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To Read or Not to Read: Risk and Literacy for Enslaved Americans

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Some black Southerners helped found schools in the Reconstruction South. They attended schools, taught in them or helped found them. All that required ability or desire to read or write. Some black Southerners also helped abolish slavery by fleeing to union lines or serving in the union military. Their departure from plantations or farms relied on news of the war and awareness that much of the North opposed slavery.[1] That knowledge, in part, relied on information they acquired through reading.[2] Moving to union lines and developing schools in the South relied on skill or motivation to read or write. Knowing why black Southerners during the Civil War and Reconstruction had the ability and desire to read and write as much as they did therefore matters.

For information about those origins, I investigated the WPA slave narratives. From those testimonies, I found that most enslaved people did not pursue literacy, and that enslaved people who did pursue literacy sometimes suffered verbal or physical abuse from slaveholders. But I could not find studies that explained the antecedents or consequences of such evidence. Three factors explain that shortcoming. One is under applying accurate portrayals of slave culture. Leading studies of slave culture—*Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, by Lawrence Levine, and *Deep Like the Rivers*, by David Weber—showed that some of slave culture conformed to masters while other parts defied them. But neither study extended that view of slave culture to literacy. Levine omitted literacy as a prospect enslaved people grappled with, and Weber

[1] Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery Through the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 13-162, 7.
[2] Hahn, 42-43.

portrayed enslaved people as strictly interested in pursuing literacy, implying that indifference or aversion to pursuing literacy was not a feature of slave culture.[3]

By showing slave ambition for literacy but not slave disinterest in pursuing literacy, *Deep Like the Rivers* also fits into the second reason scholarship has inadequately portrayed slave literacy: commitment to a double standard. *When I Can Read My Title Clear*, by Janet Duitsman Cornelius; *Self-Taught*, by Heather Andrea Williams; *Roll Jordan Roll*, by Eugene Genovese; and *A Nation Under Our Feet*, by Steven Hahn, covered enslaved people subverting the will of whites by seeking resources or literacy. In each account, enslaved people wanted literacy, pursued literacy, and benefitted from literacy. Each book overlooked enslaved people not attempting literacy or suffering from pursuing literacy.[4] Genovese brazenly did so when he wrote at the end of his section on slave literacy in *Roll Jordan Roll*: "That more slaves did not perform heroically and kill themselves trying to grasp the mysteries of the book means little, for the conditions were appallingly difficulty. The story lies with those who managed to do it."[5] Cornelius and Williams came closest to addressing enslaved people not pursuing literacy and enslaved people suffering literacy, because both briefly mentioned that phenomena.[6] But because they did not incorporate the evidence into their main argument, they still implied that not

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[3] Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978). Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[4] Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2003). Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Janet Duitsman Cornelius, When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South (Charleston, University of South Carolina Press, 1991). Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* First Vintage Books Edition (New York City: Vintage Books, 1976)

[5] Genovese, 567.

[6] Cornelius, 105-110; Williams, 17-19.

pursuing literacy, getting whipped for pursuing literacy, and fearing getting whipped for pursuing literacy were not defining aspects of the history of slave literacy in the antebellum South.[7] In addition to misrepresenting African-American history, omitting slave indifference or aversion to pursuing literacy, and drawbacks of pursuing literacy, is problematic for the history of print or literacy. By portraying literacy as simply beneficial for American slaves, these studies imply that literacy was automatically liberating or simply a good thing.

Scholars of print history in the South have portrayed literacy more accurately than that. But they have not explained the grimmer aspects of the history of slave literacy either, because they confined themselves to Southerners' personal reading experiences or to Southerners' thoughts about literacy. That neglects the power contests between masters and slaves that were important to the history of slave literacy and that the books in the above paragraph addressed. *Word by Word*, by Christopher Hager; *Literary Cultures of the Civil War*, by Timothy Sweet; *A Literate South*, by Beth Barton Schweiger, and "The Readers' South" by Timothy Williams are leading studies on print culture in the antebellum South.[8] Schweiger came the closest to explaining the evidence of slave ambivalence about literacy when she showed that Republican educational reform inadvertently increased slaveholder hostility to slave literacy. But she did not address what enslaved people thought about slaveholder hostility to slave literacy, how enslaved people responded, or what difference their responses made.[9] Thus, studies on print culture in the

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[7] Cornelius, 2-8; Williams, 7-8.
[8] Christopher Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and The Act of Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). Timothy Sweet, *Literary Cultures of the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020). Beth Barton Schweiger, *A Literate South: Reading and Writing Before Emancipation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019). Timothy Williams, "The Readers' South," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, no. 4 (December 2018): 564–90.
[9] Schweiger, 45-52.

American South did not explain the antecedents and consequences of slave ambivalence about pursuing literacy, along with enslaved people sometimes getting whipped for pursuing literacy.

This is what scholarship is missing. White southerners opposed slave literacy when they believed the identity of a reader was incompatible with the identity of a slave—a sentiment they expressed through lectures, threats, and commands made towards enslaved people about literacy. Sometimes those remarks led enslaved people to want literacy more and to then pursue literacy. Other times it dissuaded enslaved people from pursuing literacy. Enslaved peoples' decisions about whether to pursue reading or writing ability influenced if they acquired literacy or got whipped for trying. In short, white southerners' belief that slaves and readers had opposing identities influenced whether enslaved people pursued literacy, which in turn altered how much violence enslaved people suffered. To a lesser degree, it also influenced how literate the enslaved population was.

