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The Unspoken Demands of Slavery: The Exploitation of Female Slaves in the Memphis Slave Trade

Abstract

In the antebellum South, exploitation and mistreatment characterized the plight of the female slave. In Memphis, the story remained unchanged. The abusive and exploitative nature of the Memphis slave trade emerges through high prices for particular female slaves, the growth of the mulatto population, and the existence of mulatto children from certain prominent local figures. The survival of slavery depended upon the ability of the domestic slave population to sustain itself through the female slave population. This view of bondswomen as natural breeders and the accessibility of enslaved females in an urban setting, subjected them to sexual violence and exploitation. Higher average prices for young female slaves capable of having children, and higher prices for women with conventionally attractive qualities show that the price paid for a bondswoman can be used to infer the motives for buying her. Prominent men, including Nathan Bedford Forrest, left behind evidence of their exploitation of the women they owned in the children that resulted from the relationships. In Memphis between 1850 and 1860, in the most populous ward of the city, there was a 27% rise in the percent of the population considered Mulatto. A rise in the population of slaves of mixed race is the physical evidence of sexual relations occurring between slave women and the white men who owned them.

Keywords

slavery, Nathan Bedford Forrest, gender studies, sexual exploitation, abuse, Memphis, south

The Unspoken Demands of Slavery: The Exploitation of Female Slaves in the Memphis Slave Trade

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Within the domestic slave trade of the southern United States, the role of the female slave had a dual nature. Female slaves played an important role in the daily operations of domestic life and provided labor in areas that were not extremely physically demanding. Beyond their role as domestic laborers, enslaved women were acquired for the role their bodies played in the perpetuation of slavery. The inherent value of enslaved women came from the exploitation of their reproductive ability. White slave traders and white slave owners exploited female slaves for their own monetary or personal gain. As part of this exploitation within the Memphis slave trade, young women garnered prices higher than their older or less “desirable” counterparts and were subject to mistreatment by white slave owners due to their young age. Utilizing records from the Bolton Dickens and Company and Nathan Bedford Forrest’s involvement in the Memphis Slave trade, the abusive and exploitative nature of the Memphis slave trade emerges, explicitly, through the high prices for particular female slaves, the growth of the

mulatto population in Memphis, and the existence of mulatto children from prominent local figures.

Memphis, Tennessee had a large market for slave trade due to its prime location in a fertile, cotton-producing region on the Mississippi River and therefore was home to a large population of women held in urban slavery. Its location on the city's river made it easy to transport slaves from Upper South states to the slave markets in the states further south. Planters from surrounding areas would come to these Memphis markets to purchase them¹. In addition, Memphis's growing population bolstered a thriving local urban slave market. From 1850 to 1860 the white population of Memphis nearly tripled, growing from less than 7,000 in 1850 to less than 19,000 by 1860.² In tandem with the growth of the white population, the slave population also rose, increasing from around 2,500 to almost 4,000.³ This growth in the slave population goes against the trends seen in other southern urban areas, such as New Orleans, Mobile, and Richmond, during the same time period. Demonstrated by the decrease of slave populations in other southern cities, Richard Wade argues that the institution of slavery and its existence in urban centers were

¹ Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (Baltimore: J.H Furst Company, 1931), 250

² Bancroft, *Slave Trading*, 250

³ Marius Carriere Jr., "Blacks in Pre-Civil War Memphis," *Tennessee Historical Society*, (Spring 1989): 33

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incompatible. However, the trends in Memphis run contrary to that argument, suggesting that the institution of slavery thrived despite the urban threat.⁴

In the antebellum South, exploitation and mistreatment characterized the plight of the female slave. The survival of slavery as an institution depended upon the ability of the domestic slave population to sustain itself through the forceful impregnation of the female slave population. White slaveholders perceived enslaved women as “breeders,” and their value in the slave trade directly reflected their ability to reproduce⁵. Their femininity was reduced to reproduction.⁶ When searching for slaves to purchase, buyers searched for young slaves of child-bearing age to act as a self-renewing labor force.⁷ The most sought after female slaves were aged sixteen to nineteen and were “large enough to nurse,” demonstrating that the female slaves who carried the most value were

