Slavery and Food: A Means to Resistance, An Obstacle to Freedom
by Ryan Chappel

Historians of nineteenth century American plantation slavery were cast into two schools of thought: those who supported the Dunning School and argued for passive slaves with caring masters versus those who argued for slave agency and slaves' resistance against the plantation system. Recent scholars on plantation slavery, such as Richard S. Dunn, John Blassingame, and Eugene D. Genovese, are obsessed with the theme of resistance. These pioneering historians made studies on American slavery incomplete, even historically incorrect, if they did not include analysis on slaves' ability and willingness to resist. All types of resistance have received scholars' attention. From collective acts of rebellion and community building to individual acts of stealing, back-talking, and running away, resistance evolved as an undeniable part of a slave's daily existence. However, one aspect of slave resistance that historians describe without detailed analysis is the relationship between resistance and food. The most complete work on slavery and food, What the Slaves Ate, focuses on the types of foods that slaves consumed. The authors discuss general forms of resistance, but they fail to analyze the role food played in slave resistance. The relationship between slave resistance and food remains an unexplored topic.

Secondary sources offer little insight into the relationship between slave resistance and food. An analysis of this relationship must rely on the slave narratives themselves, and the slave narratives from the University of North Carolina digital archives house one of the most complete collections of slave narratives. These narratives present both biased and realistic first-hand accounts of slavery. Even though historians accept the North American slave narratives as fact, most of the narratives do not offer detailed insight into the relationship between slavery and food. Those few narratives that do discuss the relationship reveal general patterns and
demonstrate numerous ways slaves used food to fight bondage. Although conditions varied from plantation to plantation, the slave narratives reveal that the food-slavery relationship was dialectical: masters used food to control slaves and justify paternalism, while slaves used food to resist their master's control. The prototypical and contentious relationship between master and slave was at work. Upon closer examination of individual slave narratives, however, the food-resistance relationship reveals aspects of nineteenth century plantation slavery that complicate traditional interpretations on slave resistance. This paper will address six aspects of slave resistance, running away, stealing, gardening, hunting, fishing, and written publications, and analyze the ways food aided, hindered, and ultimately shaped these types of slave resistance.

Slave resistance is a broad term that historians use to describe the numerous ways slaves opposed nineteenth century plantation slavery. Peter Kolchin argues that two general categories of slave resistance existed: individual and collective. According to Kolchin, plantation slaves were far more likely to resist as an individual than as a collective group. He uses runaway slaves as one of his primary examples. Most runaways were single men who made the individual decision to escape rather than groups of slaves who escaped together. Kolchin modifies this argument when he adds that sharing food was evidence of cooperation amongst the slaves. Therefore, sharing food could make running away a form of collective resistance: “individual runaways often received help from other slaves, who sheltered and fed them during flight.” The slave narratives confirm that runaway slaves followed Kolchin's models of individual and collective resistance. Most of the time runaways escaped as individuals and received support from other slaves.

2 Ibid., 290.
3 Ibid., 289.
Food played a central role in individual and collective resistance because food determined the type of resistance that runaways pursued. First, food presented the ultimate problem for a potential runaway. A successful escape was only possible with the food necessary to live in the wilderness and survive the journey North. Former slave Horace Moutlon said that those runaways who attempted escape without food met two fates: they either died in the wilderness or returned to their master's plantation. James Curry added that hunger more often than not forced runaways to return to the plantation and beg for their master's mercy. Food thus proved more of an obstacle to a runaway's freedom than a means to resistance. Secondly, whether or not a runaway chose to resist as an individual or with the help of another individual was determined by the runaway's access to food and the means the runaway used to acquire food. Several examples prove the contentious nature of this argument: the methods runaways used to acquire food determined the type of resistance they pursued even though the need to acquire food threatened runaways' escape attempts. In examining the complexity of the relationship between food and runaways, Kolchin's argument that plantation slaves resisted both individually and collectively is put to the test.

Roper Moses slowly learned that he could not escape the plantation without enough food to survive the journey North. He attributed his first failed escape attempt to an inadequate food supply. “I became so starved, that I was obliged to go to a house to beg for something to eat, when I was captured, and again imprisoned.” He found himself short on food during his second

6 Roper Moses, *Narratives of the Adventures and Escape of Roper Moses, from American Slavery. With an Appendix, Containing a List of Places Visited by the Author in Great Britain and Ireland and British Isles, and Other Matter: Electronic Edition* (Berwick-upon-Tweed: Roper Moses, 1848) 16-17,
escape as well. When a white overseer caught the hungry and tired Moses, Moses concocted a story to acquire food and guarantee his freedom. He used his light-colored skin to his advantage and argued that his cruel master freed him at age twenty-one on account of his complexion. He was now trying to reconnect with his mother, which was well within his rights as a freeman. The story worked. The plantation family provided Moses “as much buttermilk as I could drink, and something to eat, which was very acceptable, having had nothing for two days.” Moses learned a valuable lesson: he could use his skin color and an emotional story to procure food from sympathetic white people. When hunger overcame him once again, he had no choice but to approach a group of white people and tell his story. The risk paid off a second time and the group supplied him food. Moses was both innovative and lucky. Hunger forced him to interact with whites and his story provided him food, but each interaction increased the likelihood of his capture. Although hunger would not betray him a third time, Moses’ master eventually caught up with him, and forced Moses back into bondage.