To make that argument, this thesis will proceed in three steps. First, it will define white Southerners' views of slave literacy by identifying the conditions required for white Southerners to oppose slave literacy, and by analyzing examples of white Southerners opposing slave literacy. Second, it will explain some consequences of white Southerners' views of slave literacy: how white Southerners' remarks about literacy influenced what enslaved people thought about literacy, how enslaved people's views about literacy influenced whether they pursued literacy, and that whether enslaved people pursued literacy influenced if or to what extent they acquired literacy or were whipped by slaveholders. Finally, it will provide statistics about slave literacy: whether enslaved people pursued literacy, what their reasons for not pursuing literacy were, methods enslaved people used to pursue literacy, the success rates of enslaved people who pursued literacy, and reasons literacy attempts failed.

But before that, I'll explain how I used the WPA slave narratives, and defend my approach to them. I used them to know whether someone was literate, how they acquired literacy if they were literate, or what formerly enslaved people thought about acquiring literacy in slavery. The fallibility of memory usually seemed unlikely to have distorted the content, because the questions I used the WPA slave narratives to answer—whether someone was literate, how they acquired literacy if they were literate—were so general that quirks in human memory seemed unlikely to be a problem. One is unlikely to forget or misremember whether they could read or how they learned to read, because those are straightforward and long-term concepts. Another question I took to the WPA slave narratives—what formerly enslaved people thought about acquiring literacy in slavery—was more specific and therefore more susceptible to faulty memories. But I could not think of an equally good or better alternate explanation to the testimonies I looked at. If the claims ex-slaves made about slavery were false, then those memories must have stemmed from a source besides enslaved people's experiences in slavery—an unlikely prospect.

Another alternate explanation to the testimonies in the WPA slave narratives was that the interviewees told the interviewers what they believed the interviewers wanted to hear. Enslaved people learned to be suspicious of whites and to speak in ways whites liked when whites were present. Thus, the interviewees may have downplayed the vices of slavery to protect themselves. But most of the ways that I saw interviewees portray slavery were nuanced, frank, and generally negative.

A final reason that I found the WPA slave narratives mostly reliable was their volume. With so many testimonies from so many different people, the chances of finding the full spectrum of slave thought and experiences with literacy increase, and the chances of finding the

dominant patterns in the history of slave literacy do too. A larger sample size decreases the chances of unusual cases like Frederick Douglass or Mattie Jackson dominating how slave literacy is understood.

None of my defenses of the WPA slave narratives are intended to portray those sources or even my use of them as perfect. Some flaws probably still exist in the testimonies and in my treatment of them. But the volume of the WPA sources and the shoddiness of alternate interpretations of the testimonies make the WPA slave narratives more reliable than not for the history of slave literacy. And few alternative sources exist that document what black Southerners thought and experienced regarding literacy in slavery—seemingly none match the volume of the WPA. Thus, we will be more ignorant about slave literacy if we bypass the WPA slave narratives than if we use them. Even though using those sources probably entails making some mistakes, it is the least bad option.

Slaveholder Views of Slave Literacy

Awareness that literacy is potentially subversive motivated some Southern whites to oppose slave literacy—writing especially. Hugh Auld singled writing out for potentially enabling Douglass to escape bondage.[10] Ignorance of laws against slave literacy could decide whether a Southern white person taught an enslaved person literacy too. After a mistress began teaching an enslaved person to read, her son told her that it was illegal for whites to teach enslaved people

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[10] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom. My Bondage and My Freedom. Part I.--Life as a Slave. Part II.--Life as a Freeman*: Electronic Edition, pg. 146. https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass55/douglass55.html

how to read. Remarking that she did not know that, she then stopped teaching.[11] Another factor was having missionary ambitions and thinking that fulfilling such ambitions required an enslaved person being literate.[12]

Some slaveholders tolerated slave literacy when they thought they could benefit from doing so. One former slave remembered that his ex-master taught some of his slaves how to read and write "so we could use them bookin' cotton in the field and sich like."[13] Harriet Ann Jacobs' master initially disliked that she could read and write. But when he realized that he could not unlearn her, he saw that her literacy unlocked a new communication channel and thus a way to make sexual advances towards Jacobs without his jealous wife realizing it. Thereafter, he sent Jacobs salacious notes.[14] Although he did not teach her literacy, and although Jacob's case is the only one I have seen of a master using literacy to sexually harass an enslaved person, her testimony is relevant because it showed that masters could tolerate slave literacy if they perceived a selfish reason to do so.

Of the slaveholders who thought slave literacy would benefit them, some believed slave literacy could enhance their control over enslaved people because such slaveholders used literary instruction as a bargaining tool. "My daddy learn to read, write, and cipher while he was a

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[11] Robert Anderson, *Robert Anderson, b. 1819. The Life of Rev. Robert Anderson. Born the 22d Day of February, in the Year of Our Lord 1819, and Joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1839. This Book Shall Be Called The Young Men's Guide, Or, the Brother in White* (Macon, Georgia: 1892. https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/andersonr/andersonr.html, 19.

