5-1-2002

A Plantation Mistress of the Old South: The Life of Ann Barnes Archer of Mississippi

Nikki L. Berg

A PLANTATION MISTRESS OF THE OLD SOUTH: THE LIFE OF ANN BARNES ARCHER OF MISSISSIPPI

by

Nikki L. Berg
Bachelor of Arts, Concordia College, 2000

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota
May
2002

This thesis, submitted by Nikki L. Berg in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

(Chairperson)

This thesis meets the standards for apearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

Dean of the Graduate School

April 25, 2002
Date

PERMISSION

Title A Plantation Mistress of the Old South: The Life of Ann Barnes Archer of Mississippi

Department History

Degree Master of Arts

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree from the University of North Dakota, I agree that the library of this University shall make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for extensive copying for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor who supervised my thesis work or, in his absence, by the chairperson of the department of the dean of the Graduate School. It is understood that any copying or publication or other use of this thesis or part thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of North Dakota in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis.

Signature Nikki Burg

Date 04-25-02

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In preparing this thesis, I wish to thank the Center for American History at the University of Texas for Ann Barnes Archer's letters.

I am forever grateful to my aunt and uncle, Dena and Jim Peters, for welcoming me into their home while I conducted my research. Those long, bumpy rides on the CART bus were worth it!

I wish to thank my fellow graduate students in the History Department at the University of North Dakota. Your support, laughter, and friendship have made this experience unforgettable.

At various stages, drafts of this thesis have been read, commented upon, and criticized most helpfully by my committee members. I wish to thank Eric Burin, Barbara Handy-Marchello, Anne Kelsch, and Jim Mochoruk for their encouragement and the candor with which they expressed their disagreements and suggestions.

A special thank you to my advisor and mentor, Eric Burin. Your enthusiasm and scholarship serve as continual sources of inspiration for me. Thank you for your unceasing guidance and friendship.

By dedicating this thesis to my parents I wish to acknowledge their lasting influence on my life. Your continual love and support means more to me than words can express. I thank you with all my heart.

ABSTRACT

In 1834, at the age of sixteen, southerner Ann Barnes married Richard Thompson Archer, a successful planter twenty-one years her senior. Over the course of their thirty-two years of marriage, the Archers raised ten children and acquired over five hundred slaves. Their family and bondpersons were the defining elements of their lives. As the wife of an affluent planter, the mother of nine children, and the mistress of one of the largest plantations in Mississippi, Ann Barnes Archer appears to have been the ideal southern lady and to have lived the ideal southern life.

By embodying these three principal roles of wife, mother, and plantation mistress, Archer fulfilled her duties as determined by antebellum gender prescriptions. Although such prescriptions defined and established a "feminine" base of authority within family and community, they essentially placed slaveholding women in a subsidiary position to the other white residents of their plantations. Archer, however, was far more than a subordinate of her husband, her children, and her overseers. She was at the center of her community and had significant influence over the people with whom she came into contact.

There were three principal factors which established Archer's centrality in her community - her productive and reproductive duties in regard to her slaves, her role as a counselor to her husband and children, as well as her isolation on the plantation. Through an examination of Archer's individual experience based on her correspondence, I consider the significance and consequences of a white woman's roles and responsibilities on an antebellum slave plantation.

Archer's experience reflects what was essentially a matrifocal community. Her husband, children, and slaves depended on her personal, educational, and moral guidance, her fulfillment of reproductive and productive duties, and her isolation, to sustain their community. She was in many respects the central figure on the plantation and provided stability and reassurance to both those who had the leisure to leave as well as those who were forced to remain. There may have been a strong patriarchal figure at the head of the Archer family, but, because of her authority as a prescribed moral leader, as well as her static position and management on the plantation, it was arguably the "subsidiary" female figure in the center that held the most sway. Archer accepted her position within her community and took advantage of the authority it provided her. Her experience invites a new interpretation of what it meant to be a plantation mistress in the Old South.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 1834, at the age of sixteen, southerner Ann Barnes married Richard Thompson Archer, a successful planter twenty-one years her senior.[1] Over the course of their thirty-two years of marriage, the Archers raised ten children and acquired over five hundred slaves. Their family and bondpersons were the defining elements of their lives. As the wife of an affluent planter, the mother of nine children, and the mistress of one of the largest plantations in Mississippi, Ann Barnes Archer appears to have been the ideal southern lady and to have lived the ideal southern life.

By embodying these three principal roles of wife, mother, and plantation mistress, Archer fulfilled her duties as determined by antebellum gender prescriptions. Although such prescriptions defined and established a "feminine" base of authority within family and community, they essentially placed slaveholding women in a subsidiary position to the other white residents of their plantations. Archer, however, was far more than a subordinate of her husband, her children, and her overseers. She was at the center of her community and had significant influence over the people with whom she came into contact.[2]

There were three principal factors which established Archer's centrality in her

---

[1] *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi*, 2 vols. (1891; rpr. Spartanburg, South Carolina: The Reprint Company, 1978), 1: 309.

[2] For the purposes of this thesis I define Archer's "community" as the black and white, or enslaved and free people that resided on Anchuca and Pine Woods plantations and who constituted her nuclear and extended "family." For an interesting discussion on the definition of antebellum southern communities, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 68-70.

community - her productive and reproductive duties in regard to her slaves, her role as a counselor to her husband and children, as well as her isolation on the plantation. Through an examination of Archer's individual experience based on her correspondence, I consider the significance and consequences of a white woman's roles and responsibilities on an antebellum slave plantation. Archer's labor, guidance, and isolation affected not only her own status and well-being, but also the lives and welfare of those by whom she was surrounded.

The shared experience or lifeworld[3] of antebellum southern women has been discussed in great detail since the publication of Anne Firor Scott's landmark book, *The Southern Lady*, in 1970. Because of a lack of written records by lower class women, most of these studies have focused on white women of the planter class.[4] *The Southern Lady*, Catherine Clinton's *The Plantation Mistress*, and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household* set the foundation for this field by offering comprehensive studies of wealthy, rural slaveholding women.[5] Since the publication of these works, the field of southern women's history has expanded to include important scholarship on lesser-known people such as the "unruly" women of the North Carolina Piedmont and the antebellum widows of Virginia.[6] There has also been a greater emphasis put on the

---

[3]Sociologist Ronald Davis defines lifeworld as "the practical everyday aspects of living that were simply taken for granted as a stock of shared experience," in Ronald L. F. Davis, "The Plantation Lifeworld of the Old Natchez District: 1840-1880," in *Plantation Society and Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality*, eds. Thomas J. Durant, Jr. and J. David Knottnerus (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999), 165.

[4]Kenneth Stampp defines the typical planter as one who owned between twenty and fifty slaves in Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 30-31.

[5]Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*, 25th anniversary ed. (Charlottesville and London: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

[6]Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992) and Kirsten E. Wood, "Fictive Mastery: Slaveholding Widows in the American Southeast, 1790-1860" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Pennsylvania, 1998).

experiences of enslaved and free African American women since the 1985 publications of Deborah Gray White's *Aren't I a Woman?* and Jacqueline Jones' *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*.[7] Although research of this nature continues to develop, the study of antebellum southern women is still centered around those who fit the description of elite. More to the point, the scholarship pertaining to the women of the planter class has tended to generalize the singular experiences of the various women identified with this group, particularly in regard to slavery, marriage, and family.

Applying the theory of a lifeworld, or shared experience, to historical research is generally a valid and efficient method of analysis. Historian Randolph Campbell demonstrated this in his observations of the diverse slaveholders of the Natchez District. "Differences in detail [regarding their specific experiences with slavery]," wrote Campbell, "did not affect fundamentals."[8] He argued that there were certain essential characteristics, such as the pursuit of status and wealth, that defined all slaveholders regardless of differences in experience and geographic location. This was the case with slaveholding women as well. Indeed, the diaries and letters of most wealthy female slaveholders have remarkable similarity when addressing issues of marriage, family, and slavery. It is often the variance in details of individual experiences, however, that is the historian's most valuable tool in gaining a more thorough understanding and appreciation of any historical subject.

The best way to come by these details is through the examination of one person. Looking at individual, rather than collective experience allows for human diversity and

---

[7]Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); for more recent works see Marli F. Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998) and Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina (*Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

[8]Randolph B. Campbell, "Slavery in the Natchez Trace Collection," in *Inside the Natchez Trace Collection: New Sources for Southern History*, eds. Katherine J. Adams and Lewis L. Gould (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 57.

enables one to analyze a real person, rather than an idea, a generalization, or in the case of southern women, a myth. Through the examination of Ann Barnes Archer's experience, this thesis enhances and challenges the comprehensive and generalized studies of elite antebellum southern women. So as not to isolate her from her contemporaries, I draw comparisons throughout my thesis between Archer and two other plantation mistresses, Sarah Gayle and Fanny Kemble. Both had similar experiences to Archer and serve as fitting sources of comparison. I have included Gayle and Kemble in this study so as to provide the means of drawing parallels and recognizing consistencies among southern women.

Archer was born into the prosperous, slaveholding Barnes family of Mississippi in 1818. Both her parents and her three siblings died before her twelfth birthday. Shortly after her parents' death, Archer moved to Pennsylvania to obtain an education. Four years after her arrival, Archer met and married fellow Mississippian, Richard Thompson Archer. Together they moved back to Mississippi and began their family.[9]

Archer was pregnant sixteen times in her life, but only saw nine of her children survive infancy. "I have seven dear children who I am sure are angels," Archer wrote to her nephew, "may we <u>all</u> be prepared to join them."[10] By the time her last child was born in 1856, Archer had four sons, five daughters, and an orphaned nephew who she and her husband raised as one of their own from the time he was a toddler. Abram, her eldest son, fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War and became a planter on one of the family's Mississippi estates. His cousin, Edward, was also a planter but died in battle while serving the Confederacy. Abram's younger brother, Stephen, contracted typhoid fever while serving in the Confederate Army and died at seventeen years of age. Their

---

[9] *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi*, 310.

[10] Ann Barnes Archer to Edward Archer, April 4, 1855, Ann Barnes Archer Papers, Richard Thompson Archer Papers, Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin, Box 2E649.

sisters, Ann Maria and Elizabeth, eventually married and moved away from their childhood home in Mississippi. Mr. Archer died in 1866, but his wife did not live the remainder of her life alone. Her other five children, Mary, Jane, Richard, Essie, and Branch reportedly lived with their mother until her death in 1892.[11]

In 1837, three years after their marriage and upon the birth of their first child, Archer and her husband moved to what would become their permanent residence on Anchuca plantation in Claiborne County, Mississippi.[12] At only nineteen years of age, Archer became a partner in what historian Randolph B. Campbell deemed "one of the greatest plantation dynasties in the Natchez district."[13] The home in which Archer resided on Anchuca plantation seems to fit the mythical image of the antebellum South. On an elevated piece of land sat a two and one-half story residence with a double verandah and large frescoes in the main rooms. The approach to the house was lined with cedar trees.[14]

The means for the Archer's opulent home could be found laboring in the cotton fields surrounding the house. According to the 1860 slave schedule of Claiborne County, 188 bondpersons resided on Anchuca plantation.[15] These were not, however, the only people enslaved by the Archers, for Mr. Archer was the owner and co-owner of four other estates, each with substantial slave holdings. In addition to Anchuca, Mr. Archer claimed both Pine Woods plantation in Claiborne County with eighty-three slaves, as well as a collection of three estates on Honey Island in Holmes County, Mississippi. Each of these island estates had a separate steamboat landing and a combined total of

---

[11] *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi*, 310; Campbell, 56; Bennett Lucerne Hinkley, "On Southern Womanhood: The Family Life of Ann Barnes Archer, Plantation Mistress" (M.A. Thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1996), 10-16.

[12] Claiborne County is on the western border of Mississippi, just north of Jefferson County. The nearest town to Anchuca plantation was Port Gibson.

[13] Campbell, 47.

[14] *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi*, 310.

[15] Campbell, 48.

nearly 250 slaves (some of which were co-owned by his eldest son and nephew). Altogether, Mr. Archer owned up to 520 slaves.[16]

Richard Archer was by no means the typical slaveholder. He was clearly a member of the planter aristocracy - a group identified by Kenneth Stampp as less than three thousand planters in the entire South who owned over one hundred slaves.[17] Archer's slaveholdings may not seem quite as extraordinary though, if compared only to planters in Mississippi and particularly those in the cotton-producing region around Natchez. The median size of slaveholdings on the cotton plantations of Mississippi was fifty-five, while in the Natchez District alone, seventy to eighty percent of bondpersons lived on plantations of fifty or more slaves.[18]

Richard Archer claimed a stake in the rich land of the Mississippi Delta region early in his life and found immense success after the cotton revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He organized his plantations into what sociologist Thomas J. Durant defined as an "organized social system" with the primary goal of economic gain.[19] Plantation slavery, particularly in the case of Archer and his five large estates, was very much a business. This was the environment into which he brought his young bride and within which she carved out an existence for herself.

The status and roles of white women on slave plantations has been discussed at great length. The historiography of antebellum southern women is united on one central point: that the plantation mistress was at the center of the domestic realm. Fulfilling her prescriptive duties, she held full reign over domestic concerns. This, according to most

---

[16]Ibid.

[17]Stampp, 30-31.

[18]Ollie Gary Christian, "The Social Demography of Plantation Slavery," in *Plantation Society and Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality*, eds. Thomas J. Durant, Jr. and J. David Knottnerus (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999), 153 and Davis, 166.

[19]Thomas J. Durant, Jr. and J. David Knottnerus, eds., *Plantation Society and Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999), xi and Campbell, 49.

historians, was the primary source of a white woman's power. Despite its seeming benefits, prescribed domesticity essentially placed a woman in a subordinate position to the other members of her nuclear and extended family. Women were to be helpmates and supporters, nurturers and domestic providers. They were to complement their spouses, their children, and perhaps even their slaves. Ultimately, they were to simply illuminate the lives of others. White women were compelled to fill this prescriptive position largely because of the South's stratified social order.

Patriarchy was one of the most recognizable characteristics of the slave society of the Old South. White men typically presided over their families and communities.[20] The notion of male hegemony, or female subordination, was reflected in antebellum gender prescriptions. Historians who laid the foundation for the study of women's history, such as Barbara Welter, frequently used these prescriptions as a unit of analysis. According to the tenets of "true womanhood," which promoted the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness, women were to be the willing dependents of their husbands.[21] Thus upon taking her vows, Archer conceptually became less an individual and more an appendage of her husband. More recently, historians have recognized that while gender prescriptions attempted to set the parameters of women's existence, the reality of their lives was far more complex and demanding than what was prescribed.

In *The Plantation Mistress*, historian Catherine Clinton effectively argued that after the American Revolution, northern women developed a "counterculture that undermined patriarchal oppression." With the simultaneous rise of republican motherhood and the shift from a household to a market-driven economy, New England women began to identify with a distinctly feminine, moral role that afforded them a

---

[20]Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 30.

[21]For a more detailed explanation of true womanhood, see Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976).

relative amount of social recognition and self-gratification. Their prescribed roles as moral leaders were "culturally exalted" as they became increasingly more involved in benevolent activities outside of the home.[22] Without directly challenging societal understandings of gender, northern women were able to mold a new role for themselves that had distinct public implications. Patriarchy, although still a dominant characteristic of northern society, became increasingly circumscribed as women developed their own significant positions of authority outside of the home.[23]

Southern women were typically not granted the same opportunity or latitude as northern women to extend their prescribed moral authority outside of the household, and thus, according to Clinton's interpretation, remained subject to patriarchal oppression. "Women, like slaves, were an intrinsic part of the patriarchal dream," according to historian Anne Firor Scott, "If plantation ladies did not support, sustain, and idealize the patriarch, if they did not believe in and help create the happy plantation . . . who would?"[24] Plantation mistresses like Archer were raised to be deferential to the white men in their communities and thus rarely emitted outright objections to patriarchy. Because of this, historians continue to debate the extent to which southern women were either victims or supporters of the patriarchal system that characterized their society.

