

Slave Owning Overseers in Eighteenth-Century Virginia and South Carolina

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Abstract:

This article examines the position and experiences of plantation overseers in Virginia and South Carolina in the eighteenth century who, whilst themselves employed by planters to supervise their slaves, were also slave owners in their own right. The current historiography often does little more than dismiss the overseer as a figure drawn from the lower stratum of white society. Notwithstanding the reputation of overseers as poor whites who were dependant, shiftless, and villainous, for many of these hard-working and determined individuals, working as an overseer was a transitory phase. Slave-owning overseers and those who acquired slaves while working as overseers demonstrated their long-term aspirations and the opportunities for social and economic mobility that this employment presented. This study is based upon a range of archival sources from plantation records such as diaries, letter books, account books, legal deeds and contacts.

Keywords:

Overseers; slaves; slave owners; plantation; Virginia; South Carolina

The rhetoric of eighteenth-century planters towards the overseers who managed their enslaved labourers was suggestive of the strongest of prejudices towards those they held to be of low-birth and ill-repute. Overseers, they complained, were “unskilful, idle and disorderly,” men without morals or ambition, and they were quick to blame the “Tyranny and Villainy of Overseers,” for many of the problems that arose on their slave plantations.¹ Keen to emphasise their own distinguished status, wealthy planters often conceptualised their society in terms of a clearly defined hierarchy of rank, a hierarchy in which the wretched overseer’s place was all too clear. He came from a distinct and separate order, a “necessary class of men” they acknowledged, but of the meanest sort. Thus, when Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to a friend, attempted to “state the differences between the classes of society” that had formed during the eighteenth century, he noted that the “last and lowest,” was a “seculum of beings called overseers.”² Such invective emphasised the chasm that men of Jefferson’s class believed divided them from the “last and the lowest,” but it misrepresented the reality. The stereotype has persisted; the real character of the overseer remains more elusive. Their backgrounds and their motives for taking their positions were varied. If the poor behaviour of some overseers justified the planters’ anger or scorn, others proved themselves capable and reliable. And, strikingly, some overseers owned slaves or

¹ *Journal of the Governor’s Council*, 28th April 1776, microfilm, Library of Congress (hereafter LC), as quoted in Robert A. Olwell, *Masters, Subjects and Slaves: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740-1790* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 211; Henry Laurens to Ralph Izard, 9th June 1777, “Izard- Laurens Correspondence,” *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, Vol 22, No. 1, January 1921, 44; Lewis Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1958), 501- 503.

² Thomas Jefferson to William Wirt, 14th August 1814, *Thomas Jefferson Papers*, series 1, LC; George Washington to Antony Whitting, 16th December, 1792, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799* (ed J. C. Fitzpatrick) (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931-1944), (hereafter *WGW*), 34, 193; *PHL*, 4, 503.

became slave owners while employed as overseers. For these, overseeing was a transitory stage, a means of bridging the social chasm that separated the overseer from his employer.³

The study of the socially aspiring, slave-owning overseer, challenges the ingrained negative image of overseers held by planters. Inevitably, the fragmentary nature of the evidence related to overseeing means that the voices of the wealthy and the powerful are those heard most clearly in the planters' letters, diaries, and accounts books. Yet these sources provide enough evidence to re-construct the life of the eighteenth-century plantation overseer.⁴ Men from diverse backgrounds saw overseeing not as inherently degrading but as an opportunity to hone their skills as managers of plantations and slaves. Overseeing provided some men with an acceptable means of improving their prospects and advancing their social and economic status. Indeed, overseers who already owned slaves were able to work them for maximum profit. For those overseers who did not initially own slaves, opportunities sometimes arose to acquire them. Slaves might be purchased through the proceeds of overseeing, a process facilitated in many cases by a close connection with their planter-employer who might offer favourable terms.

It might be tempting to dismiss 'plantation management' as little more than organised brutality. In fact, overseers undertook many onerous tasks alongside their primary role of managing and disciplining slave labour. Nevertheless, while overseers were a ubiquitous and essential element in the plantation system, they have occupied a limited place in the historiography of colonial slavery. One strand of investigation has focused on

³ For a full discussion of the place of overseers in colonial society, their backgrounds, recruitment, and duties see; Laura Sandy, "Between Planter and Slave: The Social and Economic Role of Plantation Overseers in Virginia and South Carolina, 1740-1790," (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2006); Laura Sandy, "Supervisors of Small Worlds: The Role of Overseers on Low Country Slave Plantations" *Journal of Early American History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, August 2012, 178-210.