Food emerged as an impediment to freedom during each of Moses’ subsequent escape attempts. Dogs caught him trying to steal food from a plantation house; he risked interacting with whites to acquire food; and, ironically, Moses became food himself when a pack of wolves attacked him in the woods. Moses realized he had to acquire food if he wanted to survive the journey North and obtain his freedom. In this sense, Moses' narrative conforms to Kolchin's argument that plantation slaves resisted as individuals. Moses did what was necessary to acquire food, and his actions served himself and no one else. Even when Moses encountered members
of his family, his thoughts centered on his own freedom and not the freedom of his family. However, Moses’ need to acquire food sometimes complicated the individual nature of his escape. Hunger forced him to interact with other slaves, and these slaves generously supplied Moses food free of charge. For instance, Moses encountered a former runaway slave, who, like himself, had been captured and forced back into bondage. Moses said that the man understood his predicament and supplied him food.\textsuperscript{11} Perhaps the man saw himself in Moses, lamented the runaway's situation, and provided Moses food as a type of vicarious escape. Another slave “cheerfully” gave Moses a piece of Indian bread.\textsuperscript{12} Did these acts of generosity change the individual nature of Moses' resistance? Moses could not have escaped slavery without food; therefore, generous slaves who provided food were essential to Moses' success. Moses may have run away as an individual, but he needed help along the way.

James Curry ran away from a North Carolina plantation with his two younger brothers in 1837. The three brothers, despite their familial affiliation, resisted slavery as individuals who required gifts of food to survive the journey North. Curry said that he only asked for food from freed colored persons or from other slaves during his escape. Not once was he or one his brothers refused food from these generous individuals.\textsuperscript{13} When the brothers could not find generous individuals in Virginia and hunger overcame them, Curry resorted to riskier behavior. He stole meal from a house and began baking bread in the woods. Tragically, the baking bread caught the attention of a nearby slave patrol, and Curry lost sight of his brothers as he ran for his own freedom. Curry successfully escaped the patrol and eventually obtained his freedom in Canada, but the need to feed cost him his brothers' company. He never saw them again.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{13} Curry, “Narrative of James Curry, A Fugitive Slave,” http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/curry/curry.html.
Curry may have escaped with his brothers, but the three men resisted as individuals who depended upon acts of generosity to escape slavery. The brothers sought their own freedom and their actions offered no benefit to other slaves on the North Carolina plantation nor to those individuals, both slave and free, who helped them along the way. Their absolute dependence on outsiders was compounded by the fact that a slave patrol caught two of the brothers when the runaways looked for food own their own. Much like Roper Moses, James Curry's escape attempt illustrated that running away was almost impossible without generous gifts of food.

Other slaves followed Moses' and Curry's examples: they needed food to escape slavery and obtained food from generous individuals or gullible white people to ensure successful escapes. Judith Taylor made her way to Indiana where she received food and clothes from Quaker settlers. Taylor moved from Quaker settlement to Quaker settlement, received food at each stop, and obtained freedom in Windsor, Canada with the help of her Quaker benefactors.\(^{14}\) A starving, tired, and desperate Robert Troy stumbled upon a slave hut in the midst of his escape and begged the old slave who lived there for something to eat. The kind slave provided Troy bread and meat, and the provisions facilitated Troy's escape to Philadelphia.\(^{15}\) John Hedgman stole his master's horse and told white people he encountered that he was searching for lost cows. He received bread from these generous yet deceived white people. Hedgman also asked slaves for food, and one generous man provided him bread and directions to safety. The bread from both whites and blacks sustained Hedgman's escape to Detroit.\(^{16}\) Although Hedgman, Troy, and Taylor successfully escaped slavery during their first attempts, their runaway experiences prove that Moses' and Curry's escapes were not isolated incidents. Slaves ran away as individuals, but

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\(^{15}\) Ibid., 54.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 61-62.
generous gifts of food from both blacks and whites made their escapes successful.

Peter Bruner's escape attempt, in contrast to Curry's and Moses' attempts, complicates the interrelationship between runaways, food, and resistance. Bruner ran away with his friend Phil Stocton, and the two men quickly realized that they would not get far without something to eat. When they asked a slave for provisions, the slave made them an offer they literally could not refuse. The slave promised the two runaways enough food for their journey in exchange for three days worth of labor. With the deal complete, Bruner and Stocton traveled North and asked every slave they encountered for food until their reliance on outside help resulted in their capture.17 “He promised to bring us something to eat after dark but never returned, and I thought and always will think that he betrayed us,” Bruner noted.18 The pair's dependence on food ultimately resulted in their capture and a return to bondage. Bruner would not escape slavery until the latter stages of the Civil War.

Analyzing the case studies of Peter Bruner, Roper Moses, and James Curry adds shades of gray to Peter Kolchin's individual and collective resistance categories. During their escape attempts, the methods Bruner, Moses, and Curry used to acquire food determined the type of resistance that the men performed. Moses' and Curry's resistance has already been categorized as an individual act that required the assistance of other slaves. Bruner's resistance was similar, but his reliance upon negotiating with and eventually working for an enterprising slave complicated his own resistance. Bruner's escape was paradoxically hindered by and dependent upon a fellow slave. He resisted as an individual with outside help, but that outside help required reciprocity from Bruner. Kolchin's argument seems to forgo this third type of negotiated resistance: That

18 Ibid., 37.
slaves resisted as individuals and required outside help that was itself dependent upon an agreement between the runaway and the enterprising slave.

