

BECOMING

FREE

IN THE

Susan Eva O'Donovan

COTTON

SOUTH

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For Brian -
A true believer, and a
true friend -
All my best -
Susan

Finding Freedom's Edges

The end of the Civil War must not be confused with the end of slavery. Nor should emancipation be understood as imbuing freedom with meaning. It would take many people many weeks to enforce emancipation. It would take many more people a good deal longer to work out the terms of freedom. But before the first year was out, it would become abundantly clear to the South's former slaves that the freedoms they sought could not be untangled from the lives that lay behind them. What they had been, what they had done, and what they had made of and for themselves under slavery conditioned the futures that unfolded before them. Liberty, as ex-slaves across the former Confederacy quickly discovered, came with strings firmly attached.¹ As black people strove through the summer and fall to put their lives on new footings, as presidential policies tipped political power back into the hands of the South's former masters, and as planters tallied up the cost of conducting old business on a free-labor basis, it became clear that, in critical ways and at critical junctures, these strings attached differently to black women than to black men. This was especially the case on cotton's expansive terrain. By year's end, those former slaves who had once been prized as much for the babies they bore as for the pounds they could pick of the South's reigning staple found themselves forcibly banished

to liberty's furthestmost edges by the planters who had previously owned them. Steeply discounted by a past that hounded their heels, the region's former slaves discovered as Christmas approached that a gendered enslavement had begotten a differently gendered freedom.

The year 1865 opened in southwest Georgia in much the same manner as previous years. Despite an upsurge in complaints from white people about rifled corncribs, missing pigs, and a more generalized restlessness in the slave quarters, the new year found black men and black women—particularly those tied to the larger estates—hard at their usual routines. As Abraham Lincoln's government reflected on the impending Thirteenth Amendment, southwest Georgia's slaves plowed out new ground, felled trees, rolled logs, repaired fences, and finished turning the previous year's crop of hogs into bacon and hams. As nearly two hundred "companies" of ex-slaves prepared to put a thousand acres of land at Davis Bend, Mississippi, to the plow, and as Ulysses S. Grant's enormous, if exhausted, army bore down in late March on Richmond, Virginia, southwest Georgia's black men and black women continued to do their masters' bidding. Under the watchful gaze of owners and overseers—many of whom had, in an effort to maintain old levels of discipline, extended the workweek to include the whole of the Sabbath—the region's slaves planted corn, peas, potatoes, and cane. Howell Cobb's son proposed turning the estate's slaves into soldiers and the overseer into their captain. "Barwick," John Cobb remarked, "will make a good officer for the negroes." A few weeks later, during the week of President Lincoln's murder and days after black soldiers under Grant's command led a jubilant procession through the streets of the former Confederate capital, enslaved southwest Georgians bedded up fields, opened furrows for seed, and planted their

masters' cotton. The same distance that had kept war at arm's reach for so long, kept freedom at bay as well. The laborers, a black man recalled later that year, "work[ed] on the same way" through that turbulent spring as they had in the past. "All the people thought they were slaves."²

But not forever: news of Union victory eventually filtered into even the most remote enclaves of the Confederates' now defunct nation. Rumors circulated through the usual channels, newspapers exchanged hands, paroled soldiers straggled home from the field; and aided by private correspondence, the residents and refugees of southwest Georgia gradually became aware of the revolutionary turn of events. John Banks, who kept a plantation in Stewart County, heard of Lee's surrender, Lincoln's death, and the war's end when he received a letter to that effect in the last days of April. A. J. Swinney, an Albany shopkeeper, got the news at about the same time. Such secondhand accounts could be, and easily were, dismissed by slaveholders unwilling to concede defeat immediately or voluntarily to a federal government they deeply despised. More difficult to ignore, however, was the federal cavalry that finally appeared over the horizon in mid-May, shattering at last the isolation that in war had made southwest Georgia such a haven for slaveholders. Dispatched from their headquarters in Macon, the soldiers made their first stop in Dougherty County, then swept south into Florida, leaving in their wake a series of widely scattered and thinly manned garrisons. Enforcing emancipation was not, however, the soldiers' primary duty. They rode under instructions not to end slavery, but rather to finalize the end of the Confederacy: snooping out fugitives from Jefferson Davis's government, accepting the surrender of any remaining Confederate soldiers, attaching the thousands of bales of cotton that by then clogged the region's warehouses, and confiscating leftover stashes of rebel supplies.

Having been “issued but few formal orders touching on” the matter of freedom, whatever acts of liberation resulted from the cavalry’s whirlwind tour were more incidental than intentional.³

Indeed, the soldiers’ passage served more often to provoke planters to bear down even harder on black labor than to let up altogether. Determined to squeeze everything possible out of their workers before the inevitable overtook them, planters drove them harder by day and locked them into their cabins by night. Hissing, as one planter did, that they would rather see their slaves dead from overexertion than risk losing them or the year’s crops, slaveholders and their minions applied their whips more frequently, swung them harder, and reached for them with shockingly less cause—even by the standards of a class already notorious for their malevolent brutality. All it took for one slaveholder to turn on a pregnant black woman—“bucking and gagging” then whipping great gouges of flesh from her back (large enough to contain the length and width of a grown person’s finger, one witness reported)—was a single skein or “knot” of yarn. That was the amount she fell short of producing two days in a row. Elsewhere, the dust from fast-riding Yankees had scarcely settled when both driver and overseer laid into Hannah. She had left the field without authorization for less than half an hour. Willis got something of the same, he having let a horse out of the barn. Aleck committed a considerably greater crime—he had, in full view of his master, borne witness to a party of Yankees he had encountered near Thomasville—and he disappeared altogether, led away by a gang of white men, never to be heard from again. Emblematic of a mounting desperation, planters hurled words as well, hoping to stave off freedom by deflating their slaves’ expectations. When Lincoln died, went one of the more popular of planters’ tall tales, so too did black people’s freedom. Numbers of ex-Confederate slaveholders sput-

tered that emancipation was only a wartime measure, issued for military purposes and sure to expire in peace. Others assured their slaves—and themselves—that “slavery in some form will again be established by the Government,” or held out hope that bound labor of some other form would take slavery’s place. Reinforcing fast words with fast whips worked for a time, dismaying a federal inspector who made his rounds of the region in late June. Only the immediate and widespread deployment of “bureau” officials—one for every hamlet and village—he advised, could induce planters to give up their slaves once and for all.⁴

“Something should be done,” other federal observers concurred. But that something would not transpire anytime soon. The rest of the summer and much of the fall would pass before the first Freedmen’s Bureau official set foot in southwestern Georgia. Six months would pass before there were more than two, but not for any locally rooted reason. When Congress created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands in March 1865, it gave it “control of all subjects relating to refugees and freedmen from rebel states.” But the Freedmen’s Bureau, as the agency was commonly known, remained unfunded and did not even begin to take institutional shape until May, when General Oliver Otis Howard assumed command of it. Further organization at the state and subordinate levels dragged on unevenly. In some states, notably those with a significant Union presence before the surrender and where federal authorities had already assumed responsibility for the former slaves, the process unfolded fairly quickly. The Bureau was crippled, however, not only by limited means but by a shortage of personnel as well (for it relied on personnel recruited from a rapidly demobilizing army), and months sometimes elapsed before Howard could arrange the appointment of assistant commissioners elsewhere in the former Confederacy. Texas, for instance, did not receive its first assistant

commissioner until October, delaying the appointment of the legions of subordinate officers who would shoulder much of the day-to-day work of enforcing freedom, serving the needs of refugees, and reordering relations between ex-masters and ex-slaves. To expedite organization, and to install at least a skeleton staff across a jurisdiction that swept from the upper reaches of the Chesapeake to what is today Oklahoma, Howard resorted to bundling multiple and contiguous states under the oversight of a single assistant commissioner. Kentucky, Tennessee, and a portion of northern Alabama thus fell initially under the oversight of Nashville-based Clinton B. Fisk; and J. W. Sprague administered Bureau affairs in Arkansas and Missouri, a jurisdiction that reached from Quincy, Illinois, westward to Fort Scott in Kansas.⁵

The Bureau arrived as haltingly in Georgia. Until the appointment of Davis Tillson as the state's assistant commissioner in late September, Georgia fell under the command of South Carolina-based Rufus Saxton, who also had charge of Florida. Plagued by the same problems bedeviling his superior and responsible for a landmass of more than 140,000 square miles, Saxton succeeded in assigning only a half-dozen agents to Georgia during the summer of 1865, nearly all of whom he posted along the coast with instructions to oversee the settlement of black people on the Sherman reserve. For most of the summer most of the state (an area that constituted roughly a third of Saxton's jurisdiction) came under the direction of just two Bureau officials: ex-soldier and Maine native John Emory Bryant, and the mercurial General Edward A. Wild, both of whom shared a headquarters at Augusta until the latter's antics cost him his job in September. The inadequacy of agency oversight did not go unremarked. General Howard's adjutant observed after a mid-summer tour of the former Confederacy that "the affairs of the Bureau have been very badly managed in Georgia—or rather

have not been managed at all." A statewide problem—"god Deliver us" from the post commander at Savannah, groaned a black minister who hoped in late May that the deity would step in to lend the Bureau a hand—it was especially acute in the furthest hinterlands of Georgia. And so things would remain for some months to come. Until Davis Tillson assigned officers to Albany and Thomasville (one to each town) in November, southwest Georgians would encounter the Bureau on much the same terms as they encountered the army: indirectly and from a distance, largely by word of mouth and through printed circulars and orders that only occasionally made their way into the region.⁶

