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"Work Enough for Head and Heart": Dramatic Interaction and the Social Dynamics of the Steward-Planter Relationship in Antebellum Tidewater Virginia

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"WORK ENOUGH FOR HEAD AND HEART"\textsuperscript{1}

DRAMATIC INTERACTION AND THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS
OF THE STEWARD - PLANTER RELATIONSHIP
INANTEBELLUM TIDEWATER VIRGINIA

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A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Anthropology
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfilment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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by
Neil Macrae Kennedy
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Neil Macrae Kennedy

Approved, April 1993

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Undoubtedly, the greatest debt I owe is that to my family for their love and support. Without them, of course, none of this would have been possible.
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Society is not primarily a material entity, but is instead a dynamic creation of human interaction. Interaction can be thought of as a type of drama or theatre in which individuals take upon themselves prescribed social roles, each of which has its attendant privileges and obligations. Failure to fulfil the expectations of the social role results in disruption of the interaction and necessitates a redefinition of the relationship between the particular participants in the interaction, as well as a redefinition of the relationship between the larger groupings of which the roles are a part.

By the late eighteenth century the traditional patriarchal social order in the American South, centered upon the plantation, was faced with a serious and fundamental conflict between the organic nature of the plantation economy and the increasingly unavoidable and incompatible capitalist industrialization movement. At issue in the changing economy of the South was the ability of the plantation gentry to continue to define the social order in their own propertied and parochial terms. The nature of the economy resulted in an increasing tendency towards the separation of social from economic spheres of interaction and acquaintance. The gentry could no longer rely upon kinship, deference and honour as social controls sufficient to maintain the social order as defined by the gentry.

This paper will examine this period of Southern history with particular interest in the relationship between absentee land owners and hired plantation managers, or stewards. Under the terms of the social order established by the Southern gentry, social power was a result of both control and ownership of property. While, most stewards held a level of control over the plantation economy equal to that of a planter, they lacked the crucial element of ownership and were thus relegated to a secondary position in the social order. Given the nature of absenteeism, however, the steward held a strategic position in the flow of information concerning plantation affairs to the owner. Using this control and the widespread decline of patriarchal authority, some stewards struggled to achieve a measure of social prestige not normally attendant to the role they performed. Resulting disruptions in the interaction required a redefinition of the social and economic aspects of the relationship between steward and planter, and indeed a redefinition of the very nature and position of the planter class in Southern society.
DRAMATIC INTERACTION AND THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS
OF THE STEWARD–PLANTER RELATIONSHIP
IN ANTEBELLUM TIDEWATER VIRGINIA
INTRODUCTION

This study grew out of an examination of a rather extraordinary set of documents written by George Washington Parke Custis, a wealthy planter, to Francis Nelson, manager of Custis' absentee-owned estates. These letters revealed that Nelson was withholding important financial information from Custis, who appeared unable to enforce his will upon his employee. Over the space of nearly twenty years Custis alternately complimented Nelson's crop yields or he remonstrated Nelson for his uncooperative behaviour; finally Custis had to resort to dismissing Nelson. Further research in archival collections produced a number of very similar situations and it began to appear as though this was ground not previously covered in the extensive literature of antebellum plantation social and economic life. While this study concerns itself with the Tidewater Virginia area, most of its content is applicable throughout the Upper South.

Recent years have seen a remarkable proliferation in the number of plantation studies, particularly those dealing with the late antebellum period. The great majority of this literature, however, concerns itself with white-black relationships and, to a much lesser extent, with black-black
relationships. The literature on white-white relationships on the plantation has been scarce indeed, and has largely been concerned with intrafamily, economic or political-organizational aspects of these relationships, rather than with social interaction outside of the kin network. The main form of this latter type of interaction, on the plantation, was that between landowners and both hired overseers and managers and, while the former have been dealt with fairly extensively, the latter have been scarcely discussed. This seems to be because few studies have adequately dealt with absenteeism amongst planters and as a result they have ignored the steward, the chief employee of the wealthy absentee landlord.

There are two central hypotheses to this study, the first of which is that interaction theory, and the critical interpretation of the role-playing nature of society, provides an important framework for studying a period of economic or class struggle. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in the Upper South was a period of drastic economic and social change. Urbanization, industrialization, and the rise of professional classes (particularly lawyers and bankers), challenged the plantation system in fundamental ways and left the planters struggling to maintain their ability to define the social order in their own terms. Studies of the plantation economy of this period which focus exclusively upon
market forces fail to capture the social tension and anxiety attendant to a period of economic change. Changing economic roles require a change in social roles and in social order and a redefinition of the elements of social power.

The second hypothesis of this paper is that given the economic transformations occurring at the time in the Upper South, there existed a new opportunity for plantation stewards to subvert the nature of their relationships with their planter employers, using their control over information to gain for themselves a measure of social power and prestige not normally attendant to their economic role. Planters were besieged by challenges to their power and the stewards examined in this study were able to significantly alter their relationship to their employers.

This study was based largely upon collections of personal letters, but also incorporates the Personal Property Tax and Land Tax Lists, and Census Records, while other materials were consulted, such as Account Books, Court Records, Will Books, agricultural journals, and Tidewater newspapers. One of the greatest difficulties faced in this study, despite extensive research, was finding suitable collections of primary source materials—particularly letters, but also account books, and court records. Virginia is blessed with a tremendous quantity of archival material, however, the very breadth and historical depth of the material has to some extent jeopardized its
accessibility. The frequently idiosyncratic circumstances of accession have meant that family papers are very often found scattered between several archives with quite limited cross-referencing between collections.

It is unfortunate that the perspective of this analysis has been somewhat limited by the absence of letters from other family members involved in the employer-employee relationship: Mrs Nelson seems to have been involved in nursing Custis in the 1850's, William McKean refers to "the Ladies" on the Roslin Estate, while Edward Watkins' two teenaged daughters lived on the plantation the entire length of their father's stewardship and indeed one of them married a Jerdone. Unfortunately, none of the collections examined contained letters from other family members directly involved in the steward-planter relationship. Such family letters, if they exist, would broaden the basis of analysis and would further illuminate the social aspects of the interaction between steward and planter.

A great deal of time was spent in archival research to try and eliminate the possibility of kinship ties existing within any of the historical steward-planter pairs that are described in this paper. A kinship bond would have brought an element of uncertainty into this analysis beyond the scope of this paper, and some other potentially illuminating collections were not examined because of this very
uncertainty. A further difficulty in this study was presented by the destruction of the New Kent County Court House records during the Civil War. These records may have clarified the nature of the disputes, and possible settlements, between each of the Custis and Jerdone families and their respective stewards. Despite these unfortunate obstacles, it is hoped that this study will shed some light on a surprisingly overlooked element of Southern plantation society.
CHAPTER I
DRAMATIC INTERACTION AND ROLE THEORY

What we mean is that a man is nothing else than a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the ensemble of the relationships which make up these undertakings.³

In the interpretation of past cultures the role of ethnographic history, it would seem, is to search out the meanings that historical action "contained and conveyed" for the participants.⁴ Society, present or past, rather than being primarily a material entity, is the dynamic product of human action, and even social structures and institutions have a dynamic character. The nature of this activity is shaped by the image participants have both of themselves and of their numerous and varied relationships with other participants.

Society attempts to facilitate interaction by establishing implicit expectations of performance in order to limit uncertainty and unpredictability. Thus:

Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics ...automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect.⁵

Interaction therefore has a promissory or contractual nature in which the character of participating individuals is
accepted on faith, a faith which is itself based on prior knowledge of the character of individuals from similar social settings or with similar conduct and appearance. This principle carries with it the necessary provision that an individual "who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought to be what he claims he is." But clearly this is not always the case.

When actions or realizations occur which disrupt a performance then the basis of that interaction will be in question and the continuation of interaction is jeopardized. That is, at their extreme, disruptive events result in the participants finding "themselves lodged in an interaction for which the situation has been wrongly defined and is now no longer defined." This most often occurs when a strategic secret of one of the participants becomes revealed to the other(s) — a strategic secret being "intentions or capacities" which were to be kept secret in order to prevent the other(s) from "adapting effectively to the state of affairs the [actor] is planning to bring about." The secret is often revealed by the inability of the actor to maintain competence over the long-term performance of a role, for:

Whether his acquisition of the role was primarily motivated by a [sincere] desire to perform the given task or by a desire to maintain the corresponding front [for social prestige], the actor will find that he must do both. 

Roles in which the participants are frequently prone to disrupting the interaction, by an inability to continue to
foster the impression that the role is being sincerely performed, are called discrepant roles and they are found in all cultures at all times.

In general the intensity and direction of human activities reveals the patterns of association between the participants. Interaction is the means to establish, to maintain, and occasionally to attempt to alter, these associations or relationships. Interaction includes both oral and written expression; texts which are stylized such as letters may be read as explicit expressions of intent and behaviour. Participants always seek to use interaction to portray themselves in a light favourable to their own perceptions of their relationships with other participants - perceptions which may not always accurately reflect the opinions of those other participants. Culture is thus a set of related languages which serve to communicate information about intention, social roles and expectations. Languages have both literal and figurative elements which include material culture, social roles, gesture, and demeanour.

In a related sense, social interaction can be interpreted as a form of exchange or social trading that occurs most frequently on uneven terms in which one person's actions have a highly significant effect upon the reactions of those in a deferential position. The dramaturgical approach seeks to enter into "the imaginative universes of other persons" through historical documents of all types in order to
understand how those aspects of self-image, expression, direction, and even coercion — all of which are inherent in social action and exchange — affected the patterns of association between participants in historical processes.\textsuperscript{9}

The dramaturgical model proposes that there are three elements to all social processes: economic exchange, social interaction (or performance of a social role), and the exercise of authority. All three are tightly bound together and an imbalance or discrepancy in the fulfilment of one element will likely result in collapse of the association or relationship.

Although the operation of society is based upon sincere performance of roles, each of which have social, economic, and political aspects, this is not to assume that all of the participants in society's interactions interpret or view actions in these terms, or that they are even aware of the role-playing nature of their involvement in society. As roles become ritualized through repetitive performance they can become internalized and the participants are likely to unconsciously come to see the role(s) that they maintain as inherent to the social order. Rhys Isaac suggests that this dramatization or ritualization of roles occurs most frequently when social inequalities are extreme, and when they are clearly understood as such.\textsuperscript{10} Alternatively, it would seem that when inequalities are not clearly defined or understood by the participants then there is an opportunity for those in
deferential positions to reshape - socially, economically, and hierarchically - the nature of their relationship(s) to those in socially superior positions.

The intention of this paper is to illustrate this dynamic process by using as an example the relationship between the plantation owner and the plantation manager or steward in the context of waning Southern patriarchal authority. This paper does not assume that a conflict between social and economic interests and obligations, of a type which occurred in the several examples examined, occurred in every relationship of this sort during this period. This paper argues instead that the nature of the association between plantation owners and hired stewards was such that there was ample opportunity for the steward to use his economic power to realign his social and political relationship to the owner. Clearly there were many stewards who maintained throughout their career a sincere interest in performing the given task and who had no interest or fewer clear opportunities to subvert or otherwise alter the nature of their association with their employer.
CHAPTER II
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Virtually all perceptions of the historic American South, whether they be perceptions of the family, the Church, or of the rural and urban social economy, have been permeated by idealized images of the plantation system.¹¹ This system, with its allusions to the English feudal manor, owes its unique nature to the most influential group of immigrants to Colonial Tidewater Virginia, the so-called Cavalier Culture. These younger, and therefore largely disenfranchised, sons of the English aristocracy, generally more familiar with London and commerce than with the manor house and state politics, saw emigration to the Tidewater both as a means to escape the English Civil War and as a means to "return to the English country life from which they had been excluded."¹²

These younger sons often left Britain because of "attenuated or conflicted relationships with their English families," and the early Colonial period was marked by a spirit of optimistic independence from the restrictive and exclusive English social hierarchy, although the underlying social order still resembled English society, albeit in
simplified form. Their sons, however, taught to make their own decisions, saw that personal profit and security were to be gained only through a closer commercial connection to England and this necessitated integrating themselves into the dominant English social and economic networks. With time, Southern society became increasingly elaborate as an emerging property-based gentry elite sought to restructure Colonial society to make themselves "more recognizably British." This society was not entirely British in nature for its development had been modified by a long-term tension or balance between conservative inherited values and the dynamic, contextual nature of experience.

