Racial Relations during Reconstruction

The Reconstruction Era attempted to reintegrate the Confederate states into the Union, on the grounds that full civil and political equality for African Americans be instituted in those Southern states. By juxtaposing the two races, artist Winslow Homer raised questions central to the reconstruction period of American history: what would the relationship be between former slaves and former masters now that they were all free citizens of the United States? What rights would the emancipated have? Homer’s painting not only alludes to these broad questions, but it addresses the specific topic of the civil rights of emancipated families.

The era of Reconstruction got off to a positive start from the end of the war to 1870. Those five years saw the ratification of three constitutional amendments; the Thirteenth Amendment had abolished slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment addressed citizenship rights and equal protection under the law and finally, the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited discrimination in voting rights based on color, race or previous condition of servitude, thereby expanding the range of American democracy to many more citizens. But these amendments did nothing to alleviate tensions or to resolve conflicts between freed slaves and their former slaveholders. The end of the war unraveled the power slaveholders held over their freed slaves. The mistress in Homer’s 1876 painting A Visit from the Old Mistress may be experiencing one of the most common postwar adjustments: confronting her formerly enslaved black women with whom she must now negotiate for their wage labor. The artist echoes the moment of disconnect described by one former slaveholding woman who wrote, “It seemed humiliating to be compelled to bargain and haggle with our own former servants about wages.” That irritation makes profoundly clear how deeply some of these white women misunderstood and underestimated the effects of slavery and how little they had comprehended the minds of those who had been enslaved.

A Visit from the Old Mistress projects the dismay felt by an overwhelming majority of former slaveholders who discovered that their slaves did not in fact love them or wish to be enslaved, no matter how benign the owner might have been. One woman wrote to her sister that her former slaves had left “to assume freedom without bidding any of us an affectionate adieu.” They wrote with apparently genuine shock and a sense of betrayal when inevitably their newly freed slaves left for the promise of emancipation or remained to assert their freedom where they already lived. The animosity evident between this white woman and her former slaves in A Visit from the Old Mistress shows that Homer understands this disconnect and has found a powerful way to make it visible. The mistress has returned, expecting to be greeted by the formerly enslaved people who loved her, only to find herself mistaken. They are not happy to see her, and the painting seethes with hostility, anger, and bitterness. Homer’s composition highlights an issue that had not yet been resolved: the understanding that both black and white carried baggage from slavery and the war years.

Under slavery African American families had been at the mercy of their mistress or master who could at any time part husband from wife or parent from child. Homer depicts a mother holding on tightly to her child, who can no longer be sold away from her family by this mistress or by any other. He
also shows both the visiting old mistress and the mother holding the child wearing gold wedding rings, which are often difficult to see in reproductions, but clear to the naked eye. While Homer was often careless about precise visual details and was attacked by contemporary critics for his “lack of finish,” he carefully delineated each of these wedding bands with its own highlight and shadow.

Homer often paired this painting in exhibitions with his 1877 artwork, *Sunday Morning in Virginia*, setting up parallels between the two paintings in size, composition, and theme. *Sunday Morning in Virginia* depicts three African American children listening intently to a young African American girl who points to an open Bible on her lap, instructing the children how to read. Nearby an elderly African American woman, presumably a former slave, sits by the group. She appears deep in thought, her gaze indicating her attention is elsewhere. Homer sets up a dichotomy between the two generations, one who certainly has clear memories of the restrictions slavery imposed, and another that has, for the most part, grown up in the freedom of the Reconstruction era. The artist addresses major changes in the lives of freed people after emancipation which dealt with how much control blacks had over their own lives in post-emancipation America. Specifically, it was illegal for slaves and free blacks to gather for the purpose of learning to read or write. Imprisonment, whippings, and fines were several punishments for disobeying the law.

The confrontation depicted in *A Visit from the Old Mistress* can be assumed, from the title as well as the physical setting in a rough cabin, to be set on or near a Southern plantation after the Civil War. Homer is implying that, as was often the case, these former slaves continued to live around the plantation where they had once lived. Homer does not tell an elaborate story with many gestures or strong expressions – he places these people together in a relatively neutral way so that the viewer may fill in much of the emotional detail from his or her own knowledge and beliefs. Homer, as a Northerner, would have seen such a story primarily from the outside, but viewers with different backgrounds might bring far more to the story. The juxtaposition of freed women with their former mistress in the composition suggests the sweeping changes that occurred in racial relations on plantations after emancipation.