Although Scott asserted that white women were typically dissatisfied with their subordinate place in life, she found little evidence of how they confronted or sought to change it and thus determined they lacked power. "Unhappiness," wrote Scott, "centered on women's lack of control over . . . the inferior status which kept them so powerless."[25] Similarly, Catherine Clinton pointed out that once the South put itself on the defense

---

[22]Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress,* 10-11.

[23]For detailed information on women's benevolent activities and organizations in the nineteenth century see chapter one of Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

[24]Anne Firor Scott, "Women's Perspective on the Patriarchy in the 1850's," *The Journal of American History* 61, no. 1 (1974): 53.

[25]Scott, "Women's Perspective on the Patriarchy in the 1850's," 55.

against northern abolitionists after 1830, southern women became even more powerless than before. "The threat of antislavery," according to Clinton, "locked plantation mistresses even more tightly into positions designated and guarded by planter patriarchs."[26] Although they were discontented, Clinton argued they had few, if any, means of attacking patriarchy. One of the primary reasons for this was their lack of legal identity. When a woman attempted to use the justice system to challenge patriarchal authority or abuse, her husband's power was most often reaffirmed.

In her commanding work, *Within the Plantation Household*, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese challenged Clinton and Scott's arguments by asserting that most southern white women were anything but discontented with their lot in life. In fact, they saw the domination of white males over their lives as a natural phenomenon. Although some did express displeasure from time to time, the majority of slaveholding women "never figured as passive victims of male dominance." They recognized that despite the limitations that were imposed on them by way of patriarchy, they profited from being members of the ruling class and rarely sought to oppose its defining characteristics.[27] More recently, historian Marli Weiner addressed this issue in her book, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80*. Weiner determined, much like Fox-Genovese, that white women supported what they perceived to be the legitimacy of patriarchy, particularly in regard to slavery. Weiner concluded that although some white women did question certain aspects of the patriarchal society in which they lived, ultimately they voiced little opposition as they compared their position to that of their slaves.[28]

Historian Laura Edwards offered a different interpretation of women's resistance to patriarchal authority in her 1999 article, "Law, Domestic Violence, and the Limits of

---

[26]Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 14.
[27]Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 44.
[28]Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves.*

Patriarchal Authority in the Antebellum South," by suggesting that white men were often subject to the women, and even the slaves, in their families and communities.[29] Edwards argued that white women were able to check their husband's authority through various measures including physical violence, social networks, and the justice system. "At times," wrote Edwards, "these factors converged to prevent white men from exercising authority and to allow wives and slaves to exploit their social resources in order to limit the authority of their husbands and masters."[30]

My own interpretation falls in line with Edwards.' Despite the fact that plantation mistresses were members of a carefully structured patriarchal society and although they may not have developed a "counterculture" to balance it like their northern sisters, they did establish and assert a significant amount of authority within their families and communities that stretched beyond the domestic realm. The prescriptive image of patriarchy did not "accurately depict the whole reality."[31] Archer's married life, for example, although clearly patriarchal, was also matrifocal.

As evidenced by her correspondence with her husband, Archer had a far more authoritative position in her marriage than that of being merely a dependent of her husband. Indeed, an examination of her marital correspondence reveals one side of an understated, yet apparent power struggle between two individuals. Although Archer did not blatantly confront patriarchy, she did challenge it and over time found a way to regulate it. Her acceptance of her husband's ultimate authority was balanced by a solid self-acknowledgment of her own power.

Although authoritative historians of southern women have acknowledged women's significant contributions to their families and communities, their interpretations of the plantation mistress' experience ultimately place her in an ancillary position to her

---

[29]Laura Edwards, "Law, Domestic Violence, and the Limits of Patriarchal Authority in the Antebellum South," *The Journal of Southern History* 65, no. 4 (1999), 770.
[30]Ibid., 741.
[31]Scott, "Women's Perspective on the Patriarchy in the 1850's," 63.

husband, children, and slaves, and thus restrict her agency in her own life and the lives of others. It is my argument that the southern woman was in many respects the central figure on the plantation and thus did not simply complement the other residents of her community, but rather helped determine the nature and direction of their existence. Her community was defined in great part by its relationship to her. Archer's experience suggests that a white woman's influence and authority could and did extend beyond the household. Both her isolation, as well as the fulfillment of her duties and prescribed gender roles on the plantation, held her community together and provided her with vital authority over those with whom she came into contact.

In Chapter Two I establish Archer's centrality in her community by examining her various roles and responsibilities on the plantation. As the plantation manager in her husband's recurring absence, Archer had an active hand in the productive aspects of her community. She supervised the production of crops, the labor of slaves in the off season, and even the activities and conduct of overseers. Archer was an indispensable component of this successful business.

Her more traditional reproductive labors, such as providing medical care, clothing, and food for her slaves, also had a tremendous effect on the plantation's productive capabilities. The plantation's productivity ultimately relied upon the labor of slaves, whom it was Archer's responsibility to care for. Archer's labors, both productive and reproductive, necessarily placed her in a vital position within her community for she not only watched over the plantation's production, but also attempted to maintain the physical well-being of those upon whom such productivity depended.

In Chapter Three I explore the significance of Archer's prescribed role as a counselor or advisor. Much of what occurred on the plantation and in the lives of her family members was touched by her influence in some way or another. Her children

frequently relied on her personal and educational guidance while they were away at school. By encouraging her children to practice proper decorum, to develop good study habits, and to associate only with respectable people, Archer demonstrated her agency in the maintenance of her family's genteel public image. By reminding them of their duty to their family, Archer also asserted a great deal of authority over the direction her children's lives were headed.

Archer had more subtle, but profound influence on the members of her family and community through the moral guidance she offered her husband. In this respect she had a significant impact on the lives of her slaves. By discouraging excessive punishment and the separation of families, Archer asserted her authority as a partner in the plantation by intervening on her slaves' behalf.

It will be demonstrated that Archer's centrality and subsequent authority were a result of her isolation and restricted mobility. Her slaves, her employees, and her family members knew they could rely on her for many of their needs, as she was the only authoritative permanent resident on the plantation. After examining the positive products of Archer's centrality in the first half of this thesis, Chapter Four examines the negative consequences of the permanent position she filled in her community. Archer accepted her responsibilities as a wife, mother, and plantation mistress, and as a result established an authoritative position for herself. However, she did so only at a significant cost to her physical and emotional well-being. Archer was continually plagued by loneliness, illness, and depression. While she sought to maintain and better the lives of those around her, she struggled to find joy and peace in her own life.

Archer's experience reflects what was essentially a matrifocal community. Her husband, children, and slaves depended on her personal, educational, and moral guidance, her fulfillment of reproductive and productive duties, and her isolation, to sustain their community. She was in many respects the central figure on the plantation and provided

stability and reassurance to both those who had the leisure to leave as well as those who were forced to remain. There may have been a strong patriarchal figure at the head of the Archer family, but, because of her authority as a prescribed moral leader, as well as her static position and management on the plantation, it was arguably the "subsidiary" female figure in the center that held the most sway. Archer accepted her position within her community and took advantage of the authority it provided her. Her experience invites a new interpretation of what it meant to be a plantation mistress in the Old South.

The primary source for this analysis is an extensive collection of letters written by Ann Barnes Archer to her husband and children.[32] Although she continued to correspond with family members up through the end of Reconstruction, I focus only on her antebellum correspondence covering the years 1834-1860, as well as two letters written during the Civil War. Altogether there are ninety-seven letters averaging five to six pages each. The letters are problematic as a source both because of the inconsistency of when they were written and/or preserved, as well as the fact that personal correspondence typically does not demonstrate the freedom of thought or expression found in private diaries. They are also problematic when trying to determine change over time, for nearly eighty percent of the letters were written between 1854 and 1858.

The earliest of Archer's preserved letters was written in 1834. Archer was sixteen years old and newly married. By the time she became a conspicuous letter writer in 1854, she was thirty-six, had been married for twenty years, was pregnant fifteen times, and had eight living children. This span of twenty years was undoubtedly a time of dramatic change in Archer's life, but because many of the letters she wrote during this period were not preserved, one can only speculate about the changes she endured. For substantial evidence of personal development, one must look to Archer's letters from the

---

[32]Ann Barnes Archer Papers, Richard Thompson Archer Papers, Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin, Box 2E649.

mid to late 1850's.

Since Archer had already been a wife, mother, and plantation mistress for twenty years, she presumably entered a stable period in her life by 1854. She was now an old hand at marriage, childrearing, and plantation management. Yet Archer experienced at least two significant changes during the four years when most of her preserved letters were written. There was a clear shift both in her relationship with her husband and in her performance as plantation manager that were direct results of greater self-confidence and assertiveness.

Archer became increasingly more confident in her managerial capabilities over time. Her husband traveled an extraordinary amount during this period which meant that she was often in charge of the plantation. She demonstrated far more hesitancy when directing business affairs in her early letters than she did in her later correspondence. As she became more comfortable with her duties and her capabilities, Archer felt less inclined to explain her actions to her husband and was far more willing to act of her own volition. She recognized that she was a competent manager and whether she was firing an overseer or purchasing additional supplies for her slaves, Archer confidently took business matters into her own hands.

Archer's increasing assertiveness led to another significant change which she experienced in the middle of her life. As she grew disenchanted with her isolation, she began to make demands on her family who she felt was neglecting her. A new side of Archer emerged as she told her family how she expected to be treated. It does not appear, however, that her demands were met to her satisfaction. Archer's marriage, for example, apparently become strained over this relatively short period of time. The affectionate tone with which she wrote to her husband in earlier letters disappeared by the end of the decade. She began to write to him out of necessity rather than affection. While reminding him of all she did for his happiness and health, Archer chided her

husband for neglecting to fulfill his responsibilities to her. When she began to recognize the significant contribution she made to the lives of her family members as well as their apparent lack of appreciation, Archer voiced her complaints and demanded their attention.

Despite the fact that the majority of Archer's preserved letters were written during a relatively short period of time, they cover an extensive set of important matters from which change is perceptible. Archer was consistent both in the manner in which she wrote as well as in the issues she addressed. Because of her consistency, one can see how her perceptions and attitudes changed and developed as years passed.

A few of the letters are faded and have entire sections missing, but for the most part they are legible and in good condition. In quoting Archer, I have preserved her spelling as well as her punctuation or lack thereof. Where there is a double space between words, Archer neglected to include any punctuation marks.

CHAPTER II

THE PRODUCTIVE AND REPRODUCTIVE DUTIES OF A PLANTATION MISTRESS

Ann Barnes Archer's centrality in her community was most evident in the fulfillment of her duties as plantation mistress. In this capacity, Archer filled a pivotal role by taking on responsibilities that were both prescriptively "feminine" or reproductive as well as prescriptively "masculine" or productive.[1] The defining element of her labor was the nearly 300 slaves who lived in her community of Anchuca and Pine Woods plantations.[2] Her duties, although not nearly as physically taxing as those of her slaves, were both mentally and emotionally exhausting. Much of her community's stability, maintenance, and financial success was dependent upon the work she performed on the plantation.

This chapter illustrates Archer's centrality and subsequent authority by examining the significance of her labors as a plantation mistress in relation to her slaves, her overseers, and the plantation's productivity. Through an examination of both her productive contribution to the plantation, primarily through her role as plantation manager, as well as her reproductive contribution as demonstrated in her roles as primary care-giver and provider, we shall see that Archer was a necessary and effective component of a successful Mississippi slave operation.

Anchuca and its sister plantations are exceptional examples of historian Elizabeth

---

[1]I define productive labor as that necessary to earn an income or make a financial profit, and reproductive labor as that necessary to support and sustain one's family, such as providing food and clothing for home consumption. See Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina (*Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

[2]Although Archer refers to the estates on Honey Island, most of the slaves whom she identifies in her correspondence appear to have lived at either Anchuca or Pine Woods.

Fox-Genovese's theoretical dilemma of the southern household as a home versus a productive unit. She argued that as production moved outside of the home and primarily into the hands of the male members of the population in the antebellum North, the household took on a determinedly "feminine" or reproductive nature. In the South, however, a steady emphasis was put on the household as both a productive and reproductive unit.[3] As secondary heads of household and stationary members of their communities, plantation mistresses, such as Archer, had significant roles to play in both productive and reproductive work. Archer's activities as plantation mistress were central to the efficiency of the business side of the plantation as well as the physical, if not emotional, well being of her slaves whom she saw as both laborers as well as members of her extended family. Her various duties provided her with unmistakable authority and frequently placed her in a focal position on the plantation.

Productive Responsibilities

Although there has been a historiographical debate about southern women's perceptions of the morality of slavery, most historians agree that, generally speaking, elite slaveholding women recognized that their own status and wealth was dependent upon the subordination and labor of slaves, and thus they rarely spoke out or acted against it. Even though some slaveholding women may have had moral qualms about the institution of slavery, the majority were compelled, simply by the nature of their environment and the duties they were assigned, to associate slaves with economic value.[4] In many cases they were required to take an active role in the productive, or economic aspects of the plantation. A primary reason for this was the recurring absence of the male head of household.

Historian Kirsten Wood referred to this occurrence as "grass widowhood." This term is coined from that of grass widow which Wood defined as a "woman whose

---

[3]Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 39.
[4]Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 185.

husband is temporarily absent."[5] This was a common occurrence among wealthy antebellum planter families. Richard Archer regularly left his home at Anchuca either to see to the management of his plantations on Honey Island in Holmes County or to pursue business ventures in other states including Louisiana, Virginia, Maryland, Texas, and Pennsylvania. Roughly one-third of the letters written by Ann Archer were sent to her husband. The tone of those letters suggest that in her mind, his absence was perpetual. This is significant, for when her husband was away Archer was essentially, if not officially, in charge of the plantation. She was, in the words of Fox-Genovese, "Massa's helpmeet and ruling lady."[6]

In addition to her traditional, reproductive duties, which will be discussed in detail later, Archer carefully watched over the economic affairs of the plantation and reported regularly to her husband. "I write once a week to let you hear how the children are," wrote Archer in October of 1856, "and to know how the work on the two plantations gets along."[7] Historian Catherine Clinton argued that without the temporary supervision of plantation mistresses, many southern plantations would have encountered substantial misfortune. "Men," according to Clinton, "expected and depended upon women's [managerial] capabilities."[8] Indeed, during her husband's absence, Archer was the plantation manager and made intelligent, critical decisions regarding slave labor, output, and management. This was a significant responsibility and accomplishment on a thriving Mississippi cotton plantation.

Basing his contention on the observations of nineteenth century landscape architect and writer, Frederick Law Olmsted, historian Charles Sydnor determined that southerners seemed to have believed that slaves in the old Southwest, including the state

---

[5]Wood, 16.

[6]Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 135.

[7]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, October 5, 1856, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

[8]Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 31.

of Mississippi, worked harder than elsewhere. " 'They [the slaves] are constantly and steadily driven up to their work," wrote Olmsted, "and the stupid, plodding, machine-like manner in which they labor, is painful to witness.'"[9] Mississippi planters were among the dominant producers of cotton in the American South. Because of high economic expectations, slaves were driven to work continuously. Mississippi planters expected each slave, on average, to pick 100-150 pounds of cotton per day.[10] Plantation mistresses, such as Archer, were fully aware of these economic demands and made a point of informing their husbands of agricultural production and slave activity while they were away.