[12] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones. 1936., Alice Green, interviewee, pg. 42. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn042/.

[13] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 1, Adams-Duhon. Simp Campbell, interviewee, pg. 192. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn161/.

[14] Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself: Electronic Edition* (Boston, 1861), 49-50, 63-64, 94-95. https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/menu.html

slave," an former slave told a WPA agent. "The Jenkins family help him, he say, cause he always keep the peace, and work as he was told to do. 'When he's set free, that white family help him get settled and loaned him books."[15] One ex-slave slave recalled that her former owners "made me study books, generally a blue-back spelling book as punishment for mean thinge I done."[16] By using literary instruction as a reward or a punishment, some masters encouraged behavior they liked or discouraged behavior they disliked.

Bonding could also lead white Southerners to enable slave literacy. A few former slaves attributed their literacy to their master permitting and teaching them to read and suggested the master's support for their literacy stemmed from kindness.[17] A more detailed testimony showed that friendship could motivate a white child to teach enslaved person and hide that activity from white adults.

> "Marster Moore had four children among whom was one boy about my age. The girls were named Atona, Beulah, and Minnie, and the boy was named Crosby. He was mighty brilliant. We played together'. He was the only white boy there, and he took a great liking to me, and we loved each devotedly. Once in an undertone he asked me how would I like to have an education. I was overjoyed at the suggestion and he at once began to tach me secretly. I studied hard and he soon had me so I could read and write well. I continued

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[15] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum. Paul Jenkins, interviewee and son of a slave, pg. 30-32. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn143/.

[16] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Squire Dowd, interviewee, pg. 268. Adams-Hunter. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.

[17] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum. 1936., Jimmie Johnson, pg. 53. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 5, Indiana, Arnold-Woodson. 1936., Robert McKinley, ex-slave, pg. 131. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn050/. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn143/.

studying and he continued teaching me. He furnished me books and slipped all the papers he could get to me and I was the best educated Negro in the community without anyone except the slaves knowing what was going on."[18]

Thus, to oppose slave literacy, Southern whites needed to believe that an illiterate slave was more useful than a literate one was. They also needed to either not see teaching literacy as a bonding experience or to not want to bond with enslaved people. Another requirement was not prioritizing religious conversion or not believing that an enslaved person needed literacy to be converted. Finally, Southern whites needed to fear laws prohibiting slave literacy, or to know about such laws and be highly loyal to them.

Antebellum white Southerners who opposed slave literacy usually did so not primarily for strategic reasons but for status ones. By strategic reasons I mean premising hostility to literacy on literacy being potentially subversive. The content of what people read or wrote could increase their ability or desire to defy social norms. Acquiring geographic knowledge, hearing anti-slavery thought, or forging passes are ways that slaveholders could oppose slave literacy for strategic reasons. By opposing slave literacy for status reasons, I mean thinking that the skill of reading or writing signified character traits that one person supposedly should not have had, which entailed disregarding the content of what one person read or wrote.

The following are examples of opposing slave literacy for status reasons. "One day the old mistress caught a slave boy with a book, she cursed him and asked him what he meant, and what he thought he could do with a book. She said he looked like a black dog with a breast pin

[18] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter. 1936., Robert Glenn, interviewee, pg. 332-333. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.

on, and forbade him to ever look into a book again."[19] By denoting a breast pin from a book and a black dog from the boy, the mistress connoted prestige from reading and inferiority from black skin, which implied that reading and the boy's identity were incongruous. To her, it was absurd for an enslaved person to read.

In addition to fearing that literacy would increase the status of their slaves, some white Southerners worried that slave literacy would equalize power between them and enslaved people. "The folks I belonged to said it wouldn't do fer niggers to learn out'n books; that schools warn't fer them," a former slave remembered. "They said learnin' would git us so they couldn't do nothin' wid us."[20] Another ex-slave said something similar. "If dey'd see us wide er book dey'd whip us. Dey said niggers didn' need no knowledge, dat dey mus' do what dey wuz tole to do."[21] The logic of their masters was: if enslaved people acquired literacy, then they would be smarter, giving slaveholders less of an intelligence advantage, making it harder for them to control black Southerners.

Frederick Douglass's recollection of Hugh Auld, his former master, explaining to his wife why she should stop teaching Douglass to read demonstrated a range of motives for opposing slave literacy.

"the thing itself was unlawful; that it was also unsafe, and could only lead to mischief."

"'if you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell ;' 'he should know nothing but the will

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[19] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 5, Indiana, Arnold-Woodson. Belle Butler, interviewee, pg. 41. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn050/.

[20] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones. Emma Hurley, interviewee, 274. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn042/.

[21] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter. Sarah Green, interviewee, 342. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.

