

2021

## Credit Is Due: African Americans As Borrowers And Lenders In Antebellum Virginia

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<https://doi.org/10.21220/b39h-pf50>

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Credit Is Due: African Americans as  
Borrowers and Lenders in Antebellum Virginia

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A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty of  
The College of William & Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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College of William & Mary  
August 2021



## APPROVAL PAGE

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

Doctor of Philosophy



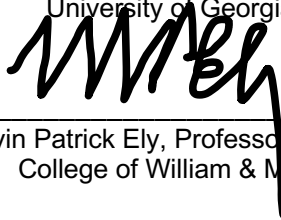
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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes the credit arrangements of Black Virginians, enslaved and free, from the American Revolution to the Civil War. As democracy assured new rights for white men, Black Virginians, and especially Black women, saw the erosion of their legal access to civil and political rights. At the same time a new system of banks provided the capital for the expansion of enslavement. This dissertation examines different forms of debt at the moment when changing ideas about race and freedom and relationships of debt began to evolve into the “modern” banking system.

Free and enslaved African Americans were active borrowers and lenders. Sometimes they used debt relationships to improve their lives and distance themselves from white supremacy and slavery. Often debt was another tool of exploitation wielded by those in power. This research reveals that that whites applied nineteenth-century liberal capitalist notions of agency to free and enslaved people when it was profitable for them to do so as a form of exploitation separate from enslavement.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In this research one of the lessons I learned was that debts are often about personal ties within a community. I am very appreciative of the communities that supported this work. Each of the folks listed below improved this dissertation. The defects are all mine.

Thank you to the Department of History at William & Mary for supporting my research with a graduate stipend, the Ed Crapol Award, the Virginia Crouch Memorial Summer Research Grant, and numerous travel grants.

My professors at William & Mary, the University of Delaware, and James Madison University shaped the way I think about history and economics in profound ways: Melvin Patrick Ely, David Dillard, Scott Reynolds Nelson, Robert Trent Vinson, and William C. Wood in particular.

Thank you to the members of my committee. My advisor, Scott Reynolds Nelson, from day one encouraged my ideas, provided emotional support when needed, and wrote endless recommendation letters. I was first inspired by Melvin Patrick Ely in 2005 at a book talk for *Israel on the Appomattox* at our library in South Hill, Virginia. His support and encouragement means more to me than he will ever know. Thank you to William Hausman for helping me find a place for myself somewhere between economics and history. I am grateful to Justene Hill Edwards for her mentorship and friendship.

Thank you to the Woodson Institute for African-American and African Studies at the University of Virginia. Deborah E. McDowell and other faculty members, my interlocutors Shennette Garrett-Scott, Talitha L. LeFlouria, and Peter Hudson, and my colleagues broadened my thinking about this scholarship and improved the final product. Being at the Woodson also allowed me the opportunity to tap into UVA's rich intellectual resources. This dissertation benefited by my participation in the Movements and Directions in Capitalism (MADCAP) seminar.

Many thanks to the archivists and other staff at the Earl Gregg Swem Library, William & Mary, the Library of Virginia, the Virginia Historical Society, the University Libraries of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Zach Hottel at the Truban Archives, Shenandoah County Library.

Graduate cohort members Jack Masterson, Kasey Sease, and Peter Olsen-Harbich provided friendship and emotional support.

I am deeply grateful to my colleagues at the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond for all that they taught me and the many ways they inspired me with their work. Thank you to Melanie Rose, Steve Malone, Jim McAfee, Kim Zeuli, Courtney Mailey, Urvi Neelakantan, and too many others to list here.

Thank you to the Business History Conference for providing me an intellectual home. The Doctoral Colloquium in Business History helped shaped the project from its inception. Feedback from subsequent business history conferences and in particular Business Beyond the Business Cycle: Crises, Resilience and Risk Management, c.1850-2000 in 2019 gave me an opportunity to workshop my research, gather valuable feedback, and network with other scholars of business history. Thank you to one such scholar, Rafael Pardo, who offered valuable comments from the perspective of legal history on chapter 4 of this dissertation.

The Virginia Consortium for Early Americanists proved a helpful community of scholars willing to provide feedback on my work.

Without the friendship and inspiration of Sarah Glosson and Alexandra M. Macdonald I would not have completed the last half mile of this marathon that is writing a dissertation. I am eternally grateful to them.

Thank you to my communities outside of academia. To my dad, David White, for introducing me early to a love of African American culture, my mom, Sylvia White, for taking me to historical sites and encouraging me to ask questions, and to both of them for warning me of the dangers of too much debt. To Suzy Shirley for our weekly calls that kept me going through the early days of the pandemic. To my pastor, Nathan Cobb, who not only reads my dissertation-length emails but is thoughtful in his responses to them. To all the others who have supported me and inspired me but are too numerous to mention. To my children, Lewis, James, Goldie, and Beau for bringing me endless joy. To my husband, Aaron, for twenty-two years of love and laughter and always listening enthusiastically to my frequent history lectures. Thanks for letting me get another degree, babe.



This Ph.D. is dedicated to Aaron, Lewis, James, Goldie, and Beau Gibson.

## Introduction

Ellen Thompson was a toddler in 1837 when Hannah Woodland, the woman who enslaved her, died. Woodland's death presented an opportunity for the Thompson family. Though he lacked the full purchase price, Thompson's father made an agreement with Woodland's heirs to purchase the freedom of his wife and daughter. For six hundred dollars Zekiel Thompson, who was free himself, had some hope that his family would be spared from sale and separation forever. Ellen Thompson's father and grandfather were not only free but, according to her brother's narrative of his life, employed as overseers on the plantation on which their families were enslaved. Their occupation of "overseer" required the men to direct the work of enslaved and free farm laborers and meant that they had some standing in the small community. Thompson had the respect of his neighbors, but not the relatively large sum of six hundred dollars. Instead, the local doctor provided Thompson with the capital needed in the form of an informal, person-to-person loan. By the terms of the agreement the enslavement of the Thompson females then passed to the doctor who agreed to free them at a future date when Zekiel Thompson paid the loan in full.<sup>1</sup>

The loan that held the freedom of Ellen Thompson and her mother in the balance was typical of lending agreements that crossed the color line in the

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson's story is extant for historians through her brother's slave narrative (in which she is not named and only briefly mentioned) and legal records associated with her enslaver's estate. Isaac Mason, *The Life of Isaac Mason as a Slave*, (Worcester, Mass.: 1893) and Will of Hannah P. Woodland, 15 June 1837, Kent County, Maryland, Maryland Probate Estate and Guardianship Files, 1796-1940, accessed 1 February 2020, [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org).

antebellum period. Evidence of these loans survives in the archives and shows a pattern of hope and disappointment and the exercise of power. Zekiel Thompson found hope that he could protect his wife and daughter from slavery. According to his son's narrative, Thompson chose to forgo other employment opportunities to do field work so he could be near his enslaved family. He worked to give his children the best start in life, which meant freeing them from slavery if he could. Their path to freedom would be difficult. The lender, Dr. Hyde, used his position as creditor to control the family. Instead of freeing the enslaved mother and daughter, he held them for ransom. When Ellen Thompson's brother refused a beating at the hands of Dr. Hyde's wife, Hyde demanded immediate payment of the loan, or the Thompsons would suffer the sale of the girl and her mother. The family made the difficult choice of sending young Ellen Thompson and her ailing mother to Baltimore alone as fugitives from slavery. Thompson's brother wrote of feeling "a gloom over my father and mother's humble but happy home."<sup>2</sup>

This project explores lending relationships—like that between Zekiel Thompson and Dr. Hyde—in which enslaved and free Black people figured as borrower or lender. In doing so it describes the relationship between freedom and financial arrangements. How were ideas about race, freedom, and democracy reflected in the evolution of American capitalism in the antebellum period? What do lending arrangements teach us about the lives and experiences of free and enslaved African Americans? What can an examination of lending arrangements prior to the advent of institutionalized banking tell historians about the racial

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<sup>2</sup> Mason, *The Life of Isaac Mason*, 16 ("a gloom").

origins of consumer banking? Finally, how can applying the concept of racial capitalism to these arrangements help scholars understand the long history of racial discrimination and disparity in financial relationships up to the present day?

This research shows that free and enslaved African Americans were fully engaged in local economies through credit arrangements. Borrowing and lending took multiple forms—payments to the municipal jail to avoid sale, cash payments over time to enslavers in exchange for freedom, the value of haircuts recorded in an account ledger over many years, and cash loans to enslaved people to purchase the freedom of their children. Slaveholders used borrowing to legitimize the theft of cash from enslaved people, and both enslavers and the enslaved used the concept of debt to describe the relationship of enslavement. Many of the phenomena historians observe in the post-emancipation period—enslavement through debt peonage, the use of debt to trap and control debtors and creditors, the hope that lending would achieve “uplift” within the African American community—had a genesis and indeed were already firmly established in the antebellum period.

Historians have undertaken extensive studies of the use of credit to grow the economy in the antebellum period. On a macroeconomic level, credit was vital to the stability of the new United States in the early Federal period. Richard Sylla, in “Financial Foundations,” writes of Alexander Hamilton’s efforts to stabilize and modernize the nation’s credit system in the 1790s. Hamilton gambled that assuming state war debts and slowly repaying the debt as the economy grew would put the American economy and political system on a firm

financial footing. The national bank, established exactly for that purpose, would lend to the government to cover spending needs and to the public to fund economic growth that would eventually produce the taxes to pay off the debt. Sylla writes that Hamilton's plan helped grow the U.S. economy. But credit is more than credit institutions. In *A Nation of Deadbeats*, Scott Reynolds Nelson argues that credit was often hidden in seemingly straightforward transactions from operating a store to accepting currency to claiming land from the Land Office. These long lines of credit that stretched from east to west, affected by rapid swings in commodity prices, have tended to turn debtors into defaulters during financial downturns.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, credit has an even more disturbing side. Many historians have argued credit was tightly bound up with enslavement. Nearly a century ago, Eric Williams in *Capitalism and Slavery* wrote that Britain's turn away from mercantilism to industrial capitalism with a focus on free trade and abolitionism was made possible by the accumulation of profits from slavery and the slave trade. He writes that the American Revolution was an integral part of the destruction of the old system, making way for this new form of "free trade" capitalism. More recently Edward L. Baptist in *The Half Has Never Been Told*, Walter Johnson in *River of Dark Dreams*, and Sven Beckert in *Empire of Cotton* each show evidence that profits from the domestic slave trade and the production

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Sylla, "Financial Foundations: Public Credit, the National Bank, and Securities Markets," in *Founding Choices: American Economic Policy in the 1790s*, ed. Douglas A. Irwin and Richard Sylla (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 59-88; Scott Reynolds Nelson, *A Nation of Deadbeats: An Uncommon History of America's Financial Disasters* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012). On the role of credit in the early American economy see also Rowena Olegario, *A Culture of Credit: Embedding Trust and Transparency in American Business* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

of the commodities by enslaved people provided the capital to finance the growth of American industry in the nineteenth century. Baptist writes that financing in the form of debt for the purchase of land and slaves to grow cotton in the South ultimately came from Northerners, Europeans, and the Second Bank of the United States. Securitization of the debt inspired a frenzy of buying and selling enslaved people that ended in a crash when cotton prices fell in 1836. Before the crash, profits from investments in the slave and cotton trades could be used to finance other business ventures and create economic growth. These historians show the close connections between credit, enslavement, and economic growth.<sup>4</sup>

This project builds on recent histories of capitalism and slavery by examining the ways in which the concept of race was important to the growth of financial systems beyond enslavement. The new history of capitalism plays a vital role in exposing the connections between the institution that Jefferson called the “hideous blot” on the American experiment and the banking sector that still powers our economy today. To do so requires these historians to center enslaved people primarily as the labor that built the American economy. While viewing enslaved people as subjects is historically accurate and necessary to understand the importance of slavery to capital accumulation, it only gives us part of the story. What was the role of free African Americans in the story of

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Penguin, 2014); See also Joshua D. Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Calvin Schermerhorn, *The Business of Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism, 1815-1860* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015).

capitalism and banking in the antebellum period? If slavery was the foundation of American capitalism, how did former enslavers slip so easily into other forms of race-based exploitation when the law suddenly required that they treat all men as free agents? To begin to answer these questions, this dissertation examines personal credit use through a critical examination of how enslavers and other whites in power treated free and enslaved African Americans as financial agents, an assumption necessary to lend to or borrow from another person. I argue that whites applied liberal capitalist notions of agency to free and enslaved people when it was profitable for them to do so as a form of exploitation separate from enslavement. This form of agency allowed some enslaved and free Black people to maneuver within the system with their own goals in mind, but it also empowered enslavers and others to enforce the violence of jail fees, coerced lending arrangements, and debt collection on Black borrowers. Tragically it held out the hope of freedom or simply a better life, but rarely delivered on that reality. Agency should not be seen only or even primarily as a form of empowerment, but equally as a construction of liberal capitalism that conferred on whites another form of power to extract wealth from Black Americans.<sup>5</sup>

Thanks to the abundant scholarship on the subject, we know a lot about the social, religious, cultural, and economic lives of African Americans in antebellum Virginia. A generation ago scholars demonstrated that families,

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<sup>5</sup> The concept of agency as used by social historians at the end of the twentieth century was problematized by Walter Johnson in his essay, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 113-124, for its underlying assumption that "agency" and "humanity" were the same and always a form of resistance to enslavement. This work aligns with Johnson's critique and instead employs agency as it was used within the historical context of antebellum Virginia; I use "liberal" in the way it was used in the nineteenth century—to refer to freedom for individuals and equality before the law regardless of class.

religion, and communities among enslaved and free African American populations flourished despite the physical and psychological destruction wrought by slavery and white supremacy. Several historians have described the economic lives of free and enslaved Virginians in detail. Charles B. Dew in *Bond of Iron* brought to light the lives of the enslaved men and women at Buffalo Forge, an iron foundry in Rockbridge County, Virginia. Dew describes the arrangement in which enslaved foundry workers were paid cash for “overwork.” Enslaved men used this overwork money to buy things for their families. They were able to negotiate within the system to improve their lives. Dew shows that even though Buffalo Forge presented an unusually privileged situation for the enslaved, and the enslaver was humane, the enslaved still resisted enslavement by sometimes refusing to work and by saving money to hedge against the ever-present possibility of the breakup of families by sale.<sup>6</sup>

Dylan Penningroth’s work also shows how the economic choices of the enslaved were a form of resistance. *The Claims of Kinfolk* describes enslaved peoples’ ownership of property. Penningroth writes that property ownership among enslaved people was financial and social. Men and women typically had to save money or borrow to acquire property. Since that ownership was not defensible through the law, it had to be supported by relationships in the community. Finally, Melvin Patrick Ely’s *Israel on the Appomattox* provides rare insight into the economic lives of free African Americans in Prince Edward County, Virginia. The men and women who lived in that county had many of the same economic

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<sup>6</sup> Charles B. Dew, *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).



goals as white men and women. They wanted to improve their lives and the lives of their families—an objective complicated by white supremacy even for those African Americans who were free. Ely writes that they participated in the credit system with these ends and limitations in mind. Understanding more specifically about the credit use of African Americans in Virginia builds on this work and continues to expand our understanding of the lives of antebellum Black Virginians.<sup>7</sup>

These works build on and respond to the influential, pioneering work on free African Americans, Ira Berlin's *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*. Berlin's thesis is that whites viewed free Black people in the South as an aberration. According to this view, white Southerners thought that all Black Americans ought to be slaves, and that free Black people were therefore aberrant because they were "without masters;" Berlin writes that whites treated free Black people consistent with that belief. Berlin's work describes the limits of legal freedom and the mechanisms through which whites limited the freedoms of their Black neighbors. He shows how white supremacy operated outside of slavery, a project that whites successfully deployed after emancipation. His work is especially useful in understanding how white

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<sup>7</sup> Melvin Ely, *Israel on the Appomattox: A Southern Experiment in Black Freedom from the 1790s through the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2004); Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); See also John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage Press, 1976); Daniel B. Rood, "An International Harvest: Slavery, the Virginia-Brazil Connection, and the Making of the McCormick Reaper," in *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, eds. Seth Rockman and Sven Beckert (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Alexandra Jolyn Finley, "Blood Money: Sex, Family, and Finance in the Domestic Slave Trade" (PhD diss., William & Mary, 2017).

supremacy operated in various insidious ways beyond enslavement. However, viewing slavery through the theory of capitalism provides a very different conclusion from the same evidence. This dissertation aligns closely with Berlin's assertion—which is shared by all historians of the South—that antebellum whites structured their society in accordance with principles of white supremacy, treating free African Americans as a caste below all whites. However, this research shows that whites did not oppress free African Americans because they imagined them as slaves. Instead, enslavers were capitalists, viewing the world around them in capitalistic terms; privileging profit, individualism, and economic growth. I argue that viewing free Black people as *free* was whites' mechanism of oppression.<sup>8</sup>

How could freedom lead to unfreedom? An enslaved person was theoretically not a free agent and therefore could not be legally held accountable for nonpayment of debt. But a free person could be arrested, jailed, and sold when they failed to pay debts. Police officer Clement White, profiled in chapter one, treated free Black people “fairly;” he testified on behalf of free Black people when their freedom was in question and viewed his work through liberal constructions of truth and justice. But he operated within a system that was designed such that when Black people were treated “fairly” they could be arrested for the petty charge of being outside their homes without free papers,

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<sup>8</sup> Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Ely points out the inconsistency between Berlin's thesis and the evidence when he writes that “I believe that much of the content of Berlin's book calls into question his general propositions about free blacks' having been treated as virtual slaves.” (Ely, *Israel on the Appomattox*, 465)

and then auctioned in a system of debt peonage. I found no evidence that White enslaved free Black people or even imagined them as requiring enslavement, a fact which did not stop him from terrorizing the free Black community of Richmond, Virginia.

Ellen Thompson's story and the lending arrangements that gave her father the hope that she would be safe from enslavement illustrate how freedom in a capitalist society can lead to unfreedom. Thompson and her mother escaped being sold, but they were far from free. Isaac Mason, Ellen Thompson's brother and author of a well-known slave narrative, wrote that his mother "found a philanthropic Quaker, who had saved a great number of families from being separated." The Quaker agreed to provide the six hundred dollars needed by the family to pay the debt to a local doctor in exchange for "a bill of sale for the child she had with her." Ellen Thompson would be a "servant" for the Quaker family until she was eighteen years old (they later took two years off her "time" and freed her at age sixteen). Mason wrote that his parents returned home "minus their only daughter that they had to sell to save themselves." For the Thompson family the cost of freedom was the continued enslavement of their daughter in a faraway city by people they did not know.<sup>9</sup>

To understand how Ellen Thompson's enslavement was not the opposite of, but instead closely connected to, her family's freedom this dissertation draws on recent work on the history of racial capitalism. Racial capitalism was first articulated by Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black*

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<sup>9</sup> Mason 16-17; Quakers were known for their anti-slavery stance and active resistance to slavery, but they were far from the model of anti-racism (see chapter 1).

*Radical Tradition* to describe the connection between capitalism and white supremacy. Robinson and others have argued that capitalism was never about freedom, but has always been fundamentally about exploiting groups of people for profit and then racializing them to explain the “paradox” of the existence of slavery in a society that prized freedom. The idea of racial capitalism is useful to explain the long duration of racism in American history beginning in 1619 and continuing to the present day. This work is concerned with how these systems changed over time and the heroic efforts of some Americans to end forms of race-based unfreedom, but also with the remarkable continuity in racial capitalism over four hundred years. While much has changed over the course of American history—such as the abolition of slavery and the dismantling of Jim Crow—I take for granted that the roots of unequal access to credit and exploitation in lending in the twenty-first century lie in centuries of racial capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

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This dissertation describes multiple forms of debt relationships involving African American men and women. Chapter 1 describes debt peonage through the jail system. Sally Ball was a young, free woman in the City of Richmond. In

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<sup>10</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Other works that follow in this tradition include Peter James Hudson, *How Wall Street Colonized the Caribbean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), Destin Jenkins, *The Bonds of Inequality: Debt and the Making of the American City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), Justin Leroy and Destin Jenkins, *Histories of Racial Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), Justene Hill Edwards, *Unfree Markets: The Slaves' Economy and the Rise of Capitalism in South Carolina* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

1842 she was arrested by members of the city's police force for being out without her free papers. Ball suffered in the cold, damp city jail for months until the local Court of Hustings declared that she was free by virtue of personal testimony or written evidence from a county court. However, Ball was not free despite being cleared of charges. Instead of being released from jail, Ball was held there for the \$17.50 debt she owed to the jailor for her incarceration. When she could not pay the debt, the unfortunate woman was auctioned out for forced labor until the debt was paid. Ball was one of many women who were "sold" to pay jail debts in the city of Richmond. Quantitative data shows that young, free African American women were reduced to forced labor through debt peonage at higher rates than African American men and charged higher fees for their incarceration than enslaved people. I argue that this system of debt peonage was only possible because the women were free. The system claimed the uncompensated labor of the women and operated alongside slavery to control Black Americans and enrich those in power.

Even when free African Americans escaped the trap of debt peonage, debt created through the jail system supported white supremacy and undermined the development of Black communities in the commonwealth. The example of Walter Bee in chapter 2 provides one example. Bee was, like Ball, young and free in the city of Richmond in 1841. Bee had lived earlier with his free parents in Northumberland County, Virginia, where the free status of his family was well-known in the community and registered with the courts. When Bee was jailed in Richmond for going without his free papers he was able to call on his family and

broader networks—including whites—who could relatively quickly gather the necessary evidence to prove Bee's freedom. Returning Bee to liberty in Northumberland County cost his family \$20.34. I argue that it cost his community much more. I rely on social disorganization theory, which describes the negative effects of modern policing of African American communities. The free Black community had fewer social and financial resources than other groups in antebellum Virginia. Richmond leaders designed a jail and legal system that would enforce white supremacy, not only by controlling the movement of enslaved people in the city, but also by draining precious resources from the African American community through the imposition of jail debt.

Chapter 3 is the story of Elizabeth Keckly, who was immortalized for a new generation as the dressmaker and confidante to Mary Todd Lincoln in the 2012 film *Lincoln*. Keckly was born enslaved in Virginia and suffered the terrors inherent in the system before purchasing her freedom. Less well-known is that Keckly borrowed the money with which she financed her emancipation. For Keckly access to credit and access to freedom were closely tied in the capitalist world of nineteenth-century America. This chapter draws on Keckly's life experiences, and on slave narratives and archival sources, to describe credit arrangements involving enslaved people who borrowed to secure their freedom in the era prior to quantitative credit scoring and modern lending institutions. Instances of enslaved people successfully purchasing freedom were rare. The few cases that are well documented show the prevalence of credit agreements—often between Black borrowers and white lenders—to secure the cash to make

the financial and legal arrangements possible. Keckly's story provides historians an example of the financial details of one such arrangement within the broader context of her life. Keckly's borrowing activities place into sharp relief the hard boundaries of race and gender that defined honor and creditworthiness in mid-nineteenth-century America. Keckly challenged these conventions, sometimes successfully, through her actions as a businesswoman. Even when she was successful Keckly was vulnerable in a system designed to privilege others. Ultimately Southern notions of race and gender would be systematized into quantitative credit scoring models.

This research also explores the role of subscription schemes in self-emancipation through purchase. Keckly turned to a subscription when she felt it was her only hope but abandoned the scheme when she was able to borrow from her dressmaking clients to purchase her freedom. Subscriptions illustrate the tensions within debt relationships: the blurring of financial and social relationships and the codependence of debt and freedom. Subscription arrangements have a long history of allowing many people to pool their money to accomplish a goal that requires a large amount of capital. The resulting capital could be used to secure the financing to build a road, erect a church building, or secure the legal freedom of an enslaved person. Subscribers often took part in the scheme because they had a social connection to the person selling subscriptions—they were members of the same church congregation, benevolent society, or neighborhood. A subscription translated a social connection into a financial connection—anti-slavery advocates or those moved by the personal

story of a speaker might be willing to subscribe to free an individual. This form of “community financing” resisted the aggressive individualism of capitalism in the nineteenth century. However, even when subscribers paid their pledges, the best these schemes offered was the freedom of one person. Subscription schemes never threatened the system of slavery. Keckly, who was a businesswoman and sympathetic to capitalist norms, considered these financial arrangements a form of “begging” and preferred to borrow on her own merit.

Subscriptions were not the only form of debt that wove together a community for better or for worse. Chapter 4 lays bare the vulnerability of free, relatively privileged African American women because of credit arrangements across a community. Neaton Henry, the free mulatto wife of free barber Prince Henry, found herself at risk of losing the wealth the couple had together accumulated when her husband died in 1841. The Henrys lived and worked on one and a half town lots in Woodstock, Virginia, that they owned outright. Prince Henry shaved the powerful white men who were his neighbors, and Neaton Henry brewed beer and made corn cakes that she sold to her husband’s clients. The family had many of the markers of mid-nineteenth century middle class status—books, mirrors, and a carriage. The accumulation of their home and property was the result of their skills and hard work and their ability to conform to racial boundaries. Prince Henry was owed by and owed debts to the Black and white members of the community in a seemingly benign web of financial obligations. Prince Henry’s death in 1841 disrupted the careful connections of debt in the community. To satisfy her husband’s creditors, Neaton Henry



watched the family's possessions auctioned on her front lawn. She then had to fight to keep her land when it was threatened by a neighbor who sued her for unsubstantiated debts he claimed were owed by her husband. This neighbor, who did not hide his animosity toward free Black members of the community when he publicly called for the deportation of free African Americans from the commonwealth, was unsuccessful in his suit. Neaton Henry lived out her life on the "widow's portion" of the land she and her husband had together acquired. I argue that the informal debt obligations that supported social relationships in small communities could nevertheless leave African American women vulnerable.

While the first four chapters of this project view African Americans in the role of debtor, the final chapter shows that they were often creditors as well. This arrangement seems to upend the usual power dynamic in debt relationships and with it the racial hierarchy. But on the contrary, whites, and especially slaveholders, viewed borrowing schemes as a way to bolster their own cash-poor situations and extract capital from a vulnerable but enterprising population. Slaveholders viewed borrowing from the enslaved in the same light in which they allowed the continuation of informal slave economies when these arrangements benefited their bottom line. Enslaved people responded to the risk of further exploitation by concealing their savings and lending money only to trusted members of their own communities, reinforcing social ties in the process. In the same way that social and financial relationships blurred into one another, financial debts blurred into cultural debts.

African American writers in the antebellum period used the language of financial accounting to convey the reality of slavery. Centuries of enslavement and white supremacy were depicted as a debt that white Americans could never repay. Slaveholders similarly applied the language of credit and debt as a shorthand to describe slavery, imagining enslaved people as debtors from whom enslavers could demand payment. After emancipation whites constructed a narrative in which formerly enslaved people were recast as the creditors who could never be repaid for their “loyal service” to enslavers. The goal of the latter rhetorical device was to romanticize the historical relationship between enslaved and enslaver and apply a patriarchal veneer to a violent financial reality. Ultimately ideas about debt and power and the material realities of those institutions were mutually reinforcing.

Considering free and enslaved Black Virginians as borrowers and lenders allows us to understand the ways in which whites integrated race into economic systems beyond enslavement. Black Virginians used financial arrangements and debt agreements to care for their families and resist white supremacy. Some were successful, as the experiences of Elizabeth Keckly and Walter Bee show. Others were not as lucky. Even when individuals were successful in their lending and borrowing goals, legal and social systems tended to benefit wealthy whites at the expense of Black communities.

## **Chapter 1 How Jail Debt Led to the Enslavement of Free Black Women**

Lucy Briggs and Sally (also spelled Salley) Ball lived a world of extremes in antebellum Richmond, Virginia. For Black Virginians the city simultaneously represented the hope of freedom and the horrors of slavery. Richmond's multiple private jails held enslaved men, women, and children who were auctioned to the highest bidder and then disappeared, often forever, from the people they loved and the homes they knew. Even for those who were not transported to the cotton fields of the deep South, the slave jails of Richmond offered misery and violence, especially for women who also expected to endure sexual violence. But the busy and growing city also held out the hope of freedom. Enslaved people who were hired out moved among a population of about 9,500 enslaved and free Black people and could enjoy time away from the oversight of whites. Networks of family and friends created a vibrant community that supported one another's claims to freedom. The city's burgeoning iron industry and flour export business fed a growing economy that allowed some Black Virginians to create a financial bulwark between themselves and forms of racial oppression. But did slavery and freedom exist at opposite poles?<sup>11</sup>

Briggs and Ball may not have known each other, but they had a lot in common as their lives teetered between slavery and freedom. Both women were free though it is not clear whether they were born to free mothers or if they had

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<sup>11</sup> Gregg D. Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), 126, 131; Leni Ashmore Sorensen, "Absconded: Fugitive Slaves in the Daybook of the Richmond Police Guard, 1834-1844" (dissertation, W&M, 2005), 8, 38 (population).

been freed in their youth. Both were relatively poor young women when they were arrested for not carrying their free papers, Ball at eighteen and Briggs at fifteen. The women were not jailed at the same time, but both were arrested by the city police force between late November and early December—Briggs in 1841 and Ball in 1842. Both women remained jailed throughout the winter, finally proving their freedom in court the following spring. When the Hustings Court of the City of Richmond heard Briggs's and Ball's arguments the court reporter noted in each case that "it appear[ed] to the satisfaction of the court that she is free and that she has been registered in the office of this court." Accordingly, in the spring of 1842 and 1843, respectively, Briggs and Ball were discharged from jail. They were again free women. Or were they? Like other inmates of the jail, Black and white, male and female, Briggs and Ball were both required to reimburse the jailer for their room and board at the jail. Fees also might have included clothing or medical care one required while jailed. Sometimes there were fees for "turning key" or "putting in jail." Ball's maintenance had cost the Richmond City jail \$17.50 during her ninety-six-day incarceration, according to the records kept by the City Sergeant. Briggs's one hundred fifty-five day stay in jail put her in debt to the jailer for \$59.38. Unable to pay these debts to the city, Briggs was hired at public auction for fifty-nine years to a man named Benjamin Ropper; Ball for twenty-five years to Quintint Blane. Both women lost their freedom for the better part of their working lives through debt.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Nancy C. Frantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered: The Records of Slaves and Free Blacks Listed in the City Sergeant Jail Register, 1841-1846* (Westminster, MD: Heritage Books, 2010), 16, 105; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 15, 1842-1844, LVA, 19, 265.

This chapter describes the process through which Richmond city incarcerated free Black Virginians and then sold them to repay resulting jail fees. I argue that this system of debt peonage was separate from and parallel to slavery. While the two systems of oppression had much in common, they were also markedly dissimilar. Debt peonage, unlike slavery, was predicated on the assumption that the debtor was a free agent. Specifically it was that freedom—clearly recognized by the court system and white Virginians—that allowed whites to subject free Black people to violence and control. Far from being slaves without masters, white Virginians recognized Black Virginians as free people who were, like all free people theoretically in a capitalist system, liable for their debts. Therefore those in power used the freedom of Black Virginians against them just as those in power used the system of slavery against the enslaved. For free Black people in Virginia, slavery and freedom were two sides of the same coin, not because white people imagined all Black people as enslaved, but because racial capitalism evolved to exploit people of African descent through more than just enslavement.

Antebellum jail records from the city of Richmond show that even though women were a minority of those arrested, free women of color were hired out in much higher proportion, and responsible for higher levels of debt, than their male counterparts. This phenomenon was a result of the confluence of slavery and debt peonage. The business of enslavement was accomplished in part by severing social ties of the enslaved; erasing the paternity of fathers, refusing to honor marriages, and breaking up families through separate sale and forced

migration. The result was that women were vulnerable in a society in which girls and women were expected to turn to their fathers and husbands for protection and support. Slavery had taken the support systems of Lucy Briggs and Sally Ball, which made it easier for the system of debt peonage to take their labor and freedom.

### **Evolution of the Jail**

The practice of hiring out Black Virginians to pay a jail debt was not new in the 1840s. As far back as 1718 a memorial to the General Assembly described a potential solution to the problem of “Negros [who] are Committed to the publick Gaol of this Country who either have not any owner or cannot or will not tell unto whom they belong.” John Brodnax proposed that people of African descent be hired out and “that the money arising by the hire of such Negro or servant may be applied to the discharging of his debt.” Those hired out would be required by law to wear an iron collar marking them as enslaved to the jail for the payment of a debt. As the prison system in the nineteenth century evolved to focus on the punishment and redemption of criminals, the public jail in the South used the creation of debt to reinforce the slave system and the system of white supremacy on which it depended. The victims who suffered a loss of freedom in this system were often disproportionately young, poor, free Black women.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> 1718 memorial of John Brodnax, Virginia House of Burgesses, Committee of Propositions and Grievances, papers, 1711–1730, VHS; On the redemption of criminals see Michael Meranze, *Laboratories of Virtue: Punishment, Revolution, and Authority in Philadelphia, 1760-1835* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Meranze shows how prisons in early America sought to go beyond simply physically punishing the body for a crime, but to reform and redeem the criminal mind.

The autobiography of George Teamoh provides a first-hand account of the jail system in antebellum Richmond. Born in 1818 in Norfolk, Virginia, Teamoh saw his family sold through the jail system in Richmond when the husband of his wife's enslaver became insolvent. Sallie Teamoh and the couple's three children were carried up the James River to Richmond and imprisoned in the jail of Solomon Davis. Teamoh wrote, "it must be remembered that the sold were always placed as far beyond the aid and influence of their friends from without as iron barred double apartments could divide between." Though the jailer's goal was to keep family and friends from knowing any details about jailed loved ones, Teamoh recounts being friends with a man named Cooper who worked for the jailer. Cooper, as "whipping master," seems to have made the best of his sordid position and did "what ever he could to relieve the distressed" including interceding on behalf of prisoners and pretending not to know Sallie Teamoh while secretly trading communications between her and her husband. Teamoh describes the slave trader's jail as having a "sickening stench arising from their walls saturated with filth," causing mother and children to become ill. The Teamohs never saw two of their children again after traders purchased them and took them from Richmond. Sallie Teamoh was sold and sold again, bouncing between Virginia enslavers, until she and her youngest child were bought by a Richmonder who repeatedly raped them both. When Teamoh returned to Virginia after the Civil War, he discovered his wife dying and his daughter with a baby by her enslaver.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> F. N. Boney, Richard L. Hume, and Rafia Zafar, *God Made Man, Man Made the Slave: The Autobiography of George Teamoh* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990): 88, 89.

Teamoh also relayed his experiences with the Norfolk public jail, which had many similarities to private slave jails. Like Frederick Douglass, Teamoh took advantage of a lax owner and the relative freedom of being enslaved in a city to teach himself to read and attend political meetings. He cleverly attended these meetings under the guise of being a servant, carrying a broom or pitcher of water. Teamoh writes that once he attended a political meeting in Norfolk without a pass. He writes that “on returning from the meeting, I was arrested by Capehart [sic]—a noted night watch & cunstable [sic] in that city.” Today the “arrest” would be referred to as an “attempted arrest” because Teamoh faked a case of the smallpox, and the constable, for fear of exposure to the disease, pretended to be unable to arrest him. He writes that “but for this ‘small’ dodge, on the next morning I should have ‘hugged the widow’ very severely; such being the language employed in whipping-post parlance.” The editors of Teamoh’s autobiography located an article in the 1851 *American Missionary* written by the very constable who attempted to arrest Teamoh, John Capheart. Capheart wrote that his job was to lock up “slaves and freepersons of color, who were collected in crowds at night.” These arrests were done without warrant and were punished by thirty-nine lashes. The Hustings Court records of the City of Richmond from the same period echo this sentence—thirty-nine lashes was routinely the punishment for those convicted of stealing, although Richmond jail records record only one “whipping charge” for a runaway enslaved man. Capheart added that he was paid for each person he arrested and each person he flogged and took side jobs as a slave catcher for private individuals. George Teamoh’s first-



hand experience shows that both private slave jails and public jails had similar goals—to legitimize violence against and reinforce control of Black people.<sup>15</sup>

Formerly enslaved people who shared narratives of their lives before emancipation with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) testified to the close connection between different forms of “jail” and the system of slavery. A “jail” was not necessarily a government institution or even clearly delineated as a place for people suspected of breaking the law. Instead a jail, or a guardhouse, was a place where the powers that be, whether that was the county government or an enslaver, could restrain an individual for runaway attempts, “disobedience,” or any other infraction. Rev. Wade Owens was born just before emancipation but remembered the stories told him of the plantation jail from his Virginia-born parents. “Us had a jail an’ looked [locked] runaways in hit,” recorded the interviewer. Other people interviewed also noted the presence of a plantation jail specifically for fugitives. Henry Andrew (Tip) Williams described his enslaver as “rough.” “He had a jail on his place. It was wood but close built. Couldn’t get out of there.” Williams described a hog that was kept in the jail to trample anyone imprisoned inside. Alec Bostwick echoed a popular refrain when he answered the interviewer that there was no jail but a guardhouse where enslaved people were confined and tortured. Easter Brown agreed. The interviewer recorded Brown as stating, “Dere warn’t no jails in dem days. Day had a gyuard house what dey whupped ‘em in.” Another woman described slave patrollers who “run down” some of the enslaved people from the plantation, “whupped ‘em and put ‘em in

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<sup>15</sup> Boney, *God Made Man*, 74, 176; Frantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered*, 86.

jail.” She remembered that her enslaver discovered these individuals were missing at morning roll call and had to retrieve them from the jail where they had been confined in the night. Anderson Furr of Athens, Georgia told a similar story. He told the interviewer that “gyardhouses is called jails dese days” and described enslaved people locked in the guardhouse and starved when they got “too rowdy.”<sup>16</sup>

Jails were also associated with sale. One man who shared his story with Depression-era interviewers remembered seeing Black people “in de big jail at Watkinsville an’ in de calaboose in Athens.” He witnessed sheriffs and enslavers selling these people. Another interviewee, Julia Ward King, recalled a song her mother sang: “I was advertised for sale, and I would have been in jail.” The song tells the story of an enslaved person whose owner promised his or her dying mother that her child would never be sold. Before the mother was dead a year, her child was advertised to be sold but escaped before he or she could be jailed. The song may have represented the experience of King’s own mother, who escaped to Canada with her family.<sup>17</sup>

Mrs. Lancy Harris, who was born in North Carolina, remembered enslaved people being purchased from Richmond. She described an enslaver, Dick Harrison, who was “good” because he refrained from beating and raping his slaves. Harris made it clear, however, that Harrison was just as profit-driven as

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<sup>16</sup> Interviews with Rev. Wade Owens, Henry Andrew (Tip) Williams, Alec Bostwick, Easter Brown, Susan Castle, Julia Cole, and Anderson Furr. *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, CD-ROM. Dialect is quoted as it was transcribed in the 1930s.

