

*Sally Williams and Bethany Veney:
The Lives of Two Female Slaves of the South*

By Jennifer Canale

Until the early 1980s, little was known about the life of the black female slave. Only recently have the lives of hundreds of thousands of these women begun to be researched and explored. Research now concentrates specifically on the different histories and experiences that enslaved men and women had throughout the American Slavery era, yet the amount of research conducted for women slaves is surprisingly small. There are many primary sources about slave women ranging from letters to diaries to biographies available; however, the amount of research conducted on these materials is very limited. For over two hundred years, black slave women helped to build the United States into what it is today. They worked as field hands, house servants, cooks, seamstresses, nannies, nursemaids, wives, mothers, and concubines. After the 1807 ban on the international slave trade, black slave women became even more important. Without these women, the institution of slavery would have collapsed, for women slaves were valued most of all for their economical worth, that is, the ability to produce the next generation of slaves to replenish the work force.

The lives of two slaves, Sally Williams and Bethany Veney, were very similar to each other. Though their paths never crossed, they both shared in the horrors of slavery and had their stories documented; Williams through a biography written by her son, Isaac, and Veney through her own autobiography. Each woman tells the tale of her childhood, marriage, motherhood, and eventual freedom. It is through the history of these women that a better understanding of the female slave experience can be made,

their experiences told, and their memories honored.

Early childhood was similar for many female black children to that of white children. They played together, ate together, and were socialized among each other. Black women nursed their master's children alongside their own; those women who worked in the master's kitchen gave equal time and care to every child of the house, black and white. However, once a female black child started to mature, she soon learned what would be expected of her for the rest of her life.

Sally Williams was born into slavery in Fayetteville, North Carolina around 1796. She was lucky enough to know both of her parents, and enjoyed what most people would consider to be a "normal" early childhood for a young female slave in that time period. Williams' mother was employed as a waiting-maid for her elderly mistress and spent much time away from home, as the old woman was deaf and dumb and spent her time traveling. Williams' father worked on another plantation fourteen miles away and was allowed to visit once a month.¹ Soon, as it was the case for all slaves, Williams soon learned what it meant to be a slave. Her biography states:

The master required but little work of the child. It is policy to leave the slaves to grow and strengthen, unfatigued by labor, until they are old enough to be constantly occupied, as a colt is loft unshackled, with free range of the pastures, until the "breaking" time comes. When about nine years old, Sally began to be employed in doing errands for her mistress, in sweeping the leaves from the walks, and in weeding the garden.²

Before the age of ten, Williams was put to work, sun up to sun down, six days a week.

Later that year, her responsibilities would include bringing dinner to the field-hands in a large bowl carried on her head. One day, she accidentally spilled the rice while carrying

¹ Isaac Williams. *Aunt Sally: or, The Cross the Way of Freedom. A Narrative of the Slave-life and Purchase of the Mother of Reverend Isaac Williams of Detroit, Michigan* (Cincinnati: American Reform Tract and Book Society, 1858), 46-47, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/sally/sally.html>.

it to the fields; when the overseer noticed her tardiness and saw grains of sand on the rice, he “called her careless and lazy, and, seizing her by the shoulder, whipped her severely.”³

By the time she was twelve, Williams was laboring in the fields full-time.

Bethany Veney, sometimes called Betty, had a different childhood. She writes in her autobiography, “I have but little recollection of my very early life. My mother and her five children were owned by one James Fletcher, Pass Run, town of Luray, Page County, Virginia. Of my father I know nothing.”⁴ When she was nine, her mother died. Soon after that, the master died and the division of property among the children began, which included the slaves. Veney was separated from her remaining family, she and her sister, Matilda were now owned by the former master’s eldest daughter. Veney describes her new mistresses’ husband, David Kibbler, as a violent man of whom she feared greatly. After a beating by Master Kibbler one day, Veney’s mistress, Miss Lucy noticed her limping and asked Matilda what had happened. Matilda told Miss Lucy the truth which upset her enough to speak to her husband about it. Enraged at Matilda’s story, Master Kibbler beat Veney again for allegedly telling Miss Lucy of the original beating, threatening her never to speak of her punishments again.⁵ However cruel the master, Veney spoke well of her mistress; at one point she said of her, “Poor Miss Lucy! She was kind and tender-hearted. She often said she hated slavery, and wanted nothing to do with it; but she could see no way out of it.”⁶

The childhoods of these two women were very fortunate and very rare. As they

² Ibid., 27.

³ Ibid., 31-32.

