

# The Weeping Time: Memory And The Largest Slave Auction In American History

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## Review

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**Bailey, Anne C.** *The Weeping Time: Memory and the Largest Slave Auction in American History*. Cambridge University Press, \$24.95 ISBN 9781316643488

Anne C. Bailey's latest book, *The Weeping Time: Memory and the Largest Slave Auction in American History* adds to the historiography of the domestic slave trade by focusing on the too often neglected and inhumane practice of the slave auction. Bailey examines the largest recorded slave auction in the country's history which was held in Savannah, Georgia. On March 2 and 3 1859, buyers from across the country assembled at the Tenbroeck Racetrack where they purchased 436 men, women, and children from the Butler plantations of the Sea Islands. The reason for the sale was the reckless spending of Pierce Mease Butler, who had inherited his grandfather's, Major Pierce Butler, plantations. By 1859, bad investments in the stock market and the fallout of the Panic of 1857 had finally caught up with Butler, forcing trustees to take control of his Sea Island property, and consequently selling most of his slaves to settle his debts. Bailey persuasively argues that the auction, known as the Weeping Time, and its accompanying history, provides historians with a prism through which to better view the connection between black and white families, who lived parallel lives, yet shared linked fates due to slavery. The Weeping Time and thousands of other slave auctions attempted to deny both the generational connections within slave families and the interconnectedness between slaves and masters.

With a total of nine succinct chapters, Bailey divides her book into three main themes or sections: the Breach, Linked Fates, and the Healing of the Breach. The first section is about the auction and the devastating breach it caused in the Butler slave families. According to Bailey, slavery was first and foremost an enemy of the family. Relying on a contemporary account of the auction written by Mortimer "Doesticks" Thomson, a reporter for the New York Tribune who posed as a buyer, Bailey opens the book with a vivid, heart wrenching account of the auction. With a novelist's flair for storytelling and a historian's eye for detail, Bailey brings to life the anticipation of the buyers, and the raw

emotions of the men, women, and children who were poked, prodded, and then sold away to the highest bidder. However, Bailey argues that the origins for the dissolution of the Butler slave families began at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 when Major Pierce Butler and other delegates ignored the morality of slavery in order to create the Constitution. Southern delegates were only willing to recognize the humanity of blacks when it benefited white political power: for example, their insistence that blacks be counted as equal to whites when determining representation in Congress. According to Bailey, it was this legacy of denial—denial of black humanity and of black and white interconnectedness—that the elder Butler passed on to his grandson in addition to his estate and slaves. And this prolonged denial of black humanity would have devastating effects on the Butlers, their slaves, and the nation.

Indeed, the second theme of parallel lives and linked fates is best exemplified by a chapter on Pierce Butler's 1834 marriage to actress and abolitionist Fanny Kemble. Perhaps Pierce Butler, so smitten, chose to ignore Kemble's abolitionist views, which she did not hide while they courted in Philadelphia. Fanny abhorred slavery, as she believed any Englishman or woman should, since slavery was illegal in England. However, in this regard, Kemble denied her own and England's connections to southern slavery. After all, as Bailey points out, it was southern cotton that fueled England's textile industry and comprised the clothing that Kemble and other Europeans desired. While visiting the Butler Island plantation for the first and only time in 1839, Kemble took special interest in the slaves, noting both their physical and moral conditions. She even agreed to educate a slave boy named Aleck despite it being against the law. After returning to Philadelphia, their marriage was on the rocks. Kemble demanded that her husband free his slaves or the marriage was over. Over the next several years, the couple lived together sporadically, but it was at best a tumultuous relationship, with Kemble accusing Butler of infidelity and he accusing her of abandonment. By 1849, the court granted Butler a divorce, which estranged Kemble from her two daughters throughout their childhood. Eventually, even her two daughters would divide over the issue of slavery, as the younger daughter sided with her father and the oldest daughter shared her mother's abolitionism. The Butler family's disintegration due to slavery foreshadowed the breakup of the Butler slaves' families, and the national family. In this way, Bailey continuously and seamlessly connects the lives and labor of the Butler slaves to those of their masters, both before and after the Civil War.

The third theme and final section of the book, the healing of the breach sees Bailey's cogent argument relying on genealogy and oral history in addition to the existing record to tell the story of the Weeping Time from the perspective of the Butler ex-slaves and their descendants. Bailey filled the historical gaps of the former Butler slaves' lives with evidence collected from interviews with their living descendants, who had conducted their own extensive genealogical research. With the aid of the descendants' research, Bailey was able to trace the lives of fifty-nine men, women, and children of the original 436 slaves that were sold. Furthermore, Bailey's use of oral history makes the Weeping Time also about recovery and reinvention for the former Butler slaves and their descendants. After the war, the Butler ex-slaves exercised their newfound freedom by assembling their shattered families, which was a top priority. Many who had been sold in 1859 returned to the Butler plantation or placed advertisements in newspapers in search of family. Also, they negotiated new patterns of work with the Butlers who expected that their former slaves would simply acquiesce to slavery work patterns. Not so. As Bailey points out, the freedmen had their own ideas; for example, working for only six hours per day and not at all on Saturdays. The Butlers, as other former masters, became so frustrated with the freedmen's independence that they brought in Chinese laborers to work their General's Island plantation. Furthermore, Bailey demonstrates that the freedmen, in the face of great peril, audaciously exercised their new civil rights in a variety of ways including applying for pensions from the federal government, obtaining an education, learning new job skills, and, importantly, voting.

Bailey's work is a must read for scholars of the domestic slave trade, but her arguments are also in conversation with multiple historiographies including the African Diaspora and Reconstruction. The author's three-dimensional examination of the former Butler slaves traces the origins of their agricultural know-how, music, cuisine, and spiritual beliefs back to their West African heritage. By recognizing this lineage, the author resurrects the humanity of the ex-Butler slaves, while simultaneously connecting their lives and labor to larger economic and social developments such as the transatlantic slave trade, the Industrial Revolution, and the pivotal Civil War. The book is also a valuable addition to the study of the history of black families through its focus on historical memory and oral history. Although Bailey is careful to point out that there is not a straight casual line from slavery to the current state of black families, the Weeping Time and its companion history shows that blacks have

continuously fought to maintain familial integrity against overwhelming, and often times, insidious outside forces, and that the black family was and remains a resilient institution.

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