<sup>17</sup> Interviews with Tom Singleton and Julia Ward. *Born in Slavery*, Library of Congress, CD-ROM.

any other enslaver despite his relatively nonviolent treatment of the people he enslaved. Harris noted that “when Dick need money tho he wud send the nicest looking one to Richmond jail fo sale.” The Richmond system of private and public jails represented sale and heartbreak. Anna Maria Coffee was born in North Carolina but experienced multiple sales from slave jails, the earliest separating her from her mother and father as a young child. Coffee described a “trader jail” as a large building with two upstairs rooms in which men and boys and women and girls were separated by sex. “Dem sho’ was sad times,” noted Coffee as she described groups of enslaved people united in the knowledge that they were to be separated from everyone they knew and loved. A “keeper” regularly patrolled the jail to keep those imprisoned from “talkin’ en plannin’.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite the fact that both had the effect of enforcing white supremacy and both employed violence to achieve that end, there were some differences between the jails of slave traders and those administered by the county or city. Alexandra F. Finley describes the slave trader’s jail as a business. It existed for the purely capitalistic process of auctioning enslaved people for profit. From the perspective of white leaders, government-run jails were for the purpose of keeping the peace and ensuring adherence to the law—which often directly meant controlling Black bodies. Despite the fact that it was not designed primarily to produce profit, and though they were far from the industrial, profit-driven prisons of the twentieth century, city officials expected the jail to operate at zero tax-payer expense. Louis Bernard Cej, whose 1975 dissertation details the

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<sup>18</sup> Interviews with Mrs. Lancy Harris and Anna Maria Coffee. *Born in Slavery*, Library of Congress, CD-ROM.

evolution of Richmond's police force, discovered that during the antebellum period policing consisted largely of apprehending runaway enslaved people rather than investigating other forms of crime. On a day-to-day basis the jail was filled with free Black people who had to pay for their incarceration and enslaved people whose enslaver would reimburse the city for jail fees from the wealth they accumulated by enslaving. Therefore, the bill for the jail system's support of the slave system was paid by Black Virginians, enslaved and free. If there was a fine distinction between private slave jails and the Richmond city jail it was in the forms of violence used to support the systems of slavery and white supremacy.<sup>19</sup>

For formerly enslaved people jails were also conceptually connected with debt, and both were best avoided. David Goodman Gullins was born enslaved in Georgia where he was taught to be happy with what he had. "If I couldn't get what I wanted, I learned to want what I could get," he stated. Gullins credited his mother's teachings for his long life, stating, "there are four things that keep old man Gullins busy all the time—keeping out of jail, out of hell, out of debt, and keeping hell out of me." For Gullins jail, hell, and debt all represented trouble. Alexander Robertson, a formerly enslaved man from South Carolina, had a similar perspective. He "tried to live up to" the name of the white father who never claimed him. For Robertson honoring his racial heritage meant never being in court, never being in jail, and paying "my debts dollar for dollar and owe no man nuthin' but good will." The implication is that one could be proud of a life in which

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<sup>19</sup> Alexandra Finley, "Blood Money: Sex, Family, and Finance in the Domestic Slave Trade" (PhD diss., WM, 2017); Louis Bernard Cej, "Law Enforcement in Richmond: A History of Police-Community Relations, 1737-1974" (PhD diss., Florida State University, 1975), 19.

the traps of debt and jail were avoided. These notions of the morality of avoiding or paying debt were part of the broader culture of capitalism, individualism, and democracy in 1840s America. Richmond leaders exploited the assumption that free people were responsible for their debts to control free Black people. The free Black women and men who found themselves jailed in the public jail in Richmond felt acutely the “trap” of jail and debt.<sup>20</sup>

The WPA testimony of Angie Boyce provides information about the conditions within jails. When she was still a baby Boyce’s father purchased her freedom and that of her mother. Mother and baby were arrested in Indiana when they traveled to join Boyce’s father and transported to a jail in Louisville, Kentucky. Boyce describes the jail as “infested with bugs and fleas” and inhabited by a “Brutal and drunken Irish woman.” Boyce’s mother was forced to stay awake all night to protect the baby from the Irish woman. In court the next morning Boyce’s mother was exonerated and released after she produced free papers. When asked why she did not show the arresting officers her free papers, Boyce’s mother replied that “she was afraid that they would steal them from her.” Jails were terrifying places, but Boyce’s mother was willing to risk jail time to protect her free papers. She hoped that the court would be more honest than the officers of the law. And she knew that without her free papers, she was in severe danger of being re-enslaved.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Interviews with David Goodman Gullins and Alexander Robertson. *Born in Slavery*, Library of Congress, CD-ROM.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Angie Boyce. *Born in Slavery*, Library of Congress, CD-ROM.

By the nineteenth century each county, town, and incorporated city in Virginia had a building that served as the jail, sometimes dating to the colonial era. The first jail in Northumberland County, Virginia was built in 1681, and the original structure was replaced in 1696. A century later a new two-story jail was built that lasted until it was rebuilt in 1839 and again in 1844 after a fire. The eighteenth-century jail had no heat source and no wall around the outside yard until after 1789. Charles City County, Chesterfield County, Charlotte County, and Louisa County jails have similar evolutions. By the nineteenth century a paid jailer and his family lived in the second story of the Northumberland County jail.<sup>22</sup>

The building that served as the Richmond city jail was similar to other jail houses at the time; detailed descriptions of some of these survive. Mrs. M. S. Fayman described the jailhouse on the Kentucky plantation where she was enslaved after being kidnapped as a child. It was a two-story stone building with a dirt floor and steps to the second floor on the outside of the building. Female prisoners were kept upstairs. Downstairs was a room “where the whipping was done.” Rev. Silas Jackson described a similar building at the plantation on which he was born in Ashbie’s Gap, Virginia. The two-story stone building had a room

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas A. Wolf, “A History of Northumberland County’s Old Jail, 1839-1958,” *Bulletin of the Northumberland County Historical Society* 46 (2009): 23-58; “A Place of Confinement: The Charles City Jail,” *Charles City County Historical Society Newsletter* 22, 23 (2000): 38-39; Isabel Gough, “The Jail: An Integral Part of Northumberland County’s ‘Society,’” *The Bulletin of the Northumberland County Historical Society* 6 (1969): 67-68; Bradford S. Hammer, “Chesterfield’s 1842 Jail,” *Chesterfield Historical Society. Its Journal* 1 (1995): 48-50; Edna Harris Bushnell, “Sheriff Joseph Bickley, Jr. and the First Jail of Louisa County, Virginia,” *The Louisa County Historical Magazine* 22, no. 2 (1991): 89-92; Herbert Brooke Chermiside, “The Jail at Charlotte C. H.,” *The Southsider* 17, no. 2 (1998): 35-39; Matthew J. Clavin, “‘The Floor Was Stained with the Blood of a Slave’: Crime and Punishment in the Old South,” in *Buried Lives: Incarcerated in Early America*, eds. Michelle Lise Tarter and Richard Bell (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2012), 265-66.

upstairs for women and two rooms downstairs—one for whipping and the other for the use of the overseer. Sam T. Stewart of Wake County, North Carolina, described Black and white prisoners segregated into separate rooms within the jailhouse.<sup>23</sup>

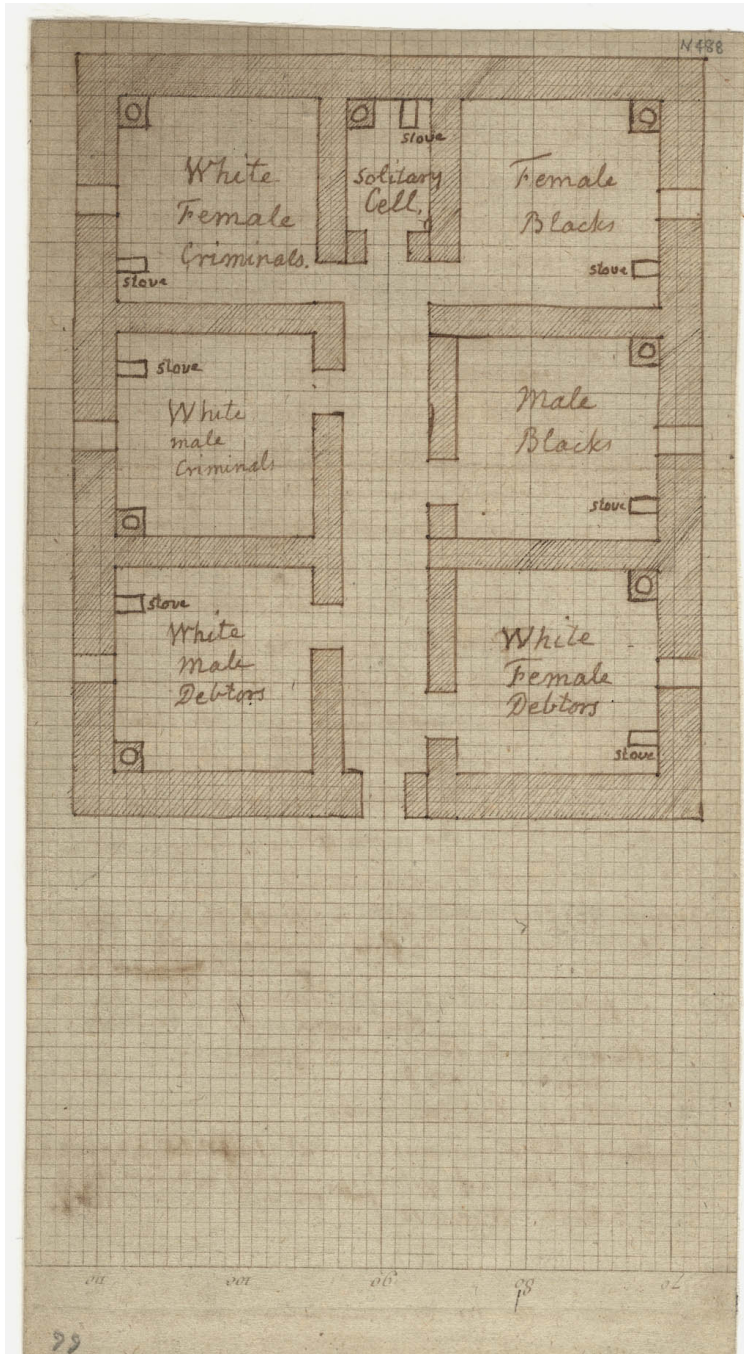
Among Thomas Jefferson's architectural drawings is a plan for a jail. The drawing shows six rooms and a cell for solitary confinement. Jefferson segregated the other six rooms by race, sex, and reason for incarceration: whether indebtedness or criminality. White inmates were to be placed into one of four cells based on whether they were male or female, criminal or debtor. Black inmates would be assigned a cell based only on whether they were male or female. Perhaps Jefferson imagined a world in which all Black Virginians were enslaved and not legally qualified to enter into debt relationships (and therefore would never be imprisoned for nonpayment of debt). Alternatively, the deliberate choice not to delineate between Black criminals and Black debtors may have reflected a belief that the difference did not matter. White debtors might pay their debts and be released back into society. Free Black debtors, on the other hand, in the minds of white leaders, might well be forcibly hired out and forfeit freedom for a lengthy period.<sup>24</sup>

#### *Illustration 1 Jefferson's Drawing of a Jail*

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<sup>23</sup> Interviews with Mrs. M. S. Fayman, Rev. Silas Jackson, and Sam T. Stewart. *Born in Slavery*, Library of Congress, CD-ROM.

<sup>24</sup> Miscellaneous Buildings: prison (plan), recto, undated, by Thomas Jefferson. N488 [electronic edition], Massachusetts Historical Society.



Original manuscript from The Coolidge Collection of Thomas Jefferson Manuscripts at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Jefferson's jail was never built as designed, but the Richmond jail was rebuilt multiple times and little by little was made more secure and more comfortable for inmates. In the spring of 1841 city council appointed a grand jury



to report on the conditions of the jail, a regularly scheduled and legally mandated activity. The jurors found the jail in good order, “with the exception that the jail they learn is occasionally left in the care of a colored man, which practice they recommend to be corrected.” Richmond officials likely wanted to prevent collusion between prisoners and sympathetic members of the community like that between George Teamoh and the jailer named Cooper who assisted his wife. The jurors also recommended updates to make the prison more comfortable for the inmates. They called for improving the flow of air and water in the jail. Jurors recommended adding bedsteads and improved heating in the lower cells.<sup>25</sup>

Recommendations also aimed to make the jail more secure not only to keep inmates from escaping but to prevent communication between inmates and those on the outside. Southern jails were notorious not only for their clear racial bias and reputation for violence but for their porous nature. Escapes occurred from what were often simple wooden structures. More successful than the escapes was the communication that flowed among cells and through walls of the jails as inmates traded information on how to undermine the system. The 1841 slave revolt on the *Creole*, which resulted in the freedom of 128 men, women, and children when rebels successfully took control of the ship and ordered its navigation to the free British Bahamas, was masterminded by nineteen enslaved men held in private slave jails in Richmond and Norfolk. The rebels likely met for the first time in jail and were able to build trust among themselves and decide on a course to the British-held Bahamas while

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<sup>25</sup> Apr-Jul 1841, Richmond (Va.) Cases and Ended Cases, 1945-1963. Local government records collection, Richmond (City) Court Records. LVA.

incarcerated. Similarly James Wilkerson, whose autobiography catalogues his post-emancipation work collecting funds to build churches and a seminary, wrote that he learned to read while in jail. Wilkerson recalled that when he was a youth in 1826 “a cousin to a Quaker lady” was jailed in Richmond for an “unjust debt” when Wilkerson was also jailed for a runaway attempt. The two took advantage of their incarceration for the “Quaker lady” to teach Wilkerson to read. Local officials were aware of prisoners’ exploitation of any opportunity to share information, and their recommendations were often in the spirit of tightening control.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Jail Registry**

To understand the forces at work concerning race and freedom in the Richmond city jail system, this paper relies on a quantitative analysis of the Richmond City sergeant jail register from 1841 to 1846. The register is organized like the account book of a store clerk. Each entry lists the inmate’s name, the date they were committed, the person’s race, slave or free status, the date they were released, and a detailed record of the expenses the jail incurred for their incarceration. The register is divided into two sections. The first tracks Black inmates who were arrested on suspicion of being runaways, going at large, not having free papers, or facing imminent sale out by court order to satisfy a debt

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.; Susan Eva O’Donovan, “Universities of Social and Political Change: Slaves in Jail in Antebellum America,” in *Buried Lives: Incarcerated in Early America*, eds. Michelle Lise Tarter and Richard Bell (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2012), 137; Phillip Troutman, “Grapevine in the Slave Market: African American Geopolitical Literacy and the 1841 Creole Revolt,” in *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, ed. Walter Johnson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 213; James Wilkerson, *Wilkerson’s History of His Travels & Labors, in the United States* (Columbus, OH: 1861), 36-37.

owed by their enslaver. The second section of the jail registry includes Black and white inmates who were arrested for crimes against people and property. This analysis will focus on the former. Simply the fact that the dual registries were maintained for these purposes shows the double mission of the Richmond city policy force: to protect people and property and to support racial oppression.<sup>27</sup>

Over six years of record-keeping the sergeant of the Richmond City jail noted 354 individual records of Black people incarcerated in the jail. Men and women, enslaved and free, were enumerated together, and these two characteristics—gender and free status—were the categories consistently recorded for each person. 286 inmates were males. Sixty-two were female. (The gender of one adult and six enslaved children is unknown.) While only 13 percent of the enslaved jailed (out of a total of 255) were women, a full 51 percent of the 101 free jailed were women. Most free Black people were recorded as such at the time of arrest, but there were instances of individuals who were arrested on suspicion of being runaways but were later able to prove their freedom. Lucy Ann Homes (or “Hoomes,” as the name appears in the jail registry) is one example.

Richmond police officers arrested Homes in May of 1842. Her arrest was not recorded in the Richmond Police Guard Daybook, the force’s own records of suspected fugitives arrested in Richmond, but records of her time in jail are included in the ended causes (detailed records of court cases) of the Richmond City Hustings Court records. The city sergeant as late as July believed Homes to

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<sup>27</sup> The register is held in the archive at the Virginia Historical Society and was also published as Nancy C. Frantel *Richmond Virginia Uncovered: The Records of Slaves and Free Blacks Listed in the City Sergeant Jail Register, 1841-1846* (Westminster, MD: Heritage Books, 2010).

be the property of John Thompson of Goochland County on the testimony of a man who came forward the day after she was arrested, John R. Blankenship. Blankenship did not divulge the details of how he knew Homes and her free status but offered that he had “good cause to believe” she was enslaved. Attempts to contact Thompson had evidently not yielded an answer from him, so the court appointed “three disinterested persons” to value Homes for sale. These men valued the unfortunate woman at “one cent.” New evidence came to light in the next few weeks because, for reasons that went unrecorded, Homes was not sold. On August 9 Homes was brought before the Hustings Court who learned “by the testimony of Clement White that she is a free woman.” The next day Homes appeared again before the court to ask for a duplicate of her registration as a free person, which she had lost. The court ordered the clerk to make the duplicate. What happened between July 18 when Homes was valued by the “disinterested persons” and August 9 when she was exonerated? It may have taken Homes some time to make contact with friends who could help her in her situation—Richmond officials had taken measures such as better fencing to ensure that inmates did not communicate with the outside world.<sup>28</sup>

Regardless of the outcome of the court case—whether one was guilty or not guilty, enslaved or free—an incarcerated person was only free to leave the

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<sup>28</sup> Lucy Ann Homes, Valuation as a Runaway, and Lucy Ann Homes, Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court, Ended Causes, Jun-Aug 1842, LVA; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 15, 1842-1844, LVA, 96-97. Ended Causes are the documents (copies of free papers, letters of inquiry, testimonies of witnesses, etc.) that were filed away after the record-keeper had completed the official record, the Minute Book. I found these collections of documents very helpful for learning more about a court case. On the low valuations of incarcerated free Black people, Berlin writes that it was a result of conspiracy between potential buyers. Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: New York Press, 2007): 225.

jail once his or her jail fees were paid. During the six years documented in the jail register Homes's \$22.12 in fees were part of a total of \$3,034.07 in fees paid to the jailer to satisfy debt incurred by prisoners for their keep. On average free and enslaved people owed \$9.31 in fees per jail stay.

The average fee paid by enslavers to reclaim their human property—\$5.98—was significantly lower than those of free inmates due to the design of the system for processing enslaved people assumed to be runaways. Enslaved people spent an average of a little more than sixteen days in jail. When a fugitive was apprehended by a nightwatchman or a private informant, the jailer was empowered to write to the enslaved person's owner, if this person was known, or advertise the person in local newspapers. The expenses for these advertisements were added to the jail fees. When the enslaver or his or her agent came to claim their enslaved property and pay the fine, he or she was free to take the captives. There was no trial. The word of the owner, and any documentation he or she offered, were trusted. In almost all cases this was the chain of events that was recorded. In only one instance did the slave owner ask the jail to sell the enslaved man, Nelson, instead of claiming him himself. In 354 entries there was one notation of an escape by a man named Ned, alias Colgin. In these circumstances it was in the financial interests of the slaveowner to 1) reduce the instances of runaways or ensure that enslaved people moving around Richmond on business had a pass and 2) to claim enslaved men, women, and children quickly to avoid more jail fees. This was not only the state working with slave owners to enforce and uphold the system of slavery, but it is also the state

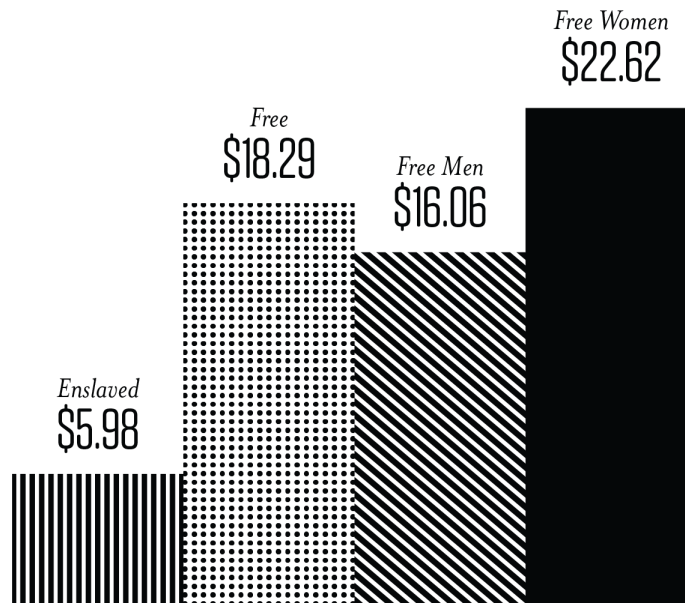
enforcing enslavers' responsibility to control the physical movement of the people they enslaved. That enforcement was done directly through the imposition of fees. In every instance of an enslaved person's incarceration (with the exception of Nelson and Ned) the fees were paid and the person was discharged into the custody of the enslaver.<sup>29</sup>

Data from the jail registry indicate that the system worked differently for those who were free. While slave owners paid a little under \$6 for the keep of their enslaved property, free people paid an average of \$18.29 per incarceration. This difference in fees paid by free people and fees paid by enslavers is due to the structure of the law. Enslaved people were claimed by owners and discharged. Free people had to wait, jailed, until the Hustings Court of the City of Richmond held its monthly session and another person could vouch for their freedom. Here was the real power of the debt resulting from incarceration. Ninety-seven of the one hundred people arrested for want of free papers ultimately proved their freedom, but half of those individuals were nonetheless hired out to pay their jail fees. For them, proof of freedom led to forced labor.

*Figure 1 Average Jail Fees Assessed*

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<sup>29</sup> Frantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered*, 21, 78.



*This chart shows that free people, and free women and girls in particular, paid higher jail fees on average than did enslavers.*

The data from the jail registry show that free women and girls of color were disproportionately affected and more likely than their male counterparts to become victims of debt peonage. There was a pronounced difference between the fees assessed on men and women. Free women on average paid fees of \$22.62 while free men paid \$16.06 on average. (Enslaved men and women show a disparity, but one not so pronounced—\$7.79 on average per enslaved female and \$5.77 on average per enslaved male). Free women, in part as a result of higher fees, were hired out as debt peons at higher rates. While 42 percent of free men were hired out to pay their jail fees, 65 percent of free women were ultimately hired out for that reason. Of those individuals whose length of service was enumerated in the jail registry, all but four were sold for more than a year of unpaid service. While the jail system subjected women to lengths of service that

could be as short as a few months, the most outrageous service lengths required the forced labor of women for between twenty and fifty-nine years.<sup>30</sup>

*Figure 2 Free People Sold for Jail Debts*

*Chart 1 Incarcerations of Free People by Gender*



*Chart 2 Outcome for Free Men*

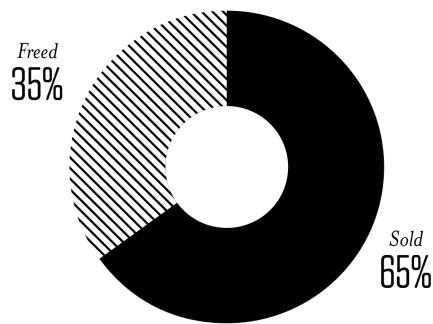


*Chart 3 Outcome for Free Women*

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<sup>30</sup> Many of the females incarcerated in the Richmond city jail would be considered children today because they were under the age of eighteen. In the period these girls were often considered women, a result of slavery and racism. See Corinne T. Field et al., "The History of Black Girlhood: Recent Innovations and Future Directions," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 9 no. 3 (2016): 383-401.





*This series of charts illustrates that men were more likely than women to be arrested for going without their free papers, but that women were more likely to be hired out to pay their resultant jail fees*

This debt forced onto the shoulders of free Black Richmonders resulted in a combined 315.25 years of forced service. This figure includes only service lengths that were noted by the jailer; the true figure was therefore much higher but is not extant. Census data show that some of the women who were incarcerated in the Richmond city jail and subsequently hired out were later living with free children. Their situation differed from that of the enslaved women who lived and worked alongside them because their children did not automatically inherit their unfree status. However, free people were forced into uncompensated servitude as a result of their entanglement with the Richmond jail, and there is at least indirect evidence that free people who were held under labor contracts were taken from Virginia where they and their children were sold into slavery. This system of unfree labor operating in the City of Richmond was different from, but parallel to, chattel slavery.

What was happening through the city jail system seems to have been a different mechanism than that occurring in the state prison system. The prison

system had complete control (within the law) of a person convicted of a crime. Therefore, the state had almost unlimited power to enact violence on that person, force them to work, and control their access to food, the outside, and other people. The data from the Richmond city jail suggests that the jail system had to exploit a mechanism different from the prison system for controlling enslaved and free Black Virginians. Once an inmate proved their free status, the jail no longer had the state's sanction to inflict punishment on that person. However, enforcing payment of debt was a form of coercion that provided that extra level of power. In capitalism free people are assumed to be responsible for debts they incur. Nonpayment of debt is considered morally wrong and is legally punishable. Though, or perhaps because, they were proven by the court to be free, Black Virginians were still under the control of the state because they owed a debt to the Richmond city jail. The debt gave the jail the authority to control such a person's labor and movement.<sup>31</sup>

The experiences of Seaton Anderson vividly illustrate the debt and slavery trap of the Richmond jail system. Anderson was born free in the Richmond area around 1820. Available documents show a difficult reality for a man arrested over and over. There is no record of Anderson's parents. His mother must have been free to pass the status on to her son, and she presumably hoped to prepare him for a career in freedom. At sixteen he was apprenticed to Joshua Goode for three years to "learn the art of stemming twisting and prising tobacco." According to the City of Richmond jail register, after Anderson's apprenticeship was to end in

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<sup>31</sup> Michelle Lise Tarter and Richard Bell, eds., *Buried Lives: Incarcerated in Early America* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

1839, he was arrested five times in a three-year period. The first time he was arrested Anderson was charged “for the want of his Free papers, and was Going at Large.” The twenty-one-year-old was freed after twelve days in jail and \$4.92 in fees, evidently paid by Anderson himself. His freedom was short-lived. Anderson was arrested again later in the summer of 1841, this time on suspicion of being a runaway. After sixteen days in jail and another fine Anderson again proved that he was a free man.<sup>32</sup>

Even before the second arrest, Anderson had already taken action. On August 2 Anderson sued the man to whom he had been apprenticed. Joshua Goode was supposed to have released Anderson from his apprenticeship in April of 1839. Instead of doing so, Anderson alleged, Goode “did keep the plaintiff in ignorance of his freedom and continued to use him as an apprentice.” Goode illegally held Anderson from April of 1839 until March of 1841. Anderson also accused his “master” of beating and abusing him and withholding his free papers. It’s not clear how or when Anderson discovered Goode’s devious dealings, but it may have been after he was arrested in the spring of 1841 when he was required to prove his freedom. Anderson originally sued for \$200, which he said that Goode had been promising to pay him for a year. When he renewed the suit in November of 1841 for \$500, Anderson argued Goode owed not only \$200, but “divers other sums of money” as well. These sums included the jail fees Anderson had paid to the city jail for his incarceration for want of free papers,

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<sup>32</sup> Seaton Anderson v Joshua Goode, Richmond (City), Justice of the Peace Records Court Records: Hustings Court Dismissals at Rule, Office Judgements 1843, Ended Causes, Jan 1844, 1843-1844, LVA; Frantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered*, 5; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 14, 1840-1842, LVA, 449.

which were held by Goode. Anderson charged Goode with “illegal and oppressive doings.” Goode was able to successfully avoid a ruling in the case until he died in January of 1844 and the case was dropped by Anderson’s legal counsel.<sup>33</sup>

Anderson never saw the money he was owed and never received justice for the abuse he suffered at the hands of Goode. Unfortunately, his legal troubles were far from over. Despite the fact that Anderson was registered as free after being jailed in August and September of 1841, he evidently still did not have his free papers on him on May 1 of 1843. City constables again arrested him as a runaway, and Anderson spent one hundred and eight days in jail before finally proving that he was free in late July. This time Anderson must have been without access to the cash that had allowed him to pay his jail fees and sue his former “master” in 1841. Because he was unable to pay his \$33.46 debt to the jail, city officials forcibly hired out the twenty-three-year-old in the “old market” to a man named James Foley. Foley took Anderson to Petersburg, Virginia, about twenty-four miles south of Richmond.<sup>34</sup>

Less than a year later Anderson was back in Richmond and arrested as a runaway for the third time (his first arrest was for want of free papers). He may have come back to settle affairs after the end of his lawsuit against the deceased Joshua Goode, which had ended just a few weeks earlier. This time Anderson

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<sup>33</sup> Seaton Anderson v Joshua Goode, Richmond (City), Justice of the Peace Records Court Records: Hustings Court Dismissals at Rule, Office Judgements 1843, Ended Causes, Jan 1844, 1843-1844, LVA.

<sup>34</sup> Frantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered*, 108, 59-60; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 15, 1842-1844, LVA, 368; The jail register lists Anderson’s owner as alternatively Folia, Foley, and McFoley. The 1830 census shows a “James S Foley” in Petersburg and lots of other “Foley”s, but no “McFoley”s.

was only in jail for four days before Foley appeared to pay the \$2.00 in fees.

Whatever punishment Foley inflicted on Anderson for his unauthorized departure did not deter him from again leaving Petersburg for Richmond. He was arrested as a runaway two weeks later, Foley again claiming Anderson and paying his jail fees within a week.<sup>35</sup>

After his dual arrests in 1844 and the end of his lawsuit to recover funds owed to him, Anderson successfully avoided another arrest (in Richmond, at least) before the end of his labor contract in July of 1853. However, his name continued to appear periodically in newspapers after the now thirty-three-year-old was finally released by James Foley. Anderson returned to Richmond where in the fall of 1853 “was found drunk, and . . . cursed and abused the police when they attempted to arrest him.” The Mayor’s Court ordered him to receive twenty lashes for his offense. Five years later in 1858 another paper called the unfortunate man a “worthless free negro.” He was convicted of stealing clothing and sentenced to the “chain gang by the Mayor.” Census records for 1860 indicate that Anderson was still jailed, this time in Petersburg.<sup>36</sup>

Then in the fall of 1864, less than six months before the end of the nation’s bloody conflict over Black freedom, Anderson found himself free from forced labor and jails. That freedom would be short-lived. A Richmond newspaper reported that Anderson, “a free negro without papers,” was found with “a lot turnips and potatoes in his possession, supposed to have been stolen.”

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<sup>35</sup> Frantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered*, 59-60.

<sup>36</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” *Richmond Mail*, October 21, 1853, [virginiachronicle.com](http://virginiachronicle.com); “Local Matters,” *Daily Dispatch*, February 25, 1858, [virginiachronicle.com](http://virginiachronicle.com).

Starvation was a reality for soldiers and civilians in the capital of the Confederacy. Bread riots, led by hungry women, had raged the previous year. Richmonders knew that Atlanta had fallen to the Union army the month before and felt the anxiety from having Union General Grant's Army of the Potomac camped on the outskirts of Petersburg. The sight of a Black man with "a lot of turnips and potatoes" was perhaps enough to seal the fate of Seaton Anderson, who was "sent to the batteries." A "battery" in military parlance was a group of cannon; Anderson may have been assigned to labor in the effort to fortify Richmond against the advancing Union army. Anderson does not appear again in census, court, or newspaper records from the time. His unusually well-documented life shows how the symbiotic perils of jail and debt could wreak havoc in the lives of free Black Virginians.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Fate of the Women**

Many of the women hired out by the jail were likely recruited by white heads of households and bound to servitude without the auction. Kitty Smith does not appear in census records of the time, but the man who paid her debts is enumerated. Smith, likely a teenager like Elizabeth Brown, spent eighteen days in jail before she was able to prove her freedom before the court. As with each of the free African Americans whose freedom was proved, the Hustings Court reporter noted "it is ordered that she be hired out for so long a time as may be necessary to pay jail fees." However, instead of the usual auction, Smith was

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<sup>37</sup> "Local Matters," *Daily Dispatch*, October 12, 1864, [viriniachronicle.com](http://viriniachronicle.com).

“delivered to Thomas Minor.” The register notes that Minor had paid her jail fees. The only Thomas Minor listed in the census as living in Richmond in 1840 was a white man who headed a household of two white women in their twenties, four teenagers, and three children under ten. The household in 1840 included no enslaved people or “free colored persons,” but would have desired domestic labor. The evidence suggests that Minor hired Smith directly from the jail as a domestic servant, which might have been the fate of many of the women in this study.<sup>38</sup>

Evidence from the census shows a pattern of young, poor free women of color as the most vulnerable to arrest and the least likely to have extra cash to pay jail fees. Louisa Brown, spelled “Louise” in the Hustings Court records and “Lauisa” in the jail records, would have been twenty-two years old at the time of her arrest for want of free papers in 1842. Census records show that Brown was a resident of Richmond for decades and suggest that her family made ends meet but not much more. In 1850 Brown was living with her father, London Brown, a laborer, her brother, Isaac, two years her junior, and her two children under five years old. By 1860 London, Louisa, and Isaac Brown were still living together, although the patriarch, at eighty-one years old, was no longer working. Brown’s children do not appear in the family’s entry in the census; at fifteen and eleven years old, they may have been apprenticed to people who would have provided

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<sup>38</sup> Frantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered*, 103; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 15, 1842-1844, LVA, 140; “United States Census, 1840,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHBM-P9M> : 20 August 2017), Thomas Minor, Richmond Ward 1, Henrico, Virginia, United States; citing p. 139, NARA microfilm publication M704, (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), roll 561; FHL microfilm 29,687.

room and board and instructed the children in a trade. New to the household in the 1860 census were Isaac Brown's children. These included London, age seven and presumably named after his grandfather, and James, age six. Despite incarceration, jail fees, and the absence of members due to death, enslavement, or employment necessity, the Brown family held together at least until the eve of the Civil War.<sup>39</sup>

If Louisa Brown's children were apprenticed out by 1860, it may have been one result of the heavy burden imposed on the family by Brown's 184-day incarceration from 1842 to 1843. When the city auctioned Brown in the old market to cover her debt of \$67.15 to the jail, a man named John Mountcastle bought the next fifty years of her uncompensated labor. Census records show that John R. Mountcastle was on the economic and social rise in Richmond. In 1843 when he purchased Brown, Mountcastle was twenty-nine years old. He and his wife had three children but did not count enslaved people among their property. Brown may have been Mountcastle's first purchase of another human being, likely motivated by a desire for domestic help for his growing household. In the next two decades the Mountcastles would add six more children to their family and lose at least one to death. They also added enslaved people to the

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<sup>39</sup> I chose to use the spelling "Louisa" because that is how it was spelled in the jail register, the records with which I started, as I am lacking any source in Brown's own hand to confirm the way she spelled her first name; Frantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered*, 103; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 15, 1842-1844, LVA, 326; "United States Census, 1850," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M8D7-TCL> : 12 April 2016), Louisa Brown in household of London Brown, Henrico county, part of, Henrico, Virginia, United States; citing family 945, NARA microfilm publication M432 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); "United States Census, 1860", database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M418-6N8> : 12 December 2017), Louisa Brown in entry for London Brown, 1860.



household; three females by 1850 and then a man and five more women and girls by 1860. The census did not record Louisa Brown as living within the household of John Mountcastle even though her labor was bound to him, unpaid, until 1893; she may have died in the meantime. Brown's contractual obligation to provide free labor to the wealthy Mountcastle household was imposed on her by debt through the jail system. It would bind her for a lifetime and limit her from contributing to the income or care of her own household.<sup>40</sup>

The evidence suggests that women auctioned by the city became unpaid laborers in industrial settings. Richmond in the 1840s was industrializing. By the 1850s Tredegar Iron Works and multiple wheat and tobacco processing factories employed thousands of men and women--native whites, immigrants, and free and enslaved Black people. Enslavers with more hands than work to employ them sent their enslaved property to the capital city to find work and remit wages. Black people forcibly hired out were likely used in the same environments. Court records show that business partnerships, and not just individuals, purchased the right to forcibly employ free Black people at the city auction. In 1842 Beazley & Quarles purchased Jim Finny's labor at the old market, Richmond's public market

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<sup>40</sup> "United States Census, 1840," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHBM-RBC> : 20 August 2017), Jno R Mountcastle, Henrico, Virginia, United States; citing p. 234, NARA microfilm publication M704, (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), roll 561; FHL microfilm 29,687; "United States Census, 1850," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M8D7-QMM> : 12 April 2016), John R Mountcastle, Henrico county, part of, Henrico, Virginia, United States; citing family 322, NARA microfilm publication M432 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); "United States Census (Slave Schedule), 1850," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MV8Y-7HW> : 4 August 2017), John R Mountcastle, Henrico county, part of, Henrico, Virginia, United States; citing line number 23, NARA microfilm publication M432 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 444,978.

and auction space at 17<sup>th</sup> and Main Streets. Finny spent the next ten years bound by an uncompensated labor contract to this building company. Finny's story suggests that Richmonders viewed the regular auctions of free city residents as a viable option to secure labor. Many women were employed in industrial settings. Mary Jane Smith, who was arrested by the city constable for want of free papers in 1844, and her children over the age of twelve were all employed in a tobacco factory in 1860 (although there is no evidence that they were uncompensated for their labor at that time as Smith should have been freed from her labor contract in 1847). Talitha L. LeFlouria's work on convict labor in the New South shows that Black women whose labor was bound and unwaged were laboring in industrial settings after emancipation. The same fate may have awaited some of the free Black women who were auctioned by the city of Richmond to pay jail fees.<sup>41</sup>

Willis Augustus Hodges described this process of enslaving free Black Virginians through the jail system in his 1849 autobiography. Hodges was born free in 1815 in Princess Anne County, Virginia, which is today known as Virginia Beach. He penned his autobiography when he was still a young man and daily engaged in the struggle for the end of slavery and injustice to African Americans. Hodges' narrative describes conditions that became more desperate for free Blacks in the wake of Nat Turner's rebellion. Hodges wrote that Kinner Flurry was arrested for going without free papers. "Flurry," wrote Hodges, "proved his freedom, but was unable to pay his jail fees, and was sold to the highest bidder."