Before emancipation, the mistress managed her home and was in charge of slaves that serviced the main house. All enslaved women on a plantation would have spent some time in the main house, but the amount of time spent there varied depending on their roles and ages. Those who were closest to
the mistress were the house slaves, relegated to domestic roles such as cooks, chambermaids, nurses, and washerwomen. Their duties included dressing the white women and children, taking care of laundry, cooking meals, looking after white children and general household cleaning. Further from the center of the main household were the “domestic producers.” These female slaves helped to produce and gather items such as milk, butter, eggs, vegetables and fruits, preserves, thread and textiles.

The enslaved women who were the farthest outside the realm of the white mistress were the female field slaves who worked alongside enslaved men to plant, hoe and harvest crops. Field labor was usually divided between tasks done by women, such as sowing or hoeing, and those allotted to men, like plowing and ditching. These physically demanding tasks were performed all day, from before sunrise to after sunset. When field slaves became ill, injured or at the end of a pregnancy they worked indoors, spinning or carding cotton until they were able to return to the fields. Slaves with many young children might also be spared from field labor, though they were still expected to work many long hours. Inclement weather also brought the field slaves inside the main house to work other jobs.

Slaves had little certainty in their lives, and many unexpected changes were made at the direction of the white mistress. She might decide to transfer a field slave to domestic production, or introduce a domestic producer to household tasks. The mistress could also choose to punish a slave by assigning her unfamiliar tasks in a new environment, such as moving a house slave to the heavy work of the fields or moving a relatively independent field slave into the close scrutiny of housework.

Whether the adult black women shown in Homer’s A Visit from the Old Mistress were formerly house slaves, domestic producers, or field slaves, they would have had a personal history of the way the mistress managed her household and her slaves. The level of tension between these women would depend a great deal on how the mistress treated her slaves and what had happened to the people of this particular plantation before and after the Civil War. The young child, however, was likely born after emancipation and her relationship with the mistress would likely start on a different foundation than that of her older relatives.

**Life after Emancipation**

The **Freedman’s Bureau** was created in 1865 to look after the rights of newly freed slaves, providing them with social, education and economic services. The bureau, along with churches and missionary societies, helped to set up more than three thousand schools in the South attended by freed blacks. For more on education after the Civil War, see [Literacy as Freedom](#). Education remained critically important to freed blacks in their quest for civic equality, but land ownership offered them the opportunity for economic freedom. Many of these former slaves believed that they had a moral right to the land that they had previously toiled while they were enslaved. After much debate, in 1865 Congress authorized the Freedman’s Bureau to rent 40 acre parcels of abandoned or confiscated farmland to freed blacks, with the eventual option to buy. This redistribution of farmland is a concept referred to as **forty acres and a mule**. In 1866 the **Southern Homestead Act** was passed by Congress, giving preference to blacks for access to public land in five southern states. However, a short time later President Andrew
Johnson nullified the previous acts and ordered that all of the redistributed land be returned to the original owners. With the cost of land available through the Homestead Act of 1862 too high for most blacks and with the institution of Black Codes, owning land and economic independence for freed blacks became near impossible.

Legal marriage was also a high priority for former slaves. The Freedman’s Bureau was deluged with requests by freed blacks to be legally married. Previously under the laws of Southern slave states, slaves were considered property and therefore could not create or enter into contracts. While many slaves took part in symbolic marriage ceremonies, these marriages had no validity in the eyes of the law. The rights of the master over the slave were paramount. Slave families could be torn apart whenever their master decided, for his own purposes. Parents had no right to their children as they too were considered property of the slave owner. In Louisiana, the law stated that slave children could not be sold away from their mothers until they reached the age of ten, but since slaves could not testify against white people in court, such laws had little force. A corporal in the U. S. Colored Troops explained to his troops the importance of Virginia’s 1866 act legitimizing Slave marriages: “The Marriage Covenant is at the foundation of all our rights. In slavery we could not have legalized marriage, now we have it . . . . and we shall be established as a people.”

Whites, too, saw legal black marriage as a high priority for both administrative and moral reasons. Among other things, it was important to create laws that would allow children conceived during slavery to be legitimate. If all children born under slavery have been considered illegitimate, they would all have become an expensive population of wards of the state. With a legal marriage in place, symbolized by the ring on the black woman’s hand, the child in A Visit from the Old Mistress is legitimate and will bear her father’s family name. Though the husband/ father figure is not present in the composition, the black mother’s wedding ring is a subtle yet powerful reminder of his presence.