Enslaved southerners refused to allow Howard's problems to become their problems. Lingered in bondage, while awaiting the full organization of the agency established to guide them to freedom, was not to most black people's taste. Acting on what often amounted to second- and thirdhand information, those who knew their geography—generally men and particularly the teamsters and others whose occupations often carried them away from their home plantations—set course for the northerners who were too shorthanded to come out to them. Picking their way across rebel-infested terrain, pursued by dogs put on their heels by erstwhile masters, and sliding past plantations of people who had no knowledge of freedom, liberty's male scouts often covered tens and even hundreds of miles in their quest for "instruction." Turning his back on the Kentucky soldiers who occupied the few federal outposts in southwestern Georgia and whose sympathies lay more with slaveholders than with slaves, George King walked east for a week. "I heard the Yankees were here," he explained after his eventual arrival in Savannah. So too had Frank Frazier and Tal Boid, who likewise followed the railroad east toward firm word about freedom. Northern nurse

Clara Barton had scarcely arrived in Sumter County on a summertime mission to catalogue the Union soldiers who had died in the Confederate prison at Andersonville, when black visitors began appearing by the hundreds to see her. "They had all heard" about freedom, she later recounted to a congressional committee. Some knew "it from one another." Those at work on Benjamin Walters's plantation heard about it from "four or five men" who arrived after dark on a Friday evening. "A few knew it from their masters." But when it came to black people's attention that "a settlement of Yankees [was] forming" at the abandoned prisoner-of-war camp, and that one of the Yankees, moreover, was a "lady," they "commenced to gather around . . . for the facts."⁷

Authenticating black liberty was the first order of business, but it was hardly the only motive for closing the distance between slavery's plantations and the Union's outposts. Crowds whose composition varied every day quizzed Yankee interlocutors about the contents of those official and usually printed pronouncements regarding slavery's end and freedom's birth, orders too often read aloud—and edited extemporaneously—by self-interested masters. Was it true, those who visited the Andersonville camp repeatedly asked, that the government of Lincoln expected the former slaves to work six and a half days of the week for no pay? Assuredly not, replied Barton, who turned over to colleagues the task of counting corpses in order to read those orders aloud—day in, day out—until her departure in August. Others came bearing mute, and sometimes not so mute, testimony to slavery's awful cruelties. People whose lives had been framed by the trade in black flesh chronicled a genealogical disaster—of lost children, of broken marriages, and of parents left in the past. This, recounted Barton when she testified later before Congress, was a common refrain. The black southwest

Georgians with whom she conversed "all seemed to apologize when they were asked where they came from. They would say, 'We were not raised here.'" Others exhibited wounds of a more corporal sort, lifting shirts and, in the case of women, the hems of their skirts, to reveal bellies made gaunt by short rations and bodies hatched with old scars, half-healed gashes, and some not healed at all. When the congressional committee expressed doubts about Barton's descriptions of the wounds she witnessed as ex-slaves paraded their pasts through her camp, she refused to recant. "I believed what I saw. I knew what I saw."⁸

Once satisfied that they understood some of the facts about freedom and that northerners understood some of the facts about slavery, freedpeople usually returned to their old masters' estates. Despite loud declarations by former slaveholders throughout the former Confederacy—including the occasional shrill yelp out of southwest Georgia—that "the universal impulse of negroes was to leave the plantation & flock to the cities," no great exodus attached to freedom's heels. To be sure, war had swept a good many black people out of their cabins and away from their masters' plantations. This was particularly true throughout the Mississippi Valley and the upper South, and along the path of Sherman's hard-marching army. Other black people had been forcibly expelled by spiteful ex-masters "enraged at the loss of their miscalled property." Thousands more had left on their own accord, seizing on a case-by-case basis freedom under cover of combat and the movement of troops. But as military and northern officials gazed intently across the remnants of the Confederate nation, they realized that, planters' assertions aside, the vast majority of the nation's former slaves remained in "their old homes, quietly working." "In fact," noted one of Howard's lieutenants after a midsummer tour through Florida, Georgia, and both Carolinas, "this is almost universally the case."⁹

Black people stayed put for good reason. Cutting loose too quickly from the sites of their enslavement cost more than most recently freed slaves were willing—or able—to pay. To leave too quickly would re-rupture families scarcely recovered from the shattering effects of the cotton revolution, and sunder those communities that had lent structure and strength to their lives under slavery. A too-hasty departure could sever as well access to sources of subsistence that few of the recently freed could possibly obtain on their own: cabins to live in, wood to burn, clothes to wear, gardens for vegetables, pastures for hogs, dirt for chickens to scratch. Even more critical, to leave prematurely would be to lose the advantage of the crop in the ground, the seed of which they had been sowing as Grant swung his army on Richmond, and the harvest of which represented their future subsistence as much as that of their ex-masters. Abandoning their spring labor and its consumable fruits was a price ex-slaves repeatedly judged too high to pay lightly. Thus it was that rather than going, most former slaves—particularly those who ended the war on cotton's ground—opted to stay, biding their time in their old homes. Movement, much to the relief of a good many northern officials, who also feared a wintertime famine, would be deferred to the future.¹⁰

This rootedness was especially apparent in southwestern Georgia, where slavery's particular regime had bequeathed its survivors a legacy of such pitiful proportions as to preclude a hasty departure. Oppressively long workdays that had stretched too often into the night, fledgling communities, and youthful families endowed former slaves with flimsy foundations on which to establish new lives far apart from old masters. No Edisto Islanders here, denizens of the South Carolina low country who exited slavery with caches of "property in Horses, cattle, carriages, & articles of furniture," amassed under rice's distinctive regime.

Most of southwest Georgia's ex-slaves owned nothing more than the shirts on their backs, and perhaps, if their masters had mounted a successful defense against Confederate agents, a spare change of clothes. A few had, by dint of extending those already long days further into their nights, or by mastering skills prized by free neighbors, managed to accumulate small lots of property: a flock of chickens, a pig, a few articles of clothing, and perhaps a trunk in which to stow them. Sumter County's Arnold Cater, a blacksmith by trade, owned a little of each when slavery collapsed, carrying away from his former master's estate "chickens, furniture, bed and bedding," as well as his sorely abused wife and a small babe. It was sufficient for Cater and his wife to establish an autonomous foothold in freedom. By midsummer, the Caters had found a house of their own in which she bore a baby that had been conceived under slavery, and Arnold practiced his craft for a dollar a day. The majority of black southwest Georgians, however, could only dream of such early autonomy. Liberated "without lands, without money, without provisions," what most of southwest Georgia's eighty thousand or so former slaves owned, if they owned anything at all, was a stake in the crop in the ground. Thus rather than observing slavery's death by hitting the roads, a decision that would cost them corn, community, and cabins in which to reside, they, like a good many other heirs to the South's many slave regimes, marked it by sticking close to old homes.¹¹

As the oppressively hot summer days closed in, the institution that had survived the war largely intact finally collapsed, pushed to its death as much by black people claiming their liberty as by military officials and the orders they published. The number of masters and mistresses still clinging to fanciful delusions that the nation's high court would find emancipation unconstitutional,

or plotting removal to a place where slavery remained legal, dropped by the day. In most cases, pragmatism of pocket and politics won out. Even the truest champions of secession were coming to admit that slavery was done and that their best opportunity for making a full recovery lay in their southern estates. With alternatives fading away, southwest Georgia's planters finally conceded defeat. Sometime in early July, David Barrow "declared freedom" to a hundred or so black people who probably already considered themselves free. Benjamin Yancey followed suit on his Dougherty County plantations a week or two later. Before the end of the month, former Confederate general Howell Cobb issued his own emancipatory announcement to the black men and black women sequestered on his Sumter County estates. Even diehard rebels like William Stiles, who had shepherded his property out of north Georgia in the last year of the war and who continued to nurture a fierce grudge against the victorious North, could not escape what was now inevitable. After much grumbling and prevarication, Stiles yielded sometime in August, giving up on an ambition to hold his workers in rhetorical, if not bona fide, bondage at least through the end of the year. As Stewart County diarist and former slaveholder John Banks noted, the "effects of emancipation" were at last beginning "to be felt" in the place Confederates had previously known as Goshen.¹²

Those effects were not felt as sharply as they might have been. Shifts in the national political climate cushioned slaveholders' fall. Rumors had abounded that a vengeful, victorious Union planned to strip secessionists of all forms of property, of civil and political rights, and perhaps even more—defeating the rebellious South not only on fields of battle but in every dimension of everyday life. Andrew Johnson's ascension to Lincoln's old office in April intensified those fears. After all, it was Johnson

who, as Lincoln's vice president, had pledged to punish all rebels as the traitors he believed them to be. "Treason must be made infamous and traitors must be impoverished," southerners remembered the new president declaring only a few months before. Some worried that they might be made to pay for secession and the subsequent war with their lives. Such a prospect looked all too possible to white southwest Georgians after the May 1865 arrest by federal authorities of Henry Wirz, the rebel major who had presided over the carnage at Andersonville prison. Indeed, the prospect of further arrests for the deaths of thousands of captive soldiers prompted delegations of Sumter County's white women to stifle their distaste for everything Yankee and submit a bid for clemency. Shortly after Barton's arrival, they began to approach her encampment, "very neighborly, very bland," on self-appointed missions to wipe the living clean of all crime by casting the wrongdoing onto the backs of the dead. "They wanted to screen Wirz," Barton explained before Congress, "because if they could get the matter to stop [with] him, that was the last would be heard of it—there was no going over that; but if it went over him, there was no knowing how far it would go. So they screened everybody but [General John] Winder," Wirz's immediate, but conveniently deceased, boss.¹³