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<sup>41</sup> Talitha L. LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

Flurry's purchaser viewed the unfortunate man not as a free person who would serve him for a set amount of time and then return to his former trade, but as another addition to the eighteen enslaved people who toiled away for the enslaver. Flurry was advertised for when he ran away, denied the opportunity to visit his family when a daughter died, and "severely flogged" when he went anyway. Crisis struck the Flurry family again with the death of the (technically) free man's wife. When he returned home to bury her he was "beaten so badly that he died in a few weeks, without canceling the debt." Hodges did not know the time Flurry was supposed to have served, according to the terms of the hiring out/auction, but he makes it clear that all parties—Flurry, Flurry's purchaser, and Flurry's friend Hodges—understood that this sale for debt was the end of his life as a free man. That was the point, wrote Hodges, "as they arrested only the poorest of the free people of color."<sup>42</sup>

It was not just those who became caught in the jail system or stood at risk of arrest who understood this process of debt creation and enslavement. The Society of Friends, or Quakers, were known for their anti-slavery stance. In December of 1844 the Richmond Society of Friends filed a legislative petition before the Virginia General Assembly "praying [for] the amelioration of the condition of Free negroes." The petition specifically addressed the issue of free Black Virginians who were arrested without papers and then forcibly hired out to pay jail fees. The Friends wrote that "such persons, have, from time to time been thus sold for periods varying from one to fifty years." Data from the Richmond jail

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<sup>42</sup> Willard B. Gatewood Jr., ed., *Free Man of Color: The Autobiography of Willis Augustus Hodges* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 27.

register shows that the group was close to the truth but actually underestimated the length of time for which people were sold; Lucy Briggs, the woman who was sold for the longest period of time, was hired for fifty-nine years. The Friends alleged that those sold “have been removed from the state and taken to other and distant portions of the Union.” Removal of hired servants by “employers” would have been fairly easy as Virginians either moved South and took their enslaved property with them or stayed put and sold men, women, and children in a steady stream of humanity south. Removal from the City of Richmond would have had other unfortunate effects on the hired free people. Enslaved and free people often relied on their networks of family and friends to defend and preserve their freedom. Free registries and court records bear this out as men and women relied on whites in their networks to vouch for their freedom. Removed from Virginia and taken from these networks by enslavers, free Blacks would have had no one to attest to their freedom when their contract was up. The petition of the Society of Friends called attention to such people’s existence “beyond the probable search of the evidence of their freedom.” The Quakers feared that “the children of the females may be held to perpetual servitude.”<sup>43</sup>

Although the Quaker petition illustrates that those affected by the system were not the only ones deeply disturbed by what was occurring in the Richmond city jail system, in another sense the Society of Friends missed part of the larger story. Their petition was focused on how the jail system, through the generation of debt, had created a structure that led to the illegal enslavement of free Blacks.

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<sup>43</sup> Dec. 31, 1844, General Assembly Legislative Petitions, Richmond (City), LVA.

In their steady work against nineteenth century American chattel slavery, the Quakers regarded this risk as the most problematic outcome of the jail debt system. However, the most likely outcome of being jailed for free African Americans, especially those who were young, poor women, was not illegal enslavement, but legal debt peonage. In this system, which those in power would ramp up exponentially after the end of chattel slavery, free Black Virginians like Lucy Trent and Seaton Anderson became effectively enslaved not because they were born to enslaved mothers but because they “owed a debt to society” for breaking its arbitrary laws. That figurative debt was translated into a financial debt, which was then paid by years of compulsory labor.

Even enslavers acknowledged the reality of slavery through debt to the jail. In Josiah Henson’s 1849 narrative account of his flight from slavery the author describes his attempt to purchase himself. His enslaver, Isaac Riley, pretended to acquiesce for the amount of \$450, while planning to trick Henson out of his money and his freedom. Riley wrote up free papers but refused to give them to the enslaved man, arguing that someone might steal them from him. “You may meet with some ruffian slave-purchaser,” argued the enslaver, “who will rob you of that piece of paper, and destroy it. You will then be thrown into prison, and sold for your jail fees, before any of your friends can know it.” Riley acknowledged the role of the debt created by jail fees, and not just the physical control and violence of the jail itself, in depriving Black people of freedom.

Despite Riley's best efforts Henson and his wife and children escaped enslavement in Kentucky for freedom in Canada.<sup>44</sup>

There is no way to know the ultimate fate of either Lucy Briggs or Sally Ball. Briggs was sold for a period of time which would have extended beyond the end of legal slavery—until 1901, assuming she had lived to the age of seventy-four. A Lucy Briggs did not appear in the 1850 census in the household of the closest match to the “Benjamin Wropper” who purchased her, “Benjamin B. Roper.” Roper was a cabinet maker whose household did include a free woman who was likely a servant helping his wife with household and childcare duties. Ann E. Humphreys was a “mulatto” woman about the same age as Briggs. Neither Roper nor Briggs appeared in the 1860 census. However, by 1870 Briggs appeared in the census for the first time as a cook. Her household, a small one, was composed of servants and must have inhabited a separate building on her employer's property. It also included a fifteen-year-old Black female domestic servant and a twenty-eight-year-old Black male gardener. The three appeared unrelated by familial bond and did not share last names. The street was a tony one in Madison Ward of the City of Richmond. Briggs's white male neighbors were listed as physician, life insurance agent, and merchant. Their wives' professions were denoted “at home.” Briggs likely worked for John Freeland, a retired merchant whose wealth in real and personal estate was valued at \$250,000, and whose household appears just before hers in the census. Freeland's household was large and bustling and included his wife, four

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<sup>44</sup> Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada* (Boston, MA: Arthur D. Phelps, 1849), 33-34.

unmarried children, and a married son with his wife and infant. There would have been plenty of work to employ three domestic servants. It is not clear whether Freeland held Briggs under the original twenty-eight-year-old contract or whether she was compensated for her labor cooking for the Freeland family.<sup>45</sup>

Ball, like Briggs, had a labor contract whose term would have extended beyond emancipation--in Ball's case until 1868. The man who hired her from the city/the jail, Quintint Blane, or Quintian Blain as he is listed in census records for Henrico County, Virginia, was a wealthy man in the mid-nineteenth century. Born in Scotland, Blane had built a large household with a wife and children, enslaved people, and free domestic servants, many of whom were immigrants themselves. According to jail records Blane, in 1843 and 1844 purchased the forced labor of two free Black women who could not pay their jail debts—Mary Jane Smith and Sally Hudson. In 1850 Blane's household included a free Black female servant named Sally Seay. Seay may have been Ball, still working off the debt she acquired at eighteen years old. By 1850 Ball may have married, which would have explained the name change. By the time census takers recorded the household of Blane in 1860, it no longer included Sally Seay or any Black laborers, enslaved or free. Blane seems to have sold the enslaved people he had been purchasing since his arrival in Virginia. Seay, if she was the same person

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<sup>45</sup> "United States Census, 1850," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M8D7-KHX> : 12 April 2016), Benjamin B Roper, Henrico county, part of, Henrico, Virginia, United States; citing family 650, NARA microfilm publication M432 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); "United States Census, 1870," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MFGN-PQP> : 12 April 2016), Lucy Briggs, Virginia, United States; citing p. 235, family 1659, NARA microfilm publication M593 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 553,153.

as Ball, and if she was still laboring, uncompensated, for Blane, may have been allowed by Blane to with her family and therefore not counted in the enumeration of his household for the census. She may have also become one of the unfortunates described by the Society of Friends as being forcibly removed from Virginia and sold into permanent enslavement.<sup>46</sup>

Quantitative and archival evidence suggests that through the creation of debt in the jail system, Richmond leaders were able to exploit the freedom of free Black people to, paradoxically, limit their freedom and claim their labor—or, more precisely, to claim money generated by their forced labor. Those most likely to be affected were the most vulnerable of Richmond's free population—young, poor girls and women of color. The debt imposed on young Black women like Lucy Briggs and Sally Ball through the jail system because of their arrest for the petty charge of "going without papers" led to the exploitation of their unpaid domestic labor by Richmond's wealthy, white families. The experiences of these women suggest that debt peonage was not at all new in the post-emancipation period. Instead, jail debt allowed Richmond leaders yet another avenue through which to restrict the freedoms of the city's free Black community.

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<sup>46</sup> "United States Census, 1840," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHBM-YCL> : 20 August 2017), Quinton Blayne, Henrico, Virginia, United States; citing p. 265, NARA microfilm publication M704, (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), roll 561; FHL microfilm 29,687. "United States Census, 1850," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M8D7-LKC> : 12 April 2016), Quentin Blain, Western, Henrico, Virginia, United States; citing family 639, NARA microfilm publication M432 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); "United States Census, 1860", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M418-RTW> : 12 December 2017), Quention Blain, 1860.



## **Chapter 2: How Avoiding Jail Debt Drained Resources from the Free African American Community**

Walter Bee was arrested in Richmond for going without his free papers in the fall of 1841 when he was just fifteen years old. He spent two months in jail, racking up fees of \$20.34 during his incarceration. Bee's experience in the jail would have been uncomfortable; the air was cold and stagnant according to Hustings Court records, and multiple sources point to the violence Bee might have had to endure. However, at that point his experiences diverged from those of the free African American women who were hired out to pay jail fees. Bee was discharged and paid his jail fees in full in November of 1841. Instead of his imprisonment ending with public auction and a long period of de facto enslavement, Bee left the jailhouse of the city of Richmond debt-free and rejoined his family in the free Black community.

The previous chapter explored the role of debt in enforcing white supremacy through the jail system. Data from the Richmond City jail register show that the freedom of free African Americans was limited through nineteenth-century liberal constructions of debt relationships. This system of unfreedom operated alongside slavery; it did not end with emancipation, and it did not affect its potential victims uniformly. Sally Ball ended up deprived of her freedom because of her \$17.50 debt to the jail, but Walter Bee did not. This chapter explains how some free African Americans were able to escape the trap of debt that led a proportionally high number of young, poor women into forced servitude. In doing so, I examine the role of the police force in handling crimes such as

“going without a pass,” the role of the court system in adjudicating the law, and the networks used by the free African American community to free its members. To have any hope of avoiding the fate of these unfortunate women free African Americans leaned on their networks and exploited any crack in a system designed to limit their freedom.

Unfortunately, freeing one person from jail debt came at a price to the community. To understand the impact of incarceration and debt on the free African American community, I rely on social disorganization theory. The theory was articulated by Dina R. Rose and Todd R. Clear in the late 1990s to describe the modern-day impact of policing on communities. They found highly suggestive evidence that policing and incarceration eroded the social structures of communities and undermined efforts to stabilize those communities. Rose and Clear theorize that state control through the justice system chipped away at social structures for multiple reasons; two are especially pertinent to a discussion of 1840s Richmond. First, removing members of a community puts a financial strain on the remaining members of that community. Second, social capital, the skills and resources that contribute to the community, are drained away when members of the community are incarcerated. This chapter will argue that, by drawing on its interpersonal networks, social capital, and financial capital to successfully escape forced labor imposed through jail debt, the free African American community strained its resources. The resulting social disorganization caused by maintaining the freedom of some individuals in the community had the

perverse effect of limiting the community's capacity to protect others of its members from the traumatic effects of white supremacy.<sup>47</sup>

## **The Police**

Each free African American arrested for going without a pass encountered two institutions of enforcement—police and the courts. Law enforcement officials, like the jails they filled and ran, were notorious for their cruelty. Jailers, employed by the locality, often lived in the upper rooms of the same building where inmates were housed and beaten. Richmond in the 1840s boasted a population of over twenty thousand, and its police force consisted of between nineteen and twenty-five patrollers led by a captain. Clement White, who served as a police officer and then captain from the 1840s to the 1850s provides an example of one such individual.<sup>48</sup>

White appeared over and over in the Hustings Court records for the City of Richmond, his work and life often weaving intimately with those of the city's Black population. Multiple free African Americans listed in the jail registry regained their freedom on his testimony—Lucy Ann Homes, Mary Brown, and Maria Mills (or Ham). White, by happenstance, foiled the getaway of a free African American man accused, and later found guilty, of murdering a free African American

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<sup>47</sup> Dina R. Rose and Todd R. Clear, "Incarceration, Social Capital, and Crime: Implications for Social Disorganization Theory," *Criminology* 36, no. 3 (1998): 441-480. Sociologists find a link between these same policing and incarceration activities associated with systemic racism today and adverse health effects. No doubt free Black communities experienced some of the same health issues in the 1840s. See the work of David R. Williams.

<sup>48</sup> Leni Ashmore Sorensen, "Absconded: Fugitive Slaves in the Daybook of the Richmond Police Guard, 1834-1844" (dissertation, W&M, 2005), 28; Louis Bernard Cei, "Law Enforcement in Richmond: A History of Police-Community Relations, 1737-1974" (PhD diss., Florida State University, 1975), 19.

woman. White testified that he and another man were on the train traveling south from Richmond when “a man came into the cars, and witness suspecting that he was Fletcher Heath arrested him, and they brought him back to Richmond.” In 1842 White was appointed guardian by the court for a thirteen-year-old free African American boy. White also testified on behalf of free African Americans when they appeared in court to register their free status.<sup>49</sup>

Evidence from the time shows that Clement White had a blossoming career in law enforcement, which accounts for his frequent appearance in court documents. In 1844 Hustings Court records he was described as a “deputy constable.” By the 1850 census, which also documented his ownership of three enslaved females, White’s profession was denoted “police officer.” And by 1855 at fifty-eight years old White had been promoted to “Capt. Police” according to *Butters’ 1855 Richmond Directory*. White was listed as living on the north side of Marshall Street between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Streets; his neighborhood was part of the district that later became Jackson Ward, the “Harlem of the South.”<sup>50</sup>

How did Clement White understand his place in Richmond and race relations in the city? The evidence offers a partial view of White’s perspective

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<sup>49</sup> Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 15, 1842-1844, LVA, 263, 96, 478, 558, 669; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 16, 1844-1846, LVA, 137; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 14, 1840-1842, LVA, 465; Commonwealth v. Fletcher Heath, Richmond (City), Court Records: Hustings Court, Ended Causes, Jan-Mar 1842, LVA.

<sup>50</sup> "United States Census, 1850," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M8DQ-B4F> : 12 April 2016), Clement White, Richmond, Henrico, Virginia, United States; citing family 724, NARA microfilm publication M432 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); "United States Census (Slave Schedule), 1850," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MV8Y-6F9> : 4 August 2017), Clement White, Richmond, Henrico, Virginia, United States; citing line number 42, NARA microfilm publication M432 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 444,978; *Butters’ Richmond Directory for 1855* (Richmond, VA: H. K. Ellyson’s Steam Presses, 1855), 171.

and suggests that he used a heavy hand against African Americans. A search of newspapers published in Richmond during White's tenure on the police force yields references to his active participation in the Democratic party. At one party dinner, he made a sarcastic toast to William C. Rives, who had switched political parties from the Democrats to the Whigs, calling him an "inglorious deserter," and proposed another toast to John C. Calhoun, "the most distinguished son of the South." White served as a delegate to the Democratic national committee several times in the 1840s. Richmond's city council and mayor—who was a member of the council as well—tended to be Whigs, which brought them occasionally into opposition with the police force. The two groups sparred over the salary and even the necessity of a city police force. The police force, like White, tended to be Democrats, who, more than their Whig counterparts, viewed slavery as a positive good. One historian of Richmond's police force called out Clement White specifically as the "terror . . . of the darky," as he was referred to by contemporaries. White's interactions with the African American community reflect the duality of slavery and freedom in Richmond, and in America more generally. The same man who testified in court to defend the freedom of a Black person could also use unnecessary force in arresting an African American teenager for stealing an apple. White most likely saw no conflict between these two extremes, viewing both as his exertions to uphold the law. However his ownership of enslaved women, his political views, and his reputation as a "terror" suggest that White led a police force that positioned itself in opposition to the free African American community. Instead of simply keeping the streets safe for all

Richmonders, White and his men were active in undermining the social structures of the free African American community, in the manner described by Rose and Clear, through their frequent and indiscriminate arrests and jailing of men and women of color.<sup>51</sup>

The pattern of arrests supports the thesis that the police force was targeting the African American community. Robert M. Saunders in an article appearing in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* examined Richmond Hustings Court documents from 1784 to the 1820s. He found that after Gabriel's Rebellion in 1800 African American men—enslaved and free—came to constitute a “substantially higher percentage” of defendants. This same population was much more likely than white men to be arrested for crimes against property. From 1841 to 1846, the years for which the Richmond jail register is extant, 101 free people were arrested and jailed for going without a pass. The 1840 census reported a total free black population of 1,926 people, which means that (assuming no double or triple incarcerations) about five percent of the total population was incarcerated at some time during those six years just for going without free papers. That figure does not include free African

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<sup>51</sup> “Toasts Drank at Mitchell’s Spring,” *Richmond Enquirer*, July 7, 1826, [viriniachronicle.com](http://viriniachronicle.com); “Valuable City Property for Sale,” *Richmond Enquirer*, March 29, 1831, [viriniachronicle.com](http://viriniachronicle.com); “Citizens’ Dinner on the Fourth of July, to the Volunteers of Richmond: Volunteer Toasts,” *Richmond Enquirer*, July 10, 1835, [viriniachronicle.com](http://viriniachronicle.com); “Democratic Dinner: Volunteer Toasts,” *Richmond Enquirer*, February 27, 1840, [viriniachronicle.com](http://viriniachronicle.com); “Democratic Association of Richmond, and their Republican Brethren,” *Richmond Enquirer*, July 17, 1840, [viriniachronicle.com](http://viriniachronicle.com); “Democratic Convention,” *Richmond Enquirer*, September 8, 1840, [viriniachronicle.com](http://viriniachronicle.com); “The ‘Spartan Band’ . . .” *Richmond Enquirer*, April 23, 1847, [viriniachronicle.com](http://viriniachronicle.com); “We omitted to state . . .” *Richmond Enquirer*, June 20, 1848, [viriniachronicle.com](http://viriniachronicle.com); “Virginia—In Chancery,” *Richmond Enquirer*, April 29, 1851, [viriniachronicle.com](http://viriniachronicle.com); Cei, “Law Enforcement in Richmond,” 25-26, quote on page 17; Unfortunately the footnoted citation does not lead to a source, so I have no context or source for the quote.

Americans jailed for other crimes or those in the state penitentiary in Richmond. Rose and Clear support their theory of social disorganization with crisis-level incarceration rates that went from ninety per one hundred thousand in 1973 to four hundred per one hundred thousand by the late 1990s. For going without their papers, Richmond's free African American population experienced an incarceration rate of *five thousand* out of one hundred thousand. Richmond's free African American population was experiencing what Rose and Clear refer to as "war-level" casualties" at the hands of the Richmond City police.<sup>52</sup>

Public jailers, like police officers and night patrollers with their reputation of targeting African Americans, were also noted for their penchant for violence against Black people. Matthew J. Clavin in his research on the antebellum public jail system in Pensacola, Florida, found that Black imprisonment was never about "redeeming" criminals despite the growing movement to refashion prisons as institutions to accomplish that end. Instead jails all over the South existed to inflict physical and psychological punishment on African Americans, whether enslaved or free. Clavin found evidence of a symbiotic relationship between the jail and slave-holding. Indeed when fugitive from slavery Andrew Jackson described his flight for freedom he wrote of his time in a "cold, damp, filthy cell." Jackson was seized by locals as a runaway and "half-starved" in the local jail when he could not produce free papers. His autobiography later testified to the sufferings he endured in the jail where his "complaints were answered by abuse,

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<sup>52</sup> Robert M. Saunders, "Crime and Punishment in Early National America: Richmond, Virginia, 1784-1820," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 86, no. 1 (1978): 35; Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States (Washington, DC: 1841), 32-34; Rose and Clear, *Incarceration*, 450-451.

and sometimes the lash.” Jackson survived the ordeal and, after being sold for his jail fees, successfully escaped to freedom in the North.<sup>53</sup>

Jailers’ occasional leniency illustrates the extent of the brutality practiced in jails. One WPA interviewer narrated the interview of a man who was called only “Eugene, an Augusta Negro.” Eugene was born free of an African American woman who was freed when she “came of age.” Eugene told the story of an African American preacher who was jailed for teaching Black children. His punishment was “stocks and lashes.” But Eugene noted that the “sympathetic jailer told the old man: ‘Ned, I won’t whip you. I’ll just whip down the stock, and you holler!’” The limitations of the WPA slave narratives are well-known. Historians will probably never know if the story of the collusion of the Black preacher and the jailer was literally true or was an attempt to “soften” the sharpness of Black-white relations during slavery. What can be gleaned here is that jails were a place where violence toward African Americans was routine and expected—thus the perceived need to feign punishment against Eugene. Some whites observed certain limitations on following the letter of the law in extraordinary circumstances—in this case an elderly, Christian man whose sentence was “not intended to be executed.”

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<sup>53</sup> Matthew J. Clavin, “‘The Floor Was Stained with the Blood of a Slave’: Crime and Punishment in the Old South,” in *Buried Lives: Incarcerated in Early America*, eds. Michelle Lise Tarter and Richard Bell (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2012). The “redemption” of criminals had multiple meaning in nineteenth century jails. It usually referred to the process of reeducating prisoners so that they could become “productive” members of society—typically involving learning a marketable skill. Clavin makes the point that southern jails had a very different motive; Andrew Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson, of Kentucky* (Syracuse, NY: Daily and Weekly Star, 1847), 20.



Another man shared that he was arrested when he happened to be in the home of a man playing craps with other African Americans. He was arrested along with the craps players, but the policeman “[ar]ranged it so I could hurry back home.” In this case the “fairness” and impartiality of the police officer may have been directed more at the man’s enslaver, who might have been angry at losing his labor, than out of fairness toward the enslaved man himself. Each story was shared specifically because they were the exceptions in an otherwise extremely violent system.<sup>54</sup>

The experiences of William Day, “a free man of color,” illustrate how a given individual from the free Black community might well tangle on more than one occasion with Richmond city police officers and jailers. Day was young like many of the other free African Americans held in jail—about sixteen—when he was arrested, jailed, and subsequently freed three times in 1841. Day’s first arrest was for stealing a hog. After about a week in jail Day was “brought into court in the custody of the sergeant” to answer the accusation. The court ruled that the “warrant summoning the court in this case be quashed,” or dismissed. The record reveals neither further details nor an order that Day be sold to pay jail fees—merely that he was discharged. Four months later in June of 1841 he was arrested again—this time for going without free papers—and was jailed for twenty-three days before he was brought before the court to argue for his freedom. Day was found to be free, which is not surprising given that five months earlier the same set of judges had not questioned his free status. Like the other

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<sup>54</sup> Interviews with “Eugene” and Neal Upson, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, CD-ROM.

African Americans who proved their freedom, Day was ordered to be hired out to pay his jail fees. However instead of being auctioned, Day was fortunate to have access to the \$9.04 needed to satisfy the jailer. The city sergeant noted that he was “Discharged by the Court he paying his Jail fees.” The discharge was also recorded in Hustings Court records with the notation “paid” next to the verdict in Day’s case.<sup>55</sup>

However, Day’s troubles with the Richmond City police were not yet over. A month later when Seaton Anderson, the free African American man who was profiled in the previous chapter, was arrested for the want of free papers, he was hauled in with another man, William Cole. Cole and Day may have been related because the former was recorded by the city sergeant as “William Day alias Cole.” Curiously, the usually thorough record-keeping of the city sergeant fails the historian in this case. Hustings Court records fill in the missing release information in Anderson’s case; he successfully established his freedom in September. The record is silent on Cole’s fate in 1841. The three men—Anderson, Cole, and Day—popped up again together in 1843.

Anderson and Cole were again arrested for want of free papers within a few days of each other in late April/early May of 1843. Both men were jailed this time until late July when they proved their freedom and were auctioned/hired out by the city to pay jail fees. Just days before Cole and Anderson appeared in court

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<sup>55</sup> Nancy C. Frantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered: The Records of Slaves and Free Blacks Listed in the City Sergeant Jail Register, 1841-1846* (Westminster, MD: Heritage Books, 2010), 7; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 15, 1842-1844, LVA, 252, 400; Day was accused of stealing the hog from Daniel Norton, the Richmonder who is credited with first cultivating the Norton grape, North America’s first native wine grape.

to argue for their free status, William Day had appeared before the Council to replace his lost free papers. Sometimes individuals appeared in court to establish their own freedom in what may have been a bid to bolster the claims of family members jailed for want of free papers. Day may have been attempting to do just that in 1843 as the evidence suggests that he was related to Cole.<sup>56</sup>

Day's freedom was short-lived. On January 4, 1844 he was arrested and jailed for failing to provide surety for fifty dollars. After thirty-five days in jail, and racking up jail fees of \$12.79, Day was released again. At this point based on the extant sources he had spent at least two months jailed, and he or his family and friends had paid \$21.83 for his freedom. Social disorganization theory predicts that incarceration hurts a community because it saps the families in the community of their precious resources. Day is an example of an individual who was forced to spend money and time dealing with the justice system instead of contributing to his family economy. Despite Day's investment in his freedom—cash paid to keep himself from being sold, time spent securing his free register—his story ends as sadly as Anderson's, who ran out of cash to keep himself from sale. Day appears in the mortality schedule of the 1850 census. The twenty-five-year-old died in the Virginia Penitentiary of "brain fever."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Frantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered*, 7, 12, 108; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 14, 1840-1842, LVA, 449; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 15, 1842-1844, LVA, 367.

<sup>57</sup> Richmond VA City Sergeant, Section Two, Register 1842-1844, VHS; "United States Census (Mortality Schedule), 1850," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MSDY-CBQ> : 4 August 2017), William Day, Henrico county, Henrico, Virginia, United States; citing line 21, NARA microfilm publication T655 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,421,031.

## **The Courts**

The next stop for Richmonders like Day imprisoned for going without free papers was the local Court of Hustings. Richmond's Hustings Court convened regularly in sessions of a few days each to rule on local matters. Composed of the city aldermen, the Court tried cases, recorded deeds, granted citizenship to immigrants, and recorded the papers of free African Americans. In many ways the Hustings Court was the lesser of the two evils as compared with law enforcement officers. Where the police and jailers were often rough and unnecessarily violent, the Court was more genteel and lenient. However, both institutions played an important role in a system that evolved piecemeal to oppress Richmond's African Americans. The Court's enforcement of laws prohibiting such offenses as "going without a pass" contributed to social disorganization in the free African American community.

Debt, not just to the jail but of all kinds, created much work for the Court. On December 14, 1840, Edwin M. Wells was brought from the jail to the Court and referred to as "an insolvent debtor." Presumably Wells was white as the court reporter seems to have usually noted an individual's race when either African Americans appeared before the court or a person's whiteness was pertinent to the trial of an African American. Wells had been jailed for non-payment of "a fine on him imposed at the suit of the commonwealth, for a misdemeanour." Wells presented a schedule of his estate to the court, made an oath that it was a true accounting of his possessions, and was "discharged out of custody." Wells demonstrated that he could pay the fine imposed on him for

some misdemeanor he was judged guilty of committing and was allowed to leave the jail. John Lafferty was similarly confined in the jail for being “an insolvent debtor.” This time the notetaker recorded the amount of the debt to the court; Lefferty owed a fine of \$200 “and the costs of prosecution,” which are not enumerated. Lafferty was also “discharged out of custody” after he delivered a schedule of his property and made his oath.<sup>58</sup>

Over and over in the Hustings Court records, jailed men and women, black and white, took advantage of evolving nineteenth century laws that gave debtors the ability to negotiate and pay down their debts. Abel S. Billings found himself in jail as an insolvent debtor because of a private suit for the collection of debt owed to Hiram W. Tyler. The court ruled that Tyler had given Billings “reasonable notice of the petition [of Billings’ request] that he may be permitted to take the benefit of the act for the relief of insolvent debtors.” Billings then presented a schedule of his estate, made his oath, and was discharged. As early as 1803 those committed for nonpayment of a court fine could make use of the act. According to Thomas Johnson Michie’s 1906 law encyclopedia, anyone who was held in jail for nonpayment of a debt or a fine could take the benefit of the Act for Relief of Insolvent Debtors. Under the terms of what became a series of acts, the debtor was required to provide a list of all his or her property and then “take an oath of a very solemn and comprehensive character.” [An oath stating what?] After this part of the process was complete the sheriff took possession of all of the items, including enslaved individuals and deeds to land, that were

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<sup>58</sup> Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 14, 1840-1842, LVA, 200, 206.

included in the estate schedule and had sixty days to sell everything. The funds would be used to satisfy the creditors. Michie noted that court cases had tested the act and proven that enslaved people “or other chattel” were also subject to seizure and sale. If the debtor tried to conceal property in slaves by deeding them to his children without actually transferring possession, the sheriff would take those enslaved people too. The 1841-1846 Richmond City jail registry noted fifteen such seizures of enslaved people including the 1842 jailing and sale of “Patsy and two children.”<sup>59</sup>

Free African Americans were sometimes able to take advantage of the act as well. Lee Humbles was recorded as a “free colored man” and an “insolvent debtor.” The court recorder used the same wording for Humbles’s case as he did whites who were insolvent. Humbles was held in jail for debt owed to a Wilson Scott. Scott’s race was not recorded by the court. However, the 1840 census recorded a free African American man by the same name living in the second ward of Richmond. Neither Scott nor Humbles appeared in any other census or the Henrico free registry. Humbles, like white debtors, was released from custody and melted back into the anonymity of history after he had provided a schedule of his estate and taken an oath that it was true.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 14, 1840-1842, LVA, 303; Thomas Johnson Michie, *The Encyclopedic Digest of Virginia and West Virginia Reports*, Vol. II (Charlottesville, Va.: The Michie Company, Law Publishers, 1906), 251-52; Double quotes are because Michie quotes the act directly; Frantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered*, 24.

<sup>60</sup> Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 14, 1840-1842, LVA, 500; “United States Census, 1840,” database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHBM-5FF> : 20 August 2017), Wilson Scott, Richmond Ward 2, Henrico, Virginia, United States; citing p. 171, NARA microfilm publication M704, (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), roll 561; FHL microfilm 29,687; A “William Scott” is listed in the Henrico free registry, not as a free person, but as the husband of free woman Lucy Scott.

The Hustings Court interacted with the black community in another way— hearing the claims of free African Americans who wanted to remain in the Commonwealth in spite of a law passed in 1806 requiring that anyone freed from slavery thereafter leave the Commonwealth within a year or forfeit freedom. In 1815, the General Assembly empowered local courts to grant individual exemptions from the operation of the law of 1806. It is not clear whether the 1806 law was being enforced when the Richmond City Sergeant noted before the court on February 9, 1841 expenses totally \$76.16 for the transportation of three “free negroes” to Delaware. The notetaker did not record why the men were forced to leave the Commonwealth or their destination when they arrived in Delaware. Even though it is not clear whether the brief case was an example of Richmond officials forcing free African Americans to leave the Commonwealth in accordance with the law, it shows the power of the court to exercise transportation authority.<sup>61</sup>

William Marshall was more fortunate than the three men transported to Delaware. Marshall was freed by his enslaver James M. Tublett on April 13, 1840 and subsequently applied for permission to remain in Richmond. At the time Richmond was in the process of making it more difficult for African Americans to be freed and remain in the city. The court records note an 1837 ordinance that created a heavier burden on those applying for residency. Marshall had complied with these rules and made application a full two months before he appeared

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<sup>61</sup> Melvin Patrick Ely, *Israel on the Appomattox: A Southern Experiment in Black Freedom from the 1790s Through the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 37-38; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 14, 1840-1842, LVA, 255.

before the Hustings Court. He then lined up five white men, including his former enslaver, to testify to his good character. Court records note that the justices were convinced that Marshall was of “good character, peaceable, orderly & industrious.” He was not an alcoholic or a gambler and did not indulge in any other vices. Of course, this level of detail was not required of free white persons who lived in the City of Richmond, and no white person born in the United States had to apply for permission to live there. A more appropriate comparison of the process is with that of immigrants. Hustings Court records testify to the influx of immigrants from Germany, Ireland, and England in the 1840s. Daniel O’Bryan provides an example. In April of 1845 O’Bryan applied for United States citizenship in the Hustings Court. Between two and five years earlier when he arrived from his native Ireland, O’Bryan had taken an oath renouncing all allegiances to foreign states and heads of states. O’Bryan presented two witnesses who testified that he was a “man of good moral character, attached to the principles of the constitution of the United States.” O’Bryan and Marshall were both judged by their moral character, but only Marshall had to show that he was “orderly and industrious,” traits that may have been more likely to be presumed in the case of white immigrants. Another compelling difference in the experiences of O’Bryan and Marshall is that O’Bryan was “admitted a citizen of the United States.” No such promise was given to Marshall. In fact his status was left in doubt and would change over the coming decades. Marshall, a “free man of colour,” and all other Black people, were declared noncitizens by the Supreme Court in 1857 with the Court’s ruling on Dred Scott. The citizenship of Marshall



would be confirmed a decade later with the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. Immigrants and free African Americans like William Marshall were required to pay a court fee. His fee paid, Marshall's application to remain in Virginia and Richmond was accepted by the court.<sup>62</sup>

Marshall was also unusual among free African Americans in Richmond because he was among the few Black enslavers. Like that of most other African American slave holders, Marshall held formal ownership of a family member, in this case, his wife, Frances. Frances Marshall was likely purchased by her husband to protect her. As her "owner," William Marshall could keep her from being sold to someone else and was more able to protect her from rape and other forms of violence. After the husband carefully secured his freedom and was given legal protection for his residence in Virginia, he freed his wife in August of 1841. Four years later the Hustings court duly recorded the deed of emancipation and the couple's long-fought legal battle to distance themselves from slavery ended.<sup>63</sup>

The Marshalls were not the only case of a free African American freeing an enslaved person through emancipation in Hustings Court documents. "Free woman of color" Nancy Bennet freed "her slave Milly Lewis" a month prior to when the deed was proved in court by two men in 1842. Also in 1842 Hope Butler, described as a "man of colour," finally recorded the 1833 deed in which he emancipated Maria Butler. Maria Butler was almost certainly a relative of her

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<sup>62</sup> Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 14, 1840-1842, LVA, 298; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 16, 1844-1846, LVA, 94, 95, 96; Richmond (City), Court Records: Hustings Court, Ended Causes, Feb-Apr 1841, LVA.

<sup>63</sup> Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 16, 1844-1846, LVA, 94.

“master.” In 1845 Matilda Mathis recorded a deed of emancipation for David Smith. The Hustings Court Minutes testify to the fact that African Americans were able to use the court to assert and protect their freedom if they had the resources and networks—the issuance of free papers usually involved the testimony of a white person—to do so.<sup>64</sup>

The Hustings Court was also charged with making sure local wills were carried out according to the law. Most of the wills read in court listed no race, but the case of Sally Godfrey provides an example of the will of a “free woman of color” coming before the court. Godfrey’s will named as executor another free person of color, Mansfield Austin. Neither Austin nor Godfrey appear in the registry of free Blacks, but Austin does appear in the 1840 census, heading a household consisting of two free Black males, one between the ages of ten and twenty-four and the other between twenty-four and thirty-five. John Jones, who was also a free African American, served as Austin’s surety. Certainly Austin, Godfrey, and Jones were the exception to the rule of life for free Black people in antebellum Richmond. They were likely part of the city’s free Black elite.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 15, 1842-1844, LVA, 74, 117; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 16, 1844-1846, LVA, 112.

<sup>65</sup> Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 16, 1844-1846, LVA, 420; “United States Census, 1840,” database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHBM-5TH> : 20 August 2017), Mansfield Austain, Richmond Ward 3, Henrico, Virginia, United States; citing p. 196, NARA microfilm publication M704, (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), roll 561; FHL microfilm 29,687; “United States Census, 1840,” database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHBM-R2Y> : 20 August 2017), John Jones, Henrico, Virginia, United States; citing p. 226, NARA microfilm publication M704, (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), roll 561; FHL microfilm 29,687; Jones’ 1840 census listing fits the pattern of Austin and Scott, discussed above. All three have small households of free African Americans—Jones heads a household consisting of three black males between the ages of ten and thirty-five. Jones, like Austin and Scott, do not appear in later censuses.

