AGAINST THE PEACE AND DIGNITY OF THE COMMONWEALTH:

PHYSICAL CONFRONTATIONS BETWEEN SLAVES AND WHITES IN ANTEBELLUM VIRGINIA, 1801-1860

by

Christopher H. Bouton

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History

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ABSTRACT

Historians have analyzed physical confrontations between slaves and whites in their broader discussions of slave resistance in the United States. While recognizing their importance, they have not yet examined confrontations on their own merits as they have with other forms of resistance. In this dissertation, I examine the history of physical confrontations in Virginia from between 1801 and 1860.

In order to describe altercations between whites and slaves, I relied upon state and county court records. These documents included trial transcripts, petitions, letters, and coroner's inquisitions. I also consulted newspapers to gauge the impact of slave violence. To understand violence from the slaves' perspective and to balance these primarily white sources, I also used slave autobiographies and interviews with ex-slaves by the Federal Writer's Project in the 1930s.

In this dissertation, I seek to understand the circumstances that prompted slaves to engage in physical confrontations with whites and what this violence revealed about the lives of enslaved Virginians. Slaves engaged in confrontations for a variety of reasons, but most often because of the prospect of physical punishment to themselves or their family members. These altercations occurred most often between individual whites and

slaves, but on rare occasions, slaves worked collectively to kill cruel owners and overseers.

I compare the differences between confrontations involving male and female slaves. When analyzing altercations between slaves and whites, I expand the historical discussion of Southern honor to include bondsmen's violence against whites. Building off of research involving the intersection of slavery and the law, the confrontations that made it most often into the courts involved the failure of white mastery. The varied experiences of slave women—as household slaves, field workers, and as objects of their masters' sexual desire—led bondswomen to engage in different forms of confrontation compared to slave men. These altercations also reveal the ability of slave violence to exacerbate tensions within white communities, but also stress the power of slavery as an institution to absorb and withstand the threat of resisting slaves.

INTRODUCTION

Contextualizing Confrontations

On January 14, 1829, David Gray engaged in a physical confrontation with Henry, one of the slaves under his supervision. After Henry had failed to perform his chores that morning, Gray called out from the stable, demanding that the bondsman appear. When Henry finally answered his overseer's summons, Gray recalled that "he came from the barn and talked very insulting." After Gray struck Henry with a shrub, Henry warned the overseer that "he must not strike him again."[1] When Gray refused to heed the warning, Henry grabbed a heavy club and beat Gray badly enough to render him unable to work for three weeks. About a month later, Henry stood trial in a Goochland, Virginia court of oyer and terminer, where a panel of five white justices of the peace found him guilty of assaulting a white man and sentenced him to hang. Since the case involved capital punishment, Virginia law mandated that Governor William Giles review the case. Giles, after consulting with his Executive Council, commuted Henry's sentence to transportation out of the Commonwealth—a common outcome involving slaves convicted of non-fatal crimes.

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[1] *Commonwealth vs. Henry*, William B. Giles Executive Papers, 1827-1830. Accession 42310. Box 6, Folder 6. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

The confrontation between David Gray and Henry was neither unusual nor unique in the history of slavery in Antebellum Virginia. Examples of violence between whites and slaves dotted the newspapers and legal records of the commonwealth. In the fields, factories, and households, slaves battled with whites out of a desire to protect themselves and their family members from punishment. They also orchestrated attacks to vent their anger over their treatment against their owners, overseers, mistresses, and other whites. Altercations offer evidence of the day-to-day interactions, tensions, and conflicts that governed the lives of bondspeople and their owners. They also provide a lens into the lived experiences of whites and blacks alike in 19th century Virginia.[2] If we wish to understand how the institution of slavery played out on the human level, where people of

[2] The literature on the development of slavery in Virginia is extensive, but major works include: Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); T.H. Breen and Stephen Innes, *Mine Own Ground: Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975); Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia by the University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, & Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia by the University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia by the University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Anthony S. Parent, *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

one skin color legally owned people of another, then we need to understand how whites and slaves interacted across the boundaries of slavery and freedom.

At its core, the institution of slavery relied on violence in order to sustain itself. Slavery involved the holding of other individuals against their will and compelling them to work for the benefit of their owners. Slavery and violence in the history of the United States went hand in hand. Many Virginians who fought in favor of American independence shed their blood to protect the rights of some men to hold others in bondage. As Edmund S. Morgan wrote, "the growth of freedom experienced in the American Revolution, depended more than we like to admit on the enslavement of more than 20 percent of us at that time."[3] Violence governed the world in which slaves and their white owners lived. White men bloodied and beat one another over affairs of honor. They whipped and brutalized their disobedient slaves to assert their mastery. Mistresses slapped and struck their bondswomen to compel them to labor within southern households. Slaves, male and female alike, fought in the quarters and elsewhere over theft, familial disputes, and matters of love. And on rare occasions, slaves themselves turned the current of violence back against their white oppressors.[4]

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[3] Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom,* x.

[4] For broader histories of slave resistance in the United States see Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts: 50th Anniversary Edition* (New York: International Publishers, 1993); Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981); Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Walter C. Rucker, *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

Physical altercations between slaves and whites are not a particularly pleasant subject to study. These confrontations offer horrifying details about how bondsmen and women dismembered their owners, burned them in fireplaces, and split open their skulls with axes, hatchets, and hoes. These violent incidents are largely disturbing and upsetting—then again so is much of history. These conflicts between owners and their slaves were moments when bondspeople declared that they would no longer tolerate abusive behaviors from whites or endure the circumstances of their bondage any longer. Every slave who engaged in an act of physical resistance had a story to tell about what prompted them to resist. Slaves who engaged in physical confrontations with whites risked their very lives through their actions. Virginia law mandated that any slave who struck a white warranted the death penalty. Since slaves risked their lives to resist, the circumstances that sparked physical confrontations —the defense of self, family members, and attempts to protect their honor—reveal what the slaves held most dear.

These extraordinary acts of violence brought the ordinary concerns of enslaved Virginians into focus. The slaves involved in physical confrontations were not revolutionaries with visions of overthrowing bondage. Instead they sought to avenge or protect themselves or their family members against violence and punishment. Randall and Cudgo, two slave brothers, attacked their master's son, Reddick Goodwin, after the young man attempted to shoot Cudgo. Unwilling to tolerate the threat to their lives, the two slaves chased Goodwin across his father's farm. Goodwin saved himself by

barricading himself inside an upstairs room.[5] George, a slave man, chased Edmund Pendleton, his overseer, all across his master's farm, pummeling and beating him repeatedly. George sought to avenge the overseer's punishment of his daughter.[6] Sarah and Creese, two slave women from Chesterfield County, murdered their mistress, Martha Morriset, rather than endure any more of her brutal treatment. The slave women so thoroughly disposed of their mistress's body that white authorities only recovered one of her legs from the James River.[7] In these altercations, violence was the only way for bondspeople to push back against the cruelties of their white owners and overseers.

Yet finding detailed examples of these physical confrontations has proven difficult for historians. White southerners, especially those of the master class, were educated and literate. They wrote voluminously to their family members and friends. They served in state and local governments, penned articles in newspapers, delivered speeches on holidays, and kept diaries documenting their lives. Owners and overseers maintained detailed plantation records to track the productivity of their crops and workers. Since these sources came from the South's ruling class, they are easily accessible to historians and contain valuable insight into the history of slavery. But

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[5] *Commonwealth vs. Randall,* James Monroe Executive Papers, 1799-1802. Accession 40936. Box 6, Folder 10, Misc. Reel 5345. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[6] *Commonwealth vs. George,* John M. Gregory Executive Papers, 1842-1843. Accession 43537. Box 1, Folder 8. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[7] *Commonwealth vs. Sarah and Creese,* William H. Cabell Executive Papers, 1805-1808. Accession 41135. Box 1, Folder 8. Misc. Reel 5962. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

whites rarely wrote or examined in detail physical confrontations with their slaves. Admitting that they had lost control of their enslaved workforce and confronting the challenge to their mastery proved too difficult for many whites to acknowledge. Finding the voices of the enslaved requires relying on sources that the slaves themselves had a role in shaping either through their words or actions. Detailed descriptions of altercations exist across a range of historical sources. Court records, slave autobiographies, interviews conducted in the 1930s as part of the Federal Writers' Project under the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.), and contemporary newspapers all offer the detail required to uncover the circumstances of slave violence.

Like all historical documents, these sources have their own biases. They provide valuable insight into physical confrontations and their meaning, provided we recognize and confront those potential problems. Slave autobiographies reflected the political goals of their authors, who sought the support of Northern abolitionists, to attack slavery, and persuade the Northern public of the evils of bondage. At one point in his famed autobiography, Frederick Douglass described the brutal activities of one of his overseers, a Mr. Severe.[8] This heavy handed thematic connection between name and personality strains credibility, but Douglass's description was not unusual or exaggerated when compared to other overseers.[9] W.P.A. interviews, conducted in the 1930s, seventy years

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[8] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845: New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 22.

[9] For the use of slave autobiographies see William L. Andrews, *To Tell A Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

after the end of slavery, raise their own questions. The passage of time had the potential to distort slaves' memories, as psychologists Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons, have written regarding human memory, "What is stored in memory is not an exact replica of reality, but a re-creation of it."[10] Seventy years of experiences, including Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Great Depression, had the potential to color ex-slaves memories about their bondage. Additionally, former slaves, generally impoverished, were wary of being interviewed by whites or even white descendents of their former owners about their time in bondage. They may have softened the horrors of their enslavement for fear of offending their interviewers. Despite these concerns, the stories of these former bondspeople vividly evoke life in antebellum America. Ex-slaves remembered the brutality of whites, the joy of emancipation, and the trauma that followed the sale of parents and siblings.[11]

Newspapers and court records feature the voices of slaves, filtered through white institutions and have their own biases. Newspaper editors tended to publish the most sensational stories of slave violence. Articles, hastily assembled in the immediate aftermath of confrontations, often contained false or inaccurate information. Reporters

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[10] Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons, *The Invisible Gorilla: How Our Intuitions Deceive Us* (New York: Broadway Books, 2009), 49.

[11] On using the W.P.A. see John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems" *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (November 1975), 473-492; Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); Norman R. Yetman, "Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 2, (Summer 1984), 181-210; David Thomas Bailey, "A Divided Prism: Two Sources of Black Testimony on Slavery," *Journal of Southern History,* Vol. 46, No. 3 (Aug., 1980), 381-404.

relied on accounts from county officials, neighbors, and local gossip. These mistakes were not necessarily intentional, but rather reflect the haphazard nature of antebellum reporting. Also some newspaper editors publicized accounts of slave violence in order to inflame passions against their political opponents. During the debate over Virginia Governor Joseph Johnson's commutation of the sentence of a slave convicted of killing his overseer, Richmond's newspapers stoked the fires of partisan outrage by sensationalizing the case.[12] Southern court systems contain similar evidence of slave violence against whites. Overseers, owners, and bondsmen alike testified to the circumstances that prompted slave violence. The circumstances described by slaves and whites echoed those found in the W.P.A. interviews and slave autobiographies. Southern court systems, however, were heavily stacked against the enslaved.[13] In Antebellum Virginia, accused slaves could not testify as the law did not consider them capable of telling the truth. Slaves did not receive trials before a jury of their peers and instead were judged by a panel of five white justices of the peace. Additionally as legal proceedings,

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[12] William A. Link, "The Jordan Hatcher Case: Politics and 'A Spirit of Insubordination in Antebellum Virginia," *The Journal of Southern History,* Vol. 64, No. 4 (November 1998), 615-648. See also Harrison M. Etheridge, "The Jordan Hatcher Affair of 1852: Cold Justice and Warm Compassion," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography,* Vol. 84, No. 4 (October 1976), 446-463.

[13] For insight into the intersection of slavery and the law see Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Paul Finkleman ed., *Slavery & the Law* (Madison: Madison House Publishers, 1997); Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Mark V. Tushnet, *The American Law of Slavery, 1810-1860: Considerations of Humanity and Interest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997).

prosecutors sought to uncover the details of the crimes under consideration and not necessarily the motivations or feelings of the slaves involved—although those frequently found their way into the court record.[14] While newspapers and criminal court records have their own biases, they offer crucial information understanding the circumstances that prompted slave violence.

In examining individual confrontations, there is a danger of reading too much into any one case. This can lead us to draw too many broad or sweeping conclusions or errors in interpretation. Only by aggregating these individual confrontations into a greater whole, we can safely draw conclusions about the common features of altercations. Then we can select incidents that reflect the different circumstances of slave violence. Examining these cases in the aggregate also allows us to identify outlier cases. These outlier cases prove valuable as well. They especially highlight the circumstances and details of confrontations that went unremarked upon by slaves and whites alike. In the case of Judy, a slave girl, sentenced to death for attacking her mistress, no one questioned the propriety of executing a female slave for murder.[15] Mingo, a runaway slave at the head of a band of "desperadoes" that terrorized Princess Anne County in 1819, had

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[14] For examples of legal cases against slaves see Helen Tunnicliff Catterall ed., *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, Vol. 1-5 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1926).

[15] *Commonwealth vs. Judy,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 20, Folder 3. Misc. Reel 4216. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

frequent interactions across the color line despite his status as a fugitive.[16] In convicting Sydnor, a slave man, of murdering Nancy Green, a young orphan girl, the authorities of Louisa County never denied that the white community had known of her fate after her disappearance.[17] In these cases, what was unremarkable to whites is most remarkable to modern historians.

Understanding the importance of physical confrontations requires comparing them to other forms of slave resistance. Altercations strike a balance between two other and more commonly studied forms of resistance: day-to-day resistance and slave rebellion. Forms of day-to-day resistance included feigning illness, shirking work, deliberate laziness, or falsifying work quotas. These behaviors offered a boon to overworked slaves, but also placed pressures on other bondsmen who had to pick up the slack of their missing comrades.[18] This disruptive slave behavior occurred frequently across Antebellum Virginia, but whites did not necessarily recognize these behaviors as a form of resistance. They, on the other hand, had no difficulty in identifying the dangers of

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[16] *Commonwealth vs. Mingo,* James P. Preston Executive Papers, 1816-1819. Accession 41737. Box 11, Folder 10. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[17] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* William B. Giles Executive Papers, 1827-1830. Accession 42310. Box 6, Folder 5. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[18] For historical analysis of day-to-day resistance see: Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, "Day-to-day Resistance to Slavery," *Journal of Negro History.* 27, No. 4, (1942), 388-419; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 97-109; James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

slave rebellion.[19] But the structure of American slavery, as Eugene D. Genovese has argued, with its resident master class, small holdings of slaves, and armed white population, made such rebellions rare.[20] Additionally, the swift and brutal retribution enacted by Virginia authorities in the aftermath of Gabriel's Plot in 1800 and the Nat Turner Revolt in 1831 served as a reminder to Virginia's slaves of the dangers of rebellion. Studying these rebellions tell us much about slavery in Virginia in those moments, but their infrequency makes it difficult to draw broader conclusions, except

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[19] Thomas J. Davis, *A Rumor of Revolt: The "Great Negro Plot" in Colonial New York* (New York: Free Press, 1985); Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in an Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*: *The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997);.Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison: Madison House, 1999); Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and his Conspirators," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 58 (October 2001), 913-976; "Forum: The Making of a Slave Conspiracy," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 59 (January 2002), 135-202; Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Scot A. French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004); Anthony E. Kaye, "Neighborhoods and Nat Turner: The Making of a Slave Rebel and the Unmaking of a Slave Rebellion," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27.4 (2007): 705-720; Peter Charles Hoffer, *Cry Liberty: The Great Stono River Slave Rebellion of 1739* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority; Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 308-326; John K. Thornton, "African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion," *American Historical Review*, 96 (October 1991), 1101-13; Mark M. Smith, *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005); Daniel Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt* (New York: Harper, 2011); Winthrop D. Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

[20] Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).

perhaps why they were so rare compared to elsewhere in the Americas. The advantage of physical confrontations comes from how they combine the frequency of day-to-day resistance with the white recognition of the dangers of slave rebellion.

Historians have long recognized the importance of physical confrontations. In the 1970s, scholars of slavery used physical confrontations to refute the myth of slave docility, popularized first by racist Lost Cause apologists in the early 20th century and later by well-meaning scholars trying to demonstrate the horrors of American slavery.[21] John W. Blassingame, one of the pioneers of this wave of slavery revisionism, noted the potential for slave violence at any time when he wrote that "In spite of the slave's general submissiveness, he might at any time resist his master or overseer. In every daily confrontation with his master violence threatened to erupt."[22] Eugene D. Genovese went further, concluding that "These isolated but not necessarily infrequent incidents of resistance represent the high point of slave assertion within the system, for although they concerned individuals and only occasionally a group, they did not threaten the interests of the collective and reminded all that the Man's power could effectively be challenged."[23]

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[21] Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918); Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life Second Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

[22] John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South Revised & Enlarged Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 318.

[23] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 620. Genovese understood slave resistance through his understanding of planter paternalism, a web of relations that encompassed masters and slaves. For a somewhat unconvincing rebuttal of paternalism see Norrece T. Jones, *Born*

While revisionist scholars recognized the importance of altercations, such incidents of slave violence only received a few pages of analysis. Historians' efforts at reversing decades of entrenched and antiquated interpretations meant that studying physical confrontations in depth would have be taken up by the next generation of historians.

Scholars, like Peter Kolchin and Jeff Forret, have pushed the historical analysis of physical confrontations beyond assertions of slave agency.[24] Kolchin, pushing back against the excesses of slavery revisionism that threatened to swing the debate too far back towards slave agency (and thus underestimating the horrors of bondage), examined physical confrontations in comparison with the *volneniia,* a form of Russian peasant resistance that lay between physical confrontations and outright rebellion.[25] Serf and slave modes of resistance, Kolchin wrote, differed because "The serfs' volneniia reflected the overwhelmingly communal nature of their life and organization, whereas the slaves' protest confirms the relative lack of such communality in the antebellum South."[26] Jeff Forret's work used physical confrontations as a way of examining race relations between

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a Child of Freedom Yet a Slave: Mechanisms of Control and Strategies of Resistance in Antebellum South Carolina (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1990).

[24] Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery 1617-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 159-164; Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 265-272, 291-296, 313-320; Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 157-183.

[25] Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 257. For scholars over-emphasizing the harmony of the slave community see Peter Kolchin, "Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community: A Comparative Perspective," *Journal of American History,* 70 (December 1983), 579-601.

[26] Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 269.

poor whites and slaves. Forret expanded understandings of southern honor to help explain the causes of this violence. He concluded that "While honor cannot be held directly responsible for the violence between slave and poor white men in the same way that it can between two southern gentlemen, the Old South's culture of honor provided the framework in which much of this interracial violence occurred."[27] These crucial insights represented the first steps into a larger examination of altercations.

While historians have recognized the importance of physical confrontations, the problem of locating them within historical sources has presented a significant barrier to analyzing them in depth. As Eugene D. Genovese wrote, "One of the most impressive forms of slave self-assertion has remained largely unsung, for it rarely reached public notice. A surprising number of slaves would not submit to the whip."[28] Since whites rarely publicized confrontations, historians had a difficult time locating them within plantation records, journals, and other white sources that dominated the historical study of slavery until the 1960s. The W.P.A. interviews, edited by George P. Rawick in the 1970s, coupled with a renewed interest in slave autobiographies revealed the potential of physical confrontations as an avenue of historical investigation.[29] But the scattered nature of the sources, few autobiographies or interviews contained more than one example,

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[27] Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins*, 181.

[28] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll,* 619.

[29] George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Vol. 1-19* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972); Rawick ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement Series 1, Vol. 1-12* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977); Rawick ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement Series 2*, *Vol. 1-10* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979).

made in depth examinations difficult. Scholars like Philip J. Schwarz, Diane Miller Sommerville, Ariela Gross, and Jeff Forret studiously examined southern legal records and helped reveal the potential of these sources for offering insight into the lives and worlds of the enslaved, including physical confrontations.[30] After combining these judicial records with sources from the slaves' perspective a deeper analysis of altercations becomes possible. This body of evidence, as Peter Kolchin concluded, points to a "surprisingly widespread pattern of small-scale confrontations in which slaves offered physical resistance to owners, overseers, and hirers."[31]

This source problem has not plagued the study of the two other major forms of slave resistance, day-to-day resistance and slave rebellion. Rebellions drew lots of attention from whites and the subsequent newspaper coverage, political debates, and trials of slave participants and conspirators generated a lengthy paper trail for historians to follow. But, as mentioned above, these infrequent acts of resistance make it difficult to draw broader conclusions about the experience of American slavery. Studies of day-to-day resistance have an advantage over physical confrontations. Like altercations, ex-slaves described their acts of day-to-day resistance in their autobiographies and interviews with the W.P.A. Unlike physical confrontations, whites frequently commented on such behaviors, but they did not understand them as resistance. Rather they viewed

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[30] Philip J. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Diane Miller Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Ariela J. Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins*.

[31] Kolchin, *American Slavery 1619-1877*, 159.

slaves' laziness, feigned stupidity, and other disruptive behaviors as proof of their racial inferiority. White misunderstandings about these behaviors reveal the attitudes of whites towards their slaves and their actions. Historiographically, historians have recognized the importance of confrontations, but the difficulties in accessing sources, especially compared to other forms of resistance, have impeded their analysis.

The biggest problem confronting the study of confrontations has been finding enough sources located in one geographic area. In many southern states, the court systems lacked centralized record keeping, making documents more susceptible to destruction or loss. In South Carolina, for example, the state tried slaves under a separate court system known as courts of magistrates and freeholders. Records from only fourteen districts survive into the present with a concentration in the upcountry districts. The lowcountry court records disappeared sometime during the Civil War and were never recovered. Virginia, however, is somewhat of an exception. Following Gabriel's Rebellion in 1801, the Virginia legislature modified the state's slave code to allow for executive review of all death sentences for slaves. The law allowed for the governor to reprieve slaves convicted of capital crimes and order them sold and transported out of the Commonwealth. The sale of condemned slaves helped offset the compensation paid to slave owners for the value of their lost property. The law also required that the Governor and his Executive Council receive a copy of the case record, including testimony, to evaluate the appropriateness of the sentence.[32] These case records have survived into the

[32] For more information on courts of oyer and terminer and slave trials in Virginia, see Daniel J. Flanigan, "Criminal Proceedings in Slave Trials in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History* Vol. 40, No. 4 (November 1974), 543-545. For works on

present within the Executive Papers at the Library of Virginia in Richmond. Virginia's institutional history with bondage created an environment that allowed for these sources to survive.

Using the records contained in the Executive Papers I have constructed a database of physical confrontations that occurred between 1801 and 1860. By aggregating the confrontations, I hope to draw out some of their common features as well as provide some guiding questions that the dissertation seeks to answer. I have identified 293 slaves involved in 219 separate altercations. Due to the small sample size, I intend to keep the analysis relatively simple lest we ask too much from the data. It is merely meant as a guide. First, I divided the slaves involved in confrontations by gender. The breakdown is as follows:

Table 1. Gender of Slaves Involved in Physical Confrontations N=293

	Total	Percentage
Male	256	87.4%
Female	37	12.6%

The overwhelming participation of men in slave violence echoes the conclusions drawn in other historical research about gender divisions in slave resistance. From the period of 1838-1860, John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweniger found that male runaways amounted for 81% of all absconding slaves. They similarly found that percentage was

slave trials and crime in Virginia see Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*; Schwarz, *Slave Laws in Virginia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

identical in an earlier period, 1790-1816, as well.[33] Slave flight and physical confrontations bore a number of similarities. They both served as intermediate form of resistance that whites recognized as threatening their power. Additionally they both functioned as a way for bondsmen to object to some part of their treatment. As Paul D. Escott has found in his study of the W.P.A. narratives, flight and confrontation often went hand in hand, as slaves fled from their owners and overseers after engaging in violence.[34] Male slaves overwhelmingly battled with white men. There were 273 whites involved in confrontations with slave men, 245 (89.7%) were men compared to only 28 (10.3%) women. At first glance, physical confrontations seemed to be a man's game.

A closer examination of the database reveals how slave violence was overwhelmingly personal. Bondsmen largely engaged in confrontations with whites whom they interacted with on a daily basis. The chart below reveals the relationships between slaves and whites involved in physical confrontations.

Table 2. Male Slaves' Relationship to Whites N=273

Relationship	Percentage	Number of Whites
Master	33.33%	91

[33] John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), Table 4: Gender of Runaways by State, Late Period, (1838-1860), 212; Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves,* Table 3: Gender of Runaways by State, Early Period (1790-1816), 211. The states in their sample include Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Louisiana.

[34] Escott, *Slavery Remembered,* 80-87.

Overseer	23.08%	63
Unclear	14.29%	39
Male Neighbor	10.99%	30
Runaway	6.59%	18
Master's Daughter	3.30%	9
Mistress	2.93%	8
Female Neighbor	1.47%	4
Accomplice[35]	1.47%	4
Other[36]	1.10%	3
Master's Son	0.73%	2
Mistress's Brother	0.73%	2

Of the cases found in the Executive Papers, 56.41% involved slaves engaging in confrontations with their masters and overseers and that number rises to 64.1% when after including other family members. Since American slaves lived on smaller holdings relative to their Caribbean counterparts, this tendency makes a certain amount of sense. In 1860 in the Upper South, 88.2% of slaves lived on holdings ranging from 1-49 slaves.[37] Combined with a largely resident master class, American slaves more frequently

[35] In a small number of cases, slaves served as accomplices to whites in crimes.

[36] Other in this case refers to a patroller, a constable, and a peddler.

[37] Kolchin, *American Slavery*, Table 4 Distribution of Slaves by Size of Holding, 1860, 243.

interacted with their owners than bondspeople elsewhere. In Jamaica just prior to emancipation, as Peter Kolchin has noted, 75% of slaves lived on holdings larger than 50 people.[38] In 1860, the median slaveholding within Virginia was only 18.8. Louisiana, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Alabama all featured median holdings ranging from 33.4-49.3 slaves.[39] This frequent contact between slaves and their white owners and overseers bred tensions that threatened to erupt in violence. The chapters that follow will discuss the specific circumstances that prompted confrontations.

Slave women represented a much smaller percentage of the participants in slave violence, but their experiences differed from those of slave men. Bondswomen engaged in confrontations nearly equally with white men and women. Of the 39 whites involved in altercations with slave women 20 (51.28%) were men and 19 (48.72%) were women. The chart below highlights the relationships between slave women and whites.

Table 3. Female Slaves' Relationship to Whites, N=39

Relationship	Percentage	Number of Whites
Master	33.33%	13
Mistress	33.33%	13
Overseer	10.26%	4
Master's Daughter	10.26%	4

[38] Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 101.

[39] Kolchin, *American Slavery*, Table 5 Median Holdings of Slaves, By State, 1790, 1850, and 1860, 244.

Male Neighbors	5.13%	2
Female Neighbors	5.13%	2
Master's Son	2.56%	1

This nearly equal division reflects the diverse nature of women's work experiences under slavery. Slave women worked in the fields alongside men, essentially performing the same labor as their male counterparts. This afforded them the opportunity to spar with their masters and overseers. Slave women also labored in the household under the supervision of their mistresses, performing what contemporaries considered women's work. The geographic space of the household, as the site of the intersection of labor, gender, and social relationships, fostered an environment where slave women and their mistresses could come to blows.

In order to explain the seeming lack of bondswomen's participation in confrontations, historians have suggested that their gender and knowledge of the consequences of their actions limited their direct resistance.[40] As Loren Schweniger and John Hope Franklin have argued regarding runaways, "Young slave women were less likely to run away because they had often begun to raise families by their late teens and early twenties."[41] Historians, such as Deborah Gray White has stressed that slave women, like slave men, largely eschewed confrontation because "A bullet through the head, a jail

[40] See Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* Revised Edition (1985: New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 70-76; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 649.

[41] Schweniger and Franklin, *Runaway Slaves,* 212.

cell, a merciless whipping, and/or sale was the likely fate of any slave, male or female, who demonstrated aggressive behavior, even in self defense."[42] As part of a recent historical emphasis on the relationship between resistance and physical spaces, Stephanie M.H. Camp has argued that slave women's truancy, their temporary absences from the plantation, constituted the most important part of their resistance. As she explained, "abseentism is an important part of the story of women's enslavement because women engaged in it more frequently than they ran away as fugitives."[43] Later chapters will detail how slave women's violence highlights the precarious position of bondswomen in antebellum Virginia, despite the smaller number of women who participated in altercations.

The dissertation will investigate the broader questions introduced by the database. The first two chapters explore confrontations between male slaves and whites in antebellum Virginia. Chapter One investigates the intersection of physical confrontations and Virginia's legal system. It examines how white failures of mastery represented the most common types of cases that appeared before the commonwealth's oyer and terminer courts. Virginia's slave codes reasserted white authority and ensured the preservation of Virginia's slave society even when individual masters failed to uphold their part of the bargain. The second chapter addresses how confrontations reveal a system of honor at

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[42] White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 79. For women's resistance see also Mary Ellison, "Resistance to Oppression: Black Women's Response to Slavery in the United States," *Slavery and Abolition* 4 (May 1983), 56-63.

[43] Camp, *Closer to Freedom,* 39; for more on contested spaces see John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Anthony E. Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

work within the slave community. Bondsmen's willingness to resist stemmed from the violation of their individual expectations regarding their enslavement. The violation of their bodies, whipping of family members, or other circumstances had the potential to spark violence. Male slaves, like white southerners, also equated violence with their masculinity. This system of slave honor, however, was highly individualized and lacked all of the characteristics of the honor culture found in white communities across the South.

The third and fourth chapters examine slave women's violence against whites. Chapter Three investigates bondswomen's resistance within the context of the household. At some part of their lives, the majority of slave women labored under the supervision of their mistresses, who sought to instruct and educate their bondswomen on the value of hard work. White women were willing participants in the culture of violence that pervaded antebellum Virginia. Bondswomen's failures to obey their mistresses represented a threat to white women's authority and their position in the household. When slave women engaged in confrontations with their mistresses, they did so within the environment of the household and their resistance represented a rejection of white power. Chapter Four details how bondswomen resisted sexual and labor exploration. Due to their status as black, slave, and women, bondswomen had little hope of successfully resisting sexual exploitation at the hands of white men. Only in the most extreme situations, like those of rape and incest, did slave women resort to violence in resisting white efforts to rape them. Bondswomen, like slave men, resisted labor exploitation at the hands of whites. In these circumstances, their violence mirrored that of bondsmen. This

resistance also suggests that slave women participated, in some form, in the culture of honor found among slave men.

Chapter Five investigates three physical confrontations in depth, revealing how slave violence had the potential to divide and undermine the white community. These three cases demonstrate how confrontations set a county against itself, the residents of a county against the commonwealth, and finally threatened to fracture Virginia's state government. The circumstances of these cases range from the mundane to the extraordinary. These divisions arose out of the very laws that Virginians had designed to protect themselves from violent slaves. Instead these altercations set white Virginians against one another in a desire to ensure their own safety. In this way, these confrontations were as effective as either of Virginia's famed slave rebellions in undermining the institution of bondage in the Commonwealth. After Gabriel and Nat Turner, Virginia's whites unified against the threat posed by their bondspeople. After these cases, Virginians were bitterly divided over what to do about their burgeoning slave population.

Violence characterized the interactions between whites and African Americans and provides a lens into the lives of Virginia's enslaved population. In examining slave altercations against whites, we see different kinds of violence in action. Slaves slugged, stabbed, shot, and pummeled whites, sometimes killing them, other times merely wounding them. This violence was not unique to the antebellum South, antebellum America, or even contemporary America. The study of physical confrontations also reveals the ways in which slaves, despite the tremendous odds against them, resisted their

oppressors. How they tried to carve out some semblance of a life for themselves and their families while protecting themselves from the threat of violence, separation, and death that loomed over their daily existence. Their writings and actions articulated a system of honor that stood in stark contrast to a society that denied their basic humanity. Slave violence disrupted, as best it could, the system of slavery that dominated their lives. If we seek to understand the experiences of slaves under bondage, then these confrontations and their aftermath provided a window into the circumstances that prompted slaves' violence and insight into their day-to-day experiences in bondage.

Chapter 1

THE FAILURE OF MASTERY: PHYSICAL CONFRONTATIONS IN VIRGINIA'S COURTS

Whites often worried that a lack of discipline encouraged their slaves' violent behavior. In 1843, George, a Fluvanna County slave, ambushed and killed his master, Andrew Bruce. He dragged his master's body from the road and hid it in some nearby woods. When white investigators found Bruce's blood in the road, George claimed the blood belonged to a hog that he had killed. The explanation failed to pass muster, especially after whites discovered Bruce's body nearby. At George's trial, Hannah Bragg, one of Bruce's neighbors complained that Bruce "was a very kind and humane master and did not punish his servants as often as they deserved." Bruce's wife confirmed that he "frequently threatened to whip the servants, but rarely executed the threats." She revealed that George had made a habit of running away to avoid being punished. When George returned, Bruce would welcome him back rather than disciplining the runaway. Hannah Bragg was convinced that if Bruce had been a stronger master and wielded the whip a little more often his "end would have been a different one."[1]

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[1] *Commonwealth vs. George,* James McDowell Executive Papers, 1843-1845. Accession 43559. Box 2, Folder 7. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

In reality, masters who consistently whipped and beat their slaves sparked slave violence. Bob, a slave belonging to David Mason, grew tired of his master's continued beatings and decided to kill him. On the afternoon of June 8, 1820, Mason struck Bob with his walking stick on his Sussex County farm. Bob ran off rather than endure any more abuse. When he returned home that night, Bob complained to the other slaves that Mason "was always beating him." Bob reportedly told another slave that "he meant to knock down, drag over, kill, and cripple" his master. The next day, Bob emerged from the nearby woods and intercepted his master as he was walking from his house. He asked Mason to spare him the lash and begged for his master's forgiveness. Instead Mason struck Bob again and told him that "he meant to give him a hundred lashes."[2] Bob then took a stick and pummeled his master to the ground, killing him. Bob sought his master's forgiveness, but when Mason unyieldingly applied his mastery, the slave man struck back.

While whites worried about the relationship between mastery and the slaves' resistance, Virginia's courts of oyer and terminer restored white control over their bondsmen. Southern slave laws, as Eugene D. Genovese has argued, "constituted a principle vehicle for the hegemony of the ruling class."[3] Virginia's slave code and more specifically the punishments doled out to bondspeople reflected and upheld the power of

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[2] *Commonwealth vs. Bob,* Thomas Randolph Executive Papers, 1819-1822. Accession 41887. Box 2, Folder 8. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[3] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 26.

Virginia's slaveholding elites. The law granted owners almost total power over the lives of their slaves. It allowed them to whip, punish, or sell away bondsmen as they wished. Virginia's slave codes contained a lengthy list of crimes that warranted the death penalty. This list served as a warning to enslaved Virginians to heed the wishes of their masters, mistresses, overseers, and other white authorities. The slave codes also established a system of oyer and terminer courts staffed by white justices of the peace. These courts operated in the open to assure everyone—white and slave alike—of the strength and perseverance of Virginia's slave society. As Philip J. Schwarz has written, "public trials would ensure the public safety."[4]

The power of slaveholding elites over the law, however, was not absolute. Rather Virginia's slave codes emerged out of relationships with poorer whites and the slaves themselves. As Genovese explained, "the law… mediated among several classes and compelled the rulers to bend to the demands of the ruled."[5] While Virginia's slave codes granted whites mastery over their slaves, they also recognized that owners often failed to live up to their obligations. Mastery, as William W. Freehling has emphasized, was more than just controlling slaves. Freehling stressed that "Southern masters' self-esteem, their self-respect, their very survival swung on the legitimacy of title. They would *master* infuriating slaves, *master* neighbors and wives, *master* the mistaken North, *master* a Western world moving against mastery. They would be the word. The world would be

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[4] Philip J. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 20.

[5] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll,* 26.

theirs."[6] The physical confrontations between slaves and whites that most often made their way before the commonwealth's oyer and terminer courts involved a failure of mastery. When masters failed, the courts had to reassert control over resisting slaves.

The threat of collective violence, confrontations against overseers, and violence by slaves who were running away or committing other crimes represented the three most common failures of mastery that came before oyer and terminer courts. Collective violence strayed far too close to slave rebellion. White owners, who rarely brought their own slaves before the courts, made sure to rid themselves of potentially rebellious slaves. Attacks against overseers revealed white concerns over the divided nature of mastery over slaves. Overseers, charged with controlling bondsmen, relied on the courts to support their claims to power. Slaves recognized the divided authority of their owners and overseers and sought to exploit that division for their own gain. It became the responsibility of courts to reassert control and ensure the alliance between overseers and their employers. Finally, slaves who engaged in violence while running away or while committing other crimes endangered white control over their enslaved population. Slaves who directly attacked whites and their property or sought to run away represented a threat to whites of all classes.

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[6] William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Volume 1, Secessionists at Bay: 1776-1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 41.

Collective Violence

Incidents of slaves engaging in collective violence especially worried white Virginians. When slaves banded together to attack or kill their overseers and owners, these confrontations represented a direct challenge to white power and mastery. In its history, Virginia would witness two slave rebellions and numerous other conspiracies.[7] These incidents made white Virginians watchful and suspicious of their large enslaved population. As Eugene D. Genovese has written regarding slave revolts, "The panic of the slaveholders at the slightest hint of slave insurrection revealed what lay beneath their endless self-congratulations over the supposed docility, contentment, and loyalty of their slaves."[8] In the vast majority of these cases, slaves who worked collaboratively in confrontations with whites were not engaged in acts of rebellion. Instead they worked together to rid themselves of cruel and abusive owners. White authorities, however, refused to take any chances. They made sure to execute collaborating slaves to send a clear message to the rest of Virginia's enslaved population. Contemplate rebellion, threaten or undermine white mastery, and face the gallows.

On April 19, 1827, Stephen Pettus of Lunenburg County left his house and went into his fields. Along the way, Edmund, one of his slaves, came up from behind him and

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[7] See Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*: *The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Scot A. French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

[8] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll,* 595.

struck him on the head with a large stick. Pettus parried the next blow with his cane and wrestled the stick away. Fearful of his master's retribution, Edmund ran off. After being captured later that evening, Edmund admitted that he had planned to kill his master. Even more frighteningly, he confessed that on the previous two evenings he had followed Pettus into town and planned to kill him. Edmund also hinted at the involvement of some of Pettus's other slaves in the murder plot. If the blow in the field had killed his master, Edmund "would have got assistance and have buried him there."[9] Edmund's actions and his acknowledgement that he had been planning to kill his master for at least several days disturbed Pettus enough to bring him before a court of oyer and terminer. Better to put Edmund on trial and get rid of him than risk that he might succeed next time.

In 1840, Bryan Lester, a slave owner from Mecklenburg County, brought assault charges against Jacob, one of his longest serving slaves. During the investigation, another slave revealed that Jacob had been encouraging Lester's other slaves to rebel. On the morning of the attack, Lester had opened the door from his house and stepped outside. Jacob immediately hit him in the head several times with rocks. As Lester confronted him, Jacob grabbed a stick and struck his master over the head. After Lester called for his gun, Jacob ran off and remained at large for several days. After being questioned about his motives, Jacob claimed that he had not intended to kill his master. Jacob told his interrogators a bizarre story about three men who had come to him one day while he was working in the fields. They had him look into a glass that revealed the

[9] *Commonwealth vs. Edmund,* William B. Giles Executive Papers, 1827-1830. Accession 42310. Box 1, Folder 5. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

names of Jacob's children. The men told him that his daughter was alive and living free in Kentucky and she had killed her master and mistress. After his capture and throughout his trial, Jacob demonstrated signs of mental derangement that prompted the court to recommend that the governor commute his sentence to transportation.[10]

Bryan Lester and the rest of the white community of Mecklenburg had no interest in sparing Jacob's life. The bondsman's strange behavior, which began right after he demanded that all the slaves rise up in rebellion against their white masters, seemed too convenient. Lester, then 62 years of age, wrote in a deposition that he had purchased Jacob when the slave was seven or eight years old in 1805. In the thirty five years since, Lester "never had any cause to suspect … Jacob was insane or deranged." Edward R. Chambers, the commonwealth attorney for Mecklenburg, wrote to Governor Thomas Gilmer asking him to ignore the recommendation for mercy. He warned that the plea "has produced much dissatisfaction in the county." During the trial, Chambers never doubted Jacob's sanity or his desire to kill Lester. According to the testimony of Fanny, a slave hired to Lester, Jacob had gone around before he attacked his master saying "he wanted every negro that could raise a stick to help him fight in assisting him to kill all the white people." Jacob said he would start with his master and then kill the other neighborhood whites. If they killed all the white people, Jacob assured them that "then all the negroes would be free."[11] He promised his fellow bondsmen that the British and Indians had

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[10] *Commonwealth vs. Jacob,* Thomas W. Gilmer Executive Papers, 1840-1841. Accession 43419. Box 1, Folder 10. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth, *Commonwealth vs. Jacob,* (LVA).

[11] *Commonwealth vs. Jacob,* (LVA).

killed all the whites in nearby Lunenburg County and would soon be coming to Mecklenburg. Only a few counties away and less than a decade earlier, Nat Turner had engaged in his own rebellion by killing the whites in his own neighborhood.[12] The threat of a slave revolt was enough for Lester to bring charges against his long serving slave and for the community of Mecklenburg to want Jacob hanged.

Slaves who bound together to murder their masters warranted immediate and swift punishment. On the evening of March 9, 1827, nine male slaves belonging to John Hamlin of Lunenburg County, Virginia ambushed their master as he came into the fields to supervise their work. Archer, one of Hamlin's slaves, came up from behind him and threw him to the ground. Nathan, Little Stephen, and Billy all rushed in and helped hold their master down. Davy, Billy, and Archer took turns choking Hamlin until he died. Davy especially "took hold of his master's throat and choaked [sic] him to death and stamped him on his neck after he was dead." After some disagreement over the best way to dispose of their master's body, the slaves decided to burn it. Big Stephen built a large fire and the slaves threw their master's body onto the flames. Archer told another slave that "they had burnt him his master so nearly up that his bones dropped apart."[13] The slaves buried Hamlin's heart in the ground and covered the ashes and the bones with soil to ensure that they would not be found by anyone.

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[12] Anthony E. Kaye, "Neighborhoods and Nat Turner: The Making of a Slave Rebel and the Unmaking of a Slave Rebellion," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27.4 (2007): 705-720.

[13] *Commonwealth vs. Davy,* William B. Giles Executive Papers, 1827-1830. Accession 42310. Box 1, Folder 2. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth, *Commonwealth vs. Davy,* (LVA).

After Hamlin had disappeared his neighbors rounded up all of his slaves and began interrogating them about the fate of their master. They threatened executions and offered pardons to any slave who would reveal what happened to Hamlin. Frank and Cato, two of Hamlin's slaves who did not participate in the murder, quickly revealed the conspiracy. Frank recalled how Davy had sought his assistance on the morning of Hamlin's death. After Frank refused to participate, Davy warned Frank that if "did not assist them, that they would lay him along side of him (their master)." Cato, another of Hamlin's slaves, described how that morning Billy offered Archer "a nice pair of pantaloons and a waistcoat" to participate in the murder. He also offered cash to some of the other slaves on the farm, hoping to entice them to join the plot as well. After neighborhood whites confronted Billy with this evidence, Billy confessed to his role in the crime. Frank showed the neighbors where the slaves had hidden Hamlin's bones and heart.[14] News of the crime quickly spread. Local newspapers reported on Hamlin's murder with titles like "Horrid Murder" and claimed that the crime was "One of the most shocking acts of murder which stains the catalogue of crime in this section of the country."[15]

Fear bound together the slaves on John Hamlin's farm. A fear of their master drove them to kill him, but it could not keep them unified against the power of the white community. Frank testified that he ran off because the other slaves "had told him that if

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[14] *Commonwealth vs. Davy,* (LVA).

[15] *The Spectator* (New York, NY), April 6, 1827.

he was present and did not assist, they would lay him along side of him [Hamlin]."[16] Frank also revealed that "several times in the course of the two last years heard Archer, Billy and others the negroes of his master planning to kill him." Frank, however, did not inform his master of the slaves' dissatisfaction. He explained that Hamlin "had been informed by Rachel one of his negroes and he whipped her for it." He scolded Rachel telling her that "if she or any of the other negroes ever told him such a thing again he would give them one thousand lashes." Hamlin claimed that "he was afraid of none of them- and if they choose to do, let them do it."[17] Unfortunately for John Hamlin, on the evening of March 9, 1827, his slaves put their threats into action.

According to the census of 1820, Hamlin owned twenty nine slaves.[18] In 1827, he owned at least nineteen.[19] He had a family of four sons and two daughters.[20] His holdings in slaves suggest that he was a man of some property and standing. On first appearance, Hamlin seemed like an encapsulation of the Jeffersonian ideal. One newspaper article described him as "an enterprising and intelligent farmer, whose death will be much

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[16] *Commonwealth vs. Billy,* William B. Giles Executive Papers, 1827-1830. Accession 42310. Box 1, Folder 2. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Billy,* (LVA).

[17] *Commonwealth vs. Billy,* (LVA).

[18] Fourth Census of the United States, 1820, Virginia, Lunenburg, Lewiston, NARA Roll: M33_137; Page 170. Accessed on Ancestry.com on February 11, 2015.

[19] *The Spectator* (New York, NY), April 6, 1827.