> of his master, and learn to obey it.' 'Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world ;' 'if you teach that nigger…how to read the bible there will be no keeping him ;' 'it would forever unfit him for the duties of a slave ;' and 'as to himself, learning would do him no good, but probably, a great deal of harm—making him disconsolate and unhappy.' 'If you learn him now to read, he'll want to know how to write ; and, this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself.'[22]

To understand why Auld said Douglass would become unhappy if he learned to read, some explanation is required. Slaveholders saw black people as less than human and the history of animal domestication as a model for how self-sufficient beings should interact with beings that could not survive on their own. Aware that physiological changes led some wild animals to develop the temperament for domestication, to become dependent on human control, slaveholders used pseudoscientific studies to argue that non-white people were beings of that type.[23] By supposedly enabling African-Americans to survive, whites enslaving blacks was not only tolerable but laudable. But if enslaved people learned to read or write, and if literacy meant knowledge or intelligence, then African-Americans would not have inferior intelligence, refuting a premise that supported racialized slavery. That meant, if black Americans were literate, then it was harder for some Southern whites to think they were uplifting black people by enslaving them.[24]

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[22] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom. Part I. Life as a Slave. Part II. Life as a Freeman* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855) https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass55/douglass55.html, 145-146.
[23] Karl Jacoby, "Slaves By Nature? Domestic Animals and Human Slaves," *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 15, no. 1 (April 1994): 89–97.
[24] William Hayden, b. 1785, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South. Written by Himself*. Cincinnati: W. Hayden, 1846. https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/hayden/menu.html, 35.

Each example I gave of a white Southerner opposing slave literacy started by conveying that people who learned to read or write would become more knowledgeable, intelligent, ambitious or refined. It then concluded by claiming that those traits would make enslaved people too crafty to enslave or too knowledgeable for whites to justifiably enslave them, making racialized slavery immoral or unenforceable. White Southern belief that readers and slaves had incompatible characteristics was a case of existential anxiety.

Did literacy liberate enslaved people from slavery? Is that why slaveholders feared slave literacy? Hardly. Four reasons explain why: white Southerners' conflating reading with knowledge, power, or prestige in their literary education; Douglass not relying on literacy to escape; most fugitives coming from border states or port cities; and oral communication having similar political benefits for enslaved people that literacy did.

White Southerners in the antebellum era used differences in language to measure social status. Spelling, grammar, and rhetoric were the order in which people learned to read and write, making spelling, grammar, and rhetoric books not only among the most common genres of print in the antebellum South, but also texts that Southerners deemed authoritative.[25] Spelling books exerted standards of pronouncing and spelling letters, words, syllables, sentences, and short paragraphs—standards that readers learned by reciting the pronunciations on their own or by attending a school in which a teacher pressed students to practice the book's lessons. Webster's Blue Back speller was a staple of Southern schools and the most popular spelling book in the antebellum South. Spelling was considered basic knowledge, the first stage of learning to read, and necessary preparation to study grammar. [26]

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[25] Schweiger, 39-123.
[26] Schweiger, 52-67.

Grammar taught how to form a sentence and was thought to "push one up the social ladder, instill morality and virtue, and liberate one's body and mind," because those who had grammar supposedly possessed greater intelligence and mastery over language.[27] Rhetoric was believed to enable one to acquire a virtuous identity, convey their thoughts, and free themselves from poor writing because rhetoric taught one how to create aesthetically pleasing language through the study of stylizing sentences.[28]

Douglass escaping without using literacy is a second type of evidence that indicate slaveholders opposed slave literacy for status reasons instead of strategic ones. With money provided by his fiancé, Frederick Douglass escaped by taking a train, a steamboat, and several ferries from Baltimore to New York City. In New York, he met David Ruggles, a member of an organization dedicated to assisting fugitive slaves called The New York Committee of Vigilance. Ruggles advised Douglass to continue North to New Bedford, Massachusetts, a place he deemed safer for a fugitive than New York City was. There Douglass would meet with another black abolitionist and work out his long-term-settlement. The plan worked. Douglass evaded recapture, living un-enslaved for the rest of his days.[29] Although Douglass could read and write, literacy was of little to no value for his escape. He never mentioned literacy as part of his escape journey. Since Douglass could read and write, not using his literary skills indicated that he did not need those abilities to escape.

A third reason that slaveholders feared slave literacy for status reasons instead of strategic ones is the original location of most fugitives who escaped through New York City:

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[27] Schweiger, 68-94, quote on 86.
[28] Schweiger, 95-122.
[29] Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 2015), 14-18.

border states and port cities. Sydney Howard Gay, a member of the Underground Railroad from the 1840's until just before the Civil War kept a record of the fugitives, a document that overviewed the journey of two hundred fourteen fugitives whom he and his colleagues helped escape in 1855 and 1856.[30] Fugitives whose origin was more inland almost exclusively came from Maryland or Northern Virginia, the places nearest Pennsylvania: the Southernmost state without slavery.[31] If literacy was a significant factor for escaping, then the original location of fugitive slaves would have been more evenly distributed.

Figure 1: "Origins of Individuals in The Record of Fugitives," from Eric Foner's *Gateway to Freedom*

State	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Maryland	94	44%
Virginia	66	31%
North Carolina	19	9%
Delaware	11	5%
District of Columbia	10	5%
Kentucky	3	1%
South Carolina	2	1%
Georgia	2	1%
Unknown	7	3%

But what about collecting information? Surely literacy was useful for that. Yes, it was. Enslaved people sometimes used literacy to acquire information about national politics, which

[30] Foner, 9-10.
[31] Foner, 201.

helped embolden many of them to flee to union lines, enabling the destruction of slavery and African-Americans to gain citizenship rights.[32] But literacy was not the only way enslaved people acquired information about national politics. Enslaved and marooned Americans spread information through word of mouth, in a "grapevine telegraph" that spanned the nation.[33] Enslaved people also sometimes spied or eavesdropped on white Southerners to learn about national politics.[34] Since oral communication was another way of acquiring intelligence, literacy was not a scarce way of acquiring information, making it less valuable than if enslaved people had no other way of learning about national politics or organizing themselves.