Those white women need not have labored so hard. Further arrests were not forthcoming. The new national president, ex-Confederates were coming to realize, was more bark than bite. Indeed, Johnson's bluster subsided considerably in the weeks following his promotion, and then stilled almost entirely when he proposed a scheme for restoring the rebellious states to the Union. Left to his own devices, for both houses of Congress were in recess and would remain so until December, Lincoln's successor drew up a surprisingly magnanimous plan, offering to return to ex-rebels control over their lives, their laws, their land, and,

with one significant adjustment, their labor as well, demanding in return only the most minimal concessions. Under the direction of provisional governors, the first of whom Johnson appointed on the day he issued his amnesty proclamation, each state need only organize new governments of "republican form" and repudiate secession, slavery, and the Confederate debt in order to regain their positions within the Union. Individuals fared similarly under the president's plan for Reconstruction. According to the terms Johnson laid out, most former Confederates could be restored to full citizenship and to "all rights of property, except as to slaves," simply by swearing an oath of loyalty to the national government. The remainder—generally people who had resigned positions in the federal government in order to serve the slaveholders' rebellion, held high political and military offices in the Confederacy, or had owned significant amounts of property—could resume their places in the Union by "making special application to the President for pardon."¹⁴

More than a few ex-rebels bristled at the prospect of pledging allegiance so soon after their defeat at the hands of "the Northern Vandall." But recognizing the practical advantage of accepting the president's offer, most contained their contempt long enough to swear fealty to a nation they continued to despise and, if personal circumstances necessitated, to submit and win presidential pardon. By July the reorganization of the former rebel states was in full swing, and by August requests for amnesty streamed out of the former Confederacy and into Washington D.C., including at least eighty that originated in southwest Georgia. Not that their authors necessarily meant what they said in their appeals. "I have my pardon in my pocket and have taken the oath three times," declared one of Albany's applicants, "but I'll be d—d if I ain't as big a Rebel as I ever was!" Still, those sacrifices of personal pride appeared to pay off. Within three

months of the somber salutes that had marked the end of the war, Georgia once again had a civilian governor—James Johnson—and preparations were under way for the election of delegates to a constitutional convention scheduled for October. By the end of the summer, courts and town councils—institutions whose operations had been suspended in the last months of the war or the first weeks of peace—had already resumed or were in the process of resuming regular business. Thomas County's lower court reconvened on the first of July, albeit with justices hand-selected by federal officials. In Early County, the judge of the probate court oversaw the selection of the court's first postwar jury on September 11. Incrementally, semiweekly mail service, triweekly stage service, and once-weekly rail service reconnected southwest Georgians to one another and to the world at large. Perhaps best of all from the perspective of the region's producers, the first load of new cotton headed downriver from Albany to Apalachicola in early September. Although the shipment left a month later than usual (planters traditionally dispatched their first bales to market in August), its departure seemed to herald a return to familiar rhythms.¹⁵

As the president's policies shifted the initiative from victor to vanquished, planters' moods brightened. Emancipation, especially, no longer seemed quite as menacing as it had in the spring. With the enforcement of contract, along with all other questions pertaining to citizenship, productive arrangements, and political rights soon to be secure in white southerners' hands, planters opened their eyes to the coercive potentials at the heart of the system the Yankees were foisting upon them. Slavery was gone, but Johnson's reluctance to extend the power of the national government into areas traditionally reserved to the states gave former slaveholders considerable optimism as well as critical room to maneuver. To be sure, they continued to voice

doubts about the efficacy of free labor, and especially about the practicalities of replacing the compulsions of bondage with the carrot of wages. As a Virginia ex-slaveholder remarked, he and most of his peers considered the "love of reward" an "[in]sufficient inducement." But increasingly confident that they themselves, not northern free-labor meddlers or (worse) laborers, would be calling the shots, planters—even those in the most remote corners of the former Confederacy, places scarcely touched by Union occupation—began dropping their objections to free labor and its companion, the contract. "They know they must have [black labor]," observed a senior Bureau official in July, "or their plantations will be uncultivated and they will be ruined."¹⁶

Thus it was with very little prodding from the very few soldiers on duty that southwest Georgia's former slaveholders began to engage their customary laborers on a contractual basis. And at first glance the terms they espoused were a significant break with the past. Acknowledging, if unenthusiastically, the principle that labor services could no longer be taken by force, almost all guaranteed remuneration of one sort or another. With "no gold or silver worth mentioning in the hands of the people, and but very little national currency," the form of that compensation bore a striking resemblance to the support formerly provided by master to slave: cabins to live in and the wood to warm them, a part of the vegetables then in the ground, a suit of clothing or a comparable length of fabric, perhaps a blanket, a hat, or a pair of new shoes, and less frequently, medicines and medical care for the sick. Rarely did a planter promise to deliver the whole of that list. Far more often they spoke or wrote of provisioning their former slaves with portions: giving them, for instance, the use of their former quarters, or perhaps promising to furnish rudimentary allotments of "vituals & clothes." Other employers considered a few bushels of corn, a gallon or two of

sorghum syrup, a pair of shoes—distributed after the potatoes had been dug, corn shucked, grain threshed, and cotton baled—sufficient reward for a year's worth of labor. Tom Barrow followed that parsimonious pattern when he told the one hundred or so former slaves on his father's Decatur County estate that the Barrow men would give them "everything for a support" and "one tenth of the corn crop." James Whitehead offered even less. When making the shift from owner of slaves to manager of free labor, he promised to pay corn only, at the rate of ten to twenty-five bushels per person to those he supervised on a plantation for which he served as executor.¹⁷

A few planters did commit themselves to providing somewhat more. As contracting and its corollary, competition, accelerated during the summer, those most fearful of losing their workers sweetened the rewards they offered. Signifying the severance, at least in the abstract, of labor from laborer, such planters loosened their grip on black people's bodies, ceding them regular periods of time to themselves. One granted his ex-slaves the right to "attend Church." A Randolph County planter retained his former slaves on his place by permitting them "one Day in each and every week" for their own purposes as well as access to the plantation woodlot and wagons and permission to cart in the latter what they cut from the former to customers in Cuthbert. In some instances, planters went further, parting with small amounts—usually "1/10 to 1/20th" but rarely more than one-sixth—of the year's crop of cotton. David Johnston of Early County told his former slaves—forty-two men, women, and children—that he would divvy among them on a "pro rata" basis whatever remained of the year's harvest after plantation expenses had been met. Even less frequently, planters showed themselves willing to pay their workers with limited amounts of their very scarce cash. Such generous gestures were usually reserved for la-

borers whose contribution to productive activities would be the most difficult to replace: carpenters, mechanics, and craftsmen generally. Taking the first tentative steps forward in a process by which former slaves would reconstitute themselves as a new laboring class, "Jack (foreman)" and "Jerry (blacksmith)" received assurances from their old master, McQueen McIntosh, that they would receive in return for their services "fifteen dollars per month" in "money." They "prefer the same," acknowledged the man who had once owned them and endeavored now to keep them.¹⁸

Planters acknowledged as well a new temporality. Slavery had been for life, wage labor was not, and nothing symbolized as clearly the absolute end of enslavement as the termination dates embedded in those inaugural contracts. Because planters wanted to ensure that they had sufficient laborers at hand during the critical weeks of fall harvest, contracts and crops usually wrapped up at roughly the same time. Most former slaveholders stuck to antebellum slave-hire tradition, releasing their laborers from employment the night before Christmas, or on Christmas Day. Others, hoping perhaps to get a jump on the next season, kept their workers fully engaged until New Year's Day. Then there were those like Benjamin Yancey, who hired his former slaves back for the somewhat ambiguous "balance of the year." But if termination dates reflected an explicit acknowledgment of slavery's demise, commencement dates spoke of planters' regrets. None seemed to have started their contractual clocks ticking with either the fall of Richmond or Lee's surrender. A few began counting forward from the day the first federal soldiers arrived on the scene; a small number of others keyed the commencement of contract to the date they first read one or another government order regarding freedom and free labor. Nancy Davis's owner agreed to start paying her on May first, the day the

freedwoman recalled being "told freedom commenced." The vast majority of planters did nothing, however, until June, well after President Johnson had launched his benign policy of reunion. McQueen McIntosh dated the commencement of wage labor on the twelfth of that month; David Johnston, two weeks later. The contract William Wilkinson drew up took effect the second week of August. Others delayed even longer. Despite urgent reminders from his Sumter County overseer, John Cobb had not drawn up a contract as late as the last week of August. A good many more failed to ever commit their new arrangements to writing. They preferred "agreement[s] verbal," a practice that secured them a good deal of interpretive room. But by admitting to the new realities of productive relations in practice, if not in print, even those who relied on oral agreements departed significantly from a past that had required no agreement whatsoever.¹⁹

For former slaveholders, that was concession enough. Auction blocks stood vacant, slavery for life was an acknowledged thing of the past, and black laborers, they realized, must henceforth be paid for services performed. But the revolution stopped right about there. In most planters' minds, managers, not workers, would be the sole and final arbiters of productive relations. Theirs was a unilateralism that expressed itself early, for it was the rare former slaveholder who freely admitted any ex-slave into the contracting process. Dismissing as utterly nonsensical both northerners' belief in a harmony of capital and labor, and what one observer derisively dismissed as black people's "'airs' about 'freedom and equality,'" planters monopolized the bargaining process. Negotiation, as James Harrison understood when he dealt directly with the man who had once owned the woman he intended to hire, was a white person's prerogative. Some exercised that right informally, "interchanging opinions" with their landowning neighbors, arriving occasionally at a com-

munity consensus about what constituted a fair wage, and in what form to pay it. Others convened countywide cartels to serve as regulatory bodies, pledging, as did the one formed by Dougherty County planters, to "take into service [no] negro without a written recommendation" from his or her former owner. Differing only in detail from the measures adopted at the same time by cartels elsewhere in the former Confederacy, such resolutions represented an effort to preserve landowners' exclusive access to their own former slaves, to keep down the cost of production by containing competition between planters, and to keep laborers out of the process altogether.²⁰

