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Privileged Bondsmen and the
Process of Accommodation:
the Role of Houseservants and
Drivers as Seen in Their Own Letters

INTRODUCTION

A generation ago, W. E. B. DuBois chided historians for writing “the record of kings and gentlemen ad nauseam and in stupid detail. . . . Of the common run of human beings . . . and particularly of the . . . working group,” he noted, “the world has saved all too little of authentic record and tried to forget or ignore even the little saved.” A few years earlier, scholars were reminded that “any history of slavery must be written in large part from the standpoint of the slave.” However, despite these longstanding pleas for an approach to black history from the point of view of the blacks, historians have only just begun to develop the sources, methods, and perspectives that will enable them to write black history from a new position.¹

Historians of slavery in the past frequently despaired of finding “adequate” sources written by slaves themselves. “Since there are few reliable records of what went on in the minds of slaves,” wrote Kenneth Stampp in 1956, “one can only infer their thoughts and feelings from their behavior, that of their masters, and the logic of their situa-

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1. W.E.B. Dubois, preface, p. v, Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York, 1951); Richard Hofstadter, “U. B. Phillips and the Plantation Legend,” *Journal of Negro History*, 29 (1944), 124. Cf. Carter Woodson, ed., *The Mind of the Negro as Revealed in His Letters Written During the Crisis, 1800–1860* (Washington, 1926), 260: “A neglected aspect of the study of slavery is the mind of the slaves themselves”

tion.” Similarly, Stanley Elkins constructed his study almost entirely on secondary sources. “There is no evidence,” wrote one critic, “that Elkins used available manuscript source records to any extent” to support his conclusion that slaves were “infantilized” by the slave system. And, as recently as 1967, George Fredrickson and Christopher Lasch bluntly stated that slavery was “an unrecorded experience, except from the masters’ point of view.” Since “adequate records of personal slave response simply do not exist,” they maintained, it is “tempting to resort to” and “indeed almost impossible to avoid” comparing bondage with other “total institutions” like prisons.²

Scholars customarily have consulted plantation journals, court records, census schedules, and travelers’ accounts—all of which yield valuable information about servitude. Used with care, such standard sources give considerable insight into the social structure of the Old South. Yet the traditional records have many serious limitations. Plantation journals dealt mainly with the masters’ farming operations and rarely give insight into the motivations of the slaves. Government records were often so haphazardly taken that they are not always reliable, and court records do not always acknowledge the gulf between state codes and their application in practice. Most travelers simply were not equipped to evaluate what they encountered, and they often had strong moral convictions that tended to vitiate the accuracy of their observations. Except for a few, like Frederick Law Olmsted, visitors saw only limited, well-traveled areas of the South, often so rapidly that they hardly had time to digest their impressions.

Furthermore, these traditional sources present a picture of slavery entirely from the white man’s point of view. Such evidence depicts black people more as whites wanted or imagined them to be than as they actually were. The standard sources tell more about the mentality of masters than about the character of their chattel.

2. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York, 1956), 88, 322; Stanley Elkins *Slavery* (Chicago, 1959, 1968); George Fredrickson and Christopher Lasch, “Resistance to Slavery,” *Civil War History*, 13 (1967) 318–19, 324; Bennett Wall, “African Slavery,” in *Writing Southern History* (Baton Rouge, 1965), 177–78, 184. Clement Eaton, *The Mind of the Old South* (Baton Rouge, 1967), ch. 9, and Gilbert Osofsky, ed., *Puttin’ On Ole Massa* (New York, 1969), introduction, are two scholars who have recently attempted to make some sense out of the slaves’ own writings.

Fugitive slave narratives and the freedmen reminiscences vividly recall the hardships of plantation life, the rigors of the domestic slave trade, the tragic relationship between bondsmen and their masters, and the pervasive brutality of the slave system.³ These accounts also reveal the personal, family, and religious lives of slaves, as well as the circumstances that made some blacks more rebellious than others and compelled some to risk all to escape bondage. Autobiographies were written by some of the most gifted, privileged, and successfully rebellious bondsmen; but this does not mean that they were not also exceptionally perceptive. In addition, the Federal Writers' Project and Fisk University collections of interviews—sembled and analyzed by Julius Lester and George Rawick—firmly establish the possibilities for an intriguing study of personal histories through oral traditions.⁴

However, these slave narratives should be treated with more caution than has been usual, and only some of them are helpful for a study of bondage from the black man's viewpoint. Most of the accounts were written many years after successful escapes, and the experiences of freedom often distorted the remembrances of servitude. Since many of the fugitives were illiterate (albeit not inarticulate), antislavery publicists often assisted their writing and narration. Moreover, in the 1840s and 1850s, the narratives became a popular form of literature and abolitionist propaganda. As a result, many were rewritten to conform to the literary standards of the time and many tended to become romanticized and moralistic to suit the tastes of Northern and British readers. Abolitionists also feared that if the narratives were published in the language of the ex-slaves—with its own rules of grammar and rhetoric—they would provide proslavery

3. Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: A Northside View of Slavery* (1855, Reading, Mass., 1969) is a useful collection of interviews with fugitive slaves in Canada.

4. Though their texts are weak, Charles H. Nichols, *Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of Their Bondage and Freedom* (Leiden, 1963), and Margaret Y. Jackson, "An Investigation of Biographies and Autobiographies of American Slaves Published Between 1840 and 1860," Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1954, both contain nearly complete lists of slave narratives. Cf. James B. Cade, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," *Journal of Negro History*, 22 (1935), 294–337; Fisk University, *God Struck Me Dead* (Nashville, 1945); George Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: From Sundown to Sunup* (New York, 1970); and Julius Lester, ed., *To Be A Slave* (New York, 1968). Philip Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered* (Madison, 1968), reprints and lists African narratives.

apologists with further arguments for black inferiority. Many of the slaves' stories thus lost much of their original content and spirit.⁵

Similarly, the recollections of the freedmen—such as those in B. A. Botkin's *Lay My Burden Down* (Chicago, 1945), the F. W. P's *Negro in Virginia* (New York, 1940), and Julius Lester's *To Be A Slave* (New York, 1968)—were taken down so long after slavery that post-Civil War experiences tended to affect antebellum ones, and specific events were not always accurately remembered. Unlike the abolitionists, however, the Federal Writers' Project interviewers were interested in preserving the speech patterns and language of ex-slaves. Even though they deserve close attention, the slave reminiscences as a whole should be supplemented with documents written or articulated by slaves themselves, documents that do in fact exist in quantity sufficient for purposes of analysis. This material consists in a rich body of folklore, spirituals, work songs, tales, poetry, oral traditions, dances, music, religious customs, and architecture and crafts. These sources are being analyzed by such scholars as Sterling Stuckey, Robert Ascher, and Robert F. Thompson.⁶

