

"Cash to Corinna": Silas and Corinna Omohundro and the Politics of Public
Interracial Relationships in Antebellum Richmond, Virginia

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ABSTRACT PAGE

This thesis examines the nature of interracial relationships in antebellum era Richmond, Virginia through the lives of Silas and Corinna Omohundro. Silas, a wealthy slave trader and owner of a slave jail, and Corinna, his slave, cohabitated for over a decade and had six children together. The history of the Omohundro family highlights the complex workings of interracial families under slavery, from internal power dynamics to the reactions of friends, relatives, and neighbors. Drawing from a close reading of Silas Omohundro's account book, wills, and court records, this thesis offers a new perspective on the public and private interactions of interracial couples and their children in the early South.

When Swiss traveler Fredrika Bremer toured Richmond, Virginia in the 1850s, she “visited some of the negro jails, that is, those places of imprisonment in which negroes are in part punished and in part confined for sale.” As Bremer spoke with an enslaved man who had cut off his fingers to avoid being sold away from his family and noted with distaste the room “in which the slaves [were] flogged,” she may not have realized that one of the prominent slave jailers of the city, Silas Omohundro, not only imprisoned, punished, and sold slaves, but also lived with one of his slaves, Corinna Hinton, as his common-law wife.¹ Omohundro both acknowledged his children with Corinna and spent significant amounts of money on her education and theirs.

The relationship of Omohundro and Hinton offers a dramatic example of open interracial relationships between Whites and Blacks that occurred in the antebellum upper South.² Interracial sex has recently garnered widespread

¹ Fredrika Bremer, *Homes of the New World Volume 2* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853), 533-535.

² Discussion of “interracial relationships” inevitably requires the use of racial terminology. But how does one write about what are considered socially constructed categories without lending legitimacy to those same categories? Is it possible to write histories without racial categories? I have found that, in this case, it is not, due to Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s observation that, “to argue that race is a myth and that it is an ideological rather than a biological fact does not deny that ideology has real effects on people’s lives.” Thus, I have included words like “Black” and “White,” but have followed Peggy Pascoe’s model of capitalizing each term in order to denaturalize racial categories and in order to differentiate these terms from problematic physical descriptions. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs* 17, no.2 (Winter, 1992): 255; Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the 19th-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

In order to examine the subject in depth, this paper focuses only on interracial relationships between European Americans and African Americans. This is not to disregard interracial relationships that took place between European Americans and Native Americans and Native Americans and African Americans. Relationships between these groups took place with some frequency and deserve to be studied in detail, a project that is beyond the scope of this paper, and has been considered by several scholars. For example, “Indian Foremothers: Race, Sex, Slavery, and Freedom in Early Virginia,” in *The Devil’s Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Michelle Gillespie (New

scholarly and popular attention, particularly in relation to the secret affair of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings.³ Not all interracial relationships, however, took such a clandestine form. Certainly, secret and sometimes violent sexual encounters between White men and enslaved women occurred frequently on Southern plantations. Then, too, the discreet affairs of elite White men and their female slaves have received much attention from scholars. Regarding these secret interracial relationships, the focus has been on elite White men's "cultural code of public silence" -- that is, the tacit understanding that they could engage in sex across the color line as long as they did not acknowledge their slave partner or enslaved children as legitimate, thus maintaining respectability. Joshua Rothman has argued that "appearances mattered most for maintaining their standing in the white community. Gossip was unpleasant and threatened one's reputation, but it was scandalous to flaunt an interracial sexual affair."⁴ This is too sweeping a statement, however, for interracial relationships sometimes took place openly, and these deserve greater scholarly attention.

The conventional focus on White men who walked along the margin of social respectability has overlooked interracial couples who openly flouted the racial ideas of White Southerners. The longstanding emphasis on couples who kept their

York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Jack D. Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Theda Perdue *Mixed Blood Indians: Racial Construction in the Early South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003).

³ For example, Jane Ellen Lewis and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *Sally Hemings & Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999); Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008); Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997); John Kukla, *Mr. Jefferson's Women* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2007).

⁴ Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: 2003), 31, 22.

interracial relationships secret suggests that the number of those who did not was inconsequential; open cohabitators are mentioned only in passing. Such a focus also places more weight on White men's actions and opinions than on Black women's, and it often leaves out non-elite interracial couples as well as White women who lived with Black men. Though less studied, interracial relationships that occurred outside the plantation and openly interracial relationships were more numerous than is traditionally acknowledged.⁵

As Martha Hodes observes in her study *White Women, Black Men*, however, the significance of such relationships is not always in the numbers but in the multiplicity of responses to those relationships. There is no way to tell how many interracial relationships went unrecorded by neighbors, census takers, tax recorders, or government officials. Whatever the statistics might be, the social importance of these interracial relationships is disproportionate to their number due to the societal norms they violated and thus challenged.

⁵ Peter Bardaglio found sixty-one interracial couples living together in the 1860 federal census of South Carolina; Brenda E. Stevenson identified six openly interracial couples in Loudon County, Virginia in 1830; and Thomas E. Buckley discovered that "at least 53 petitions" for divorce granted by the state legislature cited adultery with a partner considered to be of a different race. Obviously, the divorce cases did not start as *openly* interracial relationships, but the petitions for divorce rendered them so. Additionally, some of the cases indicate that the partner involved in interracial affairs chose to continue them after the divorce petition had been filed. Peter W. Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, & the Law in the Nineteenth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 61; Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 43; Thomas E. Buckley, S.J., *The Great Catastrophe of My Life: Divorce in the Old Dominion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 123. Martha Hodes has illustrated that interracial relationships occurred between White women and Black men more frequently than historians had realized and with a variety of reactions from their communities. Evidence exists for eighty-three overt unions between free Blacks and Whites in Alabama before the Civil War. odes; Gary B. Mills, "Miscegenation and the Free Negro in Antebellum 'Anglo' Alabama: A Reexamination of Southern Race Relations," *The Journal of American History* 68, no. 1 (June 1981).

The presence of open interracial couples in the antebellum South has been acknowledged by scholars such as Catherine Clinton, who writes, “those few men who tried to legitimize and ‘honor’ these relationships rocked the very foundation of racial domination.”⁶ This study takes Clinton’s observation further by looking at openly interracial couples in detail and questioning how unusual these men and women really were. It aims to provide a nuanced view of the individuals involved in these relationships, their treatment by friends, family, and acquaintances, and the factors that influenced their decision to acknowledge their cross-racial ties publicly.

This study also aims to examine the familial, rather than only the sexual, dynamics of interracial relationships. As Karen Y. Morrison has observed, “While some commentators have stressed violence and power in [interracial sexual relationships], others have depicted the social benefits that enslaved women gained as participants. Few discuss the results of these interactions in terms of the establishment of familial bonds” and of “contemporary popular awareness” of those ties. The men and women who engaged in interracial relationships often formed multiracial families that have largely been overlooked in the historiography. Because of legal prohibitions on interracial marriage, multiracial families usually did not leave behind the kind of records that traditional Anglo-American families did.

⁶ Catherine Clinton, “‘Southern Dishonor’: Flesh, Blood, Race, and Bondage,” in *In Joy and Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830 – 1900*, ed. Carol Bleser (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 61; Also see Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982) 210-222.

Yet these families certainly existed. Interracial couples need to be examined not only on their own but also as members of family structures.⁷

Interracial relationships occurred with varying levels of transparency. Ironically, covert relationships have been the ones most studied, and there has been speculation over whether a number of prominent male politicians, including George Wythe, Andrew Johnson, and George Washington, did or did not engage in interracial sex.⁸ Jefferson and Hemings are the archetypal example of a covert relationship; Jefferson showed no public favoritism toward Hemings and her children, did not refer to Hemings differently than his other slaves in his farm book, never acknowledged their children together, and even failed to free Hemings upon his death, though he did quietly free her children.

At the other end of the spectrum are the overt interracial relationships, which flew in the face of contemporary Southern cultural expectations. Famous examples of these relationships include Richard Mentor Johnson, Martin Van Buren's vice president, and his slave Julia Chinn, and Frederick Douglass and his second wife, Helen Pitts. Overt interracial relationships were those in which the parties involved acknowledged their partner and any children they might have to friends, family, and the general public. Some couples, like Johnson and Chinn, were public about the nature of their relationship from the beginning, while other men

⁷ Karen Y. Morrison, "Slave Mothers and White Fathers: Defining Family and Status in Late Colonial Cuba," *Slavery and Abolition* 31, no. 1 (March 2010): 29 – 55.