⁴ Bethany Veney. *The Narrative of Bethany Veney, A Slave woman* (Boston : Press of Geo. H. Ellis, 1889), 7, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/veney/veney.html>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

were not only lucky enough to be kept with their families for the first ten years of their life, they were lucky to have survived the first few critical years of infancy, for not many children did.

The infant mortality rate of young black slaves was extremely high during the 1800s for slaves. Miscarriages were high, mostly due to the malnourished and overworked mother during pregnancy. The average birth weight of an infant was 5.5 pounds.⁷ Of those who survived birth, one half died before the first year of age, mainly due to undernourishment, as most infants were weaned by three or four months; originally fed from poorly nourished mothers themselves. Cornmeal was the main diet for the next two to three years when the toddler then began to eat soups, potatoes, and vegetables.⁸ Meat was rarely an option, for most adult slaves did not frequently eat meat, except if they were allowed to fish or to raise animals on their own time. As a result, many children never had the chance to survive long enough to develop a healthy body and combat disease. The historian John Blassingame describes that time period as one in which the children died in droves due to the ignorance of the mothers about childbirth and the poor nutrition they received. Not only were the mothers uneducated about their bodies and health, many times the master had no medical knowledge about childbirth, or simply did not care.⁹

Girls began working younger than boys, and their duties were much different.

⁷ Richard H. Steckel, "Women, Work, and Health Under Plantation Slavery in the United States," *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gasper and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 50.

⁸ Digital History, "Life Under Slavery," http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display_printable.cfm?HHID=74.

⁹ Wilma King, "Suffer With Them Till Death: Slave Women and Their Children in Nineteenth-Century America," *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gasper and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 149.

Girl slaves started working inside the house, performing small housework tasks such as cleaning and cooking or outside with simple gardening. Approximately fifty-three percent of girls were working by the age of seven compared to forty-four percent of the boys. By the age of ten those numbers equalized, with many girls working not only in the house but in the fields as well. Again, by age fourteen, female slaves were employed more than men, where seventy-one percent of women as opposed to sixty-three percent of men were doing their permanent adult jobs. At the height of the season on the sugar plantations, this could mean a sixteen- to eighteen-hour workday.¹⁰ Not only did girls begin working at a younger age, but when working in the fields picking cotton, until the age of seventeen, girls were more productive than boys.¹¹

Slave children were often raised in a matrilineal¹² or matrifocal society.¹³ Since many women had to return to full employment within weeks of giving birth, the charge of most infants and toddlers fell to an older slave, usually an older woman who could not continue the usual heavy load assigned to her. Though not necessarily related to the child, these women became “aunts” or “grannies” of the child, usually spending more time with the child in the early years than the mother.¹⁴ This network of aunts, sisters, cousins, and female friends aided in the feeding, socializing, and early rearing of the child.

Upon a female slave reaching childbearing years, it was in the best interest of the

¹⁰ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 59-60.

¹¹ Steckel, *More than Chattel*, 44.

¹² Matrilineal: a domestic system in which only a mother and/or her female relatives are present in the rearing and socializing of children.

¹³ King, *More Than Chattel*, 147.

¹⁴ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999), 127-128.

plantation owner to begin to repopulate his work force. Many times, this involved two slaves marrying, sometimes the master allowed the slaves to choose their mates, sometimes a marriage was arranged for them. This marriage was not legal in the eyes of the state as it was for white people; a marriage between slaves could be made and broken at the masters discretion, with no concern for any of the couple's feelings, for slaves were property, and the owner could treat his property in whatever method would benefit him the most.

As Williams continued daily life in the fields of Fayetteville, North Carolina, her old master died. She and the plantation were passed on to the son, who soon took a wife. In no time, the new wife filled her position as mistress of the plantation:

Sally now went constantly to her work in the field, but the lady's quick eye observed her, and she soon singled her out from the rest as the one upon whom to call when she needed any extra service in the house. Sally liked the change, and strove to please her. Among the servants who worked on a distant part of the plantation, was a young man named Abram Williams. Sally was now thirteen years old, and her mistress decided that she should be married, and that this young man should be her husband. Both were her property, therefore the only part they had to play was to acquiesce in the arrangement.¹⁵

Fortunately for Sally and Abram, they liked each other well enough, and they were soon married. It was not common for that time, but they were married by a Methodist preacher, and given a party and reception by the mistress of the house.

The next morning, a Sunday, Abram had to return to his plantation, for he needed to be there and rested before Monday morning and the new week's work started. Though they did not know each other well, they formed a love for each other and Williams cried as she walked with Abram to the edge of her master's property and bid him farewell. He would only be able to visit once a week.