⁴ The extensive records left by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Landon and Robert Carter, William Byrd, William Cabbell, and Joseph Ball in Virginia and Henry Laurens, Robert Raper, Josiah Smith, William Ancrum, Margaret Colleton, and Eliza, Charles and Thomas Pinckney in South Carolina, to name but a few, provide useful information about slavery and overseers during the Revolutionary period.

the social origins and character of overseers. John Spencer Bassett's ground-breaking investigation of the role of an overseer living and working on a slave plantation, based entirely on the letters of one nineteenth-century overseer, claims there were a very small number of overseers of "an ambitious and advancing class," but alleges that, beyond those few, the majority of overseers were "illiterate men," "unimaginative" and unmotivated, due to their lower-class background. This image set the tone for other analyses of plantation overseers, which have, by and large, endorsed this view.⁵ James Baird states that "the presence of a racially debased slave population stigmatized dependence in new and powerful ways" and characterises overseers, although members of the free white population, as dependants rather than men with ambition or agency.⁶ William Scarborough's work was the first piece of scholarship to give overseers more credit for their "erudite comprehension of principles of scientific agriculture."⁷ Like Scarborough, the most recent study of overseers by William Wiethoff focuses almost exclusively on the antebellum era. Though Wiethoff provides a provocative analysis of the links between rhetoric, social hierarchy, race relations, and power, it adds little to our understanding of the backgrounds and the day-to-day work carried out by overseers in the colonial era and during the revolutionary period.⁸ Indeed, these scholars presume, rather than prove, that there were few important differences between the overseers in the colonial and antebellum periods.

A second strand of investigation of overseers views them in light of its major

⁵ John Spencer Bassett, *The Southern Plantation Overseer as Revealed in His Letters* (Northampton: Smith College, 1925), 2, 9. For similar analyses of plantation overseers see; Carl Bridenbaugh, *The Colonial Craftsman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); *Myths and Realities: Societies of the Colonial South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952). Thomas Clark (ed.), *Travels in the Old South: A Bibliography*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956).

⁶ James Baird, *Between Slavery and Independence: Power Relations Between Dependent White Men and their Superiors in Late Colonial and Early National Virginia with Particular Reference to the Overseer-Employer Relationship*, PhD Thesis, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1999), ii; James Baird, "Paternalism and Profit: Planters and Overseers in Piedmont Virginia, 1750-1825" in Robert Olwell and Alan Tully (eds.), *Cultures and Identities in Colonial British America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 147-168.

⁷ William Scarborough, *The Overseer: Plantation Management in the Old South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1984), xvi, 3-4.

⁸ William Wiethoff, *Crafting the Overseer's Image* (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 2006).

preoccupation: the influence of slavery and black culture on the social and economic development of the colonial South, and hence emphasises the social conflict between overseers and slaves. The overseers' lives, as autonomous individuals, or as a separate class, are not explored.⁹ The balance has been redressed to some extent in Max Edelson's recent work on the "plantation enterprise" in colonial South Carolina which has demonstrated that overseers played a pivotal role in the management and movement of goods and people between plantations in the country and towns. He notes that by at least the "1760s the post of plantation manager became a permanent supervisory position." Indeed, the overseer involved in the management of a dynamic and expanding plantation enterprise was a significant figure in the plantation world, one who might visit multiple holdings and take part in a wide variety of activities.¹⁰ What then was the true socio-economic status of overseers, particularly those who owned slaves, the main theme of this paper, and what contribution did they make to the formation of the slave-plantation system? How can we characterise the working lives of overseers and what benefits accrued to them?

In South Carolina, most planters chose to avoid the heat and fevers of their plantations by residing in Charleston or, more rarely, living in Britain.¹¹ Thus, the overseer performed an essential supervisory task, as recognised by legislation. For example, in 1712, a deficiency law (revised and expanded in scope in 1726 and 1755) was passed in South Carolina that penalized the owners of plantations "wherein six negroes or slaves shall be employed without one or more white person living and residing on the same plantation."¹² In Virginia, overseers were no less important. Although the majority of planters resided on

⁹ Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint, Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*.

¹⁰ Max Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise in Colonial South Carolina* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 153-154, 200-254.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of the South Carolina landscape and analysis of the development of plantations in South Carolina in the eighteenth century, see Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise*, 13-53 and 92-126.

¹² Thomas Cooper and David McCord, eds., *Statutes at Large of South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: A. S. Johnson, 1836-1841), (volumes 1 to 10), 2, 363; 3, 193, 272; 97, 175.

or near their plantations, the need for overseers was also recognised by the law. Early and recurring Virginia legislation penalised plantation owners in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who did not employ “free,” white, “Christian Overseers” to supervise their slaves and prevent them from taking part in unruly and criminal activities.¹³ Even elite planters who made their plantation their permanent residence were often absent on government or military business and thus relied on the support of overseers. As a result, during the course of the eighteenth century both South Carolina and Virginia planters and legislatures had not only declared overseeing crucial to the success and security of southern plantations, but they also decreed it to be the domain of the white man.¹⁴ Thus, the state regarded the overseer as vital to the maintenance of order and the prevention of slave rebellion. For those who owned any number of slaves, the overseer served as an intermediary between the owner and the slaves, between the big house and the fields, and between the core and the periphery of plantation business. He worked at ground level on the plantation supervising, motivating, or forcing slave labourers to be industrious and, in so doing, he represented an integral part of labour management systems. The prominent Virginia planter Landon Carter stressed that “negroes cannot be either careful or diligent without an overseer” and his peers, such as Henry Laurens, John Calhoun, Eliza Pinckney, George Washington, Robert Carter, and Thomas Jefferson, evidentially depended heavily on overseers.¹⁵

¹³ William Hening (ed.), *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature in the Year 1619* (Charlottesville, VA: Published for the Jamestown Foundation of the Commonwealth of Virginia by the University Press of Virginia, 1969), 2, 481; 3, 451, 436, 460, 336.