⁸ For discussion of Wythe, see Philip D. Morgan, "Interracial Sex in the Chesapeake and the British Atlantic World, c. 1700-1820," in Jan Ellen Lewis and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *Sally Hemings & Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999); for Johnson, see David Warren Bowen, *Andrew Johnson & the Negro* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); for Washington, Linda Allen Bryant, *I Cannot Tell a Lie: The True Story of George Washington's African American Descendants* (San Jose: Writer's Showcase, 2004).

and women acknowledged their relationships later on – for example, men who first publicly acknowledged their enslaved children when writing their wills. These were men and women who valued “family bonds and familial advancement above supporting the norms of racial attribution.”⁹

Many interracial relationships fell somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, acknowledged to a few friends or family members but not to others, or made public only in locations where neither party was recognized, or indirectly by special treatment shown by one member of the union to the other. The latter was especially the case with White planters who favored “mulatto” children during their lifetime and in their wills. For instance, John Custis IV manumitted a young enslaved boy named Jack in 1748 and made provisions for him to receive land, cattle, clothing, and an allowance after Custis’s death.¹⁰

This is by no means to say that all instances of interracial sex constituted relationships. Within the system of slavery and the structure of Southern society, the opportunity for sexual exploitation of enslaved men and women by the master was always present. This study does not contest the occurrence of sexual violence in the South during slavery. Rather, it focuses on the small but significant number of open interracial relationships, some of which were built at least in part on mutual satisfaction and affection.¹¹ The term *relationship* is not intended to romanticize these couples or ignore the differential power dynamics that helped define each relationship. As in the case of Silas and Corinna Omohundro, relationships between

⁹ Morrison, 30.

¹⁰ Morgan, 52-54.

¹¹ Rothman, 19.

White men and enslaved women occurred in the knowledge that power, and the threat of violence, ultimately rested with the male slave owner. Due to questions about power dynamics and motives, Martha Hodes employs the word *liaison* when examining cases of sex between Black men and White women. While in many ways *liaison* is a better-fitting word, I have chosen to use *relationship* in this study in order to signify that I am considering long-lasting unions.¹²

Silas and Corinna Hinton Omohundro engaged in an overt interracial relationship, living openly as husband and wife though they were not legally married. Their relationship is worth discussing for several reasons. The Omohundros left behind a unique body of documents that clearly illustrate the degree to which each acknowledged the legitimacy of their relationship. Unfortunately, the majority of these documents provide more information about Silas than about Corinna. The main source of information about the couple is Silas's General Account Book, in which he meticulously recorded purchases he or Corinna made from 1855 until his death in 1864. Corinna's voice has not been lost, however; she took an active role in the management of Silas's estate and the drawn-out court cases surrounding it. Through these court records, a greater sense of Corinna's story and what her relationship with Silas meant to her emerges. The lives of Silas and Corinna highlight many important questions surrounding the nature, causes, and effects of open interracial relationships.

Silas Omohundro and Corinna Hinton met on very unequal terms. She was his slave, and twenty-eight years his junior. He was one of the wealthiest slave

¹² Hodes, 14.

traders and jailers in Richmond. Nothing illustrates the paradoxes inherent in the Omohundro family better than the contrast between entries in Silas's general account book for the children he fathered with Corinna ("Colons Berth Day 4 Years old and 3 feet 3 Inchs high") and those in his slave account book, which contains page after page of names with prices listed after them.¹³ Though Silas appears to have regarded Corinna and their children with genuine affection their relationship originated in the kind of exploitation that his slave account book documents.

If Silas's references to Corinna and his children in his account book convey a familiar affection with the appearance of "my" before the words *son*, *daughter*, and *child* and the use of nicknames, no evidence of Corinna's feelings about Silas survives. Looking at the origins of the relationship, it is easy to see how coercion could have taken place. Whatever her feelings for the man, Corinna displayed an acute understanding of the institution of which they were both a part; she certainly recognized the freedoms Silas possessed and the restraints that society placed on her as an enslaved Black woman. By allying herself with Silas, Corinna gained material comfort and a greater possibility of achieving freedom for herself and her children. Moreover, Corinna learned how to maneuver within the society that limited her opportunities and effectively worked within the system to make a better life for herself. If her later business, financial, and legal dealings give any indication, Corinna took advantage of every possibility for education that her relationship with Silas offered.

¹³ Silas Omohundro General Account Book December 25, 1858, Silas Omohundro Business & Estate Records, Accession Number 29642, Library of Virginia, Richmond.

Little is known about Corinna Hinton's early life. According to her own testimony, "[quoting] from the family record," she was born on August 1, 1835.¹⁴ Census records indicate that both her parents were born in Virginia, and her frequent trips to Petersburg in the 1850s, recorded in Omohundro's account book, may indicate that she had family there.¹⁵

Much more has been recorded about Silas's childhood and family. He was born December 11, 1807, in Albemarle County, Virginia, the son of Richard Omohundro and Edith Seay. According to family tradition, Richard entered adulthood penniless after his father lost the family property through debt. Over time, however, Richard made a fortune by overseeing and farming; he purchased a 1,000-acre farm in Fluvanna County, a short distance east of Charlottesville, where he built the family home, "Gale Hill."¹⁶

In contrast to Corinna, Silas grew up in relative comfort and received some sort of education as a child. By his mid-twenties, he engaged in business and purchased slaves (it is not clear whether he was methodically involved in slave trading); advertised a ferry he owned that was manned by slaves and transported

¹⁴ Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494, Omohundro's executor v. Omohundro

¹⁵ Corinna made at least four trips to Petersburg between 1855 and 1856, all of which Silas entered into his account book. She took her children with her at least twice, and once was sent extra money (\$1.50) by Silas.

The 1860 Census of Petersburg lists six individuals living in the city with the surname Hinton as Black and fifteen with no race given.

According to *The Omohundro Genealogical Record*, written by Malvern Hill Omohundro, a nephew of Silas, and published in 1950-51, Corinna was born in 1823. It is surprising that Corinna appears in the larger family history at all, but when she does, it is in a "censored" version. By placing her birth twelve years before it actually occurred, Omohundro makes her older at the birth of her first child. He also conveniently provides her with a family and false surname, calling her "Corinna Clark of Dinwiddie Co....dau. of Samuel Clark and wife Martha." Malvern Hill Omohundro, *The Omohundro Genealogical Record* (Staunton, VA.: 1950-51), 472.

¹⁶ Omohundro, 461-464.

passengers across the James River at Columbia in Fluvanna County; and he placed notices in the newspaper for runaway slaves.¹⁷ His involvement in the slave trade grew, and by 1846 he was regularly buying and selling slaves both within and outside of Virginia, dealing with fellow Richmond slave traders such as Smith & Edmondson and with out-of-state-buyers, including South Carolina politician James H. Hammond. In addition to buying and selling slaves, Omohundro also profited from housing slaves in his slave jail.¹⁸

The slave jail, as Bremer wrote, was a place where slave owners and traders could board their slaves for a fee. Slaves could also be sent there for punishment, as one former slave vividly remembered in 1888 of his time in another Richmond jail, that of Robert Lumpkin. The jailors put him “in a place known as the whipping room, and on the floor of that room were the rings, and a great big man would stand over him and flog him.”¹⁹ In an account of his escape and capture, fugitive slave Anthony Burns, also jailed by Lumpkin, remembered similarly horrifying experiences. At one point, Burns observed “a slave woman stark naked in the presence of two men. One of them was an overseer, and the other a person who had come to purchase a slave. The overseer had compelled the woman to disrobe in order that the purchaser might see for himself whether she was well formed and sound in body.”²⁰

¹⁷ *Richmond Enquirer*, July 9, 1830, 1; *Richmond Enquirer*, July 23, 1830, 1; *Richmond Enquirer*, April 5, 1.

¹⁸ Silas and R.F. Omohundro *Slave and Farm Account Book*, University of Virginia Special Collections, Charlottesville; Michael Tadman, “The Hidden History of Slave Trading in Antebellum South Carolina: John Springs III and Other ‘Gentlemen Dealing in Slaves.’” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 97, no. 1 (January 1996), 13.

