

# African American History *at the* Chief Vann House

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**Edited by Tiya Miles**  
**with student editors Alexandria Cadotte**  
**& Merwin Moss**

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A project by undergraduate students at the  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor—  
programs in American culture,  
Afroamerican & African studies,  
and Native American studies

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Cover: An outbuilding at the Chief Vann House State Historic Site.

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**The Vann family's plantation home.**  
*Courtesy of the Chief Vann House.*

“ This historical site was once a place where people were treated as property. There were 100 slaves on this plantation, and *their* stories and experiences are necessary in order for the Vann House museum to fulfill its mission of public education.”

—*Amber Joi Thomas*

# “The Dead Call Us To Remember”: Illuminating the Lives of Enslaved Blacks among the Cherokees

*by Tiya Miles*

The purpose of this booklet is to illuminate, commemorate, and contextualize the lives of enslaved Africans and African Americans who labored on the Vann plantation in the Cherokee Nation. The larger goal is to contribute to the public history mission of the Chief Vann House historic site.

In an essay titled “Revolutionary ‘Renegades’: Native Americans, African Americans, and Black Indians,” scholar bell hooks argues that the conjoined history of African Americans and Native Americans has long been suppressed in the United States. Hooks attributes this suppression to a national practice of separating racial groups from one another and structuring those groups into a hierarchy of relative power and regard, with white Americans placed at the top and Indians and blacks placed at the bottom. Hooks insists that in order to challenge unjust racial hierarchies and to honor those whose lives have been forgotten, we must recover these lost histories.

“The dead call us to remember” the buried stories of our past, hooks urges (180). And in recent years, scholars and community groups have responded to this call, taking up the subject of black and Native interrelated histories and cultures—thereby reconstructing what historian Carter G. Woodson, the founder of Black History Month, has called, “one of the longest unwritten chapters of the history of the United States” (Woodson 45).

The Chief Vann House State Historic Site, operated by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, offers a rare opportunity for the exploration of African American life among American Indians. James Vann was a wealthy businessman of Cherokee and Scottish parentage who, in 1804, built a plan-

tation called Diamond Hill in present-day northwest Georgia. Vann and his heir possessed over 100 of the 583 black slaves owned by Cherokees in the first four decades of the 19th century (Norton 60; McLoughlin, *Ghost Dance* 234, 240).

The Vann home has been restored by local preservationists and state officials and is open to the public for guided tours and organized community events. In July 2002, the Vann House was augmented by the opening of a visitor's center and museum, including a permanent exhibit and documentary film. Because James Vann allowed Moravians (a German-speaking Protestant denomination) to operate a mission on his land, a detailed record of life on the Vann plantation exists in the form of missionary diaries and letters.

It is in this context that an undergraduate class titled "Blacks, Indians, and the Making of America" at the University of Michigan set out to increase awareness of African American history at this historic site. Nearly 30 students from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds researched the history of the Vann plantation, relying on sources ranging from Moravian missionary diaries to Works Progress Administration narratives of former slaves of Indians, including classic secondary sources on slavery in the Cherokee Nation by scholars such as Theda Perdue, William McLoughlin, and Rudi Halliburton.

Students shared their research findings with the class, and then wrote individual papers on their topics. The papers were edited, shortened, combined, and compiled by a team of African American and Native American students.

Students in this course were passionate about their projects and deeply serious about the topics and questions they explored. The student authors crafted the essays in this booklet with care, and the editors worked diligently to identify and correct mistakes. Errors or gaps in information are inevitable, however, especially in a project like this one. We encourage readers to refer to the partial bibliography of scholarly publications at the end of this booklet for further learning.

—Tiya Miles

## Acknowledgments

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*Special thanks to* chief interpretive ranger Julia Autry and to Dr. Rowena McClinton, who supported this project with their enthusiasm and expertise. Thank you, also, to Tim Howard of the Whitfield-Murray Historical Society for his generous and exhaustive tour of the Chatsworth area.

Moravian diaries are quoted by permission of the Moravian Archives, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

*Illustration credits:* Fig. 1 (Outbuilding at the Chief Vann site, cover)—photo by Tiya Miles, 2001. Fig. 2 (Vann family home, page ii) and Fig. 3 (Map of the Vann plantation, page 9)—courtesy of the Chief Vann House.

## Cherokees Had Slaves Too?

by *Mary Ellen Farrell*

**A**s you tour the Vann plantation home and museum today, you are likely to hear a brief mention of the Vann family's history of owning black slaves. For some, this information may come as a shock. For most, a host of questions will arise upon confronting this reality. It is the aim of this booklet to openly pose these questions and begin to explore answers.

Did all Cherokees own slaves? Was chattel slavery as integrated into Cherokee society as it was in Euro-American society?

No and no. Only about 8 percent of the heads of households within the Cherokee Nation owned slaves, meaning that 92 percent, the substantial majority, did not (Perdue, *Slavery* 57). Most accounts report that there were fewer than 100 African slaves in the Cherokee Nation just before the 19th century and that in a couple of short decades, this number grew to nearly 600 (McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renaissance* 71). That being noted, however, a very real form of slavery did exist within the Nation. And although only a minority of Cherokees owned slaves, this system had significant effects on the Cherokee Nation and certainly on the United States' view of this group.

Where does the Vann family fit in?

The Vann family stands out as owning more slaves than almost all others among the slaveholding minority in the Cherokee Nation. In 1808, it was reported that James Vann owned nearly 100 slaves (McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renaissance* 71). His son, "Joseph Vann [,] had 110 slaves in 1835, but only two other planters held title to more than 50 slaves and of the 207 slaveholders, 168, or 83 percent, owned fewer than 10 slaves" (Perdue, *Slavery* 58).

This information challenges the popular perspective that the Vann family's wealth and luxurious lifestyle amount to a success story within the Cherokee Nation. The Vann family may appear to be an exemplary model of Cherokee success and economic achievement, but to consider them the example of the Cherokee Nation's "progress" when they were part of a very small economi-



cally profitable, slaveholding elite would be doing a disservice to the rest of the Cherokee population.

This is not to say that the Vann family was not Cherokee. As descendants of Cherokee women and European men, they recognized themselves and were recognized by others as Cherokee people. But in the study of Cherokee history, it is important to note that the Vann family members, in their propensity for acquiring property and expensive possessions, led very different lifestyles than most other Cherokees.

If the slaveholders were such a small group among the Cherokees, then why focus on this topic?

Just as equating the Vann family to all or most Cherokee people of their day would not be a fair assessment of the whole of Cherokee experience, ignoring the fact that the family owned more than 100 slaves while admiring the family's grand home, fine tableware, and extensive grounds would be doing a disservice to the slaves and the descendants of those slaves who were integral to the creation and maintenance of the Vanns' economic position. In the study of black slavery in the United States, we cannot ignore the fact that some Native Americans owned slaves.

How did the Euro-American practice of possessing black people as slaves take root in the Cherokee Nation?

Although a type of captivity existed before contact with Europeans, the introduction of slavery as practiced in the southern United States was a new phenomenon for Cherokees. They were gradually exposed to this form of slavery through increased contact with white people, namely through trade, intermarriage, and political relations with the British and U.S. governments.

