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2012

## **Black Female Landowners in Richmond, Virginia 1850-1877**

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### **Recommended Citation**

Craddock, Hannah Catherine, "Black Female Landowners in Richmond, Virginia 1850-1877" (2012). *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. William & Mary. Paper 1539626697. <https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-4e0j-nz83>

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**Black Female Landowners in Richmond, Virginia  
1850-1877**

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Cary, North Carolina**

**Bachelor of Arts, Duke University, 2010**

**A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts**

**Department of History**

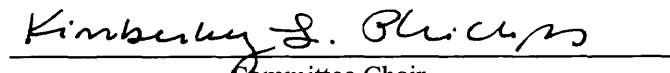
**The College of William and Mary  
May 2012**


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

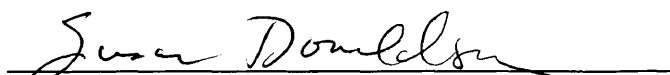
Master of Arts

  
Hannah Catherine Craddock

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## ABSTRACT PAGE

This thesis traces rates of black female landownership in the city of Richmond, Virginia between the years 1850 and 1877. It uses a variety of different sources, including census records and land tax records, to calculate the amount of land owned during this time period. Information pertaining to occupation and marital status are included within this study. For some women, property acted as a vehicle for greater economic stability and social mobility. For instance, many female landowners were able to leverage their property to open businesses, support their families, and purchase additional property. But landownership also hurt other women in these same attempts – the economic burdens of property ownership placed on some free black women proved detrimental and difficult to overcome. While there was an overall increase in the amount of black female landownership between 1850 and 1877, this study also highlights the individual experiences of property ownership across this period.

Black Female Landowners in Richmond, Virginia  
1850-1877

Introduction

In 1856, Sophia Hill and Catherine Harris purchased two adjacent lots of land on West Leigh Street in Richmond, Virginia from Keesey Boubee. Both Sophia and Catherine worked as washerwomen to support themselves and their children in their female-headed households. All three women were free women of color living and thriving in antebellum Richmond. Throughout the war, these two properties retained their value of approximately \$920. During the war, the two women managed to purchase together an additional lot of forty-two and one-quarter feet on Leigh Street together. Valued at approximately \$422 in 1862, the value of their total property rose to \$2,422 after the war.<sup>1</sup>

In 1864, Corinna Omohundro inherited land and gained her freedom during the final years of the Civil War. Silas Omohundro, her owner and the father of six of her children, named her the sole beneficiary for his estate and granted her lifetime access to his Richmond and Philadelphia properties.<sup>2</sup> Although Corinna did not own the land outright, she had a vested interest in the property and could borrow money against the estate to pay debts, educate her children, and maintain her lifestyle. By 1870, Corinna had established herself as a business owner, opening a confectionary and bakery shop on 17<sup>th</sup> Street. By 1884, Corinna held over \$6,800 worth of real estate in the city.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richmond City Land Tax Records, 1857, 1862, 1863, 1866. Available on microfilm at Library of Virginia. From now on, I will use LTR to refer to these records.

<sup>2</sup> Will of Silas Omohundro, Richmond City Circuit Court Will Book 2 1861-1865, pgs. 228-230, LVA microfilm reel 76. "For Life" was a common form of inheritance in which the inheritor was granted access to the property for the lifespan of the inheritor, but does not grant the right to pass the property after death. An alternative type of inheritance, "fee simple," means outright ownership.

<sup>3</sup> LTR, 1870, 1884.

In 1870, fifty-year-old Mary Watkins owned \$1,000 worth of real estate and headed a household composed of five prostitutes, two infants, and three other children. Her three eldest daughters, Ella, Louisa, and Betsy, ages twenty-two, nineteen, and eighteen, were three of the prostitutes residing with her; Pinkie Warrix and Ellen White, mulatto women ages twenty and twenty-two respectively, were the other two prostitutes listed under the household in the 1870 census. The two infants, Willie, nine months old, and Benjamin, eight months old, appear related to Mary, but it seems more likely that these two young boys were the offspring of the youthful prostitutes instead of the aging woman. Nora Watkins, Mary's eight-year-old daughter, also resided at home, but Mary sent her two other children, one boy and one girl, away to school.<sup>4</sup>

These women all shared one aspect of pre-Civil War and Reconstruction life in Richmond, Virginia: the ability to acquire and manage real property. While the method of this acquisition varied, the land and buildings owned by these female property owners and others that shared similar circumstances to the four highlight an ability for free black women to circumvent societal limitations placed on them due to their race and gender. These women reveal a capacity to work within a system of restriction that fundamentally limited their opportunities for success. Although the Civil War altered the available modes of economic stability, African American women continued to navigate around old patriarchal controls to gain a degree of autonomy and potential financial security. For some women, their property would act as a stepping-stone to greater social stability and economic mobility. As Corinna Omohundro's experiences suggest, she and other black women used their land to better their economic circumstances. But for others the

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<sup>4</sup> 1870 Richmond Census.

experience was not so positive. Rather than providing a source of empowerment, the burdens of property ownership ultimately hurt some women.

The decade before the Civil War and the decade after its cessation disrupted legal, social, and political norms for many Americans, including both free and enslaved women. As historian Anne Firor Scott has argued, the war allowed for a more complex social order with increased opportunities for some women in education, politics, and social organizations.<sup>5</sup> Many other historians, including Blair Kelly, have argued that patterns of segregation and racial discrimination did not immediately solidify after the Civil War. Rather, the institution of Jim Crow was an evolutionary and reactionary process to Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction America that differed across the South and social groups in considerable ways.<sup>6</sup> Changes in the black and white patriarchy, coupled with the delay in instituting Jim Crow regulations in the South until 1884, opened new venues for previously enslaved black women. In such a volatile environment of social change, some free black women like Sophia Hill and Mary Watkins acquired property in the city of Richmond and established themselves as viable and thriving members of larger society.

The acquisition of land by free black Americans has begun to appear in historical scholarship as studies have traced general landownership trends at the state and regional levels. Luther Porter Jackson, a historian who has written extensively about the status of free black Americans in Virginia, has found that African Americans expanded their landownership between 1830 and 1860 despite the severe restrictions they faced.<sup>7</sup> While

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<sup>5</sup> Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Blair Kelly, *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Luther Porter Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830-1860* (New York: Antheneum, 1942), 137.

blacks' acquisition of land in this period marked a significant shift in the demographics of property ownership, he asserts that the cohort of free men and women had simply not been free long enough to establish themselves in real estate.<sup>8</sup> Other historians have focused on other southern states; John Hope Franklin's study of free black men and women in North Carolina in the decades before the Civil War found a similar desire to own property and land that motivated ex-slaves in Virginia.<sup>9</sup> Loren Schweninger also traces the evolution of black property ownership in the South between 1790-1915. While he found increased landownership in both the upper and lower areas of the South, the number of free blacks and the amount of free black property rose more significantly in the Upper South between 1830 and 1860, echoing Jackson's earlier findings on Virginia. These patterns and regional differences continued after the Civil War.<sup>10</sup>

Other historians confine their attention to the property owned by both black and white women, offering insight into general patterns of property ownership during this time period. The Property Marriage Acts, passed in individual states during the mid-nineteenth century, explicitly protected a wife's property from her husband's debt and recognized the right for women to manage, sell, and protect their own real estate that they had acquired before marriage. Virginia did not enact such a law until 1877.<sup>11</sup> While these laws appeared to provide a modicum of protection to married women, historian Marylynn Salmon has found that they did not necessarily revolutionize female property patterns and

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 158 and 145.

<sup>9</sup> John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 154. The Upper South includes Delaware, the District of Columbia, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The Lower South includes Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas.

<sup>11</sup> Carole Shammas, "Re-Assessing the Married Women's Property Acts," *Journal of Women's History* 6, no. 1 (1994): 9.



instead continued a trend that had already begun before the war. Between 1750 and 1860, she discovered that steady changes improved the chances for women to obtain and maintain property.<sup>12</sup> Historian Suzanne Lebsack completed a similar study of women's property ownership in Petersburg, Virginia. Lebsack found that although some individual women were able to alter their economic standing and gain independence through property ownership, these changes did not translate to women as a collective group. Her study, however, did not extend beyond the Civil War.<sup>13</sup>

Little research has focused on the status and property holdings of free black women. Lebsack's work, for instance, devotes only one chapter to free African American women in Petersburg. She argues that while increasing numbers of free black women owned property, this capacity reflected their troubled status instead of any degree of economic stability or increased autonomy. "Much of the autonomy acquired by free black women was either a result of oppression," she argues, "or a form of punishment. Men were not present, or they were not free, or they did not make enough money."<sup>14</sup> But, she rightfully concludes that black women's decisions about their property, regardless of why or how they made them, deserve attention and evaluation. Loren Schweningen also traced the early patterns of black female landownership in the South and noted that in the Upper South free black women began to acquire significant property beginning in the 1830s.<sup>15</sup> Although he found that some free women worked as seamstresses or laundresses in order to acquire property, his overall study lacks a more nuanced evaluation of these women's

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<sup>12</sup> Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), xvi-xvii.

<sup>13</sup> Suzanne Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: Norton, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>15</sup> Loren Schweningen, "Property Owning Free African American Women in the South, 1800-1870," *Journal of Women's History* 1 (Winter 1990): 21.

occupations. He found regional differences and specifically noted that “some of these women – especially in Louisiana or Virginia where half of them lived – were widows of prosperous free men of color or former mistresses of wealthy whites, but in the Upper South most were simply industrious women who had spent many years accumulating small amounts of property.”<sup>16</sup> How women transcended the narrowly defined legal and social roles of wives or mistresses has not been fully explored.