¹⁹ Rev. A.M. Newman, “Reminiscences,” *Baptist Home Mission Monthly* 10, no. 11 (November 1888): 295.

²⁰ Charles Emery Stevens, *Anthony Burns* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Company, 1856), 191.

Omohundro's jail was located near most of the other slave jails in the city, around 17th Street between Main and Broad Streets in the Shockoe district. The 1860 Richmond City Directory lists Omohundro's jail as located in the alley near Wall Street (which no longer exists); Omohundro's records show that this place was called Locust Alley. Like many other jailers, Omohundro also provided lodging for slave traders and owners who came to Richmond. His business records contain lists of all the slaves jailed on the premises and frequently records their owners' names as well. One of the first entries in his records for 1851, for instance, lists "Mr. D.W. Orr self & Negroes to Board," followed by a list of Orr's slaves and the cost for boarding each.²¹ That many customers boarded with Omohundro makes it likely that many of them readily became aware of his relationship with Corinna and their children.

Accounts from the antebellum period often portray traders as having been excluded from polite Southern society because of the unsavory nature of their business, though no such censure was placed on slave owners. For slaveholders with uneasy consciences, "scapegoating the trader was a good way to defend the rest of slavery."²² Some observed that traders' position as social outcasts made it difficult for them to obtain a "respectable wife." In his account of Anthony Burns, for instance, Charles Emery Stevens wrote that "the white women of the South [refused]

²¹ "Money Paid Out and Received, No. 1, 1851-1877," Silas Omohundro Business & Estate Records, Accession Number 29642, Library of Virginia, Richmond.

²² Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 25.

to connect themselves with professed slave traders.”²³ Stevens, however, was writing from the viewpoint of a Northern abolitionist, and Silas seems to have faced little social ostracism. As historian Walter Johnson has observed, “there was apparently little stigma attached to the trade for those who were successful at it.”²⁴

Records from Silas’s estate vividly illustrate just how successful he was. At the time of his death, he owned real estate not only in Virginia, but also in Pennsylvania. Besides the house, jail, and lots in Richmond City, Silas also owned 54 ¼ acres of land outside of the Richmond city limits in Henrico County described as “the Farm.” Silas’s executor sold the farm in Henrico in 1874 for \$19,055.99; at the time of his death in 1864, Silas’s real estate in Richmond City was assessed at thirty thousand dollars. In Pennsylvania, Silas had purchased two adjoining lots in Philadelphia, each containing a house, “on the north side of Poplar west of Fifteenth Street.” One of these lots sold for \$13,100.00 in 1869; the second sold the same year for \$12,900.00. Silas owned additional real estate in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the proceeds of which totaled \$7,479.87 when the land was sold in 1866.²⁵ When he or his children were not residing there, Silas rented out his properties in Pennsylvania.

Silas had valuable personal property as well. At the time of his death he owned seventeen slaves (not including Corinna and their children together, who were not included in the appraisal of his estate), eight men and nine women. Among these were a mother, Lucinda, and her two children, Sylva and Amanda, and a

²³ Stevens, 192.

²⁴ Johnson, 55.

²⁵ Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494, Omohundro’s executor v. Omohundro; “Admr. Account” 1866 and 1869, Estate of Silas Omohundro in the Lancaster County Orphan’s Court, Lancaster County Historical Society, Lancaster, PA.

married couple, "Old Tom and wife." He also owned extensive household furnishings, some of which were doubtless used to make his slave-trader guests comfortable. For instance, the appraisal of his Virginia estate in 1864 included forty-four chairs, three sofas, five beds, four washstands and accessories, and several lots of glassware and silverware. Included as well were items more likely to be for personal family use: two book presses, a looking glass, a "What not & contents" worth five hundred dollars, "1 lot pictures," a "rocking crib," and two valuable gold watches, each worth \$1,500.00.²⁶

Clearly, Silas belonged to an elite class of slave traders. Based on the success of his business, Silas was one of what Walter Johnson calls the "men of means" who engaged in the trade. As such, his reputation would have been better than that of a part-time, small-scale trader. Adding to his status was his background: Silas came from a large, wealthy Virginia family, and he engaged in several business ventures outside of slave trading. Omohundro had married twice by 1837. Family records include nothing about his first wife, but with his second wife, Martha Tandy, he had six children within ten years. Martha died in 1847, meaning that Silas was a widower when he had his first child with Corinna.²⁷

It is unclear how Corinna came to be Silas Omohundro's slave, though notations in his record books do reveal that he occasionally engaged in the sale of

²⁶ "A List of Real and Personal Estate of Silas Omohundro, dec'd...", Estate of Silas Omohundro in the Lancaster County Orphan's Court, Lancaster County Historical Society, Lancaster, PA. The inventory in the Pennsylvania case file is a copy of the inventory made in Virginia.

²⁷ Besides his ferry business in Fluvanna County, Silas also operated a farm with his brother R.F. Omohundro and, during the Civil War, he financed a sutler business with Thomas E. Dobbs. Silas and R.F. Omohundro Slave and Farm Account Book; Silas Omohundro GAB; Omohundro, 472.

“fancy women.” These were light-skinned enslaved women, often educated in the manner of a gentlewoman, who were sold as concubines at high prices.²⁸ Silas’s involvement in this trade may have been how the two first came into contact. His existing business records begin around 1851, by which time he and Corinna already had two children together. The first, Silas Omohundro, Jr., was born sometime in 1849, and the second, Alice Morton Omohundro, between 1850 and 1851.²⁹ Corinna may have been the sixteen-year-old “mulatto” female listed as belonging to Omohundro on the 1850 Richmond slave schedule; likewise, the eight-month-old “mulatto” female could be Alice, but that would leave Silas, Jr., unaccounted for. Silas, Sr., in that year owned forty-five slaves ranging in age from forty-five to half a year old. He was a neighbor of Hector Davis, a far wealthier slave trader, and lived with (or perhaps rented quarters to) the younger trader D.W. Orr, who figures in his business records.

Corinna’s life is difficult to document in the years before 1855, and even then she can only be seen through Omohundro’s records until she appears in court cases

²⁸ Clinton, 212.

²⁹ Silas’s first two wives remain a mystery. The name of the first is not recorded in *The Omohundro Genealogical Record*. A single line of testimony in the cases involving Silas’s estate reveals that the legitimacy of Silas’s children not by Corinna was in question. Richard Cooper, Silas’s executor, described Little Omohundro as “a reputed son of my testator,” “The Deposition of Richard Cooper...,” Estate of Silas Omohundro in the Lancaster County Orphan’s Court, Lancaster County Historical Society, Lancaster, PA.; Johnson, 25; For birthdates of Corinna’s children, I have tried to take into account variations in the sources. Since the account book begins in 1855, only the birthdates of the Omohundros’ younger children could be recorded there by Silas. *The Omohundro Genealogical Record* offers precise birthdates but, as has been seen, is not always reliable. Neither, unfortunately, is a census record, so a date range has been provided.

There is some evidence to suggest that Silas and Corinna had a second daughter, Lucy, who died young. For the year 1855, a Lucy appears with Silas, Alice, and Colon, as receiving money from Silas. After 1855, however, no further mention of her is made.

Silas and R.F. Omohundro Slave and Farm Account, University of Virginia Special Collections, Charlottesville.

in her own right in 1865. The only evidence of her experiences in the early 1850s is the record of the birth of a second son and third child, Colon Omohundro, in 1853. She would have three more children who survived to adulthood: Riley Crosby Omohundro in 1859, William Rainey Omohundro in 1861, and George Nelson Omohundro in 1863. Corinna also gave birth to a stillborn child in January of 1858, recorded in Silas's account book in an entry that reads, "Buriel Expences for my Still Born child." It may have been a difficult birth for the mother, as Silas paid Corinna's midwife, a Mrs. Brown, to check on her in the following months.³⁰

As they had more children and their younger ones grew, the nature of Silas and Corinna's relationship may have changed. For the years 1855 and 1856, Silas almost always entered money spent on or by Corinna with the initials "C.H." After early 1857, she appears regularly as "Corinna." While she was most likely listed in the 1850 census as one of Silas's slaves, by 1857, according to her later testimony, she "lived there [in Richmond] with him," implying that they were living in the same household with the appearance of husband and wife.³¹ Though Corinna was interested in convincing the court that she and Silas cohabitated, her frequent purchases of household goods recorded in Silas's account book imply that her testimony was accurate. They continued to live together until 1860 when, for reasons now unclear, Silas gave her a household of her own. In the 1860 census, Corinna is listed as Silas's neighbor. While Silas lived next door with two other

³⁰ Silas Omohundro General Account Book (GAB) January 30, 1858; March 2, 1858

³¹ Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494

traders, Corinna appeared in her own household with her two youngest sons, Colon and Riley, and with Patsy Clark, another of Silas's slaves.