During the few years of records surveyed there were relatively few applications like William Marshall's to the Hustings Court by free African Americans to remain in the commonwealth through exemption from the 1806 law. However, there were people who regularly applied for free papers before the city aldermen who acted as judges. Many free people who registered with the Richmond Hustings Court were born free. Robert Brown, eighteen years old, was ordered to be registered as free on the testimony of William B. Lipscomb, who stated that Brown's mother Elizabeth B. Brown was free. When Norborne (also spelled Norbaurn) Nicholas was jailed for want of free papers, he spent a month in jail before being freed by the testimony of Cornelius Crew. Just below the record of Nicholas's court appearance in 1841 is the record of Harriet Freeman. Freeman was described as a "mulatto girl, aged about 19 years," but it is not noted whether she was related to Nicholas. If Freeman was connected to Nicholas it explains why the same man testified to the freedom of both. Freeman, perhaps fearing the same fate as Nicholas, had gone to court and was registered as a free person. Freeman, similar to Brown and many others, had spent nineteen years as a free person before she applied for her papers.<sup>66</sup>

Maria Mills or Ham found herself before the Hustings Court in Richmond twice to prove her freedom. Mills/Ham spent two weeks in the Richmond city jail in October of 1841 before Clement White testified that she was a free woman. White stated that Mills/Ham was the daughter of Catherine Ham. Just the day before, Catherine Ham and Cosby Ricks had registered their freedom, pleading

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<sup>66</sup> Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 14, 1840-1842, LVA, 272, 552.

that they had lost their registers. Perhaps Ham was taking steps to ensure that her daughter, who was only fifteen at the time, would be able to make a clear case for her freedom. The Richmond city jail registry noted that Mills/Ham paid her fees of \$6.09 and was released. Three years later Mills/Ham again found herself without a free register. Before being arrested for want of papers she then eighteen-year-old appeared again in court to register for free papers, again supported by the testimony of Clement White.<sup>67</sup>

Sometimes evidence for freedom consisted of a free registry forwarded from another locality; sometimes it was in-person testimony as in the case of Maria Mills/Ham; other times it was written testimony as will be shown below in the case of William Smith. Always free African Americans seemed to offer testimony from people of the highest social and professional status possible—wealthy slave holders, merchants, physicians, or the chief of police. The individuals who offered testimony to a free person's status were always men and always white, as far as can be proven in Hustings Court records. When African Americans were arrested for going without their free papers they used their connections with whites and their financial resources to hold on to freedom.

## **Networks**

The experience of Billy, or William, Smith shows the importance of connections to maintaining freedom. Smith, like others in the jail and all over

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<sup>67</sup> Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 14, 1840-1842, LVA, 465; Frantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered*, 14; Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 15, 1842-1844, LVA, 538.

Richmond, was a new arrival in the capital city. He was born free in Albemarle County, Virginia. Smith's mother may have been Nancy Smith, who was "emancipated for her extraordinary merit and faithful services" some time after 1806. This "exemplary and praiseworthy" woman applied to the Albemarle County court in 1819 for permission for herself and her five children, the youngest of whom may have been Billy Smith, to remain in the Commonwealth. Permission was granted to Nancy Smith, and as a young man William Smith was apprenticed to Moses Peregoy, a miller. After completing his apprenticeship Smith married an enslaved woman who also lived in the county. He worked as a laborer alongside enslaved and free people. Census records show that he was about twenty-four years old in 1843. In testimony one of his employers stated that Smith was working as a hand on his boat on March 9. Albemarle County, the home of Jefferson's Monticello, is skirted by the James River, which flows south east to Richmond. Leaving on March 9, Smith would have made it to Richmond several days later where he was arrested for going without his free papers on March 14, 1843. It is not clear from surviving documents who engaged attorneys to pursue proof of freedom, but on the day that Smith was jailed attorneys Womble and Dean wrote to Richard Duke, Smith's employer and the owner of the boat.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Smith, Nancy: Petition to Remain in the Commonwealth, 1819, African American Narrative Digital Collection, LVA; Frantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered*, 108, Richmond (City), Court Records: Hustings Court, Ended Causes, Feb-Apr 1843, LVA; "United States Census, 1860", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M4BB-SQR> : 13 December 2017), Wm Smith in entry for W G Carr, 1860.

Womble and Dean's letter to Duke is not extant, but court records reveal the flurry of letters and certificates that passed among the slaveholding men of Albemarle County in the spring of 1843. Smith had never registered his freedom with the county, a fact that his employer Duke blamed on "the great negligence on the part of Moses Peregoy his former master [to whom he was apprenticed] . . . and the great ignorance of the said negroe." Duke had for many years previously employed the man to whom Smith was apprenticed and referred to Smith's claim to freedom as "clear & unquestionable." Duke, also a justice of the peace for Albemarle County, wrote to his neighbor William W. Minor on March 25<sup>th</sup> with the details of Smith's employment and freedom, asking him to affirm the facts as stated by himself and his fellow Justice of the Peace, Frank Carr. Minor concurred and added that "he [Smith] has a wife & children among my negroes, & I have frequently employed him to labor for me." On April 1 Duke had the clerk of the court of Albemarle County also certify that he and Carr were Justices of the Peace. Bundling these letters and certificates, Duke addressed a letter to Richmond attorney John H. Ustace. "Now what I want you to do My Dear Sir," wrote Duke, "is to present the foregoing certificates to the proper authorities." Duke asked Ustace to "please pay the necessary fees, & transmit the amt to me," promising to reimburse the attorney. Duke even offered to pay Smith's passage back to Albemarle County "if he is liberated." Duke's assistance to Smith was most likely motivated neither by abstract kindness nor by a goal of enslaving the free man. However it was in Duke's, interest, and that of his neighbors, to keep Smith in Albemarle County. In the capacity of a laborer Smith

provided flexible labor to the slaveholding men in the county, and his children were a valuable asset on Minor's books. Respect for Smith's mother might have also motivated the actions of Albemarle's elite.<sup>69</sup>

The testimony compiled and sent by Richard Duke was presented before the Court of Hustings when it met on Tuesday, April 11. Smith by this time had been in jail for twenty-eight days, incurring fees of \$10.92. Probably soon after or even before Duke heard of his arrest, the grapevine had carried the news to Smith's wife. The unnamed enslaved woman might have wondered if she would ever see her husband again. Their future and that of their children was already precarious because of their status as enslaved. She would not have known until days later that the aldermen who sat as judges found "to the satisfaction of the court that he is free." However, the notation in Hustings Court records goes on to read as usual that "it is ordered that he be hired out for so long a time as may be necessary to pay jail fees." If Smith, or Richard Duke, could not pay the \$10.92 which Smith then owed to the jail, he would have been hired out for an indeterminate amount of time in the old market of Richmond. Smith's entry in the court records reads word for word like most other rulings on cases in which freedom was proven. However, Smith's entry differs in one curious way. Squeezed between this entry and the next is the line, "From this order Wm. D. Wren, alderman, dissented." In no other instance did Wren or any other alderman dissent from an order to sell a free person. Perhaps Wren had some connection

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<sup>69</sup> Richmond (City), Court Records: Hustings Court, Ended Causes, Feb-Apr 1843, LVA.

with the men who wrote to the court with evidence of Smith's freedom and knew they would not want him sold.<sup>70</sup>

The sources do not explain why Wren dissented from the order to hire Smith out, but a misspelled name suggests that Smith did return to Albemarle indebted to a white slaveholder. Entries in the jail registry specifically note when people were hired out to forced labor. For example, Seaton Anderson, a free black man who was arrested for want of free papers shortly after Smith was discharged, remained in jail throughout the spring and most of the summer. He was finally released on July 26, 1843 and was "carred to the old market of Said City and hired to E Rosenfelds Brother For the turn of ten years." Smith's entry in the jail registry does not include an ominous notation of this kind. Instead his entry reads "to wit, the said Smith was deliveared to J. Houstored." J. Houstored was likely "John H. Ustace," the Richmond attorney charged by Duke to liberate Smith and put him on a boat back to Albemarle. Duke had instructed Ustace to send the bill to him, which the slaveholder would cover. Duke's relationship with and attitude toward Smith suggest that he did not write off the expenses as cash expensed to help a friend. It is more likely that Smith's arrest and liberation put him in debt to his employer.<sup>71</sup>

The records are silent on Smith's own role in the machinations that secured his release from jail. Did he actively pursue Duke's help to bring him back to his family? Did he take offense at having to work off a debt to a slaveholder? How long did it take him to work off the debt he had incurred in one

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<sup>70</sup> Richmond (City) Court Records, Hustings Court Minutes, No. 15, 1842-1844, LVA, 243.

<sup>71</sup> Fantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered*, 108.



incarceration? Smith was young (twenty-four) and free when he was arrested for going without his free papers, during what was likely one of many routine trips to Virginia's capital. He was building a family and could have been saving money to own his own land or purchase the freedom of his wife and children—activities that would have distanced them all from slavery and want. Smith's case shows that even for free African Americans who were able to use their networks and what resources they had to resist enslavement, the process served to drain resources they might otherwise have used to improve their quality of life. It also took a father and his earnings away from his young family for three weeks and resulted in a further loss of wages to repay a loan to a powerful white man.

### **Strained Financial Resources**

Depression-era slave narratives provide a clue to the nature of the relationship between Smith and his employer/creditor. The formerly enslaved men and women interviewed discussed not only slavery, but the years following when freedmen and former slaveholders rebuilt the society anew; freedmen defending and pushing to expand the liberty they had been denied under the old regime and slaveholders holding on to much of the old order of society. Life changed significantly in the decades after Smith's arrest, but most of the individuals involved had spent their formative years in a slaveholding system. Therefore 1870s freedman/landowner debt relationships can shed some light on free man/employer debt relationships in the 1840s. John Hill was one such freedman who had been enslaved in Georgia. He noted that his uncle's owner

after emancipation “let ‘em have money all de time so day didn’t never git out of debt wid him.” This “master” beat his workers as he must have his slaves before them. Jail was a source of workers for this man who, “paid ‘em out of jail for ‘em to wuk for him.” Anthony Taylor, another freedman, remembered the children crying when one morning his family found the former enslaver, now employer, catching “the pigs and hogs in the lot that we had fattened to go on that winter.” The former enslaver sold their livestock, the only thing the family had of value and their food for the coming season, because of a debt they owed. “We didn’t even know we owed him anything,” said Taylor, who described having to split rails on top of his other work that winter just to purchase a little meat from the landowner, who charged the meat to the sharecropper’s account, driving them further into debt. Lucendy Griffen, when interviewed by a Works Progress Administration worker, put it succinctly when she said, “everytime he [the “poor negro”] think he was gone got something ahead, some white man gets him in debt to him and looks like most never gets out.”<sup>72</sup>

Confrontation over debt between the formerly enslaved and landowners could be heated and even violent. Morgan Ray was a sharecropper in Georgia after the war. One year, he calculated his share to be \$300. The landowner “claimed dat my livin’ during de year had et up his debt to me.” When Ray informed the landowner that his figures were wrong the farmer pointed a pistol in Ray’s face and ordered him off the farm. Ray began to leave when the landowner offered him “\$150 on account.” When Ray agreed to half what he was owed the

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<sup>72</sup> Interviews with John Hill, Lucendy Griffen, and Anthony Taylor. *Born in Slavery*, Library of Congress, CD-ROM.

landowner replied, “I likes a man what sticks up for his rights.” What could have been a deadly confrontation was defused by Ray accepting half of his income in the form of more credit. In these debt relationships sharecroppers were themselves the creditor, a position that left them no less vulnerable than in that of debtor. The point is that in a credit relationship between a wealthy white man and a young free African American man, the white man could easily exploit his power. Smith probably did not relish his position in debt but had few other options.<sup>73</sup>

Other evidence from the antebellum period supports the theory that escaping sale for jail debt often strained the financial resources of an already-poor community. Willis Augustus Hodges wrote in his autobiography that “the free people of color suffered severely” in Virginia in the wake of Nat Turner’s rebellion. The only way that free African Americans could prove their freedom after their arrest was to produce their free papers or by “getting some white person to swear that they were free born.” Hodges offered two examples of men who proved their freedom and were forcibly hired out to pay jail debts. One was an old man who had fought in the Revolutionary War and was “the oldest and best known man in Princess Anne County.” The other, Hodges said, was beaten to death by his purchaser. Data from the Richmond City jail register show that about half of all free African Americans arrested for the want of their free papers avoided the fate of being sold to pay their jail fees. However, Hodges noted that “almost all of those who did pay jail fees, did so at a great sacrifice.” To preserve their freedom the families of those caught in the jail system sold anything they

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with Morgan Ray. *Born in Slavery*, Library of Congress, CD-ROM.

had—land, livestock, produce—often at a great loss, to whites. They came away from the ordeal with their freedom, but “many lost all they had.”<sup>74</sup>

The available sources do not provide details of any financial arrangements between Duke and Smith, but they do show that Smith made it back to Albemarle and continued to live there as a free man. Just weeks after his homecoming Smith registered his freedom in the county court system. Almost a decade later, in 1852, Smith appeared on a county list of free African Americans who were delinquent in paying their taxes. By the 1860 census Smith was living with and working as a free man for a wealthy slaveholder, maybe with his enslaved wife and children. The 1870 and 1880 censuses show that Smith continued to work as a farm laborer after freedom came, and this time was enumerated with his second wife, Almira Smith, and their children. Smith’s freedom was held in the balance forty years earlier, but by 1880 the census recorded that his children were attending school.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Willard B. Gatewood Jr., ed., *Free Man of Color: The Autobiography of Willis Augustus Hodges* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 27-28.

<sup>75</sup> Smith, William (M, 25): Free Negro Register, 1843, African American Narrative Digital Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.; Free Negroes 1852, 1853, African American Narrative Digital Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.; "United States Census, 1860", database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M4BB-SQR> : 13 December 2017), Wm Smith in entry for W G Carr, 1860; Albemarle County Free Negroes, 1852, African American Narrative Digital Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA; "United States Census, 1870," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6QYR-2Q?cc=1438024&wc=922M-RMF%3A518656301%2C518715801%2C518749801> : 11 June 2019), Virginia > Albemarle > Fredericksville > image 206 of 332; citing NARA microfilm publication M593 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); "United States Census, 1880," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MCP6-BM6> : 15 July 2017), Wm Smith, 1880; citing enumeration district ED 2, sheet 47D, NARA microfilm publication T9 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d), roll 1352; FHL microfilm 1,255,352.

Like William Smith, Walter Bee was a young man and relatively new to the Richmond area when he was arrested for going without his free papers in September of 1841. However Bee seems to have had more resources than Smith on which to lean when he needed them. His example is one of a free African American with a rich network of family and community behind him and enough financial resources not only to prevent his sale, but to keep him from going into debt to a slaveholder to keep his freedom. The Northumberland County, Virginia, free register listed Bee's parents as Mary and Vincent Bee, although there seems to have been some question as to Bee's father's name. The clerk, copying from the registry, wrote "Wilson," then crossed it out and wrote "Vincent." The whole family, intact and unbroken by slavery, was living in Northumberland in 1832 when the register was written and Walter Bee was a three foot, ten inch tall six-year-old. The sources give no explanation for why the teenage Bee had undertaken the seventy-mile journey from the Northern Neck to Richmond. After he was arrested his parents may have been the ones to appeal to friends and relatives in Northumberland County. On November 2 the mayor of Richmond signed testimony that "Oswell Davis personally appeared before me . . . and made oath that Walter Bee is a free boy . . . and that he has known him long." Davis, a resident of Northumberland County, seems to have brought with him to Richmond the copy of Bee's register prepared by the county clerk. The relationship between Bee and Davis is unknown but they may have been neighbors on friendly terms. According to the 1850 and 1860 census Davis was an illiterate white man with real estate worth less than one thousand dollars.

Unlike the wealthy slaveholding employer who came to Smith's aid, Davis kept no one enslaved but supported a wife and growing family of children as a farmer.<sup>76</sup>

On the same day that Davis appeared before the mayor, Bee appeared before the Hustings Court, was ruled free, and was discharged from jail. Bee returned home to Northumberland County and continued to live close to Bee relatives for the rest of his life. In 1850 he was listed as a laborer and living in a household headed by a Black woman. By 1860 Bee's census listing began to mirror that of Oswald Davis, the man who had testified to his freedom. He was by that time a farmer and headed a household that included his wife and six children. Bee had acquired \$120 in personal property. Ten years later Bee and his wife had added three more children to the family. The then forty-five-year-old could read but not write. The formerly close-knit Bee extended family had evidently begun to scatter in the post-war years because the household of Walter Bee was then surrounded by a mixed-race community in which the heads of households were farmers or craftsmen. Some of his white neighbors claimed small estates valued between \$100 and \$3300, but Bee was listed as having no estate. Bee may have been a tenant farmer or leased the land he worked.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Frantel, *Richmond Virginia Uncovered*, 12-13; Richmond (City), Court Records: Hustings Court, Ended Causes, Oct-Dec 1841, LVA; "United States Census, 1850," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M8DN-JZV> : 12 April 2016), Oswald Davis, Northumberland county, Northumberland, Virginia, United States; citing family 434, NARA microfilm publication M432 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); "United States Census, 1860," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M41K-2L4> : 13 December 2017), Oswald Davis, 1860.

<sup>77</sup> "United States Census, 1850," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M8DN-Y4X> : 12 April 2016), Walter Bee in household of Betsy Bell, Northumberland County, Northumberland, Virginia, United States; citing family 345, NARA microfilm publication M432 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records

Walter Bee's experience with the jail and court systems shows the importance of a strong network to free African Americans. Bee's network included both of his parents whose freedom allowed them to provide for and care for him as a child. They could teach him how to protect himself against the worst outrages of white supremacy. And they may have come to his aid when he was jailed for going without free papers. There was a white person to whom the family could appeal to vouch for their free status. The Bee family lived among a large group of kin to whom they may have appealed for the \$20.34 their son owed to the jail. Walter Bee himself went on to raise a family like his father before him. He must have made enough income to support six children and a wife who did not work outside of the home—Harriet Bee is listed as “keeping house” in the census records. Bee's example suggests that free Black people were more likely to escape the fate of women such as Lucy Briggs and Sally Ball if they had a strong network that included whites and cash or the ability to borrow to cover fines. The network not only provided the proof of freedom demanded by the court, but the stronger the network the sooner someone could be found to testify, shortening the time in jail and lessening the debt load created. Those with fewer resources or lesser ability to raise cash quickly combined with high fees from months waiting in jail had a higher probability of ultimately being forcibly hired out.<sup>78</sup>

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Administration, n.d.); "United States Census, 1860", database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M41K-P8F> : 13 December 2017), Walter Bee, 1860; "United States Census, 1870", database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MFGY-B79> : 12 June 2019), Walter J Bee in entry for Walther Bee, 1870.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

It was no coincidence that the factors that improved one's chances of holding on to freedom—a financially stable family, a support network with access to cash, and an occupational network built through hard work—aligned with prevailing middle-class values. Instead that is exactly the point. Life within a capitalist ethos demanded conformity to the system. The jail and court system operated not only to protect slavery but also to carry out a parallel system of white supremacy that punished poverty and those who did not conform to its code of conduct.

Even when members of the free African American community, like Bee, leaned on their network to protect their freedom, they suffered a personal financial loss when they paid jail debt. Even worse, their payments perversely strengthened slavery and the broader project of racial capitalism, putting everyone's freedom at greater risk. The forced labor of free people deprived the community of a collective three hundred and fifteen years of labor. Even people who were able to escape sale imposed a cost on their community. Community members spent a collective thirteen years in jail and paid \$499.67 in fees. And these figures represent only about five years in the 1840s. This small sample from one southern city in one decade suggests that the free African American community in this period was already being drained of labor hours and financial capital over a century before drug policy led to the incarceration of large numbers of African American men in the 1980s and 1990s. Each time a jail fee was paid to protect someone from enslavement, resources were channeled from the African American community into Richmond city, which would use that money to



reinforce slavery—to pay the salaries of slave catchers, jailers, and judges. Even Walter Bee, who had a strong network of family in Northumberland County and who did not have to call on a slaveholder to defend his freedom, cost his community financial resources and time that might have been otherwise employed.

While debt generated by the jail system in antebellum Richmond served as a cleverly devised trap to ensnare free African Americans in the system of slavery, some men and women were able to assert their freedom anyway. The evidence shows that those who successfully navigated the jail and court systems did so through their networks—family and friends, Black and white, but also powerful whites—and any wealth they were able to build in freedom. These networks and access to wealth helped mostly men, but sometimes women too, like Walter Bee and William Smith keep their tenuous hold on freedom. However, each time jail fees were paid, whether by a free African American family or with a loan from a slaveholder, precious resources drained from the African American community. The loss of financial resources and the time and energy spent avoiding enslavement the community's ability to protect its members from enslavement and other outrages of white supremacy.

### Chapter 3 The Emancipation of Elizabeth Keckly: Creditworthiness and Antebellum Debt Relationships

Elizabeth Hobbs Keckly spent the last years of her life at the National Home for Destitute Colored Women and Children in Washington DC. Though the home was steps away from Howard University and the addresses of the District's Black elite in La Droit Park, Keckly lived in seclusion. The physical ailments and poverty that confined her to the home belied the heights she had attained in her life. Keckly enjoyed success as a businesswoman and modiste. She purchased her freedom from enslavement—an exceptional achievement given how few enslaved people were able to emancipate themselves through purchase. She counted first lady Mary Todd Lincoln as a client and friend. She orchestrated a meeting between Sojourner Truth and Abraham Lincoln. She campaigned on behalf of freedpeople. Indeed, the home in which she lay dying in 1907 was her own project to ease the transition between slavery and freedom for former bondpeople. Keckly was a published author and a professor at Wilberforce University. Her efforts were calculated to ensure that her days, and those of other Black people, would not end in poverty. Yet Keckly's extraordinary success did not protect her from a condition in which she “appeared worried and really pined away.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes in the Lincoln White House: Memoirs of an African-American Seamstress* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006); Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Jennifer Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between a First Lady and a Former Slave* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003); John E. Washington, *They Knew Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 219 (“appeared worried”).

Keckly was exceptional in many ways—not least because she was one of the rare nineteenth-century Black women who published an autobiography. Scholars have classed *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* as a bridge between slavery-era narratives and twentieth-century autobiography. In her own time Keckly was dismissed and lampooned by white audiences horrified at the presumption of a Black woman writing about a white, middle-class family. In the twentieth century, white writers dismissed Keckly’s work as fictional or ghost-written. Teacher and Lincoln researcher John E. Washington responded to these attacks on Keckly by highlighting the modiste in a 1942 book that detailed the lives of African Americans who were close to the Lincoln family. Following Washington’s revival of Keckly’s work, historians have used *Behind the Scenes* to understand the lives and experiences of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln. Other scholars have focused on Keckly in her own right; using her work to understand the evolution of slave narrative and autobiography, Black entrepreneurship in the mid-nineteenth century, and the intersection of race, gender, and class.<sup>80</sup>

This chapter relies on Keckly’s life experiences, other slave narratives, and supplemental archival sources to describe credit arrangements involving

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<sup>80</sup> On Keckly as a middle ground between slavery-era narratives and twentieth century autobiography see Francis Smith Foster, “Autobiography after Emancipation: The Example of Elizabeth Keckley,” in *The Elizabeth Keckley Reader, Volume 1: Writing Self, Writing Nation*, ed. Sheila Smith McKoy (Hillsborough, N.C.: Eno Publishers, 2016); On the early twentieth century debate about the veracity of Keckly’s claims see Washington, *They Knew Lincoln*, 226-241 and Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*, 324-25. The most recent major additions to the historiography on Elizabeth Keckly are Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly* (I rely on Fleischner for spelling “Keckly” without a second “e.”), Sheila Smith McKoy, ed. *The Elizabeth Keckley Reader: Volume One Writing Self, Writing Nation* (Hillsborough, N.C.: Eno Publishers, 2016), and Sheila Smith McKoy, ed. *The Elizabeth Keckley Reader: Volume Two Artistry, Culture & Commerce* (Hillsborough, N.C.: Eno Publishers, 2017).

enslaved people who borrowed to secure their freedom in the era before quantitative credit scoring and modern lending institutions. Instances of enslaved people successfully purchasing freedom were rare. The few cases that are documented show the prevalence of credit agreements—often between Black borrowers and white lenders—to secure the cash to make the financial and legal arrangements possible. Keckly's story provides historians an example of the financial details of one such arrangement within the broader context of her life. Keckly's borrowing activities place into sharp relief the hard boundaries of race and gender that defined honor and creditworthiness in mid-nineteenth century America. Keckly challenged these conventions, sometimes successfully, through her actions as a businesswoman. Even when she was successful, Keckly was vulnerable in a system designed to privilege others. Ultimately white Southern notions of race and gender would be systematized into quantitative credit scoring models that, from the outside, appeared to be objective.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Recent scholarship has stressed the extent to which slavery was central to the expansion of American capitalism. Edward L. Baptist in *The Half Has Never Been Told* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), Walter Johnson in *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), and Sven Beckert in *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Penguin, 2014) each show evidence that profits from the domestic slave trade and the production of commodities by enslaved people provided the capital to finance the growth of American industry in the nineteenth century. Other recent work lays bare the business connections between enslavement and other forms of capitalism. See Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2018) and Calvin Schermerhorn, *The Business of Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism, 1815-1860* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015). Like these authors my work supports the argument that slavery was fundamentally a capitalist enterprise. On using slave narratives as evidence see Frances Foster Smith, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994) and Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2019), xviii-xx. On the development of credit scoring models in the mid-nineteenth century see Rowena Olegario, *The Engine of Enterprise: Credit in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016). On racial inequality in quantitative credit scoring in the twentieth century see Louis Hyman, "Ending Discrimination, Legitimizing Debt: The Political Economy of Race, Gender, and Credit Access in the 1960s and 1970s," *Enterprise & Society*, 12, no. 2 (2011): 200-232.

The theme of honor permeates *Behind the Scenes* and antebellum Southern culture in general. The historian of honor culture, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, theorizes honor as the ethical rules by which the community judged individuals or “the cluster of ethical rules, most readily found in societies of small communities, by which judgments of behavior are ratified by community consensus.” In the antebellum South honor created order and hierarchy. White men competed with each other to display the honor that would define their place in society. White women’s role was to support men in their pursuit of honor and to suffer silently on the sidelines if they regretted their position in life. From the perspective of the white men who jockeyed for a place at the top, Black people were outside of the “circle of honor,” and were therefore socially dead.<sup>82</sup>

This romantic framing of society by white men did not hold in reality. In truth race and slavery were foundational to Southern white honor. In his analysis of American society in the early nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville perfectly read the connections between Southern honor, race, and gender when he wrote, “To debauch a girl of color hardly harms the reputation of an American—to marry her dishonors him.” De Tocqueville—a French aristocrat and an outsider—was willing to plainly state the truth that Southern whites dared not

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<sup>82</sup> Wyatt-Brown set the pace for later works on honor culture in the South with Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). Wyatt-Brown’s conception of honor is consistent with Patterson’s argument that slavery is social death. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). For debate on the concept of social death see Vincent Brown, “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (2009): 1231-1249 and Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” *Tensions Journal* no. 5 (2011): 1-47. Wyatt-Brown finally tackled the question of Black honor in his posthumously published *A Warring Nation: Honor, Race, and Humiliation in America and Abroad* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2014; quotes from Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, xv (“the cluster”), xxxv (“circle of”).

speak. Southern honor was not only white and male but inscribed in sexual relationships with Black women. *Behind the Scenes* illustrates this unfortunate truth about the experiences and ideologies of nineteenth century capitalism, but also presents Keckly's own life as an argument that hard-working and "respectable" Black women should be deemed capable of honor. To Keckly that honor was represented in a material way as access to credit.<sup>83</sup>

## Early Years

*Behind the Scenes* opens with a description of Keckly's life before freedom. She was born in Dinwiddie County, Virginia in 1818. Keckly's mother, Agnes Hobbs, was enslaved by the Burwell family, for whom she performed domestic work. The man Keckly referred to as her father—she learned later in life that her mother's enslaver, Armistead Burwell, was her biological father—was enslaved on a neighboring plantation. Her parents' happy marriage was interrupted first when Armistead Burwell, moved his entire household to Prince Edward County, Virginia. At first their enslavers allowed Agnes and George Hobbs to see each other twice a year. Then Hobbs's owner moved him to Tennessee, permanently separating Keckly's father from his wife and daughter. Separation from her father was devastating to "Lizzie" Keckly, who wrote that "The shadow eclipsed the sunshine, and love brought despair. The parting was

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<sup>83</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America, Volume 2*, trans. and eds. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 590 ("to debauch").

eternal.” Keckly treasured the letters that her parents exchanged for years; each one echoing a hope that they would be together again.<sup>84</sup>

Historians have shown how Keckly’s mother carefully instructed her daughter in the skills she would need to survive the dangerous life of an enslaved Black woman, though less attention has been paid to the role of her father. Agnes Hobbs was, according to her daughter, “kind and forbearing.” She taught Keckly how to care for children, cook, and sew—practical skills she would need to do the work required of domestic servants. She instructed her daughter in how to work hard, how to love despite the bitterness of enslaved life, and how to safely communicate one’s displeasure with whites. Meanwhile, according to *Behind the Scenes*, Keckly was also reading her father’s letters looking for messages of love and instruction. In one letter that she included in the text, George Hobbs shared his hope “with gods helpe that I may be able to rejoyce with you on the earth.” In the 1833 letter Hobbs expressed that he had reason to hope that he would be with them again. He expected that in 1834 “I shall have my own time from master by giving him 100 and twenty Dollars a year.” Hiring his own time would give him the opportunity to do “good business . . . and have something more than all that.” Hobbs was negotiating arrangements with his owner to hire himself out. After paying a set annual price to his enslaver he would

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<sup>84</sup> Keckly later learned that her Armstead Burwell, her enslaver, was her biological father. Like countless other sexual encounters between white men and enslaved women in the antebellum period historians know little of the specific details of Hobbs’ and Burwell’s relationship. We do know that these situations were characterized by an extremely unequal power dynamic and sometimes, perhaps often, by violence. Keckly’s birth was likely the result of Burwell’s rape of Hobbs. I chose to refer to George Hobbs as Keckly’s father instead of Armistead Burwell because Keckly herself considered him her father. Keckly, *Behind the Scenes*, 7 (“the shadow”).

be free to keep whatever extra cash he earned in the market. Hobbs hoped to save enough to purchase his freedom from slavery or that of his wife and child.<sup>85</sup>

George Hobbs, and his daughter after him, were following a tradition that historians have broadly referred to as the “slaves’ economy.” Since the very beginning of the institution in the New World, enslaved people performed productive tasks outside of the labor required of them by their owner. They grew gardens, raised chickens, worked extra hours at various crafts, and, increasingly after the 1820s, paid a fee to their owners to hire themselves out in growing cities and towns in the South. A little cash raised on the side supplemented meager rations and poor clothing. It could provide a small luxury to ward off despair. While historians have shown that some enslaved people were able to accumulate goods or cash, enslaved people were only rarely able to save enough money to purchase freedom. What is more typical is that activities in the slaves’ economy gave enslaved people the *hope* of freedom—a belief that working hard and following the rules could result in freedom. Instead the slaves’ economy was shaped by law and custom over time to benefit slaveholders. George Hobbs might have had a marketable skill that gave him reason to hope that he could save larger sums of money, but like most enslaved people, his hopes were not fulfilled. Keckly’s mother received no more letters from Hobbs after 1839 and never learned his fate.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Keckly’s mother also taught her literacy, which was foundational to her self-emancipation and business success. On Black literacy see Christopher Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013); Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 7 (“kind”) and 9 (“with gods”), (“I shall”), and (“good business”).

<sup>86</sup> On the slaves’ economy see Lawrence T. McDonnell, “Money Knows No Master: Market Relations and the American Slave Community,” in *Developing Dixie: Modernization in a Traditional Society*, ed. Winfred B. Moore, Joseph F. Tripp, and Lyon G. Tyler (New York:



Keckly took these lessons from her mother and father on survival, hope, and disappointment into a difficult adolescence. As a girl Keckly was separated from her mother and shuttled around to meet the financial needs of the Burwell family. She moved with her owners' oldest son to Petersburg, Virginia, and then Hillsborough, North Carolina. In surviving letters to her mother and members of the Burwell family Keckly described her work at this time—cooking, caring for children, and sewing. She wrote to her mother that she could “fill ten pages with my griefs and misfortunes.” In *Behind the Scenes* in a chapter titled “Girlhood and its Sorrows,” Keckly described receiving several beatings to subdue her pride and then a standoff with her enslaver and biological half-brother. Despite being victimized she refused to let her “proud, rebellious spirit” be beaten out of her. Keckly prevailed psychologically and did not receive another beating. The standoff between Keckly and her enslaver, Robert Burwell, was similar to that of Frederick Douglass and the “slave breaker” Edward Covey. For Douglass the scene represented a turning point—the moment in which he spiritually threw off enslavement even though he was still legally enslaved. Keckly portrays the “revolting scenes” as part of the “suffering and deep mortifications” that she

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Greenwood Press, 1988); Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *The Slaves' Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas* (London: Frank Cass, 1991); Lorena S. Walsh, “Slave Life, Slave Society, and Tobacco Production in the Tidewater Chesapeake, 1620-1820,” in *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, eds. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1993); Philip D. Morgan, “Economic Exchanges between Whites and Blacks,” in *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Low Country* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Justene G. Hill, “Felonious Transactions: Legal Culture and Business Practices of Slave Economies in South Carolina 1787-1860” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2015). On the hiring of enslaved people see Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

experienced as a girl transitioning into a woman in a slave society. These experiences hardened her resolve not just to claim freedom but to be treated in a manner that was consistent with her “strong and defiant” pride.<sup>87</sup>

In Hillsborough Keckly also experienced a form of suffering that her mother, and many other enslaved women, knew too well—rape by a powerful white man. Alexander Kirkland was thirty-one years old, a drunk, and prone to violence. A merchant and a slaveholder, Kirkland was failing in business and in debt when he began preying on the pretty, twenty-year-old Keckly. For four years Kirkland terrorized Keckly, who had no way to defend herself. The rape of an enslaved woman by a white man was not a crime and was even socially acceptable as long as it was not flaunted. When Keckly gave birth to her only child and Kirkland’s third late in 1841, her enslavers sent her back to Virginia to calm gossip about her “almost white” child. Despite the fact that “she did not wish to give him life,” Keckly gave her son the name of her own beloved father George. She wrote that if her son ever grieved his illegitimate birth, he should blame the “society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position.” Keckly did not bestow her own last name, and that of her enslaved father, Hobbs, on George. Instead she named him George W. D. Kirkland after his biological father. This choice of last names might have reflected her attempt to claim legitimacy for the child—later Keckly would state she and Kirkland were married when George Kirkland was born—but it might also have been a deeply held need on her part to reclaim the honor that in her mind George

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<sup>87</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 15 (“fill ten pages”) and 14 (“proud”), (“revolting”), and (“suffering”).

Kirkland had attempted to take from her by violating her. According to standards of Southern honor Alexander Kirkland was free to harass and rape Keckly and keep his place in society as long as he did not “honor” her with marriage. Keckly challenged the racial and gender structures of honor culture when she legitimized her Black son by giving him the family name Kirkland.<sup>88</sup>

After a short time in Virginia, the Burwell family moved Keckly west. She and George were enslaved in the household of Hugh and Anne Garland. (Anne was Keckly’s half-sister; a daughter of Armistead Burwell.) Hugh Garland’s fortunes followed those of many of Virginia’s white men from prominent families. Since the Revolutionary War era the wealth of the much of the Virginia gentry had been in decline, with debts accumulating. As the center of the economy moved west, Virginians followed the money. Just as Keckly’s father before her had been forcibly removed to Tennessee, Keckly and her young son went with the Garlands so that Hugh Garland, an attorney, could make a fresh start in St. Louis, Missouri. Yet St. Louis did not improve the fortunes of the Garlands. Within a few years, Hugh sold an enslaved man and was forced to put the family’s home in his wife’s name to avoid his creditors. In his desperation to raise cash to “live in comparative comfort,” Hugh Garland proposed hiring out Agnes Hobbs, but Keckly intervened on her mother’s behalf and volunteered herself.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> George W. D. Kirkland was described as “almost white” in the legal paperwork that granted him his freedom. Deed of Emancipation of Lizzie [Elizabeth Keckley] and her son George, signed by Anne P. Garland, 13 November 1855. Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America, <http://collections.mohistory.org/resource/166197>, accessed July 17, 2020; Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 14 (“she did not”) and (“society”).

<sup>89</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 17 (“to live”).

Previously Keckly had sewn for her owners as part of the domestic duties she performed for the household, but it was in Missouri that she first went into business as a seamstress and dressmaker for other households. Keckly was an highly skilled artist. She not only sewed clothing according to others' patterns, but designed fashions herself. She innovated a system for cutting and fitting garments that her clients liked so much they recommended her to friends. Keckly leaned on her network of white families in the circles in which the Garlands moved. Literary scholar Jill Jepson writes that Black female entrepreneurs in the nineteenth century had to overcome racial and gender barriers to succeed. Black women were "denied both the benefits and freedoms of the public sphere and the protections of the private." Keckly found acceptance among her white female clients because she navigated the identities of race and gender with the deftness with which she handled her needle. Light-skinned and acting in accordance with notions of middle-class respectability—she was described by contemporaries as "reserved, refined, intelligent and unobtrusive" and "a woman of refinement and culture"—Keckly transcended white assumptions about her based on her race and enslaved status. According to her narrative she was highly sought after by the ladies of St. Louis. Abundant orders and her ability to sustain hard work "kept bread in the mouths of seventeen persons for two years and five months."<sup>90</sup>

Keckly's hard work and financial success created a considerable part of the wealth and position—the honor—that the Garlands enjoyed. Historian Daina

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<sup>90</sup> Jill Jepson, "Disruption and Disguise in Black Feminine Entrepreneurial Identity," in *The Elizabeth Keckley Reader: Volume One Writing Self, Writing Nation*, ed. Sheila Smith McKoy (Hillsborough, N.C.: Eno Publishers, 2016), 1 ("denied"); Washington, *They Knew Lincoln*, 216 ("a woman") and 217 ("reserved"); Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 17 ("kept bread").

