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Breaking with tradition: Slave literacy in early Virginia, 1680–1780

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**BREAKING WITH TRADITION:
Slave Literacy in Early Virginia, 1680-1780**

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the American Studies Program

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

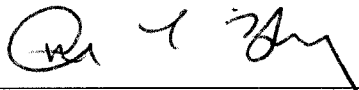
Antonio T. Bly

2006

APPROVAL SHEET

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the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

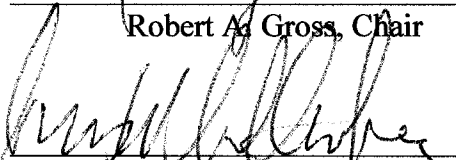


Antonio Tyrone Bly

Approved by the Committee, May 2006



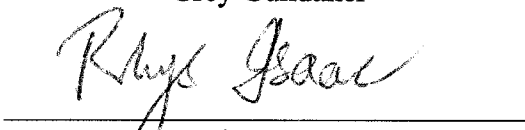
Robert Ad Gross, Chair



James P. Whittenburg



Grey Gundaker



Rhys Isaac
Professor Emeritus, LaTrobe University
Victoria, Australia

For my father.

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PREFACE.

It seemed to be everywhere. Eighteenth-century Virginia was a world immersed in letters. Or so it must have appeared in the beginning to newly arrived Africans in the tobacco colony who observed with wonder how books and newspapers, letters and broadsides seemed to speak, as if by some strange form of magic. That was certainly the view Olaudah Equiano, once a slave in the colony of Virginia, recorded in his *Narrative*.¹ “I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading,” he explained, “and I had a great curiosity to talk to the book, as I thought they did.” For that purpose, “I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ear to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me, and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent.”² For a time, print was clearly a mystery to Equiano. Although a recent study by Vincent Carretta has raised some doubts about whether or not Equiano was an actual native of Africa or of South Carolina, one thing seems apparent: whether his recollections concerning Ibo culture were his own or borrowed from others, Africans observed with awe the book’s power to speak.³ Indeed, that was true of other Africans who lived to write about it. In the extant accounts of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, a Bournou African, and Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, a native of the Gold Coast, each observed print as a form of sorcery in which the book spoke to the reader.⁴

¹Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African. Written by Himself*, in *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English Speaking World of the 18th Century*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1996), 207.

²Olaudah Equiano, *Narrative*, in *Unchained Voices*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1996), 211.

³Vincent Carretta, “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity” *S&A* 20 (December 1999): 96-105.

⁴James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, As related by Himself*, in *Ibid.*, 38; Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commence of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great Britain*, in *Ibid.*, 150-151. For a fuller discussion of the trope of the talking book, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literacy Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), 127-169.

The true mystery, however, lay not in print as a way of communicating knowledge but in the form, that is words on parchment or paper, that literacy assumed in western culture. As Grey Gundaker's studies of African American vernacular traditions have demonstrated, Africans had developed their own writing systems, systems that would have been considered as a mystery to most contemporary western observers.⁵ By Equiano's own account, the Ibo had one such system of signs. "My father was one of those elders or chiefs I have spoken of, and was styled Embrembe," he recounted, "a term, as I remember, importing the highest distinction, and signifying in our language a mark of grandeur. This mark is conferred on the person entitled to it, by cutting the skin across at the top of the forehead." The Ibo were not the only Africans who had developed their own writing systems. Quite the contrary, in many African cultures, the body, rather than parchment, represented a form of paper and scarring a form of print or a system of signs.⁶

Still, while most African societies did have writing systems of their own, for much of the eighteenth-century, the western book remained a mystery to many Africans who were brought to America. Like Olaudah Equiano, a number of Africans who were brought to Virginia looked upon the book as both strange and esoteric. The same was also true of many of their African American descendants. For nearly two centuries after arriving in America, they too considered print as a form of mysticism rather than a form of technology.⁷

⁵Grey Gundaker, *Signs of Diaspora, Diaspora of Sign: Literacies, Creolization, and Vernacular Practice in African America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 3-62; Gundaker, "Give Me a Sign: African Americans, Print, and Practice, 1790-1840" in *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation*, eds. Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelly (forthcoming).

⁶Equiano, *Narrative*, in *Unchained Voices*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Lexington: The UP of Kentucky, 1996), 188. For an useful account on the significance of African country marks, see Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and Caribbean, 1736-1831* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 28-29.

Incidentally, John Thornton and Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson's studies of early Africa demonstrate that some Africans from the Bight of Biafra and Angola were familiar with western ways of reading and writing. John K. Thornton, *The Kingdom of Kongo: Civil and Transition, 1641-1718* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), chap. 5, esp. 62-68; Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, "Letter of the Old Calabar Slave Trade, 1760-1789," in *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic*, eds., Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould (Kentucky: UP of Kentucky, 2001), 89-115.

⁷For fuller account of how African Americans considered print as mysticism, see Gundaker, *Signs of Diaspora*, 95-122 and her "Give Me A Sign: African Americans,

Before they became familiar with the new world and its new ways, print and literacy seemed to envelop all aspects of life. That was particularly true in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake. On Sundays, for example, words on paper assumed center stage as slave owners and their bond-servants congregated in the local Anglican church or in the neighboring chapel. Seated in segregated pews, the descendants of those first African Virginians could not but observe the crucial role print played in the early life in the colony. There, the clergy read from the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer and commanded the attention of all, regardless of their social grade.

The skills of reading and writing also figured in early Virginians' notions of play. When gentlemen gathered to compete in high-stakes games, they took pains to record the results in account books and in verbal or written IOUs. And when bets could not be settled and debts remained unpaid, words on paper, again, assumed center stage, commanding everyone's attention in the colonial courthouse. There, judges resolved large and small disputes and the people, who came from every corner of the colony, watched as the drama unfolded and as the county clerk recorded for posterity an account of the trials of the day.⁸

For many Afro-Virginians in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake, the importance of reading and writing and of the printed or written word was particularly significant because they were bound by it. As early as 1680, the "*generall assembly*" of the colony declared it unlawful "for any negro. . . to goe or depart from his master's ground without a certificate from his master, mistress or overseer, and such permission [should] not to be granted but upon perticular [sic] and necessary occasions." Without written consent, an apprehended slave received "twenty lashes on the bare back well layd on, and soe sent home to his said master, mistris or overseer." Over time, slaves without a ticket were taken up and held as fugitives. If taken up a second time without a certificate or a pass, a slave could suffer several forms of punishment. Consequently, writing stood for the planter's power and the slave's confinement; the absence of writing carried heavy burdens.⁹ (Plates 1 & 2)

* * *

Print, and Practice, 1790-1840," in *An Extensive Republic*, eds., Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelly (forthcoming).

⁸T.H. Breen, "Horses and Gentleman: The Cultural Significance of Gambling Among the Gentry of Virginia" *WMQ* 34, no. 2 (1977): 239-257.

⁹William W. Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large Being a Collection of all the Law of Virginia...* (Richmond, Virginia: Samuel Pleasants, Jr., 1819-1823), 2:481; Lathan A. Windley, *A Profile of Runaway Slaves in Virginia and South Carolina, 1730-1787* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 4-10. Henceforth all reference to Hening's *Statutes* will be abbreviated as *SAL*.

Permitted
 Negro Bobb Coachman & Negro George, Bookillion,
 without molestation.
 Do Pass from Fredericksburg in Spots to James
 Mercer Esq. at Williamsburg, with a Coach and two Horses.
 Committed to their care.
 The several inn keepers where they may have occasion to
 Stop, are requested to furnish them with what may be
 Needfull, for the Horses of their selves, agreeable to the usual
 Custom of uttalling of Negroes on such like Emergences.
 Nothing care to set down the Expence on the back of this
 Passport, with the Inn keepers Name, that M. Merleymay
 Discharge the same on his return.
 Thos. Oliver
 Stewart to do Mercer Esq.
 Do All Concerned
 M. B. they began there Journey on the 29th Oct
 1771

Plate 1: Slave Pass, October 29, 1771. This pass, signed by Thomas Oliver, allowed two slaves, Bobb and George, to travel from Fredericksburg, Virginia to Williamsburg. Special Collections. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, Virginia. (Front Side)

Oct. 30th Bobbs Charge with
 J. Martin

To 6 gal. oats	3.9
18 Bundles Fod. -	1.6
To support	1.3
To pasting	3.0
To 10 th of Oct.	1.0
To 5 th of Oct. of oats	2.10 ^{1/2}
To Marcus J. J. to J. Martin	3.4 ^{1/2}
	<u>13.4</u>

James C. ...
 6/10/18 ...
 3.4^{1/2}

AM
 Chain Rep for det of J.
 party this expense
 in 1871

Plate 2: Reverse Side of Slave Pass. Special Collections. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, Virginia.

Until recently, the subject of slaves reading and writing had received little to no attention by modern scholars. Save for the recent studies by Janet D. Cornelius, Grey Gundaker, E. Jennifer Monaghan, Jeffrey H. Richards, Edward E and Elaine H. Gordon, and Heather Andrea Williams, few scholars have considered seriously the subject of slave literacy. In particular, few have considered the significance of Carter G. Woodson's seminal work, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*, which examined the history of slave education and how it changed over time and space. Instead, for several decades past, historians of slavery and of eighteenth and nineteenth-century African Americans in British North America have overlooked the subject.¹⁰ Though Wright, Piersen, Berlin, and Morgan's studies have explored how the institution of slavery has changed over time and space, contemplated how such changes informed the development of black culture, and delved into the strongholds of American slavery, noting how one slave society, though in close proximity to another, differed from one to another, little has changed with regards to the subject of slaves reading and writing.¹¹ Most historians have presumed

¹⁰Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior 1861*. Washington, D.C., 1919; reprint, New York: A & B Publishers Group, 1998; Janet D. Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991; E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Reading for the Enslaved, Writing for the Free: Reflections on Liberty and Literacy" *PAAS* 108 (2000): 309-341; Jeffrey H. Richards, "Samuel Davies and the Transatlantic Campaign for Slave Literacy in Virginia" *VMHB* 111 (2003): 333-378; Edward E. Gordon and Elaine H. Gordon, *Literacy in America: Historical Journey and Contemporary Solutions* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003), 227-260; and, Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7-66.

¹¹Donald R. Wright, *African Americans in the Colonial Era: From Africans Origins Through the American Revolution*. Wheeling, Illinois: Harlard Davidson, Inc., 1990; William D. Piersen, *From Africa to America: African American History from the Colonial Era to the Early Republic, 1526-1790*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996; Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998; Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003; and, Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998. Significantly, none of these studies address slaves achieving literacy over time and space. Far from it, most agree very few slaves could read or write. Allan Kulikoff, whose study of the Chesapeake has become a cornerstone of those aforementioned works, appears to have spoken for many of them when he observed: "white training of slaves, however, was limited to those jobs that did not require literacy. Slaves understood the power of literacy, and many probably wanted to read and write, but whites used their monopoly of reading and writing to help control black behavior" *Tobacco & Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the*

mass slave illiteracy; that only a small, exceptional few, if any slaves at all, learned how to read and/or write. That view is perhaps best defined by Shendon Cohen in his study of education in colonial America: "Slavery was a cruel, debasing institution. . . In line with such repressive treatment, most southern whites frowned on. . . educating slaves. Slavery required submissiveness, obedience, and servility—qualities that were not enhanced by education."¹²

* * *

This study confronts that view. In its analysis of runaway notices, probate records, and other colonial sources, it aspires to venture beyond the current narrative about slave literacy established by Woodson's account and re-affirmed by Cornelius, Monaghan, and others. It also aspires to challenge Kenneth Lockridge's thesis in *Literacy in Colonial New England*, a crucial study of literacy in the history of the book. By Lockridge's account, slaves were illiterate, so much so that they did not warrant consideration in his larger analysis of early American literacy rates. This study proposes that Lockridge has overstated his case.¹³ Lastly, it endeavors to complicate the current account of the impact the First Great Awakening had on the lives of early African Americans. While studies by Albert Raboteau, Mechal Sobel, and others have celebrated the Awakening as a pivotal moment in which African Americans achieved a new sense of faith, one that incorporated African and European elements, this thesis argues that the religious revivals in the Chesapeake cut against slave efforts to gain literacy and through literacy mental and possibly real liberation.¹⁴

Chesapeake, 1680-1800 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 396.

¹²Sheldon S. Cohen, *A History of Colonial Education: 1607-1776* (New York, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1974), 146. Incidentally, colonial historian, Kenneth Lockridge, also concurs with this assessment. In his study of literacy in colonial New England, Lockridge stated that slavery would have an adverse effect on his estimated rates of literacy in early Virginia. In his words, literacy rates for "America was progression and regression rolled into one. The progression, however, disappears on considering that if slaves were included in the analysis, not only the level of literacy by occupation, but also the overall level of male literacy, would be lower in America" Kenneth Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England* (New York, Norton, 1974), 93.

¹³Lockridge, 94.

¹⁴Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in Antebellum South* and his "The Slave Church in the Era of the American Revolution," in *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*, eds., Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 193-216; Mechal Sobel, *The World They*

“Breaking with Tradition: Slave Literacy in Early Virginia, 1680-1780” consists of five chapters. Chapter one contextualizes the subject of slave literacy by exploring the traditional framework that has defined the subject for the past several decades. Drawing on a number of published and unpublished sources, chapter two offers a broader context for discerning slaves reading and writing, one that lies outside of the current accounts regarding slave literacy. Chapters three and four explore the various social settings in which slaves learned. Lastly, chapter five examines the role that the Great Awakening and the American Revolution played in slave efforts to achieve literacy. Together, these chapters form the first full-scale study, save, of course, for Woodson’s work, to join early slave culture and literacy in a common history.

Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton UP, 1987), 178-213; and, Sobel, *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton UP, 1988. For similarly account, see Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 63-79. Specifically, for an account the Awakening and its impact on enslaved Virginians see Rhys Isaac, “Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists’ Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765 to 1775” *WMQ* (July 1974): 345-368 and his *Transformation of Virginia*, 243-298.

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This short notice can in no way register, adequately, the contributions others have made to this thesis nor convey my deepest appreciation to them. Nonetheless, I want to thank my dissertation committee, Robert A. Gross, Rhys Isaac, James P. Whittenburg, and Grey Gundaker whose comments were invaluable to the history that follows, Thomas Acosta, Graham Hodges, E. Jennifer Monaghan, Sara Bon-Harper, Ywone Edwards-Ingrams, Martha King, Karen Y. Smith, and Julie Richter whose work has influenced mine own, and Leisa Meyer, Arthur Knight, and Jean Brown who provided a helping hand when needed. I also want to thank my wife for putting up with me and my beloved Phillis Wheatley for always giving me something to write about.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AH	Agricultural History.
AHR	American Historical Review.
AL	American Literature.
AQ	American Quarterly.
BCP	Book of Common Prayer.
CW	Colonial Williamsburg.
CWI	Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter.
EAL	Early American Literature.
GHQ	Georgia Historical Quarterly.
HMPEC	Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church.
JAH	Journal of American History.
JESDA	Journal of Early Southern of Decorative Arts.
JNE	Journal of Negro Education.
JNH	Journal of Negro History.
JSH	Journal of South History.
JSR	Jackson State Review.
LC	Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

PAAS	Proceeding of the American Antiquarian Society.
PMHS	Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society.
SAL	The Statutes at Large Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia.
S&A	Slavery and Abolition.
SAQ	Southern American Quarterly.
SECC	Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture.
SPG	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, London.
UP	University Press.
VG	Virginia Gazette.
VMHB	Virginia Magazine of History and Biography.
WMQ	Williams and Mary Quarterly.

ABSTRACT

“Breaking with Tradition” is a study of slave literacy in eighteenth-century British North America, the era of the First Great Awakening and the American Revolution. Instead of highlighting the work of a few northern slave authors (the present emphasis in African American literary history), it focuses on the relationship between slave education in colonial Virginia and the social and political circumstances in which slaves acquired a knowledge of letters. A social history of life in the slave quarters, the “great house,” and in towns, “Breaking with Tradition” is at once a case study of slaves reading and writing in the South and a counterpoint to current studies that paint a picture of early African Americans as being illiterate. Ultimately, this thesis explores the interplay between African American studies and the History of the Book.

BREAKING WITH TRADITION

INTRODUCTION:
DEFINING TRADITION

The pursuit of literacy is a central theme in the history of African Americans in the United States. In the Western tradition, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. has observed, people of African descent have been written out of “culture” because they have been identified with oral traditions. In that setting, literacy was identified with reason and civilization. Performance in print earned the laurel of humanity. Consequently, for the past two centuries, the African American literary tradition has been defined as one in which books talked and a handful of slave authors made the book talk back through the act of writing themselves into existence.¹⁵

This study, however, is not a history of slaves who were lettered. Neither is it a history of slaves who left behind even a modest body of writing. It is rather a history of slaves who were unlettered. It is a history of slaves who contributed little if anything to the African American belletristic tradition. In short, this study is a history of slaves who learned to read and write and whose story unintentionally breaks with tradition.

¹⁵Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Preface: Talk Book,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), xxviii. For a fuller account of the talking book, see his *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), 127-169 and his *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), 3-79.

The Mother of Tradition.

“To Be Sold: A parcel of Likely NEGROES, imported from Africa, cheap for Cash, or short credit; Enquire of John Avery, at his House next Door to the White-Horse, or at a Store adjoining to said Avery’s Distill-House, at the South End, near the South Market: Also if any Persons have any Negro Men, strong and hearty, tho’ not of the best moral character, which are proper Subjects for Transportation, may have an Exchange for Small Negroes.”

On July 29, 1761, this advertisement appeared in the *Boston Evening Post*. A few weeks later, the printer of the *Post* reprinted the notice. A variant appeared in the *Boston Gazette & Country Journal*. Among those “likely Negroes, imported from Africa”: a young, frail, little girl, who in several years after arriving in Boston became the celebrated poet laureate, Phillis Wheatley.¹⁶

Of her life in Africa, we know relatively little and a good deal of that lies in the realm of speculation. One of the poet’s modern critics, for example, determined the Fulani tribe of the Senegambian region of Southwest Africa to be the place of her origins.

“Owing to Wheatley’s particular fine features as revealed in the portrait which introduces the 1773 volume,” John C. Shield observed, “she was probably of the Fulani people, who

¹⁶*Boston Evening Post* July 29, 30, 1761; August 3, 1761; August 10, 17, 24, 1761; *Boston Gazette & Country Journal*, July 29, 1761. An earlier advertisement, slightly different in text, appeared in the *Post* of July 27, 1761.

lived on the meadow land along” the Gambia River. “The overall aristocratic tone both of her poems and letters. . . suggests that she could have belonged to the aristocracy or ruling class of the Fulani.” Her parents would have more than likely been Moslems. Similarly, another one of the poet’s modern critics observed that Wheatley was “most likely a native Wolof speaker.”¹⁷

By Wheatley’s recollection, the Senegambia region of the African continent was indeed the place of her birth. In a poem to a “Gentleman in the Navy” who “blest” the Gold Coast of Africa, she identified “Gambia” as her home.¹⁸ Another contemporary source also established the poet’s birth place as somewhere in the Senegambian region. According to the Fitch Papers, now at the Medford Historical Society, those “likely Negroes” identified in the Boston advertisements were taken from ports in either Senegal,

¹⁷John C. Shields, “Phillis Wheatley’s Poetic of Ascent” (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1978), 43, 44. As for the view of the poet’s other critic, see Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Trails of Phillis Wheatley* (New York: Civitas Book, 2003), 17. Henceforth all references to Phillis Wheatley will be abbreviated as PW.

¹⁸Phillis Wheatley, “PHILIS’S Reply to the Answer in our last by the Gentleman in the Navy” *Royal American Magazine* 2 (January 1775): 35.

See John C. Shields, “PW’s Poetic of Ascent” (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1978), 35-80; Shields, “PW’s Use of Classicism” *AL* 52 (March 1980): 97-111; Shields, “PW and the Sublime” in *Critical Essays on PW* ed. William H. Robinson, (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), 189-205; Shields, “PW’s Subversion of Classical Stylistics” *Style* 27 (Summer 1993): 252-271; Gregory Rigby, “Form and Content in PW’s Elegies” *CLA Journal* 19 (December 1975): 248-257; Rigby, “PW’s Craft as Reflected in Her Revised Elegies” *JNE* 47 (Fall 1978): 402-413; Mukhtar Ali Isani, “‘Far from Gambia’s Golden Shore’: The Black in Late Eighteenth-Century American Imaginative Literature” *WMQ* 36 (July 1979): 353-372; Isani, “‘Gambia on My Soul’: Africa and the African in the Writings of PW” *MELUS* 6 (1979): 64-72; and my own, “Wheatley’s ON THE DEATH OF A YOUNG LADY OF FIVE YEARS OF AGE” *Explicator* 58 (Fall 1999): 10-13; Bly, “Intertextual Cadences. ‘When wants and woes might be our righteous lot’: Excavating PW’s Transcending Voice of Accent” (MA thesis, College of William & Mary, 1999), 61-73 for a fuller account of the poet’s memory of Africa.

Sierra Leone, or the Isles de Los, off the coast of Guinea.¹⁹

Days before John Avery began placing advertisements in the *Post* and the *Boston Gazette & Country Journal*, a notice appeared in the *Boston News Letter*, saying “Gwin[n] from Africa.” Peter Gwinn had been the commander of the schooner *Phillis*, owned by one Timothy Fitch, a slave trading merchant of Boston.²⁰ Fitch had directed Gwinn to the Southwestern region of the continent: “You haveing the Command of Schooner Phillis your orders Are to Imbrace the First Favorable Opertunity of Wind & Weather & proceed Directly for the Coast of Africa, Touching First at Sinagall. . . & then proceed Down the Coast to Sere Leon & . . . make best Trade.”²¹ A minor figure in the Atlantic traffic, Fitch sold slaves to planters in South Carolina and possibly in the Carribbean, depending on the nature of the trade winds and, of course, the price a healthy slave fetched there.

In this manner, a few of the African slaves who crossed the Atlantic aboard the *Phillis* found themselves in the port city of Boston, Massachusetts. Like their brethren further South, New Englanders also fancied Gold Coast Africans who they believed were robust, tractable, and intelligent. In the milder climes, Gold Coast Africans were recognized as being slaves of the highest quality. On many occasions, the advertisements in the newspapers there portrayed them in the most appealing of terms. Whereas slaves taken from the islands were considered simply as “seasoned,” those from the coast of

¹⁹Timothy Fitch to Captain Peter Gwinn, 12 January 1760; Timothy Fitch to Captain Peter Gwinn, 8 November 1760. *Fitch Papers*, Medford Historical Society.

²⁰*Boston News Letter* July 16, 1761, 3.

²¹Timothy Fitch to Captain Peter Gwinn, 12 January 1760, *Fitch Papers*, Medford Historical Society.

Guinea were deemed “choice,” “agreeable,” and “ingenious.”²²

Of the Gambian-born girl’s life in the Americas, we know a great deal more. Sometime in 1760, African traders kidnaped Wheatley and sold her to Gwinn who carried her to the New World. Aboard the *Phillis*, she endured uncertain misery. Judging from the correspondence between Fitch and Gwinn, Wheatley and her African crew mates, who numbered “70 or Eighty More,” ate meals of “rice and water” and were forced to move about “Upon Deck” twice a day for exercise. As had been the manner of the traffic in slaves, the ship transported her to the Caribbean islands first and then to South Carolina. Somewhere along the way, perhaps while she was in the Caribbean islands, she had been found sickly and therefore unsalable.²³

Early in July 1761, the schooner landed in Boston. Several days after the ship’s arrival, John Avery, a seasoned agent of the Boston slave trade, placed notices in the newspapers, advertising the arrival of the black merchandise. After reading one of those notices, Susanna Wheatley, the wife of John Wheatley, a wealthy merchant and tailor of Boston, “visited the slave-market, that she might make a personal selection from the group of unfortunates offered for sale.” Mrs. Wheatley needed a domestic to replace her other personal servant who was getting too old to serve her well. At the White Horse Tavern, next door to John Avery’s house on the corner of Newbury Street and Avery Street, she

²²Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776* (New York: Columbia UP, 1942), 31-35; William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-century New England* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 4-13.

²³Timothy Fitch to Captain Peter Gwinn, 12 January 1760, *Fitch Papers*, Medford Historical Society.

found her new waiter. Another account suggests that Mrs. Wheatley went “aboard” the slave schooner and purchased the girl. Whether at John Avery’s Tavern or aboard the *Phillis*, both accounts concur, of the “unfortunates offered for sale” there were “several robust, healthy females.”

Susannah Wheatley, however, chose a young girl who possessed a slender frame, wore only a meager quantity of clothing, and suffered from some form of respiratory illness, possibly asthma or bronchitis. In retrospect, the child’s infirm nature may have been what caught Mrs. Wheatley’s eye. In all likelihood, Phillis may have reminded her soon-to-be mistress of her own daughter, Mary, who was also sickly at the time.²⁴ Whatever her reasons, Susanna Wheatley purchased the girl for a trifle, took her home, and named her Phillis, presumably after the slave ship that brought her from Africa to America.²⁵

At the corner of King Street and Mackerel Lane, Phillis became an addition to the Wheatley household that included the Wheatley twins, Nathaniel and Mary, and several

²⁴Mary and Phillis Wheatley would both suffer the same tragic fate. Both were sickly as children and as adults. Both also experienced hard lives due in part to sickness and in part to the precarious nature involving bearing children. Phillis would die shortly after giving birth to her third child. For Mary, death came after the birth of her sixth child. See Robinson, *PW & Her Writings*, 14-15.

²⁵Margaretta Matilda Oddell, *Memoir and Poems of PW, A Native African and a Slave* (Boston: G. W. Light, 1834), 9; Charles J. Stratford, *PMHS* 15 (1876-1877): 389. Both Oddell and Stratford were collateral descendants of Susanna Wheatley.

Incidentally, in eighteenth-century vernacular, Phillis meant maid. Years later, the poet would commit to verse a few lines concerning the curious nature of her name, disclosing perhaps some personal knowledge as to the circumstances of its origins. In “An Answer to the *Rebus*,” she observed of herself: The poet asks, and *Phillis* can’t refuse/ To shew th’ obedience of the Infant muse.”

aging black slaves of both sexes. In her new home, Phillis worked as a domestic which was the typical profession of many who were shipped from Africa to New England. But because of her frail constitution, it appears that she was restricted to performing mostly minor jobs about the house. At age 13, she worked as a waiter. An explanatory note appended to one of the poet's earliest known published verse explains: "Messrs Hussey and Coffin. . . narrowly escaped being cast away on Cape-Cod, in one of the late Storms; upon to Arrival, being at Mr. Wheatley's, and, while at Dinner, told of their narrow Escape, this Negro Girl at the same Time 'tending Table, heard the Relation, from which she composed the following Verses."²⁶ Another note suggests that by the time the young girl was four or five years older she did more than just attend tables and serve guests: "There is in this town a young *Negro woman*, who left her country at ten years of age, and has been in this eight years. She is a compleat sempstress, and accomplished mistress of her pen, and discovers a most surprising genius."²⁷

Not too long after she assumed her duties in the Wheatley's household, Phillis began showing signs of an exceptional mind. According to one account, the precocious child often tried to "make letters upon the wall with a piece of chalk or charcoal." Apparently, she tried to communicate with her owners as she attempted to write something in Arabic or in some form of indigenous West African script. Mary developed a

²⁶Phillis Wheatley, "On Messrs Hussey and Coffin," *The Newport Mercury*, December 21, 1767, 3.

²⁷Phillis Wheatley, "Recollection," *Massachusetts Gazette*, March 1, 1773, 1.

close relationship with the young slave whom she began to teach how to read.²⁸ Under her guidance, Phillis became an exemplary student of the Bible, classical myths, and the poetical writings of Alexander Pope. In “sixteen Months Time,” she mastered “the English Language. . . to such a Degree, as to read any, the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings, to the great Astonishment of all who heard her.” She also showed “a great Inclination to learn” Latin. “As to her Writing, her own Curiosity led her to it; and this she learnt in so short a Time, that in the Year 1765,” four years after her arrival in America, “she wrote a Letter to the Rev. Mr. Oocom, the *Indian* Minister, while in *England*.”²⁹

In Mary Wheatley, Phillis found a teacher and companion. Her mistress proved a steadfast benefactor and patron. Impressed with her genius early on, Susanna Wheatley saw to it that Phillis had her own room. She also gave the young bond-servant a desk, ink, and paper. Supposedly, as the future poet “did not seem to have the power of retaining the creation of her own fancy. . . The light was placed upon a table at her bedside, with writing material, that if any thing occurred. . . she might. . . secure the swift-winged fancy, ere it fled.”³⁰ Susannah Wheatley also arranged for Phillis to visit and be visited by the most prominent people in Boston. In that way, the slave-poet met Thomas Wooldridge, William Legge-(the Earl of Dartmouth), Governor Thomas Hutchinson, Lieutenant Governor Andrew Oliver, James Bowdoin, Harrison Gray, John Hancock, and eminent

²⁸For a fuller discussion of African writing systems and syllabaries see Gundaker. *Signs of Diaspora*, 33-62.

²⁹John Wheatley to Archibald Bell, TLS, November 14, 1772, in PW, *Poems On Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: A. Bell, 1773), vi.

³⁰Oddell, 15.

others. On one such occasion, she met and had tea with Mrs. Timothy Fitch whose husband owned the very ship that brought her to America.

As her reputation grew, so too did the volume of her works in print. News of her poetry began to spread throughout the colonies. By 1772, several of Phillis Wheatley's poems appeared as broadsides or in newspapers in England and in America.³¹

Advertisements of her elegy of the celebrated Reverend George Whitefield, the radical evangelical, appeared in over a dozen newspapers in Pennsylvania, New York, and in her own Boston. The elegy itself appeared in broadside and pamphlet form in Philadelphia, New York, Newport, and Boston.³²

Delighted with her work, Susanna Wheatley instructed her prodigy to select

³¹“On Messrs Hussey and Coffin” *Newport Mercury* December 21, 1767, 3; “AN ELEGIAC POEM. On the DEATH of that celebrated Divine, and eminent Servant of JESUS CHRIST, the late Reverend, and pious GEORGE WHITEFIELD...” *Boston Broadside*, October 1770, Pennsylvania Historical Society; “AN ODE OF VERSES. On the much-lamented Death of the Rev. Mr. GEORGE WHITEFIELD. . .” *London Broadside*, 1771, Huntington Library; “On the Death of Doctor SAMUEL MARSHALL,” *Boston Evening Post* September 30, 1771, 3; “To Mrs. LEONARD, on the Death of her HUSBAND,” Broadside Verse, 1772, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; “RECOLLECTION. To Miss A--- M---, humbly inscribed by the Authoress” *The London Magazine; Or, The Gentleman’s Monthly Intelligencer* 41 (March 1772): 134-135; and, “To the Rev. Mr. Pitkin, on the DEATH of his LADY,” Boston Broadside, June 16, 1772, Library of Congress.

³²*Massachusetts Spy, or Thomas’s Boston Weekly Journal*, September 29-October 2, 1770, 2 (That advertisement was reprinted verbatim in the *Spy* of October 9-10; October 11-13; October 16-18.); *Massachusetts Gazette & Boston Weekly News Letter*, October 11, 1770, 4 (That advertisement was reprinted in the *Gazette* of October 18.); *Massachusetts Gazette & Boston Post Boy & Advertiser*, October 15, 1770, 3 (That advertisement was reprinted in the *Gazette* of October 22.); *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, October 29, 1770, 3; *New York Gazette & Weekly Post Boy*, October 30, 1770, 3. According to Robinson, advertisements of Wheatley’s elegy appeared at least ten times in Boston newspaper. Robinson, *PW & Her Writings*, 28.

twenty-eight of her manuscript poems for publication. On February 29, March 14, and April 18, 1772, she placed notices in the *Boston Censor*, advertising the prospective volume. Though supported by the Governor and the Lieutenant Governor of the colony and other elite figures, the project failed to attract a sufficient number of subscribers. Many in Boston flatly refused to believe that the poems of the proposals could have been written by a slave.³³

Undaunted, Susanna Wheatley opted to have Phillis's poems published in London. In order to make her writings appeal to an even broader audience, she and Phillis began revising the verses listed in the 1772 proposals. Those poems that named the residents of Boston to whom they were dedicated were abbreviated to be attractive to a trans-Atlantic reader. In that way, the original title of "To Mrs. *Leonard*, On the Death of Her Husband" became "To A Lady on the Death of her Husband" and "To Mrs. *Boylston* and Children, on the Death of her Son and their Brother" was changed to "To A Lady and her Children, on the Death of her Son and their Brother." Less flattering verses, in particular those referring to the British crown, titles like "On the arrival of the Ships of War, and landing of the Troops," a poem about the British military occupation of Boston in 1768, and "On the Affray in King Street, On the Evening of the 5th of March," a poem about the Boston Massacre of 1770, were removed. Other political pieces, however, were included, like "To the King's Most Excellent Majesty 1768" which complimented King George for repealing

³³John Andrews, Boston, to William Barrell, Philadelphia, ALS, 29 May 1772; John Andrews, Boston, to William Barrell, Philadelphia, 24 February 1773, *Andrews-Elliott Collection*, Massachusetts Historical Society. In his letters to William Barrell, his brother-in-law, John Andrews, an admirer of Phillis Wheatley, acknowledged that the rejection of her 1772 proposals had been a matter of popular prejudice.

the Stamp Act.³⁴

To avoid the racist charge that Phillis had not written the poems in question, a charge with which she and Phillis were all too familiar, Susanna Wheatley secured the signatures “from the most respectable Characters in *Boston*”³⁵ to attest to Phillis’ authorship. With the help of Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, she then solicited the services of Archibald Bell, a London publisher and bookseller who specialized in religious works. At the behest of the Countess, Phillis sat for a portrait to be included in the new book. With the help of friends, Susanna Wheatley circulated broadsides in both London and Boston, advertising the prospective volume and creating a literary stir in London around her prodigy.³⁶

As the fates would have it, Phillis was destined for the island city. On May 10, 1773, she left Boston aboard the family-owned ship, the *London*, with Nathaniel Wheatley who was traveling there to attend family business. Days before and several days thereafter, notices of the poet’s pending departure appeared in newspapers in New England, New

³⁴See Robinson, *PW & Her Writings*, 29-30 for fuller account of how Susanna and Phillis Wheatley revised *Poems*. For a more extensive analysis see Kirstin Wilcox, “The Body into Print: Marketing PW” *AL* (March 1999): 1-29.

³⁵Wheatley, *Poems*, 8.

³⁶As a marketing strategy, she reprinted Phillis’ poem “RECOLLECTION” in the *Boston Post Boy* of March 1, 1773 and in the *Salem Essex Gazette* of week of March 16th. In the *Boston Post Boy* of April 16, 19, and 22 and in the *Boston Weekly Newsletter* of April 16, she circulated the London proposals for Phillis’ forthcoming volume. Under the agency of Archibald Bell, Susanna Wheatley also circulated ads in the *London Morning Post & Advertiser* of August 6, 9, 11, 12, and 16, 1773, publicizing further the upcoming book. Also see Robinson, *PW & Her Writings*, 32-36. For a fuller account of Susanna Wheatley and her circle of pious friends see Margaret G. Burroughs, “Do Birds of a Feather Flock Together?” *JSR* (Summer, 1974): 63-73.

York, and Pennsylvania as part of a larger effort to enlist subscribers.

For Phillis, the trip served two purposes. The first was the not so small matter of her health. Shortly before embarking, a physician advised a sea voyage for the young slave-poet who continued to suffer from a chronic respiratory ailment. Once in London, she promptly began promoting her forthcoming book. Wheatley appeared before a host of London notables, all of whom received her “with such kindness, Complaisance, and so many marks of esteem and real Friendship as [to] astonish [her] on the reflection.” No more than “6 weeks there was [Phillis] introduced to Lord Dartmouth and had near half an hour’s conversation with his Lordship, with whom was Alderman Kirkman. . . then . . . Lord Lincoln, who visited [her] at [her] own Lodging with the Famous Dr. Solander.” She also met “Lady Cavendish, Lady Carteret Webb, Mrs. Palmer a Poetess, an accomplished Lady, and Dr. Thos. Gibbons, Rhetoric Proffesor.”³⁷

When not whetting her curious public’s appetite, the African-born poet met with her printer and oversaw the processes involved in printing her poems. Like other authors of her day, she revised the printer’s proofs and made corrections. Though those documents are lost, an analysis of Wheatley’s extant papers suggests that the poet was quite familiar with the art of printing.³⁸

Benjamin Franklin may have offered the young author a certain degree of counsel. The two had met during Wheatley’s stay in London. On the recommendation of his

³⁷PW, Boston, to Colonel David Wooster, New Haven, Connecticut, October 18, 1773, *Hugh Upham Clark Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society.

³⁸Antonio T. Bly, “From Manuscript to Print: Authorship and Design in the Poems of Phillis Wheatley” *Old Dominion University Historical Review* 7 (2000): 97-119

nephew-in-law, Jonathan Williams who also happened to be a neighbor of Susanna Wheatley, Franklin “went to see the black poetess and offered her any service [he] could do for her.” Though it is unclear what the two writers discussed in their only meeting, it must have been of some weight because the poet dedicated the proposal for her second volume of poems to no other than “to the Right Honourable, BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, Esq.”³⁹ Though nothing ever became of that scheme, Wheatley’s first volume was published in September 1773.

In London, Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems* sold for “Two Shillings, sewed, or Two Shillings and sixpence bound.” According to one newspaper notice, that edition was “printed in 12 mo. on a new Type and a fine paper.” A portrait of the poet was included in the book to “contribute greatly to [its] Sale.” In the engraving, Wheatley is depicted at a writing desk, pondering a new composition. Near the inkwell on her desk is a small octavo volume, possibly the poetry of Alexander Pope. (Plate 3) The London edition did not include the dedication to the Countess of Huntingdon, a “Preface” written by the author, a brief biographical sketch signed by John Wheatley, or the “Attestation” displaying the names of eighteen prominent Bostonians certifying that Phillis Wheatley, an African born slave, had indeed wrote the poems. In Boston, subscribers paid “Four Shillings” for Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems*. If “Stitched in blue,” the handsomely bound and lettered book went for three shillings. That volume did include the dedication to the Countess of Huntingdon, a “Preface” written by the author, a brief biographical sketch signed by John Wheatley,

³⁹Benjamin Franklin, London, 7 July 1773 to Jonathan Williams, Sr., in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. William Wilcox (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976), 4: 172-173; *Boston Evening Post & General Advertiser*, October 30, 1779, 1.



Published according to Act of Parliament, Sept. 1, 1773 by Arch^d Bell,
Bookseller N^o 8 near the Saracens Head, Aldgate.

P O E M S

ON

VARIOUS SUBJECTS,

RELIGIOUS AND MORAL.

BY

PHILLIS WHEATLEY,

NEGRO SERVANT TO MR. JOHN WHEATLEY
OF BOSTON, IN NEW ENGLAND.

L O N D O N:

Printed for A. BELL, Bookseller, Aldgate; and sold by
Messrs. COX and BERRY, King-Street, BOSTON.

M D C C L X X I I I.

Plate 3: Frontispiece. *Poems on Various Subjects.*

and an “Attestation” displaying the names of eighteen prominent Bostonians who certified that Phillis Wheatley wrote the poems.⁴⁰

* * *

Particularly significant is the critical reception of Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Indeed, the public notices of this volume have defined the African native as the matriarch of the African American belletristic tradition. Ignatius Sancho, for example, celebrated the book of verse. A son of Africa and a former slave, Sancho expressed nothing but praise for *Poems*: “Phyllis’s poems do credit to nature—and put art—merely as art—to the blush.” However, in his *Capacity of Negroes for Religious and Moral Improvement Considered*, Richard Nisbet dismissed the poet as being the author of “a few silly poems.”⁴¹

One of the more famous critics of Wheatley’s poems was Benjamin Rush. In his

⁴⁰In London, the volume sold for two shillings, in Boston for three. *Poems* were printed in London and later shipped to Boston. In a letter to David Worcester, Wheatley mentioned that a parcel of her books were being sent to Boston. The difference in price can be accounted for by the expense of shipping the volumes across the Atlantic plus the cost of printing and binding those extra materials. PW, Boston, to Colonel David Wooster, New Haven, Connecticut, October 18, 1773, *Hugh Upham Clark Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁴¹Ignatius Sancho, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African, To which are prefixed Memoirs of his Life*, 3rd., ed. Joseph Jekyll (London: J Nichols, 1784), 158; Richard Nisbet, *The Capacity of Negroes for Religious and moral Improvement Considered: with cursory Hints to Proprietors and to Governments for the immediate melioration of the condition of slaves in the sugar colonies; To which are subjoined Short and practical Discourses for Negroes on the Plain and Obvious Principles of Religion and Morality* (London: James Phillip, 1789), 31.

Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America Upon Slave Keeping, the Philadelphian physician and future signer of the *Declaration of Independence* praised Wheatley's work as that of a genius. "There is now in the town of Boston a Free Negro Girl, about 18 years of age, who has been but 9 years in the country, whose singular genius and accomplishments are such as not only do honor to her sex, but to human nature. Several of her poems have been printed, and read with pleasure by the public." George Washington also held the poet in high esteem. In a letter to Joseph Reed, dated February 10, 1776, Washington called Wheatley a "genius." Voltaire too acknowledged the poet with favor: "Genius, which is rare everywhere, can be found in all parts of the earth. Fontenelle was wrong to say that there would never be poets among Negroes; there is presently a Negro woman who writes very good English verse." Later, the nineteenth-century abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, expressed similar sentiments. In his *Liberator* newspaper, Garrison observed that Wheatley's poems deserved "a place eminently conspicuous in every private and public library." Thomas Jefferson, however, felt otherwise. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, the founding father dismissed the modest volume: "Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately, but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. The heroes of the Dunciad are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem."⁴²

⁴²Benjamin Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America Upon Slave Keeping* (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1773), 2n; George Washington to Joseph Reed, February 10, 1776, in *The Writing of George Washington: Being His Correspondence, Addresses, Messages, and Other Papers. . .*, ed. Jared Sparks (Boston: Hill and Gray), 3: 298; Voltaire, *Oeuvres Completes*, ed. Louis Moland (Paris: Garnier, 1882-96), 48: 594-95; *The Liberator*, March 22, 1834, 3; and, Thomas Jefferson, *Notes On the State of Virginia* (1794; reprint, New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002),

As a result of the book's critical reception, Phillis Wheatley has become the most significant African American author of her era in British North America. For more than two hundred years, contemporary and modern historians and literary critics have acknowledged her as such. Like the Greek gods she so enjoyed writing about, she, much like the Greek titan Atlas, shoulders alone the weight of the world in which she lived. This is certainly the view of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In his analysis of the poet's *oeuvre* within the broader context of the western literary tradition, the printing of Wheatley's *Poems* marked not only "the first book of poetry published by a person of African descent in the English language" but also "the beginning of [the] African-American literary tradition." In his view, Wheatley's book refuted the western charge of black inferiority, a charge supported by ideologues of the Enlightenment like Francis Bacon, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Frederick Hegelin. To Gates, as well as a number of others, the world Wheatley shouldered inadvertently was that of the eighteenth-century African American slave in English-speaking North America.⁴³ Bernard Romans, an eighteenth-

178.