Moreover, there is a series of sources pertaining to resistance to bondage, including slave petitions for freedom to state legislatures, letters to anti-slavery organizations from slaves seeking assistance, and letters from fugitive slaves to black friends, former masters, or Underground Railroad agents. In addition, there are written com-

5. Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line* (Lexington, 1961), 122–23, discusses abolitionist ghostwriting and fictionalized slave narratives. Peter Neilson, ed., *The Life and Adventures of Zamba* (London, 1847), provides an extreme example of the problem of antislavery romanticism in a slave narrative, which is actually, according to Curtin, *Africa Remembered*, p. 6, a “blatant forgery.” Charles Ball's *Life and Adventures* (New York, 1837 edition), introduction, was admittedly “prepared by _____ Fisher from the verbal narrative of Ball.” James Williams' *Narrative of an American Slave* (New York, 1838) was dictated to John Greenleaf Whittier by Williams, who claimed to be a driver from an Alabama plantation. Actually, according to Osofsky, “Puttin' On Ole Massa,” *Argus* Taperecording, (Chicago, 1968), Ball's narrative was a “hoax” and Williams was a free black man, not a slave driver. However, Fredrickson and Lasch, “Resistance to Slavery,” 324, contend that Ball's account “seems truer than most to the reality of slavery.”

6. Cf. Sterling Stuckey, “Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery,” *Massachusetts Review* 9 (1968), 417–37; Robert Ascher, “Excavation of a Georgia Slave Cabin,” unpublished paper, Cornell University Department of Archeology, 1969; Robert E. Thompson, “African Influence on the Arts of the United States,” in *Black Studies in the University: A Symposium* (New Haven, 1969), 122–70.

munications among slave rebels, letters and testimony by Negro informers against conspiracies, voluntary or forced confessions by slave rebels implicated in insurrections and plots, and letters to the American Colonization Society from slaves seeking to return to Africa, letters from the Liberian settlers to relatives and former masters, and the well-known fugitive-slave narratives. These letters, stories, and reminiscences still await careful analytical treatment, though some work has been done by Gilbert Osofsky and Julius Lester with the narrative materials.

Finally, there is a fascinating correspondence—amounting to a few hundred letters—that reveals the daily life and inner thoughts of bondsmen.⁷ These sources include letters from slave drivers, managers, house servants, artisans, hirelings, and field hands to their masters and mistresses. The correspondence also comprises several letters from one slave to another, most interestingly between those bondsmen who were married and between slaves about to be sold or already caught up in the interstate slave traffic. These documents relating to the plantation routine and black resistance, articulated by slaves themselves, comprise a magnificent body of primary documents that have remained virtually unexplored and unanalyzed.

Like the traditional sources, the slave letters present some of their own problems. Many of the letters were written by privileged bondsmen—those house servants, drivers, and artisans—who comprised an “elite” group of perhaps five or ten percent of the total slave population. These slaves usually lived on the largest plantations under conditions that were not representative of the average slave milieu. Only a few of the letters were actually composed by the “typical” slaves who worked as field hands on farms and small plantations. Thus, even though documents written by ordinary slaves have come to light—and these precious letters must be used to the utmost extent—most evidence still pertains to those bondsmen from the upper crust of slave society.⁸

7. The slave letters and “confessions” will be published in my *Slavery As It Was: The Testimony of the Slaves Themselves While in Bondage* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971). Though the analysis presented in this paper is based solely on a few plantations and several series of letters, the book contains many other slave letters, which may make the sample more “representative.”

8. Recent scholarship on the English and European working class, peasantry, and “mobs,” which employs pioneering methodology in lower-class sources, includes Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963),

A few of the letters were dictated to an amanuensis who supposedly transcribed the slave's thoughts and words exactly as they were spoken and intended. The feelings of the white transcriber may still have affected the expression of the slave narrator and place the black under a form of duress. Since slaves were writing to whites or were aware that whites might intercept letters to blacks, not every portion of the letters should be accepted literally. Deception was necessary for survival, not only when slaves communicated with each other, but especially when they addressed their masters.

Nevertheless, the slave correspondence is still valuable for a consideration of the old question of slave accommodation and resistance to the plantation system. After all, it was precisely this elite group which not only participated (willingly or not) in the process of accommodation, but also led protest activity for the purpose of survival. Thus the role and attitudes of two types of privileged slaves—house servants and drivers—within the plantation regime should be explored. To understand the role of house servants, their relationships with their masters as well as their feelings toward themselves and their own families must be probed. To understand the function of black overseers in disciplining field hands to forced labor, several sets of relationships should be examined: the attitudes between masters and drivers, those between masters and field hands, and those between the drivers and the field hands. As much as possible, these relationships should be considered from the slaves' perspective by analyzing their own correspondence, drawn from several plantations. Such a sample is of course neither numerically satisfactory nor statistically representative of typical plantations, since all of the slave drivers and servants worked for wealthy, absentee planters, not the average slaveholding farmer. But the sample does include the best evidence available written by the slaves themselves.

Compared to the traditional sources, the slave correspondence has

Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (Manchester, 1959), and George Rudé, *The Crowd in History* (New York, 1964). For a similar approach to American merchant seamen and late nineteenth-century workers, see Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets," *William and Mary Quarterly* 25 (1968), 371–407, and Herbert G. Gutman, "The Worker's Search for Power: Labor in the Gilded Age," H. Wayne Morgan, ed., *The Gilded Age* (Syracuse, 1963), 38–68. These studies are based on hitherto unused sources, such as police reports, church records, tax and voting rolls, as well as workers' own diaries, letters and newspapers. For a superior analysis of the oral traditions of largely non-literate African peoples, see Jan Vansina, *The Oral Tradition* (Chicago, 1965). For an explanation of black tales, spirituals, and folksongs, see Sterling Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore," 417–37.

several distinct advantages. Unlike the slave narratives, most slave letters were written while the slaves were still in bondage in the South; consequently, the time lag characteristic of the recollections is absent. The emotional trauma that accompanied and followed escapes is minimized in the correspondence between slaves and their masters. Abolitionist ghost-writing is of course absent, since most of the letters were actually written or dictated by slaves. The letters suggest what slaves thought and intended, as well as their emotions and feelings while still enslaved. They preserve the language, words, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and alliteration actually used by blacks.

