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Recommended Citation

Coopwood, H'Aeneise. "The Child Apprenticeship System During the Reconstruction Era." (May 2023).

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Civil War and Reconstruction

19 December 2022

The Child Apprenticeship System During the Reconstruction Era

Just after emancipation, Maryland's white planters desperately worked through the Apprenticeship system to retain the labor of black children to maintain their wealth. Enslaved black children were guaranteed human capital for their white masters, and their work contributed to the capital gains of their master's commercial agricultural investments. Because ex-slave owners did not want "their able-bodied labor force" to leave the plantation, "owners sought the intervention of their county Orphans' Court to keep emancipated children bound to them, and ...their land as apprentices."¹ White plantation owners took advantage of the Orphans' Court to legally implement child apprenticeships that snatched the recently earned freedom of black youth, binding them to fieldwork and house labor throughout their childhoods. Not to mention, the working conditions of these agreements were identical to those of slavery. This legal loophole was essential to Maryland's white planter class because the continuities of slavery within the apprenticeship system retained the workforce of the recently emancipated black children, without whom their livelihoods would cease to exist.

To John B. Gartrell, these free black children were the most vulnerable social group in the first few months of emancipation. His *Emancipated but not free: African Americans under the post-emancipation apprenticeship system in Frederick County, Maryland 1864–1870*, takes an Afrocentric perspective of apprenticed black children during Reconstruction and argues that

¹ John B. Gartrell, "Emancipated but Not Free: African Americans Under the Post-Emancipation Apprenticeship System in Frederick County, Maryland 1864–1870." (Baltimore: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2009).

the apprenticeship system was a way white Marylanders maintained their enslaved labor. But, when used by black parents, the system was used to receive financial support for their families. Maryland's ability to maintain enslaved labor through drastic changes in the institution of slavery and Maryland's opposition to Federal intervention in state matters were two major themes throughout his text. *Emancipated but not free* is a beneficial read for scholars eager to learn how the apprenticeship system impacted the lives of blacks in Frederick County, Maryland, from 1864–1870. However, his emphasis is mainly on how the apprenticeship system affected the living conditions of free black children and not how vital they were to white planter's financial stability.

Howard Bodenhorn's "Just and Reasonable Treatment: Racial Differences in terms of Pauper Apprenticeship in Antebellum Maryland" is an economic study that examined the discrepancies between white and black child apprenticeships. He argued that the Apprentice system was not designed to treat its indentured children equally but equitably based on what the Orphans' courts expected their lives would have been like had they not been orphaned.

Bodenhorn pointed out that the nature of the system was racialized because black children's lives were determined by their previous status as slaves. As a result, their apprenticeships promised the same menial labor and the lack of education that they would have been subjected to in bondage. Like Gartrell's text, whites' use of the Apprenticeship system to maintain the status quo after emancipation was a significant theme in Bodenhorn's article. Crafts apprentices versus pauper apprentices and parent-apprenticed children versus magistrate-apprenticed children were also important themes. Bodenhorn's "Just and Reasonable Treatment" adequately delineated how the Apprenticeship system functioned and how it was

racialized. Yet, he focused on the economic, educational, and racial disparities between black and white children rather than the reliance of white ex-slaveholders on black children.

Richard Paul Fuke's "Planters, Apprenticeship, and Forced Labor: The black Family under Pressure in Post- Emancipation Maryland" calls attention to the actions of the recently freed blacks after emancipation. He argues that one response of black Marylanders' to emancipation was negotiating their work conditions and claiming the labor of their children. Tidewater whites' determination to regulate black labor, apprenticeship masters' dishonesty, and the unity of the black family were the main themes within Fuke's work. "Planters, Apprenticeship, and Forced Labor" successfully explained how freed blacks took control of their contractual labor and reconstructed their families. Still, the subject of the text was free blacks' autonomy during reconstruction rather than the significance of black children's labor to the white planters' financial stability. This paper agrees with the previous arguments and adds a condensed focus on the reliance of white farmers on black children during the Reconstruction Era.