Elites in any society are defined by three related characteristics: a high degree of control over the means of production, exclusivity, and some form of relationship to their social environment. In Southern society these three conditions were met, and the social order was perpetuated by, two closely related means: kinship and honour. Anglo-American kinship is cognatic and bilaterally defined; that is, mother's, father's, and spouse's families are equally important in determining kinship, while the degree of inclusiveness is a matter of choice and is not predetermined. Southern kinship, while explicitly about family, was also implicitly about spheres of authority surrounding the planter-patriarch, since, following the British pattern, Southern kinship networks centred around the
male head of the household and extended outwards to form the
primary support group in a society which offered little
institutional assistance. Thus, the pervasive pattern of
patriarchy, or paternal authority, as it evolved in Southern
society seems to have been an early eighteenth century
"accommodation to the peculiarities of plantation society,"
rather than an ineluctable adaptation of British society.¹⁸

Nevertheless, kinship in the South provided a widely
inclusive and powerful structure within which social behaviour
could be controlled:

Thus, Southerners defined demanding norms of proper kin
behavior and responsibility that neither distance nor
death abrogated... stresses and strains were not uncommon
[because]... Family behavioral expectations were high,
with the possibility for great emotional security, as
well as severe emotional pains if the norms were
breached.¹⁹

Prior to the Civil War the ability of kinship to control
behaviour in the South was scarcely tested, since prior to the
1860's very low levels of immigration had enabled the South to
remain insular in population and parochial in perspective.²⁰

However, clearly not all interactions were undertaken with kin
and those interactions which took place outside of the kinship
network, particularly business dealings, were frequently
activities rife with anxiety and fraught with distrust.²¹

The Southern code of honour served to define and enforce
family obligations but honour served importantly as a means to
limit the degree of uncertainty inherent in non-kin
associations. It is a subject which has been much studied and
only a few points need be related here. To the Southern gentry there were three main elements to honour: "the individual's own feelings of self-worth, the reputation displayed to the public, and the public's assessment of that reputation." Interaction, therefore, was a crucial element of honour since honour, unlike conscience, was mostly from the observer's perspective. Just as interaction, as has been mentioned, is most often the ritualized performance of a role or character, honour is a system or language of signs which regulates behaviour although, again as with interaction, participants may not always sincerely adhere to the code of honour. True sincerity, however, was not as crucial as its apparent presence, since Southern honour was in its nature highly superficial: "Southerners were concerned, to a degree we would consider unusual, with the surface of things - with the world of appearances," and physical insults, or a nose tweaking, were as invidious as a verbal slight against one's character.

This ideal vision of the patriarchal order, fostered by ideals of honour and kinship loyalty, was established and perpetuated by the planters themselves as they sought to portray a society where "white's eyes focused intently upon the plantation house and its occupants." But this vision of an ideal patriarchal order has come to describe the South in a manner that perhaps misrepresents the reality of the
complex and dynamic interrelationships that characterize all societies. Particularly after the American Revolution there was a serious and fundamental problem in Southern society:

How does an authoritarian elite based on the Old European principles of feudal aristocracy, like the Southern ante-bellum elite, maintain its status in an increasingly industrial and democratic world? Eventually the levelling forces of such a society make the aristocratic elite archaic and anachronistic.25

Such a society became susceptible to social unrest and fervent agitation for reform.26

Consequently, Rhys Isaac has suggested that the late eighteenth century in Virginia decline in the relevance and pervasiveness of patriarchal authority, was at least partially accentuated by an increasing tendency towards the separation of social from economic spheres of interaction and acquaintance.27 That is, there was a gradual shift from patriarchal social and economic relationships, centred on the plantation, to economically motivated patronage relationships of a nature which suggests incipient capitalism. This economic and social diversity of the early nineteenth century in Virginia made the attempts of the planter class to maintain traditional patriarchal social and economic relationships a matter of both some importance and of considerable delicacy.28

Overseers, who managed plantation labour and were the most common plantation employee, rose from the class of
indentured servants of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and the manner in which they were treated by the planters suggests that traditional social distinctions were clearly understood by both parties. In a slaveholding society physical labour becomes a demeaning activity, and those most closely associated with that activity, and those most closely interacting with the slaves, are likely to be those lowest in the social hierarchy.

Despite the considerable efforts of the widely-read agricultural journals to improve the image of the common white farmer, little of that image was transferred to the overseer profession into which many young common farmers entered. Indeed, overseers appear to have been unequivocally despised by most historians and planters alike, and numerous letters to Southern journals attest to this feeling:

Thus, master of his own actions, and responsible really to no one... Happy lot is that of overseer - for a man without education generally, and born to labor. He is well paid for playing the luxurious part of gentlemen, and possesses, for the time, the plantation in his care, with all its means of contributing to his comfort and pleasure.

Second to the less common position of steward, overseers were indeed paid more than plantation tradesmen who were generally employed sporadically for carpentry, blacksmithing or other tasks, but rarely did overseers enjoy their position for very long.

The dissatisfaction and distaste that planters held for overseers had a tangible result in the latter's average length
of tenure: less than four years in the Upper South, and half of that in the Deep South; as with salary, this length of tenure was under half that of stewards.\textsuperscript{35} In the Colonial period overseers were often paid a proportion of the plantation's crop yield instead of a fixed salary but this was so abused by overseers, who were not expecting to remain in the same position for very long and so worked the slaves and the soil beyond reasonable levels to increase their pay, that most planters soon replaced this system with a fixed salary.\textsuperscript{36} Letters written from planter to overseer offer explicit and terse instructions, while overseers returned brief notes of a business-like nature with personal information appearing only very rarely.\textsuperscript{37} Much of the overseers' predicament did not rest with the overseers themselves but with the position: given maximum responsibility with minimum authority, relative isolation on the plantation, modest wages, poor education, and little access to plantation surplus, overseers rarely met their employers expectations and earned only the animosity of both slaves and planters.\textsuperscript{38} Despite their dismissing them so frequently, planters continued to need overseers, however, for the very reason that they reviled them - the planters' own unwillingness to be too closely associated with physical labour and slaves. For their part young sons of common farmers continued to seek employment as overseers not just for the pay but also for the opportunity, however slight, to rise to the level of landowner
and planter themselves. The plantation system was the only large-scale economic system operating and in order to succeed by the expectations of the society one had to immerse oneself in the network of dependent relationships which maintained the paternalistic plantation system. There was no shortage of yeomen willing to take employment as an overseer or steward.

The wealthy planter class of Virginia was apparently familiar with the office of steward held by high servants of the English aristocracy, as this is indicated by the occasional use of the term steward, in Census records and personal papers, to indicate one who was paid to manage property for another. Generally, stewards were employed to supervise large estates, or often several estates at once, each of which would have one or more overseers. Removed, however, from the etiquette-bound English high society which they were trying to emulate, the Virginia planters do not appear to have been certain of the social conventions to be employed when interacting with a hired land manager.

Unlike the overseer, the importance of the steward was clear:

Although he was employed upon a salaried basis, the heavy responsibilities entailed in his appointment as the manager of large agricultural interests practically guaranteed his acceptance into respectable society. Usually a man of considerable education, the average steward exhibited those so-called gentlemanly qualities in which so many overseers were strikingly deficient.
The legal definition of the steward also recognized the nature of the position:

An important officer who has the general management of all forensic matters connected with the manor of which he is steward. He stands in much the same relation to the lord of the manor as an under-sheriff does to the sheriff.44

The five references to the steward position in the Statutes of Virginia each give precedence to the steward over the overseer.45

Even with apparently clear distinctions between steward and overseer, functionally and socially, it is surprisingly difficult to determine how many planters employed stewards. This is largely because the Census and Tax Lists do not consistently or clearly distinguish non-residential from residential ownership, and only the most prosperous of such absentee planters were likely to employ a steward. Neither do the Census records consistently separate "manager" from "overseer", largely because of a widespread synonymous historical use of the two terms.46

It seems that the essential distinction between overseer and steward was that the latter performed all of the economic functions of an average planter, including the supervision of overseers, but for whom the social prestige attendant to the economic role was not equivalent to that of a true planter since the steward still bore the social inferiority of one who was hired. One of the essential functional distinctions between steward and overseer was the formers' authority to
sell crops at his own volition, the assumption apparently being that the steward was closer to the local market than the absentee planter and thus in a better position to sense the most judicious moment to sell. This function necessitated a further distinction: a steward had the authority to leave the plantation at will, a significant liberty definitely not allowed the vast majority of overseers. Certainly the plantation manuals explicitly deny this right to overseers.\(^{47}\)

There are numerous cases in which land was managed by relatives, or by neighbours, often temporarily in the case of recently deceased land owner. This situation is usually difficult to discern in the historic record, and often only a chance statement in a letter or record book will reveal the context of stewardship. In the case of a neighbour's management it is particularly hard to distinguish this from the steward position, but it is perhaps important to note that in such cases the neighbour does not appear to have referred to themselves as a steward.\(^{48}\)

It seems that absentee planters frequently gave stewards the opportunity to live in the plantation's great house, if there was one, an important social privilege that seems to have very rarely, if ever, been extended to an overseer\(^{49}\). It would be difficult to overstate the symbolic importance of home and property ownership, or at the least the appearance of ownership, in the antebellum South. To be the "independent head of a household" was the necessary and sufficient
condition for fulfilment of Southern society’s characterization of a gentleman.\textsuperscript{50}

Ownership and independence, or the appearance thereof, symbolized two crucial things: the availability of capital and social/political enfranchisement. Economic power, political power and the power to command status are all elements of social power, and it is disparity in social power that defines inequality.\textsuperscript{51} In antebellum Virginia social power was the result of both control and ownership of capital, broadly defined. Whereas the steward maintained control over a considerable portion of a planter’s capital, the essential element of ownership was not part of the steward’s social power. This paper will apply the dramaturgical approach to three sets of letters written between steward and planter in order to illuminate how in these cases this tension between economic power and social authority affected interaction and redefined the nature of their association.
Tidewater Virginia and the Locations of Plantations Mentioned in the Text

CHAPTER III
ROSLIN PLANTATION

The first analysis of a steward-planter relationship to be presented is based upon a collection of thirty-nine letters written by William McKean of Roslin Plantation, Chesterfield County, Virginia, to his employer, the merchant James Dunlop of Glasgow and London. The letters cover the period from late 1809, when McKean arrived at Roslin from Scotland, through to his departure from the estate in early 1818. The letters available are duplicate copies written by McKean in the plantation's letterbook, all the pages of which have survived intact.