⁴³Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Trials of PW*, 31; 23-27; Gates, *Figures in Black*, 61-79. For a fuller account of other historians and literary scholars who hold Phillis Wheatley in a similar regard, see Angelene Jamison, "Analysis of Selected Poetry of PW" *JNE* 43 (Summer 1974): 414. J. Saunders Redding, *To Make A Poet Black* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 10. As for the poet's revisionist critics see James A. Levermier, "Wheatley's On Being Brought From Africa to America" *Explicator* 40 (Summer 1981): 25-26; Charles Scruggs, "PW and the Poetical Legacy of Eighteenth-Century England" *SECC* 10 (1981): 279-295; Mukhtar Ali Isani, "Far from 'Gambia's Golden Shore': The Black in Late Eighteenth-Century American Imagination Literature" *WMQ* 36 (July 1979): 353-72; John C. Shields, "PW and the Sublime," in *Critical Essays on PW*, ed. William H. Robinson (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982), 189-205; Sondra O'Neale, "A Slave's Subtle War: PW's Uses of Biblical Myth and Symbol" *EAL* 21 (Fall 1986): 144-163; Lonnell Edward Johnson, "Portrait of the Bondslave in the Bible: Slavery and

century cartographer and historian, put the matter more succinctly, defining for both past and future generations Phillis Wheatley's honored place in the African American belletristic tradition. In his history of Florida, the self-appointed literary critic wrote: "The Phyllis of Boston. . . is the Phaenix of her race. I could bring at least twenty well-known instances of the contrary effect of education on this sable generation."⁴⁴

According to Greek mythology, the phoenix was a majestic bird whose song was so beautiful that the sun god stopped his chariot daily to hear it. Only one phoenix existed at a time. By some accounts, that time was a period of five hundred years. In any event, when the bird sensed death approaching, it built itself a funeral pyre and set itself on fire. From the flames a new phoenix would rise to sing again. In invoking the classical myth of the phoenix, Romans managed at once to praise Wheatley and to deny her significance. She sings beautifully, but like the phoenix, she is one of a kind.⁴⁵

* * *

Overlooked in that debate, that has defined Wheatley as the mother of the African

Freedom in the Works of Four Afro-American Poets" (Ph.D. diss, Indiana University, 1986), 1-30, 55-73; Phillip M. Richards, "PW and Literary Americanization" *AQ* 44 (June 1992): 163-191; Robert L. Kendrix, "Snatching a Laurel, Wearing a Mask: PW's Literary Nationalism and the Problem of Style" *Style* 27 (Summer 1993): 222-251; and, Russell J. Reising, "Trafficking in White: PW's Semiotics of Racial Representation" *Genre* 20 (Fall 1989): 231-261.

⁴⁴Bernard Romans, *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida* (New York: R. Aitken, 1775), 1: 105.

⁴⁵*World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago: World Book, Inc., 1986), 15: 358.

American literary tradition, is the history of the unlettered or, to borrow Bernard Romans' words, those twenty or more "well known instances of the contrary effect of education." That story does not begin in New England, which is commonly believed to be the birthplace of the African American literary tradition. That story begins further South in a most unlikely place, eighteenth-century Virginia, the place most historians consider the birthplace of the African American experience in British North America. Instead of beginning with Phillis Wheatley, the history of the unlettered begins among a most unlikely lot: enslaved Virginians, who as early as the 1720s', if not before, were reading and writing, although they left little in writing behind. Phillis Wheatley embodied the African American literary tradition; unlettered slaves like Peter [Custis] the African American literacy tradition. The story of his life opens the chapter that follows.

CHAPTER ONE:
PRINT MARKS THE SPOT: DISCERNING
SLAVE LITERACY IN 18TH CENTURY VIRGINIA

RAN away. . . from the Hon. John Custis, Esq; of Williamsburg, a Negro Man named Peter, of a middle Stature, about 30 Years of Age; has a Scar in his Forehead, occasion'd by falling into the Fire when a Child, is Virginia-born; he went away with Irons on his Legs, . . . Breeches, laced on the Sides for Conveniency of putting them on over his Irons; he has robb'd me, in Cash, Household Linen, and other Goods to a considerable Value; and notwithstanding he is Out-law'd will not be taken or return home; he can read, and I believe write. Whoever apprehends and conveys him safe to me, shall have Two Pistoles Reward, besides what the Law allows. . .⁴⁶

Early in May of 1745 this advertisement for an absconded slave appeared in William Parks' *Virginia Gazette*. Unlike John Avery's Boston notice, advertising a "parcel of Likely NEGROES" including the African girl who would become Phillis Wheatley, the notice concerning Peter's flight had only a single appearance in print. Nor did anything

⁴⁶*Virginia Gazette* (Parks), May 2 to May 9, 1745. Henceforth all reference to the *Virginia Gazette* will be abbreviated as *VG*.

about the middling stature, Virginia-born “Negro man” with a scar on his forehead appear in the county court records that also recorded instances of slaves running away.⁴⁷ There is no notice of “Peter” being taken up southward in the neighboring Carolina colonies or in Maryland. No news appeared of the Virginia runaway’s apprehension further north in Boston, Philadelphia, or perhaps New York, all destinations where the opportunity to pass for free might seem tenable. To judge from the “published” account concerning John Custis’ servant, Peter probably succeeded in his bid to escape slavery and in all likelihood was able to pass for free.

Of this former slave we can discern something of a small biography in the notice placed in the *Virginia Gazette*. As a child, Peter received a scar on his forehead after falling into a fire. The accident suggests that the young lad may have been the child of one of Custis’ house servants, possibly the house’s cook. Like Phillis Wheatley, he too probably worked about his master’s house, performing minor tasks initially like carrying his mother a wooden pail of water.⁴⁸

At 30, Peter had grown rebellious. Though bred to be a house-servant, he adopted another line of work. For a time, truancy became the Virginia-born slave’s choice of professions. Not quite yet a real fugitive, Peter stayed in the vicinity of his master’s

⁴⁷Philip D. Morgan & Michael L. Nicholls, “Slave Flight: Mount Vernon, Virginia, and the Wider Atlantic World,” in *George Washington’s South*, eds., Tamara Harvey and Greg O’Neil (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004), 197-223, esp. 205.

⁴⁸The nature of Peter’s clothing suggest that he was a domestic. For a fuller account of slave clothing see Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America* and, in particular, her “‘Clothes for the People’: Slave Clothing in Early Virginia” *JESDA* (November 1988): 27-70.

Williamsburg estate. He lurked about town and engaged in mischief. But like other truants, he eventually returned to John Custis' house on Francis Street—wary or in want of familiar company, food, and shelter.⁴⁹

To judge from the notice, Custis accepted Peter's unruly behavior. By all accounts, he was a benevolent and generous master. His slaves had little to no reason to run away or to engage in roguery. Indeed, like other slave owners, Custis thought himself a contemporary of the patriarchs of the Bible and treated his servants well. Those who ran away, he afforded time to return on their own.⁵⁰

The local residents of Williamsburg were not as understanding of Custis' boisterous house slave. Quite the opposite, in many of their minds, Peter had made a nuisance of himself. Evidently, during a previous escape from Custis, he had lingered in the vicinity, stealing and slaughtering livestock and committing "other injuries to the inhabitants of this her majesty's colony." In retaliation, they had gone to the local justices

⁴⁹Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972), 55-56. Also see Lathan Algerna Windley, *A Profile of Runaway Slaves in Virginia and South Carolina from 1730 through 1787* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 3-38. As Windley's study suggests, outlawing Peter—a last ditch effort to control the slave—underscores the fact that the domestic had more than likely run away on other occasions.

⁵⁰For a fuller account of Custis' relationship and treatment of his slaves, see E. T. Crowson, *Life As Revealed Through Early American Court Records: Including The Story of Col. John Custis Arlington, Queen's Creek and Williamsburg* (South Carolina: Southern Historical Press, 1981), 150-152; Josephine Zuppan, "The John Custis Letterbook, 1724-1734" (MA thesis: College of William & Mary, 1978), 34-35. Incidentally, Custis fathered with his slave woman Alice a son named John. Upon his father's death, John, who preferred to be called Jack, was given his freedom and a small plantation on the York River. Custis also made provisions in his will that John receive an inheritance of 500 pounds sterling. Crowson, 152.

and gotten him officially outlawed as a danger to the community.⁵¹

In both York and James City counties, the word got out. Peter was a wanted man—preferably dead. Should he be killed or injured in the attempt, Peter's would-be captors were assured pardon and exoneration from blame. The hunt for the domestic was afoot.

To Custis' good fortune, it was a successful hunt. Peter was returned to his master and unharmed. Back in his master's possession, Peter was forced to wear leg irons so as to reduce his mobility and to deter future escapes. And as Custis, like other Virginian grandees, received many guests at his Williamsburg home, Peter's clothes were altered to preclude alarm. For the sake of politeness, his shackles were disguise to hide the brute facts of power in his master's genteel household. Finally, or so it seemed, Peter's wayward behavior had come to an end. His days of truancy were no more.

Peter, however, did not concur. After being returned, he made plans for his next escape. Having grown up in his master's household, he had gained familiarity with the slaveholder's way of life. Obviously, the privilege of domestic work failed to produce a contented slave. Far from it, Peter grew obsessed with acquiring his freedom. In that determination, he made yet another bid to live on his own terms. Knowing where the Custis family kept its valuables, he took what he needed and ran away again. But this time,

⁵¹Judging from the notice, it appears that the townspeople were responsible for outlawing Peter. According to Mullin and Windley's studies, notices for outlaws usually did not encourage a slave's preservation. Whites who apprehended a fugitive dead were given more money than for capturing the slave alive. However, as the notice indicates, Custis wanted Peter returned alive. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 55-58; Windley, *Profile*, 19-24. For the quote, see *SAL*, 3:460-461.

he headed far from Williamsburg. This time, Peter became a real fugitive.

Within a month of Peter's disappearance, John Custis posted an advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette* for his recovery. The reward was two pistoles—twice the usual sum in such cases. Clearly, Peter was a valuable as well as troublesome slave. To judge by the few facts in the notice, literacy—the ability to read and probably write—made him so. What follows is a series of probes, which demonstrate other enslaved Virginians like Peter achieving letters.⁵²

* * *

In the mid-eighteenth century, an advertisement like the one pertaining to Peter was a staple of colonial publishing. Alongside book subscriptions, literary essays, notices regarding transatlantic comings and goings, verses of poetry and, of course, notices for the ever elusive horse, advertisements for absconded slaves were crucial to financing and selling newspapers. Generally, an advertisement cost three shillings, no small sum considering that the average colonial newspaper cost twelve shillings for an annual subscription in the eighteenth-century. Particularly large advertisements ran for five shillings. And reprints went for “Two Shillings *per Week*.” So crucial were these notices

⁵²*SAL*, 3: 455-456; 5: 553-554. Incidentally, a “pistole” was a Spanish gold coin, sometimes called a doubloon. By the middle of the eighteenth century, a pistole was worth almost a pound (.83) or a little over 18 shillings. In Virginia, those who captured runaways were given “200 pounds of tobacco, or twenty shilling. . . for apprehending slaves ten miles or more from their master’s quarter. If above five miles and under ten, a reward of 100 pounds of tobacco was paid by the owner.” *Oxford English Dictionary* New York, Oxford UP, 2000; Windley, *Profile*, 25-26.

to the business of printing newspapers, William Parks, the first printer of the *Virginia Gazette*, thought it both prudent and sound to place an “Advertisement concerning Advertisements” in the paper to promote their use: “And as these Papers will circulate (as speedily as possible) not only all over This, but also the Neighboring Colonies, and will probably be read by some Thousands of People, it is very likely that may have the desir’d Effect; and it is certainly the cheapest and most effectual Method that can be taken for publishing any Thing of this Nature.”⁵³

Before Parks started the first newspaper in the colony, early Virginians “published” notices for runaways either orally or by posting and circulating manuscripts. Hand-written advertisements, for example, were placed either on the door or the billboards of taverns, ordinaries, and courthouses. A 1705 law concerning the better government of “Servants and Slaves” explains. In the event that slaves ran away or “lie out, hid and lurking in swamps, woods, and other obscure places,” local justices were “empowered and required to issue proclamation against all such slaves, reciting their names, and owners names.” When that failed, notices for runaway slaves were to be “published” at the door of the church or chapel “immediately after divine worship” usually “on two sabbaths days.” According to Philip Fithian, that practice” was still in use seven decades later. In his journal, the colonial schoolmaster observed that there were “three grand divisions at the Church on Sundays.” The first took place “Before service” and involved “giving & receiving letters of business, reading Advertisements, consulting about the price of

⁵³*VG* (Parks), Oct. 8, 1736.

Tobacco, Grain &c. & setting either the lineage, Age, or qualities of favourite Horses.”⁵⁴

By law, parish clerks were obliged to read notices for runaways before the service. After divine service, when people congregated about the church grounds, they also read aloud advertisements posted on the door. Whether read inside the church or chapel or outside, clerks and church wardens got the word out. Slave owners disseminated advertisements about their runaways. Considering the festivities that generally followed most public days, as the gentry paid a call on the homes of their peers and as those of the middling sort and slaves also visited one-another, those ways of publishing notices were quite effective as news concerning runaways probably went as far as the fastest horse or person could travel.

With the introduction of a newspaper in the colony in 1736, Virginians gained yet another avenue to circulate news about runaways. And they were quick to put it to use. When slaves ran away, masters were willing to wait a while, from a week up to a month, even two, before placing a notice. In the 1730s, over three-quarters of such notices printed in the *Gazette* appeared within a month of the slave’s flight. That figure diminished in succeeding decades. In half the notices printed from the 1740s on, slaves had been gone

⁵⁴*SAL*, 3: 460; Philip Fithian, *The Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Plantation, 1773-1774* ed., Hunter Dickinson Farish (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1999), 167. Hereafter all references to references to Fithian’s journal will abbreviated as Fithian, *Journal*. For a useful discussion of runaway ads within the wider context of eighteenth-century print culture, see Kirsten Denise Sword, “Wayward Wives, Runaway Slaves and the Limits of Patriarchal Authority in Early America” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2002), 71-80. For a fuller account of the colony’s oral culture and the significance of public places and the circulation of information see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1999), 88-142.

for up to a month before masters advertised for their capture. In the other half, the delay was two months or more, extending to as much as a year. (Table 1)

Waiting made sense. Before placing notices, most Virginians slave-holders afforded slaves time to return of their own volition, in part because truancy had become a common part of life for those who owned slaves and, in part because truancy also underscored the precarious nature of the relationship that existed between masters and slaves. That was clearly what John Custis had in mind when Peter disappeared. Rather than immediately place a notice in the paper, he opted to give his domestic time to cool off, to enjoy a self-declared holiday from work, or to experience the hardships of trying to survive on his own and in hiding before eventually returning. Truancy, after all, had become Peter's profession of choice. According to Gerald W. Mullin's study of runaways in Virginia, truancy had become such a common problem of owning slaves, masters were reluctantly forced to accept slave absenteeism as a part of the institution. Rather than incur the expense of placing a notice in the paper, most waited first because waiting simply made sound, common sense.⁵⁵

Waiting was certainly the preference of Landon Carter, one of the wealthiest planters of his generation in Virginia. According to Rhys Isaac's recent biography of this patriarch of Sabine Hall, Carter was the lord of an "uneasy kingdom," one constantly plagued by slave truants.⁵⁶ In 1770, for example, one of his black subjects by the name of

⁵⁵Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 55-56.

⁵⁶Rhys Isaac, *Landon's Carter's Uneasy Kingdom: Stories of Revolution from a Virginia Planter's Diary, 1752-1778* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 187-232.

Table 1 Placement Intervals for Advertising Runaway Slaves in Virginia
(Measured Over Time & In Percentages.)

Periods	Less than One Month	One	Two	Three to Five	Six to Twelve	Over one Year	n/a
1730s ^a	53 %	25 %	9%	6%	3%	-	3%
1740s ^b	22	26	11	7	15	-	19
1750s ^c	43	26	4	6	13	4	4
1760s ^d	23	20	11	14	8	5	20
1770s ^e	26	22	10	16	8	2	16
Average:	33%	24%	9%	10%	9%	2%	12%

Notes:

^a N = 31. ^b N = 27. ^c N = 53. ^d N = 133. ^e N = 419.

Source:

Lathan A. Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from 1730s to 1790*. (Westport: Greenwood, 1983), 1: 1-210.

Sarah decided to leave after a failed attempt to convince Carter that she was sick. According to Carter's recollection of the event, the brazen young slave told her master "she would not work any longer and run away." Apparently, Sarah had enough. After making her bold declaration, she spent several days in the woods before eventually returning as Carter, chastened by long experience with Sarah, expected.⁵⁷

Similarly, in 1778, an old slave man named Nassau, once a slave of Landon Carter's father, Robert "King" Carter, also thought it best that he leave for a time, after he had "drank up most of" master Landon's wine.⁵⁸ Like Sarah, he too returned, though not the least bit sober. By trade, Nassau was a surgeon and a quite useful one to Landon Carter. Still, he was given to excessive drink and was known to disappear for days on end. Like other truants, he eventually returned of his own volition. And such was the unfortunate life of Landon Carter, plagued by his less than dutiful slaves and their determination to live on their own terms.⁵⁹

Over time, the newspaper assumed a more prominent place within the larger public sphere of talk and manuscript publication. Increasingly, notices for runaways like Peter served to keep the public advised. To judge from the extant record of the colony's

⁵⁷According to Carter's diary, Sarah often ran away. Each time before she ran, Sarah pretended to be sick. Jack P. Greene, ed., *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1965), 1: 291; 2: 601; 1: 1075. For a fuller account of Carter's tumultuous relationship with Sarah, see Isaac's *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom*, chap. 9, esp. 211-212. Henceforth all references to Carter's diary will be abbreviated as *Diary*.

⁵⁸*Diary*, 2: 990.

⁵⁹Isaac, *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom*, 313-322.

runaways, the *Gazette* was read far and wide. Notices came from all parts, from the settled counties in the Tidewater area to newer regions of the colony. Before the American Revolution, half the notices were from York, James City, and other Tidewater counties. Almost one-tenth came from the Piedmont area that was quickly becoming a settled frontier. Not surprisingly, in the less settled parts of the Chesapeake, like the eastern shore, southside, and the mountainous regions, there were not as many advertisements for runaway slaves. In those underdeveloped areas, where the economy was slow to prosper, slaves were not so numerous. In time that would change. As the slave population there grew, expanding over time and space, so did the number of runaway advertisements.

(Table 2)

* * *

Notices are staples not only of early colonial publishing but also of American and African American history. Though most slaves did not leave any form of record behind, through these accounts, scholars have been able nonetheless to discern complex aspects of slave behavior and culture. Considering the sparse nature of most eighteenth-century slave sources, one historian, David Waldstreicher, has recently recognized the runaway notice as a type of proto-slave narrative.⁶⁰ Long before Frederick Douglass and others who published their life stories, these short biographies revealed the tales of courageous slaves

⁶⁰David Waldstreicher, "Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic" *WMQ* 56 (April 1999): 247.

Table 2 Advertised Virginia Runaways Measured Across Time and Space

Periods	Counties				
	Tide-water	Eastern	Piedmont	South-side	Mountain
1736– 1739 ^a	71 %	0 %	18 %	9 %	--
1740s ^b	58	--	39	3	--
1750s ^c	56	8	27	6	--
1760s ^d	56	1	18	15	5
1770– 1776 ^e	53	2	20	13	5
Average:	59%	3%	25%	10%	2%

Notes:

Notices that did not indicate counties were not included.

^a N = 44. ^b N = 33. ^c N = 72. ^d N = 233. ^e N = 648.

Sources:

Lathan A. Windley. *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from 1730s to 1790*. vol. 1; Thomas Acosta, comp., *Virginia Runaway Slave Database*, <http://people.uvawise.edu/runaways>; Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free": Runaway Slave Advertisement from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey*; Smith, Billy G. and Richard Wojtowicz. eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves: Advertisements for Runaways in the Pennsylvania Gazette, 1728-1790; Boston Evening Post, Boston Gazette, New England Weekly Journal, Boston Newsletter, Boston Post Boy, Massachusetts Gazette, Massachusetts Spy, Essex Gazette, New England Chronicle, 1730-1776*, LC.

who dreamed of freedom and ran to realize those dreams. Well before the celebrated slave-poet Phillis Wheatley penned her first lines, notices like the one pertaining to Peter filled newspapers, inscribing in print the efforts of numerous slaves who struggled to live life on their own terms.

For five or six decades, runaway advertisements have provided historians and other scholars with glimpses into the world slaves made. In those notices, several have discovered expressions of discontent. For Gerald W. Mullin, Lathan A. Windley, and other historians, runaway advertisements demonstrated that slaves were far from being the happy and dutiful servants U. B. Philips portrayed in his *American Negro Slavery*.⁶¹ Isaac Bee, for example, “a likely Mulatto Lad. . . [and] formerly the Property of the late President Blair” of the College of William and Mary, ran away in 1774 because “his Father was a Freeman” and “he thinks he has a Right to his Freedom.”

Bee was not alone. Eight years earlier, “SAM HOWEL, 23 years old, about 5 feet 9 inches high, well made for strength, [and] has a remarkable good set of teeth,” ran away from his “Cumberland county” master, “WADE NETHERLAND.” Like Bee, he too was a mulatto. His mother was a white indentured servant, his father a free Negro. “His pretence for going away was to apply to some lawyer at Williamsburg to try to get his freedom.”

⁶¹U. B. Philips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1918), 342. For a reaction to Philip’s dutiful slave thesis, see Windley, *Profile*, xiii-xix; Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 83-164. For fuller account, see Lorenzo J. Greene, “The New England Negro as Seen in Advertisement for Runaway Slaves” *JNH* 29 (April 1944): 125-146; Daniel E. Meaders, “South Carolina Fugitives as Viewed through Local Colonial Newspapers with Emphasis on Runaway Notices, 1732-1801” *JNH* 60 (1975): 288-319; Michael P. Johnson, “Runaway Slaves and the Slave Communities in South Carolina, 1799 to 1830” *WMQ* 38 (1981): 418-441; Billy G. Smith and Richard Wojtowicz, *Blacks Who Stole Themselves*.

Like Bee, Howell probably believed that the circumstances of his birth entitled him to his freedom.⁶²

(Incidentally, Howell did have his day in court. In April of 1770, a young lawyer by the name of Thomas Jefferson argued on the mulatto's behalf. But, despite Jefferson's best efforts, the die had been cast and not in the slave's favor. As a matter of colonial custom and law, racially mixed Virginians, particularly those born of Negro fathers, slave or free, were bound to an artisan until they reached the unlikely age of thirty-one. Howell, however, disagreed with the court's decision. Like a number of other enslaved mulatto Virginians, he refused to wait for his freedom. Three months after his day in court, he ran away again. On that occasion, he left with his brother, Simon, "a sensible fellow and a good sawyer."⁶³)

Judging from the notices, the slave's discontent did not end there. In 1775, after part, if not all, of Mann Page's estate in "King William county" had been sold, Ned, "a negro man. . . about 19 or 20 years of age," disappeared. Presumably, he left to return to "those parts, or to his mother, who lives with mr. *Thomas Booth*, in *Richmond* town." A "Negro man named TEMPLE" ran away for similar reasons. In 1766, he "took a gun with him" and set off for "Bull Run, in Fauquier county, where he formerly lived." Like the escape of Ned, Temple's flight was one of reunion as well. According to his owner's

⁶²*VG* (Purdie & Dixon), September 8, 1774; *VG* (Purdie & Dixon), May 2, 1766.

⁶³Hening, *SAL*, 3: 452-453; *VG* (Purdie & Dixon), August 16, 1770; Paul Leicester Ford, comp. and ed., *The Writing of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: G. P. Putman's Sons, 1892): 1: 373-382. For a fuller account about slave life expectancy see Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 58-101; Kulikoff, *Tobacco & Slaves*, 45-77.

notice, he was purchased recently “with his mother and sister” from one Mr. Barradall of Williamsburg. Ultimately, by Mullin and Windley’s accounts, runaway notices refuted the notion of docile slaves.⁶⁴

Other historians have used runaway advertisements to document something more than just acts of the enslaved taking matters into their own hands. During the American Revolution, several notices demonstrated that slaves were quite aware of the political times in which they lived. Some, in fact, had absorbed the revolutionary rhetoric of the day. In their studies of African Americans in the era of the American Revolution, both Benjamin Quarles and, more recently, Sylvia Frey observed that slaves adopted the revolutionary spirit of the *Declaration of Independence*, claiming their own freedom and ran away to realize their natural rights. That is apparently what “4 negro men,” three identified as being “Virginia born,” had in mind when they ran and joined “Dunmore's service” in 1776. That was also what “Charles,” a “negro man” of Stafford County, intended when he decided to disappear. Just one day after Dunmore issued his inflammatory Proclamation, Charles, “who is a very shrewd [and] sensible fellow,” fled to the British side. As his owner claimed, Charles had no “cause of complaint, or dread of whipping for he has always been remarkably indulged.” Still, despite that favorable treatment, or perhaps because of it, the slave ran. In Purdie’s *Virginia Gazette*, Robert Brent lamented the loss of the prized slave who once “waited upon” him. Unwittingly, he also betrayed something of his relationship with his slave when he observed that Charles’

⁶⁴*VG* (Purdie & Dixon), May 26, 1775; *VG* (Purdie & Co.), June 6, 1766.

“design of going off was long premeditated.”⁶⁵

More recently one historian has suggested that runaways were central characters in the larger movement towards Revolution. Many were patriots in their own right. Like the Sons of Liberty, they answered freedom’s call. In his *Forced Founders*, Woody Holton examined the role slaves, Native Americans, and “middling sort” whites played in forcing the founding fathers to choose independence. By that account, Virginia’s sable sons seized the moment and prompted not only a Royal Governor to declare “all able bodied Negroes” free but also forced an otherwise reluctant colony into declaring independence from Great Britain.⁶⁶

Runaway notices have also been used to reveal other insights. Both Luther P. Jackson and W. Jeffrey Bolster used advertisements for absconded slaves to portray a thriving maritime culture in which black slaves worked as sailors and pilots before and during the American Revolution. A notice for a “Negro Boy” named Pompey offers one example. Months before the Sons of Liberty, disguised as Native Americans, boarded East

⁶⁵Benjamin Quarles, “Lord Dunmore as Liberator” *WMQ* 15 (October 1958): 494-507; Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), chap. 3, esp. 42-50; Sylvia R. Frey, “Between Slavery and Freedom: Virginia Blacks in the American Revolution” *JSH* 49 (August 1983): 375-398; Frey, *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 45-80, 143-171. For quotes concerning the revolutionary slaves from the newspaper see, *VG* (Pinkey), January 6, 1776; *VG* (Purdie), November 17, 1775, Supplement.

⁶⁶Dunmore, *Proclamation*, November 7, 1775 [broadside]; Woody Holton, “Rebel Against Rebel: Enslaved Virginians and the Coming of the American Revolution” *VMHB* 105 (Spring 1997): 157-192. For a fuller account of Holton’s thesis concerning African American and their role in Virginia declaring Independence, see his *Forced Founders*, 133-163.

India tea company ships in the Boston harbor, broke open the cargo, and tossed the tea into the sea, Pompey, who was “about eighteen Years old [and] five Feet three Inches high,” worked as a seaman along the James River in Virginia. According to the notice, the young lad had been “bred to the Sea.” To little surprise, when Pompey decided to make a bold gesture of defiance, John Goodrich, Jr. informed the readers of Purdie & Dixon’s *Virginia Gazette* that the said slave “may endeavour to get on Board a Ship, and make his Escape out of the Colony.”⁶⁷

In two recent studies of early African American culture, Michael A. Gomez and Shane White and Graham White drew on runaway advertisements to show how the memory of their African homelands informed slave hair styles, ideas about clothing, gestures, and body language. Eighteenth-century slaves, they noted, used dyes to achieve an African sense of fashion with respect to choices of colors for clothing. When “Dick,” for instance, a “Shoemaker by Trade” who belonged to James Walker ran away in 1772, he carried with him “a Negro cotton short coat double breasted, dyed purple breeches of the same, a red frize waistcoat.” Examining absconded slaves’ fashion choices, White and White argued that slaves expressed an African-oriented sense of style. A similar case can also be made for “JACOB,” who ran away from his owner, Isaac Younghusband in 1774. As his owner told it, the slave carried with him “a cotton jacket, dyed with maple bark and copperas, a brown cloth coat, a pair of buckskin breeches, a big coat, of an ash colour,

⁶⁷L. P. Jackson, “Virginia Negro Soldiers and Seamen in the American Revolution” *JNH* 27 (July 1942), pp. 247-287; Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*; for Pompey’s account, see *VG* (Purdie & Dixon), April 8, 1773.

yarn stockings, county shoes.”⁶⁸ Through dyes, slaves like Jacob and Dick not only resisted their master’s efforts to demean them by making them wear inferior “Negro” clothing but also expressed their own “polyrhythmic” African style. In other words, jazz survived the Atlantic passage.⁶⁹

Herbert G. Gutman and Philip D. Morgan found in runaway notices a record of an enduring black family. As many of the advertisements themselves show, slaves often ran away to be with loved ones. Others ran to protect their families. That was certainly true of Roger, a Negro man, “born of Angola,” and his “18 years old, Virginia born,” wife Moll. In 1739, the two ran away together. According to the account given in the newspaper, Moll had been “very big with Child.” The fear of sale probably encouraged the couple to take flight.

Another study of runaway notices revealed a change in the notices over time. Instead of the fearful and stuttering runaways that appear in Mullin’s study of slaves in eighteenth-century Virginia, runaways of the nineteenth-century were more self-confident—or so that is how they were described by their owners.⁷⁰ Despite their accents,

⁶⁸Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998; White and White, *Stylin’: African American Expressive Culture: from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (New York, Cornell UP, 1998), 5-124; for Dick’s account, see *VG* (Rind), March 12, 1772; for Jacob’s account, see *VG* (Rind), March 17, 1774.

⁶⁹White & White, *Stylin’*, 36.

⁷⁰In her *Sign of Diaspora*, Grey Gundaker complicates Mullin’s view that slaves stuttered primarily out fear by suggesting that recorded instances of slaves stammering speech may in fact represent a sign of stress and/or a linguistic “interference between the master’s speech and the slave’s” Gundaker, 204 (note 9). For a fuller account of Mullin’s

they were noted increasingly as being articulate and well-spoken. Further, in place of descriptions of runaways as dull or as having a downward countenance, notices of the antebellum period depicted absconding slaves as being intelligent and even as attractive. Such is the view of John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger whose *Runaway Slaves: Rebels On the Plantation* extensively documented the efforts of over 8,000 slaves who ran away between 1790 and 1860.⁷¹

More recently, in a study of slave consumption in the eighteenth-century, one historian observed that runaways participated in a consumer revolution that began to crisscross the Anglo-Atlantic world during the latter part of the colonial era. Increasingly, like their owners, slaves realized that clothing communicated status. So as to dress the part of a free man, many runaways took with them additional clothes. In a society where race was not the sole symbol for slavery, clothes did more than just make the man, they told the fashion savvy colonial world that he owned himself.⁷² In that way, Nick ran away from his owner, Benjamin Harrison, in 1770. As Harrison told it, the mulatto man “took

view, see his *Flight and Rebellion*, 80; 98-100.

⁷¹Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 262-269; Philip D. Morgan, “Colonial South Carolina Runaway: Their Significance for Slave Culture” *S&A* 6 (December 1985): 57-78; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998), 87-90; for Roger and Moll’s account, see *VG* (Parks), October 26 to November 2, 1739. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 98-100; Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels On the Plantation* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), chap. 9, esp. 213-219 & 224-228.

⁷²Waldstreicher, “Reading the Runaways,” 252-254; 257. Waldstreicher also addresses the subject of slaves and the consumer revolution in his *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery and the American Revolution* (New York, Hill and Wang, 2004), chap 1, esp. 7-8.

with him a pair of leather breeches, a blue surtout coat, and many other good clothes” which he supposed the slave would use “to pass for a freeman.” In 1768, William Porter also believed his runaway slave Tom would “change his clothing” in his “endeavour to pass for a freeman.”⁷³

In her study of patriarchy in early America, Kirsten Denise Sword used runaway notices both for slaves and for wayward wives to illustrate different ways in which slaves and women challenged the authority of their masters and husbands—often one and same person. By their actions, Sword maintained, slaves and wayward wives dissented from the “natural” patriarchal order, forcing otherwise reluctant masters, husbands, and, by extension, the larger male community first to take notice of their slaves and their women folk’s discontent and then to reassert their power over those they considered unfree.⁷⁴

Overall, runaway notices are a staple of American and African American history. While present studies like Allan Kulikoff’s *Tobacco & Slaves* and even more recently Philip D. Morgan’s extensive comparative study of colonial Virginia and South Carolina have made use of probate records and of slave inventories to trace the size and nature of enslaved populations, noting their growth and development over time and space, runaway notices document something more.⁷⁵ They uncover not only obscure social histories in

⁷³*VG* (Purdie & Dixon), October 18, 1770, Supplement; *VG* (Purdie & Dixon), January 28, 1768.

⁷⁴Sword, “Wayward Wives,” 22-87.

⁷⁵In their examinations of early slave life in Virginia, Kulikoff and Morgan’s studies perhaps best illustrate how historians have made extensive and creative use of probate records, slave lists, and other similar records. For probative examples, see Kulikoff, *Tobacco & Slaves*, 45-77; 317-351; 352-380; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 27-101; 146-

which Africans and their African American descendants struggled to achieve liberty but also various aspects of the life they made for themselves in a new world. That is certainly the case with the acculturated Virginia runaway Peter [Custis].

* * *

Though analyses of runaway advertisements have been useful in probing slave culture, they overlook the subject of slaves achieving literacy. In addition to registering evidence of the slave's discontent, their understanding of the political matters of the day, and their efforts to keep their families together, runaway notices also record evidence of slaves who had learned to read or write and of slaves who mastered both skills. Some, as will be shown, learned with the help of their masters. Others, however, learned through methods of their own choosing and of their own making.

In other words, Peter [Custis] was not only one. Numerous advertisements describe runaway slaves as possessing the ability to read and often to write. In 1777, Johnny, "a mulatto man slave who formerly waited upon. . . the late Peyton Randolph, Esq." ran away. In addition to recounting what clothes he took with him, namely "a green broadcloth coat and a new crimson waistcoat and breeches," Edmund Randolph, Peyton Randolph's nephew and Johnny's new owner, observed that the slave could "read and write tolerably well." Evidently, during his tenure as the personal body servant to Peyton

203; 204-256. For an equally useful account of how historians have used probate and censure-oriented data, see the essay edited by Lois Green Carr, Philip D. Morgan, and Jean D. Russo in *Colonial Chesapeake Society*.

Randolph, one of the most distinguished men in colonial Virginia, longtime Speaker of the Assembly, and President of the Continental Congress, Johnny had acquired literacy skills. The same had also been true of a slave woman named Edith. Like Mr. Randolph's former body servant, she too was a native of the colony. Sometime in March of 1770, she ran away. In that advertisement, which appeared in Hunter's *Virginia Gazette*, Nicholas Holt recalled that the "40 years of age, 5 feet 9 or 10 inches high" woman of "yellowish complexion" could "read pretty well."⁷⁶

Notices like these represent a type of signature of slave literacy—to borrow from Kenneth Lockridge's study. In that examination of literacy in colonial New England, Lockridge took signatures on wills as rudimentary indicators of literacy. Evidently, the same holds true for a number of runaway notices that appeared in the newspaper. Much in the same way a signature underscores the mastery of letters, so do advertisements for absconded slaves in which masters observed slaves reading or reading and writing.

Significantly, not all of the notices that demonstrate slave literacy are quite this apparent. Consider the notice for "a Negro Man named Emanuel" who decided to leave his owner's Petersburg estate in 1752. Age 25, Emanuel "carried with him a Book or two"—perhaps with a view of showing off his literacy skills and thereby convincing suspicious whites that he was a free man. Much in the same way absconded slaves carried with them certain tools that may belie the fact that they were skilled, the books Emanuel stole suggest that he too may have mastered a certain skill, reading. A similar case can

⁷⁶*VG* (Purdie & Dixon), December 12, 1777; *VG* (Rind), March 22, 1770; *VG* (Hunter), July 17, 1752. Also, see Julie Richter, "'The Speaker's' Men and Women: Randolph Slaves in Williamsburg" *CWI* 20 (2000): 47-51.

also be argued for a slave named “CHARLES” who was “the property of Col. William Allen.” In 1768, when he decided to run off, “the Negro man” carried with him, a pair of “leather bags, full of newspapers.” Again, taking into account the nature of the items Charles took with him, it stands to reason that he too could also read.⁷⁷

In other instances, slaves simply wrote themselves free by forging passes. Much to the chagrin of their owners, several had become scribes in their own right. In 1774, for example, “a Negro Man Slave who called himself STEPNEY BLUE” ran away from his owner in York County, Virginia. In his possession was “a forged Pass with his Mistress’s Name to it.” In a similar manner, Tom, a country-born slave, left a quarter in Isle of Wight County. According to his owner, the slave, who was “By Trade a Sawyer,” forged a pass in his endeavor to pass for free. In both of these instances, it is reasonable to assume that both Stepney Blue and Tom were runaways who had learned how to read and write.⁷⁸

Like Peter, neither Stepney Blue nor Tom was alone. Long before Phillis Wheatley was kidnaped in Africa and brought to America, other enslaved Virginians had mastered certain literacy skills. To get a fuller understanding of those Afro-Virginians who achieved letters, I compiled a comprehensive database of over 5,000 runaways who appeared in notices printed in newspapers in Virginia, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Boston, and New York. For a thorough account of fugitives in the southern colonies, for example, I relied

⁷⁷*VG* (Hunter), July 17, 1752; *VG* (Purdie & Dixon), March 31, 1768.

⁷⁸*VG* (Purdie & Dixon) September 29, 1774; *VG* (Hunter), April 10, 1752. Significantly, in examining notices in which runaways were identified as having forged passes, I also considered background, work, and linguistic ability as factors in determining literacy.

on both Lathan A. Windley's exhaustive four volume collection of runaway notices in the Chesapeake (Maryland & Virginia) and the Low Country (the Carolinas and Georgia) and Thomas Costa's equally extensive online database of runaways in Virginia. Similarly, to determine the number of absconded slaves in colonial Philadelphia, I made use of the online archives of Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* and Billy G. Smith and Richard Wojtowicz's collection of runaway notices for that metropolitan colony. For New York, Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown's *Blacks Whole Stole Themselves*, a collection of runaway advertisements for New York and New Jersey, was consulted. As for eighteenth-century Boston, I searched several long running issues of newspapers from Massachusetts—now at the Library of Congress, namely the *Boston Evening Post*, *Boston Gazette*, *New England Weekly Journal*, *Boston Newsletter*, *Boston Post Boy*, *Massachusetts Gazette*, *Massachusetts Spy*, *Essex Gazette*, and the *New England Chronicle*. When compiling this inter-colonial database, I included runaway advertisements and notices for slaves apprehended between the 1730s, when William Parks started the paper in Williamsburg, and 1776, when America declared its independence. Reprints of notices that appeared in other newspapers were not counted twice. Except for certain information regarding a runaway's background, occupation, ability to speak, and other factors, most reprints were excluded. Furthermore, as the circumstances that made slave-holders turned to press were unfixed and because estimates for notices printed in non-extant issues of papers yield little useful evidence in the way of developing individual profiles, I also did not take into account notices that may have appeared in newspapers. Rather, I relied on the extant record of absconded slaves in

Virginia, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Boston, and New York. (Table 3)

Judging from that data, it is evident, runaways from Virginia clearly travel far and wide. Moreover, up until the American Revolution, a number of them had also achieved letters. Between 1736 and 1776, approximately one thousand runaway notices appeared in the *Virginia Gazette*. Of that number, fifty-five runaways—5.5 per cent of the whole—were described as being literate. Starting in 1736, the number of literate slaves represented in the notices for absconders grew over time. And so did the overall number of runaways in the colony. In the first three years of the paper's publication, forty-two slaves were reported as having absconded. None, however, were noted as being literate. But, in the decade following the 1730s, one out of thirty-three or 3% of the number of runaways was identified as being able to read and write. By the 1750s, that number continued to grow. Around the same time the colony's slave population nearly doubled, three out of 72 runaways were noted as being literate. In the decade that saw the Landon Carters of colonial Virginia amassing greater fortunes in tobacco, wheat, corn, and slaves, expanding their already large land holdings, and solidifying further their positions as social and political grandees in their counties, four per cent of enslaved Afro-Virginians who disappeared from their owners' estates had solved the mystery of letters.⁷⁹ In the 1760s, that number increased by almost three per cent, as sixteen runaways out of 233 were noted as being able to read and write. In the decade in which the growing tensions

⁷⁹By all contemporary and modern accounts, early Africans and African Americans initially perceived print as a form of magic. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 127-169; Gates, "Preface: Talk Book," xxvi-xxxvi; and, Gundaker, "Give Me A Sign" in *An Extensive Republic* (forthcoming).

Table 3 Number of Runaway Notices in Early America.

Periods	Colonies				
	VA	S.C.	MA	PA	N.Y
1730s	44	275	67	25	17
1740s	33	353	111	64	44
1750s	72	559	103	82	91
1760s	233	831	104	246	122
1770- 1776	648	633	115	152	70
Total	1030	2651	500	569	344

Source:

Inter-Colonial Runaway Slave Database.

between the Old and New Lights gathered to a head, almost seven per cent of the runaways in Virginia were literate and reading the word to and among themselves. But, by the time the colony declared independence, that percentage dropped off by one and a half per cent. In hard numerical terms, 35 out of 648 runaways between 1770 and 1776 had achieved literacy.⁸⁰ (Table 4)

Notices further South recorded lower figures concerning literacy. In the Low Country estates of South Carolina, where slaves labored in rice and indigo fields, literacy did not thrive. Compared to the tobacco aristocrats of the Chesapeake, the rice lords of the colonial deep South ruled over a slave population one-half the size of Virginia's. (Table 5) The newspapers of that colony, however, give a different impression. Over the four and a half decades before Independence, the *South Carolina Gazette*, the sole newspaper in the colony, carried three to four times as many notices for runaways as ran in its counterpart, the *Virginia Gazette*. In the 1730s, the Charles Town-based paper carried notices for 275 runaways, compared to a mere 33 in the Williamsburg paper. Not one of the South Carolina fugitives was described as literate. In the two decades that followed, the percentage of literate slaves in Carolina failed to reach even one per cent as the overall numbers of runaways climbed: one out of 353 for the 1740s and one out of 559 in the 1750s. By the 1760s, those figures changed. The percentage of literate runaways increased to almost 1% and remained there until the founding fathers in South Carolina declared independence from England. (Table 6)

⁸⁰For a fuller account of eighteenth-century Virginia see Billings, Selby, & Tate, *Colonial Virginia*; Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*.

Table 4 Literacy Rates Among Virginia Runaways

Periods	# Ads Examined	# Literate Runaways	% Literate
1736-1739	44	--	--
1740-1749	33	1	3 %
1750-1759	72	3	4.2 %
1760-1769	233	16	6.9 %
1770-1776	648	35	5.4 %

Source:

Inter-Colonial Runaway Slave Database.