In the months after emancipation freed former slaves, now able to travel, moved around the South in search of the family members from whom they had been torn during slavery times. When men and wives found each other, they would often go the Freedman’s Bureau to have their unions made legal. A Union officer wrote to his wife in May 1865, “Men are taking their wives and children, families which had been for a long time broken up are united and oh! such happiness. I am glad to be here.” An army chaplain attached to a regiment of black soldiers in Arkansas, reported that he spent much of his time conducting such ceremonies: “Weddings, just now, are very popular, and abundant among the Colored People. They have just learned, of the Special Order No’ 15. of Gen Thomas by which, they may not only be lawfully married, but have their Marriage Certificates, Recorded, in a book furnished by the Government. This is most desirable; and the order, was very opportune.”

The Black Codes instituted by these states severely restricted the rights of newly freed blacks. With these codes in place, black people were still not full citizens. Due to President Andrew Johnson’s lackadaisical Reconstruction policy and his support of former Confederate political leaders, the Southern states attempted to reinstate slavery in all but name. The codes allowed officials to arrest blacks who could not document residence or employment. Those arrested were sentenced to forced labor on road
construction crews or farms. One of the Black Code laws that might have affected the child depicted in *A Visit From the Old Mistress* was the Apprenticeship Law which allowed judges to take black children from their parents if it was deemed that they could not properly support their children. These children were often then apprenticed to former slaveholders. Former masters had the strongest right to seize children of their former slaves. These laws were quickly questioned in court and were largely removed under Reconstruction, but long and expensive court fights were necessary for African American parents to regain the custody of their children.

Soon after the Civil War share cropping emerged as the dominant mode of labor in the South, as the Freedman’s Bureau had encouraged emancipated people to return to work on plantations. This was due to the larger concern of reviving the Southern economy after the war. While a reformed labor system was important, getting crops growing in the fields again became the higher priority. Consequently, former slaves were encouraged to return to work (under contract) for their former masters. Initially these labor contracts between freed blacks and white plantation owners were supervised by the Freedman’s Bureau, but slowly this supervision began to wane. White landowners were soon able to take advantage of this lack of supervision, coercing more favorable contracts for themselves. Even after the repeal of the Black Codes, former slaveholders could have held a black family in such an oppressive share cropping agreement that they were unable to send their children to school and had to keep them working on the plantation to save the family from sliding into poverty.
Glossary

**Black Codes**: laws instituted by individual states that restricted the rights of emancipated blacks.

**Fifteenth Amendment**: (passed 1869; ratified 1870) guaranteed all American male citizens, regardless of race, the right to vote.

**Fourteenth Amendment**: (passed 1866; ratified 1868) prohibited states from violating the rights of its citizens, providing equal protection under the law.

**forty acres and a mule**: a concept of land redistribution for freed slaves, whereby Congress authorized the Freedman’s Bureau to oversee the rental of 40 acre parcels of abandoned or confiscated farmland, (formerly owned by Southern plantation owners) with the eventual option to purchase.

**Freedmen’s Bureau**: A United States Government agency that aided free blacks during the Reconstruction Era in their transition from slavery to freedom. The bureau provided educational, social, and economic services and advice to free blacks.

**Homestead Act of 1862**: signed by President Lincoln, the act encouraged westward migration by providing settlers with 160 acres of public land. After five years of continuous residence, settlers were given the option to purchase the land.

**share cropping**: a system in which freed blacks rented plots of land in return for giving a portion of their crop yield to the landowner, who were often their former master.

**Southern Homestead Act**: (1866) the act provided freed blacks preferential access to public lands in five southern states. However, the high cost and poor quality of the land defeated the purpose of the act.

**Thirteenth Amendment**: (1865) abolished slavery in the Southern states.
Homer’s first artistic experience in Virginia was during the Civil War, when he worked as a war correspondent for *Harper’s Weekly*, drawing scenes from behind Union lines. He later returned to the state after the war in 1875 in search of new inspiration for his artwork.

In an 1882 account of the artist’s life, author G. W. Sheldon wrote that Homer’s “Negro studies, recently brought from Virginia, are in several respects – in their total freedom from conventionalism and mannerism, in their strong look of life, and in their sensitive feeling for character – the most successful things of the kind that this country has yet produced.”