Silas regularly gave Corinna money for a variety of purposes. The majority of entries relating to Corinna in Silas's account book merely say "Cash to Corinna," implying that the money could be used at her discretion. Between January 1855 and his death in 1864, Silas gave Corinna at least \$3,395.75 entered in his accounts with such a notation.³² The amounts could vary greatly by month and year, and Corinna did not receive anything like a regular allowance.³³

Sometimes Silas gave Corinna money for specific items, such as groceries and decorative items for the home. These entries, too, occurred both during Corinna's time living with Silas and her years in her own household, indicating that she played a role in the management of both homes. The fact that entries for marketing are much less frequent than those for "cash," however, may mean that Corinna was generally expected to use the "cash" given to her to fulfill multiple needs as she saw fit. If she needed more money than she possessed at the time, she had accounts at Richmond stores; Silas recorded paying her bills in entries such as "Corinna Acct for Market, Wood, & fowls [fowls] Pd." Other times, he would give her money to pay bills, such as in the 1863 entry for \$8.25 that "Corinna Paid Caroline for Washing to Date."³⁴

³² This amount does not take into account inflation during the years of the Civil War.

³³ For one year in particular, 1858, Silas gave Corinna a disproportionately large amount of money, \$1,397.70. It is not clear why Corinna received more money in 1858 than in several of the other years combined. One possibility is that more, or more expensive, goods (such as a diamond ring) were purchased that year. Another is that Silas, particularly in the last years of life, failed to record some of his purchases in his account book.

³⁴ Silas Omohundro GAB July 8, 1863; January 24, 1863

Most of the money Silas spent on specific items for Corinna was not for groceries but for clothing and accessories. While Corinna likely made some of her dresses on her own, Silas occasionally gave her special outfits, such as the silk dress he purchased for her in 1857 for \$30.00, a substantial amount. Silas's account book includes a total of \$281.33 spent on dresses and material and \$765.12 spent on accessories, including bonnets, stockings, and corsets. Silas was most extravagant with jewelry. According to his account book, Silas gave Corinna two expensive diamond rings, one in 1858 costing \$200.00 and one in 1863 worth \$100.00. He purchased a jewelry set for her in 1857 and two days later he spent \$25.00 to have it set.³⁵

Money did not pass only from Silas to Corinna. Silas lent Corinna a total of \$1,125.00 between 1855 and 1864. Since Silas's existing account book only records money spent or lent out and not money received, there is no way of knowing whether Corinna paid him back, or whether she was even expected to do so. But it seems likely that she was, for otherwise it would be difficult to explain why Silas distinguished between money he gave her and sums he lent her, especially since Silas alone made entries in the account book, and thus apparently was accountable to no one for the money he tendered to Corinna and recorded in its pages.

If Silas was indeed lending Corinna money, the question of how she could pay off her debts arises. Being lent money implies, first, that one has a financial account separate from that of the lender and, second, that one has a source of income to

³⁵ Silas Omohundro GAB March 19, 1857; July 3, 1858; December 24, 1862; May 19, 1857; May 22, 1857.

repay the loan. The answer may lie in Corinna's involvement with Silas's jail. One entry in the account book for \$2.25 reads, "Cash to Corinna paid for work." Though a single occurrence for a small sum of money, its implications are not to be dismissed, especially in light of other work Corinna appears to have done for the jail and Silas's slaves.³⁶

Until 1861, Silas paid Corinna for providing clothes for his slaves. How she clothed the slaves is unclear. The purchase of fabric for Corinna indicates that she did some sewing, but she may also have supervised others who sewed clothes for Silas or simply gone to a store to buy some or all of these clothes. The entries for such transactions are for large sums of money and are phrased as "Cash to Corinna for Negro Clothing Pd" or "Dressing Negroes this year to Corinna." She was also paid to buy or provide clothing for individual slaves, such as an entry for \$16.00 for "Cash to Corinna for Cloths Lucy & Matilda."³⁷

The account book contains other clues about Corinna's financial situation. An entry from 1862 reads, "Cabbage from Ned Matthews \$20, from Corinna Pd," with the amount listed as \$21.25, which was \$1.25 more than Corinna originally paid for the cabbage. The entry implies one important thing and raises a significant question. First, Corinna's apparent purchase of the cabbage before Silas gave her money for it indicates that she already had the means to buy it. Those means may have come from her own income or from money (or perhaps an IOU) given her by Silas that she had saved; or perhaps she made the purchase on credit from a seller who knew

³⁶ Silas Omohundro GAB, November 7, 1857

³⁷ Silas Omohundro GAB, December 31, 1857; December 12, 1860; October 14, 1859.

Corinna was good for the money. Second, the fact that Corinna seems to have received more money for the cabbage from Silas than it had cost her leaves one wondering whether Silas paid Corinna for the trouble of buying the cabbage herself. Did she collect interest on the money Silas owed her for her purchase? Or did she owe Ned Matthews interest for a purchase made on credit, which Silas then paid?³⁸

Though the specifics are unclear, it appears that Corinna exercised a degree of financial independence, however limited. She relied on Silas for the majority of her necessities and thus remained under his ultimate control; at the same time, within that framework, she was able to use her own discretion for some, perhaps many or most, of her purchases. She made decisions about the running of her household. She was lent money, implying that she may have had some source of outside income with which to pay the loans back.³⁹ She participated in Silas's business operations. At the very least, she had experience handling money, paying bills, and participating in a market economy. All these experiences would help her later, both in the battle over Silas's estate and during the years she spent running a business with her second husband.

Other expenditures in Silas's account book reflect his concern for his children. In the years covered by the book, Silas spent \$3,398.92 on Silas, Alice,

³⁸ Silas Omohundro GAB, December 18, 1862.

³⁹ Though the evidence is fragmentary, Corinna may have profited from the boarding house for slave traders that Silas owned. Specifically, in late 1863 and early 1864, at the same time that she received many of the loans from Silas, Corinna received payment from Silas for whiskey and wine. Silas also began purchasing more whiskey and rum for Corinna during this period, implying that she may have been running the kitchen or perhaps a bar at the boarding house. This theory is supported by the many pitchers and glasses listed in Silas's estate inventory. Silas Omohundro GAB July 31, 1863; October 3, 1863; Silas Omohundro GAB October 7, 1863; November 7, 1863; "A List of Real and Personal Estate of Silas Omohundro, dec'd...," Estate of Silas Omohundro in the Lancaster County Orphan's Court, Lancaster County Historical Society, Lancaster, PA.

Colon, Riley, Willie, and George. The money went for everything from candy and apples to clothes and shoes. Most important for the children's future, a large portion of Silas's funds, \$1,547.60, went to their education. It appears that the children received some schooling in Richmond while they were young, but by 1857 the oldest children, Silas and Alice, were staying with Corinna's sister, Eliza Cheathem, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.⁴⁰ While there, they were tutored first by a woman Silas referred to as Miss M.G. Davis. Davis was likely the Miss Mary Davis listed as a "teacher" in the 1857 Lancaster City Directory.⁴¹ Around January 1862, Silas removed Silas and Alice from Davis's care and left her under the supervision of A.W. Rand, one of his business associates from Philadelphia. There, a Miss George tutored them. In 1863, Silas paid to a Mr. H. Heeling "Tuition for 3 [scholars]." Shortly after, he purchased Colon new books.⁴²

Silas took an interest in his children's curriculum, paying for a piano and extra tuition in 1860 so that Davis could instruct Silas and Alice in music and dance. His entries for book purchases indicate that they were also being taught "grammar" and "arithmetic." Silas sporadically recorded in his account book letters he wrote and received and with whom he was corresponding. Those records, along with

⁴⁰ P. Frazer Smith, comp., *Pennsylvania State Reports* (Philadelphia: Kay & Brother, 1871), 66: 115. Information on Eliza Cheathem is scarce. Cheathem, whose surname also appears as "Cheatham" and "Cheatem," appears in the testimony of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court only as Silas Omohundro's sister-in-law who was caring for his two oldest children. It is unclear how Cheatham became free or reached Pennsylvania, but Silas appears to have provided for her. After Silas's death, his administrator in Pennsylvania paid some of Cheatham's bills, "Account of William Carpenter," Estate of Silas Omohundro in the Lancaster County Orphan's Court, Lancaster County Historical Society, Lancaster, PA.