Leonard Black recalled negotiating his resistance with a non-slave holding farmer. Hungry, tired, and on the run, Black agreed to work for a farmer in exchange for a monthly salary. He planned to use the money to “defray expenses,” and from his description, purchasing food was at the top of his list.¹⁹ The working agreement also promised Black meals and he described breakfasting with the farmer on more than one occasion.²⁰ After working with the farmer for a short time, Black collected enough supplies to escape to New York. He resisted slavery as an individual, but Black negotiated his resistance because he needed food to survive. Both parties contributed to Black's escape, and at the same time, both parties received individual benefits: Black received food, shelter, and freedom, while the farmer received labor.

Hopkins, a slave from North Carolina, presents another case of negotiated resistance in action. He negotiated his resistance with Native Americans and a white Pennsylvanian farmer because he needed food to survive the journey North. Hopkins scavenged for “apples, ches[t]nuts, and Indian corn” until he reached Maryland and adopted into a Native American tribe.²¹ Both Hopkins and the Native Americans benefited from Hopkins' tribal membership and food defined the beneficial relationship. The Native Americans accepted Hopkins as a member of their community and provided him cooked food. In exchange, Hopkins hunted game animals for his new community. Hopkins lived peacefully with the Native Americans for three years, but a conflict with neighboring whites compromised his freedom and Hopkins quickly resumed his

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²⁰ Ibid., 28.
²¹ William Troy, Hair-breadth Escapes from Slavery to Freedom, 34.
escape. He ran into a white farmer in Pennsylvania and the farmer hired Hopkins on as a field hand. After a month's labor, the farmer refused to pay Hopkins for a month of labor and betrayed him to a nearby slave patrol. Hopkins avoided capture, made his way back to the farm, and demanded payment from the farmer's wife. He took so much food that he made it all the way to Canada and permanently obtained his freedom.\textsuperscript{22} Hopkins' experiences with the Native Americans and the white farmer were both cases of negotiated resistance dictated by hunger: he received food and protection from Native Americans for contributing his labor to the tribe and he justified taking food from the farmer as payment for his labors. Hopkins negotiated his way to freedom.

These case studies on the relationship between runaways and food confirms and complicates Kolchin's categories of resistance. On the one hand, runaways resisted as individuals. Their goal was to obtain freedom at all costs, and the means runaways used to acquire food confirmed their individualistic intentions. They tricked white people or outright stole provisions. On the other hand, the undeniable fact that runaways received food provisions from other slaves seems to confirm Kolchin's collective resistance argument. However, the question must be asked whether an individual act of generosity constituted collective resistance. From the case studies of Roper Moses, James Curry, Peter Bruner, Leonard Black, and Hopkins, analyzing food in terms of Kolchin's resistance categories results in a modification of Kolchin's collective resistance argument and creates two sub-categories of individual resistance. The first sub-category is individual resistance dependent on generosity. Runaways often received food from generous slaves; however, those generous acts were individual acts of kindness and not representative of collective assistance action. John W. Blassingame argues that a sense of

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 34
community existed between slaves on a plantation and that slaves often shared food and concealed one another's misdeeds from their master. Although generous slaves' gifts of food stemmed from a collective ethos of cooperation, the act of donation was usually an impromptu interaction between two individuals that did not involve the rest of the slave community. Together, the generous slave's food, taken from but not necessarily sanctioned by the slave community, and the runaway's initiative enabled the runaway to escape. The resistance fell somewhere between individual and collective action, and individual resistance dependent upon generosity is an apt definition. The second sub-category, individual resistance dependent upon negotiation, is far more complicated to place. In cases of negotiated resistance, outside assistance proved self-indulgent and not self-sacrificing. Even though slaves were forced to barter for food and delay their escape attempts, their escape attempts would not have been successful without the food they received. Once again, the categories of individual and collective resistance are blurred, and categorizing this type of resistance as individual resistance dependent upon negotiation clears the confusion. In summary, runaway slaves neither engaged in individual or collective resistance when they received food from outside sources; rather, they engaged in individual resistance that wholly depended on generosity or negotiation.

Stealing food, which most slaves considered justifiable recompense for their labor, was another way slaves resisted their masters. Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eisnach argue that planters controlled slaves' food supply for economic and social reasons. On the one hand, slaves represented an economic investment for planters. Providing food to productive slaves and depriving food from non-productive slaves offered planters the greatest economic return. On the other hand, slave ownership was an important part of a planter’s paternal identity, and planters

who failed to provide their slaves with proper rations lost “respect in the community.” The slave codes, a guidebook to slave ownership and paternal care, promised to protect planters' reputations, both socially and economically, if they adhered to two policies. First, the codes demanded that planters provide weekly rations, one peck of cornmeal and three to four pounds of pork, to each slave family on their plantation. Second, the codes ordered planters to maintain control over the plantation's food supply, which tied the survival of slaves to the plantation.\textsuperscript{24} The slave codes purportedly prevented slaves from stealing food and maintained planters' economic and social prestige by controlling and distributing the food supply.

In Southern society, economic standing was tied to social prestige and not the other way around. Paternalism, the ideal planters aspired to, explains why planters lost social prestige if they failed to control and distribute the food supply of their slaves. Eric Foner describes the dependent relationship between plantation slavery and planter domination: “plantation slavery was simultaneously a system of labor, a mode of racial domination, and the foundation upon which arose a distinctive ruling class.” Plantation slavery, paternalism, and planters were an inseparable triumvirate. The planter (ruling class) required the identity (paternalism) to run the economic institution (plantation slavery). Paternalism was the key ingredient that transformed a planter into a socially dominant and economically viable plantation master. John W. Blassingame defines planter paternalism as both an ideal and a contradictory stereotype: the paternal planter was simultaneously dominant and benevolent. Blassingame cites an article in DeBow's Review to illustrate the complicated nature of paternalism. “The negro should feel that his master is his lawgiver and judge; and yet is his protector and friend, but so far above him, as

never to be approached save in the most respectful manner.”