Most remarkably, the letters reveal the drive for and extent of literacy in the slave community, despite regulations against education and writing. The whole question of literacy and articulateness must therefore be evaluated from the slaves' perspective and in the context of whom the slaves were addressing—whether the letters were intended for whites or blacks, for public or private reading. In short, along with the folklore, the music, and the narratives, the letters are the best sources we may hope to find for an understanding of slavery from the black man's perspective.

Brutality obviously characterized American slavery, but accommodation required subtle controls, such as the creation by masters of a divisive hierarchy within the slave community. For those privileged slaves religion, status, rewards, authority, pride, and paternalism all served to regulate their behavior and promote their identification with their masters' interests. House servants had little contact with the plantation hands, but they sometimes oversaw the overseers and cooperated with the owners. Drivers had considerable contact with field workers, but they were still trusted by their owners, served them obediently, and attempted to transmit "proper" standards to the rest of the slaves.

However, masters, overseers, and drivers never completely succeeded in inculcating religious and familial precepts to those under their charge or in compelling them to be totally submissive. A group of bondsmen—usually composed of field hands, artisans, and preachers—were able to articulate their grievances and disrupt plantation routines. Under certain circumstances, of course, drivers could become rebellious themselves, and house servants might deceive their

masters. But resistance leadership derived primarily from slave craftsmen and religious figures—like Gabriel, Vesey, and Turner—whose position was even more independent than that of other privileged slaves.

Letters written by or for house servants and drivers vividly point up the nature of and conflict involved in slave accommodation.

HOUSE SERVANTS

Masters considered domestic servants to be the most accommodating and submissive of all slaves. The “Cavalier Myth” required slaveholders to have a retinue of coal-black or mulatto servants on their estates to make them appear as self-sufficient, gracious, and hospitable as possible. Wealthy Southerners therefore used slave domestic servants as cooks, waiters, butlers, maids, hostlers, and coachmen at their townhouses and plantation mansions. Some house slaves were so encouraged to identify with their master’s interests that they tattled on overseers, spied on other slaves, and revealed insurrection plans.

Of all blacks, these household slaves (who were sometimes the mulatto offspring of the masters themselves) had the least contact with the field hands and the greatest intimacy with the white family. Trained from childhood, house servants were raised to believe that they were superior in status and importance to other bondsmen. They generally received extra privileges and better food, clothing, and shelter than the field hand group. The extent to which they comprised a separate caste is open to debate, however. House servants were in a precarious position, since they always faced the possibility of demotion to the fields for poor service or breaches of discipline.

Precisely because they lived under a special oppression and knew their masters so intimately, house servants could become deceptive and rebellious. Domestic servants were, after all, in an excellent position to “hustle” favors, practice “put-ons,” steal goods, poison their owners’ food or water and collaborate in uprisings or escapes with dissatisfied field hands and industrial bondsmen.⁹ Still, on a day-by-

9. There is a considerable body of evidence concerning houseservants in the travel accounts of Bremer, Buckingham, Kemble, Lyell, Olmsted, Redpath, and Stirling, as well as in the fugitive slave narratives by Steward, Thompson, Tubman, Pickard, Clarke, and Bibb, and the standard plantation records. The role of houseservants in slave uprisings can be traced in my documentary *Denmark Vesey: the Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice-Hall, 1970).

day basis, it was necessary for these bondsmen to survive slavery however they could.

One Southerner who employed many household slaves was David Campbell, a wealthy Abingdon, Virginia, planter, who served as governor from 1837 to 1841. A Jacksonian Democrat until 1840 when he became a Whig, Campbell was noted for his early advocacy of a state common school system. While in office, Campbell lived in Richmond with his wife, Mary, and his daughter, Virginia. The governor also brought to the capitol mansion some of his house servants, including Michael Valentine, an elderly butler; Eliza Dixon and Richard, Michael's daughter and son; and David, Michael's younger son. Campbell left behind at his valley estate, "Montcalm" (under the stewardship of a Mr. Latham), his other house servants, including Hannah Valentine, the elderly wife of Michael; Aunt Lucinda (Lucy) and Aunt Lethe Jackson, Hannah's two sisters who worked as cooks and gardeners; as well as Mary and some of the other slave children of Eliza Dixon.¹⁰

Campbell's departure for Richmond and the separation of his slaves resulted in a correspondence among the slaves themselves as well as between the plantation slaves and their owners in the city. Two rare slave letters from one house servant to another survive, as do two letters from house slaves to their mistresses. Though apparently dictated by the blacks through a white amanuensis, these letters still suggest some of the house servants' feelings toward themselves, their families, and their master.

Most striking among the attitudes revealed in the house servant letters are their strong feelings for their own black relatives and family, as well as for their master and mistresses. The detailed information and gossip about plantation and neighborhood affairs, their own activities, and the behavior of other slaves and of the overseer are significant. Their strong belief in Christianity and their clear consciousness of their own obedience, responsibility for their master's interests, and dependence on their owners for orders, direction, and approval are sharply revealed. The domestic servants' lack of concern about the life or labor of the field hands suggests the profound social division between the two groups on the larger plantations. However, the household slaves' apparent acculturation should

10 David Campbell Papers, Duke University.

not be equated with complete submissiveness, as is indicated by the quest for greater privileges expressed in some of the letters.

Hannah Valentine's first letter to her daughter, Eliza Dixon, in Richmond, demonstrated clearly the house servants' emphasis on family ties, good conduct, and religious faith. After chatting about health, children, and other personal affairs, Hannah turned to family matters and sent her "best love to Michel & David. tell Michel that I am very Happy to Hear that he Has seen all his Relations." Hannah also informed Eliza that her children "are all well and doing very well," and that her "Little Daughter Mary is one of the best children in the world." Hannah then directed her son to behave properly: "tell David he must be a good Boy as Nothing will give me as much pleasure as to hear of his Good Conduct," and, she added, "it is all my thought for fear you not conduct your selves as Genteel as I would wish you to do." Hannah urged her husband to remind all his relatives that "they must behave themselves and be as Genteel as they possibly can and try to take Good care of their Master and Mistress Knowing they are the Best Friends they have in this world." With precise observation Hannah then told Eliza about the number of religious conversions attained. "Mary tells Me to say to Miss Virginia [Campbell]," Hannah stressed, "that she must not forget Her but [to] Remember her in her Praises." She closed her letter with the comforting phrase: "I Remain your Most Affectionate Mother Until Death—Hannah Valentine."¹¹