Although literacy has some strategic value, literacy was unlikely to decide whether one could escape slavery. And enslaved people had other useful ways of communicating, meaning that literacy was only of tenuous value. That means slaveholders' opposition to slave literacy stemmed more from thinking that one cannot be literate and a slave than from literacy liberating people from slavery.

Consequences of White Remarks About Literacy

Former slaves Emma Hurley, Sarah Green, and Frederick Douglass illustrate consequences of white remarks about literacy. Hurley and Green attributed their caution about pursuing literacy to slaveholder hostility to slave literacy. Douglass portrayed white remarks about literacy as a trigger for his ambition to pursue literacy. All three were convinced by white Southerners that literacy had stakes: that literacy or pursuing literacy related to their safety or their social standing. But they differed in their confidence about how useful literacy would be or

[32] Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 12-162, 42-43.
[33] Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 55-61, quote on 55; Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2009) 31-38.
[34] Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 55.

about the odds of successfully pursuing literacy, because Hurley and Green saw pursuing literacy as a fruitless path, whereas Douglass thought pursuing literacy was a fruitful endeavor.

To see the similarities and differences between Hurley, Green, and Douglass, I first need to show what the three said about their history with literacy. "The folks I belonged to said it wouldn't do fer niggers to learn out'n books; that schools warn't fer them," Hurley remarked. "They said learnin' would git us so they couldn't do nothin' wid us."[35] Green said something similar: "If dey'd see us wid er book dey'd whip us. Dey said niggers didn' need no knowledge, dat dey mus' do what dey wuz tole to do."[36] Hurley and Green seem not to have had literacy, gotten whipped in a matter regarding literacy, or pursued literacy—since they gave relevant information about literacy but omitted any evidence of such things applying to them.

Douglass remembered that he asked Sophia Auld, his then mistress, to teach him how to read because seeing her reading around the house intrigued him with the skill. She complied, teaching him to identify the alphabet. But when her husband Hugh found out, he forbade the practice, saying reading would make Douglass no longer a slave.[37] In doing so, Hugh inadvertently inspired Douglass to see literacy as a personally liberating skill. Douglass became convinced that reading was knowledge, and "knowledge unfits a child to be a slave."[38] Learning

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[35] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones. Emma Hurley, interviewee, 274. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn042/.

[36] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter. Sarah Green, interviewee, 342. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.

[37] Douglass, 145-147.

[38] Douglass, 146.

to read or write undermined "the nature and requirements of the relation of master and slave."[39] Thus, Douglass concluded, literacy was "the direct pathway from slavery to freedom."[40]

That began Douglass's determined effort to read and write. When he had errands or spare time, Douglass visited white children in Baltimore for lessons, which they provided out of kindness or in exchange for bread.[41] After learning to read, Douglass bought The Columbian Orator, a then popular rhetoric book, which he learned of from his white playmates. From that book Douglass broadened his vocabulary. But he also acquired more ambition, because the book featured stirring stories of resistance and liberation, one of which was about a slave overtly defying his master.[42] Sometime after that, Douglass learned to write. By noting the letters attached to timber that went onto ship parts that Douglass knew the name of, Douglass learned what the letters stood for.[43] Douglass then improved his writing by copying "the italics in Webster's spelling book" and the lines in Tommy's (his master) copy books, and by copying Christian texts he had read by writing on the lid of flour barrels stored in the Auld's kitchen.[44]

Pursuing literacy enabled Douglass to become more literate. Each method he used for pursuing literacy—asking Sophia for a lesson, getting lessons from white children, studying the letters on ships, and transcribing household items—enabled him to acquire more literacy. The importance pursuing literacy had for acquiring literacy is reiterated by Hurley and Green being illiterate and having not pursued literacy.

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[39] Douglass, 146.
[40] Douglass, 147
[41] Douglass, 155.
[42] Douglass, 156-160.
[43] Douglass, 170-171.
[44] Douglass 171-172.

Because Douglass expressed intent to pursue literacy with or without white help, he apparently believed that, regarding literacy, defying slaveholders was preferable than conforming to them was—indicating that they thought they could outmaneuver slaveholders enough to acquire literacy against the will of some of them, but not enough to escape bondage without literacy. Alternatively, he believed that the benefits of having literacy would outweigh the costs of acquiring literacy: that having literacy would improve his life more than the whippings he might suffer from pursuing literacy would worsen his life. To Douglass, the best possible world was one in which he escaped bondage and lived a life opposite to that of an American slave. And he believed he needed literacy to achieve that.

Whether Douglass represented enslaved people who pursued literacy is murky. None from the WPA testimonies who pursued literacy revealed their motives. But some who pursued literacy without any white help did so secretively, indicating that they knew the risks of their activity. The previous section showed that literacy had tenuous strategic value for enslaved people, so those who independently pursued literacy had some ideological motive. Religion is one possible motive. Belief that literacy meant prestige is another. Douglass demonstrated that equating literacy with prestige motivated some enslaved people to develop ambition for literacy. But his history does not show what fraction of enslaved people pursued literacy for such reasons.