Slaves who followed their master’s orders were guaranteed their health, while slaves who disobeyed were supposedly punished with “flattery, praise, and rewards”. In terms of food, an aspiring paternalist adhered to two principles. First, benevolence dictated that planters provide obedient slaves the minimum food allotment. Second, dominance dictated that planters adhere to the slave codes, control the food supply, and “benevolently” punish non-complaint slaves. Ideal paternalism did not reflect reality, as most slaves labored hard, received miniscule rations, and experienced the brutality of their master’s whip. Every time slaves stole food from their masters then, they compromised both their masters' paternal benevolence (provide enough food) and paternal dominance (control the food supply), and proved that paternalism was a contradictory and hypocritical ideology.

Josiah Henson deliberately stole food to compromise his master's paternalism because Henson believed that his master failed to live up to the paternalistic ideal. Henson received a daily ration of food that did not include meat and constant complaints from his fellow slaves spurred him to action. He routinely stole his master's sheep and pigs, slaughtered the animals, and gave the meat to the starving slaves. Henson concluded that stealing food made him more of a paternalist than his own master: “I was much more easily moved to compassion and sympathy than he was.” Henson stole food to turn the tables on his master. He provided food for other slaves to prove that he was a benevolent paternalist, who did not require a master to provide for himself and others. Henson also challenged his master's manhood and honor. A paternal planter was considered a man if he provided for his slaves, and not only did Henson's

26 Ibid., 239.
28 Ibid.
master fail to provide proper food, but he could not stop one of his slaves from assuming his social role of provider. Henson's ability to provide for other slaves symbolically and psychologically castrated his master's sense of paternalism and manhood.

Peter Bruner not only described how stealing food threatened paternalism, but also how stealing food influenced his master's behavior. “And when they did not have enough to satisfy their hunger they would step up and take ours from us so we had to do without. The white people had plenty of the best food but we never got any unless we stole it. Whenever they would have biscuits they would count them so they would tell if we stole any.”29 In this particular case, Covey and Eisnach's argument that masters controlled food to pacify their slaves requires modification. This master's desire to control food was a paranoid reaction to his slave's stealing food. An ideal master was supposed to demonstrate total control over his slaves, and controlling the slave's food was a key component of paternal dominance. At the same time, a master was supposed to act benevolently toward his slaves and provide them proper portions of food. Stealing food challenged both the master's paternal dominance and benevolence: stealing showed that the master neither controlled the food supply nor provided his slaves enough to eat. The master's reaction to slaves stealing food proved the validity of the threat (if even just psychologically), and when the master monitored the food supply to the tiniest biscuit, he testified to the slaves' success. The master's paternalism changed from an ideology he controlled into an ideology that was co-constructed by the master and his slaves. Now the master controlled the food supply and refused to practice benevolent distribution. Stealing food thus enabled slaves to change their master's behavior, which revealed the true character of paternalism. Paternalism was not a fixed, benevolent ideology that masters controlled. Rather

slaves exposed paternalism as a reactionary ideology that masters used to dominate. Stealing food proved that a master could never be both benevolent and dominant.

Henry Box Brown related another story of slaves resisting and shaping paternalism by stealing food from their master. His master did not give into paranoid control; instead, he negotiated a deal with his slaves. He permitted his slaves to steal food from neighboring plantations as long as they shared the spoils with him and stopped stealing from his plantation. Although the master altered his behavior, he maintained the facade of ideal paternalism. He controlled his food supply by permitting slaves to steal from other plantations and he demonstrated benevolence by providing his slaves food. Or so he thought. Forcing slaves to steal food, in reality, tainted both the master's paternal dominance and benevolence. He empowered slaves to steal from a racially superior white planter and continued to prove that he could not provide for his slaves with his own resources. Not only did Brown's master compromise himself socially and economically, but he also compromised himself racially. Southern society was dependent upon a racial alliance between planters and poor whites that kept black slaves in a subhuman state, and Brown's master, in conspiring with black slaves against white people, compromised this racial foundation. Self-prescribed benevolence had racial, economic, and social consequences that Brown's master seemed all too willing to ignore. Moreover, the master's paternalism was co-constructed and not dominant. Slaves stealing food forced the master to adopt a less controlling form of paternalism. The slaves immediately tested their master's sincerity, stole a pig from a nearby plantation, and shared the spoils with their master. When the neighboring planter accused the slaves of stealing, the master testified to his slaves' innocence. Master and slave established a form of paternalism that benefited both parties.

Even though Henry Box Brown described a type of paternalism that contradictorily
challenged white solidarity and suited both master and slave, the slaves did not relent and attacked the co-constructed paternalism on religious grounds. The master argued that “it was no sin to steal from others.” Brown's brother reminded his master that “it was as much a sin in the sight of God to steal from the one as the other.” The master's defense of stealing food was, in one slave's view, a pathetic attempt to defend paternalism. The master was supposed to represent the pinnacle of Southern manhood and provide food for his slaves. Instead, the master forced his slaves to steal and jeopardized both his and their Christian principles. The master's reactionary paternalism backfired because the master was self-indulgent. He was not a manly Southern paternalist: he proved his economic incompetence, compromised white solidarity, jeopardized his own religious principles, and confirmed his own passivity when he asked his slaves to steal food rather than simply provide them food. This master either did not understand paternalism (unlikely) or he revealed to his slaves that paternalism was a control mechanism planters used for their own personal gain (most likely). Either way, the master demonstrated that his slaves compromised paternalism every time they stole food from a neighboring white planter.