Hannah's letter to her husband, Michael, demonstrates poignantly not only her personal loneliness but also her concern for the well-being and good conduct of her family. Beginning sadly, Hannah felt "so anxious to hear from you and my children, and indeed from all the family"; but she then scolded her husband for having "treated me badly in not answering my last letter. . . . I want a letter to tell me what you are doing and all about yourself and Eliza & David," she ordered. After gossiping about plantation sickness and other local matters, Hannah reported that Eliza's children "grow very fast [and] do not talk much about her now, but seem to be very well satisfied without her." She was also "much pleased to hear" that her son David "has been a good boy [and] he must continue to be so." Throughout her letter Hannah conveyed messages to various friends

11. Hannah Valentine to Eliza Dixon (in Richmond), Abingdon, Va., November 1, 1837.

and relatives in Richmond from folks—black and white—in Abingdon; she thus served as an intermediary between the plantation and town people. Hannah sent her love not only to her own immediate family, but even more interestingly to Michael’s “brothers & sisters and to their wives & husbands”—the extended family—in Richmond. However, Hannah reserved her “best love” for Campbell’s family, and she urged Michael to “tell me particularly about Master & Mistress, how they look and if Mistress is as much pleased with Richmond as at first.”¹²

Hannah’s correspondence with Mary Campbell, her mistress in Richmond, indicates her acquiescence in her status, concern for her owner’s property, and her own direct participation in the functioning of the slave system. Hannah first thanked Mrs. Campbell for her last letter, expressed concern for her health, and reported on the cold weather, the doings of the neighbors, the condition of the house and garden, and the well-being of the livestock and the slaves. “Please tell Eliza that her children look very well,” Hannah commented, and “I have not found Mary eating any dirt since she got her mothers letter.” Hannah then asked whether she should preserve some of the fruit and berries, and added thoughtfully that “if you have no objection I will sell the ballance, and see how profitable I can make them for you.” Though Hannah understood the profit motive, she also begged her “dear Mistress” to give her “especial directions about every thing you want done [at Montcalm]. . . . I will if I am spared,” she promised, “do exactly as you wish me as I can.”

Suggesting the house servants’ protectiveness toward their owner’s property, Hannah related how “Aunt Lethe was somewhat annoyed by persons from town, schoolchildren &c who crossed the garden.” To remedy this situation, Aunt Lethe “put a lock on the gate, and we have determined not to let any one go in it again, unless,” Hannah hastened to add, it is “some lady that we know would not molest any thing.” With even greater sense of responsibility, Hannah concluded with a remarkably detailed report on the trustworthiness of the white overseer. “Mr Lathim is the most industrious man I ever saw and is as amiable and quiet a young man as ever was,” Hannah proclaimed.

12. Hannah Valentine to my dear husband (Michael, in Richmond), Abingdon, Va., January 30, 1838.

He "seldom leaves the house, never has left on the sabbath, [and] He seems perfectly contented tho he has no company but his books on sunday, and during the long winter nights, he has a fire in the living room, but always went early to bed," she concluded with approval, "as he worked hard all day. He is very careful and seems to consider your interest in every thing."¹³

In the last of these letters, Aunt Lethe Jackson, the gardener at Abingdon, wrote to Virginia Campbell, her young mistress residing in Richmond. Lethe's letter, even more than those of Hannah, substantiates the extent to which some house slaves acquiesced in their master's religious precepts and were dependent on whites for direction. Lethe's thoughts are therefore quoted extensively:

My dear and much respected Miss Virgina

I was much pleased at receiving your letter and was very highly flattered to think that you in the gay Metropolis so much admired and caressed should still condescend to remember old Aunt Lethe on the retired hill of Mont-calm, and be assured my sweet young mistress that old Aunt Lethe still remembers you with feelings of the utmost respect and esteem—And my Mistress too I am glad to hear she is getting better and that she has not forgotten lowly me—I hope she will still live to be a blessing to all of us—

Everything is going finely and prospers in my hands—The flowers in the garden . . . begins to look like a little paradise . . . just waiting your return to complete their happiness. . . . Tell My Master I think all the world of him and long once more to see his dignified steps up our hill—Tell Mistress I hope I shall soon hear of her recovery and that we long for the time when she will be again here to give her directions and have everything as it ought to be and as she wants it—We have all done the best we could since she went away but still there is nothing like having a person of sense to dictate—and then if we are obedient every thing goes on smoothly and happy—I try Miss Virginia to be contented at all times and am determined not to let aything make me unhappy, we are taught to resemble our Maker and He is always happy, therefore it is our duty to be happy too—knowing that his divine Providence is over all our changes my mind is continually aspiring to that heavenly place where all our sorrow will terminate. . . . Miss Virginia I feel extremely happy when I think what a good Lord & Saviour we have and I feel determined to serve him to the best of my knowledge. . . .

Oh Miss Virginia my heart is so full I know not what to say. . . . Oh Master! Oh Mistress! Oh Miss Virginia I want to see you all and Michael

13. Hannah to Mrs. Mary H. Campbell (in Richmond), Abingdon, Va., May 2, 1838.

and Eliza and Richard and David and all; my heart is large enough to hold you all—I pray that the Lord will take care of you and keep you from all evil—I hope I have not made too free in anything I said—I wanted to write as if I was talking to you—With every sentiment of veneration and esteem I remain Your faithfull servant. . . .¹⁴

DRIVERS

On small farms masters could manage their slaves themselves, but on plantations it was necessary to employ an overseer and to make the estate as self-sufficient as possible. Since white managers were scarce in the Old South, a slave—known as a driver or foreman—sometimes worked under the overseer or master to supervise and punish the field hands. Drivers had great responsibilities, superior privileges, and awesome disciplinary powers. Some had virtually complete control of the plantation when the master or overseer was absent. In this respect, drivers helped make the plantation system a self-functioning agricultural unit and acted as agents of accommodation of the field workers.

The drivers' position between owners and slaves placed them in a difficult situation. In effect, they were compelled to control their fellow bondsmen for the benefit of their masters. Sometimes drivers punished slaves more severely than whites did; their ambiguous position could express itself in vicious cruelty. Other drivers, however, were more lenient, and often used their position to protect slaves within the system of white superiority. Drivers could also become leaders of escape attempts and resistance movements, but most of them were trapped in their onerous role. Because many foremen were literate, their reports to their masters survive, giving some suggestion of the dilemmas drivers faced, as well as the plantation routine they directed.¹⁵ The existence of exchanges between masters and

14. Lethe Jackson to Miss Virginia Campbell (in Richmond), Montcalm, April 18, 1838.

15. The several travel accounts of Olmsted are especially valuable for information on the role of drivers, as are the fugitive-slave narratives of Henson, Tubman, and Randolph. The leadership of drivers in slave conspiracies (such as Denmark Vesey's) can be discerned from Lionel H. Kennedy and Thomas Parker, eds., *An Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negroes, Charged with an Attempt to Raise an Insurrection in the State of South-Carolina* (Charleston, 1822), 28–31. Edmund Ruffin's *Farmers' Register*, 4: 114–16, and 8: 230–31, advised masters to discipline drivers separately from, and out of sight of, the field hands.

drivers also permits of a more rounded view of the relationship.