Archer's letters were filled with concise and competent reports of the production of cotton and household rations, such as corn and peas, as well as reports of slave labor in the off season. "All are well now," wrote Archer in June of 1850, "the crop of cotton on each place all picked, finished on each place Wednesday. Women & children cleaning up 90 acres field here to sow Oats as soon as dry enough The men are splitting rails & getting pickets."[11] Archer's reports were regular and efficient. She clearly knew what information she had to provide to satisfy her husband. She kept herself informed about the slaves' activities and was well aware of the factors required to maintain a productive economic unit.

While her husband was away, Archer kept a keen eye out for potential disasters and mishaps that might have reduced the profitability of the plantation. As would any seasoned, acute planter, she looked beyond the present moment to prepare for the future. For example, when a slave approached Archer with news that many others were suffering from severe colds as a result of inadequate shoes, she quickly assessed the probable consequences of the situation and appealed to her eldest son's economic senses. Archer

---

[9]Quoted in Charles Sackett Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, 2nd ed. (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1965), 13.

[10]Ibid., 15.

[11]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, June 13, 1850, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

recognized that if she neglected to confront this problem the slaves would likely become more ill which would not only require them to stop working, but might also require the undesired expense of a doctor's visit. "I think it will be cheaper to buy shoes," wrote Archer, "by which we will save suffering for the negroes, also much loss of time, & perhaps a physicians bill."[12] On more than one occasion Archer was faced with a similar dilemma and often took the responsibility upon herself to remedy the situation, either by purchasing supplies herself or by directing others to do so.

Archer's correspondence suggests that she was competent enough in agricultural matters and in management to watch over her husband's business affairs while he was away. She knew what was going on in the fields around her house and frequently made informed reports to her husband, and occasionally her eldest son and nephew, about plantation activities. When not actively seeking the information herself, Archer most likely received reports about the plantation's productivity from either the slaves themselves, or more likely than not, from the overseers. In one letter she told Mr. Archer that she would copy the overseers' statements from each place when they were sent to her.[13] This message suggests that the overseers on Anchuca and Pine Woods plantations were responsible to Archer when her husband was away. Or perhaps they were simply directed by the "master" of the plantation to send reports to his wife with the understanding that they would be forwarded to him. Either way, Archer's relationship with her various overseers suggests that she had more direct control over them than one might expect.

The duties of an overseer were manifold. Their primary responsibilities were to wake the slaves and drive them to the field, to supervise their work in order to prevent laziness or bad behavior, to keep records of daily activities, to maintain discipline, and to

---

[12]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, January 27, 1857, Ibid.
[13]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, October 5, 1856, Ibid.

ensure the high quality and quantity of crops.[14] In the eyes of the primary head of household, usually a male planter, the latter of these duties was arguably the most important. Consequently, when the foremost goal of the overseer was to ensure a large crop, he had a greater incentive to over-work the slaves. Sensible planters knew that excessive work, when inflicted continuously, was not conducive to high production and profit, so many planters encouraged their overseers to invoke reason when directing slave labor. Mr. Archer encouraged this type of management from his overseers. "I want good work done," he instructed, "but no overworking either negroes or teams."[15]

When in residence at his plantation, a planter was able to watch over crop production and the direction of his slaves himself. When he was traveling, various overseers undoubtedly felt they had more freedom to direct the slaves in the manner they felt was most appropriate and efficient. The productive efforts of the plantation were not, however, placed solely in the hands of the overseer when the master was away. The secondary head of household, namely the plantation mistress, regularly claimed substantial responsibility for agricultural production in these instances, as demonstrated earlier with Archer's managerial duties.

Archer did not have a great deal of respect for overseers, partly because of her apparent class bias and partly because she felt they mistreated the slaves. In regard to one overseer, Archer wrote the following to her son, Abram, "I have no respect for his principles and have nothing to do with him except in your Pa's absense [sic] to have my orders carried out by him."[16] Archer clearly saw herself in a dominant position and carefully watched over the overseers. She frequently condemned them for negligence and immoral behavior. It wasn't that she was necessarily concerned with the well-being of the slaves, but felt that they would not work as efficiently if mistreated. In January of

---

[14]John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 147.
[15]quoted in Campbell, 50.
[16]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, May 2, 1860, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

1856 she wrote to her husband expressing concern not only for the welfare of the slaves, but of the crop as well because of the poor management of the current overseer. "I have to watch Mr. Watkins management very closely to get business carried on as you wish it," wrote Archer,

> He is self conceited, self willed and hard to understand besides this very poor memory, and very little method as far as I can discover This causes the hands to work to great disadvantage and discourages them, and I very much fear there will be another bad crop this year on this place.[17]

Later that same year Archer once again struggled with an overseer and firmly declared that it was an issue within her province. This time she did not wait for instructions or advice from her husband, but took matters into her own hands. She did not hesitate to let her overseers know who was really in charge. Writing to Mr. Archer, she expressed the following:

> From all I can learn Mr. Seggett is very careless and negligent of his business and if he does not alter he may be discharged before you reach home. He should not be employed another year on any account. I shall write to him tomorrow & tell him he must be more attentive or he will find himself out of employment.[18]

Her problems did not stop there, for the next year Archer had difficulties with yet another overseer. A slave from Pine Woods informed her that besides forcing certain slaves to perform duties for which they were unfit or unaccustomed, the overseer was excessively cruel to the men and sexually violated the young women. Archer told her son how she wrote to the overseer about this matter, "without consulting your Pa."[19] Her willingness to act in the best interest of the plantation without the express consent of her husband demonstrates that Archer was well aware of her economic responsibilities and also of the extent of her control over plantation affairs. She not only threatened overseers

---

[17] Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, January 11, 1856, Ibid.

[18] Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, October 12, 1856, Ibid.

[19] Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, January 27, 1857, Ibid. It is interesting to note that Archer's censure of the overseer at Pine Woods was based on his forcing of a slave with "bad eyes" to prepare meals for the entire plantation. She only briefly mentioned the overseers' excessive whipping and raping.

with dismissal, but actually fired one on her own in 1854.[20]

Archer, like many elite southern women, recognized that her privileged position came from the labors of her slaves. She had a stake in the productive aspects of the plantation and was determined to make sure that all laborers, enslaved or employed, worked according to her husband's, if not her own standards in order to achieve the greatest profit. She intended to maintain her privilege to the best of her ability and consequently had a direct, albeit managerial hand in the productive, or business aspects of the plantation. Her active participation reassured and comforted her while her husband was away. It likely gave her a greater sense of self-worth as well, for she eventually became adept at various skills for which her upbringing had left her unprepared. It was not only her managerial duties in the absence of her husband, however, that enabled Archer to take an active role in the productive aspects of the plantation. Her reproductive labor also had a tremendous effect, of which she was well aware, on the economic output of her husband's estates.

Reproductive Responsibilities

The typical plantation mistress recognized that she had two distinct families for which she was responsible - her nuclear white family and her extended "black family". Performing reproductive labor, or that which helped to support and sustain one's family, was one of the primary ways in which plantation mistresses fulfilled their familial responsibilities and established themselves as central figures in their communities. One of Archer's principal duties was to sustain the health of her husband's slaves by ensuring they were well cared for. Although she felt directly responsible for both her white and black "families," it was through her role as care giver and provider for her slaves that her reproductive labors were most evident.

---

[20]Ann Barnes Archer to Edward Archer, October 8, 1854, Ibid. Archer wrote to her nephew, Edward, of how she had to "turn Mr. Early off" because of his poor behavior. She went on to say that the new overseer was doing a fine job.

In regard to her "black family", the reproductive labor of a plantation mistress was often driven by economic motivations. Archer was well aware that to ensure the greatest financial profit, she needed healthy slaves. Thus the production and distribution of food, clothing, and medical care were the primary facets of her reproductive labor. When a plantation mistress provided her slaves with these things, she provided her husband with a relative amount of assurance in the stability of his labor force.

It is important to note that, just as when overseeing the productive aspects of the plantation, the mistresses' reproductive labors for her "black family" were usually managerial in nature. She directed bondpersons, employees, and her family on how to best care for her husband's human property. Although it seems that Archer may have occasionally had a direct hand in procuring, producing, and distributing medicine, the actual production of goods and supplies was typically the responsibility of the slaves themselves. In *A Hard Fight For We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina*, historian Leslie Schwalm determined that reproductive labor of this nature was performed almost entirely by female slaves. Such responsibilities were carried out only after daily chores, including laboring in the field or the "big house," and consequently went unnoticed, or at least unmentioned by planters and plantation mistresses.[21] Indeed, there is little mention in Archer's correspondence of the reproductive labors slaves took upon themselves. Archer's focus was almost entirely on her own duties, which were typically of an administrative nature, requiring her to oversee the provision of medical care, material goods, and food.

A daily reality on southern plantations was the sickness of slaves. Deficient diets, clothing, and quarters contributed to their recurring ailments. Although planters, overseers, and the slaves themselves frequently dealt with the treatment of sickness and disease, it was usually the duty of the plantation mistress to look after the physical

---

[21]Schwalm, 57-58.

condition of enslaved persons. This was an enormous responsibility on a large plantation where slaves were frequently ill. The most common of slaves' ailments were chills, colds, and intestinal diseases.[22] Archer regularly informed her husband of illnesses in the slave quarters, most of which she referred to as cases of "chill and fever" or those caused by worms. Occasionally she also mentioned more severe illnesses such as cholera, mumps, and yellow fever.

Archer received routine updates from the overseers of their five plantations regarding the health of the slaves on each. She made it clear to her husband that she was tending to those within her vicinity on a regular basis. "There have been many cases of chill & fever among the negroes since you left, that are tedious and apt to return," wrote Ann in October of 1856, ". . . I have consequently had more trouble and care about the sick this year, than I have had for many years, and I feel besides this they must suffer much for want of good & more intelligent nurses.[23] Archer was aware of her own limits as a nurse, as well as those of the slaves who she employed to directly care for the sick on a regular basis. The exact nature of Archer's managerial duties within the plantation's sickrooms is unclear, but whatever the extent of her duties, she felt they were tremendous.

One reason for this was the frequency with which slaves became ill. Another more pressing cause for Archer's frustration was her self-proclaimed lack of expertise in medical treatments as reflected in the above passage. Although she had enslaved nurses who actually tended to the sick, one senses Archer's awareness of the fact that she herself did not have the knowledge or training to better prepare those who directly cared for the slaves. Southerner Fanny Kemble experienced a similar situation on a large plantation in Georgia. She was severely distressed at the sight of her afflicted bondpersons, for she knew she was unable to help them. Upon witnessing a slave woman writhe with

---

[22]Sydnor, 48.

[23]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, October 5, 1856, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

convulsions, Kemble wrote, "How much I wished that, instead of music, and dancing, and such stuff, I had learned something of the human body, that I might have known how to assist this poor creature, and to direct her ignorant and helpless nurses."[24] Archer's self-doubt reflects that of Kemble. When faced with slave illnesses every day, it is no wonder that she was troubled by her insufficient nursing capabilities.[25]

Aware of her limits, as well as those of her slaves, Archer called on a trained physician when necessary. Oftentimes this was a last resort, for according to Mr. Archer, physicians were too expensive to employ on a regular basis. In fact, he instructed his wife to avoid calling on one unless an urgent case arose. Archer tried to follow her husband's instructions, but when she was in a position of authority and the slaves' physical well-being was put in her hands, she called in a doctor when she felt necessary despite the costs. "The negroes were so sick the Sunday after your Pa left home," Archer wrote to Abram, "Mr. Seggett [the overseer] sent Joe down here to let me know a physician was needed. I hesitated what to do, yet dare not do what I wished, and thought it best and sent for Dr. Wharton . . ."[26] In this instance, what Archer "wished" was to call on their usual doctor, but her husband informed her she was not to call on him, for he charged too much for his services. Knowing she needed to employ a physician to prevent her slaves and the plantation from suffering, Archer compromised and called on a doctor who she heard did not prescribe as much costly medicine.

Archer was aware of the high cost of a trained physician's care and ultimately sought to avoid employing their assistance through preventive measures. The most practical way to prevent sickness among slaves was through the provision of adequate

---

[24]Fanny Kemble, *Fanny Kemble's Journals*, ed. Catherine Clinton (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 109.

[25]Despite her shortcomings, Archer was familiar with certain prescribed drugs and on at least one occasion was called upon by a neighbor for assistance in treating a sick child. See Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, June 14, 1858 and H.A. McCull to Ann Barnes Archer, July 27, 1842, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

[26]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, April 23, 1856, Ibid.

supplies and sustenance. The clothes and shoes given to slaves were typically not of high quality, which contributed a great deal to their sickness and general discomfort. Archer was well aware of this and encouraged her husband to do something about their miserable situation, if not for the sake of the slaves, then for the sake of the plantation and the family's finances. In her mind, healthy slaves were more efficient slaves. When the slaves suffered from inadequate footwear in 1856, Archer scolded her husband by saying, "*I* would give them shoes, to give a second pair, but it is not *your* habit." Rather than follow his financially motivated instructions to leave the situation alone, Archer felt she knew what was best and seven days later purchased new shoes for the slaves.[27]

A year later Archer faced a similar situation and complained to her son about her husband's response when she approached him about purchasing additional footwear. He told her that he could only afford what he already provided and that if she wanted to give everyone two pairs of shoes, he would have to sell some or all of the slaves.[28] This was unacceptable to Archer, therefore when her husband was away and when she had the wherewithal to do so, she purchased additional supplies for their bondpersons.

Over time the slaves began to recognize that Archer was the person to turn to when they were in need of something. "Pad brought his shoes up to show me how bad they were," Archer told her son, "[and] said 'Mistress these shoes looked as if they were made before I was born." Archer accused her husband of buying "very bad" shoes and informed her son that she had already purchased new ones for the slaves on Honey Island and would buy more for those at Anchuca before Mr. Archer came home. "Your Pa may not approve of it when he returns," wrote Archer.[29] If her slaves needed shoes, she knew that she would have to provide them herself.

Just as with the purchasing of shoes, Archer occasionally went against her

---

[27]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, January 15, 1856, Ibid. The italics are mine.
[28]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, January 27, 1857, Ibid.
[29]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, November 12, 1854, Ibid.

husband's instructions when ordering and dispersing food. A prime example of this occurred in November of 1847 when the meat allocated for the slaves ran out. Archer wrote a telling letter, grounded in biblical references, informing him not only of her decision to purchase additional meat, but also of the explicit reasons why she felt she had to do so. Although she acknowledged that her purchase would not meet his approval, she declared that she could not eat in peace knowing that her slaves did not have sufficient food. "I have always thought it criminal," wrote Archer, "when they have to work & need it more than I do who can work or not as I choose." She continued to plead her case to her husband by telling him that she acted conscientiously, as she did in all matters, in her decision to purchase additional meat. "When does it profit us if we gain the whole world & lose our own soul?," asked Archer. She recognized that her slaves provided her with the means to her plentiful lifestyle and thus she would accord each with due attention and support.[30]

It is important to note that this letter was written in 1847. Ten years later when Archer encountered similar situations where slaves' supplies were lacking in quantity and quality, she brought them to her husband's attention, but frequently did what she felt was best without offering an explanation. As she became more comfortable with her responsibilities and authority on the plantation, she became less inclined to explain herself in such detail to her husband.