Table 5 Estimated Enslaved Population in Colonial America

Periods	Colonies				
	VA	S.C.	MA	PA.	N.Y.
1700s	16,390	2,444	800	430	2,256
1710s	23,118	4,100	1,310	1,575	2,811
1720s	26,559	12,000	2,150	2,000	5,740
1730s	30,000	20,000	2,780	1,241	6,956
1740s	60,000	30,000	3,035	2,055	8,996
1750s	101,452	39,000	4,075	2,872	11,014
1760s	140,570	57,334	4,566	4,409	16,340
1770s	187,605	75,178	4,754	5,761	19,112

Source:

[United States Bureau of the Census], *The Statistical History of the United States, from Colonial Times to the Present; Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (New York : Basic Books, 1976), 1168.

Table 6 Literacy Rates Among South Carolina Runaways

Periods	# Ads Examined	# Literate Runaways	% Literate
1730-1739	275	--	--
1740-1749	353	1	.28 %
1750-1759	559	1	.18 %
1760-1769	831	6	.72 %
1770-1776	633	5	.79 %

Source:

Inter-Colonial Runaway Slave Database.

While the number of literate runaways in South Carolina never rose above one per cent during the eighteenth-century, that was not the case north of the Chesapeake. In Phillis Wheatley's Boston, there were more literate runaway slaves there than in either the Chesapeake or in the Low Country. Though Boston was far from being a seething hub of slave discontent, its newspapers reported almost twice as many runaways between the 1730s and the 1750s as appeared in the several versions of Williamsburg's *Virginia Gazette*. In the 1730s, 67 runaways appeared in the Boston press compared to only 33 in Virginia. Two of the Boston absconders were literate. In the following decade that number grew along with the ranks of runaways. Four out of 111 runaways in the 1740s, approximately four per cent, were literate, marking the beginning of a sustained rise in slave literacy. The proportion of literate slaves among runaways nearly doubled to seven per cent in the 1750s and then to 8.6 per cent in the 1760s, when New Englanders began to sound liberty's bell. That figure peaked at close to ten per cent in the decade that saw not only the birth of independence but also the historic publication of Phillis Wheatley's *Poems*. In this setting, Phillis Wheatley was clearly not the "phoenix" of her race. Quite the contrary, as the notices from Boston show, she was one out of many literate blacks. (Table 7)

Figures among runaways westward of New England reveal higher numbers of literate slaves compared to the Low Country and the Chesapeake. Like Boston, the colony of Pennsylvania had not been a hub of slave discontent. Even so, from the 1730s to the 1760s, the number of runaways there almost equaled the total in Virginia. Initially, Pennsylvania's runaways were no more likely to be literate than Virginia's. In both

Table 7 Literacy Rates Among New England Runaways

Periods	# Ads Examined	# Literate Runaways	% Literate
1730-1739	67	2	2.9 %
1740-1749	111	4	3.6 %
1750-1759	103	7	6.8 %
1760-1769	104	9	8.6 %
1770-1776	115	11	9.6 %

Source:

Inter-Colonial Runaway Slave Database.

colonies, the proportion hovered around three to four per cent in the 1740s and 1750s. The 1760s marked a turning point, when Pennsylvania diverged from Virginia, even as the numbers of runaways and of literate slaves rose. Some eight per cent of Pennsylvania's runaways (20 out of 246) were described as literate in the 1760s, compared to seven per cent of Virginia's. By the time the colonies declared independence, the number of Pennsylvania runaways decreased. But the percentage of literate runaways continued to grow. By 1776, the proportion of runaways who were literate rose from 8.1 per cent to 9.9 per cent.⁸¹ (Table 8)

Similar figures were recorded for runaways in the colony of New York. In 1730s, seventeen notices appeared in the *New-York Gazette*. Of that number, three runaways were identified as being literate.⁸² In the ensuing decade, at the start of which New York was thrown into uproar by the detection of a slave conspiracy, two out of 44 runaways were noted as being able to read. In the 1750s, that figure doubled. Out of the 91 slaves who ran away, five could read and write. During the 1760s, only three runaways were reported as being literate. Between 1770 and 1776, six out of 70 runaway slaves who appeared in the papers in New York could read and write. To judge the notices, runaways in societies with slaves were more literate than their counterparts in full blown slave societies. (Table 9)

⁸¹Nash, "Slaves and Slave owners in Colonial Pennsylvania" *WMQ* 30 (1973): 223-256.

⁸²Considering the incomplete nature of the newspaper in New York, the percentage of literate runaways records for this decade is overstated.

Table 8 Literacy Rates Among Runaways in Pennsylvania

Periods	# Ads Examined	# Literate Runaways	% Literate
1730-1739	25	1	4 %
1740-1749	64	2	3.1 %
1750-1759	82	3	3.65 %
1760-1769	246	20	8.1 %
1770-1776	152	15	9.9 %

Source:

Inter-Colonial Runaway Slave Database.

Table 9 Literacy Rates Among Runaways in New York

Periods	# Ads Examined	# Literate Runaways	% Literate
1730-1739	17	3	17.6 %
1740-1749	44	2	4.5 %
1750-1759	91	5	5.5 %
1760-1769	122	3	2.5 %
1770-1776	70	6	8.6 %

Source:

Inter-Colonial Runaway Slave Database.

Clearly more slaves could read than were reported. To judge from the notices, for example, few slave women ran away. Fewer still were recorded as being able to read or write. In the Chesapeake, women accounted for a modest share—110 out of 1030—of the notices printed in the *Gazettes* between 1736 and 1776. Of that number, only four of them could read or read and write.

For most slave women in Virginia, running was simply not a viable choice. Though familiar with the language and customs of their masters, most chose to stay put. Family bound them to the quarter and to the house. As they were not as skilled as their menfolk, they also had little to no chance to hire themselves out. And because of their sex, female fugitives faced yet an additional obstacle when they attempted to pass for free or endeavored to find work.

Most preferred truancy. That is certainly the view of Gerald Mullin. In his judgment, only a few ran off to leave the colony or to escape slavery permanently. In many instances, slave-holders had some idea as to their whereabouts. One quarter of women fugitives in Virginia left to visit with their husbands or children on nearby plantations. Another quarter, he noted, went to town to pass for free. To support themselves, in places like Williamsburg and in other urban centers, fugitive women sold corn or potato hoe-cakes, eggs and chickens, and a variety of baked goods—all of which belie the fact that many had help. While Leni Ashmore Sorensen's recent study of women runaways has challenged the current view that women were less likely than men to run away, most historians agree, few slave women chose to run. Because of close ties to the communities in which they lived, many remained where they were. In other ways, they registered their

discontent.⁸³

The same was true of women further North and South. In South Carolina, one-fifth of the notices (492 out of 2651 runaways) were for women who disappeared between the 1730s and 1776. By the time the planters there decided to sign the *Declaration of Independence*, only one was noted as being literate. In Pennsylvania, women made up a tenth of the runaways who appeared in Benjamin Franklin's *Gazette*. In that port colony, Mary Deklyn's Rachel was one of three female slaves who could read. In 1775, when she ran away, her mistress noted, the Negro woman "Took with her... a hymn book." In Phillis Wheatley's Boston, slaves of the fairer sex accounted for almost one-tenth of printed notices. Surprisingly, none were noted as literate. To judge solely from those notices, Wheatley was indeed the phoenix of her race in Boston. That was not so in New York. There, Jenny was that colony's majestic bird. The wife of a "negro preacher" by the name of Mark, who could also read, Jenny was the only one of 34 female fugitives who appeared in the *New-York Gazette* between 1730 and 1776. In the notice posted for the slave couple's recovery, Thomas Clarke and Major Provost described the "Wench" as "smart" and likely to "make a travelling Pass." Evidently, while her husband could read, Jenny could read and write. (Table 10)

Still, more women could probably read than those who appeared in newspaper advertisements. More could also read and write. While it is impossible to discern, in exact

⁸³Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 103-105; Morgan and Nichols, "Slave Flight," 209-210; and, Leni Ashmore Sorensen, "'So That I Get Her Again': African American Slave Women Runaways in Selected Richmond, Virginia Newspapers, 1830-1860, and the Richmond, Virginia Police Guard Daybook, 1834-1843." MA. thesis, College of William and Mary, 1996.

Table 10 Percentage of Female Slaves Advertised As Runaways in Colonial America—Measured Over Time and Space.

Periods	Colonies				
	VA	S.C.	PA	MA	NY
1730s	9%	21%	12%	11%	11%
1740s	--	20	10	10	9
1750s	10	23	10	3	10
1760s	12	16	7	4	9
1770– 1776	11	16	12	8	8

Sources:

Inter-Colonial Runaway Slave Database.

numerical terms, how many had achieved letters, it is nonetheless reasonable to assume, considering that they made up half the slave population in Virginia for much of the eighteenth-century, that a fairer number of them did learn. In this context, the notices reveal only part of the story—that part being what masters knew of slaves for certain.

(Tables 11–13)

The notices also over-represent skilled slaves and domestics. As the case had been with women, runaway notices reveal only part of the story. Between 1733 and 1775, as Philip D. Morgan noted, they accounted for approximately one-tenth of all slaves in the colony. By contrast, they represented 21.6 per cent of all absconding slaves in the advertisements. They were also more likely to be literate. Four years after William Parks started the paper in Williamsburg, three runaways were noted as being skilled. At age 42, James Ball's Will who "carried with him, a white Fustian Jacket, a looping Ax, and a Fiddle" was a jack of several trades. As his master told it, the Virginian-born native was "a Carpenter, Sawyer, Shoemaker, and Cooper." But Will could neither read nor write—at least that is the case judging from the notice placed in the paper. Neither could the other two skilled slaves reported in the 1730s. By the following decade that changed. Six out of 33 runaways were artisans. Eight worked as domestics and one was semi-skilled. Among that exceptional group was Peter, John Custis' former house slave, who was also the only literate runaway recorded in the Williamsburg-based press in the 1740s. By the time religious dissenters began to settle the colony's frontier, that number became bigger in each succeeding decade. While skilled slaves made up a little over a fourth of those who ran in the 1750s, eleven per cent could read and write. In the ensuing decade, they

Table 11 Gender Ratio Among Adult Afro-Virginians

Gender	Periods			
	1740s	1750s	1760s	1770s
Male (no.)	66	26	53	33
Female (no.)	46	18	22	23
Total	112	44	75	56

Sources:

Gunston Hall Plantation: Virginia and Maryland Probate Inventories, 1740-1810. Database. www.gunstonhall.org

Notes:

1740s: Henry Fitzhugh, September 13, 1748, *Stafford County Will Book*, 11-13; Jesse Ball, March 11, 1747, *Lancaster County Deeds & Wills*, 172a.

1750s: Jeduthan Ball, September 1, 1750, *King George County Deed Book*, 65; John Washington, June 9, 1752, *Stafford County Will Book*, 231.

1760s: William Webb, 1768, *Richmond County Will Book*, 9; Capt. Charles Smallwood, *Norfolk County Will Book*, 144; Robert Tucker, September 1768, *Norfolk County Appraisements*, 118.

1770s: Edward Archer, May 28, 1772, *Norfolk County Appraisements*, 153-154; Billington McCarty, April 22, 1773, *Richmond County Will Book*, 135; Peyton Randolph, July 15, 1776, *York County Wills & Inventories*, 340-341.

Table 12 Gender Ratio Among Afro-Virginian Infants Measured Across Time & Space (Tidewater)

Periods	Total (no.)	Male (no.)	Female (no.)	n/a
St. Peters Church (New Kent County)				
1700-1709	70	27	31	12
1710-1719	127	62	47	18
1720-1729	283	139	128	16
1730-1739	243	124	113	6
1740-1749	8	4	4	0
1750-1759	85	43	42	0
1760-1769	32	16	15	1
1770-1775	18	6	8	4
Albemarle Parish (Sussex County)				
1720-1729	2	1	1	0
1730-1739	65	27	38	0
1740-1749	408	197	211	0
1750-1759	504	241	263	0
1760-1769	584	286	296	2
1770-1779	306	142	164	0

Notes:

The number slave children recorded are understated due to the vagaries of recording and local difference in practice over time.

Sources:

Churchill Gibson Chamberlayne, trans. & ed., *The Vestry Book and Register of St. Peter's Parish, New Kent and James City counties, Virginia, 1684-1786*. Richmond, Va: 1937; Gertrude R.B. Richards, trans. & ed., *Register of Albemarle Parish, Surry and Sussex Counties, 1739-1778*. Richmond, Va.: National Society Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1958.; Churchill Gibson Chamberlayne, trans. & ed., *The Vestry Book and Register of Bristol Parish, Virginia, 1720-1789*. Richmond, Va.: W.E. Jones, 1898; and, *The Parish Register of Christ Church, Middlesex County, Va., from 1653 to 1812*. Richmond, Va.: W. E. Jones, 1897.

Table 13 Gender Ratio Among Afro-Virginian Infants Measured Across Time & Space (Piedmont)

Periods	Total (no.)	Male (no.)	Female (no.)	n/a
Bristol Parish (Prince George County)				
1710-1719	8	4	3	1
1720-1729	112	50	59	3
1730-1739	98	56	42	0
1740-1749	76	33	43	0
1750-1759	38	16	20	2
1760-1769	9	3	6	0
Christ Church (Middlesex County)				
1700-1709	115	55	60	0
1710-1719	78	45	33	0
1720-1729	517	241	276	0
1730-1739	561	290	268	3
1740-1749	346	180	166	0
1750-1759	124	57	57	10
1760-1769	18	8	10	0
1770-1775	16	8	8	0

Notes:

The number slave children recorded are understated due to the vagaries of recording and local difference in practice over time.

Sources:

Churchill Gibson Chamberlayne, trans. & ed., *The Vestry Book and Register of St. Peter's Parish, New Kent and James City counties, Virginia, 1684-1786*. Richmond, Va: 1937; Gertrude R.B. Richards, trans. & ed., *Register of Albemarle Parish, Surry and Sussex Counties, 1739-1778*. Richmond, Va.: National Society Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1958.; Churchill Gibson Chamberlayne, trans. & ed., *The Vestry Book and Register of Bristol Parish, Virginia, 1720-1789*. Richmond, Va.: W.E. Jones, 1898; and, *The Parish Register of Christ Church, Middlesex County, Va., from 1653 to 1812*. Richmond, Va.: W. E. Jones, 1897.

accounted one-eighth (8 out of 64) of that number who were literate. In the 1770s, when Virginia declared independence, 123 out of 648 runaways were noted as being smiths and carpenters, waiters and coachmen, boatmen, farmers, and other such skilled hands. Almost one-tenth could read and/or write.⁸⁴ (Table 14)

In addition, notices under-reported slave literacy for skilled slaves in general. Assuming that the rate of literacy for skilled slaves who ran is close to that of the larger population of slave artisans in Virginia, modest estimates can be computed over time. For instance, in the 1740s, only one out of fifteen skilled slaves who ran away in the Chesapeake had achieved letters. For that same period, there were 6,500 slave craftsmen and domestics in the colony. Of that number, 433 probably could read or read and write. Over the course of the eighteenth-century, that figure grew along with the number of slaves who had mastered certain trades. In the 1750s, over 100,000 enslaved Virginians performed work outside of husbandry. In addition to learning their particular crafts 1,166 had also learned how to read and/or write. In the decade that followed, over 500 more had acquired a knowledge of letters. In the 1770s, that figure increased by a little under one-third. Out of the colony's 180,500 slave artisans, ferry men, and domestics an estimated 2,201 were literate. Evidently, for a fair number of enslaved Virginians, work in the house or in artisan shops encouraged literacy, to a greater extent than recorded by runaway

⁸⁴*VG* (Parks), April to May 5, 1738. Incidentally, North and South of the Chesapeake, where slave-holders posted notices in South Carolina, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New York, slaves with skills also represented a significant portion of those who ran away and of those who were literate.

Table 14 Profile of Skilled Runaways in Virginia

Periods	# of Notices Examined	# of Skilled Runaways	# of Literate & Skilled Runaways
1736-1739	44	3	--
1740-1749	33	15	1
1750-1759	72	2	2
1760-1769	233	64	8
1770-1776	648	123	15

Source:

Inter-Colonial Runaway Slave Database.

notices. (Table 15) ⁸⁵

Obviously, not all literate slaves ran away and were sought after through advertisements in the press. Whether instructed by their masters or other skilled slaves, some enslaved artisans and domestics considered Virginia their home. As the case had been with slave women, family bound many to the tobacco colony. If not familial ties, the privileges that their skills afforded them made them stay.⁸⁶

All things considered, newspaper notices for runaways represented but the peak of an indeterminate mountain range in which slaves learned to read and write. Consider a three-page letter that has survived from a Virginia slave who wrote to the Bishop of London in 1723, weeks after Edmund Gibson had been appointed the Chaplain of the trans-Atlantic colonies.⁸⁷ According to Thomas N. Ingersoll, who discovered the letter while examining the papers of the Bishop, the author may have had help from other slaves in composing the correspondence with the Bishop of London. Taking into account “the

⁸⁵Current studies of literacy concur. There is a strong connection between rates of literacy and the skilled professions. For a fuller account, see Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England*, 72-103. 2. For an account of work and literacy in colonial Virginia, see Darrett B. and Anita H. Rutman, *A Place in Time: Explicatus* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), chaps 9–11 and David Andrew Rawson, “Guardians of Their Own Liberty’: A Contextual History of Print Culture in Virginia, 1750-1820.” Ph.D. diss., College of William & Mary, 1998.

⁸⁶According to both Kulikoff and Morgan’s studies of slavery in Virginia, slave artisans passed what they learned on to their children. In addition to their craft, they probably taught their children how to read and write, had they acquired that skill along the way. Kulikoff, 403-405; Morgan, chap. 4, esp. 215-216. Also see chap. 9

⁸⁷Anonymous to Bishop Edmund Gibson, 1723, *Fulham Papers*, 17: 167-168. A copy of the letter and a transcript can be found in Thomas N. Ingersoll, “Releese us out of this Cruell Bondegg’: An Appeal from Virginia in 1723” *WMQ* 51 (October 1994): 777-782.

Table 15 Profile of the Estimated Population of Skilled Slaves in Virginia.

Periods	# of Slaves	# of Skilled Slaves	# of Literate Skilled Slaves
1730s	40,000	4,000	--
1740s	65,000	6,500	433
1750s	105,000	10,500	1,166
1760s	140,500	14,050	1,756
1770s	180,500	18,050	2,201

Source:

[United States Bureau of the Census], *The Statistical History of the United States, from Colonial Times to the Present; Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (New York : Basic Books, 1976), 1168; Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 61 & 221; and, Inter-Colonial Runaway Slave Database.

singular and plural forms of the first person” the author employed, Ingersoll observed, the letter was probably the work of a group of slaves.⁸⁸

The Bishop of London’s commission inspired the slave to write. News of Gibson’s appointment probably filled the streets in Virginia, as well as the alleys of the colony’s urban centers. By word of mouth, reports about the Bishop had probably made its way far into the back-country of the Piedmont, further westward into the Appalachian mountains, and into the equally sparsely populated south and eastern shore country-sides. If not in that manner, news of the Bishop’s appointment could certainly be heard, echoing about the tabby plastered walls of the local parish, where clerks and sextons talked and where parsons were sure to keep their congregations, that included slaves, apprized.⁸⁹

However the writer may have learned of the Bishop’s appointment, anonymously written, the letter entreated the service of the “Lord arch Bishop of Lonnd” on the behalf of other enslaved Virginians. To a lesser extend, it also beseeched “Lord King George” for assistance. The intention of the petition nonetheless was twofold. In the first part of the letter, the slave writer lamented the deplorable condition of the mulattoes and Negro slaves in the colony. By the “poore” slave writer’s account, slaves in Virginia were exploited much like “the Egyptions was with the Chillardann of Issarall.” According to the slave-author, those who owned slaves “doo Look no more up on us then if wee ware dogs which I hope when these Strange Lines comes to your Lord Ships hands will be Looket in

⁸⁸Ingersoll, 778.

⁸⁹For a fuller discussion for how news was spread in colonial America, see Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865*.

to.” Such being his lot, the slave writer then begged “The Right Raverrand father in god” and the King of England to intervene on the slave’s behalf. “Releese us,” he asked in a plea at once bold and deferential, “out of this Cruell Bondage.”⁹⁰

In the second part of the appeal, the anonymous slave writer, who identified himself as but a “poore partishinner” of the Church of England, beseeched the Bishop to take responsibility for instructing Virginia’s slaves in Christianity. “Wee. . . do humbly beg the favour of your Lord Ship. . . [to] Settell one thing upon us which is . . . that our childarn may be broatt up in the way of the Christian faith.” That meant teaching them “the Lords prayer, the creed, and the ten commandments,” the basic texts by which children were first introduced to the Anglican faith. But that was not sufficient for the Bishop’s correspondent. He also implored the Church official to put the slave “children “to Scool and Larnd to Reed through the Bybell.” In eighteenth-century Virginia, the three R’s were reading, ‘riting, and religion.⁹¹

That part of the appeal is striking because it underscores the role slave women may have played in the composition of the anonymous letter. Besides expressing their grave concerns about their mistreatment and proving that not all literate slaves ran away and were sought after through notices in the press, the authors of the letter conveyed what seems a parental interest about the educational opportunities of their children. As the shifts from first to third person points out, there was more than one author who addressed the Bishop of London in this regard. When addressing the diocese on behalf of other slaves,

⁹⁰Anonymous to Bishop Edmund Gibson, 1723, *Fulham Papers*, 17: 167-168.

⁹¹Ibid.

the authors used the singular pronoun—to separate him or herself, whose plight was no different, from the others. But, when making the case for instructing younger slaves, the voice of the slave writer shifts and becomes plural. In that shift, the unknown writer spoke not only for his or herself but also for the others who help to put the letter together. Slave mothers and fathers, in short, desired more for their children and perhaps indirectly more for themselves. More for them meant better treatment and lessons for their sons and daughters in how to read the Bible.

As early as the 1720s, if not before, enslaved Virginians were being taught. Apparently, some were being taught by local church officials. Others taught one another. Black Virginians, as the anonymous 1723 letter told it, were working together in achieving literacy. Throughout the colony, they were sharing what they learned. Slaves were teaching each other how to read and write.

Some of those lessons in letters went on in private and in clandestine places away from their owners' watchful eyes. In spite of the Church of England's best efforts in Virginia, not all slaves acquired literacy. While some slave-holders afforded slaves the opportunity, others did not. In their judgment, instruction served only to make a slave saucy. To dissuade such efforts, some slave-holders threatened to punish their slaves if they continued in their endeavors to learn. Then again, the slave authors may have been writing in secret and anonymously, not to hide their literacy from their masters but rather to conceal their denunciation of their masters to the Anglican church official overseeing religious life in the colony. Whatever their reasons, they wrote in fear. The "poore" slave writers makes that much clear when in the closing lines of the letter they explained to the

Bishop their reasons for anonymity: “Wee darer nott Subscribe any mans name to this for feare of our masters for if they knew that wee have Sent home to your honour wee Should goo neare to Swing upon the gallas tree.”⁹²

Ultimately, though runaway notices in the *Virginia Gazette* offer a fuller account of slaves achieving literacy, not all literate slaves in Chesapeake ran away. Quite the contrary, some chose not to run. Rather than express their discontent in that way, a number of enslaved Virginians put their literacy skills to a different use. As this letter suggest, they wrote the King whose authority presided over all the colonies, and appealed to one of the church’s chief clerics whose moral authority gave their compliant an added weight.

* * *

Recent archaeological findings also yield another signature of literate slaves. Much like printed runaways notices in newspapers, artifacts found in archaeological excavations provide explicit evidence of slaves achieving letters. But, unlike the notices, which tends to overstate literacy among skilled slaves and understate the literacy skills of female slaves, the archaeological evidence reveals another aspect of slaves reading and writing. In other words, while runaway notices established literacy among a great many skilled slaves and/or those who lived nearby town or in urban areas, recent archaeological findings reveal literacy among plantation slaves—men and women, who lived in the quarters.

⁹²Ibid.

Scholarship on early African American history and of African American material culture has sought to reconstruct everyday life in the slave quarters. From the analysis of faunal remains in York County, Virginia slave quarters, Ywone Edwards-Ingram showed that slaves were able to supplement their diets by hunting and trapping local game. Other scholars have used slave archaeology to examine the social relationships between masters and slaves and the processes of cultural interaction and exchange that occurred between Africans and Europeans. In *Uncommon Ground*, Leland Ferguson discovered among slave quarter artifacts a wide assortment of ceramics, clay pots, and fragments of other items. Judging from the variety of these artifacts, Ferguson concluded that in addition to supplementing their diets, slaves in Virginia and elsewhere also bartered with their masters for certain commodities. In that manner, slaves acquired items like silverware, porcelain, and cream-ware dishes and plates. Such trading challenges old assumptions that slaves, denied access to luxuries and overawed by the authority of their well-fed, well-clad, and well-housed masters, were unable to develop a sense of economy and independence. In Ferguson's judgment, enslaved Virginians, as well as slaves elsewhere, acquired property of their own through which many expressed and enjoyed a certain modicum of social prestige among their fellow bondsmen and women.⁹³

Sifting through the debris, archaeologists have discovered evidence not only of

⁹³Ywone Edwards-Ingram, "The Trash of Enslaved African Virginians" *CWI* 20 (Winter 1999/2000): 9-12; Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800*. For a fuller treatment of slave archaeology see, Patricia Samford, "The Archaeology of African-American Slavery and Material Culture" *WMQ* 53 (January 1996): 87-114; Theresa A. Singleton, ed. *"I, Too, Am America": Archaeological Studies of African-American Life*; and, Ann Smart Martin, "Reflections: African-American as Consumers" (Unpublished Paper, October 2002), 1-36.

slave food ways and forms of social stratification but also of West African cultural retentions. Fragments of tobacco pipe stems and bowls, unearthed in the root cellars or sub-terrain pits at the quarters at Carter's Grove in the James City County, home of Carter Burwell, the grandson of Robert "King" Carter of Lancaster County, indicate that Virginia slaves were consumers of the very tobacco they were forced to produce for white masters engaged in transatlantic trade. In the early part of the eighteenth-century, they too smoked tobacco, possible as way of coping with slavery. But they also smoked tobacco because it was a custom with which many were already familiar from their native African homelands.⁹⁴

That is certainly the view of Lorena S. Walsh. In *From Calabar to Carter's Grove*, Walsh suggests that in addition to producing and consuming tobacco, Africans in Virginia brought to the Chesapeake African techniques of growing the crop. While historians have long recognized the "contributions of enslaved Africans to the development of rice culture in the Carolinas," Walsh observed that African contributions to the development of tobacco culture in the Chesapeake has received little to no attention. However, slave archaeology suggests something more. In Walsh's judgment, excavated tobacco stems and pipes demonstrate not only slave consumption but also the likely presence of African

⁹⁴[Colonial Williamsburg Foundation], Carter's Grove, Artifact Inventory; Lorena S. Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1997), 61-65; 195-199. For a fuller account of these artifacts found at slave sites see Matthew C. Emerson, "African Inspirations in a New World Art and Artifact: Decorated Pipes from the Chesapeake," in *"I, Too, Am America,"* Theresa A. Singleton. ed. (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1999), 47-82 and L. Daniel Mouer, Mary Ellen N. Hodges, Stephen R. Potter, and others, "Colonoware Pottery, Chesapeake Pipes, and "Uncritical Assumptions" in *"I, Too, Am America,"* Theresa A. Singleton. ed. (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1999), 83-115.

methods of producing tobacco. Both Gold Coast and Angolan Africans, who were transported to Virginia, were quite familiar with tobacco farming. When they arrived in the Chesapeake, in addition to their labor, they also carried with them centuries of experience. As a result, fragments of tobacco pipes and stems represent a complex artifact in which African and European husbandry realized a certain common ground.⁹⁵ (Table 16)

Slave archaeology also reveals evidence of enslaved Virginians mastering letters. Pencil leads, pencil slates, writing slates, and, to a lesser extent, unidentified slates have been found at several sites excavated in the Tidewater and Piedmont regions of the Chesapeake. In the Richneck Quarter in York County, for example, three writing slates and three unidentified slates were uncovered. Similarly, in the Palace Lands Quarter in York County, one writing slate and eight unidentified slates were excavated. One unidentified slate was also unearthed at the slave site at the Governor's Land estate in James City County. Identical artifacts were found at George Washington's Tidewater plantation. At his estate in Mount Vernon, one unidentified slate was discovered in the first President's slave quarters. Much like runaway notices that appeared in the *Virginia Gazette*, these artifacts demonstrate slave literacy. As this archaeological evidence shows, slaves were practicing letters in the quarters and probably sharing the skill among themselves.

Particularly compelling are the artifacts unearthed at the slave quarter sites at Thomas Jefferson's estate at Monticello. There 237 unidentified slates, twenty-seven pencil leads, two pencil slates, and eighteen writing slates were uncovered in houses once

⁹⁵Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove*, 63-65.

Table 16 Archaeological Evidence of Tobacco Usage at Slave Sites

Site Name	Occupancy	Artifacts: tobacco pipes		
		(stems)	(bowls)	(unid.)
Governor's Land 44JC298	1690-1720	92	122	12
Carter's Grove	1710-1785	56	83	--
Palace Lands	1740-1780	75	58	1
Richneck	1750-1770	404	750	44
Monticello				
Building O	1770-1790	139	67	--
Building S	1770-1826	25	22	--
Building L	1780-1810	3	2	--
Building R	1793-1826	13	7	--
Building T	1793-1826	27	16	--
Poplar Forest				
North Hill	1770-1780	20	45	--
Quarter	1790-1810	95	60	9
Mount Vernon				
House for Families	1759-1792	212	401	3
Stratford Hall ST116	1770-1820	30	49	--

Sources:

[Colonial Williamsburg Foundation], Carter's Grove Artifact Inventory & the DAACS (*Digital Archaeological Archive of Chesapeake Slavery*) Database.
www.daacs.org

occupied by Mr. Jefferson's black bond-servants. In *Free Some Day*, Lucia Stanton took these writing slates in slave quarters as evidence of enslaved Virginians reading and writing. In her view, artifacts "unearthed in archaeological excavations below Mulberry Row attests to the hunger for education at Monticello. . . . The writers probably had only the hours of darkness to practice [their] letters and found a piece of locally available stone that saved [them] the purchase of pen and paper."⁹⁶ Perhaps unknown to Mr. Jefferson, who by Lucia Stanton's account had no problem with a number of his skilled slaves reading and writing, some of his plantation hands were also literate and apparently teaching one another.⁹⁷ (Plate 4)

Evidence of slaves reading and writing has also been unearthed at Jefferson's Poplar Forest estate. Poplar Forest was Mr. Jefferson's retirement plantation in Bedford County, Virginia. There, archaeologists have discovered four unidentified slates in the root cellars excavated at the North Hill site. At the Quarter site, they unearthed even clearer evidence of slave literacy, fragments of five writing slates. In *Hidden Lives*, Barbara J. Heath took these artifacts as clear evidence of slaves reading and writing. By her account, the fragments of writing slates "may have been part of an artisan's tool kit or may have been used by a resident of the site as he or she learned to read and write. Although formal education was denied slaves. . . . John Hemming, who did much of the carpentry. . . . at

⁹⁶Lucia Stanton, *Free Some Day: The African-American Families of Monticello* (Charlottesville: Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., 2000), 100. With regards to Stanton's comments concerning writing slates, I have edited them to reflect the recent nature of the archaeological findings.

⁹⁷Stanton, "Those Who Labor for My Happiness," 168; and her, *Free Some Day*, 97-101.

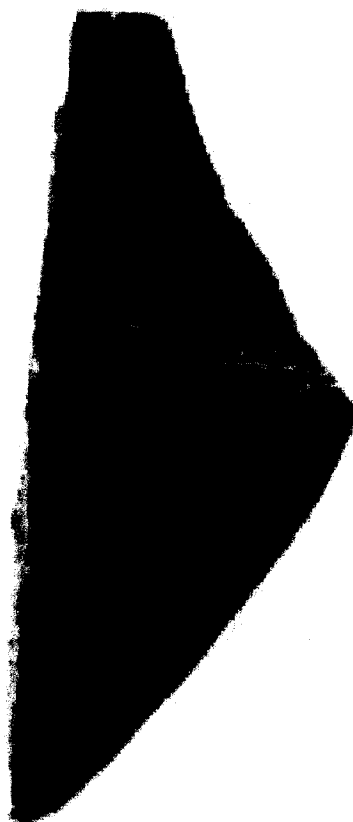


Plate 4: Writing slate excavated at the slave quarter at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. From Lucia Stanton, *Free Some Day*, 100.

Poplar Forest, and Hannah, the cook, are known to have been literate, because of letters written in their hand survive.” In Heath’s judgment, “it is likely that others. . . needed some degree of literacy to perform their work effectively. Bent over writing slates in the yards and doorways of the quarter, these men and women might have shared their knowledge with others.”⁹⁸

Considered with the artifacts unearthed at other plantations, these artifacts clearly show Thomas Jefferson as a typical slave master. Though not formally schooled, some slaves at Jefferson’s Monticello and at his Poplar Forest estate, much like slaves in other parts of the Chesapeake, learned how to read and write. Judging from the artifacts, it seems likely that Jefferson afforded certain slaves the opportunity to achieve letters, who then shared what they learned with other slaves. However, it also seems apparent that a number of Jefferson’s bonds-people did not wait for their master’s approval and began learning and teaching themselves on their own. While some used slates, others may have practiced their letters by writing in the dirt which may have proven to be an even more effective surface than slates because it could more easily conceal the fact that slaves were learning to read and write. (Table 17) Whatever the case, the archaeological evidence shows that other slaves in the colony, aside from those with skills as well as those who worked about town, were reading and practicing their letters. Presumably, one out of every twenty-five field hands probably had some knowledge of letters.⁹⁹

⁹⁸Barbara Heath, *Hidden Lives: The Archaeology of Slave at Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1999), 55.

⁹⁹This figure is an educated guess. On average, large planters owned at a minimum 100 slaves. Four per cent of that population reflects a conservative estimate of the number

Table 17 Archaeological Evidence of Literacy at Slave Sites

Site Name	Occupancy	Artifacts		
		pencil (lead)	pencil (slate)	writing slate (slate) (unid.)
Governor's Land 44JC298	1690-1720	--	--	-- 1
Carter's Grove	1710-1785	--	--	-- --
Palace Lands	1740-1780	--	--	1 8
Richneck	1750-1770	--	--	3 3
Monticello				
Site 8	1750-1807	--	--	-- 78
Building O	1770-1790	--	2	1 --
Building S	1770-1826	1	20	9 105
Building L	1780-1810	--	--	-- --
Building R	1793-1826	1	5	3 45
Building T	1793-1826	--	--	5 9
Poplar Forest				
North Hill	1770-1780	--	--	-- 4
Quarter	1790-1810	--	--	5 --
Mount Vernon				
House for Families	1759-1792	--	--	-- 1
Stratford Hall ST116	1770-1820	--	--	-- --

Sources:

[Colonial Williamsburg Foundation], Carter's Grove Artifact Inventory & the DAACS (*Digital Archaeological Archive of Chesapeake Slavery*) Database.
www.daacs.org

* * *

In the end, literacy mattered. Not only to Peter [Custis] whose narrative opened this chapter, but to a number of other slaves as well. In the Chesapeake, that was particularly evident as slaves could not move about without a pass in a hand. As early as the 1680s, Virginians had declared “no Negro or slave [may] . . . go from his owner’s plantation without a certificate and then only on necessary occasions.” Negroes discovered without a pass or without some form of consent in writing received “twenty lashes on the bare back.” Over time, the general assembly in Virginia revisited that law. A slave found without a pass was considered a runaway. A runaway found a second time and having been away for twenty days was branded on the cheek or in the palm of the hand with the letter “R.” If found without a pass a third time, slaves could be punished by dismemberment or even death.¹⁰⁰

In that setting, one can only imagine the impact that such decrees had on slaves. They were bound by writing. Many probably lived in fear of being discovered without a pass. There, words on paper truly represented a form of power, the power to invoke anxiety and the power to cause real felt pain. Amazingly, knowing all of this, enslaved Virginians continued to run.

Not surprisingly, in the minds of most Afro-Virginians, print represented a severe

of field slaves who could more than likely read and/or write.

¹⁰⁰*SAL*, 2: 481-482; Windley, *Profile*, 8-11.

type of restraint. It restricted a slave's motion. It confined him through intimidation. Like type-set letters, slaves in the Chesapeake were trapped within a certain socially made mold, forged, fixed, and set by the gentry of the colony. Without their master's consent, they were ensnared by the boundaries of the page.

Understandably, to many, the ability to read or write represented a form of liberty. Certainly with a knowledge of letters, they could pass for free. They could convince others that they were their own property. As the runaway notices demonstrate, some were able to do just that. Being able to read and write, they moved about more easily, unencumbered, to some extent, by the fear of being captured and returned to slavery.

Intellectually, literacy prepared them for the road toward freedom. Through reading, slaves were exposed to different ideas. They also became more aware of the larger world around them. This may explain why "a Negro boy named CHARLES, the property of Col. William Allen" carried off with him not only "a poor bay horse" but also "a new pair of leather bags, full of newspapers." One could argue that Charles wanted to stay abreast of things. What better way to do that than to take with him bags full of newspapers.¹⁰¹

In part, that may also explain why Peter ran away. For him, literacy probably helped him in his efforts to get away from Custis and live as a free man. Having acquired certain skills may have also helped the Virginia-born slave hire himself out. Either way, much like the clothing slaves wore, the ability to demonstrate to others the mastery of letters held the potential of freedom, for, at the very least, a particularly artful and literate

¹⁰¹*VG* (Purdie & Dixon), March 13, 1768.

slave could write and therefore forge papers and pass for free. In that regard, John Custis's former personal servant spoke for many other unlettered Afro-Virginians who could also read and/or write and for the African American literacy tradition. In the pages of the *Virginia Gazette* and in the artifacts buried in the earth that overlooked part of American and African American history is being unearthed, catalogued, and revealed. There, print marks the spot.

CHAPTER TWO:
THE “SPIRIT OF GENTILISM”: SLAVE
LITERACY IN THE EARLY CHESAPEAKE

The story of how Peter [Custis] learned to read is not a new one. To the contrary, it is an old one often retold. His master was his benefactor. A churchgoing man, John Custis probably thought himself a contemporary of the patriarchs of the Bible—a modern-day Abraham who enjoyed a bountiful estate rich in tobacco, horses, and slaves.¹⁰²

Like other heads of respected houses, Custis cared for his slaves whom he affectionately considered his people. He provided for them—food, shelter, and clothes. He tended to them when they became sick. He looked after them when they grew old or when they became infirm. And Custis—in his role as their great fictive father—also encouraged a degree of literacy instruction among some of his people.

While some were educated for reasons of faith and conscience, others were taught

¹⁰²As a matter of conscience and law, most Virginians attended church service regularly. For a fuller account, see Patricia U. Bonomi and Peter R. Eisenstadt, “Church Adherence in the Eighteenth-Century British American Colonies” *WMQ* 39 (April 1982): 245-286. Also see Anne Sorrell Dent, “God and Gentry: Public and Private Religion in Tidewater Virginia, 1607-1800.” Ph.D. diss: University of Kentucky, 2001; John K. Nelson, *A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690-1776*; and Joan Rezner Gundersen, *The Anglican Ministry in Virginia, 1723-1776*. For a fuller account of how masters imagined themselves as contemporaries of the Bible, see Anthony S. Parent, Jr. *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 236-264.

for less pious reasons. Presumably, Custis needed servants who could perform certain specialized tasks that required a knowledge of letters, contributing to his comfort and well-being. Like Peyton Randolph's body servant Johnny, Peter may have run errands for his master and occasionally acted in his stead. In educating Peter, John Custis may have also achieved a modicum of religious and social capital among his peers.¹⁰³

It is also likely that Custis had been persuaded by Peter's mother who like other slave mothers wanted more for her child. Indeed, as the 1723 letter discussed in the previous chapter demonstrates, a number of enslaved Virginians had felt the same, insisting on religious and literacy instruction for their sons and daughters. Some, as Anthony S. Parent's recent study has shown, wanted lessons in religion and letters because they believed that Christianity brought with it the rewards of spiritual and physical freedom. Others, however, had different motives.¹⁰⁴

Originally published in 1919, Carter G. Woodson's *The Education of the Negro*

¹⁰³In her history of the Bray schools in Virginia, Jennifer Bridges Oast argued that many slave-holders enrolled their children in school as way of achieving some notice among his peers. Public display, as T.H. Breen and Rhys Isaac explained, afforded Virginia grandees one avenue to distinguished themselves from one another. Oast, "Education Eighteenth-Century Black Children: The Bray Schools" (MA thesis, College of William and Mary, 2000), 25-26, Breen, "Horse and Gentlemen: The Cultural Significance of Gambling among the Gentry of Virginia" *WWQ* 34 (1977): 239-257; Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 58-114.

¹⁰⁴By Parent's account, increasingly enslaved Virginians' saw Christianity as a way of gaining real freedom. Parent, *Foul Means*, 135-173.

Prior to 1861 is perhaps the first modern account of slave literacy in cases like Peter's.¹⁰⁵

In that study of slave education and how it changed over space and time, the Virginia-born runaway represented one out of many. As early as 1701, if not before, with the establishment of missionary societies like the Society for the Propagation of the Gospels in Foreign Parts, the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, and others, a number of enslaved Africans and their descendants were taught literacy skills. Besides these Church of England endorsed organizations, individuals like Samuel Sewall, George Whitefield, and other men of faith also advocated the religious instruction of slaves through letters. Consequently, for much of the eighteenth-century, literacy served as a way of introducing western religion to those unfortunate souls who resided on the margins of Anglo-American society.¹⁰⁶

With time, that changed. When the social landscape of British North America

¹⁰⁵See C. E. Pierre, "The Work of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Part Among Negroes in the Colonies" *JNH* 1(1916): 349-360; James B Lawrence, "Religious Education of the Negro in the Colony of Georgia" *GHQ* 14 (1930): 41-57; Luther P. Jackson, "Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia 1760 to 1860" *JNH* 16 (1931): 168-239; Mary F. Goodwin, "Christianizing and Educating the Negro in Colonial Virginia" *HMPEC* 1 (September 1932): 171-212; Edgar L Pennington, "Thomas Brays Associates and their Work Among Negroes," *PAAA* 48 (1938): 311-403; Jerome W. Jones, "The Established Virginia Church and the Conversions of Negroes and Indians" *JNH* 46 (1961): 12-23; George P. Pilcher, "Samuel Davies and the Instruction of Negroes in Virginia" *VMHB* 64 (1966): 293-300; and, Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* for other accounts of slave education in colonial Virginia.