Homer was relentlessly criticized by whites for depicting blacks, and even by some African Americans for portraying exclusively poor, rural blacks and not the emerging black working class. Despite these criticisms, Homer’s depictions were far more sensitive to African Americans than other artistic caricature-like depictions at the time. His depictions also targeted the main issues of the day – slave literacy, racism, domestic labor, and the status of African Americans in post-Civil War America.

Leaving such a large, open space in a composition was not something that was not done in Homer’s day. But the gap serves an important purpose – to physically and psychologically create tension and drive a wedge between the two main opposing figures.

Several authors and historians have suggested that Homer’s almost sympathetic portrayals of blacks were not rendered out of a progressive belief for the black in American society, but simply because Homer was a skillful observer and that he strove for authentic representations of what he observed.

Homer grew up in the North, and his parents were known to have opposed slavery, though there are no records that he himself was an abolitionist.

Additionally, there is no extant correspondence from Homer during his time in Virginia observing black rural life, so we cannot say with certainty what his intentions were towards a deeper meaning for *A Visit from the Old Mistress*; the composition simply remains open to interpretation.
The visible wedding rings on both the black woman and former mistress imply that they share a human condition; both women are now on equal ground after the war, and both are able to enjoy the freedom to be wife and homemaker.

The vogue for depicting rural, poor figure in scenes of everyday life began to wane during the Reconstruction era. With the progression of industrialization the American economy boomed, and part of the American population grew richer and richer. However, this further widened the gap between the classes.

[Edwards, 1992; Regosin, 2002; Morsman, 2010.]

While Homer was often careless about precise visual details and was attacked by contemporary critics for his “lack of finish,” [Conrads, 2001], p. 94]

In Louisiana, the law stated that slave children could not be sold away from their mothers until they reached the age of ten, but since slaves could not testify against white people in court, such laws had little force. [Edwards, (April 1996): 81-124.]

Slave marriages: “The Marriage Covenant is at the foundation of all our rights. In slavery we could not have legalized marriage, now we have it . . . . and we shall be established as a people.”[Edwards, “The Marriage Covenant”.]

“Men are taking their wives and children, families which had been for a long time broken up are united and oh! such happiness. I am glad to be here.” [Edwards, “The Marriage Covenant.”]
“One army chaplain, attached to a regiment of black soldiers in Arkansas, reported that he spent much of his time conducting such ceremonies. . . . ‘Weddings, just now, are very popular, and abundant among the Colored People. They have just learned, of the Special Order No’ 15. of Gen Thomas by which, they may not only be lawfully married, but have their Marriage Certificates, Recorded, in a book furnished by the Government. This is most desirable; and the order, was very opportune.’” (Berlin, 1997)

**Transcript from the Civil War in American Art – Eleanor Harvey Podcast**

“In 1876 Winslow Homer traveled to Virginia and on his return to New York he painted several monumental works that explored the relationship between blacks and whites during the Reconstruction period in the South.

In this painting, titled *A Visit from the Old Mistress*, Homer explores the new power relationship between black and white women after the emancipation of the slaves. Here this white woman who is clearly visiting women who used to belong to her, is coming to the abrupt realization that these black women number one, don’t particularly like her, they are not happy to see her, and in fact whatever she has come to ask about, the answer may in fact, be no.

For the black women themselves, the ability to set the terms of their employment, to ask for wages, to decide who to work for and not to work for, and what tasks to do or refuse to do is a new privilege and clearly what is happening here is an awkward moment between these two women as they decide on what terms they will or won’t get along. The tension in this painting is palpable. The stare down between these two women is discomforting and extremely effective.

But Homer made a pivotal change in this painting. Between the time that he began painting until the time it was sold he first painted and the time that he sold it, he painted out what we can now see, which is the right arm of the white woman held close to her chest. It seems the former mistress may once have carried a red flower; perhaps a goodwill offering or a symbol of her own heartache. But Homer painted out this softening element and left the final image as one of stark confrontation. In doing so he winnowed and concentrated the meaning, focusing on the tension between black and white and the unresolved issues at the end of the war. We can now see this arm in part because over the last hundred years, the paint that Homer used to mask this has become slightly transparent and the ghost of that image, of a hand grasping a flower, can now be seen. It’s an opportunity to have a window into the changes in mind and mood that the artist made as he completed this work.”
“African American sociologist Orlando Patterson . . . pointed to contemporary problems in the African American family and looked to slavery as the origin of the black matriarchy.” (Burton, 2008)

“Stable families provided physical, emotional, and cultural support for childbirth and child rearing. Yet slaves understood the tenuous position of their families. Members could still be punished or sold at the owner's discretion or whim.” (Burton, 2008)