Over time Archer declared herself to be the most competent purveyor of goods for her bondpersons. She regularly gave instructions to her husband and children about the appropriate distribution of slaves' food and supplies. "I hope you have looked well into the negroes supply of clothing & bedding," Archer wrote to her husband, "[and] inquired if they were well treated & happy & seen every negro in their houses."[31] She knew precisely what every slave required, at least according to her standards, based on age, sex,

---

[30]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, November 5, 1847, Ibid.
[31]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, January 31, 1853, Ibid.

marital status, and health. At one point she instructed her husband to make sure that "every grown hand or nearly so had their blanket, and one between every two children." She went on to say that parents who had their first baby needed an extra blanket, as they often did not have a spare. When there was an odd child in a family, she threw in an additional quilt every three or four years.[32]

Archer frequently made a distinction between what she felt was an appropriate allotment of food and supplies per person and what her husband felt was appropriate. After Abram took over one of the plantations on Honey Island, Archer made it quite clear that his father did not distribute an adequate amount of food to each slave. She informed her son that he had best follow her instructions when ordering supplies. "Your Pa wishes some supplies sent up for the sick negroes on each place," wrote Archer, "Sugar, Coffee, & Rice are all he has ever sent up. I think there should be a good barrel of Flour on each place, [and] 2 or 3 lbs of Black Tea on each . . ."[33] Archer clearly felt that she knew what was best for the slaves and when Mr. Archer failed to provide an adequate amount of goods, she took it upon herself to do so.

Archer's slaves, although certainly self-sufficient in many respects, relied on her to ensure they received their proper allotment of food, supplies, and adequate medical care. Archer realized that her primary responsibility in regard to the efficiency of the plantation was to keep the slaves in good physical condition. In doing so, she not only elevated production prospects through the assurance of relatively healthy slaves, but also placed herself in a central position on the plantation. Her reproductive efforts had a tremendous effect on the physical condition of her enslaved laborers, whose health, or lack thereof, certainly affected the plantation's productive capabilities. Healthy slaves, at least theoretically, were the most efficient workers and it was Archer's duty to maintain their physical well-being. Because the success of the plantation ultimately rested on the

---

[32]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, March 16, 1856, Ibid.
[33]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, February 1, 1858, Ibid.

efforts of her bondpersons, Archer's responsibility to them placed her in a vital position in her community.

Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese persuasively argued in *Within the Plantation Household* that in the eyes of slaves, the plantation mistress was not the master. As seen in her antebellum correspondence, Archer demonstrated that although she was in fact not the master, she was an authority figure on the plantation, if not because of her own persistence, then simply because of her position as resident manager. In fact, on more than one occasion various slaves appealed to her with their complaints, such as that of poor shoes, for they knew that she had the industry and authority to take care of the situation.

This was not an unusual occurrence on southern plantations. Fanny Kemble's slaves responded to her authority in a similar fashion. Upon her arrival at the plantation on St. Simons Island in Georgia, slaves immediately rushed to her side to tell her of their woes. Kemble's bondpersons, who she frequently referred to as her "petitioners," acted as if she were the only one who could help them. For example, when calling on her assistance to reduce some of their duties, the slaves told her that "they had already begged 'massa,' and he had refused, and they thought, perhaps, if 'missis' begged 'massa' for them, he would lighten their task."[34] Kemble's husband, Pierce Butler, had little patience for his slaves' entreaties and eventually refused to hear any that came through his wife. Archer may have feared a similar reaction from her husband. To avoid this, she often addressed a particular problem without Mr. Archer's knowledge or approval. Many of the Archer slaves recognized this and rightly used it to their advantage.

That is not to say that all the slaves who resided on Anchuca and Pine Woods

---

[34]Kemble, 142.

recognized Archer's agency in plantation matters. Gender prescriptions concerning white female inferiority quite possibly influenced the opinions of enslaved blacks. Archer did not make any reference, however, to slaves who saw her as an inferior master. She was far more conscious of overseers who failed to respect or acknowledge her position of authority.

More than once, Archer informed her husband that their overseers were mindful of her authority and attended to her wishes. In fact, it seems that most of the overseers accepted Archer's administrative position while her husband was away. In her earlier years as a plantation mistress, however, Archer occasionally felt it was necessary to fall back on her husband's influence. She had not yet come into her own as manager of the plantation and felt that her authority was not as commanding as that of her husband. For example, in October of 1847 she wrote to Mr. Archer with great frustration to ask that he remind their overseer, Mr. Tindall, not to punish the slaves so severely. Apparently Archer feared that Tindall might inflict excessive punishment upon the slaves, so she asked her husband to leave written directions for him before he left. Unfortunately Tindall did not heed his instructions. He stripped a woman of all her clothes and whipped her until there were deeps cuts down her back. "I wrote to him saying I was fully authorized to say you would not allow such punishment," wrote Archer. She informed Mr. Archer that if Tindall would not listen to her, she would call on the assistance of a male cousin.[35]

This letter is interesting for a number of reasons. First, Archer had a sense that this sort of discipline might occur before her husband left, so she made sure something was done about it. She felt that she had the authority to address such matters, even when her husband was home. Second, somewhat surprising based on her actions later in life, Archer asserted her own authority only with explicit reference to that of her husband. As

---

[35]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, October 6, 1847, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

mentioned earlier in the chapter, seven years after this event Archer dismissed an overseer on her own. And third, Archer clearly recognized the limits of her power when dealing with a situation not prescribed for women, for she was ready to call on the assistance of another white male if necessary.

Despite these latter two instances of seeming insecurity, it is important to note that Archer not only recognized the unjustness of the violence that was occurring on the plantation, but also that she was perhaps the only person at the time in a position to do something about it. Consequently, she took the steps that she was most comfortable with in order to address the problem. Even though she ultimately relied on the authority of others in this case, she took an important step in establishing her own power as the mistress or manager of the plantation. Over time, Archer became more comfortable exercising her authority with or without her husband's support. One reason for this was because of the regular fulfillment of her responsibilities as manager which were central to the running of the plantation.

Archer's duties as a plantation mistress were manifold and centered around her slaves and their labors. Her productive duties as manager in her husband's absence caused her to act in the best interest of the plantation and its primary laborers. Economic prosperity was necessarily at the forefront of her concerns at such times. Cotton production, and subsequently slavery, were business matters with the primary goal of making a profit. Archer was fully aware of what it took to run a successful operation and did what she had to ensure quality production, oftentimes claiming authority not necessarily sanctioned by her husband. This was evident in her continual censure and occasional dismissal of negligent or cruel overseers. Archer recognized that if the plantation was to be profitable, the slaves had to be relatively well-treated.

Archer's concern for the well-being of the slaves was most evident in the fulfillment of her prescribed reproductive duties. As primary care giver and provider,

Archer had it within her power to ensure that her bondpersons were comfortable, well-nourished, and healthy. Her letters were filled with pleas to her husband to purchase more supplies for the slaves. Although her inducement for such requests was essentially based on economics, over time Archer developed a tie to her slaves that caused her to act out of concern for their personal welfare as well. Regardless of her motivation, however, Archer's care for the slaves helped to maintain the stability and arguably the efficiency of the plantation. The nature of her work, both productive and reproductive, defined her role as indispensable and thus placed her in a central and authoritative position in her community. Archer's commanding status, however, was defined not only by her managerial role on the plantation, but by the far-reaching guidance with which she provided her family as well.

CHAPTER III

ESTABLISHING CENTRALITY THROUGH PERSONAL, EDUCATIONAL, AND MORAL GUIDANCE

The responsibilities of plantation mistresses "began with setting a tone for husband, children, and servants."[1] Ann Barnes Archer set this tone through her personal, educational, and moral guidance. As wife, mother, and plantation mistress, Archer seemingly knew better than anyone else what was best for those around her. All called, directly and indirectly, on her wisdom, moral authority, and subsequent instruction on a regular basis - her children as they struggled through school, her husband as he traveled around the country, and even her slaves when faced with distressing situations. As a personal, educational, and moral advisor, Archer was a paramount and focal figure in her community. By examining her fulfillment of these three roles, this chapter establishes Archer's centrality and elucidates the conventional, yet significant influence she had as a mentor to her daughters, her son, and her nephew, as well as the profound impact her moral authority had on her husband and consequently the lives of her slaves.

According to her biographer, antebellum southerner Sarah Gayle felt that as a mother she was deserving of admiration and emulation. She believed that she provided a truly significant service to her children in the capacity of mother and and mentor.[2] Archer Archer felt the same way. On one occasion she told her son that he should be

---

[1]Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 115.

[2]Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South: Sarah Gayle and Her Family," in *In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South*, ed. Carol Bleser (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 22-23.

thankful he had an "anxious Mother" to point out his shortcomings and to encourage his strengths.[3] She informed him of her own want of such a blessing as a child by reminding him of the untimely death of her mother. Archer was determined not to let her children grow up without her maternal guidance. Whether at home or away, the Archer children were never far from the guiding hand of their mother.

Roughly seventy percent of Archer's antebellum correspondence was sent to three of her nine children and her nephew.[4] Abram, the Archer's eldest son, enrolled with his cousin Edward at the University of Virginia in 1854. They were both around eighteen years old at the time. Archer's two oldest daughters both attended northern schools beginning in 1856. Mary was eighteen years old and Ann Maria was fifteen when they began receiving regular correspondence from their mother. Archer's letters were not only filled with news from home and affectionate sentiments, but guidance on nearly every issue from removing stains to falling in love. Archer saw her correspondence to her children and nephew as an opportunity to instruct them on how to lead happy, respectable, and full lives.

Archer's advice to her boys resembled that with which she provided her daughters, but was clearly intended for different purposes. She recognized that Abram and Edward were headed in different directions and would encounter different obstacles in life than her daughters. Her correspondence to the boys reinforced Archer's authority in her community by demonstrating that her range of influence extended beyond the domestic realm, for she was advising two people who were preparing for public life. Archer was likely one of the primary influences on the development of these young men as she instructed them on their manners, their education, their future, and their duty. Her advice was just as influential, if not more so, on her two eldest daughters who were

---

[3]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, February, 21, 1856, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

[4]Edward Archer came to live with his aunt and uncle after his parents, Stephen and Catherine Barnes Archer, died in 1841.

learning how to best fulfill their future roles as wives, mothers, and perhaps even plantation mistresses.

Antebellum gender prescriptions deemed that the domestic sphere was the domain of women. Within this "feminine" realm, women took on substantial responsibilities as mothers, particularly in regard to their daughters. Although men were often involved in their daughters' lives, it was a woman's responsibility to guide and mentor the future wives and mothers of her society. Consequently, daughters were a direct reflection of their mothers' morality, gentility, and even intellect. Archer was well aware of this and implored her daughters to "be very polite and dignified" and to not let their "Mother be censured for any want of good manners habits or feelings."[5] Because women were the embodiment of the home, daughters were also, and perhaps more importantly, a direct reflection of the household as a whole. They not only reflected their mothers, but the rest of their family, as well as their entire community. The character and values of the Archer family and the community of Anchuca and Pine Woods plantations was oftentimes seen and understood by others through the conduct and accomplishments of the Archer daughters.

Sons, too, certainly reflected the household, community, and family, but because daughters were women and thus more "domestic," they were more closely affiliated with the gentility of the home, and thus the true character of the family. Fox-Genovese argued that family was the primary influence on a southern woman's identity.[6] Similarly, one might assert that a southern woman was the primary reflection of her family's identity. Because of this, Archer was necessarily a central figure in her family, for it was primarily her responsibility to raise respectable daughters.

Sarah Gayle, Archer's contemporary, felt that only her guiding hand would ensure

---

[5]Ann Barnes Archer to Ann Maria Archer, Fragment, 1856, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.
[6]Fox-Genovese, "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South," 16.

the "proper development" of her children's character.[7] Archer felt the same way, for as evidenced by her correspondence, she attempted to raise well-rounded, praiseworthy children by encouraging them to pursue a formal education, by refining their manners and appearance through incessant instruction, and also by offering unceasing encouragement and support. As they called on her guidance, her daughters, her son, and her nephew placed her in a pivotal position within their family and community. This provided Archer with the confidence to say, "Trust your Mother before all others with everything."[8]

Personal Guidance

Archer regularly advised her children on personal conduct, appearance, and manners. This was most apparent in her correspondence to her daughters. She continually instructed Mary and Ann Maria on self-improvement, particularly in regard to propriety. In this respect she asserted a significant amount of influence over her girls. She was quite specific in how she expected a true lady to present herself. Modesty, cleanliness, intelligence, and charm were some of the essential characteristics that Archer felt defined southern womanhood. She expressed this clearly when writing to Ann Maria about three local teachers. "I was quite pleased with Miss Warner," wrote Archer, "she is quiet, intelligent, so ladylike and neat looking. Miss Schalk is very ladylike, quiet and diffident, but intelligent. Miss Marion is jolly as ever & neat."[9] By relating detailed accounts of the appearance and, more importantly, the conduct of women who met her approbation, Archer made her daughters aware of the importance of what might initially appear to be a trivial matter.

Physical appearance was an issue of utmost significance in the world of planter ladies. As Catherine Clinton noted, "an unkempt woman displayed impiety; a spotless

---

[7]Fox-Genovese, "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South," 21-22.

[8]Ann Barnes Archer to Mary Archer, January 23, 1856, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

[9]Ann Barnes Archer to Ann Maria Archer, May 16, 1856, Ibid.

appearance equaled a spotless heart."[10] Despite this unfortunate prescription, Archer spent little time on issues of physical appearance when writing to her daughters compared to the time she spent on deportment. Other than instructing her girls to use "Magic Fluid" on their roots in order to make their hair grow long and thick, Archer's only instructions on maintaining a becoming appearance were directed at Ann Maria who was told she would have to watch herself constantly "to get as straight as [she] ought to be for health and good looks."[11] Archer was far more concerned with conduct than with beauty, for in her opinion good manners were the true sign of gentility and virtue.

Since Mary and Ann Maria were essentially the northern representatives of their family while away at school, they had to demonstrate exceptional behavior so as not to soil the reputation of their relatives. The importance of this was continually reiterated by Archer, whose responsibility it was to ensure the respectability of her daughters. The girls knew they could not escape their mother's relentless instruction on proper decorum. "In any situation you may be placed," advised Archer, "try to be amiable, affectionate, and useful . . ."[12] She wished her children to be kind, patient, and understanding of each other and all those around them. Archer placed great importance on public opinion. She hoped that good manners would ultimately counteract unattractive personal qualities in the eyes of others. "Fickleness and Self Conceit," Archer warned Ann Maria, " . . . are two of the most disagreeable traits of character a person can possess in intercourse with others, . . . such traits show a lack of principle . . . Pray God to give you the power of seeing yourself as others see you & give you a humble spirit."[13] Archer was concerned that flightiness and pride were already well developed in Ann Maria's character. This was likely one of the reasons that she continually instructed her younger daughter, more

---

[10]Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 98.

[11]Ann Barnes Archer to Ann Maria Archer, June 26, 1856 and May 16, 1856, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

[12]Ann Barnes Archer to Mary Archer, January 23, 1856, Ibid.

[13]Ann Barnes Archer to Ann Maria Archer, Fragment, 1858, Ibid.

so than her elder daughter, on deportment and respectability.

It seems that Archer had a favorite in her eldest daughter, Mary, for her letters to her tended to be far less critical and a great deal more sympathetic than those she wrote to Ann Maria. In fact, Archer never missed an opportunity to point out her younger daughter's faults. Out of the two girls, Mary was far weaker in body and spirit, and thus it could be that Archer was more straightforward with Ann Maria because she felt she could better handle the "constructive" criticism. Regardless of her rationale, however, Archer frequently pointed out various faults in Ann Maria that she felt required significant adjustment.

