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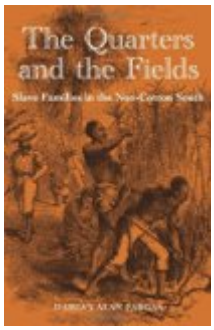
Damian Alan Pargas. *The Quarters and the Fields: Slave Families in the Non-Cotton South.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010. 320 pp. $69.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-3514-7.



Reviewed by John Cimprich

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Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle (Saint Anselm College)

Damian Alan Pargas's *The Quarters and the Fields: Slave Families in the Non-Cotton South* impressively depicts the variety within slave family life in the United States. The book compares the chattels' domestic situation in three counties, illustrating diversified farming in northern Virginia (Fairfax County), rice-growing in South Carolina (Georgetown County), and sugar-raising in Louisiana (St. James Parish). The book reviews slavery in each locale from its beginnings but, like most studies of the institution, emphasizes the nineteenth century. It focuses on quantitative analysis of a number of aspects of slave family life. Other aspects, presumably matters that vary less and have been studied well by other authors, especially qualitative and noneconomic ones, are left out. All the same, Pargas, an assistant professor of history and American studies at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, has written a very successful first book.

Pargas's thesis is that, while slaves generally sought more family time and economic opportunity, masters usually pushed for more profits. Regional agriculture primarily shaped the laborers' family life. It even set the boundaries and opportunities for slave agency. The author recognizes cultural factors but does not stress them. His findings arise from extensive use of slave census schedules, probate records, deed books, plantation records, runaway ads, diaries, letters, memoirs, and travel books.

In the case of northern Virginia, the key factor affecting families was economic decline from soil exhaustion by tobacco cultivation. The alternatives did not pay as well but required more labor under closer supervision. Owners sold or hired out many slaves to raise cash. Genders remained balanced but smaller slaveholdings and farms meant more cross-plantation marriages. Parents could not work together, visit often, spend much time with children, or earn extra cash (in this locality masters considered the last practice harmful). Pregnancy breaks were short, and children began working early. White men

had more biracial children, and destitute slaves allegedly stole more.

In the case of coastal South Carolina, great economic prosperity and stability played a preponderant role in shaping black families. Rice farming required little supervision and could be handled by men and women working cooperatively. The gender ratio stayed fairly equal, few families were broken by sales, and few biracial children appeared (here Pargas should also note the role of the high black-to-white ratio). The limited number of slave sales sometimes included families sold as a group. Pregnant women had a break from work that was average for slaves. The unhealthy lowland fields delayed the age of entering the labor force. The slaveholders' ancestors brought the task work system with them from Caribbean islands in an effort to motivate good work. Having a limited workload each day enabled families to spend more time together and to find significant opportunities to earn extra money. Despite larger slaveholdings, close landholdings led to many cross-plantation marriages.

In Louisiana's sugar-producing area, families benefited from the booming economy's expanding numbers of slaves but faced unusually long work hours. The constantly increasing production levels meant that owners rarely sold anyone out of the region. Men and women sometimes labored together, though planters bought mostly males for the intense gang work that required close supervision. The scarcity of marriage opportunities increased male conflict and pressure on teenage girls for extramarital sex. Large slaveholdings enabled most spouses to live together. Masters allowed pregnant women a break from work that was average for the institution but provided little health care, which resulted in a high death rate for infants. On the other hand, they delayed a child's entry into the unhealthy lowland fields. Families had little time together but earned substantial incentive payments for overtime hours, usually their only economic opportunity.

Such a highly structured comparative study makes for slow reading. Each chapter examines the three regions in order through a set of questions and finishes with a comparative summary. The focus is on the big picture; individuals appear only briefly as examples. Pargas enhances readability as much as possible with word variation and a smoothly flowing style. He weaves together persuasive interpretations even when little evidence exists. He describes the northern Virginia slaves' dawn-to-dusk hours as "especially long workdays" (p. 456), which seems something of a mischaracterization when one considers that nineteenth-century farmers typically labored that long; nevertheless, he does note that masters often required those slaves to work late.

The book draws upon extensive research in secondary sources. This work is much influenced by Wilma Dunaway's views (***African American Families in Slavery and Emancipation***, 2003) on the limited nature of slave agency and Brenda Stevenson's statistical techniques (***Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South***, 1996). If anything, the comparative approach conveys the author's points more forcefully. He challenges overall generalizations by previous historians and especially Eugene Genovese's contentions (***Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made***, 1974) regarding the ubiquity of customary rights and small gardens for slaves. Pargas's work firmly demonstrates the need to rethink slavery on a region-by-region basis.

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