Williams' mother returned the day after the marriage and delivers an emotional speech to her daughter about the marriage. As she cries for her daughter's future, she says, "'Chile, chile, what have ye done? De Lord knows I'd rather have soon ye in yer grave than married. . . .Oh, Sally, gettin' married's de beginnin' o' sorrow; my heart aches to think what ye've got to bar!'"¹⁶ Unfortunately, Williams' mother was proven correct, for a few years later, Abram was "sold south" to New Orleans, and Williams never saw her husband again. She remarried a free man, hoping to avoid losing another husband to the slave trade, but this time it was she that was sold to a speculator from Alabama.

Veney also experienced the devastation of being separated from her husband. She and Jerry, a slave from another plantation, had known each other for several years, and eventually they were allowed to marry. She describes her wedding day:

So it happened, one day, there was a colored man - a pedler, with his cart - on the road, and Jerry brought him in, and said he was ready to be minister for us. He asked us a few questions, which we answered in a satisfactory manner, and then he declared us husband and wife. I did not want him to make us promise that we would always be true to each other, forsaking all others, as the white people do in their marriage service, because I knew that at any time our masters could compel us to break such a promise.¹⁷

Within a year, Jerry was put in prison, collected as to pay a debt on his master's property. His master could not pay the debt, Jerry was soon sold. Veney describes her final moments with her husband, "I stifled my anger and my grief, brought his little bundle [of clothes], into which I tucked a testament and catechism some one had given me, and shook hands 'good-by' with him. So we *parted forever*, in this world."¹⁸ As so many women of that time, Veney and Williams would never know what happened to their

¹⁵ Williams, *Aunt Sally*, 49-50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁷ Veney, *The Narrative of Bethany Veney*, 18.

husbands.

Marriage for slaves was very different from that of white people. Slaves were rarely married by a minister, most of the time it was the master of the plantation who agreed that a couple could be married and performed the ceremony himself. Other times, if different owners were involved, a more formal “business” ceremony would take place, with neither law nor religion being present nor honored. As in Williams’ case, she entered into an “abroad marriage” where the couple lived on different plantations and saw each other whenever the time permitted. Generally, men could get a weekend pass to visit their wives who lived far away; for the closer plantations, a Wednesday pass was extended; in addition, for a neighboring farm, the man could visit nightly.¹⁹ Any slave caught off the plantation without a pass was immediately given thirty-nine lashes.

Although not preferred by slave owners, this type of marriage was permitted on certain plantations, but always with some risk. There was plenty of risk to the husband’s slave owner, for the husband may not work as long and hard after spending so much time traveling to a neighboring plantation. Also, the freedom of going back and forth may encourage the husband to run away. Equally at risk were the couple, for too many times during the absence of one partner, the other slave would be sold. Most of the time the departure was immediate; husbands and wives were separated forever without the chance to say goodbye.

The first President of the United States, George Washington, owned many slaves, three hundred and sixteen as of 1799, and he spread them over his Mount Vernon estate as needed. While he has been described as being against the breaking up of families, he

¹⁸ Ibid., 25.

¹⁹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 472-473.

often saw fit to distribute his slaves wherever they were needed based more on production than principle. Of the married slaves on his property at that time, 66 percent lived in abroad marriages. Once again, residential matrifocality played a key part in keeping the community together.²⁰ The presence of a nuclear family was a strange concept to most women, for if their husbands were sold off the plantation or too far away for them to commute, the family ties were forever broken, and soon, a new husband would replace the one lost. Statistics on this subject vary greatly, for many owners did not keep marriage records of their slaves. Slave owners did not care if a woman had been married or still was married when she was bought or sold. The new owner would simply tell the woman that she was to have a new husband, and if she protested, she would be severely punished until she submitted.

Though abroad and arranged marriages had their disadvantages to the slave owner, they had plenty of reasons to have their slaves marry. One such advantage was discipline, for the threat of splitting apart a family would generally keep even the most unruly slave in line. Such threats were common for behavioral maintenance, and when a slave was sold away from a spouse, it was a form of punishment for an insubordinate slave.²¹ Generally, this marriage advantage was for ensuring control over male slaves. When it came to control and discipline over female slaves, marriage was only the first step, for only one thing could be stronger than a mother's love for her husband: the love for her child. Nothing was more devastating for a slave woman than to be sold away from her children.

²⁰ Brenda E. Stevenson, "Gender Convention, Ideals, and Identity Among Antebellum Virginia Slave Women," *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gasper and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 178.