Planters' insistence that former slaves must "know their proper sphere and not attempt to turn to the right or the left" extended beyond the moment of contract and into the fields. Brooking no further challenge to the authority that had served them so well in the past, former masters anticipated "wield[ing] the bone and muscle of the negro" in freedom as had been their habit in slavery. Picking up where they left off, planters took for granted that they and their agents would determine the disposal of labor. Clamoring bells would launch ex-slaves out of their cabins, signal mealtime breaks, and sound the end of the laboring day. The very same overseers who had driven black people in slavery would continue to drive them in freedom, appoint workers to their daily assignments, distribute tools and livestock by morning, inspect them for damage by night, and ensure that laborers maintained a profitable pace in between. Black people's personal lives, their cabins (and the contents thereof), the number of dogs they supported, the number and name of the visitors they entertained, the hours they kept, the food they consumed, even the quantity of wood they burned, would, most planters presumed, remain similarly subject to an ex-master's will. And what a will: McQueen McIntosh required his seventy-two for-

mer slaves, transformed with the stroke of a pen into wage workers on July 8, to "remain as laborers . . . from this time henceforward *continuously* until the first day of January next." William Wilkinson ordered his erstwhile slaves to remain on his farm until Christmas, "render[ing] good & faithful service as they had done heretofore, at any business that may be deemed necessary, under and by" his "direction and control." Former slaves, these men and most of their peers presumed, would work "as they did before they were freed."²¹

Planters rarely stopped there. Unable, or unwilling, to differentiate between obedience and obsequiousness, former slaveholders-turned-employers demanded both. Civility and respectful demeanor, or more commonly "language and manner" and "character," vied with service for primacy of place in the order planters projected in drawing up their first set of labor agreements. Former slaves, most assumed, would comport themselves in freedom as they had under slavery, reproducing with every deferential tip of a hat or honorific prefixed to a white person's name, the subordination certified by landowners as a fundamental component of the South's productive and political recovery. For similar reasons, former slaveholders continued to wage in freedom the crusade against liquor that they had conducted under slavery. Booze, they knew from experience, threatened their interests in numerous ways, especially in its capacity to embolden imbibers to speak their own minds. Not even the death of valuable farm stock could provoke a planter as fast as the whiff of whiskey on a black worker's breath. Ruffin Mitchell was made to pay cash for the mule whose death he hastened by leaving the animal unattended while hitched to a plow. Ex-slaves caught drunk in the quarters on Benjamin Yancey's plantation paid a good deal more. Liquor cost them immediate, unpaid, and uncontested dismissal.²²

Often these expectations jumbled together, stubbornly entangled by their landowning authors in contractual texts. Defiant of all efforts to pull them apart, this recurrent trope of industry, sobriety, respect, and slavish obedience exposed the outermost edges of planters' vision of freedom and free labor. They spoke and wrote in the vernacular of impersonal contract, consenting even to terminal clauses and promises of payment, although usually deferred, but they aspired to a system that reeked of the regime that defeat had forced them to abandon. They were not purchasing labor power alone; they were purchasing the labor of people who would, with every gesture, figure of speech, and appeal for their weekly allotments of meal and meat, sustain the deferential face of the raw exploitation that had enriched their owners in slavery. Servility counted as much as, and occasionally more than, service, justifying at least in the minds of former slaveholders their ongoing rough usage of black laborers. Thus it was that William Stiles advised his grown son to send packing the "impudent" but otherwise highly skilled Adam for omitting—just once—the requisite "Mr." when addressing his erstwhile owner, and David S. Johnston anticipated in his inaugural contract that the five dozen black men, women, and children—"Negroes once owned by him and now controlled by him"—would continue to look to and "implicitly rely upon him" for the whole of their support and security.²³ Outright ownership might be a thing of the past, but if ex-slaveholders were to have their way, the spirit of slavery would outlast the institution from which it had arisen.

Ex-slaveholders presumed too much. All attempts to renew that vaunted control backfired almost immediately. From the perspective of the former slaves, it was one thing to remain on a former master's estate in order to have the advantage of friends,

family, and the crop in the ground. It was another to remain in a state scarcely distinguishable from the odious bondage receding behind them. As landowners' designs registered among the former slaves, many of whom first learned about the new terms of engagement as they were put into effect, black men and black women acted to derail their former masters' attempts to resuscitate a now outdated system. Joining figurative forces with ex-slaves throughout cotton's Confederate kingdom, people sharing a stake in forging a freedom unmarked by the inequities of the past, black southwest Georgians translated labor routines into terms that better accorded with their own version of freedom. The pace of labor declined, lines slowed, workdays shortened, bells went unheeded, dinner breaks lengthened, holidays proliferated, machinery failed through no fault of its own, workweeks shrank from seven to six to five and a half days, and the most degrading and distasteful chores went unattended. "I'll clean no streets for poor white folks' uses," is the general cry," complained one disgruntled white Albany resident. Some former slaves consented to undertake such chores but demanded high prices in return. Fifty cents became the going rate demanded by black men before they would agree to tote a fifty-pound parcel. Others simply stopped working at all, or for large parts of the day. Dolly did. So did Ben Mitchell and most of those employed on David Barrow's estate who extended the time they had for themselves by subtracting from the time they gave to their old masters. By such means, and despite planters' most strenuous efforts, the finely tuned labor regime of slavery and war at last began to unravel. Rather than doing for their ex-masters as they had in the past, freedpeople spent more of their daylight hours doing for themselves: fishing, foraging, chopping firewood; gathering honey from the forests, green corn from the fields, and the fruit from landowners' orchards. Some of these products they con-

sumed, some they retailed to customers exhausted by wartime fare at wartime prices. Cornmeal and firewood sold particularly well, earning its vendors a "tolerably good profit"—enough, indeed, that one planter lost his best workers, who made more selling kindling than they could from tending his crops. "Oh What a Change!" headlines screamed from the Albany press as midsummer passed. "A few months ago our negroes were a guileless, contented and happy people. What are they to-day, at least the greater portion of them?" "Arrogant and lazy," the author answered himself. "Freedom sick," sneered an overseer from east of Americus.²⁴

Ex-slaves were also litigious. Hardly strangers to the law—as slaves they had been regularly paraded through antebellum courts as both property and people—and fully aware of the role judges and juries played in governing relations between free men and free women, they anticipated laying claim to similar privileges immediately on freedom. Indeed, the right to seek protection from and take disputes before an impartial tribunal captured for many former slaves the essence of black liberation. Laying a case before a jury or judge appeared in their minds as both the symbol and the substance of a new political and productive order, one that leveled old inequities of power and privilege by breaking the back of slaveholder sovereignty. It was a right few black people took lightly. As a senior Bureau official recounted after conducting a midsummer tour of Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, whenever he paused to ask former slaves' opinions of "their present condition, the common reply is 'we have no massa now—we is come to the law now.'" "Meaning," the officer translated for those who might have missed the salient point, "that they now wish to live under, and be subject to the law as other people." And go to the law they did. Taking for granted what few northerners had yet come to consider—that freedom conferred

the right to seek legal solutions for what a group of black Tennesseans called "grievances felt and feared"—ex-slaves across the former Confederacy hastened to bring their cases to court, overwhelming Freedmen's Bureau officials, provost marshals, and military tribunals with complaints about employers who insisted on acting like masters. Reeling under the weight of the cases thrust onto his shoulders by freedpeople in the counties under his supervision, the Bureau's lone agent at Albany petitioned within days of his arrival for administrative assistance. "It is impossible for me to do all that should be done in the whole of these Counties. I am engaged here from sunrise until 9 o'clock in the evening," performing the work of at least two men. The burden, Gideon Hastings learned, would grow heavier as contracts expired and workers called on him not only for protection but for help in securing their wages.²⁵

As black southwest Georgians discovered, the summertime substitution of federal for slaveholder authority guaranteed neither warm welcome nor fair hearing. More often than not, the black men who spearheaded the rush for justice found themselves escorted roughly and rudely back to their workplaces by the soldiers who were first on the scene, many of whom "having lived amongst Negroes all of their lives," habitually discounted laborers' complaints. But as the Kentucky-born cavalrymen rotated out in July and as new soldiers—many of them natives of Maine, Illinois, and low-country South Carolina—rotated in, the scales tilted in freedpeople's favor. Able at last to confront their ex-masters on more neutral terrain and before more impartial tribunals, black men, followed by small but increasing numbers of black women, came forward to seek resolution for all manner of cases. Some sought to change their place of employment. Some wanted their pay. Some brought complaints of tiresome long days and exceptionally oppressive workloads.