### Methodology

This thesis uses two main collections of data: land tax records and census records. I evaluated each set differently and each set presented its own difficulties and limitations. For the federal census records, the amount of land listed under free black and mulatto women was calculated for the years 1850, 1860, and 1870. This source provides insightful information pertaining to household arrangement, neighborhood structures, and occupations. For the land tax records before the end of the Civil War (1850 to 1863), the amount of land owned by women notated as “free,” “black,” or “colored” was also calculated.<sup>17</sup> This calculation offers a gross estimate of the amount of real estate owned by free women of color but is potentially highly undervalued. Not only is such a methodology restricted by the ability and willingness of the tax collectors to efficiently and uniformly denote race on these records, but this calculation does not include those women who passed in society as white. After the Civil War, some people were still noted with their ethnicity, but this practice became far less common during Reconstruction. Many women listed as “colored” before the war are no longer associated with their

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<sup>16</sup> Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 86.

<sup>17</sup> Land Tax Records for 1864 are either missing or were destroyed. For that reason, this year has been omitted from the study.

ethnicity in the records following 1865. In an attempt to better understand the amount of land owned by black women during this time period, this study compares the 1865, 1866, 1872, and 1877 records with lists of property owners compiled from the prewar land tax records and the census records. This method diminished my ability to investigate new property owners after 1870 or those incorrectly not listed as property holders in the census. For this reason, the amount of property calculated for 1877 appears erroneously low.

This study also requires a basic understanding of property laws and terminology, a daunting and often-times disorientating process. Women, for instance, inherited property in different ways as dictated by the terms presented by the estate holder. For instance, “fee simple” ownership meant that women owned the property outright while the term “for life” provided access to the property for the lifespan of the inheritor but did not grant the right to pass the property after death. In this latter arrangement, an administrator or executor handled the economic decisions regarding an estate. Each role had the same function: each was expected to settle debts, distribute the estate among the heirs, dissolve partnerships, and manage the estate. Both earned five percent of the income of the estate. The difference between the two roles was in the appointment. While wills nominated an executor, the state could appoint an administrator when deemed necessary.<sup>18</sup> A husband could appoint his wife the executor of an estate or he could appoint an outside male to act as executor in the best interests of his heirs. However, if a woman proved inept at dealing with the estate or its debts, the courts could intercede and appoint an administrator to the case.

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<sup>18</sup> Suzanne Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*, 120.

### Antebellum and Civil War Richmond

Before the Civil War, free and enslaved blacks understood the importance and power of land and property. As enslaved blacks earned their freedom, many continued to view landownership as a vehicle for independence and security. On their own land, these men and women could earn money to purchase loved ones out of slavery; establish homesteads or build homes within the city; and provide private education for their children. Newly freed blacks linked land and property to economic stability and the full experience of freedom. Free black women played a special role in the acquisition of property. “The unique and special role of free black women, then, grew out of the peculiar conditions they confronted in a society based on slavery,” argues historian Loren Schweningen. “Free black women sought to acquire property as a means of protection, economic independence, and self-sufficiency.”<sup>19</sup>

But emancipation before the Civil War severely limited the opportunities available to free black Americans as their presence in society worried many white men and women. In the first half of the nineteenth-century, whites’ fear of black uprisings led to harsh restrictions placed on slaves and free blacks alike. “Free blacks,” writes Gregg Kimball, “lived in a legal limbo between citizenship and slavery.”<sup>20</sup> In 1801, Virginia law, for instance, required that free blacks annually register with the state and request permission to reside in the city after being emancipated or buying their freedom. If they failed to register, the state could re-enslave them.<sup>21</sup> The tension presented by a successful

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<sup>19</sup> Loren Schweningen, “Property Owning Free African American Women in the South, 1800-1870,” *Journal of Women’s History* 1 (Winter 1990): 30.

<sup>20</sup> Gregg Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond*, 73.

<sup>21</sup> Beginning in 1801, Chapter 70 of the Black Laws of Virginia declared that it was the duty of commissioners to maintain a register with all the free blacks within their districts. For more information about this code and others, see Jane Guild’s *Black Laws of Virginia: A Summary of the Legislative Acts of Virginia Concerning Negroes from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Negro Universities Press,

and established free black community in many Virginia counties, however, erupted into panic after Nat Turner's rebellion in Southampton County. In December 1831, at least five counties petitioned the state government for the removal of free black citizens from the state. In James City County, one hundred white residents signed a petition asking for the removal of all free black men and women from the state, stating "their residence among us...is incompatible with the tranquility of society... [they excite] impracticable hopes in the minds of those who are even more ignorant and unreflecting."<sup>22</sup> Other counties in the state constructed their petitions with different goals in mind. Whites in Amelia County, for example, asked for the removal of free blacks from the state, but whites in Augusta and Nelson County called from the government to transplant all free negroes and slaves to Africa.

Such petitions have led some historians, including Ira Berlin, to assert that free black economic prosperity prompted tighter controls for ex-slaves and increased white hostility toward free black Americans. Free blacks complicated the power of white slave owners, who linked the unrest of their slaves to the presence of freed men and women. The deportation and removal of ex-slaves from Virginia continued to persistent in legislative petitions throughout the decades leading up to the Civil War; Virginia even appropriated \$30,000 per year from 1850-1855 to deport free blacks to Liberia.<sup>23</sup> By August 1857, many free blacks in Richmond faced additional trouble as a nation-wide

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1969). Originally published in 1936. However, many historians have shown that formalized laws did not necessarily reflect local experience. For instance, Melvin Patrick Ely has shown that many freed slaves did not actually register or petition, and were able to remain in Prince George County unmolested. Laura Edwards makes a similar argument by asserting that a tradition of localized law dominated state law in the early decades of the century.

<sup>22</sup> Legislative Petitions, James City County. Available on microfilm at Library of Virginia, Richmond.

<sup>23</sup> Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 343-347 and 355.

recession initiated economic struggles and widespread unemployment.<sup>24</sup> In response to these conditions, Virginia lawmakers proposed bills that would legally expel free blacks or forcefully re-enslave them in 1858 and 1859.<sup>25</sup>

It was within such a restrictive environment that some free black women acquired property, expanded their holdings or increased their wealth through the purchase of property. Between 1850 and 1863, the amount of property owned by free black women increased from \$37, 980 to \$61,712 (See Table 1.1). There appears some slight fluctuations in the yearly calculation; between 1853 and 1855, the amount women owned increased from \$58, 694 to \$64, 224, then decreased to \$54,779. While such changes in value reflected the dynamic nature of real estate, they also reveal changes in the economic circumstances of individual women. In 1853, for example, Sally Randolph and her children, listed as free, owned \$16,550 worth of land and buildings.<sup>26</sup> But the records do not classify Sally and her children as “free,” “colored,” or “black” in other years. Such discrepancies reflect the inconsistent treatment of race by city officials, an incongruity that also plagues other governmental records. There is also a marked decrease in property values during this period, which reflected the nationwide depression that ensued in August 1857. Overall, in the years before the war, the amount of property owned by free black women showed a general pattern of increase - a trend that affirms Schweninger’s work regarding amounts of property owned in the antebellum Upper South.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> James L Huston, *The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 33.

<sup>25</sup> Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*, 371.

<sup>26</sup> LTR, 1853.

<sup>27</sup> Loren Schweninger, “Property Owning Free African American Women in the South, 1800-1870,” 15.

**Table 1.1**

Year	Amount owned
1850	\$37,980
1851	\$52,301
1852	\$60,060
1853	\$58,694
1854	\$64,224
1855	\$54,779
1856	\$55,536
1857	\$48,538
1858	\$52,908
1859	\$42,497
1860	\$57,687
1861	\$55,540
1862	\$60,261
1863	\$61,712

Graph 1.1



Corinna Omohundro was one property owner during these early years who offers insight into a potential avenue for gaining property available to women during this time: inheritance. Her situation, though, proves extraordinary. Corinna was a slave who acquired property from her white owner. Born on August 1, 1833, Corinna made her way to Richmond as the property of Silas Omohundro, a slave trader in the city. Together, they had six children: Silas Jr. (1849), Alice Morton (1850), Colon (1853), Riley Crosby (1859), William Rainey (1861), and George Nelson (1863).<sup>28</sup> They resided within the same household in Richmond until 1860, when Corinna moved next door with her two youngest sons and another slave owned by Silas.<sup>29</sup>

Corinna remained enslaved by Silas until his death in 1864, when his last will and testament granted freedom to her and her children.<sup>30</sup> Along with her freedom, Corinna

<sup>28</sup> Malvern Hill Omohundro, *The Omohundro Genealogical Record* (Published by author, 1951). There is additional evidence from the account book of Silas Omohundro that Corinna experienced at least one miscarriage in 1858.

<sup>29</sup> Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494

<sup>30</sup> Although the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation technically granted her freedom, most in the South ignored this decree. Silas wrote his will just months before his death, which implies that Corinna was still enslaved at that point.



received extensive property, including the old Omohundro slave jail; “I give...to the said Corinna Omohundro for and during her natural life and for her sole use and benefit,” the will read, “my entire lot on Seventieth Street in the City of Richmond, Virginia, with all the belongings thereon and other improvements including the Jail.”<sup>31</sup> Silas also included a clause that protected the property from the control or debts of another husband were she ever to remarry. “I design it for her the sole exclusive use and benefit,” he wrote, “so that if she should marry this devise shall in no ways be for the use or benefit of her husband, or the property be in any ways subject to his debts, contract, or control.”<sup>32</sup> In the 1865 Land Tax Records for Richmond, Corinna Omohundro is listed as having four lots on West 17<sup>th</sup> Street with a total value of \$13,600.<sup>33</sup>

Within his will, Silas named Richard Cooper, his business partner, the executor of the estate, but decisions regarding the properties fell to Corinna. This division of tasks regarding the estate echoes Suzanne Lebsack’s argument that men with larger estates were more likely to appoint an outside male as executor, but Corinna had more latitude than most women.<sup>34</sup> Silas did grant Corinna the ability to decide, though, whether to reside in Richmond or Philadelphia and which properties she wanted to sell in order to manage the estate. Silas also allocated to Corinna and her children a divided interest in the estate to be dispersed semiannually by Richard Cooper. In addition to the portion of the estate, Silas also granted Corinna the ability to borrow money from the estate. This she liberally did; loans ranged from \$1,200 on June 8, 1867 to \$1,000 from September 30

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<sup>31</sup> Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494

<sup>32</sup> Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494

<sup>33</sup> LTR, 1863.