⁴ Richard Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 243-281

⁵ Wilma King, “Mad Enough to Kill: Enslaved Women, Murder, and Southern Courts,” *The Journal of African American History* 92, no.1 (Winter, 2007): 37-56

⁶ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1999) 144

⁷ According to Walter Johnson, the most prized slave men were those aged nineteen to twenty-four, the ages in which they would be the most useful to production.

those of peak reproductive fitness.⁸ The age of a woman not only affected her ability to bear children but also determined her chance of getting sexually assaulted. A former slave who wrote about her experiences reported that “black female slaves were usually sexually assaulted when they were between the ages of thirteen and sixteen.”⁹ Diana Berry, in “In Pressing Need of Cash,” recounts how one slave owner did not want to pay full price for an enslaved woman’s “services” once he realized that his slave had a “disease of the womb” and was not capable of reproducing and providing more slave property.¹⁰ The services affected by a “disease of the womb” would have been the woman’s ability to bear children or perform other sexual acts. In a 1932 essay entitled “Black Folk and Birth Control,” W. E. B. DuBois, an early prominent civil rights actor, commented on the role slave women had of increasing the labor force in order to demonstrate the multi-generational societal ramifications the mistreatment of enslaved females had on the African American population. He stated that “as slaves, every incentive was furnished to raise the largest number of children possible” and named the

⁸ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 144

⁹ Bell Hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1982): 24

¹⁰Diana Berry, “In Pressing Need of Cash: Gender, Skill, and Family Persistence in the Domestic Slave Trade,” *The Journal of African American History* 92, no. 1 (Winter, 2007): 32

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“chief surplus crop” of the southern region to be the “natural increase of slaves.”¹¹ The physical health and reproductive value of bondswomen, another term to denote an enslaved woman, were the most important factors in the trading of female slaves. The belief that bondswomen were natural breeders combined with the accessibility of enslaved females, subjected them to sexual violence and exploitation.¹² The exploitation of female slaves was so ingrained into the institution of slavery that the continued existence of the slave trade relied upon the guarantee of ritual and continual rape occurring.

Male buyers perceived the “delicate” bodies of lighter skinned females, often associated with being mulatto (or mixed race), as not well suited for strenuous labor and therefore were valued in domestic jobs. “Lightness” of skin tone was associated with feminine and domestic attributes, and slaves with lighter skin were often described as delicate.¹³ As a result, lighter skinned females were favored over their darker counterparts and were more likely to be placed in a visible role.

¹¹ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, “Black Folk and Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* 16, no. 7 (June 1932): 166-167

¹² King, “Mad Enough to Kill,” 39

¹³ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 152-153

The practice of buying slaves for sex or companionship occurred openly. Walter Johnson makes the argument that the high prices of female slaves revealed the sexuality of the slave market. The role that female slaves held in a household dictated their monetary value in the slave trade. The owner paid according to what he expected from the slave. Louis Hughes, a former slave who lived in Memphis and the surrounding area, spoke about the pricing of female slaves in his autobiography. He states that “servant women sold for \$500 to \$700, and sometimes as high as \$800...A house maid, bright in looks and well formed, would sell for \$1,000 to \$1,200.”¹⁴ Hughes’ description shows what was desirable and important to male slaveholders. The focus on physical appearance and the importance of being “well formed,” perhaps meaning sexually mature, alludes to the mistreatment of bondswomen by the buyers. The high prices paid by men were not only measures of desire but also of dominance. The ownership of a slave “mistress,” or “fancy,” gave slave owners and traders a reputation of power. Of course, when describing the slaves, slave owners would describe

¹⁴ Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom* (Milwaukee: South Side Printing Company, 1897): 15

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their property as “cooks,” “domestics,” or “seamstresses.”¹⁵