James Dunlop appears to have arrived in America by 1790, and is known to have settled in Petersburg, Virginia by 1801. In 1808 he acquired the nearby Roslin Plantation property through his wife, Nancy Gilliam Dunlop, the daughter of Charles Duncan of London, a Petersburg merchant. Dunlop clearly gained a fine plantation, for Duncan had been a careful owner, taking out a Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia policy in August 1796 to insure the farmhouse there, and two additional policies in 1805 to insure a new and impressive plantation house and seven new outbuildings. Between those two dates the value of the buildings and the 670
acres of the estate had increased from $3917 to $8409.55

Despite its proximity to Petersburg, Charles Duncan may have resided on the plantation for only a small portion of the year, and perhaps viewed the estate as something of a showpiece to be used during the entertaining season.56 James Dunlop, however, clearly saw the plantation as a profitable enterprise and in his first year as owner he increased the number of adult slaves from 20 to 38, the number of horses from 6 to 12, and by 1814 he had enlarged the plantation from 670 to 832 acres. In 1815 Dunlop renewed Duncan’s 1805 Mutual Assurance Society policies to insure his investments.57

While it is not clear just when James Dunlop, and presumably accompanied by his wife, returned to Glasgow, it is apparent that he had done so before William McKean arrived to manage the Roslin Estate in November 1809. While James Dunlop does not appear to have returned to America, it seems that his brother, John, continued to travel between Virginia and the ports of Britain on the Dunlops’ merchant vessel, The Powhatten.58 McKean’s letters suggest that John managed the plantation in 1809 prior to McKean’s arrival, and continued to exert some influence on the management of Roslin at least into 1810, to the occasional consternation of McKean.

McKean’s letters are well-written, polite, and generally forthright, and they suggest that he was relatively well educated and quite familiar with the numerous treatises on
agricultural practice which James Dunlop sent to McKean, and with which Dunlop himself appears to have been familiar. The letters are strictly concerned with the financial and agricultural circumstances of the estate with scarcely any family or casual information. Dunlop and McKean's relationship appears to have been generally good at the start but increasingly deteriorated over their differing agricultural philosophies.

McKean's first letter from the estate is quite positive, with optimistic views about his ability to further improve such a fine estate and to correct what he sees as mistakes made by John Dunlop in his management of the property. John's work on the levee "does not please me at all", McKean states, and William determines to make changes[^69]. By the next summer McKean is writing a carefully neutral letter to James indicating that John and himself are in dispute over how many crops should be planted each year, and signifying a willingness to defer to James Dunlop's final authority. McKean favours the more conservative two crops, while John successfully argues for the profit potential afforded by three crops.[^60] McKean later pointedly complains about the terrible effects of soil exhaustion upon some areas of the Estate.[^61]

This dispute over profits and scales of development was at the root of the increasing friction between McKean and the Dunlops. McKean writes:
I am conscious of having acted a faithful part in the performance of my duty here and conducted the business with as much interest and attention as if it were my own & in a manner which I know will ultimately prove to your advantage. It is utterly impossible to improve an Estate of this extent considering the Situation it was in & make money at the same time... had I dreamed [before taking the appointment, that] your object was more to make a profit than to improve the Estate, I certainly would have arranged matters more to your satisfaction... after considering these things I hope you will perceive that your money has not been squandered away or lost, as I fear you are under the impression of.\^62

Indeed, McKean appears to have been frequently called to account for expenses, for example:

You mention in your letter of 6 Jany. that I must not go farther till a part of the money already laid out is reimbursed... I hope you will find that the money has not been laid out to any extravagant or unnecessary purpose, but in a way calculated to make a return\^63.

These are, in themselves, planters' complaints no doubt frequently heard by stewards, but in this instance they formed the backdrop to the communication problems which were, ostensibly at least, the main reason for the dismissal of McKean.

McKean promises in his first letter to send James a "monthly transcript of my proceedings",\^64 as apparently requested by Dunlop. His actual frequency of correspondence was just under once every four months, with two gaps of eight months each, an interval clearly at variance with James' expectations of his employee. One example of Dunlop's frequent annoyance is evidenced by:

In both your last letters you seem to complain very much of irregularity in [my] writing & mention that I had completely abandoned the system of informing you what kind of cropping was going on at Roslins.\^65
Given the nature of trans-Atlantic shipping at the time, undoubtedly further delays and even losses were incurred in the conveying of these letters. McKean uses this as his excuse, although the letterbook indicates that regardless of these mitigating factors the frequency of correspondence was well below Dunlop’s expectations. McKean only offers as an explanation that "writing letters is a task I very much dislike"\textsuperscript{66}, which seems a hollow excuse given that it was his contractual duty, not his whim, which necessarily ordained the frequency of his correspondence.

When a number of sheep disappear from the plantation accounts, McKean is accused by Dunlop of blaming the loss on what Dunlop appears to believe is a fictitious account of thieving runaway slaves. McKean apparently convinces Dunlop of the existence of runaways but in a second letter he is then left denying complicity in the matter:

\begin{quote}
You cannot suppose I would allow runaway negroes to harbour on the Estate or even in the neighbourhood if I knew of it, if I did, it certainly would show indolence & great carelessness...\textsuperscript{67}
\end{quote}

Despite the likely veracity of McKean’s defence, this episode is evidence that an important element of trust had disappeared from the relationship. McKean recognizes this in a later letter when he writes that "you seem to have lost that confidence in me which is absolutely necessary should subsist between you & whoever manages your Estate here.\textsuperscript{68}" A early as 1812. McKean is inferring that he has opportunities for employment elsewhere, but is staying on at Roslin Estate
out of attachment to the land. He suggests to Dunlop that his salary should be increased "as none of those here [are] at all capable to undertake the charge", and he has had unspecified offers of other employment. When disagreements between Dunlop and McKean become intolerable and McKean agrees to leave the plantation, he leaves for England and does not gain, or choose to undertake, further employment in Virginia.

The final letter in the collection was written by McKean from Liverpool, upon his return to Britain, and it is an emotional one in which he expresses:

I cannot account for your conduct towards me lately, there is some mystery in it that I cannot comprehend, I do not suppose it can be owing to my management... I have these eight years past made myself more of a slave in fact, than any one on the Estate, as I was in a manner the servant of all... I confess I am not a little disappointed at the manner you have acted, as I had no right to calculate on such treatment.

Then:

As to the fabrications which I learn you listened to if you choose to place confidence in them it is no fault of mine... however much your letter... has tended to mortify and injure my feelings I have the inward satisfaction to know that I have acted upright.

While the nature of this matter is unknown, it seems remarkable that McKean does not recognize the frustration clearly felt by Dunlop over the lack of communication provided by his steward. Hence, it is important to note that McKean focuses upon his sense of personal indignation, without noting his failure to fulfil Dunlop's expectations. The letter has the tone of one who feels that he has admirably performed the duties of a planter yet has been personally slighted by a
suspicious and callous associate, rather than by a dissatisfied employer.

As with many planters, particularly absentee planters, the Dunlops wanted to maximize short-term profits, even at the risk of diminishing the long-term productivity of the plantation. This goal was, naturally enough, frequently at odds with the steward's own interests in sustaining a long-term appointment. Short-term profits might just have easily been obtained with only an overseer at Roslin; as supervisor of labour the overseer was responsible for the single greatest contribution to short-term profit. Long-term planning required one well-versed in agricultural theory and with experience in the matter. Balancing the two objectives as well as the other benefits of land ownership - such as capital and prestige - was necessarily the primary concern of all planters,71 and for the absentee planter it was the task of the steward to perform the duty to the greatest benefit of the planter.72 This role, difficult as it was, put the steward in a crucial position in the planter's world. The steward expected then, as McKean did, to be treated with the same respect accorded a planter.
CHAPTER IV
THE WHITE HOUSE PLANTATION

The second collection examined consists primarily of fifty letters written by George Washington Parke Custis of Arlington, Virginia, to Francis Nelson, the manager of Custis' White House Plantation in New Kent County, Virginia. The letters cover the period from early 1832, when Nelson replaced a William Claiborne, until late 1856, at which point Nelson's employment was terminated. The White House Plantation included just over thirty-five hundred acres of the most highly valued land in New Kent County and consistently received the highest land tax assessment in the county through the period for which records are available. Similarly, in terms of personal property such as livestock, slaves, and buildings, the estate received the highest tax assessment most of the years documented.

Although the White House had played an important role in Virginia's history prior to 1802, the year in which he reached his majority, it seems that Custis never lived at the White House. In that year Custis inherited a total of nine thousand acres in New Kent and King William Counties and over one thousand acres at Arlington, the only property to be personally managed by Custis. Custis seems to have had
mixed success with stewards throughout his life. General George Washington frequently took to court on misdemeanour charges, John Price Posey, the steward of the White House plantation while Custis was still a minor attending boarding school. After several heavy fines following convictions on the charges of theft of property from the estate, Posey was hung on July 15, 1787 for the destruction of the New Kent County Court House by arson.79 When Custis, the step-grandson of President George Washington and the father-in-law of General Robert E. Lee, died in 1857, it was with his finances in a state of complete disarray. Towards the end of his life Custis had become obsessed with the completion of his great home at Arlington but this burden had proved greater than his livelihood, or his questionable financial acumen, could comfortably support.80 While easily distracted from the daily requirements of plantation management, Custis was deeply concerned with the improvement of agricultural practices in the South and the majority of his letters to Francis Nelson reflect this concern.81

The relationship between Custis and Francis Nelson, his steward, illustrates the discrepant role performed by the steward in that Custis felt obliged to be courteous and even conciliatory towards Nelson - out of respect for the vital economic functions that Nelson performed for Custis - and consequently had difficulty in using traditional patriarchal authority to enforce his will upon Nelson. Nelson was hired
to manage the White House Plantation in the best interests of Custis and, thus, at a fundamental level Nelson was financially accountable to Custis. The different manner in which each appears to have interpreted this aspect of their relationship was the prime motivation for the dismissal of Nelson.

Custis' letters to Nelson are friendly and conversational, suggesting certain courses of action that Nelson might undertake pertaining to crops, harvesting, and supplemental fishing. Instructions to send household stores up to Arlington and comments about the weather and crop prices frequently appear, although importantly, family information is almost completely absent. The tone in these letters suited the respect Custis held for Nelson's "able and judicious management" of the plantation; at one point Custis even recommended to Nelson that he publish "a short memoir" of his agricultural improvements. Despite his apparent interest in the productivity of the White House Plantation, Custis does not appear to have visited the plantation very frequently, perhaps twice in the period of correspondence. While there appears to be no means of verifying whether visits were actually made, it should be borne in mind that Custis was in his fifties when the correspondence in this collection started and that he frequently referred to being in an ill and weakened state.

While Custis was respectful, he was never deferential,
and he reserved for himself the right to determine when and where crops should be sold - a sound financial arrangement given Custis' proximity to Washington and his acquaintance there with both planter and mercantile classes. By 1855 the possibility of a railway line passing through Custis' property presented a situation in which Custis instructed Nelson to negotiate in his interests with the railway company, while Custis maintained clear direction of the ultimate decision. Custis' letters regarding the railway demonstrate considerable anxiety on his part lest Nelson not achieve the most profitable terms with the railway company. Thus, in every letter that has come into this collection it is quite apparent that Custis viewed his association with Nelson as primarily concerned with financial profit.

The first suggestion of dissatisfaction on the part of Custis appeared in 1846:

I wrote to you about 3 weeks ago, and having receiv'd no answer, it is probable my letter may have miscarried - Not having heard from my Estates for nearly half a year I naturally feel anxious to hear from them. 