⁴¹ William H Boyd, comp., *The Lancaster City Directory* (Lancaster, Pa.: Sprenger & Westhaeffer, 1857), 21.

⁴² Rand later described himself in testimony as having had "business transactions" with Omohundro, Estate of Silas Omohundro in the Lancaster County Orphan's Court, Lancaster County Historical Society, Lancaster, PA; Silas Omohundro GAB, August 1, 1863.

entries for freight on boxes and for postage, show that he wrote to or about his children at least thirty-five times over the course of seven years. Some of these letters were sent to Davis or Rand, while some went to the children directly. Silas also sent packages filled with treats, clothes, and money for them to “put in their boxes.” His children kept him updated on their progress. Their neighbor in Lancaster, M.O. Kline, later testified that he “wrote to him [Silas] for his children, on an average, during the two years they were here, about every third week.” The letters continued during the Civil War, being carried North from the Confederate states by travelers, under flags of truce, and, in one case, by a prisoner of war who was likely returning North under a prisoner exchange.⁴³

In addition, Silas recorded expenses relating to six trips to Philadelphia to visit his children. Family friends from Pennsylvania later recalled that Silas and Corinna made frequent visits to their children, staying at times “a week or ten days.” On one occasion, Silas reportedly “manifested great anxiety on their behalf.”⁴⁴ In order to keep them in mind while they were away, Silas also purchased several “likenesses” of his sons and daughter.⁴⁵

The Omohundro children were not the only Black members of the family who received schooling. An account book entry from 1858 indicates that a W. Cawfield tutored Corinna for an unknown period of time. There are two references to Cawfield in 1856, but it is not clear whether he taught Corinna or her children at

⁴³ Estate of Silas Omohundro in the Lancaster County Orphan’s Court, Lancaster County Historical Society, Lancaster, PA; Silas Omohundro GAB. For example, see May 3, 1850; June 27, 1859; April 2, 1860; December 22, 1861; January 7, 1862; February 17, 1862; May 6, 1862.

⁴⁴ Smith, 115.

⁴⁵ Silas Omohundro GAB, July 4, 1859; May 3, 1859.

that time. In 1858, however, it is certain that Corinna was his student, as Silas wrote, "Cash to W. Cawfield in full up to 8 May for teaching Corinna up to date."⁴⁶

Based on the Omohundro account book alone, Silas and Corinna's relationship did not fit the mold of covert interracial relationships. Silas embraced Corinna and their children (whether Corinna wholeheartedly returned the embrace is another question) and all received the same special treatment white family members might have expected. Corinna did not shop for dry goods at Richmond retailer Chiles and Cheney or do her marketing wearing the clothes of a slave; she had kid gloves, umbrellas, a watch, bonnets, expensive jewelry, and a steady supply of new shoes. She was not a "fancy woman," but rather the mother of her and Silas's children. She and those children received an education, part of which took place in Richmond, even though it was illegal in Virginia to pay for a slave's education. Corinna, the children, and possibly Silas went to the circus together, saw a hot air balloon, and traveled to and from Petersburg. Midwives attended Corinna; the whole family was seen by local doctors. Silas paid Corinna's bills and purchased jewelry and women's and children's clothes, none of which would have been seen by anyone as intended for a White wife, since he had none. Silas's affection for Corinna, as displayed through the expenditure of money, crossed over into the public sphere.

Silas acknowledged both his relationship with Corinna and the legitimacy of his children. A.W. Rand, a business associate of Silas's who served as Alice's guardian in Philadelphia, later testified that, at least in Pennsylvania, he had witnessed Silas introducing Corinna as his wife. "On every occasion," Rand said, "he

⁴⁶ Silas Omohundro GAB, May 24, 1858.

acknowledged her as his wife, both in public and in private; they were looked on as man and wife by those with whom they associated.”⁴⁷

Silas Omohundro’s actions in regard to his children with Corinna imply what Karen Y. Morrison has called a “prioritization of family bonds and familial advancement above supporting the norms of racial attributions.” Silas “willingly undermined accepted racial categories in an effort to improve his children’s social standing.” By providing his multiracial family with an education, Silas consciously chose his children’s interests over interests of the defense of White supremacy as framed in the rhetoric of his era. If slavery rested on the notion of Black inferiority, then Silas was undermining the system that had made him rich by treating his multiracial family members as equals. He embraced and gave precedence to his role as a father and husband, even though those roles contradicted his position as a White slave trader.⁴⁸

Silas did not want, upon his death, for Corinna and his children to remain in slavery as slaves “*in the Family*,” as South Carolina politician and planter James Henry Hammond wished for the children he had with his slave.⁴⁹ And he certainly did not sell them or “unblushingly [rear] them for the market,” as escaped slave Harriet Jacobs testified many White fathers of slave children did.⁵⁰ Nor did he settle them in some remote haven for freed slaves, such as Liberia. Rather, he gave them an education far exceeding mere occupational training and did more than let them

⁴⁷ Smith, 115.

⁴⁸ Morrison, 30.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Clinton, 62.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Hodes, 3.

slip away to freedom. All the behaviors that allowed Jefferson to retain respectability amid his affair with Hemings – “never demonstrating that he cared for Hemings, and never treating their children like legitimate blood relations” – Silas and Corinna violated.⁵¹ The Omohundros did not, in short, adhere to any sort of public code of silence.

How, then, did the public perceive and receive them? To what degree, if any, did they experience ostracism, harassment, or verbal abuse? While little evidence exists that speaks to the attitudes the Omohundros faced on a day-to-day basis, the legal system never addressed their relationship or punished either for sex across the color line. On the contrary, Richmond Mayor Joseph Mayo was a witness to Silas’s 1864 will, in which Omohundro formally acknowledged his children with Corinna.⁵² Silas maintained a successful boarding house in conjunction with his slave jail; none of his customers seemed to mind the presence of Corinna and her children in or around the establishment. Many customers returned multiple times.

Silas’s family did not ostracize him, either. He continued to work with his brother, R.F. Omohundro, in his slave trading business. Silas made frequent visits home to Gale Hill see his father; on one occasion he paid for several “likenesses” of his father Richard, who did not die until 1860. Notes in Silas’s account book indicate that he wrote often to his married sisters and purchased presents for them and their children. He similarly kept in close touch with his children from his previous

⁵¹ Rothman, 50.

⁵² Silas Omohundro, will dated March 16, 1864, proved July 8, 1864, Richmond City Circuit Court Will Book 2, 228-230.

marriages, though his relationship with son Littleton John Omohundro was no doubt enhanced by the copious amounts of money Silas lent him.⁵³

Silas and Corinna's relationship may have been interpreted differently by different people. How individuals read their relationship – marriage or fornication, legitimate or illegitimate – may have depended on cultural factors. Theirs presumably was less threatening than a liaison between a White woman and a Black man. Silas's relationship with Corinna did not contradict White Southern men's prescribed position in society; he remained the patriarch, controlling his household, his family, and his wife, who happened to be his slave. Indeed, Corinna was under Silas's control in both capacities. Where the Omohundros could be understood as challenging social norms was in Silas's treatment of Corinna and their children as legitimate, and in Corinna's assertions, through her behavior and demeanor, of her respectability. By employing washing women and nurse maids, wearing expensive clothes, accessories, and jewelry, and calling herself Silas's wife and then his widow, Corinna presented herself as a respectable Southern woman, even an elite Southern woman, regardless of her status as a slave.

