Book shows how plantation mistresses sustained slavery

Dr. Glenn C. Altschul
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"Who would choose black, in any capacity except he be held as a slave, and so bound to be obedient and faithful," an affluent white southerner asked.

To this rhetorical question she added her conviction that African Americans were "the most inferior of the human race, far beneath the Indian or Hebrew...poor, uneducated, stupid, lazy, self-indulgent."

Such sentiments were, of course, pervasive in the pre-Civil War South. It may be a bit surprising that they were expressed by a woman. Even more surprising, however, is the extent to which plantation mistresses were actively involved in the day-to-day management of their slaves.

Embraced roles

In "They Were Her Property," Stephanie Jones-Rogers, an assistant professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley, draws on court records and oral histories of former slaves to challenge the view that 19th-century southern mistresses were "gentlewomen," unlikely to know about, or assist in the affairs of their fathers or husbands.

Focusing on women who owned slaves in their own right (usually through gifts or inheritance), Jones-Rogers demonstrates that they embraced their role, "assumed portions of power over slaves within and outside their households, and challenged anyone who attempted to infringe upon that power."

Even when their treatment of their chattel seems benevolent or "maternal," she maintains, it was motivated, in no small measure, by a desire to maximize profits.

Control over 'property'

Legal cases make it clear, Jones-Rogers reveals, that married women often assumed control over slaves "as a consequence of their husbands' poor judgments, misconduct, and misfortunes."

To circumvent laws of "coverture," they insisted on promissory contracts, used their husbands' names to take "irrevocable," property, and sued creditors who seized slaves "who rightfully belonged to them" to pay their husbands' debts.

Many courts treated these "mistresses of the market" as distinct persons, not individuals joined in unity with their husbands. Nor did many slave-owning women hesitate to approve brutal methods to discipline their "property."

Violence, cruelty

Often, but not always, they delegated punishment to others. One plantation mistress, Jones-Rogers indicates, whipped her slaves with nettles and "branch...which contained chemicals causing long lasting, painful effects. Others refused to feed their slaves properly.

Another woman's violence toward her slave caused her husband to take off, tying the slaves he owned with him and leaving her with the three she had brought with her to the marriage. Jones-Rogers also relates one of the slave trade's "best kept secrets": the ubiquity of White women in buying and selling slaves.

Along with plantation masters, mistresses usually employed family, friends, and agents as proxies, but sometimes had auctions themselves. Most often, they used their own households to bring slave markets to them, acting for their husbands as well as themselves.

Exploitative practices

During the Civil War, Jones-Rogers points out, women often had sole responsibility for managing their plantations. When Union soldiers were near, they hid their slaves, imprisoned them, or relocated them.

When the war ended, many plantation masters and mistresses retained their land estates and their sense of entitlement. They began to "build their lives anew" by negotiating with former slaves to work for them, all too frequently using exploitative and coercive practices to deprive freed men and women of the compensation they deserved.

Helped sustain slavery

As she demonstrates that her plantation mistresses were co-companions, not passive by-standers, in sustaining slavery, Jones-Rogers helps us understand why "they and many of their female descendants" hid their economic interests in perpetuating slavery, and told "post-posterous stories" about the moral obligations, love, and loyalty, they felt toward "savage Africans," and the heavy burden the "peculiar institution" placed on individuals "who did not enjoy the blessed privilege of turning their servants off when inefficient or disagreeable but had to keep them for life."

Although Jones-Rogers does not quantify the number of slave-owning women in the antebellum South, "They Were Her Property" also reminds us that men were not - and are not - alone in their support of racial segregation and White supremacy.

Dr. Glenn C. Altschul is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.