *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*, 85.
- 29 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 12, 76. Also see the testimonies of Mariah Callaway, Henry Rodgers, and Jane Harmon.
- 30 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 12, 100.
- 31 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 13, 31.
- 32 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 12, 174.
- 33 Letter from Harriet Cumming to her niece, 1908, in Marion Alexander Boggs, ed., *The Alexander Letters, 1787-1900* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 107.
- 34 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 12, 163.
- 35 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 12, 162.
- 36 For a complete description of this law, see "A Compilation of the Patrol Laws of the State of Georgia, in conformity with a Resolution of General Assembly," in *The Digest of the Laws of the State of Georgia* (Milledgeville: S & F Grantland, 1818), 3-9.
- 37 *The News*, 23 July 1840.
- 38 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 13, 36.
- 39 Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 12, 75.