“Although not legally recognized, planters did allow marriage as a social institution, and slaves themselves chose to live in couples and family units. U.S. senator and pro-slavery advocate, James Henry Hammond (1807-1864), write in his rules for governing slaves that “Marriage is to be encouraged as it adds to the comfort, happiness & health of those who enter upon it, besides insuring a greater increase.” (Burton, 2008)

“The masters understood the strength of marital and family ties among their slaves well enough to see in them a powerful means of social control.” (Burton, 2008)

“Even though the formation of family units was often encouraged, slave marriages were not recognized by the law.” (Burton, 2008)

“Slaves were oftentimes separated from family members and friends for a variety of reasons. For example, they could be sold to liquidate estates, to settle debts, or because they were considered incorrigibly defiant, or they could be given as wedding presents.” (Burton, 2008)

“In some cases, ex-slaves who joined the Union army reported that masters sold their family members as retribution for their enlistment.” (Burton, 2008)

“Despite the legal restrictions, many slaveholders, especially mistresses, chose to religiously educate their bondmen. Plantation mistresses typically emphasized aspects of the Bible that encouraged slave subservience. They were particularly inclined to introduce to their slave the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, and various catechisms prepared specifically for slaves.” (Burton, 2008)

“The slave community also instilled within the minds of young slaves the reality that the interests of whites were inimical to those who were relegated to the slave quarters. Thus, from a very early age, most blacks were suspicious of whites, Blacks views whites, in many instances, as liars and hypocrites, especially as they related to, and interacted with, the African American community. Although there were a few kind and well-intentioned slaveholders, slave youth, except in very special circumstances, were told to never fully trust their masters, mistresses, and overseers. Despite such suspicion and
distrust, both the slave of his master and the master of his slave, plantation dynamics were far too complex to conclude that many bondmen were not victimized by conflicted feelings. **Former slave** Austin Steward recalled that when his mistress died “the slaves were all deeply affected by the scene; some doubtless truly lamented the death of their mistress; others rejoiced that she was no more, and all were more or less frightened [about being sold off the plantation]. One of them I remember went to the pump and wet his face, so as to appear to weep with the rest.” (Burton, 2008)

“Every slave was indebted to members of his nuclear family, his extended family, and his fellow community members to provide him practical skills and a psychological compass to carry him through the trials of a life in bondage.” (Burton, 2008)

“Little physical evidence of the nature of slaves’ quarters was recorded of has survived. Generally speaking, however, it is known that housing for slaves was of poor quality. Slaves typically lived in small log houses coated with a plaster made of mud and other materials to keep out the wind, rain, and snow; a brick fireplace was centered in the largest part of the structure. Dirt floors were most common, and wooden chimneys that could be needed as needed were attached. The door was usually centered on one side, and if there was a window, it was typically unglazed. Archaeological evidence of duplex-like cabins share by two or more families has also been discovered. On the largest plantations, housing for slaves was often a large barracks-like structure fitted with bunks and occupied solely by men; women, children, and the elderly lived some distance away in mean, small wood cabins. Black overseers on the largest plantations sometimes occupied a small one-room cabin by themselves.” (Burton, 2008)

“Social relations among slaves enabled them to affirm their humanity, and most importantly, served as a conveyor of cultural and survival skills that aided in the resilience and ability of slaves to endure the harshness of the institution of slavery.” (Burton, 2008)

“Marriage among slaves was permitted at the discretion of the owners, sometimes arranged by them, and sometimes simply forbidden. For slaves who were allowed to marry, their status was neither respected nor sanctioned by law because they were the property of their owners.” (Burton, 2008)

“Slave mistresses were commonplace and prevalent in the South. White women either ignored the situation or were resigned to it, knowing there was little they could do to change the relationship. They often blamed the mistresses, choosing to believe the slaves seduced their husbands, brother, and sons – rarely acknowledging that the young women were regarded as property and had no rights whatsoever.” (Burton, 2008)

In paintings depicting African American subjects in the south in the 1870s, like *A Visit from the Old Mistress*, Homer conveyed important aspects of contemporary southern life to his northern audiences, just as he had done while working as an illustrator for *Harper’s Weekly* during the Civil War. In the 1870s Homer most likely visited Virginia at least once and used the experience as the basis for paintings of African American subjects. He had, of course, already visited Virginia in 1862 and in later
trips following the Army of the Potomac during the Civil War. [Calo, 1980: 4-27; Cikovsky, 1995; Quick, 1978: 61-81; Wood, 1988]