Concern expressed in another example from 1852:

I have rec'd no letter from you, tho I send almost daily to the Post office, nor have I received any letter from you nor heard one word from my Estate since the 17th of October, 1851, a period of eight months and an half. I am fearful the letter the Captain mentioned that you were about to write has miscarried.

Given the extent of trade and communication throughout the Chesapeake Bay at that time, it seems quite remarkable that
communication between employee and employer should have been so discontinuous. Importantly, in most instances of the complaint Custis allows Nelson the graceful option of claiming his letters had been "miscarried. Even allowing for busy harvest periods during which Nelson may not have had the opportunity to write, it seems highly unlikely that Custis was so naive as to suggest, for instance, that all communications over nearly nine months were "miscarried", particularly given the carefully worded admonitions that Custis sent later. In these letters Custis was indicating his expectations of Nelson's position and was thus reinforcing the employer-employee distinction while simultaneously allowing the social courtesy of a convenient, if unlikely, excuse.

Increasingly in the late 1840's, and into the 1850's, Custis grew concerned about his financial state:

I have but one thing more to ask of this World which is to be independent, in my few latter days that are yet left me... I hope another good crop will set me free & I shall then glide down the stream of life, with all the happiness this World can give me.88

His letters became filled with questions about the harvest and about the possibilities of securing an advance upon each year's crop in order to pay for expenses incurred at Arlington. Despite the increased urgency apparent in the tone of Custis' letters, Nelson does not seem to have responded with information and action in the manner that Custis deemed appropriate and this tension was exacerbated by two rather remarkable incidents.
The first of these incidents was related by Custis, in 1854, in this manner:

I have been most anxiously looking for a letter from you to explain the circumstances of [my] being made welcome, to my house, from the North by a copy of a writ in a suit against me in the Courts of New Kent for $900, by a man I have never heard of and for a debt that I never contracted.

Indeed Custis felt so humiliated by this writ that he never attended the Agricultural Exhibition in Richmond that month, although attendance would have been "a bright ray of sunshine amid the gloom of my existence." One might argue, of course, that the writ may have pertained to a matter of which Nelson was not aware. However, Custis was arrested some three months later, apparently still with no idea as to how the debt was incurred. One would imagine that Nelson would have pursued the matter on his employer's behalf, at least to discover the nature of the writ, considering that the courthouse was only three miles from the White House plantation and Nelson was going there, or sending someone to there, in order to retrieve his mail. The second incident, in early 1855, succinctly demonstrates the root of Custis' concern:

A gentlemen met me in Washington City a short time ago & smilingly congratulated me with ["] I congratulate you my Dear Sir, I am just from the Lower Country, where I learned with much pleasure that your crop of wheat of this year sold for Seventeen Thousand Dollars ["]. I replied I was glad to hear such good news, but had received myself no information on the subject.

These two incidents include the additional admission by Custis
that not only was the poor flow of information to him from his estates highly inconvenient it was also highly embarrassing. It seems remarkable that Custis was consistently unable to obtain information about the financial affairs of his properties and, while Custis may have been somewhat inept in the management of his personal finances, the absence of such incidents in the early letters suggests that at least part of the problem rested with Nelson.

In time Custis resorted to suggesting to Nelson that he was going to send General Robert E. Lee down to the plantation to balance the accounts. Surely the possibility exists that these trips were a thinly veiled threat intended to encourage Nelson to become rather more compliant, and it is probably no coincidence that these threats appeared at the same time that Custis was beginning to express his dissatisfaction with Nelson's recalcitrance. While Lee's involvement in the early period of Nelson's stewardship is not clear, Lee wrote from West Point Academy in 1833 to his father-in-law:

I am as much horrified as you are at the result of the settlement of Mr Nelson's accounts. I had hoped for a different exhibit, I certainly did not expect so large a balance against you.

The full intent of this letter is not clear but Nelson was apparently derelict, or otherwise faulty, in his accounting duties and the result were several actions taken against the estate by creditors.

Robert E. Lee's personal diary suggests that his
involvement did not recur until 1855, the same year in which Custis’ own letters to Nelson become terse and demanding.\textsuperscript{95} In that year Lee’s diary records at least two visits to the White House Estate, during at least one of which Nelson was not present at the plantation. Additionally, it seems that beginning in this year the plantation accounts were being reviewed by a William Winston, Custis’ lawyer. On December 5, 1855, Lee noted in his diary:

\begin{quote}
Saw Mr Francis S Smith & Mr Mackay of Alexandria in reference to the accounts of Mr Francis Nelson, Mr Custis’ Agent. They both gave their opinion that the accounts [that I] had were illegally stated.
\end{quote}

And on December 12:

\begin{quote}
Having accomplished all I could in investigating the accounts & administration of Mr Frank Nelson went to Richmond [to see merchants for copies of their receipts not entered in Nelson’s accounts]...
\end{quote}

Shortly thereafter, on February 15, 1856, Lee returned to the White House:

\begin{quote}
...to endeavour to settle Mr Nelsons accounts... Informed him I should be obliged to place the whole matter in the hands of a Commissioner of Accounts.\textsuperscript{96}
\end{quote}

Lee’s letter to the Commissioner reads, in part:

\begin{quote}
Many of his [Nelson’s] debits, or charges against Mr. Custis are not supported by vouchers at all, or the vouchers are not in proper or necessary form...\textsuperscript{97}
\end{quote}

The implication was that Nelson, with criminal intent or simply out of ignorance, was improperly increasing the expenses charged Custis for the operation for the estate. Unfortunately, the New Kent Court House records were lost during the Civil War so there is no opportunity to examine the
court proceedings or the settlement.

At the same time Lee wrote to Nelson stating his requirement that Nelson provide the Commissioner with all copies of receipts and inventories. His personal distress and shock over the matter is eloquently expressed in a letter to his wife:

I am quite concerned at your fathers annoyances and trouble growing out of Mr Nelsons derelictions of duty... [but] It is perhaps unreasonable to expect that others will do for us as they will do for themselves... I have found that only he does well who is well watched. I fear that if Mr Nelsons accounts were settled, whatever balance was found due your father, he would not be able to recover it, as I understand his [Nelson’s] speculations have all failed...

As in the case of William McKean and Roslin Estate, the emphasis is on the personal disappointment, cynicism, and bitterness caused by the failed relationship.

Was Nelson aware of his responsibilities? Apparently so:

You have been pleased to say that you acknowledge without hesitation my undoubted right to require information touching my affairs, and that as the faithful Agent, you hold yourself bound at all times to the orders of the Principal.

Custis certainly felt within the bounds of his rights as employer:

Surely there was nothing unreasonable or improper in my requesting of my Agent an account of my affairs, that have long been in his hands. Surely I have some rights, and always the right of requiring information respecting my own property & affairs, answering a letter is the poor civility that is observed between man & man in all parts of the civilized world. Why then am I treated with marked contempt? I appeal to your own sense of justice, and disposition to do "unto another as you would he should do unto you".
Out of respect for their past association, Custis was careful to define what it was that he was objecting to:

As the time of year is near at hand when it is customary in Virginia to give notice of the discontinuance of employment, I take this opportunity to say that I shall change the management of my Estates now under your care on the close of the present year [1856] ... In regard to the management of my Estates... there can be but one opinion which is that they have been managed with great ability and improved in both their appearance and products in a very high degree. My financial concerns have not been so satisfactory and it is with a view to reform in this particular alone that I am about to make a change... I am sure [you] will do me the justice to admit that I have always treated you with courtesy and respect and placed unbounded confidence in your desire and ability to serve my interests.¹⁰²

That it took several years of inconvenience and difficulty before Custis chose to release Nelson from employment certainly indicates the degree of respect Custis had for Nelson, but it also indicates the reality of the plantation system. Custis employed a manager of proven agricultural ability and in exchange he chose to endure a certain amount of financial irresponsibility on the part of his steward. But was the steward simply irresponsible, or was he a culpable player in a dynamic interaction in which he benefitted from the social prestige and financial advantage of managing a large plantation while making the most of his relative freedom from Custis' scrutiny?
CHAPTER V

PROVIDENCE FORGE PLANTATION

The third collection includes twenty-eight letters written from Edward Watkins, manager of the Providence Forge Estate overlying New Kent and Charles City Counties, Virginia, to his employers, members of the Jerdone family of Louisa County, Virginia. These letters cover the period from early 1825, shortly after he commenced employment with the Jerdones, until August 1831 at which point Watkins' employment was terminated. The Providence Forge Estate was substantially smaller in size than Custis' property, at just under fifteen hundred acres, with land valued at two-thirds the price per acre as compared to the White House Plantation.

Sixteen of Edward Watkins' letters were addressed to Francis Jerdone Sr, and twelve to his son William Jerdone who had largely taken charge of the Jerdone family's business affairs by 1830. Francis was a first generation Virginian and his involvement in the family's agrarian interests is indicative of the process of gentrification that many wealthy mercantile families underwent. His father, also Francis, established a successful merchant business in Yorktown upon
his emigration from Scotland in 1749 or 1750, but soon moved to Louisa County where he married into the well-established Macon family of New Kent County. By the time of his death in 1771, the Jerdone family owned plantations in four counties. While mercantile concerns were still a small part of the family interests that Francis Jerdone Sr partially inherited, the family's direction was clearly towards plantation ownership as the fulfilment of the first criteria of the planter class.

In marked contrast to the Custis Papers, the correspondence from Watkins to the Jerdone family focused less on financial matters than it did upon narratives of plantation life. In many instances they are surprisingly familiar and casual. Fortunately the preservation of two letters written by Francis Jerdone Sr to his sons concerning the period of management under Watkins allows for a comparison of Jerdone's and Watkins' perceptions that is particularly revealing. From this contrast it is clear that each party in the employment relationship had very different views of the success of their involvement in that relationship. Immediately prior to the employment of Edward Watkins, Edmund Christian, previously an overseer in the employ of the Jerdones, seems to have briefly been the manager of the Providence Forge plantation. Curiously, and perhaps revealing of the planters' treatment of overseers, his final letter in the collection reads: "I saw your notice in the inquirer [Richmond Enquirer] which I take
Certainly Edward Watkins' early letters were primarily concerned with the financial requirements of maintaining a substantial plantation. For instance, Watkins requested that Francis Jerdone Sr set up an account for Watkins' use in Richmond to facilitate his making supply purchases for the plantation. Additionally Watkins indicated that:

I am afraid that I shall not be able to Cultivate the land I am preparing for a Crop except you will be good enough to furnish me with two or three more horses... I would put my riding horse to work, but I am obliged to have him to ride to attend to the business as I ought to.

The business to attend to that required a horse seems to have been his monthly ride into Richmond; perhaps Watkins was less than pleased by the idea of appearing in front of his peers on a horse marked by work in the fields. The other aspect of his business that required him to ride was probably the traditional planter's honour and distinction of riding about the plantation on horseback in order to observe the work, a plantation which at just under two square miles could easily have been covered on foot in little more than two hours. Watkins was promoting - both for the benefit of Jerdone and for the Providence Forge overseer and slaves - the distinction between his managerial position and the manual labour which the plantation required.

Over time the letters changed to narratives of the daily activities undertaken at the Providence Forge Estate, with the health of the crops and changes in the weather being the
primary concerns. Two trends are apparent in Watkins' letters: self-determination and self-promotion. Watkins came to rely very little upon Jerdone when judging which crops to plant, or the most advantageous moment to market his crops. That is, in the final letters Watkins was essentially telling Jerdone about the success of the plantation and appears to have been running the plantation without any expectation of intervention by the Jerdones.