¹⁴ The need for overseers on plantations in North America did not start with the institutionalisation of slavery in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Laws and court records suggest that in the seventeenth century black, white and Indian overseers were used to supervise plantations on which mixed (free and unfree men and women, black and white) groups of labourers worked. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, however, overseeing became racially prescriptive. With the decline of the system of indentured servitude and the rise and institutionalisation of black slavery, legislators made overseeing, before the law, exclusively a white man’s profession. For a discussion of the evolving role of the overseer in the wider defence of plantation communities see; Laura Sandy, ‘Divided Loyalties in a “Predatory War”: Plantation Overseers during the American Revolution,’ *Journal of American Studies*, Vol.48, No.2, May 2014, 357-392.

¹⁵ Landon Carter, *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778*, ed. Jack Greene (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1965) (2 volumes) (hereafter *DLC*), 1: 389- 390.

Overseers were expected to supervise the activities of slaves while at work, from sun-up to sundown. Overseers distributed and organized labour activities, and although the majority of slaves performed agricultural tasks, overseers also supervised slaves working in a variety of skilled and semi-skilled occupations such as carpentry, blacksmithing, gardening, milling, and weaving. They were also expected to organize and keep track of slaves who worked beyond the confines of the plantation or who were hired out. Most importantly, overseers were required to work the slaves they supervised hard enough to achieve a level of profit that satisfied their employers. The correct balance between care and coercion was a difficult one to strike and overseers were just as likely to be dismissed for treating slaves too leniently as they were for treating slaves too harshly.¹⁶ Planters preferred men whom they employed as overseers to have some experience of agriculture and planting; however, men with little such experience were not discounted if they had other skills that were useful to the operation of a plantation and the maintenance and development of its infrastructure.

While ‘ne’er do well’ overseers existed, the diverse tasks demanded of overseers belies the notion that they were generally men who were of questionable morals, drawn from the poorest echelon of society. Planters entrusted their slaves, livestock, tools, buildings, provisions, and the crop, to overseers, and planters expected their overseers to have a background of agricultural knowledge, practical skills and literacy, and sometimes even to possess slaves. These were qualities that the poorest members of society rarely possessed. Rather than all being men of “low circumstances,” as Robert Pringle stated, uneducated, inexperienced, young, and prone to episodes of sadistic violence or criminality,

¹⁶ Sandy, “Between Planter and Slave,” 149-183. For example, overseers received ambiguous instructions such as “Frighten the two boys till you make them tremble but don’t Whip them.” It is hard to imagine how an overseer could make the slaves under his supervision “tremble” without resorting to physical punishment, as slaves were inured to the authoritarian approach and unlikely to be frightened by strictness alone. Henry Laurens, *The Papers of Henry Laurens, 1746- 1792* (eds. P. Hamer, G. Rogers, and D. Chesnut) (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968-2003), (hereafter *PHL*), 5: 16.

overseers were in fact a heterogeneous mix of paupers, floaters, pragmatists, and professionals.¹⁷ For example, the sons of middling planters sometimes sought employment as overseers of other men's slaves in order to establish their independence. Thus, it is not surprising that some colonial overseers came from slave-owning backgrounds or were poor but ambitious men who hoped to become slave owners themselves.

Slave ownership, according to historians such as Robert Olwell, turned a man into "a master and, in a slave society, into a member of the ruling class."¹⁸ Though the elite planters who ruled the South were unwilling to allow any but the most prosperous and well-respected men into their circle, those who owned slaves moved one step up the socio-economic ladder and their progress was often acknowledged as such by the elite. The records of many large colonial plantations reveal that men who owned slaves worked as overseers. Those who were familiar with slave ownership and who could demonstrate their ability to control slaves, and who understood the importance of slave health and welfare were an attractive prospect for plantation owners and they were well-rewarded for their efforts. Despite the differences in the slave labour systems and culture that developed in the Upper and the Lower South during the eighteenth century, in both regions planters employed slave-owning overseers and, occasionally, offered non-slaveholding overseers the chance to buy slaves. Moreover, some overseers who were, or became, slave-owners during their period of employment also owned or rented land. Furthermore, it is apparent that some artisans who worked as overseers, and who had not necessarily intended to become involved in plantation slavery or slave ownership, also through their role as an overseer, entered into the world of slaveholding. Indeed, overseers who knew they were highly prized expected their employers to aid them in their ambition to join the ranks of slave owners and

¹⁷ Robert Pringle, *Robert Pringle Letter Book* (ed. W. Edgar) (Columbia, SC: Published for the South Carolina Historical Society and the South Carolina Tricentennial Commission by the University of South Carolina Press, 1972), 474, 577.