Ramey Berry's work shows how Keckly's financial value to the Garlands would have touched every aspect of her life. Enslaved women not only performed physical labor, but also gave birth to more enslaved people, a literal return on investment for their owners. Agnes Hobbs, Keckly's mother, had filled this role in white society. Her labor fed, clothed, and provided clean living quarters for the Burwell family. Armstead Burwell, her owner, took advantage of Hobbs's sexual availability. Hobbs was not sexually available to Burwell by any choice of her own. Instead she had been made so by the legal and social structure of slavery that had been built in Virginia to enrich and honor men like Burwell. In bringing Keckly into the world, Hobbs added to the Burwells' financial balance sheet and gave them another domestic servant who would in her turn add to the family's financial assets. If the Burwells needed credit to buy land or cash to finance their lifestyle they could simply mortgage Hobbs or Keckly. If all else failed Burwell could liquidate the women's bodies by selling them in the booming slave markets of Virginia or Missouri. Slaveholding Virginians had developed a myriad of ways to extract value from the bodies of women like Keckly and her mother. The wealth that resulted allowed male and female members of the white family to live, dress, and act in ways consistent with honor culture. Keckly understood that the white family who enslaved her viewed her labor and her body as constructive of honor for whites but not capable of accruing honor herself.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017). On how white, slave owning women financially benefited from enslavement see Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2019).

Keckly was denied honor by white society because of her race and gender even though she had flipped the order itself. White men were supposed to sit at the top of the hierarchy, protecting white females and other subordinates while Black enslaved women like Keckly were the bottom. But Keckly defied these ideals, working in the public sphere and providing for the entire Garland family. Keckly understood her place and chafed under the ownership and control of the Garlands. When she compared her lot with theirs, the thought made her “lips curl in a bitter sneer.” Like her father George Hobbs and so many others, Keckly began to dream of leveraging her success in the marketplace to cast off slavery. When Keckly asked to purchase freedom for herself and her son, Hugh Garland reacted out of the honor culture to which he had been accustomed: he was offended that a Black woman would want to “leave” his home. He challenged her to run away. Keckly, claiming the honor and respectability that slavery would have denied her, assured him that she honored the law that subordinated her to him and would only have freedom if he legally granted it. “I knew that he was pleased,” wrote Keckly, “some time afterwards he told me that he had reconsidered the question.” Keckly would challenge honor culture by respecting some aspects of it.<sup>92</sup>

*Behind the Scenes* was not the only slave narrative to deploy honor against the system upon which it was built. Josiah Henson was born enslaved in Maryland, and despite the depredations and physical abuses of enslavement he grew up smart and strong, taking on responsibilities on his owner’s plantation.

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<sup>92</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 17 (“lips curl”), 18 (“leave”) and (“I knew”).

Henson wrote in his narrative, the first edition of which was published in 1849, that “freedom had been the object of my ambition, a constant motive to exertion, an ever-present stimulus to gain and save.” He planned to purchase himself instead of running away, even when he had the opportunity to do so. “I had a sentiment of honor on the subject,” he wrote. Henson’s narrative of his life was in part an exercise in self-making, as all autobiographies are. He laid bare the terrors of slavery and the duplicity of whites who benefited from the system. Henson used his own honorable actions, placed in contrast to the treacherous deeds of his enslaver, as a rhetorical device to further convince white readers that slavery was dishonorable even for the whites who relied on the system to bolster their social status. By 1830 Henson was so infuriated by his enslaver’s devious dealings that he gave up his hopes of “honorably” purchasing his freedom and left Kentucky with his wife and children, eventually finding freedom and success as a minister in Canada.<sup>93</sup>

Frederick Douglass had a different perspective on the connection between slavery and honor. Multiple editions of Douglass’s narrative describe to readers how as soon as he was able Douglass escaped to the North and then Great Britain. However, the fugitive slave law of 1850 made the great orator vulnerable to kidnap and transportation back to slavery in Maryland if he returned to the United States. Believing he would be most successful undermining slavery on American soil, he allowed his connections in the Society of Friends in Great

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<sup>93</sup> Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada* (Boston: Arthur D. Phelps, 1849), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/henson49/henson49.html>, 23 (“freedom had been”) and 24 (“I had a sentiment”).

Britain to collect money to purchase his freedom from his enslaver, Thomas Auld. Douglass referred to the purchase as “this commercial transaction . . . this blood-money.” Some in the anti-slavery community thought it was wrong for Douglass to accept the money because buying one’s freedom strengthened the argument that freedom could or should be bought. Douglass viewed it as “a ransom, or as money extorted by a robber,” the payment of which gave him the freedom to return to the United States and advocate on behalf of the victims of slavery. Even though Henson and Douglass had different views on how to attain freedom honorably, both resisted the notion that Black men were not capable of honor. Both were willing to act outside of generally accepted ideals of honor in service to a higher, or more honorable, purpose.<sup>94</sup>

### **Pursuit of Freedom**

Hugh Garland preferred Keckly’s view that the only honorable way for an enslaved person to become free was with the permission of their enslaver. He agreed to free Keckly and her son for \$1,200. Yet Garland’s promise brought Keckly no closer to actual freedom. Just like her father before her, Keckly found that even for a woman of her talents, raising enough cash for freedom through her exertions in the slaves’ economy was an all but impossible task. Indeed, there are many descriptions in published slave narratives of enslaved people who attempted to save up to purchase their freedom—like Henson—but few

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<sup>94</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (Boston: De Wolfe and Fiske, 1892), 315 (“this commercial,” and “a ransom”), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/dougl92/dougl92.html>.



actually did so. Keckly wrote, “I went to work in earnest to purchase my freedom, but the years passed, and I was still a slave.” What was the equivalent of almost forty thousand dollars in 2020 prices might as well have been one million dollars for a dressmaker whose owners claimed nearly every dollar she made. Years passed. Hugh Garland died in 1855, leaving debts for his widow and her brother to contend with.<sup>95</sup>

A survey of published slave narratives shows that even though Keckly’s agreement for self-purchase with Hugh Garland was rare, it followed the experiences of others documented in published slave narratives. Multiple narratives—such as Josiah Henson’s—document slaveowners who held out the hope of freedom through self-purchase to enslaved people only to take it away. Many follow a story arc that features the painful realizations of enslavement followed by a harrowing escape. Perilous and covert escapes from slavery—like Frederick Douglass’s—were common themes; thirty-seven percent of the slave narratives surveyed feature at least one person who made a runaway attempt. In comparison, only fourteen percent of slave narratives surveyed share the story of someone who attempted to purchase themselves outright with cash—and many of these attempts were unsuccessful. Another typical path to freedom in the

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<sup>95</sup> Juliet E.K. Walker’s work is an important corrective to scholarship of the 1970s, which tended to focus on the dehumanizing aspects of slavery (which itself was a necessary response to earlier works that portrayed enslaved people as satisfied with enslavement). Walker’s work to instead show the complexity of Black economic life in antebellum America overstates the success of the entrepreneurial activities of enslaved people. Walker classes Keckly among enslaved entrepreneurs who “with their profits . . . succeeded in purchasing their freedom” (see page 369 in Juliet E. K. Walker, “Racism, Slavery, and Free Enterprise: Black Entrepreneurship in the United States before the Civil War,” *The Business History Review* 60, no. 3 (1986): 343-382). Keckly’s narrative makes clear that her activities in the slaves’ economy could not provide her with the profits she needed for freedom. In borrowing she purchased freedom with her future profits from participation in the economy as a free woman; Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 19 (“I went”).

popular imagination, manumission by slave owners, was only featured in thirteen percent of published slave narratives. These numbers suggest that tropes of enslaved people primarily gaining freedom through the benevolence of owners or the enterprising efforts of individuals miss the central role that other forms of gaining freedom played.<sup>96</sup>

More popular among the authors of published slave narratives as a tool to secure freedom was the use of some form of credit for self-purchase. Eighteen percent of the total slave narratives surveyed feature at least one person who attempted to borrow to purchase their freedom. Often narrators describe failing at their first attempt to save up cash and purchase freedom, followed by some financing scheme. For example, Noah Davis, who was enslaved near Fredericksburg, Virginia, could not raise the cash needed to purchase his

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<sup>96</sup> Documenting the American South, or DocSouth's, (<https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/index.html>) "North American Slave Narratives" is the most comprehensive attempt to collect all published slave narratives into one bibliography. Research by Marion Wilson Starling (*The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* 2nd ed.. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press 1988) shows that there are over 6,000 slave narratives. DocSouth does not include unpublished slave narratives or the Works Progress Administration Depression-Era collection of oral histories of slavery. Despite the fact that DocSouth presents only a small portion of the all slave narratives, I chose to survey this bibliography because 1) unpublished slave narratives would be almost impossible for me to systematically collect for a dissertation project—focusing on published narratives that were mostly accessible online was a more manageable project and 2) Depression-Era narratives describe credit arrangements—and I reference them in other sections of the dissertation—but almost never describe credit arrangements in the antebellum period due to the age of the interviewees. I excluded works of fiction from the survey because the small selection of fictionalized narratives in the DocSouth bibliography did not include descriptions of lending or borrowing, presumably because those details were not titillating to nineteenth century readers. I also excluded more than one edition of a single work. I reviewed slave narratives published in multiple editions and did not find an example in which details of credit arrangements changed. Therefore, I selected the edition with the most detailed account of credit arrangements to include in the survey (the 1892 edition of *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, for example). Finally, I excluded narratives that describe instances of slavery after 1865 such as kidnapping and incarceration. My survey included 265 slave narratives from which I counted 232 attempts to gain freedom prior to general emancipation. I relied on Frances Foster Smith, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Madison, WS: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979) to put Keckly's work into the larger context of slave narratives.

freedom through overwork at his skilled trade or with donations. Instead he took on the amount as a debt and paid it back after moving to Baltimore in 1847 to work as a missionary. Similarly, Lott Carey had the advantages of being hired out in Richmond, Virginia, and being esteemed by the tobacco merchants in the city, but still only secured the cash to pay the ransom for himself and his children by adding cash raised through a subscription to what he had already saved.

Keckly would also turn to more complicated financial arrangements when saving the cash to purchase freedom was not an option. In 1855 Armistead Burwell II, the brother of her owner and her biological half-brother, agreed to honor the promise of her late owner to free her and her son for \$1,200. Keckly wrote that “several schemes were urged upon me by my friends.” On the advice of this network of friends—Keckly applied the term “friends” broadly to her white clientele, the Lincolns, her former enslavers, and members of the Black communities in which she moved—Keckly resolved to “appeal to the benevolence of the people.” She would travel in the free states soliciting donations in a subscription scheme.<sup>97</sup>

Subscriptions were a form of financing in which small donations over time were pooled to accomplish a large purchase. Used by generations of Americans, subscriptions provided the financing for major projects such as building roads, publishing books, establishing churches, and supporting the liberation of

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<sup>97</sup> For a thoughtful discussion of Keckly’s treatment of interracial friendships see Janet Neary “Behind the Scenes and Inside Out: Elizabeth Keckly’s Revision of the Slave-Narrative Form,” in *The Elizabeth Keckley Reader: Volume One Writing Self, Writing Nation*, ed. Sheila Smith McKoy (Hillsborough, N.C.: Eno Publishers, 2016), 93-4; Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 19 (“several schemes,” and “appeal to”).

individual enslaved people. The second half of the narrative of Louisa Picquet, written as an interview conducted by a pastor from New York, provides an example. Picquet and her mother had been separated years earlier through sale to satisfy their owner's creditors. However, by 1859 Picquet was living free with her husband in Ohio when she received a letter from her mother in Texas, still enslaved and asking Picquet to purchase her freedom if she could. Her owner's price was high—one thousand dollars—and Picquet had no money, but she considered her mother's freedom worth almost any price. Picquet and her husband first decided to take an advance on his next two years of pay from his employer. That loan gave the couple five hundred dollars toward the effort according to her narrative. Then Picquet instituted "rigid economy" in her home, which only brought another sixty dollars in savings. Finally, she turned to a subscription to raise the remaining funds. In March of 1860 local church pastors placed notices in the *Daily Gazette* and the *Journal and Messenger* of Cincinnati to attest that Picquet was "worthy of public sympathy and benevolence." These notices she pasted into a subscription-book and started collecting funds to free her mother. Some were outright donations, but most of the money Picquet raised was in the form of subscriptions.<sup>98</sup>

Picquet collected subscriptions from her husband's employer, people she met as she went village to village, and men and women she met in churches where she most likely shared her plight and offered the endorsements written by pastors. Subscription amounts ranged from ninety-five cents up to fifty dollars,

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<sup>98</sup> H. Mattison, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon* (New York, 1861) <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/picquet/picquet.html>, 36 ("rigid economy") and 37 ("worthy of").

but she wrote that most were around five dollars each. Picquet traveled from Cincinnati to Oberlin, Ohio, Buffalo, and New York City. She appealed to anti-slavery advocates and Christian churches known for their anti-slavery stance. After two months of work Picquet had cash and subscriptions amounting to within “some eighty or ninety dollars” of the total. However, when she began to collect on the subscriptions that had been written, “some of the subscribers had died, others had moved away, and still others were tardy about paying.”<sup>99</sup>

This inability to collect on the subscriptions left Picquet “almost in despair” and highlights the extent to which subscription schemes were a form of debt. From the perspective of the subscriber subscriptions represented a future promise to pay. For multiple reasons subscribers chose to sign their name in Picquet’s subscription book, promising their future earnings. Like other forms of debt, subscriptions created a financial relationship between those making the agreement that was shaped by decisions about “creditworthiness.” Even though Picquet was not the debtor in this relationship she had to portray herself and her cause as worthy of the future earnings of her subscribers. Subscribers themselves took on the role of debtor, and like other debtors, they defaulted due to a range of personal and systemic economic situations. These defaults left Picquet, and others who hoped to find freedom with a subscription scheme, in a precarious situation. Picquet finally raised the last of the cash needed to free her mother through the sale of her narrative.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 47 (“some eighty”) and 48 (“some of the subscribers”).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 48 (“almost”).

Participating in a subscription scheme as a subscriber or as a beneficiary was to participate in what we might today call “community financing.” Like the barn raisings of past generations, a subscription scheme allowed community members to pool resources and achieve something more than any individual could accomplish on their own. While subscription schemes had been an important part of financing infrastructure growth early in the history of the Republic, by the mid-nineteenth century these agreements took on a new meaning for African Americans. In an industrializing economy characterized by racial capitalism a focus on individualism not only privileged whiteness but cloaked that privilege in the language of fairness and honor. To lean on the community instead of relying on one’s capacity to produce and achieve was a form of resisting white supremacy (“appeal[ing] to the benevolence of my people,” as Keckly put it). Significantly, Keckly disapproved the use of a subscription because she saw it as “begging,” which was beneath her. She would achieve on her own individual merits despite the fact that she was handicapped by racism and sexism. Instead of resisting the ideology of capitalism she used it for her own purpose and in doing so hoped to shape it for the better.<sup>101</sup>

Like Picquet, Keckly only resorted to a subscription scheme when it seemed to be her last hope to escape enslavement. Armstead Burwell allowed Keckly to leave St. Louis and solicit subscriptions, but Anne Garland hedged her bets on the \$1,200 she stood to gain in exchange for Keckly’s freedom. Keckly planned to journey to New York where, also like Picquet, she would speak before

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<sup>101</sup> Keckly, *Behind the Scenes*, 19 (“appeal to”).

audiences sympathetic to her cause. She would work her contacts for invitations to churches and societies where she might sign subscribers. Garland feared that the temptation to remain in the North, to escape slavery, would be too strong for Keckly to resist. To protect the family's "investment" Garland required Keckly to find six white men who would pledge two hundred dollars each—money they would forfeit if she did not return. Keckly considered this arrangement fair.

Keckly obtained the first five signatures easily but ran into an issue with the sixth guarantor. A Mr. Farrow told her "the scheme is a fair one, and you shall have my name. But I shall bid you good-by when you start." Startled, Keckly was surprised that the man did not believe that she would return from the planned trip North to pay the debt for her freedom, telling him, "I not only *mean* to come back, but *will* come back, and pay every cent of the twelve hundred dollars for myself and my child." The episode shows that Keckly did not just want freedom from slavery. She wanted the honor and respect that she deserved after decades of hard work and faithful service to her enslavers and her patrons. Farrow believed that Keckly's word was not to be honored. She might say that she would return, but Farrow was certain that "the abolitionists . . . will prevail on you to stay there." If Keckly had been a white man of standing, honor culture would have dictated that she demand "satisfaction" from Farrow, which conceivably could even have led to violence or the threat of violence. In this way Keckly was enmeshed in nineteenth-century Southern honor culture even if she resisted its tenet that she herself was without honor. Claiming honor meant that the only course for Keckly was to refuse this man's signature, which meant that she could not leave St.

Louis to pursue the subscription scheme. The realization that Keckly would not gain freedom made her feel that “darkness had settled down upon me like a pall, and I was left alone with cruel mocking shadows.”<sup>102</sup>

In this passage Keckly got to the root of the conflict in her autobiography. Pre-Civil War slave narratives often presented a struggle between slavery and freedom, but by the 1867 publication of Keckly’s narrative the question of slavery had been settled. Safe in her freedom Keckly wrote that she preferred “eternal slavery rather than be regarded with distrust by those whose respect I esteemed.” The statement is extraordinary from someone who suffered so deeply because of her enslavement. Keckly meant to be provocative to those familiar with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and other descriptions of slavery and would therefore question how anyone could prefer slavery. She was the consummate capitalist; believing that her own ability to achieve financial success would help rid the system of the racism that was antithetical to the concept of individual freedom. She coveted the respect of the whites who enslaved her because it signaled her acceptance as an individual and community member in the white capitalist world. However, viewed more broadly, Keckly’s narrative shows how closely race and capitalism were tied before and after slavery. Neither emancipation nor Keckly’s extraordinary professional rise to become modiste to Mary Todd Lincoln would undo that connection.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 19 (“the scheme”) and 20 (“I not only” [italics in the original], and “the abolitionists,” and “darkness”).

<sup>103</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 20 (“eternal”).



Why did Farrow's refusal to believe Keckly offend her honor when she accepted, without question, Anne Garland's requirement that she have six guarantors? The Burwell family, which she had served intimately all of her life and to whom she was genetically connected, could have allowed Keckly to solicit subscribers in the North based on her own promise that she would return to pay the \$1,200. They did not, but the requirement was not the result of a contentious relationship between Garland and Keckly. On the contrary, Keckly seems to have had generally peaceful relations with Garland, who was one of the "old friends" with whom Keckly visited when she journeyed South after the end of the war. Instead Keckly's differing responses to Garland and Farrow reveal the dressmaker's conceptions of honor and credibility. On one hand she respected the Garlands' legal ownership of her labor—but not their right to physically punish her—and therefore would neither run away nor refuse to hand her wages over to them. Also, securing guarantors for a financing scheme was and is a standard practice in American capitalism. In this construction Keckly accepted that Garland could insist on white, male guarantors—people deemed "honorable"—to sign for the enslaved woman. On the other hand, Keckly's dealings with Farrow were as a businesswoman. To Keckly their relationship implied a level of reciprocity that was not possible if Keckly was without honor. Keckly viewed herself as a person of honor and worthy of respect and therefore could not accept someone who "had no faith in my pledges."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 20 ("had no").

Keckly grieved the failure of the subscription scheme, but not for long. She writes in *Behind the Scenes* that “the first paroxysm of grief was scarcely over, when a carriage stopped in front of the house.” Out stepped one of Keckly’s clients, Mrs. Le Bourgois, who entreated Keckly not to go to New York to “beg” for money. Instead Le Bourgois volunteered to raise the twelve hundred dollars for Keckly among her white, female patrons. Le Bourgois proposed to make the money a present, but Keckly insisted that it be a loan that she would repay. In this instance Keckly again underscored her own respectability and honor in the transaction. Keckly would not be free through “presents.” She would not beg for money but would rely on a close female contact to solicit loans for her. She would earn her freedom by borrowing. She would prove to herself and her “friends” that she was respectable and honorable by paying back the loans with profit from hard work. Keckly was redefining honor and creditworthiness as accruing to those individuals who carried through on their promises, regardless of race or gender. Keckly believed that her future success as a businesswoman would prove that she was worthy of honor. The celebrated scholar of slave narratives, Frances Smith Foster, writes that in this moment Keckly “transformed herself from capital to capitalist by obtaining loans from investors and purchasing herself and her son.”<sup>105</sup>

Keckly’s redefinition of honor was consistent with changing notions of debt and honor in the mid-nineteenth century. In eighteenth-century Virginia debts

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<sup>105</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 20 (“the first paroxysm”); Francis Smith Foster, “Autobiography after Emancipation: The Example of Elizabeth Keckley,” in *The Elizabeth Keckley Reader: Volume One Writing Self, Writing Nation*, ed. Sheila Smith McKoy (Hillsborough, N.C.: Eno Publishers, 2016), 48 (“transformed herself”).

were contracted between individuals based on honor and reputation. Historian Bruce H. Mann writes that “for Virginia planters in the mid-eighteenth century, extending credit to neighbors on terms of honor rather than contract was a mark of respect as well as a form of patronage.” Keckly’s ability to accrue the form of honor practiced by Virginia planters and codified in debt relationships was impossible; it was defined as white and male and supported by enslavement. Then in the nineteenth century the proliferation of banks and insurance companies made the relationship between borrowers and lenders less personal. With the democratization of American politics and culture came the democratization of debt. Lenders became less concerned with reputation and more with quantifying and comparing “borrowers’ honesty and their willingness to work hard, live thriftily, and shun drinking and gambling.” New credit reporting agencies surveilled businesspeople to report on their creditworthiness according to these terms. Keckly would lean into changing notions of honor and creditworthiness to prove that a Black woman who was born enslaved could meet this definition of honor.<sup>106</sup>

Keckly interacted with the new, “modern” antebellum banking system as she pursued freedom. In June of 1855 Anne Garland signed a note promising Keckly and her son freedom when the twelve hundred dollars was paid. Throughout the summer Le Bourgeois solicited patrons on Keckly’s behalf.

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<sup>106</sup> Bruce H. Mann, *Republic of Debtors: Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 8 (“for Virginia”); Rowena Olegario, *The Engine of Enterprise: Credit in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 78 (“borrowers”); See also Scott A. Sandag, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in American* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Keckly's patrons sent her cash in the amounts of \$25, \$50, and \$100. One patron sent cash and promised more, writing, "I send you this note to sign for the sum of \$75, and when I give you the whole amount you will then sign the other note for \$100." Farrow may have refused to trust Keckly, but these elite white women trusted her completely. Keckly passed the cash along to Willis L. Williams, a lawyer working for the Burwell family, who documented each deposit of cash at the St. Louis bank Darby & Barksdale.<sup>107</sup>

It was unusual but not unheard of for an enslaved woman to have a savings account at a bank. Historian Charles B. Dew provides a detailed account of the banking activities of Sam and Nancy Jefferson Williams in his book, *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge*. The Williamses were enslaved by the owner of an iron forge in Rockbridge County, Virginia. Sam Williams was a skilled ironworker. Nancy Jefferson Williams performed dairying and housework at Buffalo Forge, the property on which the family lived and worked. In the 1840s and 1850s the couple engaged in overwork and extra production and trading, depositing the proceeds of that work, above what they needed to care for their family, in the local bank. Dew refers to their bank accounts—Nancy Williams's bank account was separate from her husband's—as "extraordinary, and

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<sup>107</sup> According to Walter B. Stevens, *St. Louis the Fourth City, 1764-1909* (St. Louis, Mo.: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1909), Darby & Barksdale was one of a handful of private banks in St. Louis in the antebellum period. Like its peers it was capitalized with the large private fortunes of its owners. The papers associated with the bank are not extant, but we know from historians' work on banking in the antebellum period that Darby & Barksdale was heavily invested in slavery. Men offered what property they had as collateral for loans; often that meant enslaved humans. When the loans were not repaid the bank foreclosed on and sold the enslaved people, feeding the hunger for enslaved labor in the deep South. Darby & Barksdale operated from about 1840 until it became one of many banks that failed in the 1857 banking panic; Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 21 ("I send you").

substantial.” The Williamses received interest on their savings at the bank until their accounts transferred to the books of their enslaver, William Weaver, in 1856. Dew speculates that “perhaps the bank directors felt uneasy about holding, and paying interest on, money belonging to slaves . . . or maybe Weaver decided it would be better to handle their accounts in some other way.” After 1856 the Williams’s enslaver was also their banker, even paying interest on their savings. This arrangement continued until 1867 when the then-free Sam Williams agreed to continue working on contract for the forge.<sup>108</sup>

Keckly’s experiences in banking were similar to those documented by Dew. Willis Williams deposited the cash Keckly collected for her at Darby & Barksdale—“\$600 on the 21<sup>st</sup> of July, \$300 on the 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of July, and \$50 on 13 August, 1855.” Williams included a note in the legal file that he had done so giving the assurance that Keckly would receive one percent per month in interest. (Sam Williams was credited with six percent annually by Weaver on his principal. One percent per month, almost double, was extraordinarily high.) If Darby & Barksdale clerks were concerned with Keckly’s race, gender, or enslaved status, they might have been assured by Willis Williams’s backing. Soon Keckly had collected enough “blood money” to pay the ransom for herself and her son. In August the family officially transferred ownership of Keckly and Kirkland from the heirs of Armstead Burwell to Anne Garland. Garland legally freed Elizabeth Hobbs Keckly and George W. D. Kirkland on November 13,

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<sup>108</sup> See the discussion of Sam and Nancy Williams’s bank accounts in Charles B. Dew, *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 182-186, quotes on 184.

1855. Keckly had achieved what so many others, including her father, could not do; she was free.<sup>109</sup>

### **Businesswoman and Modiste**

Keckly was soon ready to put slavery and much of what was connected to it, including the loan for her freedom, behind her. In the second sentence in *Behind the Scenes* after she gained freedom Keckly notes that she “went to work in earnest, and in a short time paid every cent that was so kindly advanced by my lady patrons of St Louis.” In her autobiography Keckly often employs commercial transactions to illustrate concepts such as respectability and honor. For Keckly the moment of freedom represented her full integration into society with all the honor she expected to accrue to any businessperson of her skill, industry, and honesty. Paying the loan off quickly through hard work was meant to communicate Keckly’s strong work ethic, her honesty, and her appreciation to those who believed her honest and hardworking. It was meant to convey the moment of Keckly’s transition from the state of dishonor to which she had been confined by the Burwells to her natural state of freedom.<sup>110</sup>

Keckly’s entrance into society as an honorable businesswoman is further illustrated by the contrast between her interactions with Mr. Farrow and those with a Mr. Harper after she moved to Washington DC. When Farrow insisted to her that she would escape to the North without paying for her freedom when given the opportunity Keckly was willing to endure “eternal slavery rather than be

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<sup>109</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 21 (“\$600 on”).

<sup>110</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 25 (“went to work”).

regarded with distrust by those whose respect I esteemed.” In contrast Mr. Harper of the store Harper & Mitchell trusted her integrity enough to allow her to take laces out of the store for her client’s approval. Harper told Keckly that “he was not afraid to trust me—that he believed my face was the index to an honest heart.” Keckly viewed Harper’s trust as “the dawn of a brighter period in my life.” Having fully shed her identity—in the eyes of others—as an enslaved woman, Keckly was transformed into the successful and respectable businesswoman she had been all along. The transformation is conveyed to readers of her autobiography through commercial transactions such these.<sup>111</sup>

In reality paying back the loan was much more difficult and took much longer than Keckly portrayed in her autobiography. John E. Washington’s careful archival research unearthed Keckly’s 1863 application for a war pension from the federal government, which testified to that difficulty. Keckly applied for a war pension based on her son’s death in the line of duty. (George W. D. Kirkland left Wilburforce University in 1861 to volunteer for the army, passing as white, and was killed fighting on August 10 of that year.) In her application Keckly stated that during the three years following freedom Kirkland was working and assisting her to pay back the loan. He paid her \$100 toward the loan in 1855, 1856, and 1857. In 1857 Keckly enrolled Kirkland at Wilberforce University. Presumably Kirkland stopped paying on the \$1,200 loan at this time, putting any wages he made toward his tuition and living expenses.

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<sup>111</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 20 (“eternal slavery”), 31-32 (“he was not”) and (“the dawn”).

Keckly's ability to repay the loan out of her own wages was limited as well. Between 1855 and 1860 Keckly remained in St. Louis sewing for her patrons and paying about \$100 per year toward the balance from the profits of her business. The amount must have been a substantial portion of her income—we know from Louisa Picquet's narrative that her skilled husband's salary was \$250 annually. Keckly likely made not much more. By the spring of 1860 Keckly was ready to leave Missouri. Her mother had passed away. Her marriage had ended. Her son was away at Wilberforce University. Still owing on the loan and with the skills and determination to give her the hope of financial success, Keckly moved to Baltimore with a plan to train "young colored women" in her system of dressmaking. When that plan was not successful, Keckly quickly moved on to Washington DC.<sup>112</sup>

In her autobiography Keckly notes that her first seamstress work in Washington DC paid \$2.50 per day—an amount that did not provide enough means for her to purchase the license that was typically required of free Black skilled workers living in slave territory. Short on options and in need of a white person to "vouch to the authorities that I was a free woman," Keckly used her connections to her advantage. She quickly advanced from a seamstress earning a daily wage to a modiste with seamstresses in her employ. The financial records for Keckly's business are not extant, but she likely profited more than \$2.50 per day at the height of her success. Despite her career advancement, \$100 per year would still have been a significant sum. By 1863 after eight years of freedom

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<sup>112</sup> Keckly, *Behind the Scenes*, 25 ("young colored").



Keckly stated that she still owed \$100 for the “purchase of the Freedom of myself and Son.” The difference between Keckly’s portrayal of the “short time” it took her to repay the loan and the at least nine years of hard work and frugal living it actually took her to do so reflect the difference between the image of success she wanted to portray for her readers and the precarious financial reality faced by many formerly-enslaved people.<sup>113</sup>

As she fought to achieve financial and professional success Keckly leaned on her network of elite white Southern women to realize her ambition to dress women of high social standing. She wrote that “ever since arriving in Washington I had a great desire to work for the ladies of the White House, and to accomplish this end I was ready to make almost any sacrifice consistent with propriety.” Keckly was not simply a dressmaker. She was a modiste whose designs allowed women to communicate who they were or wanted to be. Her work referenced the styles of the day and expressed the personalities of her clients. Keckly quickly built a reputation with patrons like Varina Davis, wife of then-senator Jefferson Davis, that won her an introduction to Mary Todd Lincoln. In Keckly Lincoln found exactly the talent she needed. Literary scholar Stephen Criniti writes that the new first lady was sensitive to being seen as an unpolished westerner. Through fashion Keckly transformed Lincoln from a Kentuckian into a First Lady and herself into a highly sought-after artist. Winning the patronage of women like Lincoln gave Keckly the business success of which she had been dreaming.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 26 (“vouch”); Washington, *They Knew Lincoln*, 210 (“purchase”).

<sup>114</sup> Stephen Criniti, “Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years a Fairy Godmother: Dressmaking as Self-Making in Elizabeth Keckley’s Autobiography,” *American Transcendental Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2008): 309-26; Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 31 (“ever since”).

The two women's professional relationship led to their storied friendship of mutual support. In 1861, when Keckly's son died in the war, Lincoln wrote her a "kind, womanly letter" full of "golden words of comfort." In a letter to another friend Lincoln empathized with Keckly's grief and referred to her "colored Mantuamaker" as a "remarkable woman." Keckly shared Lincoln's grief the next year when her own son Willie died. The differences between the women's responses to these tragic deaths mark the contours of the friendship between the Black modiste and the white first lady. Keckly's autobiography only refers to the single letter between the women when George Kirkland died many miles from his mother. In contrast Keckly relates that she sat at Willie's bedside as his illness worsened. She supported the grieving head of Abraham Lincoln when he cried over his son's death. She observed Mary Todd Lincoln "overwhelmed with sorrow" to the point of "convulsions." Lincoln and Keckly enjoyed a mutually beneficial, intimate friendship, but it would not venture far from the socially acceptable roles for Black and white Southern women. Their intimacy would echo countless other friendly relationships between enslaved Black women and their female enslavers. Lincoln would be supported, encouraged, and assisted by Keckly. Keckly would be appreciated and advocated for by Lincoln, but her race and professional status would always subordinate her in Lincoln's eyes.<sup>115</sup>

*Illustration 1 Elizabeth Keckly, 1861*

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<sup>115</sup> Keckly, *Behind the Scenes*, 43 ("convulsions") and 44 ("kind"), ("golden"), ("overwhelmed"); Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner, *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 106 ("colored").



*Elizabeth Keckly, photographer unknown, credit: Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University*

By 1862 the tenor of the national conflict changed, and Keckly rose to meet new needs in the Black community. The war had commenced, from the federal government's perspective, as a quick fight to restore the Union. Eighteen months of war had changed the country irreparably. The actions of enslaved people who left plantations in droves to meet the advancing Union army convinced more and more white Northerners that winning the war would require

defeating slavery as well. However, Keckly observed that though Northerners accepted that slavery should be defeated they nevertheless met the fleeing freedmen with “indifference” and outright hostility. Keckly, inspired by the desperate needs of formerly enslaved people flooding into Washington, started the Contraband Relief Organization. Like other relief associations organized to support members of the community, Keckly brought together women in DC’s Black middle class to assist the “poor dusky children of slavery.” Keckly served as president of the association from its inception at least until 1868.<sup>116</sup>

The following year brought great strides toward justice but also confirmation that freedom was not exactly the “beautiful vision, a land of sunshine, rest, and glorious promise” for which enslaved people hoped. On January 1, 1863, Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation freeing enslaved people in rebellious states. In February one thousand Black men formed the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment. In April Keckly filed her application for a pension based on the war death of her son, an act of the citizenship that had been denied to African Americans. Despite her success as a modiste, Keckly was still having trouble making ends meet. (At around the same time Lincoln applied to the Treasury department for a job for Keckly, suggesting that the first lady was aware of her predicament.) Keckly argued in her pension application that she had relied on the future income of her son. She needed the pension because despite all her “toil and labor” that had freed and supported her and George Kirkland, she was still short on funds to pay her debt. The irony is that in

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<sup>116</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 47 (“indifference” and “poor dusky”).

1863 some enslaved people had been freed by the Emancipation Proclamation and there was reason to hope that slavery might be fully abolished, but Keckly was still putting \$100 per year from her labor toward the price for her own freedom. Even in freedom Keckly was paying the wages of slavery. The pension application represented her claim to a new right for Black women—a right to compensation for the death of a relative in service to the nation. Happily for her the pension application was granted, and Keckly received \$8 (later \$12) per month for the rest of her life.<sup>117</sup>

*Behind the Scenes* subtly contrasts the borrowing experiences of Elizabeth Keckly and Mary Lincoln. In 1855, when she had accepted loans from her patrons, Keckly understood that the debt for her freedom would make her financial situation more tenuous for years, but she was willing to shoulder that risk to build better lives for herself and her son. Keckly describes the loan as a “kindly advance.” She almost sings across the pages of her narrative when she exults over her freedom from the “bitter heart-struggle” that was enslavement. In referring to the women whose loans allowed her to purchase her freedom, she calls on “Heaven” to “bless them who made me so!” Keckly rejoices in the debt relationship between herself and her patrons because it allowed her to apply her formidable skills and intelligence to freeing herself. Keckly makes no other mention in *Behind the Scenes* of her own debts, and the archival evidence suggests her only other debt was \$100 for her son’s education at Wilberforce.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> I rely on Fleishner’s discussion of Keckly’s citizenship rights (Fleishner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*, 257); Keckly, *Behind the Scenes*, 59 (“beautiful”); Washington, *They Knew Lincoln*, 210 (“toil”).

<sup>118</sup> Keckly, *Behind the Scenes*, 25 (“kindly”) and 21 (“bitter”) and (“Heaven”).

Keckly provides readers a different perspective on Mary Todd Lincoln's financial entanglements. According to the woman who knew her wardrobe better than anyone, Lincoln went into debt "in endeavoring to make a display becoming her exalted position." The contrast of the one borrowing to secure a basic human right and the other doing so to purchase "rich dresses" made of "costly materials" serves to highlight Keckly's sense of honor. Keckly borrowed because she was an honest and respectable businesswoman unjustly enslaved by the Burwell/Garland family. Lincoln borrowed because she had access to credit based on her marriage to a well-known white man. According to Keckly, by the time of her husband's reelection Mary Lincoln owed "about twenty-seven thousand dollars" at stores in New York City alone. Keckly would compound the shock to middle-class readers of learning of Lincoln's extravagant debts with the revelation that Abraham Lincoln did not even know the extent of his wife's spending. Lincoln was "almost crazy with anxiety and fear" that the debt she had been hiding from her husband would be used against him by his political enemies. Keckly expected that her own use of debt would have been judged honorable by readers who valued ideals such as honesty and liberty. In contrast Lincoln's use of debt illustrated her penchant for silliness and overindulgence.<sup>119</sup>

While Lincoln struggled with her growing debt load, Keckly's hard work paid off, and her business prospered. During the war years Keckly built a clientele large enough to support two shops. She transferred her church membership from Union Bethel to the more prominent Fifteenth Street

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 62 ("in endeavoring"), 63 ("rich dresses") and ("about"), and 64 ("almost crazy").

