
Stancil Barwick's Letter and Slave Resistance

Introduction

Enslaved African Americans were abundantly aware of the value slaveholders attached to slaves' babies, particularly after the 1808 closing of the international slave trade. Thereafter, natural means constituted the only legal way in which America's slave force could be reproduced. This reality provided slaves important leverage that they could sometimes use in their ongoing struggle to live like people instead of like property.

The following is a letter written by Stancil Barwick, a Georgia overseer, to his absentee employer, planter John B. Lamar of Macon, Georgia. As is often the case with the historical record, this one is incomplete; we do not have the letter to which Barwick is clearly replying. Nevertheless, Barwick provides numerous clues about the sequence of events that eventually compelled him to write to his employer, clues that suggest who set those events into motion, how, why, and, importantly, to what effect.

As you read this letter, you should create a timeline that notes who did what, where they did, and in what sequence. You should also think about why certain actors got involved and the actions those individuals took. When finished, answer the Discussion Questions on the back of this handout.

Transcript of Stancil Barwick's Letter

Georgia Overseer to a Georgia Absentee Planter

[near Americus, Georgia, 15 July 1855]

Dear Sir:

I received your letter yesterday ev'ng was vary sorry to hear that you had heard that I was treating your Negroes so cruely. Now sir I do say to you in truth that the report is false thear is no truth in it. No man nor set of men has ever seen me mistreat one of the Negroes on the Place. Now as regards the wimin loosing children, treaty lost one it is true. I never heard of her being in that way until she lost it. She was at the house all the time, I never made her do any work at all. She said to me in the last month that she did not know she was in that way her self untill she lost the child. As regards Louisine she was in the field it is true but she was workt as she please. I never said a word to her in any way at all untill she com to me in the field and said she was sick. I told her to go home. She started an on the way she miscarried. She was about five months gone. This is the true statement of case. Now sir a pon my word an honnor I have tride to carry out your wishes as near as I possibly could doo. Ever since I have been on the place I have not been to three neighbours houses since I have been hear I com hear to attend to my Businiss I have done it faithfully the reports that have been sent must have been carried from this Place by Negroes the fact is I have made the Negro men work an made them go strait that is what is the matter an is the reason why that my Place is talk of the settlement. I have found among the Negro men two or three hard cases an I have had to deal rite Ruff but not cruly at all. Among them Abram has been as triflin as any man on the place. Now sir what I have wrote you is truth an it cant be disputed by no man on earth.

N.B. As regards my crop of corn I think I will make a plenty to doo the Place next year my cotton is injured by the wate weather an lice the weed is large enough but nothing on it. I will [be] done working it a week or ten days from this time.

Stancil Barwick to Col. J. B. Lamar, 15 July 1855, *Plantation and Frontier: 1649-1863*, ed. Ulrich B. Phillips (New York: Burt Franklin, 1910), I, 312-13.

Discussion Questions

1. How did the slaves on John Lamar's Sumter County plantation shift the balance of power between themselves and their overseer?
2. What sort of strategies did they use to reduce his abuse of the workers? What other strategies can you imagine them having taken? Why do you think they chose the ones that they did?
3. In the end, who benefited from the slaves' actions?
4. To what extent, how, and why did the slaves' actions change the relationship between Barwick and Lamar?
5. What do we learn about slaveholders' power in reading this document? Is it absolute? Why or why not?
6. What do we learn about slaves' power in reading this document? What did that power consist of? When could they exercise it? Did all the slaves on the plantation exercise the same power or powers equally? Why or why not?