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SLAVERY IN CHARLESTON, 1830-1860

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In 1964, Richard C. Wade published his trail blazing study of slavery in the cities of the American South before the Civil War. Wade concentrated on the largest cities, which meant that Charleston, Virginia, was not among them.¹ In his study, Wade, who died in 2008, described a pattern of development that has provided historians with a number of helpful benchmarks ever since. This brief paper will utilize a number of these benchmarks to describe slavery in Charleston during the antebellum period.

Wade's fundamental conclusion was that slavery was "disintegrating in Southern cities" by 1860. A system that had seemed stable in 1820 had declined "everywhere proportionately, and in many places absolutely." It had "nearly disappeared altogether" in border state cities. Charleston, Virginia, was indeed a southern border city until 1863 when West Virginia joined the Union as another divided border state. Charleston's unique status in this regard adds an intriguing nuance to this investigation, for slavery had certainly not "disappeared" from Charleston by 1860.²

Wade described a three-step pattern of slavery development in these southern cities. Initially, slavery grew rapidly as the cities grew. At a certain point, generally around 1840, slave population stabilized while white population continued to grow. By 1860, slave population was falling in these cities. As Wade summarized:

The number of slaves mounted as the city became larger, often increasing faster than whites. At some point, however, the ratio shifted. Negro population leveled off as others continued to rise; soon a gradual reduction set in. Every Dixie metropolis went through at least the first two phases of this cycle by 1860, and most had completed all three.³

There were thirty southern cities with a population over 8,000 by 1860, but Charleston, with a population of only 1630 was not among them. Wade studied eight in detail: New Orleans, Mobile, Savannah,

¹ Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in Cities: The South 1820-1860*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.

² Wade, p. 3.

³ Wade, p. 16.

Charleston, S.C., Richmond, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Louisville, and St. Louis. In addition to his cyclical pattern of “early dynamic growth, stagnation, and finally decline,” Wade noted some other trends in these cities: (1) The percentage of slave owners was often higher in the cities than in the surrounding countryside. (2) The actual number of slaves per household was smaller in the cities. (3) By the end of the period, cities were shedding slaves, particularly males sold off to the countryside. (4) Large holdings had for the most part disappeared from these urban centers. (5) By the eve of the Civil War, 54 corporations were owning slaves. To a greater or lesser degree, all of these observations also can be tested in Charleston.⁴

In offering explanations for this pattern of development, Wade concluded that the most significant factor may have been the growth of black neighborhoods and black institutions in these cities where a large free black population had developed. As he noted: “The problem was not what happened in the factory or shop but what happened in the back street, the church, the grocery store, the rented room, and the out-of-the-way house.” It was the “associational life” of the free black population, their private lives and contacts that were significant in slavery’s decline in these cities. Slavery required a “high degree of order,” but “the city demanded fluidity.” While other trends described by Wade may have had their echoes in Charleston, the free black population was still much too small for this kind of associational life to gain much headway.⁵

Charleston, Virginia, was not much of a city before the 1820s. Only in 1830 was it large enough to be designated as an entity separate from Kanawha County on the federal census. From its formal founding in 1794, Charleston grew slowly. It may have had a couple hundred souls by 1810 and maybe as many as five hundred by 1820. Charleston’s population and institutional growth in large measure paralleled the early development of the salt industry in Kanawha Valley. Only after a branch of the Bank of Virginia opened in 1832 and a first class hotel, the Kanawha House, opened in 1834, did the city have the commercial, governmental, and service trades necessary for real city life.⁶

Once Charleston grew large enough to appear separately on the federal census, it becomes possible to compare the growth of slavery in Charleston from 1830 through 1860 against the model described by Wade. In general, Charleston did follow the broad pattern of Wade’s model.⁷

CHARLESTON POPULATION 1830-1860

<u>Population</u>	<u>1830</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>1840</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>1850</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>1860</u>	<u>%</u>
White	429	62.8	657	59.7	674	68.8	1208	74.1
Free Black	10	1.5	28	2.6	54	5.5	34	2.1
Slave	244	35.7	415	37.7	252	25.7	388	23.8
Total	683	100%	1100	100%	980	100%	1630	100%

From these census reports, it does appear that slavery in Charleston grew rapidly early, that population then leveled off after 1840, and that slavery was in relative decline by 1860 as the white population