Some brought complaints against one another. Felix Massey carried his case to the Freedmen's Bureau office at Thomasville after Sidney Burden ambushed him along a country road, attempted to gouge out his eyes, and then fired a pistol his way "contrary to the laws of the United States." Samuel Green, Frank McElvey, and William Culpepper just wanted the right to play an uninterrupted game of cards during nonworking hours. Another man named Green was fed up with the curses and blows rained down on him by his old owner's agent. Although federal officials hesitated to tamper excessively with existing contractual arrangements, revoking only the patently fraudulent or abusive out of a conviction that wage work fully performed best instilled in ex-slaves the habits of industry and thrift appropriate to a free people, they acted with alacrity in most other cases: calling witnesses, taking statements, summoning defendants, passing judgments, and levying fines on those they found guilty. "Madam," C. C. Richardson wrote on November 13 to one of Thomas County's former slaveholding mistresses, "Maria, a colored woman has shown me that she is capable of supporting her child, and further states that the child is in your possession. Pleas deliver the child over to her charge, well clothed and oblige."²⁶

Northern authorities especially wanted planters to abandon the physical compulsions most Yankees associated with the worst abuses of bondage. Freedpeople, they generally agreed, must learn to abide by the terms of their contracts. But they must not be made to obey by physical force. Corporal punishment had no place in a free-labor system, and as Davis Tillson advised white Georgians shortly after his arrival in the state, their continued reliance on whips and fists would only make wage workers "unsettled, suspicious, restless, and unprofitable." Insisting instead that the "freedpeople must be made to feel safe" and that the law rather than the lash provided the most appropriate means for

resolving workplace disputes, Bureau agents cracked down on planters and their agents who continued to crack down on black workers. In southwest Georgia, that meant hauling them in on charges of kicking, beating, knifing, whipping, shooting, and otherwise harming their former slaves. The Bureau's agent at Thomasville, C. C. Richardson, had scarcely established his office when complaints began to pour in, and he opened his register with an account of T. J. Lightfoot's assault on "Richard (freedman)" for refusing to fetch "a gun to shoot one Dangerfield, 'Freedman.'" A few days later, Henry Stringer, "a Freedman who being duly sworn" recounted how his former owner had "made a violent assault upon him, and then [and] there did stab him with a knife." In less than a month at his post, Richardson collected one hundred dollars in fines and jailed at least one former slaveholder—all, he reported, for "cruelties practiced on freed[people]."²⁷

Going to the law, especially law enforced by federal officials, paid off. Although such actions were risky (planters took a dim view of workers who sought assistance from Bureau officials) and never entirely successful (violence or the threat of violence would remain a feature of everyday life), the level of abuse of ex-slaves by ex-slaveholders declined precipitously. Repulsed by the thought of "being arrested by the 'd—d Yankees'" on charges brought by those one white woman dismissed as "nig[s]," employers with a penchant for the more coercive forms of plantation discipline began to think twice before landing a blow, pulling a knife or stinting on laborers' rations. Even those who had been recruited specifically for their expertise "in the art of farming and managing negroes," who competed to see who "produce[d] the most corn and cotton to the acre," and who were long accustomed to serving as "both judge and jury" in deciding workplace disputes, scaled back the punishments they had tradi-

tionally meted out. Indeed, Nathan Barwick, the Sumter County overseer who had been identified in the last days of the war by his boss as an ideal candidate to lead an army of slaves into battle, and who had once been the object of neighborhood gossip for treating his slaves "rite Ruff," had by the middle of August laid aside his whip. Beating, he sighed to his absentee employer after recounting a worrying rise in recalcitrance and of people inclined to work "mity badly," was a thing of the past. Too bad, he confessed with callous nostalgia. If permitted to whip, he said, "I would know what to do."²⁸

As black men and black women edged their old masters out of their lives, they accelerated the process of social and domestic reconstitution begun in the years before freedom. To be sure, other items figured into freedom's agendas: the acquisition of property in land, education for themselves and their children, securing the independence of institutions—especially churches—that had been formed under slavery and under the oversight of white people. But for former slaves whose domestic and personal lives had been buffeted roughly and repeatedly by migration to the cotton frontier and its corollary trade in black labor, suturing together domestic and affective connections tended to top their plans for the immediate future. Family reconstitution took on urgency as well for those whose lives had been further disrupted by the wartime flights of fugitive slaveholders, many of whom began "bothering" their former owners by midsummer for permission to "visi[t] their kin afar off when the crop [was] laid by." Sinai, however, was satisfied to make do with a less corporal connection. A survivor of both patterns of movement, she relayed a request through her former master to her former (and absentee) mistress for the latter "to send her her age." Sinai had lost during the course of her forced migrations the Bible that had contained

the date and location of her birth. It was more than age, however, that Sinai was seeking. In misplacing the Bible, she had misplaced textual ties to a family she perhaps no longer knew in person. To restore the where and when of her birth was to begin restoring her place among kin.²⁹

Sinai was hardly alone in wanting to locate herself within a lineage of her own flesh and blood. As black southwest Georgians carefully lifted the oppressive weight of cotton's antebellum regime, they began to reach out for those faraway and long-ago families. Combing the past for loved ones and then repairing the ruptures that had resulted from bondage was no easy task, and there were no assurances of success. Time, travel, and travail had distorted the faces and places involuntary migrants had kept carefully stored in their heads. Memories were fungible, Esquire Sherman discovered. "There is no place called Orange Court House, and no man named *Archibald Dixon*," Bureau officials explained after the Dougherty County freedman launched an attempt to retrieve his son by first locating the man who had last owned him. For those whose recollections were sharper, fresher, and better mapped onto the physical landscape, mending domestic relations came somewhat easier. This was especially the case with those who had been brought into the region during the war. With clear recollections of where they had come from and how to get back, wartime refugees had become by year's end a regular fixture out on the roads as whole plantations of black men and black women packed up their belongings and departed for the places they knew as home. A party of eleven embarked in December for South Carolina. Fourteen left at about the same time for North Carolina, hoping, they told Sidney Andrews, to arrive in time for Christmas. Another one hundred embarked shortly thereafter for their old homes in "Middle Georgia." Most traveled in large parties, and as had been the case under slavery,

women rarely traveled alone. Indeed, although Adam dearly wished to be reunited with his wife (she ended the war in south Georgia, he in the north), and Sinai's husband yearned to have her join him in Savannah, both urged the women to wait where they were until the men could arrange safe passage. None, however, intended to wait very long; going home was much too important to postpone any longer. By early December, refugee planters stood helpless as the property they had struggled to save from the war turned and headed in the other direction. "It is estimated that in this Section of the State," J. P. Stevens, late of Liberty County, lamented from near Newton, that "there are not less than 1200 to 1500 Negroes who have Signified their determination to return" to the coast. Nothing he or other former owners said, nothing they threatened—including a winter of want and starvation for those who vacated their plantations—and nothing they promised, such as hearty assurances of "ample subsistence" and high wages to any who stayed where they were, could stem the outbound migration. "They are ignorant, impulsive, destitute of foresight, & deaf to reason," Stevens complained of restless ex-slaves in an eleventh-hour plea for assistance from a federal official. "I have endeavored patiently to explain to those on my plantation, the folly of their contemplated course of action but they seem to be inflexible in their purposes & plans."³⁰

Stephens and his ilk fretted too much. Travel on the scale they witnessed was largely confined to those whose lives had been disrupted by wartime migration. The vast majority of the region's former slaves, people who had been carried into the region by traders and slaveholders in the years between settlement and secession, tended to stay put, as reluctant at the end of the year as they had been in the days following freedom to abandon what they had made for themselves under slavery. Unlike the refugees, they already occupied the places they now knew as home.

For them, breaking free of their ex-masters' orbits opened up opportunities, not to embark on new lives in new locations, but to develop, without dislodging, the families, friendships, and communities they had tenderly assembled in slavery. Some couples took advantage of their newfound access to courts of law and federal officials to formalize existing marital unions or to enter "Solemnly, duly & legally" into wholly new ones, as did Harry, who met Mary in the late days of the war. Others divorced, liberating themselves from unions that had formed, then fractured, under the pressures of slavery, as the Petersons did after a marriage of twenty-some years, four children, and multiple masters. Parents embarked upon frequently lengthy and contentious missions to recover children from former masters, some of whom refused to extend freedom to the youngest of their property, or boasted that black mothers and fathers should expect to "sweat" before they saw their children again. Churches that had been established under slavery began the equally tedious process of creeping out from under white oversight. Hampered by old laws still on the books that denied Georgia's former slaves the right to buy property in their own names, by a thicket of denominational requirements, and by a dearth of the material means necessary to create and maintain church structures and staffs, these churches struggled to their feet. Like emergent black churches more generally, years would pass before they stood firmly on their own. But before the end of the year, black congregations in Thomasville, Americus, Albany, Blakely, and elsewhere had put those processes into motion. Slowly but surely, black women drifted back into church spaces, filling up with their bodies and voices sanctuaries that had been closed to most of them by cotton's gendered demands. This is our church, we "payed for" it, a group of female black Baptists near Cuthbert would shout six years later in a dispute that not only resulted in

the dismissal of a black male teacher but signaled women's return to what had been under slavery the special prefecture of southwest Georgia's black men.³¹

New institutions also gradually took form, and few of these were more important in freedpeople's minds than schools for themselves and their children. Acutely aware of the advantages that came to those who could read, write, add, and subtract—skills critical to making and enforcing the labor agreements under which almost all of them labored—ex-slaves eagerly and “intence[ly]” scraped together their scarce pennies to rent ramshackle rooms, purchase supplies, and support what was, in the first year of their freedom, a homegrown cadre of black teachers. Although their pedagogical efforts paled considerably when compared to those that had been launched in cities like Savannah—where a much more richly endowed population of urban-based ex-slaves had earlier that year established a system of schools for hundreds of students, conducted by nineteen black teachers, and funded by thousands of dollars—black southwest Georgians took considerable pride in the few institutions they brought into existence. By the end of November, Thomasville boasted of three small schools devoted to the education of freedpeople's children. Another forty recently freed scholars ranging in ages from 5 to 32 (two-thirds of whom were male) attended ex-slave Peter R. Hines's modest academy in Albany. Small though their numbers might be, the whole of the Albany contingent—from Mamie the youngest to Robert the oldest—were, as their teacher proudly observed, exceedingly “anxious to learn.” Enthusiasm was not enough to sustain early and indigenous efforts at black education in southwest Georgia, however. As strapped for resources as were the churches, all four schools shut their doors for good before the close of the year.³²