Not pursuing literacy due to fear of slaveholders whipping them reveals what Hurley and Green might have been thinking too. By suggesting that, regarding literacy, conformity to slaveholders was a better decision than deviance was, Hurley and Green suggested that slaveholders were too dangerous to trifle with: that either enslaved people could not outthink or outflank them enough to independently acquire literacy, or that pursuing literacy without some white help was more trouble than it was worth: acquiring literacy would likely entail getting

whipped, and having literacy would not improve one's life enough to outweigh the costs endured from becoming literate. Whether it was belief that they could not acquire literacy, or that the costs of independently acquiring literacy exceeded the benefits of having literacy, Hurley and Green likely believed that a minimally violent slavery was the best achievable world, and that not pursuing literacy—at least without some white help—was necessary to achieve it.

Douglass did not always have his idealistic views of literacy. He said it was when he heard Auld talk about literacy that he conflated literacy with liberation. And his narrative matches that claim. By asking Sophia to teach him to read, Douglass showed interest in reading before Auld's lecture. But it was only after Auld's remarks that Douglass conflated literacy with liberation. And it was only then that he pursued literacy with tenacity.

Hurley, Green, and Douglass were influenced by remarks white Southerners made about literacy. How each of them interpreted white remarks about literacy influenced whether they pursued literacy. And whether they pursued literacy influenced if they suffered violence for a decision they made about literacy, and if they acquired literacy. But the history of neither Green, nor Hurley, nor Douglass showed how violence related to white views of slave literacy and enslaved people pursuing literacy. Filling that void requires noting the history of another former slave: George Thompson.

Thompson bought a spelling book with money he earned by selling to doctors ginseng that he had collected in the woods on Sundays. But "after receiving three severe whippings I gave up and never again tried for any learning, and to this day I can neither read nor write."[45] The resourcefulness, tenacity, and failure of Thompson's pursuit showed that sometimes

[45] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 5, Indiana, Arnold-Woodson. George Thompson, interviewee, pg. 196. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn050/.

enslaved people could not do anything to make pursuing literacy worthwhile. Not pursuing literacy could be a knowledgeable decision. Imagine how many more whippings Thompson would have suffered if he had pursued literacy long enough to acquire spelling, grammar, writing, or rhetoric. Now imagine if every enslaved person suffered that fate. Slavery in antebellum American would have been more violent.

Hurley and Green seemingly did not suffer whippings for a literacy related decision, indicating that slaveholders did not erroneously believe that enslaved people who were not pursuing literacy were in fact pursuing literacy. If true, then not pursuing literacy was a reliable way to avoid a whipping. Douglass's success, however, showed that enslaved people who pursued literacy were not necessarily whipped either. Pursuing literacy made new whippings possible but not inevitable.

Statistics

Figure 2: Sampled Rate of Attempting Literacy

Attempt Status	Frequency	Relative of All Sample Slavery Attempt Testimonies
Pursued Literacy	35	26%
Did not Pursue Literacy	82	62%
Ambiguous testimony	15	11%

To know what I mean by pursued literacy and other key terms about the numbers, I need to define my metrics. Pursuing literacy means an enslaved person initiating learning how to read or write, or an enslaved person sustaining the initiation a white person made for an enslaved person to learn to read or write. Asking someone for reading lessons or for advice about how to read counts as an attempt. Buying a book or studying independently are also examples of an enslaved person initiating learning how to read or write. Paying attention to a lesson or not trying to get out of the lesson count as sustaining the initiation of a white person. Explanations that said

"we didn't learn to read" but say nothing else about literacy are counted as a non-attempt, because if they had attempted literacy, then they would have mentioned it. The reason I believe that is because, although they often did not go into detail, the WPA testimonies typically gave relevant evidence about literacy. If a testifier refused to give information about literacy, then that person would not be counted as someone who did not pursue literacy, because that person demonstrated secrecy about their history with literacy. So if a testifier gave information about literacy and omitted evidence of themselves pursuing literacy, then that person is counted as an example of not pursuing literacy. Testimonies that didn't clearly indicate whether anyone pursued literacy are marked as ambiguous. Ambiguous testimonies do not also count as a case of pursuing literacy or not pursuing literacy. They count as ambiguous testimonies and nothing else.

My table exaggerates the relative frequency at which enslaved people pursued literacy. The immediate cause is that most interviewees who said they did not pursue literacy generalized. Instead of saying "I did not pursue literacy," they used terms like we or us—referencing at least two people. That means an unspecified number of other enslaved people did not pursue literacy. Two additional factors explain why I undercounted how many did not pursue literacy. One is that I favored caution. An argument can be made that a generalization should count as two people, but I only counted a generalization as one case of not pursuing literacy. My reason was that generalizing terms like we or us could have meant the enslaved people on a farm or a plantation, or it could have meant the enslaved population more generally. That is, it could have meant the person's observations in slavery, or their generalizations from their personal experiences or information they acquired after bondage.

The other reason for my undercount is that most enslaved people were illiterate. Because literate slaves were scarce, it was easier for interviewees to give specific examples of someone

having literacy, allowing a definitive tally. Since most enslaved people were illiterate, generalizing about how many were illiterate became more likely or inevitable. Slave illiteracy being the norm either enabled interviewees to generalize about illiterate slaves as a shortcut to giving specific quantities, or it meant illiterate enslaved people were too numerous to accurately count, making generalization necessary.