¹⁰⁶See Thad W. Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg*; John C. Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy and the Colonial Slavery: The American Correspondence of the Associates of Dr. Bray, 1717-1777*; Jennifer Bridges Oast, "Education Eighteenth-Century Black Children: The Bray Schools"; and, Jeffrey H. Richards, "Samuel Davies and the Transatlantic Campaign for Slave Literacy in Virginia" *VMHB* 111 (2003): 333-378 for a recent account of such missionary efforts.

started shifting in the wake of independence, some masters began to reconsider the idea of educating slaves. Apparently, their reluctance stemmed from a concern about slaves reading, writing, and adopting the very democratic rhetoric they had once used in 1776, rhetoric that in the aftermath of the British-American conflict brought to the surface the growing discontent of African Americans held as slaves. In that ensuing struggle, men like Jefferson, Washington, and others who owned slaves became distressed about their bond-servants who were becoming increasingly defiant and rebellious, adopting for themselves the Lockean-Jeffersonian proposition that all men were indeed created equal. In 1800, their fears were partially realized when a plot for a slave rebellion was discovered in Richmond, Virginia that involved a number of literate slaves who thought freedom and democracy the most American of the new country's principles.¹⁰⁷

A few years following that foiled uprising, the legislators thought it wise to prohibit slave education. To realize that goal, they began to pass a series of laws that restricted slave gatherings. Education, many Virginians believed, encouraged rebelliousness. Ironically, in much the same way that reading had inspired colonists from different walks of life to demand independence from Great Britain, the southern sons of the newly formed American republic attempted to deny slaves access to letters out of a fear that literacy would lead to a similar response amongst their slaves whom they held as

¹⁰⁷The ideology of democracy, as Douglas R. Egerton and James Sidbury told it, informed Gabriel Prosser's effort to end slavery. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 & 1802* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 3-17, 34-59; Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), chap 1, esp. 39-48 and chap 3, esp. 96-99.

subjects.¹⁰⁸

But new amendments to old laws offered little in the way of a real remedy. Tensions between masters and slaves continued to erupt as slaves pressed on for their freedom and pushed harder to gain letters. As a result, throughout the South, a slave found reading or demonstrating the ability to write was severely punished. Whites who were caught teaching them were fined. Others were imprisoned. Literacy, some came to believe, invited nothing but trouble.¹⁰⁹

Despite those efforts to restrict slaves' access to letters, enslaved African Americans in Virginia and in other parts of the South managed to achieve letters. Sympathetic whites continued to play a role in educating blacks in America. Before the war between the states, Woodson estimated, ten per cent of the enslaved population in the South acquired the rudiments of literacy and learning.

¹⁰⁸Rebellions, by Woodson's account, undermined relations between blacks and whites and hindered slaves' efforts to achieve letters. In Virginia, legislators responded to collective efforts by slaves to achieve freedom by passing laws that restricted their ability to gather. By restraining slaves meeting, they sought to reduce the number of uprisings. That did not, however, deter some slave-holders from teaching their slaves. Far from it, they did as they pleased in spite of new laws to the contrary. Woodson, chap. 7, esp. 99-101. Similarly, in her more recently study, "Reading for the Enslaved, Writing for the Free," E. Jennifer Monaghan has complimented Woodson's analysis. Rebellions, in her study of slave literacy represented "triggering events" that informed slave efforts to learn. Though Virginia never banned the instruction of slaves in reading, even after Gabriel's Rebellion, fearful legislatures did nonetheless outlaw slave gatherings as a way inhibiting rebellious. Those efforts to control slave behavior also restricted public efforts to educate blacks. But, as Monaghan observed, it did not forbid masters privately to teach individual slaves to read the Bible. Monaghan, 310; 316-318; 327-334.

¹⁰⁹See Janet Duitsman Cornelieus, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* and Heather Andrea Williams. *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* for a recent account of slaves reading and writing in antebellum America.

Since Woodson's *Education of the Negro* appeared in print, other historians have added to that account of slaves reading and writing over time and space. Thad W. Tate, for example, has revealed a fuller account of the Bray school for slave children in Williamsburg, Virginia. In his *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg*, Tate considered the school as a part of a larger Anglican mission to spread the gospels among those residing on the margins of early Virginian society. The same is true of Jennifer Bridges Oast's study of black education in the colonial Chesapeake. In that treatise, Oast highlighted not only the presence of the Bray school in Williamsburg, but also another Bray school in Fredericksburg, Virginia, as well as two failed schemes to start similar schools in York Town and Norfolk, Virginia. Arguably, the most extensive account of the work of the Associates of the Late Dr. Thomas Bray is John C. Van Horne's *Religious Philanthropy and Colonial Slavery*. In that edited collection of letters between the Bible society and its associates overseas, Van Horne offers an exhaustive picture of the Bray schools not only in Virginia, but also throughout British North America. Jeffrey H. Richards' recent study of Samuel Davies and his work among the enslaved in Piedmont, Virginia demonstrated yet another aspect to Woodson's narrative. In a similar fashion, E. Jennifer Monaghan's *Reading and Writing in Colonial America* adds to this scholarship. In that broad study of education in British North America, Monaghan has expanded the historical discourse concerning slaves reading and writing by revealing that slaves learned—as whites had—how to read and write separately that in turn may explain why some slave-holders were open to instructing slaves in reading. Slaves writing, however, was a different matter. Slave-holders, as Monaghan explained, were more less receptive to

the idea of teaching slaves penmanship because penmanship undermined in real ways their authority.

Janet D. Cornelius' study of slave education has also enlarged our present understanding of the subject. Examining slaves reading and writing in nineteenth-century South Carolina, Cornelius demonstrated that before and after the Civil War blacks sought learning. With a knowledge of letters, they achieved a new sense of religious agency. More recently, Heather Andrea Williams' study of slave literacy in the South before and after Reconstruction added another layer to Woodson's pioneering account of slaves achieving letters over time and space. Like Cornelius, William reveals a complex narrative in which numerous slaves and former slaves fought against the odds and accomplished literacy and education despite efforts by others to the contrary.¹¹⁰

But there is more to Peter's story. There is more to the story of how enslaved Virginians learned. There is more to the African-American literacy tradition. What follows in this chapter (and the next) is a series of probes that demonstrates how some enslaved Virginians (discussed in the chapter before) probably acquired a knowledge of letters.

¹¹⁰Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior 1861*. For a more current account, see Thad W. Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg*; John C. Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy and the Colonial Slavery: The American Correspondence of the Associates of Dr. Bray, 1717-1777*; Jennifer Bridges Oast, "Education Eighteenth-Century Black Children: The Bray Schools"; E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Reading for the Enslaved, Writing for the Free: Reflections on Liberty and Literacy" *PAAS* 108 (1998): 309-42; Jeffrey H. Richards, "Samuel Davies and the Transatlantic Campaign for Slave Literacy in Virginia" *VMHB* 111 (2003): 333-378; E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Reading and Writing in Colonial America*, 241-272; Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South*; and, Heather Andrea Williams. *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*.

* * *

The early Chesapeake had always been a tumultuous place. Distinctly so when it came to matters involving masters and slaves. As masters of men who were bound for life to work the land, the property-owning elites in Virginia cared little for those who would challenge their authority. And yet, for much of the early history of the colony they were challenged by a number of local parsons who thought it their calling to work among slaves. As Christ had instructed the Apostles, so the Anglican priests of Virginia assumed it was their duty to go forth and to instruct and baptize all, including the least fortunate. As early as the 1680s, if not before, slaves in the colony were taught to recite—the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and other teachings of the Church of England. By the eighteenth-century, reading became increasingly a common practice of that biblical instruction.¹¹¹

Not surprisingly, when the wardens of the church began to perform that particular work, they incurred the wrath of many slave-holders who resented outside interference with their bondsmen and feared that Christianization would be followed by emancipation. For nearly a century before Virginia would gain independence, neither side seemed to yield completely to the other. Consequently, despite the entrenched nature of this tug-of-war in early Virginia, the opportunities for slaves to achieve letters grew. Some in the colony

¹¹¹For a fuller account of reading becoming a common practice of catechizing in England, see Ian Green, *The Christian’s ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England, 1530-1740*. Also, for a fuller account of biblical literacy in colonial America, see E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Reading and Writing in Colonial America*.

learned how to read. Others learned how to write. And over time their numbers increased.¹¹²

Possibly the earliest known record of this struggle between the clergy and slaveholders is Morgan Godwyn's *Negro's & Indians Advocate, Suing for the Admission into the Church or A Persuasive to the Instructing and Baptizing of the Negro's and Indians in our Plantations*. Originally published in 1680, Godwyn's treatise appeared in print decades before either Samuel Sewall or Cotton Mather had contemplated in print colonial Americans' religious obligations to their enslaved brethren. For several decades past, historians have used Godwyn's critique of life in the plantation colonies to develop a larger analysis of race in the early Atlantic world. In Winthrop Jordan's judgment, for example, Godwyn is but one of several authors whose tracts concerning Anglo-American perceptions of race, color, and character revealed a complex discourse in which whites in the English-speaking world considered whether or not Africans had souls and if they were worth saving. Similarly, in his recent study of the roots of American racism, Alden Vaughan examined Godwyn's treatise as a key text in the contemporary discussion about the African in the British-American mind.

But the *Negro's Advocate* provides us with another account of seventeenth-century America. Stressing the difficulty the Church of England experienced in its mission to proselytize to slaves overseas, Godwyn's exposé of racial prejudice in the New World also reveals a useful portrait of the Anglican church in colonial Virginia. In this setting, the

¹¹²Luke 10: 3-12 (King James Version).

former Virginian parson's tract represents a form of travel narrative or log.¹¹³

An Anglican minister, Godwyn came from a long line of prominent pastors. His father had been the rector of a parish in Gloucestershire, his grandfather a bishop, and his great-grandfather not only a bishop but also chaplain to Queen Elizabeth herself. Not surprisingly, young Morgan, born in 1640, was destined for the priesthood. He attended Christ Church at Oxford, graduating in 1665, served briefly as rector in Buckinghamshire, then set sail for Virginia, where he took a position as a parson at the Marston Parish near Middle Town Plantation (later Williamsburg). Supposedly, Godwyn was answering a call from the Virginia Assembly for eligible candidates to fill a dire need for competent and well-trained ministers. Once he had arrived, the young parson would soon find that the Chesapeake had little to offer to men of the cloth.¹¹⁴

Life in Virginia was hard. And like others who came to the colony, Godwyn quickly discovered that his responsibilities as rector far exceeded his salary of 16,000 pounds of tobacco and the provisions the general assembly afforded him. Shortly after unpacking, the vestrymen of his parish provided him with a modest-sized glebe that was likely a two hundred acre estate including a working farm and several indentured

¹¹³Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1150-1812* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 229-231; Alden T. Vaughan, *Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), 55-81. For a fuller account of the history of race in the Atlantic world, see the 1997 January issue of the *William and Mary Quarterly*. Recently, at the 2002 Omohundro Institute conference, Owen Stanwood offered a similar analysis of Godwyn's treatise in his unpublished essay "Christian Servants and Indian Slaves: Rethinking the Origins of Chesapeake Slavery."

¹¹⁴Alden Vaughan's biographical sketch has proven to be an invaluable source when I developed my own biographical account of Morgan Godwyn.

servants and slaves to managed as his own.

In addition, they had probably given the new minister certain instructions. Like other church wardens in the late seventeenth-century, Godwyn became responsible for building and maintaining a number of outbuildings at his new place of residence. By the time he settled in, he was more than likely soon at work, overseeing the construction of a mansion-house and kitchen, a barn, stable, dairy, meat house, corn house, and a garden. Moreover, as tobacco defined life in the Chesapeake, Godwyn also quickly discovered that planting the weed and owning servants and slaves were to be parts of his religious calling in the New World.

Considering his particular background, it is doubtful that the colony's newest cleric had been prepared to be the head of a plantation and of slaves. An academic and religious scholar, Godwyn had probably given little thought to managing an estate and several house and field hands. But like other parsons who immigrated to the colony, he learned as he went along. He persevered.

As parson, Godwyn's charge included a number of tasks. Besides proselytizing and preaching, he probably made efforts to provide provisions for the hungry and the needy. He made sure that the destitute were clothed and housed. Further, as part of his calling, he also made sure that orphaned and abused children were placed in respectable homes, that those who had broken the law were reported to the county court, that ill parishioners received care, that the too old and the recently widowed and bereft were looked after, and that the unlearned were schooled. All of these tasks he evidently performed and in all likelihood under a considerable amount of physical and mental strain as most of his

parishioners lived miles away from one another.¹¹⁵

After no more than two years in the colony, which was a standard term parsons received for administering the day-to-day affairs of a parish during the seventeenth-century, he was informed that his services were no longer needed. After his short stay at Marston, the vestrymen of the county had the young reverend reassigned. In 1668, the Anglican minister moved further north to Stafford Country where he assumed another post as the parson of the Overwharton church for another period of two years.

By 1671, Godwyn evidently had his full measure of the Chesapeake and left the tobacco fields for the sugar colony of Barbados. There, he finally realized a certain degree of long-term success as he served as parson for almost a decade. But ultimately as he had in the Chesapeake, Godwyn moved on. After nine years of service, he returned home.¹¹⁶

Back in Great Britain, Godwyn contemplated his years in the New World. Apparently, he was deeply troubled by what he had seen of the Church of England abroad. Moved by what he had experienced firsthand, he entrusted his observations to print and, at his own expense, published *The Negro's & Indians Advocate*, a three-part treatise in which the reverend reflected upon his life as a minister in Virginia and in Barbados.¹¹⁷

Like Martin Luther, Godwyn believed printing a gift from God. Writing out of a

¹¹⁵Nelson, *A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690-1776* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 33-42, 48-56, 70-84.

¹¹⁶Vaughan, 58-60.

¹¹⁷Godwyn, *The Negro's & Indians Advocate, Suing for their Admission into the Church or A Persuasive to the Instructing and Baptizing of the Negro's and Indians in our Plantations* (London: J. D., 1680), 6-7.

deep sense of piety and mission, he also believed that God had commissioned him to make his grievances public. “Being my self fully persuaded,” as he explained in his *Advocate*, “that God will assuredly make good his Promise to the World, of causing his Gospel to be published. . . I do here tender to the Public this Plea both for the Christianizing of our Negro’s and other Heathen in those Plantations.”¹¹⁸

During his stay in the New World, the young minister claimed, he had run afoul of the polite sensibilities of those in his charge. At the center of the disagreement was the colony’s abuse of the religious well-being of its slaves. By his account, shortly after his arrival in the Chesapeake, Godwyn had baptized two Africans. Believing it was his duty, he also encouraged oral and possibly literacy instruction for some of the enslaved. And for these acts of Protestant charity, the minister recalled, he was ill-used by indifferent members of the church and by the local community.¹¹⁹

But to judge from the extant records, there could have been another reason why the Anglican minister became an object for the people’s scorn. For by the time Godwyn had been in the colony for two years, the legislators had already approved the idea of baptizing and instructing slaves. Publically, in 1667, the general assembly announced that while “some doubts have risen whether children that are slaves. . . by vertue of their baptisme be made ffree; *It is enacted and declared...* that baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or ffreedome.” Relieved of that doubt, “masters” who were the stewards of their slaves were duly encouraged to “more carefully

¹¹⁸Ibid., ix.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 139-140.

endeavour the propagation of christianity by permitting children, though slaves. . . if capable to be admitted to that sacrament.”¹²⁰

Virginia, as Godwyn saw it, was a country in which slave-holders were slow to act in the work of sharing the good news with their bonds-people. Intent on amassing wealth from land, slaves, and tobacco and opposed to performing their Christian duty to slaves, they not only failed to fulfill their religious obligations but also used their power to stop the Church of England from making them do so. The twins of sloth and avarice, Godwyn insisted, had the unsettling effect of producing a new species of Englishmen in the colonies who “*for the most part do know no other GOD but MONEY, nor RELIGION but PROFIT.*”¹²¹

Significantly, Godwyn found no fault in the colonists “*endeavouring after Wealth and Estate.*” Far from it, working and achieving some sense of rank were thought virtues. If done “by just ways,” he reasoned, such endeavors were “*commendable.*” But he had no patience with wickedness, whose manifestations included the colonists’ neglect of the religious duty to care for those in their charge. Slaves, in Godwyn’s view, had a “natural right” to religious instruction. Virginia’s master class not only brushed aside that educational duty but to make matters worse, justified their willful neglect by distorting the Scriptures and entertaining “wild *Fancies* and absurd *Positions.*”

¹²⁰*SAL*, 2: 260. Admittedly, there is a big difference between passing a law and enforcing it. It is possible that members of Godwyn’s parish approved the sentiment expressed in the law but were unenthusiastic about seeing it put into effect. Godwyn could have upset them by being too eager to carry out the law.

¹²¹Godwyn, 3; viii.

One such fancy was the notion that blacks were part of a separate creation prior to Adam and Eve, an assertion at odds with Scripture. More faithful Christians insisted that black Africans were an accursed lot doomed to be slaves for life. Not surprisingly, planters held fast to the idea that “colours are a means of *Grace*, and have a power in them to *recommend us to God*.” Throughout the seventeenth-century, as Winthrop Jordan and others have shown, most whites on either side of the Atlantic thought of Africans in this manner. Then, most believed that blacks were innately, culturally, and socially inferior. Still, taking particular offense with their religious-based reasons for denying the Negro religion, Godwyn challenged their reading of the Bible.¹²²

Many planters, as Godwyn noted, blamed their neglect of religious duty on the intellectual defects of the slaves. Innate “*stupidity*,” they held, made the Negroes “utterly *incapable of Instruction*.” Their “want of *English*” also made it “*Impossible*” to affect “any thing upon them.” Some simply maintained the notion that their slaves’ “*irreconcilable averseness and hatred to all Religion*” rendered their “*Duty to God*” mute. Other planters assumed less pious grounds for denying slaves instruction. Religion, they simply held, had the unsavory effect of making slaves saucy, more unruly, and openly defiant.¹²³ All these claims were, in Godwyn’s judgment, selfish excuses. Slaves in both Virginia and Barbados were “rather *fond and desirous* of being made *Christians*” but whites ignored that wish and consulting their own interests, abandoned the Africans to

¹²²Ibid., 88, 14, 3, and 26; Jordan, *White Over Black*. Also see Vaughan’s *Roots of American Racism*.

¹²³Godwyn, 101, 173, and 6.

paganism.¹²⁴

(Incidentally, recent studies of the transatlantic slave trade appear to corroborate Godwyn's claim. In the Chesapeake, slaves were "rather *fond and desirous* of being made *Christians*." But what the parson took as eagerness obscures the fact that a number of slaves brought to Virginia and their descendants were probably already familiar with the tenets of Christianity, conceivably long before Godwyn had arrived in the colony. As early as the fifteenth-century, Angolan Africans had received the Gospels from Portuguese missionaries. While some adopted the religion in full, as John Thornton explained, others did so in parts. Starting in 1619, Africans imported from that region accounted for a significant number of the slaves in Virginia. Such is the view of Lorena S. Walsh whose recent study of the slave traffic in the colony indicates that Angolans made up a considerable portion of the enslaved population where Godwyn more than likely ministered to slaves. Consequently, the Virginia parson did not have to go very far to find dedicated slave parishioners. Far from it, it seems likely, they probably found him.¹²⁵)

Against all these rationalizations for self-interest, Godwyn invoked the traditional Christian belief: all men are of one race and of one blood, descended, as the Bible said, from Adam and Eve. But Godwyn also participated in a scientific and historical discourse about race. Africans were a noble people whose skin color was simply a matter of climate

¹²⁴Ibid., 102.

¹²⁵Ibid.; John Thornton, "The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491-1740" *JAH* 25 (1984): 147-167. Also see his "The African Experience of the '20 and Odd Negroes' Arriving in Virginia in 1619" *WMQ* 55 (July 1998): 421-434; Lorena S. Walsh, "The Chesapeake Slave Trade: Regional Patterns, Africans Origins, and Some Implications" *WMQ* 57 (January 2001): 139-170.

and adaptation to environment. If anyone was degraded, it was surely the white Englishmen, who crossed the Atlantic to settle the New World, only to default on their obligation to “instruct and baptize” the Indians and the African slaves and thereby put in peril their own eternal souls. Africa, Godwyn went on to remind his readers, “was [also] once famous for both Arts and Arms; that *Carthage* did rival with *Rome* for the World’s Empire.”¹²⁶

At the root of the colonial problem was black slavery, distinguishing the Americas from England or western Europe. In the English settlements, indifferent colonists were consumed by what Godwyn called a “spirit of Gentilism,” an unbridled pursuit of profit through the forced labor of slaves. There, “*Profit*” reigned as the “chief Deity.”¹²⁷

Yet, all was not lost. Some masters were interested not only in money and profit but also in the souls of their slaves. In Virginia, Godwyn recalled, a few had requested that their people be baptized and instructed in the Christian faith.¹²⁸

Readily, Godwyn complied. But when he sought to extend his efforts, he encountered considerable resistance. “I cannot easily forget the *supercilious* Checks and

¹²⁶Incidentally, though he included Native Americans in the title of his appeal, they did not receive much attention in the work itself. For quotes, see Godwyn, *Advocate*, 176 & 36.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*, 2; 13. The cultural ethos of paternalism, as Peter Kolchin’s study of labor in America and Europe reveals, represented a significant factor that distinguished England from its North American colonies. Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russians Serfdom* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987), 103-156. Also see Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), chap. 4, esp. 111-135.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 37.

Frowns (to say no worse) I have upon this occasion alone met with.” On one occasion, he was told “with no small *Passion* and Vehemency, and that by a *Religious Person*” that he “might as well Baptize a Puppy, as a certain young *Negro*, the Mother whereof was a *Christian*”¹²⁹

Godwyn was not alone. Other parsons in the colony experienced similar treatment. While some suffered scorn and verbal abuse, others were threatened with financial ruin. Even landless whites with no slaves of their own poked fun at the meddling parsons. When “one Mr. A. B.¹³⁰ in *Virginia* “offered his Service. . . he was laughed to Scorn. . . [and offered] *neither purse nor Scrip*.” Some inclined whites, Godwyn recalled, took the matter a step further, physically interfering “by *muzzling* [parsons’] *Mouths*” with threats of violence and “by rendring the Work [among slaves] very unsafe.”¹³¹

Not deterred, some parsons nevertheless persevered, baptizing many slaves and instructing some. Religious instruction was targeted to country-born slaves who were born in Virginia and spoke English as a native tongue. Presumably, the lessons were the same ones taught in Anglican parishes throughout England. In the traditional manner, Godwyn insisted that slaves be taught to recite “the Lord’s *Prayer, Creed, or Decalogue*.” That was only a first step. After recitation came reading, by which slaves would gain access to the Book of Common Prayer and the New Testament, the twin text of the Anglican faith

¹²⁹Ibid., 38.

¹³⁰Judging from John K. Nelson’s study of the Anglican church in colonial Virginia, A.B. was more than likely Alexander Burnett (Barnett) who once served as the parson of the North Farnham Parish in Richmond County. Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 306.

¹³¹Ibid., 96, 112.

that conveyed “a thorow *knowledge* of [Christian] Principles *for which Man was made*, namely, *to glorifie and serve God*.” But these efforts were stymied by the poor “provision for Schools” in the colony.¹³²

Clearly, in his bid for slave education, Godwyn’s *Advocate* invoked Protestant tradition. From the beginning, the Lutheran religious movement had established vernacular biblical literacy as a central theme in its work of saving souls, encouraging followers to read the Bible for themselves as the standard of realizing at once salvation and truth. “Printing,” Luther explained, “is God’s ultimate and greatest gift. Indeed through printing God wants the whole world, to the ends of the earth, to know the roots of true religion and wants to transmit it in every language.” To know that true religion, one had to read.¹³³

Not surprisingly, the Church of England professed the same message. As early as the 1660s, if not before, literacy instruction had become an increasingly central aspect of catechizing new parishioners.¹³⁴ Reading, as Ian Green made plain in his exhaustive study of catechisms in England, became over time a common practice. “As soon as memorizing was going well,” he noted, “the focus was shifted to comprehension. . . . The further we

¹³²Godwyn, 112, 130-131, 22 & 9.

¹³³For Luther quote, see Jean-Francois Gilmont, ed. and Karen Maag, trans., *The Reformation and the Book* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1990), 1.

¹³⁴To judge from an earlier–yet unsuccessful–scheme to convert Native Americans in the Chesapeake, religious instruction included literacy lessons as early as 1619. For a fuller account see Philip Alexander Bruce, *Institutional History of Virginia* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1910), 1: 344-345; 362-373; Karen A Stuart, “‘So Good a Work’: The Brafferton School, 1690-1777” (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 1984), 2-11; Terri Keffert, “The Education of the Native American in Colonial, with Particular Regard to the Brafferton School” *CWI* 21 (Fall 2000), 20-21.

proceed in the early modern period. . . the more we find catechetical authors either associating literacy with learning a catechism or assuming that those using a form would already be literate.”¹³⁵

As protestant devotional and liturgical works in the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries increasingly urged literacy, a number of Bible societies formed in England, proselytizing faith through letters. In 1698, for example, the Church of England-sponsored Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.) opened the first British schools for poor children, giving equal education to girls and boys; translated, printed, and distributed the Book of Common Prayer, religious tracts and pamphlets, and established libraries for the clergy and missionaries in the plantation colonies.¹³⁶ Similarly, in 1737, Rev. Griffith began the Welsh circulating charity movement. Disseminating thousands of Bibles, psalters, catechisms, and other books provided by the S.P.C.K., the Welsh schools in England taught poverty-stricken adults and children the doctrines of the Church of England through letters.¹³⁷

Church-sponsored Bible societies also performed similar work abroad. In 1701, Rev., Dr. Thomas Bray founded the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign

¹³⁵Ian Green, *The Christian's ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England, 1530-1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), chap. 5, esp. 241-242.

¹³⁶In 1662, according Lowther's history of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Rev. Thomas Gouge had been the first to start schools for poor in Wales. W.K. Lowther Clarke, *Eighteenth Century Piety* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1945), 79-80.

¹³⁷David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England*; Kenneth Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), 72-102; W.K. Lowther Clarke, *Eighteenth Century Piety*.

Parts. Like other societies endorsed by the Anglican church in England, the S.P.G. thought literacy essential to spreading Christianity. To achieve that pious goal, it opened a number of schools for slave children in the colonies, printed and disseminated religious books and materials, and commissioned rectors, schoolmasters, and mistresses to teach letters to Native Americans, Africans, and country-born slaves. Along similar lines, the Society for Promoting Religious Knowledge among the Poor formed in 1750. In much the same way the S.P.G. used literacy to proselytize religion, that London-based society taught slaves and poor whites in the colonies Christianity through reading instruction. Literacy, as E. Jennifer Monaghan revealed in her recent study of reading and writing in colonial America, had become such a common feature of Protestant churches in America, it is hard to read the literature of the period “without concluding that literacy for poor children, enslaved children, and native Americans was just one more component of a rigidly hierarchical structure, in which Christian belief was mediated by the clergy of a formal religious establishment with a strong liturgical tradition.” Such a liturgical tradition was certainly in keeping with the Scriptures. As the Book of Isaiah instructed, “seek ye out the book of the LORD, and read.”¹³⁸

This Protestant tradition notwithstanding, Godwyn carried his message to men of influence in England, seeking their support for religious missions to the slaves. His efforts apparently bore fruit in the Crown’s 1680 decision to instruct the governor and general assembly of Barbados “to find out the best means to facilitate and encourage the

¹³⁸Jeffrey H. Richards, “Samuel Davies and the Transatlantic Campaign for Slave Literacy in Virginia” *VMHB* 111 (2003): 333-378; Monaghan, *Reading and Writing in Colonial America*, 143; Isaiah. 34:16 (King James Version).

conversion of Negroes and Indians to the Christian religion.”¹³⁹ Godwyn’s pressure may also have prompted the general assembly of Virginia to publically acknowledge a distinction between Africans and country-slaves with respect to their duty of baptizing and instructing black bonds-servants. In 1699, the legislators of the colony declared that “negroes born in this country are generally baptized and brought up in the Christian religion, but for negroes imported. . . [the] rudeness of their manners, the variety and strange-ness of their languages, and the weakness and shallowness of their minds, render it in a manner impossible to make any progress in their conversion.”¹⁴⁰

Prospects for slave religion through letters improved over the next quarter-century. As Virginia prospered as a tobacco colony, it developed a more extensive Anglican establishment, with vestries supplied by regular rectors enjoying lifetime commissions. At the same time, the cultural gap between masters and slaves narrowed. From the 1720s on, Africans gave way to creoles in the labor force; by the 1740s, bondsmen born in the country comprised well over 50 per cent of the slave population. The change altered the relations between masters and slaves. Ruling over people born and raised among them, white Virginians could no longer invoke the blacks’ “strangeness” to justify their neglect of Christian duty. Instead, some masters came to view themselves as benevolent patriarchs overseeing the care of dependent slaves. William Byrd II, the lord of

¹³⁹Vaughan, 79.

¹⁴⁰Minutes of the Council, June 2, 1699 in Julie Richter, at el, eds., *Enslaving Virginia* (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1998), 80.

Westover, took pride in this fatherly role. “I have a large family,” he boasted to an English aristocrat in 1726. “Like one of the Patriarchs, I have my Flocks and my Herds, Bond-men and Bond-women, and every Soart of Trade amongst my own Servants, so that I live in a kind of Independence on everyone but Providence. . . I must take care to keep all my people at their duty, to set all the spring in motion, and to make every one draw his equal share to carry the machine forward.” Among those cares was seeing to the baptism and religious instruction of his “people.”¹⁴¹ (Tables 18–20)

Church registers, documenting the baptism of slaves in rising numbers from the 1720s on, attest to this changing relationship between masters and “servants.” Within the canons of the Church of England, baptism admitted individuals into Christian fellowship. As the twenty-seventh article of the Anglican faith explained: “Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference; whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened: but it is also a sign of Regeneration, or new birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church.”¹⁴²

Customarily performed on infants and young children, the rite of baptism welcomed slaves alongside whites as members of the parish.

Consider the register of St. Peter’s Parish in New Kent County. During the late

¹⁴¹William Bryd to Earl of Orrery, July 5, 1726 in *VMHB* 32 (December 1924): 27; Gundersen, *The Anglican Ministry in Virginia*, 81-103; Nelson, *Blessed Company*, 122-133.

¹⁴²*Articles agreed upon by the arch-bishops and bishops of both provinces, and the whole clergie; in the convocation holden at London, in the year, 1562. For the avoiding of diversities of opinions, and for the establishing of consent touching true religion* (London: Bonham Norton and John Bill, 1662), 17.

Table 18 Africans in Virginia Slave Population

Year	Total Slaves	Africans	%
1700	13,000	6,210	50
1710	19,500	10,161	52
1720	27,000	12,209	45
1730	40,000	17,530	44
1740	65,000	22,288	34
1750	105,000	22,544	21
1760	140,500	19,236	14
1770	180,500	15,973	9

Source:

Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 61.

Table 19 Black Population Growth in Virginia

Periods	Population Increase	Surviving New Immigrants	Annual Rate of Natural Increase
1700s	6,500	6,210	.2%
1710s	7,500	5,680	.9
1720s	13,000	10,150	1.0
1730s	25,000	12,790	3.0
1740s	40,000	9,680	4.7
1750s	35,500	7,180	2.7
1760s	40,000	7,570	2.3
1770s	24,500	3,190	2.4

Source:

Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 81.

Table 20 Estimated Black and White Population in Colonial Virginia.

Years	Black	White	% Black
1670	2,000	33,309	5.66
1680	3,000	40,596	6.88
1690	9,345	43,701	17.61
1700	16,390	42,170	27.98
1710	23,118	55,163	29.53
1720	26,559	61,198	30.26
1730	30,000	84,000	26.31
1740	60,000	120,440	33.25
1750	101,452	129,581	43.91
1760	140,570	199,156	41.37
1770	187,605	259,411	41.96
1780	220,582	317,422	41.00

Source:

[United States Bureau of the Census], *The Statistical History of the United States, from Colonial Times to the Present; Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (New York : Basic Books, 1976), 1168.

part of the seventeenth century, only a negligible number of slaves' births were recorded, and not one was followed by baptism or christening. But by the first half of the eighteenth-century, as the population became more creole, those figures changed. Between 1700 and 1709, seventy slave births appeared in the church's register. Once again none were baptized. In the following decade, the number of slave births stepped up to 127. Two of those slaves were confirmed as members of the Church of England in Virginia: William Clopton's John and Captain Richard Littlepage's slave Richard. In the 1720s, 43 out of 283 slaves received the sacrament at St. Peter's church. By the ensuing decade, that figure doubled while the overall number of slave births remained nearly the same. In the decades leading up to the American Revolution, one quarter of all the slaves whose births were published in St. Peter's church register were baptized. (Tables 21 & 22)

Significantly, slave baptisms constituted an expense for slave-holders. Under Virginia law, parish clerks were obliged to keep registers of vital events—births, baptisms, marriages, deaths, and burials—affecting all souls within their jurisdiction. Such records were of service to individuals and families, providing official recognition of their comings and goings in this world. That acknowledgment was acquired by paying the clerk a small fee, prescribed in 1686 at “five pounds of tobacco or sixpence.” Reflecting rising prices, the charge dropped to “three pounds of tobacco” by 1713. Though easily borne by a wealthy planter, the burden was not inconsiderable; it could consume as much as a quarter of a slave-owning small farmer's yearly tobacco crop.¹⁴³ Rather than incur these costs,

¹⁴³*SAL* 3: 153, 4: 42-45; David Alan Williams, “The Small Farmer in Eighteenth-Century Virginia Politics” *AH* 43 (January 1969): 92.

Table 21 Slave Births & Baptisms Measured Across Time and Space.

	slaves births	slaves baptized	%
St. Peters			
1660-1669	1	--	--
1670-1679	4	--	--
1680-1689	42	--	--
1690-1699	28	--	--
1700-1709	70	--	--
1710-1719	127	2	1.57
1720-1729	283	43	15.19
1730-1739	243	91	37.44
1740-1749	8	2	25
1750-1759	85	29	34.11
1760-1769	32	5	15.25
1770-1779	18	5	27.77
Christ Church			
1660-1669	8	--	--
1670-1679	4	--	--
1680-1689	--	--	--
1690-1699	33	--	--
1700-1709	115	11	9.56
1710-1719	78	3	3.84
1720-1729	517	8	1.54
1730-1739	580	22	3.79
1740-1749	346	--	--
1750-1759	124	--	--
1760-1769	18	2	11.11
1770-1779	16	1	6.25

Notes:

Incomplete slave birth and baptism data not included.

Sources:

Churchill Gibson Chamberlayne, trans. & ed., *The Vestry Book and Register of St. Peter's Parish, New Kent and James City counties, Virginia, 1684-1786; The Parish Register of Christ Church, Middlesex County, Va., from 1653 to 1812.*

Table 22 Slave Births & Baptisms Measured Across Time and Space.

	# of slaves births	# of slaves baptized	%
Albemarle			
1700-1709	--	--	--
1710-1719	--	--	--
1720-1729	2	--	--
1730-1739	65	--	--
1740-1749	408	35	8.57
1750-1759	504	124	24.60
1760-1769	584	384	65.75
1770-1779	319	306	95.92
Bristol			
1700-1709	--	--	--
1710-1719	8	--	--
1720-1729	112	8	7.14
1730-1739	98	14	14.28
1740-1749	76	20	26.31
1750-1759	38	--	--
1760-1769	9	--	--
1770-1779	--	--	--

Notes:

Incomplete slave birth and baptism data not included.

Sources:

Gertrude R.B. Richards, trans. & ed., *Register of Albemarle Parish, Surry and Sussex Counties, 1739-1778*; Churchill Gibson Chamberlayne, trans. & ed., *The Vestry Book and Register of Bristol Parish, Virginia, 1720-1789*.

many planters avoided them by baptizing slaves at home on the plantation. Such is the view of John K. Nelson whose recent study of the church in Virginia demonstrated that “tradition places baptisms in the home rather than the parish church.” As a result, church registers may actually understate the rising numbers of slave baptisms.¹⁴⁴

Nonetheless, to judge extant registers, in addition to representing a certain rite of passage and patriarchalism, they may yield a prospective index of expenses some slaveholders incurred for the religious training of their children baptized into the church.¹⁴⁵ Particularly compelling are the birth-to-baptismal intervals measured over time and space in early Virginia. Typically baptisms followed shortly after birth, in accordance with the rules set by the Book of Common Prayer, next to the Bible the main spiritual text that guided the Church of England in the Chesapeake. Ministers of every parish were expected to “admonish the people that they bring their children to Baptism as soon as possible after birth, and that they defer not the Baptism longer than the fourth, or at furthest the fifth, Sunday unless upon a great and reasonable cause.”¹⁴⁶ As soon as a child was old enough to learn the rudiments of religion, formal instruction was supposed to begin. So that they know all the things “a Christian ought to know and believe to his soul’s health,” children were expected to attend church regularly, listen to sermons, and learn the Apostle’s

¹⁴⁴Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 213.

¹⁴⁵Patriarchalism, as Robert Filmer explained in his political treatise, *Patriarcha*, the ideal that there inherent inequality in all political and familial relationship.

¹⁴⁶[Church of England], *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments & Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (1662; reprint, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1927), 255. Henceforth all references to the *Book of Common Prayer* will be abbreviated as *BCP*.

Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments.¹⁴⁷

In this setting, birth-to-baptism intervals can be read in either one of two ways. For some enslaved Virginians, baptism led to instruction and that instruction was primarily oral in nature. But for others, baptism may have represented either a step toward achieving literacy or the completion of literacy instruction. Because unlike the babies of white parishioners, some infant slaves were not baptized immediately after birth.¹⁴⁸ Quite the contrary, as birth-to-baptismal intervals demonstrate, some masters clearly waited a number of years before bringing the child to the fount. That was particularly true of slaveholders who attended the Bruton Parish. To judge from that register, one-tenth of the slaves baptized were adults. Between the 1740s and 60s, 125 slaves out of 1,024 slave parishioners who received the sacrament were noted as being "grown."¹⁴⁹ Considering the additional expense that slave-holders transacted from such practices, it seems likely that baptism demonstrated fellowship and patriarchalism and possibly literacy. It may also

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 254.

¹⁴⁸Although the subject of enslaved Virginians as parishioners of the Church of England has been extensively explored in the works of Nelson, Tate, Parent, and Gunderson, the birth to baptismal intervals noted in church registers has received no attention. Presumably, they have been taken them for granted, as if they alluded to nothing of the complex religious world of early Virginia. Nelson, *A Blessed Company*; Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg*, 65-90; Parent, *Foul Means*, 197-264; and, Gunderson, *The Anglican Ministry in Virginia*.

¹⁴⁹John Vogt, ed. and trans., *Register for the Bruton Parish, Virginia, 1662-1792*. In addition to demonstrating piety on the part of their masters, the baptizing of adult slaves may also underscore the fact that slaves had some say in matters involving their children. By 1762, it had become a "general Practice all over Virginia for Negro Parents" to bring their children to church to have them baptized. Rev. William Yates and Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 30 September 1762 in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 184.

demonstrate the fact that some adult slaves and parents had some say over matters concerning themselves and their relationship with their masters and the church. (Tables 23 & 24)

Such was the view of those who lived then and wrote about it. That was certainly what the anonymous slave writer (discussed in chapter 2) had in mind when he or she wrote the Bishop of London in 1723. Baptism, he or she noted, was thought important not simply because it symbolized a certain rite of passage that included oral instruction, but also because it represented the first significant step for slaves learning how to read and write. The letter makes that much plain when it observed: “Wee. . . do humbly beg the favour of your Lord Ship. . . [to] Settell one thing upon us which is . . . that our childarn may be broatt up in the way of the Christian faith.” In addition to learning “the Lords prayer, the creed, and the ten commandments,” the writer asked, that they be given school lessons that slave children may “Larnd to Reed through the Bybell.”¹⁵⁰

That was also what John Lewis had in mind when he wrote *The Church Catechism Explained* which had been popular in the Anglican church in both England and abroad. Originally published in 1700, Lewis’ primer to the Church of England’s catechism emphasized reading as part of practicing the Protestant faith. Worship, as he told it, was two-fold—oral in nature when in public, textual when in private. “What is it to honour God’s word?” Lewis’s primer asked. “It is reverently to read and hear the holy Scriptures; and to use with respect whatever has a mere immediate relation to God and his service.” Likewise, “wherein does the private worship of God consist?” Once again the catechist

¹⁵⁰ Anonymous to Bishop Edmund Gibson, 1723, *Fulham Papers*, 17: 167-168.

Table 23 Baptismal Practice ^a

Parishes (Years)	Interval: Birth to Baptism						n/a
	0-14 Days	15-31 Days	1-3 mon.	4-6 mon.	6-12 mon.	More than 1 year	
Christ Church							
1704-1709	13	15	28	1	0	1	228
1710-1719	64	171	169	5	1	1	105
1720-1729	118	289	151	0	0	1	28
1730-1733	75	121	53	0	0	0	9
Bristol Parish							
1720-1729	27	26	128	121	84	128	15
1730-1739	17	49	253	103	54	17	6
1740-1744	12	18	111	45	25	11	--
St. Peter's Parish							
1733-1739	15	75	261	55	18	3	30
1753-1760	1	46	162	13	5	3	17
Albemarle Parish							
1740-1749	27	83	707	172	51	37	88
1750-1759	27	83	722	158	58	32	98
1760-1769	20	71	826	363	139	123	120
1770-1775	12	36	471	191	84	27	131

Note:

^a This table includes figures for both whites and slaves.

Source:

John K. Nelson, *A Blessed Company: Parishes, parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690-1776* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 328, 211-16.

Table 24 Slave Baptismal Practice.