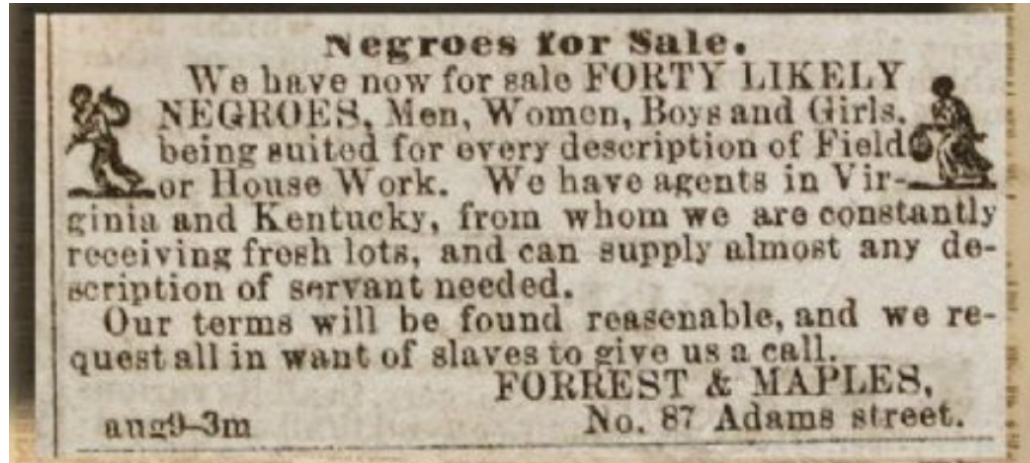


Figure 1: Advertisement from an October 25, 1855 edition of The Memphis Eagle and Enquirer

The trend in prices for female slaves, as described by Hughes, can be seen in the 1856-1858 slave ledgers of Memphis based slave trading company Bolton, Dickens and Company. The company ledger keeps records of their business transactions during those years, including the names of the slaves, the acquisition prices, and the prices the company sold them for. As seen in the advertisement from the *Memphis Eagle and Enquirer*, slave traders in Memphis consistently advertised their slaves as desirable or “likely negroes...suited for housework.”¹⁶ In the sample of

¹⁵ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 114

¹⁶ *Memphis Eagle and Enquirer*, October 25, 1855

the ledger analyzed, the prices indicate a trend towards the purchase of slaves for domestic use. Due in part to advertisements from the time, it can be assumed that slaves sold by large slave trading companies were of the most desirable qualities, and therefore were sold for a price that reflected those qualities. Between 1856 and 1858, the average price for a female slave at Bolton, Dickens and Company was \$1,126. The price of \$1,126 is well within the \$1,000 to \$1,200 price range described by Hughes in which “well-formed” housemaids were sold for.¹⁷ However, female slaves were sold between the prices of \$887 and \$1,300, further demonstrating that many aspects went into consideration for the purchase price of a female slave.

Although women who could provide further services were valued monetarily more than servant women, male slaves were still valued the most. In the same slave ledger from Bolton, Dickens and Company, the average price for a male slave was \$1,262 with prices ranging from \$950 to \$1,450.¹⁸ While these prices alone do not show much about the gender differences in the slave trade, the higher average price combined with the fact that only 39% of the slaves analyzed were female, show a higher

¹⁷ Bolton Dickins and Company Slave Ledger, 1856-1858, Memphis and Shelby County Room collections, Memphis, Tennessee

¹⁸ Bolton Dickins and Company Slave Ledger

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demand for and value of the manual labor male slaves could provide. The prices for male slaves were consistently higher than female slaves due to the need for manual labor in the city and on plantations, and due to a society where women, black or white, were not valued or treated as highly as men.

Bills of sale from the time provide a more detailed look at the sale of enslaved females in mid-nineteenth century Memphis and demonstrate that, in particular, young women sold for higher prices than other female slaves. Many bills of sale provide the age of the woman being sold, a very important factor in determining her reproductive potential and therefore her monetary value to the buyer. An 1836 Shelby County bill of sale records a sale for “one thousand dollars...bargained sold and delivered...one Negro woman named Mariah twenty five years of age.”¹⁹ Considering this particular sale occurred in 1836, twenty years before the Bolton, Dickens and Company ledger sales, it can be assumed that with slight inflation due to the time difference, a sale of \$1,000 for a female slave was a large investment. The expensive price is notable considering that Mariah is recorded as being young and within child-bearing years. She

¹⁹ Bill of Sale, 1836, The Britton Duke Papers, Memphis and Shelby County Room collections, Memphis, Tennessee

had the potential to perpetuate her master's wealth by having children, justification for her high price.