One master who used black overseers was William S. Pettigrew of North Carolina. Pettigrew was born in 1818 and educated in law at the University of North Carolina. He forsook a legal practice and, after 1838, lived at his two plantations—Magnolia and nearby Belgrade—in Tyrrell County.¹⁶ Each plantation was worked by about forty slaves—fifteen men, fifteen women, and ten children—who farmed a variety of grain crops and tobacco. Every year in the 1850s, from June to October, Pettigrew, a bachelor, vacationed at the Virginia mineral springs. In 1857–58, he was absent from home for almost the entire year. Rather than use white overseers whom he found to be “of harsh, unyielding tempers,” Pettigrew entrusted the management of his plantations entirely to his two black overseers, Moses and Henry,¹⁷ whom he instructed jointly or singly by letter. The slaves in turn made weekly reports to their master by means of letters dictated through Melachi White, a neighboring white farmer.¹⁸ Though White and other friends of Pettigrew seem to have lived in the vicinity of his estates, the two black overseers were virtually in complete charge of the plantation operations. There was no white overseer present at Pettigrew’s places for many months of the year.

Moses’s and Henry’s successful maintenance, in Pettigrew’s absence, of discipline and output derived from complex relationships between the master, the black overseers, and the field hands. Concerning these relationships, Pettigrew once confided his private intentions to his closest friend:

. . . As far as I can, up to this time, form an opinion, I think, my people will, by assistance of the two negro men who have heretofore been over them (Henry at Magnolia, & Moses at Belgrade) work faithfully, and conduct themselves well. It has been my effort, since my business has been so much increased, to stimulate the principal men to be faithful to me. They promise well, & appear to do so in good faith.

16. Pettigrew was a member of the North Carolina secession convention of 1861; after the war he was an episcopal minister until his death in 1900. The Pettigrew Family papers have been deposited at the North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, and at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

17. Pettigrew to J. C. Johnston, December 31, 1845. There were, in 1858, about 18 male slaves, 13 women, and 9 children at Magnolia; Belgrade had 13 men, 15 women, and 14 children. The names, occupations, dates of birth and death, and family ties of the slaves mentioned in this paper are given in the table below.

18. The complete correspondence, which mainly pertains to farm business, consists in several score letters written by Pettigrew, Moses, Henry, and Malachi White.

Even more revealing is the slave correspondence itself, which clearly indicates that Pettigrew's basic strategy was to instill a sort of plantation pride in his black overseers and hands. "Will you remember me kindly to the people and say to them that I hope they are conducting themselves well," the master urged the black overseers again and again. "They should do so, and I hope [they] will. Their good

Slave name	Occupation	Date of birth	Date of death	Relationship
Uncle Bill	driver	1780	1844	Glasgow's father
Uncle Charles		1775	?	Moses's uncle
Moses	Belgrade driver	1800	ca. 1860	Charles' nephew
Lizzy	servant ?	1790		Moses's wife
Henry	Magnolia driver	1806		Moses's cousin
Lydia	servant ?	1796	1850	Henry's wife; when she dies, Henry pays for her tombstone out of his account with Pettigrew.
Polly		1823	}	children of Henry & Lydia
Elijah		1823		
Airy		1830		
Airy		1780		
Abigail (Gilly)		1785		
Affy		?		Henry's aunt
Glasgow	Belgrade driver after 1860	1827		son of Uncle Bill and cousin of Moses
Jerry		1807		
Frank Buck	Belgrade carpenter	1821		
Dick Buck		1825		
Terry		?		
Venus		?		
Jack	field hands	1817		
Patience		1828		
Bill		1847		

This table is based on information from the slave correspondence cited below, and on Pettigrew's account books, Volumes 22, 25, 29, and 41.

conduct will be very gratifying to me and will add greatly to their credit and to the good name of their home."¹⁹

To intensify their pride, Pettigrew entrusted considerable responsibilities to his two slave managers. "You must do all in your power

19. Pettigrew to J. C. Johnston, December 7, 1848; see for example Pettigrew to Moses, July 12, 1856; Pettigrew to Moses and Henry, September 20, 1858, and September 29, 1857.

to promote the welfare and credit of Belgrade during my absence," he confided to Moses. "The people promised me to be industrious and obedient to you. You must remind them of this promise should any of them be disposed to forget it." Pettigrew made it plain to the overseers that their position and good "credit" (as he called it) depended on the smooth functioning of his estates; it would be "distressing and mortifying," he warned, to learn of any problems on his return. "I have placed much reliance in your management, industry, and honesty by thus leaving the plantation and all on it in your charge," continued the master, "nor have I any fear that you will fall short of the confidence I have placed in you." As a demonstration of his "confidence" in the black overseers, Henry was once given the authority to hire a *white* neighbor to cut wood.²⁰

Pettigrew's delegation of power to his Negroes was very substantial. He permitted them to make all of the day-to-day decisions on the farms: "As you are on the spot and are better acquainted, than I can possibly be at this distance, with the progress that has been made in ditching, I must leave it to your judgment as to whether you can do it or not."²¹ Since the slaves were almost completely in charge, and since there were two plantations, discipline required that the two drivers not quarrel with each other. Any disunity at the administrative level would tend to create dissidence among the hands. "You and Henry must endeavor to manage to the best advantage and occasionally you should talk together on the subject of what should be done," Pettigrew warned Moses. "You must not be unfriendly to each other, as it would injure both places and yourselves, as well as myself."²² However, Pettigrew still made the basic, long-range decisions for his business and did attempt to supervise his overseers closely through his personal, written communications.

In return for their services the black overseers received privileges and rewards that served to increase their prestige and power over the other hands. Henry obtained a pass to visit a nearby town and five dollars spending money for the trip. Moses and Henry each received a new pair of boots annually, whereas the rest of the hands received only shoes. The black managers also possessed most of the symbols

20. Pettigrew to Moses, June 24, 1856; Pettigrew to Henry, September 20, 1858.

21. Pettigrew to Moses and Henry, September 20, 1858, September 11, 1858, and September 21, 1857; Pettigrew to Moses, September 9, 1856, September 2, 1856, and July 6, 1857. Ditching was not a long-range decision.