Parishes (Years)	Interval: Birth to Baptism						
	No.	less than one year	1-2 years	3-4 years	5-7 years	8-12 years	n/a
Christ Church 1700-1775	47	14	--	--	--	--	33
St. Peter's Parish 1710-1779	177	62	4	2	4	3	102
Bristol Parish 1720-1749	42	14	17	3	2	--	6
Albemarle Parish 1740-1779	862	607	95	26	13	13	108

Sources:

Churchill Gibson Chamberlayne, trans. & ed., *The Vestry Book and Register of St. Peter's Parish, New Kent and James City counties, Virginia, 1684-1786*. Richmond, Va: 1937; Gertrude R.B. Richards, trans. & ed., *Register of Albemarle Parish, Surry and Sussex Counties, 1739-1778*. Richmond, Va.: National Society Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1958.; Churchill Gibson Chamberlayne, trans. & ed., *The Vestry Book and Register of Bristol Parish, Virginia, 1720-1789*. Richmond, Va.: W.E. Jones, 1898; and, *The Parish Register of Christ Church, Middlesex County, Va., from 1653 to 1812*. Richmond, Va.: W. E. Jones, 1897.

prescribed texts: “it consist of prayer, reading, and meditation on the word and works of God.”¹⁵¹

The colony’s parsons agreed. Slaves baptized many years after birth were more than likely candidates for literacy instruction. Consider the practice of Adam Dickie, who served for fourteen years as the parson of the Drysdale Parish in Caroline County, Virginia. Though no known register for that parish has survived, Dickie’s extant correspondence suggests that the parson was quite concerned about the spiritual welfare of the slaves under his care. He too read the Book of Common Prayer literally and observed its teachings in that manner, despite the complaints of some who “thought it a Mighty Scandal to have their Children repeat the Catechism with Negroes.” According to Dickie, older slaves generally received the sacrament of baptism after a certain amount of oral and literacy instruction. In 1732, he boasted to Henry Newman, then the Secretary of S.P.C.K, that he had fourteen slaves in his congregation who “could answer for themselves and repeat the Catechism very distinctly.” Two years thereafter, the Anglican minister began passing books out to those slaves “he thought most diligent and desirous to

¹⁵¹John Lewis, *Church catechism explained, by way of question and answer, and confirmed by Scripture proofs: divided into five parts, and twelve sections: wherein a brief and plain account is given of I. The Christian covenant. II. The Christian faith. III. The Christian obedience. IV. The Christian prayer. V. The Christian sacraments* (London: 1700; reprint, New York, James Oram, 1800), 40 & 42. Though they were not as popular as Lewis’ primer, such was the true of several other catechetical handbooks. See Ken Thomas, *An exposition of the church-catechism, or, The practice of divine love*. Boston: Richard Pierce, 1688; *The Catechism resolved into an easie and useful method: wherein the principles whereof are exhibited and explain’d in order, with inferences from, and references to those principles*. Boston, 1723; Samuel Johnson, *A short catechism for young children: proper to be taught them, before they learn the Assembly’s, or after they have learn’d the church catechism*. Philadelphia: Ant. Armbruster, 1753. Isaac Watts, *A Serious call to baptized children*. Boston: S. Kneeland, 1759.

read.” Presumably, in his parish, slaves were initially taught to recite. Later, some of them were taught literacy lessons enabling them to read the Bible. Evidently, Dickie’s work impressed a number of slave-holders who permitted slaves instruction. Their slaves, as he told Henry Newman, “who formerly were thieves, lyars, Swearers, prophaners of the Sabbath, and neglecters of their business, from a Sense of Religion and of their Duty have left off all these things.” The Secretary of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge was also impressed—so much so that he sent the parson a packet of books to help further his work in teaching his slave parishioners.¹⁵²

Other church wardens performed a similar work among mature slaves. Jonathan Boucher, minister of the church in Hanover County, called on “a very sensible, well dispos’d Negro,” who belonged to a “Gentleman” living a mile from the church, to instruct “his poor fellow Slaves in Reading & some of the first Principles of Religion.” While it is unclear how this slave tutor learned to read himself and also how many others he instructed before coming to the attention of the county’s parson, one thing seems apparent, by 1762, this unnamed slave instructor had “betwixt Twenty & Thirty who constantly attend Him.” After their reading lessons, those who graduated to the rank of slave scholars were brought before reverend Boucher that he “may examine what Progress They have made.” Had they proven themselves, they were probably confirmed as members

¹⁵²Adam Dixie to Henry Newman, 27 June 1732, *Fulham Papers*, 12: 182-183; Henry Newman to the Bishop of London, Nov. 15, 1732, *Fulham Papers*, 12: 192-193.

Interestingly, as both the S.P.C.K and the S.P.G. were missionary schemes started by Thomas Bray, an Anglican minister who believed passionately in the power of the printed word and in reading, it seems like that parcel of books Newman sent included a number of spellers and primers that were to be used to instruct slaves in reading. Such had certainly been the case with the extant book inventory of the S.P.G..

of the congregation.¹⁵³

A few years later, after he moved to St. Mary's Parish, Boucher continued to instruct slaves in religion through letters. "Every Sunday," he confided to John Waring, a fellow minister and a philanthropist, he had "twenty or thirty who could use their prayer-books, and make the responses." Much as at his former post, Boucher enjoyed help. By his own admission, shortly after he assumed his new commission, he sought the assistance of "an old Negro, or a conscientious Overseer, able to read." By the summer of 1767, he had occasion to boast that in one day, he "baptised 315 Negro Adults, & delivered a Lecture of about an Hour's Length, after reading Prayers to Them, to above 3000" which he considered with glee "the hardest Day's Service [he] ever had in [his] Life."¹⁵⁴ To judge from his letters, for some of those adult Afro-Virginians, confirmation followed instruction. Though no register has survived for parson Boucher's church, his account of instructing slaves may nonetheless explain some of the birth-to-baptism intervals found in extant church registers.

Edmund Gibson's correspondence with Virginia's parsons in the 1720s provides perhaps the fullest account of this changing relationship between masters and slaves and provides further evidence of how some enslaved Virginians may have acquired literacy

¹⁵³Jonathan Boucher to Rev. John Waring, 28 April 1764, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy and Colonial Slavery* (Urbana, Ill., 1985), 206.

Significantly, John Waring, the Secretary of the Associates of Dr. Bray, was also an advocate of proselytizing religion by way biblical literacy instruction.

¹⁵⁴Jonathan Boucher to Rev. John Waring, 9 March 1767, in *Ibid.*, 255-256.

skills. Gibson was a more than able diplomat, keenly adept in ecclesiastical matters and in the politics of his day and of his office. He was also an earnest Protestant committed to the project of baptizing and instructing slaves and Native Americans. Shortly after “being call’d by the Providence of God to the Government and Administration of the Diocese of *London*, by which the Care of the Churches in the Foreign Plantations is also devolv’d upon” him, Gibson thought it his “Duty to use all proper means of attaining a competent Knowledge of the Places, Persons, and Matters, entrusted to [his] Care.” So that he could obtain “a right knowledge of the State and Condition of” the churches overseas, the newly charged Bishop of London drew up a “Paper of Enquiries,” employed the services of a printer and distributed his leaflet to the Anglican clergy in North America.¹⁵⁵ (Plates 5–8)

Gibson’s questionnaire was the first official bid to compile an accurate account of the Church of England’s work in the New World. In seventeen queries, he sought to determine the state of religion in the colonies overseas. To that end, the Bishop asked questions about the sizes of parish congregations, the manner in which services were conducted, and the nature of the parson’s provisions. He also sought a report about the educational work being done among the colonies’ slaves and likewise among Native Americans. Expecting at once a full and candid account, he inquired: “*Are there any Infidels, bond or free, within your Parish, and what means are used for their conversion?*”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵Letter of Introduction, Bishop of London, Nov. 2, 1723, *Fulham Papers*, 12: 48.

¹⁵⁶While Bononi and Eisenstadt’s study of church attention in British North America has made extensive use of the Bishop’s “Paper of Enquiries,” no-one, save for

(1)

Bishop of London,
Nov 1st 1727.

GOOD BROTHER,

B EING call'd by the Providence of God to the Government and Administration of the Diocese of London, by which the Care of the Churches in the Foreign Plantations is also devolv'd upon me; I think it my Duty to use all proper means of attaining a competent Knowledge of the Places, Persons, and Matters, entrusted to my Care. And as the Plantations, and the Constitutions of the Churches there, are at a far greater distance, and much less known to me, than the Affairs of my Diocese here at home, so it is the more necessary for me to have recourse to the best and most effectual methods of coming to a right knowledge of the State and Condition of them. Which Knowledge I shall not fail, by the Grace of God, faithfully to employ to the service of Piety and Religion, and to the maintenance of Order and Regularity in the Church.

With these Views, I have drawn up a Paper of Enquiries, and have left a void Space under each Head, in which I desire you to set down the several Answers, and then to deliver or transmit the Paper to the Person who was Commissary to my Predecessor, and who will take care to convey it back to me. And as I doubt not but you on your Part will readily and faithfully afford me these necessary Lights, that I may be able to situate a right Judgment of Things, and discharge my Duty with greater Certainty and Success; so you may rest assur'd, that I on my Part shall be ready on all Occasions to give you the best Advice and Assistance I can, in order to the successful and comfortable discharge of your Ministerial Function.

In the mean time I desire to recommend to your serious Consideration some few things, which seem more particularly to concern those who are appointed Missionaries to preach and propagate the Gospel in Foreign Parts; and which are peculiar Obligations to Diligence, Seriousness, and Circumspection, over and above the Obligations that are common to you with all other Ministers of the Gospel.

I. The Churches, of which you and other Missionaries are Ministers, have not been long planted, and therefore they will need greater degrees of Diligence and Assiduity, to build them up in Faith and Practice, than is requir'd in other Churches, where Christianity has been long planted, and has taken deep Root. They are yet as it were in their Infancy, and therefore need to be attended by you, who are the Guides and Pastors of them, with great Care and Watchfulness.

II. You

Plate 5: Bishop of London, Paper of Enquires: Letter of Introduction. Page Page 1. *Fulham Papers*, 12: 41.

II. You have not only a regular Spiritual Discipline, as being establish'd and wisely us'd, but also a constant Restraint upon Persons of loose Principles and Principles, and therefore you are to supply that Want by a more than ordinary Diligence to check and suppress Vice and Immorality of all kinds, both by public Preaching and private Exhortation and Reproof; and further, by such means as in you lies to train up the Youth of your Parish to a more and more perfect Knowledge and Sense of their Duty, and by that to lay a sure Foundation for the service of God and their Country.

III. The less Assistance you have from the Spiritual Power to restrain Vice and Immorality, the greater should it be to engage and secure the Assistance of the Temporal Power, in this your most important Work. And the best Way to secure that both by your own Influence, and in reasonable Interpositions there, is to make your own Examples, in the first place, of Duty and Loyalty to our most gracious Sovereign King George, and then of a respectful and decent Behaviour to your Majesty's Governour who is sent by him; to whose Favour and Protection I have in the most honest manner recommended the Concerns of the Church and Clergy. And you will do well to avoid, as much as may be, all Concern in Civil Affairs, making it your Choice to confine your self to your proper Function as a Minister of the Gospel, which is the surest way both to avoid Offence, and to gain Respect.

IV. As your Behaviour is seen and observ'd, not only by Christians, but also by Heathens, whose Conversion you are bound to endeavour as one Part of the Mark belonging to your Ministry, it is particularly concerns you on that Account to be strictly regular in your Lives, and circumspect in all your Behaviour, considering what a powerful Argument an exemplary Life is to invite Heathens to admire and embrace Christianity; and how great the Guilt is of every Christian, and much more of every Minister of Christ, who shall prejudice the Heathens against the Gospel, and hinder the Propagation of it, by an Unchristian Life.

Thus, commending you to the Grace and Protection of God, and beseeching you for the Sake of Jesus Christ, to lay these things seriously to Heart, I remain,

Your Affectionate Friend and Brother,

Note, That the Name of the Parish is to be set down at the beginning of the Queries, and your own Name, as Minister, at the end of them.

EDM' LONDON.

Plate 6: Bishop of London, Paper of Enquires: Letter of Introduction. Page 2. *Fulham Papers*, 12: 42.

Breton Parish, alias called Williamsburg

(3)

Q U E R I E S

To be answer'd by every MINISTER.

How long is it, since you went over to the Plantations as a Missionary?

I came to Virginia, June 21st 1698

Have you had any other Church, before you came, to that which you now possess, and if you had, what Church was it, and how long have you been remov'd?

I was first Minister of the same, at some 50 Miles distant from it College, & left it in 1698, to attend y^e College, & was then Minister of the same in a distant parish till 1700. In Church 8 Miles distant. Since 1711 I have been Minister only of this Parish, where the College stands.

Have you been duly Licens'd by the Bishop of London to officiate as a Missionary, in the Government where you now are?

I was duly licens'd by the Bishop of London

How long have you been Inducted into your Living?

I have had this Living 13 years, but without Inductions.

Are you ordinarily Resident in the Parish to which you have been Inducted?

I am constantly resident in this Parish.

Of what Extent is your Parish, and how many families are there in it?

The Parish is about 10 Miles square, about 100 families.

Are there any Infidels, bond or free, within your Parish, who are not brought to the Christian Religion?

No Infidels, but Slaves I encourage to be taught the Christian Religion, as well as the English, and exhort their masters to bring them to the Christian Religion.

How often is Divine Service perform'd in your Church? And what number of the Parishioners attend it?

I have Divine Service & Sermon every Sunday, & on the 1st of every month, & on the 1st of every quarter. We have a Church Warden, & a Vestry, & a School, & a Charity, & a Hospital, & a Prison, & a Workhouse, & a Poorhouse, & a Charity School, & a Charity Hospital, & a Charity Prison, & a Charity Workhouse, & a Charity Poorhouse.

Plate 7: Bishop of London, Paper of Enquires. Page 3. Fulham Papers, 12: 48.

(4)

How oft is the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper administer'd? And what is the usual Number of Communicants?

I administer the Sacrament four times in the year viz at Trin. Smase, Easter, Whitsun and the feast of Pentecost to 100 Communicants.

At what times do you Catechise the Youth of your Parish?

Every Sunday in Lent, after the first services.

Are all things duly dispos'd and provided in the Church, for the decent and orderly Performance of divine Service?

Yes. We have a great Bible, a Communion table, the Stations, Canons, Vigil book, Willow pattern, about Communion table, and so on.

Of what Value is your Living in Sterling-Money, and how does it arise?

I think it is about 100 pounds per Annum. It arises by 16000 pounds of sweet, mixed Tola and a few partridges &c. & a marriage by duties of 1/2 pence per 100 and some other 40 p.

Have you a House and Glebe? Is your Glebe in Lease, or let by the Year? Or is it occupied by your self?

I have a piece of about 300 acres of land, no dwelling house. I live in a house of my own by the College. The Glebe is occupied by my self.

Is the Care taken to preserve your House in good Repair? And at whose Expence is it done?

There is no dwelling house. I doubt not the Parish will build one when they come to have a minister that wants one; it will keep in repair.

Have you more Cures than one? If you have, what are they? And in what Manner serv'd?

I have no more Cures but this one, nor more than one Church. I am also Rector of the College, which is in the same Parish, and just by my house.

Have you in your Parish any publick School for the Instruction of Youth? If you have, is it endow'd? And who is the Master?

We have no publick parish school. The school is where they teach to read & write & with a little Latin, which is a convenient number of scholars. Of these I have four in my parish.

Have you a Parochial Library? If you have, are the Books preserv'd, and kept in good Condition? Have you any particular Rules and Orders for the preserving of them? Are those Rules and Orders duly observ'd?

We have not, nor ever had any parochial library. The College has a small library. The key is kept by one of the Masters.

Williamsburgh
4th 13. 1728.

Your Lops most obedient servant
James Blair minister of Williamsburgh

Plate 8: Bishop of London, Paper of Enquires. Page 4. Fulham Papers, 12: 48.

Considering the influence of Morgan Godwyn's appeal in London several years prior, it is hardly unreasonable to assume that his plea concerning slaves and Indians may have exerted some influence—probably indirectly—on the Bishop when he prepared his “Paper of Enquiries.” When he originally published his *Advocate*, Godwyn did enlist the Archbishop of Canterbury's favor as a way to encourage the sale of his treatise and likewise its reception. A prefatory letter in the *Advocate* explains: “To the most Reverend Father in God, WILLIAM [Sancroft] by in Divine Providence, Lord Arch-Bishop of *Canterbury*. . . Of all *England* Primate and Metropolitan. . . *It is at once both the Duty and Interest of these Papers to beseech your Favour and Patronage. . . to give them that Reputation and Lustre which of themselves they wanted, and to supply all Defects and Errors of the unskilful Author.*” Although Gibson was not the Bishop when Godwyn published his observations concerning Virginia, it appears likely that he did nonetheless read his appeal as the two men were both respected members of the Church of England. If not by Godwyn's *Advocate*, it also seems possible that Bishop's request concerning Negroes in particular may have been a response to the anonymous letter he had received from a Virginia slave who petitioned his Lordship shortly after his appointment to the office.¹⁵⁷

Whatever his reasons, the parsons in Virginia received the Bishop's questionnaire and were perhaps the most anxious to respond of the southern colonies. Of the fifty-four

this study, has explicated all of the extant parson's accounts of that work performed among slaves in Virginia. Patricia U. Bonomi and Peter R. Eisenstadt, “Church Adherence in the Eighteenth-Century British American Colonies” *WMQ* 39 (April 1982): 245-286.

¹⁵⁷Godwyn, 3.

parishes that existed in the colony at the time Edmund Gibson dispatched his inquiry, twenty-eight responses have survived, accounting for over one-half of the churches in the colony. Similarly, measured from region to region, almost one-half of the number of the parsons in Virginia sent the Bishop accounts of the Anglican church in the Chesapeake. (Table 25)

From their replies to the Bishop's query emerges an insightful portrait of the old church in the New World. Virginians were devout people. From all walks of life, from the gentry to the merchant class, from artisans to yeoman farmers, from indentured servants to black slaves, people attended church and did so regularly. Every Sunday they observed with reverence the church's teachings as each sat in accord with their social rank, enacting the Anglican ethos of an orderly cosmos and a reasonable God.

But for all their piety, Virginians had grown far more dependent on African slave labor over the four decades since Godwyn had framed his *Negro's and Indians Advocate*. Though they were God-fearing people, the ministers' replies told Gibson, most slaveholders were indifferent about fulfilling their duties as masters and baptizing and instructing their slaves. Nor could the clergy make them do so. As the Bishop's correspondents revealed, they were powerless to impose their will on reluctant masters. Still, they persisted in the struggle for the spiritual well-being of the slaves.

Of the twenty-eight letters that have survived, eighteen indicated that while some masters saw to it that their slaves were baptized and instructed, most did not. "We've no infidels, that are free," reported Henry Collins, the rector of St. Peter's Parish in New Kent County, "but a great many Negro-bondslaves; some of which are suffered by the

Table 25 Characteristics of the Virginia Parsons' Replies to the Bishop of London in 1723/4.

Regions	Number of Parishes	%	Number of Replies	%
Tidewater	28	51.85	14	50
Piedmont	13	24.07	7	25
Southside	8	14.81	4	14.28
Mountain	3	5.55	1	3.57
Eastern	2	3.70	2	7.14
Total	54	99.98	28	99.99

Sources:

Bishop of London, *Fulham Papers*, 12: 41-84; Joan Rezner Gundersen, *The Anglican Ministry in Virginia, 1723-1766* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989), 8-9.

respective Masters to be baptized. . . but others are not.” The parson’s conclusion was precise; during the 1720s, only fifteen per cent of the 283 slaves whose births were carefully recorded by Collins in the church register were subsequently baptized. George Robertson, the rector of the Bristol Parish in James City County, expressed similarly accurate sentiments, succinctly writing “Some masters instruct Slaves at home or bring them to baptism, but not many.” In his parish, no more than seven per cent of slave infants were baptized in the 1720s. (See Table 22)¹⁵⁸

Not surprisingly, most ministers in Virginia blamed the slaves’ masters for the poor health of religion in the colony. Finding little fault in themselves, they pinned the shortcomings of the church on the gentry. Reverend James Blair of Bruton Parish admonished those who owned slaves and who refused to bring them to church. The Commissary of the colony up until the 1740s and the esteemed President of the College of William & Mary, Blair spoke not only for himself but also for six other ministers when he observed, I have “No infidels, but slaves. I encourage the baptising and catechizing of such of them as understand English, and exhort their Masters to bring them to Church and baptise the infant slaves.” But Alexander Scott was not quite as restrained. Rather than graciously concede any fault on his part, the cleric of the Overworton Parish in Stafford County placed the burden of slaves’ instruction firmly on their masters’ shoulders: “The Children of [Negro Slaves] and those of them that can speak and understand the English Language we instruct and baptise if [we are] permitted by their Masters.” John Brunskill,

¹⁵⁸Henry Collings, St. Peter’s Parish, to the Bishop of London, *Fulham Papers*, 12: 53; George Robertson, Bristol Parish, to the Bishop of London in *Fulham Paper*, 12: 79.

the parson of the Wilmington Parish in James City County gave a more stinging account when he wrote: "There is no law of the Colony obliging their masters or Owners to Instruct them in the principles of Christianity." Even if there was such legislation, "obliging those Masters or Owners to Instruct them in the principles of Christianity," they would hardly comply because "they are hardly persuaded by the Ministers to take so much pains by them; by which Means of poor Creatures generally live & die without it."¹⁵⁹

Despite the slave-holders' indifference, a number of the colony's clerics did achieve some success. William Black, boasted about his work among the colony's slaves. Since his arrival in 1709, the rector of Accomako Parish claimed that he had baptized about two hundred Negroes, if not more. William LeNeve, the rector of the James City Parish, performed a similar work. In 1724, he wrote: "My Lord, I can't say we have any Freeman Infidels; but our negro Slaves, imported daily are altogether ignorant of God & Religion, & in truth have so little Docility in them that they scarce ever become capable of Instruction: but, My Lord I have examined and improved several Negroes natives of Virginia, and I hope in God that, by due Observance of the Directions for ye Catechist & printed by Orders of the Society for the Propagation of ye Gospel in Foreign Parts, I shall labour to plant that seed among them, wch will produce a blessed Harvest."¹⁶⁰

Significantly, although most parsons indicated whether or not slaves were

¹⁵⁹James Blair, Bruton Parish, to the Bishop of London in *Fulham Papers*, 12: 48; Alexander Scott, Overworton Parish, to the Bishop of London in *Fulham Papers*, 12: 81; John Brunskill, Wilmington Parish, to the Bishop of London in *Fulham Papers*, 12: 51.

¹⁶⁰William Black, Accomako Parish, to the Bishop of London in *Fulham Papers*, 12: 47; William LeNeve, James City Parish, to the Bishop of London in *Fulham Papers*, 12: 78.

instructed, only a few addressed directly the Bishop's query as to the means they had used "for their conversion." Some slaves, according to James Falconer, the parson in Elizabeth City County, were taught by their masters and at home. Afterwards, they were brought to church for confirmation. But recently imported Africans, he observed, were "impossible to instruct" because they were not "able either to speak or understand our language perfectly." Daniel Taylor, the parson of the church in Blissland Parish in New Kent, expressed a similar opinion, writing "None but negro Slaves most of which are not Capable of instruction. Those that are Children my own & many others I have instructed & Baptized."¹⁶¹

Other church rectors were only a little more precise in explaining their methods. Francis Fontaine, the pastor of the York-Hampton Parish, wrote "I know of no Infidels in my Parish except Slaves. I exhort their Master to send them to me to be instructed. And in Order to their Conversion I have set a part every Saturday in the afternoon and Catechize them at my Glebe house." Working along similar lines, his brother Peter, the minister of the Westover Parish, wrote "I take all opportunity both Publick and private to extort all Masters and mistresses to Instruct their Slaves in ye Principles of Christianity and to send them to Church to be [baptized?] and instructed by me during ye time of Catechetical [lectures?] which I begin in April and continue every Lord's day . . ." As to his method of converting infidels at his Southwark Parish, John Cargill told the Bishop "There is a Town of Indians made up of the Scatter'd Remains of four or fives towns seated on the frontier

¹⁶¹James Falconer, Elizabeth City Parish, to the Bishop of London in *Fulham Papers*, 12: 56; Daniel Taylor, Blissland Parish, to the Bishop of London in *Fulham Papers*, 12: 82.

of my Parish where for sometime, there was a School for [Charles Griffin?] to Teach ye. But he is now removed to the Sect[ion] of the Government where he [teaches?] Indian children from the several Nations in the Colony has a Sallery out of Mr. Boyle's Legacy name. . . . as to ye Negro Slaves there some of their Masters on whom I do prevail to have ye baptized: I taught, but not many."¹⁶²

By contrast, some of the ministers were quite vague. Lewis Latane, for example, explained his method of converting slaves as simply being a series of questions. Thomas Dell, the parson of the Hungars Parish, seemed to have relied solely on oral instruction: "There are Infidels bond and free. No other method used throughout ye Colony but Ordinary Preaching." Thomas Hughes of Abingdon Parish employed a similar method to instruct the infidels at his church.¹⁶³

Most parsons in Virginia agreed, country-born slaves were more likely to receive baptism and instruction than their African counterparts, if for no other reason than that they were more likely to understand English. Some slaves who received the sacrament also

¹⁶²Francis Fontaine, York-Hampton Parish, to the Bishop of London in *Fulham Papers*, 12: 58; Peter Fontaine, Westover Parish, to the Bishop of London in *Fulham Papers*, 12: 59; John Cargill, Southwark Parish, to the Bishop of London in *Fulham Papers*, 12: 52.

Incidentally, The Indian school Cargill referred to was undoubtedly the Brafferton in Williamsburg which taught a number of Native Americans religion through literacy instruction between 1699 and 1777. For a fuller account, see Karen A. Stuart. "'So Good a Work': The Brafferton School, 1691-1777." M.A. thesis, College of William and Mary, 1984 and Terri Keffert. "The Education of the Native American in Colonial Virginia, with Particular Regard to the Brafferton School" *CWI* 21 (Fall 2000): 20-28

¹⁶³Lewis Latane, Southampton Parish, to the Bishop of London in *Fulham Papers*, 12: 77; Thomas Dell, Hungars Parish, to the Bishop of London in *Fulham Papers*, 12: 55; Thomas Hughes, Abingdon Parish, to the Bishop of London in *Fulham Papers*, 12: 74.

received instruction. In most instances, instruction appeared to have occurred before baptism which, as alluded to earlier, may explain birth-to-baptism intervals in extant church registers.

Nonetheless, reading was clearly what the Bishop had in mind when he dispatched his questionnaire. In 1729, he made that much plain when he responded to the parsons' letters by publishing two letters of his own, addressed to "the Masters and Mistresses. . . in the *English* PLANTATIONS. . . [and to] the MISSIONARIES there." Much as Godwyn had done years before, Gibson admonished those who had refused to instruct "*their* NEGROES in the *Christian Faith*" and those ministers in the colonies who refused to perform their duty. Put off by their woeful neglect of their obligation, he judged their reasons for not proselyting God's word self-serving and unrighteous. Besides beseeching colonial planters to consider themselves "not only as Masters, but as *Christian* Masters, who stand oblig'd by your Profession to do all that your Station and Condition enable you to do, towards. . . enlarging the Kingdom of Christ," Gibson encouraged them to invest in schools to educate Negroes. "Considering the *Greatness* of the Profit that is receiv'd from their Labours," he observed, "it might be hop'd that all Christian Masters, those especially who possess'd of considerable Numbers, should also be at some small *Expence* in providing. . . a common Teacher, for the Negroes belonging to them." The London-based "Society for Propagating the Gospel in Foreign Parts," he went on, "are sufficiently sensible of the great Importance and Necessity of such an establish'd and regular Provision

for the Instruction of the Negroes. . . that it may please God.”¹⁶⁴

Ever a skillful diplomat, the Bishop tempered his criticism by conceding to slaveholders that he saw no conflict between teaching blacks the Gospels and maintaining the institution of slavery. Far from it, instruction in religion, he reasoned, served everyone’s best interest as it made slaves content. “The embracing of the Gospel, does not make the least Alternation in Civil Property, or in any of the Duties which belong to Civil Relations; but in all these Respects, it continues Persons just in the same State as it found them.”¹⁶⁵

Asserting that adherence to Christianity does not alter the status of a slave, the Bishop had simply restated the Church of England’s doctrine. As the church’s book of catechism explained: when asked, “What is thy duty towards thy Neighbour,” prospective converts were expected to reply “To honour, and obey the King. . . To submit myself to all my governors, teachers, spiritual pastors and masters. To order myself lowly and reverently to all my betters. . . and to do my duty in that state of life, unto which it shall please God to call me.” Or as Jesus admonished the church, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar, and to God the things that are God’s.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴Gibson, *Two Letters of the lord bishop of London: the first, to the master and mistresses of families in the English plantations abroad; exhorting them to encourage and promote the instruction of their negroes in the Christian faith. The second, to the missionaries there; directing them to distribute the said letter, and exhorting them to give their assistance towards the instruction of the negroes within their several parishes. To both which is prefix’d, An address to serious Christian among our selves, to assist the Society for Propagating the Gospels, in carrying on this work* (1727; reprinted, London: Joseph Downing, 1729), 1, 14, 9-10. For a fuller account of literacy campaign of the S.P.G., see Monaghan’s *Reading and Writing in Colonial America*, 143-190.

¹⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶⁶*BCP*, 273; Mark 12: 17 (King James Version).

The Bishop also chastised the clergy in the colonies. As he had with the masters and mistresses who were in charge of the plantations, Gibson called for greater missionary zeal that included lessons in reading: “Having understood by many Letters from the Plantations, and by Accounts of Persons who have come from thence. . . I would also hope, that the *Schoolmasters* in several Parishes, parts of whose Business it is to instruct Youth in the Principles of Christianity. . . [carry] on this Work. . . on the Lord’s Day, when both they and the Negroes are most at Liberty.”¹⁶⁷

For most parsons in the Chesapeake, the Bishop’s words offered little in the way of revelation. Quite the contrary, many of them had already expressed a similar position when it came to the subject of baptizing and instructing slaves. William LeNeve, rector of Bruton parish in Williamsburg, had already been using books provided by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to “produce a blessed Harvest” among his slave parishioners. That was also true of the Reverend James Blair. In 1699, long before the Bishop sent out his questionnaire, the Bruton Parish parson circulated “*A Proposition for encouraging the Christian Education of Indian, Negro and Mulatto Children.*” The Bishop of London’s representative in the colony, Commissary Blair proposed a bargain with slave masters. In exchange for allowing “the good instruction and Education of their Heathen Slaves in the Christian faith,” “Masters and Mistresses of this Countrey” would be “exempted” from all taxes on those slaves until they reached the age eighteen.¹⁶⁸ But to

¹⁶⁷Gibson, *Two Letters*, 17 & 19. By schoolmasters, Gibson referred to the parish schools several parsons alluded to in their replies to his original inquiry.

¹⁶⁸William LeNeve, James City Parish, to the Bishop of London, *Fulham Paper*, 12: 78; Blair, *A Proposition for encouraging the Christian Education of Indian, Negro*

judge extant records, nothing appears to have come of his plan to educate slaves.¹⁶⁹

Blair's successor as Commissary and College President, William Dawson, was equally committed to instructing slaves for the sake of religion. On May 21, 1739, he asked the Bishop of London to send him a "collection of religious books. . . for the benefit of the Negroes & the Poor of this colony." Presumably, like other Anglican ministers in the Chesapeake, Dawson achieved some degree of success among the slaves under his charge, so much so that he inspired others to write about his good works. In 1743, James Blair, the nephew of the late Commissary, wrote the Bishop of London: "I cannot help adding, though I am sensible I trespass on your Lordship precious moments, That I perceive with pleasure a zealous disposition in our new President to co-operate with your Lordships pious endeavours for the instruction of the negres here in the principles of christianity. I find his laboring among such as he thinks are well disposed that way to get school set up here for the purpose." By that December, Dawson's plan appeared to be taking shape. In a letter addressed to Henry Newman, he requested a

and Mulatto Children in Samuel Clyde McCulloch, "James Blair's Plan of 1699 to Reform the Clergy of Virginia" *WMQ* 4 (January 1947), 85. Interestingly enough, considering Nelson's study which shows early Virginians paying substantially more per tithable for the parish levy than for the county levy, Blair's plan represented a considerable windfall for slave-holders. Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 43.

¹⁶⁹Michael Anesko, "So Discreet a Zeal: Slavery and the Anglican Church in Virginia, 1680-1730" *VMHB* 93 (July 1985): 247-278.

Interestingly, education for slaves, that is to judge from Blair's efforts among Native Americans, included undoubtedly biblical literacy instruction. For a fuller account of Blair's work among Native Americans in Williamsburg, see Terri Keffert, "The Education of the Native American in Colonial Virginia, with Particular Regard to the Brafferton School" *CWT* 21 (Fall 2000): 21-22 and Karen A. Stuart, "'So Good a Work': The Brafferton School, 1691-1777." MA. thesis, College of William and Mary, 1984.

number of tracts on “charity schools. . . which, with some little Alteration, [he believed] will suit a Negro School in our metropolis, when we shall have the Pleasure of seeing One established. . .” Seven years later, all was going well. In May of 1750, Dawson boasted to the Bishop that there was several such schools in his parish, saying “Many tell me that such schools are wanted here. I cannot deny it, and therefore am now endeavouring to get such erected in all our parishes. There are three such schools in my parish.” Unfortunately, except for the reverend’s letters, there is no other evidence of these schools, except perhaps for a bill to Dawson’s estate, dated “October, 1754,” from Elizabeth Wyatt for “1.6” pounds for “the schooling [his] Negro girl Jinny for one year.”¹⁷⁰ (Plate 9)

Besides the stewards of the established church in Virginia, dissenters in the colony also baptized and instructed slaves. That was the case with Samuel Davies. A Presbyterian minister who had migrated to the Chesapeake in 1747 and assumed the pastorate of Hanover church the next year, Davies welcomed slaves into his growing congregations. By 1750, he claimed to have baptized forty slaves; five years later, that number had climbed to about three hundred Negroes.

For Davies, as was the case of a number of his Anglican peers, baptism for adult slaves came after instruction and instruction meant, at least for some of those enslaved

¹⁷⁰Rev. William Dawson to the Bishop of London, May 21, 1739 in “Unpublished Letter at Fullham” *WMQ* 4 (April 1901), 223; James Blair to the Bishop of London, May 28, 1743 in “Unpublished Letter at Fullham” *WMQ* 4 (April 1901), 225; William Dawson to William Newman, December 22, 1743, *Dawson Papers*, LC (microfilm).

Significantly, in the 1760s, Dawson became a trustee of the Williamsburg Bray school whose mission had been to teach slave children religion through letters. For a fuller account, see the next chapter.

451. The Rev. William Dawson's Estate (P)
 To City of Myrtle

To Schooling your Negro Child Jerry 1 Year. . . . \$ 1. 16.

Wm. Lough: I hereby certify that this
 account is just and true and that she hath received
 no satisfaction for the same this 30th Day of Oct.
 1754 before me
 Wm. Miller

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Plate 9: Notice from the Account of Rev. William Dawson's Estate. *Dawson Papers*, Library of Congress.

Virginians, a knowledge of letters. To realize that goal, he sought and successfully enlisted the assistance of the Society in London for Promoting Christian Knowledge among the Poor, a Bible society charged with bringing literacy and the gospels to the lower sort in British North America. Besides acknowledging their gifts of books, providing progress reports concerning his instruction of the colony's poor and enslaved, and thanking the various members of the Society for sending "*Spelling Books*, and Watt's two sets of Catechism, which most Negroes seemed to prefer," Davies' letters to his overseas friends show that the reverend stressed literacy instruction.¹⁷¹

Davies' work inspired others. One so inspired was the Reverend John Todd who succeeded Davies as the Presbyterian minister in Hanover and carried on his mission to the slaves. "I cannot point out the exact number," he wrote the Society in 1760, "but am well assured some hundreds of *Negroes*, besides *white* people, can read and spell. . . And with sacred hours of the *Sabbath*, with other leisure times, are improved in reading and. . . brought out of darkest into GOD's marvellous light."¹⁷² Colonel James Gordon was also inspired by Samuel Davies' work. After attending several of his sermons, the wealthy

¹⁷¹For a fuller account of Davies' missionary work among enslaved Virginians see George William Pilcher, "Samuel Davies and the Conversion of Negroes in Early Virginia" *VMHB* 74 (1966): 293-300 and Jeffrey H. Richards, "Samuel Davies and the Transatlantic Campaign for Slave Literacy in Virginia," 333-378.

¹⁷²Rev. John Wright, Cumberland Count, Virginia, to Mr. J. F., November 1759, in *Letters from the Rev. Samuel Davies, and Others; Shewing, The State of Religion in Virginia, South Carolina, &c. Particularly Among the Negroes* (London: J. and W. Oliver, 1761), 18-19. According to Davies' biographer, George William Pilcher, Wright was once a student of Davies before he eventually moved to Virginia. Pilcher, *Samuel Davies*, 106; Rev. Mr. Todd, Hanover County, Virginia, to Mr. B. F., August 7, 1760, in *Letters from the Rev. Samuel Davies, and Others*, 23-24.

Presbyterian merchant of Lancaster County encouraged literacy among his own slaves, a number to whom he noted in his diary he “Gave several books.”¹⁷³

* * *

In 1715, sometime in Spring or perhaps in the dead of Winter, eight years before Edmund Gibson dispatched his now famous questionnaire to Anglican parsons across British North America, a slave woman whose name has escaped the records gave birth to baby boy on a plantation in Virginia in New Kent County. His name was Peter. And in all likelihood the boy was named after the Apostle who had been the first to preach the good news to the gentiles.¹⁷⁴

As a name for a slave, Peter carries a double meaning. It connects the lowly bondsman to Christ’s closest discipline, suggesting, as the gospel says, that someday “the

¹⁷³James Gordon, “Journal of Col. James Gordon, of Lancaster County, Va” *WMQ*, 11 (October 1902), 108. Judging from his journal, Gordon was a typical Virginia gentlemen when it came to his property in men. Like most Virginians, he was god-fearing man. In one entry, he wrote: “Silla C. & Molly went to Church. I read a sermon to the negroes” (107). On other occasion, he mentioned that fact that a number of his slaves attended church. But, Gordon was also a typical Virginian in terms of how he managed his property. Indeed, as his journal demonstrates, he, like other slave owners of his day, worked, brought, and sold men like they were mules.

¹⁷⁴Assuming the register of St. Peter’s Parish provides a fair account of the birth dates of slaves owned by John Custis, the birth cycle for those who toiled on his New Kent County plantations can be determined. To judge from the register, 33 per cent of slave infants were born sometime between March and May and thirty per cent or 18 out of 61 were born during the fall months of the year. During the winter months, 8 out of 61 slave infants becoming member of Custis’ New Kent family. In sharp contrast, only thirteen per cent were born during the summer.

last will be the first.” But it also enjoins submission to the status quo. “Blessed are those servants” who remain dutiful subjects to their masters,” Christ told Peter. Virginia slaveholders, familiar with the New Testament, may well have considered the name appropriate for a slave, without reflecting on its ambiguities. Whatever the reason, the name was probably chosen in this case, as in most, by the master and not the actual parent of the child.¹⁷⁵

John Custis was Peter’s master—his fictive father. A lawyer and statesman, a planter and a member of the vestry of Bruton Parish church, Custis, like a number of other wealthy Virginians, owned slaves. As far as can be ascertained, he had been the master of about 200—if not more. Because Peter’s mother was more than likely a domestic herself, Custis elevated the boy by according him the privilege of serving as one of his house slaves.¹⁷⁶

When Peter came of age, Custis allowed Peter to receive literacy instruction, possibly under the direction of the local parson, William Brodie. It is also likely that Peter did not receive any instruction in the church at all. Instead, he was taught how to read at Custis’ plantation. It is possible that he had been taught by another literate slave, conceivably by his mother. Whatever the case, one thing is certain. While Peter’s name does not appear in the extant church registers, the Virginia-born slave nonetheless

¹⁷⁵Luke 12; For quote see Luke 12: 37. (King James Version).

¹⁷⁶John Custis to Jno Starch, June 25, 1728, in Josephine Zuppan, John Custis “Letterbook, 1724-1734,” 87; John Custis to Robt Cary, [1729], in Zuppan, “John Custis Letterbook,” 88-89; E.T. Crowson, *Life As Revealed Through Early American Court Records*, 150-152; Zuppan, “The John Custis Letterbook,” 34-35; and, Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 127, 140, 187, 323, 402

received a degree of education. Presumably, by means of his own design, he taught himself how to write.¹⁷⁷

By the 1730s and 40s, things had changed in Virginia. By the time Peter ran away, the slave population had become largely creole, altering the relationship between masters and slaves. But as the parsons' letters also show, sloth and avarice continued to conspire together and beget a "new Race of *Christians*" in Virginia, who like their forefathers were also consumed, though not fully, by the "spirit of Gentilism." In this conflict of interest, masters in the tobacco colony, perhaps as matter of conscience or possibly because they were persuaded by their slave subjects, began to honor their "Duty to God"—though modestly so.¹⁷⁸

Such was the case of John Custis. In Williamsburg, he permitted twenty-one of his slaves to receive the sacrament at the Bruton Parish church. At his plantation in New Kent County, 19 out of 61 or a full third of the slaves he owned there were also baptized. In addition to learning how to recite the Lord's Prayers, the Ten Commandment, and the Apostle's creed, some of them may have received literacy instruction.¹⁷⁹

For their part, enslaved Virginians did not sit idly by and wait upon their masters. Evidently, a number of them seized the moment, convincing their owners that they should

¹⁷⁷Between 1710 and 1720, William Brodie was the rector of St. Peter's Parish.

¹⁷⁸Godwyn, *The Negro's and Indians' Advocate*, 172.

¹⁷⁹*The Parish Register of Saint Peter's New Kent County, Virginia from 1680 to 1787*. Richmond: William Ellis Jones, 1904; John Vogt, *Register for the Bruton Parish, Virginia, 1662-1792*.

honor their responsibility as Christians. Through the education of some, others had achieved letters—probably far more than can be discerned. Fathers taught their sons and sons their fathers. Mothers taught their children and by their children some mothers were taught. Friends also shared with one another what literacy skills they had learned. In this fashion, throughout the Chesapeake, Afro-Virginians passed on what they learned from the big house to slave quarters, from workshops to the tobacco fields.

By whatever means they learned, some slaves apparently registered their growing knowledge in religion and presumably in letters in the names they chose for their children.¹⁸⁰ Before the 1730s and 40s, masters named slaves. To judge from over two thousand slave names that appeared in over one hundred probate inventories in Virginia, some masters preferred either work or geographic names like Boston or Cooper, Boatswain or London. Others chose classical names like Caesar, Bacchus, Cato, Jupiter, or Neptune. In her study of the Carter's Grove slave community, Lorena Walsh observed that such names were usually imposed on slaves who in many instances were new African

¹⁸⁰Although Gutman, Thornton, Cody, Handler, Jacoby, Joyer, Wood, Morgan, and others had extensively explored slave naming patterns as a form of agency, relatively little of that body of scholarship has addressed names as a possibly sign of slaver literacy. For fuller account, see Gutman, *The Black Family*, 185-229; Cheryll Ann Cody, "There Was No 'Absalom' on the Ball Plantation: Slave-Naming Practices in the South Carolina Low Country, 1720-1865" *AHR* 92 (June 1987): 563-596; Thornton, "Central African Names and African-American Naming Patterns," 727-742; Jerome S. Handler and JoAnn Jacoby, "Slaves Names and Naming in Barbados, 1650-1830" *WMQ* (October 1996): 685-728; Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina From 1670 Through the Stone Rebellion* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), 182-183; and Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana, 1984), 218-219; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 451-455.

arrivals.¹⁸¹

Overwhelmingly, most slave-holders preferred English names for their bond-people. Judging from the probate records, nearly half of the slaves bore western or old English names. But in many cases slaves were not granted the dignity of proper English names. They were called by diminutives—Su for Susannah, Betty for Elizabeth. Even biblical names were shortened. Samuel became “Sam,” David “Davy,” James “Jimmy” or “Jemmy.” Significantly, well over one-half of the slaves with English names were diminutives. In addition to underscoring a certain degree of acculturation and patriarchalism, these diminutive names represented another way masters asserted power over slaves. (Table 26)

But over the course of the eighteenth-century, these naming practices changed as slaves assumed the right to name. Between the 1730s, when the colony began to grow as a result of creolization and natural increase, and the 1770s, when the colony found itself caught in the throes of two revolutions, the Great Awakening and the American Revolution, English diminutives increased while biblical diminutives diminished in frequency. Tim, Joe, Sall, Abram, or Davie were replaced by their unabridged referents Timothy, Joseph, Saul, Abraham, and David.

Most intriguing are the biblical names slaves appear to have adopted for themselves. By the 1730s, as Philip D. Morgan and Alan Kulikoff explained in their studies of the Chesapeake, enslaved Virginians gain increasing control over the names of

¹⁸¹Lorena S. Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove*, 159-160.