The ages at which white slaveholders required black children to begin their slave labor and when these children were signed into their Apprenticeships are remarkably similar. Maryland's Orphan's Courts apprenticed free black children in the 1860s as early as one year of age. The records of Somerset County's Register of Wills show that in the years 1864-1867, 23 of 796 child apprentices were indentured from age 1 to the ages of 18 for girls and 21 for boys.² These numbers are closely paralleled in the Worcester County Register of Wills, where 22 black child apprentices of the 471 recorded were apprenticed from age 1 to 18 for girls and 21 years old for boys.³ While the number of child apprentices who spent their entire childhood in

² Edward H. Nabb Research Center, *Somerset County Register of Wills Indentures 1864-1867* (Salisbury, MD: Salisbury University Libraries, 2022)

³ Edward H. Nabb Research Center, *Worcester County Register of Wills Indentures 1864-1867* (Salisbury, MD: Salisbury University Libraries, 2022)

servitude is relatively small, it still stands that black children were vulnerable to slave-like labor after they were emancipated. Because white planters refused to find new humane ways to sustain their agricultural endeavors, black freedom meant white financial detriment. Therefore, in response to emancipation, white growers placed black infants in contracts spanning the time of their childhoods to ensure the future success of the plantation.

Mayland's white farmers used the apprenticeship system to maintain the labor force they were the beneficiaries of during slavery. Ever since the General Assembly of Maryland passed the slave act of 1664, which stated that "all children born of any black or other slave were to be "Slaves as their Fathers," white slaveholders guaranteed the ability to use black children's labor to accrue their wealth.⁴ In this context, whites referred to the ages of their child workers "by the fractional hand system of classification."⁵ Enslaved Black youth "was referred to as a quarter-hand or a half hand," to determine whether a child "was too young, ... to work full time."⁶ An enslaved child's numerical age did not matter as much as their capability to work.

Slavery's age requirements for labor indicated white planters' dependence on black children for the efficiency of the plantations' production. All resources and efforts had to go directly toward expanding and maintaining the master's wealth and livelihood. Black children were sent to work alongside their enslaved elders as early as their toddler years, performing small tasks to make the work of the enslaved adults run smoother and faster. In this environment, there could be no time for any semblance of childhood or individual time for development. With this labor apparatus, Maryland's slaveholders created a lifestyle no longer sustainable when their workforce gained freedom. In hopes of preventing the inevitable failure of their agricultural

⁴ Ross M. Kimmel, "Freedom or Bondage -- the Legislative Record," in the *Black Before the Law in Colonial Maryland* (Annapolis: MD: Maryland State Archives, 2000)

⁵ Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011),73.

⁶ Ibid

investments, former slaveholders sought to continue slavery under the guise of the apprenticeship system.

In Maryland, white planters manipulated the apprenticeship system to secure black children's labor with the help of "the 1860 Maryland Code of Public General Laws."⁷ Under this code, Maryland's Orphan's Courts were justified to issue contracts that bonded black children to white apprenticeship masters. The Courts were "authorized to 'summon before them the child of any free negro,' and... "'for the habits and comfort of said child,' apprentice him or her to a white employer' to learn to labor."⁸ Most often, black apprentices were Not given the skills to move beyond a life of labor which maintained the status quo of black servitude for white gain.

One contract of indenture issued by the Freedmen's Bureau on November 21, 1865, exemplifies the young age of a black youth inserted into the Apprenticeship system. The contract "bind[ed] Oney Cunningham, a free girl of color, ... being the age of nine years, to ... Alex Cunningham, to learn the art of a Housekeeper, ... [until] the age of Eighteen years."⁹ Forced into this agreement as a young child, Oney Cunningham was bonded to her apprenticeship master for the remainder of her childhood.

Because they bore the same last name, Alexander Cunningham was most likely Oney Cunningham's former enslaver during slavery, and her recent freedom threatened the continuity of this lifestyle. The fact that this source was documented on November 21, 1865, when congress recently abolished slavery in January of 1865, demonstrated the urgency with which Alexander Cunningham moved to rebind the young girl to him.¹⁰ While it is possible that Oney Cunningham could have been literate at the time of her emancipation, her name was signed in

⁷Richard Paul Fuke, "Planters, Apprenticeship, and Forced Labor: The Black Family under Pressure in Post-Emancipation Maryland." *Agricultural History* 62, no. 4 (1988): 63.

⁸Ibid

⁹Alexander Cunningham, *Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands 1861 – 1880* (Record Group 105:National Archives, 11/21/1865)

¹⁰National Archives "13th Amendment of the U.S Constitution: Abolition of Slavery, (1865)" *Archives.gov*, 2022.

the same handwriting as Alexander Cunningham's, which indicates that she did not have any say in the arrangement. This young girl did not enjoy the freedom legally entitled to her by emancipation. Instead, she was forced back onto white lands to continue the accrual of her former master's wealth.