Watkins' letters are filled with references to the superior quality of each year's crop compared to the other plantations within the county. He stresses his personal abilities to the point of arrogance:

I have no doubt if you could see the work I have had done and the alterations I have made, you would say no man could have done better, considering when I took the Estate in hand everything was gone to wreck and not sufficient teams to do the work. One thing I am confident of, the improvements I have made and shall continue to make will cause the Estate to Sell for much more than it would have done...110

And:

...after doing my duty I must leave the result to Providence, after having a fair trial I shall make this Estate profitable. This much I think I can venture to say, in the five or six years from the time I commenced, I shall make it worth at least twenty-thousand dollars more than when I took the management of it. If I do not, [I] think [that] I shall be extremely sorry and much disappointed as I believe many would rejoice if I did not succeed.111

As has been noted concerning McKean and the Roslin plantation, the steward was constantly trying to foster the impression that he was achieving the best possible fulfilment of the various goals of the owner. Watkin's letters reflect this in
a manner which sociologists would call dramatic realization:

The work that must be done by those in certain statuses is often so poorly designed as an expression of a desired meaning, that if the incumbent would dramatize the character of his role, he must divert an appreciable amount of his energy to do so.112

In order to gain the personal respect and attention that he deemed appropriate, Watkins, and many other stewards, found themselves exaggerating the importance of their role and the success of their management.

Francis Jerdone Sr seems to have visited the estate only occasionally, leaving that duty to two of his sons, William and Francis Jerdone Jr. While no letters from Francis Sr to Watkins have entered this collection, two letters from William to Watkins are available. These letters are courteous and conversational, but strangely William offers more information about the Louisa County plantation than he asks for from Watkins about Providence Forge.113

When William Jerdone appears to have taken charge of part of the family business affairs, due to the failing health of his father, there is a remarkable change in the demeanour of Watkins' letters:

I have waited for some length of time with considerable anxiety expecting to receive a letter from you but have been disappointed: if I am not mistaken, when I last saw you I requested you to write to me. I hope you will no longer deprive me of the pleasure of hearing from you, but will write to me on the reception of this.114

The manner in which he had previously addressed Francis Sr - "I would not have troubled you so soon with a letter..."115
is markedly different from the manner in which he now addresses William - "Thinking it would be agreeable to you to hear from us, I embrace the present opportunity to write to you a few lines." Clearly Watkins presumptuousness was an expression of considerable confidence - his impression was that he was a social equal to William, who was after all still his employer.

It is important not to overstate such interpretations, for it ensues that William's brother, Francis Jr, marries Watkins' daughter Elizabeth early in 1831. This might suggest that Watkins was indeed judged to be a social equal to the Jerdones except that a frustratingly vague reference to the marriage has been preserved. Francis Jerdone Jr wrote this intriguing note to his older brother William:

You will see by this letter that I have changed my mind in relation to marriage and have come to the determination to be married at the time that was appointed which is the 3rd Nov[ember]. Let the consequences be what they may... I cannot bear the idea of it without giving you notice... This letter was written only four days before the intended wedding day and is, therefore, intriguingly suggestive of the possibility that his father, Francis Jerdone Sr, did not approve of this match. The letter goes on to imply that only William and a small number of friends will attend the wedding.

Despite the marriage, Watkins is dismissed from his duties as steward of the Providence Forge Estate at some point
in 1832. It is not clear how this actually transpired but fortunately there is adequate information about the justification for his dismissal as perceived by Francis Jerdone Sr. He states to William:

...I have duly considered the contents of your letter and am very sorry to find that Edward Watkins has been so remiss in his Duty not withstanding receiving such high wages as have been paid him, it is a pity he has been continued so long. 

P.S. In bringing Ew’ Watkins for a settlement of his transactions at the forge, if he has trusted out [?] your property [properly?] if I was in your place I would insist upon his taking it upon himself & making good before I paid him any of his salary, for now is your time. If it is not done now you need never expect it will (but this between ourselves). 

Two months later he sent a bitter diatribe to his son Francis Jr:

...I cannot give you any information how my plantation affairs go on here [Louisa County], not being able to attend to them [due to his failing health] I am under necessity of trusting to what they [the Louisa overseers] tell one. But I believe they are one half of their time idle, but this when it is considered is even better than paying some worthless chap [the steward, Watkins] high wages and maintaining him with his family for doing nothing, running about taking his pleasure of corrupting the Negroes & doing 40 times worse than nothing. I would not have such upon the place [even] if they would pay me...

The salient part of his objections being:

If a person could get a good industrious man such would be a valuable acquisition, but it would appear that such is not to be had. Therefore, all that one can do is to do without them. They are generally in that line so badly brought up they are fit for nothing. They have a wrong idea of liberty and freedom & think of doing nothing but what suits their ideas.

Despite Francis Sr.’s intention, a steward named Philip Brooks was soon hired to manage the Providence Forge plantation;
Brooks did not remain there long and of him little is known. Jerdone's reference to upbringing is clearly a reflection of his personal opinion about the social standing of land managers - that their actions were partly excusable on the grounds of their lack of breeding. Similarly, the final sentence indicates Jerdone felt that Watkins had assumed the pride and the independence of a planter despite the fact that he was hired and therefore was simply not "free" - the social and economic liberties Watkins seems to have assumed for himself were not those that Jerdone wished him to have taken. The two letters also poignantly exhibit the helplessness that Francis Sr felt. The Jerdones relied upon Watkins to manage the estate in their interest yet they could not monitor his activities closely enough to effectively deal with their perceptions of his intransigence regarding some unstated point(s).
CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

These three sets of documents each describe a sequence of historical events that can be read like the acts of a play, illuminating the actors' own narrative with inference and context. McKean, Nelson and Watkins strove to achieve the hallmark of the Southern gentleman - to be the independent head of a property - at the expense of their rightful employers. The deference that Dunlop, Jerdone and Custis felt was their privilege was not forthcoming, and all three seem to have had considerable difficulty in reminding their stewards of their social and financial obligations. They do not seem to have felt that they had recourse to acceptable legal means of reestablishing their authority, perhaps out of fear of embarrassment in the face of their peers. Even when General Lee, on behalf of Custis, did begin legal proceedings against Francis Nelson there is nothing in his letters or Diary which suggests that he was at all optimistic about the outcome. Ironically, the local court house, where the planter had traditionally both drawn and demonstrated his power, had become by the nineteenth-century hopelessly "unjust and ineffective," and "crimes against property were all but
encouraged, so inefficient, incompetent, and casual [was] the apparatus." No longer was the court system an exclusive arm of the planters; the sturdy package of class power and honour which had been intimately tied up in the court process was beginning to come undone.

Social interaction which occurs on uneven terms, as has been mentioned, is never static, but is evolutionary as:

Each participant confronts the other with demands and expectations, seeking continually to enhance his own power within the framework of their interaction.

The English manorial customs which had governed landlord-steward relationships for centuries proved to be an inadequate means to control or guide the relationship between planter and steward in the Tidewater area since the general economic conditions, and more specifically the labour conditions on the plantation, namely slavery, were so different from the English model. On larger plantations, which were usually those with stewards, planters generally made most of their income from "land speculation, rents, tobacco trading, slave dealings, and numerous offices" and this may explain why planters were more lenient with, or less aware of, some stewards' poor management of the property.

Of course, examples of troublesome stewards are not confined to Virginia or to the nineteenth century. In 1676 Christopher Jeaffreson left England for the West Indies and the island of St. Christopher in an attempt to revitalize the
old family indigo estate. Upon his arrival he found the estate poorly managed and badly in need of basic supplies. Jeaffreson quickly converted his estate to sugar production and by 1681 the estate was operating two sugar works and had forty-six working slaves - "one of the largest slave gangs in St. Christopher." He returned to England in 1682 fully expecting the estate to remain in the productive state in which it had been left. However:

In the hands of a dishonest steward everything quickly collapsed once more: by 1685 thirteen slaves and almost all of the livestock had died, the mill was inoperable, the fields were unplanted, his household furnishings were gone, and the startled Jeaffreson found himself deeply in debt.  

While extreme, this serves as an example of the difficulties inherent in absentee plantation ownership. Indeed, throughout the British Caribbean absenteeism had grave, disruptive effects upon the political and economic development of the region.

A similar example of Virginia absenteeism to that of the Roslin Plantation is the stewardship of Robert Booth, general manager to the London tobacco merchant Robert Bristow. In the first quarter of the eighteenth-century Bristow purchased a total of 11,742 acres in three Tidewater counties; Booth was hired to directly supervise two of the plantations and to hire an overseer for the third and smallest estate. In order to offset the high-costs of establishing these plantations and turn a profit, Bristow needed these estates to produce a top quality tobacco, but from the start Booth and the overseer
made amateur mistakes in cutting and packing the tobacco. While this was enough cause to replace the overseer, Booth was retained as manager for at least eleven years (1705-1716) despite Bristows' frequent letters accusing Booth of mistreating the slaves, and allowing so many adults and children to die that Bristow had to purchase slaves every year to replace losses. Regardless of these admonitions the Bristows continued to lose money every year:

Booth had concerns of his own, and the Bristows sometimes suspected he was giving much more attention to advancing his own fortune than to watching out for theirs... The Bristows expected some profit from the sale of surplus horses and cattle, but were disappointed; apparently the overseer [and Booth] either neglected the stock or converted some to their own use.125

The sheer distance between Bristow and his steward greatly exaggerated his uncertainty in controlling his wayward employee.

There would appear to be two salient qualities, closely related, to be examined when assessing the efficacy of a particular situation of absentee land ownership: "the extent of intervention by the landowner in the administration of his estates and the mechanisms which allow indirect control of these operations."126 While the relationship between steward and planter was primarily an economic one, as with every interpersonal relationship it also incorporated many social and political aspects. Thus intervention and control cannot be fully understood solely in the context of economics, despite the intentions of most plantation management studies.
Both intervention and control required knowledge of the conditions on the plantation, and it was largely this factor which determined the effectiveness of the absentee planters' authority. Some absentee planters, such as Maryland's Edward Lloyd, profited enormously from their ownership of several large estates with numerous stewards and overseers, but only by tightly controlling the management hierarchy and devoting an enormous amount of effort to compelling and securing the flow of information from their estates. But this was rare, and their other business and family dealings kept the great majority of absentee owners from visiting their estates on all but the rarest of occasions. The three case studies presented here each illustrate the ability of the steward to control the quantity and quality of information which the planter received. If control over time is power, then equally powerful is control over information.

Without apparent support from the court house, the planters were in a position where it was unclear to both themselves and to stewards how they might practically direct the activity of the stewards. Effective power results not merely from a means of punitive action, but from an effective means of communicating intent. That is, the planter, given his position in authority must:

Convey effectively what he wants done, what he is prepared to do to get it done and what he will do if it is not done. Power of any kind must be clothed in effective means of displaying it.
The only recourse that the planters seem to have felt that they had was the same as that used against problem overseers: dismissal and the implication that employment references will not be forthcoming. Overseers on absentee estates without stewards often had a measure of autonomy but rarely were they employed for more than a few years,\textsuperscript{130} so why were the three stewards presented here each maintained in office for much longer than one would expect given the planters' problems in controlling the flow of information and their inability to otherwise intervene and resolve the invidious challenge to authority?