4 Wade, p. 5, 19 (quote), 20-28.

5 Wade, pp. 245, 249, 262.

6 For Charleston’s early development see R. Eugene Harper, “Glenwood 1852. Why? The Context for an Historic House.” Paper presented at the Glenwood Estate Symposium, Marshall University Graduate College, July 28, 2007. Available online at: <http://www.marshall.edu/gsepd/humn/GlenwoodProject/>

7 U.S. Federal Census for 1830, 1840, 1850, 1860 and the 1860 Slave Schedule for Kanawha County, Virginia, available on microfilm at the West Virginia Archives, Capitol Complex, Charleston. Because each census is structured differently, direct comparisons are not as simple as it might seem, and each researcher will need to make interpretive decisions. Nevertheless, the general pattern of development is not in doubt.

nearly doubled. While this follows the general pattern described by Wade, clearly by 1860, slavery had not “nearly disappeared altogether” from this border city, and the growth of a free black population was not yet a significant factor in city life.

Wade’s broad pattern also holds when one looks at households and slave ownership. The number of households reported as owning slaves grew little in absolute numbers over the period even as the total number of households grew more than threefold. There was essentially no change from 1830 to 1840, a moderate jump by 1850, and a minor increase from 1850 to 1860.

SLAVE OWNERSHIP 1830-1860

<u>Households</u> ⁸	<u>1830</u>	<u>1840</u>	<u>1850</u>	<u>1860</u>	
White	70	109	133	230	
Free Black	1	8	7	7	
Total Households	71	117	140	237	
Whites with Slaves	58	57	68	72	
Percentage with Slaves ⁹		83%	52%	51%	30%

As a proportion of the white population, however, the percentage of households reporting slaves declined dramatically over the period even as the total number of slaves actually increased. Thus, the overall pattern follows Wade: a high proportion of slave owners early on, then a general stabilization, followed by a significant decline in the proportion of slave owners by 1860.

If one looks more closely at these numbers, certain complications appear and some refinements need to be made. For example, can the high number of slaves (415) in 1840 be explained? Or, in spite of the much smaller proportion of slave owners, why were there still so many slaves in Charleston in 1860? Note the following mean (average) number of slaves per owner in each decade:

SLAVES PER CHARLESTON HOUSEHOLD

	<u>1830</u>	<u>1840</u>	<u>1850</u>	<u>1860</u>
Number of Owners	58	57	68	72
Slaves per Owner	4.2	7.2	3.7	5.4

Contrary to what one might expect from Wade’s model, slave owners appear to have owned more slaves per owner in 1860 than in 1830. As the full distribution of slaves per owner shows (see next page), most owners held only a few slaves. However, a few owners had many slaves, and these large

⁸ Household does not necessarily imply a separate dwelling. An owner may have lived in a boarding house or hotel.

⁹ Occasionally slaves were reported living with free blacks. In 1840, two single female slaves lived with a free black woman, Nelly Fry. In 1850, washerwoman, Judy Grinham, had a free black family (occupation: cooper) and a single female slave living with her. Were these slaves owned by these poor free women, or simply residing there? Only slaves in white households are included in the percentages.

numbers easily skew mean statistics in a population this small. A handful of owners held more than twenty slaves, and in 1840, one Charleston owner claimed 85.

If one looks more closely at those owing twenty or more slaves, it is highly unlikely that many of these slaves actually lived in Charleston. To take the most glaring example, Joseph Friend's 85 slaves illustrate the point. Friend was a salt maker and merchant. According to the peculiarities of the 1840 census, Friend was credited with fifty jobs under a column titled "manufacturing and trade." This strongly suggests most of Friend's slaves lived at the salt works along the Kanawha River outside Charleston and not in town. Similarly, Fredrick Brooks had 27 slaves and was credited with 17 in manufacturing as well as 8 in mining. Robert Thompson owned