<sup>34</sup> Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*, xvii.

to December 31, 1879.<sup>35</sup> By 1870, Corinna had established herself as a business owner and sometime in this period she remarried. An advertisement in the Richmond City Business Directory of that year described a bakery and confectionary that she ran at 210 17<sup>th</sup> Street. Nathaniel Davidson, her white husband during this time, sold coal and wood in the property next door.<sup>36</sup>

Although Corinna was successful in the management of the Omohundro property and leveraged her stake in the estate to acquire additional real estate in the city, she also faced numerous financial challenges. For instance, it took years for Corinna and Cooper to identify and pay off the debts accrued by Silas before his death. The estate was additionally tied up in a number of court cases, which kept the estate in the Richmond courts until 1918. The defendants and prosecutors of the cases varied: Cooper initially lodged a complaint against Corinna in 1864; Silas's siblings later brought the estate to court over Cooper's management of the finances; and Corinna's daughter, Alice, brought a case against both Cooper and Corinna regarding the management of the estates.<sup>37</sup> There were multiple concerned parties involved within the property, and Corinna had to prove herself able to manage the financial decisions for the estate.

Another case contested the legality of Corinna's inheritance and questioned whether or not the state could lawfully tax the property based on inheritance laws when it was unclear whether Corinna should legally be considered Silas's wife.<sup>38</sup> In his will, Silas did not refer to Corinna as his wife and only freed her on his death. "In the first place I do absolutely emancipate," he wrote, "my woman, Corinna Omohundro, and her five

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<sup>35</sup> Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494.

<sup>36</sup> Richmond City Directory 1871-1872 Pg. 69 LVA Microfilm 229 Reel 1A.

<sup>37</sup> Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494.

<sup>38</sup> Pennsylvania state reports, Volume 6, 1870.

children.”<sup>39</sup> Corinna and Silas could not legally marry because Virginia law prohibited interracial marriages.<sup>40</sup> This constraint forced single black women who engaged in illicit, unacknowledged relationships with white men into an ambiguous economic and legal standing. Because the women were not legally married, the law technically viewed them as having the status of *feme sole*.<sup>41</sup> While the law categorized these women as single and unattached to males, this status also meant that black women’s property was legally protected from the creditors of their male companions. At the same time, these women could not claim the legal protections offered to those with the legal status of wife. Their single status made their inheritance uncertain. In Corinna’s case, not only was the property taxed differently due to her unclear status, but other inheritors fought her over her inclusion in the estate. Although married women technically retained the rights of *feme sole* after the men died, widows remained dependent on their husbands, who could limit their wife’s role in the management of the property through restrictions written into wills.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout these legal troubles, Corinna kept her properties in Richmond intact, continued to educate her children and to earn increasing amounts of capital, both at her confectionary shop and through the rents she earned on her various properties. Throughout each step, Corinna proved capable and able at managing her portion of the estate and the monies paid or loaned to her. When she left Richmond for Washington, D.C., in 1880, Corinna rented the remainder of her Richmond properties to Joseph J.

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<sup>39</sup> Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494

<sup>40</sup> Virginia law prohibited interracial relationships until the 1967 case of *Loving v. Virginia*.

<sup>41</sup> Due to laws of coverture, when a woman married and became a *feme covert*, her husband received all of her property. A married woman had no rights regarding her property and could not enter into a legal contract by herself. An unmarried *feme sole* had these rights that would be removed by marriage.

<sup>42</sup>Carole Shammas, “Re-Assessing the Married Women’s Property Acts,” 10.

Burke, TH Briggs, and the Virginia Ransom Company.<sup>43</sup> By 1884, Corinna still held over \$6,800 worth of real estate in the city.<sup>44</sup> Although she remarried (or began to live with) another white businessman, records continued to list both personal and real property as separate from that of her husband.<sup>45</sup>

Comparing the 1850 census to the land tax records of this antebellum period reveal an interesting discrepancy in the perceived ownership of property between husbands and wives. Approximately six female property owners in the land tax records are listed under male households without their own property in the census. Leonora West, listed under maiden name of Reaves in the land tax records, appears married to Ruben West, a black barber with \$10,000 worth of real estate in the census. Although she owned significantly less than her husband, Leonora's property increased in value from \$1,418 to \$3,050 between 1850 and 1858.<sup>46</sup> The tax collectors listed Leonora Reaves as "now West" continuously throughout the records in this period. Another woman with a similar circumstance was Cora Ann Gray. Cora resided with her husband, George Gray, a barber who owned \$4,000 worth of property.<sup>47</sup> The land tax records of the same year reveal a lot on Duval Street worth \$150 held in trust for Cora Ann Gray. Her property then increased greatly in value with a lot on Baker Street, worth \$1,800, in 1851. Cora earned at least \$284 worth of rent on this lot each year. By 1863, her property had diminished in value somewhat, valuing \$1,122.<sup>48</sup> Cora presents an interesting study – she is one of few black women whose property is listed as a trust in the tax records. There are a number of

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<sup>43</sup> LTR, 1885-1886.

<sup>44</sup> LTR, 1884.

<sup>45</sup> 1870 Richmond Census; Richmond City Directory 1870 Pg. 93 LVA Microfilm 229 Reel 1A.

<sup>46</sup> LTR, 1850, 1858. Whenever possible, I identify the street based on the shorthand street name used on the records. For "E," this has not yet been possible.

<sup>47</sup> 1850 Federal Census.

<sup>48</sup> LTR, 1850, 1851, 1862.

possibilities for why this property was tied up within a trust. It is possible that her father deeded her the property in this manner in an attempt to protect it from her husband's debts. But it is also possible that her own husband, George Gray, put the property in her name for the same reason.

Other women who potentially had more property than their husbands were also overlooked or ignored by census takers. Alice Greenhow, for instance, appeared to have more property in the land tax records than her husband, who was listed with \$200 worth of property in the census.<sup>49</sup> By 1851, though, sixty-seven-year-old Alice owned a 20' lot on the corner of Duval and Baker that was worth \$460 and earned her \$50 in yearly rent.<sup>50</sup> In 1852, she also acquired another 30' lot on St Peter from RH Napier, worth \$90. By 1862, Alice's two lots were valued at \$790.<sup>51</sup> Alice reveals another trend experienced by many black landowners during this time period: as women acquired land, they appear more likely to add to their property. Septemia Barnett, for instance, owned 27' between Hague and Jackson, worth \$1,424 in 1851. Each year she earned approximately \$150 in rent. In 1862, Septemia moved to Charlottesville, Virginia but she also purchased two properties in Richmond: the first, a 24' lot on 14<sup>th</sup> Street worth \$10,400; and a 48' lot on 14<sup>th</sup> worth \$5,380.<sup>52</sup> Septemia was not the only absentee owner of property; Lucy Clarke, who lived in Ohio, also owned two lots in Richmond worth \$1,078.<sup>53</sup>

Sophia Hill and Catherine Harris worked as washerwomen, an occupation shared with many other free black female property owners during the antebellum period. A little under half of the twenty-nine women who owned property also listed laundress as an

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<sup>49</sup> 1850 Richmond Census.

<sup>50</sup> LTR, 1851.

<sup>51</sup> LTR, 1862.

<sup>52</sup> LTR, 1857, 1862.

<sup>53</sup> LTR, 1851.

occupation. The remainder had other types of occupations, including seamstress (5), factory worker (3), ladies' nurse (2), servant (2), grocer/shopkeeper (2), and mantua maker (1).<sup>54</sup> Such occupations reflect Schweninger's findings in the Upper South; during the 1850s he discovered that the number of washerwomen rose from 4 to 330, while their overall wealth increased from \$900 to \$195,400.<sup>55</sup> Although such employment offered free black women the chance to earn an income to support themselves and their families, the few options for employment greatly limited their abilities to do anything outside of general domestic or factory work, which were often the lowest paid jobs. Such work was also temporary and offered no security or reliable income.<sup>56</sup> However, some women succeeded amid such harsh economic and social restrictions. For instance, Jeanetta Harris, Nancy Bird, Sally Abrams, Caroline Cates, and Catherine Harris all labored as washerwomen, and all owned at least \$1,000 worth of real estate. Eight of the wage earners listed in the census also appeared to have owned their own business or worked in their homes. As historian Juliet Walker explains, a woman could start a business as a seamstress with relatively little capital and become self-employed.<sup>57</sup> Through such occupations, some women succeeded in gaining wealth and property. Rhoda King, for instance, a sixty-five-year-old mulatto seamstress had \$1,100 worth of real estate and \$150 worth of personal property in 1860.<sup>58</sup> Another business owner, Matilda Thacker, ran a grocery store and owned over \$3,000 worth of real and \$400 worth of personal

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<sup>54</sup> 1860 Richmond Census.

<sup>55</sup> Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South*, 78.

<sup>56</sup> Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>57</sup> Juliet Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

<sup>58</sup> LTR, 1860.

property.<sup>59</sup> Although limitations greatly circumscribed the economic options available to free women of color, such restrictions did not prevent some women from acquiring economic assets.