Some evidence indicates that at least some who knew Silas and Corinna did regard their relationship as that of husband and wife. After Silas's death, his brother R.F., in an account of his farm expenses, referred to Corinna as "Mrs. Corinna Omohundro," giving her relationship with his brother legitimacy with the title

⁵³ Silas Omohundro GAB. For example, see August 14, 1855; March 26, 1856; March 14, 1862.

“Mrs.”⁵⁴ For the property tax lists of 1867, Corinna is also referred to as “Mrs. C. Omohundro,” implying that the recorder of the property tax information saw her as Silas’s legitimate widow.⁵⁵ Paradoxically, de facto acceptance of the relationship in Virginia created a lack of documentation in that state. Instead, the most explicit evidence comes from Pennsylvania, where litigation over Silas’s estate took place. There, Alice’s tutor A.W. Rand later testified that he knew Silas and Corinna to be husband and wife, as did Pennsylvanians William Carpenter and Michael O. Kline and his family.⁵⁶ Corinna’s sister, by allowing Silas, Jr., and Alice to live with her, accepted Corinna’s relationship with Silas.

After Silas’s death in 1864, the issue of whether Corinna was Silas’s legal widow took on great importance. Silas freed Corinna and their children, whom he acknowledged as his own, and he left her his entire estate in his will, giving her the option of residing on his properties in Richmond or in Philadelphia.⁵⁷ He also directed his executor, his friend Richard Cooper, to invest the profits made from selling the real estate and personal property that Corinna did not want and to pay the interest to Corinna, and to his children upon reaching the age of twenty-one, semiannually.⁵⁸

The execution of Silas’s estate was not completed easily. The settlement of the estate in Virginia appeared at first to be going smoothly. By 1870, however,

⁵⁴ Silas and R.F. Omohundro Slave and Farm Account, University of Virginia Special Collections, Charlottesville.

⁵⁵ Richmond City Personal Property Tax Book 1867, Page 47, LVA Microfilm Reel 832

⁵⁶ Smith, 115.

⁵⁷ It is unclear why Omohundro owned real estate in Pennsylvania. It may have been for the precise purpose it served in his will: to offer Corinna a safe haven in a free state if it became necessary.

⁵⁸ Silas Omohundro, will dated March 16, 1864, proved July 8, 1864, Richmond City Circuit Court Will Book 2, 228 - 230.

problems were beginning to arise. According to the testimony of Richard Cooper, the executor, he had paid all the estate's debts as early as 1864 and knew of no other claims against Silas. Around this time, believing the estate to be in good standing, Cooper gave a \$1,200 bond to Corinna in 1867, using her sixth of the estate as security on the loan. Corinna received another bond, or loan with interest, in 1871, and in 1874 Cooper issued her an advance of one thousand dollars that she received in the place of her son Colon, who was then still a minor. Colon needed the money in the settlement of his father-in-law's estate. Cooper gave bonds out of the estate to individuals who were not members of the Omohundro family, including a bond to his own son for eight hundred dollars. While some of the individuals proved reliable in repaying their loans with interest, others failed to do so, and Cooper was forced to admit "it is not believed that anything can be realized" from some of the bonds.⁵⁹

Around the same time, in 1870, two new claims against the estate of Silas Omohundro emerged. The first was made by Silas's brother and sometime business partner Richard Omohundro, Jr. Cooper had paid a debt Silas owed to Richard soon after Silas's death in 1864. He made the payment in Confederate money. Richard allegedly accepted the payment at the time but changed his mind after the end of the war. Richard now claimed that Silas's estate owed him \$12,800.00 in U.S. dollars. The claim became particularly complicated because the money Silas had borrowed was a portion of his father's estate and thus belonged not only to Richard, Jr., but to all of the children of Richard Omohundro, Sr. Though the Circuit Court of the Eastern

⁵⁹ Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494; Estate of Silas Omohundro in the Lancaster County Orphan's Court, Lancaster County Historical Society, Lancaster, PA.

District of Virginia ruled in favor of Richard, Jr., in 1872, Cooper appealed the decision and the case continued to be disputed in court for more than a decade.⁶⁰

A son or reputed son of Silas from Cincinnati, Littleton John Omohundro, made another claim against the estate in 1874. Littleton, too, claimed to have lent money to Silas that had never been repaid. The money was allegedly to have been used to build a house for Corinna and the Omohundro children in Ohio. Cooper attempted to avoid paying the debt because the agreement about the money had taken place during the war, when Silas was technically an alien citizen. The case eventually made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court where, again, a ruling was issued against Cooper.⁶¹

The two judgments were handed down against an estate which by that time was plagued by other financial troubles. Cooper's lawyer had started issuing orders to show cause against the administrator of the estate in Pennsylvania, William Carpenter, as early as 1870. Cooper argued that the money in that state should be transferred to him due to the "heavy liability" that had appeared against the estate. The Pennsylvania courts hesitated to transfer the money to Cooper because one of Silas's children, Alice Morton Omohundro, lived in Pennsylvania with her husband, Edward C. Street. Alice Omohundro Street's complaints to the Pennsylvania court about Cooper's management of the estate, particularly in regard to loans he had made, seemed to confirm the court's hesitation. Alice and her husband reported that

⁶⁰ Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494; Omohundro's Ex'or v. Omohundro Supreme Court of Virginia 62 Va. 626; 1872 Va. LEXIS 86; 21 Gratt. 626; Omohundro's Ex'or v. Omohundro & als. Supreme Court of Virginia 68 Va. 824; 1876 Va. LEXIS 74; 27 Gratt. 824.

⁶¹ Cooper, Executor v. Omohundro Supreme Court of the United States 86 U.S. 65; 22 L. Ed. 47; 1873 U.S. LEXIS 1426; 19 Wall. 65.

“since the estate has been in the hands of Mr. Cooper it has been gradually dwindling into nothing.”⁶²

Cooper readily admitted in 1871 that Silas’s “personal estate which came into [his] hands [had] been exhausted,” but he denied any culpability. Cooper blamed the estate’s troubles on demands against the estate that had appeared five years after Silas’s death. When daughter Alice Omohundro Street and her husband failed to receive Alice’s legacy after she reached twenty-one, they filed a claim against Cooper, asking the courts to hold him and his sureties – including Corinna – personally liable for the debts of the estate. Corinna’s other children sided with their mother and Cooper, though at least one of them maintained amicable relationships with sister Alice. In November 1884, George Nelson Omohundro wrote to Cooper asking for legal advice. George had recently visited Alice in Philadelphia and wanted the estate settled soon so that “Ed Street won’t have the closing of [his] business” because of financial troubles.⁶³

The question of Corinna’s legitimacy as Silas’s widow, however, arose not in these Virginia cases but in the Pennsylvania courts. The state of Pennsylvania attempted to collect a five percent collateral inheritance tax on the grounds that Corinna was not Silas’s lawful widow and thus not a legal heir, though originally the Lancaster County Orphans’ Court’s appointed auditor treated Corinna as a legal widow. In 1866, the auditor of the orphan’s court, H.B. Swarr, filed his report on the

⁶² Estate of Silas Omohundro in the Lancaster County Orphan’s Court, Lancaster County Historical Society, Lancaster, PA; Lancaster County, Pennsylvania Miscellaneous Book 1870-1872, Lancaster County Courthouse, 204, 206, 732.