Stealing food sometimes created unlikely alliances between slaves and poor whites, which further undermined the racial solidarity of Southern society. Paternalism marginalized poor whites to the status of secondary citizens. The ideal southern gentleman was a disinterested, paternal planter, who enjoyed a leisured lifestyle at the expense of his slave laborers. Poor whites were the non-slaveholding opposites of their planter counterparts. Slave John Brown observed that white society frowned upon poor whites because laboring for oneself

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was considered shameful. Some slaves took advantage of the marginalization of poor whites, stole corn from their masters, and delivered the stolen corn to poor whites for processing. The poor whites, in turn, ground the corn into meal, took a share of the spoils, and returned the remaining corn to the slaves. Together, poor whites and slaves undermined planters' paternalism by working together to steal food. They proved that planters did not have complete domination over the food supply and that planters did not provide their slaves enough food to eat. However, their alliance signified a far more damaging source of resistance that extended beyond paternalism: they challenged white solidarity. Walter Johnson argues that the idea of white solidarity existed because poor whites fantasized that one day they too would become slaveholders, paternalists, and disinterested gentleman. The poor whites in Brown's narrative rejected that fantasy and embraced reality. Although their motivations remain a mystery, the poor whites found themselves in such a difficult state that they turned to slaves for help instead of members of their own race. In doing so, poor whites facilitated slaves' resistance against paternalism and compromised the racial and hierarchical integrity of Southern society.

Other masters tried to maintain both their benevolence and dominance in using their overseers to punish slaves for stealing food. Annie L. Burton recalled how her master punished slaves for stealing food: “Then would come the whipping-post. Master himself never whipped his slaves; this was left to the overseer.” The overseer acted as the master's surrogate disciplinarian, executed the master's dominance, and enabled the master to retain the guise of

32 Ibid., 54.
benevolence. However dominant and benevolent the master wanted to appear, his projected identity was paradoxical. In not directly punishing his slaves for stealing food, the master failed to demonstrate his personal dominance over his slaves. His tactic to maintain benevolence also backfired. Burton added that her master was responsible for distributing food and that slaves complained about the quantity and quality of their food.35 Hiding behind inadequate rations only further compromised the perceived benevolence the master sought to protect. Every time slaves stole food, they proved that their master was not a manly disciplinarian and that his benevolence was misguided.

Although the case studies of Annie L. Burton, John Brown, Henry Box Brown, Josiah Henson, and Peter Bruner present a broad spectrum of master's reactions to slaves stealing food, overarching themes appear in the examples. Stealing food demonstrated slave resistance, revealed the hypocrisy of paternalism, and sometimes challenged white solidarity, but a deeper question remains unanswered: did stealing food determine the type of resistance a slave performed to the same degree that food determined the type of resistance a runaway performed? In other words, did slaves steal food for themselves, for their community, or for some other reason? Once again, analyzing this question complicates the meaning of resistance. Stealing food was almost always an individual act. Even when slaves stole food in larger groups, individuals participated with the group in order to feed themselves. Sometimes slaves stole food for less self-indulgent reasons, such as to provide for their families or for slaves who could not care for themselves. These generous acts still constituted an act of individual resistance. The slave fulfilled the individual goal of providing for a family member or a suffering individual, and did not provide for the whole slave community. When stealing food forced the planter to alter

35 Ibid.
his behavior, however, stealing food became an act of individual resistance that affected the whole slave community. Some masters reacted like Peter Bruner's and increased discipline; other masters reacted like Henry Box Brown's and increased their benevolence; smarter masters reacted like Annie L. Burton's and tried to maintain both dominance and benevolence; but, in all cases, the master's adherence to a paternal identity enabled slaves to reveal the contradictions. When an individual slave forced a master to change his paternal identity by stealing food, the change in the master's behavior affected every slave on the plantation. An individual act of resistance enabled every slave to witness the duality of paternalism first-hand. Stealing food thus exposed paternalism as an elusive form of dominance and perhaps even inspired other slaves to resist Southern slave society.

Whereas stealing provided slaves an opportunity to simultaneously co-construct and resist paternalism, slaves who hunted, fished, and gardened for themselves resisted paternalism by reversing the role of provider and dependent. Ingenious masters believed that they demonstrated paternalism when they permitted their slaves to garden, hunt, and fish for their own food. Francis Frederick, for example, described slaves receiving adequate food rations, raising sweet potatoes on garden plots, selling the sweet potatoes at the local market, and using the profits to purchase goods that the master did not provide.36 Frederick's master thought that he was fulfilling his paternal duty by distributing garden plots. The distribution demonstrated benevolence, as the plots were a reward for the slaves' hard work, and dominance, because the master controlled the distribution of the plots. In reality, the master's actions compromised his paternal identity. Garden plots enabled slaves, such as Frederick, to provide food for themselves and their family members, which challenged the master's ability to provide for his slaves and

ultimately his sense of manhood and dominance. Permitting or preventing slaves from gardening, hunting, or fishing thus created the paternalist paradox. Masters who enabled their slaves to obtain alternative food sources were benevolent, but not dominant; masters who prevented their slaves from obtaining alternative food sources were dominant, but not benevolent. Whether or not masters permitted their slaves to hunt, fish, or garden did not affect slaves’ views on their masters. In either case, slaves used their master's sense of benevolence and dominance to expose the paradoxes of paternalism and reverse the role of provider and dependent.