During Oney Cunningham's time indentured, she was to "not absent herself from the service of her master day or night, without his leave; but shall, in all things, as a faithful Apprentice, behave herself towards her master, and all his family"¹¹ These requirements are identical to that expected of enslaved individuals. Her apprenticeship promised to teach her "the art of a Housekeeper."¹² However, these are the same 'skills' she would have likely learned alongside the house slaves during her enslavement. This fact is parallel in the assigned labor of child apprentices in Sussex County. 792 of the 1,602 total number of child apprentices in the Sussex County DE Apprentice Indentures 1822-1924 were female children, of whom all but a few exceptions were apprenticed in housework.¹³ Correspondingly, 512 of the total 1,602 apprentices were male children, and except for a select few, the vast majority were registered as farming apprentices.¹⁴ Because the jobs of apprenticed children were the exact jobs given to enslaved black children insinuates that the apprenticeship system was intended to replace the system of slavery.

While Oney Cunningham was apprenticed to Alex Cunningham as a house worker, her contract reveals the exploitative ways of apprenticeship masters as well. Because she was to be trained in the house, her duties most likely served to maintain the apprenticeship master's lifestyle that was made possible by forced labor during slavery. Her contract promises her

¹¹ Alexander Cunningham, *Records of the Bureau of Refugees*

¹² Ibid

¹³ Edward H. Nabb Research Center, *Sussex County Apprentice Indentures DE, 1822-1924* (Salisbury, MD: Salisbury University Libraries, 2022)

¹⁴ Ibid

“competent and sufficient meat, drink, washing, lodging, apparel, and all other things necessary for the said Apprentice to have,” but she would not have been given cash until the end of her service at which she is provided, “the sum of Fifty Dollars, lawful money of Virginia.”¹⁵ This money would be paid at the very end of her apprenticeship. During her service, Alex Cunningham would have profited off her labor many times more than she was compensated for at the end of her service. Thus, her apprenticeship master took advantage of the low cost of her labor, giving her only a fraction of its monetary worth. In addition, since Oney Cunningham was only 9 years old at the time the contract was issued, it's likely that she could not negotiate its terms. Vulnerable on account of her race and youth, Oney Cunningham's apprenticeship master Alex Cunningham, used the apprenticeship system to exploit her labor to maintain the forced labor required to sustain their lifestyle.

Because slavery separated black families, children were wrongfully said to be orphans who needed white apprenticeship to help them develop into functioning members of society. But these apprenticeships only offered black youth the functions of slaves in society. Labeling newly freed black children as ‘orphans’ or targeting children of impoverished parents provided ex-slaveholders a loophole to confiscate black children from their homes. More often than not, the skills these children “learn[ed] to labor” during their apprenticeships were the exact skills they would have acquired had they been enslaved. The “Orphans’ Court judges ... had an interest in keeping children on their master’s land, as many judges were themselves planters.”¹⁶ In this way, Maryland’s slave-holding planters used their network to prevent the eminent societal changes that threatened to affect their lives negatively. They utilized their institutional and social connections, like judicial officials, to ensnare black children on their plantations and protect their

¹⁵ Alexander Cunningham, *Records of the Bureau of Refugees*

¹⁶ J. B., Gartrell, *Emancipated But Not Free*, 4.

cultural and economic status. Through their institutional connections, white planters preyed on the most vulnerable members of the black community because they could not move on from their dependency on forced labor.

Ex-slaveholders turned apprenticeship masters counted on the vulnerability of the black youth to continue to perform slave labor while free. Before emancipation, black children followed the adult field hands and house servants to observe how to perform their duties properly. Wilma King's *Stolen Childhood* explains the job-shadowing nature of enslaved children in training. When referring to boys who were being shown the ways of house service, she stated that "the boys were working and learning the detailed and formal service rituals of fine dining through on-the-job training under the supervision of their elders."¹⁷ This was because the enslaved children considered half-hands were expected to replace their mentors when they became full-hands. When explaining how enslaved girls learned laundry work, she noted that "the slave laundress must be waited on by a little Negress, to kindle her fires, heat her irons, and do everything that the dignity of the 'lady' in question deem it 'derogatorium' for her to put her hands to."¹⁸ By staying close to the slave laundress, the young girl learned housekeeping skills on the job so that, eventually, she would fill in the place of the women who trained her. black children were lunged into housework and field labor during their earliest years of learning how they worked on the job. These skills and jobs were vital to the luxurious livelihood of their slave masters, who depended on the child's forced labor for food, clean clothes, and upkeep around the estate. To maintain their relative life of ease, white apprenticeship masters indentured black children to do those same duties after emancipation.