22. Pettigrew to Moses, June 24, 1856.

of authority—whips and high boots and greatcoats, compared to the field hands' jackets and shoes. Moreover, the position of overseer was passed down within slave family groups, so that Glasgow—Moses' cousin and the son of Uncle Bill, the foreman who had died in 1844—inherited the job when Moses died in 1860.²³ In this way, elite families from which the overseers were selected became differentiated from the field hands.

To complement his relationships with his black overseers, Pettigrew maintained personal contact with the rest of the slaves, sending them occasional words of praise and encouragement. "Remember me kindly to the people, and say that I am glad to learn that they have conducted themselves so well during my long absence," he recommended. "I hope they will hold out to the end in well doing." In this regard, Pettigrew was very careful to retain relations with the older slaves, especially the house servants and drivers' wives, who could assist the managers in maintaining plantation order. "Remember me kindly to the people, particularly the older ones," he often stressed, "and say to them that I frequently think of them and am glad to hear they are well." Sometimes Pettigrew would even send personal messages to his favorite bondsmen who, in return, seemed to develop great respect for their master. "Remember me to Uncle Charles, Affy, Airy, Gilly, Lizzy, Polly, and to all the people," he directed. And, of course, such intimacy was enhanced when Pettigrew closed his letters with the comforting phrase, "believe me, your friend, Wm. S. Pettigrew." Moreover, Pettigrew also gave his pet hands privileges and rewards: Polly once obtained a pass to visit a nearby town, and Affy received permission to visit a neighboring plantation. The rest of the slaves normally received a three-day holiday after harvest as well as occasional Saturdays and the standard Christmas-week break.²⁴

23. Pettigrew to Moses, July 6, 1857; Pettigrew to Moses and Henry, July 28, 1858; Henry and Moses to Pettigrew, August 7 and 10, 1858; see table above, and Pettigrew to sister, [1860?]. Living arrangements of the slave families are not clear.

24. Pettigrew to Moses, September 9, 1856, and August 30, 1856. Pettigrew to Moses and Henry, September 15, 1858, and September 22, 1858; Pettigrew to Moses, July 6, 1857. From 1848 to at least 1853, Pettigrew also used an elaborate system of material incentives as a means of slave discipline. For the effectiveness of these rewards, see my recent book on *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York, 1970), ch. 3. Pettigrew's father, Ebenezer, used the same system until his death in 1848, when the slave accounts were settled by giving most slaves fifty dollars in credits. It is not clear whether this system was still operative after 1853.

The effectiveness of Pettigrew's use of plantation pride as a means of accommodation may be evaluated by examining the overt behavior of the slaves as well as the letters they wrote back to their master. Such evidence indicates that Pettigrew succeeded in commanding the loyalty not only of the two overseers but also of the house servants and most of the field hands. Indicative of the acquiescence of Pettigrew's slaves to the plantation routine are reports from the two black overseers, parts of which are worth quoting at length: "Dear Master" (the letters always began),

I was happy to hear from master an am thankful to receive the lines witch master sent to me. I return my respects to you, an I take great pleasure of sending a few lines back to master an hope it may be a great comfort to master in reading them. I have don all in my power toward your benefit. The behaviour of the people I have no fault to find of them. All the people has been faithful and dutiful and veary well behaved to me and to thare work and all have agreed together since master left home. I take a delight in writing to master my love as soon as master can make it convenant I should like to hear from him again, I want to see master as bad as I ever did an ef master cant come pleas send some word so that I can hear from you all the people wishes thare love and respect to master, hoping master is well. all wants to see you an myself also veary bad.

The slave reports would then close with the familiar, respectful salutation, "your Servant and your friend, Moses and Henry."²⁵

The older slaves, the houseservants, and the drivers' wives (who sometimes appended messages of their own at the end of the overseers' reports) also seem to have become accommodated to Pettigrew's routine. Typically, one of the managers would end his report with "polly, arry, an effy wishes thare love to master an all the old ones. tha were veary glad to hear from you." Polly asked Pettigrew to send her some cooking utensils, and Lizzy closed the letter as follows: "I shall be glad to see master come home when may be to his convenance. ef I never should see master no more I hope we shall meat in hevan."²⁶ At least with the older slaves, Pettigrew's arrangements apparently were effective.

Despite the use of black drivers, slave resistance at Pettigrew's

25. For typical slave letters, see Moses to Pettigrew, July 5, August 2, and August 9, 1856, and March 20, 1858; Henry to Pettigrew, July 5, August 2, and August 9, 1856, February 27, and March 13, 1858.

26. Henry to Pettigrew, July 5, 1856, September 12, 1857; Polly to Pettigrew, October 10, 1857; Lizzy to Pettigrew, July 5, 1856.

plantations occasionally surfaced during Moses's and Henry's twelve-year stewardship. In 1850, "two or three unprincipled fellows" (led by Frank Buck, a twenty-nine-year-old slave carpenter, "remarkable," as Pettigrew wrote, "for smartness both of body and mind, and no less worthy of note for his lamentable deficiency in common honesty") cut a trapdoor under the lard-and-meat house at Belgrade, and for some months carried on "a robbery" until Buck was caught, lodged in irons, forced to confess, and released on the condition that he would become a "better man." In 1855, Venus was caught by the patrol at 2 AM one night carousing with a friend. Then, in 1858, Moses had a "fracus" with his cousin Jerry, who was whipping a youngster. I "told him, to stop," reported Moses, "an he did not an gave words an I hit him, an it all was between me an him." Two weeks later, the patrol caught Dick Buck at night with some flour, beat him, and turned him over to Moses. The driver whipped him some more and lodged him in Pettigrew's "penitentiary." Moses and Henry seem to have quarreled only once—over sharing some brandy.²⁷

In the fall of 1857, however, shortly after Pettigrew had returned from vacation, several slaves were involved in stealing money and attempting to escape. Frank Buck, the slave carpenter, who was apparently in league with Venus, Jack, Patience, and Bill—four field hands—made a set of false keys, robbed the master of \$160 worth of gold and silver and then ran away. Frank Buck (who, according to Pettigrew, was "very polite in his manners when an end is to be gained") informed several white persons whom he encountered on the roads that he had been sent by his master to search for a fugitive! Despite such "art and cunning"—to use Pettigrew's epithet—Frank and his accomplices were soon caught, flogged, and incarcerated. As further punishment, all of the resisters were deprived of their ration of molasses. As late as January 1858, however, Frank was still refusing to return the stolen money.²⁸

In reaction to the slave unrest, Pettigrew admitted that his confi-

27. Pettigrew to James C. Johnston, October 3, 1850; S. S. Woodley to Pettigrew, January 7, 1855; Moses to Pettigrew, September 25 and October 9, 1858; Moses and Henry to Pettigrew, January 30, 1858.