²¹ Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: a Documentary History*, (New York: Vintage Books,

As mentioned earlier, the most valuable asset a slave woman had was that she could give birth to replenish the work force. It is estimated that one-third of slave children grew up without at least one parent.²² Slave owners were as uncaring about keeping a mother with her child as they were keeping a husband and wife together. The more children a woman had, the more valuable she was to her owner, and the less chance she had of being sold. Her husband and children were another matter; they would be sold off as the owner desired for profit, pleasure, or punishment.

Veney continues her story after her husband was sold: “Several months passed, and I became a mother.”²³ After having to accept the loss of her husband, Jerry, Veney soon learned she was pregnant. She had a daughter, Charlotte, and a few years later, Veney was sold off of the plantation. Through some clever and desperate tricks, she was able to keep herself in the same state and was able to see her daughter grow up. She eventually married again, a free man named Frank Veney who won her heart: “He would often bring water from the spring for me, and in many kind ways caused me to regard him with a different feeling from any one I had met since I had lost my poor Jerry.”²⁴ Soon after, they had a son, Joe. As usually happened in the south, Veney’s owner fell into debt, and as she listened to the news of the town, she thought:

. . .for McCoy's debts, I might at any moment be sold away from my boy, as I had been before from my girl. I determined this should never be. I would take my child and hide in the mountains. I would do *anything* sooner than I would be sold.²⁵

Once again, luck was on her side, for she was sold to a man whom she had been caring

1976), 7-8.

²² Digital History, “Slave Family Life,”

http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display_printable.cfm?HHID=76.

²³ Veney, *The Narrative of Bethany Veney*, 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

for the past several years. She and her son were purchased for \$775 on December 27th, 1858, and they moved north to Rhode Island and freedom. But, sadly, “I had been here only about three months, when my little Joe sickened and died; and this was a great affliction to me.”²⁶ Shortly after the end of the Civil War, Veney headed south again to find her daughter.

Williams, too, had to endure the separation from her children. She and Abram had two sons, Isaac and Daniel. Through the negligence of her master, the plantation and its wealth deteriorated, and soon there was nothing to eat. Williams would beg for food at neighboring plantations to keep her children alive. She became pregnant again, but this time:

another child was born to her, but its little life was soon closed; and at evening, after working hours were over, it was buried in a rough box out among the pines. Sally did not mourn for it; she was glad it had escaped the misery of their earthly lot. No stone marked its grave, but the mother knew the spot, and sometimes stole out there at night to pray.²⁷

When Isaac was twelve, he was to be taken from her and put into service, but she bartered with his owner and paid two dollars a month of her own earnings to keep him with her. He soon learned to read, and became quite taken with religious study. After four years away from Abram, Williams’ master decided she should marry again, and arranged that she marry a man named, Lewis Beggs. She had another son, Lewis, with him. She had other children too, but they had died very young, and Lewis was the only child that lived with her second husband. Isaac and Daniel were working for other masters now, and Lewis was turning three. But then, tragedy struck; her owner died, and the plantation and its property were split up. Lewis was taken from his mother and sold

²⁵ Ibid., 35.

²⁶ Ibid., 40.

south to Alabama; Isaac and Daniel were sold to different masters but remained in Virginia.²⁸ Soon, Williams was sold, and she headed for what is now Texas.

Though many states had laws prohibiting the sale of young children away from their mothers, only Louisiana seemed to enforce it. The age of sale there was ten, still too young for a small child to experience what was sometimes permanent separation.²⁹ The law also stated that any children born to a slave woman was a slave for life and belonged to the mother's owner. Fathers had no legal rights to their children, whether they be free or not, and had little chance of helping to raise them, especially in an abroad marriage. Furthermore, even if the mother's freedom were purchased, her children would still remain slaves.³⁰ Customarily, a child was named after a relative such as a grandfather or uncle; sometimes, a child would be named after an ancestor's owner, not the current owner.³¹ One can only imagine that this was to help broken families find each other if a slave were fortunate enough to be freed. This also enabled families to find each other after the end of the Civil War, for they could track their separated family through their ancestor's names.

As mentioned earlier, it was rare that a woman could tend to her own child for more than a few weeks after delivery. After a month, a woman was expected to return to work full strength. House servants had the advantage here, for their babies could be kept in the kitchen or other areas of the big house with them. Field hands were expected to tend to their children secondary to their work, which meant bringing the child outdoors,

²⁷ Williams, *Aunt Sally*, 65.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 84-87.

²⁹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 455.

³⁰ Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood. Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 2, 6.

