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Freshman

Slave Bill of Sale, 1848

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The "Slave Bill of Sale," which is dated from 1848, is a handwritten legal document regarding the sale of an 11-year-old boy named Jacob in Wilcox County, Alabama. The artifact is currently held in the Museum of Southern History at Houston Christian University and is shown to be written in cursive on creased yellowed paper. In 2022, The University purchased the "Slave Bill of Sale" from Gallery of History, Inc. The Bill establishes a slave's representation as newly bought "property." In the Bill of Sale, the parties, dates, and prices are all accounted for to ensure proper legalization of the transfer. This former legality of the sale of another human being is a significant reminder of how dehumanizing slavery once was.

An individual who purchased a new slave would be issued a "Slave Bill of Sale." The Bill contained information about the newly acquired slave and other further terms regarding the sale. Much of this information included, but was not limited to, Sex, Age, Name, Family Relationships, Weight, Eye Color, Hair Color, and any other physical distinctions that could distinguish the slave. (Rae, Issa).

Jacob was sold by George Ptomey to Willis Sturdivant for the price of \$129.98 on the date of March 4, 1848. This amount is equivalent to the modern value of just over \$5000. At the time, slaves were typically given the surname of the owner who possessed them; Jacob could have carried the last name of Ptomey (Hait, Michael). However, there are no further records indicating when Jacob died or what events may have occurred after the sale; analyzing other "Bills of Sale" could give an insight into the possibility of Jacob's outcome.

The piece "Bill of Sale for Slave Boy" held in the Charles F. Heartman Manuscripts of Slavery Collection labels a further reason that slaves in the Confederacy would be traded amongst slave owners (Sarah Thruston). In this Bill, a boy was traded from one owner to another to pay off a debt owed in 1784. Although there is no specification of the debt, the dehumanizing nature is more pronounced when recognizing that the Bill legally established the boy's status as monetary property.

Although negligible details have been accounted for on Sturdevant, Ptomey was a recognized figure in Alabama. The real estate, personal property, and slaves suggested that Ptomey had an accumulative value worth of assets just over \$30,000 following his death (The Ptomey Family of Alabama...). Analysis of the text outlines that George Ptomey was most likely a victim of the "Panic in 1837", which caused many cotton farmers to sell off their land and slaves. Ptomey sold 40 acres of land to Mullikin Nored for only \$50 on April 27, 1839. Ptomey believed that slave ownership was not solely a sign of wealth but an efficient method to run a large cotton farm (pg. 30). Ptoemy's death on March 22, 1849, indicates that Jacob was sold to Sturdivant almost a year earlier.

According to U.S. Census Data, just under four million unnamed slaves comprised the United States population of 31,118,075 in 1860. Of this population, 1 in 70 individuals were slave owners, and each slave owner possessed around ten slaves. Wilcox County was the 9th largest holder of slaves in the state of Alabama and the 19th largest in the United States in 1860. After the Emancipation Proclamation was enacted, Wilcox County's "colored" population rose 21% in 1970 (Blake, Tom).

Slave owners were undecided whether President Lincoln would jeopardize this right to ownership of a slave looming the Civil War, causing demand to diminish. Due to this apprehensive state in the Confederacy, slave owners began to trade slaves among themselves. As Jacob was sold much closer to the Civil War, the price of \$129.28 was below average, considering Jacob's sex and age. Before the civil war, the prices of another human being would reach \$1500 in many cases. The recorded sale price in the state of Arkansas regarding a girl named Polly in 1835 was \$1500 (Smithsonian Magazine).

The drafting of a slave into the Civil War on the side of the Confederacy was a common strategic tactic. Slaves who participated in the war were never allowed to possess a firearm or any other classification of a weapon. Jacob had most likely entered the Civil War as Cannon Fodder, a term describing soldiers, especially slaves, that would equip combating Confederate soldiers with necessary medical supplies, ammunition, and food. If true, Jacob would have been around 24 years old in 1861.

The probability that a Cannon Fodder Slave had died in the Civil War is possible. Cannon Fodder Slaves that were killed or required too much medical expense to be treated were often thrown in the masses into a pit and buried. Cannon Fodder Slaves did not carry a surname during the war and were only identifiable by uniform, indicating that this is one possible reason why there is no record of Jacob Ptomey or Jacob Sturdivant in modern databases.

In the assumption that drafted slaves, including Jacob, had survived the war, adjusting to an accepted social status remained restrictive. Newly established African Americans in America were still under a heavily oppressive society. In the book, "Slavery and Class in the American South," Frederick Douglas elaborates on the struggles African Americans continued to face even

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Commented [GU2]: spelling error-remove "l" (should be Ptomey not Ptolemy)

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after the implementation of "The Emancipation Proclamation." Douglas explains that the verse "(Ephesians 6:5) gave Christians sanction to slavery while enjoining slaves to remain loyally obedient to their "earthly masters." (Andrews, William). Even after the emancipation proclamation, high-ranking members of churches in various former Confederate states would still claim slavery as ethical and purposeful as it would allow man to carry out the virtue assigned by God. Therefore, African Americans were often targeted for participating in Christian worship in many former Confederate areas.

Although the Bill had represented that an individual would be established as property, slave owners determined whether their slaves would be assets or labor bondage during ownership. Comparatively, Bills of sale for slaves are similar to contemporary property sales. The similarities highlight how dehumanizing a Bill of Sale was when created and exercised for an individual. Figures such as Jacob significantly influence our interpretation of how immoral slavery is when we understand a victim's perspective.

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