

Chapter Nine

THE TRANSFORMATION OF SLAVERY IN THE CITIES

By 1860 the institution of slavery was in great disarray in every Southern city. The number of Negroes had declined precipitously. Discipline over those remaining proved difficult to sustain. The network of restraint so essential to bondage no longer seemed to control the blacks nor wholly govern the whites. The distance between the races as well as separation of free colored from slave could not be maintained in the kinetic world of the city. In the most dynamic towns the whites overwhelmed the Negro population; even places with a larger proportion of slaves and less impressive growth tended to slough off at least their male blacks. In any case an institution which had been an integral part of urban life in Dixie in 1820 was languishing everywhere in 1860.

The census figures outlined the story. Though the number of slaves rose throughout the South, the proportion living in cities declined. In addition, the Negroes lost their earlier share of the urban population. In 1820, 37 per cent of all town dwellers were blacks; by 1860 that portion had dropped below 17 per cent. Urban slaves fell from 22 per cent to 10. The most dramatic shifts came, of course, in the border area, but everywhere the same pattern appeared. The New Orleans statistics demonstrated the tendency most clearly. In 1820 one out of two residents was Negro; in 1860 only one in seven.

To be sure, the black populations of smaller and newer cities, like Montgomery or the Texas towns, showed some vitality, but there is no reason to believe they would not have shared the same attrition as they expanded.

This decline did not stem from any economic reasons. There was plenty of work which whites had traditionally considered appropriate to blacks and particularly suited to slaves. Industrial employment, moreover, had proved feasible in a variety of enterprises. Hiring rates continued to rise throughout the last ante-bellum decades. And, perhaps most conclusively, the price of urban slaves on the market more than matched the general increase. In short, the usual indices suggested the continuing profitability of slavery as an economic institution. "In all departments of mechanical labor, the slaves of the South are profitably employed," the *Richmond Enquirer* asserted confidently in 1853. "As carpenters, as blacksmiths, as shoe-makers, as factory hands, they are far more valuable than field-laborers—indeed, intellectual expertness and manual dexterity are much more important elements in the price of a slave, than mere physical strength and power of endurance."¹ Or, as a visitor put it, "those whom good treatment has rendered most fit for freedom, are the most desired as slaves."²

Slavery's compelling problem in the city was not finding work for bondsmen, but controlling them when they were off the job. While busy, in the house or around the yard, on the docks or driving a dray, toiling in a factory or cotton press, they caused little trouble. When the task was finished or the supervision lifted, however, when the slaves became idle or contrived some free time, when dusk fell and the demand for service slackened, then the system weakened. And when the Negroes gathered by themselves, beyond the eye of masters and police, in homes, churches, or grog shops, the "peculiar institution" itself was jeopardized.

It was the total environment rather than industrial or commercial employment which eroded slavery in the cities. The problem was not what happened in the factory or shop but what happened in the back street, the church, the grocery store, the rented room, and the out-of-the-way house. It was not contact with machines or an industrial process which broke the discipline, it was contact with people of all kinds in numerous ways which generated the corrosive acids.

"The city, with its intelligence and enterprise, is a dangerous place for the slave," wrote a shrewd analyst. "He acquires knowledge of human rights, by working with others who receive wages when he receives none; who can come and go at their pleasure, when he from the cradle to the grave must obey a master's imperious will. . . . It is found expedient, almost necessary, to remove the slave from these influences, and send him back to the intellectual stagnation and gloom of the plantation."³ Bondage "does not thrive with master or slave when transplanted to cities," a Louisiana planter observed, adding that in such surroundings "the slaves become dissipated, acquire the worst habits," and were generally "corrupted."⁴

An editor commenting on the Louisville scene contended that the "negroes scarcely realize the fact that they are slaves" in the city. They became "insolent, intractable, and in many instances wholly worthless. They make free negroes their associates, and imbibe feelings and imitate their conduct, and are active in prompting others to neglect their duty and to commit crime."⁵ "The evil lies," a Charleston committee contended, "in the breaking down the relation between master and slave—the removal of the slave from the master's discipline and control, and the assumption of freedom and independence on the part of the slave, the idleness, disorders, and crime which are consequential."⁶ Even more directly, a Southerner told a visitor that "the city is no place for niggers. They get

strange notions in their heads, and grow discontented. They ought, everyone of them, be sent back on to the plantations." ⁷

Slaves, on the other hand, found urban life to their liking. "The negroes are the most social of all human beings," De Bow asserted, "and after having hired in town, refuse to live again in the country." ⁸ Slavery's most famous refugee to attack the institution in all its aspects made the same point with elegant simplicity: "Life in Baltimore, when most oppressive, was a paradise" compared to "plantation existence," Frederick Douglass wrote. ⁹ When masters were forced to sell, their bondsmen pleaded to be kept in the city because—in the words of some Richmond blacks—"they had acquired town habits." ¹⁰ And often those sent into the country headed back at the first opportunity to run away. In short, how could you keep them down on the plantation once they had seen Mobile?

The slave's preference was easily understood. Not only was urban life more congenial, but the alternative was especially grim. Solomon Northup found that every Negro sharing his Washington pen "dreaded the thought of being put into the cane and cotton fields." ¹¹ Douglass, too, remembered that it was "a source of deep consternation" to him and his friends in Maryland that "we should be hurried away to the cotton fields and rice swamps, of the sunny south." ¹² A sympathetic Northern traveler caught both the white and Negro perspectives when he observed that "The atmosphere of the city is too life-giving, and creates thought. It is the doom of them all to be sent back to the gloom of the plantation cabin." ¹³

II

The cause of slavery's difficulty in the city was the nature of urban society itself. In the countryside physical isolation comprised one dimension of a successful discipline. Another was the simple division between master and slave, with vir-

tually no other important element. The distinction between field hand and house servant, while important to the Negroes involved, constituted no significant fracture in the system. Treatment and comforts might vary, privileges could be more extensive, and everyday tasks quite different, but no area of independence was thus created. Indeed, a house servant often fell more directly under the eye of his owner than the black in the field. Nor did the overseer create a new interest among the whites. Employed by the master, usually a short-term resident, living apart from the colored quarters, and only occasionally a confidant of the owner, the overseer had at most a marginal influence on the structure.

Between black and white the social distance was immense. Slaves were confined to primitive work at worst or acquired rudimentary skills at best. Their contacts with whites were few and seldom lasting. An occasional visitor sometimes broke the isolation; nearby white families were seen just often enough to be recognized; overseers came and went. Except for the infrequent trip to town or a neighboring farm, the possibilities of outside stimuli scarcely existed. Even on small plantations or farms, the contacts with the surrounding world were circumscribed. Indeed, without other slaves about he was deprived of even the most elementary association. Rural life had always involved some social remoteness; for the plantation slave, isolation, next to his servitude, was the most compelling fact of life.

The cities, on the other hand, developed more complex structures. Both white and Negro communities included many different parts, and in the larger places a highly sophisticated system evolved with almost endless groupings and distinctions. This fragmentation, which, of course, characterized urban life nearly everywhere, had a special significance for slavery. It meant that the great gap between owner and chattel would be filled with all kinds of diverse elements, inevitably disturbing