“Two things chiefly surprised me in their feeling toward their former masters – the absence of affection and the absence of revenge. . . . I never heard one speak of the masters except as natural enemies.”
Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911), Union Commander

“Slaveowners had powerful incentives to encourage slave marriages: to bring new slaves into the world and to discourage slaves from running away. . . . The keenest challenge to the slave family came not from the slaves themselves but from slavery. The law did not recognize or protect slave families. Although slaveholders were reluctant to break slave marriages by sale, economic hardships might force their hand. . . . Naturally, the commonplace buying and selling severely disrupted slaves’ attempts to create a stable family life.” (Boyer, 2011)

“The slaveholders’ interest in encouraging family connections in the quarter was also compromised by decisions to sell or transfer slaves. Such decisions might be the calculated result of a reorganization of plantation production or a hasty response to financial crisis; they might derive from an owner’s death or from a determination to punish an intractable slave. Whatever the cause, such transfers – mere property transactions in the plantation account book – inevitably fragmented families.” (Berlin, 1997)

“To supplement the owners’ dole, husbands hunted and fished and crafted furniture, shoes, and tools, and wives fashioned their own wares as quilters, weavers, and seamstresses. Together they worked garden and provision grounds, kept barnyard animals, made pottery, and wove baskets. Sometimes they sold their produce and handicrafts to fellow slaves, to their owners, or to other free people.” (Berlin, 1997)

“Like the obligations of husband and wife, those of parent and child generally found expression in the patterns of daily life rather than in formal pronouncements. But disputes between former slaves and former owners over the custody of children, as well as conflicts among parents themselves, brought to the surface the unspoken standards that governed the relationships of parents and children and the emotional ties that buttressed them. Contests over children’s labor figured prominently in these disputes, for the familial bond was economic as well as emotional. The labor of children was as essential to the support of the freedpeople’s households as it was to the material enterprise and domestic comfort of the former slaveholders. To reassert control over what had been unquestionably theirs under slavery, former owners employed apprenticeship laws that bound black children to unpaid labor until they reached adulthood. In challenging such apprenticeship, freed parents recognized the economic importance of their children to the family’s survival but also asserted a fuller understanding of familial bonds.” (Berlin, 1997)
The Freedman’s Bureau, created in 1865 to look after the rights of newly freed slaves, was deluged with requests from former slaves who wished to be legally married. [See: Marriage records of the Freedman's Bureau on their web site.]

Is the Gold Ring Plausible?

Would a man who could not afford to keep his family in any better circumstances than the rags and rough cabin that Homer shows have been able to afford a gold wedding ring? Probably not, but Homer needed the clearly recognizable symbol to tell his story. In reality, African Americans found their own symbols of marriage. One woman who married while enslaved recalled that her husband to be had carved away the inside of big red button to make her a ring. She wore the ring lovingly for 50 years until it vanished into a wash tub. [Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll.]

While work in the house was physically easier, it was also far more closely supervised and afforded many opportunities for correction or humiliation by the white mistress. The mistress would have decided which enslaved woman would do which types of labor. At her whim, the mistress could demote a house slave to physically demanding field work. Or a relatively autonomous field slave could suddenly find herself close under the authoritative eye of the mistress in the big house. Manipulations of the lives of slave women were easy for a mistress to arrange, whether she punished slaves or defended them from punishment by her husband the master. [Weiner, 1998]

“Migration to the Southwest often deeply unsettled plantation women. They found themselves in frontier regions, surrounded by slaves and bereft of the companionship of white social peers. “I am sad tonight, sickness preys on my frame,” wrote a bride who moved to Mississippi in 1833. “I am alone and more than 150 miles from any near relative in the wild woods of an Indian nation.” At times, wives lacked even their husbands’ companionship. Plantation agriculture kept men on the road, scouting new land for purchase, supervising outlying holdings, and transacting business in New Orleans or Memphis. Planters and their wives found various ways to cope with their isolation. Hiring overseers to supervise their plantations, many spent long periods in cities. . . . Most planters acted as their own overseers, however, and dealt with harsh living conditions by opening their homes to visitors. The responsibility for such hospitality fell heavily on wives, who might have to entertain as many as fifteen people for breakfast and attend to the needs of visitors who stayed for days. Plantation wives bore the burdens of raising their children, supervising house slaves, making clothes and carpets, looking after smokehouses.
and dairies, planting gardens, and keeping accounts. On the frequent occasions when their husbands were away on business or holding political office, their wives, along with their overseers, ran their plantations.” (Boyer, 2011)