Exposure to black slavery happened first through trade. It was customary for Cherokees to take captives in war, and during the period of the enslavement of Indians by Europeans, Cherokees would trade these prisoners of war. Therefore, "when colonists abandoned the Indian slave trade and demanded black slaves instead, the existing system of Indian captives-for-goods was easily adjusted. Cherokees and other tribes ... became hunters and traders of Africans" (Miles 31). While at this point, in the early 1700s, the practice of Cherokees owning such African slaves had not yet begun, this introduction to European slavery undoubtedly affected the Cherokees' view of the value of slaves as well as the spread of slaveholding in the European colonies.

It was not until after the Revolutionary War in the late 1700s and into the 1800s that some Cherokee elite began the practice of owning slaves. The Cherokees had sided with the British during the war, so after the war Cherokees were economically devastated as well as politically weakened.

Thus, in 1791, members of the Cherokee Nation and the U.S. government signed the Treaty of Holston which called for, among other things, land cessions, the return of captives from the war, and a project of civilization of the Cherokee people (*A Treaty of Peace and Friendship*). Although Henry Knox, the secretary of war at the time, had been pushing a government plan for “civilizing” the Native Americans, it was not until this treaty in 1791 that “the civilization program became an official part of Cherokee relations with the federal government” (Perdue, *Women* 110).

Similar notions of “civilizing” and assimilating Native Americans began to emerge as soon as the United States concluded it would be easier to pacify the Native Americans than fight wars against them. The hope was that if Native Americans could evolve to the supposed superior status of Europeans and believe that their “interests coincided with those of the whites,” then both groups could live peacefully together sharing the most cherished asset of the Native Americans—land (Perdue, *Slavery* 46).

One aspect of the Euro-American definition of civilized behavior was slave ownership. Therefore, when the notion of civilizing the “savages” began to emerge as an alternative tactic to battling with them, the introduction of slavery into southern Native societies and their continued loss of land certainly went along with it.

So how should we view the Vann House now?

The Vann House is a valuable and cherished historical site as one of the few house museums dedicated to 19th-century Cherokee history. This site shows us that the Vann family was indeed an economically successful and politically influential family—but at what cost, and toward what ends? Recognizing slavery as a major source of Vann family wealth leads us to face the implications of placing this particular family on a historical pedestal while neglecting the stories of poorer Cherokees, African American slaves, and Afro-Cherokees.

As part of the U.S. civilization program, federal officials tried “to determine if Native Americans could learn to live, think, and work like ideal Anglo-American settlers, if they could adopt the gaze that appraised nature primarily in terms of its economic value for commercial agriculture and intensive husbandry” (Martin 93). In many ways, the Vann family reached and surpassed these ideals, since for Native Americans “to own slaves became both a source of wealth and a source of respect” (McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renaissance* 338).

But what was being respected then? And by admiring the Vann family’s economic achievements without confronting the system of slavery that made it possible, what are we respecting now?

## Moravian Missionaries as Recorders of History

by Ashley Harris, Jonathan Garrett,  
Alexandria Cadotte, Courtney Monroe,  
Brittany Marino, and Allison Lasky

**M**issionaries are individuals sent to do religious or charitable work on behalf of a church in a foreign territory or country. At the same time, missionaries also endeavor to spread their cultural practices and values to those they are set on converting.

Missionary intentions to convert others to their own belief system can create tensions within their targeted communities. Such tensions are evident in the history of the Cherokee Nation, where Christian Protestant missionaries from the Moravian Church, Southern Province (a devout German-speaking denomination originally from Central Europe and based in Salem, North Carolina) made forays in 1799. In 1800, the Moravians received permission from wealthy Cherokee trader and slaveholder James Vann to build a missionary compound on his plantation lands in an area called Springplace.

On the Vann grounds at Springplace, Moravian missionaries described events that unfolded around them. Entries in what is called *the Springplace Diary* (housed at the Moravian Church Archives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina) provide a vivid, firsthand account of life on the Vann plantation. The entries logged by various missionary diarists (primarily Anna Rosina Gambold) are a valuable primary source of information on African and African American life in the Cherokee Nation at that time. Moravians, as careful observers, recorded the names, experiences, and trials of enslaved blacks. Many slaves attended church services, visited the mission for assistance, or were forced to labor for the missionaries. Enslaved men, women, and children appear in the record throughout the years that the diaries were kept, allowing us an excellent opportunity to learn about their lives.

As valuable as the missionary diaries are as a source, however, these diaries give only limited information about the community of enslaved blacks on the Vann plantation. The missionaries wrote these diaries to communicate with fellow parishioners, who were likely more interested in reading about the successes and challenges the missionaries faced in their primary goal than about details of the gruesome practice of slavery or even details of black life outside the realm of Christian conversion.

In addition, the missionaries simply did not have access to all arenas or the most intimate realms of enslaved people's lives. For these reasons and more, we must assume that substantial information about African American experience was simply not included in the diaries.

In this booklet, we have by necessity relied on the Moravian diaries as our major primary source. However, we wish to stress the importance of questioning the information presented by the missionaries, and by extension, the historical interpretations made possible by these records.

Questions our class considered while researching this booklet included: Were there events that the missionaries could not document, for whatever reason? Was the diarist altering events as she or he recorded them for personal reasons or to give a certain impression of the missionaries to diary readers?

We cannot know the answers to these questions, but we can read the diaries for what they offer as well as read between the lines to try to arrive at an understanding of African American history on the Vann plantation.

## The Vann Family as Slaveholders

*by Brittany Marino, Erica Coleman, Alisha Humphrey,  
Ollie Ganz, Kelly Shalifoe, Rachael Howerly,  
Alexandria Cadotte, and Ashley Payne*

**T**he Vann family exemplifies the minority of Cherokee people who adopted large-scale individualized agriculture and commercial ventures in the early 1800s. This economic success did not occur without a cost, however—for success at that time in U.S. history often meant owning a large number of enslaved African Americans. Although the Vanns differed from members of the dominant white society in many ways, they shared this definition of success with Euro-American southerners. Indeed, the Vann family was sustained by the labor of a black slave population.

The purpose of acknowledging this history is not to discredit the Vann family or to devalue their achievements, but rather to allow historians and visitors of the museum to see a broad and all-encompassing picture of life on the Vann plantation.

One way to understand life on the Vann plantation is to examine the various relationships that members of the Vann family had with their slaves. From the Moravian Springplace Mission diaries, we can begin to develop snapshots of the relationships that the Vann family members had with the blacks who lived among them. The most evident cordial set of relationships between a Vann and enslaved African Americans was between Margaret Ann “Peggy” Scott Vann and her slaves.

Peggy Vann was one of James Vann’s wives. She is mentioned frequently in the missionary diaries, and very rarely do we see her unaccompanied by at least one black woman, such as Grace, Sally, or Minda. In almost every month of the decades of diary entries that have been kept, there is an entry that shows Peggy Vann attending church with her “negroes.” One slave woman she was very fond of, Candace, attended Peggy’s baptism and “wept during all the service” (Moravian Diary, Vann House, August 13, 1810). In 1811, Peggy

requested that the missionaries baptize the child of one of her slaves. She also requested that the baptism take place at her home so that the child's mother and three other black women could be present (Moravian Diary, Vann House, February 18, 1811).

Further, Peggy Vann had a close relationship with an enslaved woman named Caty. When Caty fell ill, the missionaries described Mrs. Vann and her "Negresses [:] Grace, Sally, and Minda," along with the missionaries' slave Pleasant [,] refusing to leave Caty's side just before her death (Moravian Diary, Vann House, October 1, 1808). Peggy seems to have had a very close relationship with Caty even though she was Peggy's slave. And beyond the relationship with Caty, Peggy Vann seems to have had a close relationship with her other slaves, who may have remained by the bedside not only to see Caty, but also to support and comfort Peggy.