Practically speaking, planters believed that garden plots permitted slaves to provide food for their families, which they hoped would cut food costs, decrease theft, and discourage runaways.\textsuperscript{37} The paternal distribution of garden plots actually reversed the role of planter provider and slave dependent. Paternal masters controlled (dominance) and distributed (benevolence) the food supply, but garden plots let slaves control and distribute food for themselves. James Curry was one of the few slaves who discussed his master's motivation for providing garden plots to slaves. The slaves raised tobacco and pig food, sold the tobacco at the local market, and used their earnings to purchase clothing and pigs for themselves. After the slaves cultivated the ground and raised the pigs, the master requisitioned the property and took the pigs for himself. The master then provided the slaves uncultivated plots and forced them to start anew.\textsuperscript{38} Curry's description demonstrated that garden plots falsified paternalism. Paternalism obligated the master to provide food and clothes to his slaves, and the slaves used the garden plots to provide food and clothes for themselves. Requisition not only compromised the master's benevolent intentions, but also defined the master as a dependent of his slaves. He

\textsuperscript{37} Covey and Eisnach, \textit{What the Slaves Ate}, 74-77.
confiscated the garden plots because he was unwilling to cultivate the land himself; therefore, the master depended on his slaves to maintain his paternal identity (both economically and socially), while his slaves proved that they could provide for themselves independent of the master.

Although Curry offers an extreme example, masters who distributed garden plots always created the paternalist paradox. Josiah Henson was one slave who neither complained about food rations nor about having to grow his own vegetables. Nevertheless, Henson's gardening challenged his master's paternalism because Henson raised vegetables to provide for his family. Henson's case was not extraordinary. Henry Clay Bruce and his fellow slaves grew vegetables for their families despite the fact that their master fed them well. As a counter example, Henry Bibb was a slave who provided for his family and complained about his food allotment. Here again, the paternalist paradox was in play. Masters benevolently provided gardens for their slaves, but slaves undermined both their master's benevolence and dominance when they supplemented their food rations with their own vegetables and provided for their own families. Masters were supposed to be dominate father-figures who slaves respected and depended upon; instead, garden plots enabled slaves to assume a paternal role and care for their own families, which removed their need for a paternal master. Masters distributed garden plots to reinforce their sense of paternal identity, whereas slaves used garden plots to care for their families, thus demonstrating that slaves were better paternalists than their own masters.

Just as planters attempted to demonstrate paternalism by distributing garden plots, other masters tried the same tactic when they allowed slaves to hunt and fish for their own food. Peter Randolph was one slave who criticized paternalism even though his master allowed him to hunt and fish. Randolph described trapping game animals, such as opossum and squirrels, and catching fish on his master's plantation. However, Randolph also used hunting and fishing as evidence against his master's benevolence. “This is very little food for the slaves. They have to beg when they can; when they cannot, they must suffer.” Randolph was forced to hunt and fish for himself because his master failed to provide food for his laborers. Furthermore, hunting and fishing for himself showed that Randolph’s master failed to control the food supply. Much like Randolph, Ball hunted and fished to supplement his inadequate food rations. He also argued that providing food for himself made him feel like an “independent man,” and Ball demonstrated his independence from paternalism on two accounts. He challenged his master's benevolent distribution of food by supplementing his diet with fish and game, which, in turn, enabled him to challenge his master's dominance by declaring himself an independent man, an individual who was not reliant on his master for food. Neither Randolph nor Ball needed paternalism to endure slavery: hunting and fishing enabled both men to provide for themselves, which demonstrated rational, civilized behavior and defeated the purpose of paternal provision. They, therefore, proved their master unmanly; a true paternalist required dependent slaves to mentor; yet Randolph and Ball survived on their own. Hunting and fishing, therefore, created the paternalist paradox. Allowing a slave to hunt or fish challenged a master's ability to dominate and care for

44 Ibid., 276.
his slaves, but, at the same time, turned a planter into a benevolent and dominant paternalist. Therefore, the master's identity was dependent on slaves providing for themselves, which was the opposite of ideal paternalism.

Hunting, fishing, and gardening clearly challenged planter paternalism and reversed the role of provider and dependent, but were hunting, fishing, and gardening evidence of individual or collective resistance? In many ways, hunting and fishing were similar to stealing food. Some slaves hunted for themselves, some slaves hunted for their family and friends, and some slaves hunted in groups. No matter the motivation, hunting proved to all other slaves on the plantation that slaves were capable of providing for themselves and that a master's paternalism was dependent upon allowing slaves to hunt or fish for themselves. Hunting and fishing were forms of individual resistance that had the potential to become collective resistance if every slave participated. Garden plots, in contrast, always constituted collective resistance because every slave on the plantation was provided a plot and every plot compromised paternalism. Bruce, Henson, Curry, and Frederick all using the garden plots to provide food for their families. Thus, this act became a collective form of resistance when undertaken by all members of the community. Together, slaves who provided for themselves and their families proved that a master's paternalism was far more self-serving than caring.

In addition to day-to-day resistance against paternalism on the plantation, former slaves also published narratives that exposed the realities of paternalism to the public. In response, planters defended themselves by justifying slavery on paternal grounds. George Fitzhugh, who owned a small plantation in Virginia, echoed the typical pro-slavery argument: “But we do say that he [(slave (s))] is well and properly governed, so as best to promote his own good and that of
Third parties, curious or skeptical individuals without a stake in the master-slave relationship, also felt compelled to publish their views on paternalism. Frederick Law Olmsted, a Northerner who visited Southern slave society in 1858, accepted the rhetoric of the planter class. Concludes Olmsted, slaves “are fed better than the proletarian class of any other part of the world.” Former slaves published autobiographies to counter such pro-slavery literature. However, resistance against paternalism did not end with emancipation as Southerners defended their reputations and argued that ideal paternalism existed on their plantations. For instance, Susan Dabney Smedes described her father, Thomas, as a caring planter, whose slaves were better off enslaved than free. Slave autobiographies, once again, provided a counter point and used food to undermine Southerner's arguments.