Unmarried or unattached free women of color had an equal propensity to own property. For instance, unattached, both Sophie Hill and Catherine Harris, detailed at the start, owned property. Only nine out of forty-five women with property lived in a male-headed household in 1860; of those nine, it appears that seven women out of forty-five households were related through marriage or birth with the men. Martha Davis, age sixty-two, resided in the household of Warren Davis and owned \$1,000 worth of property while Warren, a shoemaker, owned none. Three women - Sally Dabney, Sally Harris, and Bidy White – resided with men without any apparent or formalized relationship with them. Sally Dabney and Bidy White, neighbors in adjoining households, both owned property while the men residing with them did not.<sup>60</sup> In 1860, a shift toward female-headed households appeared. Out of forty-four households in which women owned property, only one – that of Leonora and Reuben West – was male-headed.<sup>61</sup> This preponderance of female-headed households does not signify increased female capacity or power in antebellum Richmond, however; Suzanne Lebsack equates the gainful employment of many free women of color and the high rates of black female-headed households in Petersburg, Virginia, as “badges of oppression.”<sup>62</sup> Most women worked and supported a household simply because they had no other choice. “Neither was chosen from a position of strength,” she argues, as “both were the products of chronic economic

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<sup>59</sup> LTR, 1860.

<sup>60</sup> 1850 Richmond Census.

<sup>61</sup> 1860 Richmond Census.

<sup>62</sup> Lebsack, 103.

deprivation and of a shortage of men.”<sup>63</sup> But some women achieved economic stability despite such “badges of oppression.” This pattern included Betsy Allen, who supported five children and amassed \$500 worth of real estate as a washerwoman; Lucy King, who worked as a factory worker to support her daughter Jane and Jane’s three children under the age of four while still gaining \$500 worth of real property; and Pinder Dean, who supported seven children and earned \$520 worth of real estate as a laundress.<sup>64</sup>

### After the War

Following the Civil War, many former slaves continued to view property as a vital way to secure their rights as citizens and Americans. “Former slaves and their children,” continues historian Loren Schweningen, “firmly believed that the possession of property would help them to protect their families, assert their rights in court, and secure the goodwill of whites.”<sup>65</sup> Much of the scholarship on the Reconstruction era has stemmed from this assumption. Many historians, including Eric Foner, Christie Farnham Pope, Loren Schweningen, and Claude Oubre, have linked the ability of free men and women to own land as a marker of economic independence and stability in their freedom.<sup>66</sup> These historians have asserted that many African American property owners attempted to leverage their property to acquire some degree of political power, economic influence, and autonomy during Reconstruction. Those whites opposed to racial equality, including Democrats and, later, Redeemers, were additionally conscious of the link between land and social influence. They actively fought to defeat the redistribution of

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> LTR, 1850, 1860.

<sup>65</sup> Schweningen, *Black Property Owners in the South*, 77.

<sup>66</sup> Eric Foner, *America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Christie Farnham Pope, “Southern Homesteads for Negroes,” *Agricultural History* 44, no. 2 (1970); Schweningen; Claude F. Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule* (Baton Rouge, La: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).



confiscated lands to freedmen after the war. Southern white fears of black landownership ultimately led to initiatives like President Andrew Johnson's restoration programs and his pardoning of southern rebels, which removed considerable confiscated land from the control of the Freedmen's Bureau. Although the Federal government outlawed the Black Codes, which many southern states attempted to impose immediately following the war, the Federal effort to ban this legislation often fell to over-taxed state and local officials. These same limitations affected the dispersal of land to freed men and women as directives of the Freedmen's Bureau frequently relied on the overwhelmed numbers of Federal officers for enforcement.<sup>67</sup>

At the close of the Civil War, black women owned \$115,213 worth of property, or .64% of the real estate owned in Richmond (See Table 2.1 and Appendix). While small, this amount is almost double earlier prewar percentages of .374. In the year immediately after the war, the value of property owned dropped to \$84,672.<sup>68</sup> This decrease in 1866 makes sense; not only was Richmond economically disturbed following the war, but much destruction occurred in the final months of the fighting in the capital of the Confederacy. In April, 1865, many sections of the city burned in a massive evacuation fire, including a large portion of the commercial district.<sup>69</sup>

Table 2.1

1865	\$115,213
1866	\$84,672

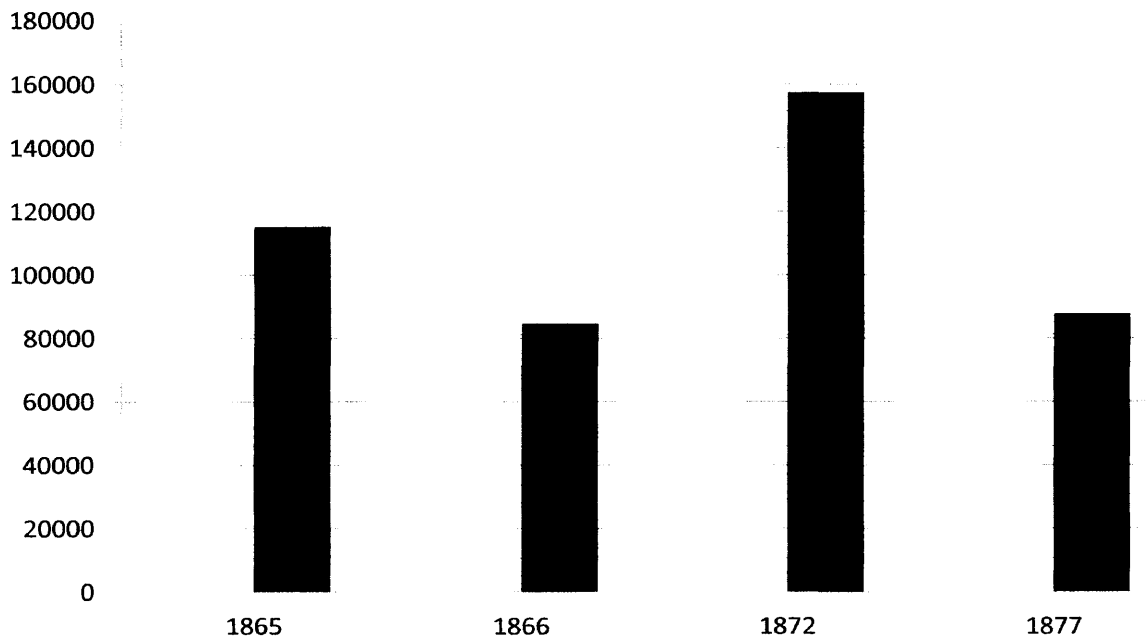
<sup>67</sup> See Oubre's *Forty Acres and a Mule*, Chapter VIII A Stake in the Land and Chapter IX Conclusions and Eric Foner's *America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, Chapter 2: Rehearsals for Reconstruction and Chapter 6: The Making of a Radical Reconstruction.

<sup>68</sup> LTR, 1865, 1850, 1866.

<sup>69</sup> Marie Tyler-Mcgraw, *At the Falls: Richmond, Virginia and its People* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

1872	\$157,506
1877	\$87,658

Graph 2.1



But by 1872, black female property had increased to the highest amount recorded in this study, a staggering \$157,506, or .636% of the total real estate owned. The census, although presenting a lower amount of property owned by free women of color, also echoes this escalating trend with a value of approximately \$124,590. By 1877, the year Virginia passed the Property Marriage Acts, the amount owned had decreased significantly to \$87,658.<sup>70</sup> However, for reasons already explicated, such a calculation is not necessarily truly representative of the amount of land owned in the second half of the decade. Unfortunately, the 1880 census does not list property.

One of the women who acquired property during the Reconstruction era was

<sup>70</sup> LTR, 1865, 1866, 1872, 1877. 1870 Richmond Census.

Mary Lumpkin. Mary echoed many of the same experiences as Corinna Omohundro, but with drastically different outcomes. Little information remains about Mary's early life. According to the 1900 federal census, Mary was born in Virginia in July 1832.<sup>71</sup> By 1840, it appears that Mary lived in Richmond as the property of Robert Lumpkin, another slave jailor and trader in the city and business acquaintance of Silas Omohundro.<sup>72</sup> By 1857, court registration records reveal that Mary lived in Richmond as a free woman of color, presumably freed by Robert Lumpkin with whom she resided until his death in 1866.<sup>73</sup> Mary had five children with Robert: Martha (1845), Annie (1847), Robert (1848), Richard (1853), and John (1857). The children were quite fair, and several passed for white in later census records.<sup>74</sup> Before the start of the Civil War, Robert sent his five children to Pennsylvania where they received a formal education. Why they left the South remains unclear, but evidence suggests that he sent them to Philadelphia to protect them from being taken into slavery.<sup>75</sup>

After the war's end and the onset of Emancipation, Mary Lumpkin's life altered significantly. When Robert Lumpkin died at the age of sixty, Mary became the sole proprietor of his estate in Richmond and Philadelphia, including his old slave jail in Shockoe Bottom. Robert named Mary the executor and devisee of the inheritance,

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<sup>71</sup> 1900 United States Census (Free Schedule), New Richmond, Clermont, Ohio. This Census technically listed Mary as born in "West Virginia," which was not a state until 1863.

<sup>72</sup> Although it is unclear how Robert acquired Mary, the 1840 Census listed a female slave under the age of 10 who resided in the Lumpkin household, which could have been eight-year-old Mary. 1840 United State Census (Free Schedule), Richmond Ward 1, Henrico County, Virginia.

<sup>73</sup> Hustings Court of the City of Richmond, Court Order Book, 1856-57, 262: January 17, 1857.

<sup>74</sup> See the 1870 and 1880 Philadelphia Federal Censuses for examples of the children being designated as "white."