One of the most vexing of Ann Maria's faults, at least in Archer's opinion, had to do with her letter writing. According to her mother, she had sloppy handwriting and poor spelling, she wrote far too hurriedly and with too much levity. Mr. Archer was also aware of these imperfections in Ann Maria's correspondence, but deferred to his wife in addressing them.[14] Archer felt it was important for Ann Maria to correct such faults while still young, for she would be writing letters for the rest of her life. Correspondence was the most efficient method for individuals who were separated by great distances to keep in touch. Archer felt it was a necessity to keep friends and family informed of one's activities and well-being, if not out of affection, than at least out of obligation. She feared that others might misperceive Ann Maria's careless letters as a sign of egotism or disrespect. "We should always show we appreciate [our friends] by at least a kind message," Archer instructed her daughter, "Remember not to neglect those whom it is your first duty to cherish and love."[15] With such advice Archer helped create a family community of affection by encouraging and maintaining ties with both her immediate and her extended network of friends.

---

[14]See Ann Barnes Archer to Ann Maria Archer, December 1, 1856, Ibid. "Your Pa speaks of [your levity] whenever he reads one of your letters," wrote Archer, "and desires me to tell you to correct the habit."
[15]Ann Barnes Archer to Ann Maria Archer, Fragment, 1856 and January 12, 1857, Ibid.

Archer herself was probably the best example for Ann Maria to emulate, for unless she was too ill to write, she never neglected to correspond with those she loved. Besides her profusion of affection for her family, a primary reason that Archer maintained regular correspondence was that she acknowledged her duty to raise respectable children, and thus kept a guiding hand extended to them while they were away from home. This was particularly important in matters of personal conduct, for Archer was unable to watch over her children herself. Thus she continually offered her written advice, whether solicited or not. Such advice was not limited to her girls, but was frequently extended to her boys as well.

Drew Gilpin Faust noted in the epilogue to *In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South*, that at least two of the families studied in the anthology "baldly acknowledge[d] male children to be of paramount emotional and social importance."[16] Although daughters certainly reflected the gentility of their family, it was southern sons who entered the public arena on a regular basis and most often associated with people unfamiliar with the family. They were the most conspicuous carriers of the family name and reputation. Archer acknowledged this, but feared that her boys might fall into wicked company when they went off to school. Thus she constantly reminded them to be aware of the character of the people they associated with, for just like their sisters, they represented the Archer family while they were away. "I will feel mortified if you do not leave a <u>good</u> name <u>behind</u> you . . .", Archer wrote to her son.[17] She feared that if either Abram or Edward spent too much time with those who had loose morals or bad reputations, they might pick up their habits which would reflect poorly on their relatives.

Upon first glance one might sense that Archer had a greater concern about her

---

[16]Drew Gilpin Faust in Carol Bleser, ed., *In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 255.
[17]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, June 13, 1855, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

nephew in this regard than she did about her son. Only in one of her letters to Abram did she mention anything about keeping baneful associates, yet many of her letters to Edward mention this topic. "Keep the company of none who are vicious profane, gamblers, drinkers, or idlers," Archer instructed Edward, ". . . it is far easier to fall into bad habits than to leave them off Easier to get into bad company than to get out of it so you cannot be too careful of your associates."[18] Early the next year Archer directed her nephew once again to "keep a strict watch over your morals and manners & avoid all evil associates."[19] Then again only three months later Archer urged Edward to "try & be all we so much desire in your separation from us, (upright in every situation) Guard well your thoughts, & actions, & let no evil associates lead you astray."[20]

Perhaps Archer was more anxious about her nephew than her son, but it is more likely that she intended her letters to one or the other to be read by both. If there was a personal flaw particular to one of the boys, she made it clear that she was addressing that child. For example, on more than one occasion Archer expressed a desire for Abram to stop chewing tobacco, for in her opinion it was a dirty and unhealthy habit. She not only told Abram as much, but Edward as well, perhaps with the hope that he might influence his cousin to discontinue the habit.[21] In most instances, however, Archer's advice was directed at both Edward and Abram.

Archer was desirous for both boys to make their family proud and to succeed in every objective they pursued. Her advice was heartfelt and she intended for them to follow it by directing it at their innermost feelings. It seems that Archer felt the most effective way to ensure conscientious behavior from her boys, was to place guilt in their minds. When imploring them to keep themselves pure and upright, she reminded them of

---

[18]Ann Barnes Archer to Edward Archer, October 11, 1854, Ibid.

[19]Ann Barnes Archer to Edward Archer, January 7, 1855, Ibid.

[20]Ann Barnes Archer to Edward Archer, March 25, 1855, Ibid.

[21]See Ann Barnes Archer to Edward Archer, February 2, 1855, Ibid., and Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, April 23, 1856, Ibid.

her love for each of them. Archer was essentially telling her boys not to disappoint her. "Do not add to my sorrows," she wrote.[22] Archer urged her boys to watch their ways for *her* sake and she continually reminded them of her anxiety about the proper development of their character. She felt that the development of a solid character would allow them not only to perform their duties on earth more fully, but it would also prepare them to enter Heaven upon their death.

Ultimately, her advice to her boys on matters of decorum and character was summed up in a letter she wrote to her son in February of 1856 - "Therefore I say again watch yourselves. Shun the vicious, shun the profane, ungodly, or idle. Be kind, be polite, be obliging, be gentle, and courteous to all."[23] Archer was most impressed with people of righteous character, and thus encouraged her sons to be as virtuous as possible. She was also, however, greatly concerned with duty and continually reminded her sons of theirs to their family which was first and foremost achieved by obtaining a solid education.

Educational Guidance

"Never let pleasure lead you astray," Archer counseled her boys.[24] While they were in school she intended for them to place all their energies not only on developing good manners, but also on receiving a thorough education. Archer told Abram and Edward that to truly become men, they had to put aside inclinations toward jollity and direct their attention to their studies. She reminded them that it was she and her husband who provided them with the opportunity to pursue an education and thus they had an obligation to obtain it. "You have the means," advised Archer, "do use them."[25]

Archer felt strongly that it was necessary for her boys to learn a profession

---

[22]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, February 1, 1855, Ibid.
[23]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, February 1, 1856, Ibid.
[24]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, June 13, 1855, Ibid.
[25]Ann Barnes Archer to Edward Archer, February 22, 1856, Ibid.

besides planting. She believed that people could not always depend on their property to support themselves throughout life, and even if they could, they would be far better prepared to attend to it with an education. "I desire you both to be acquainted as far as possible with each profession," Archer told her nephew.[26] In her mind, the professions with which they should be familiar were medicine and law. She encouraged her boys "not only to have a thorough knowledge of your studies, but to have industry, and good business sense and that you feel the importance of attending first to your duty and last to pleasure."[27] The latter portion of this statement was continually stressed by Archer in numerous letters to Edward and Abram. Not only would an education ideally help prepare them to be upright and well-informed individuals, but it also prepared them to fulfill their duty to their family.

Soon after the boys reached Virginia to attend college, Mr. Archer, who was nearing sixty years of age, began to worry that he raised his family in too much extravagance. He feared that he might leave them with a significant debt upon his death. Consequently his wife began to worry about him, for she noticed he was not attending to his business as easily as he did in earlier years. "He [Mr. Archer] is getting old & losing his capacity for business," Archer informed her nephew and son.[28] She reminded them both that it was their responsibility to come home upon earning their degrees not only to assist their father and uncle in his business, but ultimately to support the rest of the family as well. "We have taken care of you from infancy and during your most helpless years," wrote Archer, "and it is your duty and our right for each one of you to love and cherish us in our feeble years, and to let us have as easy and comfortable an old age, as your efforts rightly used can make us."[29]

---

[26]Ann Barnes Archer to Edward Archer, April 4, 1855, Ibid.
[27]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, June 13, 1855, Ibid.
[28]Ann Barnes Archer to Edward Archer, April 4, 1855, Ibid.
[29]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, Fragment, 1855, Ibid.

Archer felt that the education she and her husband made possible for her boys to obtain was meant to benefit not only their children, but themselves as well. In this sense, Archer played a central role in her children's lives for she compelled them to meet their familial responsibilities and thus was a great influence on the direction their lives were headed. She acknowledged that her boys were the most likely candidates to care for the family financially once her husband died and thus encouraged them to work hard towards earning a degree which would assist them in business matters throughout life. Indeed, Abram and Edward both eventually returned to Mississippi and took over the management of two different Archer plantations. Archer's feelings about the importance of an education were not, however, restricted to Abram and Edward. She clearly felt that a quality education was a necessity for her girls as well.

Archer attended a northern school herself as a young woman, but apparently cut her instruction short. This was a decision that she regretted the rest of her life. In 1856, when Mary struggled with her health and consequently did poorly in her classes, Archer encouraged her continued enrollment in school. "I have felt the want of a finished and thorough education too painfully and frequently," wrote Archer, ". . . not to wish you to do what you are able to bear to get one."[30] She, presumably more than anyone else, was conscious not only of her academic deficiency, but also of the negative consequences of such a want. One such repercussion was an inadequate amount of certainty in herself. "I fear he is like me in one respect," wrote Archer in regard to her son, Stephen, "not sufficient confidence in his ability to succeed to do justice to himself. It is a misfortune not to have sufficient confidence in one's self . . ."[31] Archer, in an attempt to spare her daughters from such an affliction, encouraged, and perhaps even demanded, that they obtain a quality education while in their formative years.

---

[30]Ann Barnes Archer to Mary Archer, January 23, 1856, Ibid.

[31]Ibid. It is interesting to note that although Archer felt it was a "misfortune" to have a lack of self-confidence, it was "a greater one to have too much."

Archer's centrality and subsequent authority in her community, and more specifically in her family, was manifest in *her* decision to send her two eldest daughters, Mary and Ann Maria, to be educated by her former teacher, Mrs. Gardel, in Philadelphia.[32] Although she consulted with her husband on this matter, it appears that ultimately the decision was hers.[33] Upon the girls' departure for school, Archer fondly remembered her days at Mrs. Gardel's yet once again regretted the brevity of her stay. "When I think of my children being with [Mrs. Gardel] as I once was," wrote Archer, "I wish I too were young, and could enjoy her instruction again."[34] Both Mary and Ann Maria appear to have been excited about obtaining a formal education, and their mother, although greatly depressed in spirits because of their absence from home, felt reassured that they were at a school of high quality. She could not stress enough the importance of an education in her letters. "I wish you both to pursue your studies and read useful instructive books for a year or two after you return," Archer told her daughters, "to strengthen your minds, and improve your hearts."[35]

Mary and Ann Maria agreed with their mother on the importance of an education and tried their best to earn one despite the challenges they faced, particularly in the form of homesickness and low self-esteem. Archer's guidance to her children, both personal and educational, was the most emotional, heartfelt, and optimistic when her daughters felt discouraged and needed the support of their mother. This is interesting, for one of the most striking and recurrent characteristics of Archer's correspondence was an overwhelming sense of dejection and pessimism. Yet despite her despondent nature,

---

[32]According to Randolph B. Campbell, Mary and Ann Maria Archer attended Mrs. Gardel's school in Philadelphia as well as the Patapsco Institute in Maryland. See Campbell, 49.

[33]In a letter to her husband on January 27, 1856, Archer stated that she was the cause of their daughters attending Mrs. Gardel's school. At the time the letter was written, the girls were having a difficult time being away from home. "What I believed to be for the best," wrote Archer, "I fear will make them have had to suffer greatly. May they not reproach me." Archer clearly saw the decision to send the girls to this particular school as *her* decision. She took the blame for their unhappiness entirely upon herself.

[34]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, January 11, 1856, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

[35]Ann Barnes Archer to Ann Maria Archer, January 12, 1857, Ibid.

Archer was quite reassuring when writing to her daughters. From the moment she arrived at her northern school, Mary suffered intensely from physical illness and homesickness. "Do not be discouraged if you do not succeed as soon you would like," wrote Archer, " 'Try, Try, again' should be your motto."[36] And to Ann Maria, who feared her baby sister, Essie, might struggle through adolescence as she did, Archer wrote the following, "If you have had trouble to strive to do right, I hope that your success will be so great you will be fully repaid . . . You must not be discouraged, but persevere to the end."[37]

It seems that both girls wrote to their mother regularly about their grief and loneliness. They relied on her encouragement to get through school, even though they may have simply wished for her to tell them to come home. Archer struggled with this, as she could not bear to see her daughters so distressed. "I do not wish Ann Maria or Mary to remain there [at Mrs. Gardel's school] if they are unhappy," Archer told her husband, "Mary I think ought to be at home with me.[38] Despite her wish to have the girls content and safe at home with her, Archer felt that they should try to obtain an education, no matter the struggle, in order to see true happiness in life. She felt that an education would not only improve their intellect, but their manners as well. As Anne Firor Scott noted, "an educated woman could inhabit the sphere more gracefully and conduct her female responsibilities more effectively."[39]

Archer recognized that it was her responsibility to encourage her daughters to improve as best they could and apparently did so to the best of her ability. This speaks well of Archer, for as chapter three demonstrates, she herself suffered from extreme loneliness and depression. She could have easily acted on selfish motivations and told

---

[36]Ann Barnes Archer to Mary Archer, January 23, 1856, Ibid.
[37]Ann Barnes Archer to Ann Maria Archer, April 3, 1857, Ibid.
[38]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, January 27, 1856, Ibid.
[39]Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 71.

her girls to come home, but Archer did no such thing. Besides the fact that she simply wanted the best for her children, it was Archer's duty to ensure the proper development and refinement of her daughters - the family's spokeswomen. Thus she put aside her own wishes and did her duty, thereby strengthening her centrality and authority. That Archer established herself as an authoritative figure in her community through her guidance is perhaps more evident in the moral influence she held over her husband and the treatment of his slaves.

Moral Guidance

Archer's influence reached not only her children, but her husband as well. She apparently did not feel the need to instruct Mr. Archer on manners or education, but reserved her guidance to issues of morality. In the nineteenth century, morality was typically women's source of power in marriage.[40] Upon first glance at her correspondence to Mr. Archer, however, one sees none of the extensive advisement like that with which she provided her children. Usually the little direct guidance Archer did offer took on the appearance of an appeal, rather than helpful instruction. The most pressing personal issue with which she was concerned was infidelity.

Archer frequently implored her husband to be true to her and often prayed that the Lord would keep him from sin. One should not be misled by Archer's seemingly pitiable entreaties, however, for according to antebellum gender prescriptions she was simply fulfilling her duty as a wife by reminding her husband of his responsibility and pledge to her. Women were supposed to save immoral men from themselves. The moral guidance Archer provided her husband was not limited, however, to that of a personal nature. In fact, her moral hand most often reached the business side of her husband's life as she frequently offered her advice and opinion on the treatment of his slaves.

Historians continue to debate the degree to which southern plantation mistresses

---

[40]Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1984), 16.

were either anti-slavery or pro-slavery advocates. "Since they were so central to the workings of the home, the management of the slaves, and the moral training of both black and white children," wrote Dorothy Ann Gay in her 1975 Ph.D. dissertation, "Southern women were potentially the most subversive anti-slavery thinkers in the whole society."[41] The key word here is "potentially." Archer was in an ideal position to assert anti-slavery sentiment, yet she apparently did not do so. In fact, as established in the previous chapter, she was well aware of the benefits she received from slavery and did what she could to perpetuate the institution.

In her study on the slaves of the great antebellum plantations of Louisiana, Katherine Bankole went so far as to suggest that in the eyes of slaveholders, like the Archers, slaves existed only in the capacity of android-like laborers. They were not considered fully human, and thus were essentially "invisible" to their owners.[42] A slave's valuation went up or down with his or her economic output. Because of the sheer enormity of the labor force and productive capacity of Anchuca and Pine Woods plantations, Archer necessarily associated slaves with a cash value. However, she felt a moral compulsion to treat them humanely. Archer recognized that it was they who gave her "the means of so much" and who were perhaps "hastened to their graves & to woe for it . . ."[43] Perhaps it was her recognition of that with which her slaves provided her, or perhaps it was her daily interaction with her bondpersons that caused Archer to at least recognize, if not appreciate, their fundamental humanity.

