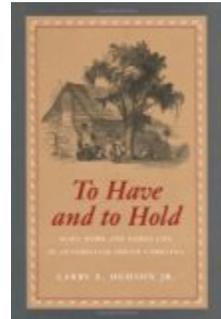


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Larry E. Hudson, Jr. *To Have and to Hold: Slave Work and Family Life in Antebellum South Carolina*. Athens, Ga. and London: University of Georgia Press, 1997. xxii + 241 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1830-1.

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Larry Hudson crisply states that *To Have and to Hold*, “is about slaves’ endeavor to influence crucial areas of their lives, to exploit a small piece of land and produce surplus provisions that led to significant property accumulation in the slave quarters. Property holding improved the slaves’ ability ‘to have and to hold’ that which was most dear—a family” (p. xvi). With this agenda, Hudson hopes to establish an analytic framework for the slave family that goes beyond “African retentions” or the “natural tendency” of people to form families in slavery. Key questions Hudson investigates include: What was the structure and meaning of the family for antebellum South Carolina slaves? To what extent can the slave family be understood in materialist terms? How does the family’s economic function relate to its meaning as an affective group? How useful is Caribbean-derived historiography, respecting slaves’ autonomous production of food and craft goods, in exploring slave life in mainland North America? To what extent were slaves’ family-driven activities manipulated by slaveholders; contrastingly, how much of the story of the slave family can be rooted within the slave quarters, sealed off from the public world of the slaveholder?

In addressing these questions, Hudson is not given to lengthy historiographical debate, at least in the body of his text. *To Have and To Hold* does not openly confront the work of Herbert Gutman [1] or Ann Malone,[2] though much of Hudson’s argument challenges or refines their assessments of the slave family. Hudson also tells us at the outset that, “If (the book) has a bias, it is against so heavy an emphasis on the brutality of the institution that it obscures the humanity, endeavor, and creativity of the enslaved” (p. xiii). Indeed, Hudson’s account of slave families is so centered on the community of the quarters

that slaveholders and their doings often disappear from view. There is a good deal of discussion and speculation about power, dominance, and status in the quarters. Issues such as separation of families by sale, or the problems posed by marriages between slaves owned by different masters (i.e., “abroad” marriages) are examined primarily from the standpoint of enslaved people and their methods of keeping families together. Some readers may find this stance troublingly dismissive of the horrors that could attend chattel slavery, but such a reaction would not do justice to Hudson’s accomplishment. He invites us to see slaves as neither “victims nor rebels,” but as self-motivated and self-interested families and individuals striving hard to exert control over their immediate world.

*To Have and To Hold* begins with a chapter on the slaves’ world of work. Working with plantation account books and slaveholders’ family papers to document slaves’ lives, Hudson divides his sources into low-, middle-, and up-country plantations, and looks for significant differences in slaves’ work and family life in each sub-region. Hudson finds a “work and garden” system broadly characteristic of all three areas, though most fully articulated in the low country. Slaves performed most work for their masters by the task, rather than in gangs. For Hudson, gang labor appears most commonly on new plantations, in connection with expanding the number of acres under cultivation. (Not all historians would agree. Joseph Reidy [3] has argued that Georgia planters shifted from tasking to gang labor, when and as the scale of their operations increased.) Slaves who did work by the task were able to tend plots of land made available to them by slaveholders. The garden produce supplemented slaves’ diet or was sold to the master, un-

like the situation in the Caribbean, where slaves more commonly bought and sold in open markets. Some slaves amassed considerable wealth in this fashion, as Hudson demonstrates through analyses of claims from ex-slaves about losses to Union troops before the postbellum Southern Claims Commissions. Some claimed losses for hundreds of dollars worth of grain and livestock; at least one case indicated that a slave had possessed a horse.

Hudson sees the ability to exploit provision grounds as a strong attraction for slaves, and suggests that “night work,” often adduced as an example of the extreme harshness of slavery, might represent voluntary activity by slaves seeking to generate income for themselves. Slave control of provision grounds was thus critical to accumulation, and maintenance of a strong and stable family, in turn, was essential to exploiting a provision ground effectively.

In a second chapter featuring extensive and painstakingly-developed slave family genealogies, Hudson finds that those families possessed of the greatest proportion of skilled, hard-working, healthy members were most likely to thrive economically, most likely to be commercially active, and least likely to suffer separation by sale. Selling a member of a large and productive family might significantly worsen morale and lower production in the slaveholders’ fields; hence, wise masters sought to avoid such actions. In contrast, isolated individuals were highly vulnerable to sale. Thus, kinlessness, often an important precondition to enslavement in African societies, posed a parallel threat of removal and disruption to blacks living in slavery in South Carolina. As conceptualized by Hudson, one could compare the South Carolina slave family’s economic activity with that of West Indian slaves. Much of what he has to say is congruent with Sidney Mintz’s view of Caribbean slaves as “proto-peasants.”[4] Of course, if South Carolina’s blacks are to be viewed thus, it would be reasonable to expect to find completed family sizes growing smaller over time, as a way to conserve limited resources available from one’s provision grounds, a theme that Hudson does not significantly address.