Nothing demonstrated black people's freedom from bondage

as much as freedom from physical dependence on their former masters. It was not enough to simply lay claim to a greater portion of their day-to-day lives by reducing the labor they allowed their old owners, or to have “the privilege of buying their [own] supplies, *without being allowanced*,” as a group of Early County ex-slaves demanded of their astonished ex-master later that fall. Most former slaves aspired to outright possession of the means of production and to live, as a black Charlestonian patiently explained, “on our own hook.” These efforts could take the form of independently owned and operated groceries, blacksmith shops, taverns, livery stables, or, as was the choice of a handful of freedwomen in Portsmouth, Virginia, small cookshops from which to serve the appetites of an urban clientele. But those whose pasts belonged to the fields—and these were by far the largest contingent of the South's former slaves—looked to the land for an autonomous future. Indeed, this was the message conveyed by a group of black ministers when asked by one of the Union's most feared generals to advise how best the nation's former slaves could take care of themselves, and how they might “assist the Government in maintaining [their] freedom.” “The way we can best take care of ourselves,” the ministers answered, “is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor.” Although the ministers went on to suggest at that January 1865 meeting that black people should be required to “buy it and make it their own,” the general to whom they spoke made land appreciably easier for ex-slaves to acquire. Within days of that memorable meeting, William T. Sherman set aside a large stretch of the Atlantic coastline for the exclusive settlement of the Confederacy's former slaves. By early April, Union authorities had already settled something on the order of thirty-five thousand black men and black women on what came to be popularly known as the Sherman Reserve—a thirty-mile-wide strip that extended from

Charleston, South Carolina, to the St. John's River in north Florida—and thousands more filled up coastal cities and abandoned estates, eager to partake in one of the most radical of war-time developments.³³

With the cessation of hostilities, word of Sherman's gift of land as well as of other federal settlements of ex-slaves percolated into the interior. Conveyed by a chorus of mobile voices—from sympathetic Union soldiers and refugees making their way home, to planters who continued to talk as if their servants entered life hard of hearing—such news traveled at considerable speed, often arriving hot on the heels of (and occasionally in advance of) more general announcements of freedom. Indeed, Rufus Saxton, who oversaw the low-country resettlement project and served as the first assistant commissioner of Georgia, suspected that a good many black people had learned of Sherman's reserve well before the end of the war, getting the word probably "from those in rebellion." Certainly by midsummer such information had reached southwest Georgia, where it first surfaced on plantations whose owners and workers had been deeply involved in making and moving Confederate supplies as well as much of white people's mail. Speaking of the one hundred black people who ended the war under his care, many of whom had spent long hours on the roads carrying salt from the Florida coast, an astonished George Davis announced to his absentee boss that "they have been under the impression they would" not only "Draw an equal portion of the crop" with their old master, but that his "Land[s] would Be equally Divided Among them." Such rumors and increasingly firsthand accounts withstood planters' best efforts to quash them and by fall, talk about land could be heard just about everywhere. Excited voices conveyed it along the Florida border; others talked openly about it on some of the richest plantations adjacent to Dougherty County, and on

William Stiles's estate rumors about coastal settlements of black settlers induced a small-scale exodus of freedpeople eager to lay their own claim to a piece of an old slaveholder's estate.³⁴

It is unlikely, however, that the seven freedmen and one freedwoman who slipped away from Stiles's plantation on the pretext of heading for church ever found the utopia they sought. By the time they heard of, let alone acted on, that whispered promise of land, it had been effectively revoked by Lincoln's successor. When Andrew Johnson had signaled in May his intent to return to former Confederates all their property, exclusive of slaves, he meant it. In Johnson's view, Reconstruction was more about reunion than about a radical remaking of the American state. It was enough that Union victory had liquidated ex-Confederates' property in slaves. It was too much to liquidate anything else—a move considered as threatening to landowners in the North as to those in the South. Drawing support from moderate Republicans, many of whom shared his reticence about allowing the revolutionary impulses unleashed by war to spread nationwide in peace, Johnson overrode protests from the more radical Republicans and hastened to return abandoned and confiscated plantations to their previous owners. By midsummer, that transfer was well under way, but at too slow a pace for the president's liking. Annoyed by the ongoing efforts of high-ranking Bureau officials, including the agency's chief officer General O. O. Howard, to hold large sections of southern land in reserve for the benefit of the former slaves (the land represented not only the material substructure of black freedom but the primary source for agency funding), the president sped up the exchange. On September 12, just twelve days before that party of eight aspiring black farmers set course for the coast from southwestern Georgia, Johnson made it even easier for planters to reclaim their estates. With nothing more than a land title, an amnesty oath, and if neces-

sary, one of the president's pardons, dispossessed former Confederates could be reinstated to land they had lost during the war. Only those black settlers with viable titles of their own stood any chance of staying in place beyond the end of the year. As General Howard explained to heartbroken audiences on Edisto Island, South Carolina, and elsewhere that fall, everyone else who occupied plots on the Sherman Reserve or similar land under federal control must make arrangements to vacate their homesteads or to enter into wage-labor agreements. The soil, he told them, would soon revert to its previous owners.³⁵

As prospects for a large-scale redistribution of property grew dimmer, so did the possibility that southwest Georgia's ex-slaves might secure their freedom in land. A few tried, cutting pragmatic deals with war-weary small farmers and yeomen ready to turn part, if not all, of their operations over to the "exclusive" control of black farmers. A few simply squatted in place, refusing, one planter howled, "to surrender their houses or leave the plantations." But such efforts were doomed from the start. As settlers on the Sherman Reserve had already discovered, digging freedom out of the soil (however one came to occupy it) required significant capital investment that few former slaves could immediately afford. This was especially true for those whose slavery had bequeathed them a material legacy of puny proportions. The few lengths of ribbon, plugs of tobacco, or changes of clothes that accompanied black southwest Georgians out of bondage did not go far toward making a farm, and crops do not grow well by themselves. Even the hardest require some form of capital and technological assistance. William Wells managed to finagle access to five hundred acres of good land, but failed in the end for the want of a mule. The agricultural enterprise launched collectively by thirty or so freedpeople in Decatur County failed for the want of everything else. Entering into their

experiment without the tools needed to work up the soil, the seed to drill into it, or even the rations to live on until the crops started to ripen, the farmers were forced almost immediately to abandon their own fields to take up wage-paying positions on land belonging to others. Perhaps "if these Freedmen had a sufficiency of Food and Stock to run the farm," a Bureau official reported after conducting a close investigation of the aborted affair, "they could make a living but under the circumstances I see no way for them to feed themselves without subsisting almost Entirely upon their neighbors."³⁶

One group of black farmers did manage to put seed in the ground and feed themselves without depending upon the goodwill (or employment) of their neighbors. Well organized, well funded, and backed by layers of federal authority, they came to stand out for the success of their farming experiment. They also stood out because they were newcomers to postwar southwestern Georgia, the first of them arriving out of the northeast from Wilkes County toward the end of November. Heirs to a past shaped on the leading rather than the lagging edge of the state's cotton revolution, the Wilkes County colonists (as they were popularly known) were able to convert social and material gains made under a much older slavery into a freedom of remarkable and propertied proportions. By late September, their project was well under way. As southwest Georgia's indigenous black people fought for the right to labor a less taxing day, more than two thousand former slaves "of which the larger portion were males" gathered together in Wilkes County to discuss setting up entirely free of their old masters' control. Located on lands long past their agricultural prime (the county had been settled before the American Revolution and put to cotton shortly thereafter), still reeling from General Sherman's march through their midst, and bedeviled by "bushwhackers" and "jayhawkers" who delighted in

"burning and beating negroes to get money," "many yea thousand[s]" of the county's ex-slaves concluded that their interests were better served by moving away than by staying. Reaching into pockets fattened by years of investment in resources of time, mobility, and materials they, as slaves, had won—individually, collectively, and carefully—from their owners, the Wilkes County freedpeople contributed "different Sums of Money varying from four to Seventy Dollars" to one of the most impressive cooperative settlement schemes put into place by the South's former slaves. Within two months, their kitty held close to seven thousand dollars, and its guardians expected the level to climb by at least three thousand dollars more. It was money enough to purchase or lease a fully appointed, ready-to-plow plantation, the supplies to make it productive, and a year's worth of rations for those who would farm it.³⁷

At first the colonists considered locating close to their known homes. But after discussing the matter with a senior Bureau official who reminded them that the far eastern end of the state's cotton kingdom had little to offer beyond "worn out" soil and surly white occupants, the colonists shifted their gaze toward Albany. Even after four years of war, southwest Georgia continued to attract aspiring agriculturalists. Its land remained fertile and thinly populated enough that the best of it could still be bought for less than three or four dollars per acre. Following a path carved into the ground by thousands of bound workers, migrating planters, and those who had made their livings catering to cotton's demands, the colonists sent two representatives shopping for a settlement site. It took a few weeks and much touring of potential locations and careful inspection of several locations, but the point men, Lawrence Speed and Wallace Sherman, eventually found what they wanted in Dougherty County: a five-hundred-acre established estate situated in comforting proxim-

ity to the Bureau office recently opened in Albany. Davis Tillson believed that the former slaveholders of southwest Georgia would make decent neighbors, or at least would make "no objections" to their presence. Sherman and Speed were not quite as sure. They liked being within a half-dozen miles of a federal agent. Leaving the latter, a former provost marshal by the name of Gideon Hastings, to look after their interests, the two colonists were soon on their way back to Wilkes County, eager to begin preparing and packing for their pending migration. The plan, which they ultimately realized, was to be back on the Dougherty plantation in time to put in a full complement of cotton and corn for the upcoming agricultural season.³⁸