Presbyterian. At the end of the war she took time off to visit Virginia and the family who had enslaved her. Keckly's purpose was to visit the scenes of her childhood but also to celebrate how far she had come. Frances Smith Foster writes that one of the subtle differences among postbellum narratives is their emphasis on what the victim had learned from the crucible of enslavement. Keckly's visit South was her "vindication and testifies to the general acceptance of her life as a success story." Despite all the setbacks that enslavement had imposed on her, Keckly had achieved remarkable success.<sup>120</sup>

This high point in Keckly's life came at the same time that African Americans and their allies celebrated success in defeating slavery and prepared for the work ahead. In her autobiography Keckly relates that upon hearing the news that Richmond had fallen, she and the seamstresses in her employ "wandered about the streets of the city with happy faces, and hearts overflowing with joy." Enslaved people had taken advantage of the war to bring down the system of slavery. Leaders in the movement found hope that Black Americans would enjoy the same rights and privileges as white Americans. Many understood that there was still a battle ahead to achieve racial equality. Frederick Douglass wrote, "Though slavery was abolished, the wrongs of my people were not ended. Though they were not slaves, they were not yet quite free." The assassination of Abraham Lincoln, by ushering in the presidential administration

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<sup>120</sup> Foster, "Autobiography," 53 ("vindication").

of Andrew Johnson, would threaten the success of the Reconstruction era Black freedom movement.<sup>121</sup>

Lincoln's assassination also brought a reversal of Mary Todd Lincoln's fortunes. As she had in previous times of crisis, Keckly was by the side of Lincoln to comfort her in her "fit of hysterics." She accompanied the grieving widow on her move to Chicago, even though it was at a cost to her business. When Keckly did return to Washington DC, it was with the news that Lincoln was "laboring under pecuniary embarrassment" and "practicing the closest economy." Lincoln was being pressed by creditors who eyed her husband's estate as their best chance of being paid. When her hopes for the provision of an income from the government went unfulfilled Lincoln turned to Keckly to help her sell her extensive wardrobe. The resulting "Old Clothes Scandal" was an embarrassment for both women. The press, already predisposed to view the former first lady as "deranged," lambasted Lincoln for what they saw as the vulgar and indelicate step of offering her private items to be viewed by and for sale to the public. To aid her friend, Keckly gave an interview to the New York *Evening News* in which she defended Mary Todd Lincoln. Ultimately, she was successful neither in saving Lincoln's reputation nor repairing her finances.<sup>122</sup>

Just as Keckly flipped the hierarchy of honor in slavery—supporting the white family who enslaved her with her successful business venture—her autobiography portrays the flipping of her and Lincoln's roles. The modiste had

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<sup>121</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 69 ("wandered"); Douglass, *Life and Times*, 458 ("Though slavery").

<sup>122</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 85 ("fit of"), 95 ("laboring"), 144 ("deranged").



rejoiced that in 1855 she was not reduced to “beg” for money to purchase her freedom through a subscription scheme. By the end of 1867 Lincoln was in such comparatively reduced circumstances that “a subscription-book was opened at the office of her agent” at Keckly’s urging. Keckly hoped that the scheme would appeal to Black citizens who “still have the memory of her deceased husband fresh in their minds.” Keckly even wrote to Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet to discuss the possibility of a lecture tour to collect donations. In the end these schemes did not materialize. Douglass did not think the lecture series wise. Lincoln agreed. Instead Keckly turned to her pen to redeem Lincoln’s—and her own—reputation in the hope that Lincoln “should be judged more kindly than she has been.”<sup>123</sup>

In the book resulting from her efforts, *Behind the Scenes*, Keckly resisted racial stereotypes, just as she had bravely done in life. Janet Neary argues that Keckly challenges existing racial binaries by undermining the presumption that blackness was linked with slavery and whiteness with literacy. Similarly, instead of focusing on the suffering of black bodies, Keckly presents the vulnerability of the white body in the suffering and untimely deaths of Willie Lincoln and Abraham Lincoln. This same ambition to overturn racial binaries is seen in her discussion of credit. By comparing her own use of credit with that of Lincoln, Keckly challenges the argument that her race should bar her from accruing honor and therefore being considered creditworthy. Neary argues that these assertions make *Behind the Scenes* a successful activist text.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 134 (“a subscription-book”) and (“still have”), 2 (“she should”).

<sup>124</sup> Neary, “Behind the Scenes and Inside Out.”

Unfortunately for Keckly and Lincoln, *Behind the Scenes* was not successful at redeeming Lincoln's reputation among white readers and it was not a commercial success. Whites angered at what they perceived as Keckly's activism responded with vitriolic reviews and a racist parody entitled *Behind the Seams*. Keckly's careful critique, though truthful, of Mary Lincoln severed the relationship between Keckly and the Lincoln family. In an 1868 letter to a friend Lincoln dismissed Keckly as she referred to her as "the *colored* historian," calling out Keckly's race to underscore the difference between the women. Lincoln was angered not only because a friend would publish parts of her private letters, but also because a Black woman would judge her financial choices. Keckly's defense of her actions did little to improve the circulation of her book, which she believed was suppressed by Lincoln's son Robert. Keckly defended herself against the allegations that she had betrayed a friend, but also the deeper implications in having crossed racial, gender, and class lines of propriety. In a letter published in the *New York Citizen* Keckly claimed the right to speak her mind based on the fact that she had "honestly purchased my freedom." Frances Foster Smith writes that Keckly believed she could rely on her truth—that her honesty and respectability would ultimately matter more with readers than her race or gender.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Turner and Turner, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 476 ("this proposition"); *New York Citizen*, April 25, 1868, quoted in Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*, 318 ("honestly"); Francis Foster Smith, "Romance and Scandal in a Postbellum Slave Narrative: Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes*," in *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* (Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press, 1993), 117-130.

Keckly's misplaced faith in the white American public—that it would ultimately value her based on her character rather than her race—would be paralleled by the broader experiences of Black Americans during the three decades after the war. Despite the work of Black and Radical white leaders to fight for the full integration of all people into American life, a relatively brief experiment in democracy known as Reconstruction was followed by the building up of structures to exclude nonwhites. During Reconstruction Black men voted en masse and were elected to state and federal office. Activists pushed for public education and the redistribution of land to enable newly freed people the opportunity to own their own farms. These measures were designed to reduce the gap in social, economic, and political power between people who had very recently been enslaved and enslaver. Instead, “Redeemers” successfully pushed for structures that included an agricultural labor system that raised barriers between Black Americans and land ownership, a carceral state designed to control and extract labor from Black people, and a credit scoring system that would privilege white Americans. Unequal access to credit handicapped African Americans’ access to land ownership and business development, the two key avenues of wealth creation in American capitalism. These inequalities held in Keckly’s lifetime and up to the present day.

Keckly wrote that “the labor of a lifetime has brought me nothing in a pecuniary way.” Despite her success she lived in relative poverty, continuing to make ends meet by sewing for the white patrons who did not desert her after the scandals involving Mary Todd Lincoln. In the 1890s Keckly sold Lincoln relics to

remain solvent and accepted a position on the faculty of Wilberforce University. When her health forced Keckly back to the community she knew in Washington DC, she lived on her pension and the small amount she had been able to save.<sup>126</sup>

According to interviews conducted by John E. Washington with people who knew her personally, Keckly's death in 1907 was as proud and dignified as her life. He described her "dingy" little basement room "with one window facing the setting sun." This scene of elegant decay—Keckly did not fade in dignity even as her physical and financial health deteriorated—was humble but did not denote destitution. Washington noted that Keckly paid for the room out of her pension and savings. He included the probate records concerning her will showing that Keckly died with \$428.25 in a savings account with the National Bank of Washington. These savings paid for her funeral and burial and a tombstone to mark her grave in Harmony Cemetery. According to probate records, "there were no debts due on estate of decedent." After funds were disbursed for her final expenses, Keckly left \$179.11 to the home that she had worked to build forty-five years earlier. Washington's point was to show the success of this member of the Black elite, despite the limits placed on her, who was referred to as "remarkable" in her own time.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 141 ("the labor").

<sup>127</sup> Washington, *They Knew Lincoln*, 222 ("dingy") and ("with one"), 214 ("there were"); Paying for her own grave marker was itself a statement of honor and success for Keckly. Her own mother's grave was unmarked, as were the graves of most enslaved people. This fact gave the daughter much pain—"To look upon a grave, and not feel certain whose ashes repose beneath the sod, is painful, and the doubt which mystifies you, weakens the force, if not the purity, of the love-offering from the heart" (Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 104)—and perhaps hardened her resolve to mark her own grave.

However, Keckly's use of debt and personal finances should be placed in the larger context of evolving lending arrangements in the nineteenth century. Keckly worked her whole life to show that she was an honorable Black woman. Her business success and loan repayment refuted arguments that only white men could be honorable in credit arrangements. Instead she claimed honor for herself and the treatment she received exposed the intersectionality of racism and sexism that characterized credit worthiness in the history of banking. "She was a woman of high ideals, character and dignity," wrote one of Washington's interviewees. Though Keckly met the difficult realities of her life with talent and tenacity, making her own opportunities and demanding what she was owed, evolving systems of white supremacy ultimately limited her pathways to success.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Washington, *They Knew Lincoln*, 217 ("she was").

## **Chapter 4 The Entanglement of Neaton Henry: How Credit Arrangements Made Free African American Women Vulnerable**

Even Neaton Henry's name is not easy to discern from the evidence that exists in the archive. She was born between 1801 and 1805. No details are extant about her birth or parentage, although she was always denoted as "mulatto" in legal documents. It is not known whether she was born free or gained her freedom as a young woman. The first time Henry appears in the archive is in 1832 court records when she registered as a free woman named "Grace Neaton." Grace Neaton was assigned free registry number 161 on a May day with the man who was likely already her husband, Prince Henry. Prince Henry's name appears just above hers as registry number 160 in what was the second time he legally registered his freedom (the first was in 1818). At this point Neaton Henry's identity begins to morph in the documents that have survived. The free mulatto woman who registered her freedom as "Grace Neaton" in 1832 was in 1833 included in the county's "Free Negro Registry" as "Grace Ann Henry, wife of Prince Henry." Two years later in the 1835 compilation of "Free Negroes" the name "Neaton Henry" appears for the first time with her husband, Prince Henry, and their ten-year-old son, John William Henry. For the next fourteen years, the years for which this paper is primarily concerned, Henry represented herself as "Neaton Henry," so I chose to use that designation as well. Henry's identity changed again by the 1850 census, nine years after her husband's death, in which she was again referred to as "Grace A. Neaton."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Shenandoah County Minute Book, 1830-1835, Minute Book, 1835-1843, LVA, 78; "Registration of Free Colored, Reconstructed, 2008," Nancy B. Stewart, "Index of African

This chapter relies on the records resulting from the estate settlement of Neaton Henry's husband Prince Henry to describe debt relationships between free Black and white residents of Shenandoah County, Virginia, in the antebellum years. I show that the networks of community debts that wove together communities left free African American women open to substantial risk even when the debt relationships were not explicitly exploitative and the freedom of the women was unquestioned. I rely on Ira Berlin's seminal work on free Black people, *Slaves without Masters*, to understand the incomplete and precarious freedom enjoyed by the Henry family. However, I depart from Berlin in his analysis of the economic place of Prince and Neaton Henry in the larger economy. Berlin describes free African Americans as being pushed by whites to the margins of the economy. Keeping them impoverished kept these "slaves without masters" under the control of local whites. Untangling the webs of debt recorded by Prince Henry that wove together the men, and by extension their dependents such as wives and children, of Shenandoah County, Virginia, shows that the Henry family was an integral part of the local economy. I argue that it was a process of integration, and not a project of marginality, that enforced white supremacy. This research shows that the actions of slaveholder William W. Magruder to seize the Henry land were ultimately unsuccessful. Instead, it was another white man, a man who was not a slaveholder and appears to have been

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Americans in Shenandoah County Virginia," 2010, Truban Archives, Shenandoah County Library, Edinburg, VA, accessed Feb. 6, 2019; "United States Census, 1850," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-67RW-7RQ?cc=1401638&wc=95R4-6TG%3A1031351901%2C1033158201%2C1033158202> : 9 April 2016), Virginia > Shenandoah > Shenandoah county, part of > image 41 of 307; citing NARA microfilm publication M432 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

a close friend of the Henrys, who legally and “fairly” dissolved the Henry wealth.<sup>130</sup>

### **Black Freedom in Shenandoah County**

In Neaton Henry’s lifetime she would have been witness to the increasing grip of white supremacy on free African Americans in the South. Shenandoah County was incorporated as Dunmore County in 1772 and was then renamed during the Revolutionary War. The early twentieth century historian John W. Wayland portrays the county as an outlier in a Commonwealth known for its slave regime, a fact Wayland attributes to Shenandoah’s high population of non-slaveholding, German farmers. He writes that “slavery never fastened itself very deeply in Shenandoah County.” More recent historians have shown that even though the ratio of enslaved African Americans to free whites was lower in the Shenandoah Valley than in other areas in the state, slavery and white supremacy were just as entrenched socially and constructive of life in Shenandoah County as elsewhere. The archives bear this out. The same legal regime built to protect enslavement and systematically oppress African Americans was in full force in the Valley. In 1837 a group of citizens in Shenandoah County went as far as to submit a memorial to the Virginia legislative in support of state funding for colonization to rid the Commonwealth of free Blacks. “We regard,” wrote the Shenandoahans, “the residence of the free Black population, among us as highly

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<sup>130</sup> Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: New York Press, 2007): 182 (“the desire”); Berlin describes the place of free African Americans in chapter 7, “The Economics of Marginality.”



injurious.” The memorial was timely. It came a few years after Nat Turner’s 1831 bloody attack on slavery and at a time when the enslaved population of Shenandoah County peaked. The population of enslaved individuals had grown each decade the census was recorded until the 1830s. Its decline can be attributed not to manumission but to the sale and forced migration of the enslaved population to cotton-growing regions. It was likely no accident that Neaton Henry and her husband registered their free status within six months of Turner’s execution. Fear of rebellion inspired whites all over Virginia to crack down on the freedom of their free Black neighbors.<sup>131</sup>

The work of historian Ellen Eslinger supports the thesis that slavery and white supremacy were just as entrenched in the western region of Virginia as in the eastern. In her examination of two Shenandoah Valley counties, Rockbridge and Augusta, Eslinger found that the enforcement of registration and residency laws aimed at free African Americans in the antebellum period was often lax but still had the intended effect. Like Shenandoah County, Rockbridge and Augusta had no large urban areas. The proportion of the population that was either enslaved or designated free Black was small. Eslinger found that free Blacks often waited years to register, only doing so when necessary. She also found

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<sup>131</sup> John W. Wayland, *A History of Shenandoah County Virginia* (Strasburg, VA: Shenandoah Publishing House, 1927), 289-291 (“slavery never”); On the entrenchment of slavery in the Shenandoah Valley see Donna Camille Doderhoff, “Oh Shenandoah! The Northern Shenandoah Valley’s Black Borderlanders Make Freedom Work during Virginia’s Reconstruction, 1865-1870” (PhD diss., WM, 2016) and Ellen Eslinger, “Free Black Residency in Two Antebellum Virginia Counties: How the Laws Functioned,” *The Journal of Southern History* no. 2 (2013): 261-298; Citizens: Petition, Shenandoah, County, 1838.01.03, Legislative Petitions Digital Collection, LVA; On the fall in the population, Page County was created in 1831 and Warren County in 1836 out of land that had mostly been included in Shenandoah County. Even given the redrawing of county borders, the population of enslaved people fell between 1830 and 1840; Citizens: Petition, Shenandoah, County, 1838.01.03, Legislative Petitions Digital Collection, LVA (“We regard”).

evidence that free African Americans migrated across county and state lines in defiance of laws meant to curtail their movement. Whites were aware of and openly tolerated these illegal moves. However, the laws still had power. Eslinger argues that whites invoked the 1793 and 1806 laws when they chose because legal culture was “more personalized and contingent” than today. As long as order was preserved, to invoke laws such as those requiring that all free Blacks register their status was a waste of resources. Neaton and Prince Henry were part of the financial fabric of Woodstock, Virginia. Their livelihood was based in part on their ability to interact peaceably with whites, even those like Samuel C. Williams who signed the 1837 memorial publicly calling their presence an “alarming evil.” Williams was willing to put aside his political and philosophical beliefs about free Blacks when he interacted with individuals like the Henrys because their presence did not threaten the racial order.<sup>132</sup>

Even though Prince Henry found a place in the larger community of whites and slaveholders, he relied on the small free African American community in Woodstock to make his first major financial investment. Prince Henry was a barber, one of the few professions open to African Americans in antebellum Virginia. These businessmen were sometimes able to build wealth over time and often enjoyed the respect—within appropriate racial boundaries—of the leading local men and women. The historian of legal culture, Eslinger noted that the free Black barber in Staunton, Virginia, sixty-five miles south of Woodstock, was “rich and popular,” but that these characteristics did not keep his son from persecution

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<sup>132</sup> Eslinger, “Free Black Residency,” 296 (“more personalized”); Citizens: Petition, Shenandoah, County, 1838.01.03, Legislative Petitions Digital Collection, LVA (“alarming”).

when he defied residency laws. Prince Henry first registered his freedom in 1818, perhaps as a way to create a legal presence for himself when it was the closest he could come to claiming citizenship and the legal rights it conferred. [Up to now you've said or implied that people registered as a \*defensive\* move; now you're saying Henry did so as an act of (within-the-system) self-\*assertion\*. How do you reconcile?] In the following year, 1819, Henry partnered with Aaron Gaskin to purchase a town lot on which he lived and likely ran his barber business. The two African American men had in 1818 also registered their freedom on the same day. Henry may have registered his freedom and bought a piece of property in preparation for raising a family. It was during this period that he married Grace Ann (Neaton) Henry. In 1824 or 1825 the Henrys welcomed their only child, John William Henry. Henry and Gaskin may have been in the minority as Black property owners, but they were not the first African American owners of town lot number twenty. The men purchased the lot from free African American William W. Payne and his wife, evidently paying in cash.<sup>133</sup>

Neaton and Prince Henry grew in affluence during their roughly two decades together. The list of items purchased at the estate sale following Prince Henry's death gives historians some clues about life in the home of the Henry family. The Henrys made use of the items one would expect to find in a middling nineteenth-century home: a trundle bed and bedding, pots, crockery, and the

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<sup>133</sup> Eslinger, "Free Black Residency," 269 ("rich and"); Shenandoah County, Deed Book JJ, 1830, Deed Book KK, 1831, Reel 17 LVA: 286; Dee Ann Buck, "Abstracts of Shenandoah County, VA Deed Books AA-HH, 1820-1830, 2010, Truban Archives, Shenandoah County Library, Edinburg, VA, accessed Feb. 6, 2019: 85; "Registration of Free Colored, Reconstructed, 2008," Nancy B. Stewart, "Index of African Americans in Shenandoah County Virginia," 2010, Shenandoah County Library System Archive. On free Black barbers see Douglas W. Bristol, Jr., *Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

workhorse gardening tool, the “grubbing hoe.” Prince Henry’s profession of barber dictated many of the items: razors, hones, razor straps, and a barber chair. The “lot of books” indicates literacy in the family. Indeed, Prince Henry kept a written account book of his transactions with customers, which also testifies to his business acumen. In addition to the two town lots that he and Neaton Henry purchased over time the couple added other markers of middle-class affluence. The couple owned a “30 hour clock” that sold at the estate sale for more than any other piece of furniture. They had a “box plate stove” and a “ten plate stove” for warmth and cooking. In addition to a home full of furniture there were two horses. The ownership of a side saddle suggests that Neaton Henry was a rider. Not only did they own two horses, the Henrys owned a carriage.<sup>134</sup>

Carriages in the nineteenth century were a clear marker of wealth, likely a complicated symbol in the eyes of white Woodstock residents when combined with the powerful construct of race. Samuel Mordecai in his 1856 book on Richmond, Virginia, in “by-gone days” mocked members of Richmond’s free Black community who displayed their accumulated wealth. “Like their betters, the negroes of the present day have their mock-aristocracy, and like them, they sustain it chiefly in dress and pretension.” If her Woodstock neighbors thought Neaton Henry was pretentious by enjoying rides in her carriage, it does not seem to have stopped her from doing so or hurt her husband’s business. And Neaton, not Prince, was the owner. Personal property records for 1839 list Prince Henry with no such property but testify to Neaton Henry’s ownership of the carriage.

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<sup>134</sup> Inventory, Stickley Family Papers, VHS;

According to records from the estate sale, the carriage, at \$50, was the most expensive single item that the Henry family owned.<sup>135</sup>

Indeed carriages were not only socially questionable for African Americans, but illegal in Richmond. In 1810 the Richmond Council passed an ordinance that “no Negro or mulatto shall be permitted to use the same [Gig chair or other carriage], except in the Capacity of Maid or Servant.” No matter one’s free status or wealth, any outward marks of African ancestry kept an individual from the comfort, convenience, and social status of riding in a carriage. An immediate challenge to the law in the form of a legislative petition to the General Assembly of Virginia shows that the Black residents of the city expected the ordinance to be enforced. Within six months Christopher MacPherson challenged the law and asked for an exception for himself and his family. MacPherson argued that the ordinance infringed on his “rights as are given him by the General Laws of his Commonwealth.” He offered as evidence of his claim to citizenship his free status, his nativity to Virginia, his Revolutionary War service, his property ownership, his business need to travel, and finally his and his wife’s infirmities. Despite all these realities—and even MacPherson’s stated racial identity of “mulatto,” signaling his possible connection to white family—the request was denied even though it was “deemed reasonable.” The MacPhersons ultimately could do nothing to protect themselves from persecution for their race. Neaton Henry, who was also noted in the census and free Black register as “mulatto” and

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<sup>135</sup> Inventory, Stickley Family Papers, VHS; Samuel Mordecai, *Richmond in By-Gone Days Being Reminiscences of an Old Citizen* (Richmond, VA: George M. West, 1856), 319 (“like their”); 1839 Personal Property Tax Records for Shenandoah County, Reel 318, 1830-1843, Part 1, LVA.

enjoyed a measure of wealth and social status like the MacPherson family, would come to understand this as well.<sup>136</sup>

In *Birthright Citizens* Martha S. Jones describes the intersection of race and citizenship in the antebellum period. Though Jones's research is centered in Baltimore, her work provides context for the Henrys' experience. Registering their freedom, recording property purchases at the courthouse, and later Neaton Henry's defense of her property from seizure for debts were all acts of citizenship. Who qualified as a citizen and how were questions largely in flux in the pre-Civil War era. At the time citizenship was determined by individual states, and throughout the country Black activists asserted that being born in the United States entitled one to citizenship. This conception of citizenship was carried over into the goals of Reconstruction and enshrined in the Constitution in the Fourteenth Amendment. Jones documents the process of how "black Americans imagined, claimed and enacted their relationship to law." The Henrys' use of debt and the court follows a similar pattern. They assumed their place in the economic, social, and legal order of Shenandoah County as if they belonged there. It would be up to the white supremacist actions of their neighbors to refute their claims.<sup>137</sup>

Prince and Neaton Henry likely walked a very fine line in which their freedom was tolerated and their engagement in the community allowed because

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<sup>136</sup> Loren Schweninger, ed., *The Southern Debate over Slavery: Volume 1: Petitions to Southern Legislatures, 1778-1864* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 46-47 ("no Negro," "rights," and "deemed").

<sup>137</sup> Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 2018), 11 ("black Americans").

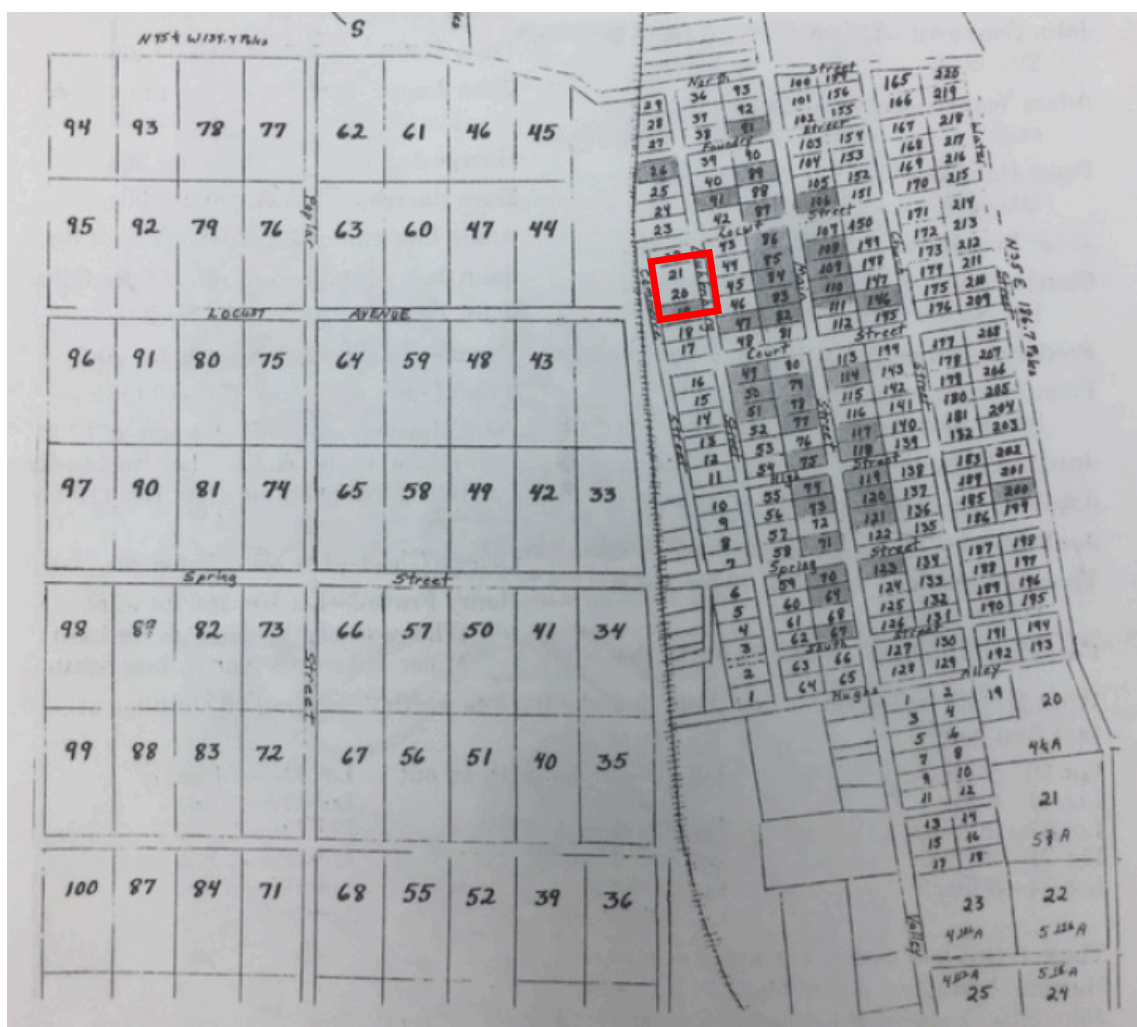
they were in general willing to live within the bounds of a society marked by racism. The Henry family members were part of a small, elite African American community in Woodstock. Their wealth, property-ownership, and Prince Henry's occupation as barber, typical for free African American men, insulated them from the aggression of whites who otherwise thought of the presence of free African Americans in "their" community as "highly injurious." Their reward was a modicum of independence and the toleration of their participation in local economic relations in a world in which most other African Americans were enslaved.<sup>138</sup>

### **Prince Henry's Death**

By 1829 Prince Henry had made enough money to buy Gaskin's half share of lot twenty and half of the adjoining town lot for seventy-five dollars. Two years later Henry paid thirty-five dollars in cash to whites Susan Bowman and Peyton Bowman for half of lot twenty-one. Bowman and her son had bought the land only two years earlier from William W. Magruder and his wife, Mary, both white. Magruder would later sue Neaton Henry and her son for the same land. Though other women were listed with their husbands, Neaton Henry was not listed as a part owner of the land on the deed or in property tax records for either town lot owned by Prince Henry.

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<sup>138</sup> Shenandoah County, Deed Book JJ, 1830, Deed Book KK, 1831, Reel 17 LVA: 286; Dee Ann Buck, "Abstracts of Shenandoah County, VA Deed Books AA-HH, 1820-1830, 2010, Truban Archives, Shenandoah County Library, Edinburg, VA, accessed Feb. 6, 2019.



1921 drawing of lots in Woodstock, Virginia, Henry lots are called out in red.  
Credit: Woodstock: 250<sup>th</sup> Commemorative Program and Historical Booklet, 2002, Truban Archives, Shenandoah Country Virginia Library.

Free African Americans like Prince Henry, by necessity and desire, participated in community financial arrangements just as whites did in antebellum America. Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark's *Black Masters* describes the life of the free and wealthy William Ellison. Ellison leveraged his business skill and savvy to purchase his freedom and then build a gin making and repair and cotton plantation business that made him wealthier than most South Carolinians of his time, Black or white. Ellison, despite his clear awareness of and opposition



to white supremacy, still made much of his fortune through the labor of the enslaved people he owned. Johnson and Roark show that slavery was how one successfully built wealth in antebellum South Carolina, even if one was a mixed-race man whose purpose was in part to distance himself from the institution. Credit use was a part of that world. Johnson and Roark write that Ellison bought many of the people he enslaved on credit and repaid that debt with revenue from his plantation. The authors also show that Ellison ran his business on credit—extending it to planters when he repaired their gins. Like his white counterparts, Ellison seems not to have hesitated to take white delinquents, who were often his neighbors as well, to court to recover debts. At one point Ellison took out a \$10,000 mortgage to purchase more land and, remarkably, paid it back in a year. The records suggest that Prince Henry, who never achieved the wealth of William Ellison and never enslaved anyone, also extended credit to and accepted credit from whites. There is no evidence that he ever took a delinquent debtor to court, but the administrator of his estate did not hesitate to do so, and his widow successfully fought off another such suit.<sup>139</sup>

When Prince Henry died in February of 1841 in his late 40s it must have been unexpected. Despite his property holdings he did not leave a will. Instead he left a significant amount of property, real and personal, and a collection of debts owed and owned. It soon became apparent that Neaton Henry occupied an economically precarious place. Documents from the time show no trace of any family other than the couple's fifteen-year-old son, at least no family who could

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<sup>139</sup> Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 1984).

help Henry legally or financially. Court records from 1860 show a woman named Neaton Ann Jane Sucken who registered her freedom and that of her children. The names “Neaton” and “Ann” suggest that Sucken might have been related in some way to Neaton Henry, who used both names at times. However, the free “washer” who had three daughters in 1860 would have been only six years old in 1841. If her parents were part of Henry’s network, they did not appear in any documents associated with the estate. Aaron Gaskin, with whom Prince Henry bought his first land, and the man who was listed as head of household for the Henry family just the year before, does not appear in any documents surrounding the settlement of Prince Henry’s estate.<sup>140</sup>

Because there was no will, and evidently with the acquiescence of Neaton Henry, whose motion “that administration on said estate be committed to the sheriff of Shenandoah county” was recorded in court, responsibility for the settlement of the estate fell to deputy sheriff David Stickley. Stickley was a member of a large, wealthy, slaveholding family in Shenandoah County. Shenandoah Valley historian Wayland includes his name in a list of “First Citizens,” or “roll of honor,” and notes that he served on a committee to collect subscriptions to finance the Valley Pike, or main road through the county. Stickley was not a surprising choice. Sheriffs in early America were often tasked with collecting debts and ensuring that estates were administered according to the law. Legal historian Thomas D. Russell goes so far as to assert that in

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<sup>140</sup> “Registration of Free Colored, Reconstructed, 2008,” Nancy B. Stewart, “Index of African Americans in Shenandoah County Virginia,” 2010, Truban Archives, Shenandoah County Library, Edinburg, VA, accessed Feb. 6, 2019.

financial interactions “the legal process was often an indissoluble part of the economic transaction.” Henry likely expected that Stickley would fairly discharge her husband’s debts.<sup>141</sup>

That law, and the place of women in it, changed between the colonial period and the end of the nineteenth century. The rise of “domestic feminism” limited women’s role outside of the home but led to laws that gave them more control over property owned by the family. According to a 1705 Virginia law—also the year in which laws were passed to curtail the legal rights of Virginians of African descent—widows were entitled to receive life rights to one third of the real and personal property of their husbands. This property was expected to provide for her, in reduced circumstances, for the rest of her life before its ownership transferred to her eldest son to control and manage. By 1850 many states began to allow widows to receive a share of the property held during the marriage, instead of just receiving life rights, although Virginia was slower than other states in changing the law. Even as women became more autonomous throughout the nineteenth century, they remained dependent on the men in their lives. Neaton Henry experienced the death of her husband and the financial stress of widowhood in the midst of these historic changes. Without being named in a will, Henry’s fate was left to the structure of the law. She would be allowed to keep her personal effects—clothing, jewelry, and personal items—and she, in

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<sup>141</sup> Wayland, *A History*, 276 (“First” and “roll”), Stickley is listed on 282 and 263; Shenandoah County Minute Book, 1830-1835, Minute Book, 1835-1843 Reel 59, LVA (“that administration”); Thomas D. Russell, “The Antebellum Courthouse as Creditors’ Domain: Trial-Court Activity in South Carolina and The Concomitance of Lending and Litigation,” *The American Journal of Legal History* 40, no. 3 (1996): 331-364, 336 (“the legal”).

theory, should have received enough real estate to maintain her until her own death. But the estate would first be liable to pay her husband's debts.<sup>142</sup>

Prince Henry's debts were complicated and interwoven with his loans to his neighbors. Historian Richard Lyman Bushman in his *The American Farmer in the Eighteenth Century* describes the web of debts between the farmers of New London, Connecticut, as an "exchange economy." Buying on accounts with each other without cash provided for the needs of farm families and "formed the bones and sinews of local society." Bushman describes debts in the form of bonds between members of the community as the normal ebb and flow of exchange. The exchange economy was not just financial, but social too, generating—or undermining—trust between members of the community that bled over into other social relations. Bushman theorizes these local debt relationships as different from the more-exploitative lending relationships of financial capitalism but writes that even in this environment "growing debt . . . signaled the arrival of the sorrows that debt frequently brought." Financial relationships between Prince Henry and others in the community seem to adhere to this description. Borrowers were not borrowing because they did not have wealth but because they did not have available cash. Lenders were not lending because they had capital to invest but because that was how goods and services were exchanged. Clower built a door for Prince Henry, and Henry cut his hair. Even Henry's interactions with Williams do not seem to have been based on the slaveholder's attempts to control and exploit Henry—the form that credit arrangements between Black and

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<sup>142</sup> Carole Shammas, Marylynn Salmon, and Michel Dahlin, *Inheritance in America From Colonial Times to the Present* (New Brunswick, CN: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

white often took, especially after emancipation. Accounts were open -ended and could be settled with other goods and services as easily as with cash. Prince Henry entered into these credit arrangements as a member of the community even though his real estate purchases prove that he had the cash to settle accounts immediately.<sup>143</sup>

To begin to untangle the credit accounts that wove members of the Woodstock community together the nineteenth century deputy sheriff, and the twenty first century historian, had Prince Henry's account book. Account books were kept in the nineteenth century typically by listing each transaction in a list of credits (Cr) and debits (Dr). The names of clients were written at the top of a page, one page per client. Prince Henry's accounting was similar to store accounts and those of other businesspeople extant today. The barber's accounts were written in his own hand and represent his economic interactions with the men of Woodstock. Henry noted when men came in for a shave or a trim or when clients returned to apply a few cents to an outstanding balance, but he never included the date of individual transactions. Like other account books, Prince Henry crossed out accounts when they were settled in full. The deputy sheriff used Prince Henry's account book to enumerate and track down each of his creditors and debtors.