DISTRIBUTION OF SLAVES BY HOUSEHOLD

No. of Slaves	Households (White and Free Black) with Slaves			
	<u>1830</u>	<u>1840</u>	<u>1850</u>	<u>1860</u>
0	12	59	71	165
1	15	11	25	21
2	14	8	10	8
3	6	7	12	10
4	6	6	4	5
5	4	5	3	3
6	4	4	2	7
7	1	4	3	3
8	2	2	3	4
9	0	0	4	2
10	1	1	0	1
11	0	1	0	0
12	0	1	0	0
13	1	3	0	2
14	1	0	1	0
15	0	0	0	0
16	1	0	1	1
17	0	0	1	0
18	1	0	0	1
19	0	0	0	0
20	0	0	0	0
More than 20	1 (21)	5 (21, 22, 23, 27, 85)	0	4 (23, 25, 26, 29)
Total Households	71	117	140	237

23 slaves and was credited with 12 jobs in manufacturing and trade. However, Squire William Gillison, who had a farm on the West Side technically not in Charleston at that time, had 22 slaves, only one of whom was an adult male; 15 were children under age ten, and the remainder were females of various

ages above ten. The three persons credited to commerce in the entry for John Welch were likely the three white males above age twenty in his family and not any of his 21 slaves. Similarly, in 1860, Isaac Noyes and John C. Wright (both “gentlemen” on the census) as well as County Clerk and ferry operator, Alexander W. Quarrier and lawyer Benjamin Smith each owned more than twenty slaves. Although the 1860 census provided occupations for each person, it did not attribute slaves to any particular occupation as the columns on the 1840 census did.

What refinements in our picture of Charleston slavery can be drawn from this additional information? First, it is obvious that Charleston’s population is not as large as the original tallies indicated. Clearly many slaves should not be counted in the Charleston population since they actually resided at various salt works along the river. In 1840, for example, the slaves of Friend, Brooks, and Thompson—all three men associated with the salt industry—accounted for 87 manufacturing and mining jobs, all of which were probably at the salt works. Although young single men were most prized for such labor, some salt workers had families adding to the slave population not living in Charleston. In addition, Gillison’s slaves were probably on his farm outside of town as perhaps were the slaves of other owners. Similarly in 1860, Isaac Noyes (23 slaves) was a noted salt maker; Benjamin H. Smith (29 slaves) had a long association with the salt industry, and given his occupation as “gentleman”, John C. Wright (25 slaves) quite likely also had invested in the industry. Given this information, one might safely suggest the slave population of Charleston in 1840 was closer to (less than?) 315 than 415, and for similar reasons some adjustment should be made in 1860 and perhaps the other census years as well.¹⁰

However, one should not automatically assume someone owning many slaves had all of them employed elsewhere in the salt industry or on farms outside of town. Andrew Quarrier probably used some of his 26 slaves to man his ferries that ran back and forth across the Kanawha River. Perhaps some of John Welch’s slaves transported goods in his mercantile business. Undoubtedly, these slave owners had slaves as domestic help. Certainly there is specific evidence that a number of Charleston’s tradesmen employed slaves, although in much smaller numbers. To further confuse the situation, slaves owned by out-of-state residents were leased to local businessmen for work in the salt industry, mining, or other trades and appear on the census with the local businessman to whom they were leased. One thing is certain, Charleston’s true population in the era of slavery, those actually living in the town, cannot be known precisely.

Briefly, what further can be said regarding the other trends noted by Wade? First, it must always be remembered that slavery in Charleston was uniquely influenced by the existence of the extensive salt industry a few miles away. During the 1850s, the salt industry suffered major setbacks, so that by 1860, it was but a fraction of what it had been at its peak and would not recover. The following paragraph from John Stealey summarizes the decline:

Between 1850 and 1860 the salt industry of the Great Kanawha Valley suffered a severe decline unrelated to the labor system. Only nine salt manufacturing establishments existed in 1860. The surviving companies only employed an average

¹⁰ John E. Stealey III, *The Antebellum Kanawha Salt Business & Western Markets*, Lexington, KY, The University Press of Kentucky, 1993 is the definitive study of the salt industry and is an excellent source for cross-checking census names. Chapter 13 focuses specifically on slavery in the salt industry.

of 285 male and 10 female hands in a month of operation. Annual salt production was approximately a third of what it had been a decade before. While Kanawha County's white population increased between 1850 and 1860, . . . the slave population dropped dramatically because of the demise of the salt industry. The total slave population decreased 30 percent, and the male and female slave populations decreased 35 percent and 23 percent respectively. The adjustment is more meaningful when one views the decreases in the prime age groups for male labor: ages fifteen to nineteen, 37 percent; twenty to twenty-nine, 56 percent; and thirty to thirty-nine, 49 percent. In fact, in Kanawha County there were fewer slaves in 1860 than in 1850 in every age and sex category except for males and females over fifty-nine.¹¹

With this in mind, Wade noted that the percentage of households with slaves was higher in the cities than in the countryside, and that appears true for Charleston. More than half of Charleston households owned slaves through 1850, but the number dropped to 30 percent in 1860, likely influenced to some extent by the decline of the salt industry. By comparison, in Kanawha County in 1820, before Charleston was separated out, the percentage of households with slaves was only 21 percent, and that fell to 13.5 percent for the county outside of Charleston in 1860.