⁶³ Ibid.; Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494.

estate after the administrator sold Silas's real estate in Pennsylvania. After taking testimony from Silas's executor, the Omohundro children's former neighbor in Lancaster, and Silas's business associate in Philadelphia, Swarr reported that Corinna was "the lawful widow of the decedent, and that their children named in the will as legatees, the issue of this marriage are legitimate. From this it results, that the Commonwealth is not entitled to a Collateral Inheritance tax..."⁶⁴

Swarr based his decision heavily on Silas's having presented Corinna and their children as his legitimate family in public. Swarr was particularly swayed by Silas's "introduction of her [Corinna] into the society of families of the highest respectability in Lancaster and Philadelphia," which he thought "clearly [established] the fact that the cohabitation of these parties was that of man and wife." Swarr was so impressed "that she was introduced into society by him as his wife, and that in conversations in the presence of Mr. Rand and others, and in the presence of their children he called her his wife," that he even postulated that Silas "may have purchased her with the view of taking her to a free state, and marrying her there." For Swarr, it was not necessarily the legality of marriage that mattered, but rather the Omohundros' public recognition of one another as a married couple. Since Silas and Corinna presented themselves as legitimately married, Swarr was willing to accept them as such.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Estate of Silas Omohundro in the Lancaster County Orphan's Court, Lancaster County Historical Society, Lancaster, PA.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

The Lancaster County Orphans' Court reviewed Swarr's report and, "after argument," confirmed it. A dissenting member of the court, Emlin Franklin, Esq., brought Swarr's decision to the attention of the Commonwealth, claiming that Pennsylvania was due collateral inheritance tax because Corinna and the Omohundro children were not Silas's legal heirs.⁶⁶ Unlike the other members of the court, Franklin was not convinced that a presumption of marriage could be established from the three witnesses' testimony and Silas's will, and the state supreme court agreed.⁶⁷

The Supreme Court of the Middle District of Pennsylvania made a ruling in May of 1870. The superior court overruled the decision of Swarr and the Lancaster County Orphans' Court, ruling that Corinna and her children with Silas were not his legal heirs. The Supreme Court based its decision on the wording of Silas's will. Silas described Corinna only as "my woman," and "a kind, faithful, and dutiful woman to me and an affectionate mother," never as his wife. In addition, the Supreme Court took Silas's declaration that the "sole purpose" of his will was to leave his "whole estate to Corinna and her children" as evidence that he "knew that Corinna and her children sustained no legal relation to him which would entitle them to his estate without a will." Where Swarr had accepted Silas and Corinna as legally married because they had presented themselves as such, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court

⁶⁶ And thus, in legal terminology, were "volunteers." Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

ruled that they were not because Silas through his actions had in effect acknowledged the opposite.⁶⁸

The Pennsylvania Supreme Court also drew a sharp distinction between Northern and Southern society. The judges of the court were not convinced by the testimony of the three witnesses because all three were from Pennsylvania and not Virginia. The court believed that “the proof should come from Virginia,” because “that he [Silas] should call her [Corinna] his wife in this state is not strange. He could not indulge in the practice of concubinage with her in this state as he had done in Virginia, without submitting himself to reproach, and perhaps to punishment.” Though Swarr had wanted to project a liberal racial attitude onto Silas, at least as regarded his own Black family, these judges drew on Northern antebellum traditions of seeing the slave states as depraved, a society with morals inferior to those in the North. Interestingly, in drawing this distinction the court did not rebuke Silas for engaging in sexual relations with a Black woman, but rather did so, at least implicitly, for engaging in sexual relations outside of wedlock.⁶⁹

The Supreme Court’s decision cost Corinna only \$322.36 out of Silas’s estate of more than \$6,000, but it doubtless took a larger emotional toll on a woman who had lived and had children with one man since she was in her teenage years. One wonders how Corinna felt about Silas’s will, where his decision not to call her his wife had not only caused so much legal trouble but also seemingly slighted the

⁶⁸ Silas Omohundro, will dated March 16, 1864, proved July 8, 1864, Richmond City Circuit Court Will Book 2, 228 – 230; Estate of Silas Omohundro in the Lancaster County Orphan’s Court, Lancaster County Historical Society, Lancaster, PA.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

nature of their long relationship. Silas's descriptions of Corinna as his "woman" highlighted her subordinate position in the relationship. She was *his* woman, and she was "dutiful." Ironically, these phrases could have been applied equally to Corinna's position as Silas's slave and her position as his wife. Corinna had lived her life with Silas as both, generally afforded the treatment of wife but always with the knowledge that she was still his slave. Silas did not free her or their children until immediately before his death, when the threat of their being sold with his estate loomed. With Silas's death, however, Corinna was free from slavery. (And, if there had been any element of exploitation in her relationship with Silas, that ended, too). Left with the financial security of Silas's estate, Corinna began her life as a free woman.⁷⁰

She appears to have taken full advantage of her new status. Given the choice between property in Richmond and Philadelphia, Corinna chose to keep her home in Richmond and sell the real estate in Pennsylvania. She actively engaged in her late husband's finances. As has been noted, she contested the treatment of Silas's estate in court. She borrowed significant amounts of money from Richard Cooper, both in her own name and on behalf of her children, who were still minors. Perhaps due to her prior experience in managing a household and engaging in Silas's business affairs, Corinna proved to be a skilled financial planner. Cooper's records show that she faithfully made payments on her bonds and had the resources to secure them. When Silas's estate was in crisis because of its debts to Silas's siblings, Corinna

⁷⁰ Silas Omohundro, will dated March 16, 1864, proved July 8, 1864, Richmond City Circuit Court Will Book 2, 228 - 230.

wisely offered to sell her Richmond properties to partially repay the money owed. Before that time, Corinna had made good use of her real estate by renting out the properties in which she was not residing.⁷¹

An interesting provision in Silas's will allowed Corinna the opportunity to remarry with security. Silas specifically instructed "that if she should marry this devise [the real estate] shall in no wise be for the use or benefit of her husband, or the property be in any wise subject to his debt."⁷² Corinna did in fact marry again, this time to Nathaniel Davidson, a White newspaper reporter.⁷³ Davidson, through his participation in the later legal battles of Silas's estate, would have come to know, and probably knew all along, the nature of Silas and Corinna's relationship and her status as an ex-slave. None of this apparently bothered Nathaniel, and by 1868 at the latest they either married or began to live as husband and wife. The alliance of Corinna and Nathaniel is particularly interesting in light of their very different backgrounds. Nathaniel, a New England native, had served as a major in the Union Army before resigning to become a war correspondent for the *New York Herald*. The two likely met when he was in Richmond covering the fall of the Confederate capital.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494; Silas Omohundro Business Records; Estate of Silas Omohundro in the Lancaster County Orphan's Court, Lancaster County Historical Society, Lancaster, PA.

⁷² Silas Omohundro, will dated March 16, 1864, proved July 8, 1864, Richmond City Circuit Court Will Book 2, 228-230.

⁷³ No marriage record for Corinna and Nathaniel exists in Virginia, though they may have married out of state. In Virginia, such a marriage would have been illegal, as the ban on interracial marriage was renewed in the Virginia Code in 1873.

⁷⁴ 1870 and 1880 Census Richmond City; "Death of Nathaniel Davidson", *The Washington Critic* (Washington, D.C.), April 29, 1886, 1; "Newspaper Changes at the National Capital [sic]", *New York Herald* October 1, 1877, 10; Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494

After Davidson's work as a war correspondent, he and Corinna went into business together in Richmond. According to advertisements in the Richmond City Business Directory and the 1870 Census, Corinna managed a bakery and confectionary at 210 17th Street in the district known as Jefferson Ward, while Nathaniel sold wood and coal next door at 212 17th. The couple's household included Corinna's four youngest children and several boarders. The value of Corinna's personal estate is listed separately in the census. Though she owned less personal property than Nathaniel, it is intriguing that someone specified to the census taker that Corinna Davidson owned personal property separate from that of the man listed as her husband. By 1870, Corinna was listed by census takers as White, indicating that she was likely able to "pass" as White among people who did not know her personal history.⁷⁵

Corinna and Nathaniel's business existed between 1870 and 1874, the last year it was listed in the city directory. In 1877 Nathaniel was appointed managing editor of the Washington, D.C. newspaper the *National Republican*. In 1880 he and Corinna appeared in the census in Washington, with his occupation listed as journalist. After working in the newspaper business for several years, Nathaniel was appointed to the Quartermaster General's Office, where he remained until his death in 1886. Corinna died only a year later, after spending the last ten years of her life in

⁷⁵ "Death of Nathaniel Davidson", *The Washington Critic* (Washington, D.C.), April 29, 1886, 1; 1870 Census Richmond City; Richmond City Directory 1870 Pg. 93 LVA Microfilm 229 Reel 1A; Richmond City Directory 1871-1872 Pg. 69 LVA Microfilm 229 Reel 1A; Richmond City Directory 1873-1874 Pg. 56

White Washington, D.C. society as the wife of a prominent newspaper editor.⁷⁶ The executor of her estate was her youngest son, George Nelson Omohundro.