Thus, a bias underpins my tables: those who pursued literacy could be counted with quantitative precision more often than those who did not pursue literacy. Since ascribing a number greater than two to a testimony that generalized would be arbitrary, one must count a generalization as one or two quantities. And because many of those generalizations likely entailed more than two people, I undercounted how many enslaved people did not pursue literacy—hence the exaggerated relative frequency at which enslaved people pursued literacy.

To illustrate the potential uncertainty of generalizations made by testifiers, one person said that none of the fifty slaves on her plantation could read or attempted to read. Just adding the forty-nine others said to have not attempted literacy boosts the percentage of my sample who did not pursue literacy from sixty two percent to seventy two percent. And that was just one generalizations about not attempting literacy. So when factoring in the generalization numbers (of who did not pursue literacy), we know that a minimum of sixty two percent, more likely seventy two percent, and probably a significantly higher percentage of enslaved people in my sample did not pursue literacy. And if I changed a generalization from one case to two, then absolute frequency of enslaved people who did not pursue literacy would be even higher. Thus, my table is a minimal count of enslaved people who did not pursue literacy in the WPA narratives. Although the exact percentage ranges enormously, most from my sample did not pursue literacy.

Figure 3: Reasons Cited for Not Pursuing Literacy in Slavery

Reason Cited for Not Pursuing	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
White Aversion to Slave Literacy	89	95%
Aversion to Literacy	5	5%

The interviewees usually conveyed that their illiteracy stemmed from white hostility to slave literacy. They cited white verbal opposition, whites forbidding slave literacy, strict rules against literacy and independent black social organization, fear of white maiming, and whites not teaching as reasons they were illiterate while enslaved. Only knowing work, a white child declining to teach, books or schools not existing for blacks, laws prohibiting slave literacy, lack of opportunity, and fear of getting caught or scolded were other reasons. Because each of those reasons stemmed from white aversion to slave literacy, I say white hostility to slave literacy was the reason cited for being illiterate in slavery.

Aversion to literacy means not pursuing literacy despite saying they had the opportunity to do so, or that they would have declined an opportunity. The following testimony is an example. "I warnt learnt nothin' in no book. Don't think I'd a-took- to it, nowhow. Dey learnt de house servants to read. Us fiel' hanfs never knowed nothin' 'cept whether and dirt and to weigh cotton. Us was learnt to figger a little, but dat's all."[46] Another case was from a man named William Grant. On one hand, he demonstrated diffidence to literacy. He did not learn to read or write in slavery, even though he believed his master would have allowed it. And he claim to not

[46] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 9, Mississippi, Allen-Young. Charlie Davenport, interviewee, pg. 38. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn090/.

"take stock in reading and writing after the war."[47] On the other hand, he said he could have gotten literacy in slavery if he had more opportunities, by which he meant books, schools, and instructors.

Another case of ambivalence about literacy was an enslaved person not paying attention to occasional lessons given by the mistress, which the interviewee regretted.[48] The following testimony is a case of enslaved people avoiding literacy: "It was understood that white people were not to teach Negroes during slavery, but many of the whites taught the Negroes. The children of the white-folks made us study. I could read and write when the 'war was up. They made me study books, generally a blue-back spelling book as punishment for mean thinge I done. My missus, a young lady about 16 years old taught a Sunday school class of colored boys and girls. This Sunday School was at a different time of day from the white folks.'" [49] Here is the only other example I found of enslaved people not pursuing literacy not because of white hostility but aversion to reading itself: "Yassuh, we was taught to read an' write, but mos of de slaves didn't want to learn. Us little niggers would hide our books under de (steps to keep f'um havin' to study. Us'd go to church wid de white folks ion Sunday and sit in de back, an den we go home an' eat a big Sunday meal."[50] The point of cases in which interviewees expressed

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[47] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 3, Gadson-Isom. William Gant, interviewee, pg. 12. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn023/.

[48] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones. Fannie Jones, interviewee, pg. 354. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn042/.

[49] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Squire Dowd, interviewee, pg. 268. Adams-Hunter. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.

[50] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young. Lucinda Washington, interviewee, pg. 410. 1937, 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn010/.

aversion to literacy is that, although some cases like that existed, they were a minority and sometimes only mildly averse to literacy. No major opposition to literacy manifested in the WPA slave narratives.

The dominant reasons enslaved people did not pursue literacy was white hostility to it. Did the interviewees exaggerate white hostility or understate their opportunities because admitting to bypassing literacy was embarrassing? Possibly. But if they did, then it is hard to explain why they admitted to being illiterate rather than lying or avoiding the question. Did being kids during slavery mean they pursued literacy less than most enslaved people did? That is also possible. But that claim is also tenuous. The interviewees typically gave relevant evidence they had about literacy, meaning that they sometimes referenced an adult whom they knew was literate.[51] And some said adults advised them not to pursue literacy to avoid whites whipping them.[52] Thus, adults may not have been less likely to not pursue literacy or less likely to enter the testimonies.

