

Slaves for Hire: Renting Enslaved Laborers in Antebellum Virginia

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Review

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Zaborney, John J. *Slaves for Hire: Renting Enslaved Laborers in Antebellum Virginia*. Louisiana State University Press, \$42.50 ISBN 978-0-8071-4512-8

A Fresh Perspective on Slavery

There has long been debate among historians of American slavery about the significance of the practice of hiring out slaves. Scholars from Clement Eaton in 1960 to Midori Tagaki in the late 1990s drew attention to the greater autonomy enjoyed by many hired-out slaves, particularly in urban settings, compared with those under the direct control of their owners. Others, from Richard Wade in the 1960s to Jonathan D. Martin four decades later, suggested that hiring out either illustrated the incompatibility of slavery with economic development or threatened to destabilize the slave system by dividing authority over slaves. In *Slaves for Hire*, John J. Zaborney provides a rounded, well-documented study of slave hiring in Virginia that – while building on and incorporating earlier findings – argues that the practice bolstered rather than compromised slavery, and also helped build cross-class solidarity among whites in the slave South.

For long-recognized reasons, post-Revolutionary and antebellum Virginia produced a “surplus” of slaves. While sale and forced migration to the Lower South and the Southwestern frontier removed many slaves to other regions, Zaborney points out that hiring out of slaves within Virginia was also a factor in bringing demand for slave labor in line with the supply. Virginia’s slave population grew during the antebellum period, but prices for slaves and rates for hiring them also rose. Hired slaves represented a significant proportion of the total in many parts of the state; of adult slaves in Loudon County, for example, 34 percent were hired out in 1860. Slave hiring was pervasive. It was common in rural as well as urban areas; in agriculture as well as in manufacturing; in domestic work as well as craft production; and Zaborney stresses its significance to mining and railroad construction, which brought slave labor into far-flung corners of the Commonwealth. Not least of his contributions is to give close

attention to the gendered aspects of the slave hiring system: women slaves and their experiences are as much a focus of this account as those of the male fieldhands, craftsmen, and laborers who have usually been discussed in studies of slave hiring.

Drawing on census reports, slave schedules, hiring bonds, letters, diaries, court records, and other sources Zaborney describes the array of circumstances in which slave hiring took place, from owners' desire to earn income from renting slaves or to place "extra" hands, to employers' demands for labor, and middle-class households' desire for domestic workers. He considers life-cycle issues, such as the placing-out of child slaves in other families, and the hiring-out of slaves by widows. He devotes part of a chapter to the debates among some Presbyterians during the 1840s as to whether their church should continue to hire out the slaves it owned or sell them. While he pays full attention to the patterns of urban hiring that historians have long noted, Zaborney also stresses the role of slave hiring in the local exchanges conducted among rural households, and in the patronage relationships between large slaveholders and their small-farmer neighbors in the countryside. While he considers the many functions of hiring for slaveowners and their clients, he also pays full attention to its effects on the experiences of slaves. Not surprisingly, the story was mixed. Some slaves achieved measures of the autonomy that earlier studies have noted, not least those men who, often in urban contexts, got to find their own lodgings and might obtain money for themselves by earning overwork payments in the task system. The frequency of slave-hiring also, Zaborney suggests, retained in Virginia considerable numbers of slaves who would otherwise have been sold or transported to other parts of the South. But these advantages were heavily qualified. Hired-out slaves were often separated from their families. Working conditions were often harsh or outright dangerous. Though hired slaves might gain some negotiating-space from the split authority and inherent tensions between their owners and the masters who rented them, Zaborney presents many instances in which the reverse was true, in which owners and renters agreed on harsh punishments and other measures to enforce discipline. If hiring out divided mastery over slaves, he argues, it was within parameters that sustained, rather than undermined, the slave system.

This was due to the very pervasiveness of slave-hiring that he documents. Developed over decades from the American Revolution on, the hiring system became institutionalized in Virginia society and culture. Terms and conditions in hiring contracts became regularized, and – because they were commonly

understood – often implicit, rather than explicitly specified. There were annual hiring fairs. Agents and other institutions emerged to facilitate the slave-hiring system, to match owners with renters, and to supervise the movement of slaves between them. Above all, Zaborney argues, the very variety of contexts in which hiring occurred ensured that many segments of white society became directly involved in the slave system even as the distribution of wealth and slave ownership became more unequal. Slave hiring meant that a wide array of white men and women who did not own slaves nevertheless obtained the use of slave labor and the right to exercise authority and discipline over slaves. Renters of slaves, Zaborney implies, were hiring not just labor-power but the fruits of racial domination. Perhaps as much as the political rights obtained by white men, this social and economic power enjoyed by women and men alike represented the “wages of whiteness” in the antebellum South. If so, it helps explain how southern leaders obtained the support of non-slaveowning whites for their secession adventure in 1860 and 1861.

Slaves For Hire is a rich study, steeped in many individual stories that give valuable insights into the hiring system. Its impact, however, comes more from the accumulation of examples than from systematic measurement. Future studies might address a number of themes that could test and perhaps strengthen the arguments it advances. Sharper attention to chronology could be helpful; though most emphasis here is on the 1840s and 1850s there’s a disconcerting tendency to jump back to the late-eighteenth or early nineteenth century for examples, and that could obscure some issues. What might be said, for example, about the relationship between slave hiring and the overall prices of slaves over time? To what extent was hiring a consequence of slaveowners’ desire to hold slaves as investments during price rises? And was the concatenation of slave hiring and white solidarity that Zaborney postulates a persistent facet of Virginia society between the Revolution and the Civil War, or did it emerge most strongly in the buoyant markets of the 1840s and 1850s in parallel with sectional disputes over the expansion of slavery, the assertion of “positive good” justifications for it, and the emerging influence of “scientific” racism? Finally, it would have been useful to have a fuller comparative discussion of slaveholding Virginia with other regions. Zaborney does note that slave-hiring markets in Delaware and Maryland were weaker, though his explanation that this was due to smaller internal improvement projects seems not entirely convincing. If white solidarity cemented by a pervasive hiring system was as important as he suggests, was that so primarily in Virginia, or did it also apply more widely in the plantation South?

And what about those parts of Virginia, Tennessee and elsewhere where apparently it did not apply? Was attachment to the Union from 1861 on as much correlated with the weakness of slave hiring as it was with slave ownership in general?

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