Another 1836 bill of sale to the same man, Britton Duke, records the sale of a "mulatto girl aged about 12 or 13 years named Jane for... the sum of seven hundred dollars."²⁰ The sale of such a young girl for the price of \$700, in 1836, was most likely due to her lighter skin, thought to be more desirable. Slave owning men tended to pay more for mulatto women because their lighter skin, desirable for its perceived whiteness, was appealing to them.²¹ The higher prices for young, mulatto women, therefore, may be an indicator of future sexual exploitation and abuse.

Also 1836, Britton Duke purchased another female slave. This bill of sale does not state the age of the woman, but it does include the sale of her son as well. The bill of sale states "that this day I have bargan[sic] sold and delivered unto Britton Duke asertin[sic] negro woman by the name of Ceala and her son...for the sum of one thousand dollars."²² The price paid for Ceala, with a child, is the same price paid for Mariah, who was of childbearing age. These prices indicate the value of procreation in the

²⁰ Bill of Sale, 1836, The Britton Duke Papers, Memphis and Shelby County Room collections, Memphis, Tennessee

²¹ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 155

²² Bill of Sale, 1836, The Britton Duke Papers, Memphis and Shelby County Room collections, Memphis, Tennessee

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slave trade. Both women promised the possibility of a self-sustaining slave population. The high prices that white men paid for alluring and fertile women, and the profits that slave traders made from the sales, exploit the existence of female slaves' womanhood. The slave trade reduced the value of female slaves to their worth as sexual objects.

The exceptional prices paid for particular slaves is very indicative of alternative motives for their purchase, as these high prices did not constitute the norm in all slave transactions. An 1862 bill of sale states that "Mary Ann" was bought for "about \$400."²³ There is no indication of age or skin coloration included in this bill of sale, but due to the significantly lower price it can be assumed that Mary Ann was bought for reasons more purely relating to the labor she could provide. A bill of sale for "Nathan" also helps to contextualize the prices seen in previous bills of sale. Nathan, a 45-year-old man, was sold for "about three hundred and thirty-six dollars."²⁴ Men, typically, sold for more than women due to the perceived greater value of the labor they provided. It shows that white male buyers were willing to pay more for the possibility of female companionship than for guaranteed

²³ Bill of Sale, 1862, Driver-Hunt family papers, Pink Palace Museum Collections, Memphis, Tennessee

²⁴ Bill of Sale, 1841, Driver-Hunt family paper, Pink Palace Museum Collection, Memphis, Tennessee

manual labor. This sale helps to demonstrate the value of sexual desirability in the slave trade.

An 1854 bill of sale by the Bolton, Dickens and Company slave trading firm sheds light on the pricing of slaves in the 1856-1858 slave ledger from the company, analyzed previously. This bill of sale details a payment of “nine-hundred dollars in full for a negro girl by the name of Mary, between the age of 13 or 14 years of age.”²⁵ In the slave ledger for the company, created solely as business records, no mention of age is recorded with each listing of a slave. This 1854 bill of sale from the company allows for a better understanding of their pricing of slaves in the slave ledger. As stated earlier, Louis Hughes wrote that the price range for a typical “well-formed” housemaid varied from \$1,000 to \$1,200.²⁶ Also as previously stated, the term “housemaid” or “domestic” carried with it the insinuation that sexual relations between the enslaved woman and slave owner may have occurred.²⁷ Due to the sexual connotations associated with domestic housemaids that sold for \$1,000 to \$1,200, or even more, it can be assumed that the “well-formed” enslaved women were of at least the age of sexual maturity, meaning at least 16

²⁵ Bill of Sale, 1854, Bolton, Dickins, and Company file, Memphis and Shelby County Room collections

²⁶ Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 15

²⁷ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 114

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to 19 years old.²⁸ Mary, the previously mentioned girl sold for \$900, garnered \$200 to \$400 more than the price for a typical servant while only being 13 or 14 years old.²⁹ The price indicates that despite having not yet reached peak maturity, the intentions of her buyer may have still been sexual in nature. The monetary value of 13-year old Mary also sets a price benchmark for the Bolton, Dickins and Company slave ledger. Since the average price for a female slave was \$1,126, many female slaves being sold were likely older than Mary and at the age of sexual maturity, therefore worth more to male buyers.