[20] Fourth Census of the United States, 1820, Virginia, Lunenburg, Lewiston, NARA Roll: M33_137; Page 170. Accessed on Ancestry.com on February 11, 2015.

regretted by that class of the community particularly, and by society generally."[21] Hamlin's slaves, however, had other ideas about the death of this seemingly upstanding member of the white community. He had been, for them, a cruel master. He had savagely whipped one of his slaves who warned him about the dissatisfaction of her fellow bondsmen. He promised even further punishment for anyone who made similar threats and dared his slaves to put their words into action. Hamlin's slaves took him up on his threat. The slaves' hatred led them to kill their master, but fear of punishment and retribution drove them quickly apart.

While slaves collaborated to kill their cruel masters, they could not successfully cover up their crimes. A group of slaves in Prince George County burned the home of their master, John H. Lewis, to the ground in order to conceal his murder. Fire, however, failed to destroy Lewis's body and when white neighbors arrived to help put out the blaze they uncovered the crime. After pulling Lewis's body out of the flames, his neighbors discovered bruises on his head and neck where the slaves had choked and beat their master. The neighbors also discovered that most of Lewis's valuables had been removed from the house before the fire consumed the dwelling.[22] Martin and Captain, two slaves belonging to John W. Bell, murdered their master with an ax. Martin had "struck him behind the ear with the pole of the axe." Bell "fell on a cedar log with his face, breathed two or three times and died." The two slaves then dragged his body down a bank and

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[21] *The Spectator* (New York, NY), April 6, 1827.

[22] *Commonwealth vs. Preston; Commonwealth vs. Preston and Dennis; Commonwealth vs. Ephraim and Anthony,* John Floyd Executive Papers, 1830-1834. Accession 42665. Box 5, Folder 1. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

tossed it into the Shenandoah River. While the slaves initially escaped suspicion, a postmortem examination of the body revealed the wound on the side of Bell's head.[23] While they managed to kill their masters, slaves had a difficult time covering up their crimes.

When slaves attempted to cover up their crimes, their efforts could turn quickly into farce. On February 24, 1825, Johnson and Jim, two slaves belonging to Thomas Edwards, killed their master in King William County, Virginia. Thomas Edwards had gone off into the woods to inspect the slaves' work. After he failed to return home, Edwards' son, Isaac, went out to search for him. Isaac first asked Johnson and Jim about his father. The slaves answered that their master had gone to a neighbor's house. His suspicions aroused, Isaac inspected the area. First, he found a large pool of blood. Then Edwards observed that "Jim's pantaloons were bloody and Johnson's shirt had some blood upon that also."[24] Isaac Edwards quickly returned to the house, unwilling to confront Johnson and Jim by himself and possibly meet the same fate as his father. Isaac gathered up some of his neighbors and ventured back into the woods to confront the slaves.

Isaac Edwards accused Jim and Johnson of killing their master. The slaves at first denied the charges, but their stories quickly began to change. Instead of denying their

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[23] *Commonwealth vs. Captain and Martin,* John Rutherfoord Executive Papers, 1841-1842. Accession 43494. Box 2, Folder 7. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[24] *Commonwealth vs. Johnson & Jim*, James Pleasants Executive Papers, 1822-1825. Accession 42046. Box 6, Folder 10. State Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth, *Commonwealth vs. Johnson & Jim*, (LVA).

involvement, Johnson and Jim blamed one another. As Isaac Edwards explained, "Jim said he was killed and cut in two, and that Johnson killed him, upon which Johnson immediately spoke, and said that he did not kill his master, that Jim killed him." After repeated questioning, the bondsmen continued to blame one another. Gradually they revealed the details of their crime. Jim admitted that "if his master was killed, he was killed just there" pointing to a nearby spot. The men then searched a nearby swamp and found Edwards' head, arms, and upper torso. Johnson and Jim had "severed the body from the region of the stomach, and again divided, longitudinally, that part of the trunk with the head attached to it." Isaac Edwards and the other white men were beginning to understand why Jim and Johnson were covered in blood. Now that the white men had discovered the upper part of Edwards' torso, Johnson and Jim's stubborn refusals returned. There was little doubt that they had killed Edwards, but now they "refused to tell where the legs were deposited."[25] Isaac Edwards and the neighborhood whites eventually found Thomas Edwards' legs and the rest of his torso. Ultimately, the slaves confessed that they had dismembered their master because he was too fat for them to drag off on their own.

Confrontations where slaves conspired together and planned to murder their master drew attention from the public, who demanded that slaves face justice. In 1858, Major and Henry, two slaves belonging to James Grant of New Kent County, killed their master by shooting him through a window. The slaves had agreed to kill their master and procured a gun. They could not, however, bring themselves to do it immediately. Henry

[25] *Commonwealth vs. Johnson & Jim*, (LVA).

originally asked his brother Dick to kill Grant, but Dick refused. Henry then had second thoughts and gave the gun to Major, who shot Grant. The use of the gun made the perpetrators of the crime easy to catch. After the New Kent County court sentenced Dick, Major, and Henry to die for their role in the death of James Grant, a petition to Virginia Governor Henry A. Wise asked for all of the slaves to be executed. The author of the petition, Bartholomew Christian, wrote to the Governor that the court's only regret was that "they can not hang all of the balance of the Grant negroes, as all seemed to know something of the contemplated plot."[26]

As with the murder of masters, slaves who conspired together to kill their overseers faced the wrath of angry whites. Hercules, George, and Henry, all slaves of James Wilkinson, conspired together and murdered William Summerell, their overseer. While the slaves agreed in their desire to kill Summerell, they struggled to formulate a successful plan. First, they collected money in order to buy scorpion heads so that they could poison him. George's wife, however, found and destroyed them, fearing that they were intended for her. Next, George, Hercules, and Henry resolved to shoot Summerell. Henry managed to procure a gun and powder and Hercules obtained the lead necessary for buckshot. Hercules waited alongside the riverbank one morning and shot Summerell on his way to the fields. The men dragged Summerell's body into the lowlands by a nearby river and covered him with dirt and logs. Later on, George used a hoe and heavy

[26] Letter from Bartholomew Christian, Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 11, Folder 6. Misc. Reel 4206. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

logs to cover the body in mud. Despite their precautions, suspicion almost immediately turned to Wilkinson's slaves.[27]

Neighborhood whites quickly uncovered the slaves' role in the murder when Aaron, another of Wilkinson's slaves confessed to helping dispose of the overseer's body. Aaron had watched Hercules shoot Summerell and helped drag his body down to the river. Aaron avoided charges for his part in the crime by agreeing to testify against the other three slaves. James Jackson, one of the neighborhood white men, took Hercules and George and whipped them until they admitted to orchestrating Summerell's murder.[28] When Summerell disappeared, suspicions immediately turned towards the slaves under his supervision. George, Hercules, and Henry had a history of animosity towards Summerell. They had tried to kill him once and failed because George's wife had thought the poison was for her. White authorities brought the full weight of the law down on the slaves, including threats of execution and promises of leniency for confessing. They convinced Aaron to testify and reveal the entire plot.

Slaves who conspired to kill their overseers also prompted a violent reaction from the white community. As John Matthews, overseer for Miles King, sat on a stump while the slaves worked in the field, four of King's slaves seized the opportunity to kill him. Frank grabbed him by the neck and held him. As Matthews called for help, James, Edmund, and Jack, three other slaves belonging to King, ran over. Instead of aiding their

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[27] *Commonwealth vs. Hercules,* James Monroe Executive Papers, 1799-1802. Accession 40936. Box 7, Folder 4. Misc. Reel 5347. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth, *Commonwealth vs. Hercules,* (LVA).

[28] *Commonwealth vs. Hercules,* (LVA).

overseer, James clubbed him over the head with a hoe. The slaves buried Matthews' body in a nearby ditch. Fearing it would be easily found, they then tossed it into a nearby river. Miles King returned home later that day and found his overseer missing. After several days, Matthews' body was found floating in the river. King interrogated his slaves and Billy, along with several other bondsmen, confessed to witnessing the murder. As a punishment for their crime, the justices who sat on the court of oyer and terminer directed the sheriff to "cause the heads of the said Frank and James to be severed from their bodies after they are executed and to be exposed to public view as a warning to others."[29] Individual cases of physical confrontations could allow for some leniency, collective ones could not.

When slaves conspired together to rid themselves of cruel overseers, the cases proved memorable to the white and black communities. On February 16, 1824, Humphrey and Thornton, slaves belonging to Edward Garland of Hanover County, murdered George King, their overseer. While they had plotted together to kill King, the bondsmen proved initially hesitant to commit the act themselves. Thornton and Humphrey originally sought to convince two other slaves, Jacob and Jack to murder the overseer. The four slaves had run away from Garland's farm to avoid punishment when Thornton proposed that Jacob and Jack kill him, that way all four men could safely return home. After the two bondsmen refused, Thornton and Humphrey took a different track. In the days leading up to the murder, they sought to provoke King into violence,

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[29] *Commonwealth vs. Frank, James, Edmund, and Jack,* John Tyler Executive Papers, 1808-1811. Accession 41223. Box 2, Folder 4. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

providing them with an excuse to kill him. Thornton told Humphrey to chop down a tree against King's orders. He hoped that it might prompt a violent response and "afford them a pretext for killing him."[30] Neither of these activities, however, worked. Instead the slaves decided to take it upon themselves to kill their cruel overseer.

On February 16, 1824, Humphrey and Thornton took matters into their own hands. As they were engaged in chopping down trees and turning them into rails, King came out to inspect their work. While King conversed with Thornton, Humphrey snuck up behind him and, "struck him with an axe and repeated the blow three times."[31] William Arnall, one of the white men who interrogated the slaves, testified that Humphrey admitted that "he struck the said King four licks on the head with an axe."[32] The blows knocked King to the ground. As he lay twitching in the dirt, Humphrey delivered a final killing blow. With King dead, the slaves calmly returned to chopping and preparing the rails. They, then, left King's body in the woods and went home to feed the livestock. After the moon rose, Humphrey and Thornton journeyed back into the woods. Using some rope taken from King's pocket they lashed him to one of the newly made rails and dumped his body deep in the woods.

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[30] *Commonwealth vs. Humphrey*, James Pleasants Executive Papers, 1822-1825. Accession 42046. Box 4, Folder 3. State Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth, *Commonwealth vs. Humphrey*, (LVA).

[31] *Commonwealth vs. Thornton*, James Pleasants Executive Papers, 1822-1825. Accession 42046. Box 4, Folder 3. State Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[32] *Commonwealth vs. Humphrey*, (LVA).

William Anderson, an ex-slave from Hanover County, described King's death in his 1857 autobiography. Anderson revealed the hatred that the neighborhood slaves felt against King. He described King as "an awful tyrant--a monster among the negro race--whipping and driving both men and women, and cohabiting among the women, both married and single." King's cruelty, Anderson explained, pushed the neighborhood slaves to fight back. Anderson described how two slave brothers, Humphrey and Thornton "knocked him down with their axes and killed him."[33] As a result of their actions, Humphrey and Thornton were tried and convicted of King's murder. William Anderson saw them executed on April 1, 1824. The survival of the story for over thirty years suggests that memories of physical confrontations lingered in the memories of bondsmen. These altercations served as a reminder that bondsmen challenged the authority and cruelty of their white oppressors.

Virginia's white population demanded justice for murdered whites and executions reassured the public of the power of slave law. In 1818, a group of slaves owned by Robert Berkeley of Frederick County conspired and killed their master. Three of the five slaves, London, Randall, and Sarah were executed. Before their execution, the slaves' confessions were published in local newspapers. They each followed a similar course, describing their respective roles in the murder, apologizing for their crimes and asking for

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[33] William Anderson, *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson, Twenty-four Years a Slave; Sold Eight Times! In Jail Sixty Times!! Whipped Three Hundred Times!!! or The Dark Deeds of American Slavery Revealed. Containing Scriptural Views of the Origin of the Black and of the White Man. Also, a Simple and Easy Plan to Abolish Slavery in the United States. Together with an Account of the Services of Colored Men in the Revolutionary War--Day and Date, and Interesting Facts* (Chicago: Daily Tribune Book and Printing Office, 1857), 50.

forgiveness. Randall admitted to feeling "the most awful guilt of conscience and the greatest distress and sorrow, which has never fully left me." London acknowledged his guilt and confessed that, "My crime has been great and my end is shameful." Sarah similarly admitted to her role in the murder and called upon her fellow slaves "to bear their sufferings with patience."[34] These confessions sought to reassure the public of the power of Virginia's slave codes and the safety of the slave regime. They also served as a public reassertion of white power and mastery.

Overseer Confrontations

Overseers occupied a nebulous middle ground in the master-slave relationship. As hired employees of a slave owner, it was their job to keep the slaves working and adhere to their employer's wishes. A writer in *De Bow's Review* explained that overseers had agreed "to carry out the orders of your employer, strictly, cheerfully, and to the best of your ability."[35] The writer warned overseers that their duties would require their full attention, so they should not spend too much time drinking, entertaining guests, or away from their duties. When it came to disciplining the slaves, the author recommended that overseers "[b]e *firm,* and at the same time *gentle* in your control. Never display yourself before them in a passion; and even if inflicting the severest punishment, do so in a mild, cool manner, and it will produce a tenfold effect."[36] The goal of this advice was to teach

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[34] *The American Beacon and Commercial Diary* (Norfolk, VA) July 28, 1818.

[35] *Duties of an Overseer,* De Bow's Review, Vol. 18, Issue 3 (March 1855), 339.

[36] *Duties of an Overseer,* 344.

the overseer how to exert control over the slave population, while also keeping in mind that the slaves also had to fulfill the orders of their owners. The overseer had the unenviable job of trying to balance these two realities.[37]

As many overseers knew, advice from the pages of journals like *De Bow's Review* was bunk. It presented some Platonic ideal of an overseer; slave owners wanted someone reliable, loyal, and willing to work for a relative pittance to control their slaves for them. In reality, overseers occupied a precarious position; they had authority over slaves, but not mastery. Slaves recognized their overseer's tenuous status and tried to exploit it for their own gains. Short of outright rebellion, slaves could not overthrow the system of bondage. But within the day-to-day interactions and management of their lives, bondsmen seized opportunities to assert more control over their own lives. The division of authority between a master and overseer provided one such opportunity. Slaves could play the two off of one another, knowing that the overseer needed them to work in order to keep his job and fulfill his employer's wishes. Bondsmen even tried to negotiate their way out of punishment and exploit the absence of owners. These efforts also highlight how bondsmen rejected the efforts of overseers and others to punish them, instead claiming that only their master had the authority.

The prospect of punishment was the most common cause of individual confrontations between overseers and slaves. In 1803, Dick, a slave belonging to Shadrach Vaughn, heard that Robert Barlow, his overseer, intended to whip him. Barlow

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[37] On the lives of overseers see William K. Scarborough, *The Overseer: Plantation Management in the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966).

sent Dick back to work after assuring him that he had no intention of punishing him. Unconvinced, Dick grabbed an adz (an ax-like tool used in chopping down trees and shaping wood) and struck Barlow over the head several times.[38] In a similar encounter in Roanoke County in 1849, John Richardson barely escaped with his life when Charles, one of the slaves under his supervision, attacked him with an ax. Richardson had gone to inspect Charles's work, but the slave, fearful that the overseer would find it lacking, swung his ax at Richardson's chest. Richardson managed to raise his walking stick in time and divert the blow.[39] At the slaves' trials, both overseers explained that they had gone out to supervise their slaves' work. Neither had planned to punish either bondsman, but the possibility of punishment proved enough to spark a confrontation.

In order to take advantage of the fragile authority of overseers, some slaves attempted to negotiate their way out of punishments. In 1851, Silas Emory ordered the head man to bring over Hartwell, one of the slaves, for punishment. Emory wanted to correct Hartwell because he had become "trifling and negligent about his work."[40] Hartwell ran off, fearful of punishment. When Emory tracked the bondsman down, Hartwell sought to avoid a whipping. He promised to return home if Emory agreed not to

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[38] *Commonwealth vs. Dick,* Virginia Auditor of Public Accounts, Records of Condemned Blacks Executed or Transported, 1794-1809. Accession APA 756. Misc. Reel 2250. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[39] *Commonwealth vs. Charles,* John B. Floyd Executive Papers, 1849-1851. Accession 43924. Box 1, Folder 6. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[40] *Commonwealth vs. Hartwell,* John B. Floyd Executive Papers, 1849-1851. Accession 43924. Box 9, Folder 3. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

discipline him. After Emory rejected his request, Hartwell attacked him with a stick. Hartwell's attempt to negotiate with his overseer represented a common tactic among slaves. They agreed to do their work without complaint if the overseer agreed not to punish them. Emory had to choose between accepting or rejecting Hartwell's offer. If he accepted it, Hartwell would return to work and Emory had fulfilled his duty to his employer to keep all the slaves working productively. If he rejected it, then Emory had lost control of his workforce, surely something that his employer did not want. Punishing Hartwell had another added bonus. It clearly established his willingness to use the whip and let the rest of the slaves know that they could not challenge their overseer without risking punishment.

Slaves sometimes attempted to feign illness or were deliberately slow in performing their work. These resistance strategies also challenged the overseer's authority and could escalate into confrontations. On a November morning in 1837, Samuel Moody, an overseer in Hanover County, went to the house of Sam, one of the slaves, to find out why he was not at work. Sam feigned illness, but Moody refused to let him stay home. Instead he drove the reluctant slave out to the fields. The next morning, Sam approached Moody told him that "he had come to apologize for his conduct the day before." Moody demanded that Sam hand over the stick in his hand. Instead Sam smashed his overseer over the head with it.[41] Only a year later in Albemarle County, Herbert, a slave belonging to Tucker Coles, proved similarly reluctant to work. When

[41] *Commonwealth vs. Sam*, David Campbell Executive Papers, 1837-1840. Accession 43151. Box 2, Folder 6. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Tallon Pace, the overseer, went to his house to demand he attend to his chores, Herbert replied, "Where am I to work?" Herbert had made a habit of appearing late to work and Pace had warned him of the consequences. Pace then struck him several times with a brush. Herbert grabbed a nearby spade and struck Pace over the head, fracturing a part of his skull.[42]

These confrontations highlight how day to day acts of resistance challenged the authority of overseers and resulted in physical confrontations. These resistance strategies could be effective in small doses. Sam could feign illness every once in a while and probably get away with it but only with an overseer who would allow it. Repeated claims of illness would only make the overseer suspicious about the slave's true motives. When Moody refused to tolerate his behavior, Sam became violent. If he could not escape the drudgery of work through illness, then maybe attacking the overseer would do the trick. Herbert had already taken advantage of his position to try and avoid work and frequently had been late to the fields in the morning. Had he done this only occasionally, Pace may have ignored it. But by making it a consistent pattern, Herbert guaranteed that his overseer would take notice. Pace had to respond by disciplining him in order to maintain his authority. Allowing Herbert to go unpunished would encourage other slaves to behave similarly. Overseers could tolerate the occasional threat to their power, but not a consistent one.

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[42] *Commonwealth vs. Herbert*, David Campbell Executive Papers, 1837-1840. Accession 43151. Box 3, Folder 2. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Bondsmen also tried to avoid punishment by shifting responsibility for their actions onto absent owners. The masters' orders, after all, superseded those of the overseer. Overseers, however, who had forged strong relationships with their employers, recognized such tricks. In 1834, Aaron engaged in a confrontation with his overseer, William Harwood. One evening Harwood demanded to know why Aaron was working in a field away from the other slaves. Aaron replied that his master had ordered him to work there before he left for Baltimore. Harwood, however, sensed that Aaron was lying and prepared to punish him. Aaron raised his hoe and swung it at Harwood's head. Harwood used his arm to deflect the blow and stabbed at Aaron with a knife. Harwood eventually escaped back to his own house, temporarily defusing the situation. Harwood had worked for three years as the overseer for Aaron's master John Minge. The two men had formed a strong partnership. Minge testified at Aaron's trial that "it was not his habit to authorize a negro to go to any work independently of the overseer." He had also affirmed Harwood's authority to punish the slaves in his absence. He had told his slaves that "all upon the farm were required to submit implicitly to the orders of the overseer."[43] The strong relationship between owner and overseer negated Aaron's efforts to exploit the division of his master's power.

Virginia slaves, like those elsewhere in the Slave South, were frequently hired out to other owners and placed under the supervision of overseers. For the slaves this added several new layers of authority. Instead of just answering to their owner, they also had to

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[43] *Commonwealth vs. Aaron*, Littleton Tazewell Executive Papers, 1834-1836. Accession 42998. Box 2, Folder 6. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

obey orders from their hired out owner, and potentially an overseer as well. Each man had his own interest in the slave's labor. Owners wanted to make sure their slaves worked so they could collect their wages. Hired out owners wanted to make sure they were getting their money's worth from their temporary property. Finally, overseers had to ensure that the slaves under their supervision met their employer's demands. As Jonathan D. Martin has written, "hiring transactions were intrinsically and idiosyncratically triangular. Where they had been two people, now there were three, and the dynamics immediately changed."[44] If the hired out owner had an overseer, then the relationship of three became four: owner, hired-out owner, overseer, and slave. With so many conflicting interests, this divided mastery could lead to violence as well.

Questions over white authority could prompt violence, especially if they involved violating arrangements between slaves and their hired out owners. John Thompson, an overseer, sparked a confrontation with Jim, one of the slaves under his supervision, by asking him to work on a Saturday morning. Thompson wanted Jim to help the other slaves haul a load of fodder. Jim objected, claiming that "it was his day to go home." In exchange for helping with the fodder, Thompson offered Jim the use of a mule. Jim still refused, claiming that according to his deal with Mr. Fairfax, Thompson's employer, Jim "was to go home soon in the morning."[45] Thompson grew increasingly annoyed as Jim continued to argue with his orders and the two men came to blows. Jim charged at him

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[44] Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2.

[45] *Commonwealth vs. Jim*, Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 17, Folder 3, Misc. Reel 4213. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

with an ax and Thompson drew a pistol. Jim swung his ax and Thompson pulled the trigger, but somehow the two men managed to not kill one another. Instead Thompson bore the brunt of the attack, suffering numerous wounds and only the intervention of his wife scared Jim off.

The confrontation erupted as a result of the tenuous nature of Thompson's authority over Jim. As a hired out slave, Jim had three different white men who claimed control over his labor: William Lewis, his owner; Mr. Fairfax, the man who hired him, and John Thompson, the overseer. Jim also had some say over his work, reaching an agreement with Mr. Fairfax that allowed him to go home on Saturdays. Jim believed that this concession exempted him from any orders that Thompson might issue on Saturdays. Thompson's demand that Jim haul the load of fodder violated that agreement. Jim refused to work, because it would have undermined his ability to get home each weekend and set a dangerous precedent. If Thompson could delay him to haul one load, why not two? Thompson interpreted the deal between Fairfax and Jim differently. Thompson, in his role as overseer, wanted Jim to work like any other slave under his supervision and obey his orders. He acknowledged Jim's right to leave, but wanted him to help. If exchange for his help, Thompson offered the use of a mule—that would presumably get Jim home faster than walking. These differing understandings of Jim's work obligations led to the confrontation.

In 1836, an altercation between Reuben Bruce and his slave Wilson stemmed from a similar problem of divided mastery. For years, Bruce had managed his uncle Joseph's farm and his slaves. One March day, Rueben found Wilson working in the fields

contrary to his orders. Wilson claimed that Joseph Bruce had ordered him to work there. Reuben rejected Wilson's explanation and prepared to punish him with a hickory stick. Wilson grabbed the stick out of Reuben's hands and pummeled him repeatedly with it. The two men battled back and forth until Reuben Bruce finally gained the upper hand. As he pressed forward with his desire to punish Wilson, Bruce told one of the other slaves that Wilson had been "obstinate and has struck me several times with the stick and I am determined to make him yield or one of us must die."[46] Wilson continued to half heartedly resist, repeatedly claiming that he would not be whipped, but eventually gave in. Wilson had sought to use his master as an excuse to disobey the orders of his overseer. Reuben Bruce, however, would not tolerate any type of disobedience from the slaves under his control.

Slaves also turned violent at the prospect of punishment by someone who could not claim mastery over them. Cromwell, a slave, worked in a blacksmith's shop in Pittsylvania County owned by his master, Samuel Tunstall, and James M. Hall. One evening, Hall saw Cromwell and two of Tunstall's other slaves get into a fight. The next morning, Hall informed Cromwell that he would punish him for his behavior. The bondsman grew angry and claimed that Hall had no authority to whip him. Cromwell asserted that only his master, Samuel Tunstall, had the right to discipline him. As Hall prepared to tie Cromwell's hands, the slave reached down for a pair of blacksmith's tongs and struck Hall in the head. Hall then punched Cromwell in the throat. As the two men

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[46] *Commonwealth vs. Wilson,* Wyndham Robertson Executive Papers, 1836-1837. Accession 43097. Box 1, Folder 5. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

engaged in their confrontation, Hall called on Lawson, another hired out slave in the shop, to help. Hall testified that "Lawson turned off and said he would have nothing to do with it."[47] Lawson, who similarly rejected Hall's claims to mastery, left the two men to settle their fight on their own. During Cromwell's trial, Hall claimed that while Cromwell worked in the blacksmith's shop, Tunstall had granted him full authority to punish the slaves as he saw fit. Lawson and Cromwell, however, refused to recognize his authority.

Masters and overseers also disagreed over who bore the responsibility for confrontations. On March 30, 1845, Albert Jenkins stormed into the cabin of Edward, a slave belonging to his employer, Daniel Warwick. Despite repeated summonses, Edward had not come out of his cabin and prepared breakfast as the overseer demanded. On entering the cabin, Jenkins slapped Edward with a cowhide whip in order to wake him up. Jenkins admitted during his testimony that Edward was hard of hearing and likely deaf, making it difficult for him to hear the yelling from outside the cabin. Jenkins noted that Edward "started up and seemed to manifest both surprise and torpor."[48] To rouse the sleepy slave to work, Jenkins slammed him against a wall and demanded rope to tie his hands. He then began whipping him with a cowhide. Edward screamed out demanding to know why he was being whipped. The two men engaged in a confrontation as Edward

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[47] *Commonwealth vs. Cromwell,* Joseph Johnson Executive Papers, 1852-1855. Accession 44076. Box 2, Folder 9. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[48] *Commonwealth vs. Edward,* James McDowell Executive Papers, 1843-1845. Accession 43559. Box 6, Folder 4. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Edward,* (LVA).

grabbed an ax and swung at the overseer. He quickly gained the upper hand and Jenkins only managed to escape after several members of his family intervened.

Jenkins and Edward's owner, Daniel Warwick, disagreed over who was responsible for Edward's violence. In response to the attack, Warwick sent Jenkins a letter and confirmed that Edward was indeed hard of hearing—making Jenkins's actions a gross overreaction to the entire situation. Warwick admitted that Edward had a temper, but had been a good and loyal slave for almost fifteen years. For his part, Jenkins denied that he had brought the case to court at all. The overseer's sister testified in court that Jenkins had given Edward "a whipping to his satisfaction" and that he only brought the case to court at the insistence of some unidentified neighbors.[49] The disagreement between Warwick and Jenkins highlighted the precarious relationship between owners and overseers. Jenkins wanted control over his labor force and to punish Edward for his failure to obey orders. Warwick had given up part of his mastery by hiring an overseer to compel his slaves to work. By losing control of the situation, Jenkins demonstrated his failures as an overseer. Through his own incompetence—not taking into account that Edward was mostly deaf—Jenkins had allowed the confrontation to escalate to the point where now Warwick was about to lose a valuable slave. The Amherst court of oyer and terminer sentenced Edward to hang. While Warwick received $470 in compensation, he could not get his slave back.

Owners petitioned the governor for pardons or to commute the sentences of their condemned slaves—over the wishes of their overseers. Shadrach Vaughn, whose slave

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[49] *Commonwealth vs. Edward,* (LVA).

Dick, mentioned earlier, tried to kill his overseer, Robert Barlow asked Governor James Monroe to commute Dick's sentence. Vaughn argued that testimony in the case proved that Dick's "intention was not to kill." Further, Vaughn claimed that Dick's youth and relative stupidity warranted sparing his life. He wrote to Monroe that Dick "is a young and rather a stupid negro."[50] Vaughn also believed that Barlow's quick recovery offered further proof of Dick's lack of intent to kill. Barlow, Vaughn claimed, had already returned to work as his overseer. Another petition signed by numerous citizens supported Vaughn's request. Vaughn's efforts to commute Dick's sentence sparked a counter petition by a number of citizens in Goochland County. In their petition, they claimed that the current "situation of our Country from that class of people require public example to be made of those who shall be found guilty of similar crimes."[51] They requested that Governor Monroe allow the execution to go forward. Monroe, however, commuted Dick's sentence to transportation.

Further highlighting the precarious position of overseers, their confrontations could leave them with permanent injuries. Ann Byrd, a female slaveholder in Louisa County, Virginia, recalled the confrontation between Nathan, one of her slaves, and Anderson Talley, her overseer. On May 26, 1825, Byrd left her house and headed towards the horse pen, about thirty steps away. She found Talley and Nathan engaged in

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[50] Shadrach Vaughn Letter, James Monroe Executive Papers, 1799-1802. Accession 40936. Box 7, Folder 3. Misc. Reel 5347. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[51] Petition, James Monroe Executive Papers, 1799-1802. Accession 40936. Box 7, Folder 3. Misc. Reel 5347. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

a brutal struggle. She watched as Nathan struck Talley over the head with a fence stake. The blow left the overseer senseless. Talley's father William claimed that he "thought his son would never recover." William claimed that the wound left Anderson "unable to attend this court and occasionally delirious."[52] In 1856, Samuel Harris suffered various wounds from a confrontation with Peter, one of the slaves under his supervision. During Peter's trial, Harris recalled how Peter repeatedly struck him in the shoulders and head. Harris claimed that he received a wound on his right arm "from which I have not yet recovered."[53] Such complaints served as stark reminders of the dangers of confrontations for overseers as well.

The murder of overseers could also generate anger and sympathy in the white community. In 1847, Bernard Peyton promised a fifty dollar reward after his slave Giles attacked and killed Thomas Goodman, Peyton's overseer. Peyton complained of the "ferocious and unprovoked assault" on Goodman. Governor William Smith also offered a hundred dollar reward for Giles' capture. Peyton described Giles as "an unusually large and athletic young man, quite black, with fine teeth."[54] The *Richmond Enquirer* reported that on the day of Giles's execution "A promiscuous assemblage of persons, variously estimated from five to ten thousand, were present to witness the awful scene." The

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[52] *Commonwealth vs. Nathan*, James Pleasants Executive Papers, 1822-1825. Accession 42046. Box 7, Folder 9. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[53] *Commonwealth vs. Peter*, Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 5, Folder 1. Misc. Reel 4198. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[54] *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA) April 13, 1847.

Enquirer reported that Giles appeared to have "little intelligence, and a sullen disposition." Giles ignored the situation around him displaying "the most stoical indifference throughout." The bondsman's behavior, the paper claimed, afforded "abundant evidence that he was a proper subject for the gallows."[55] Giles gave a brief speech, acknowledging his crimes and asking his fellow bondsmen to learn from his mistakes. After being hanged, the crowd dispersed seemingly satisfied that Giles had received justice.

Community Threats: Runaways & Robberies

Besides violence against owners and overseers, slaves also engaged in confrontations while running away and engaging in robberies. These confrontations exposed the failure of mastery. These slaves were not just a threat to their owners and overseers, but to the white community at large. Masters relied on poor men seeking money, their neighbors, constables, and other whites to take control of their slaves for them. For slaves who committed robberies, they placed violence alongside their desire to strike back against the white community through theft. These bondsmen represented a different threat from the other confrontations previously discussed. Instead of targeting their owners and overseers, they attacked shopkeepers, grocery store owners, or travelling peddlers. In these instances, the failure of their masters to control their bondsmen placed the broader community in danger. These altercations reminded whites that slave violence

[55] *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA) December 14, 1847.

was not something that they could easily contain to a few isolated farms or lazy masters. Rather they highlighted that anyone, from farmer to grocery clerk, could be a target.

Slave flight and physical confrontations occurred side-by-side. As John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweniger have demonstrated, slave flight was a pervasive feature of southern slavery.[56] Slaves ran away for a variety of reasons. Some fled to avoid punishment or express their discontent with their circumstances. Some attempted to escape to the North and freedom. Sometimes slaves stayed away for only a few hours or days at a time. In other circumstances, they would spend weeks or even months at large. Geography played a role in slave flight as well. Slaves in the border states had much less distance to travel for freedom than those in the Deep South. The circumstances of slave flight differed depending on the particular slaves, whites, and geography involved. Virginia's runaway slaves engaged in two general types of confrontations. Individual confrontations involved slaves using violence in order to facilitate or continue their escapes to freedom. Collective violence featured groups of slaves conspiring together to kill their owners to avoid being taken into the Deep South.

Runaway slaves proved especially dangerous to the white men who attempted to capture them. Peter Cheatham, an overseer in Henry County, Virginia, was repeatedly stabbed while trying to a capture a runaway from a nearby farm. Cheatham entered one of the cabins in the slave quarter and found Miles, a runaway, hiding inside. Cheatham, Samuel Hairston, Miles' owner, and another white man tried to take Miles into custody.

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[56] John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); James Oakes, "The Political Significance of Slave Resistance," *History Workshop* 22 (1986): 89–107.

Miles drew a knife and swung repeatedly at Cheatham, cutting him repeatedly on his arms and wrists.[57] John Campbell of Amherst County had a similar confrontation with a runaway that nearly cost him his life. After capturing, Anthony, a runaway slave, early in the morning, Campbell brought him back to his cabin before heading off to the Amherst County jail. While Campbell ate his breakfast, Anthony untied himself, stole Campbell's gun and ran off. Campbell drew his own pistol and chased after him. After the gun misfired, Anthony swung it repeatedly at Campbell's head landing several blows. The wounds left Campbell unable to work for the next several weeks. For his part in the confrontation, Anthony was hanged.[58]

The capture of runaways revealed how masters relied on the work of poorer whites to make up for their own failures of mastery. John Lilton's offer of a twenty dollar reward for the capture of Israel, one of his slaves, enticed Ira Reynolds and Abraham and Samuel Fuller. On March 31, 1834, the three men went into the woods where they suspected Israel might be hiding. They found the runaway at a makeshift camp. After a brief pursuit through the woods, the three white men managed to capture Israel. The bondsman had drawn a butcher knife and refused to drop it because he could not "suffer himself to be taken." The three men triumphantly carried Israel back to Lilton's house

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[57] *Commonwealth vs. Miles*, Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 20, Folder 6, Misc. Reel 4217. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. See also *Commonwealth vs. Miles*, Henry County (Va.) Commonwealth Causes, 1856-1859. Accession 23219. Henry County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[58] *Commonwealth vs. Anthony,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 9, Folder 3, Misc. Reel 4203. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

expecting to collect their reward. Instead Lilton refused to pay, noting that "his advertisement of reward directed him to be delivered at the jail."[59] Since it was late at night, Reynolds and the Fullers would have to wait until the next day to deliver Israel to the jail and claim their prize.

After taking Israel back to Reynolds's house, the men barred the door and locked it so Israel could not escape. The men, however, did nothing to secure the bevy of weapons strewn about the room including a gun, an ax, and an iron shovel. In the night, Israel attacked Samuel Fuller with an ax handle. After beating Fuller, Israel turned his attention to Reynolds. He thrashed the white man so badly that Reynolds could not get up and the "blood that flowed so profusely over his eyes prevented him from seeing what passed till he recovered."[60] Abraham Fuller joined in the confrontation and the three men subdued Israel again and secured him until they could carry him off to the Russell county jail. The court record makes no mention of whether Reynolds and the Fullers collected their twenty dollar prize for performing the work of John Lilton's mastery for him.

Confrontations with runaways and whites threatened the lives of whites. Fed, a runaway slave in Mecklenburg County killed a white man named William Stainback. On the morning of September 17, 1803, Stainback and another man, Daniel Glover, found Fed asleep in a field. Suspecting that he was a runaway, they woke him up and captured him. Fed initially went along, but as the men walked to a nearby house he drew his knife

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[59] *Commonwealth vs. Israel,* Littleton W. Tazewell Executive Papers, 1834-1836. Accession 42998. Box 1, Folder 2. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Israel,* (LVA).

[60] *Commonwealth vs. Israel,* (LVA).

and fatally stabbed Stainback.[61] In 1825, Joel and Lindsay Stinnett, Williams Wells, and Thomas Edgar had trapped Harry, a runaway slave, inside a tobacco barn in Bedford County. Edgar entered the barn and attempted to capture Harry while the other three men waited outside. Harry repeatedly swung a scythe at Edgar, wounding him. As Harry escaped, the tobacco barn went up in flames. The other men dragged Edgar out of the burning barn, but they could not save his life.[62] Capturing suspected runaways could prove fatal to unprepared whites.

Runaway slaves also threatened the lives of other whites in their neighborhoods. In 1834, Nelson, a runaway slave, snuck into the house of Edward Jones to roast some corn. Nelson had run away from his master two days earlier and was in desperate need of food. After stealing some corn from a nearby field, Nelson found his way into Jones's kitchen, hoping to sneak into the kitchen and roast the corn while the family was asleep. When he ran into Edward Jones, Nelson panicked. The bondsman threatened to strike Jones with his ax if the white man came any closer. Jones failed to heed Nelson's warning and attempted to corner the desperate slave. Nelson then struck him over the head with the ax. The wound proved fatal and Nelson fled back into the woods. Rather

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[61] *Commonwealth vs. Fed,* Virginia Auditor of Public Accounts, Records of Condemned Blacks Executed or Transported, 1794-1803. Accession APA 756. Misc. Reel 2250. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[62] *Commonwealth vs. Harry*, James Pleasants Executive Papers, 1822-1825. Accession 42046. Box 8, Folder 7. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

than become the subject of a manhunt, the next morning he surrendered himself to a neighborhood resident and confessed to his crime.[63]

Even when in custody, slaves resisted in order to escape. On May 26, 1815, Caesar, a slave of John West, fought with James Flood and Henry Etheridge, two Norfolk city constables, who were guarding him on the way to the whipping post. Once they arrived there, Caesar threw himself into a nearby creek. As Caesar swam deeper and deeper into the water, Flood jumped in after him. As Flood neared the escaping slave, Caesar pulled a stake from the creek and struck Flood over the head with it. The two men then grappled with each other and Caesar managed to gain the upper hand. One witness described how the bondsman "seized Flood round the neck and drew him down in the water, and held him under the water for about four or five minutes."[64] After drowning Flood, Caesar stripped himself of his clothes and swam off down the creek. A group of white men commandeered a canoe, paddled down the creek, and dragged Caesar out of the water. Instead of a whipping, Caesar now faced the hangman's noose for killing Flood.

Slaves also conspired together to kill their masters and avoid being taken out of the Upper South. In 1803, two slaves named Isaac and Adam Cook killed their master, James Howard, as they traveled down the Ohio River in rural Kanawha County. In the

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[63] *The Lynchburg Virginian,* (Lynchburg, Virginia), September 1, 1834, reprinted in *Salem Gazette* (Salem, MA), September 12, 1834. See also *Georgia Telegraph* (Macon, GA) September 4, 1834.

[64] *Commonwealth vs. Caesar*, Wilson C. Nicholas Executive Papers, 1814-1816. Accession 41612. Box 2, Folder 7. Misc. Reel 237. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

middle of the night, the sound of Adam and Isaac striking their master repeatedly with a whip and an ax awakened the other men on the boat. After the bondsmen killed Howard, the slaves tossed his body into the river. One of the white men, however, alerted the others to the murder before the slaves could escape.[65] In 1821, Ellis and Nathan, property of Patrick Wilson, killed their owner and tossed him into the Ohio River. Wilson had purchased five slaves in Baltimore and was taking them south to his home in Natchez, Mississippi. Fearful of the consequences of Ellis and Nathan's actions, the other three newly purchased slaves landed the boat on the banks of the Ohio River and turned their fellow slaves over to local authorities.[66]

Slaves also took the opportunity to kill their new owners in order to escape to the North. On April 23, 1834, Littleton and George, slaves of John and Jesse Kirby, killed their masters. The Kirbys had purchased Littleton, George, and a number of other slaves in Maryland and were bringing them home to Georgia. While traveling through Prince Edward County, John and Jesse Kirby stopped at the end of the day on April 23rd to make camp, a short distance from Bill's Tavern. After the group had eaten dinner and laid down to sleep, the scream of a young slave boy jolted everyone awake. The slaves discovered that their new masters were dead. Rachel, one of the slaves in the coffle, described how "their heads were broken, faces bloody, brains knocked out and they were

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[65] *Commonwealth vs. Isaac and Adam Cook*, Virginia Auditor of Public Accounts, Records of Condemned Blacks Executed or Transported, 1794-1803. Accession APA 756. Misc. Reel 2250. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[66] *The Reporter* (Washington, PA), October 16, 1820.

dead."[67] As the slaves searched the area, they noticed that the Kirby's trunk had gone missing. George, Littleton, and a handful of other slaves had disappeared as well. After the murder, George and Littleton convinced some of the other slaves to run off with them, hopeful of their prospects for escape. Many of the other slaves, unsure of what to do next, refused to leave. The slaves who had fled divided the money and goods from the trunk amongst themselves.

During the subsequent investigation, the authorities discovered that the slaves robbed and killed their masters in order to escape to the North. Horace, another slave in the coffle, revealed their plan; "they would get clear and go to Pennsylvania."[68] Robert Hill, a white witness, claimed that George's "object was to make his escape and get to a free state, he wanted the money."[69] The two slaves sought their freedom. In order to accomplish it, they murdered the slave traders who had just purchased them and stole their money. George, Littleton, and likely some of the other slaves wanted their freedom. Having left Maryland and their homes behind, they likely believed that violence afforded them the last possible opportunity to escape whatever fate awaited them in Georgia. Georgia offered fewer opportunities for escape than Maryland. The movement south threw the slaves lives into flux.

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[67] *Commonwealth vs. Littleton,* Littleton W. Tazewell Executive Papers, 1834-1836. Accession 42998. Box 1, Folder 3. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth, *Commonwealth vs. Littleton,* (LVA).

[68] *Commonwealth vs. Littleton,* (LVA).

[69] *Commonwealth vs. George,* Littleton W. Tazewell Executive Papers, 1834-1836. Accession 42998. Box 1, Folder 3. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Slaves who assaulted or killed whites during robberies extended the range of targets for slave violence. These confrontations emerged from a longstanding tradition of slave theft from whites. Whites considered slave theft proof of their natural inferiority. Theft was often necessary for the day-to-day survival of slaves, so bondsmen never adapted the view of the master class that theft represented some sort of moral failing. Stealing could mean the difference between survival and starvation. Slaves, as Eugene D. Genovese notes, differentiated between stealing and theft. He wrote that "The slaves made a distinction: they stole from each other but merely took from their masters."[70] As property of their masters, how could they steal his property? Slaves though did not limit their theft to their owners. They targeted local shopkeepers, grocery stores, farms, and travelers. Theft when combined with violence made these types of confrontations especially disturbing for the white community. These incidents represented a failure of masters to control their slaves and posed a threat to the entire white community.

Physical confrontations and other slave crime converged during slave robberies. Slaves physically assaulted or killed whites whom they intended to rob. In 1860, Taylor Brown entered a Richmond clothing store belonging to Harris Fisher and attempted to abscond with some clothing. Fisher pursued Brown into the alley, when Brown turned around and stabbed him several times with a knife. Other witnesses to the crime chased down and arrested Brown who had jumped into a nearby canal in an effort to escape.[71]

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[70] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan,* Roll, 602.