One significant way in which Archer's emotional tie to her slaves was evident was in her continual references to enslaved individuals throughout her letters. On the two

---

[41]Dorothy Ann Gay, "The Tangled Skein of Romanticism and Violence in the Old South: The Southern Response to Abolitionism and Feminism, 1830-1861" (Ph.D. diss., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1975), 121.

[42]Katherine Bankole, "Plantations without Slaves: The Legacy of Louisiana Plantation Culture," in *Plantation Society and Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality*, eds. Thomas J. Durant, Jr. and J. David Knottnerus (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999), 194.

[43]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, November 5, 1847, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

plantations with which Archer was most familiar, Anchuca and Pine Woods, there resided over 250 slaves. Archer mentioned at least seventy-five, or nearly thirty percent of them, by name. She clearly saw these slaves as her "black family" and felt it was important to pass on information about their lives to her white family. Whether she was recalling a slave wedding, birth, or death, Archer wrote about her slaves with a sense of personalism that suggests she knew them beyond their work in the field or the house.

Loneliness was a recurring theme in Archer's letters to her husband and children.[44] Although they did not substitute for her family or her friends, Archer apparently desired the company of her slaves. "This morning," Archer once wrote, "three of the Pine Woods women came in my room and staid [sic] till dinner was ready."[45] Writing to Abram in 1855, Archer recounted how five "men servants" came to the house inquiring about her children who were away at school. Although she was preoccupied at the time of their visit, she talked with them for a while. "I do not like to send them away," wrote Archer, "as they [the fieldhands] seldom come where I am."[46] She openly acknowledged that the slaves were often her most reliable and loyal companions. Besides her young children, they were frequently her only companions. "I see no one as often as once a week," she told her husband, "except those at home."[47]

Archer's letters suggest that her relationship with her slaves, at least from her perspective, was one of mutual affection and support. She regularly wrote to her family to send greetings from the slaves. Indeed, nearly every letter Archer wrote closed with "the servants send their love." Not only did the slaves express warm feelings for their "master" and the children, but apparently evinced a fair amount of concern for their mistress as well. Archer recalled that when she was feeling lonely "most of the servants

---

[44]See Chapter Four for a detailed analysis of Archer's loneliness.

[45]Ann Barnes Archer to Ann Maria Archer, March 15, 1857, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

[46]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, December 16, 1855, Ibid.

[47]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, January 4, 1856, Ibid.

seem to try to sooth [sic] my feelings by manner or word."[48] She clearly felt that her slaves cared for her and looked out for her best interest, just as she did for them.

It is important to recognize, however, that the only evaluation of the relationship between this mistress and her bondpersons came from Archer herself. It is highly probable that the slaves had an entirely different perception of their relationship with their mistress. They knew, just as she did, that she benefited from their enslavement and presumably had different motivations for carrying on a seemingly affectionate relationship with her. Even so, it is significant that Archer felt she had a fairly interdependent relationship with her slaves. This mutual dependency, whether real or not, undoubtedly influenced her treatment and perception of her "black family." Her daily interaction with the slaves compelled her to be sympathetic for their wants and needs as humans and individuals, rather than just as economic investments.

As seen in Chapter Two, economic motivations and obligations arguably reigned supreme in the reproductive work of plantation mistresses. However, these motivations were often clouded by prevalent gender prescriptions which promoted the morality of white women. Their virtue was to reach beyond their white family and into their black family. "Taught that as women they were more moral than men and charged with upholding the morality of their society," wrote historian Marli F. Weiner, "they took seriously the requirement that they ameliorate the suffering of slaves."[49] In this regard, Archer's reproductive labors regularly took on a benevolent or sympathetic quality. Her responsibility for the well-being of her slaves often went beyond a concern for maximum economic output, and clearly focused on issues of personal welfare.

Historian Ronald Davis noted that the slaves in the Natchez District were aware that they had no way to protect themselves from wrongdoing. Often the only protection

---

[48] Ann Barnes Archer to Abram and Edward Archer, September 11, 1854, Ibid.

[49] Marli F. Weiner, "Mistresses, Morality, and the Dilemmas of Slaveholding: The Ideology and Behavior of Elite Antebellum Women," in *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*, edited by Patricia Morton (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 294.

they had was from a white person intervening on their behalf.[50] In the case of the Archer slaves, it appears that on more than one occasion this intervening white person was the plantation mistress. This is evident not only in Archer's frequent calls for additional food and clothing as seen in the previous chapter, but also in her efforts to prevent excessive discipline and the separation of families.

A recurring subject in Archer's correspondence to both her husband and children is her condemnation of overseers who abused their slaves. Although Archer most likely relied on the overseers or other authoritative men on the plantation to discipline the slaves, she was vocal about her aversion to extreme punishment. One reason for this was because of the negative effects it would have on the plantation economy - to put slaves out of work because of injury was to put the plantation at risk. Another reason Archer was opposed to severe beatings was because of her concern for the slaves' personal well-being. She frequently expressed a desire for the slaves' happiness and comfort in her letters. Archer's reproductive labors were meant to support and sustain her black family. Violent discipline only created a hostile and threatening environment for the slaves, so she felt it was her duty to remedy this when she could or, more importantly, when she felt the need.

At one point Archer expressed concern that their overseer would be too harsh on the slaves while her husband was away and that they would be too afraid to tell her about it. "Unless I hear about it from old John," she told her son, "they will suffer."[51] Although Archer's slaves appealed to her for extra supplies and food, they likely had good reason to hesitate in telling their mistress about excessive punishments. Fanny Kemble, a plantation mistress from Georgia, described a similar situation in which one of her slaves was beaten for telling her that the overseer worked them too hard. Kemble felt that the slaves would cease coming to her with their complaints if they "were to be

---

[50]Davis, 168.

[51]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, January 27, 1857, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

chastised for anything they said to [her]."[52]

Like Kemble's slaves, those who were enslaved by the Archer's conceivably felt that more severe punishments would be inflicted upon them by the overseer if they told their mistress of his cruelty. They had a legitimate concern and Archer tried to remedy it. She regularly fell back on her position as care giver and provider for her husband's slaves to impose her moral authority on those who perhaps had more direct or regular contact with his bondpersons. By simply writing to her husband about situations she found unacceptable on the plantation, Archer provided a significant amount of moral guidance and influenced the way their slaves were treated.

Even so, Archer expressed what Randolph Campbell identified as "bottom-line paternalism."[53] Her benevolence and concern for the slaves certainly had limits. For instance, at one point when she was extremely frustrated with the behavior of an enslaved woman, Archer wrote to her son and declared, "the mother is so <u>insolent</u> she shall feel <u>her</u> place the rest of her life as long as I live."[54] It appears that although she was generally opposed to extreme punishment, Archer was not adverse to stern discipline when the situation called for it.

One area regarding the treatment of slaves in which Archer did not waver was the separation of families by sale. Slaves' forced separation from their loved ones was devastating. Sale was frequently used as a method of slave discipline and was a common, albeit disturbing, reality of the business side of slavery. Slaveholders broke up half of all slave marriages in which both husband and wife were alive in 1865.[55]

Historian John Blassingame determined that slaves rarely recovered from the shock of

---

[52]Kemble, 111.

[53]Campbell, 49.

[54]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, May 2, 1860, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649. The underlining is Archer's. It is not clear what her slave did that provoked her to say this.

[55]Catherine Clinton, *Tara Revisited: Women, War, & the Plantation Legend* (New York, London, and Paris: Abbeville Press, 1995), 33.

such separations.[56]

Archer realized this and was determined to prevent it from happening to any of her slaves. She recognized that a great part of the slaves' well-being relied on the stability of their families and their homes. At one point her nephew, Edward, was faced with a lawsuit in which it was possible that his inherited slaves would be given to an in-law. Archer continually implored him to purchase all those who could potentially be sold. "It is very distressing to negroes to be sold at any time," wrote Archer, "but more so to be sold from their old family, or from their own families."[57] She was clearly concerned about how her slaves would be affected by a potential sale, but was also concerned about how it would affect herself. One reason Archer was insistent upon not selling any slaves was because of her personal ties to them. She frequently made references to slaves who had been in the Archer family for years and how it would be terribly difficult to see them taken away.

Although Archer seems to have had an emotional tie to her "black family" and although she asserted a great deal of moral authority on their behalf, she ultimately supported slavery and the subordination of her slaves. Like many slaveholding women, Archer displayed a marked degree of ambivalence towards the "peculiar institution." She was clearly fond of many individual slaves and had personal relationships with them, she often intervened on their behalf, and she regularly relied on their companionship and comfort. Yet not once did Archer question the institution of slavery in any of her preserved letters. Not once did she mention the possibility of manumission. Not once did she express any opinion on abolition. This is striking, for the Archers saw their greatest success as slaveholders during the time when slavery was most vehemently protested by northerners. Despite her occasional disagreements with certain aspects of

---

[56]Blassingame, 197.

[57]Ann Barnes Archer to Edward Archer, April 4, 1855, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649. The underlining is Archer's. She was referring to the Barnes family (her parents) when she wrote "old family."

slavery, it seems likely that Archer saw it as a benign and natural institution which ultimately benefited both her white and black "families." Accepting it as such, Archer did what she felt was morally right and frequently advised her husband on how to best look after the well being of their "black family."

Archer's entire community depended on her guidance. They looked to her for instructions on how to act, work, live, and love. Her children undoubtedly had minds of their own, as is evident in their negligence to write to her as frequently as she requested, but their character and conduct were certainly shaped by their mother's influence. It was Archer's customary responsibility and personal desire to raise respectable children. This was a significant responsibility, for children reflected not only their mother, but their family and their entire community as well. It was particularly important for the oldest Archer children to conduct themselves well, for they were away from home and represented their family amongst strangers. Archer was well aware of this and sought to prepare her children by asserting her maternal authority and influence in the form of personal and educational guidance.

Archer's influence on her husband was just as consequential, if not more so, than that on her children, for her moral guidance had a direct impact on the lives of over two hundred slaves. Although her own benevolence was certainly limited, Archer asserted a significant amount of authority in regard to the treatment of her bondpersons. It may not seem like she accomplished a great deal on the surface, but perhaps her slaves lived a less fearful and more secure life than they would have had Archer not sought to advise her husband with her morality.

Archer's children, her husband, and her slaves frequently called and relied on her personal, educational, and moral guidance. By fulfilling her role as a counselor or advisor, Archer placed herself in a vital position in her community and was able to assert

a significant amount of authority over plantation and family affairs. This centrality and subsequent authority was not, however, as beneficial to Archer as one might assume, for it came at a severe emotional and physical price.

CHAPTER IV

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ISOLATION

Ann Barnes Archer's isolation was one of the most defining elements of her centrality on Anchuca plantation. Her permanence provided stability and reassurance to both those who had the leisure to leave as well as those who were forced to remain and, as demonstrated in the preceding chapters, it allowed her to take on significant responsibilities and to assert a substantial amount of authority. Because of this, she ultimately filled a vital position in her community. Such power and centrality, however, came at a severe price for Archer both emotionally and physically. Her correspondence was laden with recurrent themes of illness, depression of spirits, and loneliness that were a direct result of her isolation and limited mobility.

Thus far I have elucidated the significance of Archer's authoritative and influential role in her community in a relatively favorable and empowering light. While the preceding chapters demonstrated Archer's agency, this chapter relays the more sober aspects of her experience, such as loneliness, illness, and depression. Although Archer accepted her situation and duties as plantation mistress and took advantage of the power they granted her, she often did so unwillingly and with significant consequences to her physical and emotional well-being.

Most rural southern women lived their lives within the confines of their domestic communities. Since gender prescriptions determined that women were best suited for the "private" realm, they theoretically had little reason to leave their households. "Besieged

by domestic concerns," asserted Catherine Clinton, "the white woman was cut off from society."[1] Archer's existence was characterized by her limited travel away from Anchuca and Pine Woods plantations. This community was her home, her place of work, and depending on her mood, it was her jail. Archer's isolation and limited mobility severely circumscribed her travel and thus the breadth of her social intercourse. Although she occasionally made reference to traveling to Honey Island, or more likely to Port Gibson, far more frequently she called attention to the fact that she had not left Anchuca for days or even weeks. With limited travel and little society, Archer lived a restrained and lonely life. "Every woman was an island," wrote Clinton, "isolated unto herself and locked into place by the stormy and unsettling seas of plantation slavery."[2]

Although Archer occasionally felt captive in her community, it is important to recognize that her containment could not begin to compare to that of her slaves. Despite apparent disadvantages, her "captivity" was prescribed and not absolute. Had she wanted to leave the plantation, she could have left. Although Archer suffered from her isolation and from the extended periods of time when she was unable to leave, Anchuca was her home and she wanted to be there. She became so accustomed to her life on the plantation that at one point she evidenced fear upon leaving it. "I have the blues whenever I think of leaving my home to go away for such a length of time," wrote Archer, "and can see nothing but discomfort and trouble in the future till I am once more settled at home."[3] Notwithstanding significant consequences, Archer's confinement, compared to that of her slaves, was ultimately an asset that contributed to the authority and subsequent independence she was able to assert on the plantation.

Archer recognized the important contribution her permanence allowed her to make to her family and community. Her guidance, protection, and supervision afforded

---

[1]Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 165; see also Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 81.
[2]Ibid., 179.
[3]See Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, November 12, 1854, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

her not only a significant amount of authority, but a greater sense of self-worth as well. "Though you were with your friends whom you speak always of being so affectionate," she wrote to her husband,

> . . . you feel still there is no one who can soothe your spirits, and next to a physician, can so well relieve you of bodily suffering as I can. It is well perhaps that I am not with you always so to make you know how much I can and have done for your happiness and comfort.[4]

Self-respect was one of the seeming benefits of Archer's isolation and limited mobility. From a feminist perspective, it seems that although Archer was bound in a restrictive situation, she overcame such adversity and carved out an autonomous and indispensable niche for herself. She did not allow herself to be a marginal captive of a male dominated society. Indeed, when examining her management and guidance it becomes clear that she was often the central focus of her community. Yet as demonstrated by the despondency in her letters, Archer did not necessarily perceive her situation in this way. One senses she felt enormously aggrieved by the situation in which she was placed and the roles which she was expected to fulfill. This was most evident in her struggles with loneliness, depression, and illness.

Psychologist Nathaniel Branden, an authority on issues of self-esteem, determined that every individual has the potential to encounter a state of "need-frustration" where their "overall capacity to live" is diminished. This is a condition where one's psychological or emotional needs are unfulfilled as evidenced by pain, illness, and even death.[5] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese suggested that southern Sarah Gayle's "recurring lassitude and depression" could be interpreted as an "unconscious protest" against what she felt were endless responsibilities as a plantation mistress.[6] Her fatigue and

---

[4]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, January 22, 1856, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.
[5]Nathaniel Branden, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem: A Revolutionary Approach to Self-Understanding that Launched a New Era in Modern Psychology*, 32nd anniversary edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 19-20.
[6]Fox-Genovese, "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South," 30.

despondency signaled a pressing need for physical assistance and perhaps emotional encouragement.

Archer, too, suffered continually from depression and illness. Based on how and what she wrote to her family members, her fragile physical and emotional state appears to have signaled her psychological need for companionship, comfort, and support. Archer's isolation and permanence on the plantation limited her travel and allowed many of those closest to her to leave. Plus, if her female neighbors and friends experienced anything like she did, their travel was also restricted. A lack of female companionship, coupled with the perpetual absence of adult family members, caused Archer to experience profound loneliness. This was manifested in her severe depression and recurring illness.

