

A Slave Auction at Wilmington ^[1]

Share it now!



Bondspeople [people in bondage, i.e. slaves] lived with the constant fear of being sold away from their loved ones, with no chance of reunion. Historians estimate that most bond were sold at least once in their lives. No event was more traumatic in the lives of enslaved individuals than that of forcible separation from their families. People sometimes fled when they heard of an impending sale.

To meet the growing demands for sugar and cotton, slaveholders developed an active domestic slave trade to move surplus workers to the Deep South. New Orleans, Louisiana, became the largest slave mart, followed by Richmond, Virginia; Natchez, Mississippi; and Charleston, South Carolina. Between 1820 and 1860 more than 60 percent of the Upper South's enslaved population was "sold South." Covering 25 to 30 miles a day on foot, men, women, and children marched south in large groups called coffles. Former bondsman Charles Ball remembered that slave traders bound the women together with rope. They fastened the men first with chains around their necks and then handcuffed them in pairs. The traders removed the restraints when the coffle neared the market.

Johann David Schoepf was born in 1752 in Bayreuth in Germany. He was educated as a physician and scientist, and he came to America during the Revolution, in 1777, as the chief surgeon for German troops in the service of George III. After the war he traveled throughout the new United States, and when he returned to Europe in 1784 he wrote the book from which this excerpt is taken. Schoepf died in 1800 while serving as president of the United Medical Colleges of Ansbach and Bayreuth.

The day after our arrival we attended a public auction held in front of the [Court](#) ^[2]-house. [House-leases for a year were offered for sale](#), and very indifferent houses in the market street, because advantageously placed for trade, were let for 60, 100, and 150 Pd. annual rent. After this, negroes were [let](#) for 12 months to the highest bidder, by public cry as well. A whole family, man, wife, and 3 children, were hired out at [70 Pd.](#) a year; and others singly, at 25, 30, 35 Pd., according to age, strength, capability, and usefulness. In North Carolina it is reckoned in the average that a negro should bring his master about 30 Pd. Current a year (180 [fl. Rhenish](#)). In the [West Indies](#) the clear profit which the labor of a negro brings his master, is estimated at 25–30 [word](#), and in Virginia, according to the nature of the land, at 10–12–15 guineas a year. The keep of a negro here does not come to a great figure, since the daily ration is but a quart of maize, and rarely a little meat or salted fish. Only those negroes kept for house-service are better cared for. Well-disposed masters clothe their negroes once a year, and give them a suit of coarse woollen cloth, two rough shirts, and a pair of shoes. But they who have the largest droves keep them the worst, let them run naked mostly or in rags, and accustom them as much as possible to hunger, but exact of them steady work. Whoever hires a negro, gives on the spot [a bond for the amount](#), to be paid at the end of the term, even should the hired negro fall sick or run off in the meantime. The hirer must also pay the negro's [head-tax](#), feed him and clothe him. Hence a negro is capital, put out at a very high interest, but because of [elopement](#) ^[3] and death certainly very unstable. Other negroes were sold and at divers prices, from 120 to 160 and 180 Pd., and thus at 4–5 to 6 times the average annual hire. Their value is determined by age, health, and capacity. [A cooper](#), indispensable in pitch and tar making, cost his purchaser 250 Pd., and his 15-year old boy, bred to the same work, fetched 150 Pd. The father was put up first; his anxiety lest his son fall to another purchaser and be separated from him was more painful than his fear of getting into the hands of a hard master. "Who buys me," he was continually calling out, "must buy my son too," and it happened as he desired, for his purchaser, if not from motives of humanity and pity, [was for his own advantage obliged so to do](#). An elderly man and his wife were let go at 200 Pd. But these poor creatures are not always so fortunate; often the husband is snatched from his wife, the children from their mother, if this better answers the purpose of buyer or seller, and no heed is given the doleful prayers with which they seek to prevent a separation. One cannot without pity and sympathy see these poor creatures exposed on a raised platform, to be carefully examined and felt by buyers. Sorrow and despair are discovered in their look, and they must anxiously expect whether they are to fall to a hard-hearted barbarian or a [philanthropist](#) ^[4]. If negresses are put up, [scandalous and indecent questions and jests are permitted](#). The auctioneer is at pains to enlarge upon the strength, beauty, health, capacity, faithfulness, and [sobriety](#) ^[5] of his wares, so as to obtain prices so much the higher. On the other hand the negroes auctioned [zealously](#) ^[6] contradict everything good that is said about them; complain of their age, long-standing misery or sickness, and declare that purchasers will be selling themselves in buying them, that they are worth no such high bids: because they know well that the dearer their cost, the more work will be required of them.

User Tags:

[African Americans](#) ^[7]

[history](#) ^[8]

[New Hanover County](#) ^[9]

[North Carolina](#) ^[10]

[North Carolina History](#) ^[11]

[Page](#) ^[12]

slave trade ^[13]

slavery ^[14]

Students ^[15]

Teachers ^[16]

Wilmington ^[17]

Creative Commons BY-NC-SA ^[18]

From:

LEARN NC North Carolina History: A Digital Textbook^[19]

Copyright Date:

2009

3 January 2018

Source URL: <https://ncpedia.org/anchor/slave-auction-wilmington>

Links

[1] <https://ncpedia.org/anchor/slave-auction-wilmington>

[2] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/court>

[3] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/elopement>

[4] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/philanthropist>

[5] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/sobriety>

[6] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/zealous>

[7] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/african-american>

[8] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/history>

[9] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/new-hanover>

[10] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/north-carolina-5>

[11] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/north-carolina-6>

[12] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/page>

[13] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/slave-trade>

[14] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/slavery>

[15] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/students>

[16] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/teachers>

[17] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/wilmington>

[18] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/creative-commons>

[19] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/learn-nc>