“The isolation, drudgery, and humiliation that planters’ wives experienced turned very few against the system [of slavery]. When the Civil War came, they supported the Confederacy as enthusiastically as any group. However much they might have living as white islands in a sea of slaves, they recognized no less than their husbands that their wealth and position depended on slavery.” (Boyer, 2011)

“When given the opportunity, slaves sought to solemnize their marriages before clergymen. White clergymen who accompanied the Union army into Mississippi and Louisiana in the closing years of the Civil War conducted thousands of marriage rites for slaves who had long viewed themselves as married and desired a formal ceremony and registration.” (Boyer, 2011)

“The slave regime of the American South gave slaves little room to develop a family life. Slaves’ marriages had no legal standing; their unions were mere couplings whose issue, like the slaves’ labor, belonged to their owners. In the eyes of the law, slaves could not be husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. Slave parents had no rights to their children, who – like themselves – were the owner’s property.” (Berlin, 1997)

“Slaves based their family life on the marriage compact. They courted according to customs of their own choosing and selected partners according to rules of their own making. . . . Once married, most slave husbands and wives honored their vows with lifelong fidelity. Their unions were broken more often by death or forcible separation than by desertion or mutual agreement. Within the slave household, husbands and wives played distinct and complementary roles.” (Berlin, 1997)

“If northern ministers and teachers took special interest in formalizing the marriage relations of former slaves, the freedpeople themselves pressed for ceremonies that celebrated the new security of black family life and brought their most intimate ties into conformity with the standards of a free people. One army chaplain, attached to a regiment of black soldiers in Arkansas, reported that he spent much of his time conducting such ceremonies. . . . ‘Weddings, just now, are very popular, and abundant among the Colored People. They have just learned, of the Special Order No’ 15. of Gen Thomas by which, they may not only be lawfully married, but have their Marriage Certificates, Recorded, in a book furnished by the Government. This is most desirable; and the order, was very opportune.’” (Berlin, 1997)

“Slave fathers and mothers had no legal claim to their sons and daughters, who, like themselves, were property. . . . In defiance of their owners; power, slaves affirmed the connection of parent to child . . . and defined for themselves the responsibilities each bore to the other. Finding support in a slave community that saw the rearing of children as a collective endeavor.” (Berlin, 1997)

The solidarity of the women in the family – perhaps child, mother, aunt, and grandmother – is clearly shown by the close physical proximity of these women. But if this painting is about black families, why is the black father not depicted? During and after the Civil War, as the majority of white male
southerners between the ages of 17 and 50 went to serve in the Confederate military and then often did not return alive or well, southern white women were left in charge of many plantations. With few white men to offer the threat or reality of violence to control slaves or former slaves who still worked on plantations after emancipation, the possibility of violent insurrection or sexual assault by black male slaves loomed large in the southern imagination. [See Drew Gilpin Faust, Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 30, 59.] Had a black male been included in the composition, the implied sexual threat and/or tension toward the white woman would have distracted from the topic Homer wanted to open for discussion – the stability of the black family after emancipation. A husband’s faithful presence and support of his family is implied by the child he has begotten and the wedding ring he has labored to purchase and put on his wife’s finger. How stable the African-American family could stay in the face of racial prejudice and economic hardship would be another question, implied by the patched clothes the black women wear. The bonnet on the child’s head shows a level of protection and care that these women might not have known when they were growing up in the shadow of the big house.

Under slavery, the African American family was dominated by the master and mistress. The enslaved husband and father had no rights to protect or determine the lives of his wife and children. On any typical southern plantation, the mistress would have known all of the enslaved women well. Whether they were house slaves doing cleaning and looking after children, domestic producers who looked after dairy cows or wove fabric, or field slaves who grew and harvested crops, they would all have seen the mistress frequently. Enslaved women and men who worked in the fields were daily under the direct supervision of men – white overseers or black slave drivers. But all enslaved women on a plantation came to the big house, under the control of the mistress, whenever they were sick, far along in pregnancy, had just born children, had many small children, or when the weather for too bad for field labor.