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<sup>143</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, *The American Farmer in the Eighteenth Century: A Social and Cultural History* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2018), 123 ("formed the"), 137 ("growing debt"); On antebellum credit networks and bankruptcy law see Bruce H. Mann, *Republic of Debtors: Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002) and Edward J. Balleisen, *Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

The account book is interesting not just because it provides details on the financial arrangements between Prince Henry and the men of Woodstock, but also because it suggests that Neaton Henry was an active participant in the financial affairs of her family. There were multiple charges for beer and cakes throughout the account book. The Henrys were most likely peddling Neaton Henry's household produce to the barbershop clients. Far from the craft or hobby beer brewing is today, in the early nineteenth century brewing was a daily chore central to providing needed calories for each member of the family and was typically undertaken by women. The cakes sold by the Henrys might have been the "Johnny Cake" that was a staple in the early American diet. Neaton Henry was likely making use of one or both of the stoves listed in her husband's estate inventory to prepare these cakes made of mashed rice and hominy. The men who frequented the barber shop also saw it as a convenient stop for a quick meal. The profit from Neaton Henry's work contributed to her family's income and the means through which she acquired her own carriage.<sup>144</sup>

The seemingly benign financial arrangements Shenandoah County white men made with the town's free Black barber contrast with the rise in white fear of African Americans and efforts to enslave them or banish them from the United States. These two poles existed simultaneously. Henry's account with Samuel C. Williams provides one example. According to historian Wayland, Williams was a lawyer and prominent member of the community and was appointed a trustee for

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<sup>144</sup> Account Book and Accounts, Stickley Family Papers, VHS. Mary Randolph in her famous nineteenth century cookbook, *The Virginia Housewife: or, Methodical Cook*, notes that if baked thin, toasted, and buttered Johnny cakes are "nearly as good as cassada bread." (Baltimore, Md.: Plaskitt, Fite, and Co., 1838. 113, accessed through Google Books, March 24, 2021).

the local Episcopal church and the Woodstock Female Seminary. Williams was also a slaveholder and one of the signers of the memorial calling for the Virginia Legislature to dedicate more money to colonization efforts. The Henrys and Williamses were neighbors, appearing on the same page of the 1840 census. Between 1834 and 1839 Prince Henry regularly shaved Williams and cut his hair. Henry performed whitewashing for Williams once in 1834, and throughout the period sold him oysters. At the end of the 1830s Williams was indebted to Prince Henry for \$7.18  $\frac{3}{4}$ . Williams paid Henry \$1.75 in cash and applied the value of two bushels of wheat to his account. Williams did not pay the full amount he owed the barber until 1843, two years after the latter's decease. The lawyer also served as the teste in court when Prince Henry's estate was finally settled in 1844.<sup>145</sup>

Williams was not the only white neighbor with whom the Henry family's finances were interwoven. Peter Sapinger provides another example. Sapinger was the white head of a household that was enumerated two lines below Henry's family in the 1840 census. Sapinger neither owned slaves nor signed the petition to remove people like Neaton and Prince Henry from Virginia. At Henry's death Sapinger owed the barber \$40.30  $\frac{1}{4}$  for regular shaves for thirteen years and five months. Sapinger told the sheriff who settled Henry's estate that he had paid Henry \$6.25 in cash toward the debt at different times over the years. Henry was

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.; "United States Census, 1840," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GYYD-974Z?cc=1786457&wc=31SV-W7P%3A1588670024%2C1588670927%2C1588665902> : 24 August 2015), Virginia > Shenandoah > Not Stated > image 9 of 120; citing NARA microfilm publication M704, (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.). Prince, Neaton, and John Henry were three of the "free colored persons" who appeared in the household of Aaron Gaskins; Wayland, *A History*, 290-91.

also indebted to Sapinger, who was a blacksmith. He was listed as being in “Manufactures and Trades” in the census and was owed \$28.63 by Henry for services such as “pairs of sheers” and “welding 2 rods for shop.” Records kept by Deputy Sheriff Stickley show multiple instances of these financial relationships going back to 1825 and extending through Prince Henry’s 1841 death. Death was not the end of the financial arrangements between the Henrys and the white members of the community. Included in documents from the settlement of Prince Henry’s estate was his account with carpenter John Clower. During Henry’s life, Clower made a counter, a door, and a cupboard for the barber, and at his death made his coffin. Clower charged the estate eight dollars for the coffin.<sup>146</sup>

The apparently fair and amiable credit relations between the Henry family and whites in the community differed markedly from those described by formerly enslaved people after emancipation. Most interviewees who told their stories to the writers of Depression-era slave narratives testified to the oppressive role of debt in the post-emancipation South. “We never was give a thing at freedom but papa was buying a place from his master and got in debt and sold it. I don’t own a home,” remarked Diana Rankins of Brinkley, Arkansas. John Wesley was able to buy land after emancipation. He said, “I had a acre and a home. I got in debt and they took my place.” Gabe Butler remembered that “all de slaves wus sot free wid nuffin.” Sharecroppers found themselves so deeply in debt to

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<sup>146</sup> Account Book and Accounts, Stickley Family Papers, VHS (all quotes); “United States Census, 1840,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GYYD-974Z?cc=1786457&wc=31SV-W7P%3A1588670024%2C1588670927%2C1588665902> : 24 August 2015), Virginia > Shenandoah > Not Stated > image 9 of 120; citing NARA microfilm publication M704, (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).



landowners by the end of each planting season that “white folks tuk all day made.” Many freedmen saw the former enslavers’ use of debt as an instrument for keeping them enslaved. Indeed Elizabeth Lee Thompson’s research shows how white Southerners were able to take advantage of the 1867 federal Bankruptcy Act to preserve their pre-war social and economic power.<sup>147</sup>

The issue of debt after emancipation may have been strong enough to induce the formerly enslaved to understate the ills of enslavement. Annie Trip was a young child before emancipation. She stated, “wish I was dare right now. I had plenty of food then. I didn’t need to bother about money. Didn’t have none. Didn’t have no debts to pay, no bother not like now.” Trip’s reminiscences may have been prompted by the presence of a white interviewer, but they also speak to the fear and deprivation that she and many others African Americans felt in the post-emancipation, Jim Crow South. Trip recognized the stepped-up use of debt to control and exploit African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This research has shown that credit relations between Black and white before the end of slavery were anything but fair and just. However, like other features of the Jim Crow era—segregation, suppression of voting rights—using debt specifically to control and exploit African Americans was not as essential when slavery was available to do that grisly work. When white society could rely on slavery to enforce white supremacy whites did not fear the presence, or

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<sup>147</sup> Interviews with Diana Rankins (“we never”), John Wesley (“I had a”), Gabe Butler (“all de” and “white folks”). *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, CD-ROM; Elizabeth Lee Thompson, *The Reconstruction of Southern Debtors: Bankruptcy After the Civil War* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

necessarily question the freedom, of a few free Black people. After emancipation however, whites stepped up practices such as debt peonage and racial terrorism specifically because they could no longer rely on slavery to keep what they saw as the appropriate racial order.<sup>148</sup>

### **Prince Henry's Estate**

Neaton Henry was aware that while the wealth she and her late husband had carefully built served as a buffer between their lives and the threat of slavery her husband's debt left her vulnerable to loss if her situation deteriorated. George Teamoh's narrative of his life provides an example of the use of debt to deprive free African Americans of their property in post-emancipation Virginia. Teamoh was born enslaved in Virginia and claimed his freedom by escaping to the North and enlisting as a sailor before he eventually settled in Massachusetts. Returning to Virginia after the Civil War, Teamoh became involved in politics during Reconstruction, fighting for equal pay for African Americans and working to convince whites that freedmen were deserving of honor. He also bought a house and land in Portsmouth, paying \$1,050 down and taking out a note for the \$1,050 balance. Teamoh, having fought for justice his entire life, expressed bitterness over his continued disappointments, political and personal. As the opportunities of Reconstruction turned into the disappointments of Redemption, Teamoh's personal fortunes turned as well. By 1883 he had lost his home due to nonpayment of the mortgage. Teamoh surrendered to the foreclosure, writing

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<sup>148</sup> Interview with Annie Trip. *Born in Slavery* ("wish I was").

that he understood that the lender had a right to take the house, but he mourned the lack of charity shown by the white Christian minister who owned the company that foreclosed on his home. Neaton Henry would not lose her home when she lost her husband, but she would have to legally fight for it.<sup>149</sup>

However, Henry would have to suffer the indignity of seeing almost everything she owned, which the law recognized as being owned by her late husband, auctioned to the public. Less than two months after the decease of Prince Henry the deputy sheriff arranged an estate auction as he collected account statements from those to whom Henry owed money. Included were most of the items in the Henry home. The carriage, specifically listed as the property of Neaton Henry and not Prince Henry in 1839 property tax lists, was the first item listed in the sale notice. Notice was given to the public that the sale would take place at the Henrys' home on Friday, May 21<sup>st</sup>. The notice extended an offer of eight months credit on "all sums of five dollars and over by the purchasers giving their notes with approved security." The goods and the debt would change hands on Neaton Henry's front lawn.<sup>150</sup>

Along with the carriage, the horses, and the box stove, Henry watched her neighbors purchase the items that had been accumulated during her life with Prince Henry and their son, John. Men and women carried off quilts, curtains, jugs, and tea kettles. Henry let the "lot of books" go as well as a picture and looking glass. A neighbor bought both horses and the carriage. Henry spent over

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<sup>149</sup> F. N. Boney, Richard L. Hume, and Rafia Zafar, *God Made Man, Man Made the Slave: The Autobiography of George Teamoh* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990).

<sup>150</sup> Inventory, Stickley Family Papers, VHS ("all sums").

thirty dollars purchasing back her own possessions, presumably those she would need so she and her son could continue living in her their home. She bought the Dutch oven, a set of andirons, plates, dirks, and a table. The two most expensive items Henry purchased were the “ten plate stove” and a bedstead. Henry also repurchased some of the items that Prince Henry would have used in his barber business. She may have hoped that their son, who was about fifteen years old at the time, would continue in his father’s profession. Henry either could not afford to or did not want to keep the carriage. It is not known if Henry took advantage of the offer of eight months of credit to pay for her property, but it is likely that she did as any cash that the family set aside would have been included in the estate. The sale raised \$199.53 to pay Prince Henry’s creditors. Stickley noted the amount in addition to the cost of the sale itself—\$22.99. Fees were paid to various members of the community for appraisals, “crying sale” or auctioneering the sale, and Stickley’s own commission, seven percent.<sup>151</sup>

In 1842 Stickley began to collect on the credits extended to those who had made purchases at the estate sale. In May, the one-year anniversary of the opening of the books of the estate, he took a seven percent commission and credited the estate for interest, also at seven percent, on the cash it contained. Stickley would continue to pay himself a commission annually, which finally amounted to almost eighteen dollars and seventy-nine cents for his “health and

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<sup>151</sup> Inventory, Stickley Family Papers, VHS.

expenses,” according to court records. At this annual check in on the estate Stickley also noted the balance due the estate and the cash on hand.<sup>152</sup>

The deputy sheriff continued to pay out on accounts and collect cash owed the estate until 1845 when the estate was finally closed. In September of that year, John Clover received eight dollars for Prince Henry’s coffin. Peter Hushour received eight dollars and forty-seven cents on his account for a bond for \$6.63 Henry had signed just months before he died. One of the largest payouts was to Isaac Trout & Co for \$24.68. This amount was the interest—six percent as stated—and principal on a bond for eighteen dollars and ninety-eight cents dated five years earlier “the payment of which I bind myself, heirs, executors or administrators, jointly, firmly, by these presents.” In the administration of the estate Stickley had collected two hundred and twenty dollars and forty-eight cents. After paying each of Prince Henry’s debts and settling all credit accounts, Stickley closed the estate on April 3, 1841.<sup>153</sup>

Neaton Henry managed to hold on to her real estate after the death of her husband, but not without going to court to protect her ownership. In 1843 William W. Magruder sued Henry and her son for what he alleged was a debt of ninety-four dollars and twelve cents, “the precise amount of which is unknown.” Magruder was a justice of the peace—in this role he called community members to give account of any debt owed to them by Prince Henry. He was also a doctor, a member of the Virginia House of Delegates, and a signer of the memorial

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<sup>152</sup> Account Book and Accounts, Stickley Family Papers, VHS; Shenandoah County Will Book X, 1844-1846, Reel 43, LVA.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid (“the payment”).

calling for the transportation of more free Blacks from the state. Magruder claimed that Prince Henry owed him for purchases at his store going back to 1827 and enclosed an account statement listing each item supposedly purchased. According to his statement, the Henrys shopped at Magruder's store a few times a year buying staples such as bacon and beef. As town residents, Neaton and Prince Henry probably had a garden to grow vegetables but would have had to purchase meat and grains for their family. According to extant records Magruder was one of several providers of these items for the family. Magruder's suit assumed that Prince Henry's property would not be "sufficient to pay the debts." Instead he was going after Neaton Henry's real estate—the one and a half lots in Woodstock on which she and her son lived. The suit was likely a bid to reclaim land that Magruder himself had owned earlier in the century.<sup>154</sup>

Neaton Henry responded to the lawsuit by hiring her own attorney, Green Berry Samuels. Samuels, like other men who appear in the records associated with Prince Henry's estate settlement, was a close enough neighbor that he appeared on the same page as the Henrys in the census. He was also a slaveholder and later a member of Congress and a justice of the Virginia supreme court of appeals. On Henry's behalf Samuels fired back that when her husband died, he left no "bonds or other debts binding his real estate" and that Magruder did not offer enough evidence to "maintain his suit against her." Indeed, Samuels and Henry were following a precedent in Virginia legal culture.

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<sup>154</sup> William W. Magruder v. Admr of Prince Henry, et als, Chancery Causes Shenandoah County, VA, 1845-003, LVA ("the precise" and "sufficient"); Wayland, *A History*, 291, 371, 660; Account Book and Accounts, Stickley Papers, VHS.

During the antebellum period Virginia law treated debtors with relative leniency and specifically had a history of protecting land ownership. In particular Virginia law recognized a writ of *elegit* in which the rents and profits from a debtor's land were transferred to a lender, but not the actual ownership of land. When the court heard the suit it did not consider a writ of *elegit*. Magruder would get neither Henry's land nor any rent that she gained from the ownership of it. The lawsuit was continued until March of 1845 when it was dismissed.<sup>155</sup>

However, Henry's situation and right to dower lands were complicated by the racism inherent in the law and society concerning the recognition of Black marriages. Free African Americans were sometimes denied the legal protections of marriage just as their enslaved counterparts were. The Henrys may have been recognized as married socially, but not legally. Their names did not appear in the marriage registry for Shenandoah County. This status could also explain Neaton Henry's changing identity in the archival record. However, if that was the case, Magruder missed an opportunity to use their lack of a legal status against Neaton Henry's claim to her husband's assets as his suit never questioned their marriage. Land tax records also support the claim that the community recognized the Henrys' marriage even if their race may have legally called it into question. Land tax records show that Neaton Henry continue to own parts of lots 20 and 21

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<sup>155</sup> *Magruder*, 1845 Chancery, LVA ("bonds or" and "maintain"); Wayland, *A History*, 559. According to land tax records Magruder did manage to acquire the second half of the lot of which the Henrys owned one half after the passing of owner, who was the same person who sold the first half of the lot to the Henrys. His plan may have been to acquire both halves of lot 20 because it was next to his own lot 19; on Virginia legal culture concerning land seizures of debtors see chapter 14 of Peter J. Coleman, *Debtors and Creditors in America: Insolvency, Imprisonment for Debt, and Bankruptcy, 1607-1900* (Madison, Wis.: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1974).

until her death. In keeping with nineteenth-century laws that granted lifetime rights to a portion of a deceased husband's estate to his widow, Henry's ownership was noted "by assignment of dower." Even if the Henrys were not legally married in Shenandoah County, the local courts recognized their marriage and therefore her right to a widow's dower.<sup>156</sup>

Henry's experience of having to fight hard to resist exploitation was not unusual. Sally Dabney was purchased from her owner by her husband, Cambridge Dabney, in Richmond in 1818. If the husband had freed his wife, she could have been required to leave the state (he must have already been free before the 1806 law), so he kept her legally enslaved to protect her even as she lived as a free woman. When her husband died, Dabney was bequeathed "all his property of every description . . . which he believed was sufficient to constitute her a free woman without the formality of a deed of emancipation." For eight years Dabney had lived as the de facto free wife of a free man. The couple had no children, but they had accumulated property in their time together. Dabney had continued to live as a free woman after her husband's death, even remarrying. However, Dabney's freedom was precarious. She chanced arrest for "going at large" because she had no owner to provide a free pass or being forced to leave Virginia because she had been effectively freed after 1806. Dabney fought back with a legislative petition begging for recognition of her free status. Included in the petition were the testimonies of two white Richmonders who

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<sup>156</sup> Tera W. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 99-100; Shenandoah County Land Tax Book 1849B, LVA ("by assignment").



testified to her husband's intention of freeing Dabney. Both men also argued that Dabney had "always borne a good character" and, at forty-five years old, would have no children. Dabney's reproductive capacity was relevant because free women who had children might rely on public funds for their support—a situation Richmond's leaders preferred to avoid. The General Assembly granted Dabney's petition, giving her freedom and the right to remain in the Commonwealth. However, that freedom only extended until "some person claiming as next of kin, or as a creditor of the estate of Cambridge Dabney, shall assert and maintain a right to her as a slave." Dabney was free until she was not; until her husband's debtors could claim her.<sup>157</sup>

After her husband's death in 1841 and the closing of his estate in 1845 Neaton Henry continued to live on the land that had been her home for over a decade. The Shenandoah County court had apparently unquestioningly accepted the Henrys' marriage and granted Neaton Henry the dower rights that would allow her and her son to continue to inhabit the land purchased by Prince Henry. She may have continued to sell beer and Johnny cakes from her home to make ends meet as she fended off Magruder's attempt to claim her property. The 1850 census showed Henry and her son still living together on the land, with Henry herself as the head of household. But that census record, in which Neaton Henry is again referred to as "Grace A. Neaton," was the last time she appeared in the census. She also acquired a new legal designation. By the mid-1850s county land tax collectors began to refer to her as "colored," a label that they had not

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<sup>157</sup> Schweninger, *Southern Debate*, 150-52 ("all his property," "always borne," and "some person").

previously applied. Henry's race had not changed in the eyes of her neighbors, but its importance was heightened legally and politically. Land tax records note that in 1860 Henry's dower right to her property was dissolved on her death that year. The property transferred to John Haines, who was granted the other "part" of Henry's lots when her husband's estate was settled.<sup>158</sup>

John Haines, like Magruder and Williams, was a neighbor. Unlike Magruder and Williams, he was not a slaveholder. He was about the Henrys' age and was listed in Prince Henry's account book. In 1837 Haines stopped in Henry's shop at least once for a trim. In 1839 Henry honed a razor for "John" and charged Haines's account thirty-seven cents. At his decease Henry owed Haines a considerable sum, though his account books do not offer a clue as to what Henry received in exchange for the debt. Haines was present at the estate sale where he purchased \$139.30 of the \$200 worth of estate items, including the carriage and horses. Haines was also the last person paid by the sheriff when the estate was finally settled in 1845, receiving \$120.52 and Henry's land that was not reserved for Neaton Henry's dower. Whatever the relationship between John Haines and the Henrys and whatever had been their motives, the economic and legal system that defined the boundaries of their lives ensured that all the wealth that had been accumulated during the lives of Prince and Neaton Henry transferred to the ownership of their white neighbor on their deaths. Haines

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<sup>158</sup> Shenandoah County, Virginia, Land Tax Books, 1849, Truban Archives, Shenandoah County Library, Edinburg, VA, accessed Feb. 6, 2019; On Henry's new designation as "colored" in tax records, Martha S. Jones found the same racial marking in legal records at the time in Baltimore, suggesting that race was a category of increasing importance in the decade that would herald the Dred Scott decision and the John Brown insurrection.

received the cash and property without evident malice or hatred. Simply put the financial system worked as it was designed for free people. Specifically because the Henrys were woven so fully into the financial fabric of the community, Prince Henry's debts in life left his wife and son in reduced circumstances on his death.

Henry's son John carried on as his parents before him. Free Negro register number three hundred fifty-six was granted in 1856 to "John Henry a dark mulatto" in the same month that Democrat James Buchanan won the presidential election on a pro-slavery platform. John Henry was about thirty years old at the time. The fact that he waited so long but then registered his freedom suggests that he may have thought he was only then in danger. Indeed, the year of his registry corresponds to the year that his mother began to be noted as "colored" in the land tax records, suggesting that racial tensions which usually below the surface in quiet Shenandoah County were beginning to bubble up. The Civil War would bring tangible change to John Henry's life in the next decade. The 1867 "colored poll book" listed "John W. Henry" as a registered voter. By then forty-one years old, the son of Neaton Henry still lived in the county of his free birth, though not on his father's land, and would vote in his first election.<sup>159</sup>

The Henry family were free Blacks in a world run by whites increasingly identifying "Black" with "slave." Their wealth and their ability to hew to the standards and expectations of their neighbors allowed them to take part financially in the community and enjoy a measure of freedom. As her husband

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<sup>159</sup> Shenandoah County Minute Book, 1853-1859, LVA: 356 ("John Henry"); Colored Poll Book, 1st Magisterial District, Shenandoah Co., Va., *Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative*, <http://www.viriniamemory.com/collections/aan/>, accessed Feb. 26, 2020, LVA.

was a full participant in the web of financial arrangements that tied the community, Black and white, together, Neaton Henry was wrapped in as well. When Prince Henry died, she negotiated carefully to preserve her property and standard of living for herself and her son, fighting back when Magruder threatened her real estate ownership with old, unpaid debts, but ultimately losing all her property to another white neighbor. Henry's experience shows how credit arrangements laid bare the financial vulnerability of women of color in antebellum Virginia, an experience that led them to reach for the safety of financial freedom in the era after emancipation.

## Chapter 5 Enslaved Creditors: The Material Reality of Capitalism and it's Cultural Meaning

Molly Horniblow's name is less familiar than that of her famous granddaughter, Harriet Jacobs. Horniblow, or "Aunt Martha" as Jacobs styled her with a pseudonym in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, was born in South Carolina when it was still a colony; one of three children born to a white planter and his enslaved mistress. When the planter died, his will directed that Horniblow, her mother, and her siblings be freed and sent to St. Augustine, Florida. However, as the family sailed south to freedom during the Revolutionary War, they were kidnapped, reenslaved, and split up and sold to multiple buyers. Despite the heartbreak of her childhood, Horniblow did not lose hope for freedom. Jacobs writes that her grandmother, after working all day for her enslavers, stayed up late into the night baking crackers to sell. Proceeds from her overwork were used to clothe herself and her children and secreted away in a fund to purchase the freedom of her children. Horniblow hoped to protect her own family from the fate she had suffered. Instead, her enslaver forced her to "lend" him the cash she had saved. As we will see, the loan was the beginning of a series of tragic events in the life of Harriet Jacobs.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*, ed. Lydia Maria Francis Child (Boston, 1861), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html>. The work of Jean Fagan Yellin has been central to improving historians' understanding of Harriet Jacob's life, including knowing that she was the author of her famous narrative. See Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004) and Jean Fagan Yellin, ed., *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), among her other works on Jacobs. Other scholarship on Jacobs includes Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar, eds., *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

Enslaved people rarely appear as lenders in the scholarship on slavery and capitalism. This is in part because the lending activities of enslaved people often went undocumented like other everyday occurrences in the slaves' economy. These usually illegal activities were clandestine by necessity as much as they were a part of daily life. An examination of these lending activities aids scholars in understanding the slaves' economy by describing what was done with any cash accumulated. The rare instances in which enslaved people saved enough money to purchase freedom occurred only after years of saving. Capitalism even then provided strong incentives for savers not to leave money idle. For the majority of enslaved people who engaged in market activities but would never save significant sums of money, a small but regular cash flow would have been all that was needed to enter into lending agreements.<sup>161</sup>

Centering enslaved people as lenders allows scholars to describe more fully the cultural underpinnings of capitalism. Enslavement was an act of power, but Americans of the period also viewed debt relationships in terms of power,

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<sup>161</sup> On the slaves' economy see Lawrence T. McDonnell, "Money Knows No Master: Market Relations and the American Slave Community," in *Developing Dixie: Modernization in a Traditional Society*, ed. Winfred B. Moore, Joseph F. Tripp, and Lyon G. Tyler (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988); Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *The Slaves' Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas* (London: Frank Cass, 1991); Lorena S. Walsh, "Slave Life, Slave Society, and Tobacco Production in the Tidewater Chesapeake, 1620-1820," in *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, eds. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1993); Philip D. Morgan, "Economic Exchanges between Whites and Blacks," in *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Low Country* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Justene G. Hill, "Felonious Transactions: Legal Culture and Business Practices of Slave Economies in South Carolina 1787-1860" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2015). Much of what we do know about enslaved lenders comes from legal historians who find evidence of debt arrangements in court cases; see Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 2018) and Kimberly M. Welch, *Black Litigants in the Antebellum American South* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

going so far as comparing indebtedness to enslavement. In the order of things enslaver was above enslaved, man above woman, white above Black, and lender over debtor. What can a situation in which an enslaved Black woman became the creditor of a rich white man tell historians about culture and the economy in the antebellum South? Debt relationships tended to lay bare beliefs and assumptions not always reflected in rhetoric. This chapter argues that ideas about debt, power, and enslavement and the material reality of those institutions mutually reinforced each other.<sup>162</sup>

### **Financial Arrangements Between Enslaved and Enslaver**

William Hayden's narrative of his life provides multiple examples of a typical loan from an enslaved person to an enslaver. Born enslaved in Virginia in 1785, Hayden, at an early age and because of an unpaid debt incurred by the man who owned him, ended up in the hands of Thomas Phillips, a slave trader. Hayden traveled with Phillips through the South, serving as his clerk. Hayden wrote that he managed to save up \$75, lending the money to Phillips at six percent interest and even procuring a receipt for the transaction. When Hayden asked for the money back to pay passage home from Baltimore for his mother, his enslaver/debtor—out of spite toward the mother and a continued need for the cash—tried to convince Hayden that the woman claiming to be his mother was actually feeding him a “story trumped up to rob me of my money.” Hayden sensed duplicity and did not back down. He eventually got \$30 out of Phillips,

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<sup>162</sup> On the culture of debt in early America see Bruce H. Mann, *Republic of Debtors: Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

who only partially repaid the loan because he feared Hayden would otherwise run away.<sup>163</sup>

The episode was, like many others in pre-emancipation slave narratives, designed to appeal to middle-class white readers. Hayden embodied bourgeois ideals as a hard-working clerk who carefully saved money and prudently invested it at interest. Hayden's experience illustrated his own honor and the dishonor of Phillips, who did not pay his debts. The message was clear to middle-class readers: slavery dishonored enslaver and enslaved alike. On another similar occasion Hayden loaned Phillips \$300, for which he again received a note, and which also went unpaid for some time. When Hayden felt the time draw near to seize his freedom, he became more determined and resolute in his interactions with his owner, asserting "what I deemed my rights." As the enslaved man deviated farther from the actions and language considered by whites in keeping with the proper humility and deference of a Black man, Phillips grew angry. "Every muscle of his face was set in demoniac determination," wrote Hayden, describing a scene in which Phillips displayed and examined his pistols and a knife in front of the enslaved man in an attempt to intimidate him. When Hayden refused to cower or back down, Phillips finally repaid his debt and Hayden returned his note. Hayden's loan to Phillips did not upend the slave trader's

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<sup>163</sup> William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South* (Cincinnati, 1846), 69 ("story trumped"), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/hayden/hayden.html>.



power over him, but asserting his right to repayment did shift the dynamic.

Hayden liberated himself from enslavement when he forced Phillips to repay.<sup>164</sup>

Similarly, Oscar Taliaferro fought back legally when his enslaver continued refusal to repay a loan from him imperiled his freedom. Taliaferro's 1847 petition to the General Assembly of Virginia to remain in the Commonwealth brought to light his financial arrangements with his owner, James Blakey. Taliaferro was enslaved in the city of Richmond where he lived in close proximity to his wife, who was also enslaved. Through overwork he had saved \$400—money he hoped to apply to the purchase of his own and his wife's freedom. His petition stated that he "lent as he accumulated [the money], to his said master to keep for him, & account with him for." However, Blakey proved a poor money manager. Not only did Taliaferro lose the \$400 with no hope of recovery, but he was suddenly in danger of being sold to satisfy his owner's white lenders. Taliaferro found another Richmond enslaver to purchase him who promised to free him once his purchase price was repaid. Taliaferro worked to secure his freedom only to become sick before raising the funds to free his wife. His petition to the General Assembly asked for permission to remain in the Commonwealth with his wife—without this concession Taliaferro feared he would be forced to leave Virginia soon after he was freed. No act was passed to allow Taliaferro to remain with his wife, and his fate is unknown.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> William Hayden, *Narrative*, 97 ("what I deemed" and "every muscle"), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/hayden/hayden.html>.

<sup>165</sup> Loren Schweninger, ed., *The Southern Debate over Slavery: Volume 1: Petitions to Southern Legislatures, 1778-1864* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 197-98 ("lent as").

Because of the risks of losing one's money and one's hopes of freedom, enslaved people went to great lengths to avoid lending to their owners or even divulging to their owners that they had cash. Lunsford Lane was born in North Carolina and earned enough money through his trade as a tobacconist to purchase his freedom. While he carefully saved up the one thousand dollars he planned to offer his enslaver for his freedom, he told no one but his wife of the existence of the money, "never venturing to put out a penny." "Putting out," or lending, his earnings would have allowed Lane to collect interest, increasing his savings and protecting it from some forms of theft. However, legally the money belonged to his enslaver. Even though he described her as a "very kind woman for a slave owner," Lane knew of similar situations that had imperiled the lives and freedom of lenders—such as those of Hayden and Taliaferro. Any veneer of kindness and paternalistic concern often ended when cash was on the line in an increasingly capitalistic economy. He likely also knew that the woman's estate was insolvent, which increased his own risks as their financial fates were bound together in the ownership of his body. Instead of taking the risk of losing the money in a loan to his enslaver, Lane gave the money secretly to his wife's enslaver to buy and free him. Lane continued to labor with the goal of freeing his wife and children. After years of payments to slaveholders, harassment, physical separation from his family, and threats of lynching, the Lane family was finally

freed in 1842. Immediately Lane, his wife, his mother, and his seven children left North Carolina for a more secure freedom in Boston.<sup>166</sup>

These examples of lending relationships between enslaved and enslaver exposed the falsity of the paternalistic narrative that attempted to set the order of things. “Masters” were not supposed to enter into a subordinate financial arrangement with their slaves. An 1854 farm book used to record the daily management of Belmead plantation in Powhatan County, Virginia, attempted to set the stage for the proper relationship between enslaved people and enslavers. A farm book simultaneously served as a journal for an overseer or farm manager and a manual for how to manage a plantation. It included advertisements for mills, druggists, and books alongside advice on how to conduct an annual “inventory of negroes, stock and implements.” The farm book instructed overseers or managers that “order . . . in all things must be the aim of every man who expects to make himself a manager.” Much of the culture the book sought to animate was aspirational and did not fit the reality of slave life that historians have documented: “All running about at night is strictly prohibited,” ordered the farm book, and “No negro shall sell anything without written permission from the manager, specifying the article or articles to be sold.” The farm book reflected white supremacist notions that “it is almost universal with negroes to lie, feign ignorance or prevaricate when called upon to give evidence against others.” From the perspective of the author of the farm book the enslaved were not to be

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<sup>166</sup> Lunsford Lane, *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N.C., Embracing an Account of His Early Life* (Boston: J. G. Torrey, 1842) 16 (“never venturing”), 23-24 (“very kind”), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/lanelunsford/lane.html>.

trusted and therefore were not people with whom to enter into financial agreements.<sup>167</sup>

Harriet Jacobs shared the story of her life, and that of her grandmother, Molly Horniblow, for the purpose of exposing fictions like those expressed by the writers of the 1854 farm book. Jacob's discussion of credit relationships specifically served that goal. Horniblow was the strong matriarch of the family, well-respected by Black and white in the community. As an enslaved woman she labored unendingly for her enslaver, but also to ease the burden of slavery on her family and free them if she could. Horniblow baked at night as part of an agreement with her enslaver. She would provide clothing for herself and her children if she could keep the profit from her "midnight bakings." Jacobs's grandmother was so successful that she was able to save toward the goal of freeing her children to prevent their sale. Jacob relates that Horniblow had saved \$300 with her overwork after experiencing the heartbreak of the sale of her son. But "her mistress one day begged [the cash] as a loan," wrote Jacobs, "promising to pay her soon." Horniblow "trusted solely to [her enslaver's] honor" for the repayment of the loan, but she would be disappointed.<sup>168</sup>

Horniblow's actions, and those of her enslaver, who went unnamed in Jacob's narrative, departed from the fictions of the farm book. Like many of her peers the enslaver recognized the material advantages to herself in allowing Horniblow to participate in the slaves' economy—it saved her the expense of

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<sup>167</sup> Farmbook for Belmead, 1854, Philip St. George Cocke (1809–1861), Formbooks, 1854–1871, Mss1C6455a, VHS, 3 ("inventory of"), 4 ("order"), 10 ("all running," "no negro," and "it is almost").

<sup>168</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 12 ("midnight"), 13 ("her mistress" and "trusted").

clothing the people she enslaved. She could have benefited even more by taking Horniblow's earnings and was legally allowed to do so. However, it would have been socially detestable to simply demand the money this esteemed woman had earned on her own time. Instead, the enslaver imagined Horniblow as a lender—a convenient construction of the social and financial relationship between the two women. This construction fit the capitalist logic of the antebellum period—two rational economic actors could enter into a mutual financial agreement. The enslaver may have originally planned to repay Horniblow, but Jacob's description of the woman makes it likely that she did not. Instead, she had taken a loan of indefinite duration, safe in the knowledge that her race and her status as "owner" protected her from the power of her creditor to seek repayment.

It was not just slaveholders who used credit arrangements to further squeeze cash from enslaved people. Other whites in the community used the same scheme, taking advantage of a legal and social system that supported the property rights of creditors but not those of enslaved creditors. Israel Campbell's narrative described the extreme frugality of a white woman with whom he lived when he was hired out in his youth. One of her tricks to living as cheaply as possible was to take advantage of enslaved people's inability to enforce their claims on debts owed. Campbell wrote that enslaved young men came to town on Sundays to sell the produce of their precious overwork hours. "Aunt Katy was ever on the alert to find a stranger, who, should she espy one, she would always accost," wrote Campbell. "Aunt Katy" would make an agreement with one of the enslaved vendors, usually a child in Campbell's telling, who was instructed to

come back in the following week to be paid. Campbell supplied readers with an example exchange between the enslaved seller and the scamming woman.

"Good morning, mistress."

"Good morning, my man, and what do you wish this morning?"

"I called, mistress, for the little change you owe me."

"What change?"

"The change for the things you bought last Sunday, mistress."

"Be off from here, you rascal, I never saw you before."

"Oh, yes, mistress; do you not remember you bought some brooms, and eggs, &c., last Sunday?"

"Get out of [missing word in the original] yard this minute, or I will have Mr. Willett after you, you saucy d--l."

So the poor fellow would have to leave without a cent for his things.

The woman featured in Campbell's narrative borrowed from enslaved people in the form of goods with no intention of repaying her debt, threatening an enslaved youth with violence if he pursued his claim to repayment.<sup>169</sup>

The white woman who used credit arrangements to trick enslaved sellers out of their produce carried out a common form of economic exploitation. Despite the fact that aspects of the slaves' economy were prohibited in Virginia with the passage of laws in 1792 and 1798, the buying and selling of goods between enslaved people and others was common. Enslaved people purchased items from whites and stores to supplement the rations provided by slaveholders that never stretched far enough. Slaveholders purchased items from enslaved people to improve morale and lessen resistance. However, slaveholders also purchased goods from enslaved people because their power to control the price ensured

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<sup>169</sup> Israel Campbell, *An Autobiography. Bond and Free: Or, Yearnings for Freedom, from My Green Brier House. Being the Story of My Life in Bondage, and My Life in Freedom* (Philadelphia, 1861), 17 ("Aunt Katy" and "Good morning"), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/campbell/campbell.html>.

that they always received a bargain. In a letter from Adam Foster, a northerner visiting Mathews County, Virginia, in 1847 described enslaved African Americans who secretly spent their nights fishing for oysters to sell illegally to the oystermen who plied the rivers spilling into the Chesapeake Bay. Foster shared that “they get the little compensation for their labor and are imposed upon by the masters of these vessels who pay them in trifling articles at an exorbitant price.” Enslaved oystermen had to take whatever “trifling articles” they were offered because they had no legal recourse. These interactions show the imbalance of power in the marketplace between enslaved producers and free consumers. Credit markets were another example following this same pattern.<sup>170</sup>

Using credit arrangements to exploit and harass lenders was a scheme used by slaveholders not just against enslaved African Americans but also against whites who threatened their power and wealth. John Brown was born enslaved in Virginia and was sold by several owners until he was enslaved in Georgia. Brown described a white farmer who only employed free labor—Black and white. The man’s slaveholding neighbors colluded to displace this man whose success at growing cotton without enslaved labor undercut their own efforts to further cement slavery as the only labor option in the community. The planters paid the farmer twice the value of his land in promissory notes with the

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<sup>170</sup> Justene Hill Edwards documented the reality of enslavers using their power over enslaved producers to set the price of produce to their advantage. Hill, *Felonious Transactions*; Kimberly M. Welch in *Black Litigants* was able to document two instances in which enslaved people were able to use the court system to compel their white debtors to pay. In these cases, both in Mississippi early in the nineteenth century, neither enslaved woman sued their owner, but both relied on the court’s ability to find a “workaround” (132) and a “workable legal fiction” (156) to make their cases; Adam Foster to Cynthia, 9 January, 1847, Adam Foster Letters, Mss2F8111a, VHS (“they get” and “trifling articles”).

intention of defrauding him. When the men, now in the farmer's debt, did not pay, he threatened to sue them. The planters' wealth allowed them to pay bribes and file counter suits until the farmer was reduced to begging for corn from the enslaved families he viewed as friendly in the community. Brown was forced to aid his owner in the unfortunate farmer's murder under cover of darkness. Brown shared the story to show the ruthless means slaveholders would use to enforce white supremacy, even using a debt relationship to entrap a white farmer. In this case, as with those involving enslaved lenders, the story upends the usual narratives that describe the creditor as holding the power in the relationship. Though Brown's narrative was published in 1854, his description of slaveholders' use of credit to control and dominate a free white landowner foreshadows one of the forms of control that landowners would use to exploit Black sharecroppers after emancipation.<sup>171</sup>

However, when enslaved people attempted to enforce debt agreements, especially across the color line, they could face violence. Theodore Dwight Weld's famous exposé of slavery included the testimony of "a highly respected citizen" who witnessed slavery firsthand when he traveled South. The man recounted the tale of an enslaved man who made a loan to a "servant." The "servant" was likely a white man as he was neither referred to as a "negro" nor was he subjected to the savage beating the enslaved man later received. "Twelve and a half or twenty-five cents," the amount of the loan, was

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<sup>171</sup> L. A. Chamerovzow, ed., *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Now in England* (London, 1855), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jbrown/jbrown.html>.



communicated by Weld imprecisely to indicate that the amount was a paltry sum and not worth the retribution that the enslaved man would receive from white men in authority when he attempted to enforce the agreement between himself and the servant. When the servant did not pay his debt the enslaved man carried away a carpet in repayment from the tavern in which the servant was employed. The servant denied any part in the situation. In retribution for “stealing” the carpet the tavern keeper, his son, and another man beat the enslaved man so severely that he later died of his wounds. The men were acquitted of the murder but were ordered to pay damages to the unfortunate enslaved man’s owner. The story was conveyed to illustrate vividly the useless brutality and inhumanity of slavery. The small value of the debt contrasted with the oversized punishment meted out by the tavern-keeper show the unfair nature of slavery. Similarly, the lack of justice for the enslaved man contrasted with the financial recompense doled out to his enslaver highlight the profound injustice of the system. Another truth of the system was also laid bare. Whites relied on enslaved people for loans of cash and then punished them when they dared collect.<sup>172</sup>

### **The Language of Debt Relationships**

Historians who write about debt often describe Black creditors as reversing what whites imagined was the natural order of things. Kimberly M. Welch writes that “debt meant dependency on and subordination to a creditor.