28. Runaway advertisement by Pettigrew, November 13, 1857; Pettigrew to Moses and Henry, December 18, 1857; Moses to Pettigrew, January 23, 1858. According to the advertisement, Frank the carpenter was "about 5 ft. 9 inches in height, 37 years of age, weighing about 140, of a *dark mulatto* color, not fleshy, some of his teeth rotten in front, with a small scar on his forehead, over one eye, caused by a kick from a horse when a child. . . ." A hundred-dollar reward was offered.

dence was “much impaired” and he was “apprehensive” about further trouble. He instituted several repressive measures: first, he cancelled Christmas vacations, on the grounds that the slaves should be “ashamed to be seen away from home after the plantation has been so disgraced by those criminals.” Next, he insisted that Moses and Henry keep him better informed about their business affairs. Despite his continued absence, Pettigrew was “more so than ever anxious” and “interested” in them. When Moses died, as mentioned earlier, Pettigrew elevated Glasgow, Moses’s cousin, to the post of overseer—indicating his determination to continue to use drivers for disciplinary purposes. “Glasgow possesses many qualities that will, I think if cultivated, adapt him to his present position,” asserted Pettigrew after making the new appointment. “He is honest, industrious, not too *talkative* (which is a necessary qualification), a man of good sense, a good hand himself, and has been heretofore faithful in the discharge of whatever may have been committed to his care. He is but thirty two years of age [which] may militate against him [only] for a short while. . . . [for] withal, the young man grows up with the business of the plantation, and it becomes incorporated in his very mind.”²⁹

Slave drivers were also employed by the Reverend Charles Colcock Jones of Georgia, the eloquent pastor of Savannah’s First Presbyterian Church who became the leading proponent of formal religious training for slaves. The minister seemed concerned for the salvation of the slaves’ souls, but he stressed that religion should be deliberately used to control the slave population—that is, as he said, to support “the peace, the order, the purity, the happiness, and the prosperity of our Southern country.” Jones firmly believed that “a faithful servant is more profitable than an unfaithful one,” and both his widely used slave catechism and his famous pamphlet *Suggestions on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the Southern States* (1838) were being reprinted as late as 1862.³⁰

29. Pettigrew to Moses and Henry, December 18, 1857; Pettigrew to sister, [1860?]. Pettigrew confided to J. C. Johnston, May 11, 1856: “What a blessing it is to have two such [black] men in whose hands to commit my two places; whose chief desire I think is to relieve me of as much burden as possible; to promote my happiness here, and to remove stumbling blocks from my way towards rest hereafter.”

30. The Reverend C. C. Jones of Savannah, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes. A Sermon* (1831, Princeton, N. J., 1832), 24–32; C. C. Jones, *Suggestions*

The Reverend Jones had an opportunity to practice what he preached, since after 1832 he operated three rice plantations in Liberty County, Georgia. Jones was often absent from his estates, however, preaching his gospel around the South, teaching "ecclesiastical history" at a Columbia, South Carolina, theological seminary, and spending several months each year in Philadelphia at the offices of the Presbyterian Board of Domestic Missions. To manage the plantations in his absence, Jones employed at least two white overseers, John S. Stevens and Thomas J. Shepard, to whom he sent letters of instructions. Under these whites worked three black managers: Cato, the foreman at "Montevideo," Andrew, the driver at "Maybank," and Sandy Maybank, the head carpenter. With these three slaves, as well as with others, Jones carried on an unusual correspondence, but separate from his letters to the white overseers.³¹

This correspondence clearly reveals that Jones attempted to accommodate his work force to bondage mainly through careful instruction in Christian beliefs, hopeful that his slave managers would transmit conservative religious ideas to the field hands. "I trust you are holding on in your high profession of the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ at all times, and constantly watch and pray," Jones wrote to Sandy the carpenter, after directing the slave to complete some work. "I hope God will be with you and give you good health again," the master advised Cato the foreman, expressing similar sentiments. "You know our life and health are in His hands, and it is a great comfort to me to have a good hope that you love Him, and do put all your trust in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who is a precious Saviour to us in life and death."³² By urging his slaves to place their faith in religious salvation, Jones attempted to promote plantation discipline.

To reinforce his religious instruction Jones granted some of his favorite bondsmen, particularly the foremen, extraordinary privileges in return for their services. He paid some slaves pocket money,

on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the Southern States (Philadelphia, 1847 edition), 28–40; R. B. Rhett, et al., eds., *Proceedings of the Meeting in Charleston, S.C., May 13–15, 1845, on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes* (Charleston, 1845), 8–9, 22, 59–61, 65.

31. Manuscript material relating to the Jones family is located at the Georgia Historical Society, Savannah; the University of Georgia, Athens; and Tulane University, New Orleans, La.

32. Jones to Sandy, August 15, 1853; Jones to Cato, January 28, 1851.

awarded them extra rest periods, gave them Christmas and New Year's gifts, singled out elderly or devout servants for special attention, and sometimes permitted Sandy the carpenter to "hire out" his own time to other planters. Jones's foremen thus enjoyed those privileges which could enhance their prestige and authority in the eyes of the slave field hands whom they directed, but who did not share such favors.

If the letters composed by the slave drivers themselves are any indication, Jones' religious instruction contributed substantially to their accommodation to bondage. "Dear Master," Cato the driver once wrote,

I received your kind letter, and . . . I felt thankful to god for So good a master and it made me feel melancholy to think you and mistress who I know loved and felt for me was so far away, and the uncertainties of our lives. Maybe we Shall never look on one another, but be this as it may, we know one thing: if we live as we aught death cant Separate us, though it may do so far a little while . . . [I] send you my great Thanks for the kindness & love which I know you have for me and also for the New years present your letter contained, but besides all this, I feel thankful Master for Your Memorance of me, when you bow befor god. And beg you Still to do so for his and your unworthy Servant, and I will do so for you the best I can. I wish to live right, and Serve god faithfully, and be prepared, let death come sooner or later, and I know I cant be unfaithful to my Earthly Master, and faithful to god. but I feel it in me If I am faithful to my heavenly Master the Best I can, then Every Thing goes right.³³

Of course, the drivers may have been "puttin' on Ole Massa" to obtain better conditions for themselves or their field hand friends. But the evidence seems to point more in the direction of loyalty by drivers to their masters than toward deception.