There are also instances in which Mother Vann, James Vann's mother, showed compassion for the slaves that she owned. For instance, one of Mother Vann's slaves, Demos, was accused of slaughtering one of James Vann's oxen. Rather than killing or selling Demos, James Vann returned him to the custody of Mother Vann (Moravian Diary, Vann House, February 11 and March 15, 1807). Mother Vann most likely pleaded with James Vann and requested that Demos be released to her.

In addition, Mother Vann often opted to spend time with slaves at parties and dances (Moravian Diary, Vann House, 1806). In 1809, Mother Vann is described as having "heathen amusements" in her home, parties that seem to have included enslaved African American participants (Springplace Diary, Archives, 1809).

Mother Vann's unusual perspective on slavery most likely came from her traditional Cherokee background. Conventionally, Cherokee culture did not embrace chattel slavery. Historian Claudio Saunt explains that while Southeastern Native Americans "may have employed forced labor centuries earlier to build the ceremonial mounds that still dot the landscape, in the 18th century no Native American in the Deep South Interior could recall ever seeing or hearing about such slavery" (Saunt 47).

Despite Peggy Vann's and Mother Vann's out-of-the-ordinary relationships with African Americans on the plantation, it is important to recognize that they still owned slaves and benefited from their slaves' free labor. This ownership of other human beings was clearly in tension with these women's personal ties to blacks, as well as with traditional Cherokee beliefs.

Not all of the Vann family members had friendly relationships with their slaves, however. James Vann was particularly known for having an outrageous temper. The missionaries often recorded him as being drunk and taking out

his aggression, rather violently, upon his slaves. After accusing Demos of slaughtering one of his oxen, for example, James Vann tied him up with chains and kept him at the house. After he released Demos back to Mother Vann, Vann continued to beat him on many occasions (Moravian Diary, Vann House, February 11 and March 15, 1807).

We can draw only limited conclusions about relations between the Vanns and their slaves because the descriptions available to us were recorded by foreign missionaries rather than by the Vanns or by blacks themselves. Yet given the abundant examples provided in the missionary diaries, we can be sure that even more interactions took place between this slaveowning family and the black people they possessed.

## James Vann and His Son, Joseph

**James Vann exceeded the expectations of the average** American Indian person by U.S. standards of the time. His land ownership, accumulations of goods, livestock and slaves made him considerably wealthy in the eyes of the U.S. government, Moravian missionaries, and other Native peoples. Although other Cherokees owned slaves, it was rare to own as many as Vann did. Vann's plantation resembled many of those in the Deep South at the time. Vann employed white overseers to work his slaves, he regularly disciplined his slaves, and in some cases he was the cause of their deaths.

Vann is remembered for his business savvy, his statesmanship in Cherokee affairs, and his generosity to visitors and the Moravian missionaries. He is also remembered for his bad temper, often fueled by alcohol. The missionaries bore witness to many of Vann's episodes of violence. They, and many of the plantation residents, were afraid of Vann. The Moravians spoke with Vann on many occasions in an attempt to save his soul and perhaps also to evoke in him some form of moral responsibility.

In addition to committing frequent violence against his own family, Vann was especially violent toward his slaves. The year 1805 is the most violent of years documented by the Moravian missionaries, with at least eight separate eruptions of violence, including the most horrific account. Four of Vann's slaves, along with a former overseer and a guest at Vann's, stole \$3,500 and clothing from the Vann home (Moravian Diary, Vann House, August 23 and September 13, 1805). In revenge, Vann burned alive one of the thieves, a slave named Isaac, while making the other slaves watch (Moravian Diary, Vann House, September 16, 1805). He then shot another slave, Bob, who had also participated in the robbery (Moravian Diary, Vann House, September 28, 1805). Still another slave, Peter, and a female slave, April, were beaten for their roles in the robbery (Moravian diary, Vann House, November 6, 1805).

It is often argued that “the lives of black slaves owned by the Cherokees were considerably easier than those owned by white masters” (Halliburton, Red 4). However, that may not be the case, as revealed by Vann’s brutal treatment of blacks.

James Vann’s actions would seem to dispel the myth that blacks preferred to have Indian masters as opposed to white masters. The violence inflicted by James Vann further emphasizes that under his control, this plantation was no exception to the humiliation, brutality and loss of life associated with slavery.

After James Vann’s death, his son Joseph Vann took over ownership of the plantation. Known as “Rich Joe,” Joseph Vann carried on his father’s successful business enterprises, including the ownership of African Americans. Joe seems not to have continued his father’s reign of violence, however. In 1805, during James Vann’s era, there were many missionary accounts of brutality against blacks. In contrast, in 1819, 10 years after Joe inherited the plantation, such accounts do not appear at all (Moravian Diary, Vann House, January-December).

Different explanations, such as a transition in diary authors, can certainly be given for why the missionaries stopped recording anti-black violence, but it is also possible that Joe Vann was a different man than his father and did not personally engage in acts of violence against the plantation inhabitants.

## The Vann Family During Removal

**In the early part of the 1800s, white settlers in Georgia** put steady pressure on the state to remove Indian nations from the land, seeing them as an obstacle to Euro-American progress. Squatters and thieves were common in the Cherokee Nation, as the Moravian missionary diaries show.

In order to assert their sovereignty and right to remain on their land, the Cherokee Nation appealed their case to the United States Supreme Court. Although the court struck down the state of Georgia’s right to control the Cherokee land base, the newly elected president, Andrew Jackson, declared his ardent support of a federal policy of Indian Removal and refused to enforce the Supreme Court’s decisions.

In a context of extreme political pressure and internal friction, a small faction of Cherokees signed a treaty agreeing to removal in 1835. Although the vast majority of Cherokees did not support this decision, and approximately 15,000 Cherokee people are said to have signed a petition in protest, the U.S. Congress still decided to ratify the treaty in 1836. At the end of a two-year term during which Cherokees could migrate voluntarily, the U.S. government forced their removal with 7,000 troops. During this removal, known as the Trail of Tears, thousands of Cherokees died of hunger, cold, and disease.



Like other Cherokees, the Vann family was directly affected by this unjust policy. And like other slaves in the Cherokee Nation, African Americans on the Vann plantation were displaced along with their Cherokee owners. Joseph Vann lost possession of his house, mill, and nearly 1,000 acres of land. When whites usurped his stately home, he and his family fled to Tennessee and then to Webbers Falls, Indian Territory aboard his steamboat, *The Lucy Walker* (Perdue, *Slavery* 70).

Once en route, Vann relocated “with greater comfort than most Cherokees” (Shadburn 262). The enslaved blacks owned by Vann were among others “who accompanied the detachments of Cherokees in the removal of 1838–9” and “occasionally performed useful services” by acting as armed watchmen, hunters, and cooks (Perdue, *Slavery* 71). The Trail of Tears was an extreme hardship for black slaves, and an unknown number died on the journey.

Once in the West, slaveholders like Joseph Vann “possessed a distinct advantage over the non-slaveholders in re-establishing themselves” (Perdue, *Slavery* 70). Most other Cherokees experienced a trying transition marked by poverty and hunger, but “while their compatriots struggled to eat, Cherokee slaveholding families flourished in a market economy driven by slave labor” (Miles 164). Vann’s slaves were the key to ensuring his economic productivity in a new region.