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<sup>172</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), 90 (all quotes), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/weld/weld.html>.

When that creditor was black, the white borrower's world tilted." Slave narratives were often written exactly for the purpose of tilting white perceptions of the world. George Moses Horton used the same language of credit and debt in one poem condemning the institution of slavery, casting the enslaved in the role of "creditor." Born enslaved, Horton's genius for writing made him an acclaimed poet later in life in freedom in the North. "The Creditor to His Proud Debtor" describes the slaveholder in the role of a dandy whose fine clothing is owed to the subjugated slave. "Tott'ring Johny" struts, boasts, smokes a cigar, and jiggles coins in his pocket. But Horton warns him that "the wind would blow your plume aside if half your debts were paid" and that "you would be trash, if your accounts were paid." Horton would "leave you bare without that coat, for which you have not paid." Borrowing from the language of debt relationships, the poem looks forward to a day when the debts of slaveholders will be paid and "Tott'ring Johny" finds "a sheriff at your back."<sup>173</sup>

Similarly, Lewis Garrard Clarke included in the 1845 narrative of his escape from slavery in Kentucky an account page showing the balance of debt between an enslaved man and his enslaver. Clarke credited \$100 to "John Work-Without-Pay," a hypothetical enslaved man. Structuring the account page like that in a store or plantation account book, he listed the "contra credit" applied to the account of the enslaved. "Ichabod Live-Without-Work" had provided his enslaved property with cornmeal and clothing and deducted the value of livestock

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<sup>173</sup> George Moses Horton, *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North Carolina, to Which Is Prefixed the Life of the Author*. (Hillsborough, NC: Heartt, 1845), 67-68 (all quotes), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/hortonpoem/hortonpoem.html>; Welch, *Black Litigants*, 128-29 ("debt meant").

he assumed the man had stolen from him for a total of \$11.51 ½. The account stood at \$88.48 ½ owed to the enslaved man to illustrate Clarke's point that the care enslavers were to take of their enslaved property could never equal the amount of labor they took from them, refuting the claim that slaveholders were caring paternalists. Clarke added "the account stands unbalanced thus till the great day of reckoning comes." In a world of financial capitalism, the language of credit and debt provided those who sympathized with the plight of the enslaved a fitting metaphor for the unfairness and deprivation of slavery.<sup>174</sup>

Enslavers also used the language of the debits and credits to describe their ownership of humans as property. Jacob Aldrich, who was interviewed in the 1930s by Works Progress Administration writers, described how his father was jailed near New Orleans after seven months of living as a fugitive from slavery. Aldrich's father was apprehended when he mixed with a crowd of gamblers who became rowdy. When his owner claimed him from the jailhouse the slaveholder beat the unfortunate man and returned him to work. His enslaver claimed "pa owed him sixty cords of wood for de time he was off and made him work every Sunday 'til he got dat sixty cords cut." Enslavers, operating in a capitalist world, had the power to demand payment from the enslaved whenever they imagined they were "owed."<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Lewis Garrard Clarke, *Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clarke, during a Captivity of More Than Twenty-five Years*, ed. Joseph Cammet Lovejoy (Boston: D. H. Ela, 1845), 75 (all quotes), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/clarke/clarke.html>.

<sup>175</sup> *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, CD-ROM., Interview with Jacob Aldrich ("pa owed").

At times African Americans leveraged these constructed social debt relationships to further their own goals. Peggue Potter was born enslaved in Virginia but was freed by her enslavers who also helped her to emigrate to the American colony of Liberia with the Colonization Society of America. Potter wrote back home to her former owners in Clarke County to share family news and report on the conditions of colonists. “I am well,” wrote Potter who also noted that “if a man is got money he can live.” However, life was difficult, and it took all of Potter’s time to get enough to feed and clothe her children. Potter hoped to trade in some of the goodwill she felt she was owed by her former enslavers. She had gone along with their colonization scheme at great personal risk to herself and her family. In return she asked, “I beg you if you Please to send my money.” If not money then “Tobacco, Cloth & Flower [flour] & meat, Powder & gune and nail.” The colonists wrote back to Virginia requesting assistance multiple times in the 1840s, but still conditions remained difficult in Monrovia. By 1855 some members of the group were returning to the United States. John M. Page wrote to his white sponsor to thank him for being willing to reimburse Page’s expense for the passage back from Africa. However, money was tight. Page asked that he be “privileged from, liquidating said expesis untill my arrival in the U States.” Page banked on his “credit” with the family who had formerly enslaved him to get an advance on the money for his return voyage.<sup>176</sup>

Pre-emancipation slave narratives sometimes used Black lending as a rhetorical device to show the grace and generosity of enslaved people despite all

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<sup>176</sup> Mary F. Goodwin, “A Liberian Packet,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 59, no. 1 (1951): 72-88, 74 (“I am well,” “if a man,” “I beg you,” and “tobacco”), 85 (“privileged from”).

they had suffered at the hands of enslavers. Okah Tubbee related a story in his narrative to illustrate his own penchant for charity. When on the streets of New Orleans he saw the wife of the owner who had severely abused him Tubbee took pity on the woman. She explained that her husband had died and she and her child were hungry. The wife asked the man her husband had formerly enslaved for a loan so she could purchase food. Tubbee wrote that he did not hesitate to give her five dollars and fifty cents, more than half of the ten dollars he had in his pocket. To the child with her he gave twenty-five cents. The woman, still treating Tubbee's gift as a loan, came to his house to pay him back, but Tubbee wrote that he refused her, instead giving her two dollars and fifty cents to buy shoes for her "partly barefooted" feet. He was so moved by the woman's desperation that Tubbee generously allowed her to live in his house rent free for three months. Tubbee's purpose in relaying the story was to exhibit his graciousness. Greater than the five dollars and fifty cents the woman owed Tubbee was the justice that he was owed for the abuse he had suffered at the hands of her husband. Tubbee forgave both debts out of grace and charity.<sup>177</sup>

In another story related by Tubbee, his goal was again to show charity specifically by not taking repayment for debt. Tubbee owed a friend thirteen dollars and wanted to pay his debts before he left town. When he offered the money to his friend, the friend refused payment, saying "he was only trying my integrity." Having proven his integrity Tubbee found a trusted friend. Repaying

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<sup>177</sup> Okah Tubbee, *A Thrilling Sketch of the Life of the Distinguished Chief Okah Tubbee Alias, Wm. Chubbee*, ed. Lewis Leonidas Allen (New York: L. L. Allen, 1848), 24 ("partly"), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/tubbee1848/tubbee1848.html>.

debts showed integrity but refusing to accept the repayment of debts showed grace.<sup>178</sup>

The biography of Pierre Toussaint, written by novelist Hannah Farnham Sawyer Lee, provides another example in which the enslaved lender exhibits his good nature and superior character by generously forgiving his debtors.

Toussaint was born in 1766 on St. Domingo but was taken by his enslavers to New York when the Haitian Revolution began and employed by them as a hairdresser. Toussaint was “the most respected and beloved negro in New York” by the time of his death according to Lee. The mid-nineteenth century biography drips with the sentimental tones of racial apologists’ descriptions of “respected” African Americans. Toussaint is described as the “pet of the plantation” and part of a “beautiful family picture” that included his enslavers. The ever-faithful Toussaint is depicted using his own money to pay a debt for his owner. When the woman equivocates as to when she would be able to return payment, Toussaint insists that she did not need to pay him back. Lee described Toussaint as “perfectly contented with his condition” because “his great object was to serve” his enslaver. By casting Toussaint as a forgiving creditor, Lee attempted to soothe her white, northern, female readers who had grown increasingly uncomfortable with slavery since the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* two years

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<sup>178</sup> Tubbee, *A Thrilling Sketch*, 24 (“he was”). Tubbee’s narrative in its illustrations of grace follows other similar works that borrowed from Judeo-Christian imagery, as described by Frances Smith Foster in *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

earlier. Lee hoped to convey to her readers that Black Americans would forgive white Americans the enormous debt they were owed through enslavement.<sup>179</sup>

The application of the language of financial ledgers to enslavement continued long after the end of slavery and was used by former slaveholders to reimagine the connection between enslaver and enslaved as one of mutual obligation. The beginning of the twentieth century was the height of racial violence in the South and the misremembering and reimagining of the narrative of slavery and the Civil War. Not surprisingly, as the memory of slavery was recast to fit a Jim Crow narrative, whites employed the language of debt to express the close relationships between enslaved and enslaver, but this time roles were reversed. The *New York Herald* profiled a freedman named Aaron Burton. Burton was born enslaved to the Mosby family in Virginia and was taken by his owner, the famous guerilla leader, John Singleton Mosby, as his personal body servant when he joined the Confederate cavalry. The details that emerge from the newspaper profile of Burton show that his life followed a story of enslavement and freedom familiar to readers of slave narratives—forced relocation, change in ownership, and finally freedom. As a young man Burton was traded between members of the family that held him as a slave, a “present” from a father to his daughter. When he was selected to serve as his enslaver’s personal servant during his time in the Confederate Army, Burton “didn’t want to go away to the war, but they said I must go.” When Burton was finally able to claim his freedom

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<sup>179</sup> Hannah Farnham Sawyer Lee, *Memoir of Pierre Toussaint, Born a Slave in St. Domingo* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Company, 1854), 121 (“the most respected”), 4 (“pet” and “beautiful”), 20-21 (“perfectly”), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/leehf/leehf.html>; Lee’s other fiction writing also uses the themes of debt and speculation for their potential to produce anxiety. See

with the defeat of the Confederacy, he and his family moved to New York City, leaving the Mosbys behind.<sup>180</sup>

The article reflects the sentimental, racially harmonious narrative that was being reimagined by former slaveholders to fit their contemporary political needs. It was meant to highlight not Burton's painful history of enslavement but the close relationship between the formerly enslaved man and the family of enslavers. The article mentions that Mosby still corresponded with the man he enslaved, writing, "you were always faithful to me, and I shall always remember you for it." Like a debtor who hoped to, but would in reality never pay a debt, the former slaveholder "sends [Burton] a check every once in a while." He owed Burton. By Burton's admission he "raised Colonel Mosby" and then the enslaved man served the cavalry officer "faithfully." The institution of slavery was reimagined as creating a debt relationship in which the enslaved person was the creditor and in which the slaveholder, who formerly claimed mastery over every aspect of the lives of the enslaved, now viewed himself as a debtor. Horton and Clarke referred to the enslaved as creditors because of what was violently taken from them. However, when white writers—such as the writer for the *New York Herald*—imagined enslaved people as creditors it was for the political convenience of casting the relationships between enslaver and enslaved as familial and paternalistic.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Stuart-Mosby Historical Society, papers, 1858–1929, Mss3St935a, Section 14, VHS ("didn't want").

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., (all quotes).



Harriet Jacobs made clear that the relationship between Horniblow and her enslaver was purely profit-based. When her owner died, Jacobs's grandmother was informed by the executor of the woman's estate that "the estate was insolvent, and the law prohibited payment" of her debt to Horniblow. This arrangement allowed the family to cover the theft of Horniblow's cash legally while also securing their enslavement of her and her children. Jacobs saw through this subterfuge. She noted that a silver candelabra was kept by the family. The insolvency that did not prevent the family from keeping valuable items stood as a barrier between Jacobs's grandmother and freedom. Despite a will that stated the aged woman should be free, the executor determined that she should instead be sold to pay debts. Jacobs placed the incident in the larger context of enslavement. This was not about the lax morality of one woman but typical of a slave system built for the purpose of extracting value from Black people. Credit arrangements in which the enslaved lent to their enslavers, far from upending the order of things, was a normal activity that supported the goals of white supremacy. Later in her narrative Jacobs drove home the point when she wrote that "Mr. Thorne [a relative of the white man who fathered Jacobs' children] had become poor and reckless long before he left the south." This was a dangerous condition for the owner of an enslaved person, because "such persons had much rather go to one of the faithful old slaves to borrow a dollar . . . than to go to one whom they consider an equal." The law was on the side of owners; anything their slaves "owned" was legally the property of slaveholders.

Borrowing the cash of an enslaved person helped them in a pinch, preserved their dignity before other whites, and was protected from lawsuits.<sup>182</sup>

## **Building Community**

Lenders envisioned some debt relationships as constructive of community through both the creation of relationships of obligation and in the generation of economic growth. In the narrative of his life William Hayden not only loaned cash to his enslaver but described giving money to children to buy treats. When the children's mother asked Hayden the reason for his generosity the man replied, "I was sowing the seeds now in the shape of cents, which should, in the course of time, sprout to dollars--and the debt would be paid, not in filthy lucre, but by releasing me from a difficulty more essential than the wealth of all the south." And he was repaid. The same woman and children who had received Hayden's kindness years before fed and cared for him when he was jailed for asserting his freedom. Hayden cultivated other loyal friends in the same way. On "Uncle Daniel" the enslaved man "used to lavish a great deal of loose change." The investment paid dividends when Hayden could trust the old man to provide him a place to hide during his flight from slavery. These debt relationships allowed Hayden to communicate to his audience that lending could be an investment in one's community, benefiting others and oneself simultaneously. The middle-class white readers of his narrative would have understood that Hayden was signaling his responsible and profitable use of credit. Lending to his enslavers almost got

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<sup>182</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 13 ("the estate"), 268 ("Mr. Thorne" and "such persons").

him killed, but lending to powerless children and the elderly poor brought him freedom.<sup>183</sup>

The will of Dangerfield Hunter provides archival documentation of community bonds strengthened by financial bonds. Hunter's will, written in 1856, is unusual only because few wills of enslaved people survive today. Otherwise it was structured like the will of anyone who was legally allowed to direct the ownership of property. Hunter was seventy-five years old when he wrote his will in 1856 in Augusta County, Virginia. He owned a number of goods that he parceled out among his family, acquaintances, and owners. His nephew received his bedstead and bedding. A woman named Addy Robinson received "my Black Sal Hen and her 4 chickens." Another nephew received "one fine shirt and a black Cravat." One line in the will shows the connections of the community through debt. Hunter wrote "Anderson L owes me 75 Cts which is to be added to the price of one old turkey and whatever young ones may be after John gets his third and used to pay a debt in Glinders store of about \$1.50." "Anderson L" was Anderson Lindsey, who was bequeathed Hunter's "big Pot, Pot Rack and Pot Hooks." Lindsey was about fifty years old when Hunter died. The two men may have been friends or kin. Hunter did not lend to Lindsey to profit from the interest on the debt. Instead, in addition to social bonds, Hunter and Lindsey were tied in debt bonds that reinforced their mutual obligations to each other.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden*, 105 ("I was sowing"), 112 ("Uncle Daniel"). As Mehrsa Baradaran shows in *The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), community lending or Black banking would never be enough to overcome white supremacy.

<sup>184</sup> Hunter, Dangerfield (d. 1856), will, 1856, Mss2H9167a1, VHS (all quotes).

Like the individuals mentioned in Hunter's will, the social ties between Madison Henderson, Alfred Amos Warrick, James W. Seward, and Charles Brown were reinforced in the credit arrangements between them. In 1841 the four men were accused of conspiring to steal money from the safe of Messrs. Simonds & Morrison, burning down the store and banking house on the property, and murdering the two young white men inside. Each man, in his confession, described the circumstances of his birth and how he fell into a life of crime with the others. Henderson, a Virginian by birth, was enslaved in New Orleans when he met Brown, who was free. Brown tried to work himself into Henderson's good graces, but Henderson "was rather shy of him." Finally Brown gave Henderson a loan for \$100. Henderson stated that he "returned him a \$50 bill . . . and \$50 in silver . . . After that, we became pretty intimate friends." After the friends committed murder and theft together, Seward testified that Henderson "loaned me a small part of [the stolen money]." These loans between co-conspirators reinforced the social bonds between the men. The debt established trust between the friends and spread the plundered cash, and the complicity for its acquisition, among the four men. The men were hanged together for murder and other crimes in July of 1841.<sup>185</sup>

Community-building through loans and financial ties broke down when debtors did not pay. William J. Anderson was born free in Virginia but bound out

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<sup>185</sup> Madison Henderson et al., *Trials and Confessions of Madison Henderson, Alias Blanchard, Alfred Amos Warrick, James W. Seward, and Charles Brown, Murderers of Jesse Baker and Jacob Weaver* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chambers and Knapp, 1841), 24 ("was rather" and "returned him"), 62 ("loaned me"), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/henderson/henderson.html>; On the community, experiences, and goals of enslaved people who enacted fugitivity from enslavement see S. Charles Bolton, *Fugitivism: Escaping Slavery in the Lower Mississippi Valley, 1820-1860* (Fayetteville, AK: The University of Arkansas Press, 2019).

by his destitute mother and “under slave influence [he] had to live and suffer” until he was kidnapped into slavery. After his successful escape to Indiana Anderson became a businessman and leader in the AME Church. He ran a “business of grocery keeping, huckstering, etc.” catering to the free Black population, which proved a “ruinous move.” He writes that he was too trusting of his customers, extending credit too easily. His debtors “pleaded poverty and inability to pay.” Some skipped town. Others, according to Anderson, preferred to fight him than pay their debts. Anderson was disappointed with this time in his life, writing that “the remembrance of their unmanly treatment of me, stirs up the sorrow of my heart.” Anderson imagined that members of his community would support one another through lending. He bought into a notion that would perhaps also resonate with the middle-class readers of slave narratives: supporting less fortunate members of the community with loans would affect social and economic uplift. When his loans went unpaid it challenged his vision of society and put him out of business. The formerly enslaved man moved on to Indianapolis and committed himself to raising money to build churches.<sup>186</sup>

Slaveholders used the knowledge of the lending activities of enslaved people to their own advantage. Mary Prince never lived in the United States—she was born in Bermuda and found freedom in London—but her story closely parallels those of people enslaved on the continent. Prince attempted to free herself through purchase many times. Often these aborted agreements included

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<sup>186</sup> William J. Anderson. *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson, Twenty-four Years a Slave* (Chicago: Daily Tribune Book and Job Printing Office, 1857), 5 (“under slave”), 42-43 (“business,” “ruinous,” “pleaded,” and “the remembrance”), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/andersonw/andersonw.html>.

credit arrangements, but her hopes of freedom were denied over and over. Prince finally claimed freedom in England, where she was carried by her enslaver, John Wood, to care for his child; Wood evidently assumed his enslaved property was secure and Prince would obediently return with them to the West Indies because her husband remained there. Prince concluded her 1831 narrative in limbo. She had claimed her long-denied freedom, but could only enjoy it in England away from her husband, unable to return to Antigua where she would be reenslaved. The editor included a supplement with letters and arguments supporting Prince's claim to freedom and to refute allegations made by her former enslaver. In one letter Wood claimed that Prince had between thirty-six and forty pounds sterling on her in England that she had lent to "a white man" and that Wood had taken "some trouble" to recover. Wood's purpose in sharing this information was to undercut Prince's reputation as a poor woman who needed the assistance of the English people who supported her cause. Instead, Wood painted Prince as a woman with enough means to lend to a white man.<sup>187</sup>

The illiterate Prince responded to Wood's attack through her editor, saying that she at one time had a total of \$113—this may have been the money she had previously saved to purchase her freedom—but that little was left, "the rest having been partly advanced, as she states, to assist her husband, and partly lost by being lodged in unfaithful custody." Here Prince's experience mirrors

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<sup>187</sup> Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself. With a Supplement by the Editor. To Which Is Added, the Narrative of Asa-Asa, a Captured African* (London: F. Westley and A. H. Davis, 1831), 28 ("a white man" and "some trouble"), 31 ("the rest"), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/prince/prince.html>.

those of other enslaved lenders. With a legal system designed to reduce enslaved people to property, their own property could be impossible to recover. The person in whom Prince had “lodged” the cash had proven unfaithful, leaving her with almost nothing. Loans Prince made to help her husband, who was free and working as a carpenter and cooper in Antigua, had not been repaid. Prince’s enslaver’s attempts to spin her lending activities into an argument to discredit the woman failed to return her, enslaved, to Antigua, but contributed to keeping her impoverished.<sup>188</sup>

Foreshadowing the role of savings banks, lending cash out to trusted members of the community was a way to protect it from theft and grow the principal with interest. In addition to his balance sheet illustration of the debt that enslavers owed the enslaved, Lewis Garrard Clarke’s narrative provides an example of this form of lending. Clarke described the various means through which he and members of his family claimed freedom. Clarke escaped to Ohio. One member of his family borrowed money from planter, politician, and opponent of slavery Cassius Clay. Though the man finally repaid Clay, securing his own freedom, he died before he could earn enough money to purchase his wife and children. Clarke’s brother Cyrus was owed “several little sums of money in the hands of the foreman of the tan-yard, and in other hands” for work he had done and small loans he had made. Clarke assisted his brother in his own successful escape from slavery, not by purchasing his freedom, but by collecting in various

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<sup>188</sup> Prince, *The History*, 31 (“the rest”); Until 1834 slavery was legal in the British empire, but only outside of England itself, which allowed Prince to claim freedom as long as she resided in England.

ways on some of these debts to raise money for flight to the North. Cyrus Clarke was tied into the community through webs of debt, choosing to leave his money in the hands of others he trusted rather than risk holding it and having it seized by his enslavers. The strategy proved useful when Clarke was able to collect on these small debts to raise the capital his brother needed to gain freedom.<sup>189</sup>

However, financial investments in one's community were not always profitable. The woman known to the world as Sojourner Truth for her powerful oratory was also a religious zealot who joined the infamous Kingdom of Matthias. As a free woman living in New York City, Truth "accumulated more than enough to supply all her wants, and she placed all the overplus in the Savings' Bank." She then became convinced by her employer of the truth of the prophet Matthias and invested her savings and her own labor in his Kingdom. Its followers assumed the Kingdom would profit spiritually and financially—its adherents investing in stoves and other money-making ventures. Truth assumed the same, believing that the fund would "supply all her wants, at all times and in all emergencies, and to the end of her life." Truth's investment of the only savings she ever had was effectively a loan. The money was given to others for their use with the assumption that she would eventually receive profit in the form of interest on her investment. When the extravagances of the Kingdom were exposed and it disintegrated, Truth "recovered a few articles of furniture from the wreck of the kingdom, and received a small sum of money," but she never recovered the money she had lent. Truth went on to work for the end of slavery

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<sup>189</sup> Clark, *Narrative of the Sufferings*, 50 ("several little").



and continued in her faith, assuming her memorable name, but remained scarred by her experience in the Kingdom of Matthias.<sup>190</sup>

Published slave narratives also show that African Americans were active in short-term lending arrangements in their communities. John P. Parker threw himself into the business of pawning to raise the cash to free himself from slavery. Parker had made an agreement with a woman who would buy him from his enslaver, promising to grant him legal freedom when he repaid the debt. Parker was an iron molder by trade. To supplement his work and repay his debt more quickly, Parker noted in his autobiography that he “ran a regular three-ball pawnshop, buying and selling anything and everything offered me.” Parker offered scant details in his autobiography about the business and gave no indication that he continued the work beyond the purchase of his freedom. In her examination of nineteenth-century pawning, one historian has stressed that short-term credit in the form of pawning was necessary for the rise of industrial capitalism. She writes that pawnbroking has been derided by Americans since the Revolution because Americans have always been suspicious of usury, and because the industry lays bare one of the negative externalities of capitalism—its generation of cyclical poverty. Far from being in the business to exploit their clients, a perception fed by antisemitism toward predominantly Jewish pawnbrokers, these businesspeople filled a need for short-term capital within their communities. Parker’s narrative describes his pawnbroking business

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<sup>190</sup> Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828*, ed. Olive Gilbert (Boston: The Author, 1850), 97-98 (all quotes), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/truth50/truth50.html>.

consistent with this analysis. Once he had built up a small amount of capital through his work at the foundry, he would have offered loans, less than a week at a time, secured by consumer goods, to those within his network, likely other African Americans and working-class whites. The loans assisted others in a financial pinch and, if national figures can be extrapolated, were repaid at a rate of 85-90 percent, likely earning Parker a tidy profit that he applied to his debt and his freedom.<sup>191</sup>

The coming of the Civil War afforded enslaved African Americans new opportunities to fight for the end of slavery and resist white supremacy. William Henry Singleton lent his labor to the effort. Singleton in his narrative described how he followed his enslaver to war as his servant, learning military arts from the man before he escaped to Union lines. Singleton was able to gain employment as the servant of an officer and used his position to argue for allowing Black recruits into the Union army. Singleton was willing to extend credit in the form of his labor with the hope that in his work he could advocate for the end of slavery. When the colonel to whom he was assigned dismissed his idea that the Union army would allow him to fight, he demanded the payment of his wages. Singleton took the five dollars he was paid by the Union colonel and used the money to lease a church building in which he recruited and trained a black regiment of soldiers. In 1863 Singleton's men finally entered the Union army as the 35th

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<sup>191</sup> John P. Parker, *His Promised Land: The Autobiography of John P. Parker, Former Slave and Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, ed. Stuart Seely Sprague (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 67 ("ran a regular"); For more on pawning in the period see Wendy A. Woloson, *In Hock: Pawning in America from Independence Through the Great Depression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Regiment, United States Colored Troops, whose actions, and mere presence, on the battlefield helped bring down the Confederacy and served as a witness for the fitness of African American men for citizenship.<sup>192</sup>

The Freedmen's Bureau provided a new avenue for the reparation of unpaid debt to formerly enslaved people. Milton Green Burks of Craig County, Virginia, was one of many who used the Bureau to force his debtor, George W. Hutchison, to pay in 1865. Historians have shown that early labor contracts between formerly enslaved people and former enslavers were modeled on slavery. They were also debt relationships; laborers lent their labor all season with the assurance that landowners would pay their debts at the end of the contract. But landowners were notoriously short on cash and reluctant to change the practices they had perfected in slavery. "The order and labour on the Plantation to be the same in every respect as formerly," one contract provided in 1866. Unhappy with Hutchison's refusal to pay him in cash and instead compensate his labor in clothing, Burks took his case to the supervising Freedmen's agent. The agent wrote to Hutchison that he was "required to settle what balance may be due." African Americans would continue to use the channels available to them post-emancipation to resist white supremacy.<sup>193</sup>

Molly Horniblow "lived to rejoice in [her granddaughter's] freedom," but died without reparation for the debts she was owed by her enslavers. In her last

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<sup>192</sup> William Henry Singleton, *Recollections of My Slavery Days* (Peekskill, NY: Highland Democrat, 1922), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/singleton/singleton.html>.

<sup>193</sup> Freedman contract 1866, Skipwith family papers, Mss1Sk366a, VHS ("the order"); Charles S. Scheaffer to George W. Hutchison, 13 August 1866, Hutchison family papers, Mss1H9754a, VHS ("required to"). On Reconstruction-era laborers as lenders see Gerald David Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862-1882* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

letter to Jacobs, who was living in the North with her children, this merciful woman expressed her hope that the man who had oppressed her family had found peace with God. Jacobs could not share the grace shown by her grandmother. Her narrative of her life was written to show the myriad ways in which the system of slavery was an affront to humanity. Slaveholders created a system in which owners could compel work by, rape, and abuse victims. Leaning on the enslaved for any cash they produced in the slaves' economy supported their power as enslavers. Loans could also be constructive of community in ways that allowed African Americans to resist white supremacy, but lending did not necessarily put one in a position of power. On the contrary, African American lenders were liable to exploitation just as when they were indebted. As social commentators in the era observed credit arrangements, they applied the language of debt to descriptions of enslavement. Proponents and opponents of slavery alike used familiar debt structures to shape cultural understandings of slavery, race, and indebtedness. As David Walker wrote in his *Appeal* about the historic abuse of Africa and its people, "May we not hope that America will extinguish a great portion of that moral debt which she has contracted to that unfortunate continent?"<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 302 ("lived to"); David Walker, *Walker's Appeal, In Four Articles; Together With A Preamble, To The Coloured Citizens Of The World, Third And Last Edition* (Boston: Revised And Published By David Walker, 1830), 51 ("may we not"), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/walker/walker.html>.

## Conclusion

On July 1, 2020 staff members of Richmond's First Baptist Church rang the church's bell in celebration of the removal of the Stonewall Jackson statue from Monument Avenue. Ringing the 179-year-old bell was a symbolic show of support for the movement for racial justice that exploded onto the streets of Richmond following the murder of George Floyd in May of that year. Activists called for an end to police killings and the removal of Confederate monuments, among other demands. According to local press, members of First Baptist rang the bell and offered water to those passing by its steps on the way to the monument to "come down on the right side of history." First Baptist's bell was indeed symbolic, because the bell that was almost "melted for cannon" in support of the Confederacy in 1862 now rang out for justice. While the motives of the July 2020 bell ringers no doubt reflected an honest sense of justice, the bell itself was tied to First Baptist's nineteenth-century use of lending arrangements as a performative display of justice and charity even as they limited the ability of their Black brethren to resist slavery and white supremacy.<sup>195</sup>

In 1841, the same year the bell was cast for First Baptist to celebrate the construction of a new church building, the white members voted to "allow" the Black members to break off and form their own congregation. Like so many other actors in this study, the white congregants of First Baptist Church viewed their

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<sup>195</sup> Bill Lohmann, "Confederate soldiers almost used this Richmond bell for munitions; Wednesday it rang in a new era on Monument" *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. July 2, 2020. [https://richmond.com/news/local/lohmann-confederate-soldiers-almost-used-this-richmond-bell-for-munitions-wednesday-it-rang-in-a/article\\_de663fa4-8274-55b9-8a36-7939163acb6e.html](https://richmond.com/news/local/lohmann-confederate-soldiers-almost-used-this-richmond-bell-for-munitions-wednesday-it-rang-in-a/article_de663fa4-8274-55b9-8a36-7939163acb6e.html).

Black fellow believers as unworthy of full admittance to citizenship in their community. The Black members viewed the split as an opportunity to distance themselves from the racism they had experienced at First Baptist. They formed First African Baptist Church and purchased the former First Baptist Church building from the white congregants. First Baptist entered into a loan agreement with First African Baptist to allow the congregation to purchase the buildings outright ostensibly “out of love for them, and from pure regard to their spiritual interests.”<sup>196</sup>

This dissertation has shown how racial capitalism affected the lives of free and enslaved African Americans beyond enslavement. Indeed, slavery was just one economic institution within a broader capitalist system. Paradoxically, freedom for some Black Americans meant exposure to other financial systems designed to control and exploit them such as jail debt and loan agreements that privileged the rights of whites. These systems would be ramped up by former slaveholders who maintained power after emancipation. When Depression-Era interviewers asked Margrett Nillin about the difference between slavery and freedom Nillin stated, “in slavery I owned nothing, and never owed nothing.” She wrote that after emancipation she felt the responsibility of debt for the first time. Nillin stated, “in slavery, I had no worriment, but I’d take the freedom.” Though

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<sup>196</sup> Gregg D. Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2000); Charles F. Irons, “And All These Things Shall Be Added Unto You: The First African Baptist Church, Richmond, 1841- 1865,” *Virginia Cavalcade* 47, no. 1 (1998): 26-35; Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (Manchester: Lee and Glynn, 1851), 30 (“out of love”), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brownbox/brownbox.html>.

Nillin preferred freedom to slavery, she acknowledged that being recognized as a rational economic agent by the law opened her to new difficulties.<sup>197</sup>

Antebellum Black Virginians shaped freedom to fit their needs despite whites' attempts to oppress them. They supported the purchase of others' freedom with subscriptions, worked their networks to escape enslavement through jail debt, lent within their communities, and shaped cultural ideas about creditworthiness and honor. Though they intimately understood the difficulties of a life of slavery and the effects of racial capitalism even on free people of color, African Americans lived lives of joy and beauty. Elizabeth Keckly took great pride in her work dressing Mary Todd Lincoln and in her proximity to the president. Harriet Jacobs loved and honored the dear grandmother who cared for her as a child and then as a fugitive from slavery. The members of First African Baptist Church navigated Virginia laws meant to keep them under the supervision of direction of whites to provide leadership to the Black community in Richmond.

The members of First Baptist Church understood how their actions were damaging to the lives of their Black fellow believers. They cloaked their actions in the language of love and "fairness" and hid behind the law that privileged their whiteness. Henry "Box" Brown, known for his escape from enslavement in Richmond by mailing himself in a box to freedom in the North, was a member of First Baptist Church before the split. In his narrative Brown described the loan between First Baptist Church and First African Baptist Church as a "pious fraud" to keep members of First African from purchasing freedom for enslaved people

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<sup>197</sup> *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, CD-ROM, interview with Margaret Nillin, (all quotes).

associated with the church. Brown writes that when a “splendid new church was built for the whites,” which featured the aforementioned bell, the old building was offered to First African for \$3,000, a great deal below its value of \$13,000. Brown wrote that it was understandable that the members of First African would want to take advantage of a deal and have a building where they could meet to worship on their own terms, but this “deal” was meant to extort. “The negroes paid what was at first demanded of them for the old building, but when they wished to get it placed entirely in their hands, they were charged with a still further sum; and after they had paid that, they had still more to pay,” wrote Brown.<sup>198</sup>

Much has changed since First African Baptist Church parted ways with First Baptist Church, but so much else has not. Americans still largely worship in segregated churches. In the post-emancipation period African American borrowers had greater opportunities to participate in the financial system through the expanded operation of Black-owned banks but also experienced redlining and other discriminatory practices that restricted their access to credit and maintained lines of segregation. When African Americans could get credit, it was often at high interest rates in the form of store credit or more highly exploitative operations like car dealership financing or title loans. The quantification of credit scoring in the 1960s and 1970s baked racism and other inequalities into lending. In 2020 the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System reported that the median white family wealth was eight times the median wealth of Black families,

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<sup>198</sup> Brown, *Narrative of the Life*, 30 (“pious fraud”), 31 (“splendid new”) and (“the negroes paid”).



just \$24,100 in 2019. Despite the formidable gains Black Americans and their allies have made in pursuit of racial equality, racial injustice persists.<sup>199</sup>

Leadership of First African Baptist and First Baptist met in 1848 and finally agreed that the Black congregation would pay \$500 more to settle the matter. The members of the congregation of First African Baptist Church had paid the loan securing the church building for their use—at a higher rate than they had originally agreed. The church attracted members of Richmond’s Black elite, who tended to be literate and the owners of property and were sometimes afforded a measure of respect in the white community, within racial boundaries. Regardless of these facts, their race, inscribed in the law, endangered their claim to the building in which they had worshiped for decades and had now paid for in full.<sup>200</sup>

Despite these initial setbacks, First African Baptist Church continued to grow and undertake its missionary and evangelical activities. It added members from among the free and enslaved African Americans in the city. Congregants sponsored missionaries to Africa and migrants to Liberia. They made gifts to the

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<sup>199</sup> On credit issues for Black Americans in the post emancipation period see Louis Hyman, “Ending Discrimination, Legitimizing Debt: The Political Economy of Race, Gender, and Credit Access in the 1960s and 1970s,” *Enterprise and Society* 12 (March 2011): 200-232; Mehrsa Baradaran, *The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017); Robert W. Fairlie and Alicia M. Robb, “Disparities in Capital Access between Minority and Non-Minority-Owned Businesses: The Troubling Reality of Capital Limitations Faced by MBEs,” report produced for the U.S. Department of Commerce, Minority Business Development Agency, January 2010.; Christian E. Weller, “Access Denied: Low-Income and Minority Families Face More Credit Constraints and Higher Borrowing Costs,” report for the Center for American Progress, August 2007; Bhutta, Neil, Andrew C. Chang, Lisa J. Dettling, and Joanne W. Hsu (2020). “Disparities in Wealth by Race and Ethnicity in the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances,” FEDS Notes. Washington: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, September 28, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.17016/2380-7172.2797>.

<sup>200</sup> Minute Book, 1841-1857, First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Va., Virginia Historical Society, 142 (“inexpedient”).

poor and occasionally were able to purchase the freedom of the enslaved among their membership. By the mid-1850s the church was planning a “daughter” church to the west. This time First African Baptist Church would plant a church without going into debt to First Baptist Church. In 1856 the church authorized the pastor to purchase a sixty-foot lot on Leigh Street in Richmond for “a new house of worship for colored people.” To raise the \$541.25 to repay the pastor for the purchase the church leadership voted to take up a collection on Christmas Day that would continue until the amount was paid in full. In 1857 the First African Baptist “appointed 12 brethren & furnished them with books to get subscriptions to build the ch. on Leigh St. . . . sisters were also appointed for the same purpose.” Congregants moved quickly and the new church was dedicated the following year. The resulting church, Ebenezer Baptist Church, continues to serve as a center of worship for parishioners in the Jackson Ward community in Richmond.<sup>201</sup>

While the First Baptist Church bell rang in 1841 in celebration of a white supremacist victory through credit arrangements designed to exploit their fellow believers, I remain optimistic that its 2020 ringing represents real change in the world whether or not the members of First Baptist Church are part of that important work. It is up to our generation to ensure that the stated promises of liberalism and capitalism—freedom, racial justice, equal opportunity for all—are finally realized. That would be worth ringing the church bells.

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<sup>201</sup> Minute Book, 1841-1857, First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Va., Virginia Historical Society, 294 (“appointed”); On Ebenezer Baptist Church today see <http://www.richmondebenezer.com/mission-vision-historical/>.

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