¹⁷ Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood*, 80.

¹⁸ Ibid

Through the apprenticeship system, white planters accumulated much wealth by maintaining slavery's economic exploitation of black children. Howard Bodenhorn's "Just and Reasonable Treatment" explains the low wages black children were given for their childhood of labor. He stated that "Children bound to engage in farm labor rarely received cash payments from their masters, though some negotiated to be released from their apprenticeship for a week or two during the harvest to hire themselves out as day laborers to earn some cash."¹⁹ Only through instances of negotiation was the opportunity to receive money for farming apprentices granted. These negotiations happened more often with white children apprenticed by their parents than with black children apprenticed for farming by the Maryland magistrate. In the case of the black farming apprentice, the master profited from their labor while granting the child no economic mobility. In this way, white planters depended on the cheap labor of their black apprentices to retain large profits from their plantations.

By continuing the educational restrictions of slavery, white apprenticeship masters and Maryland's court officials ensured black children's vulnerability beyond their duration as apprentices. Being given no formal education during their apprenticeships, young blacks were kept incapable of properly reading contracts. This left them "effectively excluded from a number of relatively high-status occupations that required basic literacy" and "barred from independent production even in rudimentary crafts."²⁰ With no ability to legally protect or economically sustain themselves, recently released black apprentices who spent their childhoods in bondage were forced back onto the plantation because of contractual manipulation. Therefore, black apprentices were intentionally prevented from obtaining their literacy to keep them tied to the white planter's land, and the labor force they relied on during slavery continued.

¹⁹Howard Bodenhorn "Just and Reasonable Treatment: Racial Treatment in the Terms of Pauper Apprenticeship in Antebellum Maryland." National Bureau of Economic Research, (2003): 7.

²⁰Bodenhorn, Howard. "Just and Reasonable Treatment". 8.

Whites worked to render black parents powerless in their attempts to protect their children from slave labor in the guise of apprenticeships. The Freedmen's Bureau Illegal Apprenticeship Complaints holds 48 records where parents complained about having their children taken from them without their consent. All of these records show that their "case[s] was settled and the child released."²¹ While Maryland's petitioning black parents won their legal battles, others through the south did not. Richard Paul Fuke's "Planters, Apprenticeship, and Forced Labor" provides examples of how black parents were hindered from retrieving their illegally claimed orphan children.

He discussed how Maria Nichols of Kent County was forced to apprentice her child stating, "[T]hey sent for me to come to the court house,' she complained, 'and i refuse to go and the sent high sheriffs after me and taken [me] by force then after i got there they did not ask me anything but they taken him and bound him and they would not let me say a word."²² In another example Fuke explained the attempts of one family to resist their coercion. As a result of Basil Croudy and his wife's refusal, "to consent to the binding of their three children, the "constable... finding the mother obstinate, and deaf to reason... struck her in the face with his fist in the presence of the judges."²³ Parents unwilling to sign their children's childhoods away were met with violent retaliation on behalf of labor-starved planters. These retaliating efforts served to legally restrict black parents from getting in the way of the re-establishment of acclaimed apprenticeship masters' child labor force, indicating the reliance of the southern agricultural economy on black children's labor during Reconstruction.

²¹ Salisbury University Libraries, *Freedmen's Bureau Illegal Apprenticeship Complaints*, (Salisbury, MD: Salisbury University Libraries, 2022)

²²Richard Paul Fuke, "Planters, Apprenticeship, and Forced Labor.65.

²³Richard Paul Fuke, "Planters, Apprenticeship, and Forced Labor.66.

Enslaved children were automatic human capital entitled to southern white planters at birth, but this entitlement to slave labor was interrupted by emancipation. The apprenticeship system was the solution through which white planters resumed their plantation production. Through the apprenticeship system, Maryland's planter class and Orphans' Court magistrates introduced orphan laws that bonded black children to former slaveholders and other white planters. Under these contracts, Black children continued to perform their slave duties for small wages and little to no education over the course of their childhoods.

Though parents did try to protect their children from returning to the hands of white masters, oftentimes these attempts failed. This left black children vulnerable to the whims of opportunistic apprenticeship masters. The determination of whites to maintain their labor force after emancipation is evidenced by their reliance on black children. So needy were southern whites that they illegally took children from their homes, forced them to continue slave labor as freed persons, and inflicted violence on black parents who attempted to protect their own young. black children's labor was a vital part of the south's wealth that white planters were determined not to live without.

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