<sup>75</sup> Charles Henry Corey argued that Robert Lumpkin sent his children to the free state of Pennsylvania in order to protect them from being overtaken by the institution of slavery. "The father," he wrote in his early remembrances, *A History of the Richmond Theological Seminary*, "fearing that some financial contingency might arise when these, his own beautiful daughters, might be sold into slavery to pay off debts" sent them away. Charles Corey, *History of the Richmond Theological Seminary, with Reminiscences of Thirty Years' Work Among the Colored People of the South*; Reverend Smith, *Memoir of Rev. Nathaniel Colver, D.D. with Lectures, Plans of Sermons, etc* (Boston: Geo. A. Foxcroft, Jr., 1875)

granting her complete control over the management of the properties and the finances of the estate.<sup>76</sup> Although Robert bequeathed Mary financial control over their property, this decision might have been because of Robert's indebtedness after the war and not a conscious attempt to better Mary's status. Although Robert remained wealthy in 1860, the total value of his property (mostly in real estate after the abolition of slavery) sharply decreased in value after 1865.<sup>77</sup> Robert had real estate, but not significant personal property following the Civil War. As a slave trader, most of his wealth before the war was tied up in his slaves. After the war, much of this wealth was lost.

As in the will of Silas Omohundro, Robert did not explicitly refer to Mary as his wife within his will, but he did grant her the surname of Lumpkin and noted that she "[resided] with [him]."<sup>78</sup> Mary's relationship with Robert proved socially ambiguous at best and, had the financial capacity of the estate been more significant, other potential heirs might have fought Mary for the inheritance, which happened in Corinna's case. But this ambiguous marital status alternatively granted some black women protections unavailable to other married women. Nancy West, for example, was a free black woman who lived in Albemarle County, Virginia, in the mid-nineteenth century. She had a long relationship with David Isaacs, a Jewish merchant, and acquired extensive property both with him and outside of their relationship. By 1850, Nancy had become the wealthiest nonwhite person in the county, with real estate valued at almost \$7,000.<sup>79</sup> In the early 1820s, residents of West's neighborhood had brought a suit against the couple, declaring

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<sup>76</sup> Robert Lumpkin Will, Richmond City Hustings Wills, 1866, vol. 24, 419. A devisee is someone who inherits property.

<sup>77</sup> According to the 1860 Federal Census, Robert Lumpkin continued to maintain a relatively affluent lifestyle, as the estate was valued at over \$26,845 (\$20,000 real estate and \$6,845 personal property). See 1860 Richmond Census.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Lumpkin Will, Richmond City Hustings Wills, 1866, vol. 24, 419.

<sup>79</sup> Joshua Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 57.

that their co-habitation broke indecency and anti-fornication laws. The court declared them not married, and when David Isaac's finances later became tangled in a web of court cases, creditors attempted to gain access to Nancy's estate in order to pay Isaac's debts. But because of the court's earlier decision, West circumvented coverture laws and protected her own property.<sup>80</sup>

Robert Lumpkin's will suggests a conscious attempt to exploit these laws of coverture, as Mary's inheritance came with one critical limitation: she had to absolve claims to the property if she remarried. "In case the said Mary F. Lumpkin marry," the will decreed, "the above devises shall be wholly void and of no effect." If she did remarry, the property would transfer to her children and "any other child she may hereafter have by [Robert]."<sup>81</sup> Through the Virginia laws of coverture, a married woman's property and real estate transferred to her husband. After her death, the practice of curtesy determined that the husband continued to manage her real estate for the tenure of his life.<sup>82</sup> This custom created a degree of legal dependency, as a woman could not enter into contracts by herself, which greatly limited her ability to purchase real estate.<sup>83</sup> Some free women in antebellum Richmond appeared aware of such restrictions and avoided formalized attachments with men. But even after 1877, these protective laws often helped married men to safeguard their property from debt collectors; rarely did these laws increase the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 59-67, 72-82.

<sup>81</sup> Although Robert does not say "my children" when defining the children, this last statement grants acknowledgement to the five children who were born before his death in 1866. Robert Lumpkin Will, Richmond City Hustings Wills, 1866, vol. 24, 419-22, Library of Virginia Microfilm, 422.

<sup>82</sup> Carole Shammas, "Re-Assessing the Married Women's Property Acts," *Journal of Women's History* 6, (1994): 9. Laws of curtesy state that although a man could use his deceased wife's property until his death, he could not leave it to anyone other than her own children.

<sup>83</sup> C. McDevitt, "Women, Real Estate, and Wealth in a Southern US County, 1780-1860," *Feminist Economics* 6, no. 2 (2010): 2.

economic stability of married women.<sup>84</sup> Robert prevented the transfer of his property to Mary's future husband, if she had remarried, and instead ensured that the real estate would go to their children. Robert utilized the only means available to keep the property in his family, but this decision forced the court to acknowledge Mary and her children.

Mary's responsibilities in managing the property and estate proved troublesome. While her inheritance transformed her into a property owner, she also acquired financial burdens that she had to overcome in order to maintain her land. Significant concerns, including payment of annual taxes, arose and weighed heavily on the estate's finances. On average, Mary owed \$325 in annual taxes; these costs and the upkeep for her properties exceeded what she collected each year. Consequently, by 1872, she had not paid her taxes for several years.<sup>85</sup> Richmond businessmen to whom Robert Lumpkin owed money continued to put liens on the estate until past 1879, over thirteen years after his death.<sup>86</sup>

Mary took pains to keep and maintain her property – including Lumpkin's Jail in Shockoe Alley – with her limited economic resources. In an attempt to minimize these growing encumbrances, Mary leased the property in 1867 to white, male Baptists of the American Baptist Home Mission Society who had travelled to Virginia from the North.<sup>87</sup> Nathaniel Colver, a Baptist Reverend and ardent abolitionist, ventured to Richmond under the auspices of the ABHMS to educate black men as future ministers to serve in their communities. More than education, Colver and his northern white male comrades

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<sup>84</sup> Laura Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 12.

<sup>85</sup> Chancery Court of City of Richmond, Report of S.N. Davis, June 13, 1872, *Lumpkin Ext v. Kelsey & Co.*

<sup>86</sup> Letter from Annie Lumpkin, 1879, *Lumpkin Ext v. Kelsey & Co.*

<sup>87</sup> Charles Corey, *History of the Richmond Theological Seminary, with Reminiscences of Thirty Years' Work Among the Colored People of the South*, 74. Hereafter, the American Baptist Home Mission Society will be referred to as ABHMS.

intended to instigate social change through the education of freedmen, something many white Virginians actively resisted. Thus they found it difficult to persuade whites to sell or lease them property. Colver walked the streets of Richmond and eventually met Mary Lumpkin, who offered him the use of the retired slave pen, a proposal he readily accepted. Beginning on July 1, 1867, the Institute leased the former jail for \$1,000 a year, supposedly \$500 less than she could have acquired from other sources. The Baptists continued to lease the jail until 1870.<sup>88</sup> The relationship between the free woman and the northern Baptists proved mutually beneficial: Mary required money for the estate and these men needed land that they were unable to get through other channels.

The correspondence between Mary Lumpkin and the men of the ABHMS reveals the continued financial burdens that plagued her estate after she leased the men the Shockoe property. While these letters suggest that Lumpkin had become literate, they also reveal the stress she experienced in managing the property and the monetary burdens she still faced. On March 23, 1869, Lumpkin requested early payment of the rent. "I would like for you to let me have one month's rent," she petitioned Charles Corey, who led the Richmond Theological Seminary after Reverend Colver left, "as I have to raise \$200 by next month, and if you could it will help me very much." Lumpkin's precarious economic conditions forced her to plead for their aid. "I dislike to ask you," she admitted in the same letter, "but I am so worried about money affairs that I hardly know what to

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<sup>88</sup> For information regarding the early history of the Richmond Theological Institute, see Charles Corey, *History of the Richmond Theological Seminary, with Reminiscences of Thirty Years' Work Among the Colored People of the South*; Reverend Smith, *Memoir of Rev. Nathaniel Colver, D.D. with Lectures, Plans of Sermons, etc* (Boston: Geo. A. Foxcroft, Jr., 1875); Miles Fisher, *Virginia Union University and Some of her Achievements: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1899-1924* (Richmond: Brown Print Shop, 1924).

do.”<sup>89</sup> Although no legal prohibitions limited her capacity to sell her Richmond real estate, the troubles that arose from the estate prevented her from economically benefitting from her inheritance.

Financial concerns continued to be the focus of Mary’s correspondence to both Corey and Colver, including continual references to urgent debts. “I received a letter from Mr. Davis,” she wrote on June 28, 1869, “and he says every body is pressing him for settlements.”<sup>90</sup> Lumpkin’s observation suggests that her situation was not unique; in the postwar economy, many southerners experienced economic burdens.<sup>91</sup> These debts included the taxes, her husband’s business debts, including the \$600 owed to William Echlon for goods received, and monies to Dr. R G Cabell and Dr. James Beele for medical services provided to Robert Lumpkin.<sup>92</sup> These debts brought the estate into court and two such cases, including *Small’s Administrator v. Lumpkin* and *Lumpkin’s Executor v. Kelsey*, reveal Lumpkin’s continued financial troubles during the years following her husband’s death and the difficulty in selling her Richmond property. Now responsible in the management of the property, Mary played a central role in both.

*Small’s Administrator*, the first case, involved a debt Robert Lumpkin accrued prior to the Civil War. Although he paid a portion of the debt before the war’s end, the courts argued that the Confederate money that he used for repayment during the war did not qualify as appropriate compensation (as the value of the Confederate dollars did not

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<sup>89</sup> Mary F. Lumpkin to Mr. Corey. Philadelphia, March 23, 1869, Richmond Institute Collection, Douglas L. Wilder Library, Virginia Union University.

<sup>90</sup> Mary F. Lumpkin to Mr. Corey. Philadelphia, June 28, 1869, Richmond Institute Collection, Douglas L. Wilder Library, Virginia Union University.

<sup>91</sup> Multiple documents within *Lumpkin Ext v. Kelsey & Co* highlight Mary’s inability, or unwillingness, to pay property taxes for multiple years. The “Mr. Davis” mentioned was S.N. Davis, who worked with the Chancery Court of Richmond to dispose of Lumpkin’s property in order to pay off her debts to the city.