[71] *Commonwealth vs. Taylor Brown,* John Letcher Executive Papers, 1859-1863. Accession 36787. Box 3, Folder 7. Misc. Reel 4709. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

John, a slave, followed Rebecca Cooper several miles outside of Norfolk in order to rob her. As Cooper and another woman, Susan Lambert, rode in their cart out of the city, John stalked them. When their cart reached a secluded wooded area on the road, he attacked the two women with a stick, knocking them both unconscious. John, who was hired out to a baker in Norfolk, was later spotted on the road rummaging his way through the flour that had been in the cart.[72]

Like slaves involved in other forms of confrontation, bondsmen who committed robberies against whites found it difficult to cover up their crimes. In 1855, Thomas Johnson, a white farmer in Buckingham County, spotted a slave scurrying away from his hog pen. He demanded to know what the slave, a runaway named Madison, had hidden away in his bag. Johnson saw blood on the bag and suspected that Madison had stolen from his pen. When Johnson demanded that Madison turn the bag over, the slave threatened him with a stick. Johnson refused to accede to the slave's threat and Madison struck him repeatedly over the head with the stick. Johnson eventually tracked Madison down and had him arrested for assault.[73] Temple and Burwell, slaves of John P. Downing, robbed George Grimes as he was coming home from Rowling Green in Caroline County in 1856. Grimes testified that Temple "knocked him down with a fence

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[72] *Commonwealth vs. John,* John Rutherfoord Executive Papers, 1841-1842. Accession 43494. Box 1, Folder 6. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[73] *Commonwealth vs. Madison,* Joseph Johnson Executive Papers, 1852-1855. Accession 44076. Box 11, Folder 2. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

rail and choked him" while another slave robbed his cart of his goods. The slaves disappeared down the road, but several days later, Benjamin Hicks, Downing's overseer, had the two slaves arrested after he found the stolen goods in their possession.[74]

Slaves also killed whites in order to rob them. Miles, a slave living in Isle of Wight County, robbed and killed William Snow, a peddler. Snow worked for a Richmond clothier and traveled around the Commonwealth selling shoes, buttons, shirts, ties, and other clothing items. According to white witnesses, Miles had announced his intentions to kill Snow several hours before the murder while brandishing a gun. He warned that "if any person ever betrayed him, he would kill them." Jacob shot Snow, stole his cart, and drove it into the woods to divide the spoils.[75] One evening, Jacob, the slave of James H. Christian, entered the home of E.E. Harwood, a Charles City store owner and asked to go into the store. After Harwood finished his dinner, he and Jacob went into the store alone. Isabel, one of Harwood's slaves, heard a loud noise from the store. When she tried to investigate she found the door had been locked. A look through the peephole revealed that the door to the storeroom was open. Later that night she discovered Jacob lurking around the property. He fired a pistol at her and tried to strike her with a stick before

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[74] *Commonwealth vs. Temple,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 1, Folder 2. Misc. Reel 4193. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[75] *Commonwealth vs. Miles,* James P. Preston Executive Papers, 1816-1819. Accession 41737. Box 1, Folder 8. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

some neighbors intervened. They captured Jacob and uncovered the dead body inside the store.[76]

The combination of theft and violence was more common among groups of slaves than individual ones. In 1828, Robert and Anthony, two slaves from Petersburg, were convicted of murdering and robbing Richard O'Maher. According to one of the witnesses at the slaves' trial, O'Maher and Anthony had become close friends and O'Maher had revealed to Anthony where he kept his money, between $120-$150. One evening Robert and Anthony snuck into O'Maher's room, stole his money and beat him to death.[77] In 1833, two slaves, Lee and Peter, robbed and murdered a white man named Peter Ware. After Ware's death, rumors spread among the white and slave communities that the two slaves had recently come into a load of goods. After the neighborhood whites searched Peter's cabin, they uncovered Ware's watch. Confronted with this evidence Peter admitted that he had gotten the watch from Lee, but denied that he participated in the murder. He was to meet Lee that Sunday in Milton, "where they would sell the watch and divide the money."[78] Peter admitted that he was present when Lee killed Ware and decided to share in the spoils. It was well known in the community that Ware frequently

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[76] *Commonwealth vs. Jacob,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 2, Folder 1. Misc. Reel 4194. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[77] *Commonwealth vs. Robert and Anthony,* William B. Giles Executive Papers, 1827-1830. Accession 42310. Box 4, Folder 9. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[78] *Commonwealth vs. Peter and Lee,* John Floyd Executive Papers, 1830-1834. Accession 42665. Box 10, Folder 11. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

carried large amounts of money on his person. Peter and Posey, slaves belonging to J.M. Pendleton in Goochland County in 1847, broke into the store of John J. Trice and murdered him. The evening of the murder Posey proposed to Peter that they go to Trice's store, rob it, and steal the money they found there. The slaves broke into the store and Posey brutally attacked Trice with a hatchet before taking the money and running off. The slaves' crime was quickly discovered when Pendleton's other bondsmen noticed that Peter had been displaying large amounts of money to his fellow slaves. Pendleton's overseer, William Payne, discovered that Peter's coat was covered with blood.[79]

Conclusion

Virginia's slave codes reflected the desire of white Virginians to establish their supremacy over their slaves. These laws were not simply the product of the wishes of the slaveholding elite, rather they emerged out of the interactions between white Virginians of all classes and the slaves themselves. Courts of oyer and terminer served as a warning to enslaved Virginians about the dangers of disobeying their masters and attempting to control the direction of their lives. The cases that made it before the courts represented instances where whites had failed to exercise their mastery over their bondsmen. Collective action threatened to undermine the institution of slavery in Virginia and even though most of these confrontations did not rise to the level of rebellion, whites refused to offer any leniency. Physical confrontations with overseers revealed how slaves

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[79] *Commonwealth vs. Peter and Posey,* William Smith Executive Papers, 1846-1848. Accession 43708. Box 5, Folder 3. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

challenged the division of their owner's mastery for their own benefit. These altercations highlighted class differences between whites, who relied on the courts to secure their racial alliance and the subjugation of African-Americans. Finally, cases involving runaways and robberies highlighted how the failures of masters to control their bondsmen placed the rest of the white community in danger. Poor whites, constables, neighbors, and other whites dealt with the slaves who had successfully challenged their owner's mastery. In all of these cases, the court system had to step in to reassert white supremacy when the efforts of masters failed.

Chapter 2

INDIVIDUAL SLAVE HONOR

Southern honor, as scholars such as Bertram Wyatt-Brown and Kenneth S. Greenberg have stressed, had two interrelated components: a belief in one's own self and an assessment of that claim by the community at large.[1] These internal and external motivations pushed white men towards socially approved behaviors, and only through the responses of the community could a white man understand his place in honor culture. This community response also helped differentiate between those with honor and those without. According to southern whites, slaves had no honor. As Wyatt-Brown succinctly explained, "honor is reputation."[2] Slaves had no such claims to reputations. As sociologist Orlando Patterson explained a slave "could have no honor because he had no power and no independent social existence, hence no public worth. He had no name of

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[1] For honor and violence see, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, The Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Elliott J. Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review* 90 (February 1985), 18-43.

[2] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor,* 14.

his own to defend."[3] Patterson also contrasted the ability of free people to respond to challenges to their honor, whereas the slave "usually stood outside the game of honor."[4] As the legal property of their owners, slave men had no socially acceptable claim to violence in defense of themselves. Without reputations to defend, slaves could make no claims to honor.

Only recently have historians begun questioning whether slaves were truly separate from this culture of southern honor. In his work on slave on slave violence, Jeff Forret has stressed the existence of a code of honor among bondsmen in their dealings with one another. He contends that "The willingness of slave men to use violence to uphold and enforce their business dealings, defend their women, or take vengeance on other male slaves who had successfully violated their sexual claims points to the significance of a code of honor among slaves; a language of honor infused their behavior in both their economic and personal lives."[5] In his examination of violence between slaves and poor whites, Forret has similarly highlighted slave claims to honor. Struggles with poor whites, Forret wrote, "may have given slave men a taste of the honor and manliness that their condition denied them."[6] In discussing this form of slave honor,

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[3] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*: *A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 10.

[4] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 11.

[5] Jeff Forret, "Conflict and the 'Slave Community': Violence among Slaves in Upcountry South Carolina," *The Journal of Southern History,* Vol. 74, No. 3 (August 2008), 576.

[6] Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 182.

Forret is careful to point out that such violence emerged primarily for defensive purposes.[7] This slave honor had narrower confines than the type of honor found amongst southern whites.

Bertram Wyatt-Brown has also drawn an explicit connection between slaves' notions of honor and violence. He concluded that "Male honor was richly prized in the slave quarters, and a defense of it established rank among fellow slaves." Like Forret, Wyatt-Brown emphasized the limitations of slave honor. He noted that "slave honor was confined to the slave quarters, a restriction that may have made them all the more brutal out of frustration."[8] Wyatt-Brown further recognized that slaves' claims to honor could complicate their lives with their masters or among their fellow bondspeople. He wrote, "Ethically, however, the Southern black lived in two worlds. To please those in one sphere could well mean the loss of respect in another."[9] Slaves could earn respect and esteem from their masters by demonstrating loyalty, strong work habits, and deferring to their master's wishes. This eager acceptance of servile status in exchange for recognition and favor from owners could, in turn, generate resentment from slaves in the quarters. On the other hand, slaves who resisted their masters or shirked their responsibilities could

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[7] Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins*, 162-163, 181-182. For the defensive nature of confrontations see also Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 265-267, 313-320.

[8] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Old South," *The American Historical Review,* Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988), 1249.

[9] Wyatt-Brown, "Mask of Obedience," 1246.

win respect from their fellow bondsmen, but risk the wrath of an angry owner or overseer.

So if we know that slaves participated in some kind of honor culture, what did honor mean to them? White violence stemmed from a desire to preserve their reputations, but slaves had no reputations to defend. So their violence had to come from somewhere else. Instead the willingness of bondsmen to engage in physical confrontations emerged from an internal sense of violated expectations. These expectations were largely personal in nature and differed from slave to slave. Bondsmen tolerated different levels of abuse from their masters and dealt with it in different ways. Some fought back, some ran away, some committed suicide, and some absorbed horrifying levels of brutality and mistreatment without ever fighting back. That individual slaves developed different expectations should not surprise observers of southern slave communities. The fragmented nature of antebellum slave communities made it so that bondsmen could not agree on communal understandings of honor when it came to confronting whites. If slaves had developed a collective honor culture, then they would have developed a more unified front against white violence.

Slaves lived circumscribed lives compared to whites. Slave men had no reputations to defend and only limited legal rights. Despite the differences between the status of bondsmen and their free white counterparts, the tenets of southern slave honor largely reflected the key components of white southern ideas of honor. Bondsmen reacted violently to the violation of their bodies through punishment and in defense of their fellow slaves, especially family members. Honor and defense of family, as Bertram

Wyatt-Brown wrote, have been interconnected for centuries: "From the days when Tacitus wrote *Germania*, the cardinal principle of honor was family defense."[10] Honorable men, too, defended themselves from aggressors. Insults or other challenges to their manhood could not go unmet. These attacks on slaves' honor and masculinity warranted a violent response often when they occurred in full view of other slaves or whites. Wyatt-Brown explained that "Any word of calumny required immediate response among white southerners, just as among pagan German tribesmen centuries before."[11] Bondsmen's expressions of masculinity were quintessentially southern in that they saw violence, and not restraint as some of their northern counterparts did, as the key to asserting their manhood. While slaves did not have reputations to protect, they could earn the respect of their fellow bondsmen by resisting whites. Slave understandings of honor emerged from southern culture, but also reflected their status as property of whites.

Defense of Family

Since family and kinship ties played such a central role in the organization of southern society and since men served as the head of the family, the behavior of wives and children made up a key part of white men's honor. Wyatt-Brown has explained that "The inner life of the family was inseparable from its public appearance."[12] As a result, as Bertram Wyatt-Brown has stressed, white men did not sit idly by when others insulted

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[10] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 110.

[11] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor,* 43.

[12] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor,* 54.

their family members. And other members of the white community looked the other way when white men avenged insults against their family members. Wyatt-Brown noted that "A crime of passion in response to a family wrong was often greeted with acquittal."[13] Yet slaves did not have the same societal expectations. Whites expected that slaves would tolerate and accept punishment, insult, or even sexual exploitation of their family members. Slave families did not have the same legal rights and protections as white ones. White men had few qualms about violating the sanctity of slave marriages, especially since slave codes did not recognize their legality. Since slaves had no claims to honor, they had no claims to violence in defense of their kin.

Jeff Forret has investigated the intersection of slave honor and family protection. His research into violence among upcountry South Carolina slaves revealed that they battled amongst themselves over love and family. In this way, slaves' willingness to defend their kin mirrored that of the white community. Forret argued that "slave men valued status and reputation, and in contests analogous to those among white participants, they vied for rank and honor among themselves. Bondsmen employed violence to redress grievances and thereby prevent any loss of honor. Male slaves acted as honorable men when they quickly defended wives, family, and friends from any slights or aspersions."[14] Slave violence in defense of family played a central role in Forret's description of a culture of honor present among male slaves. This violence, Forret further argued,

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[13] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor,* 43.

[14] Forret, "Conflict and the 'Slave Community,'" 577.

"permitted slave men to display their manhood in the quarters."[15] Forret limited his examination to the culture of honor within the quarters, thus he does not discuss how slaves addressed violations of the bonds of family by whites. An examination of confrontations by slaves against whites reveals a similar devotion to the defense of family members.

Violence against siblings could prompt seemingly well behaved bondsmen to resist. In October 1839, Harry, a slave belonging to John Allan, struck and killed his overseer, Isham Cheatham over the head with a piece of a wooden cart. One day while the slaves were at work, Cheatham began punishing Harry's brother Jim in front of the rest of the slaves working in the field. Jim had sassed his overseer, and Cheatham wanted to make sure that all the slaves knew the punishment for disrespect. As one of the slaves explained Cheatham "would teach him how to give him such impertinent language."[16] As Cheatham disciplined Jim, Harry came up behind him and struck him on the head. After Cheatham crumpled to the ground, Harry ran off, fearful of what might happen next. The slaves carried the overseer back to their master's house where Cheatham died of his wounds. Harry remained at large for six days before turning himself in. When he returned home, Harry denied that he had wanted to kill Cheatham. He told a neighborhood white man that he "did not intend to kill Mr. Cheatham and was sorry for what he had done, and

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[15] Forret, "Conflict and the 'Slave Community,'" 569.

[16] *Commonwealth vs. Harry*, David Campbell Executive Papers, 1837-1840. Accession 4315. Box 7, Folder 1. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Harry,* (LVA).

had come in to surrender himself that justice might be done." He confessed that he had struck Cheatham because "he was whipping his brother Jim."[17]

The prospect of participating in the punishment of a fellow slave also sent some bondsmen over the edge. Jordan, a slave belonging to Thomas Taylor of Henrico County, killed William Woodram, his overseer in February 1820. Woodram had ordered Jordan to fetch some switches so he could use them to discipline Ned Coats, another slave on the farm. Ned had come home late from a weekend spent with his wife and Woodram wanted to punish him. Jordan, however, refused his overseer's orders causing Woodram to shift his attention away from Ned. Woodram struck Jordan several times with a stick and refused to stop even after Jordan begged him. Jordan then grabbed the stick from his overseer and "knocked him down and some of his brains came out."[18] Jordan ran off as the other slaves rushed to carry Woodram to the house where he died shortly afterwards. The next day Jordan surrendered himself to his master, Thomas Taylor. Jordan only admitted that "he had struck his overseer."[19] The prospect of participating in the punishment of another slave proved too much for Jordan to handle.

Bondsmen who had to participate in the punishment of their fellow slaves risked the wrath of their owners if they disobeyed orders. Edwin Epps, Solomon Northup's master, ordered him to whip Patsey, one of his slaves, after he suspected that she was

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[17] *Commonwealth vs. Harry,* (LVA).

[18] *Commonwealth vs. Jordan,* Thomas M. Randolph Executive Papers, 1819-1822. Accession 41887. Box 1, Folder 7. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth, *Commonwealth vs. Jordan*, (LVA).

[19] *Commonwealth vs. Jordan*, (LVA).

having a sexual relationship with a neighboring white man. Northup described how he inflicted 40 lashes on Patsey's back before refusing to punish her any further. As Northup wrote, Epps "ordered me to go on, threatened me with a severer flogging than she had received, in case of refusal. My heart revolted at the inhuman scene, and risking the consequences, I absolutely refused to raise the whip."[20] Luckily for Northup, Epps focused all of his range on Patsey and never punished Northup for his disobedience. Harriet Tubman suffered a lifelong injury when she refused to aid in subduing a resisting slave. After she refused to assist in subduing the slave, her overseer threw a heavy weight that struck Tubman on the side of the head. The wound left her "subject to a sort of stupor or lethargy at times."[21] The stories of Harry, Jordan, Northup, and Tubman reveal the difficulties confronted by slaves when they had to witness or participate in the disciplining of their fellow slaves. If they refused or turned violent, they risked facing the wrath of angry whites. But if they did nothing, then they had to witness the suffering of their fellow slaves.

The vast majority of physical confrontations in defense of family occurred when slave men protected or avenged their female family members. As Eugene D. Genovese has pointed out, "With half the slaves in the South on units of four black families or less and another quarter on units of ten families or less, relationships among slaves were often

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[20] Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation near the Red River, in Louisiana. Ed. David Wilson* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1853), 257.

[21] Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn: W.J. Moses, 1869), 74-75.

a family matter."[22] Slave families represented a bulwark against the inhumanity of bondage, but such incidents threatened to fracture and divide them.[23] For the slave men who fought back against whites, the insult, punishment, and even rape of their female kin pushed them to violence. They had accommodated themselves to much of the harsh reality of bondage, but the violation of their mothers, wives, and daughters proved too much to handle. In white honor culture, as Bertram Wyatt-Brown has argued, "To attack his wife, mother, or sister was to assault the man himself." Such insults meant that "[f]ierce retaliation was therefore mandatory when a daughter, wife, or mother had been dishonored."[24] Slave men, however, had fewer legal or extralegal options available to them. Defending the honor of their families could mean a certain death. And this harsh reality meant that few slaves actually took revenge for their aggrieved family members. On rare occasions whites recognized bondsmen's claims to honor and refused to punish them for protecting their loved ones.

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[22] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 636.

[23] For a view of an overwhelmingly unified slave family see John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community*: *Plantation Life in the Antebellum South Revised & Enlarged Edition* (New York: Oxford University, 1979); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976). More recently scholars have stressed division as well as unity: Peter Kolchin, "Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community: A Comparative Perspective," *Journal of American History,* 70 (December 1983), 579-601; Nell Irvin Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

[24] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor,* 53.

The punishment of family members could make even the most privileged slave on the plantation turn homicidally violent. On the morning of May 23, 1842, George, a slave, hired out to John Holladay of Louisa County, Virginia encountered his overseer, Edmund Pendleton, on his way to the fields. Pendleton demanded to know why George was late. After George replied that he had tried to please his overseer and "would be damned if he tried hard to please him any longer," Pendleton confronted him. Without a pause, George struck Pendleton on the head with a hoe. The two men began grappling with one another. In desperation Pendleton drew a knife, causing George to exclaim, "You damned Rascal to have the outdacious [sic] appearance to draw your knife upon me! I'll kill you now, I don't care where you go!" As Pendleton ran off towards Holladay's house, George chased him down, beating him repeatedly as Pendleton desperately searched for a place to hide. Holladay finally intervened and compelled George to stop his attack. Pendleton collapsed into a chair with wounds across his head, arms, neck, shoulders, and torso. Pendleton claimed that his wounds were so debilitating that "for three days he could hardly move himself in his bed."[25] A constable carried George back to the home of his owner, Mrs. Virginia Minor, where he stayed until his trial for attempted murder.

The savagery of the attack shocked Holladay, who struggled to explain why George had turned so violent. During George's trial, Holladay explained to the court that, "George maintained a general good character, had been considered a man more hasty

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[25] *Commonwealth vs. George,* John M. Gregory Executive Papers, 1842-1843. Accession 43537. Box 1, Folder 8. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. George,* (LVA).

than common." George had held a series of privileged positions for both his masters. He had worked as the head man under his previous owner and Holladay had made him his carriage and wagon driver. On occasion, George even served as Holladay's personal valet. Holladay did not blame the confrontation on his overseer. Pendleton had worked for Holladay for five years and "he was greatly pleased with him, confided his business and interests on the farm entirely to him, and had found him the most attentive, industrious, and trustworthy man with whom he had had anything to do as an overseer." While his master had no idea why George turned violent, Pendleton explained to the court what had made George try and kill him. He testified that "four days before he had whipped a negro girl, the prisoner's daughter, for some neglect or misconduct." Since the punishment, George "had been very surly in his behavior and abrupt in his language."[26] During his testimony, Pendleton expressed surprise that George could become so angry over the punishment of his daughter.

Yet it was precisely this violence that prompted George's brutal behavior. The overseer's discipline violated George's expectations about his own enslavement. He had lived his entire life in bondage and earned the trust of both of his owners. The jobs of driver, coach driver, or personal attendant went to slaves who, in white eyes, had earned their positions through hard work and loyalty. Perhaps George believed that his relatively privileged position afforded him and his family better treatment than the other slaves. Why should a good and loyal slave be subject to the same discipline as a lazy or recalcitrant one? Pendleton's actions betrayed George's expectations and drove him to

[26] *Commonwealth vs. George,* (LVA).

violence. George had tried repeatedly to "please" Pendleton, but the punishment of his daughter meant that he would try no longer. Violence afforded George a way to express his anger and violated expectations over Pendleton's treatment of his daughter. In this way, George's actions were similar to those of white Virginians. In their culture of honor, attacks against the family warranted a physical response. In George's case, his violated expectations prompted him to sacrifice everything in order to take revenge on the overseer who wronged him.

On rare occasions, slaves bonded together to protect a female slave from being unjustly punished. On July 25, 1857, John H. Dodd, the overseer on the farm of William Boulware of Henrico County, was having trouble with Betty, one of his employer's slaves. Betty claimed that she was sick and unable to work. Not believing her, Dodd ordered her into the fields and when he came back to check on her that afternoon, he found that Betty had returned to the quarters without his permission. When he questioned her about why she was not at work, Dodd later recalled that Betty "gave me some of her slack jaw."[27] Dodd took his whip and struck her several times with it. Betty ran off and Dodd decided to let the matter rest until the next Monday. That Monday morning, Dodd ordered Tom, the head man, to fetch Betty from her cabin for punishment. Tom repeatedly refused and asked Dodd to wait until the master, William Boulware arrived. By the time Tom went into the cabin, Betty had slipped away. When Dodd made his way

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[27] *Commonwealth vs. Ben, Tom, George, Robert, Moore, & Edmund,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 9, Folder 2, Misc. Reel 4203. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Ben, et al.,* (LVA).

out into the corn fields, he found Betty at work. As Dodd raised his whip, Betty raised her hoe in defiance. She unexpectedly snatched the whip out of the overseer's hands, and ran off.

Ben, Tom, and Robert, three other slaves on the farm, convinced Dodd to allow them to go and talk to Betty. They persuaded her to accept punishment. She was hesitant when Dodd told her he needed to tie her hands, but the slaves assured her it was for the best. As Dodd whipped Betty, he grew unsatisfied with the course of his punishment. So he began stripping Betty of her clothes to ensure the blows had their intended effect. That proved enough for Betty's brother Ben. Ben, along with Tom, Edmund, Moore, and Robert all raised their hoes and charged at the overseer. Dodd swore he heard the slaves yell out "kill him."[28] Dodd fled from the fields, but the slaves followed in close pursuit. They chased him back to the house and only broke off their pursuit when Dodd called for his gun. Dodd sought the help of a neighbor and justice of the peace Jackson Childrey, but the slaves had all run away. They remained at large for two days before turning themselves in to their master.

As Childrey, in his role as justice of the peace, investigated the attack, he discovered that the slaves only wanted to punish Dodd for his actions towards Betty. The entire incident, meanwhile, had shocked the overseer, who had worked for Boulware for almost two years. Under interrogation, Tom admitted that only wanted to "catch him [Dodd] and give him a whipping." Tom's honesty in describing the situation impressed his master. Boulware stated that Tom had said "it was no use to tell a lie about it, that

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[28] *Commonwealth vs. Ben, et al.,* (LVA).

they intended to whip Mr. Dodd." Boulware, who had raised the slaves, believed Tom. Two of the other slaves involved in the confrontation, Ben and Robert were related to Betty—Ben was her brother and Robert was an unspecified "relation." They admitted to attacking their overseer because they saw Betty being stripped naked and punished for refusing to work. Whether these explanations were merely an effort to save themselves from execution or the truth, Boulware's belief in the slave's honesty lends credence to their claim. In this case, the bondsmen had decided that they would not tolerate Dodd whipping Betty any further so they decided to attack him.

William Boulware revealed that the slaves may have been right in their efforts to protect Betty. He expressed frustration with how Dodd handled her. He testified that "Betty is a half witted creature and excessively stupid, which fact I had communicated to Mr. Dodd, but which he seems to have forgotten." The family repeatedly questioned whether Betty had any good sense at all. Boulware further revealed that Betty had recently been ill. He testified that "She had been suffering for the last year with a disease of the womb, a disease of which men could not judge." After this incident, Boulware ordered Dodd to send for Mrs. Boulware to examine Betty and evaluate her fitness for work. The slaves also knew of Betty's illness, as Tom had told Dodd that instead of trying to punish her, he should wait for his master to come. Dodd recalled that Tom had told him that "it would be better for me and him too" if they waited until Boulware arrived.[29] In this case, Boulware sided with his slaves and their desires to protect a sickly slave over the wishes of his overseer to punish her.

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[29] *Commonwealth vs. Ben, et al.,* (LVA).

In their interviews with the Federal Writers' Project, ex-slaves, similar to the confrontations found in Antebellum Virginia, revealed how they engaged in violent confrontations to protect their female loved ones from punishment. One Sunday, George Brown's mother left the plantation to attend church. Sothern, the overseer noticed her absence and informed the mistress, Miss Sarah. Once Brown's mother returned Miss Sarah "had mammy called out and they had a strop 'bout as wide as my hand and had holes in it, and they started whippin' her." George Brown could not stand the sight of his mother being punished and attacked the overseer. Brown explained that "I was runnin' around there with my shirt tail full of bricks and I was chunkin' 'em at that overseer." Sothern grabbed Brown and began to punish him. Tom Kelly, Miss Sarah's son-in-law, interfered in the whipping. Kelly, as Brown remembered, said "'A calf loves the cow,' so he wouldn't let old miss whip me."[30] Hal Hutson, a slave in Tennessee recalled how the overseer whipped his mother until his brother intervened. Clark told a W.P.A. interviewer that "my big brother heard her crying and came running, picked up a chunk and that overseer stopped a'beating her." [31]

Slave men especially reacted violently to assaults or rapes against their wives. Manuel, a slave, brutally murdered Langford Harrison, a neighborhood white man, for sexually exploiting his wife. The confrontation occurred on June 3, 1818 and included a shocking level of violence. Manuel attacked Harrison on the road near William Coakley's

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[30] George P. Rawick ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 8, Part 1* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), 282. Henceforth Rawick ed., *Arkansas Narratives,* Volume 8, *Part 1*, 282.

[31] Rawick ed., *Oklahoma Narratives,* Vol. 7, 146.

Tavern in King George County, Virginia. Armed with a bayonet or similar weapon, Manuel repeatedly stabbed Harrison through the eyes, skull, and brain. Manuel became enraged when he learned that "Harrison had had connection with his wife." Manuel and Harrison had a longstanding animosity. Manuel told Cate, a fellow slave, that "he wished he might be damned if Harrison should not die before Saturday night."[32] Manuel expected that Harrison might try to kill him, so Manuel decided to strike first. He followed Harrison to the home of William Coakley, a local tavern owner, and waited outside in the darkness. Manuel waited until Harrison left Coakley's house and ambushed him in the road, brutally killing him. The assault against his wife was enough to drive Manuel to murder.

Slave husbands similarly engaged in confrontations to protect and avenge their wives, but paid a terrible price for it. Phillip Evans, a slave of John Bratton of South Carolina, recalled the trouble his Uncle Dennis had with an overseer. Evans told a W.P.A. interviewer that the overseer "insult[ed] my aunt and beat her. Uncle Dennis took it up, beat de overseer, and run off to de woods." Uncle Dennis escaped in the back of a wagon before being recaptured. Evans remembered how "they take him to de whippin' post of de town, tie his foots, make him put his hands in de stocks, pulled off his shirt, pull down his britches and whip him terrible."[33] While Dennis had tried to avenge the beating of his wife, he had to suffer the consequences of his actions. His willingness to

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[32] *Commonwealth vs. Manuel,* James P. Preston Executive Papers, 1816-1819. Accession 41737. Box 5, Folder 2. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[33] Rawick, ed., *South Carolina,* Vol. 2, *Part 2*, 36.

attack the overseer revealed how far bondsmen would go to protect their family members. White owners and overseers had broad legal authority and power over slaves to treat them as they wished. Bondsmen, like Dennis, offered a stark reminder that while slaves could push back against the excesses of white rule, they risked brutal punishments to do so.

Slave men risked a permanent change in their lives and personalities by avenging attacks on their wives. Josiah Henson's father brutally thrashed an overseer who had assaulted his wife. Henson remembered little of his father apart from that confrontation. He wrote that "The only incident I can remember, which occurred while my mother continued on N.'s farm, was the appearance of my father one day, with his head bloody and his back lacerated." Henson described how his father's "right ear had been cut off close to his head, and he had received a hundred lashes on his back." Henson later learned that his father had "beaten the overseer for a brutal assault on my mother, and this was his punishment."[34] The confrontation and its aftermath transformed Henson's father's attitude. Before the incident, Henson remembered his father as "a man of amiable temper, and of considerable energy of character."[35] After the punishment Henson described how "my father became a different man, and was so morose, disobedient, and

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[34] Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, As Narrated by Himself* (Boston: A. D. Phelps, 1849), 1.

[35] Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson,* 2.

intractable, that Mr. N. determined to sell him. He accordingly parted with him, not long after, to his son, who lived in Alabama."[36]

Interviews with ex-slaves after the Civil War revealed that slave men knew the risks of avenging the punishment and exploitation of their family members. An ex-slave who gave an interview to Fisk University recalled the fate of Sam Watkins, a white man from Tennessee who slept with his slave women. She recalled that "he would ship their husbands (slaves) out of bed and get in with their wives." While most husbands endured the exploitation of their wives, one slave finally decided to act. The ex-slave recalled that "One man said he stood it as long as he could and one morning he just stood outside and he [Watkins] got with his wife he just choked him to death." The slave acknowledged that he understood the consequences of murdering Watkins; "He said he knew it was death, but it was death anyhow; so he just killed him. They hanged him."[37] The male slave decided that he could no longer accept Watkins sexually exploiting his wife. Nor could he live with the knowledge of Watkins's behavior.

Occasionally owners refused to punish male slaves who fought back to protect their wives. Turner Jacobs, an ex-slave from Mississippi remembered how his father nearly killed an overseer. The overseer had ordered the slaves to dig a canal through the slave quarters. Jacobs explained that "My maw woan throwin' her dirt as high as de rest and de overseer knock her down and start lashin' her wid de whip." Jacobs's father, witnessing the punishment of his wife in front of him and every other slave on the

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[36] Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson,* 1-2.

[37] Rawick ed., *Unwritten History of Slavery (Fisk University),* Vol. 18, 2.

plantation, became enraged. As Jacobs put it, "Hit made my paw so mad dat he started after him wid de shovel and I reckon he'd killed but some of de other darkies stop him. Dey knew what would happen if a nigger jump on a white man."[38] Jacobs's father escaped and told his mistress about the incident. Luckily for Jacobs's father, the mistress fired the overseer. This acknowledgement by his mistress allowed Jacobs's father to avenge the beating of his wife and avoid any retribution.

Whites occasionally acknowledged bondsmen's claims to honor by allowing husbands to take whippings meant for their wives. Will Glass provided an interview to the W.P.A., where he detailed how his grandfather, a slave named Joe, managed to protect his wife from punishment. Will told the interviewer that "Just one time they whipped Grandfather Joe. That was because he wouldn't give his consent for them to whip his wife." Grandfather Joe demanded that his master whip him instead and leave his wife alone. As Will explained, Joe "was a good worker and they didn't want to kill him, so they strapped him and let her be like he said."[39] The situation highlighted how slaves and whites dealt with the prospect of punishing spouses. Joe's master had two choices: whip the slave woman and risk Joe's anger or whip Joe and lessen the chance of sparking a violent confrontation. Rather than risk the anger or death of a good slave, Joe's master decided to recognize Joe's desire to protect his wife and whipped him instead. In doing so, he acknowledged a key tenet of slave honor.

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[38] George P. Rawick ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Mississippi Narratives,* Supplement Series 1, Vol. 8, *Part. 3* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 1116. Henceforth, Rawick, *Mississippi Narratives,* Sup. 1, Vol. 8, *Part 3*, 116.

[39] Rawick, ed., *Arkansas Narratives,* Vol. 2, *Part 3,* 38-39.

Slave families were one of the few defenses bondsmen had against the brutality of bondage. In the best of circumstances, husbands and wives consoled each other over deaths, fears of sale and separation, and provided support to one another. They reared children and watched them grow, marry, and have children of their own. In the worst of times, husbands and wives saw each other whipped and beaten, sold away, or even raped. They witnessed firsthand their children stripped naked and their flesh torn open by whips. As slaves, black men had no legal or societal recourse. Whites did not recognize their honor or their role as the heads of their families. The law forbade them, under penalty of death, from raising their hands against whites. Yet on rare occasions, slave men did resist. Similar to white ideas of honor and familial protection, bondsmen fought back against their owners and overseers. They wounded and killed white men who harmed their families and loved ones. In doing so, they demonstrated how they, too, had their own ideas of honor.

Masculinity

Southern ideas of masculinity comprised another key component of white honor culture. Both external and internal judgments of a man's character revolved around his behavior and ability to live up to the masculine ideals of his society. White southerners equated masculinity and violence. They began instilling these virtues in youth. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown has written, "No less intense than the influence of slavery was the parental insistence upon early signs of aggressiveness, demanded by notions of white

masterhood, before the child met the outside world at school."[40] Young boys had to prove their manhood early by engaging in violence. This allowed them to assert dominance over women, slaves, and their compatriots. This connection between manhood and violence was not universal. In the antebellum North, a new culture of masculinity—one of several in existence—stressed that restraint, rather than violence, characterized masculine behavior. Amy S. Greenberg has defined this type of masculinity as restrained manhood. As Greenberg explains, for this type of men "[t]heir manhood derived from being morally upright, reliable, and brave."[41] Radical abolitionists, like William Lloyd Garrison, preached this type of manhood to slaves, suggesting that their refusal to engage in violence made them better than their white oppressors. Bondsmen's restraint, however, largely came from discretion—not wanting to risk punishment—rather than an elevated sense of manhood.

While slave men asserted their claims to masculinity, they faced significant limitations. Owners, not slave fathers and husbands, held the ultimate power over slave families. They could break up marriages or families by selling away spouses or children. Owners, overseers, other whites or even other slaves sexually abused slave women undermining men's roles as protectors of their families. Owners and overseers whipped and corrected female family members in front of their fathers, husbands, and sons. Bondsmen retaliated, but not without risking their own lives. Additionally when owners and overseers punished them in full view of their wives, children, and fellow slaves they

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[40] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor,* 154.

[41] Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 12.

undermined men's claims to control over their families. The word (and lash) of the master ruled slave households. Male slaves rarely supplied their families with food, clothes, and other goods necessary for a self sufficient existence. Rather owners provided these key items, further undercutting slaves' claims to sole control over their households. These limitations imposed by the white dominated society of the antebellum South hindered the power of bondsmen over their families.

In a small number of criminal cases, slaves managed to make their claims of masculinity explicitly clear. In two cases, one from 1802 and the other from 1860, slaves equated their violence with their masculinity. Filtered through the lens of a justice system administered by whites, the slaves' assertions of manhood rarely managed to enter the public record. In 1802, Cudgo and Randall, two brothers belonging to Samuel Goodwin of Isle of Wight County, attempted to kill Goodwin's son, Reddick. Reddick had found Cudgo causing a disturbance in his father's kitchen and ordered the bondsman to leave. Cudgo later confronted Reddick outside and unleashed a "train of unqualified abuse and insult" against him. Reddick demanded that Cudgo stop cursing, but Cudgo responded that "he would be ordered by no white man."[42] As the situation escalated further, Reddick retreated to the house and retrieved his gun. He took several unsuccessful shots at Cudgo. Then Cudgo joined up with his brother Randall and they chased Goodwin back into his father's house. As the slaves pursued Goodwin up the stairs, the young man cudgeled Cudgo with the gun, but only managed to break it all over the floor.

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[42] *Commonwealth vs. Randall,* James Monroe Executive Papers, 1799-1802. Accession 40936. Box 6, Folder 10, Misc. Reel 5345. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Randall,* (LVA).

Reddick Goodwin locked himself inside an upstairs room as the slaves tried to batter the door down. All the while they unleashed a torrent of profanity and threats against Goodwin's life. After failing to break through the door, Cudgo and Randall retreated outside and began pelting the upstairs window with bricks. Armed with sticks and knives, the slaves attempted to unsuccessfully storm the room one last time before their master intervened. He demanded to know why they were trying to kill his son. Cudgo replied that he was furious with Reddick for shooting at him and "would be damned if he would not kill him for it." Randall meanwhile expressed support for his brother, saying "let any white man touch my brother, if he dares." As Samuel Goodwin and some of his white neighbors attempted to calm the slaves, Randall told them "in a threatening manner that he was a man, let any white man touch him, and he would do for him." Randall had sworn that "he had laid down his word sixteen years ago that if ever any white man shot him with powder and shot that he would shoot them with glass bottles and old nails, which would do their business in a few days."[43] Samuel Goodwin finally managed to calm his slaves so his son could escape with his life.

In Randall's mind, the attack on his brother violated his expectations about the behavior of whites. He had given his word that he would not tolerate anyone shooting at him with a gun. When Reddick Goodwin challenged his word, Randall put his threats into action. Oath taking was a key tenet of southern honor culture. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown explained, "only those within the circle of honor were entitled to participate in the

[43] *Commonwealth vs. Randall,* (LVA).

oath-swearing rite."[44] Whites excluded slaves from this culture because they believed that slaves were incapable of understanding and upholding principles like honesty and honor. Bondsmen could not testify against whites in criminal and civil trials. Yet Randall clearly exhibited a desire to fulfill his oath. He also equated his violence with his manhood, declaring that "he was a man." And it was the responsibility of a man to uphold his oath and take revenge on those who tried to kill him and his brother. This adherence to honor and the importance of oaths helps explain the ferocity of the brothers' violence. They repeatedly attempted to kill Reddick Goodwin and refused to stop despite the orders of their master. Only a well built door in Samuel Goodwin's house managed to protect his son's life from the wrath of two angry slaves.

In 1860, Winston, a slave of John Woods, attacked his overseer, Joseph Hoy, in a similar expression of masculinity. One morning early in March, Winston had gone down into a tobacco cellar and struck Hoy across the right side of his head with an ax. The confrontation emerged, as did many in the Antebellum Virginia, over the issue of punishment. According to Joseph Hoy's son Luther, the day before the altercation, Winston had threatened his overseer and claimed that Hoy would never to whip him again. Winston had boasted that he "was a boy when Mr. Hoy whipped him other time, but he was a man now. Said that he warnt [sic] going to let anybody run over him but his master Dr. John Woods." Winston further warned that "if he put his bone on Hoy he

[44] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor,* 57.

would soon have him on his bed and in his grave."[45] The young boy had overheard Winston's threats and rushed to tell his father. As a result, Joseph Hoy confronted Winston and punished him.

The attack in the basement emerged from Winston's growing sense of his own maturity and masculinity. When he was younger, he was too weak and allowed himself be whipped by his overseer. Now as a man—about nineteen or twenty—, he refused to allow the punishment to happen again. As Wyatt-Brown has pointed out, "boys' entry into young manhood took more social forms… Fighting, horse racing, gambling, swearing, drinking, and wenching were all activities that tested the school boy's honor among his peers."[46] While not a southern white school boy, Winston's violence did exhibit the same tendencies that Wyatt-Brown described. As a youth, Winston had accepted punishment from the overseer, but as a man Winston maintained that he would no longer accept it. His exclamation also hints at the limits of this slave masculinity. White men rejected violence from anyone, white or black, rich or poor. Winston, however, allowed for an exception. He made it clear that he would permit his master to punish him. So for slaves this masculinity was not necessarily about rejecting discipline from all whites. Winston could reconcile his sense of manhood with chastisement from his owner, but not anyone else.

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[45] *Commonwealth vs. Winston,* John Letcher Executive Papers, 1859-1863. Accession 36787. Box 2, Folder 6, Misc. Reel 4707. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Winston,* (LVA).

[46] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor,* 164.

A few ex-slaves recognized and acknowledged how their willingness to use violence proved essential to their expressions of masculinity. Frederick Douglass fought slave breaker Edward Covey after Covey tried to punish him. Douglass expressed ignorance at the origins of his resistance. He explained that "from whence the spirit came I don't know—I resolved to fight; and suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat." Douglass's resistance surprised Covey, who "trembled like a leaf." Douglass wrote that Covey's fear "gave me assurance, and I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my fingers." [47] Afterwards, Covey never tried to whip Douglass again. Douglass described how his victory over Covey "revived within me a sense of my own manhood."[48] In describing the story for his readers, Douglass stressed that "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man."[49] By fighting Covey, Douglass reasserted his masculinity and won a better life for himself. Eventually, Douglass admitted, this rediscovered manhood encouraged him to escape from slavery.

Harriet Jacobs similarly connected violence and slaves' assertions of their masculinity. She described Benjamin's resistance as "The Slave who Dared to Feel like a Man."[50] Jacobs described her uncle as "a tall, handsome lad, strongly and gracefully

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[47] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845: New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 67.

[48] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, 68*.

[49] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass,* 63.

[50] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* eds. Nellie Y. McKay and Frances Smith Foster (1861: repr. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 17.

made, and with a spirit too bold and daring for a slave."[51] Benjamin's master had attempted to punish him, prompting Benjamin to fight back. Benjamin, as Jacobs wrote, "had raised his hand against his master, and was to be publicly whipped for the offence."[52] Her uncle then ran away, explaining that "he was no longer a boy, and every day made his yoke more galling."[53] He, however, was eventually recaptured and imprisoned. When his mother appealed to him to beg his master for forgiveness, Benjamin replied "No! I will never humble myself to him. I have worked for him for nothing all my life, and I am repaid with stripes and imprisonment. Here I will stay till I die, or till he sells me."[54] Instead, Benjamin rotted away in jail for months before being sold. Jacobs understood her uncle's stubborn refusal to submit to his master as stemming from his attempt to assert his masculinity.

Like their white counterparts, slaves made their own judgments about the character their fellow slaves and of their owners and overseers. Fair and hardworking whites won admiration and respect, while drunken and lazy ones warranted scorn and derision. These judgments often fell along class lines. Poorer whites who served as overseers frequently failed to live up to slaves' expectations. As Jeff Forret has written, "Poor whites often served as cogs in the machinery of slavery, performing much of the

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[51] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 18.

[52] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 21.

[53] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 20-21.

[54] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 22.

dirty work for the slaveholders and therefore earning slaves' abhorrence."[55] When overseers failed to perform their duties, the slaves often picked up the slack. Masters still wanted the work done, whether the overseer was incompetent or not. These relationships could create lingering resentments between slaves and their white overseers. Tom, a slave, engaged in a violent confrontation with Richard Foster, his overseer, that left Foster dead.

On the morning of September 18, 1825, Foster entered his employer Wyatt Whitehead's house and confronted Tom about a missing surcingle (a strap wrapped around the body of horse that helps pull farm equipment). The two men began to argue as Foster demanded to know the location of the surcingle and Tom denied knowing anything about it. Foster accused Tom of lying and "picked up a small switch and gave him one lick." Tom, who was holding a cane in his hand, struck Foster. The two men continued to brawl before Tom grabbed a hoe and clubbed Foster over the head with it, killing him. Tom rushed over and picked up Foster and "said he hoped he was not dead, he did not intend it."[56] That morning, Tom had complained to his mistress, Lucy Whitehead, Foster's brother, about the overseer. Tom claimed that Foster failed to tend to the tobacco and other crops properly. He told her that "if the deceased would keep sober he could do business, but he was always drunk." Tom also complained that Foster prevented him from reporting his ineptitude to his owner, Wyatt Whitehead. Lucy

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[55] Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins,* 24-25.

[56] *Commonwealth vs. Tom*, John Tyler Executive Papers, 1825-1827. Accession 42267. Box 8, Folder 10. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth, *Commonwealth vs. Tom*, (LVA).

Whitehead had seen her brother drunk that morning before he confronted Tom about the surcingle. Tom seemingly hoped that his master would remedy the situation either by firing Foster or taking away some of his responsibilities. Foster's persistent drinking made him a liability to the slaves.

The tensions between slave and overseer had been simmering for months. Mat, another of Whitehead's slaves, recalled that he heard Tom call the overseer, "a mischievous contrary man." According to Mat, Tom said that if Foster "put his hands on him, he would kill him." The animosity ran both ways. Teiller, another slave, testified that during the confrontation Foster expressed his hatred for Tom. He claimed that Foster, "said he had for a long time wanted to mash his damned mouth." Maria, a slave, recalled how one night before the murder, Foster had drunkenly threatened to kill Tom. Foster told Tom that "if he opened his mouth he would blow his brains out. Tom replied, "I have done nothing."[57] The precise reasons of Foster's hatred of Tom remain unclear, but he likely loathed the slave who treated him with such contempt and attempted to go over his head to Foster's employer. Whites, like Richard Foster, expected slaves to respect their white superiors. The reality of life in the Antebellum South, however, revealed that slaves valued themselves and their abilities against the poor whites who supervised them. When those expectations fell short, violence could erupt.

Insults represented a key component of white honor culture. Calling another man a scoundrel, liar, or rascal often sparked violence. These public attacks on a man's reputation could not go unanswered. Slaves, too, had their own understandings of the

[57] *Commonwealth vs. Tom*, (LVA).

power of insults and lobbed them at their owners and overseers, indicating that they understood the importance of reputation. On October 9, 1827, Allen, a slave, engaged in a deadly confrontation with his master, Jonathan Smith. Their altercation had arisen over Allen's care of his master's horse. Allen had failed to bring the animal under control and injured it. When Allen did not bring out a halter to his master, Smith sought to whip him. As the two men argued, Smith struck Allen several times, nearly knocking him to the ground. Allen began to fight back and another slave heard Smith exclaim, "O! Allen do not do that."[58] Allen fatally struck his master over the head with some sort of club. The residents of the household, including Smith's wife, rushed to the mortally wounded owner's side.