¹⁸ Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 44.

sometimes threatened to leave if their demands were not met. For these individuals, overseeing was an intermediary stage in a career directed towards economic and social advancement. Overseers with a few slaves could not rival great planters in social status, but they did become respected, if minor, members of the slave-holding class. In both Virginia and South Carolina, overseers who owned one or more able-bodied slaves used their labour to increase their incomes under the "share" system. That is, overseers' slaves were worked alongside those of the planters, each slave earning a proportionate share of the crop. The share system obviously incentivised overseers: the larger the crop they produced for the planter, the more they earned from their own slaves.

Many planters, who advertised for overseers in the *South Carolina Gazette*, welcomed overseers who brought their own slaves. One planter offered to place an overseer's slaves on "shares or hire" them, while others were willing to place a "few on shares," in some cases up to eight.¹⁹ Another planter revealed a preference for "a Person has two or three Hands to put on Shares", stating that a man who could add his own slaves to the workforce would be "more acceptable."²⁰ Wealthy planters such as Henry Laurens, John Calhoun, William Ancrum, and the Pinckneys employed slaveholders as plantation overseers. At least 11 out of 32 of Henry Laurens's overseers were slave-owners.²¹ Timothy Creamer took up a post as an overseer for Laurens in 1763. When he and his wife moved on to the South Carolina plantation, he was listed as owning two slaves and his employer noted that as well as his standard payment "The Overseer if he employs any Negroes of his own to

¹⁹ For example see; December 1767, December 1768, March 1765, January 1765, *South Carolina Gazette* (hereafter *SCG*).

²⁰ 23 December 1774, *SCG*.

²¹ This number has been calculated from a variety of archival collections that contain plantation records for Henry Laurens: *PHL*; *Henry Laurens Account Book*, Robert Scott Small Library, College of Charleston; *Henry Laurens Papers*, South Carolina Department of History and Archives (hereafter *SCDHA*). Although, the total number of overseers employed by Henry Laurens is higher than the number that Philip Morgan claims, this estimate includes non-traditional overseers who were performing the role of an overseer and hired as an overseers but had other skills and duties, for example gentlemen-overseers and artisan-overseers. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 327.

draw a share of the Crop of Rice in proportion to the number of such his Negroes.”²² In other words, he would have drawn two shares of the crop on top of his annual salary, although, of course, the value of the shares varied with the size of the crop. William Gambell became an overseer for Laurens in 1773 and brought with him five slaves, for whose labour he collected additional payment. By the time he left Laurens’ employ, he was well-respected and sought after by other planters. Indeed, he moved to a new plantation with his slaves and negotiated better terms with his new employer.²³ Other overseers, such as Mr Davis and Marlow Pryor, who worked for the South Carolina planter William Ancrum during the American Revolution, are recorded as having taken their own slaves with them to the plantation. The payments planters offered were often dependant on the labour value of their overseer’s slaves. One overseer on the Izard estate in South Carolina owned five slaves. After an assessment of the contribution these slaves could make to the plantation workforce, the overseer was paid three full shares and two half-shares for his five slaves on top of his salary. Similarly, Gambell was not offered five full shares for the labour of the five slaves he owned. His employer judged that there were “only four that can go in the Field., two of them who are ordinary, his fifth Negro is an incumbrance.” The payment Gambell received reflected the different abilities of his slaves.²⁴

The practice of employing slave-owning overseers continued and, seemingly, became more common during the eighteenth century, as the number of large-scale plantations increased and expanded their activities. Although the trajectories of Virginia and South Carolina were contrasting in many respects, in both regions large plantations quickly began to dominate the markets as well as the landscape. As a result, the options for aspirant

²² *PHL*, 4: 1.

²³ *Ibid*, 8: 88.

²⁴ William Ancrum to Parker Qunice, 14th February 1778, *William Ancrum Letterbook*, Caroliniana, University of South Carolina, (hereafter USC); Land Plat for 100 acres in Amelia County, 18th June 1771, SCDHA; *Petitions for Land Grants*, 3, 182; 4, 1; 6, 211, 218, South Carolina History Room in Charleston County Public Library; “Izard to Laurens Correspondence,” *SCHM*, XXII, January, April, July, 1921, 40- 43; *PHL*, 7: 513-17.

individuals who owned small numbers of slaves contracted.²⁵ Overseeing, however, offered a somewhat rare opportunity for economic and social advancement. Planters, who were escalating the size and scale of their operations, increasingly looked for skilled and experienced individuals who would be capable of managing their slaves and business interests. Thus, it is apparent that men with one or several slaves and experience of planting or a trade were the best option and more readily available for hire.²⁶ By the 1790s, many plantation account books contain details of the additional payments made to overseers for the use of their slaves. John Ball's account book shows that his overseer, David Franklin, was paid for the labour of his two slaves, Tom and Old Sambo. Although Franklin received less than half his agreed basic annual salary after various deductions were taken into account, the additional income he received from his slaves' shares almost doubled his standard salary each year.²⁷ Benjamin Roodes was in the possession of at least two slaves in 1797 when Allard Belin recorded him as an overseer for the forthcoming year. Roodes likely expected to receive additional remuneration for the use his slaves, but suffered when,