Figure 4: Methods Cited for Pursuing Literacy *(double check numbers, missing 3); maybe 1 more pursued literacy*

Method	Quantity	Relative Frequency
Some Whites Knowingly Helping	26	68%
Independently Pursuing Literacy	9	24%
Ambiguous	3	8%

[51] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 13, Oklahoma, Adams-Young. 1936., Marshall Mack, interviewee, pg. 213. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn130/.

[52] Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 12, Ohio, Anderson-Williams. Julia King, interviewee, pg. 59. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn120/. Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter. Jane Arrington, interviewee, pg. 48. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/.

Enslaved people independently pursuing literacy means eavesdropping on school sessions, whites' discussions about school lessons, sneaking glances into whites' books, studying privately, or one enslaved person teaching another. Whites knowingly helping means whites enabling enslaved people to acquire literacy in any other way. The variations of some whites knowingly helping were: adult white instruction and white schooling, white children teaching against white adult wishes, instruction from white children and a white adult, and instruction from unspecified whites. In this table, ambiguous means numerous interpretations exist of what method an enslaved person used.

Figure 5: Sampled Success Rate of Those Who Attempted Literacy

Acquisition Status	Frequency	Relative to all Sample
Succeeded	28	72%
Did not Succeed	11	28%

By succeeded, I mean whether a pursuit of literacy culminated in that person having literacy without suffering any violence. Did not succeed means acquiring literacy but getting whipped in doing so. Or it means pursuing literacy (by asking a white for lessons, for example) without avail. I define literacy as any reading or writing ability reported by the interviewees. In this case, numeracy does not count as literacy, but only one person in my sample reported having numeracy anyway.

The cases in which enslaved people did not successfully pursue literacy indicate that pursuing literacy with help from at least one white adult was the safest way of pursuing literacy. None who pursued literacy that way were whipped, and only one of the ten cases of pursuing literacy that way failed. Asking a white child or a white adult who declined never led to a whipping either. All those who were whipped for pursuing literacy either pursued literacy independently, or with the help of a white child but not a white adult. The method an enslaved person used to pursued literacy was ambiguous in some of the five cases of slaves suffering

whippings for trying to read or write. That means it is unclear if pursuing literacy independently was safer than pursuing literacy with white children helping. But since at least two who used one method or the other were whipped, and because no more than ten pursued literacy with each method, respectively, the success rate was lower—and the rate of violence far higher—for those who pursued literacy without the help of a white adult.

Conclusion

A challenge enslaved people faced was whether the possibility of getting literacy was worth risking a whipping for. Given that literacy probably would not have gotten them out of bondage, and that they could also get information orally, the answer seems to be maybe at best and no at worst. But because literacy had some strategic value, the best-case scenario was to acquire literacy without getting whipped, which enslaved people usually achieved. Most who pursued literacy succeeded. The absence of a bias against literacy in most enslaved people indicates that they knowingly bypassed few good opportunities to acquire literacy, and three reasons indicate that enslaved people were usually not biased against literacy. One, white hostility to slave literacy was usually their reason for not pursuing literacy. Two, literacy had tenuous strategic value. And three, a marginal but noteworthy fraction of enslaved people independently pursued literacy, indicating a strong preference for having literacy. A remaining doubt about how many good opportunities enslaved people bypassed is refuted by help from a white adult or asking a white for instruction being the safest way to pursue literacy.

Enslaved people rarely declined the safest methods for pursuing literacy, which were getting some white help. And a significant fraction of them pursued literacy without any white help. In doing so, enslaved people kept their quantity of literacy attempts high to the extent that they also kept the quality of their attempts high quality. By high quality attempts, I mean

methods that were fairly safe. That is why most enslaved people did not pursue literacy: getting some help from adult slaveholders was the safest method in my sample, and adult slaveholders usually opposed slave literacy in the Antebellum era.

Had enslaved people pursued literacy much less often, they would have been safer, but they would have been less literate. Had enslaved people pursued literacy much more often, they might have been more literate. But it is more likely that it would have suffered more violence, because pursuing literacy without help from a white adult was tenuous. And enslaved people already took most chances for whites to knowingly teach them. Thus, enslaved people achieved something of a goldilocks middle when it came to pursuing literacy. Pursue literacy much more, and they get the costs of pursuing literacy (violence) with little to no benefits (acquiring literacy). Pursue literacy less often, and they get the benefits of conformity (short-term safety) but not the benefits of pursuing literacy (again, acquiring literacy).

How violence relates to short-term safety is clear. But how literacy related to enslaved people's long-term power requires explanation. As mentioned in the introduction, enslaved people sometimes used literacy to collect information about national politics. Such information helped inspire a significant fraction of them to flee to union lines during the Civil War, which enabled emancipation. After the war, black Southerners who acquired literacy in slavery taught in schools during Reconstruction. And black Southerners comprised many or most teachers of black schools in the Reconstruction South. Enslaved people helped end slavery and replace it with a world in which some black Southerners could attend schools—developments that empowered black Southerners in the long-term. Since black Southerners sometimes used literacy to achieve those ends, literacy complemented the long-term power of black Southerners to some degree. Because enslaved people achieved about as much literacy as they could have without

getting whipped much more often, enslaved people achieved a good or great balance of short-term safety and long-term power. Pursuing literacy was a risk that enslaved people managed well.

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