Clearly the economic and hierarchial problems were balanced against the third element of interaction: social interaction. Socially the steward was at an indistinct point between the planter class and the large body of leaderless and directionless yeomen,\textsuperscript{131} and their letters distinctly suggest that many of these stewards felt themselves to be the near social equals of their employers, something an overseer was in no position to intimate since they had little control over information. Stewards inflated the importance of their role through dramatic realization, and they also idealized their role to engender in the planters the belief that these stewards were related to them in a "more ideal way than is always the case" and to obscure the routine nature of the steward's position. Idealization can also serve to obscure illegality, error, compromise, and the lack of certain
qualifications to perform the role. In this case one of the most important qualifications lacking on the part of the stewards, from the perspective of the planters, was an immersion in the code of honour and loyalty that was an integral part of a planter's upbringing.

In the South, exclusivity of rank was based upon one's occupation, material possessions, and social skills. Rising above one's rank was very difficult, social mobility being strictly circumscribed, although, one's status could be completely dashed by a loss of honour in the eye's of the community. Of the many elements of the Southern code of honour, two are important for this discussion: oath-taking and deference. The word of a gentleman was considered to be equivalent to his signature on a contract and was not to be challenged. Neither was it to be abused, and when McKean and Nelson failed to fulfil their contractual obligation, to provide regular dispatches concerning the condition of plantation affairs, a serious breach of Southern ethics had occurred. The letters of Custis indicate a strong sense of personal indignation and resentment over this affront to a gentleman's agreement.

In Virginia, "an extended hierarchy of deferential relationships" delineated social rank and obligation; deference shown to a superior was a "psychological cement"
which assured those in superior stations that their social position was clearly demarcated. Condescension, in its original meaning, was an expression of kindness and decency shown towards an inferior, this also serving to show those in inferior statuses that their position was just as clearly recognized:

Being affable and condescending was required of the man with rank, but clearly the lower the subject of such attention was, the less solicitous one had to be. Being personal in nature, such a system was bound to be uneasy and, at times, unpredictably violent.

In the expanding social and economic complexity of the nineteenth century, deference was no longer assured and even the appearance of deference was not always a guarantee that the underlying social order was as intact as one believed. Certainly Custis and Francis Jerdone Sr discovered that the deference they expected was not forthcoming.

Individuals have two basic elements: character, or personality and integrity, and performer, or the fabricator of impressions. Society operates most efficiently when these are one and the same, but when an event occurs which is expressly incompatible with the impression fostered, such as occurs with discrepant roles or with the breaking of a gentlemanly agreement, consequences are felt at three levels. First, disruptions in social interaction challenge the self-conceptions of those involved. Thus the planter may have become critical of his class' ability to command authority, while the planters' inability to effectively control the
steward may have encouraged the latter's assumption of social equality. Secondly, the very direction or focus of the interaction becomes unclear and the lines of authority are confused. Lastly, the larger social units, gentry and upper yeomen, represented by the participants had their legitimacy and permanent reputation put to test.\textsuperscript{138} That is, in every interaction in which a planter was unable to use traditional patriarchal authority to command an employee then the very long-term survivability of that authority was challenged.

There were certainly other anomalous groups from this same period in Southern history, for the most part also products of this increasing cleft between social and economic interaction or acquaintance. One of the more interesting ones involves the remarkable lack of large-scale banking in the South. While recent data suggest that banks were actually quite important, and grew at a steady rate, through the nineteenth-century they did not diversify away from agrarian interests and become the major power brokers that they had already become in the North.\textsuperscript{139} Most planters were very suspicious of industrial development, for in many ways it threatened the nature and economy of the plantation system, the very area that bankers saw the greatest stability and growth for themselves. In many ways:

\textit{Antebellum Southern monetary and financial activities can be viewed in terms of different classes struggling over a number of specific economic and noneconomic processes which constituted Southern social life.\textsuperscript{140}}
Thus bankers' decisions were heavily influenced by social class concerns but it is not yet certain with which group, merchants/factors or planters, the bankers were most intimately involved.

Traditionally it was held that banks supported the class structure and dominance of planters, who thought that banks would provide a means to escape the spiralling financial trap of indebtedness to merchants and factors. However, while the majority of the bankers dealings were with planters, since planters were virtually the only group borrowing money, the bankers increasingly took an interest in supporting industrial concerns and the profits that these ventures generally produced.¹⁴¹ This interest served to increasingly fracture the social relationship between bankers and planters, who had relatively little capital and thus attenuated economic power. Although it was not taken, the opportunity had existed for the planters to encourage the development of banks and to bring banks under their control and thus perhaps gain a measure of competitiveness with the North.

The professional lawyer in the South faced a similar distrust from planters, those who might require their services but were unsure as to the lawyers' allegiances, and antipathy from the poor whites, those who feared lawyers from uncertainty as to their new role in a traditional society.¹⁴² This conflict was generally most prevalent during that transition period when a region passed out of the
frontier stage of development, a period in which many planters':

call for a united front against clerks, lawyers, and Scotch merchants crystallized widespread anxiety over the swift economic and political changes taking place...¹⁴³

For instance, in North Carolina's piedmont area of the 1770's several lawyers were brutally beaten by mobs of planters and poor whites in a series of riots that raged across the frontier.

The planters feared that their traditional control over the local courts was quickly eroding and that corrupt legal officials were hindering the planters' access to trade routes.

The planters, and an organized political arm of the planters called The Regulators after their proposed Regulation Acts, believed that the primacy of property was threatened by the proliferation, and very often non-propertied wealth, of lawyers and merchants. This despite the fact that initially many planters had seen professional lawyers, and the litigation process, as a means to harass and profit from other planters and poor whites, thus helping to create a situation in which the legal profession made itself indispensable to the functioning of the society. Many lawyers acquired economic power and wealth very quickly but took much greater lengths of time to achieve some semblance of social equality with the planter elite, primarily because the planters insisted on defining class by occupational distinctions, with themselves at the pinnacle.¹⁴⁴
This example brings to mind the similar dual position of the Southern merchant, and the plantation agent or factor. As has been suggested, the importance of kinship in Southern business frequently made such dealings outside of the, usually extensive, kin network an anxious activity fraught with distrust. The planters believed that their indebtedness to merchants and factors was inescapable:

As outsiders [merchants] were envied and accused of having unfair advantages... because of their superior market information, their control of production credits, their versatility in business, and their ability to profit from even the poorest of economic conditions.145 The nature of the planters' thinking paralleled that of English land owners who "were never very clear about the proper place of the merchants in the scheme of things," a scheme which clearly has social as well as economic aspects.146 The familiar twinned emotions, envy and enmity, appeared in America, with respect to merchants, from the earliest Colonial period when planters mistrusted the immense power merchants had to shape trading practices, to set prices, to influence settlement patterns, and to determine production levels.147 By the antebellum period planters had begun to see merchants as something of a necessary evil, and to ease social tensions, and to disguise their dependency on merchants, they had transferred their hostility onto Northern industrialists. The planters emphasized the "community of interest" between merchant, factor and planter without fully appreciating that in times of financial difficulty the burden
"fell unevenly upon the planter class." In the postbellum period, planters had returned to an open hatred of merchants although many of the economic problems of the period were due to the planters' own refusal to modernize.

Outside of the business or professional sphere there were other groups in the antebellum South whose social position or role had an incongruous relationship with their economic or political position. In both the North and the urban South beginning in the eighteenth century, and directly as a product of urbanization, there began to appear bands of "the strolling poor". These male bands were seen as "frightening anomalies" largely because of a deep-rooted "tendency to segregate people into two categories - propertied household head or household dependent." These propertyless males were not clearly under any one's jurisdiction, whether familial or bureaucratic, and they posed a potential threat not just on criminal grounds but also as a threat to contemporary social and familial values.

Antebellum literature contains considerable evidence of an anomalous group in pre-Revolution Southern society, the Northern tutor. Prized for their superior education, and hired by planters to cultivate intellectual appearances in the Great House, the tutors were often snubbed socially by Southern high society, and their letters and autobiographies often record revulsion at the cruel nature of the plantation system. Their presence at once provided the means,
through literacy and education, to celebrate and glorify Southern society but also their presence was a constant reminder of the antithetical culture of the North.

A final interesting example of a group which could not be accommodated by contemporary social categorization, concerns mulattoes in the antebellum South, a group that were not even clearly distinguished in the instructions to Census Marshalls. By the Civil War mulattoes made up roughly ten percent of the slave population and in urban areas of the South miscegenation rates amongst free populations were probably much higher. There is considerable evidence that some mulatto house servants, urban slaves, or free mulattoes were quite snobbish towards poor whites as well as to darker blacks. They were quite often preferentially treated by whites which probably encouraged mulattoes' own biases. However, the South's single-minded assertion of a simple, strict two part categorization of white or black was "a formidable obstacle to the mulattoes' class aspirations." The mulatto straddled an ontological category that was seen as inflexible, and which was foremost in the Southern mind: black and white.

The dramaturgical model proposes that there are three elements to social process: economic exchange, social interaction, and the exercise of authority. The three sets of letters, and these other examples, suggest that extreme imbalance or dysfunction in one of these categories will
likely result in an imbalance in the entire process. Deference reinforces authority, but when deference is absent authority is challenged. As an established, well-bred member of Southern society, Custis' mannerisms were characterized by gentility and courtesy and he expected the same from his acquaintances. The Jerdones, recent members of the planter class, were perhaps less secure in their self-image as planters.154 Neither was certain of the appropriate course of action when the social roles were not clearly distinguished from the economic ones.

These sorts of situations became an increasing problem as the relevance and pervasiveness of patriarchal authority, centred on the plantation, began to decline in the late eighteenth century, and as a division increasingly appeared between social and economic spheres of interaction and acquaintance. Gentrification and agrarianism, as in Britain, had developed interdependently in the Old South,155 and there evolved an organic network of reciprocal obligations, based on kinship, honour, and authority, which came to define the plantation system. The very organic nature of these obligations made them difficult to assimilate into a world increasingly defined by capitalism and industrialism and non-propertied forms of wealth and power.

The nature of labour on the estate "tended to pull the planter in an opposite direction" from the market economy, leaving the planter an increasingly irrelevant and despondent
entity in a changed world.  

A spirit of upward social mobility and acquisitiveness gradually undercut the paternalistic notions of the past and small planters and yeomen increasingly demonstrated a market orientation which challenged the plantation system.  

By the late antebellum period, the Southern economy was stagnant, and the yeomen and planters alike were in dire financial straits:

The once-proud gentries of the Tidewater and low country struggled with a calamitous sense of decline as rebellious slaves and emergent abolitionism coincided with slumping prices, falling population growth rates, and decaying family estates.

The ability of the patriarch to maintain dignity and authority in the community was correlated to his ability to do so in the household and plantation network; poor success in one area would very likely result in poor success in the other. Unsympathetic courts, problematic business associations with merchants and bankers, and personal affronts to their honour by recalcitrant stewards all exacerbated the collapse of paternal authority. Kinship and honour had their limitations: "The chief problem was the discrepancy between honor as obedience to superior rank and the contrary duty to achieve place for oneself and family."  

By the late antebellum period, the steward was in a prime position to prey upon the occasional credulity and the inveterate parochialism of the planter class.

Clearly then, the dramaturgical approach can reveal the
nuances of behaviour, intent, and social process, which are usually missing from traditional accounts of historical events, and which are particularly missing from analyses of economic change. Interaction is a communicative act which has a strong moral quality since the impressions which a performer gives are "treated as claims and promises [that] they have implicitly made."\textsuperscript{161} However, not all of these claims and promises are fulfilled by individuals, since each player in society is constantly seeking to reshape and redefine their universe into terms favourable to themselves. The conflict and compromise that inevitably results can reveal much about social expectations and preconceptions.
APPENDICES

APPENDIX I
THE RICHMOND ENQUIRER;
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA, JULY 19, 1815:

A MANAGER WANTED
For the Estates of Mr Curtis[sic] in New Kent and King William Counties. A steady man with a small family, he must understand accounts and produce the most unexceptional recommendations. Letters (post paid) to be addressed to the proprietor, (Arlington, near Alexandria) or to William Dandridge, Richmond.