²⁵ Timothy Breen, "A Changing Labor Force and Race Relations in Virginia 1660-1710," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Autumn, 1973), 5-6; Peter Coclanis, *The Shadow of a Dream: Economic Life and Death in the South Carolina Low Country, 1670-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 64-68; Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 48, 64; Allan Kulikoff, "A Prolifick People: Black Population Growth in the Chesapeake Colonies, 1700-1790," *Southern Studies*, XVI, 1977, 415; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 16-17, 61, 93; Philip Morgan, "Black Society and the Lowcountry, 1760- 1810," in *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman (Charlottesville: Published for the United States Capitol Historical Society by The University Press of Virginia, 1983), 85-89; Lorena Walsh, *Motives of Honor, Pleasure, and Profit: Plantation Management in the Colonial Chesapeake, 1607-1763*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 202-205; Lorena Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1997), 238; Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina From 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975), 4-6, 9, 27, 36-37, 131-167.

²⁶ William Scarborough, when using the more comprehensive antebellum records, such as the census, in an attempt to offer "a statistical view of the overseer" across the South, commented on "the difficulty experienced in identifying slaveowning overseers." The problems, stemming from insufficient data available for the colonial and, also, the early national and antebellum eras, has prevented a full analysis of slave owning overseers and made it near impossible to reach any solid conclusions about change over time. Scarborough, *The Overseer*, 53, 54-66.

²⁷ John Ball Account Book, 1786-1812, Folders 2/11/ and 11/515/6, *Ball Family Papers*, SCHS.

as Belin noted, “a tornado happened which killed Mr Roodes two Negro boys.”²⁸ Less commonly, South Carolina planters offered overseers a wage rather than a crop-share for the labour of their slaves. For example, John Ewing Calhoun offered one Thomas Gravenstock £16 per annum for each slave's labour rather than a share per slave.²⁹

Indeed, many planters used the offer of slave ownership to attract or retain experienced and skilled men. John Ewing Calhoun and many of his peers sold slaves to their overseers or allowed them to buy them on credit.³⁰ Marlow Pryor was given financial aid by Ancrum, which enabled him to buy two slaves for each of which he was allowed “one share.”³¹ Josiah Smith, who managed the plantation affairs of absentee planter George Austin, wrote to Austin that an overseer he had employed was dissatisfied with his contract and terms. He informed Austin “tis ten to one we shall be able to retain him against his will,” but suggested that if the overseer in question proved “tractable and industrious” then the best way to encourage him to stay would be to purchase him a slave and let him gradually pay off the debt.³² Laurens advanced wages or credit to several overseers that he wished to support or retain so that they too could purchase slaves. He wrote to one of his managers concerning his accounts with his overseer William Godfrey; “You will see by my books I owe him no Wages, I enabled him by an Advance of Money, to make a very beneficial Bargain of Negroes...” James Brenard also purchased a slave from one of Laurens’s shipments for £250 South Carolina currency, to be paid the following year. John

²⁸ Entry for July 26 1797, 2, Allard Belin’s Sandy Island Plantation Journals, 1792- 1798, South Carolina Historical Society (hereafter SCHS). For similar cases see, Overseer Agreement with John Foster, December 1789, and Overseer Agreement with Thomas Gravenstock, 1793; John Ewing Calhoun to John Christian Greninger, 10 December, 1796; John Ewing Calhoun to Mr Boineau, 10 January 1799, *John Ewing Calhoun Papers*, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, (hereafter, SHC).

²⁹ Overseer Agreement with John Foster, December 1789, and Overseer Agreement with Thomas Gravenstock, 1793, *John Ewing Calhoun Papers*, SHC.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ William Ancrum to Marlow Pryor, 19th June 1778 & William Ancrum to Mr Chesnut, 19th April 1779, *William Ancrum Letterbook*, Caroliniana, USC.

³² Josiah Smith to George Austin, 25th February 1772, *Josiah Smith Letterbook*, SHC.

McCulloch, an experienced planter who likely owned one or two slaves when he was recruited to be an overseer for Henry Laurens, impressed his employer who wrote:

I am of the opinion that under Mr McCulloch's directions I shall have $\frac{1}{3}$ d more preformed by my Negroes than has been done under Mr Noble, & the Negroes better satisfied upon the whole.³³

Laurens offered McCulloch increased autonomy and responsibility and, more importantly, loaned McCulloch the money to buy six new slaves, which he allowed him to work for “shares” on the plantation where he worked. Laurens noted that he paid “his wages therefore with the allowance for his Negroes.” As a consequence, his wage doubled while he was in Laurens’ employ. When McCulloch decided to quit his job, he informed Laurens that he “did not wish to serve anybody as an Overseer after” and enquired about settling any remaining debts he had with his employer. Laurens responded:

I am willing to give McCulloch every reasonable Indulgence for his debt- let him have every opportunity of attempting to improve for his own benefit the Talents put into his hands. I believe him a very honest man & am desirous of befriending him.³⁴

McCulloch, with ample support from his employer, was thus able to join the ranks of independent planters.