Wade's observation that corporations owned slaves was certainly true in the Kanawha Valley all during this period, but it was the large companies in the salt industry outside of Charleston that owned the vast numbers of slaves as can be seen on page after page of the slave schedule. As stated above, most large slave holdings in Charleston were attributable to individuals connected to the salt industry, and that remained true in 1860 in spite of that industry's collapse. Therefore, it cannot be said of Charleston, that the large slave holdings had for the most part disappeared from the city by 1860 as Wade suggested. A few Charleston residents continued to have large holdings, although none—not even Joseph Friend's 85 in 1840—ever compared with the major salt manufacturers up the river such as the Dickinson and Shrewsbury firm. Given the decline of the salt industry it is also hard to judge Wade's observation that cities were shedding slaves, especially adult males, to the countryside. With the salt industry shedding more than half of its prime laborers aged 30 to 39 during the 1850s, the more surprising fact is that the number of slaves in Charleston apparently did not decline at all.

Finally, the scope of this paper does not allow comparison of the size of slave holdings per household in Charleston with the thousands of households in Kanawha County over the period. It can be said that most Charleston slave owners held just a few slaves. Excluding those few holdings above twenty, which were mostly attributable to the salt industry, the median (typical) holding for white slave owners was two (almost three) in 1830 and 1850, and three (almost four) in 1840 and 1860. Testing just the proportion of white slave-owning households with six to twenty slaves, there were 21 and 22 percent respectively in 1830 and 1850, and 31 percent in both 1840 and 1860. The size of holdings in Charleston thus appears to have been fairly steady. There was a plateau around 1840, as in the Wade model, but after the decline in 1850 a further decline by 1860 did not occur in Charleston.

In conclusion, the Wade model does help explain the general pattern of slavery in Charleston: early growth, stabilization, then some decline. However, by 1860, slavery still seemed viable; it had

¹¹ Stealey, p. 153.

not “nearly disappeared altogether” despite collapse in the salt industry, nor was there a significant free black population. It is little wonder that Charleston was a divided city during the Civil War. Further, because of the involvement of a number of Charleston’s elite in the salt industry, Charleston’s slave population is impossible to calculate exactly, and thus the total population of Charleston in the antebellum period cannot be precisely known.

This brief paper has just scratched the surface of what we may ultimately learn about slavery in Charleston. Additional intensive work with local manuscripts, tax assessment records, deeds, wills and court records as well as more sophisticated analysis of the census can fill in the many gaps not covered by this paper. One hopes that local scholars, especially the students and faculty of the Marshall University Graduate College working on the Glenwood Project, will fill in many of those gaps in coming years.

GLENWOOD SUBJECT OF OCTOBER PROGRAM

West Virginia State University Professor, Dr. Billy Joe Peyton will present a program on Glenwood at the Kanawha County Public Library on October 20, at 1:00 p.m. The public is invited to hear this presentation detailing the evolution of Glenwood with maps and photos.

WEST VIRGINIA STATE MUSEUM OPENS

Archives Library has new Look

If WVHS members have not yet had the opportunity to visit the new WV State Museum in the Cultural Center, the first trip for each will be a treat. The

new, multi-million dollar venture displays as many aspects of the state’s culture and history as possible with an innovative time trail leading guests from one historical venue to another. The museum is open everyday but Monday and has limited hours on Sunday.

The Archives and History reading room has been extensively renovated with new window treatment, new upholstery for the chairs and several new computer terminals for research. The same old, and greatly appreciated, personal service is available from the experienced and expert staff. The archives staff is planning new controls to protect valuable manuscripts. Soon, visitors will be asked to leave personal items in conveniently placed lockers before entering to ensure that documents are not removed from the collections.



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