<sup>92</sup> *Lumpkin Ext v. Kelsey & Co.*, and Chancery Court of City of Richmond. *Small’s Administrator v. Lumpkin et als. D.M. 60—D*, (Richmond, 1873).



equal that of US currency). The importance of the court case, however, comes from the details provided regarding Mary's financial straits. "There are still some debts due by the estate which have not been paid," Mary testified within the court documents, "as the income of the estate has not yet enabled her to do so."<sup>93</sup> The only property that yielded significant revenue during this time period was the leased jail, although the total amount received cannot be determined.<sup>94</sup> While Lumpkin had no other personal property, Davis estimated the value of Mary's Richmond real estate at \$8,700, which included "a lot fronting on Wall street 180 feet, with a building thereon known as Lumpkin's jail, worth \$7,000...a lot fronting 90 feet on Wall street, with a new wooden *building* thereon, worth about \$1,600... [and] a lot fronting on 16th street 44 feet, with no buildings thereon, worth about \$1000."<sup>95</sup> He estimated the annual rent from the properties to be approximately \$480, which proved insufficient to support Mary, pay her husband's debts, and provide for the upkeep of the property. A portion of the property had already been sold, but the profit proved inadequate in minimizing the overall debt the Lumpkin estate had accrued.

The second case, *Lumpkin v. Kelsey*, documents Mary's attempts to sell the property, which by the early 1870s had diminished in value but was still estimated at approximately \$12,700.<sup>96</sup> An economic depression that plagued the start of the decade further minimized potential profits and motivated Mary to accept any offer, regardless of the actual value of the land. By July 5, 1872, her agent had made every possible effort to

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<sup>93</sup> *Small's Administrator v. Lumpkin et als*, 8.

<sup>94</sup> The court documents assert that Mary only receives \$480 for her rent on the jail property. The ABHMS alleges that they paid \$1,000 per annum in rent for use of the property. Either amount would not be sufficient to pay the debts of the estate.

<sup>95</sup> Deposition of S. N. Davis, November 30, 1871, *Small's administrator v. Lumpkin et als.*, 66-67.

<sup>96</sup> LTR, 1872.

sell the land, including multiple public auctions. Unfortunately “not a single bid was made for the property,” even though significant “efforts [had been] made to obtain the attendance of persons supposed to be in want of such a property.”<sup>97</sup> The problems with the old slave jail proved overwhelming: the four buildings on the property had fallen into complete disrepair; the Shockoe Creek overflowed onto the property, sometimes multiple times a year; significant capital would be required to make the necessary repairs to make the property inhabitable. In its 1872 state, the buildings proved “neither fit for residence for white persons nor for any business purpose except possibly as the site for some manufacturing establishment.”<sup>98</sup> Although the property still held value on paper according to the tax records, in reality it proved a burden that weighed heavily on Mary. She could not unload the property and she could not pay the high taxes on the land as determined by the state.

The Shockoe neighborhood previously had been located in the slave-trading center of Richmond, and these court cases also indicated a problem regarding the current racial composition of the residents. “In view of the fact that the slave trade has been abolished,” disclosed a group of realtors in 1872, “this property has become of little value comparatively, and is occupied wholly by coloured persons with little prospect of being occupied in the future by any better class.”<sup>99</sup> Others, including realtors John Sinton and James M. Taylor, described the neighborhood as “disrespectable” and “undesirable.”<sup>100</sup> The property and the neighborhood, generally, had fallen into disrepair and decay. With the abolishment of slavery, the purpose of the land and its worth ultimately diminished.

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<sup>97</sup>Statement, Market B filed report with E.Y. Cannon, November 29, 1872, *Lumpkin Ext v. Kelsey & Co.*

<sup>98</sup> Statement of SN Davis, July 5, 1872, *Lumpkin Ext v. Kelsey & Co.*

<sup>99</sup> Statement, Market B filed report with E.Y. Cannon, November 29, 1872, *Lumpkin Ext v. Kelsey & Co.*

<sup>100</sup> Statement from John Sinton and James Taylor of the Commissioner’s Office, December 4, 1872, and Statement from SN Davis, July 5, 1872. *Lumpkin Ext v. Kelsey & Co.*

This testimony reveals Mary's troublesome position in inheriting property that had lost significant value because of its past use and its close proximity to a creek that regularly flooded. The issues with the properties continued, which compounded her economic problems; the income from leasing the property barely covered its upkeep, which caused the land to fall into disrepair and made it extremely difficult to sell.

Mary Lumpkin eventually sold the property to A.J. Ford, the proprietor of Ford's Hotel, for \$6,000, taking a loss of approximately half its worth in the tax records. John Sinton and James Taylor agreed that the sale to Ford was the most viable option for Mary to dispose of the property in a timely manner. Although the sale price was significantly less than its appraised value, the two argued that it was appropriate considering the economic state of the city.<sup>101</sup> Mr. Ford purchased the property to establish a laundry for his hotel and use the buildings to lodge servants and employees who could not be housed elsewhere. On November 28, 1872, the Chancery Court processed the sale and Mary had finally rid herself of one property and its pressing concerns.<sup>102</sup>

Corinna and Mary shared many of the same experiences, but the outcome of their inheritance followed significantly different routes. Corinna succeeded and flourished while Mary unquestionably failed in her attempts at becoming economically stable. Although both came from similar backgrounds, their commonalities in the circumstances of their lives and the context of their inheritances diverged at important points. Corinna inherited considerable and valuable property from Silas. Along with the real estate in Philadelphia and Richmond, she also acquired personal property to use and a stake in the interest accrued in the estate. The Omohundro accounts continued to earn enough money

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<sup>101</sup> Sinton and Taylor Statement, *Lumpkin Ext v. Kelsey & Co.*

<sup>102</sup> Bill of Sale signed by A.J. Ford, November 28, 1872, *Lumpkin Ext v. Kelsey & Co.*

to pay off debts and returned a profit large enough to support both Corinna and her children. In contrast, Mary inherited everything from Robert outright, but his property proved worthless as the years passed and his debts overwhelmed the estate. Her inheritance was primarily in real estate, and Mary could not maintain the land without cash or personal property. An important difference also arose from the executor of the estate. Mary, although literate, did not effectively act as executor, and the courts ultimately took control of the properties by appointing administrators to her case. Eventually, she absolved rights to the estate and turned all remaining property over to her children. Although naming Richard Cooper the executor of the estate potentially limited Corinna's decision-making ability, it also provided her with someone proficient in the ways of business. Because Cooper also had a stake in the success of the estate, he probably helped Corinna make effective decisions regarding the properties and the business.<sup>103</sup>

While it is difficult to determine if Corinna would have been successful without his guidance, she had also assisted Silas in his business and handled some of their finances before his death. Silas kept a meticulous account book in which he detailed his spending and business expenditures; he often gave Corinna various amounts of money to manage the household and pay bills. For instance, she received loans from him while he was alive (although it is unclear for what), he paid her for work, and she assisted Robert in feeding and clothing his slaves.<sup>104</sup> Although not financially independent, Corinna revealed an understanding of finances and business before being placed into a decision-making role in Silas' estate. This background would have aided her in the maintenance of

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<sup>103</sup> Executors receive a percentage of the proceeds of the estate. See Lebsock, *Free Women of Petersburg*, 37.

<sup>104</sup> Silas Omohundro General Account Book, LVA

the property and would have allowed her to make sound business and financial decisions after Silas' death. No evidence exists to suggest that Mary acquired similar experiences with Robert's finances.<sup>105</sup>

Many other black women inherited property from their significant others during this time period. Octavia Adams, for instance, inherited property from her husband who owned extensive real estate in the state of Virginia. Born in 1829, Octavia had married John Adams by the age of twenty-one. John was a plasterer who had amassed significant property in Richmond. Together, they had three children who survived to adulthood: Joseph, John, and Alice. By the time he was fourteen, Joseph worked as a plasterer like his father. By the time John died in 1873, he had accumulated approximately \$30,000 worth of property.<sup>106</sup> He named Joseph the executor of the account and bequeathed six houses, eleven lots, and personal property to his wife and children. John explicitly left property to his daughter, Alice, and stipulated that it remain separate from her husband's. "At her death" John gave "the said lot and improvements to such children as she may have then living of the descendants of such of her children."<sup>107</sup> John could determine what would happen with the property after the death of his daughter because he granted her the inheritance for life, not fee simple. Properties to his sons, however, were not bequeathed with the same restrictions. Within his will he also established trusts for his daughter, his sister, and his sister-in-law; in addition, he granted Octavia a fourth part

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<sup>105</sup> Two accounts do exist, however, that reveal Mary helping Robert in the slave jail, but never in financial matters. See Charles H. Corey's *History of the Richmond Theological Seminary, with Reminiscences of Thirty Years' Work Among the Colored People of the South* (Richmond: J. W. Randolph Co., 1895) for an address by Reverend AM Newman and Charles Emery Stevens's *Anthony Burns: A History* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Academic Affairs Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999) for a discuss on Burns' treatment while in the Lumpkin Jail.

<sup>106</sup> LTR, 1873.