Slave ownership combined with proven success at overseeing brought some men opportunities that they seldom would have achieved outside of the world of slave management. Laurens summed up the potential career paths of successful slave-owning overseers when, after visiting and “fixing a New Overseer” at his Mepkin plantation in 1769, he commented on the man who was being replaced. John Smith, who had been employed as an overseer for Mrs Caws before he entered Laurens’ employ, joined Laurens with at least two slaves. In 1765, Laurens informed him “I have agreed with you upon your

³³ *PHL*, 6: 447.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 11: 378, 12: 85, 542, 855.

own terms & something better...” and, by 1769, according to Laurens, through overseeing Smith had “grown Rich & set up for himself.”³⁵ Overseers who owned slaves could exert some influence over their terms and payment as well as earning additional income and thus accumulate enough wealth to set up their own plantations.³⁶

The great planters of Virginia also employed slave-owning overseers and helped to facilitate their transition from non-slaveholder to slaveholder during their employment. George Washington, Lewis Burwell, Robert and Landon Carter, Charles Dabney, William Cabell and many others employed slave-owning overseers. The contracts and agreements that Virginia planters made with their overseers included extra payments, in “shares” or sometimes money, for the labour of their slaves. Robert Carter paid his overseers a share for the labour of each able-bodied slave they owned. James Harrison received one share for his slave Aggy, John Grubb received a share for his slave Charles, and Samuel Straughan also

³⁵ Ibid, 4: 628, 632, 661, 662, 668, 5: 3, 6: 251.

³⁶ Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball* (New York: J. S. Taylor, 1837), Documenting the American South Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/ballslavery/ball.html> (Accessed 27 September 2016), 166. There is a small amount of evidence that indicates overseers could become temporary or surrogate slave-owners through the slave-hire system. Overseers who owned their own land but who did not own slaves or who owned only a small number, could sometimes hire the slaves they managed (or others owned by their employer or nearby planters) to work for them on Sundays. For example, in the early nineteenth century, Charles Ball’s overseer owned “a field of near twenty acres” about two miles from the plantation where he was overseer. Here he “planted in cotton, on his own account,” but, according to Ball, “he had no slaves” and was, thus, “obliged to hire people to work it for him, or let it lie waste.” In this case, interestingly, the system benefitted the slaves as well as the overseer. The slaves “had gone to work for wages for themselves” and their overseer paid them “fifty cents each” per day for their work. Significant evidence of this practise is not available for the eighteenth century, though the move towards diversification and slave-hiring in the latter half of the century would suggest that some planters may have allowed overseers or other neighbouring planters to hire slaves and pay them a wage for their labour. Encouraging slaves to work in their free time kept them active, under supervision, and, no doubt, out of trouble. The more business-minded probably took a portion of their slaves’ earnings. At the same time such a practice, as part of the broader slave hiring system, supported the independent endeavours of overseers and other such small-scale planters. The complexities of the slave hire system that developed across the South needs further investigation. It must be noted, however, that it is very unlikely that all or many planters allowed their slaves to hire themselves out in this manner. Commonly, Sundays were reserved for activities such as growing provisions, washing, mending and making clothes, religious worship, craft and leisure activities, or simply time to rest to ensure the enslaved were healthy and able to work hard for their owners. Indeed, after commenting on the slaves who were allowed to hire themselves to their overseer on Sundays, Ball then states that “on every plantation, with which I ever had any acquaintance, the people are allowed to make patches [gardens]...These patches they must cultivate on Sunday.” Furthermore, it must be noted that planters were constantly weary of their overseers and their slaves’ attention being drawn away from their plantation businesses. In the eighteenth-century planters mostly discouraged their overseers from leaving the plantations and, on occasion recorded their overseers’ illegal use of slaves’ under their supervision to work in their households or on land they owned. See for example; *DLC*, 1: 305, 385, 389-390, 482; *PHL*, 7: 323.

