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Freedom and the Slave Landscape

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Abstract

Both academic and popular works acknowledge the importance of hidden trails and secret hiding spots in the lives of enslaved communities on Southern antebellum plantations. However, such “slave landscapes,” often celebrated as sites of black resistance, also contributed to the frequent failure of escape efforts. Slave landscapes are best understood not simply as networks of sites and passages occupied by enslaved blacks, but also as the cognitive order that enslaved people imposed upon the settings they shared with master-enslavers, non-slaveholding whites, and others. While providing them many advantages on and around the plantation, slaves’ geographic understandings became a disadvantage once they moved very far away in pursuit of freedom. Nonetheless, the slave landscape still played in an important role in emboldening many to set out for freedom in the first place.

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