Table 26 Slave Naming Patterns.

Periods	No.	African	Classic	Work or Geographic	English or Western	Bible	n/a
1710s	26	0	1	1	1 (56.69)	15 (15.38)	5
1720s	58	1	2	1	26 (44.82)	21 (36.20)	7
1730	26	3	2	7	11 (42.30)	3 (11.53)	0
1740s	234	13	13	13	110 (47)	70 (29.91)	15
1750	536	36	12	39	244 (45.52)	192 (35.82)	13
1760s	575	44	25	54	264 (45.90)	179 (31.13)	9
1770s	557	32	24	27	291 (52.24)	176 (31.59)	9

Sources:

Gunston Hall Plantation: Virginia and Maryland Probate Inventories, 1740-1810. Database. www.gunstonhall.org

York County Probate Inventories. www.pastportal.com

their children.¹⁸² In the first half of the eighteenth-century, when masters were likely in control, well over half the slaves in Virginia were named for figures in the New Testament. During the second half of the eighteenth-century, those figures changed. Increasingly, slaves bore names taken from the Old Testament—and did so in full.¹⁸³ (Table 27)

Evidently, enslaved Virginians identified with figures in the Old Testament. In addition to the Exodus story of Moses, Aaron, and the Israelites, Afro-Virginians seemed fond of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.¹⁸⁴ The story of Abraham mentions his wife, Sarah, their son, Isaac, and Sarah's Egyptian servant, Hagar, all of which were names slaves adopted. The story of Jacob, his marriages to Leah and Rachel, the birth of his daughter, Dinah, and his twelve sons, in particular, Joseph and Benjamin, were also popular among enslaved Virginians. The same was also true of the biblical stories of Noah and the Ark, David's struggle with Goliath, Daniel's trial in the Lion's pit, Saul's anointing as Israel's first king, Solomon's temple, Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden, and many others. (Table 28)

Despite their masters' indifference, enslaved Virginians learned. While some were

¹⁸²Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 546-547; 549-551; Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 325-326.

¹⁸³Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 451-455; 549-558; Kulioff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 325-326; Parent, *Foul Means*, 226-228; and Walsh, *From Old Calabar to Carter's Grove*, 134-170.

¹⁸⁴Afro-Virginians fondness for the names of patriarchs of the Old Testament may also speak to the influence of Islam in early African and African American culture. For a useful account of the Islamic influence in African American culture, see Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims in the Americas*. (New York: New York UP, 1998), 4-48 and Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 59-87.

Table 27 Diminutive Slave Naming Patterns.

Periods	# of English Names	# of English Diminutive	# of Bible Names	# of Bible Diminutive
1710s	16	10 (62.5)	4	2 (50)
1720s	26	11 (42.30)	21	13 (61.9)
1730s	11	6 (54.54)	3	0 (0)
1740s	110	65 (59.09)	70	38 (54.28)
1750s	244	170 (69.67)	192	97 (50.52)
1760s	264	183 (69.31)	179	82 (45.81)
1770s	291	215 (73.88)	176	80 (45.45)

Sources:

Gunston Hall Plantation: Virginia and Maryland Probate Inventories, 1740-1810. Database. www.gunstonhall.org

York County Probate Inventories. www.pastportal.com

Table 28 Characteristics of Slave Bible Names (Measured in Percentages)

Periods	Old Testament	New Testament
1710s	25%	75%
1720s	38.10	61.90
1730s	66.67	33.33
1740s	55.75	44.25
1750s	66.67	33.33
1760s	58.25	41.75
1770s	63.07	36.93

Sources:

Gunston Hall Plantation: Virginia and Maryland Probate Inventories, 1740-1810. Database. www.gunstonhall.org

York County Probate Inventories. www.pastportal.com

reluctantly instructed by their masters at home, others were sent to church. Between 1760 and 1775, others began attending a series of Negro schools in the colony established by the Associates of late Reverend, Doctor Thomas Bray. There, some learned how to read. Others learned how to write. That story is subject for the chapter that follows.

CHAPTER THREE
THE PROTESTANT BOOK ETHIC: SLAVE LITERACY
BEFORE THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

By 1760, when the first Negro school sponsored by the Associates of Dr. Thomas Bray opened its door in Virginia, Peter [Custis] was forty-five years-old and probably long gone from Williamsburg. Had he remained close to home, one can only imagine what he would have made of how the colony had changed. Well before he stole away, the Virginia he knew was already looking different. In his native New Kent County, new fields of brown and gold began to replace the old fields of green. As tobacco depleted the soil, most planters had little choice but to cultivate other kinds of crops. Starting in the 1730s and 40s, agriculture in the Chesapeake began to shift, focusing less on tobacco and more on growing wheat and corn.¹⁸⁵

But the land was not the only thing that had changed. Before he left, so too were the relationships between masters and slaves. As the slave population in Virginia became even more creole, slave-holders' attitudes toward their bond-servants shifted. Before, masters had imagined themselves as contemporaries of the patriarchs of the Bible. "Next to children and brethren by blood," as William Bryd II explained it, "our servants, and

¹⁸⁵Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 146-203; Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 78-164.

especially our slaves, are certainly in the nearest relation to us.”¹⁸⁶ All powerful father figures, Bryd and other slave-holders administered justice and demanded obedience. In exchange, they offered protection and provided sustenance. In this manner, order was safeguarded. Social harmony was maintained. But, by the 1740s, as Morgan and Parent’s recent studies of slavery in the Chesapeake have demonstrated, that patriarchal ethos began to give way to “a more enlightened [form] of patriarchalism.” By the second half of the eighteenth century, the cultural landscape changed with the emergence of “a more affectionate family, the rise of evangelicalism, romanticism, [and] humanitarianism.” Adopting these ideas, slave-holders, who continued to stress order, “seemed much more respectful of slave family ties than their predecessors. Gangs were often sold ‘in families’ rather than individually, and many a prospective purchaser stated a preference for family units.”¹⁸⁷

Slave-holders’ changing sensibilities were also evident in advertisements they placed in *Virginia Gazette* for runaways. At mid-century, William Newgent’s Harry ran away. As his master told it, the “Negroe Man” ran “without any Cause.” Along similar lines, James Mercer claimed that his “Man CHRISTMAS,” a “lusty, well made, genteel Fellow” had been “too much indulged” which in his judgment explained why he stole away.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶William Bryd II to the Earl of Orrey, July 5, 1726, *VMHB* 32 (1924): 24.

¹⁸⁷Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 284-296; Parent, *Foul Means*, 197-264. For quotes, see Morgan, 284 & 286.

¹⁸⁸*VG* (Parks), March 20 to March 27, 1746; *VG* (Purdie & Dixon), March 19, 1772.

Perhaps no one exemplified this new group of slave-holders in the Chesapeake better than Thomas Jefferson. Like other masters of his day, Jefferson encouraged his black bond-servants to form families, whom he considered as members of his own extended household. In her account of the sage of Monticello and of his slaves, Lucia Stanton noted that Jefferson spoke fondly about his slaves, all of whom he viewed as his “children” who labored willingly for his “happiness.”¹⁸⁹ In Jefferson’s mind, his slaves fared far better than those of classical antiquity. “We know that among the Romans, about the Augustan age especially,” he explained in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, “the condition of their slaves was much more deplorable than that of the blacks in the continent of America.” “The American slave cannot enumerate,” Jefferson went on, “the injuries and insults” of his Roman peer. Far from it, slavery, the founding father reasoned, served to enlighten the Negro who was the inferior of his white master, as it “availed. . . [them] of the conversations of their masters” and brought them up “to the handicrafts arts” and in the “sciences.”

There were limits to such improvement. Like other slave-holders, Jefferson relied on his slaves and their labor for his earthly comfort. While giving privileges to some of his people, the master of Monticello never lost sight of the “spirit of gentilism” that informed his father and others who also owned slaves. Slavery, after all, was the cornerstone of his wealth and power. Not surprisingly, on the very same grounds of compassion that inspired his respect for slave families, Jefferson insisted it would be cruel to free the slaves. “To

¹⁸⁹Lucia Stanton, “‘Those Who Labor for My Happiness’: Thomas Jefferson and His Slaves,” in *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter Onuf (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1993), 147.

give liberty to, or rather, to abandon persons whose habits have been formed in slavery is like abandoning children.”¹⁹⁰

The complexity of master-slave relationships is also apparent in the history of the Bray schools in the Chesapeake. Despite their reservations, some slave-holders sent their people to school probably for reasons of conscience and faith. Others had their slaves instructed for self-serving reasons. Like Thomas Jefferson, some masters evidently needed literate slaves capable of performing specialized tasks. A number of slave-holders, as will be shown, were also persuaded by pleas from slave mothers or fathers who insisted upon better treatment for their sons or daughters. Whatever the reason, the acquisition of literacy by slaves was never easy, and in the 1760s, as earlier, many slave-holders remained suspicious of those who sought to instruct blacks in reading and writing and of slaves who were literate. What follows in this chapter is an account of the Associates’ work in the Chesapeake through which slaves realized another way to achieve literacy.

* * *

Founded in 1724, the Associates of Dr. Bray used religion to ameliorate the plight of African Americans in the New World. In keeping with the Apostle Timothy’s

¹⁹⁰Jefferson, *Notes*, 178-179; 177; Stanton, 147. For a fuller account of Jefferson’s realization of slavery, see Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), chap., 18, esp. 375-377 & 383-385. Also, for a useful account of slavery in ancient Greece and Rome, see David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984), 8-31.

injunction, to “give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine” until Christ returned, they established a series of charity schools that provided Christian instruction to slaves and free blacks through letters.¹⁹¹ Like the Society for the Promoting Christian Knowledge and the Society for Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, philanthropic Bible societies also started by Thomas Bray, reading represented a central aspect of their commission to minister to those who resided on the margins of Anglo-American society. From their extant correspondence with overseas agents emerges an account of the Bray schools in the colonial Chesapeake.¹⁹²

The idea for a Bray school in Williamsburg came from Philadelphia’s most celebrated adopted son. In winter 1757, John Waring, an English minister, sought out Benjamin Franklin’s advice. Waring was serving as trustee of the late Henry Wheatley’s estate, and he inquired whether any of the beneficiaries were alive and living in Philadelphia. But the Anglican minister had a second purpose in mind, involving many more people. He was serving as Secretary of the Associates of the Late Dr. Thomas Bray, whose “Attention as a Society are the [Instruct]ion and Conversion of the Negroes in the Plantations to Christianity & founding parochial Libraries for the Use of the Clergy in

¹⁹¹1 Tim 4:13 (King James Version).

¹⁹²My account of the Bray schools in Virginia is deeply indebted to John C Van Horne’s *Religious Philanthropy and Colonial Slavery*, a compilation of the Associates’ papers. To a lesser extent, my account is also indebted to Thad Tate and Jennifer Oast’s accounts of the Associates’ work in Virginia. Thad Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg*, 76-85; Jennifer Oast, “Education Eighteenth-Century Black Children: The Bray Schools.”

England & America.” The Associates hoped to follow the successful example of the Rev. Griffith Jones, who a few years earlier had dispatched “itinerant Schoolmasters” throughout Wales to teach “persons of all Ages to read” and provided instruction in “religious knowledge.” Would a similar scheme work with “black Children” in the colonies?

Like previous proponents of educating slaves in “the Principles of Christian Morality,” notably, Morgan Godwyn and the Bishop of London, Edmund Gibson, Waring saw no point in teaching Negroes imported from Africa. They are “Strangers to our Language,” he observed, “Little Good I fear can be done with them.” Not so for the growing population of creoles. “Might Not the black Children born. . . be taught to read & [be] instructed?” Such a scheme would “have a very good effect upon their [morals?] & make them faithful & honest in their Masters Service.”¹⁹³

Franklin concurred. But before he agreed, he consulted the “Commissary & other Clergy in the Neighbourhood.” At the time, Reverend Robert Jenney, the rector of Christ Church, served as the Commissary of the Bishop of London in Pennsylvania. He also conferred with William Sturgeon, a minister and schoolmaster, who was perhaps the ablest of the group considering the Associates’ plan. Since 1746, Sturgeon had worked in Philadelphia as a Society for the Propagation of the Gospel “Catechist to the Negroes in [the] city.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³Rev. John Waring to Benjamin Franklin, 24 January 1757 in John C. Van Horne, ed., *Religious Philanthropy and Colonial Slavery*, 122

¹⁹⁴Ibid.; Rev. William Sturgeon to Benjamin Franklin, 22 August 1757, in Ibid, 125; William Sturgeon to Rev. John Waring, 1 July 1762, in Ibid., 174-175.

That following January, Franklin wrote back. After contemplating the Associates' proposal, the post-master thought it "fit to make of a Tryal of a School for Negro Children in Philadelphia." In that endeavor, he judged Sturgeon the best "Person under whose Care it would be more likely to succeed." A diligent and discreet man, the S.P.G. Catechist had "the general Respect & Good-will of the People" of Philadelphia.

But Franklin held some reservations about the plan. Both a slaveholder and an advocate of the S.P.G.'s efforts to instruct enslaved African Americans in religion and letters, the post-master knew that everyone did not share his moderate views of the institution of slavery.¹⁹⁵ Always one to proceed with caution, the celebrated author of *Poor Richard's Almanac* had concerns about how the school would be received in a town where most Gentlemen owned at least one black slave. "At present," he went on to explain, "few or none give their Negro Children any Schooling, partly from a Prejudice that Reading & Knowledge in a Slave are both useless and dangerous; and partly from an Unwillingness. . . to have their Children mix'd with Slaves in Education." To judge from Gary B. Nash's study of slavery in colonial Pennsylvania, the post-master gave the Associates an accurate report. Starting in the late 1750s, slave-holding in the colony was expanding rapidly. By the late 1760s, slaves numbered about 1,400, roughly a twelfth of the city's population of 16,000.¹⁹⁶ In view of the city's growing black population, Franklin offered the Associates a counter proposal. "A separate School for Blacks," he advised,

¹⁹⁵David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 34-35.

¹⁹⁶Nash, "Slaves and Slave Owners in Colonial Pennsylvania" *WMQ* 30 (1973): 223-256, esp. 237.

“under the Care of One, of whom People should have an Opinion that he would be careful to imbue the Minds of their young Slaves with good Principles, might probably have a Number of Blacks sent to it; and if on Experience it should be found useful, and not attended with the ill Consequences apprehended” would be “followed in the other Colonies, and [be] encouraged by the Inhabitants in general.”¹⁹⁷

By February, Franklin expanded his earlier proposition. After consulting further with Sturgeon and probably with the rector and the vestrymen of Christ Church, he wrote the Associates a second time. “I am of Opinion,” as that correspondence explained, “that for 30£ a Year, Sterling, a good Master might be procur’d that would teach 40 Negro Children to read; I think he could scarce do this Duty to a greater Number without an Assistant.” Franklin also suggested that in addition to “Reading” and Christianity, the Negro pupils should be taught “some useful Things.” A Mistress, he went on, “might be best to begin with, who could teach both Boys & Girls to read, & the Girls to knit, sew & mark.” A good one, he noted, “might be had, I believe, for about 20£ Sterling, that would well instruct in this Way about 30 Scholars.” Once the school had proven itself useful, “most of the Owners of the Negro Children” would in time supplement part of the school’s expense.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷Benjamin Franklin to Rev. John Waring, January 3, 1758, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 124.

¹⁹⁸Benjamin Franklin to Rev. John Waring, February 17, 1758, in *Ibid.*, 125-126. Significantly, considering that most embroidery lessons may have included the use of samplers, it stands to reason that some slave girls who attended the Bray schools probably acquired rudimentary skills in forming letters in addition to learning how to read. Such is certainly the view of E. Jennifer Monaghan who reached a similar conclusion in her analysis of the Bray school in Philadelphia. By her account, “embroidering a sampler was

The Associates approved Franklin's plan "to make a Trial of a School [but] for three Years." To that end, they wrote the postmaster back, requesting of the Philadelphian a recommendation of "a proper Master or Mistress." By that March, their plan to start a Negro school in Philadelphia was on foot.¹⁹⁹

Several months later, on November 20, 1758, the Bray Charity Negro School in Philadelphia opened its door to thirty-six scholars. William Sturgeon served as the school's trustee. Following Franklin's suggestion, a school mistress was hired at a starting salary of twenty pounds sterling a year. Her commission was made plain. As the mistress of the school, she was charged to teach "the Boys to read, the Girls to read, sow, knit, and mark; and to attend at Church with them every Wednesday and Friday; and that all her Endeavours are to be directed towards making them Christians." Religious instruction was central to her duties: the Negro children were to learn to "say the Creed and the Lords Prayer, and other Parts of our Catechism." So began the Bray school in Pennsylvania.²⁰⁰

No fewer than two years passed before the school proved itself a success. That was the view of Franklin's wife Deborah. In August of 1759, after hearing the "Negro Children catechised at Church," she enrolled their slave Othello into the school. The Associates were also impressed with the school's progress, so much so they elected

clearly the apex of the sewing curriculum" Monaghan, *Reading and Writing in Colonial America*, 260.

¹⁹⁹Benjamin Franklin to Rev. John Waring, January 3, 1758, in *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁰⁰Rev. William Sturgeon to Rev. John Waring, November 9, 1758, in *Ibid.*, 135; Rev. William Sturgeon to Rev. John Waring, June 12, 1759, in *Ibid.*, 136. Incidentally, as embroidering is a form of penmanship, it seems likely that some of the girl slave scholars learned how to write and read.

Franklin a member and sought the post-master's counsel in their efforts to establish other charity schools in the colonies.²⁰¹

Franklin welcomed the appointment. Sometime in the middle of January, he wrote back. Possibly reflecting his close network of friends in the printing business, Franklin judged "New York, Williamsburgh in Virginia, & Newport in Rhode Island" the "Most proper Places in the British Plantations for Schools for the Instruction of Negro Children." In Virginia, he recommended William Hunter Esq., a friend, postmaster, and his business partner and "Rev. Dr. Dawson," the President of William & Mary College "& the Minister of the Church at Williamsburgh" as suitable candidates for the position of the school's trustees.²⁰²

Not surprisingly, the Associates agreed. Trusting in Franklin's counsel, they presumed a favorable response and sent the Williamsburg trustees a parcel of books for the "Use of the School." Among those titles were five copies of Reverend Thomas Bacon's *Four Sermons, upon the Great and Indispensable Duty of All Christian Masters to Bring Up Their Negro Slaves in the Knowledge and Fear of God* (1750), as well as five copies of his *Two Sermons, Preached to a Congregation of Black Slaves* (1749). The box also included fifty copies of "Childs first Book," an ABC primer, forty copies of Henry Dixon's *The English Instructor* (1728), an eighteenth-century spelling book, and twenty copies of the *Book of Common Prayer* which contained the Church of England's

²⁰¹[Deborah Franklin to Benjamin], 9 August 1759, in *Ibid.*, 137; Rev. John Waring to Benjamin Franklin, 4 January 1760, in *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁰²Associates of the Late Dr. Bray, Minutes, 17 January 1760, in *Ibid.*, 144.

catechism.²⁰³

As expected, Hunter and Dawson accepted the Associates' plan. Rector of Bruton Parish, Dawson probably used the interval before worship services began to encourage masters to enroll slaves, "Some of Each Sex," in the school.²⁰⁴ The colony's post-master, William Hunter, may have also used his position to recruit others into the scheme. To secure the services of a school mistress, the trustees circulated notices. To judge from the extant record, there were "many Applications" made for the job. Of those who had sought the position, only two appeared in the letters that have survived. The first was a Scottish woman by the name of Mrs. Thompson and the second Anne Wager, who was hired for the post. Of the former candidate, little is known. Although she failed to get the job, Mrs. Thompson later served as the Governess for the Reverend John Blair, Jr. and for the Page family. Of Ann Wager, a good deal more is known largely because of her work as the Bray school teacher.²⁰⁵

Anne Wager was the widow of William Wager of James City County, who had died in 1748, leaving her with two young children to support. She had been earning her living as a private tutor for well-to-do Virginia families for more than a decade when the position at the Bray school opened up. Among her qualifications were two years' experience as the tutor for the children of the grandee Carter Burwell at his mansion-

²⁰³Ibid., 146; Monaghan, *Reading and Writing in Colonial America* (Worcester, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 259.

²⁰⁴Rev. John Waring to Rev. Thomas Dawson, February 29, 1760, in Ibid., 144-145.

²⁰⁵William Hunter to Rev. Thomas Dawson, [July 1760], in Ibid., 148.

estate, Carter's Grove. Well-connected to leading Virginians, Wager was a strong candidate for the post. The trustees appointed her mistress of the Williamsburg school in 1760, and she stayed on for fourteen years until her death in 1774.²⁰⁶

Having employed Mrs. Wager's services as the school's mistress, Hunter and Dawson turned their attention to procuring a building to hold classes. Securing a space was no small matter. Supplying the new school with books and paying for the schoolmistress' salary covered the Associates' end of the enterprise. Without an endowment to build a school, as was the case of the Boyle legacy that underwrote the building of the Brafferton School for Native Americans, the two Williamsburg trustees thought it wise to find a place to rent in town. Judging from the extant accounts of the school's expenses, classes were held in several different locations. For the first five years, they were held in at least three different buildings owned by Colonel Dudley Diggs, a York County Burgess and later a member of the Virginia Conventions, the Committee of Safety, and the State Council. One of those buildings had been a house Diggs owned on the northeast corner of Henry and Ireland Street on the outskirts of the town. It was likely a modest place, a wooden structure with a brick hearth and foundation. In the years that followed, the classes for the Bray school were held in at least two different houses owned by John Blair, Jr., another Virginia Burgess and the Deputy Auditor General.²⁰⁷ (Plate 10)

²⁰⁶“Anne Wage: Biography” in *Freeing Religion: Resource Book* (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1998), 402-403; William Hunter to John Waring, February 16, 1761, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 153.

²⁰⁷The Associates of the late Revd. Doctor Bray in Acct. with Ro. C. Nicholas for the Negro School in Williamsburg, [27 December 1766], in *Ibid.*, 253-254 & The Associates of Dr. Bray, [Account], [17 November 1774], in *Ibid.*, 325; Mary A.

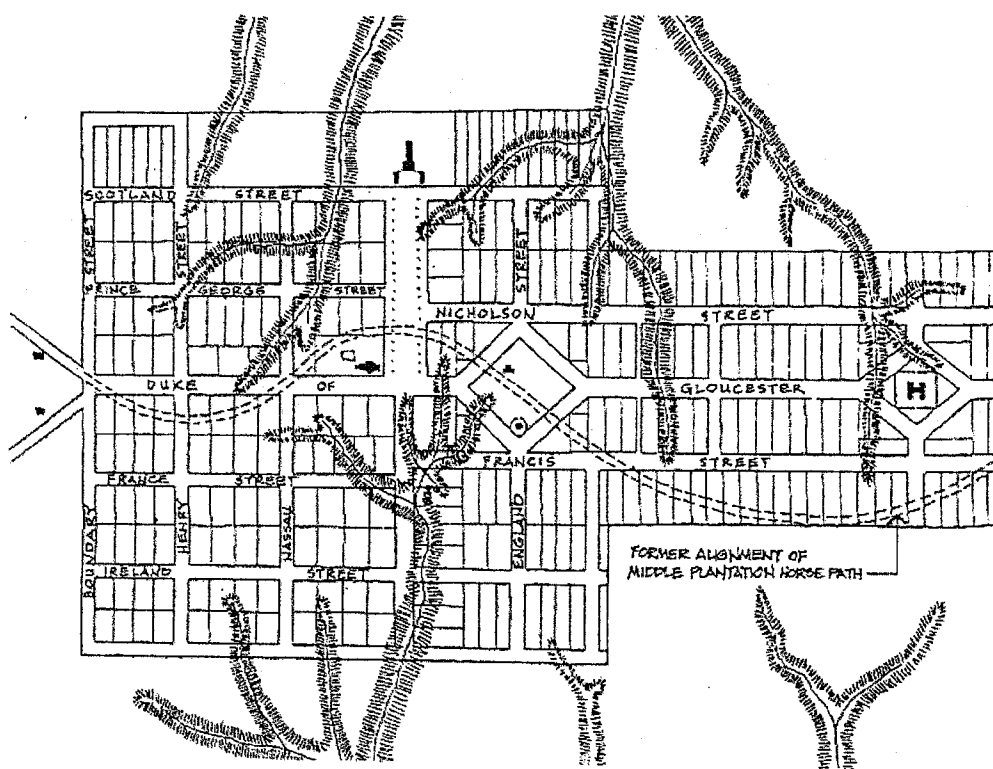


Plate 10: Conjectural Plan of Williamsburg (1699). From John Rep's *Tidewater Towns: City Planning in Colonial Virginia and Maryland* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1972), 169.

Finding a place was the least of the new school's problems. From the beginning, the trustees had a difficult time realizing the Associates' pious commission. Though they agreed to provide the students with books and other reading materials, Wager judged her stipend insufficient. While it is likely that local racial prejudice stigmatizing the instruction of Negroes may have been a factor, there may have been other reasons the schoolmistress felt her stipend was not enough. Indeed, except for the colony's few parish schools, provisions for education were negligible in the Chesapeake.²⁰⁸ Those who could afford it, employed the services of a tutor for their children. Before reaching their majority, most sons of well-to-do families were sent off to England for additional instruction. Before taking the position as the Bray school's mistress, Wager had received £10 annually for schooling only a few children in such genteel settings. Conceivably, she may have thought her charge to instruct thirty children was less than reasonable and asked for more money. The trustees agreed. Judging the "Allowance of £20 Sterling... not Sufficient," they "gave the Mistress... the whole Sum as a Salary." In contrast, in Philadelphia and New York £20 sterling proved an acceptable sum for the rent and the schoolmistress's salary.²⁰⁹

Stephenson, *Notes on the Negro School in Williamsburg* (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1963), 4.

²⁰⁸Lyon G. Tyler, "Education in Colonial Virginia" *WMQ* (April 1897): 219-223; Guy Fred Wells, *Parish Education in Colonial Virginia* (New York: Columbia University, 1923), 70-89; Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 70-84; and, Barbara Lynn Doggett, "Parish Apprenticeship in Colonial: A Study of Northumberland County, 1680-1695 and 1750-1765" MA thesis, College of William and Mary, 1981.

²⁰⁹William Hunter to Rev. John Waring, February 16, 1761, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 153; Richter, *Freeing Religion: Resource Book*, 402-403.

Incidentally, to judge from Franklin's initial correspondence with the Associates, a schoolmaster would generally receive 10£ more than a mistress. In this context, Wager's

To make up their loses, Dawson proposed “to raise Ten Pound Sterling by Subscription for the Payment of the House Rent.” Unfortunately, the reverend’s scheme was to little avail. Dawson died on November 29, 1760, and it does not appear that he had a chance to post a notice in the newspaper to enlist potential subscribers. With his passing went any plans for raising the funds to pay the rent for the school. For his part, Hunter considered Dawson’s method of raising the additional money “petty” and “trifling.” Rather than encourage support through a public notice, Hunter recommended that the allowance for the school be increased to thirty pounds sterling. In the wake of Dawson’s passing, Hunter nominated Robert Carter Nicholas, the grandson of Robert “King” Carter, as the school’s new trustee.²¹⁰

Not surprisingly, the Associates elected Nicholas a trustee. But as to Hunter’s proposal of raising Wager’s pay to £30, the Associates were doubtful. In Philadelphia and New York, they noted, the master of the Bray school received “no more than 20£ Sterling per Ann. for 30 Children.” Not “competent Judges what Salaries may be Sufficient for a Mistress,” they wondered why that pay was not sufficient in Williamsburg. But instead of pursuing the matter, which may have brought an end to their work in Virginia “in its Infancy,” they deferred to the “Prudence” and “Discretion” of the Williamsburg managers and raised the allowance—but in the hope that sometime soon the Virginians would

demand for an increase in pay represents an instance of a woman insisting on equal pay for equal work and achieving it. In effect, she received a salary that was equal to that of her male counterparts in New York and Philadelphia.

²¹⁰William Hunter to Rev. John Waring, February 16, 1761 in *Ibid.*, 153.

voluntarily contribute the extra £10.²¹¹

For their concession, the Associates expected one in return. Increase the “Number of Scholars,” Waring asked Hunter, “to 30 agreeable to their first proposal, & to the Number instructed in their other Schools.” In addition to pressing the reluctant Williamsburg trustee, Waring sent him another parcel of books. Unfortunately, before the post-master could comply, he died, leaving to Robert Carter Nicholas the matter of improving the school.²¹²

The son of two wealthy and well-respected families in Virginia, Nicholas was a graduate of the College of William & Mary, a respected Burgess, a prominent lawyer in his native Williamsburg, and a devout Anglican. Clearly, a man of considerable influence, Nicholas was also an ideal choice for trustee.²¹³ Like Franklin, he had serious misgivings about the whole enterprise. Negroes, he suspected, were incapable of learning. Nonetheless, he was willing to set aside such doubts. The Bray school promised to “promote Christianity,” and as a devout Anglican, he was prepared to advance that goal. Still, his expectations were modest. Nicholas had “no very sanguine Expectations of the

²¹¹Rev. John Waring to William Hunter, 1 June 1761, in *Ibid.*, 157-158 & Rev. John Waring to Robert Carter Nicholas, 1 June 1761, in *Ibid.*, 159.

²¹²Re. John Waring to William Hunter, 1 June 1761, in *Ibid.*, 157-158 & Rev. John Waring to Robert Carter Nicholas, 1 June 1761, in *Ibid.*, 159. Significantly, besides recommending Nicholas as a trustee, Hunter also named the Reverend William Yates as a prospective trustee for the school. Yates succeeded Dawson as both rector the Bruton Parish and the President of the College of William and Mary.

²¹³Rev. John Waring to Robert Carter Nicholas, 1 June 1761, in *Ibid.*, 159.

School's answering the Design of the pious Founder."²¹⁴

Understandably, the Associates received Nicholas's letter with some doubts of their own. In April 1762, they tried to convince the new school trustee that there was no real cause for apprehension. "You say You have no very sanguine Expectations that the School will not answer our Design; I hope good Sir, that in a Little time You will find Reason to alter your Opinion. We have a School at Philadelphia & another at New York, in both which the Success hath exceeded our most Sanguine Expectations." If you "will be so good as to visit the School once a week," Waring advised Nicholas, "You will find that it will produce very good Effect as to the Care of the Mistress & the Improvement of the Scholars. But this I ought to retract, because I am perswaded it is what You have already done."²¹⁵

A few months later, Nicholas seemed ever doubtful. "I must own to you that I am afraid the School will not answer the sanguine Expectations its pious Founders may have form'd," he told Waring that June, "but we will endeavour to give it a fair Trial." To judge from the letters, despite his own apprehensiveness about overseeing a school that taught slaves to read, the Williamsburg grandee did nonetheless make a fair trial of his efforts to serve as a trustee. By June 1762, he "had the Number of Children augmented to thirty as [they] desired."²¹⁶

²¹⁴Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 17th September 1761, in *Ibid.*, 164.

²¹⁵Rev. John Waring to Robert Carter Nicholas, 4 April 1762, in *Ibid.*, 171.

²¹⁶Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 23d. June 1762, in *Ibid.*, 174.

That September, Nicholas' opinion about school changed. Evidently, while Waring had been somewhat judicious in his last correspondence with the Williamsburg trustee to recommend a visit, it appears that the Secretary may have been right not to "retract" his suggestion. Sometime before the end of the month, Nicholas had the occasion to visit the school. In all likelihood, he took Waring's advise and probably visited several times. Whatever the case, the visit(s) succeeded in changing the indifferent trustee's initial impressions. "We [Reverend William Yates (the other the school's trustees) and myself] can only say in general," Nicholas wrote Waring that Spring, "that at a late Visitation of the School we were pretty much pleased with the Scholars' Performances, as they rather exceeded our Expectations. The Children, we believe, have all been regularly baptized; indeed we think it is a pretty general Practice all over Virginia for Negro Parents to have their Children christened, where they live tolerably convenient to the Church or Minister."²¹⁷

Still, despite that revelation, Nicholas remained reserved as to the prospects for the school's success. So Benjamin Franklin concluded after meeting with Nicholas on a visit to Williamsburg in June 1763, where he was to settle his accounts with the executors of William Hunter's estate. "He [Nicholas] appears a very sensible & a very conscientious Man," Franklin reported to his overseas Associates, "and will do his best in the Affair, but is sometimes a little diffident as to the final Success; in making sincere good Christians of

²¹⁷Rev. William Yates and Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 30 September 1762, in *Ibid.*, 184.

the Scholars.”²¹⁸

Nicholas’s doubts were not without some justification. Many slave-holders, as he told it, sent their people for reasons that had nothing to with the pious designs of the Society’s founder. “We fear that People who have sent or would send their little Negroes to School,” he told Waring, “would not do it upon the Principles which they ought.” Instead, some used the school as a convenient nursery, enrolling their slave children “to keep them out of mischief.” Other masters took their slaves “Home again so soon as they began to read” and before they were “made acquainted with the Principles of Christianity.” Such self-serving actions, Nicholas believed, defeated the very purpose of their instruction.²¹⁹

To remedy the situation, the Williamsburg trustee thought “a Set of Rules” were in order “for the better Government of the Scholars & to render it more truly beneficial.” So that the Bray scholars would receive the “benefit” of attending the school, Nicholas proposed that “Every Owner, before a Negro Child is admitted into the school, must consent that such Child shall continue there for the Space of three Years at least.” He also insisted that the children appear at school “properly cloathed & kept in a cleanly Manner,” as befitted the serious purpose of the institution. Possibly anticipating some slave-holders’ objections, he proposed an inexpensive “one uniform” garment “by which they might be distinguished.” “A decent Appearance of the Scholars,” the grandee explained, “especial

²¹⁸Benjamin Franklin to Rev. John Waring, June 27, 1763, in *Ibid.*, 198-199.

²¹⁹Rev. William Yates and Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 30th. September 1762, in *Ibid.*, 184-186.

when they go to Church” will “very likely to make a favourable Impression.”²²⁰

Nicholas also proposed a number of “Rules” for the school’s mistress. Wager was to admit no scholars “but what are approved of by the Trustees.” In addition, she must keep regular hours, opening the school at “seven O Clock in the Winter half Year & at six in the Summer half Year in the Morning.” In keeping with the goals of the Associates, “she shall make it her principal Care to teach them to read the Bible, to instruct them in the Principles of the Christian Religion according to the Doctrine of the Church of England, shall explain the Church Catechism to them by some good Exposition, which, together with the Catechism, they shall publicly repeat in Church.” Significantly, the lessons went beyond learning to foreswear lying, cursing, swearing, stealing, and profaning the Sabbath. Wager should also teach the slave scholars to submit and to be “faithful & obedient to their Masters, to be diligent in their Business, & quiet & peaceable to all Men.” On Sundays, she was to conduct “them from her School House, where they are all to be first assembled, in a decent & orderly Manner to Church. . . where she shall take Care that the Scholars, so soon as they are able to use them, do carry their Bibles & Prayer Books to Church with them.”²²¹

The Associates in London approved. “It gives Us uncommon pleasure to find ourselves,” they wrote Nicholas back, “assisted by Gentlemen who seem animate with a truly christian zeal. . . The Best & indeed only Return We can make to You is to offer up

²²⁰[William Yates and Robert Carter Nicholas], Regulations, in *Ibid.*, 189-190.

²²¹*Ibid.*, 190-191.

our Prayers to our heavenly Father.”²²² Nicholas received this praise warmly and reciprocated with one of his own. “It gives me great Pleasure,” he observed, “to find that my former Letter had met with so thorough an Approbation.” Still, the Williamsburg’s steward tempered his pleasure with characteristic caution. “However I must endeavour to enforce them [the regulations] by Degrees; I assure you, Sir, however strange it may appear, ‘tis a very difficult Business I engage in.”²²³

As for the school, Nicholas had little to add. Except for a change of a few students, the school had continued as before. The classes in Williamsburg were full; the students attended regularly. Save for a small group of slaves, most finished their lessons after three years. Those who completed the school attended church and did so regularly. At divine service at the Bruton Parish church, several of the Bray scholars showed up with their own Bibles and hymn books or Books of Common Prayer.²²⁴

That December following, Nicholas sent the Associates a list of the students who were enrolled. To judge from that roster, nineteen of the scholars were boys and fourteen were girls. That following December, he sent them an account of the school’s expenses. To judge from that postscript, the structure used for the school had changed.

In 1766, the polite discourse the two parties enjoyed dissolved and rather quickly.

²²²Rev. John Waring to Robert Carter Nicholas, [March 1764], in *Ibid.*, 204.

²²³Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 21 December 1764, in *Ibid.*, 222-223.

²²⁴Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 21 December 1764 in *Ibid.*, 223; Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 13 September 1765, in *Ibid.*, 236; Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 27 December 1765, in *Ibid.*, 241-242.

By that winter, the two factions had again resumed their earlier jostling over how the school should be managed. Beginning near the end of December, Nicholas sent the Society a letter, that in addition to making them aware of his recent appointment as the Treasurer of the colony, revealed the school was having serious financial troubles. "I have Nothing material to say on the Subject of the Charity School," Nicholas wrote Waring two days after Christmas, "I send you a Copy of [the account for the school] from my Book. . . That we may not be confused, I propose beginning a new Acct. & have therefore drawn on you for £37.10.8 Sterling the exact Balance which will be due to me the first Proximo."²²⁵

His explanation for this sudden change in the school's account cited inflation and ever rising prices. "You may perhaps be surprised at the Difference of the Value of our Current Money," as his letter explained, "it is owing to the fluctuating State of our Exchange, which is now 25 per cent & I suppose will be considerably lower."²²⁶ Presumably, this change in exchange rates had been caused by a slump in tobacco prices that occurred shortly after the French and Indian War. Matters became even worse, when during that postwar depression, the crown elected to enforce the Navigation Acts that plunged a number of the colony's slave-holders into further debt. Slave-owning Virginians became even more outraged when the crown issued the Proclamation of 1763 that had foiled their plans to move westward and claim new Indian territories and forced some merchant-creditors to call in some planters' debts. The Stamp Act crisis more than likely

²²⁵Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 27 December 1766, in *Ibid.*, 252.

²²⁶*Ibid.*

added to these tensions. Nonetheless, despite it all, in the winter of 1767-68, as the crisis between the colonies and Great Britain deepened, Nicholas drew “£30 Sterling” for the school Allowance and reminded the Associates that it would not be enough to “defray the Expenses of the present Year.”²²⁷

The Associates were incensed. They could not fathom why the school’s expenses continued to increase. Though the school in Williamsburg had from the very beginning given them more trouble than they would have confessed, by 1768, they were no longer acquiescent but rather took the moral high ground. “The Associates are thankful to You,” John Waring wrote, “but when they first began this charitable work at Williamsburgh They did not intend to allow more than 20£ Sterling a year for its Support, & were in hopes that if that Salary were not sufficient, what was further wanting wou’d have been supplied by the charitable Contribution of the Inhabitants for whose Benefit this Institution was intended.” But, to their surprise, “They now find, by an Increase of Salary, & the Addition of Rent, your School stands them in more than 30£ Sterling whereas no other School costs us more than 20£ Sterling, Books excepted.” Rather than see the good work among the slaves in the colony end, Waring reminded Nicholas, the Associates “resolved to allow no more than 25£ Sterling to your School from Mid-summer next, & hope that if any thing more be wanting, it will be supplied by Contributions at Williamsburgh.” In their judgment, Waring declared, the burden of the school should lie on the shoulders of the slaves’ masters whose responsibility it is to instruct them “in the way of Salvation, as his

²²⁷Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 1 December 1767, in *Ibid.*, 263. Woody Holton, *Forced Founders*, 39-74.

own Children.” Feeling personally insulted, John Waring also criticized the slave-holders of the colony. “How can Gentlemen on Your Side of the Water,” he inquired, “expect that We on this shou’d Subscribe two, three, or four Guineas a Year apiece, as I have for many Years, to promote the Instruction of the Slaves of those masters, who themselves will contribute Nothing to it. This Conduct. . . appears [to me] unaccountable, & I wish our Brethren in America woud consult their own Honour a little more in this respect.”²²⁸

Unquestionably, some of the Associates’ impatience with the slave-holders in Virginia may have stemmed from the tumultuous political climate of the day. By 1768, the colonies were defying the crown over the Townsend duties. Like their brethren in Philadelphia and in New York, the local residents of Williamsburg were attempting to pressure Parliament to repeal the duties on paint, glass, lead, and paper by forming nonimportation committees. Much like colonists elsewhere, Virginians grew increasingly critical of the crown policies on its North American subjects. As such, they were no more willing to share in the cost of educating slaves than they were to shoulder some of the financial burdens of the imperial administration in the colonies.

Almost a year had passed before Nicholas would respond. In February 1769, over a year before Lord North would repeal almost all of the Townsend duties (the one exception being tea), a less than conciliatory trustee wrote back. Put off that the Associates were not happy with his conduct “with Respect to the Negro School in the

²²⁸Rev. John Waring to Robert Carter Nicholas, April 20, 1768, in *Ibid.*, 266-267. Incidentally, the hard line the Associates took with the Williamsburg trustees in private was not reflected in their public accounts. There, Waring, like any good public relations person, projected a positive image of cooperation between the Associates and the slave holders in the in Virginia. Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 35.