received an additional share for the labour of his slave Ben.³⁷ In 1756, Harrison Harris worked as an overseer for William Dabney and earned an annual wage of £20. In the 1760s, he was employed by his former employer's son, Charles Dabney, as an overseer on the Ambler estate which Dabney managed. Harris was paid in shares (rather than an annual salary) and also received an extra share of the crop of tobacco and corn for his "boy Charles" who laboured alongside the Ambler's slaves. From this Harris earned over £30 per annum and, therefore, by 1760 increased his wage by over 50 per cent from what he had earned in 1756.³⁸ Philip Burt, whose father was a middling planter, was hired as an overseer on New Quarter plantation on the Burwell estate from the early 1760s. Burt drew a full share for his slave, earning an average of £40 per annum between 1763 and 1771, and in one of those years, the income from his own and his slave's shares allowed him to earn £47. This was a higher wage than the basic annual salary overseers usually received, which was in the region of £20 to 25. In fact, Burt was receiving a sum equivalent to that paid to men who were employed within a managerial position, such as a "head-overseer." Another of Burwell's overseers drew extra shares for at least two of the four slaves he owned, which enabled him to earn between £37 and £58 per annum during 1763 and 1770. William Moody was employed by Burwell as an overseer and used the slaves he owned to increase his profits from overseeing. On marriage, his wife brought a small amount of land, slaves, and skills to the overseeing partnership, which no doubt speeded up the couple's advancement. Moody became a moderately successful planter; by the time of his death, he owned an estate worth £633 and 12 slaves and had served as a juror, surveyor, and

³⁷ Robert Carter Overseer Agreement with Samuel Straughan, *Robert Carter Papers*, Virginia Historical Society, (hereafter, VHS).

³⁸ Dabney Ledger and Loose Papers, 4, *Dabney Family Papers*, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; Account of Mr Edward Ambler Estate in Hanover and Louisa County 1760, Vol. 4, 15-16, Charles Dabney Account Books (vol. 1-18), *Charles William Dabney Papers*, SHC.

lieutenant in the militia.³⁹ Such individuals do not merely defy the caricature of the overseer as the ill-bred scion of the “last and lowest” class of colonial society; they demonstrate that a successful career in plantation management was a route to property and status.

William Cabell’s accounts also included extra payments made to overseers for the use of their slaves, but reflect some of the intricacies involved in such arrangements. His account books show that he paid some overseers with provisions, cash sums, or shares. Like most planters, Cabell was willing to integrate his overseers’ slaves into his plantation workforce but, like his peers in South Carolina, the rate or method of payment varied with the age, gender, and ability of each slave. Initially, Cabell only provided provisions and clothing for one overseer’s slave boy, but as the slave grew older, he paid an annual sum of cash for the use of the boy’s labour. This amount increased each year as the slave grew more valuable as a labourer.⁴⁰ In the contract of another overseer, Burwell gave him monetary compensation for using his own slave woman to be his domestic helper, while another Burwell overseer was allotted a half-share per year for his female slave’s plantation labour. Similarly, the additional payment Burwell offered his slave-owning overseers was in line with an assessment of the labour capacity of the slave.⁴¹

In colonial Virginia and South Carolina, some skilled artisans who could not find work in their trade or who wished to enter the plantation business turned to overseeing. Alongside a secure annual income, through overseeing they gained valuable experience in planting and slave management and access to the network of wealthy, influential planters in the vicinity who could provide support for future ventures. Artisans with the experience to supervise both skilled slaves and field slaves often received above average remuneration

³⁹ Lorena Walsh, *Carters Grove Biographical Notes* (The biographical notes about employees who worked for Lewis Burwell at Carters Grove plantation were kindly given to me by Lorena Walsh). For more information on the payment of overseers in Virginia and South Carolina see; Sandy, “Between Planter and Slave,” 74-107.

⁴⁰ *William Cabell Commonplace Books, 1770-1799* (hereafter *CCB*), 3, 17th March 1771-21st December 1771, VHS.

⁴¹ Walsh, *Carters Grove Biographical Notes*.

once they had proved their aptitude. Artisan-overseers received extra payments for the additional skilled work they undertook and supervised and, like other slave-owning overseers, increased their earnings by integrating their slaves into the gangs of unskilled and skilled slave labourers they supervised. Such opportunities for self-improvement were not restricted to slave-owning artisans who became overseers. Artisan-overseers, who initially owned no slaves themselves, sometimes used overseeing to acquire slaves, once again, often with the help and support of their employer.

In Virginia, Charles Higgason worked as an artisan-overseer for Charles Dabney. In addition to his agreed salary for “overlooking the BlackSmiths,” he also received payment for the use of his “negro” on the plantation where he worked.⁴² John Ross was an overseer of both slave artisans and field slaves for Lewis Burwell. In addition to his payment for working as an overseer, he received a further £9 per annum as “rent” for the use of his slave boy, Phil, on the estate where he worked. After working as an overseer for three years, he procured a small plot of land, hired a slave and then bought more slaves, and set up his own plantation. Although illiterate when he died in 1781, his will reflected his material success and hard-earned status (in addition to, of course, the labour of the enslaved). At his death he owned a plantation that included at least 100 acres of land, seven slaves, and a household inventory worth £269.⁴³

⁴² Account with Charles Higgason, Daybook 16, 41-43, *Charles William Dabney Papers, 1716-1833*, SHC.