All this initiative on the part of their former slaves was simply too much for most of southwest Georgia's former slaveholders. Declaring themselves bedeviled and "out Done" by freedmen and freedwomen who not only refused to serve them like slaves but showed themselves altogether too eager to treat white people like equals in matters pertaining to etiquette, landowning, and law, planters' moods grew progressively darker. This was not the productive and political order they had intended to nurse into being. Rather than restoring the substance of a slaveholder's system, they felt its remaining foundations giving way under their feet, eroded by those they had hoped to contain and constrain by means of unilateral labor agreements and a continued recourse to whips. "Freedom," one sighed to another in early October as it became apparent that planters' dominion was slipping, "runs badly down this way."³⁹

Indeed, freedom ran so badly in some white people's minds that a few resumed earlier discussions about cashing in, selling off, or at the very least diversifying their productive portfolios in order to reduce their reliance on people who refused to jump at

every command. But given the condition of their own war-ravaged pockets, talk of flight or a wholesale retooling of productive practices was as impractical in October as it had been in June. So too was a notion that had been gaining some currency in limited circles about recruiting new workers from Europe, Asia, and even the North to replace some of the old. But at the miserly "\$4 to \$6 per month and four suits of clothes a year" that planters proposed awarding Chinese laborers in return for their services, or the \$15 per month considered adequate for Irish men lured down from New York, that was unlikely to happen. Far better wages were available outside of the former slaveholding South. In hiring for the upcoming year, Pennsylvania farmers, for instance, were offering double that sum, California close to triple, and in Colorado, farmworkers could expect to earn \$67 a month. Better conditions were available elsewhere as well. Few immigrants with alternative options were likely to stake their futures on employers who insisted in public that none of their great staples could be "profitably cultivated" without "some strong assurance, something approaching at least a certainty, that the labor can be commanded and controlled for the season or the crop." The prospect of dining on a slave's ration, living in a slave's cabin, and performing a slave's work for what most of the nation's free laborers considered not much more than a slave's wage discouraged all but the most desperate of immigrant workers from taking ex-slaveholders up on their offers. As a former slaveholding mistress would later observe from her family's Dougherty County estate, planters' best chance for recouping spent fortunes lay in sticking to what they knew best: cotton, corn, and the labor force most accustomed to the everyday rhythms and requirements of plantation production. "Sometimes I wish we were off the plantation," William Smith's wife admitted, but "that is the only way for us to make a living."⁴⁰

As the summer of 1865 gave way to an increasingly contentious fall, the majority of Smith's agrarian neighbors had still not resigned themselves to throwing in the towel. But without a doubt, from the planters' perspectives, prospects looked ominous. They were especially anxious about the pending expiration of the current year's contracts. In many respects, Christmas would mark the majority of southerners' first experience with full freedom. After all, black people's earlier tendencies to stay close to, if not actually in, their former homes had relieved former masters of much of the process by which employers commonly recruit new workers. Most southern planters had simply captured in contract those whom they had the day before owned, regardless of their age, their condition, or even their capacity to labor. When agreements began to expire toward the end of the year, however, those who had once been their slaves would be legitimately loosed on the land, affording planters only a few weeks to replace a labor force most had spent a lifetime accruing. Coinciding with a holiday associated traditionally with the rituals of social inversion—when the bottom rail momentarily, if symbolically, displaced the top—it was a predicament that posed a novel and unnerving challenge to the South's former slaveholders. As a people far more accustomed to acquiring their laborers through purchase or birth and then holding on to them for life, hiring in a hurry was anything but a routine affair. "My great fear," admitted a planter who had charge of two Early County plantations, is "that [the ex-slaves] will refuse to contract until too late to make a cotton crop—a crop . . . now need[ed] above all others, for the sake of the gold it will bring us from Europe."⁴¹

The reestablishment of civil government, a process that had commenced systematically with the election of delegates to state constitutional conventions (Georgians elected theirs on October

4), imbued planters with renewed hope. After all, the restoration of state and local authority afforded former slaveholders and planters two significant advantages. First, and most obvious, the reorganization of the state's lawmaking and law-enforcing apparatus would render federal involvement redundant, giving southern citizens ample excuse to edge the national government and its increasingly annoying Bureau officials out of their lives and away from their estates. Indeed, planters across the South had been servicing this point every time they alluded to their particular gift for knowing black people's "wants" and "the best mode, and manner" for exploiting their labor. Second, with the state courts, legislatures, and police powers back in their hands—or at least in those of people born on the free side of a slaveholding system—planters anticipated being able to replicate through those structures much of the personal and productive authority they had lost along with the war. In the right hands, they believed, the law could be made to stand in for the brutal and now thoroughly proscribed machineries of chattel slavery. As a perceptive Bureau official pithily observed from Mississippi in early November, former slaveholders had "an ulterior motive" in their rush to restore their state and local governments. "If they can once get free of all [federal] control," Samuel Thomas warned General Howard, "they know they can do as they please with the negro."⁴²

Thomas's caution came a little too late, if Johnson's administration felt inclined to heed it at all. The seven former Confederate states that fell under the provisions of the president's Reconstruction were already well on their way to shaking off that federal control by the time the general set his pen to paper. South Carolina and Mississippi had been especially quick off the mark and would finish much of their work before recessing for Christmas, but Georgia was not far behind. By the first week of

December, the state's general assembly had sat down to business in Milledgeville, where they promptly took up the problem of free labor by taking in hand an "Act to authorize and regulate contracts between master and servant," the creation of a committee appointed in early November by the president of the constitutional convention. Chillingly similar to the "black codes" under construction in Mississippi and South Carolina—legislation that sharply restricted black people's ability to direct their own lives and control their own labor—the authors of Georgia's proposal elevated planters' self-serving vision of free labor to the level of state law. Leaving little but the choice of employers to workers' discretion, the act secured for planters what they had given themselves in the contracts drafted the preceding summer: workdays that stretched from daylight to dark, unquestioned obedience, and an uncontested authority to determine all causes for dismissal. A "master," wrote the authors of a law that with the governor's signature would have put the state at planters' private disposal, "may discharge his servant" for negligence, indolence, intemperance, absence without leave, and the "want of respect and civility for himself, his family," his guests, or his agents.⁴³

Even if the legislature were to complete its business before the holiday recess, the law applied only if laborers remained in the fields. That was not yet enough for southwest Georgia's anxious former masters, who had convinced themselves that the former slaves intended "to quit at Christmas & go up the Country some here & some there," a situation guaranteed, they believed, to "ruin themselves & the entire planting interest—if some measure is not adopted to *Keep them where they are*." Not trusting the state to act quickly enough, and doubtful that federal officials could or would do any better, planters stepped into action. Availing themselves of a political reorganization that extended from statehouse to courthouse to the smallest town

councils, planters in southwest Georgia participated in a wave of year-end assaults against black workers: lashing out at those who spoke too freely of striking bilateral bargains when their old ones ran out, who attempted to go it alone, or who dared to muse aloud, as did a black man named Jack, of impending changes that would "make them 'more free.'" Although town councils and grand jurors lent considerable assistance by passing new laws that sharply restricted black people's options and prosecuted black men on dubious charges, it was the newly reinforced police forces and a reorganized system of civil militias that took the most noticeable lead. Armed with ample supplies of rifles and rope, galvanized by rumors of servile insurrection then sweeping the South, and operating under "the color of law" (and frequently under the cover of night), posses scarcely distinguishable from antebellum patrols prowled their way through the region's plantations, pried into black people's cabins, roughed up unauthorized visitors, seized whatever weapons they happened to find, and brutally savaged those who stood in their way. "Oh Lord, Master don't kill me," a witness remembered hearing Wesley scream after a gang of five tricked him away from his house and into the woods. Although civil officials defended the militias as legitimate keepers of community peace and on occasion patrolled in their ranks, both militiamen and their victims knew a good deal better. They rode to restore relations of labor, sputtering openly, as did the party who caught a white man on his way from Sumter County to Savannah, that unless former slaves returned to work on planters' terms, the woods would soon reek from the stench of rotting black bodies.⁴⁴

Despite the impression left in the wake of the Yuletide terror, cotton planters were not conducting an indiscriminate or wholesale enclosure of ex-slaves. Freedom and free labor had broken

them of that particular bad habit. With slavery abolished and Bureau officials zealously enforcing the payment of wages, planters were no longer interested in accumulating both the fit and the fertile. Nor were they interested any longer in supporting those whose productive years lay far in the future or back in the past. Both were habits of plantation management that had been common in slavery, but whose logic had collapsed along with the Confederacy. What planters wanted were the "young and sturdy," people able to work hard, work steadily, work at whatever task they were assigned, and above all to work at the lowest possible price. Planters wanted, in other words, what most employers usually want under a free-labor system: to keep the costs of production down and the level of productivity (and profits) up.⁴⁵