## African American Life, Culture, and Community

*by Jennifer Jones, Jessica Jones, Tiffany Teasley,  
Neika White, and Cachavious English*

**A**s historian Ira Berlin has observed, pinpointing forms and practices of labor is a fundamental way of understanding the experience of enslaved people (Berlin 6). A conjectural map of the Vann's extensive "improved" lands that hangs on the wall of the Vann House Museum (see fig. 3) shows numerous fields, gardens, orchards, and structures. In the slaveholding South, the success of a large plantation like this one would have required a sizeable slave labor force. Over time, James Vann and his son, Joseph Vann, developed such a force, reflected in Joseph's ownership of 110 slaves by 1835 (Perdue, *Slavery* 58). Outlining the tasks these enslaved people performed day in and day out can help us to see the shape of their daily lives.

Enslaved persons on the Vann Plantation engaged in a number of different agricultural pursuits. First and fundamentally, they were responsible for the deforestation and clearance of fields. In fact, one missionary diary entry records that 80 acres of land were cleared by Vann slaves at a particular time. Other slave responsibilities included felling trees, uprooting stumps, "rolling blocks on [the] newly cleared field," planting, and plowing (Moravian Diary, Vann House, April 2, 1802). Corn seems to have been the most substantial crop grown on the Vann plantation, and slave labor was used not only to cultivate and harvest corn, but also to build corn cribs to store the produce. It appears that Vann slaves grew wheat on the estate as well (Springplace Diary, Archives, June 19, 1816).

Slaves were also engaged in construction projects, and they played an integral part in building every structure on the Vann grounds, including the main house and mission complex buildings. The range of construction projects that slaves worked on included constructing fences, building a bake oven, enlarging



tries. The millwright and James Vann settled on a construction fee of \$133.50 “if the Negroes would build the dam and house under his supervision,” and the construction date was set for June because “at that time Negroes would be the least busy and would be able to bring the millstones from Tellico,” (Moravian Diary, Vann House, May 21, 1802).

Slave labor was also employed to make any repairs needed to the mill (Moravian Diary, Vann House, March 29, 1806). Furthermore, the centrality of slave labor at the mill extended beyond its construction; labor and oversight of the mill seem to have been delegated as an enslaved person’s task. In 1808, Vann brought 20 “negro men and women, including children,” from Virginia and placed them on the mill site (Springplace Diary, Archives, April 3, 1808), while two years earlier an enslaved man acting as miller, who is not named, and his wife Renee, were already in residence at the mill (Springplace Diary, Archives, April 12, 1806).

In addition to the above mentioned activities, enslaved blacks were engaged in a variety of other pursuits, which basically encompassed the numerous tasks being executed on the vast plantation. The types of manual labor they engaged in included picking pumpkins, cutting wood, fighting fires, and animal husbandry (Moravian Diary, Vann House November 3, 1802; March 18, 1805; February 14, 1822; Springplace Diary, Archives, February 6, 1819; Moravian Diary, Vann House, December 4, 1821). The numerous animal enclosures located on the estate give credence to the fact that between 1800–1810, James Vann supposedly owned a “hundred head of horses, 400 head of cattle and plenty of hogs” (Perdue, Slavery 97). The task of finding the missionaries’ pigs was assigned to a child known as “Little Negro Isaac,” supporting the assertion by Theda Perdue that because “the Cherokee custom was to allow livestock to forage in the forests, the herds commanded little time on the part of slaves until late fall,” (Perdue, Slavery 97; Springplace Diary, Archives, January 4, 1807; February 21, 1806).

Interestingly enough, one entry speaks to the vastness of the grounds if not to the importance of livestock as an activity. On July 3, 1814, the “Negro Jacob” brought “July [Dully] and wife Betty” to a service at the missionaries’ complex. This couple lived in an isolated area where they watched after livestock and therefore “the English they spoke was impossible for [the missionaries] to understand,” so much so that Jacob had to act as an interpreter (Moravian Diary, Vann House).

As this example indicates, language was another field of labor in which enslaved persons took an active role. Blacks acted as interpreters for both whites and Cherokees. One entry from December 5, 1813, features a man called “Old Indian Black Fox” who wanted to use an enslaved person as an

interpreter to help him to redress a grievance against whites who failed to uphold their promise of payment to any Indian who found their lost horses (Moravian Diary, Vann House; Springplace Diary, Archives). Also, scholars have asserted that enslaved persons probably operated the ferry that Vann owned (Perdue, Slavery 98).

Many of these jobs would have been performed by women as well as men, since gender norms of the day did not necessarily exclude enslaved women from hard manual labor. Yet despite the participation of slave women in arduous manual labor, there does seem to be some gendered division of labor along the lines of domestic work and health care. Here, as in numerous other plantation households, domestic service was undertaken by black women. For instance, the missionary complex on Vann grounds depended upon the domestic work of a series of enslaved women: Vann's slave Hagar starting in 1803, Pleasant, who was brought to Springplace with a newborn child in the fall of 1805, and later Mother Vann's slave Betsey in the fall of 1819 (Moravian Diary, Vann House, December 12, 1803; Springplace Diary, Archives, October 19, 1805; September 6, 1819; September 15, 1819). It also seems that women were employed in caring for the ill, milking cows, and weaving (Moravian Diary, Vann House, February 19, 1806; Springplace Diary, Archives, December 6, 1816; June 14, 1806; July 9, 1806; December 13, 1812).

Even while enslaved, peoples of African descent found agency in their situations and attempted to exert some degree of control over their own lives. In the context of labor, one way that slaves sought control was by earning money or items by working freelance on Sundays (Moravian Diary, Vann House, June 3, 1806). The missionaries often document requests by Vann slaves to work for them on the Sabbath (Moravian Diary, Vann House June 3, 1806; Springplace Diary, Archives, March 2, 1806; June 8, 1806).

Occasionally, slaves working for the missionaries demanded non-monetary forms of compensation like "a pair of young turkeys each" or whiskey (Moravian Diary, Vann House, April 19, 1802; Springplace Diary, Archives, June 15, 1806). This maintenance of "independent productive activities" or ways in which enslaved persons could gain extra money or items was something that Vann slaves had in common with other slaves across the region (Berlin 312).

Another way in which enslaved people on the Vann estate asserted some degree of control over their own lives was through work stoppage. In the wake of James Vann's death the missionaries observed that "his Negroes have proved themselves unmanageable. ...they seem utterly confused," (Moravian Diary, Vann House, March 4, 1809). While the missionaries may have attributed this behavior to sorrow over James Vann's death or incompetence without a master, most likely enslaved persons seized the opportunity to cease

working during a time when the system of authority was weak. Also, there could have been some concern over whether or not members of their community would be sold away.

This exertion of agency is also evident in May of 1811, when enslaved persons began to discuss dividing up the land on which the missionaries lived and were supposedly vacating (Moravian Diary, Vann House, May 5, 1811). The actions of these enslaved peoples also signal a sense of entitlement to restitution from those who extract their labor.

Finally, agency is evident in resistance to cruelty by the various overseers employed on the Vann estate. One overseer named Talley was especially cruel, not only beating slaves “for no reason” but also forbidding enslaved persons to seek out missionaries for help, threatening “an hour lashing for disobedience” (Moravian Diary, Vann House, May 11, 1813; March 19, 1813). One “brave African” stood up to Talley when he threatened to abuse him (Moravian Diary, Vann House, May 12, 1813).

