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Inventing New England's Slave Paradise:

Master/Slave Relations in Eighteenth-Century Narragansett,

Rhode Island

by

Robert K. Fitts
A.B., University of Pennsylvania, 1987
A.M., Brown University, 1989

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of Anthropology at Brown University

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1991	Patricia E. Rubertone & Robert K. Fitts National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: Smith's Castle. On file National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior.
1990	Puritans, Yankees and Gravestones. *Volumes In Historical Archaeology XV*, edited By Stanley South. South Carolina Institute Of Archaeology and Anthropology.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"The comparatively mild and favorable conditions of Negro slavery, as it formerly prevailed in New England, are well known," and "it is believed that there were but few exceptions to the prevailing rule of kindness to old servants." When Esther Carpenter (1924:195, 201) proclaimed this in the late-nineteenth century, she was merely stating what most historians considered undisputable fact. Approximately one hundred years later some prominent historians still argued that New England slavery was characterized by "a relatively mild form of servitude and a kind of household kinship" (Piersen 1988:146). During the past one hundred and fifty years this interpretation has been repeated so often that it is generally accepted. Yet, it is a nineteenth-century creation. Northern slavery, like Southern, was characterized by the conflict between the masters' desire to control their slaves and the bondsmen's resistance to this domination. For a variety of political, social and intellectual reasons, however, nineteenth and twentieth-century historians created a sanitized history of Northern slavery which removed this inherent conflict. Despite many published criticisms, this interpretation still survives today.

In this dissertation I first examine how historians sanitized the history of slavery for a small region of New England known as Narragansett, Rhode Island. I then return to the primary sources and show these past interpretations' inadequacies by examining the planters' methods of control and their slaves' responses to them. The discrepancy between the tradition of harmonious master/slave relations and my interpretation will highlight how

history itself is a creation which reflects contemporary social issues rather than the discovery of historical facts. Viewing the construction of history as an anthropological problem will provide a more sophisticated approach to New England slavery and insight on the nature of history.

History and Anthropology

Until the late 1970s, most scholars considered the disciplines of history and anthropology to be distinct. Scholars noted stereotyped characteristics to differentiate the disciplines. Historians examined past, literate societies, while anthropologists examined contemporary, non-European and usually illiterate cultures. Furthermore, historians usually constructed narratives, without explicit theory, to show the uniqueness of the events, while anthropologists, in search of cross-cultural generalizations, organized their works topically and explicitly stated their theoretical assumptions. The two disciplines' attitudes toward time also differed. Historians stressed change, while anthropologists, studying the ethnographic present, paid little attention to the past and often depicted societies as timeless. Most importantly historians usually studied events, people, and ideas, while anthropologists focused on a society's culture or structure (Axtell 1981; Carmack 1972; Cohn 1980, 1987a; Evans-Pritchard 1962; Fogelson 1989; Krech 1991; Lurie 1961; Rogers 1991; Sturtevant 1968; Washburn 1961).

Although these characteristics separated the fields of history and anthropology, the distinctions were never fast. As early as the 1920s, members of the French Annales School made their theoretical assumptions explicit and wrote histories which focused on cultural structures (e.g. Bloch 1961; Braudel 1972, 1973). Similarly, some anthropologists, such as Franz Boas, studied the history of illiterate cultures, while others examined literate

cultures diachronically (e.g. Cohn 1961, 1969). Writing in the late 1950s, both

E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1962) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) agreed that the

differences between history and anthropology were slight. For example, Lévi-

Strauss (1963: 16-17, 25) wrote:

> the methodological parallels which are sought between ethnography
> and history, in order to contrast them, are deceptive. ... They share the
> same subject, which is social life; the same goal, which is the better
> understanding of man; and, in fact, the same method, in which only
> the proportion of research techniques varies. ... Until now, a division
> of labor, justified by ancient tradition and the needs of the moment,
> has contributed to the confusion of the theoretical and practical aspects
> of the distinction, and thus to an undue separation of anthropology
> from history.

Evans-Pritchard (1962: 188, 191) concurred.

> I can see no vital difference between sociological history and what some
> anthropologists like to call social dynamics or diachronic sociology or the
> study of social change or processual analysis. Indeed, ... I would say that
> social anthropology and history are both branches of social science... and
> that consequently there is an overlap of relevance. ... I agree, therefore,
> with Professor Levi-Stauss, ... that the difference between them is one of
> orientation, not of aim, and that the two disciplines are indissociables.

Yet, despite the views of these two eminent scholars, most anthropologists

and historians continued to see their disciplines as distinct.

More recently, however, the distinctions between the disciplines have

faded. In the 1970s and 1980s, the field of social history began to dominate the

discipline of history. As a result, many historians incorporated

anthropological approaches and theories into their works. For example, both

Robert Darton (1984) and Rhys Isaac (1982) have used Clifford Geertz's

approach to symbolic interpretation to examine aspects of eighteenth-century

Western life. Other historians have focused on traditionally anthropological

topics, such as social structure (e.g. Greven 1970; Levy 1988; Stone 1977) and

cultural attitudes toward sex (e.g. Thompson 1986), death (e.g. Stannard 1977), and drinking (e.g. Taylor 1979). Another group of historians has invaded the anthropologists' "territory" by studying past non-Western societies. Using the method of ethnohistory, these studies often adopt anthropological theories to examine the native perspective of past events (e.g. Axtell 1981; Morrison 1984). Furthermore, historians no longer undertake only diachronic studies of past societies. Today, many social historians produce synchronic analyses, while others examine contemporary life and events (e.g. Darton 1984; Davis 1987; Wells 1994). Thus, with the rise of the fields of social history and ethnohistory, many historians' works now conform to the stereotypical characteristics of anthropology.