Smith and Allen had longstanding hatred for one another that boiled over during the dispute over the horse. Smith knew that in order to punish Allen he needed to tie him up first, because Allen would resist. Bailor, one of Smith's slaves recalled, "that if had to punish Allen again he would tie him up and make a paddle and paddle him." Allen meanwhile admitted to killing his owner during his interrogation. After being asked whether he killed Smith, Allen answered "I wish to God I had kil'd[sic] him for I aimed to do it. He is such a rascal and has treated me so mean."[59] In his investigation of slave on slave violence, Jeff Forret has argued that when slaves used the word rascal they meant "someone judged dishonest, unprincipled, or mischievous, suggesting that in the quarters,

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[58] *Commonwealth vs. Allen*, William B. Giles Executive Papers, 1827-1830. Accession 42310. Box 2, Folder 9. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Allen* (LVA).

[59] *Commonwealth vs. Allen* (LVA).

slaves revered honesty, fairness, and trustworthiness."[60] Forret's work, however, addressed slaves hurling insults at one another, not whites. Yet the same principles governed slave on white violence. Allen's loathed his master and did not think highly of him. Allen's violence against his master and his use of the term rascal suggest that he, like a white southerner, believed that physical confrontation was an acceptable response to a man of bad character.

Some slaves understood their violence through the language of honor. In May 1847, Daniel, a slave, attacked and killed John Allen, his overseer. That evening the slaves had gathered to shell corn inside of the corn house. As the slaves and overseer filed out for the evening, Jack, another slave on the farm, heard John Allen cry out for help because "there was a negro killing him."[61] Jack ran towards the scream and discovered Allen's dead body. The pre-existing animosity between Daniel and Allen made the bondsman the prime suspect in the murder. Daniel also had disappeared into the woods immediately after the corn shucking and was not seen by his fellow slaves for several hours afterwards. Daniel tried unsuccessfully to reassure his fellow slaves that he had nothing to do with the murder. He stated that "they need not think he did it for he would not have done for anything in the world." Davis's other slaves, however, did not believe him. Neither did the white members of the community, who had Daniel arrested and thrown in the Halifax County jail.

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[60] Forret, "Conflict in the Slave Community," 580-581.

[61] *Commonwealth vs. Daniel*, William Smith Executive Papers, 1846-1848. Accession 43708. Box 5, Folder 6. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Daniel*, (LVA).

After several days in jail, Daniel admitted to killing his overseer. Daniel acknowledged that he hated Allen and had sworn to kill him or die in the attempt. The previous week, Allen had whipped Daniel, and the slave claimed that Allen was continually persecuting him. Julius Hudson, a white witness, described Daniel's motivations as Allen "had whipped him as he thought without cause and he had determined to take satisfaction for it."[62] The idea of fighting to the death to avenge an insult or attack on one's honor was common in the Antebellum South. Kenneth S. Greenberg has identified not fearing death as one of the three components of honor, especially how it related to the difference between slaves and whites.[63] Honorable white men did not fear death, while slaves presumably did. Daniel reportedly used the word "satisfaction" to describe how he wanted revenge for Allen's punishment and treatment of him. The idea of "satisfaction" implied a set of expectations that Daniel held regarding his treatment by the overseer. When those expectations were violated, he violently struck back.

Slaves also displayed their commitment to protecting their masculinity when faced with public demonstrations of their inferior status or threats to their personal safety. On a November evening in 1809, Davy, slave of William Urton, killed John Tavener, a white man. The two had attended a community corn shucking at the farm of Hezekiah Glascock in Fauquier County. James Fletcher, one of the white men present, recalled how late in the evening, he and Davy mounted their horses and prepared to leave the barn.

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[62] *Commonwealth vs. Daniel*, (LVA).

[63] Greenberg, *Slavery and Honor,* xiii.

Tavener, who was drunk, had "commenced playing tricks with their horses by putting a stick under their tails." Tavener's drunken escapades upset the horses and annoyed Davy. A frustrated and slightly intoxicated Davy exclaimed "if you want any thing with me come on by God." Tavener stopped annoying the horses and the two men rode away into the darkened evening. During their ride home, Davy admitted that he may have made a mistake in speaking so harshly to a white man. He told Fletcher that "expected that the deceased would follow them."[64] Fletcher advised Davy to ignore the incident.

Tavener, however, was not so willing to forget Davy's harsh words. He ran out of the barn armed with a sick and confronted the two men. Fletcher continued to ride home, while Davy dismounted to confront Tavener. The two men came to blows and Davy wrestled the stick out of Tavener's hands and beat him repeatedly with it. Davy rode off as two other slaves at the corn shucking found Tavener's wounded body. They carried him off to a nearby house where he died shortly thereafter. How exactly did a drunken white man playing with horses tails prompt so much anger in a slave? Was this really what caused his death? And how can we explain it? Whites and blacks alike thought of Davy as a well behaved slave. William Urton claimed that "Davy has always behaved himself in a peaceable and orderly way, that he is a slave of good character and temper, has always been perfectly obedient." James Fletcher similarly claimed that Davy had "a good character." The other slaves also viewed Davy in a good light. Peter, a slave of

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[64] *Commonwealth vs. David,* John Tyler Executive Papers, 1808-1811. Accession 41223. Box 3, Folder 11, Misc. Reel 6010. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. David,* (LVA).

George Glascock, testified that, "David is a slave of good character and temper and he never knew him engaged in fighting or quarreling before."[65]

Tavener's drunken and public attempts to throw Davy off of his horse sparked the confrontation. Davy considered Tavener's behavior annoying, dangerous, and insulting, prompting him to sass a white man. Even though Tavener's behavior did not fit that of a man worthy of respect or honor, according to the conventions of antebellum Virginia, Davy had no right to challenge Tavener's character. Yet in his exasperation Davy challenged him, later recognizing that such an outburst and display of his violated expectations might cause problems. Riding away from the corn husking, James Fletcher had advised that if Tavener caught up to them, Davy should let the matter go rather than risk a violent confrontation with a white man. When Tavener and Davy met only a few hundred yards away from Glascock's neither proved willing to leave the matter alone. Davy's insult on Tavener's honor and the claim for his own manhood proved enough to spark the violent confrontation that led to Tavener's death.

An examination of confrontations with whites in public spaces offers further evidence of slaves' claims to their masculinity. Napoleon, a slave of William Bryant, was convicted of assaulting Eldridge Meeks on a Lynchburg street in 1858. While walking home on the evening of June 5, Meeks "met prisoner and several other negro boys on the side walk opposite Kimmier's grocery." The other slaves moved aside to allow Meeks to pass. Napoleon, however, did not. Meeks "took him by the arm and asked him to get out of the way, he said he wasn't in my way." Having physically manhandled Napoleon,

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[65] *Commonwealth vs. David,* (LVA).

Meeks continued walking down the street. He quickly noticed that someone was following him. He initially hastened his pace back to his own house. Meeks then decided to slow down so he could see who was in pursuit. He testified that "just as I turned prisoner threw a stone striking me on the right side of my head, just above the ear." Meeks called out for help and Napoleon fled down the road. Meeks admitted that "I had never known or seen that I know of, the prisoner, when I asked the boy to get out of the way, I took hold of his arm just as I would a white man."[66]

Lewis, a slave of Erastus Chandler, engaged in a physical confrontation in the street outside of the United States Hotel in Richmond in December 1860. A crowd of boys had gathered near the hotel and were throwing rocks at pigeons. William Shields, one of the boys involved, testified that he "threw at some pigeons in the street and struck the prisoner." Lewis demanded to know who had struck him. Shields admitted that he had "struck him, but he did not intend to do so." An angry Lewis picked up a piece of a brick and tossed it at Shields. He missed William Shields and instead hit John Shields, a seven year old boy. The brick wound up "knocking him senseless and inflicting a dreadful wound on his head." Several witnesses observed that the wound was bad enough that Shields was "bleeding very much."[67] Recognizing that he had severely wounded a white boy, Lewis fled down the street. Several white men who had been standing nearby

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[66] *Commonwealth vs. Napoleon,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 13, Folder 7, Misc. Reel 4209. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[67] *Commonwealth vs. Lewis,* John Letcher Executive Papers, 1859-1863. Accession 36787. Box 6, Folder 8, Misc. Reel 4719. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

pursued and captured him. A Hustings Court in Richmond convicted Lewis and sentenced him to transportation.

On July 4, 1855, Richmond Edwards, a white man, spotted Juba, a slave inside a tavern at the Black Water Depot in Isle of Wight County. Edwards believed that Juba "was out of his place and ordered him out of the bar." When Juba refused to leave, Edwards "caned him out." About an hour later, Edwards left the tavern and walked across a rail road bridge into neighboring Southampton County. After he had crossed the bridge some 60 or 70 yards, Edwards "saw a negro come out of the bushes." The slave charged at him and Edwards "received a blow from some person with a stick which fell him to the ground- partly recovering he received a second and a third blow." The two men scuffled and Juba fell over onto Edwards. Edwards "recognized prisoner called him several times by his name Juba and asked him what he meant, prisoner gave no answer, but released himself and run off." A nearby white woman tried to interfere and Juba threatened to kill her. He then "commenced beating [the] witness again and how long he beat him or how many blows he gave him witness did not know, he became senseless."[68]

The behavior of these slaves reveals how bondsmen defended their masculinity in public settings. Napoleon, Lewis, and Juba were driven to violence by public demonstrations of their inferiority by whites. Eldridge Meeks grabbed Napoleon by the arm and moved him out of the road, while Napoleon was walking down the street with a group of fellow slaves. Lewis was minding his own business outside of the United States

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[68] *Commonwealth vs. Juba,* Joseph Johnson Executive Papers, 1852-1855. Accession 44076. Box 12, Folder 3. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Hotel and Juba was trying to get drunk at a tavern on the Fourth of July. Meeks believed that slaves should yield the road to him, and Richmond Edwards believed it was not appropriate for slaves to drink in a tavern with whites. Rather than accept such physical attacks on their persons, the slaves decided to strike back. They refused to allow white men to insult their characters and allow such behaviors to go unchecked. Since other people saw what happened to these slaves, the bondsmen might have felt compelled to act in defense of themselves. Their actions would show that they would not tolerate such attacks on their manhood or character.

While white honor culture denied bondsmen their masculinity, slave men used violence to assert their own claims of manhood. As children, slave boys had been too weak to resist, but as adults they declared that they would no longer accept violence from whites. These expressions of masculinity manifested themselves in physical confrontations and found their way into trial records and slave autobiographies. A closer look at the circumstances that prompted slave violence also reveals the operations of these claims on masculinity and honor culture. Bondsmen fought back when whites visibly demonstrated bondsmen's inferiority and treated them accordingly. The public presentation of the slave's inferiority also helped spark this violence. These claims of manhood were even more remarkable since slaves had no societal claims to honor or masculinity. They were the property of their owners and no slave, without control over his own life or labor, could claim to be a man. Instead slave men constructed their own individual conceptions of manhood and reacted violently when they were violated.

Earning a Reputation

In trying to understand the relationship between slaves, honor culture, and reputation, it is worth discussing different forms of honor. In his recent book detailing honor and the advent of moral revolutions, philosopher Kwame Appiah divides honor into two component parts: peer honor and competition honor. Appiah's discussion of peer honor largely mirrors Wyatt-Brown and Greenberg's understandings of white southern honor. Appiah defined peer honor as "treating people in ways that give appropriate weight to some fact about them."[69] Peer honor, as Appiah writes, "governs relations among equals."[70] Although he never uses the term, Appiah's conception of peer honor is equivalent to southern understandings of reputation. As gentlemen, white southerners expected a certain level of respect and deference from others. When one party failed to meet those expectations violence or a duel could ensue. As Kenneth Greenburg wrote in his discussion of the duel between John Randolph and Henry Clay, "one of the central purposes of the dueling ritual was to reaffirm the equality of the principals after it had been disrupted by an insult."[71] Southern slaves, as previously discussed had no reputation and due to their lack of legal rights, stood largely outside of this system of peer honor.

Slaves, as Forret and Wyatt-Brown have described, participated in what Appiah calls competitive honor. This type of honor and its corollary, esteem mean "judging a

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[69] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 13.

[70] Appiah, *The Honor Code*, 14.

[71] Greenburg, *Slavery and Honor,* 58.

person positively according to a standard. And doing well by a standard essentially means doing better than most others."[72] Wyatt-Brown described this type of honor when he noted that violence helped establish a hierarchy within the quarters. Forret made a similar connection when he described how slaves fought over matters in their business and personal lives and how the winners of those contests received the respect of their fellow bondsmen. Similar to these confrontations in the quarters, when slaves engaged in violence against whites they earned respect from their fellow bondsmen. This admiration, however, differed from white understandings of violence and reputation. Whites fought to preserve their reputations, while slaves had none to protect. Instead physical altercations against whites garnered slaves' esteem from their fellow bondsmen. Their resistance to white authorities, especially cruel owners and overseers, brought admiration for other members of the slave community who had not resisted. Rather than suppressing their anger over their bondage, these slaves directed it against their white oppressors, earning them the respect of their enslaved comrades.

Bondsmen admired slaves who resisted punishment, even if they were not successful in their confrontations. William Wells Brown recalled the story of Randall, a physically imposing slave who had never been whipped by his owner or overseer. Despite the warnings of Randall's owner, Mr. Cook, the overseer, had decided to attempt to assert control over the seemingly unconquerable slave. While at work on the farm, Cook assigned Randall a task that he could not possibly finish in time—setting the stage for the punishment. As Cook called Randall forward for his chastisement, the slave

[72] Appiah, *The Honor Code*, 13.

challenged his overseer: "I have always tried to please you since you have been on the plantation, and I find you are determined not to be satisfied with my work, let me do as well as I may." Similar to Virginia slaves like Randall and Cudgo, Randall warned Cook that "No man has laid hands on me, to whip me, for the last ten years, and I have long since come to the conclusion not to be whipped by any man living." [73] The threat briefly dissuaded Cook from his intended goal.

Cook enlisted the aid of several other white men and called Randall into the barn. After Randall refused to go, the men attacked and overpowered him. Brown wrote that they whipped Randall over one hundred times. Cook attached a heavy ball and chain to Randall's leg and compelled him to work in the fields alongside all the other slaves. Brown observed that his master "was much pleased to find that Randall had been subdued in his absence."[74] While for Cook, the ball and chain represented a sign of his victory over Randall, Brown saw it as a sign of Randall's character. He expressed admiration for Randall, describing him as "six feet high, and well-proportioned, and known as a man of great strength and power. He was considered the most valuable and able-bodied slave on the plantation." Yet even his strength could not protect him. Brown pointed out that, "no matter how good or useful a slave may be, he seldom escapes the

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[73] William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1847), 19.

[74] Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown*, 20.

lash."[75] If no slave could avoid punishment, then bondsmen respected those who resisted it as long as possible.

Bondsmen also fondly remembered slaves whose willingness to resist led to their deaths. Harry Smith recalled the courage of a slave named Jim Hayden. Smith described him as "the most powerful man, either white or black, that ever was known in the State of Kentucky."[76] Jim's owner wanted all of the slaves to submit to punishment. When Jim, similar to Randall, refused to allow his mistress to whip him, she attempted to sell him away. Jim remained at-large for three years before he was finally captured. After his mistress sold him away, Jim came into conflict with his new overseer. When the overseer attempted to discipline him, Jim "beat his brains out and beat the ground where they lay." Jim's new owner gathered up a posse of white men and surrounded him. Smith wrote how they "riddled him with bullets, and then cut his heart out and placed it on a high pole in the field and his body was given to the hogs to devour." Smith lamented that "Thus was murdered a negro who had done more hard work in Kentucky than any man known."[77] While Jim died as a result of resistance, his fellow bondsmen appreciated his willingness to resist white oppression.

Ex-slave Joseph William Carter recalled the story of Jim Gardner, a slave blacksmith who resisted the efforts of his owner to punish him. His master, Marse

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[75] Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown*, 17.

[76] Harry Smith, *Fifty Years of Slavery in the United States of America* (Grand Rapids: West Michigan, 1891), 135.

[77] Smith, *Fifty Years of Slavery in the United States of America*, 138.

Gardner, brought in professional "whippers" from Mississippi to punish his slaves. During one of their visits, Gardner targeted his slave blacksmith, Jim Gardner, for punishment. According to Carter, Jim knew the fate that awaited him, "The blacksmith worked on day and night. All day he was shoein horses and all the spare time he had he was makin a knife." When it came time to discipline Jim, Marse Gardner brought out all of his slaves to witness the punishment. Jim, however, proved unwilling to accept chastisement. As Carter explained, "Jim Gardner did not wait to feel the lash, he jumped right into the bunch of overseers and negro whippers and knifed two whippers and one overseer to death; then stuck the sharp knife into his arm and bled to death." Carter expressed sympathy and respect for Jim. He told a W.P.A. interviewer that "Suicide seemed the only hope for this man of strength. He could not humble himself to the brutal ordeal of being beaten by the slave whippers."[78] Carter admired Jim's choice to fight back and die rather than submit to further punishment.

The level of respect that slaves accorded to bondsmen did not change whether their fellow bondsmen lived or died as a result of their confrontations. The act of resistance was enough to garner the respect and admiration of their fellow bondsmen. This willingness to award honor to violence mirrored the function of honor in white southern society. In order for slaves to earn the esteem of their colleagues they had to resist publicly. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown has explained in white honor culture "[t]he stress upon external, public factors in establishing personal worth conferred particular

[78] Rawick ed., *Indiana Narratives,* Vol. 6, 46.

prominence on the spoken word and physical gesture…"[79] Slaves had no reputations to protect when they engaged in physical confrontations with whites. Rather they expressed their dissatisfaction over the violation of their internal expectations. Reputation for slaves did not exist prior to their violence, but bondsmen who fought back could earn respect from their fellow slaves, whether they lived or died.

Bondsmen could win some recognition of their honor and desire not to be whipped from whites, but it came at a high cost. John Thompson admired Ben, a fellow slave, who refused to be whipped. Ben came into conflict with the overseer who wanted to assert his authority over all the slaves. Thompson recalled that Ben, however, had "concluded that death is but death any way, and that one might as well die by hanging as whipping; so he resolved not to submit to be whipped by the overseer."[80] The two men came to blows and Ben severely beat the overseer before fleeing to the woods. After Ben returned home, his owner nearly killed Ben with a savage beating. Afterwards Ben became increasingly bitter and angry. He lamented, "I wish I had killed the overseer, then I should have been hung, and an end put to my pain. If I have to do the like again, I will kill him and be hung at once!" Thompson expressed admiration for Ben. He noted that, "Ben was a brave fellow, nor did this flogging lessen his bravery in the least. Nor is Ben the only brave slave at the South; there are many there who would rather be shot than

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[79] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 46-47.

[80] John Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave; Containing His History of 25 Years in Bondage, and His Providential Escape. Written by Himself* (Worcester: J. Thompson, 1856), 35.

whipped by any man."[81] Ben's owner ordered the overseer never to whip Ben again and he was sent to a different part of the farm to work alone. While Ben was never punished again, it came at a high price.

Thompson expressed similar admiration for Aaron, another slave who resisted the efforts of his owner to punish him. When Aaron's owner, Mr. Wagar wanted to discipline him, he required five or six other men to help him. Wagar, however, grew tired of exerting so much effort to chastise a single slave and decided to sell Aaron. When the slave traders arrived to take him away, Aaron resisted them at every turn. Thompson recalled how he "sprang from the scaffold, axe in hand, and commenced trying to cut his way through them; but, being defeated, he was knocked down, put in irons, taken to the drove yard, and beaten severely, but not until he had badly wounded two of his captors."[82] Aaron eventually broke out of jail and remained free for a year before finding himself a new master. Thompson respected Aaron's bravery when he wrote that Aaron "never submitted to be flogged, unless compelled by superior force; and although he was often whipped, still it did not conquer his will, nor lessen his bravery."[83] While slaves like Ben and Aaron suffered brutal punishments, they won the respect and affection of their fellow bondsmen for their willingness to resist.

Ex-slaves also remembered their own violence against whites with pride. Joseph Allen grew up on Met Allen's plantation in Cumberland County, Kentucky. Allen's

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[81] Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson,* 37.

[82] Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson,* 27.

[83] Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson,* 26.

mistress made a habit of punishing the slave children regularly. As Allen told a W.P.A. interviewer, "Ole Missus waz cross and whipt us chillins a plenty." When the mistress punished the children, "she stickt me head atween her knees and clamp me tight. She slip me garmen aside an fan me plenty wid a shingle on me bare sef." Allen devised a way to free himself from his Mistress's torments. The next time she tried to punish him, Allen took action. He explained that "Ise bite'r like er dog, an hel' on wid me teeth to'er leg." Allen expressed pride at his behavior noting that "Old Missus wuz lame fur a spell; I broke'r." Allen's success, however, was short lived. He explained that "After 'zat, she buckle me up on ther groun and lash me." [84] Even in his old age, Allen proudly remembered how he had beaten up his mistress.

Frederick Douglass similarly recalled the pride he felt at defeating Edward Covey. Not only did the victory over Covey reaffirm Douglass's manhood, it restored his self esteem. As the confrontation with Covey neared its conclusion Douglass recalled how "Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted he would not have whipped me half so much." The comment astounded Douglass who later wrote that "The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all. I considered him as getting entirely the worst end of the bargain." The confrontation encouraged Douglass to reject Covey's authority and that of all slaveholders. For the remaining months at Covey's, Douglass reacted to Covey's threats of punishment with scorn, "He would occasionally say, he didn't want to get hold of me again. 'No,' thought I, 'you need not;

[84] Rawick ed., *Indiana Narratives,* Sup. 1, Vol. 5, 3.

for you will come off worse than you did before.'"[85] Unlike Joseph Allen, Douglass managed to avoid punishment for his actions. As he explained, if Covey had sent the 16 year old boy to the whipping post for their confrontation, "his reputation would have been lost; so, to save his reputation, he suffered me to go unpunished."[86]

Austin Steward recalled the admiration he felt for the slaves who resisted patrollers attempting to break up a slave dance. Steward wrote that the arrival of the patrol jolted the crowd of slaves from their merriment. Steward described the dread that swept over them. He wrote that "Many a poor slave who had stolen from his cabin, to join in the dance, now remembered that they had no pass! Many screamed in affright, as if they already felt the lash and heard the crack of the overseer's whip." Some slaves, however, refused to cower in fear. The prospect of punishment for attending a dance instead sparked anger and outrage. As Steward explained, they "assumed an attitude of bold defiance, while a savage frown contracted the brow of all." These feelings of fear gave way to a desire to fight the patrol. Steward wrote that "Their unrestrained merriment and delicious fare, seemed to arouse in them the natural feelings of self-defence and defiance of their oppressors."[87] A small group of slaves readied themselves for battle.

When the patrollers stormed into the cabin to disperse the dance, the slaves fought back. Steward described the violence that ensued, "Hand to hand they fought and

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[85] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*, 68.

[86] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*, 69.

[87] Austin Steward, *Twenty-two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman; Embracing a Correspondence of Several Years, While President of Wilberforce Colony, London, Canada West* (Rochester: W. Alling, 1857), 33.

struggled with each other, amid the terrific explosion of firearms, - oaths and curses, mingled with the prayers of the wounded, and the groans of the dying!"[88] Steward recoiled at the aftermath, he wrote that "Two of the patrol were killed on the spot, and lay drenched in the warm blood that so lately flowed through their veins. Another with his arm broken and otherwise wounded, lay groaning and helpless, beside the fallen slaves, who had sold their lives so dearly."[89] The slaves had died trying to protect their communal rite to hold social activities free of white supervision. Steward recounted that "all moved on solemnly to the final resting-place of those brave men, whose descendants may yet be heard from, in defence of right and freedom."[90] Steward recognized and appreciated the bravery of the slaves who resisted the patrol's efforts to punish them for the crime of attending a dance without a pass.

Reputation played a central part of white honor culture. White men engaged in violence to avenge insults to their reputations and maintain their status as honorable men. Defense of reputation prompted whites to engage in violence. The southern culture of honor and violence made it so that such altercations could erupt anywhere and at any time. In the eyes of whites, slave men had no honor or reputations to maintain. The expectations of white honor culture maintained that slaves had no claim to violence either. Slave men did not engage in physical confrontations to protect their reputations. As discussed above, they engaged in violence in defense of family, objecting to

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[88] Steward, *Twenty-two Years a Slave*, 36-37.

[89] Steward, *Twenty-two Years a Slave*, 37.

[90] Steward, *Twenty-two Years a Slave*, 39.

punishment, or as a way to assert their masculinity. Bondsmen's violence also garnered appreciation and admiration from other slaves. Slaves admired those who stood up to the cruelties of whites, remembering them years and even decades after slavery ended. Through their resistance, slave men could earn reputations for bravery.

Conclusion

In examining the relationship between honor and violence in the Antebellum South, historians long contended that slaves had none. As the property of whites, they were unable to protect their bodies from punishment, their families from separation, or their wives and children from sexual exploitation. They could make no claims on honor. Honor, as the old historiographical argument went, belonged to whites. Yet as Kenneth S. Greenberg argued slavery lay at the root of this honor culture. Southern historians have continually chipped away at this framework. Elliot J. Gorn explored how poor whites engaged had their own honor culture. Jeff Forret has investigated the relationship of honor between slaves and poor whites. Forret and Bertram Wyatt-Brown have even recognized the prevalence of a system of honor between the slaves themselves. Within the quarters, slaves guarded their reputations, protected and avenged their family members, and regulated the internal economy. When examining physical confrontations between whites and slaves in Antebellum Virginia, it becomes clear that we need to expand our understandings of honor further. Through their violence, words, and actions slaves revealed their own culture of honor in operation.

When slaves engaged in physical confrontations with whites over the punishment of their family members, they demonstrated a system of slave honor in action. Ideas of honor among whites had long stressed the importance of family defense. White men in the antebellum South fiercely protected their family members from insult and attack. Bondsmen in the slave quarters battled over matters of love and family. In their dealings with whites, slave men sought to protect their loved ones. Owners and overseers could punish members of slave families or sexually exploit slave women. By doing so, they entered dangerous territory by undermining the unity of slave families. And when they did so, whites risked angering even the most trusted and loyal of slaves. Similar to white men, bondsmen equated their masculinity with violence. By the American Civil War, Jim Cullen has argued, African Americans and ex-slaves viewed enlistment as a way to prove their manhood.[91] The slaves who resisted whites were small in number, but they managed to win the respect and admiration of their fellow bondsmen. The slaves' honor culture was not as expansive as that of white southerners. Instead slave honor, in its limited form, reflected the circumscribed lives of bondsmen in Antebellum Virginia.

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[91] Jim Cullen, "'I'se a Man Now': Gender and African American Men" in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber eds., *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 76-91.

Chapter 3

SLAVE WOMEN'S VIOLENCE IN THE HOUSEHOLD

Throughout their lives, the vast majority of slave women worked, for some length of time, in the households of their owners. As little children they tended to gardens, swept floors, or cared for their young masters and mistresses. As they grew up, slave women assumed roles as nurses, maids, or cooks or moved into the fields. After their days as field hands had passed, older bondswomen returned to the household to supervise slave children, to assist in births, or to spin cloth.[1] As historians have investigated the lives of southern women—black and white alike— they attempted to understand the household through the doctrine of "separate spheres."[2] White men, this ideology stressed, led their

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[1] For an examination of the lifecycle of female slaves see Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* Revised Edition (1985; New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 91-118. For slaves as different ages see Marie J. Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Stacey K. Close, *Elderly Slaves of the Plantation South* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997).

[2] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly* 18 (2) (1966), 151-174; Welter expanded on this idea in her book, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977); see also Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History*, 75, 1 (June 1988), 9–39; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). For historians pushing beyond the notion of separate spheres see Cynthia A. Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700-*

households and represented them in public, while women's work and activities were largely private. While serving as a useful insight into nineteen century understandings of gender, this public/private dichotomy obscures as much as it illuminates. In terms of understanding the functioning of southern households where slave women and white women worked, Thavolia Glymph has written that this separate spheres "has made it difficult to see the household as a workplace, and beyond gender relations, as a field of power relations and political practices."[3]

Bondswomen performed much of the labor that kept southern households running while living and working under the supervision of their mistresses.[4] They slept under the

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1835 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[3] Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2. For other views on southern households see Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Peter. W. Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[4] For more on the varied lives of slave women See White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Prese0nt* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black And White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine eds., *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1996); Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Patricia Morton, *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women:*

same roof and often in the same room. Slave women swept and scrubbed floors, made beds, and prepared meals all under their mistress's supervision. Through this constant interaction, bondswomen acquired an intimate knowledge of their mistresses' moods and whims. White women similarly learned the working habits and attitudes of their slave women. They knew who could be trusted to carry a note to a neighbor, care for a child, or attend to important visitors. Maintaining a functioning household required nearly all of the mistress's attention. As Catherine Clinton has argued, "Very little escaped the attention of the white mistress and most plantation problems were brought to her unless, being crop-related, they fell within the sphere of the overseer."[5] These close ties created bonds of intimacy. Bondswomen nursed white children, cared for ill owners, and shared in the joys of marriages and births. White women, too, grew up alongside slave women and watched them marry and have children.

This view of the bonds between white and black women espoused by historians like Catharine Clinton overlooked the dark side of this unending contact— fostering tensions and animosity between mistresses and their bondswomen. Their frequent interactions carried the potential to explode into violence at any moment. In their role as mistresses, white women sought to align their slave women's labor with their own desires. When these desires diverged, white women used violence to correct their bondswomen's wayward behavior. Depending on the circumstances, burnt biscuits, a

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Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*.

[5] Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 18.

sassy remark, or poor working habits could warrant anything from a gentle scolding to a vicious whipping. As Eugene D. Genovese has argued, "white women became aggressors much more often than their husbands, in part because of sexual jealousies and frustrations, but also because the men had field hands to vent their spleen upon."[6] In a recent historical monograph on the transformation of southern households following the Civil War, Thavolia Glymph wrote that "violence on the part of white women was integral to the making of slavery."[7] White women's violence sewed bitterness and resentments that could fester and manifest themselves in the future. White women secured their position in the household through the whip, the crop, and the back of the hand. As a result, the household, just like the fields, was as likely a site as any for violence.

Until recently, historians have had difficulties reconciling their attempts to illuminate the worlds of white southern women with those same women's role in maintaining and perpetuating slavery. The earliest works of revisionist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s stressed how southern ideas of mastery and patriarchy subjugated white women. These oppressed women formed alliances with their bondswomen against the power of masters.[8] This view placed scholars in an untenable position when they tried to

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[6] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 333.

[7] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 5.

[8] For claims of the alliance between slave women and their mistresses, see Ann Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930 25th Anniversary Edition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995); Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*; Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom*

explain white women's violence towards their slaves. Catharine Clinton, a historian who studied plantation mistresses, condemned the behavior of white women, but also excused it by equating their violence to child abuse—where victims often themselves became abusers. She lamented that, "Persons trapped within a system that psychologically handicaps them frequently strike out, not at their oppressors, but at those equally helpless."[9] This view, however, obscured the reality of the lives of white women in the antebellum South. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Thavolia Glymph have argued, white women wielded a significant amount of power in their households that they directed towards their bondswomen. There was nothing aberrational or unusual about white women's violence, rather it pervaded their interactions with the slave women under their supervision.

The conflicts between slave women and their mistresses emerged within this context of the household. As Thavolia Glymph has written, "Resistance could thus be construed, by turn, as a management problem and as incontrovertible evidence that black

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in South Carolina (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); and Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*. For more on white and black women in the Antebellum South see Patricia Morton ed., *Discovering Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Kirsten E. Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Marli F. Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Carol K. Bleser, "Southern Planter Wives and Slavery" in David R. Chestnut and Clyde N. Wilson eds., *The Meaning of South Carolina History: Essays in Honor of George C. Rodgers Jr.* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991); Virginia Bernhard, Betty Brandon, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Theda Purdue eds., *Southern Women: Histories and Identities* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992).

[9] Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 188.

women were 'by nature' savage and uncivilized."[10] When slave women misbehaved, they undermined their mistress' claims to domesticity—a domesticity that justified white racial supremacy and white women's superior position within the household. By placing the burden of upholding white domesticity on black shoulders, the household became a likely place as any for slave violence. Bondswomen most often targeted their mistresses for violence, but they also on occasion attacked the whole family. Slave women's violence revealed the potential impact of confrontations beyond the individual level. Slave women's violence challenged the authority and legitimacy of the household as an institution that empowered white women and subjugated slaves. Their violence attracted the attention of the public, serving as a reminder of the dangers that bondswomen posed. When slave women fought back, they engaged resistance to the white southern understanding of the household. The household served as a site of labor, kinship ties, and gendered interactions all defined by a limited geographic space where whites attempted to assert their superiority over their human chattel.

Violence Against Mistresses

Within the household, slave women most often targeted their violence against their mistresses. White women oversaw their bondswomen's daily activities and took an active role in "educating" and "training" their slave women on how to work. Frederick Douglass recalled the casual level of violence that dominated many southern households. He described a Mrs. Hamilton who sat in a chair "with a heavy cowskin always by her

[10] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage,* 91.

side, and scarce an hour passed during the day but was marked by the blood of one of these slaves."[11]When slave women failed to live up to their mistresses' expectations, they often found themselves on the receiving end of the lash. These constant interactions fostered tensions and, on occasion, bondswomen struck back against their mistresses' violence. This resistance occurred within the environment of the household where black women labored under the command of white women. Bondswomen's work supported white women's position within their households, freeing them from heavy labor to assume their role as gentle and kindly creatures of Lost Cause mythology. In reality to uphold their position, white women needed to wield violence to bring their bondswomen into line. The household proves central to understanding the context of slave women's violence against their mistresses.

When slave women attacked their mistresses over punishment, the confrontations revealed the importance of violence in maintaining a properly functioning household. Mary, a slave, attacked Elizabeth Pond, after her mistress tried to discipline her. On April 16, 1833, Pond spoke to Mary about needing to improve her poor behavior. In response, Mary knocked her mistress down and "cursed her and said she meant to kill her."[12] Mary savagely beat and choked Pond. Pond attempted to escape, but not before Mary dragged her over to a well and attempted to toss her into it. Violet, a slave living in Spartanburg County, South Carolina in 1854, had a similar confrontation with her mistress, Polly

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[11] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845: New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 40.

[12] *Commonwealth vs. Mary,* John Floyd Executive Papers, 1830-1834. Accession 42665. Box 9, Folder 11. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Burgess. Burgess believed that Violet had been spending too much time in the kitchen and not tending to her work. Fed up, Burgess threatened to strike Violet if she did not leave. Violet attacked her mistress and knocked her to the ground with a stick. The bondswoman struck her mistress several times before other members of the Burgess family intervened.[13] Pond and Burgess sought to control their slave women through violence, but wound up the object of their bondswomen's anger.

Mary and Violet's violence represented a direct challenge to the authority and power of their mistresses. As Thavolia Glymph has argued, "the work of efficiently-run households in fact required the unending attention and oversight of mistresses and the unending attention of slave women to the work on which depended mistress's ability to fulfill those standards of order and efficiency."[14] The refusal of Mary and Violet to follow their mistresses' orders represented not only a threat to their mistresses' authority, but to the household. Elizabeth Pond and Polly Burgess expected their bondswomen to obey their orders and perform their work, not turn violent. As a matter of course, the concept of resistance requires some kind of object—resistance to what? The meaning of this type of slave women's violence is not simply resistance to enslavement. Rather as Glymph has argued, slave women were not only resisting their mistresses and their claims of labor over their bondswomen, but the entire southern understanding of the

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[13] *State vs. Violet,* Spartanburg District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Case #160. South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Columbia, South Carolina.

[14] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage,* 63.

household, where white women taught and corrected their slave women on how to work.[15]

Bondswomen also engaged in violence against their mistresses to protect and avenge their family members. In Laurens County, South Carolina, in 1859, Dicey, a slave woman, attacked her mistress, Caroline Adams. Adams had ordered Dicey's daughter to wash some dishes and after the girl refused, Adams threatened to whip her. After Adams threatened to punish her daughter, Dicey struck Adams and then tried to choke her.[16] The two women had a history of violent altercations as Dicey and Adams had engaged in a confrontation several months earlier. Mary Armstrong, a former slave from Texas, recalled how she took revenge against her mistress who had beaten her 9 month old sister to death. As she grew up, Armstrong went to live with her mistress's daughter. One day her old mistress came to visit and Armstrong took advantage. She told to a W.P.A. interviewer how she "picked up a rock 'bout as big as half your fist an' hit her right in the eye an' busted the eyeball an' told her that was for whippin' my baby sister to death."[17]

These confrontations highlighted the difficulties faced by slave women in responding to the violence of their mistresses. White women used violence to keep the household running smoothly and highlighted the precarious position of bondswomen.

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[15] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage,* 64.

[16] *State vs. Dicey*, Laurens District Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Case #39. South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina.

[17] George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Texas Narratives* Supplement Series 2, Vol. 2, *Part. 1* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1979), 67. Henceforth Rawick, ed., *Texas Narratives,* Sup. 2, Vol. 2, *Part 1*, 67.

They could resist and avenge the violence against their family members or accept it as part of the normal functioning of southern households. Slave women naturally wanted to protect and avenge violence against their loved ones. But they would need to learn, if they were not already aware, the prevalence of violence within the household. If they were to take up positions as maids, nurses, or cooks, they would have to accommodate themselves to their mistresses' whims and moods as well as their direct supervision. White women closely watched their bondswomen at work and were not hesitant to raise a hand or a whip. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has pointed out, "For the slave girl, the quick blows and occasional whippings rapidly became an expected feature of everyday life."[18] Mistresses used violence to control slave women and their children and keep everyone pointed and working in the same direction—to fulfill the wishes of their mistresses.

Slave women's violence within the household also exposed the limits of their mistresses' power, especially in relation to their husbands. These limits helped bondswomen escape punishment for their resistance. Josie Jordan's mother Selina battled with her master Mark Lowery's new wife almost immediately. Jordan recalled that, "The Mistress was trying to make mammy hurry up with the work and she hit mammy with the broom stick." After her mother resisted, the mistress insisted that Lowery punish Selina further. He refused and after his wife summoned her family to whip Selina, Lowery told

[18] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household,* 154.

his in-laws to "[w]hip your own slaves… Mine have work and if they're beat up they can't do a days work."[19]

Fannie Jennings and her mistress engaged in a confrontation over punishment. The mistress struck Fannie, prompting the slave woman to tear all of her mistress's clothes off in a frenzied rage. A few days later, Fannie fought off a pair of men sent by her mistress to punish her. In response, Mrs. Jennings finally agreed to hire out Fannie and her husband in Memphis, as she told Fannie, "I'll have to send you away. You won't be whipped, and I'm afraid you'll get killed. They have to knock you down like a beef."[20] Fannie's violence forced her mistress to make a decision, continue in her efforts to punish her bondswoman or sell her away.

While white women wielded considerable power within the household, the difference between their power and that of masters offered some opportunities for bondswomen to take advantage. In the antebellum era, mistresses' political authority in the South flowed from their husbands. White southern women had to navigate different and sometimes contradictory gender roles. In their relationships with their husbands and when presenting themselves to southern society, mistresses had to uphold ideas of women's domesticity and gentility. According to these societal expectations, mistresses civilized their naturally inferior slave women through caring and education. Within the household, that caring and education manifested itself through violence. As Thavolia

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[19] George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Oklahoma Narratives,* Vol. 7 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972), 161-162. Henceforth, Rawick ed., *Oklahoma Narratives,* Vol. 7, 161-162.

[20] Rawick, ed., *Unwritten History of Slavery, Fisk University,* Vol. 18, 287.

Glymph has explained, white women "regularly contravened notions of white female gentility that undergird ideologies of race and class and southern domesticity, slipping in and out of the costume of the soft, gentle 'southern lady.'"[21] Within this shifting between submissiveness to their husbands and dominance over the slaves gaps in authority and power emerged. Just as slave men sought to exploit the diverging interests of owners, overseers, and hired employers, bondswomen similarly recognized that the power of their mistresses sat on uneven ground. Mark Lowery's new wife wanted to establish her authority over Selina Jordan, but her husband had no interest in upholding her claims to power. His slaves needed to work and his wife would have to find some other way to assert control over the household.

In the case of Fannie, it was clear that her mistress could not manage her, so Mrs. Jennings passed the responsibility off to someone else. Hiring out Fannie allowed the Jennings to maintain their right over her as their property, but they gave up the responsibility of trying to make her a respectful slave and valued member of the household. Cornelia Jennings, Fannie's daughter, remembered that in the year that her mother was away, "there was no excitement around the place."[22] While Cornelia considered her mother's actions as prompting "excitement" on the farm, the Jennings's understood it something much deeper. Fannie's persistent resistance was more than just the actions of an unruly or undisciplined slave. In her unwillingness to follow orders, Fannie rejected her mistress's authority to discipline her and by extension the ideology of

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[21] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage,* 46.

[22] Rawick, ed., *Unwritten History of Slavery, Fisk University,* Vol. 18, 288.

the household that justified her mistress's status. Mrs. Jennings attempted to punish Fannie on several occasions in order to assert control over her bondswoman and restore order to her household. When Fannie proved unwilling to submit to her rightful place, the Jennings decided to remove her from the household entirely.

The case that perhaps best epitomizes slave women's violence against their mistresses within the household does not involve a woman at all, but rather an eight year old girl. This confrontation and its aftermath demonstrates how white Virginians had acclimated themselves to slave women's violence against their mistresses to the point that no one questioned the propriety of trying an eight year old girl for a capital crime. Only after Judy was convicted and sentenced to hang did anyone object to executing her. But instead of citing her gender, they cited her age as warranting sparing her the noose. On April 9, 1859, Judy had attacked her mistress, Margaret Terrell, while she lay in bed recuperating from an illness. That morning, William Terrell, Margaret's husband, left the house with Charles Rogers, Margaret's brother, for Charlottesville. Soon after her husband left, Margaret, who had been taking doses of opiates to help manage her pain, drifted off to sleep. She was awakened by a blow and saw Judy armed with a pair of tongs. When Terrell asked Judy what she was doing, Terrell claimed that the young girl answered that "she intended to kill me."[23]

Judy unleashed a shocking level of violence against her mistress. As Terrell attempted to wrestle the tongs out of Judy's hands, Judy attempted to gouge out her

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[23] *Commonwealth vs. Judy,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 20, Folder 3. Misc. Reel 4216. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Judy,* (LVA).

mistress's eyes. She grabbed a shovel from the fireplace and struck Terrell several more times. Terrell broke four of the fingers on her left hand deflecting the blows of the shovel. She testified that she had "15 or 16 cuts on my head." Judy then loaded the shovel with coal and ash from the fireplace and threw it on her mistress. Terrell recalled that Judy "threw the ashes all over my clothes and burnt my right knee—also my left arm in 4 or 5 places. She beat me with the tongs not only my head, but all along down my left arm, side, and leg."[24] Terrell unsuccessfully called out for her nurse, Caroline, who was working in the garden. Terrell then passed out from her wounds. Only the arrival of Terrell's doctor, A.C. Wood, interrupted the attack and prevented Judy from killing her mistress.

The white authorities investigating the case seemed unsure of how to react to the girl's violence. They had a difficult time reconciling the idea that an eight year old could attack her mistress with Judy's fear about the consequences of her actions. They seemed confused that Judy would become upset at being questioned and interrogated. O.G. Mitchell, a justice of the peace, interrogated Judy in the Terrell's corn house where she had been locked up after the confrontation. Mitchell went into the interrogation "supposing that she was instigated to this act." When he asked Judy who had encouraged her to attack her mistress, the slave girl denied that anyone had put her up to it. She maintained this story through repeated interrogations while in the corn house and later at the county jail. While Mitchell could not conceive of a world where the eight year old had acted alone, he was confused when she acted like a child. After being locked in the

[24] *Commonwealth vs. Judy,* (LVA).

corn house and repeatedly questioned, Judy began to cry. When Mitchell asked her why she was crying, Judy answered, "she wished to get out." When being carried to jail, Judy "did not seem to understand where she was going." Samuel Harlow, her jailor, reported that Judy was scared and did not want to be hung. She only wanted to go home to her family. Harlow reported that Judy seemed "indifferent" to the prospect of being executed.[25] On one hand, the neighborhood whites refused to believe that a young girl was capable of such a crime, yet reacted with surprise when she acted like a child.

The threat of punishment, as it was so often in the case of confrontations, prompted Judy's violence. Margaret Terrell testified that Judy primarily performed chores around the household and was "sprightly and intelligent." Terrell also described how Judy had a mischievous spirit and her mistress kept her in the bedroom where she could keep an eye on her. Despite her precociousness, the young slave girl had never previously committed any violence against her mistress. Three or four days before the attack, Terrell had seen Judy steal something from her bedroom and threatened to whip her if she tried to do it again. Judy admitted to Samuel Harlow that she attacked Terrell because "she was afraid she would whip her for stealing biscuit, and she wanted to take the advantage of her whilst she was weak."[26] Judy told her jailer that if given the opportunity she would try to kill her mistress again. Terrell and Harlow's testimony proved enough to convict Judy of attempted murder at the Albemarle County Courthouse

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[25] *Commonwealth vs. Judy,* (LVA).

[26] *Commonwealth vs. Judy,* (LVA).

in July 1859. The court of oyer and terminer that included O.G. Mitchell, the justice of the peace who initially investigated the case, sentenced the slave girl to hang.