³¹ Digital History, "Slave Family Life,"

sometimes in extreme weather conditions. Many mothers would lay their babies down at the end of a row or in the shade under a tree, hoping that one of the older women could help tend to the child. Unfortunately, by the time the mother returned, the baby was likely to be covered in ants or mosquitoes, seriously jeopardizing its health.

Williams had two small children and no one to look after them. The plantation did not have any elders to help her, and there were no young children to help either. So three weeks after her second child, Daniel, was born, she brought both of them to the field with her. She was frightened to leave her children at the end of the row, for a woman on the next plantation had done so and the child had been strangled by a snake in her absence. Instead, she found another way:

. . .one was placed securely in her bosom, and the other fastened to the skirt of her dress, which was rolled up in front to make a resting place for him. Thus burdened, she worked on, never losing her rounds, for a mother is a mother every where, in the rice fields of Carolina, or amid northern snows.³²

With two children securely fastened to her, three weeks after giving birth, and in extreme temperatures, Williams went back to work.

Three years later, Williams was sold south. She said goodbye to her husband and oldest son and began to make the long journey south to Alabama (now Texas). As she was part of a procession headed to the southern market, she and the others walked the entire way, fifteen miles a day, chained to each other for two months. It was quite a feat for all of the slaves in this coffle to survive the journey, for many regularly perished during the long trek south. For the sake of Williams' children, it was better for them to have been sold, for few children, especially infants, survived the arduous march. Stories

http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display_printable.cfm?HHID=76.

³² Williams, *Aunt Sally*, 64.

abound of women abandoning their children along the side of the road, either because they had already died or the driver forced the mothers to leave them because they slowed down the coffle.³³ It would have been doubtful that Lewis, her youngest, would have survived the crossing of the Savannah River, which they were required to all swim together.

Once in the Deep South, there was little chance for freedom. For over two hundred years, slaves who were either born or forced into slavery toiled through their daily lives from birth to death without ever hoping to gasp a free breath. A few slaves who ran away actually achieved freedom, and a few slaves were able to buy their freedom from their masters. Both Sally Williams and Bethany Veney were able to buy their freedom and relocate into the North. Without this freedom, they may have never had the chance to tell their stories.

After twenty years in the south, Williams finally received word of her family. Her second husband was dead, but her children were alive. Isaac had purchased his freedom and was living up north as a Methodist minister. He had been searching for her for years, and upon finding her begged her owners to let him buy her. She learned of this in a letter one night:

"A few weeks after this," to use her own words, "I was a-getting supper, an' mas'r called me, an' I was scared, for I didn't know what was de matter. I tried to think if I had done anything, but thinks I, 'you've got to go,' for mas'r was one of de men, if he told you he'd whip you, he would. Well, I went in an' stood by his side, an' he had a paper in his hand, an' says he, "Sally, whar'd you live?" "Near Fayetteville, on Haymount Hill," says I. "Who were your neighbors?" So I told him. "What was your husband's name, and what was he sold for?" So I told him that, an' then says he, "Sally, here's a letter from your son Isaac, sure!" Well, I could hardly believe it; but says he, "Sally, he wants to buy you. Now you've paid for yourself many times over, and if you can get your mistress to give you up,

³³ Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood*, 26.

you know you belong to her, I'm willing." So I went right and spoke to mistress about it. . .³⁴

She eventually convinced her mistress to let her son buy her freedom for four hundred dollars. January 1857, Sally Williams arrived in New York a free woman. She was reunited with her son, Isaac and moved to Detroit with his wife and family. She heard news that Daniel was in jail in Virginia as a runaway slave. No word was ever heard about Lewis.³⁵

After the end of the Civil War, Veney returned to the south to see if she could find what was left of her family. Eventually:

After visiting about for six or seven weeks, I turned my face again to the North, my daughter, her husband and child, coming with me. Three times since I have made the same journey, bringing back with me, from time to time, in all sixteen of my relatives. . .³⁶

These are the stories of two women who survived, who would not let defeat take over, who would not give up. They were whipped, tortured, ripped apart from their families, but they were never beaten.

That slavery existed in the United States for as long as it did is unforgivable. That it still exists in the world is intolerable. In a world where democracy is becoming available to everyone, it must be made clear that slavery of any form, whether race, sex, class or religion will not be permitted. Yet through all of the research, all of the knowledge, all of the political summits and sanctions, it does exist; sometimes much closer to home than actually realized, and sometimes realized but ignored.

³⁴ Williams, *Aunt Sally*, 177-179

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 215-216.

³⁶ Veney, *The Narrative of Bethany Veney*, 42.