<sup>107</sup> Will of John Adams, dated January 8, 1873, John Adams Family Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

share in the estate, with his children equally dividing the remainder.<sup>108</sup> By 1877, real estate in the city owned by Octavia, Joseph, John, and Alice was valued at \$5,520.<sup>109</sup>

Similar to Corinna's experiences, other women who acquired property before the Civil War continued to own property after its end. In 1872, for instance, seventy-nine-year-old Mahala Amos owned \$1,260 worth of real estate. This 46" lot, located between Jackson Avenue and 15<sup>th</sup> street, had almost doubled in value since 1850, when it was worth approximately \$520.<sup>110</sup> Consistently listed as "free" before the Civil War, after the war she was no longer listed as "colored." Martha Pennicks was another women who "became white" in the land tax records after the Civil War. Her 20" lot on Madison, repeatedly valued at \$560 before the war, increased to \$800 during Reconstruction. By 1877, Martha was no longer noted as black.<sup>111</sup> Only one woman, Virginia Ann Rex, appeared as a free female landowner before the war in the land tax records and is listed as "colored" afterward. It appears, however, that Virginia sold her original land by 1855 and purchased a new lot by 1872. Her original lot, 33" on Concord Avenue, was valued at approximately \$200. After 1855, she was not listed with this property. However, Virginia reappeared in the 1872 land tax records as owning a lot between Jackson & 32<sup>nd</sup> Street worth \$500. By 1877, she had made improvements to the buildings on her property that increased the value to \$1,028.<sup>112</sup> Virginia is one of the few women listed as African American during this early Reconstruction period. In fact, out of sixty-five black women

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> LTR, 1877.

<sup>110</sup> LTR, 1850, 1872.

<sup>111</sup> LTR, 1860, 1877.

<sup>112</sup> LTR, 1852, 1872, 1877.

that appear to own property in 1872, only four are listed as “colored.” In 1877, four out of fifty-seven are listed as such.<sup>113</sup>

The 1870 census listed seventy-six African American women as owners of property in the city. As occurred before the war, many women continued to run female-headed households, supporting large, sometimes multi-generational families. Six female property owners lived in male-headed households, but the patriarch within these homes did not own any property themselves. Betsy Clark, a fifty-year-old mulatto woman who kept house, owned \$1,000 worth of real estate while her husband Peter, a dining room servant, had none. Some women leading female-headed households appear to have imparted the importance of property to their children. Caroline Coles, for instance, was a fifty-year-old mulatto woman who owned \$600 worth of real property. Her sons James and Robert both worked at the tobacco factory and had each amassed \$400 worth of real estate themselves. Caroline’s daughter, Agnes, had also accumulated over \$1,400 worth of property.<sup>114</sup>

Along with the new female property owners that emerged after the Civil War, new occupational trends also surface in the census records. Of the seventy-seven women, fifty-six are listed as “keeping house” or “at home.”<sup>115</sup> On average, this consort of women owned \$1,662.32 worth of property, approximately \$523.90 more than the average for the total group. One of the women listed at home, Sarah Breeden, owned \$25,000 worth of real estate – by far the largest female property owner included in this study.<sup>116</sup> However, this group also included those with the smallest amounts of real estate, including Welley

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<sup>113</sup> LTR, 1852, 1855, 1872, 1877.

<sup>114</sup> 1870 Richmond Census.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

Wilson who owned just \$100 worth of property. Other occupations include seamstress (2), washerwoman (5), servant (3), and dress maker (1). For the first time in the course of this study, young girls are also listed as property owners. Rebecca Vandewall, for instance, the eight-month-old daughter of Nelson and Rebecca Vandewall, owned \$2,000 worth of real estate and \$300 worth of personal property. Ann Cheton presents a similar circumstance; Ann was a thirteen-year-old servant who is listed with \$5,000 worth of real estate and \$500 of personal property in the 1870 census. Like Rebecca, Ann was the youngest daughter of Mahala and William Cheton. Either these two young girls inherited the land from someone outside of their household or that someone (potentially either girl's mother or father) put the land into her ownership in order to hide it from debtors.<sup>117</sup>

The 1870 census also lists five prostitutes with property and two black female property owners who potentially acted as madams – occupations previously not recorded in the 1860 census. Most of the property owned by these prostitutes was modest; four women owned less than \$500 worth of personal property, including Adely Girard, a thirty-nine-year-old who owned \$100 worth of personal property, and the forty-five-year-old black prostitute named Mallory Rosa who owned \$500. Mary Dean, a thirty-eight-year-old mulatto prostitute, provides the exception to this rule; in 1870, Mary owned \$3,000 worth of real estate and \$600 worth of personal property.<sup>118</sup> Mary Watkins, whose household is detailed in this introduction, appears to be the head of brothel. She lives with five prostitutes – three of which are her eldest daughters. Two young infants appeared to be her daughter's offspring. But Mary, listed as “keeping house,” owned \$1,000 worth of real estate and \$200 worth of personal property. Although not listed as

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.



linked with prostitution, another woman named Catherine Coots appears potentially associated with the profession. As a thirty-four-year-old woman, Caroline owned \$2,000 worth of real estate and had \$100 worth of personal property. Her profession: “saloon keeper.”<sup>119</sup>

Unfortunately, very little scholarship addresses the role of prostitution in Reconstruction-era Richmond or in the South in general. E. Susan Barber has argued that it is extremely difficult to contextualize antebellum prostitution in the city as it “was hidden from view and often far more clandestine in nature” than it would be in later decades.<sup>120</sup> She has identified at least four brothels in the census but suggests that women engaging in prostitution within the same brothel rarely shared a familial connection.<sup>121</sup> In Richmond, prostitution flourished as men flocked to the city to work for the Confederate government and became a more apparent aspect of Richmond society. It is within such an environment of change that Mary Watkin’s girls – both her daughters and the other prostitutes under her care – became part of the profession. Interestingly, however, the census taker identified these women and did not list them as “servant,” “housekeeper,” or some other occupation that was more socially appropriate. Although it would be impossible to truly understand the world of these prostitutes, it appears that black women used prostitution as a viable method for gaining economic security. For women like Maddy Alves, it offered a chance to acquire several hundred dollars’ worth of personal property. For women like Mary Dean, it allowed an opportunity to carve out a comfortable existence within the city and economic security unavailable to many other

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> E. Susan Barber, “Depraved and Abandoned Women: Prostitution in Richmond, Virginia, across the Civil War,” in *Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 157.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 158 and 160.

women. For Mary Watkins, it proved so lucrative that her own daughters became involved in the trade. In fact, Mary was able to use the financial gains earned by her working girls to send two of her children away to school.<sup>122</sup> Free women of color appropriately adapted in a society that consistently restricted their capacity for economic and social security. They did whatever they could to achieve a degree of economic autonomy, and it appears that prostitution offered one vehicle with which they could achieve that ultimate goal.

Richmond provides a particularly useful area for the study of free black women who owned property before the Civil War and those women who continued to, or became, property owners after the war. Richmond's transition from a small industrial capital of the South, to capital of the Confederacy, and then to a city destroyed in its aftermath provided a turbulent and fluctuating environment for social and economic variations to occur. Richmond provided an environment of flux and change; part of the evolution experienced by the city arose from the different interactions many Richmond inhabitants experienced in work and trade. These changes altered the physical environment and neighborhoods of the city. Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg Kimball argue in their study of the spatial dimensions of Richmond that although concentrations of African Americans resided in areas along Main Street and Shockoe Valley, by 1860 no clearly defined segregated neighborhoods existed in the city.<sup>123</sup> Mary Wingfield Scott, in contrast, highlights how certain areas of post-Reconstruction Richmond, particularly in parts of

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<sup>122</sup> 1870 Richmond Census.

<sup>123</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg Kimball, "Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond," in *The New African American Urban History*, ed. Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996), 69.

Jackson Ward, became centers of African American activity and property-ownership.<sup>124</sup> However, this study discovered other areas of concentrated black female property ownership overlooked by these previous works.

The data used for this thesis links some of these concentrated areas to the era before and during the Civil War. Although not necessarily clearly defined or restricted by law, many African American women owned property that was in close proximity to each other and in a limited number of areas in the city (See Map 1.1 in Appendix).<sup>125</sup> As Brown and Kimball assert, one small concentration of ownership occurred near Shockoe Creek; Mary Lumpkin, Frances Amos, Maria Cooper, Polly Hamilton, and Mary Nicholas all own property described as “near creek” or on “Sho Creek.” Concentrations also appear on 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> street, near the creek; this included the households of Mary Briggs, Mahala Bridesley, Lucy Coleman, and Virginia Cunningham. Another area occurred west of Church Hill and included the households of Melissa Ann Brown and Mary Ann Erans on Broad Street. The largest concentration of black female landownership occurred in Jackson Ward, as argued by Scott. Black female-owned households, including Mahala Basanett, Lucy Anderson, Kesiah Barbee, Caroline Cates, and Sally Dabney, dominated on Duval, Baker, Marshall, St. John, Judah, Leigh in Jackson Ward.

These concentrations of black female property ownership are not surprising. The unique position of these free women offered them the ability to carve out autonomous

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<sup>124</sup> Mary Wingfield Scott, *Old Richmond Neighborhoods* (Richmond, Virginia: Whillet & Shepperson, 1950). Scott, in her efforts to preserve old architectural buildings in Richmond, took photographs of many homes before their demolition.

<sup>125</sup> These locations are estimates. While some tax entries listed an intersection, others just detailed the land as “22 feet on J.” Although some roads were estimated, others could not be located on the map. Also, when an intersection was not provided, the location of the properties on the specific road was estimated.

private communities of their own within Richmond. For some, like Sophie Hill and Catherine Harris, close proximity to each other acted as a smart business decision. As each worked as a washerwoman, they appeared to pool their resources to not only complete their work but also to purchase property – which they eventually did together. But even before their joint property, the two women built abutting houses on their two lots:



Properties of Sophie Hill and Catherine Harris, built 1856. (Mary Wingfield Scott Collection and printed in *African-Virginians and the Vernacular Building Tradition in Richmond City, 1790-1860*).

Although this is extraordinary example of proximity between black female properties, Hill and Harris reveal how some black women sought the support of others that shared their circumstance. These women would understand the hardships each faced in day-to-day life and could offer each other a degree of security.