Until this point, no one involved in the case had objected to the prosecution of Judy for a capital crime. The whites of Albemarle focused solely on her age and not her gender; they did not believe that an eight year old girl could commit such a heinous crime. After becoming convinced that Judy acted alone, the Terrells, the commonwealth attorney, and the members of the court of oyer and terminer were content to put her on trial. Throughout the entire investigation, no one mentioned her gender, only her age. It seems that there was nothing unusual about slave women's violence, only that Judy was so young when she decided to resist. In the aftermath of the conviction, at least one member of the court began to have doubts about the appropriateness of executing Judy. As Egbert Watson, Judy's attorney, wrote to Virginia governor Henry Wise, "One of the justices comprising the court was opposed to the sentence and it was so announced from the bench, but he finally acquiesced, upon the express condition that there should be a recommendation for mercy."[27] Yet without interference from Governor Wise, Judy was set to hang on November 4, 1859.

As Judy's attorney, Watson attempted to persuade Governor Wise to commute her sentence to transportation. He cited Judy's age as the primary reason for the granting of mercy. Watson wrote "I sent the application solely upon the ground that the prisoner is too young and too ignorant to have been conscious of the crime she was committing." He acknowledged that the law granted the state the power to execute an eight year old, but

[27] *Commonwealth vs. Judy,* (LVA).

could not find evidence of such an execution dating back three hundred years in England. In the United States, Watson argued, "it is believed no one under twelve years of age has ever been executed. It would be a blot upon our state and wholly at war with the present state of civilization (to say nothing of religion) to execute a child nine years of age."[28] Watson attached a petition from white residents of Albemarle citing Judy's age as a justification for asking for a reprieve of the sentence to transportation. John Moffat, a Presbyterian minister in Montreal, sent a letter pleading with Wise to spare the young girl's life. The prospect of execution, he wrote, "outrages every principle of humanity and justice and is nothing less than a legal murder."[29] None of the appeals mentioned Judy's gender, only her age, as a reason to spare her life.

Governor Wise followed suit by commuting Judy's sentence citing "her infancy, being less than 9 years of age when the offence was committed." He sentenced her to spend her life laboring on the public works. The remarkable case came to a close with the county of Albemarle willing to execute an eight year old slave girl for attempted murder. No one involved in the case from the Terrells to the white investigators the case to Egbert Watson to Governor Wise seemed shocked that a female slave could commit such violence. None of them objected to putting a slave girl on trial for a capital trial until it came to the prospect of actually executing her. Watson wrote to Wise that the people of Albemarle seemed content to execute Judy. This rare and extreme case of bondswomen's

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[28] *Commonwealth vs. Judy,* (LVA).

[29] *Letter from John Moffat to the Honorable Governor Wise,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 19, Folder 6. Misc. Reel 4216. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

violence against their mistresses demonstrates that Virginia's whites did not see anything unusual about bondwomen's violence. Only when the prospect of executing a child became a reality did anyone object. Concerns about her age, not her gender, justified Judy's reprieve.

White Virginians tried to retroactively explain slave women's violence by pointing to the bad character of bondswomen. Jane, a slave in Bedford County, killed her mistress, Elizabeth Musgrove, during a dispute over punishment. Jane had complained of a toothache and refused to go out into the fields to work. When her mistress attempted to punish her, Jane fought back, killing Musgrove. One of the witnesses at Jane's trial testified that the bondswoman was known to be "very insolent to Mrs. Musgrove whenever her master was from home."[30] In Powhatan County, another slave woman named Jane killed her mistress, Jarriger Beasley, during a dispute over punishment. On July 7, 1852, Beasley picked up an iron poker and struck Jane for being rude. Jane snatched the poker away from her mistress, struck Beasley on the neck, and choked her to death. One white witness at Jane's trial speculated that Jane may have grown tired of tending to her mistress. Beasley was somewhere between 60 and 70 years old, suffered from rheumatism, had lost the ability to walk, and could only use her right hand. Jane had to help Beasley move around the house. It was well known around the neighborhood that

[30] *Commonwealth vs. Jane,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 14, Folder 3. Misc. Reel 4209. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

"Jane did not attend to her business faithfully and was insolent in manner and by words."[31] She had tired of tending to her cruel and infirm mistress.

The use of words like "insolent" by white women to describe the behavior of slave women denied the dangers that lurked just beneath the veneer of the plantation household. These words reduced slave women's resistance to a problem of behavior and management. Slave women merely needed to learn (from their mistresses) how to behave with a little help from an iron poker or whip. Mistresses would, through this treatment, civilize their slave women, teaching them the importance of hard work and discipline. This understanding allowed mistresses to see their bondswomen's behavior through the prism of southern domesticity instead of the reality of the situation—that bondwomen rejected the power and authority of their white superiors. This language is highly revealing, as Thavolia Glymph has written, because "embedded within the camouflaging language of disorder and behavior is the story of the damage unruly household slaves did to mistress's worlds and the claims of southern domesticity."[32] What white women saw in their slave women as intractable behavior was, in fact, resistance to their enslavement.

Household animosities between mistresses and their slaves could create longstanding tensions that manifested themselves in violence. Sarah and Creese, two slaves belonging to Martha Morriset of Chesterfield County, Virginia brutally murdered and dismembered their mistress on April 1, 1806. That morning, Morriset had sent Creese

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[31] *Commonwealth vs. Jane,* Joseph Johnson Executive Papers, 1852-1855. Accession 44076. Box 2, Folder 6. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[32] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage,* 67.

into the fields to plow. When Morriset came to inspect her work, she threatened to punish Creese. The beleaguered bondswoman sought solace from Sarah, another of Morriset's slaves. A distraught Creese told Sarah that "her mistress was so hard to please that she must run away." Sarah suggested that rather than run away, the two bondswomen should kill their mistress. After Morriset came out to the fields to punish Creese, the slave woman began to fight back. As Creese struggled with her mistress, Sarah came up behind the two women, armed with an ax. Once Creese had grabbed hold of Morriset, Sarah "knocked her mistress down with an axe, and give her five or six blows."[33] With the assistance of Sarah's husband, Jim Strobe, the slaves so thoroughly disposed of her body that the neighborhood white men who searched Morriset's farm and the nearby James River only recovered several pieces of her calico dress and one of her legs.

The extreme nature of the violence of slaves like Creese and Sarah reveals the depth of their hatred of their mistresses and their willingness to use violence to resolve the situation. Within the household, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explained, "Slaves were expected to perform the major portion of the work for which the mistresses were responsible."[34] Slaves and their mistresses naturally came into conflict as whites perpetually lamented the lack of good help. Slave women learned the realities of life under their mistresses' watch quickly, as Fox-Genovese wrote, "Even the youngest could

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[33] *Commonwealth vs. Sarah and Creese,* William H. Cabell Executive Papers, 1805-1808. Accession 41135. Box 1, Folder 8. Misc. Reel 5962. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[34] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household,* 135.

become the object of the mistress's flash of anger."[35] This constant supervision and building tension between slave women and their mistresses manifested itself in a myriad of ways. Bondswomen worked slowly, feigned illness, or as Creese initially suggested, ran away. And on rare occasions, they turned violent against their mistresses. In this way, slave women's violence was natural byproduct of the violent household environment in which they lived and worked.

The circumstances of the day to day lives of slaves shaped the forms of their resistance. Bondsmen who worked in the fields attacked their owners and overseers using hoes, axes, or clubs that they used in their daily activities. This pattern of turning working tools into weapons continued in the household as well. Instead of gardening implements, bondswomen used household items as their means of resistance. In 1857, the Commonwealth of Virginia witnessed two similar cases of horrifying violence against mistresses by their slave women. Catharine and Jenny, the slaves involved in these two instances, employed two of the quintessential symbols of the household, an iron and the hearth, as the means to kill their mistresses. Catharine attacked her mistress and then set her on fire with an iron and Jenny repeatedly beat and tossed her mistress into the lit fireplace. These confrontations highlighted this type of violence as reflecting the importance of the southern household. Slave women resisted their mistresses and used two of the most powerful symbols of household labor in the Antebellum South, the hearth and the iron.

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[35] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 153.

On the morning of June 27, 1857, Thomas Hall returned home around 11:00 A.M. to find that his wife, Salina, had burned to death. Catharine, a slave woman who worked in the household, claimed that she had seen her mistress ironing before she went out to retrieve firewood from the nearby woods. When she returned home, Catharine claimed that she found her mistress lying on the floor, near death. Catharine told her master that in her dying moments, Salina Hall, in heartbreaking fashion, told her to "give her love to Mr. Hall and tell him to pray for her."[36] But Catharine's story failed to hold up to scrutiny, Salina Hall's body featured a number of sizable wounds on her head, unrelated to the burns that covered her body. Two neighborhood white women found a shovel with bits of blood and hair on it propped up against the door of Hall's house. The women also noticed a small pool of blood on the floor nearby. If Salina Hall had burned to death, then why was her blood and hair all over the shovel and floor?

The confrontation revealed the nature of this violence within the household as well as its potential to erupt at any time. After questioning, Catharine admitted that she had murdered her mistress. She told one of her white interrogators that while she "was sitting down getting a splinter out of her foot, Mrs. Hall told her to get up and go and get wood." Catharine replied that she would retrieve the firewood as soon as she had removed the splinter from her foot. Mrs. Hall then grabbed a cowhide and began whipping her. Catharine admitted that she "struck Mrs. Hall with the shovel, that she struck her twice before she fell." She grabbed the hot iron and used it to set fire to Hall's

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[36] *Commonwealth vs. Catharine,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 8, Folder 7. Misc. Reel 4203. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth, *Commonwealth vs. Catharine* (LVA).

body and make sure her mistress was truly dead. The admission came as a surprise to Thomas Hall. He testified that his wife "never lodged any complaint to me that the girl had been disobedient." Hall revealed that he "never had any occasion to correct her since I had her." Catharine was about fifteen or sixteen years old and seemed "to be a right strong girl."[37]

Jenny, a slave from Alexandria, Virginia, murdered Elizabeth Hall, her mistress, by repeatedly tossing Hall into the fireplace in December 1857. Hall died of her wounds later that night, but not before giving a deposition that helped ensure Jenny's execution. Earlier that day, Hall had ordered Jenny to fetch water from the spring and Selina, another household slave, to begin making dinner before settling down for a nap. When she awoke Hall saw that Selina was not cooking dinner, and Jenny answered that "she had sent her to the spring, I asked her why she had done that contrary to my orders." Hall wrote in her deposition that Jenny responded with "some of her insolence and I slapped her in the mouth."[38] Jenny continued to defy her mistress by placing more wood in the fire. After Hall tried to pull the wood out of the fireplace, the two women came to blows. Jenny grabbed hold of her mistress, put Hall's head between her knees, and pushed her into the fire. As Hall smoldered in the fireplace, Jenny blocked the door to prevent her from escaping.

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[37] *Commonwealth vs. Catharine* (LVA).

[38] *Commonwealth vs. Jenny,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 11, Folder 3. Misc. Reel 4206. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth, *Commonwealth vs. Jenny* (LVA).

After Hall tore off her flaming clothes, Jenny threw her into the fireplace a second time. Hall promised Jenny that she would never whip her again, and offered her money and her freedom if she would cease her attack. Hall managed to pull herself from the flames a second time, but Jenny threw her half-dead mistress into the fireplace a third time. As her mistress burned, Jenny grabbed a pile of nearby clothes and threw them into the fire on top of Hall's head. Amazingly, Hall dragged herself out of the fireplace a third time. She doused herself with a bucket of water and climbed out of a nearby window. Jenny desperately grabbed at her mistress's legs and tried to drag her back inside the house. Hall somehow managed to free herself and called out for help. William, one of Hall's slaves, heard his mistress's screams and came over to help. Jenny yelled to him to go and fetch his master, Basil Hall, because "Mistress was almost burned to death." Elizabeth Hall begged William to stay because she was "afraid if he left me she would murder me."[39]

When Basil Hall reached his house, he found his wife lying in bed. Elizabeth told him, "O Basil Jennie done it." Hall recognized that his wife did not have long to live and he told her "to reconcile herself and keep as still as she could." Hall sat at his wife's side as she relayed the details of the entire confrontation to him. Hall went outside and tied Jenny up on the front porch. As she resisted, Hall struck her repeatedly. Out of the sight of his dying wife, Basil Hall loaded his gun and readied himself to shoot Jenny. Only the interference of his dying wife spared Jenny's life. Elizabeth Hall then revealed to her husband what had sparked Jenny's anger. The bondswoman had asked for permission to

[39] *Commonwealth vs. Jenny* (LVA).

leave the farm that morning, but Hall had refused as Jenny had failed to complete any of her chores. The tensions between mistress and slave had been simmering all morning. In her last moments, Elizabeth Hall requested that "Mr. Hall to take good care of her children after she was gone and write to her sisters."[40]

Jenny's anger, which had been building throughout the day, led her to brutally kill her mistress. But violence was nothing new in the Hall household. They had a reputation in the community for being strict owners. As the *Washington Star* reported, Hall and his family "were considered by respectable persons in the neighborhood, as being hard on servants." Shortly before Elizabeth Hall's death, her husband "had a portion of his farm building burned by some of his own servants."[41] The newspaper report made it clear that both Basil and Elizabeth Hall maintained firm control over their slaves. Yet this violence within the household had the potential to spark violence from the slaves. The violence from bondswomen like Jenny, as Thavolia Glymph has argued, came from the unwillingness of slave women to subsume their own desires for those of their mistresses. From the viewpoint of whites, as Glymph explained, "slave women simply failed to see their mistresses' needs as their own needs and sought within the confines of slavery to live their own lives."[42] Elizabeth Hall had denied Jenny the right to leave and attempted to correct her when she disobeyed. But Jenny sought to follow her own desires and assert some control over her own life, resulting in the confrontation that left her mistress dead.

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[40] *Commonwealth vs. Jenny* (LVA).

[41] *Washington Star* reprinted in *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), January 29, 1858.

[42] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage,* 64.

Antebellum southern households contained female slaves laboring under the direction of their mistresses. These bondswomen performed much of the labor that kept the household running and allowed white women to live up to their ideals of domesticity. Plantation mistresses needed to civilize the slaves under their care and teach them the importance of hard work, industry, and obedience and if necessary discipline them when they failed to live up to their mistress's standards. Since white women's claims rested on the labor of slaves, this created tension and the potentiality for violence. In the Antebellum South, southern plantation owners lamented the lack of good help. Mistresses saw their bondswomen as unruly, lazy, and recalcitrant. What white women understood as character defects in their slaves were in fact the efforts of slave women to assert control over their own lives and reject their mistresses' power. Due to the daily and unceasing interactions between southern women, these circumstances provided ample opportunities for violence. When slave women resisted their mistresses, they did demonstrated the potential of the household as a site for violence.

Expanding Household Violence

Bondswomen did not limit their resistance within the household to their mistresses. They also attacked or killed the children and families of their owners. By extending their violence beyond their mistresses, slave women's confrontations revealed how bondswomen represented a threat not only to their mistresses, but to the entire white family as well. The household was not simply a female space where white and black women lived and worked isolated from the rest of the world. Rather the household was

the central organizing unit of the southern family and slave women performed much of the labor that kept it running. Bondswomen cooked, sewed, and cleaned for the entire white family, not just their mistresses. On rare occasions, bondswomen resisted not only their mistresses, but took out their anger and frustrations against the whole family. These confrontations revealed how individual acts of slave women's resistance represented an attack on the primacy of the household and white power in antebellum Virginia.

Disputes between bondswomen and whites revealed class tensions within white households. On March 15, 1857, John Davenport, an overseer for Peter Watkins, engaged in a brutal confrontation with Milly, one of the slaves under his supervision. Davenport's wife, Martha, had spotted Milly milking the Davenport's cow. Martha confronted her and Milly answered that "she did not milk her cow and repeated in a short manner that she did not milk her, witness's old cow." Martha Davenport took offense to Milly's comment and demanded that the bondswoman "must not dispute her word."[43] The two women continued arguing as Martha Davenport followed Milly back to her mistress and demanded that she be disciplined for her disrespect. Mrs. Watkins assured her that she would have Milly punished. The next morning after hearing about the incident, John Davenport confronted Milly and grabbed her by the collar. In response, she tried to bite him. Davenport then struck her with his fist prompting Milly to lower her head and charge into his chest. Milly drew a knife and began stabbing Davenport, leaving behind extensive injuries that required a month's convalescence.

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[43] *Commonwealth vs. Milly,* Henry County Court Records. Henry County (Va.) Commonwealth Causes, 1856-1859. Local Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Milly* (LVA).

John Davenport's willingness to avenge his wife reveals the tenuous stature of poor white households in Virginia's slave society. By confronting Milly, Davenport had hoped that "correcting her would give him satisfaction." Davenport's use of the word satisfaction highlights how he understood Milly's rudeness to his wife in terms of honor culture and how she disrespected his household. Milly had insulted his wife, her status within the household, and by extension Davenport himself. As Davenport explained, "He felt it a duty he owed to his wife to correct Milly for her treatment to her." This was a role that only he could fulfill, as Martha Davenport reported that "She was not satisfied that Mrs. Watkins would have Milly corrected, as she replied in a very short manner 'Mrs. Davenport I will have Milly corrected.'"[44] Martha Davenport resented Mrs. Watkins' condescending tone and suspected that she had no desire to see Milly punished for her misbehavior. White women of different classes would not support each other in maintaining their households. It then fell upon John Davenport to correct the recalcitrant slave woman and uphold the honor of his household.

The confrontation also revealed the tensions between poor whites and slaves. Slaves contrasted "de quality" of their owners and with the "po' white trash" frequently employed as overseers, patrollers, and other hired hands. Slaves animosities towards poor whites were understandable. Poor white women engaged in similar labors as their black counterparts. John Davenport had worked for seven years as Watkins' overseer and was responsible for much of the day to day operation of the farm, including doling out discipline, making him a natural target for slave violence and animosity. Milly had no

[44] *Commonwealth vs. Milly* (LVA).

problem taking out her anger on the Davenports. She repeatedly sassed Martha Davenport and knifed her husband. Milly denied that she had hidden her knife, instead she proudly proclaimed that "'I brought it in my hand' and damn him I will show him who he fools with." William Pharis, a neighborhood resident, had attempted to break up the confrontation and called Milly an "insignificant hussy." Milly, apparently a quick-witted slave, replied that she "was no more of a hussy than he witness was."[45] Pharis, with the aid of several white neighbors, subdued Milly and had her arrested, but not before she tried to bite him.

Slave women also took out their anger against the children who they had helped raise. Ellen Cragin's mother, Luvenia Polk, became so angry when her young master tried to discipline her that she paralyzed him. Cragin explained that one day her mother fell asleep at the loom and the young master spotted her. When the young boy went and told his mother, the mistress instructed him to grab a whip and punish her. The young boy "took a stick and went out to beat her awake. He beat my mother till she woke up." An enraged Polk, "took a pole out of the loom and beat him nearly to death with it." When the boy begged for her to stop, Polk replied, "I'm going to kill you. These black titties sucked you, and then you come out here to beat me."[46] The altercation left the young boy unable to walk. The bonds of intimacy forged between slave women and the white children of the household could manifest themselves in a violent and uncontrollable rage. They also served as a reminder of the dangers of disciplining bondswomen.

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[45] *Commonwealth vs. Milly* (LVA).

[46] Rawick, ed., *Arkansas Narratives,* Vol. 8, *Part 2*, 42.

Bondswomen's violence against the children of their owners reminded whites that the dangers of household violence included the entire family. On September 28, 1812, Amey, a slave belonging to James Tate of Augusta County, murdered Tate's daughter Mary. After Tate arrived back home, he found his daughter lying face down in a pool of water. Her body and clothing reeked of the fetid water. Tate's mother Margaret searched the property trying to find the smell that had permeated Mary Tate's clothes. Inside the still house, she matched the smell to a half empty hogshead of water that had been sitting there for months. James Tate's suspicions quickly turned to his slave, Amey. Amey had served as Mary's nurse when she was a baby and had frequent interactions with her. Tate also suspected that Amey had been violent towards the children. He claimed that "once that Mary's check was bruised as if pinched, the child said that Amey did it." He described Amey as being "of obstinate temper and more difficult to manage than any other he ever had to manage."[47]

James Tate, as well as his three other slaves, came to suspect that Amey had killed the little girl. Sam, one of Tate's slaves, testified that "Amey came out of the house in very bad humor one day and said to him, if her mistress did not care about whipping her, she would kill her too." Amey's trial revealed the tensions within the household that existed between the bondswoman and her owner and his family. Amey resented the efforts of her mistress to discipline her. She took her anger over her treatment out on Mary, pinching and hurting her. Amey's role as Mary's nurse meant they frequently

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[47] *Commonwealth vs. Amey,* James Barbour Executive Papers, 1812-1814. Accession 41557. Box 4, Folder 11. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

spent large amounts of time together and placed Amey under the constant supervision of her mistress. This situation especially fostered tensions, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explained, "Nurses, like other female house slaves… performed most of the labor that the mistress fancied she had done herself."[48] Mistresses, like Margaret Tate (James Tate's wife was also named Margaret), had no problem disciplining slave women who failed to live up to their expectations. The Tates likely never considered the possibility that their slave woman would take out her anger not against them, but against their daughter, who could not fight back.

On August 10 1838, Lucinda and Andrew, slaves of George Mayse, murdered his daughters Mary and Margaret while they walked home from school in rural Bath County, Virginia. With the aid of Caroline, Lucinda's daughter, Lucinda and Andrew lured the children to a blackberry patch. Once Caroline brought them there, Andrew "seized Mary, and Lucinda coming up, took hold of Mary by the head, and stood behind her, whilst Andrew stood on one side and cut her throat with a new-looking shoeknife." Margaret ran off, but Andrew captured her and slit her throat as well. Lucinda threatened Caroline, telling her "she would be hung if she told any thing about it."[49] The Mayse family, along with some of their neighbors, quickly organized a search for the girls and Caroline, fearful of what might happen, pointed them in the direction of the blackberry patch. Lucinda, meanwhile, had tried to send them off towards the stream, away from the

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[48] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household,* 137.

[49] *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), September 7, 1838.

murder scene. George and Sarah Mayse quickly found the bodies of their eight and nine year old daughters lying near the blackberry patch.

The trial of the slaves revealed the tensions that existed between the Mayses and their slaves. In 1830, Mayse owned seven slaves and by 1840 he had increased his holding to twenty. By all accounts, he was a prosperous farmer, but had trouble controlling his slaves.[50] A few days before the girls' murders, George Mayse had attempted to whip Lucinda, but she had escaped from his grasp. Andrew also loathed his owner. Sarah Mayse testified that "Andrew had also made threats, and said he would do something to make his master sell him, for he would not live with him." In an attempt to assert his masterly authority and bring his slaves in line, George Mayse had recently purchased a new whip. He had not yet used it, but "placed it so that they might see it, in order to alarm them and make them behave better." Sarah Mayse testified that Lucinda and Andrew "were both much incensed against their master, and both of them had made threats." Lucinda had been particularly vociferous about her hatred for her master. She had "declared that neither her master nor any other man should ever whip her—if they did, there would be murder committed for she had as soon die one death as another."[51] The testimony at the slaves' trial made it seem that George Mayse's efforts at controlling his household backfired and prompted his slaves to take their anger out on his daughters.

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[50] George Mayse, *1830 United States Federal Census*, Bath, Virginia; Series: M19; Roll: 189; Page: 195; Family History Library Film: 0029668. Accessed on Ancestry.com June 26, 2015; George Mayse, *1840 United States Federal Census*: Bath, Virginia; Roll: 551; Page: 122; Image: 252; Family History Library Film: 0029684. Accessed on Ancestry.com June 26, 2015.

[51] *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), September 7, 1838.

Local newspapers rampantly speculated about the causes of the slaves' violence. The Stanton, Virginia *Spectator* blamed the bad character of the slaves on George Mayse's failure to run a strict household. The paper claimed that "the ill temper of the woman had been greatly excited by something which had occurred in the family, and thus cruelly and savagely, it would seem, has she wreaked her vengeance."[52] The *Richmond Enquirer* reported that the lax discipline of George Mayse, likely caused his slaves' violence. The paper claimed that "the family had been very indulgent towards the slaves." The lack of masterly authority, "operated upon such too malignant and reckless spirits, so as to produce the perpetration of two of the most cold blooded and atrocious murders which the present day has produced. It thrills the blood of every humane person, to see two such tender and helpless innocents fall victims to the demon-like passions of two such fiends."[53] In making these claims, the paper blamed George Mayse for the death of his daughters. These newspaper articles implied to its readers that strong willed masters did not need to worry about such violence in their own households.

On Monday July 19, 1852, Joseph P. Winston, his wife Virginia, and their infant child (also named Virginia) were brutally attacked as they slept in their Richmond home. Virginia and her infant daughter died shortly thereafter. Joseph P. Winston, however, survived his wounds. Jane Williams, one of Winston's slaves, had discovered the family near death. Almost immediately the Winston household was flooded with neighbors, doctors, and city authorities. The scene inside the Winston bedroom horrified the

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[52] *Spectator* (Stanton, VA), reprinted in *Hampshire Gazette* (Northampton, MA) August 29, 1838.

[53] *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), September 7, 1838.

onlookers. The *Richmond Dispatch* reported that "Mr. and Mrs. Winston were found lying on their bed with several gashes and deep brain-cuts upon their heads… The bed was saturated with blood."[54] The investigation into the murders revealed that Jane Williams, the Winston's slave woman, had entered the bedroom that morning armed with an ax and attacked the Winston family as they slept in their beds. The case attracted the attention of the community and local media. The gruesome details of the murder and the investigation that followed highlight the prominence of household violence and its potential to trouble southern slaveholders everywhere.

As the Richmond authorities convened a coroner's inquest to investigate the murders, they searched the Winston house. The inquest discovered a "large broad edged hatchet, with a small handle and stained with marks similar blood" hidden behind a chest in Jane Williams' room.[55] They uncovered a frock with blood stained sleeves and a bloody chemise. The investigators also found a roll of fake hair, approximately 14 inches in length, belonging to Virginia Winston, in the yard. The members of the inquest discovered that the family's valuables, including clothes and a sizable amount of cash that Mr. Winston was preparing to take with him on a business trip, undisturbed. The state of the house convinced the members of the inquest that the guilty party resided within the Winston household. The inquest placed the Winston slaves under arrest. They immediately began to suspect Jane Williams, the slave woman who had discovered the crime in the first place. Jane denied that she had any role in the murders. She claimed that

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[54] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), July 20, 1852.

[55] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), July 20, 1852.

she had entered the bedroom that morning, turned down the bed cover, and went over to the cradle to tend to the child. After feeling the lifeless baby, Jane pulled back the curtains to reveal the horror that had befallen the Winston family. She ran out of the room and called for help.

Under interrogation, Jane could not explain how she came to have a bloody hatchet and bloodstained clothes hidden in her room. She claimed she had gone out early on Sunday morning (the day before the murder) and bought some meat. Jane used the hatchet to chop it up for a soup that she made for her family. She told the inquest that she simply tossed the bloody hatchet aside without bothering to clean it. The blood on her clothes, Jane explained, came from when she went into the Winston's bedroom that morning. Her story did little to convince authorities of her innocence, especially when Jane's husband, John Williams, testified that he never ate any soup or saw his wife make it. Nelly Scott, the other slave woman who resided with the Winston's, cast doubt on Jane's story by saying she saw John Williams, not Jane head out in the morning to the market. The testimony of John Williams and Nelly Scott left Jane with no reasonable explanation for the bloody hatchet. Jane tried to shift the blame for the crime onto Anna, another of Joseph Winston's slaves, who had run away the previous weekend. Jane claimed that Anna had a rendezvous with a mysterious stranger who threatened to "knock Winston in the head some of these times."[56] This mysterious stranger, Jane suggested, might have been responsible for the murders.

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[56] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), July 22, 1852.

Jane's stories, however, failed to convince anyone of her innocence, especially after the inquest learned more about the character of Jane and her husband, John. Nelly claimed that "Jane did not appear to be much affected by the death of Mr. and Mrs. Winston." Nelly also testified that "Jane has said she did not like Mr. and Mrs. W." John Williams had a similarly unsavory reputation. John Wortham, an overseer who had hired Williams the previous year, testified that he had "great trouble with him; threatened to whip him; he complained of too much work." When Wortham suggested that John Williams speak to his master, Williams refused and instead said "that he intended to put an end to it."[57] James Green testified that he had hired John Williams from Joseph Winston for a short period of time. Green found John, "turbulent and refractory, and that he would have whipped him for his insolent behavior if he had not been afraid of having his house burned by him." John Williams's behavior scared Green so much that Green "told his foreman to give John a note to get place, as he would not have him any longer in his shop." To punctuate his point, Green claimed that he "regarded him as a dangerous man."[58] The circumstances of the crime combined with the poor characters of John and Jane Williams convinced the inquisition of their guilt.

John Williams continually denied that he had anything to do with the murder of the Winstons. He testified that "I like Mr. Winston very well… I never made a threat against him; had no cause." John Williams also tried to shift the attention away from himself and his wife and towards Anna. He revealed that "I have formed the opinion that

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[57] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), July 20, 1852.

[58] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), July 21, 1852.

Anna knows something about the matter, because I have heard her say, that if anyone interfered with her she would 'fix them.'"[59] Williams denied that he was a dangerous slave who threatened the lives of his overseers. He explained that "Mr. Enders [his current employer] and overseer said that I was falsely accused." John Williams tried to explain his behavior the morning of the murders. He testified that he "was waked by hearing a noise—my wife waked me, and called me by saying, "I believe everyone in the house is dead." He then went downstairs and found "Nelly Scott hollowing, and asked her to stop." Joe Scott, Nelly's husband, complained that John had told Nelly "not to make so much noise" after the discovery of the crime. John explained that he wanted her to stop since he found "the noise was so distressing." [60] John Williams' protestations failed to dissuade the inquisition of his guilt.

The investigation also revealed that the Williams's marriage had grown increasingly strained. John Williams told investigators that "Last week my wife *ceased to sleep with me*." Instead Jane slept on a small bed with her young daughter. Even though John Williams demanded she stop, Jane continued to sleep with the child. Jane Williams confirmed that her relationship with her husband had grown worse. She testified that "Sometimes I would not sleep with him for a week. He was dissatisfied once or twice about it." Officer John Yarrington of the Richmond police guarded John Williams as he waited to testify on the first day of the investigation. During the long wait, a white man, whom Yarrington did not recognize, approached Williams. The unknown

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[59] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), July 20, 1852.

[60] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), July 20, 1852.

man observed to Yarrington that Jane Williams "was making a full confession." Yarrington turned towards John Williams who "appeared to be very much alarmed, and altered the position he had occupied a long time, and remarked that '*she did it*.'"[61] Yarrington told Williams to be quiet as he had not yet testified. When asked about his comment in front of Officer Yarrington, John Williams tried to walk back the damaging statement. He explained, "I believe that she ought to know of it. She goes into the house early and must have known something of it, if any one on the lot committed the murder."[62] Both slaves, however, continued to deny any participation in the crime.

The tensions between the Winstons and their slaves as well as those between John and Jane Williams convinced white authorities of the slaves' guilt. Anna did not hesitate in laying the blame for the murder squarely at John and Jane's feet. Tensions within the household prompted Jane to murder her mistress. Anna revealed "I heard Jane say that she did not like Mrs. Winston and never would. It was not long ago when she said this. John told me he did not like master Joe, and never would."[63] Anna portrayed Jane as single minded in her pursuit of revenge; "Jane says that she never forgets or forgives anything done to her." Anna also suggested that Jane's anger towards her master stemmed from an incident when Winston "threatened to sell her without her child." Anna further claimed that Jane "always had such bitter feelings towards Mrs. W. and her child." Anna also laid the blame for the poisoning of another of Winston's children on

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[61] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), July 21, 1852. Emphasis in original.

[62] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), July 22, 1852.

[63] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), July 22, 1852.

Jane. She suspected John Williams "because he never liked Mr. Winston."[64] Despite the continued protestations of John and Jane Williams, Anna's testimony confirmed white suspicions regarding the estranged slave couple.

The murder of a prosperous white family by their household slaves drew the attention of the Richmond media. Their interest in the case continued to grow after Jane Williams confessed to the crime a week after her arrest. After meeting with the Reverend Robert Ryland, the white pastor of the African Baptist Church where Jane was a member, she admitted her guilt. Ryland implored Jane to "make her peace with God, as she would undoubtedly be hung." In her confession, Jane admitted that she had attacked her master and killed her mistress and the Winston's infant daughter, but she claimed she acted alone. Jane said that John Williams was asleep in his bed and knew nothing of the crime. Jane later described to her jailor, Mr. Starke, how exactly she perpetrated the crime. She attacked Joseph Winston first, knocking him out. Jane then "stepped around the bed, and commenced cutting into the head of Mrs. Winston."[65] After attacking the Winstons in their bed, Jane killed the infant child. After confessing at the urging of Reverend Ryland, Jane Williams accepted responsibility for her actions and the consequences that would surely follow. Why exactly Jane tried to protect her husband is unclear, but white authorities refused to believe her.

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[64] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), July 22, 1852.

[65] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA) reprinted in *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), July 29, 1852.

In the immediate aftermath of the crime, the tensions within the Winston household became fodder for local newspapers. Jane had claimed that "she had been ill-treated by Mr. and Mrs. Winston and had been brooding over her bloody revenge for some time. The devil, she stated, had such possession of her that morning, that she believed she could have went further than she did, if necessary." John Williams confessed that Jane "had threatened to murder them because they intended to send her to the country, and that he remonstrated with her."[66] The *Richmond Enquirer* offered a different spin on their motive. The paper claimed that John and Jane "desired to be sold, but Mr. W. … refused to sell them—hence their dissatisfaction, and hence, it is thought, their too fatal revenge." To further heighten the tragedy, the *Enquirer* contrasted the Joseph Winston's generosity with his slaves' savagery. The paper claimed that "Mr. Winston purchased Jane's husband at Charleston, where he had been sold and had him brought back to this city, to please her."[67] Whatever the motive, the white citizens of Richmond agreed that trouble had lurked within the Winston household.

On August 9, 1852, hours before Jane Williams faced her arraignment citizens of Richmond packed themselves tightly into the courtroom. The *Richmond Dispatch* reported that "A deep and painful excitement pervaded the entire assembly." When Jane Williams entered the court room, she "appeared greatly discomposed, and was evidently laboring under the fear —which she had previously expressed — that she would be taken

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[66] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA) reprinted in *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), July 29, 1852.

[67] *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), July 23, 1852.

from the court house before the court adjourned, and publically executed in the square."[68] When no lynch mob appeared to drag Jane away, the Hustings Court began its proceedings. John R. Gilmer, Jane's court appointed attorney, announced that his client intended to plead guilty to murdering Virginia Winston. When asked if she had anything to add before the court announced its sentence, Jane simply replied, "Nothing, sir." The court then sentenced Jane to hang on September 10, 1852. A newspaper account described Jane as receiving her sentence "with the utmost composure, not a muscle of her moving." [69] John Williams stood trial a month later on September 14, 1852. The commonwealth attorney had delayed John's trial so that Joseph Winston could testify.[70] The crowd that had gathered in the court room "loudly applauded the verdict, and some, it is said, threatened to seize him and hang him on the spot."[71] The justices sentenced John Williams to hang on October 22, 1852. By then, his wife, Jane, had already hanged for her crime.

On September 10, 1852, Jane Williams, clad entirely in white, rode in an open wagon from the Richmond jail to the place of her execution. A crowd of about six thousand people gathered to witness the hanging. All of Richmond, it seemed, turned out to see Jane Williams hang, as the crowd contained a collection of "all sexes, colors and

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[68] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), August 10, 1852.

[69] *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), August 17, 1852.

[70] *Commonwealth vs. John Williams,* Joseph Johnson Executive Papers, 1852-1855. Accession 44076. Box 3, Folder 1. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[71] *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), September 16, 1852.

ages." Reverend Ryland offered a prayer on Jane's behalf. The *Richmond Dispatch* reflected the white community's anger towards Jane when it wrote that "Never before in this city, perhaps, did religious ceremonies of so serious and impressive a character, fall upon more unwilling ears. The thick-crowding thoughts of the diabolical murder of two innocent, guileless beings, committed by Jane with the coolness and deliberation of a fiend, rendered unimpressive, cold and tedious, those ceremonies."[72] Even Jane's death could not seemingly quell the anger of Richmond's white residents. After the prayer, Reverend Ryland once again demanded that Jane expose her husband's role in her crimes. He asked Jane, "whether any one beside herself was cognizant of, or accessory to the murder. Her calm reply was 'no one.'" Even when facing death, Jane would not implicate her husband.

At 10:46 A.M., the executioner pulled a chair out from under Jane's feet. The *Richmond Dispatch* hoped that "her merited and summary execution will operate as a warning to the fractious portion of our negro population."[73] Jane's body was then taken and buried near the spot of her execution. At long last, the people of Richmond could rest easy; Jane Williams, the slave murderess, lived no more. Before her execution, one newspaper had described her as a "yellow woman, about medium height, with one eye and a most diabolical visage." The newspaper claimed that she "met her fate with the

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[72] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA) in *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), September 14, 1852.

[73] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA) in *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), September 14, 1852.

same stolid, besotted indifference which she manifested in taking the lives of others."[74] Except Jane Williams was not quite done plaguing the white community of Richmond. After her death, Reverend Ryland revealed that Jane had also confessed to poisoning one of the Winston's other children weeks before the attack on the rest of the family. Jane had asked that Ryland keep the confession a secret because she feared "that a mob would seize and destroy her."[75] The people of Richmond, however, could no longer take their revenge. But her husband John would join her as a second sacrifice to white demands for justice.

A little more than a month later, on the morning of October 22, 1852, Reverend Jeremiah Jeter, a local Baptist minister and missionary, travelled with John Williams on the way to his execution. A small crowd consisting mostly of African Americans, much smaller than had occasioned the death of Jane Williams, had gathered at the gallows. As Williams ascended the steps, the *Richmond Daily Dispatch* expressed shock at Williams's appearance, "When first committed, his complexion was of a dark dingy brown; when placed in the hangman's cart… his face was nearly of the light color of a mulatto or quadroon." The paper attributed the change to fear, noting that Williams "exhibited marked trepidation, and trembled at times, violently." Williams briefly addressed the crowd. He informed the gathered citizenry, "Gentlemen—I desire to inform you that the charge alleged against me I am innocent of. I feel myself innocent of the crime." Williams hoped to speak to the crowd for longer, but the City Sergeant

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[74] *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), September 13, 1852.

[75] *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), September 24, 1852.

interrupted the doomed bondsman. The moments before his execution were not the appropriate occasion for Williams to offer a lengthy speech in defense of himself. The *Daily Dispatch* declared that "there would have been a manifest impropriety in allowing him to address the crowd of negroes around him, to the perversion of their minds under the circumstances." At about 10:30 A.M. the executioner pulled a black cap down over Williams's face. He stepped onto a chair situated atop a wagon. Once the executioner fixed the rope around Williams' neck, "the wagon drove off, and Williams was launched into eternity."[76]

After the executions of Jane and John Williams, the *Richmond Daily Dispatch* saw an opportunity to exploit public interest in the case. The newspaper advertised the sale of a pamphlet that included the horrid details of the murders, a transcription of the court proceedings, the sermons and prayers offered by several clergymen, and an account of the executions of Jane and John Williams. The *Dispatch* declared that "The fearful character of the whole transaction, the small offence given by the unhappy victims, the daring effrontery with which the culprits met the accusation, conspire to render this one of the most remarkable occurrences that has ever taken place within the limits of Virginia, and the interest which has been felt everywhere, with regard to its details, will, doubtless, secure for this pamphlet a ready and widely-extended circulation."[77] The paper happily reported that it had two thousand copies of the pamphlet ready for sale.

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[76] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), October 23, 1852.

[77] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), October 25, 1852.

The sensational level of violence, the crime's location within the capital of Virginia, and the circumstances of the murders all helped popularize Jane Williams's case. Her dissatisfaction with her life, her husband, master, and mistress contributed to the violence that plagued the Winston household. Joseph Winston had bought John as a way to please Jane and keep her content in her position. Winston's threats of sale, however, of either of John or Jane's daughter, only added further tension to the household. The one eyed slave woman had reached her breaking point, with the aid of her husband—or perhaps not—Jane killed three members of the Winston family and eventually killed a fourth. Joseph Winston died in 1880 of an epileptic fit, brought on by the wounds he sustained in the assault.[78] The case proved a warning to the citizens of Richmond that even the slaves who served their food, carved their meat, tended to their houses, and polished their silverware could be a threat. The household, like any other place where slaves and whites interacted, could erupt in violence.

The cases of Jane Williams, Andrew and Lucinda, Amey, and Milly served as reminders of the dangers of slave women's violence in the household. They not only engaged in confrontations with their mistresses, but other family members and children as well. These altercations could not be easily dismissed as the simple misbehavior of uncivilized slave women, rather they were the results of long simmering household tensions that boiled over. Bondswomen grew tired of the violence of their mistresses and decided to fight back. When they decided to take out their anger against children or the entire family, they represented a danger to the entire household as well as to its centrality

[78] *Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), July 5, 1880.

in southern society. Since the household served as the foundation of white power, male and female, slave women's resistance represented the ways in which slave women fought back against the institution of slavery itself. Their violence emerged from the circumstances of bondswomen's enslavement and their constant and unceasing interaction with their mistresses. And in this way it represented a form of women's slave resistance different from that of slave men.

Conclusion

Violence upheld slavery in Antebellum Virginia. Slaves who resisted, worked poorly or slowly, or in some other way displeased their owners were subject to whippings, beatings, or other forms of physical abuse. The most obvious and oft reported instances of this treatment occurred in the fields and other public venues. Violence within the household largely took place outside the view of others, but this did not mean that it was in some way private. Instead the household represented another workplace for antebellum slaves where they endured their owners' violence. Only within the household, white women held much of the power and bondswomen did much of the labor. While historians initially struggled to understand female on female violence—often buying into Lost Cause mythologizing about the kindly and gentle nature of plantation mistresses—more recent historical analysis has emphasized the importance of this violence and how it helped perpetuate and maintain slavery. Violence within the household occurred far more often than earlier historians recognized and may have even occurred more frequently than

violence elsewhere. Whatever its frequency, white women's violence against their bondswomen played an important role in defining the lives of black women in bondage.

While the vast majority of the violence flowed from mistresses to their slave women, occasionally bondswomen resisted, engaging in violent and sometimes deadly confrontations. These altercations occurred in an environment that stressed the need for white women to discipline and control their slave women in order to run their households properly. White women's claims to domesticity rested on the labor of bondswomen. From the perspective of slave women, there was nothing civil about repeated physical abuse. Their resistance represented an effort to challenge their mistress's authority as well as reject the belief that they were somehow in need of white uplift. The majority of the time slave women directed their anger back towards their mistresses. On rare occasions, they attacked children or the entire family, demonstrating the depth of their rejection of white authority and a southern society that judged them inferior to whites. These confrontations emerged out of a context where slave women labored under the supervision of their mistresses and their conflicts resulted from struggles over bondswomen's labor. Their violence occurred within the context of the household and represented a challenge to the power and authority of white women.

Chapter 4

BONDSWOMEN'S RESISTANCE TO SEXUAL AND LABOR EXPLOITATION

Slave women's status as human chattel, white understandings of race, and nineteenth century understandings of women's gender roles placed bondswomen in a particularly different position. They, like their male counterparts, had to labor on behalf of their owners. But when they returned to the quarters at the end of the day, bondswomen still had to tend to the cooking, cleaning, and other domestic chores. Bondage granted no reprieve from the conventions of the day that mandated that women care for the home. As African Americans, slave women also confronted white assumptions about their race. White owners assumed that they were unintelligent, lazy, and overly emotional. As Deborah Gray White explained of Sojourner Truth, "She, like most black women of the time, plowed, planted, and hoed, did as much work as a man, endured the brutal punishment meted out by slaveholders and their overseers, and also fulfilled her ordained role of motherhood."[1] This triple position as slave, black, and woman placed a unique burden on African American bondswomen.

White owners and overseers used their power to compel slave women into sexual liaisons. They threatened them with punishment, sale, or separation from their families if

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[1] Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* Revised Edition (1985; New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 14.

they did not accede to the wishes of white men. White slave owners also promised bondswomen a better life by engaging in sexual liaisons. By promising better treatment or at least not to harm slave women further, white owners gave them some choice in the matter. Bondswomen had to weigh whether to consent to sexual liaisons or risk rape, sale, or other horrifying consequences. A Tennessee slave woman recalled the difficulties confronted by female slaves. She stressed that "all of the colored women didn't have to have white men, some did it because they wanted to and some were forced. They had a horror of going to Mississippi and they would do anything to keep from it."[2] While bondswomen always had the option of resorting to violence, the potential benefits of agreeing to relationships with slave owners outweighed the risk of confrontation. Yielding to their masters' wishes could mean a better life. Refusal could mean sale to a more brutal master and separation from families and loved ones. These circumstances meant that slave women rarely risked physical confrontations in rejecting sexual exploitation.

As slaves, African American women labored for their owners. If they did not, they faced brutal punishments or sale away from their families. They were the property of others and without much in the way of legal avenues to resist the demands of their masters. Like their male counterparts, slave women employed a variety of resistance strategies against their owners and overseers, including violence. They, too, sought to lessen the exploitation of their physical labor and gain some measure of control of the

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[2] George P. Rawick ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Biography, Unwritten History of Slavery,* Vol. 18 (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), 2. Henceforth Rawick, ed. *Unwritten History of Slavery* Vol. 18, 2.

daily rhythms of their work. In his study of slave resistance recounted in the W.P.A. narratives, Paul D. Escott found that bondswomen accounted for 32.4% of slave resistors.[3] Escott found that 68.4% of confrontations where slave women struck their masters involved field hands. In those 68.4% of cases, the vast majority of slave women, 74.2% were protesting punishment.[4] White responses to bondswomen's violence varied. At times, especially incidents involving slave women's sexuality, they treated slave women less harshly. In other instances, however, masters and overseers showed no sensitivity to slave women's gender.