Similarly, on October 15, 1806, the missionaries document some newly enslaved persons threatening the unidentified overseer with an axe because “he insisted they husk corn in the evening” (Springplace Diary, Archives, November 15, 1806). The comment stating that “such actions are not punished by the master, which the Negroes certainly know,” implies that slaves could sometimes assert agency with relative impunity on the Vann estate (Springplace Diary, Archives, July 10, 1806; Moravian Diary, Vann House, August 13, 1806).

## Experiences of Enslaved Men

**Enslaved men were essential members of the plantation** and the surrounding community. Laboring for the Vanns and their missionary residents could consume the best years of an enslaved man’s life. Black men worked hard in the fields, but also at Vann’s mill, on his riverboat, and in his stock pens. They also occasionally filled other roles; for example, when a Native person came to the missionaries looking “to be bled,” the Moravians called upon “Negro Bob” to “perform the operation” (Moravian Diary, Vann House, October 1, 1803). The mission’s reliance on enslaved men illustrates the expertise slaves must have possessed.

The Vann plantation attracted a diverse set of people. Enslaved men would have been exposed to these people and would have interacted with them often. In this environment, enslaved men had the opportunity to cross cultural barriers and relate with others outside of the slave-master relationship.

At one point the missionaries received a white man and a black man into the mission when Joseph Vann had turned them away because there was not enough food to feed them (Moravian Diary, Vann House, July 17, 1831). Al-

though this occurrence marks desperate times for the Vann plantation because of the shortage of food, it also illustrates that white men and black men who perhaps were free or enslaved, frequented the Vann plantation. Also, it shows that enslaved men had the opportunity to interact with other blacks who were not of their slave community.

The missionaries also stated that Tony, a Vann slave, grew up with “the Indians, and understands their language as well as he does English” (Moravian Diary, Vann House, July 9, 1806). Tony’s bilingual skills helped him to negotiate his position within the community. Many bilingual slaves were “interpreters for their Native American owners” (Naylor-Ojuronbe 167). This ability made slaves like Tony highly valuable to their masters

The experience of black men on the Vann plantation was dictated not only by labor, but also by the interactions and relationships that developed on the grounds. In the harsh context of slavery, they carved out social and personal lives. Black men developed friendships with one another and took part in group outings such as nearby “shooting” expeditions. They attended Cherokee cultural events such as ball games, and they also created families with African American women (Moravian Diary, Vann House, December 26, 1805; June 29, 1817).

Enslaved men had a range of abilities that were exploited in various ways by the Vanns. These black men played a prominent role on the Vann estate. Without them, the Vanns’ wealth and success would not have been possible.

## Experiences of Enslaved Women

**Black female slaves carried out essential tasks on the Vann plantation,** and they were distinguished by their centrality to domestic, social, and agricultural activities. There are many stories that could and should be told about black women on the Vann estate, but this space will be dedicated to the unique biography of Candace, a slave woman to Peggy Scott Vann, the widow of James Vann.

The recorded history of Candace begins on Monday, August 13, 1810, when she attended the baptism of her mistress, Peggy Scott. The missionaries write: “For the occasion her relatives, the negress Candace, the school children and our household were assembled at the school ... Her maid Candace wept during all of the service” (Springplace Diary, Archives, August 13, 1810).

Although we are not sure of Candace’s age at this moment, we know that she was in her childbearing years, probably between her mid-teens and twenties. After this event, it becomes clear that Candace was a very spiritual and religious woman who participated in weekly prayer sessions, church services, and Sunday school.



Nearly a month later, Candace attended the praying of the church litany where she was the only slave present. Later, during the sermon of the gospel text she was accompanied by seven more slaves. The following Sunday, Candace attended the praying of the church litany again, this time with Jack Still, a relative of Peggy. Often the only slave in attendance, Candace was loyal to the church and often encouraged other slaves to accompany her. Candace's devotion to the faith may have provided her with a source of strength and inspiration for bearing the heavy burden of slavery.

Her dedication to the church suggests a need to seek peace and stability wherever possible. Indeed, these church services may have been sanctioned social activities that allowed slave women on the Vann plantation to leave the confines of the plantation home or field, if only briefly.

In February of the next year, the young daughter of Candace was baptized at two weeks old in Mountjoy. This was done at the request of Peggy Scott, who wished to raise Candace's child to have a promising future, proclaiming: "My dear Savior has done so much for me, and I believe He asks me to dedicate this poor child to Him ... He would not accept it well from me if I let it grow up like the other Negro children here in this country" (Moravian Diary, Vann House, February 24, 1811. The child was baptized in the Vann house in the company of Candace, Peggy, and three other slaves. At noon, Peggy Vann's mother-in-law, Mother Vann, came with her slaves, making a total of 20 slaves present at the event.

The ceremony was emotional for all in attendance; the missionaries wrote: "She and her dear owner both cried almost out loud ... After a sincere prayer, the child received the name Deborah in baptism. An indescribably holy feeling prevailed during this important event, and our poor children seemed to be very moved as well" (Moravian Diary, Vann House, February 24, 1811). For Candace, the baptism of her baby must have been a crucial milestone in her life, a sign that her child was being recognized as a human being rather than as an inanimate product of her enslaved mother's childbearing labor.

Although Candace and her child seem privileged in this moment of baptism, most slave women in the United States were valued in large part for their ability to bear children, who could be sold away regardless of the maternal bond between mother and child. The Vann plantation was also a place where such separations occurred, since, according to the missionaries, "James Vann namely had the habit of giving Negro children to his relatives" (Moravian Diary, Vann House, May 7, 1820).

Despite the sorrow that many enslaved mothers must have felt at the loss of their children on the Vann plantation and elsewhere across the South, much of female slavery "was concerned with bearing, nourishing, and rearing



children” (White 69). Indeed, Candace soon gave birth to a second child, Virginia, who was also baptized by Brother Gambold at Mountjoy in 1812.

Although the missionary records do not reveal much of Candace’s life experience outside of church meetings, we know that she formed friendships with other enslaved women. Historian Deborah Gray White notes that “the organization of female slave work and social activities generated female cooperation and interdependence” (White 124). Candace seems to have shared this sense of interdependence with at least one fellow slave, Phoebe. In 1819, Candace approached Sister Gambold regarding Phoebe and her spiritual growth, saying: “I ask you, have Phoebe come to you! She has most certainly found peace in our Savior! She can tell you herself, although she otherwise is so ignorant and does not like to speak words about it This much is certain; her walk is completely different than it was before this!” (Moravian Diary, Vann House, March 28, 1819).

After this conversation, Sister Gambold and Phoebe met together to discuss her situation, where Phoebe testified to have felt the spirit of the lord in her presence while going to pray in the woods. Later that afternoon she also confessed to Peggy Scott and her second husband, along with Mother Vann, and together they all cried tears of joy for Phoebe’s renewed spirit that was first recognized by Candace.

Although the history of Candace, a sensitive and caring woman, is not further documented after 1820, we can assume that she continued to wrestle with the duties of a mother, the faith of a Christian, and the burdens of a slave on the Vann plantation.