City,” as well as with the conduct of his fellow Virginians, Nicholas conceded nothing. To the contrary, he judged his actions as the school’s representative just and his service to the Associates honorable. True to form, he reminded Waring that from the beginning he had had his doubts: “When I first engaged in this Business. . . I could not but cordially comment the pious Designs of its Authors.” And yet, in spite of his own reluctance about the scheme, Nicholas chided Waring, he braved “many Difficulties” and made considerable progress with respect to the school’s design. Among those difficulties, he reminded his friends in London, were the slave-owners who made few efforts to encourage instruction among their children. “The Regulations which I formerly drew up & transmitted to you,” he went on to explain, “I was in hopes of carrying into Execution, but have been disappointed in several Respects,” as most masters did not think much of his trespassing their authority.²²⁹ Another difficulty, Nicholas confessed, was the Associates’ unreasonable expectation as to the school’s expenses. At the beginning of their endeavor, he noted, they accepted that they were “not competent Judges” of the school’s account and therefore referred “that Matter entirely” to the trustees’ “Prudence & Discretion.” But in truth they did not leave the matter alone. Instead, they whined. Imagine “my Surprize” Nicholas wrote mockingly, “to find you complaining that I had advanced the Salary to £25 Sterling without proper Authority. . . My first Bills were only for £25 Sterling. . . [that is]

²²⁹Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 16 February 1769, in *Ibid.*, 275-276. Considering the unfolding politically crisis of the day, as colonist Virginians became more defiant and less differential of their peers, Nicholas’ effort to enforced his set rules made rubbed some slave-holders the wrong way who, in turn, projected their feeling toward Parliament onto him. For a useful account of how social distinction were breaking down between 1765 and 1770, see Rhys Isaac, “Evangelical Revolt,” 345-368

when our Exchange was at 55, 60 & 40 per Cent but, when Exchange fell to 25 per Cent, you see that £30 Sterling yield not enough to pay the Salary & Rent.”²³⁰

The Associates were not moved. Quite the contrary, they were probably hardened by the growing political crisis between Great Britain and the colonies. Indeed, by May 1769, the colonies, persistent in their professions of loyalty, continued to denounce British encroachment of their liberties. Not surprisingly, when the Associates wrote back, they continued in their assault of their colonial brethren. “Must it not greatly Surprize Us to find that Gentlemen possessed of opulent Fortunes, as many of the Inhabitants of Williamsburgh are,” Waring wrote Nicholas, “have so little Generosity and publick Spirit as to refuse to contribute even in small Degree to the Support of an Institution calculated purely for their benefit?” But rather than honor their responsibility, the Associates went on to further admonish the school’s trustee, they “choose to be beholden to the Benevolence of Strangers to instruct their Children, the young Negroes than to do it at their own Expence?” Astonished “that any persons descended from Britons. . . sho’d so far deviate from the Principles & Practice of their Progenitors,” they reminded Nicholas, that the burden of instructing slaves lie primarily with the slave-holders in the colony. At once cavalier and haughty, they declared, Virginia had “time enough for the Masters to get the better of old prejudices.” Positive that their work in the Chesapeake was to little avail and frustrated by the slave-holders’ aversion to convert their slaves, they concluded their communiqué with Nicholas with an ultimatum. “If the Gentlemen at Williamsburg are willing to have the Negro School continue they may: but then They must engage to defray

²³⁰Ibid.

all Expenses above 25£ Sterling a Year. If these Terms, very easy to them. . . are *refused*, You are desired to put an End to the School at the End of this present Year 1769.”²³¹

Surprisingly, the residents of Williamsburg elected not to close the school. Despite his own reservations, which were as old as the school itself, Nicholas stayed on as a trustee. Ironically, instead of encouraging the well-to-do to pay a little, the mistress had been made to pay. By reducing Wager’s salary, he solved the school’s financial crisis. Her charge nonetheless remained the same. The classes went on as before. That following year, things seemed to return to normal. On January 1, Nicholas wrote the Associate in his usual manner: “I have received your last. . . tho’ our Sentiments are pretty much alike, with Regard to the poor Slaves in this Colony, I see very little prospect of our Wishes being accomplish’d.”

By 1772, the school’s prospects made a turn for the better. “Some few of the Inhabitants,” Nicholas explained that December, “do join me in contributing towards supporting the School.” True to form, the Williamsburg trustee tempered his good news with his usual reluctance. It “is far from being a general Disposition to promote its Success,” he wrote the Associates, “the Reasons, which I at first foresaw & mention’d to you.”²³²

While all seemed well, the situation did not last long. In November 1774, Anne Wager died. According to Nicholas, although she continued to work faithfully with her

²³¹Rev. John Waring to Robert Carter Nicholas, 25 May 1769, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 283-285.

²³²Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 1 January 1770, in *Ibid.*, 288; Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 1 December 1772, in *Ibid.*, 310.

slave scholars, the mistress had never truly recovered from an earlier sickness. With her passing, as the school's trustee had predicted, died whatever hopes there were for continuing the school in town.²³³

* * *

By November 17, 1774, when the Bray school in Williamsburg closed its doors, a number of enslaved Virginians had learned “the true Spelling of Words” and how to pronounce “& read distinctly.”²³⁴ In the school's fourteen year history as many as 400 scholars, if not more considering the school's injunction that its scholars practice their lessons at home, received biblical instruction through letters. From Jennifer Oast's study, which analyzed the lists of students that Nicholas from time to time submitted to the trustees, emerges a fuller account of those scholars who showed up for class. The average age of most of the children was six years old; the median age was seven. The sex ratio of the scholars remained fairly even. In 1762, ten boys and fourteen girls attended. Nineteen boys and fourteen girls were in the school in 1765. Four years later, the school had fifteen boys and fifteen girls. Except for a handful of free blacks, between twenty and thirty slave children attended the school at any given time.²³⁵

²³³Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 17 December 1771, in *Ibid.*, 305; Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 17 November 1774 in *Ibid.*, 325.

²³⁴[School Regulations,] 30 September 1762, in *Ibid.*, 190.

²³⁵Oast, “Educating Eighteenth-Century Black Students,” 21-24.

Other insights can also be discerned from the lists Nicholas sent. To judge from the names that appear on the extant school rosters, it appears that most, if not all, of the scholars were urban slaves belonging to well-to-do or gentry families who lived in or about the York and James City Counties. That was the case of Peyton Randolph, the Speaker of the House of Burgesses, who owned almost 30 slaves. Between 1762 and 1774, the resident of Williamsburg enrolled several of his slave children in the school. Two years after it opened, he sent Aggy, a seven-year-old girl. Apparently, he was impressed by Aggy's conduct and the report she gave of herself, so much so the Speaker entrusted others to Anne Wager's care. In 1765, he enrolled two of his slave boys: Roger and Sam. In 1769, another one of his boys by the name of Sam attended the school.

Presumably, Randolph also sent more of his people. Taking into account their ages and the school's charter, it is possible that several of Randolph's slave children attended the Bray school in 1760. Three were girls—Aggy, Coy, and Sukey—who would have been enrolled at age eight and two were boys—Dabney and Charles who would have been seven when the school started. Had Randolph's boy Dimbo whose name appeared in the Bruton Parish register in 1750 attended the school in 1760, he would have been ten years old.²³⁶

While it is impossible to discern for certain why the Speaker of the House of Burgesses sent several of his slaves to the school, it seems likely that he enrolled some of them out of a sincere sense of faith. Consider the number of slaves he had baptized at the Bruton parish. Of the twenty-eight slaves the Speaker owned at the time of his death, twenty-one were noted as being members of the Anglican church. Fifteen—Effy, Charly,

²³⁶Vogt, *Register for the Bruton Parish, Virginia, 1662-1792*, 33; 35; and, 36.

Lucy, Mars, Robin, Robert, Dimbo, Aggy, Coy, Sukey, Dabney, George, Lewis, Henry and Charles—were children when they receive the rite of passage. Six—James, Humphrey, Sarah, Jane, Williams, and Robert—were adults when they received the sacrament.²³⁷ If not for reasons of conscience, Randolph may have done so at the behest of his slave children's parents. As the church register established, 28 per cent or almost a full third of the infants who belonged to the colonial grandee also noted the names of their mothers which demonstrated not only familial ties but also the complex nature of master-slave relationships. It is also possible that Randolph may have observed the counsel of the older slaves under his charge who may have persuaded their master of the merits of the school.²³⁸

Some slave parents apparently had some say in the lives of their children. That was certainly the view of the Negro school's trustee. "The Children," Nicholas explained to the Associates two years after the school opened, "we believe, have all been regularly baptized; indeed we think it is a pretty general Practice all over Virginia for Negro Parents to have their Children christened, where they live tolerably convenient to the Church or Minister."²³⁹

Christiana Campbell, the proprietor of a tavern in town, sent a number of her

²³⁷For Randolph's slaves baptized as adults, see Vogt, 28; 33; 35; 36; 49; 53.

²³⁸Vogt, 50; 54; 56; 58. To judge from the extant church registers, only few slaveholders noted the names of slave parents. In most cases, the owner's name is only mentioned.

²³⁹Re. William Yates and Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 30 September 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 184.

slaves to the Bray school as well. In 1762, she enrolled three of her children. One was a boy named London who was baptized in 1753. Though his age was listed as being seven at the time, it was more likely, considering the extant Bruton Parish church register, that he was actually nine years old when he was enrolled. The other two were a boy and a girl: Shrophire and Aggy. Both were six years old at the time they attended the school. Three years afterwards, Campbell enrolled two more: a girl named Mary and probably a boy by the name of Young. In 1769, Campbell's Mary, Sally, and Sukey appeared on the roster of Bray school scholars. Like Peyton Randolph, it seems likely that the owner of the Christiana Campbell tavern enrolled more of her slave children in the school, a number of whom may have attended in 1760. Like the Speaker of the House, her decision may have also influenced by the adult slaves who helped her run the tavern or by her slave children's parents.²⁴⁰

That was also the case with Jane Vobe, the proprietor of the King's Arm Tavern in Williamsburg. Much like Christiana Campbell, Vobe probably thought herself a God-fearing, Anglican woman. Of the seven slaves she owned, three—Joe, John, and another boy whose named is lost because of damage to the record—were baptized at the Bruton parish. To judge from the church register, Nanny, Joe and John's mother, may have encouraged her mistress to have them baptized and possibly sent to the Bray school. While it is unclear whether or not Vobe actually enroll the two boys, she did enroll others. In

²⁴⁰Enclosure: List of Negro Children, 30 September 1762, in *Ibid.*, 188; Enclosure: List of Negro Children, November 1765, in *Ibid.*, 241; and Enclosure: List of Negro Children, 16 February 1769, in *Ibid.*, 275; Vogt, *Register for the Bruton Parish, Virginia*, 36. For a useful account of Christiana Campbell, see Richter, *Enslaving Virginia*, 610.

1765, she sent a boy by the name of Sal to the school. Four years later, Jane Vobe's Jack appeared on the roster as one of Wager's scholars. Supposedly, the tavern-owner also sent her slave boy Gowan who more than likely attended the school when it opened.²⁴¹

Biographies of several of the scholars who attended the school can also be discerned.²⁴² Consider Hannah who was enrolled in 1762. At the time her name appeared on the school's roster, she was seven-years-old. Her master, Robert Carter Nicholas had been the school's long-time trustee. Like Peyton Randolph, Christiana Campbell, and Jane Vobe, Nicholas probably thought himself a pious man. Indeed, of the 19 slaves he owned in Williamsburg, he permitted at least nine slaves to be baptized at the Bruton Parish church. And of that exceptional lot, three were enrolled in the Bray school. Conceivably, Hannah had also been baptized before she became one of Anne Wager's students.²⁴³

By Nicholas' account, the seven-year-old, Virginia-born slave girl was a

²⁴¹Enclosure: List of Negro Children, 30 September 1762, in *Ibid.*, 188; Enclosure: List of Negro Children, November 1765, in *Ibid.*, 241; and Enclosure: List of Negro Children, 16 February 1769, in *Ibid.*, 275; Vogt, 39; 41; 50.

²⁴²With respect to the biographies of several Bray scholars that follows, I am deeply indebted to Julie Richter and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation whose extensive work and research have proven to be invaluable.

²⁴³Enclosure: List of Negro Children, 30 September 1762, in *Ibid.*, 188; Enclosure: List of Negro Children, November 1765, in *Ibid.*, 241; and Enclosure: List of Negro Children, 16 February 1769, in *Ibid.*, 275. My count of Nicholas's estate in Williamsburg is based on the Bruton parish register which identified in several instances the names of the slave child's mother. While it likely that he had more of his slaves baptized, we know for certain that Nicholas's slaves, Hannah, Lucy, Samson, Richard, Milly, Diana, Salley, Sarah, and Caesar were all baptized at the Bruton parish. Vogt, *Register for the Bruton Parish, Virginia*, 13; 36; 39; 43; 45; &, 53.

rambunctious child. To her master's dismay, she was fond of entertaining her own fancies. Like Landon Carter's slave girl named Sarah, Hannah did as she wanted. She talked back and she behaved disobediently. In 1765, after several years of tuition, Hannah disappointed her master. "I have a Negro Girl in my Family," a befuddled Nicholas explained in a letter to the Associates in December 1765, "who was taught at this School upwards of three Years & made as good a Progress as most, but she turns out a sad Jade, notwithstanding all we can do to reform her."²⁴⁴

Hannah had previously minded her master, so much so that when Nicholas decided to test the value of the school, he thought she was the ideal choice.²⁴⁵ Under Wager's guidance, Hannah made a good report of herself. Unwittingly, she also deepened her master's commitment to the enterprise. At age 10, Hannah had learned "the true Spelling of Words." She had also learned to recite the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles Creed, and the Ten Commandments.²⁴⁶

But Hannah learned more than just how to recite. After no more than three years at the school, she learned to "read the Bible." Through reading, she learned humility. Like the mother of the prophet Samuel for whom she may have been named, Hannah performed her tasks about her master's house dutifully. She was prayerful.²⁴⁷ But like other slaves,

²⁴⁴Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 27 December 1765, in *Ibid.*, 240.

²⁴⁵Considering Nicholas' letter to the Associates in London, Hannah was probably enrolled in the school in 1761.

²⁴⁶[School Regulations], 30 September 1762, in *Ibid.*, 191.

²⁴⁷1Samuel 1: 9-28. (King James Version).

the Bray school scholar may have also found a particular solace in the Book of Exodus. Reflecting on the story of the Hebrew's captivity, she came to look at Robert Carter Nicholas as a contemporary of Pharaoh. To hurry God's judgement, Hannah acted out. She became a "sad Jade."

Still, despite her unruliness, it seems apparent, Hannah's initial success as a Bray school student may explain why Nicholas did not back away from the institution in 1768 when the Bray Associates proposed closing it down, unless the Williamsburg managers came up with more money. She may have also been the reason why Nicholas pursued and successfully enlisted a number of subscribers to underwrite the school's expenses. Clearly, Hannah's excellent performance encouraged her master to send more children to the school. In 1769, a year after he decided to continue on as the school's trustee, Nicholas enrolled two more of his slave children. One was a girl named Sarah. The other slave was a boy whose name was Dennis. Nicholas also extended his charge beyond the scholars who attended the school in Williamsburg, distributing primers, Bibles, and Books of Common Prayer "to grown Negroes in different Parts, who [he] thought would make a good Use of them."²⁴⁸

Next to Hannah probably sat Isaac Bee, a seven-year-old mulatto bond-servant who attended during her final year at the school. His father, John Insko Bee, was free man. His mother was white and indentured to John Blair, the nephew of the former

²⁴⁸Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 16 February 1769, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 275.

Commissary, James Blair, and a prominent statesman and a colonial grandee in his own right. Like other mulattoes, the young lad was bound out and placed in Blair's charge. "If any woman servant," the colony's legislatures explained in 1705, "have a bastard child by a negro, or mulatto... the church-wardens shall bind the said child to be a servant, until it shall be of thirty one years of age."²⁴⁹

Though no record of his indenture has survived, it is likely that Bee worked for Blair as a domestic. Considering Blair's high standing in the Williamsburg community, the mulatto may have worked as a waiter. It is also likely that Bee served Blair as a personal body servant or as a coachman. Much like other Bray scholars, Bee was probably baptized. If not after birth, he certainly received the sacrament after completing his term at the school. Indeed, as Nicholas' "set of rules" make plain, after each Bray scholar received biblical literacy instruction, he or she was catechized in church and baptized as a member of the Anglican church.²⁵⁰

In 1771, a few years after he left the school, Bee became the property of Lewis Burwell, a resident of Mecklenburg County, Virginia, the grandson of John Blair. But life in the country was not to the teenaged boy's liking. Far from it, he hated it, preferring instead the clamor of the city. By 1774, Bee had his fill of life in Virginia's southernmost frontier. Separated from his parents and his sister, Bee decided that the time had arrived for Williamsburg's sable son to return home. Like other slaves in the colony whose family life had been disrupted by separation, Bee decided to run away. On September 8, 1774,

²⁴⁹*SAL* 3:453.

²⁵⁰[Set of Rules,] 30 September 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 191.

Burwell had the following notice placed in Purdie and Dixon's *Virginia Gazette*:

RUN away from the Subscriber, about two Months ago, a likely Mulatto Lad named ISAAC BEE, formerly the property of the late President Blair, and is well known about Williamsburg, where I am informed he has been several TIMES seen since his Elopement. He is between eighteen and nineteen Years of Age, low of Stature, and thinks he has a Right to his Freedom, because his father was a Freeman, and I suppose he will endeavour to pass for one. He can read, but I do not know that he can write; however, he may easily get some one to forge a Pass for him. I cannot undertake to describe his apparel, as he has a Variety, and it is probably he may have changed them.

To judge from this notice, Bee may have had other reasons for leaving. Although not yet thirty-one, as Burwell told it, the mulatto man believed that he was entitled to his freedom. It seems likely that the Virginia-born man may have been inspired to run by the politically charged times in which he lived. Like others who could read, Isaac followed current events printed in the newspaper. It is also possible that Bee's claim to his own freedom had nothing to do with the burgeoning conflict between the British crown and her North American colonies. Just the opposite, he may have thought himself free on certain religious grounds. According to Julie Richter's extensive study of slavery in Virginia, besides going to the Bray school, Bee may have received some schooling from home,

possibly from his father. Presumably, Bee's father was not only a free man, but also a student of a Quaker named Fleming Bates. Like his father, Bee probably came to the belief that slavery was immoral—a position increasingly adopted by Quakers at the time.²⁵¹

His beliefs notwithstanding, Bee was captured several years after he had ran away. To his dismay, the mulatto bond-servant was forcibly returned to Burwell's estate in the Virginia countryside. Between 1782 and 1785, Bee's name appeared on Burwell's personal property tax lists. Several years earlier, sometime in 1778, those same tax records also indicate that the mulatto man became a father. While he resided in Mecklenburg Country, Bee had a son and most likely a wife. Interestingly, the slave couple named their son John, presumably after Isaac Bee's father or possibly after the Apostle John or John the baptizer who christened Jesus Christ.²⁵²

By the time Isaac Bee had finished his schooling, Dennis was just beginning his lessons. Dennis, like other Bray scholars, first appeared in the local church record. In 1761, he was baptized in Bruton Parish.²⁵³ Eight years later his name appeared on the list of students Nicholas sent the Associates in 1769. His master had been Robert Carter III, a Westmoreland County slave-holder, grandee, a member of the Governor's Council, and the grandson of Robert "King" Carter. At age 12, Dennis worked as a waiter. Like Peter [Custis], he probably knew where the Carter family kept its valuables.

²⁵¹Richter, *Enslaving Virginia*, 605

²⁵²Ibid.

²⁵³Vogt, *Register for the Bruton Parish, Virginia*, 13.

Life as a domestic proved no less hazardous than life working in the field. While waiting tables, possibly a year after he left the Bray school, Dennis received a serious injury. “This afternoon,” Philip Fithian, the Carter family tutor from 1773 to 1774, recorded in his dairy, Dennis “was standing in the front Door which is vastly huge & heavy.” When the door suddenly flew open, it “drew off the Skin and Flesh from his middle Finger caught between [and] took off the first Joint, and left the Bone of the greater part of the Rest of the Finger naked.”²⁵⁴

Several months later, Dennis reappeared in the school master’s diary. Evidently, at his father’s request, Carter allowed the young lad to continue his education under the instruction of the family tutor. By Fithian’s account, the slave boy could “spell words of one syllable pretty readily” and comes when “he finds opportunity.”²⁵⁵

That was not so of Jane Vobe’s Gowan who probably made the most of the literacy skills he learned at the Bray school in Williamsburg. A god-called minister, Gowan preached in York and James City Counties, spreading the spirit of the Great Awakening to the black community. By Thad Tate’s account, the charismatic slave-preacher probably founded one of the earliest Black Baptist churches in the Chesapeake, if not the first.²⁵⁶

Like Isaac Bee, Gowan, probably in his early twenties, first appeared in local

²⁵⁴Richter, *Enslaving Virginia*, 613-614; Fithian, *Journal and Letters*, 182-183 & 208; 51 & 56.

²⁵⁵Fithian, *Journal and Letters*, 182-183.

²⁵⁶Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg*, 90.

records. In July 1779 he was advertised as a truant.

YORK TOWN, *June* 10, 1779.

STOLEN [sic] from the subscriber on *Tuesday* the first instant by a negro fellow name Go [faded] belonging to Mrs. Vobe of *Williamsburg*, a black horse between thirteen and fourteen hands high, a hanging mane and switch tail, his rump remarkable sloping, branded on the near should with either T or I, about the brand the hair is rubbed off which makes it appear to be two letters; he is also branded on the near buttock, which appears to be W, his right eye seems to have a [illegible] over it, a star in his forehead, paces and gallop [faded or torn] Whoever delivers the said horse to me, shall re[faded or torn] a reward of thirty dollars. J. [faded or torn] C. Gunther.²⁵⁷

To judge from this notice, this was probably not the first time Gowan had absconded. Like John Custis's slave Peter, Gowan was apparently in the habit of taking self-declared holidays from work, to his mistress's displeasure. As far as can be judged, from time to time, Gowan disappeared only to return to his mistress' house or tavern when he longed for familiar company. Like other slave-holders of her day, the tavern-keeper probably learned to accept his truancy as a part of the paternal give and take that came with owning slaves.

But a local resident by the name of John Conrad Gunther had a different opinion of

²⁵⁷*VG* (Clarkson), June 3, 1779.

the tavern keeper's slave who stole away with his horse. Gunther was a wealthy tailor in town who enjoyed frequenting Vobe's King's Arm tavern, as such houses served as hotbed for gossip and talk, good company and food.²⁵⁸ Supposedly, during one of his visit to his mistress' tavern, Gowan took the tailor's steed for an extended ride.

Gunther was not the least bit amused. That Tuesday, several days following Gowan's sojourn away from home, the ill-affected tailor went to John Clarkson, then one of several printers operating a press in Williamsburg, and placed a notice in the *Virginia Gazette*. But before the ink could dry, Gowan returned home and with him he brought Gunther's black steed.

Although it unclear whether or not Gowan was punished, one things seems certain. The Virginia-born man was determined to get away. Between the 1760s and 70s, a series of religious revivals were sweeping through the Chesapeake colony. Drawn to New Light teaching of universal salvation, the country-born man may have taken the horse to go and hear a sermon. But it is also likely that religion was the furthest thing from Gowan's mind. He may have simply taken time off from work in the tavern to visit relatives or perhaps a close acquaintance.

Whatever his reasons, years after he had stole away with Gunther's horse, Gowan grew increasingly involved in matters of faith. Like other enslaved Virginians of his day, he became a convert of the Separatist Baptist movement which had become a powerful evangelical force in Virginia. Attracted to the Baptist's message of unbridled community and spiritual death and rebirth, the country-born man may have found solace in the New

²⁵⁸*VG* (Clarkson), June, 17, 1773.

Light teachings that all men were brothers and sisters and were born of one blood.²⁵⁹

By 1781, Gowan received the revelation to go forth and preach. And preach he did. Shortly after his mistress moved to Chesterfield Country, the urban slave gained a reputation as a minister. Much in the same way that others New Light ministers had, Gowan delivered passionate and heart-felt sermons. In open fields, he probably moved a number of slaves to tears. In a short time, the word got out, Gowan was blessed with the gift to inspired in others a deep sense of mission and faith.²⁶⁰

A few years later, the slave minister received a second revelation. For reasons still unknown, Gowan adopted a new name for himself. Presumably, like the Bible's Jacob who became Israel after wrestling an angel, Jane Vobe's bond-servant may have had a similar experience, one from whence he took for himself the surname: Pamphlet. Like other slave names, Pamphlet carries multiple meaning. It may signify, for instance, the pamphlets the Associates used to instruct slaves in religion and letters. Gowan may have also mistaken the word pamphlet for prophet. Whatever the basis, it seems clear that Gowan's surname identified him with literacy. In the slave preacher's mind, pamphlet meant sermon, school, and reading. It also meant prophet and preaching.

That much appears to have been the view of those who considered Gowan their leader. As early as the 1780's, Pamphlet's following in Virginia had become well known throughout the Tidewater area in the Chesapeake. Besides preaching, he baptized slave parishioners. Sometime around 1785, if not before, Pamphlet and his followers formed

²⁵⁹Rhys Isaac, "Evangelical Revolt," 345-368.

²⁶⁰Richter, 625-626.

their own separate church that was located near the outskirts of the town near Nassau Street. Coincidentally, the site for the church lay only a few blocks away from Colonel Digges' house off of Ireland Street, which for a time served as possibly the first site for the Bray school. In 1793, when the church gain official recognition, Gowan was elected the shepherd of the flock.

Incidentally, the slave minister's congregation included a number of literate slaves. According to a nineteenth-century historian of the Baptist church in the Old Dominion, Gowan's congregation kept a record book that has since been lost.²⁶¹ Within its pages was a running list of individuals whom Gowan baptized. Clearly, the preacher was not alone in his ability to read and write. Perhaps others of his New Light brethren had also once been members of Church of England and students at Williamsburg's Bray school.²⁶²

* * *

Gowan, Dennis, Isaac Bee, and Hannah were not alone. There were other Bray scholars. Nor was the Williamsburg's school the only one in the colony. There was another Bray school in the town of Fredericksburg. Though not as successful as its counterpart in James City County, slaves were taught there. Unfortunately, of those Bray scholars who attended that school in Spotsylvania County, relatively little appears to be

²⁶¹Robert P. Semple, *The History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptist in Virginia* (1810; reprint, Richmond, 1894), 148.

²⁶²Richter, *Enslaving Virginia*, 625-626; Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg*, 88-90.

known.²⁶³

Not so for the school. The idea for a school in Fredericksburg came about in part because of the actions of a less than honest minister. Encouraged by their successes in Philadelphia, Williamsburg, and in New York, the Associates set upon an ambitious plan of starting more charity schools in the colonies. In April 1762, they began sending out proposals and parcels of books along with letters of introduction.

In Virginia, however, it appears that they had presumed too much. Despite the pious designs of their Bible society, the Associates in London would only receive discouragement in return.²⁶⁴ In York Town, for example, the Associates' efforts to start a school in that city came to naught. Though a shipment of books and letters were sent to William Nelson, a prominent merchant and planter, nothing was to come of the society's scheme to start a school in that port-town. For reasons still unknown, this fervent supporter of Anglican church at home and abroad failed to reply. Either he never received what the Associates sent or he chose to make no reply.

In the borough of Norfolk, the Associates plans came to the attention of Reverend Alexander Rhonnald. A schoolmaster and the rector of the Elizabeth River Parish, Rhonnald not only declined their offer but also gave his reasons why he thought their plan would fail. Unlike Robert Carter Nicholas who despite his doubts made efforts to convert slaves, Rhonnald's reservations prevented him from opening a Bray school. To judge from his response, his doubts were not misplaced. He believed that few teachers in his parish

²⁶³Oast, "Educating Eighteenth-Century Black Student," 38-47.

²⁶⁴Ibid., 32.

were capable of instructing more than six pupils in a class, far fewer than what the Bray schools demanded. "If a Mistress must be had," he explained, "qualified with such Accomplishments. . . Such a One may be found Superannuated, who might instruct in some Measure about Five or Six, but there is not that Woman in this County Young or Old who could manage Thirty Negro Children, at one & the same Time, however Worthy or Wicked She may be." Considering the work load, the stipend was also too low. "Supposing that such a Mistress could be found," he wrote, "the Salary, if £20, is not much above half the Trouble. . . No Woman, however gracious, would undertake that Charge. I myself would be willing to add £5 of this Currency to the £20 Sterl., which will make it £30 a Year, but I can perceive none willing under £50 & a House found for that purpose."

Parson Rhonnald also thought local racial prejudice would prove an insurmountable obstacle. That had certainly been his own experience with the slaveholders in Norfolk, many of whom had proven themselves unwavering stewards of Godwyn's "spirit of gentilism." As was the case with other parsons in the colony years earlier, Rhonnald was treated with scorn when he tried to proselytize the Negroes of his congregation. The worthies of the city used "Me with the most invidious Terms of Ill nature for my pains, & because I baptise more Negroes than other Brethren here & instruct them, from the Pulpit. . . I am vilified & branded by such as a Negro Parson." Not surprisingly, on April 7, 1763, after considering the reverend's account, the Associates

dropped their plans to start a school in Norfolk.²⁶⁵

They pressed on in search of other openings. Sometime in 1763, an inquiry from the Associates came indirectly to the attention of James Marye, Jr., minister of St. Thomas parish in Orange County. Marye's father was a native of Rouen, France who renounced Catholicism, fled to England, and was ordained an Anglican minister. Emigrating to Virginia, the elder Marye assumed several clerical positions before he eventually became the rector of the St. George Parish in Spotsylvania County, serving from 1735 until his death in 1767.²⁶⁶

As the son of an Anglican priest, Marye, Jr. grew up with privileges. In 1754, he attended the College of William & Mary and prepared for the ministry. Before his formal ordination, the young man served for a time as a tutor in the household of William Byrd III. A year after he returned from being ordained in England, Marye, Jr. became the minister of the St. Thomas Parish in Orange County.²⁶⁷

Despite this pious upbringing, it seems that the Virginia parson was a less-than-honest church steward, particularly in his dealing with the overseas missionary society. To

²⁶⁵Rev. Alexander Rhonnald to Rev. John Waring, September 27, 1762 in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 180, 182.

²⁶⁶Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 342-343.

²⁶⁷Though Marye was aware of the Associates's work in the Chesapeake as early as 1760, he was not directly approached by the Bible society until three years later. To judge from their correspondence, the London group probably thought Marye a likely agent because of his work among slaves. By his own account, in addition to his mission to minister to the poor, the Orange County rector also baptized slave children "& many of the Adults likewise are desirous of Baptism." Rev. James Marye, Jr. to Rev. John Waring, August 2, 1760, in *Ibid.*, 149.

judge from the parson's letters with the Associates, the rector of St. Thomas Parish appeared given to exaggeration. In 1763, three years after he had assumed his new post, Marye was approached by the Associates. Like the parson in Norfolk, though for different reasons, the Orange County minister did not think a school in his parish a likely scheme. The county was too rural for such an enterprise. "I gave you my Reasons for not Judging it proper to set up a School in my Parish for the Erudition of young Negroes," he went on to explain further, "which were that the Planters live so remote for each other, that I could not place a School so that more than five or six perhaps would attend."²⁶⁸

Though he thought a charity school in his county would not realize any real success, Marye did believe a parochial library a more likely scheme. As a member of the Church of England, the minister was undoubtedly aware of the Bible society's missionary work in the colonies. On that basis, he proposed that the Associates sponsor the parochial library he wanted to start in his parish. "I have a convenient Room now fitted adjoining the Glebe House," he wrote presumptively, "for the Reception of what Books you will be pleased to send. Those that would be best suit my present Necessity I mentioned to you in my last."

The Associates took the bait. As a library had been part of their overseas mission, they sent Marye a parcel of books. But apparently they had other reasons for agreeing to underwrite the minister's plans for a library in his parish. Though the St. Thomas parson did not welcome the idea of a Bray school, he did give them what amounted to some

²⁶⁸Rev. James Marye, Jr. to Rev. John Waring, October 24, 1763, in *Ibid.*, 202-203.

useful information, a recommendation of a site for another possible charity school. “There is a Town on the River to which all in these Parts trade,” his letter explained, “which makes it very flourishing & populous, where a negro-School might be place (I think) to great Advantage, which is about hundred & ten Miles distant from Williamsburg, as the Town contains great Numbers of Negroes & their Owners have not those many Employment of them that they have in the Country.”²⁶⁹

But that exchange proved to be problematic. Although the town Marye had in mind was Fredericksburg, the young parson forgot to mention this pertinent detail. Apparently, having gotten the free books for his parochial library, Marye had lost interest in the Bray school scheme. When the Associates asked for clarification, he took his time to respond. Not surprisingly, the Associates were upset. Eventually in September 1764 the St. Thomas rector apologized for his neglect and supplied the name, which he had apparently thought was obvious. “You seem much disturbed that I neglected mentioning the Name of the Town; had I been certain that Evin’s Map of Virginia, or Jefferson’s & Fry’s never fell in your Hands. . . [I would have been sure to inform you that the town I meant] is called Fredericksburg.” Unfortunately, in the time since he had first mentioned the town as a good place for a school, Marye had changed his mind. After consulting with his father, the parson of Fredericksburg, and other town leaders, Marye retracted his recommendation. “I acknowledge it was an Omission in me not to have mentioned the Name [of the town] in my last,” he tried to explain, “I likewise inform you that being in the said Town since I wrote you, I made Inquiry what Number of smiall Negroes would be

²⁶⁹Ibid.

sent, should a School be set up there for the Purpose, & could not learn it would be possible to get above four or five or thereabouts, & they not to go constantly, but only at spare Times when it suited their Owners”²⁷⁰

But all had not been lost. Despite his claims to the contrary, Marye had once again misjudged. If only to restore the family’s honor, the elder Marye threw himself into getting up a Bray school and enlisted in that cause a number of leading men, including Fielding Lewis, the brother-in-law of George Washington, a slave-owner, and a Spotsylvania County Burgesses. Not surprisingly, the plan of the Negro school resembled those established elsewhere. Leading men—Lewis, Marye—were chosen as trustees. A mistress for the school was hired. Her salary had been set at twenty-five pounds sterling. On April of 1765, the Bray charity school for Negroes in Fredericksburg opened its door.

Much like its parent school one hundred and ten miles further southeast, the school in Spotsylvania had a modest beginning. Rather than thirty scholars or even twenty-five pupils, which marked the beginning of the school in Williamsburg, the Bray school in Fredericksburg started with sixteen. They were a tenacious lot, according to Lewis. “The School was opened [*blank in MS*] of April,” the delighted trustee wrote the Associates the following September “and there are now Sixteen Children who constantly attend who have improv’d beyond my expectation.”²⁷¹ The minister of the parish his given me all the assistance he could,” Lewis went on to report, “and has promised to call frequently and

²⁷⁰Rev. James Marye, Jr. to Rev. John Waring, September 25, 1764, in *Ibid.*, 218-219.

²⁷¹Fielding Lewis to Rev. John Waring, 14 September 1765, in *Ibid.*, 237.

examine the Children; As they begin already to Read prittily [sic] there will be occasion for a few Testaments and Prayer Books. . . I shall in my next send you a Copy of the School Register wherein is enter'd the Ages of the Children and the time of their admittance."²⁷² Though no extant copy of that roster has survived, we do know that by 1766, Lewis had succeeded in increasing the number of the Bray scholars to seventeen. Over the next several years, the school in the Fredericksburg taught somewhere between forty and fifty slave scholars to read.

To judge from the extant account, the school in Fredericksburg followed closely the example established by the school in Williamsburg. "Mr. Nicholas," as Lewis explained, "has furnish'd me with the Rules established at the School in Williamsburg which are so well calculated for the well Government of it, that I have establish'd the same in Fredericksburg." Considering Nicholas' set of rules, a fuller account of the school and its scholars in Spotsylvania can be discerned. In terms of the school's gender ratio, for example, there were probably equal numbers of girls and boys who attended class. In addition to learning how to read, the scholars at the Fredericksburg school, in particular the girls, were also taught how to knit, sew, and embroider. Irrespective of their sex, all of the slave children were also taught to submit and to obey their masters. In the winter, classes began at seven in the morning. In the summer months, they started at six. Most students went to the school for at least a term of three years. Students were also expected to attend school dressed appropriately, most likely in a uniform Negro cloth garment.²⁷³

²⁷²Ibid.

²⁷³Fielding Lewis to Rev. John Waring, September 14, 1765, in *Ibid.*, 237.

Like the school in Williamsburg, the Bray school in Fredericksburg also experienced difficulty in realizing the pious design of the Associates in London. Most notable were the school's problems with the indifferent attitudes of the town's slave-holders. "It gives me the greatest concern that so much Money should have been expended to so little purpose," as Lewis tried explain in a letter to the Associates in 1772, "and am of the Opinion that a School will never succeed in a small Town with us, as the Number of Negro's are few and many believe that the learning them to read is rather a disadvantage to the owners." Despite of the slave-holders' aversion to the school, however, Lewis remained hopeful. Unlike his counterpart in Williamsburg, he expressed no reservations about the intention of the school's benefactors and whether or not the scheme would fail. Quite the contrary, Lewis believed that the school had promise. Whatever its shortcoming, in his mind, the blamed laid primarily among the town's slaves-holders.

Lewis did share Nicholas's conviction that a number of slave-masters enrolled their children for self-serving reasons. "I have the greatest reason to think that there will not soon be any greater Number," he wrote Waring in 1768, "for I observed that several have left the School as soon as they could read tolerably to attend in the Houses of the Proprietors, to take care of the Younger Negroes in the Family to which they belong." Like the Williamsburg trustee, Lewis also came to believe that some of the town's slave owners used the school as a form of nursery.²⁷⁴

Whatever the slave-holders' reasons, self-serving or otherwise, some enslaved

²⁷⁴Fielding Lewis to Rev. John Waring, October 31, 1768, in *Ibid.*, 273.

Virginians in Fredericksburg achieved literacy. Evidently, some had learned by attending that Bray school in town. Others were taught by those who brought those lessons home and who passed them on. In the short time the school was open, the number of literate slaves in Spotsylvania County certainly grew as a result of the school²⁷⁵

* * *

Besides the schools in Fredericksburg and Williamsburg, there were also a number of unofficially-sponsored Bray schools operating in the colony. Judging from the extant documents, these institutions were quite different from those that were formally supported by the missionary authority based in London. Typically, these Bray schools were conducted by a schoolmaster as opposed to a mistress. The school's master and the local church-warden was one and the same. Unlike the schools in Williamsburg and in Spotsylvania, the masters of these unofficial schools received no stipend for their work, the books the Associates sent notwithstanding. Considering that these Bray schools were conducted by men, it is also doubtful that any of the slaves enrolled were taught the how to sew and knit. Most, if not all, of these schools were conducted somewhere within the purview of the parson's glebe or within the church itself. Consequently, in terms of location, most of these schools, unlike their counterparts in Williamsburg and Fredericksburg, were in rural settings as opposed to an urban one.

There were some similarities. Like the officially sponsored schools, scholars who

²⁷⁵Fielding Lewis to Rev. John Waring, February 1, 1772, in *Ibid.*, 306.

attended these particular schools tended to be of both sexes and possibly in near equal numbers. That certainly seems to be the case if we were to take into account the slaves whose names appear in extant church registers. As was the case with the official Bray schools in the colony, a number of the scholars who were allowed to attend were likely young children, somewhere between the ages of three and ten. And as they had before, some slave-holders probably used the schools as a form a nursery.²⁷⁶

Between the 1750s and the 1760s, several such schools were open in the colony. Reverend James Marye, Jr., ran one such school in Orange Country, albeit reluctantly. Like other members of the clergy in Virginia, Marye came to realize that it was his duty to instruct slaves. As alluded to before, considering his extant letters, Marye's informal school for Negroes developed purely by accident. In 1758, the Reverend Mungo Marshall died. Two years later, Marye, Jr. was elected to served in the late rector's place. Significantly, once at the church in Orange County, the minister unexpectedly came across a parcel of books that the Associates had sent Mungo Marshall some time before. Apparently, Marshall ran an unofficial Bray school of his own. As early as 1756, if not before, the late parson wrote to his friends in London, requesting "Some Books & pious Tracts to enable him more effectually to promote the Instruction of the Negroes," many of whom he found "destitute of any Principles of Religion." On December 15, 1756, the Associates in London complied, sending the minister of the St. Thomas Parish "One Copy of each Book in [their] Store & 25 copies of the Several Catachetical Tracts, together

²⁷⁶In his compilation of the Associates' papers, Van Horne's introduction does not consider those schools there were unofficially supported. But the correspondence between the Associates and Virginia parsons suggest another narrative.

with 25 of Mr. Bacons Six Sermons on the Conversion of the Negroes.”²⁷⁷ Considering the nature of the books sent, there can be little doubt that Marshall used the books sent to teach the slaves in his charge to read as that parcel included a number of primers and spellers. More than that, it also appears that Marshall’s informal classes among the county’s slaves progressed quite well. Sometime before he passed away, the minister requested a second shipment of books.

But before he could receive that shipment, Marshall died. Shortly after the parson’s passing, the new rector of Orange County wrote the Associates. His reasons for writing, as allude to before, were twofold. First, he wrote to confirm the receipt of Associates’ shipment of books to Rev. Marshall. Secondly, he wrote to explain what he had done with some of the books in his care. “The first Living that became vacant was the one Occasioned by the Death of your Late worthy Correspondent the Revd. Mungo Marshall,” as his letter to Waring explained, “The Books you sent arrived much about the Time of his Illness. Since his Death I had them conveyed to his Parish, & have distributed about those that were sent for the Purpose to the poorer sort of People that live in the remotest Parts of the Parish.” The others, the recently elected parson admitted, he kept “& lend out to the Neighbours that desire the Use of them.”

Believing he made a good report of himself, the new rector of St. Thomas’s then asked the Associates for another shipment of books, one he had hoped to use to increase the stock of his new library. Besides requesting more books, he also mentioned, in

²⁷⁷Rev. Mungo Marshall to Rev. John Waring, September 1756, in *Ibid.*, 121; Associates of the Late Dr. Bray, Minutes, 15 December 1756, in *Ibid.*, 121.

passing, that he had baptized a “great Quantity of Negroes” in his parish which included “three Churches, & one Chapel.”

The Associates received Marye’s letter with some reservations. Judging from their official recorded minutes, they found Marye to be somewhat insincere, at least with respect to his charge to instruct slaves. But, despite whatever reservations they had, they agreed to honor his request for books. That October, the Associates in London elected to sponsor Marye’s library project, provided, of course, that the minister agree to enlarge his work among his slave parishioners by teaching them religion through letters. To that end, in addition to sending him another parcel of books, the Associates also requested “a particular Account of the progress he hath made in converting & Instructing the Negroes.” Reluctantly, Marye seemed to have acquiesced.²⁷⁸

For three to four years, the minister ran what appeared to have been an unofficial Bray school in Orange County. By his own account, Marye had instructed a number of country-born slaves. In 1764, two years after he declined the Associates’s offer to start an official school, he boasted that he had instructed several dozen slaves out of a thousand or more whom he counted as a part of his parish at that time. “You must understand,” he reminded his overseas friends about the slaves in his charge that September, “there are great Quantities of those Negroes imported here yearly from Africa, who have Languages peculiar to themselves, who are here many years before they understand English.” Confronted by growing numbers of Africans in his parishes, Marye labored nonetheless to

²⁷⁸Rev. James Marye, Jr. to Rev. John Waring, August 2, 1760, in *Ibid.*, 149; Associates of the Late Dr. Bray, Minutes, 1 October 1761, in *Ibid.*, 150.

save a few. "As to the Number that attend Divine Service on Sundays it is greater at some Churches than others," he reported back, "as they are placed nearer to where Quantities of the Negroes live, but in general there is about 30 or 40 and some Sundays I have seen 60 or more."²⁷⁹ While it is doubtful that he taught all "60 or more" slaves he had to read, it stands to reason that he did nonetheless to teach some, if for no other reason than to placate his friends in London and ensure their future gifts of more books.

Jonathan Boucher, the minister of the Hanover Parish also ran an unofficial Bray school in King George County. Much like the rector at St. Thomas Parish, Boucher, who also wanted books from the society to start a parochial library, was also not particularly fond of the idea of opening a formal school for Negroes in his parish. Supposedly, as the case was in Orange County, geography and prejudice seemed to discourage such a work among slaves. "I also told You before," the parson wrote in 1762, "how at a Loss I was to pitch upon a Situation for a School where it could be at all convenient to a competent Number of Children Except in a few little Town, the People Generally live dispers'd in scatter'd Plantations. And I know not a Place in my Parish where I could fix a Mistress within 5 or 6 Miles or even 30 or 20 Children of a proper Age to be admitted."²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹Rev. James Marye, Jr. to Rev. John Waring, August 2, 1760, in *Ibid.*, 150; Rev. James Marye, Jr. to Rev. John Waring, 24 October 1763, in *Ibid.*, 202; and, Rev. James Marye, Jr. to Rev. John Waring, 25 September 1764, in *Ibid.*, 218.