Female slaves' confrontations over the issue of labor exploitation mirrored those of slave men. Since slave women performed labor identical to that of men, their violence followed similar forms. Violence, after all, undergirded the entire system of southern honor. Slave women's violence suggested that they, too, understood and participated in some limited form of honor culture. Bondswomen resisted efforts to exploit their labor, worked to protect their family members from violence, and even leveled insults and challenged the honor of their owner and overseers. While male slaves represented the majority of resistors, we should not overlook slave women's participation in this honor culture. That slave women held similar principles and reacted similarly to bondsmen suggests that participation in honor culture spread across gender lines. When

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[3] Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth Century Slave Narratives,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), Table 3.4 Sex of Reported Resistors, 88.

[4] Escott, *Slavery Remembered,* Table 3.9 Occupations of Female Slaves Who Struck Master and Stayed & Table 3.10 Purpose of Resistance by Female Slaves Who Struck Master and Stayed, 92.

bondswomen engaged in what southern society considered typically male activities, they adopted masculine behaviors to their environment. And in their responses, white men only paid attention to slave women's gender in certain circumstances. Bondswomen's violence highlights a gender fluidity within southern honor culture.

Resistance to Sexual Exploitation

Slave women's resistance to sexual exploitation occurred least often of all the different forms of physical confrontation. Bondswomen bore a heavy burden in bondage, as Deborah Gray White has argued, "Black in a white society, slave in a free society, woman in a society ruled by men, female slaves had the least formal power and were perhaps the most vulnerable group of antebellum America."[5] In order to understand when bondswomen resisted sexual exploitation it is best to consider their violence on a spectrum of sexual relationships between white men and their slave women. First, when white owners engaged in long term, stable relationships with slave women, violence did not ensue. Second, masters threatened sale, separation, or continued physical punishment to coerce slave women into sexual liaisons. By not immediately attempting to sexually assault slave women, white men largely avoided physical confrontations. The circumstances that prompted bondswomen to resist involved the immediate or continued threat of rape. The violation of their bodies prompted slave women to turn violent. Slave women rarely found allies in white women, who blamed bondswomen for their own

[5] White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 15.

sexual exploitation. With few ways of diverting or dividing the power of their masters, slave women were largely unsuccessful in warding off the sexual advances of whites.

On extremely rare occasions, relationships between slave women and white men could be loving and caring. Masters married and fathered children with their slave women and provided for them. Anna Maria Coffee described how her master had married one of his slaves and their children passed as white. She recalled how "Miss Patsy she wuz er pretty, fair, brown skin cullud 'oman; but Marse Thomas he had tuk her en she wuz zame as his wife, en dey had all dem chillun." Coffee also stressed that her owner, Thomas Hurt, treated his slave children well. She told a W.P.A. interviewer that "De chillun passed as white, en went ter white schools en churches." She also emphasized how "Miss Patsy wuz good ter all de slaves, en she wuz an abolitionist at heart."[6] Coffee claimed that Thomas Hurt and Patsy had fifteen children. When slave women and white men engaged in largely consensual and loving relationships, the risk of confrontation was minimal. In these exceedingly rare cases, slave women had little reason to violently reject the sexual advances of their owners. They had agreed to such relationships, had better lives, and the possibility of freedom for themselves and their children.

Even seemingly loving relationships rarely guaranteed freedom or permanent improvement in the lives of slave women. Solomon Northup described the life of Eliza, who had engaged in a relationship with her master. He built her a house, fathered at least one child with her, and promised to emancipate her and her children. They lived together

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[6] George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Indiana Narratives*, Supplementary Series 1, Vol. 5 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 286. Henceforth cited as Rawick ed., *Indiana Narratives,* Sup. 1, Vol. 5, 286.

for nine years where she was "with every comfort and luxury of life."[7] After he died, however, ownership of Eliza passed to her master's abandoned daughter and son-in-law. The presence of a mixed race child proved even more problematic, as Northup explained, "The sight of Eliza seemed to be odious to Mrs. Brooks; neither could she bear to look upon the child, half-sister, and beautiful as she was!"[8] Mr. Brooks took Eliza to Washington D.C. ostensibly to emancipate her. Instead Brooks sold her to a slave trader, who carried her and her child south. Northup described Eliza's fate, "Eliza is now dead. Far up the Red River, where it pours its waters sluggishly through the unhealthy low lands of Louisiana, she rests in the grave at last— the only resting place of the poor slave!"[9] Eliza's relationship with her master caused jealously within his family who sought to rid themselves of her and her half-white child as soon as possible.

Slave owners used the threat of punishment or sale to compel bondswomen into sexual liaisons. Nehemiah Caulkins recalled the inability of a slave woman to reject her master's advances forever. After her master had "proposed a criminal intercourse with her," the bondswoman refused. The master then instructed his overseer to whip her. After two vicious whippings, the slave "seeing that her case was hopeless, her back smarting with the scourging she had received, and dreading a repetition, gave herself up to be the

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[7] Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation near the Red River, in Louisiana. Ed. David Wilson* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1853), 52.

[8] Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 52-3.

[9] Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 53.

victim of his brutal lusts."[10] Malinda Bibb faced a similar situation after being sold to Madison Garrison, a slave trader. Garrison separated Bibb from her husband, Henry, and took her "to a private house where he kept female slaves for the basest purposes." Garrison, Henry later wrote, "made a most disgraceful assault on her virtue, which she promptly repelled; and for which Garrison punished her with the lash, threatening her that if she did not submit that he would sell her child." [11] After Malinda refused a second time, Garrison whipped her repeatedly. Bibb does not explicitly state whether his wife acceded to the slave trader's demands, but Garrison never sold away Malinda's child.

These cases demonstrated the power that slave owners could bring to bear against reluctant bondswomen. Slave owners had the right to whip, beat, and threaten to sell their bondswomen to cajole them into submission. White men understood slave women as being naturally promiscuous. This view, which historians have termed the Jezebel archetype, began to form when Europeans made first contact with Africa in the 15th century.[12] Europeans assumed that African women wore little clothing because of their sexual licentiousness. European travel narratives, art, and other depictions of Africans

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[10] Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), 15.

[11] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: The Author, 1849), 98.

[12] For a discussion of the Jezebel stereotype see White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 27-46; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 291-292.

reified these racial assumptions.[13] In America, white concerns over the growth of the slave population led white owners to take an interest in the reproductive lives of slave women. Owners valued slave women who gave birth to high numbers of children and carefully monitored their fecundity. They discussed, in journal articles and in private conversation, the best ways to maximize bondswomen's reproductive capacities. Additionally, white men routinely exposed slave women's bodies in public—something considered shameful for white women. Owners and overseers frequently stripped slave women to their waists in order to whip them. During sale, slave traders and buyers closely inspected bondswomen's bodies in order to gauge their value and reproductive potential. These circumstances combined to condemn slave women as sexually licentious.

While masters pledged to improve their bondswomen's lives, those promises rarely lasted long. William Wells Brown recalled an incident between his master, Mr. Walker, and Cynthia, one of the slaves. On a boat trip to New Orleans, Brown overheard Walker propose to Cynthia that she enter into a relationship with him and he would "establish her as his housekeeper at his farm." If she refused, he would sell her "as a field hand on the worst plantation on the river. Neither threats nor bribes prevailed, however, and he retired, disappointed of his prey."[14] The next morning, however, Cynthia changed

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[13] For a discussion of the evolution of European views on slave women's sexuality see, Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

[14] William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (London: C. Gilpin, 1849), 47.

her mind and accepted her master's offer. Walker upheld his end of the bargain for a time, living with Cynthia and fathering two children by her. Once Walker found a white wife, he "sold poor Cynthia and her four children (she having had two more since I came away) into hopeless bondage!"[15] While Cynthia thought she had secured a better future by agreeing to a relationship with her owner, Walker only upheld his promise for a brief time. Even having children with her master could not protect her from sale.

The strain of sexual exploitation affected the husbands of sexually exploited slaves as well. Henry Bibb described how when he asked permission to marry his wife Malinda from her master, "his answer was in the affirmative with but one condition, which I consider to be too vulgar to be written in this book."[16] After Bibb escaped from slavery, he learned, "that my wife was living in a state of adultery with her master, and had been for the last three years."[17] After confirming the story of his wife's fate with family members, Bibb became resigned and even cold to her fate. He wrote that "As she was then living with another man, I could no longer regard her as my wife. After all the sacrifices, sufferings, and risks which I had run, striving to rescue her from the grasp of slavery; every prospect and hope was cut off. She has ever since been regarded as theoretically and practically dead to me as a wife, for she was living in a state of adultery, according to the law of God and man."[18] In order to marry Malinda, Bibb had endured

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[15] Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown*, 48.

[16] Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 40.

[17] Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 188.

[18] Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 189.

insults from her master. When he finally escaped slavery and discovered that his wife had engaged in sexual relationship with her master, Bibb no longer considered Malinda his wife.

Slave women who resisted punishment or sexual assault could not necessarily prevent their own sexual exploitation. Elizabeth Keckley's mistress convinced Mr. Bingham, a local school master, to discipline her. The mistress wanted Bingham to beat the "stubborn pride" out of the slave woman. But the first time he attempted to punish her, Keckley "resisted with all my strength."[19] Despite her efforts, Bingham and later her master, Mr. Burrell, overpowered her and beat her severely. Keckley later described, somewhat implausibly, that her willingness to resist and beaten body prompted her mistress to fall upon her knees and beg her husband to stop. Physical violence, however, did not protect her permanently, as Keckley eventually gave birth to a mixed race child. She recalled that "I was regarded as fair-looking for one of my race, and for four years a white man---I spare the world his name—had base designs on me. I do not care to dwell upon this subject for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years and I—I became a mother."[20] While slave women may have used violence to ward off sexual exploitation, they could not necessarily prevent it forever. The incident revealed that Keckley's owners made no effort to protect her from sexual

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[19] Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes Or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868: repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 34.

[20] Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 38-39.

exploitation. And without the intercession of an owner or other powerful white, she had little chance of successfully resisting the sexual demands of a white man.

Female slaves who sought to avoid sexual exploitation chose to engage in relationships with other white men. In order to escape a sexual relationship with her owner, Dr. Flint, Harriet Jacobs entered into one with another white man, Mr. Sands. Flint had made his intentions towards Jacobs clear, building her a cabin, where she could live in peace and be available for discrete sexual liaisons whenever Flint wanted. By isolating Jacobs, Flint could keep her away from her family and anyone else who might interfere in their relationship. Harriet Jacobs knew what fate awaited her as she had witnessed Flint exploit and discard other slave women. She described how, "I knew that as soon as a new fancy took him, his victims were sold far off to get rid of them; especially if they had children. I had seen several women sold, with his babies at the breast. He never allowed his offspring by slaves to remain long in sight of himself and his wife."[21] Jacobs' relationship with Sands and the resulting pregnancy allowed her to shield herself from rape at the hands of her master. The pregnancy, however, meant that Jacobs' child became Flint's property. While she avoided rape at the hands of her master, Jacobs could never fully free herself from his grasp until her escape from bondage.

Jacobs' actions in protecting herself from sexual exploitation generated scorn from her owner, family, and—she worried—potentially readers of her narrative. Jacobs's revelation that she was pregnant with Sands' child dumfounded Flint. When Jacobs

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[21] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* eds. Nellie Y. McKay and Frances Smith Foster (1861: repr. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 47.

finally met with Flint again, she described his reaction as "He talked of the disgrace I had brought on myself; how I had sinned against my master, and mortified my old grandmother. He intimated that if I had accepted his proposals, he, as a physician, could have saved me from exposure. He even condescended to pity me."[22] Flint argued that if Jacobs had only consented to his sexual exploitation of her, she could have avoided public shame. Jacobs's grandmother responded with similar scorn, "'O Linda! has it come to this? I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother.' She tore from my fingers my mother's wedding ring and her silver thimble. 'Go away!' she exclaimed, 'and never come to my house, again.' Her reproaches fell so hot and heavy, that they left me no chance to answer."[23] Jacobs' defended her actions to the readers of her narrative. She appealed for sympathy and understanding:

> Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others.[24]

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[22] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 50.

[23] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 48.

[24] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 47-48.

Jacobs' managed to protect herself from rape at the hands of her owner, but paid a heavy price.

Jermain W. Loguen's mother, Cherry, used her sexual relationship with her owner to protect herself from exploitation by other white men. Loguen wrote in his autobiography that Cherry had consented to a relationship with her master, David Logue, but resisted the efforts of anyone else to sexually exploit her. He recalled that "outside the family of Logues, woe to the hand laid upon her person with lascivious intent."[25] One day while at work at Logue's distillery, she resisted the efforts of a local planter to rape her. Cherry grabbed a large stick used to stir the malt and struck the planter. The planter "rushed upon her with the fury of a madman, and she then plied a blow upon his temple, which laid him, as was supposed, dead at her feet."[26] Despite nearly killing a white man, Cherry managed to avoid punishment. As J.W. Loguen explained, "In the meantime Cherry was shielded from harm, partly by the shame of her violator--partly by her masters' sense of justice--more because they had a beastly affection for her as a family chattel--more still because they prized her as property--but most of all because she was the admitted mistress of David Logue."[27] Cherry's role as her master's mistress allowed her to avoid rape at the hands of another white man.

Around midnight on the evening of August 22, 1830, Peggy and Patrick, slaves belonging to John Francis, burst into their master's house and beat him to death. They set

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[25] Rev. J. W. Loguen, *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freeman. A Narrative of Real Life* (Syracuse: J.G.K. Truair & Company, 1859), 20.

[26] Loguen, *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freeman,* 21.

[27] Loguen, *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freeman,* 22.

fire to the house in order to cover up their crime. Peggy had decided to kill her master because he desired to sleep with her. After Peggy had refused her owner's offers, Francis "generally kept her confined by keeping her chained to a block and locking her up in his meal house." Francis warned Peggy that if she continued to refuse his requests "he would beat her almost to death, that he would barely leave life in her, and would then send her to New Orleans." In a story familiar in the Antebellum South, Francis planned to keep Peggy in chains until she consented to sexual exploitation. The case then took a bizarre and incestuous turn. Jesse claimed that "Peggy said she would not yeald [sic] to his requests because the deceased was her father, and she could not do a thing of that sort with her father." Jesse, one of Francis's slaves, testified that Francis told Peggy that "if she did not consent he would make him witness and Patrick hold her to enable him to effect his object."[28] John Francis had no qualms about having sex with his own daughter or compelling his male slaves to help him rape her.[29]

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[28] *Commonwealth vs. Peggy, Patrick, Franky, and Caroline*, John Floyd Executive Papers, 1830-1834. Accession 42665. Box 2, Folder 7. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth cited as *Commonwealth vs. Peggy,* (LVA).

[29] For more on the rape of African American slave women see: Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," in Darlene Clark Hine ed., *Hinesight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Brooklyn: Carson Publishing Company, 1994); Nell Irvin Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Towards a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting" in Nell Irvin Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 15-39; Edward E. Baptist, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States," *American Historical Review* CVI (December 2001), 1619-1650.

The claims regarding Francis's incestuous desires seem extraordinary and maybe even a desperate bid to save the lives of his fellow bondsmen. Yet members of the New Kent County community, white and black, confirmed their veracity. Hannah, another of Francis's slaves and Peggy's half sister, recalled that "my mother always said that the deceased was Peggy's father and Peggy considered him her father." Abner Ellyson, a white man and neighborhood resident, claimed that "it was currently reported in the neighborhood that the deceased was the father of Peggy and that he wished to have illicit intercourse with her, to which she objected and that that was the cause of their disagreement."[30] Knowledge of Francis's desires extended to the legal authorities investigating the case. Two justices of the peace who sat on the court of oyer and terminer that convicted Peggy, John W. Royster and William E. Clopton, lived within a mile of Francis' house.[31] The only white witness not to testify to Francis's sexual proclivities was Richard Burnett, Francis's neighbor and likely relative.[32] It is difficult to

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[30] *Commonwealth vs. Peggy,* (LVA).

[31]Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 284, en49.

[32] In 1819, Burnett had married a woman named Rebecca Francis see Jordan R., Dodd, et al. *Early American Marriages: Virginia to 1850* (Bountiful, UT, Precision Indexing Publishers). Accessed on Ancestry.com, August 25, 2014. He also inherited Francis's estate and received compensation for the slaves, see *Commonwealth vs. Peggy, Patrick, Franky, and Caroline,* Virginia Auditor of Public Accounts, Records of Condemned Blacks Executed or Transported, 1823-1832. Accession APA 756. Misc. Reel 2252. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth cited as *Commonwealth vs. Peggy* (State Auditor's Office). See also Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 284, en45.

imagine that he was unaware of Francis's sexual appetites. The whole neighborhood, white and black, seemed to know about Francis's behaviors towards his slave daughter.

At first glance, John Francis appeared to be very much like the other white residents of New Kent County. While not exceedingly wealthy, he was a land owner and slaveholder. A closer examination of Francis's household reveals the horror that lay underneath the veneer of a country farmer. In 1830, Francis, then in his early fifties, lived without white companionship. His ten significantly younger slaves shared his household. They included a boy and girl under the age of ten, two boys and four girls between ten and twenty three, and one man and one woman between twenty four and thirty five.[33] Even more disturbingly, in 1820, Francis had owned six slaves, all women, four of whom were under fourteen years old.[34] By 1830, Francis had fathered at least one slave child. Peggy, however, was probably not the only one. The widespread knowledge of Francis's behaviors in the neighborhood made it likely that he had sexually abused his female slaves for years.

Francis's behaviors spurred the whites of New Kent County, including John L. Poindexter, one of the justices of the peace who presided over Peggy's trial to appeal her death sentence to Virginia Governor John Floyd. The petitioners claimed that "there are circumstances attending the case of the poor ignorant slaves although not sufficient to justify the act for which they were condemned yet in the opinion of the undersigners

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[33] Fifth Census of the United States, 1830, Virginia, New Kent County; Series: M19; Roll: 192; Page: 24. Accessed on Ancestry.com, August 25, 2014.

[34] Fourth Census of the United States, 1820, Virginia, New Kent County; NARA Roll: M33_133; Page: 202. Accessed on Ancestry.com, August 25, 2014.

should mitigate the punishment."[35] Throughout Virginia and other states in the Antebellum South, petitioning on behalf of convicted slaves was a common practice. As historians such as Diane Miller Sommerville and Ariela Gross have demonstrated, whites interjected community judgments and customs into the legal arena through petitioning. These actions, Sommerville has argued, helped mitigate the harshness of southern rape laws.[36] The petitioners from New Kent County similarly sought to insert the judgment of the community into the case. The petition headed by John L. Poindexter did not seek to excuse Peggy from punishment for her crime. Rather it sought to soften it. The petitioners acknowledged the horror of murdering a white man and the necessity of punishing slave criminals. They believed, however, that the horrifying circumstances of John Francis's household warranted sparing Peggy's life.

John Francis wanted to sleep with his slave daughter. As her owner, he had the right to do with her as he pleased. Yet he seemingly never raped her and instead sought her consent to a sexual liaison. Why? The court record leaves no clear answers, but the evidence offers some likely possibilities. The fear of admonishment from the New Kent County community may have deterred Francis from forcing himself upon his daughter. Harriet Jacobs speculated that concern about reputation and community punishment dissuaded her owner, Dr. Flint, from raping her. She explained that, "Bad as are the laws and customs in a slaveholding community, the doctor, as a professional man, deemed it

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[35] *Commonwealth vs. Peggy,* (LVA).

[36] Diane Miller Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 7. See also Ariela J. Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

prudent to keep up some outward show of decency."[37] Bertram Wyatt-Brown echoed Jacobs' sentiments when he wrote that, "Unrestrained promiscuity by men was by no means uniformly condoned, but discretion was the mark of a gentleman."[38] John Francis had slept with his slave women and fathered slave children, but such behaviors were commonplace in the South. If he took his sexual activities another step farther and raped Peggy, his own daughter, Francis may have worried about garnering public scorn for his actions.

Celia, a Missouri slave, murdered her master, Robert Newsom, after five years of sexual exploitation. Newsom, the owner of five male slaves, had purchased Celia in 1850. According to historian Melton A. McLaurin, Newsom had bought her for sexual companionship following the death of his wife in 1849.[39] Newsom's sexual exploitation of Celia began immediately. At Celia's murder trial in 1855, Jefferson Jones, one of Newsom's neighbors, testified that he had heard Newsom had "forced her on the way home from Audrain County."[40] With that first rape, Newsom established a pattern of behavior that continued over the next five years. None of Newsom's children seemingly objected to their father's behavior. Newsom had even constructed a one story brick cabin, located fifty yards behind his own house for her. Newsom would leave the comfort of his

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[37] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 27.

[38] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 297.

[39] Melton A. McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 18.

[40] *Testimony of Jefferson Jones, State vs. Celia,* Testimony available at http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/celia/jonestranscript.html

home and white family for the privacy of Celia's cabin. There he likely fathered both of Celia's children.

By 1855, Celia's sexual situation had grown even more complicated. She had engaged in relationship with George, a fellow slave, while Newsom continued to rape her. Celia had become pregnant and did not know whether George or Robert Newsom had fathered the child. Confronted with the reality of Celia's multiple sexual partners, George demanded that Celia end her relationship with Newsom. If she did not, he vowed to leave her. He could no longer tolerate being involved in a shared sexual relationship with Celia. George, either unwilling or unable to confront Newsom himself, put Celia in an untenable position. She had to choose between the demands of her black lover and the rampant sexual abuse of her owner. Rather than offer her support or confront Newsom himself, George had placed the onus for ending the relationship entirely on her shoulders. The relationship between owner and slave woman would not come to an end as easily as George or Celia had hoped.

In June 1855, Celia acceded to George's wishes and attempted to break off her relationship with Newsom. She threatened Newsom with physical violence if he ever tried to sexually exploit her again. On the evening of June 23, 1855, Newsom, undeterred by Celia's warnings, went to her cabin. After entering the cabin, the exact nature of events is unclear.[41] According to testimony at Celia's trial, the two exchanged words and Newsom "was talking to her when she struck him. He did not raise his hand when she went to strike the first blow, but sunk down on a stool towards the floor. Threw his hands

[41] See McLaurin, *Celia,* 29-31.

up when he sunk down. She struck him with left hand then right hand."[42] Celia struck Newsom several times fearing that she had not killed him with her first blow. Celia built up a roaring fire and placed Newsom's body in it. She hoped to destroy the body and any evidence of her involvement in the murder. The sexual abuse of Newsom and George's demands highlighted the precarious position of slave women and placed Celia in an untenable position.

In their efforts to avoid sexual exploitation, slave women could not rely on help from their mistresses or other white women. In some cases, white women actually punished slaves for resisting the sexual demands of whites. Fannie Moore remembered how her owner's mother terrorized the slaves on their South Carolina plantation. The master's mother also aided Hill, the overseer, in sexually exploiting the female slaves. Moore described Hill as, "mean as de devil." The slaves lived in fear of Hill and his sexual desires. Moore explained that "on de Moore plantation Aunt Cheney, everybody call her Aunt Cheney, have two chillun by de overseeah." She further described how her owner's mother cajoled Aunt Cheney into a relationship with Hill in the first place. She remembered how "Ole Granny call Aunt Cheney to de kitchen and make her take her clothes off den she beat her til she jest black an' blue."[43] Rather than endure further beatings, Aunt Cheney submitted to Hill's desires. The aid of the owner's mother made

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[42] *Testimony of Jefferson Jones, State vs. Celia,* found at: http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/celia/jonestranscript.html.

[43] Rawick, ed., *North Carolina Narratives,* Vol. 15, *Part 2*, 132.

Aunt Cheney's efforts to resist nearly impossible. Notions of gender solidarity did not lead white women to aid or protect slave women from sexual exploitation.

White wives even aided in the sexual abuse of slave women by their husbands. Jacob Mason, an ex-slave from North Carolina, highlighted the commonality of sexual exploitations by masters. He stressed that "At dat time it wus a hard job to find a marster dat didn't have women 'mong his slaves. Dat wus a ginerel thing 'mong de slave owners." Mason explained that his master "had no chilluns by white women. He had his sweethearts 'mong his slave women."[44] He also told a story of a plantation mistress who refused to help protect a slave woman from sexual desires of her own husband. He explained that "One of de slave girls on a plantation near us went to her missus an tole her 'bout her marster forcing her to let him have sumthin to do wid her an her missus tole her, 'Well go on you belong to him."[45] Rather than aid the slave woman, the mistress helped doom her to further sexual exploitation.

White mistresses also lashed out at slave women who were the targets of their husbands' sexual desire. Solomon Northup largely praised the character of his mistress, Mrs. Epps. He noted that she was "beautiful, accomplished, and usually good-humored." Northup also observed that Mrs. Epps was also "possessed of the devil, jealousy."[46] She envied the attention that Edwin Epps gave to Patsey, one his hardest working and prettiest slaves. Mistress Epps repeatedly ordered Northup to whip Patsey while Mr. Epps

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[44] Rawick, ed., *North Carolina Narratives*, Vol. 15, *Part 2*, 97.

[45] Rawick, ed., *North Carolina Narratives*, Vol. 15, *Part 2*, 97-98.

[46] Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 198.

was away from the farm. Northup recalled that "I would refuse, saying that I feared my master's displeasure, and several times ventured to remonstrate with her against the treatment Patsey received." Northup tried to protect Patsey from Mistress Epps and shift her anger towards her husband. He wrote that "I endeavored to impress her with the truth that the latter was not responsible for the acts of which she complained, but that she being a slave, and subject entirely to her master's will, he alone was answerable."[47] Northup's pleading did little to assuage Mrs. Epps's jealously. When Edwin Epps beat Patsey for her alleged affair with Mr. Shaw, Northup remembered that "Mistress Epps stood on the piazza among her children, gazing on the scene with an air of heartless satisfaction."[48] Slave women found few allies with the power to stop their sexual exploitation.

Slave women were more likely to succeed in their confrontations and avoid sexual exploitation when they involved a third party powerful enough to protect them. Gus Feaster described how Wash Evans, an overseer on his master's plantation, "was a wicked man. He take 'vantage of all de slaves when he git half chance." Evans proved especially dangerous to the female slaves on the plantation, "Couse he 'vantage over all de darkies and fer dat reason he could sway everything his way, most all de time." One day the plantation mistress ordered Feaster's mother and another female slave to pick blackberries. Evans attempted to convince the women to surrender to his desires. The bondswomen pretended to submit, convincing the overseer to remove his clothes. Once the overseer had stripped, the bondswomen beat him up and left him the bushes. When

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[47] Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 254.

[48] Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 256.

the mistress found Evans beaten and lying in the blueberry bushes, she fired him.[49] By humiliating the overseer in front of his employer, Feaster's mother and the other woman managed to protect themselves and the other women on the plantation from sexual exploitation.

Slave women expressed bitterness at the response of white women to their plight. Harriett Jacobs resented Mrs. Flint, the wife of her owner, who continually sought to rape and sexually exploit her. Jacobs wrote that "Mrs. Flint, like many southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash."[50] Jacobs claimed that Mrs. Flint knew of her husband's lust for his slaves, but did little to stop him or help the slaves avoid him, Jacobs wrote that "Mrs. Flint possessed the key to her husband's character before I was born. She might have used this knowledge to counsel and to screen the young and the innocent among her slaves; but for them she had no sympathy. They were the objects of her constant suspicion and malevolence."[51] Jacobs, however, pitied her mistress, "Yet I, whom she detested so bitterly, had far more pity for her than he had, whose duty it was to make her life happy. I never wronged her, or wished to wrong her; and one word of kindness from her would have brought me to her feet."[52] Mrs. Flint

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[49] Rawick, ed., *South Carolina Narratives*, Vol. 2, *Part 2*, 65-66.

[50] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 14.

[51] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 28.

[52] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 29.

directed her anger over her husband's behavior at Harriet Jacobs, while the slave woman sought aid in avoiding sexual exploitation.

White slave owners reacted angrily when their bondswomen engaged in sexual liaisons with other white men. Eleazar Powell described the reaction of Mr. M'Coy to his slave, Dinah, engaging in a liaison with an overseer named James Farr. M'Coy caught Dinah at Farr's house and "caught Dinah as she ran out, she was partly dressed in her mistress's clothes; M'Coy whipped her unmercifully, and she afterwards made her escape." M'Coy told Powell that he feared that Dinah had hanged herself because of the punishment, "He then gave me the particulars of the flogging. He stated that near Farr's he had made her strip and lie down, and had flogged her until he was tired; that before he reached home he had a second time made her strip, and again flogged her until he was tired; that when he reached home he had tied her to a peach-tree, and after getting a drink had flogged her until he was thirsty again; and while he went to get a drink the woman made her escape."[53] Dr. Flint cursed out Harriet Jacobs for her relationship with Mr. Sands. He chided her, "'You obstinate girl! I could grind your bones to powder! You have thrown yourself away on some worthless rascal. You are weak-minded, and have been easily persuaded by those who don't care a straw for you… I might have punished you in many ways. I might have had you whipped till you fell dead under the lash. But I wanted you to live; I would have bettered your condition. Others cannot do it. You are

[53] Weld, *American Slavery as It Is,* 99-100.

my slave.'"[54] White owners wanted their slave women for themselves and became enraged when their bondswomen engaged in relationships with other white men.

White owners could become violent over the suspicion of slave women engaging in affairs with other white men. Patsey, a slave of Edwin Epps, earned special scorn and suspicion when Epps found her absent from the farm. Shortly afterwards, Patsey returned from the house of a neighbor named Shaw. After rejecting Patsey's explanation for why she had been gone, Epps ordered Northup to tie her to the ground and whip her. With Mistress Epps "gazing on the scene with an air of heartless satisfaction," Northup began whipping Patsey. Epps meanwhile grew mad with passion, stamping the ground and screaming. After Northup refused to whip her any longer, Epps took over until "She was terribly lacerated—I may say, without exaggeration, literally flayed." Epps eventually gave up his punishment, but not until Patsey nearly died. The experience transformed Patsey's attitude. Northup noted after the whipping Patsey "no longer moved with that buoyant and elastic step—there was not that mirthful sparkle in her eyes that formerly distinguished her."[55] The suspicion of carrying on a sexual affair with a white man that was not her master brought a horrible vengeance down on Patsey.

Slave women's resistance to sexual exploitation was rarely successful and even if they managed to avoid rape, their victories were short lived. Bondswomen who voluntarily engaged in sexual relationships or yielded to their master's desires did not result in confrontations. By submitting, however, slave women did not necessarily better

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[54] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 50.

[55] Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 258-9.

their lives. They could still endure the jealousies and hatred of white women who did not hesitate in taking out their hatred against bondswomen. Slave women who resisted the efforts of white men to sexually assault them only succeeded when they could rely on support from other whites. These actions, however, came at a high cost. Harriet Jacobs avoided sexual exploitation by engaging in a relationship with a white man other than her master. Slave women killed their masters on rare occasions, but only in the most extreme circumstances such as avoiding incest or as part of a love triangle. The difficulties confronted by slave women in dealing with sexual exploitation reveal their precarious position in southern society. This burden made their resistance rare and rarely successful.

Resistance to Labor Exploitation

Much of the historical discussion regarding southern honor has excluded slave women. Scholars largely discussed white women within understandings of their virtuous character, chastity, and ability to maintain a proper household. Bertram Wyatt-Brown has suggested that the importance of these virtues served an important role in the Antebellum South. As he explained, "Such concepts ensured at least outward submission to male will."[56] Yet Wyatt-Brown did not closely examine how white southern women upheld their part of the honor culture. Thavolia Glymph's insights into southern households reveals how white women's violence towards their bondswomen upheld white women's honor. For plantation mistresses, they had to live up to these southern white ideas of domesticity, but relied on their slave women to perform the actual labor of maintaining

[56] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 234.

the household. When slave women failed to uphold their mistresses' desires, they represented not only a threat to the institution of the household, but the honor of the mistress as well. So when bondswomen dishonored their superiors, their mistresses retaliated and thus participated in the culture of honor and violence that permeated southern society.

Scholarship on honor has yet to extensively explore the issue of honor among slave women. In terms of their interactions with white men in the field of labor and labor exploitation, bondswomen participated in the same culture of violence as slave men. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has pointed out, "As field workers, slave women resisted in the same ways as men."[57] When working out in the fields or under the supervision of whites, slave women's labor was no different than that of their male counterparts. If their resistance was the same as men, it stands to reason that slave women, under these circumstances, also participated in a culture of honor and violence. Bondswomen orchestrated the murders of cruel owners and tried to protect their family members from violence. White men even understood bondswomen's violence through the prism of honor. Perhaps the biggest difference between slave men and slave women's violence was how whites reacted to it. Whites sometimes reacted differently to the violence of female slaves compared to males. In other circumstances, they paid little heed to gender.

Slave women's violence revealed that they participated in the same culture of honor as male slaves. Whites reacted violently to what they considered insolent behavior by female slaves. On June 28, 1859, Rose, a slave belonging to Joseph Epperson, killed

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[57] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household,* 316.

her overseer, John Deanor in a confrontation over punishment. That afternoon, Rose had gone to fetch a bucket of water for her fellow slaves, prompting chastisement from the overseer. He yelled at her and ordered her to go back to work. Deanor confronted Rose saying, "I don't believe you look like work or feel like it either." He called her lazy and insisted that she worked much less than the rest of the slaves on the farm. Rose answered back, "no sir, I have eaten my dinner and feel as much like work as any of the rest of them."[58] Rose's answering back sparked Deanor into a violent rage.

Deanor confronted Rose and demanded to know "what sort of jaw is that you give me." Rose denied that she had intended to disrespect her overseer in any way. Her arguments did little to soothe his anger. He chided her, "you stinking bitch you I have a great mind to knock your brains out with this hoe." After Rose tried to avoid punishment, Deanor again called her a "stinking bitch" and struck her on the head and shoulder. Rose raised her hoe and struck him on the head, causing a large wound. After being taken back to his employer's house, Deanor told Epperson of the confrontation and told his employer that "he wanted satisfaction." Epperson allowed Deanor to punish Rose for her insolence. The process of whipping Rose, however, coupled with his untreated head wound proved fatal. By the end of the punishment, Deanor had given Rose "a great many licks and exerted himself very much while whipping her." Billy, one of Epperson's slaves, recalled that Deanor "meant to have satisfaction if it cost him his life."[59] Despite Epperson's

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[58] *Commonwealth vs. Rose,* John Letcher Executive Papers, 1859-1863. Accession 36787. Box 19, Folder 5, Misc. Reel 4216. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth, *Commonwealth vs. Rose,* (LVA).

[59] *Commonwealth vs. Rose,* (LVA).

protestations that Deanor allow a doctor to examine his head wound, the overseer refused. As a result of his exertion and his fractured skull, Deanor died at around midnight that evening.

The use of terms like "satisfaction" "insolence" and "stinking bitch" suggest that Deanor understood his reaction with Rose through a prism of southern honor. As discussed in Chapter 2, these terms carried highly charged meanings within southern society. By being insolent, Rose challenged the honor of her overseer by insulting him and placing herself on his level. He had to respond with violence in order to restore the bondswoman to her proper place at the bottom of the social ladder. If left uncorrected, Rose's behavior threatened to undermine Deanor's authority over the slaves as well as his claims to honor. Joseph Epperson also made concessions to Deanor's honor by accommodating to his desire to punish Rose. Epperson was surprised by the violence between the slave woman and the overseer. He testified that "I raised Rose from a small girl, she has always been obedient, she has always behaved herself to her mistress and to me."[60] Epperson further claimed there was no lingering animosity between Deanor and Rose. Viewing Deanor's actions through the lens of honor culture offers the best explanation for his violent response and desire to punish Rose.

The confrontation between Jenny Clarkson and her master, Robert Allen, demonstrated how slave women were aware of and participated in this primarily male honor culture. One evening in 1824, Allen had gone out into the fields to supervise his

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[60] *Commonwealth vs. Rose,* (LVA).

slaves. He returned home, "in perfect good humor, not in any manner angry." Sometime later that night, Clarkson attacked Allen by striking him over the head. He later died of his wounds. Under interrogation, Jenny admitted that "she killed her master with an axe." Jenny had a history of making threats against her master. Clarkson had once even threatened Allen that "if the said prisoner was a man she would murder her master."[61] Her threats and subsequent violence suggest that Clarkson, and other slave women, participated in this culture of violence and honor. She claimed that a man would have fought back against such cruel treatment. When Jenny Clarkson struck back against her master, she suggested that women, too, could participate in this honor culture.

Slave women, like bondsmen, fought to protect their family members. In 1854, Jane, a slave of Mary Strange, attempted to kill Chiles Brand, a neighborhood white man. On February 9, 1854, Brand came to Strange's house to inquire about hiring Henry, one of her slaves. Jane answered the door and led him inside to speak to her mistress. Strange was initially reluctant to hire Henry out as "she did not wish to hire him to stay in town, said he was a very impudent fellow." Brand assured Strange that he wanted Henry to work on his farm. With her permission, he went to the kitchen to find Henry. Brand described how Henry "looked very mad- witness told him he had hired him to work on the farm- thinks he replied that it was a damn high move." Brand went and told Strange of Henry's behavior. She assured him that Henry would go with him. Brand went and found Henry and told him to prepare to leave, but Henry refused to go along. He replied

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[61] *Commonwealth vs. Jenny Clarkson,* James Pleasants Executive Papers, 1822-1825. Accession 42046. Box 5, Folder 8. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

to Brand that "he be damned if he would, that he would be killed first, and said he would go to Richmond."[62] The two men began to grapple with each other.

As Henry and Brand struggled, Jane attempted to defend her brother. She grabbed a stick and struck Brand on the shoulder. When the stick failed to deter him, Jane grabbed an axe. She struck him on the shoulder and face and just barely missed smashing in Brand's skull. Faced with an enraged slave woman, Brand turned his attention to Jane, threatening to kill her and demanding that she cease her attack. Jane threatened him, "God damn you I'll kill you." Henry fled into the yard and Brand pursued him, hoping to escape from Jane and her ax. Jane struck Brand several times, but failed to land a fatal blow. Henry managed to slip away long enough to avoid being taken to Brand's farm. Perhaps the most surprising part of the slaves' resistance was that Brand admitted that he "never saw either servant before, knew nothing about them." The desire to protect her brother showed that Jane was willing to "wade in blood before she would see her brother choked in that way."[63] Slave women, like slave men, proved willing to fight to protect their families.

These slave families perpetually lived on a precipice. Slave women had to navigate familial life under the domination of whites and forge and maintain kinship ties in whatever way possible. As Elizabeth Fox Genovese has argued, "Slave women, like slave men, lived in a world in which no solid or independently guaranteed institutions

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[62] *Commonwealth vs. Jane,* Joseph Johnson Executive Papers, 1852-1855. Accession 44076. Box 8, Folder 1. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Jane,* (LVA).

[63] *Commonwealth vs. Jane,* (LVA).

mediated between their basic relations of gender and the masters power."[64] The power of white masters had the potential to divide and destroy African-American slave families at any time. Jane had a close relationship with her brother, evidenced by her violent desire not to be separated from him. When confronted by the power of a new owner who sought to hire him out and split his family apart, Henry resisted, demonstrating his familial bond with Jane. Family represented an important bulwark against the horrors of slavery. The circumstances of the case suggest that Jane and Henry were the only members of their family still living together. The prospect of separation proved too much for either Henry or Jane to bear.

Ex-slave Josie Jordan revealed how slave women could earn reputations for fighting their masters. Jordan explained that her mother, Salina, was sold from her first owner "'cause she was a fighting, mule-headed woman." Jordan explained that it wasn't her mother's fault because "The master… was one of them white mens who was always whipping and beating his slaves and mammy couldn't stand it no more." So one day when her master came out to punish her, Salina attacked and nearly killed him. Rather than deal with the violent slave woman any longer, her master sold Salina to a new owner, Mark Lowery. On her second day of working, Lowery tested Salina's willingness to resist by pretending he was going to punish her. In response, as Jordan explained, "mammy knocked him plumb through the open cellar door." Lowery picked himself up off the ground laughing. He admitted that he was "only fooling to see if she would

[64] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household,* 299.

fight."[65] Lowery wanted to see how far he could push Salina before she resorted to violence.

James Burleson proudly remembered a slave woman who battled the overseer and tore off his clothes. Aunt Angeline, the slave, fought back against Jake Burleson, the overseer and master's son. James Burleson stressed that Angeline had a penchant for fighting and "would fight anybody dat tried to whoop her." Jake, the overseer, sought to punish her on numerous occasions. But, "Many was de time dat Massa Jake tried to whoop her fo' somethin', and he wound up by standin' almost naked in de row."[66] By beating the overseer, Angeline demonstrated her power over him. James Burleson took pride in how Aunt Angeline inverted the power dynamics of the master-slave relationship. He also revealed the accordant shame that must have accompanied Jake Burleson for repeatedly trying and failing to subdue a slave woman. Slave men recognized that losing a fight to a slave woman, proved shameful for white overseers.

Similar to slave men, bondswomen orchestrated the murder of cruel masters. On January 31, 1860, James Sherwood, overseer for William Croxton, a slave owner in Essex County, Virginia noticed that his employer was missing. He had last seen Croxton the previous morning as the two men went into the fields to work. Sherwood organized a search, but found only his employer's horse and empty saddle. Eliza and Ann, two of Croxton's slaves, explained that their master had left the farm the day before, but had not returned. Unsatisfied by the slaves' answers, Sherwood gathered the other men of the

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[65] Rawick, ed., *Oklahoma Narratives,* Vol. 7, 160-161.

[66] Rawick, ed., *Texas Narratives,* Sup. 2, Vol. 3, *Part 2*, 528.

neighborhood and organized a search for Croxton. The men followed his footprints right to the farm's lye hopper.[67] James Sherwood discovered "some bones which they believed to be the bones of a human being, that they also found a large pocket knife and a spectacle case."[68] A local doctor identified the bones as hand and thigh bones. Due to the warmth of the ashes, the men concluded that bones belonged to Croxton and his body had only recently been consumed by the flames.

Under interrogation, Eliza and Ann confessed to the murder of their master and revealed the depth of their hatred for him. Eliza disrespected and sassed the white men interrogating her. Peter Toombs, one of the interrogators, testified that Eliza proved "very insolent to the witness and for which insolence he struck her two or three licks with a rope." Toombs placed Croxton's remains in front of Eliza and repeatedly beat her in order to elicit a confession. Soon, however, the slaves began to turn on each other. Ann claimed that Eliza delivered the first blow, while Eliza claimed that Ann had instigated the killing. William, one of Croxton's other slaves, later testified that Ann told him "that she intended to kill her master and burn him up because he had whipped her that day and sent her out of the house where she had been at work to work upon the farm."[69] The

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[67] A lye hopper collects lye from ash. The ash is placed in large holding box and when it rains the water washes the lye down into a bucket that collects it. Lye has numerous household uses including for soap and stripping the hair off of dead pigs.

[68] *Commonwealth vs. Eliza and Ann,* John Letcher Executive Papers, 1859-1863. Accession 36787. Box 2, Folder 3, Misc. Reel 4706. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth, *Commonwealth vs. Eliza and Ann,* (LVA).

[69] *Commonwealth vs. Eliza and Ann,* (LVA).

circumstances that prompted Eliza and Ann's violence proved identical to that of slave men.

In the case of Eliza and Ann, white Virginians followed the same legal procedures against slave women as they did slave men. An Essex county court of oyer and terminer found both slave women guilty of the murder of their master and sentenced them to death. The justices of the court, however, recommended that Governor John Letcher extend mercy to Eliza, sparing her life. Eliza's lawyer submitted a petition to Governor Letcher asking him to reprieve her sentence. Throughout the petition he made no reference to her gender as a moderating factor in her punishment. Rather Eliza's attorney pointed out "That so far as the evidence in the case goes I only established the fact that she aided Ann in concealing the body of her master after he had been killed."[70] He further argued that Eliza had only committed the crime out of desperation and because she was afraid of Ann. The case documents do not indicate whether the appeal was successful or not. In this case, white legal responses to slave women's violence emphasized their status as slaves rather than women.

White authorities, however, did not always react this way. In other cases where bondswomen orchestrated the murder of their masters, white authorities took the slaves' gender into account during sentencing. In 1856, Nelly, an older slave, along her daughter Betsey, and grandchildren James, Elias, and Ellen killed their master, George E. Green on Christmas Eve. Under interrogation, Nelly admitted that she and the other slaves had murdered Green. She explained to her interrogators that he "was a bad master and they

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[70] *Commonwealth vs. Eliza and Ann,* (LVA).

were tired of living with him." On the night of the murder, Nelly led her family into the house and attacked Green with an ax. After he escaped from the house, the slaves chased him down and attacked him with "shovels, axe, and stick till they killed him."[71] While Green managed to briefly wrestle the ax away from Nelly, the five other slaves quickly overpowered their master and killed him. They dragged his body back to his house and set it on fire, hoping the flames would cover up their crime. Their efforts proved fruitless as white neighbors quickly put out the fire.