## African Cultural Retentions

**The trans-Atlantic slave trade destroyed many cultural traditions** formerly held by the newly displaced African people. Once on North American plantations, slaves were exposed to European and Native American cultures. Many historians describe the displaced African’s cultural experience in the United States as one of interaction, integration, and assimilation (Holloway 22). But even within this limiting framework, slaves endeavored to retain aspects of African belief systems and cultural practices.

In the Southeast, where the Vann plantation was located, there was a large population of slaves originating from Greater Senegambia/Upper Guinea (Hall 67). Owing to black population concentration in this region, there was an even greater opportunity for slaves to retain and practice African ways, though modified by the influence of Euro-American and Native American cultures.

African American studies scholar Joseph Holloway, remarks on the ability of many slaves in this area to carry on cultural practices: “They were able to

retain much of their cultural identity. These Africanisms were shared and adopted by various African ethnic groups of the field slave community, and they gradually developed into African American cooking, music, spirituals, and language” (Holloway 37).

The Vann plantation seems to have been a place where African-based cultural and spiritual rituals could be practiced. Often, in the Cherokee Nation prior to Indian Removal, slaves were given a relative level of freedom of social and religious expression. Indeed, a number of missionary reports refer to social and cultural gatherings of plantation slaves characterized by singing, dancing, and drumming. One missionary diary entry among many such entries states: “It was very unpleasant during our worship service . . . to hear the Negroes’ despicable worship of the devil. There was the continuous thunder of musket, drumming, screaming, and dancing that lasted until late in the night” (Springplace Diary, Archives, December 24, 1805).

These gatherings on the Vann grounds might be construed as merely social in nature, but they likely included religious aspects as well. The euphoric tenor of the events, together with the shouting, drumming, and Christian missionaries’ strong disapproval, indicate African spiritual influences (Holloway 36). It seems that on the Vann plantation, as well as on many other plantations in the nearby areas of Georgia and South Carolina, black slaves remembered, modified, and practiced the ways of their homelands.

## Escape and Resistance

*by Merwin Moss, Jason Rukavina, and Adrienne Call*

Slavery is the shackling of one's spirit, the barring of one's freedom. Whether carried out by Anglo-Europeans or Native tribes like the Cherokees, the enslavement of blacks was brutal and demoralizing. The inhumanity of slavery led slaves to rebel against the prevailing repressive powers by absconding. However, circumstances did not always allow for slaves to make successful escape attempts. Factors such as age, gender, terrain, and the master's oversight, as well as the intertwining of these variables, made escape formidable. Nevertheless, many slaves who perceived escape as feasible took their chances.

Slaves ran away for numerous reasons, sometimes as a form of negotiation with their masters, other times to visit loved ones, and in other situations to gain their freedom completely (Franklin and Schweningen 109). Instead of a quest for absolute freedom, the most common form of escape on the part of slaves was "absenteeism" (Franklin and Schweningen 98). Absentees would abscond for a couple of days at a time to visit loved ones

Another common form of escape was called "lying out"—living in the vicinity of the plantation, but fishing, trading, hunting, and looting for survival (Franklin and Schweningen 98). The form of punishment meted out to an absent slave depended on the slave owner's perception of the intentions of the slave upon his or her departure. Slave masters tended to deal with absentee-like behavior with only a mild punishment or sometimes no punishment at all (Franklin and Schweningen 98). But if a slave was gone for a lengthy period of time, he or she would be reported as a runaway, chased, apprehended, and harshly punished.

According to historians John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweningen, most slaves on southern plantations who were set on escape would have attempted to leave between the ages of 14 and 19 (210). Without sufficient remedies for particular ailments, slaves were plagued with sicknesses such as yellow fever,

dysentery, pneumonia, and cholera (Franklin and Schweningen 211). A slave who lived to see his or her 21st birthday might only have another decade or two to live, and as time wore on the chances of escape and survival became bleak (Franklin and Schweningen 211). Life was difficult and death was imminent in the slave's South; thus, those who determined to escape tended to do so in their early years.

The decision to abscond from one's plantation would also have been contingent on gender. Nearly 81 percent of those who attempted escape from slavery were men (Franklin and Schweningen 210). Enslaved women with children were less likely to leave than men because they felt bonded to their youngsters, and to attempt an escape with dependents would be "onerous, time-consuming, and exhaustive" (Franklin and Schweningen 212). Before planning an escape, women likely contemplated the consequences for themselves and their families; most found that the risks far outweighed the chances for success.

Many blacks clearly felt that slavery was overly restrictive. Yet it is also possible that some slaves felt connected to Cherokee slaveowners because of cultural factors. Although many slaves were not related to the Cherokees through bloodlines, former slaves interviewed during the WPA Federal Writers Project described non-biological connections with Indians (Naylor-Ojurongbe 182). Blacks owned by American Indians adopted many of the values, customs, clothing, language, foods, and medicines of the tribe in which they were enslaved (Naylor-Ojurongbe 182). The resulting layers of cultural connection fashioned an identity that linked African Americans enslaved in the Cherokee Nation with Cherokees themselves. And it is possible that having a dual sense of belonging could have been a means of surviving the grotesque abuse of power that was slavery.

Some slaves in Native nations were desperate enough for freedom to cut ties of tribal affinity. These men and women had no intentions of returning and were more likely to attempt a distant trek. A specific destination was less important than finding a place where they could obtain assistance, locate loved ones, or integrate into free people of color communities (Franklin and Schweningen 145).

Northward, beyond the plantations, lay the "promised land." Yet the dream of absconding to the north was often denied, especially to slaves within the Deep South, since slave catchers fortified northern routes and used "Negro dogs" to frighten and apprehend fugitives (Franklin and Schweningen 116, 160). Thus, many slaves attempted other routes. Northwest Georgia, the location of the Vann family's plantation, is thicketed with trees and lies in the lower portions of the Appalachian Mountains. To the south lie marshlands

and swamps. Before Florida became a territory in 1821, many Georgian slaves moved south across the Florida border, seeking refuge in the swamps and forming maroon communities (Franklin and Schweningen 115). Perhaps one or two of the African people owned by the Vanns also made this trek and found what would have been an uneasy respite.

## Isaac's Story

**One slave in particular on the Vann plantation** demonstrated his enduring resistance to James Vann and to the institution of slavery. Isaac attempted to escape enslavement by running away from the plantation on several occasions. Isaac's ongoing aspiration for freedom and his efforts to obtain it bear witness to the fact that enslavement by Cherokee people was strongly resisted.

The interesting part about Isaac's recorded life in the diaries is that all the written accounts revolve around him trying to escape or taking part in some type of radical activity. His name first comes up in a July 22, 1802, entry that claims, "Isaac, the Negro, fled from his master and took with him a Negress and one of Vann's horses" (Moravian Diary, Vann House). Reportedly, other blacks chased after Isaac, but could only bring back the woman and the stolen horse. The missionary account then notes that, "Isaac who had returned came to ask us to put in a good wor[d] for him with his master" (Moravian Diary, Vann House, July 29, 1802). Not only did Isaac have a hunger to escape, but he also seems to have felt a duty to return when the woman he was with, perhaps a loved one, was captured.

The evidence of Isaac's numerous escape endeavors suggests that the bondage he lived with each day was intolerable. A September 1802 missionary record claims that, "For the third time Isaac ran away" and that he, "... sent word to Vann ... that he would shoot anyone who attempted to catch him" (Moravian Diary, Vann House, September 15, 1802; September 27, 1802). This entry explicitly shows that Isaac attempted to flee the Vann plantation at least three times, as well as showing that he was willing to threaten Vann.