Many aspects of Memphis's slave population did not follow the trends seen in other prominent southern cities. Richard Wade argues that by 1860, most of the big cities of the South were "shedding slaves" and that less people had any stock in the system of slavery. He also argues that the introduction of slavery in the cities along with the widespread practice of "living out," caused the authority of the master to begin to break down. "Living out" removed slaves from the authority and constant supervision of their master.³⁰ Neither of these trends took place in Memphis. By 1860, the

²⁸ Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 15 and Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 113, 144

²⁹ Hughes, *Thirty Years*, 15. This point makes use of the numbers provided in Hughes's autobiography

³⁰ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 21, 82

slave population in Memphis had grown to the highest levels the city had seen, increasing by 56% in the 10 years leading up to 1860, unlike other southern cities.³¹ Kathleen Berkley refutes Wade's argument concerning the effects of slaves living out of the house. She states that due to strict local ordinances, slaves in Memphis did not have much intermingling with free blacks and other groups that would lead to a breakdown in the master's authority. In fact, Berkley uses an "Index of Dissimilarity" to measure the degree of segregation of a certain population against the rest of the population.³² She found that in 1850 slaves in Memphis were the "least residentially segregated group", meaning that slaves lived in very close proximity with their masters.³³ The rise in the slave population coupled with the close proximity in which slaves and masters lived, explains why the amount of sexual exploitation rose in Memphis during the same period of time.

In southern slave-owning households, the presence of mulatto slaves was the tangible evidence of the abuse of enslaved females. The close proximity in which owners and slaves lived in Memphis allowed for easier access to female slaves and therefore more opportunities for sexual abuse to

³¹ Carriere, "Blacks in Pre-Civil War Memphis," 33

³² Berkeley, "Like a Plague," 47-48

³³ Berkeley, "Like a Plague," 47-48

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occur.³⁴ It was in the white domestic household where “sexual exploitation of young slave girls usually occurred.”³⁵ In her diary, Mary Chestnut expressed the attitudes towards sexual relations between master and slave. She wrote that sexual relations between slaveholding white men and their female slaves “was the thing we can’t name.” “Every lady,” Chestnut stated, “tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody’s household, but those in her own she seems to think dropped from the clouds or so pretends to think.”³⁶ Chestnut’s statements on the treatment of female slaves prove that white slave-owning males did take advantage of their female slaves in the household. While the presence of slave mistresses was very prevalent in society, its effects were not talked about by the families affected.

Unlike other prominent cities in the South, the population of slaves in Memphis increased 56% from 1850 to 1860. The need for labor during this period of growth in Memphis during the 1850s fueled this continued reliance on slavery. White Memphians, enjoying the new wealth and growth associated with the city’s growth, valued the social

³⁴ Kathleen Berkeley, “Like a Plague of Locust: Immigration and Social Change in Memphis, Tennessee 1850-1880” (PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 1980), 48

³⁵ Hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*, 25

³⁶ *Mary Chestnut’s Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) 29, quoted by Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 115

status and distinction that being a slave owner provided.³⁷

The growth in both population and wealth during the 1850s caused the evidence of sexual exploitation of slaves to increase and become more visible. The 1850 and 1860 census slave schedules are useful when examining the prominence of sexual exploitation of female slaves, because included in the documents is the race of each enslaved person. The number of mulatto slaves at each period in Memphis's history can therefore be determined. A high percentage of the slave population being classified as mulatto would indicate that sexual abuse of enslaved females by white men was very prevalent in Memphis. It can be inferred that most sexual contact between white owners and their female slaves was not consensual due to the power dynamics that existed. An enslaved woman was nothing more than property that could be used, or abused, as the owner wished. Any women who did not "willingly respond to the sexual overture of masters and overseers were brutalized and punished."³⁸