The white neighbors who came over to the house to help extinguish the flames found Green's body in a shed near his kitchen. The location of the body aroused their suspicions as there was no way for Green to enter the shed from inside his house unless he somehow exited his burning house and then re-entered the shed where he died. The neighbors uncovered a blood trail extending about one hundred and fifty yards around the house. Suspicion fell upon Green's slaves. Under interrogation, Nelly and the other slaves shocked the whites investigating the crime by describing Green's brutal treatment of his slaves. Elias claimed that Green "was such a bad master they could not live with him and concluded to kill him." Nelly told the assembled whites that Green "did not allow them enough to eat, did not allow them any privileges and said they should get in his corn during the holy days." P. Lipscomb, one of the neighborhood whites, was shocked by Nelly's statements. He told her that "Mr. Green was a mild good man. She said I knew nothing about him that he had taught school up there and treated the children

[71] *Commonwealth vs. Nelly, Betsey, James, Elias, & Ellen,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 6, Folder 2. Misc. Reel 4199. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Nelly et. al* (LVA).

so bad none of them liked him." Luther Lynn, one of Green's neighbors, claimed that he "never saw a more comfortable negro house" and he "considered Mr. Green as one of the best masters." Jim admitted that the slaves wanted Green to sell them, but he refused. During the confrontation, they again asked him to sell them, but as Jim recalled, "his master refused to sell them but said that they would all be hung for what they had done."[72]

While slave women's violence was similar to that of men's, whites did not always react the same way. The Prince William county court of oyer and terminer decided to send a message about Nelly's violence towards her master. As the justices sentenced the five slaves involved in the crime, they estimated the sale price of each of them for the purpose of providing compensation to George Green's heirs. All of the younger slaves were valued at varying rates: Betsey $300; James $800; Elias $600; and Ellen $500. The court valued Nelly at $0.[73] She was the only slave I have found in the history of Antebellum Virginia to be considered worthless by a court of oyer and terminer. The idea that an aging female slave could have little value is not surprising. Nelly was likely past the age of reproduction as well as her physical peak. But that did not mean she was wholly without value to anyone, she could have sold for even just $1. Only a deliberate act by the court of oyer and terminer can explain why they declared Nelly worthless in the eyes of the law and the Commonwealth of Virginia.

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[72] *Commonwealth vs. Nelly et. al* (LVA).

[73] *Commonwealth vs. Nelly et. al* (LVA).

Slave women, similar to slave men, engaged in violence over seemingly trivial affairs. In the spring of 1836, Phoebe, a slave belonging to Carter Lumpkin, killed her master. Their dispute began one evening when Lumpkin dragged Phoebe into his house and demanded she move her bed so he could get some potatoes from the cellar. After Phoebe refused, Lumpkin tried to bribe her with alcohol. Phoebe gladly took the alcohol, but still refused to move her bed. After sending her away, Lumpkin stormed over to Phoebe's house in the middle of the night, determined to get his potatoes. Frances, Lumpkin's wife, remembered that she "heard him at the house of the prisoner after midnight- and there appeared to be considerable noise as if the prisoner and deceased were quarrelling."[74] Carter Lumpkin never returned home that night. The next morning, his wife, Frances, found his body about ninety yards from the house. Suspicion fell on Phoebe as white neighbors discovered near her doorstep a pile of bloody and burnt clothes and a blood soaked hoe with pieces of Lumpkin's hair stuck in it.

The history of disagreements between Lumpkin and Phoebe extended far beyond potatoes. Frances Lumpkin recalled that Carter and Phoebe, "had a difference last fall and the deceased struck her when she resisted him and threw him down." Only with the aid of his wife did Carter Lumpkin managed to gain control of Phoebe and tie her up. Lumpkin "gave her a slight whipping after which the prisoner said the deceased should never whip her again." The animosity between slave and master did not end there. George Fay, a witness at Phoebe's trial revealed how she had "one of the most violent tempers of any

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[74] *Commonwealth vs. Phoebe,* Wyndham Robertson Executive Papers, 1836-1837. Accession 43097. Box 1, Folder 1. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Phoebe* (LVA).

negro he knows." Fay also claimed that Phoebe "was very disobedient to her master and frequently ran away." Although Fay conceded that some of the tensions came from Lumpkin's drinking, as he "sometimes got drunk and when so was difficult to please."[75] Like in the case of slave men, bondswomen resented the efforts of their owners to whip and punish them. Phoebe swore that her master would never whip her again.

When bondswomen labored in the fields under the supervision of their overseers or owners, their work was identical to that of bondsmen. They performed the same tasks, worked the same hours, and were subject to the same scrutiny of their labor as men. Working in the fields, it is not surprising that slave women employed similar resistance strategies as slave men. They worked slowly, feigned illness and stupidity, and engaged in direct confrontations to challenge the authority of their white superiors. Like male slaves, they sought to gain a greater control over the rhythms and pace of their labor. Bondswomen frustrated their masters by failing to live up to expectations. Like slave men, they exploited the divided nature of white authority when their masters employed overseers. Masters expected overseers to compel the slaves into meeting their masters' labor demands. When bondswomen resisted and overseers failed to meet these expectations, owners faced difficult choices. Replace ineffective overseers and create more opportunities for violence? Or do they accept less control in exchange for a slightly slower pace of work? The answers to these questions determined the success of bondswomen's violence.

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[75] *Commonwealth vs. Phoebe,* (LVA).

While slave women performed men's labor, white owners expected their overseers to handle troublesome bondswomen. Failure to do so, as Anna Williamson explained, meant the overseer had to find new employment. Williamson said her "Mamma muster been a pretty big sorter woman when she young." When an overseer tried to punish her, Williamson's mother fought back. As Williamson explained, "A ridin' boss went to whoopin' her once and she tore every rag clothes he had on offen him." She gloated that "I heard ma say he went home strip stark naked." Williamson remembered that "I think they said he got turned off or quit, one."[76] Being beaten by a woman proved too much for the overseer. Either the owner fired him for losing a fight to a woman or he quit because of it. Williamson's mother's ability to beat up the overseer angered her owner. He expected that an overseer could handle an unruly slave woman.

Alice Alexander's mother similarly revealed how owners expected their overseers to handle uppity slave women. Alexander described how her mother, Mary Marlow, battled with the overseer on her master's plantation. Marlow had claimed that the overseer was "the meanest man on earth. He'd jest go out in de fields and beat dem niggers." Alexander remembered how her mother told her that "one day he come out in de field beating her sister and she jumped on him and nearly beat him half to death." The master witnessed the confrontation and fired the overseer. He claimed that "he didn't want no man working for him dat a woman could whip."[77] Even though slave women labored in the fields alongside men, owners still expected overseers to control them.

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[76] Rawick, ed., *Arkansas Narratives,* Vol. 11, *Part 7*,193.

[77] Rawick, ed., *Oklahoma Narratives,* Vol. 7, 7.

Marlow's actions had challenged the ability of her owner to govern his slaves. He had to hire an overseer who could manage bondswomen or risk losing control of their labor.

Lucy Franklin's altercation demonstrated that slave owners expected their overseers to at least be able to control female slaves. Leonard Franklin remembered how his mother Lucy "was a terrible working woman." With Hill Pennington, the master, absent on a hunting trip, the overseer attempted to whip her. Instead, Lucy "knocked him down and tore his face up so that the doctor had to 'tend to him."[78] When Pennington returned, he demanded to know the cause of the overseer's injuries. The overseer explained that "he went down in the field to whip the hands and that he just thought he would hit Lucy a few licks to show the slaves he was impartial, but she jumped on me and like to tore me up."[79] Pennington showed little sympathy for his overseer, telling him that "Well, if that is the best you could do with her, damned if you won't just have to take it."[80] Pennington implied that slave women were more manageable and easier to control than slave men. While Lucy Franklin's violence may have been similar to that of a male slave, her owner's response stressed that gender played a key role in dealing with its aftermath.

An unnamed slave man told a W.P.A. interviewer how his sister managed to avoid punishment for her altercation with an overseer and her owner because of her owner's reticence to sell his slaves. Her brother described his sister as having "an awful

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[78] Rawick, ed., *Arkansas Narratives,* Vol. 8, *Part 2*, 336.

[79] Rawick, ed., *Arkansas Narratives,* Vol. 8, *Part 2*, 336-337.

[80] Rawick, ed., *Arkansas Narratives,* Vol. 8, *Part 2*, 337.

temper and was always in something." He worried that her penchant for violence would only lead to further trouble. He remembered how, "She jumped up one day and hung a cider buck over the overseer's head because he tried to make her stop nursing the baby."[81] The woman had also recently struck another slave woman with a hoe. The master arrived and rather than deal with her continued misbehavior, threatened to sell her to Mississippi. In response, the slave woman "right up and chopped him in the head with the hoe she was chopping with." She nearly killed her master, but he refused to sell her away. The woman's brother explained that "He didn't do anything with her about it. He wasn't so awful mean and didn't like to sell his slaves."[82] The slave woman escaped punishment and suffered no further consequences because her owner refused to sell away his slaves.

Fannie Alexander recalled an incident where the slaves, who had grown accustomed to working without white supervision, banded together to fight off the efforts of their owner to install an overseer to supervise their labor. While working under the overseer, the slave women had deliberately shirked their work. Alexander explained that "One day the overseer was going to whoop one of the women 'bout sompin or other." In response, "all the women started with the hoes to him and run him clear out of the field." Alexander stressed that "They would have killed him if he hadn't got out of the way." The overseer fled the farm and the master heeded the message from his slaves. The

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[81] Rawick, ed., *God Strike Me Dead,* Vol. 19, 181.

[82] Rawick, ed., *God Strike Me Dead,* Vol. 19, 182.

master "put one of the men on the place over the women. He was a colored foreman."[83] By installing a black driver, the master admitted that he could not control the labor of his slave women. Rather than continue to battle with his slaves and risk further confrontations and violence, he allowed them to work without white supervision.

By engaging in violence, slave women tried to convince overseers of the risks of disciplining unruly bondswomen and also sought to persuade their owners not to hire any more overseers. Ruben Laird remembered "when an overseer started to whip a young negro woman for not doing her share of the field work." The slave woman did not take kindly to the overseer's chastisement. Instead, "The woman turned on the overseer and chased him out of the field with her hoe." The overseer resigned claiming that "Dr. Laird's slaves were too 'ambitious' for him to manage."[84] While the women's violence compelled the overseer to quit, Dr. Laird had a new overseer on the job the next morning. Ruben Laird, however, did not mention whether that overseer tried to discipline any female slaves. Due to the actions of the slave woman, Dr. Laird may have instructed the overseer not to try and whip the slaves. He may have not cared about the slave woman's violence and driving off the other overseer either. But when slave women engaged in these confrontations they had the potential to better the working conditions for all the slaves.

The response of Martha Bradley's owner revealed how sometimes masters took women's gender into account in dealing with the aftermath of confrontations. Bradley

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[83] Rawick, ed., *Arkansas Narratives,* Vol. 8, *Part 1*, 30.

[84] Rawick, ed., *Mississippi Narratives,* Sup. 1, Vol. 8, *Part 3*, 1299.

had engaged in a confrontation with the plantation overseer out in the fields. She recalled how, "One day I wuz workin' in de field and de overseer he come 'roun and say sumpin' to me he had no bizness say." Rather than ignore the comment, Bradley turned violent: "I took my hoe and knocked him plum down." Fearing her master's retribution, Bradley ran off and hid in some nearby bushes. Her master, however, found her and began punishing her. As he chastised her, Bradley spoke up, "I say to Marster Lucas whut dat overseer sez to me and Marster Lucas didn't hit me no more." Lucas believed that the overseer's actions proved outrageous enough to justify Bradley's resistance and excused her from any further discipline. Bradley praised Lucas's response and believed in the goodness of her master. She said that, "Marse Lucas wuz allus good to us and he wouldn't let no body run over his niggers."[85] While we will never know what the overseer said to Martha Bradley, her master considered it sufficient enough to excuse her violence.

Slave owners demonstrated sensitivity to the gender of slave women when they spared them punishment for attacking an overseer who had beaten a pregnant slave woman. Ann Coley recounted, "But ole Boss Jones had a mean overseer who tuk 'vantage of the womens in the fiel's. One time he slammed a niggah woman down that was heavy, en cause her to hev her baby- dead." The overseer's cruelty prompted a response from the other women in the fields. Coley told how, "The niggah womens in the Quarters jumped on 'im and say they gwine take him to a brushpile and burn him up."[86] The slave men on the farm failed to dissuade the women, but the arrival of the owner

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[85] Rawick, ed., *Alabama Narratives,* Vol. 6, 46.

[86] Rawick, ed., *Mississippi Narratives,* Sup. 1, Vol. 7, 441.

saved the overseer. Master Jones threatened to whip the women, but Coley stressed that "Boss never say no more about it. He sent the overseer away en never did hev no more overseers."[87] The overseer's savage treatment of the pregnant slave convinced Jones to spare his slave women the lash. Punishing them for avenging a dead slave child would only cause more harm than good. The death of the baby proved egregious enough to justify the slave women's behavior and protect them from retribution.

Irene Coates recalled how the violence of a slave woman led to the improvement of the lives of all the slaves on her master's farm. One day the overseer whipped one of the slave women while they worked in the fields. Another bondswoman took notice and threatened "that if he ever struck her like that, it would be the day he or she would die." Shocked by such an insolent display, the overseer struck her with a whip. As Coates described it the slave woman "struck the overseer on his head with the hoe, knocking him off his horse, she then pounced upon him and chopped his head off." The woman hacked up and mutilated the overseer's body before confessing her crime to her master. After witnessing the slave woman calmly admit to the murder, the owner pointed to a cabin in the woods and told her to "take all your belongings and move into that house and you are free from this day and if the mistress wants you to do anything for her, do it if you want to." Coates fondly recalled "with much warmth the effect that incident had upon the future treatment of the slaves."[88]

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[87] Rawick, ed., *Mississippi Narratives,* Sup. 1, Vol. 7, 441-442.

[88] Rawick, ed., *Florida Narratives,* Vol. 17, 76.

In response to labor exploitation, slave women's violence mirrored that of men's. Bondswomen sought to control the circumstances of their work and challenged the authority of whites to do so. They especially played on the division of authority between owners and overseers. When slave women attacked their overseers, they forced their owners to decide whether to retaliate with more violence and risk losing control of their slaves or to let the violence go unpunished. Bringing in a new overseer or unleashing waves of punishment upon bondswomen could reassert masterly control, but threatened further disruption of work routines. By not hiring new overseers or refusing to punish resisting slave women, owners allowed bondswomen more control over their lives. In doing so, they largely guaranteed their own control over their slave women's labor. Bondswomen were not resisting the institution of slavery itself, rather the circumstances under which they worked. By yielding to some of those demands, masters gave up some power, but won a larger victory by ensuring that their bondswomen would continue to work according their desires.

Conclusion

Due to their status as enslaved, female, and black, bondswomen had few ways to successfully resist sexual exploitation. White men had a variety of means to compel their slave women into sexual liaisons. A few masters offered lives of luxury in exchange for lifelong companionship, but as Eliza, the slave woman encountered by Solomon Northup, learned those promises only lasted as long as their masters lived. Whites also threatened sale, separation from family members, and other violence in order to compel

bondswomen into sexual liaisons. They presented these demands as choices for slave women, who few options other than bowing to their masters' wishes. And as Cynthia, the slave woman described by William Wells Brown, learned, they could enter such relationships and still suffer being sold away. Finally, whites who attempted to rape or had raped slave women were most likely to prompt violent resistance. Bondswomen who had wearied of their condition or sought to protect themselves from immediate sexual violation had little to lose by resisting. The threat of community disapproval prompted many white men to avoid such direct assaults on slave women's sexuality, instead favoring more subtle, but no less damaging attacks against the humanity of bondswomen.

Slave women also resisted the exploitation of their labor at the hands of their male owners and overseers. In this type of resistance, bondswomen's violence followed similar circumstances as that of bondsmen. Slave women resisted efforts to whip them, tested the power of owners and overseers, and killed abusive whites. In some circumstances, owners responded differently to bondswomen's violence, especially those incidents involving slave women's sexuality. They sometimes acceded to the wishes of their bondswomen by not installing new overseers and granting them greater control over their own labor. By making these small, but important concessions, slave owners won the long game—giving up some control in return for long term control. Through this type of violence, bondswomen revealed that they too participated in the limited form of slave honor practiced by slave men. Their violence revealed that, in some circumstances, bondswomen and bondsmen participated in an honor culture that transcended strict gender boundaries. This was not the case with all forms of violence. Male honor culture,

for example, had no equivalent to bondswomen's resistance to sexual exploitation. Yet their resistance revealed that slave women were similarly willing to challenge the authority of their owners in exchange for small, but meaningful improvements to their lives.

Chapter 5

DIVIDING AND CHALLENGING THE WHITE COMMUNITY

The previous chapters have already examined how slave violence caused rifts between owners, hirers, overseers, or even within white families. These divisions sometimes proved beneficial to bondsmen who could avoid punishment for their actions. The aftermath of physical confrontations between slaves and whites also had the potential to divide the white community. Physical altercations that set different parts of the community against one another amplified preexisting white concerns over the behavior of bondsmen, the safety of white citizens in a world governed by violence, and even the future of slavery itself. The disagreements between whites revolved around what kind of punishment slaves should receive for their crimes. Local citizens favored the death penalty for slaves involved in these divisive confrontations and wanted to rid themselves of troublesome slaves for good. Virginia's state government favored commuting death sentences in favor of transportation. The governor and his executive council took a broader view of slave crime that recognized that such individual confrontations did not necessarily threaten the fabric of slavery within the commonwealth. These differing beliefs led to conflicts that divided white Virginians. In a seemingly bizarre twist, the response to the most outrageous examples of slave violence only divided local

communities while the most mundane of altercations sparked intra-state strife that nearly tore apart the government of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

White disagreements over the outcome of slave confrontations stemmed from a variety of factors. Diane Miller Sommerville has found that in antebellum rape cases, "towns and neighborhoods were frequently racked with discord as black rape trials played out. Typically, these splits fell along class lines."[1] Sommerville noted that slave owners sought to protect their bondsmen from the claims of lower class women who were often the accusers in such cases. As in the case of Betty and John H. Dodd, her overseer (discussed in Chapter 2), owners and overseers differed over how best to discipline slaves. Whites also sought to protect their reputations by refusing to involve the authorities. In the case of the most famous physical confrontation between a master and slave, Edward Covey refused to send Frederick Douglass to the whipping post following their confrontation. Douglass believed that since Covey valued his reputation as a slave-breaker, he did not want the community to know of their violence.

In her analysis of slaves and slave law, Ariela Gross has found that southern slave codes represented an intersection of legal principles and practical concerns. She wrote that "rules of evidence and the language of legal argument shaped local disputes, but so did community norms." She noted that law "as it is actually experienced is created by a variety of lawmakers; not only by judges and legislators, but by the litigants, witnesses,

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[1] Diane Miller Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 4.

and jurors in the courtroom."[2] Wishes of masters, prosecutors, justices of the peace, and community members played an important role in shaping the legal outcome of slave confrontations. In Virginia, the commonwealth's system of executive review added another force that could shape the response to slave violence. As slave cases passed their way through the legal system, the potential for disagreement grew. When whites debated and fought over the outcomes of slave trials, they revealed how physical confrontations had the potential to disrupt the community at large.

This small-scale resistance by slaves proved as effective as outright rebellion in challenging the slave regime. In the aftermath of Gabriel's Plot in 1800 and Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831, white Virginians unified against the threat posed by their slaves. They put down both incidents quickly and ruthlessly. In the aftermath, white authorities enacted stricter slave codes, cracked down on slave behavior, and after Nat Turner, ended any discussions of emancipating Virginia's bondspeople. When rebelling slaves threatened their way of life, white Virginians acted quickly and decisively. When resisting slaves engaged in small scale confrontations, white Virginians debated the merits of their responses. The largely individual nature of these altercations and the strictures of slave law allowed them to address each case separately. Yet when the right circumstances came along, the exposure of prominent white citizens to public censure, a troublesome band of runaways, or concerns over changes to the commonwealth's political structures, confrontations could wreak havoc far beyond their initial scale. In this

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[2] Ariela J. Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 5.

way, physical confrontations could spark as much dissension amongst whites as a unified slave rebellion.

This chapter will examine three of these cases in detail. It will use each confrontation to indicate the potential of slave violence to cause discord among whites. The first case involved the disappearance and death of a white girl in Louisa County in 1828 and highlighted the willingness of whites to sacrifice an unpopular African American slave to protect their own reputations. The second case from Princess Anne County in 1819, detailed the extralegal murder of a slave by local whites who rejected the authority of the Governor to reprieve him. Residents of Princess Anne wanted the slave dead so badly that they killed him as he was being escorted out of the county to be transported out of Virginia. The third case, from Richmond in 1852, sparked a state wide political crisis when the Commonwealth's first democratically elected governor reprieved a male slave convicted of murder. When taken together, the three cases demonstrate the ability of slave violence to divide and undermine the slave regime.

Slave Violence Divides the Community: The Disappearance of Nancy Green

On February 14, 1829, Virginia Governor William B. Giles ordered that Sydnor, a slave convicted of killing Nancy Green, a 13 or 14 year old white girl from Louisa County, be reprieved for transportation. Governor Giles' decision brought to close a long and bizarre chapter in the history of Louisa County. Nancy Green had disappeared in the fall of 1825 and her fate remained a mystery until three years later, when Sydnor and a group of three white men discovered Nancy Green's decomposing body buried in the

woods. The investigation and trial that followed divided the white community into two camps. A majority of the white residents of the county believed Sydnor had killed Green and wanted him hanged. A smaller group of citizens, led by Sydnor's lawyers, believed that the civic leaders of Louisa sought to scapegoat Sydnor in order to cover up their own knowledge of Nancy Green's fate. Executing Sydnor provided a way for the white authorities to mask their own culpability in Green's life after her disappearance, when she was sexually exploited for the pleasure of white and black men in the county. The case revealed the ability of slave violence to wrench apart white communities and the willingness of whites to use their power to protect their own reputations at the cost of the life of one unpopular African American slave.

Susannah Kernal, Nancy Green's aunt, last saw the young girl alive sometime in the fall of 1825. She saw her niece leaving the house with Clara, a slave belonging to Richard Sandidge, one of Kernal's neighbors. After Green's disappearance, county officials organized a search, but came up empty. The case remained unsolved until November 1828, when three white men, William Kimbrough, Anderson Trice, and William J. Toler discovered a female body buried in the woods near Sandidge's property. Kimbrough had previously searched for Green's body in October 1828, but had failed to find anything. On November 24, 1828, Kimbrough tried again and had approached Toler and convinced him to join his search for Nancy Green. The next day Kimbrough, who had also been joined by Trice, suggested that the men ask Sydnor for help. Sydnor conversed with Kimbrough who led the other two men to a spot deeper in the woods. They began digging and quickly found the body of a white female buried a foot or so

underneath the dirt. Toler explained that she was "without coffin or shroud entirely naked." Toler described how "The legs were off at the knees, except a small ragged portion of the flesh and skin by which they hung." Toler also observed that "the end of the bone of one leg, instead of being round, looked square, as if cut off with some instrument."[3] While the men believed they had found Nancy Green's body, they had little idea of how she had died.

The willingness of the white community to blame Green's death on Sydnor despite confusion over key evidence in the case began immediately following the discovery of the body. None of the authorities investigating in the case could agree on how exactly the young girl had died. After William Kimbrough and the others uncovered the grave, John Poindexter, the Louisa County coroner, opened an inquest to determine the cause of death. The inquest concluded that Sydnor and his sister, Eliza, had killed Nancy Green "with some cord or string hung by the neck."[4] Eliza and Sydnor were taken to the county jail. Eliza's trial began in early December. At Eliza's trial (and subsequently at Sydnor's as well) Lucian Minor, the commonwealth attorney, claimed that Sydnor did "violently make an assault with clubs, sticks, knives, and other weapons unknown" upon Nancy Green, killing her.[5] The change in the circumstances of the

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[3] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* William B. Giles Executive Papers, 1827-1830. Accession 42310. Box 6, Folder 5. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

[4] *Inquest of Nancy Green,* Princess Anne County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1810-1927. Local Records Collection, Virginia Beach (City)/Princess Anne County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[5] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

murder was telling—no one could exactly identify when Nancy Green had died or how. This urge to put Sydnor and Eliza on trial for Nancy Green's death overwhelmed practical considerations, like figuring out exactly how she died.

The investigation into Nancy Green's disappearance also revealed that someone, either Eliza or Sydnor or both, had hid the orphan girl. They had allowed white and black men of Louisa County to sexually exploit her and then killed her and disposed of the body. The shocking details of the last days of Nancy Green's life outraged the local community, who demanded that someone pay the price for the young girl's death. Green's disappearance had troubled her family and members of the local community, but had not sparked any kind of serious outrage. Disappearances, deaths, and other unfortunate events claimed the lives of all sorts of Virginians in the 1820s. Nancy Green, an orphan, lived on the margins of society already, so it was not unusual that she disappeared. When William Kimbrough uncovered her body in the woods in 1828 and the subsequent investigation revealed her troubling fate, Lucian Minor, the commonwealth attorney, and the other justices of the peace who investigated the case knew they needed to assuage the community's anger. Luckily for them, Eliza and Sydnor's owner, Richard Sandidge, had a troubling reputation in the neighborhood.

Sandidge had fathered slave children and violence and dissension tore his household apart. Sandidge, Sydnor's father, was a seventy year old bachelor, who had fought in the Revolutionary War. As Sydnor's lawyer explained in a letter to Governor Giles, Sandidge "in the folly of youth was so unfortunate as to become the father of this

Sydnor."[6] The case record also lists Eliza as Sydnor's sister, but does not specify that Sandidge was her father. It seems likely that this was the case considering Eliza was only about twenty years of age and Sydnor was in his forties or fifties. Sandidge's slaves hated one another. Eliza loathed Sydnor because he often whipped her in his job as overseer for his master. Eliza and the other slaves frequently complained about Sydnor. Tensions continued to grow after William Kimbrough had sent a letter to Sandidge warning him that he, along with other white authorities, were closing in on the body of Nancy Green, in October 1828. Kimbrough wrote that the discovery of the body would be damaging to Sandidge and his family.

The letter sewed further violence and discord within the household. In the letter, Kimbrough asked for a meeting and warned that "I think that it may be well for you to see me as quick as possible if you wish a part of your family well." Kimbrough assured Sandidge that "I wish them to have justice done them, if the laws of the land will do it." Sandidge ordered Sydnor to carry back a reply indicating his willingness to meet. By October 20, 1828, however, their meeting had yet to occur, so Kimbrough penned a follow up letter. Kimbrough warned that "I repeat again, if you do not I must undertake I think something that may hang or take the years of some of your people." Richard Sandidge never met with Kimbrough and later recalled that "Eliza and the girls persuaded me not to go and Sydnor to go." Sydnor, however, "was very anxious for me to go and

[6] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

they had a great contention about it."[7] The argument sparked a confrontation between Sydnor and Sandidge's female slaves and divided the endangered household.

After the discovery of Nancy Green's body, William Kimbrough, Richard Toler, and Anderson Trice followed Sydnor back to his master's house where the two men engaged in a verbal confrontation. Toler later testified that "Mr. Sandidge told Sydnor he believed him to be the guilty man." Sydnor denied the charge and asked his father how he could believe that his own son was a murderer. Sandidge told Sydnor that "you know that you threatened my life." Sydnor reminded him that "your negroes told you I did, being angry with me for endeavoring to make them do what you had directed me, as their overlooker." Sandidge next claimed that Sydnor attacked him with a sword. Sydnor answered that "I never did. I found a cane with a sword in it and told you I thought it would suit you to walk with in your old age, and made you a present of it." The two men bickered over where Sydnor had placed the sword-cane before Sandidge resumed his litany of complaints against his son. He claimed that Sydnor "threw brick bats at me and had liked to have knocked me in the head."[8] Sydnor reminded Sandidge that he had put him in charge of his slaves to prevent them from hurling brickbats at one another. The back and forth revealed that either Sandidge was a forgetful old man or Sydnor was a cruel and manipulative slave.

By early December 1828, Lucian Minor, the commonwealth attorney for Louisa County, put Eliza on trial for Green's murder. During Eliza's trial (and subsequently

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[7] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

[8] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

Sydnor's), the horrifying details of the last months of Nancy Green's life became a matter of public record. While the two slave siblings blamed each other for Green's death, they agreed that Nancy Green had hid out at Sandidge's house for several months. During that time, whites and blacks alike raped Green and paid compensation to the slaves, who functioned as her pimp. Eliza claimed that Sydnor had brought Green to Eliza's room in Sandidge's house. Sydnor announced his plans to hide Green in the medicine closet adjoining Eliza's room. When Eliza objected and told her brother that "he had no business to bring her there; he pulled out a pistol and pointed it at me saying God man your soul, if you don't hold your dam'd tongue or if you ever tell any one about her being here, I'll blow your damned brains out."[9] With a gun pointed at her face, Eliza agreed to Sydnor's demands and locked Green inside the medicine closet.

One evening Sydnor left the key with Eliza, who took the opportunity to let Green out. As the two women sat by the fire, Eliza "saw the face of a white man looking through the glass." Fearing that it was her master, Eliza rushed to the door while Nancy extinguished the flame. After a knock at the door, Eliza inquired to the identity of the man. He answered "a friend- let us come in, haven't you some girls here?" Nancy Green chatted with the two men and took one of them into the closet, leaving the other to wait by the fire. After a time, the two men left as inexplicably as they had come. The next morning Sydnor demanded to know what the white men had wanted. Surprised and confused by the entire situation, Eliza wondered how Sydnor knew about the nocturnal visitors. Eliza claimed that Sydnor concluded that "Nancy Green must stay no longer and

[9] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

that night he carried her again as he told me to the barn."[10] According to Eliza, Sydnor kept Nancy in the barn until sometime during the winter of 1825-1826.

When the barn became too cold, Sydnor moved her back to the medicine closet. Nancy Green stayed in the cramped closet through the summer, only coming out at night. One evening, Sandidge came into Eliza's room seeking the key to the closet so he could retrieve some sulphur. Eliza told her master that Sydnor had the key and a frustrated Sandidge left without his drugs. Eliza found Sydnor the next morning and told him what had happened. Sydnor conferred with Nancy and the two agreed to leave. Eliza recalled how Nancy "came and bade me farewell." When Sydnor returned the next morning, he told Eliza that he "had carried her over Brooks bridge and that she was on her way over the mountains." Eliza also claimed that Sydnor had admitted to killing Nancy Green. Sydnor had drunkenly boasted of a fortune teller who had predicted he would kill someone. When Eliza expressed fear for the safety of her mother, the inebriated Sydnor declared "'by God' it was too late for that now, for he had done it."[11]

Sydnor offered a similarly sensationalistic account of Nancy Green's life after her disappearance. He explained that in 1825, white authorities had questioned Eliza about Nancy's disappearance, but ultimately let her go without charging her. While Eliza avoided arrest, Sydnor claimed she panicked, fearing the consequences of being caught with the missing white girl. Sydnor believed "she was afraid of losing her ears for secreting her." He explained how Eliza had a small hiding place attached to Sandidge's

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[10] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

[11] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

house where she kept Nancy out of sight. Eliza kept the girl there "for the purpose of making money out the white men that came there to visit her." Sydnor offered a different explanation for orphan girl's death. He explained that "Nancy Green took sick and died there, and Eliza had her put away." Eliza, however, grew increasingly alarmed about anyone discovering the body. Eliza was afraid that "the offense of concealing her would be nearly as bad as if she had murdered her."[12] Eliza buried the body in the woods in an effort to conceal her crime.

Perhaps most importantly for the white authorities investigating the case, Sydnor claimed that he knew the identities of most of the men who had come to Sandidge's house to sexually exploit Green, but "was afraid to name them." One such white man had told Sydnor that if he "mentioned his coming there he would kill him." Sydnor provided a list of the names to his attorney, John McPherson. In a letter acknowledging the existence of the list to Governor Giles, McPherson refused to send it to the governor because it included "among the most respectable in the County" and McPherson deemed it "improper to name them."[13] Remarkably no one involved in the case disputed the fact that Sandidge's slaves had pimped Nancy Green out to the residents of the neighborhood and Sydnor had a list to prove it. The horrifying nature of the case as well as the threat of exposure compelled Lucian Minor and the other justices of the peace investigating the case to push for a murder conviction in order to assuage the concerns and anger of the white community.

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[12] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

[13] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

After three days of testimony in Eliza's case, Lucian Minor, the commonwealth attorney for Louisa County, suddenly withdrew all of his charges against Eliza and proceeded to try Sydnor for Nancy Green's murder. The unusual behavior of Louisa County's civic leaders continued into Sydnor's trial. Instead of summoning a new court of oyer and terminer with a new set of justices of the peace, the same court handled Sydnor's trial as well. The justices and Minor agreed not to re-summon some of the witnesses in the case and have them testify a second time. Instead the justices of the peace read their testimony from the record of Eliza's trial into the record of Sydnor's. In a break from legal procedures, the court refused to allow Sydnor's attorneys to cross examine these absent witnesses. At one point in the trial, as Richard Sandidge testified, the justices took over the questioning from the commonwealth attorney. When the trial concluded, the court convicted Sydnor of murdering Nancy Green and sentenced him to hang on January 23, 1829. They had hoped that the conviction would bring to a close this long and disturbing chapter in Louisa County history. Instead the verdict divided the white community, as supporters of Sydnor claimed that the justices railroaded Sydnor in an effort to bring the case to a quiet conclusion. Lucian Minor and his supporters claimed that they had acted in the best interests of justice and the desires of the community. They left Virginia Governor William Giles to sort out the mess.

As Sydnor's lawyers worked on their campaign to spare Sydnor's life, Lucian Minor and the five justices who comprised the oyer and terminer court launched their own efforts designed to ensure Sydnor's execution. Minor wrote to Governor Giles that in his discussions with the citizenry of Louisa County that he had not "known any feeling

so strong and so persistent among them (saving perhaps zeal for Genl Jackson during the late election) as is the feeling of discontent at the contemplated pardon of this convict." Minor warned the Governor that "The very consequence that I predicted when with you—an abated confidence in the efficacy of the penal laws- is even already beginning to show itself." If the governor spared Sydnor's life, the citizenry might abandon all faith in the legal system, Minor wrote that "I have had one man say that we shall have no further use for courts: another that we may as well cut down our gallows."[14] Minor told Governor Giles of the existence of a petition demanding that Sydnor be executed, but the lack of a court day or other social event made it impossible to gather sufficient signatures.

Minor sought to defend the actions of the court and convince Governor Giles to allow Sydnor's execution. Minor explained that the Governor might get the wrong impression about the evidence, because "there are in this case peculiar causes rendering the evidence as laid before the Executive, far more favorable to the accused than it was as presented in court upon the trial." Minor claimed that the court record failed to properly reflect the evidence in the trial because they had already heard much of the evidence against Sydnor during Eliza's trial. After Minor withdrew the charges against Eliza, he and the justices agreed that they did not need to hear the same witnesses again. They reasoned that with "the same court sitting on both trials, it was deemed unnecessary to have repeated in the second, all the circumstantial facts which had been detailed on the first trial because they were ineffaceably fixed on the minds of the court, and their

[14] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

repetition was thought superfluous for ensuring a conviction."[15] Minor admitted that much of the evidence that the court of oyer and terminer considered in rendering their verdict never made it into the trial record.

Minor, shockingly, did not believe that this action violated the law or denied Sydnor his right to a fair trial (at least under the guise of Virginia's slave codes). Only after the case concluded, did Minor and the five justices realize how badly they had mangled the prosecution. Minor explained that "it was then perceived that many facts trivial and inconclusive in themselves yet when connected with the principal mass, supplying its chasms, and greatly increasing its strength, were in admissible upon the record, altho' they had naturally and legally conduced to influence the operation of the court." Once they read over the court record, Minor and the justices realized just how much evidence they had considered in their deliberations never made it into the court record. Minor noted that these omissions in the court record meant that significant pieces of evidence were "then precluded from the consideration of the Executive on the record."[16] They believed that these failures of legal process had no bearing on Sydnor's guilt.

Minor sought to assure Governor Giles that the presentation of the case had been much more convincing than the record indicated. He tried to fill in the gaps claiming that he offered more evidence about "the decrepit frame and confessed intellect of Mr. Sandidge the master—his solitary and singular bachelor life—the peculiar and scandalous

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[15] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

[16] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

relation in which he stands to the accused." Minor also pointed out that "the species of discipline or rather the total absence of discipline as of other, property and good morals, that prevailed on his domain—and the high hand with which the accused governed there." He noted that Eliza gave a particularly remarkable performance as a witness. Minor praised her "impressive tones her strongly emphatic gestures, and the solemn earnestness of her whole manner betokened her consciousness of the portentous truth, which she had never till that occasion dared to divulge." He assured the Governor of the "incalculable difference between oral and written testimony—especially whether testimony abridged" and how the written record failed to convey the power of the witnesses testimony. Minor and the justices reiterated their belief in the strength of the case. They argued that "few stronger cases of guilt proved by mere circumstantial testimony have ever been presented to a court of justice."[17] Contrary to legal principles, Minor stressed that any prosecutorial errors should favor the Commonwealth and not Sydnor.

Any sympathy that Governor Giles may have felt for Sydnor because of the prosecution's legal blunders, Minor and the five justices warned, would undermine faith in Virginia's criminal justice system. They lamented "the mercy (almost to a fault) in which criminal justice is administered by our county courts." They further claimed that executive clemency led to criminals escaping "the just consequences of their crimes." Such mercy also gave encouragement to "future offenders by the impunity of their precursors." Commuting Sydnor's sentence threatened to undermine the white

[17] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

community's faith in the judicial process. Minor and the justices explained that a pardon or reprieve would impair the "confidence of the community in the administration of public justice." They rejected transportation as a viable alternative for Sydnor, noting "its inefficacy in either reforming the offender, striking a salutary terror into others, or ridding society at large of annoyance and danger from his subsequent outrages (the criminal cuts off all punishment)."[18] With their missive complete, Lucian Minor and the five justice— John Graves, James Michie, James Poindexter, Richard Wyatt, and Oliver Cross— expressed their expectation that Governor Giles would uphold the verdict.

With Sydnor now sentenced to hang for murder, his lawyers, John McPherson and Garret Quarles, tried to convince Governor Giles to pardon Sydnor or commute his sentence to transportation. McPherson, shortly after Sydnor's conviction, penned a letter, on December 17, 1828, hoping to draw Giles's attention to the peculiar circumstances of the case. Since the justices had sentenced Sydnor to hang without recommending mercy to the Governor, McPherson worried that "the Record may not receive that close investigation which it might were it accompanied by a recommendation for mercy—I beg leave to draw you serious attention to it, as in my humble opinion the evidence was not satisfactory to condemn the prisoner to death." He hoped to convince Giles that the numerous flaws in the commonwealth's case, including the conflicting witness testimonies and the failure to articulate exactly when and how Nancy Green died, warranted sparing Sydnor the hangman's noose. McPherson was willing to admit that "the circumstances are strong enough perhaps to satisfy the mind that Nancy Green was

[18] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

once in the possession of Sydnor the condemned prisoner."[19] He, however, refused to concede that Sydnor had murdered Nancy Green or had anything to do with her death.

McPherson warned Giles that while the evidence against Sydnor was weak, a powerful group of white citizens had lined up against him. McPherson informed Governor Giles that he had wanted to ask the court to recommend Sydnor for mercy. But one member of the court informed him "that a majority seemed to think example necessary. The people were excited in turn against every one who was taken up (which was 3 besides Sydnor) in the offense they said required that some one should be hanged." McPherson himself could not believe that his client had killed Nancy Green. He, however, explained that many county residents wanted Sydnor hanged. He was unsure "whether or not they are the most numerous, one thing I do know, they cry the loudest and many join who have but a hearsay knowledge of the matter and will sign the paper urging you to hang him." He also informed the Governor that the court had excluded favorable evidence to Sydnor from the trial. McPherson wrote that Edmund Pendleton, the justice who investigated the initial disappearance of Nancy Green in 1825, stated that "he would not have voted for his condemnation." [20]

McPherson and Quarles, Sydnor's attorneys, attacked the actions of the court and the ferocity with which Minor and the five justices of the peace were pursuing Sydnor's execution. The attorneys described how Minor and members of the court's actions were "unusual and to our minds has more the appearance of warm partisans pursuing with

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[19] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

[20] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

unrelenting vengeance the life of their most deadly enemy, than that of a dignified attorney and impartial and unprejudiced justices, seeking for truth in a legal manner and administering the criminal laws of the Country impartially and in mercy." McPherson and Quarles wrote to Governor Giles that the five justices had sat as a court of oyer and terminer charging Eliza with the death of Nancy Green and "they had heard a great deal of evidence in her case, much of which was illegal." After Eliza's acquittal, the same five justices put Sydnor on trial yet they "were distinct and separate Court. The prisoners were not tryed [sic] jointly, they plead separately, and there was no attempt made by Mr. Atty or the Court to shew [sic] they committed the crime jointly or to try them jointly." The Court tried to swap one defendant for another without a hitch. Quarles and McPherson noted that "on some occasions when the defending counsel objected to the illegality of the evidence about to be elicited by the Court, the Attorney was appealed to say whether it was legal, or not, he would decide that it was illegal, yet the Court persisted contrary to the opinion of their Attorney and would make the witness give the evidence." They noted that "so great was the zeal of some members of the Court, that the counsel deciding more than once reminded them of that humane maxim of the law 'that the Court should be of Counsel for the accused' and to say to them, that so far from pursuing that maxim they were taking on themselves the office of prosecutors."[21]

Quarles and McPherson then turned to one of the most pertinent legal matters at hand, the influence of Eliza's trial on Sydnor's. Sydnor's lawyers complained that "what the evidence was, which the Court heard in the tryal [sic] of Eliza, that had so much

[21] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

influence on their minds, on the tryal [sic] of Sydnor, and which was not repeated on his Sydnor's tryal [sic], Mr. Attorney, nor the Justices, have not thought proper to tell us, we wish they had as we cannot divine." McPherson and Quarles had reasonably thought that Eliza's trial was separate from Sydnor's. They had "supposed the court would not transfer the evidence heard in her tryal [sic] to the account of another prisoner, and permitted it to have weight on their minds. It never entered into the minds of the defending counsel to conceive or image that the evidence heard against Eliza was to operate against Sydnor unless it was heard in his case." McPherson and Quarles, at first, refused to believe that the justices of the peace allowed the evidence from one case to influence the outcome of another "but for having said so themselves."[22]

This admission represented a major breach of legal practice. As McPherson and Quarles wrote, "Would it not, violate every rule of law and justice?" They painstakingly detailed the legal objections to such behaviors. First, the lawyers pointed out that using evidence from Eliza's trial denied Sydnor the right to confront his accusers. McPherson and Quarles wondered, "And why were these facts that had so much influence on the minds of the Court not admissible on the Record—the Justices and Mr. Attorney furnish the best answer-because they were not heard on the tryal [sic] of Sydnor but on that of Eliza and this is the legal way to try a prisoner for murder, away with all the much boasted rights of persons." They continued their attack on Minor's arguments, "What! Condemn a human being to death, on evidence not heard in his tryal [sic]? The Spanish Inquisition is far preferable, there you are not mocked with a pretended impartial tryal,

[22] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

and then condemn the unfortunate victim upon evidence now heard on the tryal [sic], and the first information he has of the evidence in which he is condemned to die, is set forth in a representation to the mercy seat, praying his certain execution." Quarles and McPherson turned to another key issue: Sydnor's legal status. As a slave, he lacked the legal rights of a white man, but Virginia's slave code allowed for Sydnor to confront his accusers and hear all of the evidence against him. Quarles and McPherson quipped that "if the evidence on which his is to be condemned or acquitted is not to be heard by the counsel: of what possible service could counsel be."[23] No fact, they argued, could be taken on face value unless proven by a witness or other suitable evidence before the court.

The defense attorneys also highlighted the "some members of the Court who tried [sic] Sydnor are pursuing his life." One of the justices spent an entire day gathering signatures from local citizens "not one in ten of whom heard the trial and who have made up their opinions." McPherson and Quarles requested that Sydnor be spared the death penalty, asking for either pardon or transportation. They summarized their key arguments, noting that the behavior of the court made his conviction questionable. Second, the court admitted that they condemned Sydnor on evidence not presented at his trial. Third, they presented a statement from the deputy sheriff of Louisa County, Nicholas Poindexter, that contradicted much of Eliza's testimony. Finally, they argued that the evidence presented in the court record was not "sufficient proof that Sydnor was

[23] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

guilty of the murder of Nancy Green."[24] Two petitions dated February 9, 1829 arrived in Richmond, one in favor of the execution, the other opposed. On February 14, 1829, six days before his scheduled execution, Governor William Giles reprieved Sydnor's sentence to transportation. The Commonwealth paid out $350 in compensation to Garret Quarles for the value of Sydnor, closing one of the most bizarre legal cases that the Commonwealth had ever seen.