To judge from Philip D. Morgan's recent of slavery in the Chesapeake, the rector of the St. Thomas Parish made an accurate reported of the number of Africans in his parish. Although the number of Africans imported decreased, most of those who were brought into the colony went to counties in the Piedmont region. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 60-61. For a fuller account, see Morgan and Michael L. Nicholls, "Slaves in Piedmont Virginia, 1720-1790" *WMQ* 46 (April 1989): 217-223.

²⁸⁰Rev. Jonathan Boucher to Rev. John Waring, December 31, 1762, in *Ibid.*, 195;

Nevertheless, to judge from the extant record, geography and prejudice did not appear to have discouraged the minister from instructing slaves in a less formal way. Far from it, shortly after being ordained in England, the cleric returned home, full of zeal. In addition to registering his doubts that an official Bray school, like the one in Williamsburg, would not work in his particular parish, Boucher tempered his review of the large county in which he presided with a promising account of his work with the slaves who attended his church, many of whom he believed were further encouraged by the Associates' recent gift of books. "Your Books," as he told them, "will be of great Service to Me in some public Catechetical Lectures which I purpose soon to commence. I have baptiz'd upwards to 100 Negro Children, & betwixt 30 & 40 Adults. . . May God continue to grant a Blessing on all your Endeavours."²⁸¹ By 1764, Boucher reported that he had put the books into the hands of those persons he believed would "meet with the Approbation of The Society." Roughly around that same time, he also reported that he had employed the services of a literate Negro slave who lived nearby to teach his fellow brethren how to read. "I have employ'd a very sensible, well-dispos'd Negro," his letter explains, "to endeavour at instructing his poor fellow Slaves in Reading & some Principles of Religion."²⁸² Though the reverend forgot to mention the name of this slave who served as the school's master of his unofficial school, he did not forget to mention other details. By his account, twenty or thirty Negro scholars regularly attended the informal King George charity school.

²⁸¹Ibid., 196.

²⁸²Rev. Jonathan Boucher to John Waring, 28 April 1764, in Ibid., 206.

That school did not last long. In 1764, Boucher left his Hanover post and relocated to nearby Caroline County, where he continued to work with slaves, employing books sent from the Associates of the Late Dr. Thomas Bray. The school at Hanover had far exceeded Boucher's expectations, as he boasted to John Waring after he had relocated to Caroline County: "I might Surprise You were I to relate to You some of the Conversations I have had with Negroes to whom I had given Books. It must be a Comfort to the Associates. . . to have the Prayers & Blessing of many of these unfortunate People, which I have so often heard xpress'd with Tears of Gratitude." In his new post Boucher continued an informal school for slaves. Within two years he had baptized over three hundred slaves and their numbers continued to swell. He devoted close attention to the Negro school. "The Method I take I hope They will think is not misapplying it," he wrote Waring in March, "I generally find out an old Negro, or a conscientious Overseer, able to read, to whom I give Books, with an Injunction to Them to instruct such & such Slaves in their respective Neighbourhoods."²⁸³ Three months later, he reported that all was well with his unofficial Bray school. In that same letter, he also wrote that the number of his scholars had increased and that he had passed out two dozen books to a number of slaves. In 1770, Boucher's unofficial Bray school in Caroline County may have officially closed when the pastor accepted the calling to be the parson at the St. Anne's Parish in Annapolis, Maryland. But it is also possible that school continued to operate in the reverend's absence, as that was probably the case of the Bray school in King George County.

²⁸³Rev. Jonathan Boucher to Rev. John Waring, 9 March 1767, in *Ibid.*, 255.

* * *

Whether official or not, the history of the Bray schools in Virginia represents yet another example of how some enslaved Virginians learned how to read. In addition to demonstrating slaves mastering letters, despite the ever present “spirit of gentilism,” the history of the Bray schools in Virginia serves perhaps as possibly the most explicit example of another spirit in the colony, the Protestant book ethic or the idea that Protestantism engendered literacy. Indeed, like other stewards of the Protestant church, some early Virginians were not only men of horses and slaves, but also men of deeply held religious convictions.

They had been that way, as Perry Miller has shown, from the very beginning.²⁸⁴ In 1607, shortly after they arrived along the James River, the one hundred and four men who traveled aboard the *Susan Constant*, *Godspeed*, and the *Discovery* erected a church. Though that church offered little in the way of bricks and mortar, according to John Smith’s account, it served nonetheless as a religious safe haven for those poor souls who found themselves in the wilderness of the Chesapeake. Undoubtedly, writing to inspire in others a sense of his grand adventure, not to mention convey an air of reverence and civility, Smith wrote of his early travels in the chaste land: “I well remember wee did hang an awning (which is an old saile) to three or foure trees to shadow us from the Sunne, our walles were rales of wood, our seats unhewed trees till we cut plankes, our Pulpit a bar of

²⁸⁴Perry Miller, “The Religious Impulse for the Founding of Virginia: Religion and Society in Early Virginia” *WMQ* 5 (October 1948): 492-522.

wood nailed to two neighboring trees. . . This was our Church.” For the first few Sabbaths, divine services were conducted in this manner. Shortly thereafter, as the settlers of Jamestown began to grow in number, a more permanent church was built within walls of their emerging palisade.²⁸⁵ By 1619, when the first Africans were introduced into the colony, a new church had been built. Like the others before, it too was made of wood. It too reserved a place near the center of that small yet burgeoning colonial enterprise. That was a year before the Puritans, who had broken with the Church of England years earlier, sailed the high seas for their new Canaan, a land they would eventually call Plymouth.

Nonetheless, despite the economic reasons why the early settlers of Virginia came to North America, they were no less pious than their Northern counterparts who came to the New World years later. That is certainly the view of Anne Sorrell Dent whose treatise “God and Gentry” challenges current assumptions that the elites of colonial Virginia were irreverent of religion. That is also the view of Rhys Isaac, John K. Nelson, Joan R. Gundersen, and Patricia U. Bonomi whose studies of the church in the colony also reveal a gentry sort deeply concerned about and connected with the established church. Much in the same way that the settlers of Plymouth brought with them a sense of community and faith, Virginians had done the same.²⁸⁶ As they too were stewards of the Protestant book

²⁸⁵Smith, *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith*, eds. Edward Arber and A. G. Bradley (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1910), 957.

²⁸⁶Rhys Isaac, *The Transform of Virginia*; Patricia U. Bonomi and Peter R. Eisenstadt, “Church Adherence in the Eighteenth-Century British American Colonies” *WMQ* 39, no. 2 (April 1982): 245-286; Dent, “God and Gentry: Public and Private Religion in Tidewater Virginia, 1607-1800” (Ph.D. diss: University of Kentucky, 2001); Nelson, *A Blessed Company*; and, Gundersen, *The Anglican Ministry in Virginia, 1723-1776*.

ethnic, a notion almost as old as the Reformation itself, it hardly seems surprising that the number of literate slaves in the colony increased over time and probably far more than current scholarship or the present study is willing to concede. As conservative estimates of slave literacy rates makes plain, more and more enslaved Virginians were achieving letters. Some did so with the help of their masters. Others worked together and on their own.

Assuming that the projected rates for slave artisans established in chapter two faithfully reflect the number of skilled slaves in the colony who were literate, a fair account of slave literacy rates can be determined over time in the Chesapeake.²⁸⁷ Starting in the 1720s when several Afro-Virginians seized the occasion of Edmund Gibson's recent appointment as the Bishop of London, three per cent of the slave population had some knowledge of letters. In the ensuing decade, that figure grew nearly by a fourth. Between 1730 and 1739, 1,440 out of 40,000 slaves in Virginia could probably read. If not taught by local church wardens, it seems likely that some were taught by their masters, perhaps for both pious and self-serving reasons. It is also possible that some enslaved Virginians were sharing what they had learned. Whatever the case, because most masters needed slave artisans, some Afro-Virginians may have also known how to write as well. All the same, in the midst of that on-going struggle between the colony's parsons and indifferent slave-holders, growing numbers of slaves in the Chesapeake were nonetheless achieving letters. During the 1740s and 1750s, that number nearly doubled in part because of masters who imagined themselves the contemporaries of the patriarchs of the Bible began

²⁸⁷Considered over time and space, the archaeological evidence revealing slave reading and writing indicated that a small portion of slaves in the quarters could read and write—at the very least 4 per cent or 1 out of every 25 field slaves.

to listen to their slaves who demanded religious instruction. All-powerful father figures, some carried their slaves to church and permitted some literacy instruction and afterwards the sacrament of baptism. Among that group of literate Virginians was John Custis' domestic slave, Peter. In the decade that followed, that figure grew even more when the cultural ethos of patriarchalism of former decades made room for a new brand of paternalism. Increasingly, slave-holders like Jefferson, Randolph, and Robert Carter Nicholas permitted some of their "people" literacy instruction, a fact clearly corroborated by recent archaeological findings. By the 1760s, almost five per cent or 6,814 out of 140,500 slaves in Virginia could read and/or write.

Though that upward trend would continue well into the 1770s, things began to change and rather quickly when the founding fathers moved toward a rebellion against Great Britain. During that unfolding conflict, the Anglican church grew increasingly unpopular. Still reeling from the First Great Awakening, the colony's established church began to lose its once cherished position in the 1760s and 70s. As a result, between those two decades, enslaved Virginians' efforts to acquire a knowledge of letters were dealt a significant blow. That story is the subject for chapter five. (Table 29)

Table 29 Estimated Slave Literacy Rates, 1720-1776

Periods	# of Slaves	# of Literate Skilled Slaves	# of Literate Field Slaves	%
1720-1729	27,000	--	1000	3.7
1730-1739	40,000	--	1440	3.6
1740-1749	65,000	433	2,340	4.26
1750-1759	105,000	1,166	3,780	4.71
1760-1769	140,500	1,756	5,058	4.84
1770-1776	108,300	1,321	3,899	4.819

Sources:

[United States Bureau of the Census], *The Statistical History of the United States, from Colonial Times to the Present; Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (New York : Basic Books, 1976), 1168; Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 61 & 221; and, Inter-Colonial Runaway Slave Database.

CONCLUSION:
BETWIXT "UNHAPPY DISPUTES": SLAVE
LITERACY IN THE MIDST OF REVOLUTIONS

Peter [Custis] would have been sixty-two years old in 1777 and possibly long gone from Williamsburg and likely from this earth. As most African Americans, in the best of circumstances, generally did not live past their forties or early fifties, it is doubtful that John Custis' former domestic servant would have been around to see the colony he had once called home take up arms to fight British redcoats. Had he escaped somewhere North where he had the opportunity to pass for free, the change in climate might have had an ill effect on his health. Then again, he might have fared no better had he made his way to the warmer climes of the Carolinas. Wherever he found sanctuary, had he lived to that ripe old age, it is doubtful that Peter would have given much thought to the unfolding American Revolution, as he had won his own struggle to secure his freedom.²⁸⁸

The year 1777 proved to be a watershed in the history of black literacy,

²⁸⁸Christian Warren, "Northern Chills, Southern Fevers: Race-Specific Mortality in America Cities, 1730-1900" *JSH* 63 (February 1997): 23-56. Also see Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 90-91; 212-223; 246-253. Moreover, if notices from runaway faithfully represent a cross-section of the general population as most historians claim, it appears highly unlikely that Peter would have lived to age 62 in any colony. For a fuller account about problematic rhetoric concerning liberty and freedom, see F. Nwabueze Okoye, "Chattel Slavery as the Nightmare of the American Revolutionaries," *WMQ* 37 (January 1980): 3-28.

particularly in colonial Virginia. As colonials took up arms and declared themselves free, the Associates of the Late Dr. Thomas Bray took heed. Uncertain about the unfolding conflict “between great Britain and her Colonies,” they thought it wise to discontinue their work in North America. That spring they suspended their support of the “Negro Schools on the Continent of America,” ended their correspondence with their agents overseas, and began to wait for “an amicable Accommodation” to take place between the disputing parties. With the lone exception of the Bray Charity Negro School in Philadelphia which resumed its work after the war, the Associates’ proclamation signaled the end of nearly a century of religious philanthropy and biblical literacy instruction in North America.²⁸⁹

In the Chesapeake, the decision could not have come at a worse time. As the Revolution gathered force, the Anglican church began to lose its footing in Virginia. The declaration of rights, adopted by the Virginia Convention of Delegates on June 12, 1776, signaled the beginning of the end of the established church in the colony. Drawing largely on Lockean ideas of government, Virginians affirmed that “all men are by nature equally free” and are given “certain inherited rights,” among which were “the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience.”²⁹⁰

For many enslaved Virginians, this rejection of the old regime was hardly

²⁸⁹ Associates of the Late Dr. Thomas Bray, Minutes, April 1, 1777 in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, Ibid., 327. For a fuller account of the Bray charity schools in America see Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 1-38 and Monaghan, *Reading and Writing in Colonial America*, 327.

²⁹⁰ [George Mason]. *In Convention. June 12, 1776. A declaration of rights made by the representatives of the good people of Virginia, assembled in full and free convention; which rights do pertain to them, and their posterity, as the basis and foundation of government* (Williamsburg, Va.: Alexander Purdie, 1776), 1-2.

liberating; it set back their struggle for literacy. In accord with the Declaration of Rights, the Virginia Assembly took steps to relieve dissenting Protestant sects from the burden of Anglican parish taxes, about which they had long complained. To that end, it immediately suspended the payment of the public salaries of church parsons. Not long after the ink had dried on Declaration of Independence, Anglican churches were forced to close its doors. By 1784, as John K. Nelson's study of the church shows, Anglican church property was transferred to local Episcopal parishes. In that shift, among those displaced were numbers of enslaved Virginians, some of whom had found solace in the Anglican church and in certain instances in literacy instruction. This chapter tells that story, as it explores the larger subject of slave literacy in the Chesapeake in the nexus of the two revolutions.²⁹¹

* * *

The disestablishment of the Church of England in Virginia did not happen overnight. Far from it, the seeds of the church's demise can be traced back almost to the colony's beginning. By the late seventeenth-century, as the familiar story goes, religious dissenters played a significant part in the settlement of the Chesapeake. Much like the pilgrims of the Plymouth colony, many came to the colony in search of a Canaan they could call their own. Early on, for most Virginians who came to reside primarily in the Tidewater region, all of those lands further west, past the Potomac, the Rappahannock, the James, and the York rivers were judged ideal places for such religious refugees.

²⁹¹Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, chap. 12, esp. 285-292.

The dissenting sects agreed. As early as the late 1680s, French Huguenots and Quakers established several small communities in the colony beyond the fault lines of the colony's main rivers. But those particular groups of religious dissenters were small in number and did not make a lasting religious impression in the Chesapeake. Long before the social upheaval brought about by the Great Awakening, Joan R. Gundersen observed, the French Huguenots represented an insignificant community within the colony. By all accounts, they were not numerous enough to pay a full time cleric. Eventually, most married into other Virginian families, adopted the Anglican faith, and scattered into the colony.²⁹²

That was not the case of the German Protestants who also immigrated to the Chesapeake. Much like the French Huguenots and the Quakers, they too settled on the peripheries of the colony. Eager to foster greater economic opportunity, the governing body in Virginia endorsed Governor Spotswood's plan to encourage and likewise import increasing numbers of dissenters. Interestingly, the Governor's intentions had little, if anything at all, to do with being tolerant or pious. As the colony's leader, it was given to him to come up with schemes to make Virginia prosper. Importing dissenters had simply been a matter of good, sound business sense. Before Nathaniel Bacon and his "giddy multitude" had conspired to overthrow the colony, indentured immigrates were considered a useful source for cheap labor. Even though they seem to have lost some of their luster as a source of labor after Bacon's Rebellion, they were still considered useful, if for no other reason than performing the equally important task of conquering hostile natives and

²⁹²Gundersen, *The Anglican Ministry in Virginia*, 173.

settling the back-lands of the Piedmont. Rather than importing Europe's riffraff into the colony, as it had done before, the Governor happened upon the less than novel idea of encouraging dissenters to consider Virginia as their new Canaan.²⁹³

Forty-two German mining families came to the Chesapeake in 1714. Though some Lutherans came to enjoy greater religious freedom, others came seeking new fortune in the Rappahannock iron mines. Whatever their reasons, the Governor of the colony had his own plans. As the colonists concentrated in the long-established Tidewater region, they become anxious about the Algonquian-speaking neighbors on their borders. The German immigrants would serve as a useful buffer against that threat. Located on the margin of the colony, they marked the line between those lands that were settled and those that were not.²⁹⁴

To booster western settlement, Governor Spotswood arranged for the early settlers to be given a temporary exemption from all colony taxes, including those for the Anglican Church. For at least seven years, the German Lutherans in the colony were relieved of having to pay the parson's mandated and annual salary of sixteen thousand pounds. They were also relieved of paying a tax on their tithables. So as to further show their new German neighbors their good intent, the governing body in Virginia also gave

²⁹³Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*. Also see T.H. Breen, "A Changing Labor Force and Race Relations in Virginia, 1660-1710" *JSH* 7 (1973): 3-25 and his "Looking Out for Number One: Conflicting Values in Early Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *SAQ*, 78 (Summer 1979): 342-360.

²⁹⁴For a fuller account of dissenting sect settling the Virginia frontier, see Gundersen, 173-202 and Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 282-289.

them a church of their own, St. George's Parish, and permitted them to worship as they saw fit.

Thanks to these encouragements, the Lutheran population in Virginia quickly increased. They were formally constituted into the first of several frontier counties. One county, Spotsylvania, was named after their benefactor, the Governor. The other was called Brunswick. Around that same time, the Lutheran St. George church was also reconstituted and officially recognized as a regular Anglican parish.

For the parishioners there, the news came as little surprise. As it had been agreed upon before their arrival, once their numbers included four hundred tithables or more, the Germans were required to assume the burden of the established Anglican church by paying the church's taxes. In all likelihood, they probably considered it a fair exchange. In addition to establishing and enforcing land boundaries, the established church in Virginia provided for the general welfare of those considered members of its congregation and for a rudimentary education as well.²⁹⁵

By all accounts, there was little, if any, conflict between the established Anglican church and its German neighbors. Far from it, up to the 1740s, the two sects managed to cooperate with one another. The Reverend Hugh Jones recalled one occasion in which the Anglican vestrymen of Hanover Parish in King George County decided to build, at their own expense, a chapel for a dissenting congregation and pay a salary for its minister. Patrick Henry, Sr., the father of the American Patriot of the same name and then the

²⁹⁵Gundersen, *Anglican Ministry in Virginia*, chap. 8, esp. 173-175; Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 283.

rector of the St. Martin's Parish in Hanover county, also responded in kind when in 1734, he wrote a letter of recommendation for Reverend John Casper Stoeber Jr., who had been a minister of a German Lutheran congregation of the same county.²⁹⁶

Next to the Lutherans, the Presbyterians formed another significant group of dissenters in the colony. Much like their Lutherans brethren, the Scots-Irish arrived early in the eighteenth century. As early as 1708, if not before, they formed several small communities spread across the Shenandoah Valley. In much the same way that the Lutherans made the western counties of Spotsylvania and Brunswick their home, by the late 1730s, the Presbyterians carved out Rockingham, Augusta, Rockbridge, Albermarle, Charlotte, Prince Edward, and Berkeley counties on the Virginia frontier.

The Presbyterians' relationship with the Anglican church was quite different from that of the Lutherans. It was freighted with ambivalence from the start. But friction between these two Protestant sects, reflecting tensions in the mother country, did not become manifest until the 1750s, when the Scot-Irish Presbyterians began publically to demand exemption from Anglican church taxes. From that point on, the conflict between the two only escalated. Far from attempting to reconcile the dissenters, the Virginia Assembly saw no reason to offer relief. The Scots-Irish should be grateful that they enjoyed residency in the Old Dominion. They were not.

Before the Great Awakening came to Virginia, conflict in the colony between the Anglican church and the dissenting sects was muted. As a matter of a Royal decree, dissenters in the Chesapeake were granted official toleration. But that acceptance had its

²⁹⁶Hugh Jones in Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 283.

limits.

* * *

Although the Presbyterians won no concessions from the Assembly, their efforts were not for naught. They took shape as the religious climate was changing dramatically. The Great Awakening was reviving the spirit of evangelicalism in the Old World and the New. In Germany, it manifested itself in the form of Pietism. In England, this new brand of evangelicalism became identified with the Methodists. In America, the Awakening inspired a sense of religious zeal across all denominations. But, in Virginia, that spirit of revival stirred first among the Presbyterians.²⁹⁷

Between the late 1740s and the late 1750s, the number of the Presbyterian congregations in Virginia grew rapidly. This dramatic change was largely the result of the work of a log cabin academy started in Pennsylvania by a New Light Presbyterian minister by the name of William Tennant. Somewhere around the 1720s, the graduate of Trinity College in Dublin launched a religious college in Pennsylvania in order to provide ministers for the growing numbers of Presbyterians in the colonial backcountry. Tennant warmly embraced the new spirit of religious revival. He and his students scorned a religious faith that had become cold in formality and rigid in repetition. That hostility was surely due to resentment against the refusal of the Philadelphia Synod, the governing body

²⁹⁷Wesley M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790* (Durham, N. C.: Duke UP, 1930), 40-105.

of the Presbyterian church in Pennsylvania, to accept Tennant's log cabin college as an official institution and to license its graduates as preachers. Tennant was thus forced to strike out on his own.²⁹⁸

From Tennant's college emerged a cadre of bold New Light Presbyterian preachers, who, in a short time, found their way into the Virginia frontier. Perhaps the most celebrated of those former log cabin graduates was Samuel Davies, who between 1748 and 1759 served as the Presbyterian minister in Hanover County, Virginia.²⁹⁹ Passionate in his oratory, Davies inspired in others a deep sense of faith and mission. According to one eye-witness account, Davies sermons were not the dull, sensible homilies common in the Anglican church. His sermons were "inextinguishable [in their] zeal to save" and burned with a sense of "Sublimity and energy of thought." Davies' sermons, as Thomas Gibbons told it, enlisted from those who heard him a powerful reaction.³⁰⁰

Actively, Davies proselytized for his faith, crisscrossing the Virginia countryside to minister to all who would listen. To many Anglican parsons, Davies' work was unsettling, for his preaching tours attracted many of their own parishioners. Some accused him of

²⁹⁸Alan D. Strange, "Samuel Davies: Promoter of 'Religion and Public Spirit'" (MA thesis, College of William and Mary, 1985), 1-14; Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 40-67.

²⁹⁹By Gewehr's account, Davies was perhaps the most militant of the Presbyterian preachers in Virginia. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 68-105.

³⁰⁰Thomas Gibbons, "An Elegiac Poem to the Memory of the Rev. Samuel Davies," in George William Pitcher, *Samuel Davies: Apostle of Dissent in Colonial Virginia* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee, 1971), 65.

plotting to Presbyterianize the colony. Commissary William Dawson, for one, viewed Davies with awe and fear. “The Dissenters,” he explained to the Bishop of London in 1752, “were but an inconsiderable number before the late arrival of certain Teachers from the Northern Colonies.” Once the people had “quietly conformed to the doctrine and discipline of our church, constantly frequented the public worship of God, and the Christian sacrifice.” But ever since “Mr. Davies has been allowed to officiate in so many places. . . there has been a great defection from our Religious Assemblies. The generality of his followers, I believe, were born and bred in our Communion.”³⁰¹ Virginia Governor Dinwiddie was also alarmed by the minister, as Davies spoke to growing communities of dissenters in Louisa, Goochland, Amelia, Henrico, Albemarle, and Caroline counties. But Dinwiddie did nothing to stem that growth, since the Presbyterians provided a useful buffer against the hostile populations of native peoples and French subjects on Virginia’s frontiers.

Despite these concerns to the contrary, Samuel Davies worked within the confines set by the gentry and the established Church of England in Virginia. Like a number of other Presbyterians who came to the colony, he registered as a dissenting minister and applied for a license to preach. Unlike the radical preacher John Roan, who denounced the Anglican church as the “synagogue “of the Devil,” Davies assumed a moderate position and never indulged in making public statements against the established church.³⁰² Still,

³⁰¹Commissary Dawson to the Bishop of London, June 17, 1752, in *Fulham Papers*, 13: 47-49.

³⁰²Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 56.

Davies' work helped to set the stage for the rise of Separate Baptists who, for their part, were neither modest, nor quite so accommodating.³⁰³

* * *

For three decades, if not more, much has been written about the Great Awakening in America and the impact that the Separate Baptist movement had on African Americans in general and on Afro-Virginians in particular. In his study of life in early Virginia, Rhys Isaac described the Awakening as a turning point in which slaves and middling sort whites discovered a renewed sense of purpose and asserted a vigorous religious challenge to earthly social distinctions.³⁰⁴ For several decades past, Isaac's seminal cultural analysis has shaped a larger historiographical consensus about the social impact of the Awakening in Virginia. Overlooked by that consensus is the story of the how the Awakening disrupted enslaved Virginians' efforts to acquire literacy. Indeed, in their laudable efforts to explore the effects the Awakening had on others, most historians have failed to consider the ways in which that spiritual movement undermined slave efforts to achieve letters.³⁰⁵

³⁰³Ibid., 66-67

³⁰⁴Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 243-298. Recently, John K. Nelson's study of the church in Virginia has challenged currently held historical assumptions about the impact of the revival movement in the Chesapeake. Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 282-289. Unfortunately, however, Nelson's account adds relatively little to the history of African Americans acquiring letters in Virginia.

³⁰⁵For general studies of the Awakening and its impact on African Americans see Albert J. Raboteau, "The Slave Church in the Era of the American Revolution," in *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*, eds., Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman

By all accounts, the Baptist revolt in Virginia was a largely unlettered evangelical movement. That is certainly the view of those who lived and wrote about it. Isaac Gilberne, the Parson of the Lunenburg Parish in Richmond County, considered the Baptists irreverent and ignorant and their beliefs “whimsical Fancies or at most Religion grown to Wildness & Enthusiasms!” Judging from other published first hand accounts, most Baptists were stereotyped as a “poor and illiterate sect” and a band of “ignorant enthusiasts.”³⁰⁶

There is good reason for that view. Unlike other dissenting sects in the colony at the time, the Baptists in Virginia left only a few printed sermons. As Isaac sees it, orality was a defining mark of the Baptist persuasion. By contrast, the better-educated Presbyterians put a greater premium on the written and printed word. In 1758, Samuel Davies published a sermon on *The Duty of Christians* originally delivered in Hanover County. Expressing his faith in the Word, Davies admonished slave-owning Virginians to honor their Christian duty and teach religion to their slaves through letters.³⁰⁷ Virginia

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 193-216; Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 80-117; Jon Bulter, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990), 129-163. For an account of the Awakening and its impact on enslaved Virginians see Rhys Isaac, “Evangelical Revolt,” 345-368; *Transformation of Virginia*, 243-298; Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together*, 178-213; and, Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*.

³⁰⁶For quote, see Fithian, *Journal and Letters*, 72; Isaac, *Transformation*, 174.

³⁰⁷*The Duty of Christians to Propagate Their Religion Among the Heathens, Earnestly Recommended to the Masters of Negroe Slaves in Virginia. A Sermon Preached in Hanover, January 8, 1757*. London, 1758. With respect to Davies’ other published efforts to instruct Afro-Virginians also see his *The State of Religion Among the*

Baptists, however, did not share the Presbyterian demand for an educated ministry, nor did they see literacy as necessary to salvation. In most Separate Baptists' minds, God called the minister to preach and through Him the minister conveyed the divine word, as had the Apostles Peter and John.³⁰⁸ Moreover, Baptists did not have to read, digest, and then recite from memory the Lord's Prayer, Creed, or the Decalogue, as did Anglicans. For the Baptists, entrance into the pious circle came only by way of testimony to a spiritual experience from whence they experienced regret, sought repentance, and achieve grace and the promise of eternal life. Such confessions were deeply emotional and quite heartfelt. Instead of refraining from open and public expressions of emotions, as did Anglicans and to some degree Presbyterians, the Baptists encouraged expressions of emotion that included atypical and unusual bodily gestures seen as signs of the Holy Spirit. Separate Baptists also rejected all things remotely associated with the gentry or the established Anglican church. Thus, literacy was deemed unessential because religion, they reasoned, was to be felt and not read.³⁰⁹

Not surprisingly, the Great Awakening under Baptist leadership won followers among the colony's poor whites and among enslaved Afro-Virginians who were all

Protestant Dissenters in Virginia; in a Letter to the Reverend Mr. Joseph Bellamy of Bethlem, in New England: From the Reverend Mr. Samuel Davies, V.D.M., in Hanover County, Virginia. Boston, 1751; *Letters From the Rev. Samuel Davies, etc., Shewing the State of Religion in Virginia, Particularly Among the Negroes.* London, 1757; *Letters From the Rev. Samuel Davies, and Others; Shewing the State of Religion in Virginia, South Carolina, etc., Particularly Among the Negroes.* London, 1761.

³⁰⁸Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 106-137.

³⁰⁹Isaac, "Evangelical Revolt," 349-355.

considered brothers and sisters in faith. Baptist attacks on the cold formality of the Anglican church appealed to the lower and poorer sorts who yearned for a more emotional and informal faith.³¹⁰ Baptists welcomed slaves to their gatherings, where they were under no pressure to read and recite. Emotional display was the essence of faith.³¹¹

In this context, the Great Awakening undoubtedly affected slave literacy in significant ways, not the least of which were those efforts orchestrated by the dissenters in the colony to achieve tax-free status. Much as the Presbyterians had done during the 1750s and early 1760s, the Baptist pressed for relief as their numbers swelled. In the spring of 1776 they seized the moment, when the Virginian legislature began to consider seriously the official status of religion in the Chesapeake.

In retrospect, there can be little doubt that the religious pluralism of the evangelical revolt informed the founding fathers' endeavors to declare themselves free of Great Britain. In May 1776 Virginia's patriots gathered in Williamsburg to create a new system of government. That historic session revised the English Act of Toleration which had governed the relationship between the established church and dissenters. Baptists and

³¹⁰Ibid., 358.

³¹¹Incidentally, in her *The World They Made Together*, Mechal Sobel demonstrated the several Baptist churches had slave members who were literate. For example, of the seventy-four original members who signed the Dan River Church covenant, eleven were black. Similarly, of the one hundred and fifty-eight members who signed the Hartwood Church covenant, twenty were Afro-Virginians. While these numbers are quite encouraging, they still do not change the fact that the Baptist church was typically not given to the idea of teaching their religion by way of letters and reading. Further, given this account, it stands to reason that most of those enslaved black who joined those Baptist churches were literate before they became members. Sobel, *The World They Made Together*, 191.

Presbyterians seized the moment to petition the assembly for tax-exempt status. On October 16, 1776, the dissenters in Virginia submitted one combined appeal. Affixed to that petition were ten thousand names. The subscribers declared that “their hopes have been raised and confirmed by the declarations. . . with regard to equal liberty. . . [and] . . . having long groaned under the burden of ecclesiastical establishment, they pray that this, as well as every other yoke, may be broken and that the oppressed may go free.” Later that year, their prayers were answered. The pharaoh of the Anglican church had no choice but to let the dissenters go, and that he did grudgingly, much like the pharaoh of Exodus.³¹²

For Thomas Jefferson, who co-authored the Declaration of the Rights, religious tyranny, which brought with it intolerance, was the real pharaoh of Virginia. Inspired undoubtedly by the ideas of the Enlightenment, Jefferson endorsed the idea of religious freedom and liberty. Free from the tyranny of an established church, the new American republic would prosper. As his *Notes on the State of Virginia* explains, “difference of opinion is advantageous in religion. The several sects perform the office of a censor morum over each over other.” In his view, imposed religious uniformity violated man’s natural rights, as it forced “one-half the world [to be] fools, and the other half hypocrites.” By contrast, in a free democratic society, diverse faiths contributed to the advance of truth. Returning to his *Notes*, Jefferson observed “Had not the Roman government

³¹²“To the Honourable Speaker and House of Delegates, the petition of the Dissenters from the ecclesiastical Establishment in the Commonwealth of Virginia,” October 16, 1776 in Isaac, *Transformation*, 280. For a fuller account of the *Virginia Declaration of Rights* and likewise the role the Great Awakening played in its development, see Isaac, *Transformation*, 278-285.

permitted free inquiry, Christianity could never have been introduced. Had not free enquiry been indulged, at the era of the reformation, the corruptions of Christianity could not have been purged away.”³¹³

In the wake of Virginia’s declaration, the days of the established church in Virginia were numbered. With the nullification of the parish tax system, the Anglican church in the colony was like an old lion who no longer had any teeth. By 1786, that old lion died. “Almighty God hath created the mind free,” as Jefferson’s Statute of Religious Liberty made plain, “all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments. . . tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness.” To guarantee that Virginians did not fall victim of religious tyranny, the General Assembly, declared “that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship. . . nor shall [he] suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief.”³¹⁴

* * *

For a number of Afro-Virginians, Jefferson’s statute concerning religious freedom represented a stumbling block in their efforts to achieve letters. Had Peter lived to see the day when the churches had closed, he might have mourned. Other Afro-Virginians might have joined him, as the access they once enjoyed to letters became more restricted. Consider an estimate of slave literacy over time. In 1730s, 3.6 per cent of the slaves in

³¹³Jefferson, *Notes*, 191-193.

³¹⁴Jefferson, *Statute of Religious Freedom* in Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 298.

Virginia were more than likely literate. By the time Presbyterians and Baptists began to flock into the colony, that figure grew by almost one-third. In the 1760s, slave efforts in achieving letters reached their zenith when an estimated 6,814 out of 140,500 or 4.8 per cent of the slave population had acquired some knowledge of reading and writing, in part because of the work of the Bray schools in Virginia and in part because of the slave themselves who shared what they learned with others. But, in the aftermath of the Great Awakening and the American Revolution, the percentage of literate enslaved Virginians declined. By the 1770s, the rate by which slaves in the Chesapeake had learned to read and write fell by .2 per cent. In the ensuing decade, that figure dropped off by another .3 per cent. (Table 30)

The explanation for this downward spiral in slave rates of literacy seems twofold. The first has to do with the impact of the Great Awakening itself. There can be little doubt that the Baptists did have an effect because they made no efforts to teach slaves to read and write. In their view, literacy was unnecessary for achieving faith. The other explanation lies with American Revolution that slowed and understandably so slave efforts to achieve literacy.

While slave efforts in Virginia to learn were indeed beset by the Great Awakening and the American Revolution, perhaps the most significant challenge came in 1800. That summer, those efforts in letters produced a slave revolutionary. Much like Thomas Jefferson, he too felt it had been his natural right to rebel so that others of his race could be free of the tyranny of their masters. And though his efforts were to no avail, the discovery of his plot forever changed slave literacy in Virginia and not for the better. After

Table 30 Estimated Slave Literacy Rates, 1720-1789

Periods	# of Slaves	# of Literate Skilled Slaves	# of Literate Field Slaves	%
1720-1729	27,000	--	1000	3.7
1730-1739	40,000	--	1440	3.6
1740-1749	65,000	433	2,340	4.2
1750-1759	105,000	1,166	3,780	4.7
1760-1769	140,500	1,756	5,058	4.8
1770-1779	180,500	1,930	6,498	4.6
1780-1789	224,000	1,770	8,000	4.3

Source:

[United States Bureau of the Census], *The Statistical History of the United States, from Colonial Times to the Present; Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (New York : Basic Books, 1976), 1168; Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 61 & 221; and, Inter-Colonial Runaway Slave Database.

his plan was betrayed, by a slave ironically named Pharaoh, Virginians outlawed assemblies of slaves, including gatherings of “pupils in school settings” and religious meetings without the supervision of whites.³¹⁵ The name of that enslaved Virginian was Gabriel. And like the seraphim of the Bible he was probably named after, Gabriel came with a message. Echoing the revolutionary words of Thomas Jefferson, he also proclaimed: It is self-evident. All men are created equal and they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. To secure these rights, it becomes necessary, at times, to take up arms and fight. But Gabriel had another implicit message. In literacy, he also proclaimed, lies the real promise of revolution, to transform first the mind and then the body, if the heart is willing to follow.³¹⁶

FINIS.

³¹⁵For the quote see, Monaghan, “Reading for the Enslaved, Writing for the Free,” 327. For the law restricting slave religious meetings, see Shepherd, ed., *SAL*, 3: 124.

³¹⁶For betrayal of Gabriel, Pharaoh gained his freedom. For a fuller account of Gabriel’s story, see James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730-1810* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 105-115 and Douglass R. Egerton, *Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slaves Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill, 1993), 70-71; 83-84; and, 149.

EPILOGUE: HISTORY &
MEMORY IN BLACK HISTORY

History is a reconstruction of the past, one that examines the artifacts of a time passed. Memory, on the other hand, is a knowledge of that period, but as it actually existed. History is an objective and a scientific thing. But memory is not. Mulling over this conflict, Pierre Nora observed, history destroys memory in part because it is a reconstruction that reflects more about the present than it does the past.³¹⁷

Consider black history as one such example. Ever since 1773, when Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* appeared in print, resistance has been the central theme or driving force in the history of the African American experience in United States. To the poet's modern-day critics, Wheatley's real value lies not so much in what she wrote as in the very fact that she wrote anything at all. Indeed, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and others have observed, Wheatley literally wrote herself into existence. Assuming the laurels of poetry, letters, and print, she not only challenged white assumptions of black inferiority but also forged the foundation of the African American literary tradition, a tradition currently defined primarily by resistance or, as Gates put it,

³¹⁷Pierre Nora, "Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Memoire" *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 8.

the ability to make the western book talk back.³¹⁸

But what did Wheatley think of her writing? Did she think of herself as the mother of a literary tradition? Did she conceive of her work as a form of intellectual challenge to those who thought the Negro incapable of authorship and letters? Probably not, which highlights the fact that there is more to Phillis Wheatley's story than most of her modern critics have been willing to concede.³¹⁹ There is more to Phillis Wheatley than current notions of history will allow. Indeed, lost in the present narrative about the celebrated slave-poet is the story of a figure about whom little is actually known: the young Gambian African who survived the Middle Passage to become a bond-servant in the Wheatley household, the prized pupil of her mistress Mary Wheatley, and the close friend of Orbour Tanner a fellow bond-servant and confidant. Even less appears to be known about Phillis Wheatley, the freed woman, the wife of John Peters, and the mother of three children. Instead, for well over two hundred years, those stories regarding the first significant writer in the African American belletristic tradition have warranted little to no attention. As fate would have it, those stories have almost been consumed by a heated scholarly debate over what we should make of the majestic phoenix Phillis Wheatley and what she has come to

³¹⁸Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 127-169. For other accounts of the talking book, see Robert B Stepto's *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*; Frances Smith Foster's *Written By Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*; and, William L. Andrews, *To Tell A Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*.

³¹⁹As Gates correctly observed, Wheatley had been too black for her contemporary critics and too white for her modern-day critics. In each case, the issue of race overshadows and defines the critical reception of the poet during her day and in the present. Gates, *Trials of PW*, 82.

represent.³²⁰

So, does history destroy memory? When I began to write what would become “Breaking With Tradition,” this inquiry loomed foremost in my mind. Convinced that there are other ways of writing about history in general and writing about black folk in particular, I decided early on that this excursion into the lives of enslaved Virginians, how they learned to read and write, and how those efforts to achieve letters changed over time would not be confined to the accepted construct of resistance which has become the dominate paradigm of writing black history. Instead, I wrote to complicate that very paradigm that we have come to accept about black people and about the nature of black history in the United States.³²¹

By unearthing the African American literacy tradition, I tried to achieve several goals at once. First, I sought to challenge long held notions about the African American

³²⁰Except for William H. Robinson’s *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings* and, to a lesser extent, June Jordan’s “Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley,” few scholars have sought to understand the poet outside of her work. Robinson, “On Phillis Wheatley and Her Boston” in his *PW and Her Writings*, 3-69; Jordan, “The Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley” *MR* 27 (Summer 1986): 252-261. In my own work on Phillis Wheatley, I considered her used of accents as one way in she expressed meanings that had little to with writing poetry and more to do with matters in her personal life. Bly, “Intertextual Cadences. “When Wants and Woes Might Be Out Righteous Lot’: Excavating Phillis Wheatley’s Transcending Voice of Accent” (MA thesis, College of William and Mary, 1999), 36-77.

³²¹Recent scholarship is also beginning to search for new paradigms in writing black history—albeit slowly. For a fuller account this move in that direction, see the introduction of Clarence E. Walker’s *Deromanticizing Black History: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (1991) and Elizabeth McHenry’s *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002). In both instances, or so it is my opinion, Walker and McHenry fall short of the exciting premises they introduced at the beginning of their work.

literary tradition and its underlying emphasis on the trope of the talking book. In uncovering the story of Afro-Virginians like Peter [Custis], I have tried to tell a story about black people that had little or nothing at all to do with the current focus on black resistance. Ironically, Peter's flight towards freedom certainly qualifies his story within the current protest genre of black historical and literary writing. As a matter of fact, I first became aware of enslaved Virginians who acquired literacy but opted not to abscond through studying the notices for fugitive slaves. Even so, Peter's story also reveals a part of a much larger story I tried to tell, the story of enslaved Virginians who mastered letters and decided not to run but to stay home and to make the best of those particular circumstances in which they lived. Consequently, in both urban and rural settings, they used their knowledge of letters to realize goals of their own design which had little if anything to do with resistance.

Gowan Pamphlet represents one such example. Rather than desert his mistress and turn his back on the community of black people among whom he was raised, Pamphlet stayed Jane Vobe's bond-servant until she passed away in 1788. In addition to observing his duty to the proprietress of the King's Arm Tavern, the New Light minister served a higher lord and savior. In that spiritual calling, he read the Bible and delivered sermons that inspired in others, slaves and whites alike, a willingness to take a leap of faith and change their religious beliefs. During the 1770s and 1780s, when his congregation grew, the Virginia-born slave relied on the literacy lessons he had probably received at the Williamsburg Bray school to develop and form his own Separatist Baptist church. Not surprisingly, while a number of literate slaves like Peter thought it best to run away from

their masters and discover a new life and live on their own terms, other enslaved Virginians who also knew how to read and write chose to stay put, despite the fact that the literacy skills they acquired more than likely increased their chances to pass for free.

Thirdly, when I began to write "Breaking With Tradition," I sought to expand the accepted narrative about slave education. While in Woodson's seminal study, slave efforts to gain a knowledge of letters over time and space is primarily qualitative in nature, as is true of the others cited in this dissertation, I have attempted a different approach, exploring such sources as probate inventories, runaway notices, church records, and slave artifacts, to develop a quantitative account of slave literacy. In so doing, I have sought to unearth the past as it existed. I have tried to reclaim memory and its complexities which at times appeared to be odds with itself.

Ultimately, in unveiling these interlocking stories within the larger narrative of slaves reading and writing, I tried to explicate symbolically, albeit indirectly, another aspect of the life of Phillis Wheatley: the dutiful servant who remained faithful to her mistress and earned manumission in 1773. Whatever success I have managed to achieve in these endeavors, I attribute them all to the Almighty and to a lesser extent, my wife who has endured me and this work in all its manifestations. Only the mistakes and shortcomings of this treatise are my own.

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For the past several years, Antonio T. Bly has published a number of articles and reviews covering different aspects of early American and Virginia history, African American Studies, and the History of the Book in America. Currently, he is a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Mary Washington.