³⁷ Carriere, "Blacks in Pre-Civil War Memphis," 33

³⁸ Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 26

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Memphis Ward	1850 Mulatto Percentage of Population	1860 Mulatto Percentage of Population	Change
1 st Ward	30.27%	34.4%	4%
2 nd Ward	24.4%	29.6%	5%
7 th Ward	3.15%	30.67%	27.5%

Figure 2: Data from slave schedules showing the change in the percentage of mulatto slaves present within the city

The data from the slave schedules, shown in the table above, show that as both the slave population and Memphis grew, so did the amount of sexual abuse of female slaves. In 1850, in the 1st ward of Memphis, the percentage of slaves who were labeled as “mulatto” totaled 30.27%. In 1850, in the 2nd ward of Memphis, 24.4% of the slave population were recorded as being “mulatto.” In 1850, in the 7th ward of Memphis, 3.15% of the slave population were recorded as “mulatto.”³⁹ A change can be seen in the data from the 1860 slave schedule. In the 1860 slave schedule for the 1st ward of Memphis, 34.4% of slaves were labeled “mulatto”, an increase of over 4%. In 1860, the percentage of slaves recorded as “mulatto” in the 2nd ward was 29.6%, an increase of over 5%. In the 7th ward, in 1860, the percentage of slaves labeled

³⁹ United States Seventh Census, 1850, Slave Schedule, Shelby County, Tennessee

as “mulatto” reached 30.67%, an increase of 27.5% in 10 years.⁴⁰

The growth in the population of mulatto slaves in the 7th ward of Memphis is the most significant for demonstrating an upward trend of the sexual abuse of female slaves in the mid-nineteenth century. Per the 1865 Memphis census, the 7th ward had the highest population of both whites and blacks in the entire city. 39.95% of the black population, 4,393 people, lived there in 1865, 5 years after the 1860 slave schedule was created. 4,361 white people, 26.1% of the white population, lived in the 7th ward in 1865.⁴¹ The large growth, an increase of 27.5%, in the number of mulatto slaves in the most populous ward of the city, shows that with the growth of urban slavery in Memphis the prevalence of sexual abuse also grew.

The slave population of Memphis grew in part to the large number of slave traders that operated in the city once the interstate slave trade became legal in 1855.⁴² They profited from Memphis’s booming economy in the 1850s by selling slaves to those in need of labor in or near Memphis and people traveling via the Mississippi

⁴⁰ United States Eighth Census, 1860, Slave Schedule, Shelby County, Tennessee

⁴¹ United States Census, 1865, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee

⁴² Lester C. Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee, 1791-1970* (University of Tennessee Press, 1981): 22

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River. The Bolton Dickens and Company and Nathan Bedford Forrest's slave trading companies held a large portion of the slave trading enterprise in Memphis and the surrounding areas. Forrest grew in prominence when the Bolton Dickens and Company slave trading business closed in 1858 due to an internal feud. He became one of the wealthiest men in Memphis and gained greater notoriety after his time as City Alderman, involvement in the Civil War, and involvement in the Klu Klux Klan.

In 1853, Nathan Bedford Forrest, just entering the Memphis slave trade market, made his first recorded purchase as a slave trader.⁴³ On November 10th, 1853, Nathan Bedford Forrest paid "twelve hundred and fifty dollars in full for a negrow woman named Catherine aged seventeen and her child named Thomas aged four months."⁴⁴ The exact purpose Forrest had in mind while purchasing Catherine is impossible to know. The high price of \$1,250 would seem to indicate that there was some alternative motive behind the purchase of Catherine, but Jack Hurst poses the theory that perhaps Forrest was simply making an investment with this purchase. The rising values of women of child bearing age would have caused the purchase of Catherine to be a smart investment at