APPENDIX II
THE RICHMOND ENQUIRER;
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA, AUGUST 13, 1824

Wanted for the ensuing year two Overseer with small families, for my plantations in the counties of Newkent [sic] and Charles City, lying on the Chickahominy river, who must be honest, industrious, sober men, and well acquainted with Farming and Planting - and also with the management of negroes: such as can come well recommended and will answer to above description, will please make application to the subscriber near Pottiesville.

Francis Jordone[sic]
Louisa, August 10

APPENDIX III
THE RICHMOND ENQUIRER;
RICHMOND VIRGINIA, SEPTEMBER 14, 1832

OVERSEER WANTED - The Subscribers wish to employ, for the ensuing year, two men to superintend their plantations in New Kent and Charles City, men with small families will be preferred. None need apply unless they can produce satisfactory testimonials of their characters, as well as abilities to superintend a large estate: to such liberal wages will be given. Application to be made to the Subscribers, living near Pottiesville, Louisa County.

Francis Jerdone, jr.
William Jerdone


[ALSO APPEARS IN TUESDAY SEPTEMBER, 18]
APPENDIX IV

[The Jerdone Family Papers, Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Box XII, Folder 6, Item 4]

5 November 1824

This agreement made, and entered into between Francis Jerdone of the one part and Edward Watkins of the other this 5th day of November 1824, witnesseth that the said Watkins for, and in consideration of the sum of six hundred dollars, to be paid to him quarterly that is one hundred and twenty dollars at the end of every three months - and in consideration of the other stipulations herein made, undertakes and agrees to perform faithfully, and to the best of his knowledge and ability the office, duties, and labours of a Steward and Superintendent for the said Jerdone on his Estates in the Counties of New Kent & Charles City, known and called by the name of Providence Forge Estate, during the year 1825. Cultivation, improving, enclosing and preserving the same, attending to all slaves, stocks, crops, machines, and utensils for the benefit and advantage of the said Jerdone. Rendering regular and Just accounts of all his actings, and doings in the premises, unto the said Jerdone and performing all other things appertaining to the charge undertaken for the benefit and Interest of his Employer, the said Watkins is to be furnished with all necessary provisions and attendances for himself and family. He is allowed to employ two overseer to assist him in the management, of said Estate not exceeding in their wages one hundred and twenty dollars each, four hundred weight of neat Pork, one hundredweight of Beef, and wheat corn, and wheat may be sufficient and necessary for their support.

To the performance of which the parties here to bind themselves each to the other in the penal sum of five thousand dollars as witness their Hands, and Seals the Day, and the Year above written.

Done in the Presence of

Francis Jerdone

Edward Watkins

of

John Jerdone

William Jerdone
NOTES TO THE TEXT

In order to simplify the notation process, certain abbreviations will be used. Primary source material was obtained from collections in the following institutions:

CWFRL - Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Research Library, Williamsburg, Virginia
SWM - Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, The College of William and Mary in Virginia
VHS - Manuscripts and Rare Books, The Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia
VSA - Manuscripts, The Virginia State Archives, Richmond, Virginia

Academic Journals will be abbreviated as:

AgrH - Agricultural History
AHR - American Historical Review
JEH - Journal of Economic History
JIH - Journal of Interdisciplinary History
JSoH - Journal of Social History
JStH - Journal of Southern History
VMHB - Virginia Magazine of History and Biography
WMQ - The William and Mary Quarterly

Primary sources have been quoted with minimum corrections to grammar and spelling.

1. This doleful missive: "I can assure you dear Sir, it has given me work enough for head and heart" appeared in reference to the maintenance of the Providence Forge plantation of which he was the manager. Edward Watkins to William Jerdone, August 17, 1831, The Jerdone Family Papers, SWM.

2. This literature is comprised almost entirely by three rather aged books: John Spencer Bassett, The Southern Plantation Overseer as Revealed in His Letters (Northampton, 1925); James O. Breeden, ed., Advice Among Masters: The Ideal in Slave Management in the Old South (Westport, 1980); and William K. Scarborough, The Overseer: Plantation Management in the Old South (Baton Rouge, 1966). Only the latter deals with stewards or attempts to convey a distinction between the two types of employees.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid, pp 12, 142, 27.


10. Ibid, p 338.

11. Historians themselves have been apt to present these idealized images without due regard for the variation and discontinuities apparent in both social and economic spheres. See for example Thomas J. Wertenbaker, *Patrician and Plebian in Virginia* (New York, 1959).

12. David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (Oxford, 1989), p 218. There are a great many works which discuss the origins of the planter class but Fischer's is perhaps the most elegant. This work should be coupled with a reading of WMQ 48(2): (1991), which contains four critical reviews of *Albion’s Seed* along with Fischer's replies.


166-169.


24. For a discussion of the planters' own preoccupation with the plantation ideal see Bruce Collins, White Society in the Antebellum South (London, 1985), pp 158-159.


26. J. Stephen Knight, Jr., "Discontent, Disunity, and Dissent in the Antebellum South: Virginia as a Test Case." VMHB 81(4): 437-456, (1973). Knight suggest that there may have been even more social unrest and agitation for reform in the antebellum Upper South than in the North, p 440. See also Eugene Genovese, "Yeomen Farmers in a Slaveholders' Democracy." AgrH 49(2): 331-342, (1975); p 339.


33. This letter appeared in *Southern Cultivator*, II, June 1844, p 97. There is hardly an issue of this or the contemporary journals which does not contain some bitter diatribe against overseers.

34. Scarborough, *Overseer: Plantation Management*, p 36. During the nineteenth century Virginia stewards earned between $800 and $1100 per year, overseers rarely more than $400 per year, p 182.


37. Ibid, includes many such transcriptions of letters and in a qualitative sense they are very different from steward-planter letters. See also Louis Morton, *Robert Carter of Nomini Hall: A Virginia Planter of the Eighteenth Century*, (Charlottesville, 1941); and The Newcastle-Macon
Papers, SWM, for further examples. Interestingly, the overseer hired by Francis Jerdone Sr for Edward Watkins' use at Providence Forge are referred to by Watkins in a proprietary sense (See for example, Edward Watkins to Francis Jerdone, January 24, 1826, Jerdone Family Papers, SWM). Appendix II of this paper includes the advertisements published by the Jerdones in reference to the hiring of overseer for Providence Forge. Note the tone of the advertisements, particularly in the early one, in comparison to the contract between Watkins and Jerdone in Appendix III.

38. Many sources discuss this problem, but Scarborough, Overseer: Plantation Management, is perhaps the best of these. See also James C. Bonner, "The Plantation Overseer and Southern Nationalism." AgrH 19(1): 1-11, (1945): "Given maximum responsibility with minimum authority, his was an anomalous position on the plantation" (p 1).


42. One factor affecting this uncertainty was the class background of the stewards themselves. While overseers were quite clearly associated with the yeomen class, stewards seem to have increasingly become representative of the, then incipient, middle class. A distinct change occurred in the social fabric of Virginia following the widespread transition in the Upper South from tobacco to wheat cropping in the 1760's, encouraging the growth of urban centers; Alan Kulikoff, "The Economic Growth of the


44. Black’s Law Dictionary (St Paul, Minnesota, 1891), p 1659.

45. Henings Statutes: Vol IV, pp 81-2; Vol 9, pp 24, 65, 144, 378. All of these are from the eighteenth century and refer to collection of property taxes and the division of appropriated British lands during the Revolution.

46. It seems that little can be done to quantify or statistically examine stewardship until a detailed analysis of antebellum absentee land ownership has been completed. Unfortunately it is much harder to compensate for the historical confusion of terms. This is well evidenced in Breeden, Advice Among Masters. It is just one of many "imperfections" in the Census records which "affect analyses unsystematically" - M.D. Schmitz and D.F. Schaefer, "Using Manuscript Census Samples to Interpret Antebellum Southern Agriculture." JIH 17(2): 339-414, (1986); p 413.

47. Bassett, Southern Plantation Overseer, Chapter 2. Breaking this rule was one of the most frequent causes for dismissal of overseers, Scarborough, Overseer: Plantation Management, p 112.

48. For an example of such a situation see the James Galt Diary 1835-1844, SWM, and the three James Galt Diaries, 1844-50, 1851-54, 1859-64, VHS.

49. Few of the secondary sources examined deal with this matter in anything even approaching a comprehensive manner, revealing the residential status of steward or overseer in a haphazard way, if at all. Unfortunately the great many primary sources examined for this thesis gave few clues as to how one might reliably and systematically approach this question. Internal evidence in the letters suggests that the stewards Watkins and Nelson were living in a great house.


52. James built a house on Adams and Washington Streets in Petersburg, in 1801, according to the 1827-28 diary of Allen Campbell Dunlop, James Nathaniel Dunlop Papers 1840-1888, VHS. James Nathaniel Dunlop appears to have been a nephew of James Dunlop, owner of Roslin Plantation. A further source indicates (without references) that James Dunlop came from Ayrshire; Scotland, James H. Bailey, Old Petersburg (Petersburg, n.d.). The Virginia Executive Papers for May 26, 1777, list a James Dunlop and a James Dunlap as immigrating from Britain in that year, this is the only reference to that name in the immigration lists for the eighteenth century; The Virginia Genealogist 16(2): 83-88, (1972).

53. This is indicated in Charles Duncan's will, recorded June 13, 1808, Chesterfield County Will Book 7, pp. 45-48. His will indicates that he purchased the land from three men at a date which is not mentioned. The first available Land Tax Record for Chesterfield County is 1792 and Charles is indicated to be the owner of Roslin, he continues as such until the 1807 Land Tax assessment (an 1808 assessment was not made in Virginia). The property appears under James Dunlop's name in 1809. Consent for the marriage to Nancy Gilliam Duncan was given by her father on May 6 1800, as recorded in The Marriage Bonds and Minister's Returns, Chesterfield County 1771-1815, edited by Catherine Knox.

54. Mutual Assurance Society Volume 1-151, Policy 41, August 1796, VSA, insures a "dwelling, kitchen and laundry" at a total of $2400. M.A.S. Volume 1-271, Policy 105, May 1805, VSA, insured a wooden, two-story house, with brick cellar and with two wings connecting two-story occupancies (giving a total front facade of 106 feet in length), and separate laundry and kitchen buildings, for a total value of $5350. M.A.S. Volume AD 1-124, Policy 5, May 1805, VSA, insures seven agricultural outbuildings for a total of $1150.

55. This is extracted from the M.A.S. figures given in the previous Note, added to the Land Tax assessments for those years, $1917 and $1909.

56. This information comes from Jeffrey M. O'Dell, Chesterfield Co. Early Architecture and Historic Sites, pp 329-330 (Chesterfield Co., 1983). This source indicates that the Great House was destroyed during the 1910's.
57. M.A.S. Volume 1280-1545, Policy 1332 and 1333, April 1815, VSA. These have the same valuation as the 1805 policies and there does not appear to have been any significant changes to the structures on the estate. The slave and horse figures come from the Personal Property Tax Lists for 1807 and 1809, and the estate size in acres is given in the Land Tax assessment.