These women's experiences reveal how some free women gained access to extensive property in Virginia despite the obstacles that many freed people encountered as they sought property. Some women succeeded through property ownership. Corinna

Omohundro and Leonora West become financially independent and secure. Yet, property ownership for black women did not follow a singular trajectory of progress. Mary Lumpkin struggled with the debts of Robert's estate, and her properties proved too overwhelming to manage. The location and condition of the land and buildings further diminished her options. Although the opportunity as landowner allowed her to explore alternative business options – including renting the land, which other black women successfully did – Mary could not successfully leverage the property and rent to elevate herself out of debt and she eventually became impoverished. While property did not instigate overall changes to the status of freedwomen in Richmond, an evaluation of individual women reveals how real estate could offer one way for some women to circumvent certain societal restrictions while it continued to ultimately limit others. During the decades between 1850 and 1870, black women owned less than one percent of the total real estate in the city, but the amount owned followed an important upward trend in the period before and after the war. From 1850 to 1872, the percentage of land owned by free black women almost doubled – despite restrictions that this group continued to experience. Black women linked independence and security to the acquisition and retention of real property. Despite the arrival of segregation, many more acquired property or passed property to their kin.

Appendix

Table 3.1

<b>Year in Tax Records</b>	<b>Amount owned by African American Women (Lot &amp; Buildings)</b>	<b>Total Amount of Property</b>	<b>Percentage Owned</b>
1850	\$37,980	\$10,166,620	.374%
1860	\$57,687	\$11,674,053	.494%
1865	\$115,213	\$17,988,073	.64%
1872	\$157,506	\$24,773,557	.636%
1877	\$87,658	\$26,796,760	.327%

Table 3.2

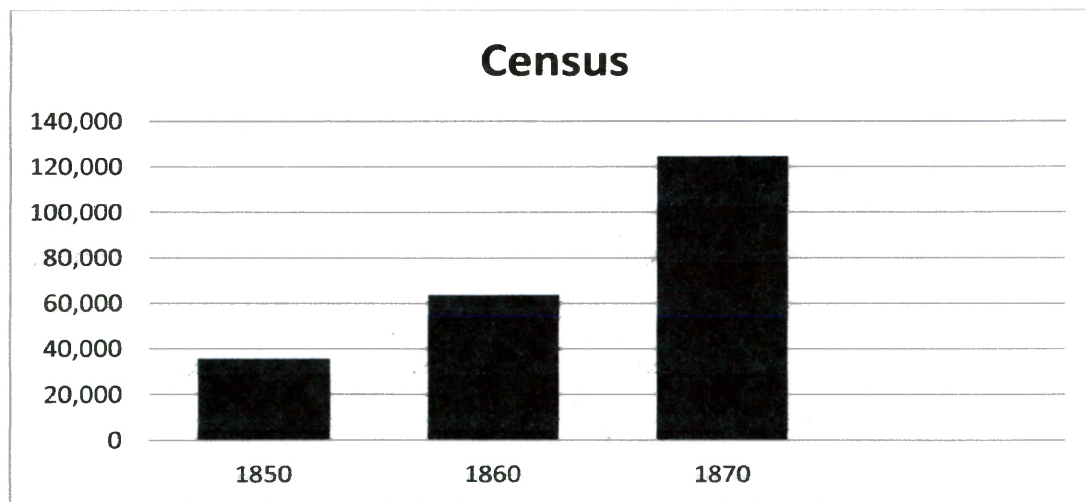
<b>Year in Census</b>	<b>Amount owned</b>
1850	\$35,700
1860	\$63,772
1870	\$124,590

Table 3.3

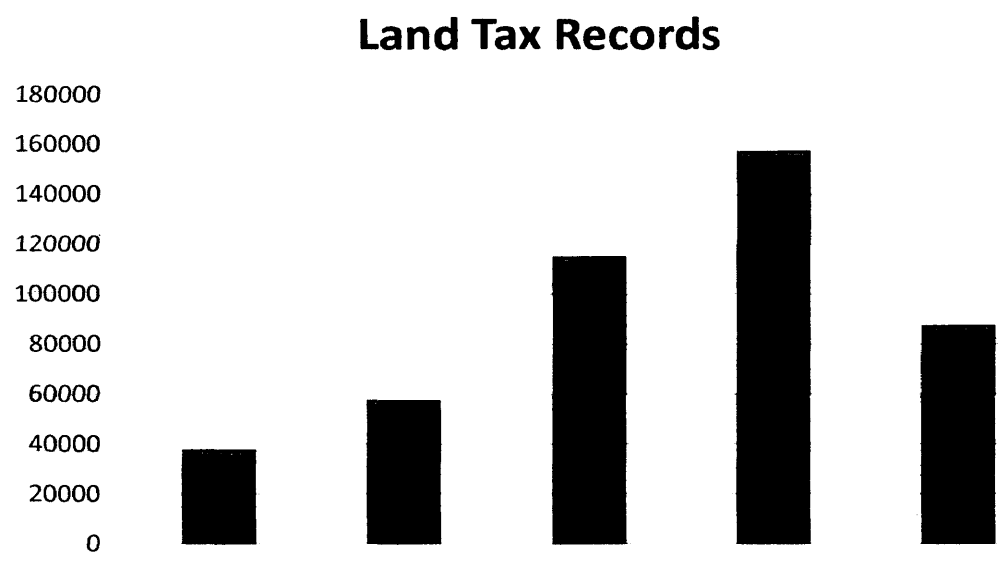
<b>Year</b>	<b>Amount owned in Land Tax Records</b>
1850	\$37,980
1851	\$52,301
1852	\$60,060
1853	\$58,694
1854	\$64,224
1855	\$54,779
1856	\$55,536

<b>1857</b>	\$48,538
<b>1858</b>	\$52,908
<b>1859</b>	\$42,497
<b>1860</b>	\$57,687
<b>1861</b>	\$55,540
<b>1862</b>	\$60,261
<b>1863</b>	\$61,712
<b>1865</b>	\$115,213
<b>1866</b>	\$84,672
<b>1872</b>	\$157,506
<b>1877</b>	\$87,658

Graph 3.1

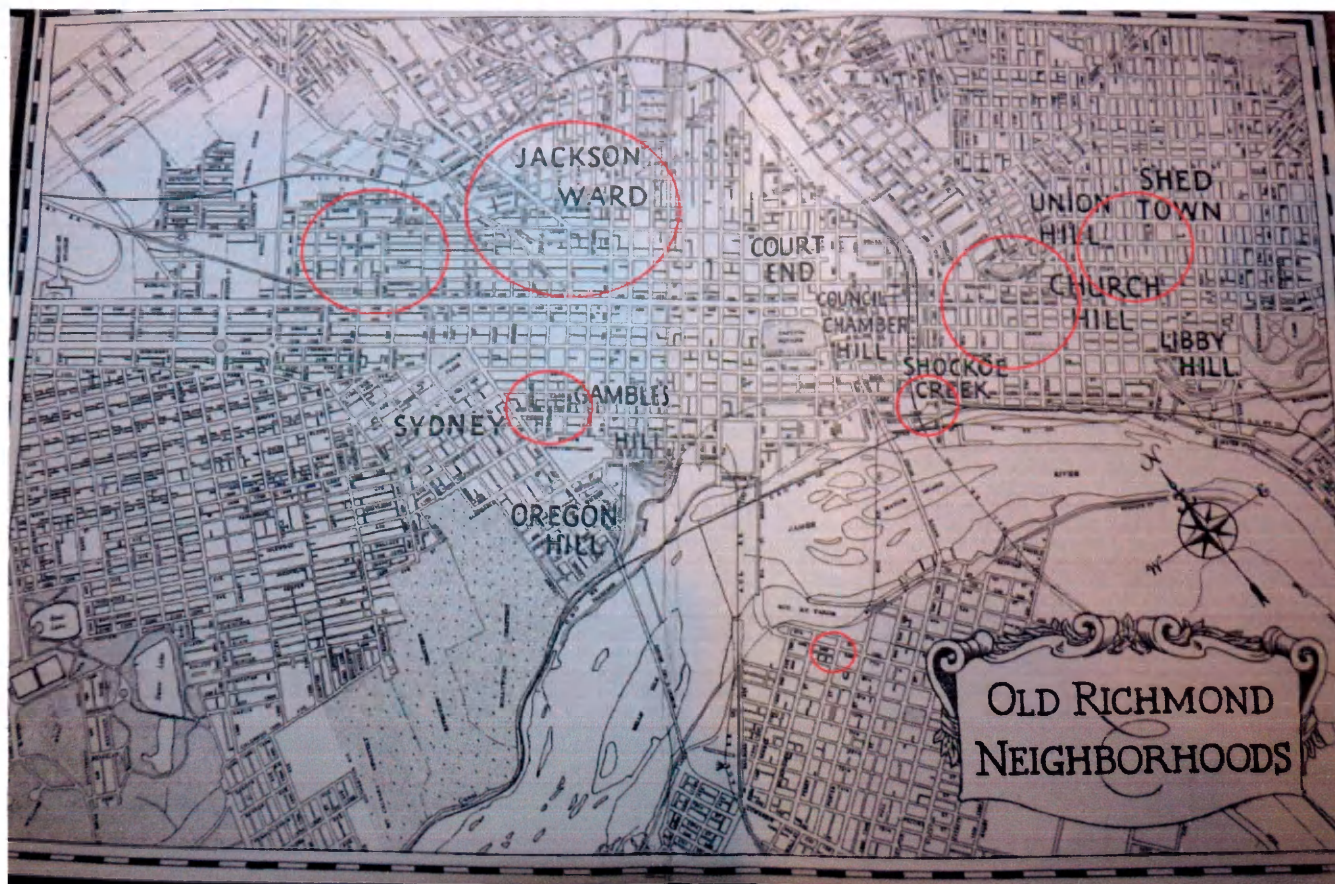


Graph 3.2





Map 1.1



This map was originally published in Mary Wingfield Scott's *Old Richmond Neighborhoods*.