Sydnor's trial revealed the divisiveness that physical confrontations could cause in the white community. Prominent citizens in Louisa County had visited and paid for sex with Nancy Green after she had disappeared. If Minor and the justices were trying to prevent that knowledge from becoming public, then ensuring Sydnor's execution would guarantee his silence. Their flimsy justifications for asking Governor Giles to not intervene lend credence to this belief. Minor may have simply been expressing the white community's anger over how Nancy had been sexually exploited following her disappearance. The idea of a young white girl being pimped out by slaves offended the sensibilities of most white Virginians. This community outrage necessitated that someone pay the ultimate price for what happened to Nancy Green. On the other hand, Sydnor's master, lawyers, and other supporters in the white community refused to sit idly by. Lucian Minor and the five justices of the court of oyer and terminer had acted illegally in administering Sydnor's murder trial. Quarles and McPherson meticulously detailed the weaknesses in the case against Sydnor and the court's illegal behavior. Ultimately,

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[24] *Commonwealth vs. Sydnor,* (LVA).

Governor Giles settled the matter by sparing Sydnor's life, but by ordering him transported, he removed him permanently from the county.

Defying the Governor: Mingo & Princess Anne County

Throughout 1818, a band of runaway slaves plagued the residents of Princess Anne County, Virginia. The county's abundant swamp areas, especially in the Pungo neighborhood, made it a haven for runaways. They killed cattle, stole, burned down barns and homes, terrorized the white community before disappearing back into the swamps. In order to survive, the runaways relied on support from the white and slave communities alike. Led by two slaves named Ned and Mingo, the band of runaways participated in a murder for hire scheme orchestrated by a white farmer named Harper Ackiss. In response, the Princess Anne county justices of the peace called out the militia and managed to capture Mingo. Mingo was convicted of arson and sentenced to hang. Governor James P. Preston, however, reprieved Mingo's sentence to transportation, angering the citizens of Princess Anne County. They sent the Governor a petition explaining that executing Mingo was the only way to ensure that he would never terrorize the county again. When Preston failed to heed their wishes, a small group of citizens orchestrated the extralegal murder of Mingo. The bondsman's death demonstrates how slave violence divided whites and set the wishes of a local community against the state government.

Mingo's participation in the murder of a white man named Alexander Taggert in November 1818 triggered his downfall. Taggert, a wealthy native of South Carolina, had

arrived in the Pungo neighborhood of Princess Anne County, in order to purchase slaves. One evening at the home of William Gornto, Taggert met a young white farmer named Harper Ackiss. Ackiss insisted that Taggert stay at his home that evening, but Taggert refused. The following day Taggert met with Ackiss to discuss the purchase of some slaves. Taggert, however, remained wary of the overly friendly Ackiss, but nonetheless agreed to spend the night at his house. As the evening dragged on and Ackiss left to go hunting, Taggert became increasingly anxious. He worried that "the gang of negro desperadoes and runaways who infested the neighborhood and with whom Ackiss's negroes were known to be in league might seize the opportunity to murder him."[25] Taggert's concerns were well-founded. The next morning, after he left Ackiss's house, Taggert disappeared.

Several days later, neighborhood residents found Taggert's horse wandering the road about three miles from Ackiss's house. The neighbors alerted the local authorities who convened a coroner's inquest. Members of the inquest began searching the area and found papers belonging to Taggert lying along the side of the road. A search of the nearby woods uncovered his saddle. The inquest discovered Taggert's body buried underneath a patch of newly dug earth. A hoe, belonging to Harper Ackiss, was lying nearby. Taggert's money, an estimated fifteen or sixteen hundred dollars in cash, was missing. In his pockets, Taggert carried a copy of his commission as a captain in the South Carolina militia and his diploma certifying his status as a master mason.[26]

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[25] *Alexandria Herald* (Alexandria, VA), Dec. 9, 1818.

[26] *Alexandria Herald* (Alexandria, VA), Dec. 9, 1818.

Suspicion in the case turned immediately towards Harper Ackiss. After Taggert's death, Ackiss suddenly had the cash to pay off longstanding debts and buy a new slave woman.

Taggert's concern about the band of runaways being in league with Ackiss's slaves proved correct. Ackiss exploited this relationship by hiring Mingo and the other leader of the runaways, Ned, to kill Taggert. Mingo admitted to their arrangement when he claimed that "Harper Ackiss offered him $100 and Ned $100 to do the deed—that he refused, but that Ned consented, and he saw Ned shoot Taggert while he was letting his horse drink at a run in the road."[27] At Mingo's trial, Joshua L. Hopkins had testified that "Mingo told him that he and Ned Downs were in the swamp back of Harper Ackiss which was the night before that Taggart was killed and Harper Ackiss came in the swamp to them the night before."[28] There was nothing unusual about economic dealings between free whites and runaways or other slaves. As Jeff Forret has investigated, poor whites and slaves had frequent interactions across the boundary between freedom and slavery. They gambled and drank together, sold each other food and other goods, and even engaged in petty crime together. They fought with one another and shared some mutual antagonisms towards elite whites who viewed African Americans as racially inferior and poor whites

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[27] *Baltimore Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser* (Baltimore, MD), Dec. 21, 1818.

[28] *Commonwealth vs. Mingo,* James P. Preston Executive Papers, 1816-1819. Accession 41737. Box 11, Folder 10. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Henceforth *Commonwealth vs. Mingo,* (LVA).

as socially undesirable.[29] So it is unsurprising that Ackiss hired the band of runaways to kill Taggert.

Ned and Mingo were not the only Virginia slaves to kill at the instigation of whites. In 1828, in Powhatan County, Robert Mendum, a white man began an affair with the wife of Elbert Mosby. After Mosby discovered the affair, Mendum sought to kill him. Mendum wanted to lure Mosby "to some secret place and to murder him." Mendum promised Henry, a slave belonging to Mosby, three dollars to kill his master. Mendum instructed Henry to lure Mosby out of his house to a thicket where Mendum was waiting. When Mosby was distracted by the sight of his wife's lover, Henry would kill him. On the night of the murder, Mosby took the bait and proceeded out of the safety of his house and into the pine thicket. Henry, armed with a gun, fired at Mosby, but missed. The shocked white man turned against his bondsman and "stabbed the negro very dangerously and, under the impression that he had killed him, ran off." Mosby, however, had not managed to kill Henry. The badly wounded Henry "overtook and held him until Mendum succeeded in knocking him down with a fence-rail."[30]

A court of oyer and terminer in Powhatan County convicted Henry of Mendum's murder. At his trial, Henry denied any participation in the crime and laid the blame solely on Mendum. The justices convicted him of murder and sentenced him to hang. They, however, recommended him for mercy to Virginia Governor William Giles. The citizens of Powhatan also organized a petition to send along to the Governor. The citizens

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[29] Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

[30] *Newburyport Herald,* (Newburyport, MA) January 1, 1828.

believed that Giles should spare Henry, "in consideration of his youth, of his general good character, of the bad character of many members of the family, to which he belonged." The petition also noted many in the county wanted to see Henry hanged. The petitioners, however, wrote that "when the popular excitement, which now exists, shall have subsided; they, who, as we are informed have remonstrated to you against the recommendation of the Court will regret that they had not listened to the dictates of Mercy."[31] Giles, however, refused to commute Henry's sentence and the slave was hanged on January 10, 1829. Unlike his later decision in the Nancy Green affair, Giles erred on the side of public sentiment and allowed the execution to go forth despite serious questions about Henry's guilt.

Governor David Campbell had to deal with a similar case of a slave convicted of aiding a white man in the murder of another white man. In 1839, Benskin Hopkins, along with the aid of several others in Charles City, orchestrated the murder of his father-in-law, James Carradus. Over the previous winter, Carradus had vanished and according to a newspaper article, "the public were induced by the representations of some of the members of his family, to believe that he had been accidently drowned in the Chickahominy river."[32] Charles City authorities, however, doubted the family's story and launched their own investigation. Hopkins and his slave, John, were brought before a justice of the peace who ordered them committed to jail. John remained confined, but

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[31] *Commonwealth vs. Henry,* William B. Giles Executive Papers, 1827-1830. Accession 42310. Box 4, Folder 12. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[32] *Albany Evening Journal* (Albany, NY) July 31, 1839

Hopkins made bail and fled. Pleasant, one of Carradus's slaves, recounted how Squire, another slave, admitted that "Benskin Hopkins had shot him there the evening before and killed him dead, and that he said Squire, John the prisoner, Benskin Hopkins and George C. Hopkins had rolled him up in an old piece of seine and carried him into the marsh and buried him."[33] Governor Campbell, however, commuted John's sentence to transportation on July 2, 1839.

Whites also hired slaves to frighten and terrify others. Stephen, a slave convicted of attempting to murder Elizabeth Gillam of Sussex County in 1823, claimed he was only hired to scare her. Stephen broke down the front door and stormed into the house swearing "if you do not open the door God damn your soul I will come in and kill you." According to Gillam's husband, Charles, "Stephen said in his presence that John Prince gave him five dollars to scare Mrs. Gillam."[34] In 1856, the wife of Francis Sheridan offered Sam, a Highland County slave, two hundred dollars to kill her husband. According to a neighbor, "Sheridan and his wife were very unhappy. Had not been married long, she regretted it, did not eat with her husband." On the evening of the murder, Sam "got a rope round Sheridan's neck, a short rope, he then got a stick in the

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[33] *Commonwealth vs. Henry,* David Campbell Executive Papers, 1837-1840. Accession 43151. Box 6, Folder 3. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[34] *Commonwealth vs. Stephen*, Virginia Auditor of Public Accounts, Records of Condemned Blacks Executed or Transported, 1823-1832. Accession APA 756. Misc. Reel 2252. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

rope and twisted it around till he killed him."[35] The level of violence led Governors James Pleasants and Henry Wise to allow both slaves to hang for their crimes.

The white authorities in Princess Anne County decided to try and rid themselves of their runaway slave problem for good. On December 7, 1818, two justices of the peace, Joseph McApline and William K. Land, of Princess Anne County drafted an order to Peter Land, the county sheriff and William's father, and commanded him to action. They wrote that they had "received satisfactory intelligence on oath that Negroes Mingo and Ned and other runaway negro slaves whose names and owners are unknown are lying out hid and lurking in swamps, woods and other obscure places." They further claimed that the slaves were "committing murder killing hogs and doing other injuries to the inhabitants of said County in the neighborhood of Pungo." The justices wanted Land to spare no man or expense in capturing the runaways. They wrote to Land that he should "take with you such force and power of this County as you shall think fit and necessary for the effectual apprehending such out lying slaves and to go in search of them."[36] They further ordered him to bring any slaves he captured to the county jail for trial.

In response, Land called out the militia of Princess Anne County to hunt Mingo and Ned. One hundred and forty infantry and cavalrymen met at the county seat of Kempsville and began their search. The militia men "set off, in squads, to scour the different swamps, and forests between that place and the southern edge of the county, in

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[35] *Commonwealth vs. Sam,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 4, Folder 4. Misc. Reel 4197. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[36] *Commonwealth vs. Mingo,* (LVA).

search of the gang of desperadoes who have so long kept that part of the county in a state of alarm." The search meandered around the county from Kempsville to the Pungo Chapel. Despite their best efforts, the militia men came back empty handed, having failed to capture either Ned or Mingo. They resumed their efforts the next day, when a white man named Cox, joined one of the squads. He claimed "he was intimate with one of the runaways named Mingo, and would engage to deliver him into their power, if they would secret themselves in his house."[37] The soldiers, likely tired after almost two days of wading through swamps for two slave men in a county of over eight thousand residents and thirty seven hundred slaves, agreed to Cox's plan.

Cox led the soldiers to the upper part of his cabin where they hid themselves. Cox left and shortly afterward returned with Mingo, "who appeared to be perfectly at home with Cox, and they drank together as old acquaintances." Cox planned to get Mingo drunk so that the militia men could swoop in and arrest him. While Cox and Mingo drank to their hearts' content, the soldiers waited quietly. Cox "took care to ply him with it until he thought he had produced the desired effect." To celebrate his escape from the soldiers, Mingo drunkenly shot his musket, his favorite weapon, into the air. Cox watched Mingo reload the weapon, but in the course of their drinking managed to get it out of the drunken bondsman's hands. Cox then signaled the soldiers to move in. The three men pounced on Mingo, but "he drew a dirk and wounded one of them severely; and even after they had tied him, he made a violent effort and maimed his friend Cox with his teeth

[37] *Baltimore Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser* (Baltimore, MD), Dec. 21, 1818.

and nails."[38] With Mingo now in custody, the authorities of Princess Anne began the process of interrogating him and preparing him for trial.

Mingo had developed quite the reputation in the county as the result of his activities. After his capture, Mingo did not want to face trial or go back into a life of slavery. Instead he requested that "he might be turned loose and thirty of the soldiers be ordered to fire at him."[39] A newspaper article describing his actions noted that "His ferocity and frequent depredations on the farms in the vicinity of his cruizing [sic] ground, have given rise to many strange stories among the inhabitants of that part of the county; which would furnish out a volume of no small dimensions and no little interest." After escaping from his former master, Mingo had spent months living and hiding out in the swamps. Throughout the course of the interrogation, Mingo admitted to burning down the haystacks and smokehouse of Henry Capps. He also admitted to firing his musket at Capps when he tried to put the fire out. Mingo confessed to shooting his musket at justice of the peace William K. Land. While Mingo found his way to the county jail in Kempsville, the militia continued their unsuccessful search for Ned.

In early January the citizens of Princess Anne began the legal process of punishing Mingo for terrorizing the county for so many months. When Mingo stood trial for his crimes, the testimony of white witnesses revealed the close relationship between the "gang of desperadoes" and the white community. Eight different white men testified to conversing with Mingo about his desire to kill Peter Land, the sheriff of Princess Anne

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[38] *Baltimore Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser* (Baltimore, MD), Dec. 21, 1818.

[39] *Baltimore Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser* (Baltimore, MD), Dec. 21, 1818.

County. Yet none of them tried to apprehend him. William Gornto, a white man, revealed "that he went up to Mr. Thomas Ackiss's house and saw the said Mingo and Ned Downs there, he Mingo told me that he shot at Captain Land and missed him, but if ever he came across him he would kill him." Mingo and Ned frequented certain areas of the county where they could travel and interact with whites without fear of capture. The circumstances of Mingo's capture offer corroboration on this point. Cox easily tracked Mingo down while one hundred forty militia men were out searching for him. Mingo also agreed to drink with him and expressed little worry about Cox turning him over to the militia. The prosecution of Mingo revealed the ease with which he moved across the color line.

After convicting Mingo of burning down the smokehouse of Henry Capps, a court of oyer and terminer sentenced him to hang on February 19, 1819.[40] On January 16, 1819, however, Virginia Governor James Preston interceded in the case. A group of citizens had petitioned Preston to commute Mingo's sentence to transportation. As a result, Preston ordered that Mingo be brought to Richmond so he could be sold and transported out of the state. There was nothing unusual about this process. Ever since the 1801 law change allowing the governor to reprieve death sentences in favor of transportation, Virginia's chief executives had not been shy about using that power, especially when slaves were convicted of crimes against white property. As Philip J.

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[40] *Commonwealth vs. Mingo,* James P. Preston Executive Papers, 1816-1819. Accession 41737. Box 6, Folder 12. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. This file may now be located in Box 11, Folder 10. I found it while searching for another case and requested that the archive place it with the other papers related to Mingo's case.

Schwarz has explained, these cases revealed "the perception of oyer and terminer justices that slaves particularly dangerous to property alone could be removed safely by condemning them to death, with the full expectation that the governor and Council would commute the sentence to transportation."[41] The citizens of Princess Anne County, however, had no intention of letting Mingo escape with his life.

William K. Land and other leading citizens of the county quickly crafted a petition asking Governor Preston to reconsider his decision. The petitioners expressed their "great regret" at Preston's actions. The petitioners believed that Governor Preston "may not be fully apprised of his character, they feel it their duty to trouble you with information upon the subject." They claimed that arson was "only one of the many crimes for which his life was forfeited to the law it is robbery at least that he has been now sold out of County and as often made his escape and returned to the said County." The petitioners claimed that Mingo and the other slaves in his gang of desperadoes waged "open war against the property and even being of our citizens." They listed Mingo's numerous crimes including shooting at William K. Land, threatening to kill Peter Land, and terrorizing the county. The petitioners believed that the "good of the County require that he should suffer the justice of the land."[42] The petition bore a staggering 663

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[41] Philip J. Schwarz, *Slave Laws in Virginia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 108.

[42] *Commonwealth vs. Mingo,* (LVA).

signatures. This represented approximately 62% of the white male residents of Princess Anne County over the age of sixteen.[43]

Governor Preston refused to change his mind. He sent James W. Lord, who worked for the Commonwealth transporting prisoners from county jails to the State Penitentiary in Richmond, to retrieve Mingo from the Princess Anne County jail. On February 11, 1819, Lord arrived in Kempsville to claim Mingo. The jailor, however, refused to turn Mingo over without the permission of Sheriff Peter Land. Land had gone to deliver the citizens' petition to Richmond and would not return for another two days. Lord returned to Richmond empty handed. Once he arrived back in the capital, Governor Preston ordered Lord back to Princess Anne County. Sensing trouble, Preston ordered him to solicit some help in guarding Mingo on the journey from Kempsville to Norfolk, where they would take a steamboat back to Richmond. On the morning of February 18, 1819, Lord, alongside John Wilson, the white man recruited to help him, arrived at Kempsville around 11:00 A.M. The men guarding Mingo refused to hand the slave over until the jailor, Mr. Williams, came to the jail and gave his permission. After a nearly four hour wait, Williams arrived and handed Mingo over. The three men set out on the road to Norfolk.

The citizenry of Princess Anne County were not content to let Mingo be sold away and potentially return and terrorize them yet again. Several citizens threatened Mingo's life as John Wilson and James Lord took him from the jail. They tied Mingo to a horse drawn chair and rode on to Norfolk. When they were several miles outside of

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[43] Calculations taken from the 1820 Census, *Abstract of the Returns of the Fifth Census* (Washington: Duff Green, 1820).

Kempsville, the men heard a gunshot from the nearby woods. Lord wheeled his head around to see where the shot had come from. Instead he "saw the head of Mingo fall forward, with his brains and blood running out, without a single struggle or a groan." Wilson rode off for assistance as Lord tried to free Mingo's body from the chair and unhitch the horse. Lord waited several hours for Wilson to return before finally riding off to Norfolk. The shot from the musket had struck Mingo in the head, killing him instantly. The shots also wounded both Lord and Wilson. Lord "received a ball just above the right hip bone and a buck shot below the wound."[44] He eventually made it home to Richmond, but remained unable to move his right thigh for some time afterwards.

The murder of Mingo and the attack on Lord and Wilson prompted a response from Governor Preston and the condemnation of local newspapers. The *Richmond Enquirer* recognized how Mingo had been "as great a curse as is represented to the citizens of the county of Princess Anne." But the paper wrote, "It is impossible for us not to regret in the strongest terms, this attack upon a prisoner." The paper further complained that "no citizen ought to have take the law into his own hands, and sacrificed the life of the prisoner." The extralegal action taken by the residents of Princess Anne warranted a response from Governor Preston as well. He issued a proclamation promising a five hundred dollar reward for information leading to the arrest of whoever killed Mingo and wounded Wilson and Lord. Preston lamented the actions of the murderers "for wounding and endangering the lives of the innocent agents of the government, whilst in

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[44] *American Beacon and Norfolk and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser* (Norfolk, VA), March 1, 1819.

sacred performance of their duty; and for committing a cruel and atrocious murder on a defenseless slave, who had been reprieved under the law for transportation."[45] There is no indication in the court records that anyone ever stood trail for Mingo's murder.

The case of Ned and Mingo revealed how slave violence caused a local community to defy the will of the state government. Mingo, Ned, and the other runaways had terrorized the local community, attempted to kill the sheriffs, justices of the peace, and local farmers. They burned down buildings, killed cattle, and even participated in a murder for hire. This band of runaways became such a problem that the citizens of Princess Anne summoned the militia to capture them. They convicted Mingo of arson and sentenced him to hang. Yet when Governor Preston commuted the sentence to transportation, the residents of Princess Anne mobilized to make sure that Mingo never troubled them again. When Preston refused to allow Mingo's execution to go forward, a group of citizens decided it was better to kill him and defy the Governor than allow Mingo to live. He had been sold out of the county once before, but returned. The judgment of the community superseded that of the executive branch. Mingo had to die, even if it meant that James Lord and John Wilson got caught in the crossfire.

As the residents of Princess Anne County learned, they could never rid themselves entirely of their runaway slave problem. In October 1818, Bob Ferebee, Nelson, James, and Nelson's wife Maria were all runaways, hiding in the county's cypress swamps. One day they saw two white men in the woods and hid. Bob, determined to remain free, promised to investigate the identities of the two men. He later

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[45] *American Beacon and Norfolk and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser* (Norfolk, VA), March 1, 1819.

returned and claimed that they were David Manning and Josiah McCoy, two white men of neighboring Norfolk County. Bob claimed that the two men "were coming shortly to hunt them out." The next day Bob grabbed his gun and left in search of some tobacco. He asked James to go with him, but James refused. Nelson testified that Bob had not been gone long when he "heard the report of a gun and remarked to his companions that he suspected some one had shot Bob." When Bob returned, he revealed that he had shot David Manning. Bob claimed that "he did not intend to kill him, that he only shot at his legs." Nelson feared for the consequences that would befall them following the death of Manning. He asked Bob, "how he could be so cruel as to kill a man in that way." Bob chided him, calling Nelson "a fainthearted wretch."[46]

While the crime occurred in October 1818, Bob Ferebee did not stand trial until June 24, 1823. He spent the intervening years as a runaway living in the swamps of Princess Anne and Norfolk counties. How long the other slaves remained at large is unclear from the case record. The *Norfolk Herald* reported about his capture and trial with relief. The paper noted that Bob "had rendered himself notorious and even formidable for his daring outrages." It claimed that he was "chief of the party of outliers in the neighborhood of the Great Bridge, by whom so many atrocious outrages have been committed."[47] During his five years on the run, Bob and a band of fellow slaves terrorized the white neighborhood. The court of oyer and terminer convicted Bob of

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[46] *Commonwealth vs. Bob*, James Pleasants Executive Papers, 1822-1825. Accession 42046. Box 2, Folder 4. State Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[47] *Norfolk Herald* (Norfolk, VA), June 25, 1823, reprinted in *Spectator* (New York, NY) July 1, 1823.

Manning's murder and sentenced him to hang on July 25, 1823. Virginia Governor James Pleasants, unlike his predecessor William Preston, refused to intervene in the case and allowed Bob to be hanged, assuaging the demands of the residents of Norfolk and Princess Anne counties.

Slave Violence Divides the Commonwealth: Jordan Hatcher

On the morning of February 25, 1852, Jordan Hatcher, a slave, engaged in a physical confrontation with Nathaniel Jackson, his overseer at the Walker & Harris tobacco factory in Richmond. Their altercation, like many between bondsmen and overseers, began over Jackson's attempt to discipline Hatcher for his poor work habits. Two days later, Jackson died of his wounds and Hatcher was put on trial for murder. A Richmond court found him guilty of murder and sentenced him to hang. Responding to a petition of Richmond citizens, newly elected Governor Joseph Johnson reprieved Hatcher's sentence to transportation. This series of events was common in the history of physical confrontations within Virginia. The crime, unlike the death of Nancy Green or the murder of Alexander Taggert, did not exhibit an extraordinary amount of violence. The reaction to Johnson's reprieve, however, was anything but normal. His political opponents organized a protest meeting outside the Executive Mansion that erupted into mob violence. The debate over Hatcher's fate revealed the tensions over the future of slavery within the Commonwealth of Virginia following the adoption of the new state constitution. Hatcher's confrontation with Jackson revealed how, under the right set of circumstances, slave violence could divide an entire state and spark a political crisis.

The altercation began sometime in the morning on February 25, 1852, when Nathaniel Jackson sought to whip Hatcher for his continued poor work. Robert Jones, another slave employed at the factory, testified that Jackson chastised Hatcher for leaving dirty tobacco stems on his bench. Another slave, William Barkus, claimed that Jackson reminded Hatcher that he had warned him about leaving dirty stems on his bench and promised to punish him. Hatcher, meanwhile, said "he would try to do better if he would not whip him. Mr. Jackson said that he would whip him about it first, and make him do it." Jackson struck Hatcher several times with his whip. Hatcher grabbed the whip and the two men began grabbing and kicking each other. As they continued to struggle, Hatcher "picked up an iron poker… and struck Mr. Jackson a blow with it on the forepart of the head, which caused Mr. Jackson to fall."[48] Hatcher fled into the streets to try and avoid any further punishment.

Jackson shook off the wound and continued his work. Dr. John Cunningham, who examined him on the morning of the altercation, later testified that he "saw no evidence of any serious injury." Jackson did not complain of pain or illness. At the end of the work day, he returned home where he lived with his parents. Jackson ate dinner with his family and went to bed. After he arose for work the next morning, Jackson's mother convinced him to stay home instead. She summoned Dr. Cunningham again. Only now, the prognosis was dire. Cunningham "saw that Mr. Jackson was suffering from a very severe injury to the brain." Cunningham consulted with another physician who agreed that they

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[48] *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), May 11, 1852. I was unable to locate a copy of the trial transcript within Governor Joseph Johnson's Executive Papers.

would have to operate on Jackson's skull. Cunningham recommended that they call for a third doctor, James Bolton. Bolton examined Jackson and found "that the skull had been broken, and portions of it forced in upon the brain."[49] Bolton performed the surgery and removed the broken parts of Jackson's skull. The doctors, however, acted too late. By the next morning, Friday February 27, the nineteen year old Jackson had died, only two days after his confrontation with Hatcher.

The circumstances of the fight between Hatcher and Jackson mirrored that of other confrontations between overseers and slaves within factories. In Richmond in 1859, Edward Hancock, an overseer at the Stevenson & Co. factory, readied to whip Robert, one of the slaves under his supervision. Robert had been absent ten days from work, and when Hancock ordered him "to take his breeches down." Robert initially pretended to obey his overseer's orders, but once Hancock let his guard down the slave struck him in the jaw.[50] Also in 1859, Robert Allen, an overseer, had disciplined David, one of the slaves employed at another Richmond factory. David returned to work after a two hour absence and as Allen grabbed a hold of him, David "pulled his hand out of his pocket with a knife in it and stabbed witness [Allen] in the left temple."[51] Augustus, a slave employed at a Lynchburg tobacco factory in 1847, similarly attacked his overseer after a

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[49] *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), May 11, 1852.

[50] *Commonwealth vs. Robert,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 20, Folder 6. Misc. Reel 4217. State Records Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[51] *Commonwealth vs. David,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710. Box 17, Folder 6. Misc. Reel 4217. State Records Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

whipping. Augustus slashed at Theodorick Harris, his overseer, with a knife ordinarily used for cutting tobacco leaves. He charged at Harris telling him, "I'll kill you you grand rascal." Augustus managed to land two blows "extending from the ear around under the jaw bone to the chin or right side of the neck and face."[52] The non fatal circumstances of these confrontations convinced Virginia's governors to commute the death sentences. Augustus was transported out of the state and David and Robert received life sentences to labor on the public works.

Shortly after Hatcher's conviction, a number of leading citizens of Richmond petitioned Governor Joseph Johnson to spare the bondsman's life. The signers of the petition included lawyers, ministers, and leading businessmen. S.S. Baxter, a former attorney general, William McFarland, the president of the Farmer's Bank of Virginia, W.M. Elliot, editor of the *Richmond Whig*, and G.A. Myers, the president of the Richmond City Council all lent their names to the petition. The petitioners did not dispute that Hatcher's blow had killed Jackson. They, however, claimed that the "consequence was neither expected nor desired by him." They furthered argued that "All of the facts of the case tend to establish that the blow was struck under circumstances tending greatly to aggravate the boy, without premeditation and with no design to kill. There is no malignant, willful or deliberate purpose developed by the proofs to commit murder." The petitioners did not believe that Hatcher should die for his crime. Rather they saw the case as "precisely one of those cases upon which a sound discretion would induce the exercise

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[52] *Commonwealth vs. Augustus,* William Smith Executive Papers, 1846-1848. Accession 43708. Box 6, Folder 1. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

of some degree of executive clemency."[53] They also cited Hatcher's youth as a reason to mitigate his death sentence.

While a number of leading citizens worked to spare Hatcher's life, a counter petition began to circulate asking Governor Johnson to let the death sentence stand. The petitioners expressed their displeasure at any effort to commute Hatcher's execution. They also claimed that "nothing in his favor has been elicited since his trial" and there were no mitigating circumstances warranting clemency. They wrote, "We believe, for the protection of our lives and property, that examples should be made of all such offenders, and the change of punishment asked for in the present instance will, we are satisfied, fail to produce any satisfactory effect whatsoever." The petitioners offered an ominous warning to Governor Johnson if he decided to pardon Hatcher. They warned that "a growing spirit of insubordination amongst of the negroes of this city has been manifested for several years and particularly amongst those employed in the tobacco factories, who number some two or three thousand." The petitioners also claimed that the situation had grown so bad that "the managers of those establishments can now rarely correct the negroes for the gravest offenses, without hazarding their lives."[54] Virginia, they argued, stood at a precipice and only decisive action by Governor Johnson could stem the tide of rebellious slaves.

On May 5, 1852, Governor Joseph Johnson commuted Hatcher's punishment to transportation. The citizens of Richmond quickly mobilized against the Governor's

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[53] *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), May 11, 1852.

[54] *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), May 11, 1852.

actions. Richmond newspapers, led by the *Richmond Republican*, published notices of an "indignation meeting" to be held at City Hall on the evening of Friday May 7th at 8 o'clock. The organizers of the meeting called on "all good citizens who are willing at all times ready to stand by the institutions of the South and especially Virginia laws" to gather to express their outrage. The notice included further incendiary language: "Come one, come all, and protect your firesides by putting down all those who uphold murder." The *Republican* claimed that "the news had spread like electricity throughout the various ramifications of the city, and all sections, classes and vocations of the people, had poured out their hundreds to express their great indignation at the course pursued by Governor Johnson." The participants listened to a few outraged speakers before getting to the business of the meeting. They passed a resolution claiming that Governor Johnson had "abused the trust confided to him by the Constitution, has outraged the feelings of the community, and has given an encouragement to insubordination and crime, which calls for the indignant reprobation of the people of Virginia."[55] Having expressed their disapproval of the Governor's actions, the meeting then broke up.

Many in the crowd refused to disperse and instead, as the *Richmond Enquirer* reported, began "to invade the private grounds of the Governor's Mansion, and to degrade themselves and the city of their residence by the most gross breach of hospitality, the most shameful abuse of personal sanctity, and the rudest intrusion upon domestic quiet that ever degraded this commonwealth." The paper claimed that "We only speak the truth when we say that it was a MOB and not a deliberative assembly." The crowd who

[55] *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), May 11, 1852.

attacked the Governor's mansion wanted "to make a row and uproar, closing their ears to truth and facts." The paper explained that "Our laws confer the power of remitting the death-penalty upon the Executive, impose upon one man that gravest of all responsibilities, the responsibility of deciding between the life and death of the a fellow creature in the last resort."[56] The *Enquirer* defended Governor Johnson and the lawful exercise of his constitutional authority and condemned the mob for attempting to impose their will on the rest of the state.

As a result of the backlash against his decision, Governor Johnson justified his actions in a message to the Legislature. After reviewing the case, Johnson believed that Hatcher "had no intention of committing murder or taking the life of his overseer, Mr. Jackson in some way." He further argued that Hatcher's single blow with the iron poker was "given at a moment of great excitement and suffering." Since Hatcher did not premeditate the murder or intend to kill Jackson, Johnson spared the slave's life. Johnson argued that the death sentence was "against the spirit of our laws and of the age, as it is contrary to mercy and humanity." Then the governor pushed his argument too far. He claimed that "If Hatcher had been a white man, the utmost he could have been charged with would have been justifiable homicide, or involuntary manslaughter; and in this case it was but manslaughter, without intent to kill."[57] With this logic, Johnson, as William A.

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[56] *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), May 11, 1852.

[57] *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), May 14, 1852.

Link has written, argued "that the standards of justice existed above race."[58] Johnson made it seem that he cared more about the equal application of the law than maintaining white supremacy. Rather than extinguishing the debate, Johnson's comments only fanned the flames.

By arguing that equality under the law should take precedence over skin color, Johnson sparked further outrage from his political enemies. On May 19th, Johnson issued a second message to the Legislature seeking to clarify his position. He wrote to the legislators complaining that "the terms in which those reasons were expressed have been misconstrued and my views upon the delicate relations existing between master and slave, misapprehended." Johnson denied that he suggested that "the slave would under any circumstances be excused for justified in resisting the legal authority of his master." He described the right of masters or their representatives to punish slaves as "necessary for wholesome discipline and restraint." He rejected the idea that slaves had the right to resist their masters' punishment in any way. He further clarified his position on the balance between slavery and justice. Johnson wrote that "I did not intend to convey the idea that the relative positions of the white citizen and the slave, to the laws of the country, were the same." Johnson further stated that "I did not intend to express the conviction of my mind that a slave should not suffer death for offenses below the grade

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[58] William A. Link, "The Jordan Hatcher Case: Politics and 'A Spirit of Insubordination in Antebellum Virginia," *The Journal of Southern History,* Vol. 64, No. 4 (November 1998), 632. See also Harrison M. Etheridge, "The Jordan Hatcher Affair of 1852: Cold Justice and Warm Compassion," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography,* Vol. 84, No. 4 (October 1976), 446-463.

of murder."[59] Johnson sought to reassure the Legislature and his political opponents of his devotion to the protection of slavery.

Johnson's clarification failed to quell the debate over his actions. In the legislature, the two parties divided along geographic lines. Whigs, from the eastern part of the commonwealth, accused Johnson of being a secret abolitionist and demanded that he crack down on slave violence. Johnson's Democratic supporters from the western parts of the commonwealth rejected the ludicrous attacks on the Governor's character. As William A. Link has argued, men from the western part of the state, like Governor Johnson, "had long borne a grudge against the eastern slaveocracy."[60] The eastern counties had held disproportionate power in both houses of the legislature. The new state constitution of 1851 afforded equal representation in the House of Delegates, but not the state senate. Eastern delegates wanted to maintain political control by weakening or even removing the western aligned Governor and protecting their rights as slaveholders. As Link explained, "To many easterners, the Hatcher case revealed western hostility for or indifference towards slavery."[61] Exacerbated by the entire situation, Charles Lewis, a Johnson supporter, even proposed the formation of a committee to investigate moving the capital away from the coast to a more centralized location within the state. The Hatcher case revealed how slave violence could cause such a deep political fissure within the nation's largest slaveholding state.

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[59] *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), May 21, 1852.

[60] Link, "The Jordan Hatcher Case," 634.

[61] Link, "The Jordan Hatcher Case," 635.

Conclusion

While slave violence largely occurred between individual slaves and whites, the ramifications of these confrontations could cause deep divisions within the white community. The willingness of Lucian Minor and the justices of the oyer and terminer court to execute Sydnor for what had happened to Nancy Green despite a lack of convincing evidence revealed how desperately they wanted to silence the bondsman before he could incriminate members of the white community. Sydnor's lawyers, his master, and other county officials did not want to see him executed because of the illegal actions of the county's legal officers. The case of Mingo highlighted the tensions that emerged between local and state government over the response to slave violence. The residents of Princess Anne County wanted to execute Mingo and bring an end to his reign of terror. After trying and failing to convince Governor Preston to rescind his reprieve, members of the Princess Anne County white community took matters into their own hands. Governor Joseph Johnson's reprieve of Jordan Hatcher revealed how slave violence could divide the commonwealth on the proper response to resisting bondsmen. It also highlighted centuries old political tensions between eastern and western Virginia.

In their ability to exacerbate preexisting tensions between white Virginians, individual physical confrontations could threaten the slave regime as much as outright rebellion. On the few occasions that Virginia's bondsmen actively plotted or engaged in slave revolt, they brought down the full fury of white Virginians, who executed and tortured slaves thought to have participated in such insurrectionary activities. Such

outright violence demanded a swift and brutal response. In dealing with individual confrontations, Virginia's Governors and citizenry approached each case based on its own merits. They used precedent and slave laws to govern their actions. They pondered whether to execute or spare the lives of condemned bondsmen. The circumstances of the slaves' violence tapped into issues that sparked division and dissension amongst the commonwealth's whites. These disagreements had little to do with the actual crimes themselves, but rather the best way to control Virginia's bondsmen and what that meant for the future of slavery. As a result, on a few rare occasions, the right combination of circumstances conspired to cause disruption to the slave system similar to that of outright rebellion.

CONCLUSION

Physical Confrontations and American Slavery

Slaves' extraordinary acts of violence brought their ordinary concerns into focus. These slaves were not revolutionaries like Nat Turner or Gabriel, rather they engaged in confrontations to restore some balance to their lives and to push back against white oppression. Archer, Davy, and the other slaves belonging to John Hamlin, orchestrated the murder of their cruel owner rather than endure any more of his brutal treatment. Hamlin had fostered a horrifying environment of mistrust and cruelty that prompted his slaves to risk their own lives in order to kill him.[1] Peggy, a slave woman belonging to John Francis, murdered her master in the middle of the night and burned down his house to cover up her crime. Peggy resorted to such desperate measures because Francis, who was also her father, sought to rape her.[2] Winston, a slave, attacked Joseph Hoy, his overseer, in response to punishment. Winston's resistance arose out of his desire to protect his manhood. No man, Winston believed, would allow himself to be whipped by

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[1] *Commonwealth vs. Davy,* William B. Giles Executive Papers, 1827-1830. Accession 42310. Box 1, Folder 2. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[2] *Commonwealth vs. Peggy, Patrick, Franky, and Caroline,* John Floyd Executive Papers, 1830-1834. Accession 42665. Box 2, Folder 7. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

another.[3] The desire for better treatment, wanting to avoid sexual exploitation, and laying claim to masculinity all represent the circumstances that sparked physical confrontations.

Violence is an appropriate way to examine the lives of slaves since it governed their daily interactions with whites. Slave owners used force, either through threats or physical coercion, to compel their slaves to labor. Masters and overseers whipped and beat bondsmen and women as they tended to the fields. Mistresses slapped and corrected their slave women in the household in order to teach their bondswomen the value of hard work. Violence also upheld white mistresses' claims to domesticity and their privileged position in southern society. Whites expected that this current of violence would only flow one way, towards their slaves. In antebellum Virginia, violence extended beyond the master-slave relationship. Gentlemen engaged in duels. Poor whites knifed one another and brawled in taverns and in the back alleys of Virginia's cities. This system of southern honor, as historians like Kenneth S. Greenberg have argued, relied on the existence of a class of people without honor.[4] The presence of slaves made it abundantly clear who in southern society could be considered honorable. Despite white efforts to control their bondspeople, white violence did occasionally prompt resistance from the slaves themselves, who attempted to set limits on white control.

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[3] *Commonwealth vs. Winston,* John Letcher Executive Papers, 1859-1863. Accession 36787. Box 2, Folder 6, Misc. Reel 4707. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[4] Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, The Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Virginia's slave codes emerged as the result of decades of interaction between slaveholding elites, poor whites, and the slaves themselves. These laws laid out the contours of white supremacy in Virginia. They granted masters almost complete power over the lives of their bondsmen. While owners held great power over their slaves, they often failed to live up to the responsibilities of slave mastery. The courts, then, stepped in when owners failed. One of the most common failures of mastery included slaves collaborating with one another to rid themselves of cruel owners and overseers. Even though bondsmen did not engage in rebellion, whites reacted quickly and brutally to such confrontations. Additionally, slaves challenged the authority of overseers in order to exploit the divisions between whites of different classes.[5] This division of mastery provided slaves an opportunity to challenge the authority of whites. Slaves who ran away or engaged in crimes like theft also highlighted the failure of mastery. These masters placed their neighbors, poor whites, and local authorities in danger by not controlling their bondsmen.

The circumstances that prompted these physical confrontations reveal the existence of a system of honor among slaves. This slave honor reflected some, but not all, of the elements of white honor culture. As property of others, bondsmen had no legal right to defend themselves or make claims to reputation, two essential aspects of white southern understandings of honor.[6] Virginia's slave codes forbade slaves from engaging

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[5] Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[6] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery;* Elliott J. Gorn,

in violence against whites except when in mortal danger (resisting lawful punishment did not constitute mortal danger). Bondsmen could not make claims to reputation, the communal judgment of their character and worthiness as an individual.[7] Their status as slaves made it clear that they warranted no such respect. No true man, after all, could be a slave. Yet when looking at the circumstances that prompted their resistance, bondsmen engaged in confrontations to defend themselves and their families, equated violence with their masculinity, and won respect from their fellow bondsmen for their resistance. These were all key features of white honor. While lacking recognition from the white community and reflective of their status as human chattel, slave men developed their own largely individualistic code of honor that contained many elements of southern white honor culture.

Slave women also engaged in physical confrontations against whites, but largely under different circumstances than men. The antebellum household served as a site of violence between bondswomen and their mistresses. Slaveholding women had the responsibility for keeping their households functioning, but relied on their slave women to perform the actual labor. When bondswomen failed to meet expectations, their mistresses reacted brutally and violently. As Thavolia Glymph has explained, slave

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"'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review* 90 (February 1985), 18-43.

[7] For examples of slave honor within the slave community see: Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Old South," *The American Historical Review,* Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988), 1228-1252; Jeff Forret, "Conflict and the 'Slave Community': Violence among Slaves in Upcountry South Carolina," *The Journal of Southern History,* Vol. 74, No. 3 (August 2008), 551-588.

women's resistance undermined their mistress's claims to domesticity.[8] White women, contrary to the claims of the first generation of scholars of southern women, played a crucial role in perpetuating and maintaining slavery.[9] Additionally the bonds of intimacy that formed within the household made for an especially violent atmosphere. As Eugene D. Genovese has pointed out, mistresses had few outlets for their anger apart from their bondswomen.[10] Slave women, too, lashed out at their mistresses in particularly brutal ways. They threw them into fireplaces, stabbed them in the middle of the night, or even took out their frustrations on the children or the entire family. The circumstances of this type of violence between mistresses and their slave women occurred within the household and represented a specific form of resistance undertaken by slave women.

In their confrontations with white men over sexual and labor exploitation, bondswomen's violence took two markedly different forms. The triple burden of race, gender, and slave status made resisting sexual exploitation extremely difficult. White men had a variety of ways to compel bondswomen into sexual relationships. They could woo them with promises of a better life or even their freedom. They could threaten punishment, sale, or separation from loved ones or force themselves upon their slave

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[8] Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 91.

[9] Ann Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (1970; Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

[10] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 333.

women (as the law did not consider the rape of a slave woman a crime).[11] Whites often combined the first two approaches, promising gifts and better treatment if slave women agreed to relationships and threats of whippings or sale if they did not. These circumstances made it remarkably difficult for bondswomen to successfully resist sexual exploitation. They only managed to succeed when they received help from some outside source—usually another white man. Meanwhile, when slave women worked in the fields, the circumstances and outcomes of their resistance proved remarkably similar to that of bondsmen.[12] Bondswomen rejected the efforts of their masters and overseers to punish them. Since this resistance mirrored that of slave men, slave women also participated in this culture of slave violence, suggesting that honor culture was not strictly a male affair.

On rare occasions, physical confrontations threatened to divide the white citizens of Virginia and even undermine the institution of slavery itself. Debates over the fate of condemned slaves revealed the concerns of white citizenry about the future of slavery in the Commonwealth. Citizens of Louisa County, Virginia inundated Virginia Governor William Giles with letters and petitions regarding the fate of Sydnor, a slave condemned to death for killing Nancy Green, a young white girl. The accusation that Sydnor, or his sister Eliza, had prostituted Nancy Green to the men of the neighborhood, prompted calls for his execution. The persistence of Mingo, a runaway slave living in Princess Anne County, led the residents of the county to petition Virginia Governor James Preston to execute him. When the Governor failed to accede to their wishes, the residents took the

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[11] Melton A. McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991).

[12] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black And White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 316.

law into their own hands, killing Mingo as he was being transported out of the county. And finally the seemingly unremarkable confrontation between Jordan Hatcher and his overseer sparked a political crisis in Richmond that nearly ended the term of Joseph Johnson, Virginia's first democratically elected governor. These cases revealed how Virginia's slave laws were formed as much by those who practiced and executed the law: the judges, lawyers, justices of the peace, and other citizens as by the legislators in Richmond who wrote them.[13] Altercations also proved as divisive and threatening to Virginia's slave regime as slave rebellion because whites, unlike during Gabriel's Plot or Nat Turner's Revolt, did not initially recognize how the debate over the fate of these slaves revealed their deeper fears about the future of slavery in Virginia.

The study of physical confrontations reflects the history of American slavery as a whole. Altercations reveal a host of rich detail about the lives of bondsmen and women, their relationships with whites, and the importance of violence in trying to limit the brutality of bondage. For individual slaves, these confrontations were watershed moments in their lives. Frederick Douglass described the outcome of his confrontation as "a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom."[14] While many other slaves who engaged in confrontations did not have similarly successful outcomes, their violence etched them permanently into the historical record. They resisted efforts to

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[13] See Ariela J. Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Diane Miller Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[14] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845: New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 68.

punish them, their families, and pushed back against the excesses of white cruelty. These confrontations also remind us of the circumscribed nature of the lives of slaves. As much as the actions of these slaves impacted their lives on the individual level or even affected the lives of their fellow slaves within their communities, these confrontations could never overthrow the system of slavery in Virginia. As long as slaves remained on small holdings and lived side by side with their masters, only a cataclysm the size and scope of a civil war could bring bondage to an end.

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