Depression

Because southern women spent most of their lives enclosed in their "domestic" communities, their happiness was linked to their relationships with their family members. Men, on the other hand, found fulfillment and satisfaction in other venues, for they "could escape into the public realm, to town, to business, to the outside world."[7] Archer clearly articulated her pain and suffering upon the departure and absence of her children, husband, and even her friends in much of her correspondence. There was hardly a letter written by Archer that did not in some way or another express sorrow as a result of extreme loneliness. Her family was her life and when they were away from her she suffered immensely. Southerner Sarah Gayle suffered from bouts of depression, inadequacy, and loneliness rather frequently, especially when her husband was away.[8] Archer suffered in much the same way as Gayle, for she too was dependent upon her husband for companionship.

At only sixteen years old, Archer appears to have been extraordinarily young on her wedding day. The typical southern bride, however, was in fact under twenty years of

---

[7]Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 38.
[8]Fox-Genovese, "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South," 29.

age during the antebellum era. As Fox-Genovese pointed out, southern brides often "went to their marriages more as girls than as mature women." Southern men, who typically wed in their mid to late twenties, took their vows at a later age than their female counterparts, primarily because they were expected to establish financial security before marriage.[9]

Mr. Archer, at thirty-seven years of age, was remarkably older than his wife when they married. One can only speculate what effect their twenty-one year age difference had on either member of the union. It is likely that Archer had a similar experience to her contemporary, Sarah Gayle, who also married a considerably older man. Gayle, like Archer, was an "adult orphan." Both women lost their mother and father at a young age and married a short time later.[10] Because of her early loss, Gayle looked for "quasi-maternal love and understanding" in her husband.[11] Both John Gayle and Richard Archer likely became parental figures of sorts to their wives. Without the protection of their fathers and the guidance of their mothers, both women put their entire beings into their marriages and the supportive arms of their husbands. Upon the saying of their vows, they took on a new life and a new identity as well.

By pledging herself to her husband through her wedding day promise, Archer was to bid farewell to her budding independent identity. In the antebellum South, marriage vows were intended on the base level, not to unite two separate souls, but rather to execute a strict social arrangement in which a woman's primary identity sprang from that of her husband. As the slaveholding South came under increasing scrutiny from its

---

[9]For statistics on the marrying age of southern men and women see Fox-Genovese, "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South," 24; Scott, "Women's Perspective on the Patriarchy in the 1850's," 55; Clinton, *Tara Revisited,* 42; and Sally McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1992), 29. At an average of twenty-three years of age, the typical northern bride during this period was considerably older than her southern counterpart. See Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 13-14.

[10]Archer lost her mother in 1827 at the age of eight or nine, and her father three years later in 1830. *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi,* 310.

[11]Fox-Genovese, "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South," 24.

neighbors in the North, southern white men, who had the greatest stake in the institution of slavery, sought to find a way to maintain both their way of life as well as their privileged position in southern society.[12] One way to ensure a scrupulous social hierarchy and to justify the superiority of white males was through the subordination of women. By enforcing women's dependence on their husbands, not only for physical survival, but also for personal identity, the South tried to protect itself from hostile critics.

Although the previous chapters demonstrated that Archer certainly developed an identity of her own as the plantation manager, the primary care giver, and the family counselor, at times she felt that she was not complete without her husband. Her correspondence does not suggest, however, that this had anything to do with the southern social philosophy of marriage and identity. It seems that Archer did not look to her husband for self-definition. She clearly distinguished between her identity and that of Mr. Archer. Her feeling of incompleteness upon his absence was more likely a result of her loneliness. When Mr. Archer was away, his wife missed him. Besides her slaves, he was her only established adult companion. She wanted Mr. Archer to be home with her, for her isolation on the plantation was far more painful when he was away.

Archer's regular entreaties for her husband to come home varied in style and method depending on her mood. She often told him "I am very lonesome & much confined to the house," or "Look well into your matters so as not to leave home very soon again."[13] She informed him not only of her sadness when he was detained longer than initially planned, but also of the fact that time seemed to drag when he was gone. She continually stressed her loneliness and depression of spirits when writing to Mr. Archer. When these personal appeals did not work, however, Archer seems to have tried a different approach to bring her husband back home.

---

[12]Ibid., 19.
[13]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, March 16, 1856 and January 8, 1850, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.

In January of 1853, Archer told her husband, "I have been expecting you for three weeks . . . I fear you are delaying too long to have your business progress here as it might."[14] This statement is interesting, for not only did Archer suggest her husband was dawdling in his travels, but also that she felt it may have been more effective to press his business interests to get him to come home. Three years later she told Mr. Archer that he should hurry home for the crop might suffer because of a negligent overseer.[15] Chapter One demonstrated that Archer did have an interest in the economic success of the plantation, so her concerns about the crops while Mr. Archer was away may have been sincere. However, Archer demonstrated that she was capable not only of managing the crop production on the plantation, but also of taking care of derelict overseers. Perhaps Archer felt that her husband could address these issues more effectively than she could, but judging from her frequent pleas for him to come home, she likely discovered a more efficient method of bringing him back. It should be noted, however, that in her seemingly furtive entreaties for her husband's return, Archer was acting from sincere motives. In reading her letters, one clearly perceives her loneliness and depression - a result of living in such a confined and isolated world.

Although Archer felt forlorn when her husband was way, her most profound loneliness arose when her children left home to attend school in Pennsylvania and Virginia. "A separation from my children this fall," Archer wrote to her husband, "has been the . . . most severe trial I have ever had, and I have had many."[16] She had a deep attachment to her son, nephew, and two oldest daughters, all of whom left home within a relatively short period of time. "I feel as if there had been a funeral in my family," wrote Archer upon saying good-by to her boys, "and cannot think of your absence without crying."[17] She made several references in her correspondence to instances when she was

---

[14]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, January 31, 1853, Ibid.
[15]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, October 12, 1856, Ibid.
[16]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, January 1, 1856, Ibid.
[17]Ann Barnes Archer to Edward and Abram Archer, September 11, 1854, Ibid.

too sad to go outside or to visit other relatives and friends. At one point Archer could not even look at the daguerreotypes of her daughters "without great depression of spirits."[18]

Archer missed the company of her children, but was also anxious about their happiness, their behavior, and their health since she could no longer see them for herself. She encouraged and practically begged them to write home regularly. "If I do not receive a letter once a week I get uneasy and restless, and feel much disappointment," Archer told her daughter, Ann Maria.[19] When her son and nephew neglected to write her one week, Archer informed them that she feared they "were too sick to write or perhaps dead."[20] Indirect reprimands such as this apparently succeeded in giving Archer's children added incentive to write home. Yet despite receiving regular correspondence from them, Archer continued to feel immense sorrow while they were away. When her children went back to school after the winter holidays in 1856, Archer informed her husband, "I have now lost the power to be cheerful or look on the bright side. The sight of my own changed face is painful to me." A month later she sadly told her nephew, "I realize more fully than at some other times my children are beyond my reach."[21]

Archer's children were her life. Although she still had many little ones at home with her after Abram, Edward, Mary, and Ann Maria went away to school, their companionship did not serve in the same capacity as that of the older children. As mentioned earlier, Archer's only adult companion besides her slaves, was her husband who was frequently away from home. She no doubt established close relationships with her eldest children during Mr. Archer's absence. When they left home, Archer felt incredibly lonesome. One factor that contributed to her forlornness was her lack of female companions who lived nearby.

---

[18]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, January 4, 1856, Ibid.
[19]Ann Barnes Archer to Ann Maria Archer, May 16, 1856, Ibid.
[20]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, May 19, 1856, Ibid.
[21]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Archer, January 4, 1856 and Ann Barnes Archer to Edward Archer, October 11, 1854, Ibid..

"I have been very lonesome & closely confined at home and have had only two visits," Archer wrote to her husband in 1853.[22] Archer deeply desired female companionship on more than one occasion. At one point a friend wrote to Archer saying that she regretted leaving the area, for she realized that there were few "kindred spirits" in Port Gibson with whom Archer could share "familiar intercourse."[23] Archer was painfully aware of this and on more than one occasion made reference to a want of female society.

At one point Archer openly expressed her feelings on this matter to her daughter. She told Ann Maria that she had only two cousins who she felt close to that lived nearby. Mr. Archer did not approve of these cousins and their families and made sure they were aware of his feelings. He "showed his dislike to them so plainly they would not feel like seeing him or be welcome with him," wrote Archer. Although it is not clear what caused her husband's bad feelings, the situation Archer described reflected a common form of emotional abuse by which some men were able to control their wives. If this was the case in Archer's experience, her husband was unsuccessful. It was incredibly important to Archer to see her intimate friends, for she did so against her husband's will. When he was away they came to see their cousin at her "urgent request." She felt that it was a grievous act on her husband's part to prevent these people from visiting her. Not only were they close friends, they were the only relatives, according to Archer, that could tell her about the lives of her deceased parents. "It is hard, very hard I should be thwarted in my wish of having each one to visit me freely," she wrote.[24]

Over time Archer's isolation and loneliness began to wear at her relationship with her husband. Marriages between planters and their wives often became strained when husbands frequently took extended leaves of absence from home.[25] It was not long

---

[22]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, January 17, 1853, Ibid.
[23]Cara A. [last name illegible] to Ann Barnes Archer, February 7, 1854, Ibid.
[24]Ann Barnes Archer to Ann Maria Archer, April 13, 1857, Ibid.
[25]Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 74.

before Archer began to resent the fact that she was habitually home alone managing the plantation and caring for the children. In her early letters to her husband, Archer appeared far more affectionate than she did in her later letters. By 1856 one senses a shift in their relationship, for her correspondence was far more cold and impersonal than earlier. "I have not written to you till now as I had nothing of interest to tell you," wrote Archer.[26] She no longer pleaded with him to be faithful, nor did she express tender sentiments. Rather than writing to her husband because she missed him, it seems that Archer wrote only to inform him about their children and the work on the two plantations. One of the primary reasons that she became more withdrawn over time, was because of her recurring illnesses. The pain of her confinement, isolation, and loneliness became exaggerated in Archer's mind as she suffered continuously from bodily afflictions.

Sickness

"What is life without health?," asked Archer. "[It] is an invaluable blessing & none of us know its value till deprived of it."[27] With this statement, one can understand and appreciate the despondency so evident in Archer's letters. Not only was she faced with the recurring illnesses of others on a daily basis as the managing plantation nurse, but she was plagued by ill health throughout much of her life as well. Poor health was characteristic of all of antebellum American society, but was particularly striking in the South and among women.[28] A hostile climate, demanding responsibilities, restricted physical activity, poor diets, inefficient medical practices, and dangerous parturition, all contributed to southern women's seemingly incessant ill health. The letters of plantation mistresses, and more specifically those of Archer, reflect women's fixation on sickness

---

[26]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, September 18, 1856 and October 5, 1856, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.
[27]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, January 22, 1856, Ibid., and Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, Fragment, 1855, Ibid.
[28]Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 139-140.

and disease. This was partly a result of their continual interaction with those who endured ill health in their communities.

Archer's reproductive duties placed her in the position of nurse to her family and indirectly to her slaves. It became such a prevalent issue in her life that her letters were filled with detailed accounts of ailments and disease amongst the plantation's residents. Archer tried to remedy the ill health of those around her, but over time she was forced to become painfully familiar with the ultimate repercussion of illness - death. "The baby looks very badly & seems to suffer very much with his gums & Bowels," Archer told her husband, "I fear he will suffer as much as our poor & beloved one we lost last summer."[29] Archer was faced not only with the death of her own children, but of various members of her "black family" as well. "Poor Stephen [a slave] died last Saturday afternoon at 3 o'clock," Archer told her son, Abram. The very same day she wrote to her daughter, Ann Maria, to tell her the news of Stephen's passing. "He was sick for two weeks," wrote Archer, ". . . I had not been out of the house since my babe's birth and could not go to see him."[30] Such was the daily reality on a large antebellum slave plantation which undoubtedly wore her down over time. Yet while trying to deal with the illnesses and deaths of those around her, Archer also had her own precarious health to look after.

In *The Plantation Mistress*, Catherine Clinton noted the irony of the fact that most mistresses, whose responsibility it was to attend to the sick on their plantations, commonly "endured poorer health themselves."[31] Archer's letters to her husband and children were filled with accounts of her own health, or lack thereof. "My hand is so weak I can hardly hold my pen," was one of Archer's frequent messages to her family members, as well as "all keep well but me." She appears to have suffered a great deal

---

[29]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, May 22, 1849, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.
[30]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram Archer, January 27, 1857, Ibid., and Ann Barnes Archer to Ann Maria Archer, January 27, 1857, Ibid.
[31]Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 151.

from sore eyes, indigestion, fever, and general weakness of the body. One does not sense any insincerity in Archer's complaints about her sickness, but it is likely that her perception of her health was influenced by loneliness and confinement. "Isolation," according to Clinton, "further aggravated women's fears of illness, disease, and childbearing."[32] Her frequent references in her correspondence to her illnesses were likely an attempt to relay the daily realities of her life to her family members. Historian Ann Douglas suggested that by stressing their ill health in correspondence, women not only dramatized "their anxiety that their culture found them useless and wished them no good," but provided them with the means of getting much wanted attention as well.[33]

Archer wanted to be comforted by those she loved when she was feeling indisposed. When all of her family members who were old enough and thus capable of caring for her were away, she was forced to rely on the emotionally unsatisfactory care of her servants and adolescent children. "I have hardly been able to keep up for two weeks," Archer told her husband, "and suffer a great deal from Dyspepsia, great nervousness and have more or less feverishness all the time and great depression of spirits . . . I have a lonely & sad time of it."[34] It was not long before Archer began to resent her isolation and lack of familial nurses. She indirectly informed her son, Abram, and nephew, Edward, on how she expected to be cared for. "Keep well & be kind & affectionate to each other & if sick or distressed be doubly tender & attentive," wrote Archer, "A sick person feels lonesome & weak & needs more attention than when well . . . do not wait for each other when sick to ask you to do for him but anticipate each others wants."[35] Archer's delicate scolding of her family members suggests that she felt they were not fulfilling their duty to her in her time of need. They knew, because of her confinement and permanence on the

---

[32]Ibid., 139.
[33]Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 92; quoted in Elizabeth Bookser Barkley, "American Primitives: Nineteenth-Century American Women's Personal Letters" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cincinnati, 1997), 141.
[34]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, October 12, 1856, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.
[35]Ann Barnes Archer to Abram and Edward Archer, September 11, 1854, Ibid.

plantation, that they could rely on her for most of their wants. Archer, however, was not certain that she could rely on them and overtime began to express her disappointment and anger in a more blatant and accusatory manner.

Archer was most vehement with her husband when confronting her confinement, isolation, and the negligence of her family in caring for her. Her anger was most evident during her numerous pregnancies. Archer's oldest child, Abram, was born in 1837. She was pregnant practically every year after that for the next twenty years. Archer had only nine children who survived infancy, but was pregnant a total of sixteen times.[36] Although this number is high, it was not unheard of in the antebellum South. American women had an average of 5.4 children during this time period. Most southern women, however, "exceeded that rate and often devoted thirty or more years of their lives to bearing, nursing, and raising children."[37]

Pregnancy and parturition were key themes of women's letters throughout history. Childbirth was a "natural fulfillment and an inescapable duty."[38] Because she was gravid a total of sixteen times, it is somewhat surprising that Archer rarely mentioned her pregnancies in her correspondence, especially since she was so open about discussing her other ailments. The inherent dangers that came with pregnancy caused it to be one of the most dangerous "ailments" in the nineteenth century. "Whenever a plantation mistress faced childbirth," asserted Catherine Clinton, "she literally prepared to die."[39] Since they were faced with an "unhealthy climate, the prevalence of malaria, improper medical practices, and comparably frequent childbearing," southern women were twice as likely

---

[36]There are no records of how or when Archer's seven children died. We do know that Abram was her oldest living child and Branch, who was her sixteenth and was born in 1856, was her last child who survived infancy. It is not clear, however, whether or not Abram was Archer's first born or if she was pregnant again after giving birth to Branch.