Such a threat could have been legitimate or it could have been a desperate plea to keep Vann from recapturing him, but either way, Isaac's will to continue running away, along with his courage to intimidate Vann, exemplify his grim determination to escape life on the Vann plantation. This is not surprising, since missionary accounts of Vann's cruelty and violent temper describe him as a, "frequent drinker and abuser who terrorized his slaves, burning their cabins, [and] whipping them" (Miles 41).

Isaac's life was most likely filled with similarly brutal attacks and dehumanizing treatment, which ultimately fueled his fundamental resistance to the system that had denigrated him.

While there is no mention of Isaac again in the missionary diary until 1805, James Vann's viciousness presumably continued to be inflicted upon Isaac. An August 23, 1805 account claims that, "Last night four of Vann's Negroes again ran away but before doing so they robbed him of the money he had in the house, about \$3,500," among other things (Moravian Diary, Vann House). This entry illustrates that Isaac was not alone in his sentiment of resistance. And as it turns out, Isaac was one of the slaves that took part in this insurrection. In the end, Isaac suffered the extreme severity of Vann's brutality because of his involvement. As a result of Vann's malicious ways and built up aggression toward Isaac's repeated plots to escape, Vann, "... burned alive his Negro, Isaac, who had helped rob and tried to kill him." As if this wasn't torturous enough, "To set an example to the rest of his slaves he had them all assembled to witness the event" (Moravian Diary, Vann House, September 16, 1805). Vann's threats were employed to deter any other black slaves from following Isaac's quest for freedom. Even the slave-owning missionaries had attempted to plea for Isaac's life to Vann, but to no avail.

This gruesome murder of Isaac was a disturbing end to the life of a person who had committed himself to struggling against his "owner." Even though Isaac's resistance ultimately cost him his life, Isaac's story symbolizes the heroic quest for freedom among the enslaved.

## Henry Bibb's Story

**Henry Bibb is the quintessential example of a slave who yearned for freedom.** It should be noted that Bibb endured enslavement by white men and by Cherokees, but that his Cherokee enslavement took place after the Cherokees were removed from their land in Georgia and forced west in the 1830s. While the Springplace missionaries claim that Vann was capable of being, "... so enraged that all had to flee from him for fear of what he might do them," Bibb's experience with Cherokee slave owners was quite different (Moravian Diary, Vann House, August 23, 1805). Bibb's poignant account of his desire to be free offers some parallels to the thoughts that were most likely running through the minds of other runaway slaves. Bibb writes, "No one can imagine my feelings in my reflecting moments, but he who has himself been a slave" (Bibb 17).

Even though Bibb claimed that his enslavement at the hands of Cherokees was not as bad as bondage by whites, he still sought every opportunity to escape it. Once his Cherokee master died, Bibb "pretended to be taking on a great rate about his death, but I was more concerned about running away." (Bibb 155). This line shows that regardless of the context of slavery that Bibb had to endure, his ultimate goal was always freedom. In regard to one of his

many escapes from slavery, Bibb remembered that, “Notwithstanding every inducement was held out to me to run away if I would be free, and the voice of liberty was thundering in my very soul, ‘Be free Oh, man! Be free’” (Bibb 47). Bibb’s heartfelt account speaks to this desire for freedom.

## Other Forms of Resistance

**Individual escape was not the only form of resistance** on southern plantations. Enslaved people also enacted subtle forms of sabotage and critique of the slavery system, such as masking their feelings, slowing or stopping their work productivity, or simply regarding themselves and other blacks as human beings worthy of full respect. Although this kind of resistance is often difficult to document, punitive violence against slaves from masters and overseers suggests that slaves rejected mistreatment. For example, the missionary records of January 29, 1813, talk of a slave named Mima who was whipped by the new overseer on the Vann plantation to the point of near death. Although we do not know what offense Mima committed in the eyes of the overseer, her horrific punishment suggests that Mima acted in some way that undermined the expectations of the slavery system (Springplace Diary, Archives).

Another more obvious way that African Americans resisted slavery was through revolts and violence against others. After Cherokee removal from the Southeast, slaves on the Vann plantation in Indian Territory started a revolt to fight against their bondage. In 1842 slaves from the Vann plantation joined slaves from the surrounding area, stole firearms from the Vann store and escaped to the Creek Nation after stealing horses, mules, and clothing from their masters (Perdue, *Slavery* 82). As the escapees encountered runaway slaves from other tribes who had been recaptured, the group killed the enslavers and freed the fugitives. Unfortunately, 31 slaves were eventually captured and returned to their masters (Miles 172).

Another example of violent resistance comes from the relative of a former slave, via the WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives. Princess Bee recalled how her aunt was a “mean, fighting woman” who chopped off her own hand and showed it to her master when she was on the seller’s block (Baker and Baker 49). Although this particular woman was not owned by the Vanns, her story is an illustration of experiences among slaves held by Cherokees like the Vanns.

The many examples of resistance and rebellion documented here are a testimony to the hardships slaves endured and sought to overcome. Innovative and pertinacious, slaves on the Vann plantation and elsewhere conjured up numerous methods to rebel against an overtly oppressive institution. Their repeated, radical acts of resistance tell us that enslaved people sought freedom in Native American nations, as well as in the United States.

# Perspectives on Black Slavery in the Cherokee Nation

by *Alicia Benavides, Nick Orlowski, Julia Cooperman,  
and Nathaniel Crowther*

**T**his chapter consists of three points of view on slavery in the Cherokee Nation. In many ways, the disagreement among the student writers as to how we might best understand this phenomenon reflects a similar dispute among scholars of southern Indian and African American history. The following are single-authored essays printed in the order that the names appear above, with research contributed by all of the listed authors.

## I. Bibb Said It Best: A Comparison between White and Cherokee Slavery

**Henry Bibb, ex-slave and radical self-abolitionist**, once claimed that “[a]ll things considered, if I must be a slave, I had by far, rather be a slave to an Indian, than to a white man, from the experience I have had with both” (Bibb 153). This famous quote sums up what many historians accept to be true; a difference did exist in the way that white southern slave owners and most Native American slave owners treated their slaves. White slave owners, on the whole, were much more punitive than their Native counterparts

In a WPA interview, Patsy Perryman, age 80, from Muskogee, Oklahoma, talks about her experience working for a Cherokee family in a way that further undergirds this point. She claims:

[T]he Taylor family was Cherokees and the mistress and master always treated us mighty good. We didn’t know what whipping were, only what we heard about other slaves getting beaten for trying to run away or too lazy to work (Baker and Baker 314).

According to Perryman’s recollection, Cherokees valued slave families as units and worked hard to keep them together:



Father belonged to some other man for a long time; he would get a pass to visit with mother and us children, the go back the next day. The Taylors bought him so that we could all be together (Baker and Baker 314).

But just as there were exceptional white plantation owners who were kind to their slaves, there also were Cherokee slave owners, like James Vann, who were cruel. Vann's example shows that a small minority of Native people eventually came to practice black slavery in the way that white slaveholders did. Although on the whole many Native-owned slaves were better off than their counterparts on white farms and plantations, there were cases of abuse in both environments.

In addition, white supremacist notions and the practice of associating lightness of skin color with fixed positive traits and civic rights spread from white plantation owners to Native plantation owners. This way of thinking still has a deeply negative impact on the way race and social identities are constructed today.