According to John W. Blassingame, almost every “black autobiographer complained that they had at least one owner who did not give them enough food.” Food was a source of propaganda for former slaves because of the link between food and paternalism. A hard-working slave who complained that he or she did not have enough food criticized planter benevolence. William Green (Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green, 1853) presented the case of Henry Holliday in his 1853 narrative. Quipped Holliday in reference to corn meal, “they came home from work, and hardly stopped work at all.” These slaves earned the right to eat, yet they still had to prepare their own food. Frederick Douglass' (Life and Times of Frederick Douglass,

1892) description of slave food mirrored that of Holliday. The food “was more fit for pigs than for men” and the corn meal was unprocessed. Holliday and Douglass raised two important criticisms against paternalism when they wrote about poor food quality. First, complaining about food quality challenged a master's obligation to guarantee an obedient slaves' health. Second, even when planters did provide food, their obligations were only half-fulfilled and half-hearted. The corn was unprocessed, which required the slaves to process the food and provide for themselves. Once again, paternalism was exposed as an ideal, and not a reality.

Exposing a planter's poor treatment of children was the easiest way to attack paternalism and Southern society in writing. Francis Fredric described how his Virginian master fed slave children (Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky, 1863). Children ate out of troughs like pigs and competed against one another for food. Fredric theorized that planters forced children to compete this way to highlight the differences between uncivilized blacks and civilized whites. Samuel Hall (The Life of Samuel Hall, 1912) analyzed the damaging affect trough feeding had on children. Hall wrote that “They were raised to do just like what you would tell a dog to do. When they would come to ten or eleven years old they would be put on the block and sold.”

Food enabled planters to raise slaves to be sold like animals at the marketplace. In Southern

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50 Frederick Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself. His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time, Including His Connection with the Anti-slavery Movement; His Labors in Great Britain as Well as in His Own Country; His Experience in the Conduct of an Influential Newspaper; His Connection with the Underground Railroad; His Relations with John Brown and the Harper's Ferry Raid; His Recruiting the 54th and 55th Mass. Colored Regiments; His Interviews with Presidents Lincoln and Johnson; His Appointment by Gen. Grant to Accompany the Santo Domingo Commission--Also to a Seat in the Council of the District of Columbia; His Appointment as United States Marshal by President R. B. Hayes; Also His Appointment to Be Recorder of Deeds in Washington by President J. A. Garfield; with Many Other Interesting and Important Events of His Most Eventful Life; With an Introduction by Mr. George L. Ruffin, of Boston: Electronic Edition (Boston: De Wolfe and Fiske Co., 1892), 62, http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/dougl92/dougl92.html (accessed May 19, 2012).


society, planter gentleman were supposed to distance themselves from the marketplace, but Hall used food to reconnect his master to the market. Hall characterized his master as a shrewd economist and not as a caring father; the master viewed his slave children as an economic investment and failed to become their surrogate father. Frederick Douglass also described slave children competing for food. Rations were distributed by an elderly black women who favored her relatives over other slave children. Douglass was forced to compete against the other children and steal food to survive. Hall, Frederick Douglass, and Fedric all demonstrated that paternalism did not apply to slave children; in fact, planters' treatment of children was the exact opposite of paternalism. Through feeding and competing for food demeaned slave children, which meant that planters' treatment of children did not fulfill the paternal obligation of civilizing slaves. The relationship between children, food, and plantation slavery exposed paternalism as a control mechanism for plantation masters and demonstrated the damaging affect that “fatherly” planters had on their slave children.

Slaves narrators especially contrasted their master's treatment of slave children with their parent's treatment of themselves during their own childhood. Charles Ball (Fifty Years in Chains, 1859) celebrated his mother's and father's ability to provide him food in his narrative. His mother did what she could. “She had been a kind and good mother to me; had warmed me in her bosom in the cold nights of winter, and had often divided the scanty pittance of food allowed her by her mistress, between my brothers, sisters, and me.” Ball, Fifty Years in Chains, defined caring parents as those who provided food for their children despite the limitations of bondage. Ball equally praised his father for providing him presents, such as melons, sweet potatoes, and corn, even though his

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53 Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, 34-35.
54 Ball, Fifty Years in Chains, 18.
father lived on a distant plantation.\(^{55}\) After Ball's parents were sold into slavery, however, the obedient Ball felt cheated by his master, who, in Ball's estimation, failed to provide his slaves adequate food.\(^{56}\) Ball challenged his master's paternalism on three fronts: Ball's parents supplemented their son's food supply; the master failed to provide Ball adequate food despite his obedience; and, most importantly, Ball's parents were better parents than his so-called paternal master. Ball's juxtaposed his parents and his master to identify his master as the worst possible paternalist.