Jones's slaves also seemed greatly impressed by the simple fact that their master cared enough to correspond with them; Jones apparently succeeded in making his hands feel as if they were members of his own family. "I always feel satisfied that I have a good Shear of your Love and confidence," Cato once disclosed to his master, "but whenever I See you take the time and trouble, to write me your Servant a kind and I may say fatherly letter, it makes me feel more like crying with love and gratitude for So kind a master than anything else, and [I] always feel it in my heart to say [that] I will try and be

33. Cato to Jones, March 3, 1851.

a better Servant than ever.”³⁴ Jones’s drivers thus seem to have assimilated their master’s concept of the family ideal, and were greatly confident that their “father” was fulfilling his obligations.

The letters written by the foremen also indicate that they had become their master’s most trusted agents for controlling the field hands and other slaves. “As for all the women I have nothing to Complain,” reported Cato the driver, “in the religious duties they all Seem willing and are punctual at the hour of Prayer and [I] am in hopes [they] are trying to live Christian lives. . . . I make all the children go out [to be catechized and to hear the preacher, Mr Winn.] We are all much pleased with Mr. Winn, and hope he will come as often as he can.” Similarly, driver Andrew reported that his own daughter had joined the church after hearing a preacher administer the sacraments. “I trust she may practice what she professes,” confided Andrew, “for as Mas John says it is no light thing to be a christian, for we may play with the lightning and the rattle snake, but dont trifle with Almighty God.”³⁵

Although Jones’s arrangements seemed effective, especially with privileged slaves, discipline was never complete. Even religious instruction and the family ideal could never guarantee that there would not be backsliders and recalcitrants. In this regard, the slave correspondence is especially revealing of the lives of two bondsmen named Phoebe and Cash, who were “married.” According to the records, Cash was definitely a field hand, while Phoebe served partly as a seamstress and sometimes worked in the fields.³⁶ They were a very troublesome couple. As early as 1851, Cato the driver reported to Jones on the problem of managing these two blacks. Ever since Cash has been living with Phoebe, complained Cato, “I am afraid he has given himself up to the old boy . . . [and] he appears more petulant and has not only given up going to prayers but I have several times heard him make use of bad words whenever he was displeased.” Using religion as a means of control, Cato brought Cash’s case before the local minister, who in turn “cited” him in front of the next church service. “Phoebe and I get along So, So,” reported the driver.

34. Cato to Jones, September 3, 1852.

35. Cato to Jones, March 3, 1851; Andrew to Jones, September 10, 1852; cf. Lucy to Jones, December 30, 1850.

36. Jones to Shepard, March 6, 1851, and January 28, 1851.

“So far as yet, She does her work very well, but there is a strong notion now and then to break out, but she knows well Enough how it will be if She does, and I am in hope she will let her better judgment rule her passions.”³⁷

Over the next six years, Cash’s cussing and Phoebe’s passions became so unruly that driver Cato could not control them. Despite his religious principles—which once led him to regard with “admiration” certain plans of manumission and colonization³⁸—Jones decided to dispose of these two slaves along with several members of their family. They were placed with a slave trader and shipped to New Orleans for sale, where they apparently found an opportunity—on March 17, 1857—to write back to their family and friends on the old plantation. Since they wrote their letter themselves, not dictating it, and *before* they had been sold to a new master, it is one of the few direct expressions by blacks subjected to the interstate slave traffic.³⁹

Phoebe and Cash began their letter with a request to a “Mr. Delions” to send regards to members of their family still in Georgia; then they related how “sister Jane” died on the way to Louisiana. “Pleas tell my daughter Clairissa and Nancy a heap how a doo for me Pheaby and Cash and Cashes son James. we left Savanah the first of Jany,” they continued, “we are now in New Orleans. Please tell them that their sister Jane died the first of Feby. we did not know what was the matter with her. . . .” The two slaves then demonstrated complete consciousness of their predicament: “Although we were sold for spite we hope it is for our own good, but we cannot be doing any better than [this]. we are doing very well. . . . please tell Cato,” they demanded, with open hostility for their former driver and previous treatment, “that what [food] we have got to throw away now would be enough to furnish your Plantation for one season.” Phoebe

37. Cato to Jones, March 3, 1851.

38. Jones was very careful to make a distinction between his religious work and the issue of emancipation, maintaining that he could not afford even privately to have his preaching associated with abolition. Jones to J. McDonogh, December 22, 1843.

39. Phoebe and Cash to Mr. Delions, New Orleans, March 17, 1857. The existence of this extraordinary letter, as well as several others like it, contradicts the assertion by Wall, “African Slavery,” 178, that “from the interstate slave traders there are only scattered records; from the sold chattels none. . . .”

and Cash then concluded their letter with the following series of messages to family and friends:

. . . please answer this Letter for Clairssa and Let me know all that has hapend since i left. Please tell them that the Children were all sick with the measles but they are all well now. Clairssa your affectionate mother and Father sends a heap of Love to you and your Husband and my Grand Children Phebea. Mag & Cloe. John. Judy. Sue. My aunt Aufy sinena and Minton and Little Plaska. Charles Nega. Fillis and all of their Children. Cash. Prime. Lafitte. Rick Tonia sends their love to you all. Give our Love to Cashes Brother Porter and his wife Patience. Victoria gives her Love to her Cousin Beck and Miley

I have no more to say untill i get a home. I remain your affectionate
Mother and Father.

Pheobia and Cash

P. S.

Please give my love to Judys Husband Plaska and also Cashes love.⁴⁰

Not only are Phoebe and Cash hostile to driver Cato, but throughout their letter they never mention either their master or any member of his family—suggesting that they had not assimilated the Reverend Jones's concept of a family of co-religionists. On the other hand, the slaves do send their love to many members of their own family, retaining their own family ties while rejecting Jones's paternalism. Moreover, Phoebe and Cash's letter is entirely non-religious in tone, even when they send regards to friends and family—a point at which other slave (and non-slave) letters usually break into religious imagery. This secular character of the slave letter suggests again that the two slaves never assimilated either Jones's (or Cato's) religious indoctrination; Phoebe and Cash remained recalcitrant and refractory to the bitter end.

There was great diversity in the slave response. Recalcitrance need not surprise us, nor should accommodation. The possibilities for accommodation were available to some slaves and were actively promoted by some masters. Further work on sources from slaves themselves should increase our understanding of the quality and extent of the varied responses of slaves. It should also prove suggestive for those who seek to understand black history since slavery's end.

40. Cf. Abream Scriven to Dinah Jones, Savannah, September 19, 1858. The financial loss of Jane prompted Jones's son to comment that one should never trust a slave trader to be careful—an interesting example of how masters who sold their slaves transferred the blame (and guilt) for losses to the slave traders who were merely acting as agents. C. C. Jones, Jr., to Jones, March 28, 1857.