58. John Dunlop was apparently Scottish-born like his brother, and married a Mary Ruffin Gilliam, the Gilliam name suggesting some sort of kinship to James' wife Nancy Gilliam Duncan. James H. Bailey, Pictures of the Past: Petersburg Seen by the Simpsons 1819-1895, p 45 (Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, 1989). In addition to the references within McKean's letters, evidence of the Dunlops' shipping business comes from a "Shipping Licence" dated August 13, 1812 that is item 20252 in the Business Papers, VSA.

59. William McKean to James Dunlop, November 26, 1809, Roslin Papers, Chesterfield County 1786-1832, VHS.

60. McKean to Dunlop, July 17, 1810, Roslin Papers, VHS.

61. McKean to Dunlop, February 26, 1815, Roslin Papers, VHS.

62. McKean to Dunlop, February 26, 1815, Roslin Papers, VHS. The reference to the extent of the plantation is unusual given that, while substantial at 832 acres, the plantation was not overly large for the available labour force. This may suggest that a greater percentage of the total acreage was under cultivation than was normal for the time.

63. McKean to Dunlop, June 22, 1811, Roslin Papers, VHS.

64. McKean to Dunlop, November 26, 1809, Roslin Papers, VHS. There seems little reason to believe that McKean may have sent letters to Dunlop which were not copied into the letterbook since McKean appears to have been conscientious in his other business duties, and there are no incidents mentioned in his letters which refer to prior events not discussed in previous letters.

65. McKean to Dunlop, December 11, 1816, Roslin Papers, VHS. While clearly the amount of work to be done on the plantation was considerable, McKean had at least one overseer to assist him in the management of the labour force. Overseer mentioned in McKean to Dunlop, October 20, 1814, Roslin Papers, VHS.

66. McKean to Dunlop, December 11, 1816, Roslin Papers, VHS.
67. Ibid. The first explanation appeared in McKean to Dunlop, February 26, 1815, Roslin Papers, VHS.

68. McKean to Dunlop, September 5, 1817, Roslin Papers, VHS.

69. McKean to Dunlop, December 11, 1816, Roslin Papers, VHS.

70. McKean to Dunlop, May 2, 1818, Roslin Papers, VHS.


72. The importance of this charge was outlined in the numerous "Instructions to Managers" which appeared in agricultural journals, and such manuals as The Plantation and Farm Instruction, Regulation, Record, Inventory and Account Book, printed by J.W. Randolph, Bookseller (Richmond, n.d.). The agricultural journals themselves carried surprisingly little in the way of practical information: at maximum less than 8% of the total length of the paper and generally much less than that. See Richard T. Farrell, "Advice to Farmers: The Content of Agricultural Newspapers, 1860-1910." AgrH 51(1): 209-217, (1977).

73. That Nelson may also have simultaneously managed Custis' Romancocke plantation in King William County, is suggested by internal evidence in The George Washington Parke Custis Papers, 1781-1857, SWM.

74. In 1815 a notice appeared in The Richmond Enquirer soliciting applications for the position of manager of the White House Estate (see Appendix I). The Lee Family Papers, 1732-1892, VHS, contains one letter from William Claiborne to Custis concerning the position, as well as several subsequent letters from him concerning the management of the plantation. Evidence in the letters suggests that a James Anderson and then a William Brumley, preceded Claiborne in the position. There is no evidence regarding the reasons for dismissal of any of these stewards.

75. Pre-Civil War New Kent County Land Tax Lists are available until 1826.

76. New Kent County Personal Property Tax Lists, 1782-1816.

77. For a history of the property and of the Custis and Washington families see Malcolm H. Harris, Old New Kent County Volume I (West Point, 1977), pp 97-132. Curiously,
Harris states that Custis came into his majority in 1798 (p 124), at age 17, although neither the Land Tax List nor the Personal Property Tax List for New Kent County record the change from his father's name until 1802, at age 21.

78. One of these deeds of inheritance appears as Personal Papers item 20352, VSA.


80. For a complete discussion of Custis' financial enslavement to his improvements to Arlington House see Paul C. Nagel, *The Lees of Virginia* (New York, 1990). For a somewhat more positive overview see Lee Mansion National Memorial (National Park Service Historical Series Number 6, 1950).


82. Custis to Nelson, May 9, 1846. Custis Papers, SWM.

83. Custis to Nelson, January 15, 1852. Custis Papers, SWM.

84. Visits are proposed in Custis to Nelson, August 29, 1845 and January 27, 1847, Custis Papers, SWM. In one letter Custis indicates to Nelson that he would not visit the White House estate after a trip to Richmond, and notes that "I was a total stranger in Richmond, having been there only once in thirty years." Custis to Nelson, November 2 1856, Custis Papers, SWM. It would seem likely that Custis would have travelled through Richmond on the way to the White House estate if he had visited in that period of thirty years.

85. For example see Custis to Nelson, January 17, 1855, Custis Papers, SWM. Here Custis outlined the points that Nelson should take into consideration when he determined the compensation due the estate.

86. Custis to Nelson, May 2, 1846, Custis Papers, SWM.

87. Custis to Nelson, June 30, 1852, Custis Papers, SWM. The "Captain" is a Captain Hodgings who appears to have been the captain of the vessel that either Custis owned or hired to transport goods between his plantations at
unknown but probably irregular intervals.

88. Custis to Nelson, September 12, 1849, Custis Papers, SWM.

89. Both quotations; Custis to Nelson, November 7, 1854, Custis Papers, SWM.

90. Custis to Nelson, January 26, 1855, Custis Papers, SWM.

91. The distance is given in New Kent County Land Tax List for 1820.

92. Custis to Nelson, January 17, 1855, Custis Papers, SWM. Underlining in original.

93. References to the possibility of Lee balancing the accounts appear in Custis to Nelson, June 9, 1853; April 24, 1854; August 27, 1854; and February 26, 1856, Custis Papers, SWM. Certainly in the 1850's General Lee's military reputation was already considerable in the South.

94. Robert E. Lee to G.W.P. Custis, March 2, 1833, Lee Family Papers, VHS.

95. A letter from R.E. Lee to his mother, dated July 19, 1841, does refer to Custis' affairs being in "disorder", although Lee does not appear to have been involved. Mssl L51c28, VHS.

96. Robert E. Lee Personal Diary, Lee Family Papers, VHS.

97. Lee to Wm. Wickham, January 2, 1856, Lee Family Papers, VHS.

98. Lee to Francis Nelson, February 15, 1856, Lee Family Papers, VHS.


100. Custis to Nelson, January 26, 1855, Custis Papers, SWM.

101. Custis to Nelson, December 5, 1854, Custis Papers, SWM. The "do unto another" phrase appears essentially unchanged, and certainly in the same context, in a letter dated January 17, 1855, Custis Papers, SWM.

102. Custis to Nelson, June 26, 1856, Custis Papers, SWM.
103. The Jerdone Family Papers, 1753-1893, SWM, includes over two thousand letters written between family members, and to and from business associates, and related account books. A further collection, and three of the 28 Watkins letters, of Jerdone Family Papers is housed at the VSA. Several nephews and other relations managed plantations for the Jerdone family at various times and at least three hired stewards managed the Providence Forge plantation in the early nineteenth century. The intricacies of the Jerdone family and business histories do not add to the focus of this paper and will not be related at length, but they have been pieced together from the Family Papers; Malcolm H. Harris, History of Louisa County, Virginia (Richmond, 1936), pp 122-126, 371-373; and Harris, Old New Kent County, pp 204-211.

104. Jerdone owned some land in partnership with business associates and it is difficult to be entirely sure of the extent of the plantation during Watkins' management. Seven hundred acres were added to the property when the co-ownership with William Douglass of an adjacent plantation was dissolved after 1824.

105. "Lawyers and businessmen sought to become planters, partly to consolidate their social status, partly as a matter of sound investment policy," Collins, White Society, p 161.

106. Edmund Christian to Francis Jerdone Sr, August 22, 1824, Jerdone Family Papers, SWM. The notice was in The Richmond Enquirer, August 13, 1824, and is reproduced as Appendix II. A similar notice, reproduced as Appendix III, appeared September 14, 1832, upon the termination of Watkin's employment, but is for two overseer rather than a steward as William Jerdone had moved to Providence Forge to run the estate personally.

107. Watkins to Francis Jerdone Sr, March 15, 1825, Jerdone Family Papers, SWM.

108. Watkins to Francis Jerdone Sr, January 24, 1826, Jerdone Family Papers, SWM.


110. Watkins to Francis Jerdone Sr, January 24, 1826, Jerdone Family Papers, SWM.
111. Watkins to Francis Jerdone Sr, May 3, 1827, Jerdone Family Papers, SWM. The actual length of his employment to this point was three and one half years [Appendix IV], and even in 1826 the total value of the estate including buildings was under fifteen thousand dollars, New Kent County Land Tax Lists 1782-1826. The final phrase of this section is particularly intriguing although there is no indication of who these people might be - presumably some of his peers.

112. Goffman, Presentation of Self, p 33.

113. William Jerdone to Edward Watkins, June 4, 1830 and September 3, 1830, Jerdone Family Papers, SWM.

114. Watkins to William Jerdone, March 11, 1830, Jerdone Family Papers, SWM.

115. Watkins to Francis Jerdone Sr, June 15, 1825, Jerdone Family Papers, SWM.

116. Watkins to William Jerdone, May 21, 1830, Jerdone Family Papers, SWM.

117. Emphasis added. Francis Jerdone Jr to William Jerdone, October 29, 1831, Jerdone Family Papers, SWM. Unfortunately New Kent marriage records for this period have not survived. Letters written to Francis Jerdone Jr after this date do not suggest that any social separation has occurred amongst the Jerdones so it is important to not make too much of this one reference.

118. Francis Jerdone Sr to William Jerdone, December 9, 1832. Jerdone Family Papers, SWM. Perhaps the parenthetical comment is a reference to Francis Jerdone Jr, prompted by the delicate matter of his marriage to Watkins' daughter.

119. Emphasis added. Francis Jerdone Sr to Francis Jerdone Jr., February 14, 1833. Jerdone Family Papers, SWM. The date of the letter and its tone in light of the previous one leaves little doubt that this letter refers to Watkins.


129. Goffman, Presentation of Self, p 241.


134. Fischer, Albion’s Seed, p 384.

135. Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, pp 56-57.

136. Fischer, Albion’s Seed, pp 384-385.

137. Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, p 63.

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140. Susan Feiner, "Factors, Bankers, and Masters: Class Relations in the Antebellum South." JEH 42(1): 61-68, (1982); quote is on p 61. Many secondary sources discuss the basic conflict between industrial and agrarian interests in the South.

141. Scheikart, "Southern Banks", p 19. For a discussion of the restrictions planters had on their ability to invest, since property may be wealth but it is not often easily disposable capital, see Luria, "Wealth, Capital, and Power", p 267-269.


144. Ibid, p 220.


147. Although, of course, there are exceptions to these generalizations. For an example of an amicable relationship see Samuel M. Rosenblatt, "Merchant-Planter Relations in the Tobacco Consignment Trade." VMHB 72(4): 454-470, (1964).


151. For an interesting discussion of the nature of learning in the South see Isaac, Transformation of Virginia, pp 121-130.


154. It is interesting to note that the tone of the letters written by Francis Sr's merchant father to those who owed him money or goods was forthright and undisguised. Perhaps he would have had less time for the presumptuousness of Watkins than his planter-bred sons and grandsons.


159. Ditz, "Ownership and Obligation," p 236.

160. Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, p 61.

161. Goffman, Presentation of Self, p 249.
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