During the 1970s and 1980s, anthropologists were also discovering history. Since the 1970s, the amount of work produced in the sub-fields of historical anthropology and ethnohistory has greatly increased. Although some of these works are synchronic examinations of past cultural structures, many stress cultural change (e.g. Dening 1980; Sahlins 1985; Wolf 1982). Furthermore, with the abandonment of structural-functionalism as a theoretical paradigm, current studies rarely search for cross-cultural generalizations, but instead emphasize historical context and a culture's uniqueness. During the past twenty years, anthropologists also have increasingly examined European and other literate societies rather than more traditional illiterate societies (e.g. Kertzer 1988; Ohnuki-Tierney 1990; Silverman and Gulliver 1992; Wallace 1972; Wolf 1982). As a result of these trends, there is now significant overlap between the disciplines of anthropology and history.

The convergence of history and anthropology has helped scholars from both disciplines to address more sophisticated questions. Scholars are

examining cultural structures diachronically (e.g. Rosaldo 1980), native responses to European contact (e.g. Dening 1980; Obeyesekere 1992; Robinson 1990; Trigger 1976), native perceptions of the past (e.g. Sahlins 1985; Price 1983), and the use of material symbols in power relations (e.g. Leone 1988b; McGuire 1988). Yet, perhaps the most important question currently examined is how history is culturally constructed and how its content is manipulated for social reasons.

The Cultural Construction of History

Throughout the past hundred years most historians and anthropologists have insisted that their disciplines used scientific methods to uncover objective truths. Although few historians explicitly defined what they meant by "scientific method," Peter Novick (1988:37) explained "the model of scientific method which, in principle, the historians embraced. Science must be rigidly factual and empirical, shunning hypothesis; the scientific venture was scrupulously neutral on larger questions of end and meaning; and, if systematically pursued, it might ultimately produce a comprehensive, "definitive" history."

Academic historians first adopted this scientific approach in the late-nineteenth century to differentiate themselves from amateur historians. They argued that good research would uncover historical facts which, when brought together, would disclose the truth about past events. These scholars were aware that gaps in the historical record would led to misinterpretations, but they assumed that mistakes would be corrected once new sources were discovered. The ultimate goal of the historical profession was the convergence of many small-scale objective studies into a definitive history of mankind (Novick 1988).

Between the World Wars, the naiveté of some of these assumptions were attacked by the leaders of the American historical profession (e.g. Beard 1934; Becker 1932), but following World War II a slightly more sophisticated form of positivism came back into vogue. By this time most historians recognized that they could not escape their cultural biases, but they still strived to get as close as possible to historical "truth." This attitude characterized the historical field until the 1970s, when relativist critiques emerged once again. Today, there is no consensus on the best approach to history (Gordon 1991; Hexter 1991; Megill 1991; Novick 1988, 1991).

Anthropology followed a similar pattern. In the late-nineteenth century, reacting to grand evolutionary schemes which often relied on historical conjecture, Franz Boas advocated the rigid scientific study of small-scale societies. He argued that cross cultural laws could be determined only after the internal dynamics of individual cultures were understood (Boas 1940). Although many later anthropologists disagreed with Boas's theoretical approach, most took a positivist stance and agreed that anthropology was an objective science. Throughout most of the twentieth century, most anthropologists' ultimate goal was the creation of cross-cultural generalizations which could explain and predict human behavior (e.g. Harris 1979; Murdock 1968; Radcliffe-Brown 1952). As in the field of history, many anthropologists in the 1970s began to reject this positivist stance for various degrees of relativism. Now, relativistic views are in vogue, but they have not completely replaced positivism.

Despite the prevailing opinions in both history and anthropology, numerous studies scattered throughout the century showed that the completely objective search for historical truths is unattainable (e.g. Beard 1934; Becker 1932; Collingwood 1956; Deetz 1988b; Evans-Pritchard 1962; Kuhn

1962; Lowenthal 1985). These writers noted that it was impossible to know more than a fraction about past events. To begin with, most actions and thoughts went unrecorded, leaving them forever beyond the historian's grasp. Even recorded events were already interpreted by a contemporary observer who decided what to document and what to ignore. Thus, a historian's first task is to determine the assumptions, biases, and accuracy of this observer. Therefore, from the start a historian's data do not correspond with actual events. Furthermore, individual biases, perspectives, and knowledge can led observers to describe the same event differently. Thus, there can be multiple, and equally valid, accounts of the same event. Limited by the numbers of available sources and by the length of the final product, a historian can only examine a handful of accounts. Thus, they can rarely know how all participants perceived an event. This precludes them from capturing an event in its entirety and shows that the concept of historical "truth" is itself problematic.

Once a historian has collected his data, he makes subjective decisions which make complete objectivity impossible. First, he must choose the topic and thesis of his study. The question he asks and the methods and theories he uses to answer it are derived from current intellectual paradigms and contemporary social life. As intellectual paradigms and social patterns change over time, so must approaches to historical questions. Thomas Kuhn (1970:111) explained: "when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them. Led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during [intellectual] revolutions scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments [or methods] in places they have looked before."