## II. Imperial Nostalgia in Memories of the Vann Plantation

Henry Bibb's classic slave narrative, in addition to other historical works, has produced an assumption that it was better to be an Indian's slave than a white person's slave. Yet it can be argued that Indian treatment of slaves, on the Vann plantation and elsewhere, did not in the end differ significantly from white treatment.

One account on the nature of slavery on the extended Vann family's lands comes from R.P. Vann, grandson of Joseph Vann and great-grandson of James Vann. In it, R.P. discussed the death of his grandfather on the steamboat the "Lucy Walker." R.P. stated that he met the sole survivor of the explosion and refers to him as "the negro" while telling about the night of the explosion:

They were having a race with another boat on the river and though they were a little ahead of the other boat my grandfather came down to the boiler deck drunk and he told the negro to throw another side of meat on the fire in order to get more steam so that they could gain on the other boat. The negro told him that the boat was carrying every pound of steam it could stand and Joe Vann pulled his pistol on the negro and told him that if he did not obey him he would shoot him. The negro threw the side of meat on the fire as he was ordered and then turned and ran to the stern of the boat and jumped into the river, and he had not much more than got into the water when the boilers blew up (Foreman 838).

R.P.'s account suggests being a slave to this Cherokee family was unlike that of Henry Bibb's experience. If one takes "the negro's" account to be true, then Joseph Vann was far from the ideal slave master.

Perspectives from slaves on other plantations also attested to how unfavorable ownership by the Vann family could be. Morris Sheppard, like the Vann slaves, was owned by a Cherokee family. He tells of an encounter he had with a runaway slave of "Little Joe" Vann, son of Joseph: "His britches was all muddy and tore where de hounds had cut him up in de legs" (McDaniel, Morris Sheppard 20). Morris said his mistress even offered to buy the slave from Little Joe when he found him at the Sheppard's. Morris went on to say, "Dat was one poor negro dat never go away to de North and I was sorry for him cause I know he must have had a mean master" (McDaniel, Morris Sheppard 20). Morris also remarks that none of the Sheppard slaves tried to run away.

In late autumn 1842, Joseph Vann saw 25 of his slaves attempt a revolt with slaves from the Mackey and Tally plantations (Littlefield and Underhill 121). The slaves headed southwest for the Mexican border, along the way burglarizing a store for supplies to aid their effort. Scholars suggest that one of the main causes of the revolt was the increasing severity of slavery due to new black codes in the Cherokee Nation (Littlefield and Underhill 123).

Historian Monroe Billington looked at ex-slave narratives using a data-based approach in his comparison of conditions of slavery among Indians and whites. His work shows that Indian-owned slaves were more likely to receive favorable treatment than slaves owned by whites. However, Billington's approach often uses samples that are too small to draw any reliable statistical conclusions. Billington himself does not draw any grand conclusion from his findings, noting that, "the fact remains that the institution of slavery wherever it existed was undesirable—as were its residual effects" (Billington 64). It follows, then, that the Vanns should be viewed through the same lens as other slaveholders.

Many people still insist on believing that Indian owners would have been more desirable to black slaves. Cultural critic and feminist theorist bell hooks may help point to the reason why. In her book *Black Looks*, she argues that America is intrigued by Indian culture because of what she calls "imperial nostalgia," the notion that those who colonize other groups of people desire to hold on to the ways of life of the people they have conquered (hooks 189). This "imperial nostalgia" works to the benefit of Indian slaveholders. For if non-Native Americans hold a romantic view of Indians, it is fair to assume this would carry over to perceptions of slavery and red-black relations.

Further, the widely held view that blacks and Indians share a natural affinity towards one another (shared by hooks, it must be noted) also perpetuates

this stereotype of Indian slaveholders as benign. It is easier to envision two minority groups uniting against an oppressive majority, rather than one mirroring the majority's cruelty.

Believing Indian slavery was more compassionate than white slavery misrepresents historical reality. The oppression of Native peoples by the United States government does not exempt Native peoples from historical criticism. It is unproductive to allow the Vann family to be seen as a symbol of Cherokee progress, when a similarly positioned white slaveholding family would not be so uncritically remembered.

### III. The Experience of Slavery in Scholarly Debate: Cherokee versus White

Historian Theda Perdue's *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540–1866*, represents the classic argument in the scholarly debate regarding the enslavement of African Americans by Cherokees. Perdue posits that the slaves of Cherokees experienced a much milder form of slavery characterized more by "leniency" than did slaves of white southern plantation owners (98).

Through research conducted to ascertain the point of view of slaves and former slaves on their personal experiences and perceptions, however, it has become clear that enslavement by Cherokees had the potential to be just as brutal as enslavement by whites. From careful readings of the documents left behind by various sources, the "unsubstantiated generalizations and outright myths" that "the lives of black slaves owned by the Cherokees were considerably easier than those owned by white masters" is slowly being deconstructed (Halliburton, *Origins* 483).

A valuable source on the experiences of ex-slaves of Cherokees is The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives, a series of interviews taken between 1936 and 1938 from 135 ex-slaves, 39 of whom were slaves in Indian Territory. Historian Monroe Billington collected data from the narratives and found that "a higher proportion of Indian-owned slaves lived on plantations than did non-Indian-held slaves" (60). Billington directly challenges the leniency thesis by pointing out that although few Indian-held slaves reported being punished much, "... their vivid recollections of others receiving punishment reminds the present-day reader of one of the worst aspects of American slavery" (63). Statistical analysis of the narratives "tend to support the conclusion that Indian slaveholders apparently were no more or less lenient with their slaves than were white slaveholders" (Billington 64).

Historian Celia Naylor-Ojurongbe's analysis of the WPA interviews likened the experience and legacy of Cherokee enslavement of African American people to those of blacks enslaved by whites with one crucial difference:

each group left slavery with divergent, two-tiered identities. After emancipation, both groups were promised citizenship rights and land by the U.S. government and/or its officials. The difference between freedpeople in Native tribes and freedpeople in the U.S. South lay in the fulfillment of that promise. Many Cherokee freedmen and women received allotments, as opposed to freedpeople in the United States who did not receive their mythical 40 acres (Naylor-Ojorongbe 176–181). The idea that Cherokee slavery was not as oppressive as white slavery may, in part, have come about based on what freedpeople gained in the end.

J.B. Davis's analysis employs the use of Cherokee Nation legal documents that could be considered Slave Codes and Black Codes similar to those of the United States. These documents show that punishment for slaves was almost always severe and included bodily harm. Patrol companies had the power to exact whatever punishment they thought proper over both free and enslaved blacks. Furthermore, teaching any black to read or write was prohibited and carried enormous penalties.

When compared against the statutes of the United States that applied to blacks, the Cherokee codes seem hauntingly similar. In fact, "So many drastic laws had been passed that some irresponsible youths thought that there would be no punishment for killing a slave" (Davis 1067). Possibly more shocking was the law stating that any malicious killing of a slave would be deemed murder, unless, of course, the murderer was that slave's master (Davis 1067-8).

Upon final assessment of the debate over whether African Americans suffered more under Cherokee or white oppression, it seems apparent that one must look no further than the Vann Plantation to answer this question. The evidence provided by recent scholars has elucidated this point: James Vann in Georgia and his son, Joe, in Indian Territory, were not so-called "exceptions."

In the end, however, the most crucial point is this: no matter what kind of slavery people experienced and no matter what its origins were, the experience was not a good one, and neither is the legacy.

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