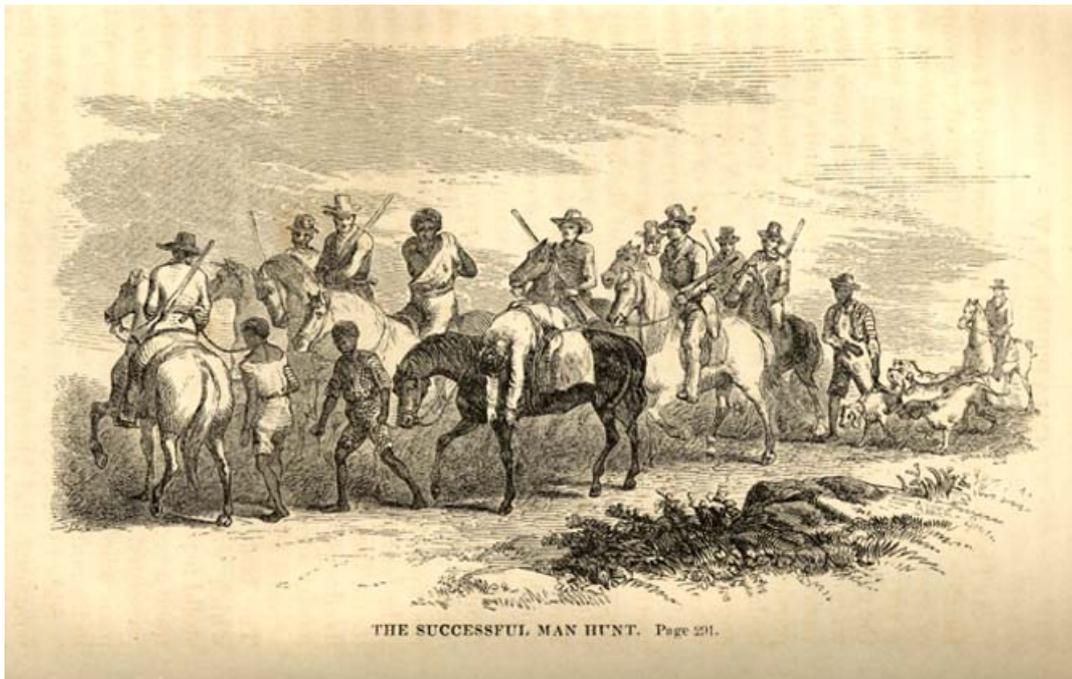## Slave Names [1]

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Slave Names

by John C. Inscoe, 2006

"THE SUCCESSFUL MAN HUNT. Page 291." Photo courtesy of the Richard Hildreth, 1807-1865 Papers, DocSouth, UNC.

[2]Some scholars of slavery have come to view the names and naming of slaves as a meaningful gauge of many aspects of slave life and culture and of how their customs changed over time. Anthropologist Meyer Fortes's observation that the naming practices of any society "epitomize personal experiences, historical happenings, attitudes to life, and cultural ideas and values" holds particularly true for African American [3] slaves. Extensive records of slaveholding over several generations exist for a number of North Carolina plantations, most notably the Skinner and Hayes [4] plantations in Chowan County [5]; Pettigrew plantations in Tyrrell [6], Washington [7], and Wake Counties [8]; Bennehan-Cameron plantation in Orange [9] County; Hargrove plantation in Granville [10]County; Arrington plantations in Nash [11] and Edgecombe [12] Counties; Avery plantation in Burke [13] County; and Lenoir plantation in Caldwell [14]County. Along with records from churches, manumission societies [15], slave traders, and estate settlements, these documents provide a vast pool of data from which to trace patterns and trends from the colonial period through emancipation [16].

Evidence indicates that many slave parents named their children after the first generation or so of family members brought to America. Recognizable patterns of change in names and naming practices are evident from the mid-eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century and on through the 1860s. They reflect an acculturation process by which generations of slaves, increasingly removed from the direct influence of the first enslaved African transplants, adopted the conventions of their owners, eventually creating a culture and value system all their own. The names they gave their children provide a valuable, if limited, index of that process over time.

Slaves remained nameless from the time of their capture until their purchase by American masters. Quite a few slaves were allowed to keep their original African names or names assigned them elsewhere (as reflected by the frequency of Spanish and Portuguese names among the first generation of Carolina slaves). Throughout the colonial period, as many as one-fifth of the slaves in North Carolina retained African names; Quash, Cuffee, Mingo, Sambo, Mustapha, and Sukey were among the most common recorded. Slaves often transferred such names to later generations in modified form or relied on African naming traditions, such as "day names" or names reflecting the order of birth among siblings.

Although masters often assigned names to newly purchased slaves that were whimsical, satirical, or condescending in intent, the frequent appearance of classical names-Venus, Cato, Hercules, Bacchus, Pompey-reflect planters' own educations and libraries. Slaves themselves sometimes chose names denoting weather conditions at the time of their child's birth or some distinctive feature of his or her appearance. Geographic names were common, as were the names of

ships or distant ports for slaves born in places such as <u>Wilmington</u> [17] or New Bern. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, more biblical names were given to slave children, a reflection of the widespread attempts to Christianize slave communities and their greater exposure to Bible stories.

With the <u>Civil War</u> [18] and emancipation of approximately 360,000 slaves in North Carolina, changes in African American names became indicative of a new value system and sense of self-identity among freedpeople. Whereas slaves had perpetuated African, classical, or other unusual names from one generation to the next-creating a distinctive nomenclature unlike that of southern whites-free blacks began to use more traditionally Anglicized versions of their first names.

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