⁴³ Walsh, *Carters Grove Biographical Notes*. Lorena Walsh surmises that since there were not enough workers at Mill Quarter listed to justify an annual salary of an overseer, Ross’ salary must have reflected his payment for other assignments, including “supervising carpenters and coopers.” His salary increased from £20 in 1774 to £25 in 1776, after which he left overseeing. For an overseer paid in cash in Virginia, the £9 “rent” that Ross received for the labour of his slave substantially increased his income, and with regard to the average annual salary of Virginia overseers, it amounted to approximately a third or a quarter increase in payment per year. Like Burwell, George Washington also employed artisans to work as overseers. For example, Caleb Stone worked as an overseer of the slave carpenters for George Washington from 1774 to 1777. Although, he was not a slave-owner he was diligent and competent in his role as overseer and prudent in his habits. After four years, he had saved enough of his income (possibly with the help of a small inheritance) to buy some land and slaves. Once a slave owner he built a modest settlement, and set up a small carpentry business using his slaves

In South Carolina, skilled men who could train and supervise slaves were also sought by planters who strove to make their plantations self-sufficient. Some slave-owning artisans and tradesmen who became overseers, like Paul Villepontoux in South Carolina, brought their slaves to the plantation with them. Villepontoux, the son of a planter, worked simultaneously as an overseer and carpenter for at least three years between 1774 and 1777. He was paid an annual salary for his work as an overseer but he also received payments from his employers for additional carpentry work he undertook: for example, making coffins and constructing and repairing plantation boats. While working as an overseer, he most likely supervised both field slaves and skilled slaves, and also appears to have supervised the work of his employer's slaves who were hired out to work on carpentry projects for other planters. His own slaves also worked alongside field slaves and skilled slaves on the plantation where he was overseer and as part of hired-out gangs of skilled labourers.⁴⁴ He received both monetary payments and shares for the additional work his slaves carried out. Indeed, the labours of his slaves earned him a 25 percent increase on top of his agreed salary (excluding the additional carpentry jobs he undertook). Villepontoux, after working as a well-remunerated overseer, entered into a small-scale planter-partnership with David Anderson. Both men were to supply an equal number of horses to plough, and slave labourers to cultivate the crops and also "Provisions according to the number of His respective families." Villepontoux was to receive a "two fifths part of all the crop of corn, Rice, Potatoes, Cotton" and Anderson would be entitled to "the remaining three fifth parts of the crop."⁴⁵

as additional labourers. The experience and benefits of his employment as an overseer undoubtedly helped facilitate his move from non-slave-owning artisan to slave-owning, independent businessman. Fluvanna County, Virginia, *Will Books*, 2, O. S., 52, 118; Dalzell and Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, 144, 155. For examples see; Sandy, "Between Planter and Slave," *passim*.

⁴⁴ Overseers Reports 1774- 1777, *Allston Family Papers*, SCHS.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

In other cases, well-established craftsmen who had migrated from Europe, and who did not own slaves, became overseers. Having failed to find enough work in his trade in South Carolina, the English immigrant Stephen Brown was advised by an acquaintance who had progressed from overseer to slave-owning independent planter, that he should follow the same path. His friend predicted that “a few more years experience, gained through overseeing ... would make him an able planter” and also afford him entry into the world of slave ownership. Brown followed the advice and took a job as an overseer. Both Brown and his wife were considered “very industrious” by the agent of their employer, who also reported that Mr Brown “& wife will both save what money they get” and be able to “buy a couple of New Negroes on Credit.” Once slave owners, they would be allowed to work them for extra shares. Indeed, if they continued to work hard at their tasks and increased their income from overseeing, it was considered highly likely the couple would, in time, progress into the world of independent, small-scale slaveholders. Sadly, these predictions were disrupted by the death of Mrs Brown, who succumbed to a “sickness” that also claimed the life of another overseer and some of the plantation’s slaves and, less than three years later, by the outbreak of revolution.⁴⁶

Despite the later misfortunes of the Browns, their friends and employer had anticipated slave-ownership and upward mobility lay ahead. Clearly Jefferson’s dismissal of that “seculum of beings called overseers” as the lowest class in colonial society was a misleading generalization, redolent of a stereotype that has persisted for far too long and that has obscured evidence of an occupation that often promoted aspiration and opened an avenue to social mobility. Ownership of slaves proved a key mechanism. For some men, who already owned one or two slaves and perhaps rented land, overseeing was an opportunity to secure a future as an independent planter. Furthermore, overseeing offered

⁴⁶ Josiah Smith to George Austin (in England), 30 January 1772, 25th February 1772, and 31st January 1774, Josiah Smith Letterbook, SHC.

men from a variety of backgrounds who were not slave owners, but who had agricultural experience or who were skilled artisans or who gained the respect of their employer, the opportunity to become slave owners. Living on large plantations and in regular contact or communication with wealthy planters, overseers were placed in a unique position to buy slaves in the colonial era. Sometimes, these slaves were purchased from their planter-employer; more often, the advances on their salary or credit extended by their employer financed the buying of slaves. Other occupations which offered no access to this powerful network of wealthy planters and large plantation enterprises did not (or very rarely) provided such opportunities. From the lowly, to those of moderate means, many men used overseeing to procure slaves or enhance their slave-holdings and prepare them for independent slave ownership and management.

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