George was one of five of Corinna's children who survived her. In the contest over Silas's estate, it was repeatedly documented that Silas had meant for the estate to be used for Corinna's maintenance and for the support and education of the children they had together. Cooper, Corinna, and Nathaniel testified in 1888 that these instructions had been followed; the children had received an education that "prepared them for the duties of life and are either already established in housing or ready to." Indeed, all of Silas and Corinna's children who reached adulthood seemed prepared for "the duties of life" and all but one established their own households.⁷⁷

According to family records, the eldest son, Silas, Jr., died at age sixteen, sometime around 1865. The Omohundros' only daughter who survived into adulthood, Alice Morton, married young, wedding Edward C. Street of Philadelphia at about fourteen years of age. Edward Street, listed in the censuses as White, was an oil broker. According to a letter to Cooper from Alice's brother George, Street "bought out half interest in [the] firm of Davis and Holcomb," a Chicago-based "engine, cylinder, machinery, and gasoline" company. Edward died in 1886, leaving Alice a widow. Though Alice and her husband seemed the most alienated from the Omohundro family, bringing suit against Cooper for lending money from the estate

⁷⁶ "Death of Nathaniel Davidson", *The Washington Critic* (Washington, D.C.), April 29, 1886, 1; John S. Blair, ed., *The Washington Law Reporter* (Washington, D.C.: Law Reporter Print, 1887), 15: 92.

⁷⁷ Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494

to parties that included her mother and brother, Alice nonetheless named her youngest daughter Corinna.⁷⁸

Colon Omohundro, who had lived with his mother and stepfather in Richmond in 1870, moved with them to Washington. In the 1880 census, he appeared as a White apothecary married to a White woman, Catherine (called Kate), who had been born in the District of Columbia. The two lived on Vermont Avenue Northwest and had five children.⁷⁹ Colon's acceptance as White, like his mother's and siblings', speaks to the continuing fluidity of racial categories and the importance of considerations outside of skin color, "including a person's associations, actions, and loyalties," in neighbors' – and census takers' – assignments of race.

Colon and Kate shared a life full of tragedy. Their youngest son, Colon Nathaniel Omohundro, died of dysentery in 1879 when he was only three years old. Colon, Sr., died on July 28, 1886 due to "paralysis of the heart." As a widow, Kate faced the death of two more children, three-year-old Ellis Marmaduke Omohundro in 1887 (his death was caused by burns after his clothing caught fire) and four-year-old Kate Corinna Omohundro in 1891. All four were buried in Washington's Congressional Cemetery. Kate, however, carried on through these hardships; she was listed as a druggist in her own right in Boyd's 1887 directory.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ 1870 and 1880 Census Philadelphia ; "The License List," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, Penn.), August 25, 1886, 2; "Common Pleas Suits," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, Penn.), November 5, 1886, 2; Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494.

⁷⁹ 1870 Census Richmond; 1880 Census Washington D.C.

⁸⁰ Rothman, 205; *The Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), June 25, 1887, July 24, 1886; William H. Boyd, comp., *Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia...* (Washington, D.C.: William H. Boyd, 1887), 662.

Riley Crosby Omohundro, who was living with Corinna and attending school in Richmond in 1870 and working (presumably under Nathaniel) as a reporter in 1880, disappears from the records shortly after. The family history says mysteriously of Riley, “First went to Florida, then to old Mexico, and that was last heard of him.”⁸¹ More is known about William Rainey Omohundro. Only about three when Silas died, William was raised by Corinna and Nathaniel. While living in the Davidson household in Washington, William worked as a clerk for a patent attorney in 1880. By 1900, he had moved to Chicago, where he practiced law and was married to a woman named Bessie who, like him, was considered White by the census taker. The couple and their eleven-year-old daughter, also named Bessie, lived on Lake Avenue in the Hyde Park neighborhood of the city. They had enough money to employ a live-in Irish servant.⁸²

Silas and Corinna’s youngest son, only a year old at his father’s death, would have had no memory of the world of slavery in which his mother and older siblings had existed. George Nelson Omohundro wrote to Richard Cooper in 1884, telling his father’s old friend that he was in Chicago “looking after [Edward Street’s] interest” in Davis & Holcomb. He eventually made his way back to Washington, where he married a bookkeeper and stenographer named Mary. In 1887, George was listed as a clerk in the Washington, D.C. city directory. He and Corinna were living at 1813 9th

⁸¹ 1870 Census Richmond; 1880 Census Washington D.C.; Omohundro, 472.

⁸² 1880 Census Washington, D.C., 1900 Census Chicago

Street Northwest. Until his death sometime between 1900 and 1910, George was a “manager in a beef house.” Like his brothers and sister, he entered White society.⁸³

Silas and Corinna Omohundro’s life together challenged Southern attitudes about race and interracial sex. The visibility of their relationship challenged Southern cultural notions that interracial couples had to stay silent and hidden. Corinna challenged the subordination of enslaved women through her education. She and her children challenged ideas about the immutability of race by living as White Southerners after the Civil War in Richmond and in Washington, D.C. Together, the Omohundro family challenged the system of race-based slavery by presenting themselves as a legitimate family.

At the same time, the very fact that they *could* present themselves as a legitimate family challenges historians’ accounts of the ostracism interracial couples faced. Even as the Omohundros challenged popular rhetoric about the evils of “amalgamation,” they do not seem to have faced violent opposition in their everyday life. They were not brought into court on charges of indecency, as David Isaacs and Nancy West of Charlottesville, Virginia eventually were. No mobs appeared outside their door; there is no evidence they were ever threatened with physical violence. They did not have to run away from those who knew of their relationship, like Thomas Foster and his slave Susy who “abandoned [their] Mississippi home in 1826” when Mrs. Foster tried to sell Susy. Nor did they face the social and familial

⁸³ Richmond City Chancery Court Case File 494; 1900 and 1910 Census Washington, D.C; Boyd, 662.

ostracism that Joshua Rothman depicts in the case of Ralph Quarles and his former slave, Lucy Jane Langston.⁸⁴

Rather, the Omohundros continued to be successful financially, maintained contacts with friends and family, and participated in the social and economic life of their Richmond community for a quarter of a century. Even if not embraced by society in the same way that Silas and his wife Martha Tandy may have been, all evidence indicates that Silas and Corinna received at a minimum what Martha Hodes calls a level of “toleration” from their neighbors. Moreover, their experiences do not stand alone; the historical record contains other cases – such as Hezekiah and Anna Madgigine Jai Kingsley, Richard Mentor Johnson and Julia Chinn, and James and Elizabeth Dungey – in which “white Southerners [reacted] in a way that complicates modern assumptions.”⁸⁵

Interracial couples did not automatically face ostracism and vehement opposition. Their relationships cannot be seen as a uniform, predictable phenomenon, playing out in the same way regardless of circumstance. As the history of the Omohundros shows, depending on the individual, the location, and the situation, interracial sexuality could be met with very different responses. The Omohundros apparently did not face the kind of sanctions one would expect after reading antebellum proscriptions against the evils of “race mixing.” When faced with individuals whom they saw daily - who lived next to them, who sat next to them in

⁸⁴ Rothman, 64; Clinton, 61; Rothman, 43.

⁸⁵ On the Kingsleys, see Daniel L. Schafer, *Anna Madgigine Jai Kingsley: African Princess, Florida Slave, Plantation Owner* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); for the Dungeys, see 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), 79-80; Hodes, 2 – 3.

church, who shopped at the same stores, with whom they shared gossip while exchanging milk or eggs – white Southerners at least sometimes did not see the anonymous evils supposedly inherent in “amalgamation.”

The life of Silas Omohundro, Corinna Hinton Omohundro Davidson, and their children proves that interracial couples did live openly together and could receive toleration from neighbors even as – perhaps because - they presented themselves as a legitimate couple. In light of their history, it is no longer possible to generalize that as long as a “couple kept their relationship a strictly illicit one and at least maintained the illusion that it did not exist,” it could be accepted, but that once they asserted their legitimacy as a family “the community [would] find their arrangement unacceptable.”⁸⁶ It is too simple to write off those who broke the southern code of public silence as socially ostracized transgressors. A more nuanced account of interracial couples must be written--one that considers them not as anomalies but rather as individuals, as husbands and wives, as families, and as community members who constitute a significant part of Southern history in their own right.

⁸⁶ Rothman, 64 – 65.

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