Ball's definition that caring parents provided food for their children did not hold true for all slaves. Other former slaves felt similarly toward their masters: masters were supposed to provide food. However, they often excused their parents: parents provided food when and if they could. In fact, most parents were not in a position to provide food because they either lived on a distant plantation or their masters controlled the food supply. James B. Watkins (Narrative of the Life of James Watkins, 1852) and Frederick Douglass both received food from caretakers and offered interesting assessments of their parents. Watkins had an ambivalent relationship with his caretaker. While he acknowledged that she provided him food, he also compared his upbringing to that of a piglet, rolling in the mud and receiving little attention. Watkins despised his father, an overseer who neither provided him food nor treated him like a son. Ball never mentioned his mother providing him food, yet a strong bond existed between them. She visited frequently and Ball and his mother spent lots of time together.\(^{57}\) Douglass criticized his caretaker, who provided food to her children and forced him to starve; he loathed his master, who provided disgusting

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\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 26.

food that was fit for animals; yet, he praised his mother, who stood up for him on one occasion, but never provided him food.\textsuperscript{58} From these examples, Watkins, Ball, and Douglass revealed that a double standard existed for slaves with regards to food, their parents, their caretakers, and their masters. These three men praised parents who went out of their way to provide for their children. This same gesture was not extended to caretakers or overseer fathers, who served as cogs in the master's wheel. Masters, justly or unjustly, never received credit for provisioning their slaves. Ball, for example, received standard weekly rations and still complained about the quality of his food. Even caring family members who did not provide food for their children were not criticized, such as Watkins' and Douglass' parents. The three authors used food to juxtapose their kind parents with their paternal masters and their master's complacent slaves. Parents who tried their best to provide for their children were usually given the benefit of the doubt, while complacent caretakers failed to provide for slave children and food rich planters failed to prove themselves fatherly paternalists. Slave autobiographers wrote about food as a double-standard: caring parents were portrayed as excellent providers despite their inability to provide food, while complacent caretakers were portrayed as pseudo masters and masters were portrayed as poor providers and false paternalists.

Whereas running away, stealing, and providing food for oneself (garden plots excluded) usually constituted individual acts of resistance, slave autobiographies constituted communal resistance against paternalism in practice and in memory. Narratives published pre-emancipation exposed the realities of slavery and paternalism, contributed to abolitionist movements, and altered popular attitudes on slavery, while post-emancipation texts compromised Southern nostalgia and the defense of slavery on paternal grounds. Food played a central role in

\textsuperscript{58} Douglass, \textit{Life and Times of Frederick Douglass}, 35-36.
autobiographers’ collective attacks, and examples of caring slave parents scraping together food for their children juxtaposed against cruel masters purposefully depriving children of food. Together, published autobiographies and their descriptions of slavery and food transformed individual acts of defiance into collective attacks against slavery.

Ironically, abolition proved a double-edged sword for freed slaves: slaves were freed from the chains of bondage, but planters were also freed from the chains of paternalism. Planters were no longer paternalists because they no longer owned slaves, and emancipation freed planters from the paternal paradox: weighing dominance and benevolence was no longer a social responsibility. Planters quickly flexed their new power. Planter sponsored laws punished freedmen for stealing, curtailed black access to land, prevented blacks from hunting and fishing, and denied blacks access to political rights.\footnote{Eric Foner, \textit{Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 62-71.} The relationship between food and resistance now favored the planter: laws to control food were really laws to control freedmen. Without land to farm, game to hunt, or political rights to express their grievances, many freedmen rented land from their former masters and worked as sharecroppers. Former slaves soon found themselves in a quasi-slave state because high rent and country stores indebted freedmen to their former masters. Food still proved a means to resistance: planters used food to restrain black freedom during Reconstruction, and laws that controlled the food supply inspired future laws that institutionalized racial oppression.

Considering the complex and evolving relationship between food, slaves, and planters, the history of nineteenth century slave resistance has been oversimplified by recent historians because it reduces the complex master-slave relationship to the basic idea of master control and
slave's resistance to that control.” 60 Although the master control-slave resistance paradigm reflects historical reality, the paradigm leads to simple categorization of slave resistance.

“Everyday resistance” has become a popular term that encompasses a variety of resistance from stealing, back-talking, and running away to idleness, damaging equipment, and killing animals. Everyday slave resistance is, therefore, interpreted as individuals momentarily lashing out against Southern plantation slavery. Other types of resistance, such as rebellions, community building, and retaining African culture, are considered far more interesting and significant than everyday resistance. However, Walter Johnson's analysis of slave resistance against paternalism and Peter Kolchin's new categorization of slave resistance brings everyday resistance back to the forefront of history. Building upon the works of Johnson and Kolchin, an analysis of slavery, food, and resistance reveals that everyday resistance was both complicated and significant. Food determined that individual runaways were dependent on outside help if they wanted to escape slavery; stealing food enabled slaves to simultaneously construct and reject planter paternalism; hunting, fishing, and gardening demonstrated that slaves were better paternalists than their masters; and, slaves' use of food as published propaganda provided damaging attacks against Southern society. Slaves used food as both short term and long term resistance: they needed food to runaway from their masters and to contradict their masters' paternalism on a daily basis; at the same time, slaves used food to criticize and ultimately destroy Southern plantation slavery. These methods of resistance, despite Kolchin's argument to the contrary, enabled nineteenth century American plantation slaves to resist both individually and collectively. Ironically, and unfortunately, planters caught onto the food as resistance theme and used food to resist increased

60 David Barry Gaspar, Bondmen & rebels: a study of master-slave relations in Antigua, with implications for colonial British America, Johns Hopkins Studies in Atlantic History and Culture (Boston: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 62.
black rights during Reconstruction. Post-Civil War planters' ability to control the food supply and the political process enabled planters to limit black political and economic freedom, an injustice that was not overcome until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Therefore, planters used food to resist black rights both individually (making up rules for workers on their own plantations) and collectively (using the political and judicial process). Food truly was a means to individual and collective resistance for both slaves and planters, but, most importantly, food was an obstacle to black freedom.