“Slave women who worked in the fields were usually separated from their children by day; young sons and daughters often were cared for by the aged or by the mothers of other children. . . . Despite enormous obstacles, the relationships within slave families often were intimate and, where possible, long-lasting.” (Boyer, 2011)

“In white families, the parent-child bond overrode all others; slaves, in contrast, emphasized ties between children and their grandparents, uncles, and aunts as well as their parents. Such broad kinship ties marked the West African cultures from which many slaves had originally been brought to America, and they were reinforced by the separations between children and one or both parents that routinely occurred under slavery. . . . In addition, slaves often created “fictive” kin networks; in the absence of uncles and aunts, they simply called friends their uncles, aunts, brothers, or sisters. In effect, slaves invested non-kin relations with symbolic kin functions. In this way, they helped protect themselves against the involuntary disruption of family ties by forced sale and established a broader community of obligation.” (Boyer, 2011)
“Slavery thus played havoc with the domestic lives of slaves. The inability of parents to protect their children and to provide for loved ones eroded their domestic authority and their capacity to impart their own values to their offspring. In like manner, the slaves’ inability to hold – rather than be – property and the resulting absence of a system of legal inheritance denied the slave family a material base and eroded long-term loyalties. The owners’ power stunted generational ties within the slave community.” (Berlin, 1997)

“[Freed slaves] struggled to reconstitute their work and family lives in ways that would reduce the direct supervision of white employers and allot more of the family’s labor to self-directed activities. . . . A key component of the same process was the widespread withdrawal of black women – especially mothers – from field labor and their attention to productive activities at home.” (Berlin, 1997)

“The conjugal relationships of slaves had no legal standing, no formal protection against intrusions by the owner. Husbands and wives could reside together or visit across plantation lines only with their owners’ consent. . . . Their unions could be permanently shattered at any time by the sale of a spouse or other forced separation. In the face of these circumstances, slaves forged their own understandings of marriage, the proper regulation of sexuality, the obligations of husbands to wives and wives to husbands, and the role of the wider slave community in sanctioning and enforcing such expectations. With the long-awaited end of slavery, they adapted these understandings to the new world of freedom. Eager to celebrate publicly relationships that under slavery had received but backhanded and partial recognition, husbands and wives validated their marriages before clergymen and government officials. In so doing, they not only confirmed the arrival of freedom but also established their unions at law and thereby gained the claims to progeny and property that only legal marriage could provide. Spouses who had belonged to different owners seized the opportunity to live together under one roof. Former slaves whose marriages had been broken by sale and distance set out to reunite with long-lost husbands and wives. Young men and women marrying for the first time created families free from the constraints that slavery had imposed.” (Berlin, 1997)

The Artwork

We know that Homer intended these two paintings as a pair because he said so in a letter to wealthy art collector Thomas B. Clarke. Homer drew Clarke’s attention to A Visit from the Old Mistress as a companion to his painting Sunday Morning in Virginia. Homer wrote to Clarke on April 23, 1892 “I have two darkey pictures one of which you refer to ‘Dressing for the Carnival.’ The other, the companion to the one Mr. W. T. Evans has [is] ‘A Visit from the Old Mistress.’ I always though [sic] Mr. Evans should have it – it’s the same size and was exhibited in Paris with his ‘Sunday Morning in Virginia.’” (Goodrich and Gerdts, 2005, 2008); Homer letters to Clarke, Archives of American)

Sunday Morning in Virginia is set in a rough wooden building that appears to be a former slave cabin or similar structure, with a large brick fireplace at the far left. A young African American woman
reads the Bible to a group of black children. She may be teaching them to read, since they are looking at
the book as she reads and points to the page. An older black woman, a former slave, is seen to the right.
In most slave states prior to emancipation, it had been illegal for slaves or even free blacks to be taught
to read and write. It was specifically illegal for slaves, or free blacks, to gather for the purpose of
learning to read and write. Severe penalties for these activities included imprisonment, the
administration of lashes, and heavy fines. (Williams, 2005)

* A Visit from the Old Mistress * has a setting very similar to that of * Sunday Morning in Virginia *, and
depicts people in similar circumstances. The composition is also parallel to * Sunday Morning * in that a
group of African Americans, counting the baby in arms, four of them, is to the left. The older figure who
reminds the viewer of former slavery times is again placed to the right. In this case, the former slave
mistress on the right. If we are to understand these two paintings as having parallel content, we must
look for a specific instance of civil rights, such as the right to learn to read shown in * Sunday Morning in
Virginia *. Other than generally being free and no longer under the full domination of master and
mistress, these black women are exercising their right as freed women to contract marriage, taking full
legal control of their own families.