[37]Sally McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge and Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 32.

[38]Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998), 90 and 96.

[39]Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 151.

as northern women to die in delivery.[40] Thus the typical woman shared little or no excitement upon learning of her pregnancy.[41]

The dangers of childbirth were exaggerated in the mind of an expectant mother whose husband was away from home during her confinement. This was readily apparent by Archer's sixteenth pregnancy. She scolded her husband, albeit indirectly, for his absence at such a dangerous time. She told Mr. Archer of her illnesses and declared that she feared she may have a premature birth. She plied his sentiments by informing him that she was incredibly depressed and that it was only with "very great difficulty" that she could perform her duties on the plantation.[42] Apparently this doleful approach was not met with success, for only a week later Archer wrote her husband another, far more vehement letter reminding him of his responsibility to her.

Archer was already upset that her husband was away from home, but became even more incensed when he neglected to write to her. She had been expecting a letter for some time, but was informed by a friend who had spoken to Mr. Archer, that he did not have the time to write to his wife. Archer's response was teeming with anger. "Busy as I am and unwell all the time," wrote Archer,

> . . . I still take the time to write to you though I much doubt if you care to get letters from me except to hear from the children and crops. I know how anxious a person from home is generally to hear often and regularly, therefore I take time though my time may be short on earth . . . I may come as near death as I did at Essies' birth . . .[43]

Archer clearly resented her husband's negligence in attending to her and after fifteen births was not afraid to let him know it. She had a legitimate reason for calling on him to return home and a legitimate reason for being angry, for Mr. Archer neglected his wife in

---

[40]McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 55.
[41]Scott, "Women's Perspective on the Patriarchy in the 1850's," 55.
[42]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, September 28, 1856, Archer Family Papers, Box 2E649.
[43]Ann Barnes Archer to Richard Thompson Archer, October 6, 1856, Ibid.

her most vulnerable state. Throughout her life Archer accepted her confinement, permanence, and subsequent responsibilities calmly and efficiently. And despite her frequent pronouncements of loneliness, she dealt with her isolation as best she could. But when she was faced with the prospect of losing her eighth child and possibly her own life, Archer could not suppress her anger. She demanded to be noticed and supported by her husband, and ultimately her children as well, who she had assuredly looked after and cared for, for nearly twenty years.

Over time, Archer's isolation and stability on the plantation became an accepted reality. As the first two chapters demonstrated, she established and maintained her centrality in her community through the significant authority she was able to claim through her management and guidance - both which resulted from her permanence and isolation. The power and status Archer acquired, however, came at a severe price to herself, both emotionally and physically, as she suffered from loneliness, depression, and illness for much of her life.

Isolation and forlornness were prevalent themes in Archer's letters. Despite her relegation to the domestic realm and her affinity for her home, Archer ultimately regretted her containment, for it isolated her from her husband, her grown children, and her closest female friends. Her letters were filled with distressing accounts of loneliness and despair. She missed her family and friends when they were away and desperately wanted them near her.

Archer's despondency was greatly enhanced when she was feeling unwell. In addition to her incessant gloom, Archer's presumably poor diet, her lack of exercise, her continual pregnancies, and the unhealthy environment in which she lived all contributed to her perpetual state of ill health. Although she was surrounded by illness, disease, and death nearly every day, it was her own sickness that most affected her spirits. When she was ill, her loneliness was ever more lucid and painful. She wanted her family to care for

her, but those who were most able to do so were oftentimes far from home. Archer could not help but feel neglected and forlorn.

Yet despite her poor emotional and physical health, Archer continued to fulfill her responsibilities to her family and slaves. It was not until she realized that she did so to her own detriment, that she began to confront her family about her loneliness and ill health. By relaying somber and sincere accounts of her distress, Archer compelled her family to commiserate with her, ultimately hoping that they might return home to help alleviate her suffering. She realized, probably more than anyone else, that she needed a healthy body and mind to fulfill her responsibilities to her family and community. As Archer's dear friend and former teacher, Mrs. Gardel, gently reminded her, ". . . you cannot do your duty by them without health."[44]

---

[44]I.L.H. Gardel to Ann Barnes Archer, November 16, 1847, Ibid.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Ann Barnes Archer was in many respects the focal figure in her community of Anchuca and Pine Woods plantations. Her management, guidance, and isolation established and maintained her centrality. These factors enabled Archer to assert significant authority over both the business and domestic sides of the plantations on which she resided. Nearly everyone and everything in her community was touched by her influence and directing hand. Much of what occurred on Anchuca and Pine Woods plantations pivoted around what Archer did, said, and commanded. Such centrality, however, placed in the body of a white woman on a slave plantation may seem surprising based on the historical scholarship concerning plantation mistresses.

The historiography of antebellum female slaveholders has recognized the various contributions white women made to their communities, yet has still placed them in a marginal role and in an ancillary position to the other residents of their plantations. Historians have acknowledged that white women were consequential players in large plantation communities, but, as a result of focusing on the strength of patriarchy in antebellum southern society, they have interpreted their significance primarily through the medium of domesticity. For example, although Catherine Clinton recognized that white women "performed essential and complex functions within the cotton economy," she concluded, as have most historians of plantation mistresses, that their real achievements and authority were found in their prescribed domestic or "private" sphere.[1]

---

[1]Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, xv.

By placing plantation mistresses in a restricted and subsidiary position, such interpretations circumscribe the agency of white women not only in their own lives but in the lives of those who surrounded them. By placing Archer in the center of her community, rather than on the periphery, we see that the character of her immediate society, both domestic and professional, was shaped in great part by her influence and authority.

Archer's productive and reproductive duties helped sustain the efficiency of the Archer cotton industry through her management, maintenance, and support of their slave labor force. Fulfilling the role of plantation manager in her husband's frequent absence, Archer was compelled to become involved in the plantation's productive affairs. She knew what her husband's economic goals were and what it took to meet them. If a cruel overseer threatened the productivity of the plantation, she both threatened and carried out his dismissal. If the slaves' lack of adequate clothing or food threatened their health, Archer either petitioned her husband or purchased more supplies on her own. She knew what it took to maintain an efficient economic unit. While Mr. Archer was away, he relied in great part on his wife to ensure advantageous production on Anchuca and Pine Woods plantations.

In these instances, Archer was a pivotal figure on the plantation. She was the only authoritative permanent resident, thus what she said and did carried a great deal of weight. This was the case not only in the business side of the plantation, but in the domestic side as well. Fulfilling her prescribed role as an advisor or counselor, Archer asserted lasting influence over her entire family. Their morality, public image, and familial connection was strengthened through Archer's unceasing guidance and instruction.

When Archer's children were away at school, she advised them on the importance of refined manners, a good education, and strong family ties. She felt these were the qualities they would need to become upright, successful, and contented people. She

recognized that her son and nephew were headed in different directions than her daughters, and thus tailored her advice for each child. Archer, once again demonstrating her centrality, helped determine what direction her children's lives were headed by reminding them not only of their duty to their family, but also by keeping them focused on what she felt constituted a noble and respected path.

As the plantation's prescribed moral leader, Archer also had considerable influence over her husband. The advice she offered on the treatment of his labor force had a steady effect on the personal lives of their slaves. She was tenacious in her objections to excessive punishment and the separation of slave families by sale. Archer asserted her moral authority in order to alleviate the suffering of those who she considered to be her "black family," and had a significant influence on the quality and stability of their lives.

Despite Archer's apparent sympathy for her slaves, it is important to remember that she was a steadfast supporter of slavery. She never questioned the institution in her correspondence, nor offered an alternative to it. She saw slavery as natural phenomenon and approached it with a definitively paternalistic attitude. Whether taking an active role in the managerial aspects of plantation production, fulfilling her reproductive duties, or asserting her prescribed moral authority, Archer was ultimately a necessary and effective component of a shameful business from which she knowingly profited.

Archer was able to take such a direct hand in the business and domestic sides of the plantation because she was a permanent and authoritative resident. The power and status claimed by Archer went hand in hand, however, with severe emotional and physical distress, a result of her isolation and restricted mobility. She frequently called out to her family members in the hopes that they might take notice of her loneliness and ill health. Archer desperately wanted to be comforted during her times of need and ultimately resented the fact that her family, and particularly her husband, was able to leave the plantation upon will. They were able to do so partially because they knew she

would remain behind. Unfortunately, Archer's family did not readily acknowledge or did little to alleviate the negative consequences of her confinement and loneliness.

"Such isolation," wrote Catherine Clinton, "took its psychological toll on women, leaving them - despite their arduous labor for family and home - wondering about their own worth."[2] Although Archer recognized the significant contribution she made to her community, her despondency and illness, as well as her frequent reference to it in her correspondence, was a sign that she felt her family did not fully appreciate her. It was a sign that she felt she was working hard for nothing. And more than anything else, it was a sign of loneliness and nervous exhaustion. Archer desired companionship and assistance, yet the people who she was closest to were often out of her reach, thereby magnifying the pain of her isolation and confinement.

Archer's responsibilities and roles on the plantation were manifold and substantial. Her isolation, guidance, and management placed her in a central and authoritative position in her community, despite the negative consequences to her mind and body. Most of what occurred at Anchuca and Pine Woods was in some way or another touched by her influence, as were most of the people who resided there. Archer's experience as a wife, mother, and plantation mistress demonstrates that one should not study antebellum slave plantations without examining the roles and contributions of white women. Despite what much of the historiography suggests, Archer did not fulfill a marginal or subsidiary position. She was at the center of her community and was one of the most critical elements in the lives of those who surrounded her.

---

[2]Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 168.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Ann Barnes Archer Papers, Richard Thompson Archer Papers, Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin, Box 2E649.

Fuller, Margaret. Woman in the Nineteenth Century. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971.

Holmes, Kenneth L., ed. Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails, 1852, vol. 4. Lincoln and London: The University of Nebraska Press, 1985.

Kemble, Fanny. Fanny Kemble's Journals. Edited by Catherine Clinton. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Griffen, Farah Jasmine, ed. Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854-1868. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999.

Secondary Sources

Articles

Bankole, Katherine. "Plantations without Slaves: The Legacy of Louisiana Plantation Culture." In Plantation Society and Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality, edited by Thomas J. Durant, Jr. and J. David Knottnerus. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999.

Bloch, Ruth H. "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815." *Feminist Studies* 4 (Summer 1978): 101-26.

Burr, Virginia. "A Woman Made to Suffer and Be Strong: Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1834-1907." In In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, edited by Carol Bleser. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Campbell, Randolph B. "Slavery in the Natchez Trace Collection." In Inside the Natchez Trace Collection: New Sources for Southern History, edited by Katherine J. Adams and Lewis L. Gould. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999.

Cashin, Joan. "The Structure of Antebellum Planter Families: 'The Ties that Bound us Was Strong.'" *Journal of Southern History* 56 (February 1990): 55-70.

Christian, Ollie Gary. "The Social Demography of Plantation Slavery." In Plantation Society and Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality, edited by Thomas J. Durant, Jr. and J. David Knottnerus. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999.

Davis, Ronald L. F. "The Plantation Lifeworld of the Old Natchez District: 1840-1880." In Plantation Society and Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality, edited by Thomas J. Durant, Jr. and J. David Knottnerus. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999.

Durant, Thomas J., Jr. "The Slave Plantation Revisited: A Sociological Perspective." In Plantation Society and Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality, edited by Thomas J. Durant, Jr. and J. David Knottnerus. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999.

Edwards, Laura F. "Law, Domestic Violence, and the Limits of Patriarchal Authority in the Antebellum South." *Journal of Southern History* 65 (November 1999): 753-770.

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South: Sarah Gayle and Her Family." In In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, edited by Carol Bleser. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

- - -. "Social Order and the Female Self: The Conservatism of Southern Women in Comparative Perspective." In What Made the South Different?, edited by Kees Gispen. Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990.

Genovese, Eugene. " 'Our Family, White and Black': Family and Household in the Southern Slaveholders' World View." In In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, edited by Carol Bleser. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

- - -. "Toward a Kinder and Gentler America: The Southern Lady and the Greening of the Politics of the Old South." In In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, edited by Carol Bleser. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Hagler, D. Harland. "The Ideal Woman in the Antebellum South: Lady or Farmwife?" *Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 3 (August 1980), 405-18.

Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd and Anne Firor Scott. "Women in the South." In Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham, edited by John B.Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987.

John, Beverly M. "The Construction of Racial Meaning by Blacks and Whites in Plantation Society." In Plantation Society and Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality, edited by Thomas J. Durant, Jr. and J. David Knottnerus. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999.

Kerber, Linda. "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History." *The Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 9-39.

Scott, Anne Firor. "Women's Perspective on the Patriarchy in the 1850's." *The Journal of American History* 61, no. 1 (1974): 52-64.

Wates, Wylma. "Precursor to the Victorian Age: The Concept of Marriage and Family as Revealed in the Correspondence of the Izard Family of South Carolina." In In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, edited by Carol Bleser. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Weiner, Marli. "Mistresses, Morality, and the Dilemmas of Slaveholding: The Ideology and Behavior of Elite Antebellum Women." In Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past, edited by Patricia Morton. Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996.

Books

Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi. 2 vols. Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1891. Reprint, Spartanbug, South Carolina: The Reprint Company, 1978.

Blassingame, John W. The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.

Bleser, Carol, ed. In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Bynum, Victoria. Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Dakota Press, 1992

Branden, Nathaniel. The Psychology of Self-Esteem: A Revolutionary Approach to Self-Understanding that Launched a New Era in Modern Psychology, 32nd anniversary ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Clinton, Catherine. The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.

- - -. Tara Revisited: Women, War, & the Plantation Legend. New York, London, and Paris: Abbeville Press, 1995.

Cott, Nancy F. The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977.

Deutsch, Sarah. No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987

Durant, Thomas J., Jr. and J. David Knottnerus, eds. Plantation Society and Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999.

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South. Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

Friedman, Jean E. The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

Lebsock, Suzanne. The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984.

McMillen, Sally. Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990.

- - -. Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South. Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1992.

Oakes, James. The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders, 2nd ed. London and New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998.

Rose, Phyllis. Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages. New York: Vintage Books, 1984.

Schwalm, Leslie A. A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997.

Scott, Anne Firor. The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930, 25th anniversary ed. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1995.

- - -. Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Stampp, Kenneth M. The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South. New York: Vintage Books, 1956.

Sydnor, Charles Sackett. Slavery in Mississippi. 2nd ed. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1965.

Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

Vickery, Amanda. The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998.

Weiner, Marli F. Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998.

Welter, Barbara. Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976.

Wyatt-Brown, Bertram. Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior in the Old South. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Unpublished Theses and Dissertations

Barkley, Elizabeth Bookser. "American Primitives: Nineteenth-Century American Women's Personal Letters." Ph.D. diss., University of Cincinnati, 1997.

Gay, Dorothy Ann. "The Tangled Skein of Romanticism and Violence in the Old South: The Southern Response to Abolitionism and Feminism, 1830-1861." Ph.D. diss., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1975.

Hinkley, Bennett Lucerne. "On Southern Womanhood: The Family Life of Ann Barnes Archer, Plantation Mistress." M.A. Thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1996.

Wood, Kirsten E. "Fictive Mastery: Slaveholding Widows in the American Southeast, 1790-1860." Ph.D. diss., The University of Pennsylvania, 1998.