⁴³ Jack Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 36-37

⁴⁴ Shelby County Register's Records, Book 16, p.125

the start of his Memphis business ventures. An 1864 article published in the *Chicago Tribune* makes a mention of a slave named Catherine, 11 years after the original bill of sale for “Catherine” was drawn up. The article, entitled “The Butcher Forrest and his Family”, begins by sharing the news of the capture of Fort Pillow by General Forrest and continues on to describe his family life and his business ventures as a slave trader. The article claims that Forrest had two wives, “one white, the other colored (Catherine) by which he had two children. His ‘patriarchal’ wife, Catherine, and his white wife had frequent quarrels or domestic jars.”⁴⁵ Hurst argues that if it were not for the emphasis of the name Catherine, with the same spelling as the 1853 bill of sale, due to the brief and biased nature of the article the claims would have been completely dismissible.⁴⁶

In the 1870 Memphis census, there is one entry that seems to prove many of the claims made by the 1864 article. In the 1870 census, in the 4th ward of the city there is a listing for a female Cath. Forrest, age 36, from Tennessee, labeled as mulatto. With just one name separating them and listed as being in the same tenement, there is a listing for a girl named Narcissa Forrest, age 13, also from

⁴⁵ *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 1864

⁴⁶ Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest*, 37

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Tennessee and also labeled as mulatto.⁴⁷ The evidence strongly suggests that the Cath. Forrest listed in the 1870 census and the Catherine bought in 1853 at age 17, rumored to have been Forrest's mistress in 1864, is the same woman. Many of the names in this particular census were abbreviated, furthering the argument that the "Cath. Forrest" listed is the shortened version of "Catherine Forrest."

The 13-year-old girl, therefore, may have been one of the children mentioned in the 1864 article. The Catherine bought in 1853 aged around 17 years old, would have been around 36 years old in 1870, making the timeline correct and any disparity in time likely due to the unavailability of exact birth dates and ages. The labeling of "mulatto" may also be accurate. In the original bill of sale there is no indication of the exact color of her skin besides referring to her as a "negro woman," typical of all bills of sale. If the Catherine in the 1853 bill of sale were actually mulatto, or had light mulatto-like skin, then the unusually-high original price of \$1,250 could be explained due to her more desirable skin tone. Lighter skinned women typically held more monetary value in the slave market. The presence of a child, also with the surname Forrest, further solidifies the argument that

⁴⁷ United States Ninth Census, 1870, Fourth Ward, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee

these two women were indeed the mistress and child of Nathan Bedford Forrest. The child, Narcissa, is recorded as being mulatto. Thus, this proves that her father most likely was white. If Catherine was, in fact, mulatto and had a daughter with a man who was not white, the resulting child would not have been labeled as mulatto. Also, the birthdate of Narcissa would most likely be sometime in 1857, well before the 1864 publication of the article that named Catherine, Forrest's "colored wife" and mentioned two children that resulted from their relationship.⁴⁸ The presence of a slave mistress in a prominent household was a common occurrence for the time. Due to the societal status that slave owning represented, it would have made sense for Forrest, at the start of his Memphis ventures, to buy a slave through which to gain status. Taking the relationship a step further would have been a natural move for the period. It was "so common for female slaves to have white children, that little or nothing is ever said about it."⁴⁹

Memphis, a booming slave trading town, created an atmosphere surrounding slavery that

⁴⁸ Chicago *Tribune*, May 4, 1864, p.3

⁴⁹ Theodore D. Weld, *Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York, 1839): 101 accessed through John White, "Whatever Happened to Slavery in the Old South?" *Journal of American Studies* 8, no. 3 (December 1974): 383

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perpetuated the exploitative nature of owning slaves longer than other southern cities. In many ways Memphis was not very different than other cities important to the cotton industry, but the growth of the city and the continued growth of slavery made it unique in its region. The evidence that the sexual exploitation of enslaved women persisted, and even increased, until the eve of the Civil War, shows how deeply engrained into popular attitudes the acceptance of the abuse of women was in Memphis. The growth in the amount of mulatto slaves, the high prices for particular female slaves, and the existence of mulatto children from prominent local figures are specific ways in which the exploitative and abusive nature of the Memphis slave trade surfaced. In the mid-nineteenth century, Memphis's particularly unique construction of urban slavery caused its deviant trends and led to the continued exploitation of slave femininity, that occurred until slavery ended.