One could also draw comparisons more broadly to other regimes of family and work. One thinks of colonial New England farmers and fishermen, *a la* Daniel Vickers’ work on the family as an economic unit,[5] or of the internal dynamics of family among immigrant textile millworkers, as analyzed by Tamara Hareven.[6] Slaves’ purported willingness to work many extra hours, at far below market wages, to keep a family intact and in control

of a piece of land, suggests a variation of the behavior of Appalachian farmers taking on mining or logging at heavily exploitative wages, in order to retain control of a family farm, as demonstrated by Paul Salstrom in *Appalachia’s Path to Dependency*. [7]

In the third chapter of *To Have and to Hold*, Hudson ponders the challenges slaves faced in keeping a family together. He notes that mortality rates were high for infants, children, and adults, citing Cheryll Ann Cody’s work that less than half of slave unions lasted fifteen years without the death of a partner. Hudson argues that slaves living in large families were likely to have better diet and nutrition, as a consequence of family-earned or produced food “extras,” and better nursing when sick; hence, they would be less likely to be debilitated or die from disease. This is a plausible claim, but Hudson’s data do not permit him to adduce strong statistical support for the idea that larger and stronger families had lower mortality rates than other slaves.

In his fourth and final chapter, Hudson turns to an analysis of the slave family and its role in creating kin networks and affective ties. He begins with a discussion of “abroad” marriages, i.e., marriages between slaves residing on two different plantations. Such marriages detracted from a husband’s ability to produce extras for his family, by requiring him to use spare time to travel to and from his spouse. Still, most available evidence suggests the prevalence of such marriages among slaves in all but the very largest holdings. Does this pose a problem for Hudson’s hypothesis about the centrality of economic production to defining the role of the slave family? Hudson deals with the issue by acknowledging the necessity of abroad marriages as a kind of limiting factor on the ability of slaves to build large, productive, and autonomous families. He believes that the most successful families were those that contrived to arrange the largest share of marriages among partners on the same plantation; here again, the sparse data available are at best suggestive of Hudson’s view.

Ultimately, he downplays the importance of abroad marriages’ economic impact by noting that they generated more extensive kin networks than on plantation marriages, and thus provided some of the protection and benefits of large families. Only at the close of this chapter does Hudson deal directly with slave sale or the threat of sale by masters. Consistent with his overall vision he looks at sale from the slaves’ vantage point. For Hudson, a slave bought and then resold quickly is likely to be a person who became troublesome because he had been

separated from his family. (Michael Tadman and other students of slave dealing might see such transactions as evidence that slaveholders, large and small, speculated extensively.[8] Alternatively, the slaveholder might be an economic maximizer constantly adjusting the size of his workforce.) Hudson also endorses the idea that late antebellum masters were increasingly shamed by the idea of separating families by sale, a claim that probably will not draw universal affirmation.

A brief concluding section restates Hudson's principal claims about slaves' ability to increase their sphere of influence via the creation and maintenance of economically strong families. Hudson's single-mindedness and clarity of vision in developing this theme make *To Have and To Hold* a strong and important book. At times he may push his point too far, but no reader will come away from this book without having reconsidered and reimagined much of the conventional scholarly wisdom surrounding the slave family. That is a significant accomplishment; Larry Hudson merits praise for this provocative study.

#### Notes

[1]. Gutman, Herbert, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, Pantheon, 1976.

[2]. Malone, Ann Patton, *Sweet Chariot: Slave Family and Household Structure in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana*,

U. North Carolina, 1992.

[3]. Reidy, Joseph, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880*, U. North Carolina, 1992. The question here is when, and under what circumstances, did it make economic sense for slaveholders to reduce supervision costs by tasking laborers as opposed to seeking to increase output by assuming the costs of direct supervision via gang labor.

[4]. Mintz, Sidney, *Caribbean Transformations*, Aldine, 1974.

[5]. Vickers, Daniel, *Farmers and Fishermen: Two Centuries of Work in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630 - 1850*, U. North Carolina, 1994.

[6]. Hareven, Tamara, *Family Time & Industrial Time*, Cambridge U. Press, 1982.

[7]. Salstrom, Paul, *Appalachia's Path to Dependency: Rethinking a Region's Economic History, 1730-1940*, U. Press of Kentucky, 1994.

[8]. Tadman, Michael, *Traders, Speculators, and Slaves*, U. of Wisconsin, 1989.

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