Some of the South's former masters found such a free-labor force in the not-so-free labor of black adolescents, scooping up under apprenticeship codes leftover from slavery or reworked under freedom, armloads of teenagers and preteens. Maryland landowners were especially enamored of juvenile labor and the ways indenture could be deployed to circumscribe black liberty, but other former masters caught on almost as fast. Indeed, within six weeks of calling the local lower court back into session, Thomas County officials shifted thirty-five working-age kids out of the guardianship of parents declared by justices to be invisible, incompetent, or immoral and into the hands of applicant planters. Other southwest Georgians likewise expressed (and would continue to express) an appreciation for apprenticed farm labor. Convinced that black youth lacked the "run away & fortune-making natures of [grown] men," they plotted to flesh out the ranks of their workforces by "try[ing] to get the best of the children." Thomas Willingham was particularly keen to displace his ex-slaves with a youthful contingent, submitting a bid in early December for an army of children to cultivate his

eleven-thousand-acre Dougherty County plantation. "I will take from 25 to 200 boys & girls Between the ages of 10 & 14," he wrote a senior Bureau official in the first week of December, bumping the number up by one hundred a couple of weeks later. He volunteered to pay what amounted to a finding and binding fee of ten dollars a head in addition to "mak[ing of the children] all that can be made anything of." "I don't feele at all diposed to let every thing go as I see some people doing &, give up," he unctuously wrote of a plan that would deliver to him on fruition as many as thirty-three hundred years of black labor for less than the price of a small herd of hogs. "We can all get along if we try."⁴⁶

Too many problems attached to juvenile labor for most planters' tastes, however. Children fell ill; they got hurt; and they were novices, at best, in the art and science of making the South's staple crops. The youngest especially remained as inadequate to meet planters' taxing demands in freedom as they had been in slavery, under which owners had often waited until children were ten, eleven, or twelve before assigning them to gangs of suckling women and old men, a status most would hold until their early teen years. Moreover, as angry parents began to avail themselves of a thickening Bureau presence to recover children bound out without their permission, apprenticeship lost much of its luster. S. W. Brooks most likely thought so when, after a long and fiercely fought battle with Margaret, the mother of several of his eight youthful workers, he lost two at the height of spring planting. The recruitment of adult workers, while presenting planters with the distasteful prospect of bargaining directly with people they had recently owned, at least removed the problem of parents and the possible loss of labor at an inopportune time.⁴⁷

One adult was not the same as another, however. Cotton

planters remained as selective in freedom as they had been in slavery, only now they based their decisions on different criteria. Workers were about all they wanted. Determined to rebuild the South's fortunes, and their own, planters hoped to confine to their estates not only those capable of harvesting high daily weights of cotton, rebuilding fences, and chopping down weeds—labor traditionally performed by women as well as by men. They also wanted employees capable of felling trees, raising rafters, commanding the meanest of mules, and muscling five-hundred-pound bales of cotton from wagon to wharf. They wanted workers who could plow out new ground as well as turn up the old, who could sweep through acres of ripe grain with a scythe, split three hundred to four hundred rails between daylight and dark, and perform such services day after dependable day. They wanted, in short, the same class of workers who had performed the same types of labor in slavery, people whom they had esteemed for a capacity to produce significantly more than the cost of their keep, people not distracted from their duties by reason of age, infirmity, or, especially fertility—the people whom slaveholders once prized as "*Prime Hands*," as jacks of all possible trades. They wanted, in other words, what one former slaveholding Georgian called "operatives" and what many others described as "No. 1" hands.⁴⁸

Planters began fairly early to reconfigure workforces composed under slavery to accommodate the novel demands of free labor. Defiant of northerners' pleas that they retain and maintain on their estates "the old, decriped, worn out &c." until civil authorities made provision to support them, and insistent that the obligation to hire conferred the right to fire, former slaveholders evicted on dubious grounds or no grounds at all those whose labor they doubted would turn a measurable profit. They started out somewhat tentatively, launching their first assaults during

the late-summer lull in agricultural routine known as the lay-by. But planters soon picked up the pace, deliberately shortening the payroll before wages came due. Condemned as "superfluous 'help,'" those reckoned incapable of producing to their old master's standards—the very old, very young, the feeble, and the infirm—were sent packing, usually with nothing to go on and nowhere to go. "Make [your] livin' on . . . freedom," a Dougherty planter sneered when he dumped seven men and six women on an Albany street in November. He, at least, gave each of the party \$3.50 for the services they had rendered him since freedom; most did not bother. It was, a northern official concluded as he observed in July a process that expanded exponentially as settlement day crept closer, "a striking commentary on the old pretences of a strong & intense affection subsisting between the planter on the one hand & his negroes on the other." "The rough barbarism of war has torn off the vail that covered the radical barbarism of Slavery." As a measure of the depth of that barbarism, both military and civil officials calculated that roughly half of the South's rural ex-slaves stood at risk of eviction before the end of the year; in southwest Georgia that figure came to more than thirty-one thousand.⁴⁹

Planters took special pains to rid their estates of black women, especially those with small children. Once prized by their owners—women for their capacity to bear babies, and infants for their prospective contributions to slaveholders' fortunes—their value to landowners tumbled to near nothing in freedom. Neither made sense to employers under a free-labor system. Wage-paying planters had no interest in recruiting, unless absolutely necessary, jills of something less than half of all trades, and even less interest in supporting babies who consumed but could not produce. They wanted employees who could put in a full day's work immediately, not at some undetermined point in

the future. They wanted "working hands." They wanted them now, and they especially wanted them devoid of all external distractions. "Hire no women, who have children," recommended Dougherty County's Benjamin Yancey, especially those the other planters dismissed as "*sucklers*." They "stay in too much & jeopard[ize] the crop." Occasionally planters honored what one of them called the "dictates of humanity" by retaining the female and pint-size elements of their dismantled slave forces. Most did not. Whether they carved out their living on the plains of east Texas, in southside Virginia, on lush Delta estates, or on one of the plantations that sprawled along the banks of the Flint, planters generally took as their own some version of Yancey's hard-nosed advice. Out of patience with the pregnant, the recently pregnant, the potentially pregnant, and the very young—people who had been reckoned "a heavy Expense" in bondage but tolerated for the value they had added to a slaveholder's purse—planters turned their backs on the distaff and diminutive portions of their former slaves. In their view, mothers of youngsters, people incapable of "work[ing] well and regularly," would simply not do in the new order of things. Reported a senior Bureau official from Alabama, such individuals were "every where regarded and treated as an incubus." Be gone by Monday, Dolly's former master ordered the twenty-nine-year-old mother of eight-year-old Abby and six-year-old Jane on a day in September. Agnes's ex-master drove her away in November. Susan's turn came in December. So too did Adeline's, when her old master abandoned her and her children to shift for themselves on a chilly and translocal terrain that up until then had been the special domain of black men. "Starvation," mourned one of free labor's female victims, "seems at length to be the price I & my helpless children must pay for freedom, a bargain I had no hand in making."⁵⁰

The demographic imbalances of southwest Georgia's ex-slave population threw into relief the special disdain with which ex-masters beheld black women and their offspring in freedom. Scarcely allotted time enough since settlement to overcome the youthful character of slavery on the cotton frontier, less than 6 percent of the region's black people were forty-nine years old or older on the eve of secession. Five years later, that proportion had dropped even further, pushed downward by the arrival of refugee rebels who insisted on bringing only those slaves deemed most critical to recovering their fortunes after the war, a population sharing characteristics of age and capacity with those who had been favored in previous migrations. Thus black women and their children in southwestern Georgia bore the brunt of planters' postemancipation productive recalculations. Cast aside in numbers that both swelled the rate of local indigence out of all previous proportion and gave poverty a youthful and feminine face, freedwomen struggled to salvage themselves and their children from a freedom that had suddenly turned sour. Lending a distinctive gendered dimension to the frantic last weeks of 1865, when contracts expired, wages came due, and rumors of insurrection swirled through plantation communities, "colonies" composed almost entirely of unemployed black "women of sound constitution" began to take shape in and between southwest Georgia's small towns. By the time Christmas passed, which it did peacefully in spite of planters' impassioned predictions, black women found themselves thrust outside familiar surroundings, huddled among strangers in tumble-down shacks—or out in the open—without furnishings or fuel, and, ominously as winter approached, without much to eat.⁵¹

No former slaves obtained the whole of what they wanted as they steered their ways across the fast-changing landscape of the

first year of freedom. Slavery, over and above the fickle and contingent advances of federal interests or former masters with decisive plans of their own, still stood in their paths. The peculiarities of cotton's frontier regime had foreclosed well in advance on black southwest Georgians' prospects for attaining immediate education, developing their own churches, and cutting loose completely from the sites of their enslavement. The rhythms and relations established under one of cotton's older regimes likewise but dissimilarly set up the Wilkes County colonists as targets of white men who wanted their money. Most especially, slavery blocked black women differently than it did black men. Once cherished for their ability to provide what liberty negated—lifetime supplies of perpetually bound labor—black women stumbled especially hard as they attempted to cross freedom's irregular and seemingly capricious surfaces. By late fall, those who had passed out of slavery on cotton's terrain teetered at the edge of a precipice, scorned and denounced by ex-masters in a free-labor system that under their touch unapologetically privileged the fit over the fertile. But as scholars of the nation's passage from slavery to freedom have taken considerable and recent pains to point out, slavery bequeathed to its victims significant gains as well as crippling losses. And rather than cling to their babies in ramshackle huts, attempting to make what living they could off of the land and former slaveholders' leavings, the black women of King Cotton's domain would find their salvation in what they already knew: the gendered lives and ideas that they and black men had made for themselves under slavery's antebellum regime.