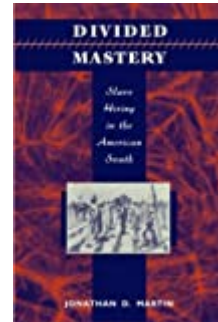




**Jonathan D. Martin.** *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. 237 pp. \$43.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01149-6.



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### Slave Hiring: Not a Bargain

In describing slave hiring, one Virginia slave owner claimed that it “pa[id] well” but only after acknowledging that it was “a troublesome and tedious business” (p. 81). In *Divided Mastery*, Jonathan D. Martin addresses both of these observations by showing slave hiring’s connection to liberal capitalism in the South and by illustrating the ways it undermined southern society. In doing so, he sheds valuable light on an important yet understudied aspect of slavery. While historians such as Walter Johnson, Robert Gudmestad, and Steven Deyle have recently brought considerable attention to—and provided insightful conclusions about—the slave trade, until now, nothing equivalent to their work has been done on the process of owners renting out their slaves.[1] This omission is surprising because, according to Martin, slaves were three to five times more likely to be hired out than bought or sold. Martin’s book admirably fills this gap in the study of slavery, and he certainly deserves encomiums for his efforts. *Divided Mastery* convincingly contends that slave hiring was “at the center of the region’s society and economy” (p. 2), and it demonstrates just how important this often neglected aspect of slavery was to all southerners, whether owners, slaves, or hirers.

Slave hiring shaped owners’ economic decisions, slaves’ family lives, the relationship between owners and their slaves, and the relationship between slave holders and non-slaveholders. The specific hiring situation had tremendous variety, with hirers ranging from wealthy planters needing extra help to non-slaveholders who desired slave labor but could not afford to buy slaves to slaves hiring themselves. Every slave, including the very young, the very old, male, female, skilled, and unskilled, could be hired. Hiring contracts frequently ran from January 1 to December 25, with New Year’s Day serving as “hiring day” throughout the South. In other instances, however, slaves could be hired by the week, the month, or the job. As Martin succinctly observes, “If there was work to be done, a slave could be hired to perform it” (p. 189).

Slave hiring provided flexibility to the slave system by separating the market for slave labor from the market for slaves themselves. Without hiring, owners and prospective owners would have to buy and sell slaves, an option that could be cost prohibitive and/or impractical. According to Martin, the flexibility of hiring paradoxically

both strengthened and undermined the slave system. It strengthened the system by democratizing slave holding (allowing those who could not afford to buy slaves the opportunity to rent mastery and thereby increasing the number of southerners who had a stake in the slave system), by increasing profits for slaveholders who now could find work for otherwise idle or unprofitable slaves, and by facilitating westward expansion (slaves could help finance a move West by either being sent ahead or by being left behind to earn money for a prospective migrant to the frontier).

At the same time it provided flexibility, hiring also undermined the slave system. Ideally, slave owners portrayed southern society as a united front. Yet, social and legal disputes arose from hiring, and these disputes exposed fissures in southern society. At times, white laborers, who saw themselves in competition with hired slaves, saw their petitions to limit this prospect ignored by owners who valued profit over workers' concerns. More frequently, owners and hirers entered into conflict with one another, in which case, the court system tended to favor the former. Hiring attempted to divide the ownership of property between two people, at least temporarily. In a capitalist world, two people simultaneously claiming to own the same property proved problematic, particularly to the court system. Legally, slaves could only have a single owner. Hirers resented that courts and contracts limited their right to punish recalcitrant slaves and that they could be held liable for slaves who ran away or died. They also felt insulted by the fact that in these legal disputes, owners and southern courts often valued slaves' testimony over their own. This proved particularly disruptive to southern society because hirers believed that they had purchased not only slave labor but also mastery, which in the antebellum South was intimately connected to honor and independence. Ironically, in their effort to become independent, hirers often found themselves dependent on owners, courts, slaves, and contracts limiting their power. Understandably, hirers took exception to the idea that the mastery they purchased was not absolute.

To highlight the tensions in southern society, Martin focuses on the triangular nature of the slave hiring process. His second through fourth chapters look at the hiring process through the eyes of slaves, owners, and hirers, respectively. He asserts that "slaves with two masters were able to control their own destinies and, in the process, sow discord in white social relations" (p. 4). First, by "using their market value as a weapon" (p. 55), slaves could influence their own hiring. Threats of run-

ning away, harming themselves, or simply refusing to work could quickly end negotiations. In manipulating the hiring process, slaves strove to keep their families together. Second, Martin later explains how slaves recognized the loopholes provided by dividing mastery. In an ideal situation, they could play their owner and hirer against each other, and possibly emerge with a better situation for themselves.

*Divided Mastery* strikes another blow at the idea of slavery as a primarily paternalistic endeavor. Recent research on the slave trade has shown that owners viewed their slaves first and foremost as commodities. If the buying and selling of slaves strayed from paternalism, hiring was perhaps an even more capitalistic endeavor. Paternalism necessitated a reciprocal relationship between owners and slaves, where slaves provided labor and owners provided care and protection. As the southern legal system acknowledged, hirers lacked the sense of self-interest to protect slaves, viewing them merely as means to profit. Additionally, owners who rented their slaves clearly considered their slaves more as investments than as dependents. Martin contends that even the area where one might be most likely see this paternalistic relationship in action, the act of slaves running away from their hirers and appealing to their owners for protection, in reality emphasized the lack of paternalism in hiring. In running away, slaves acted in an independent rather than a dependent manner, and in appealing to their owners, slaves emphasized their market value rather than any sense of a reciprocal relationship.

While articulating the triangular nature of the hiring arrangement, Martin adeptly avoids falling into the trap of attributing so much agency to slaves that they no longer appear as slaves. As he puts it, at times having two owners "only made life doubly bad" (p. 144). He makes his strongest points in this regard in his section on slaves who hired their own time, paying their owner a stipulated amount on a regular basis. Whites in the antebellum South and some historians have considered these slaves "quasi-free" since they often did not live under the same roof as their master, could negotiate their own contracts with employers, and could keep the money they made in excess of their hiring contract. Martin reminds readers that the phrase "quasi-free" would not be one that the slaves recognized. Self-hired slaves were still slaves, and they lived in a precarious world; white laborers railed against their competition, their contracts were not legally binding, illness, injury, or temporary unemployment could put them in desperate straits, and even if they earned enough money to purchase themselves, their

owners could simply take that money from them.

*Divided Mastery* is an outstanding addition to the literature on slavery. In exploring this neglected topic, Martin has provided an excellent overview of the slave hiring process and of the diverse perspectives of slaves, owners, and hirers. He also has presented additional support to the argument that slavery's capitalistic nature clearly overshadowed its paternalistic side. His brief book, only 195 pages of text, gives some sense of change over time and geographic differences in the hiring process, but future research on local hiring markets could

complement the superb book that Martin has written.

Note

[1]. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Robert Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); and Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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