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Masterful Women: Colonial Women Slaveholders in the Urban Low Country

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When Abraham Minis, merchant and tavern keeper, of Savannah, Georgia sat down to draw up his last will and testament he faced a heart-wrenching dilemma: how would he successfully provide for all of his eight children *and* also ensure that his beloved wife Abigail would have enough to live out the rest of her days in widowhood in comfort? Three years later, in spring 1757, Abraham died. When his will was read, there were thankfully no surprises for Abigail and their children – Abraham had followed Low Country custom regarding the division of family wealth. He gave his three sons his horses and mares and left five daughters all of his black cattle. It was Abigail, he explained, who was to inherit "all the rest of my Estate both real and personal" to be "enjoyed by her" so that she would be able to "maintain educate and bring up our children." He sealed his love, approval, and trust in his wife's abilities to meet this request by nominating her his sole executrix. Any help that she might need when settling the affairs of his estate, he observed, would be provided by his loyal friends Joseph Phillips and Benjamin Sheftall, who would assist and advise her.[1]

Almost thirty years later, in 1794, at ninety-six years old, but nonetheless "still of sound Mind and Understanding," Abigail Minis herself passed away. She had, since her husband's death decades before, amassed an enormous fortune for her family. This consisted of three garden lots, eight farm lots, almost two and a half thousand acres of land, a house in Savannah, a plantation, and twenty slaves, which at different periods during the course of her life she transferred to numerous family members. Through her entrepreneurial efforts, great business acumen and sheer will

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[1] Will of Abraham Minis, written 21 Oct. 1754, recorded 5 May 1757, Georgia Colonial Will Book AA, 20–21 (Georgia Department of Archives and History; hereafter GDAH).

and determination, Abigail Minis created a substantial property empire for her family.[2]

In her actions and deeds as a propertied widow Abigail Minis seems an extraordinary Low Country woman, perhaps even unique. And yet, in the role that she performed for her family, keeping together her husband's estate and building on it for future generations, she was not so unusual at all. Abraham's bequests in his will, despite his Jewish heritage, differed very little from other Low Country husbands, who also chose to empower their widows and provide them with a great deal of property. Yet, as Abraham himself explained, such munificent bequests were intended not to promote his wife's own independence but rather to enable her to provide for their children and, in turn, to ensure that the family's assets were maintained for future generations. What prompted such generosity amongst Low Country testators was, as John Crowley has argued, a combination of horrifically high mortality rates and a small pool of surviving, close relatives and kin. As a consequence of these factors, there emerged a gendered ethos that was quite specific to the Low Country, which actively preferred widows to step in as the guardians of children and property and promoter of family wealth when no adult sons were available.[3] Therefore when Abigail

[2] Will of Abigail Minis, written 25 Oct. 5789 (Jewish Calendar), recorded 11 Dec. 1794, Minis Family Papers, Abigail Minis Papers (c.1701–1794), (1505, 2, fo.1) (Georgia Historical Society; hereafter GHS). Harold E. Davis, *The Fledgling Province: Social and Cultural Life in Colonial Georgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 161. *Georgia Gazette*, 10 Jan. 1765. Frances Howell Beckemeyer, ed., *Abstracts of Georgia Colonial Conveyance Book C-1, 1750–1761* (Atlanta, GA: R. J. Taylor, Jr. Foundation, 1975), 255. Marion R. Hemperley, *English Crown Land Grants in Christ Church Parish* (Atlanta, GA: State Printing Office, 1972), 127–28. Allen D. Candler, ed., *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia, 1757–1763, Vol. 28* (Atlanta, GA: Chas. P. Byrd, 1937) 1, 351, 671. Her notoriety in the newspapers is suggested by: "Mrs. Minis's plantation," *Georgia Gazette*, 11 Jan. 1776 and *Gazette of the State of Georgia*, 18 May 1786. Her plantation is mentioned again in the *Georgia Gazette* of 23 Oct. 1788. She advertised for six runaway slaves in *Gazette of the State of Georgia*, 17 Jan. 1788 and for a slave runaway, 'Nancy', in ibid, 10 April 1788.

[3] On widowhood in the British colonies in the colonial period, see John E. Crowley, "Family Relations and Inheritance in Early South Carolina," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 17 (May 1984), 35–57; Ingeborg Dornan, "Women Slaveholders in the Georgia and South Carolina Low Country, 1750–1775," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2001). More generally, see Carole Shammas, Marylynn Salmon, and Michael Dahlin, *Inheritance in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 59–60; Carole Shammas, "Early American Women and Control Over Capital," in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 134–54; Joan R. Gunderson and Gwen Victor Gampel, "Married Women's Legal Status in Eighteenth-Century New York and Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 39 (Jan. 1982), 114–34; Daniel Scott Smith, "Inheritance and the Social History of Early American women," in Hoffman and Albert,

Minis threw herself into Savannah's world of trade and commerce – running a tavern, applying for multiple land grants, buying up town, garden and farm lots, and buying, selling and hiring out slaves – she did so because her husband willed her to, and because the society in which she lived also willed her to. And she was not alone in this. Hundreds of Low Country wives were called upon, in the absence of husbands and adult sons, to maintain and promote their family's wealth in widowhood and transfer it when possible to the next surviving adult male heir. The very presence and role of these propertied widows underscores the fact that Low Country patriarchy was very much an ideal; furthermore, it was an ideal that in reality required the entrepreneurial skills and industry of women like Abigail Minis to sustain it.[4]

Historians of the early South have, however, demonstrated very little interest in Low Country women like Abigail Minis. Only a handful of historians, Elizabeth Anthony Dexter, Julia Cherry Spruill and, more recently, Betty Wood, Cara Anzilotti and Cynthia Kierner, have been encouraged to delve into the lives of colonial Low Country women, free and enslaved.[5] This analysis draws a great deal of inspiration from their studies, but ventures further by unlocking the intimate relationship that existed between these women's duties and activities in widowhood, as requested and expected by husbands such as Abraham Minis, and the institution of slavery.

The *Georgia Gazette* and the *South Carolina Gazette* contained numerous advertisements and notices placed by women throughout the colonial era. Low Country women in fact commanded a great deal of visibility in the newspapers by calling upon the public to buy their slaves and land, frequent their grocery shops, attend their music schools, enter their coffee houses, buy meat from their butcher stores and drink in their taverns. Others inserted

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eds., 45–66; Gloria L. Main, "Widows in Rural Massachusetts on the Eve of the Revolution," in ibid., 67–90.

4 See Philip Morgan, "Three Planters and Their Slaves: Perspectives on Slavery in Virginia, South Carolina, and Jamaica, 1750–1790," in *Race and Family in the Colonial South*, ed. Winthrop D Jordan and Sheila L Skemp (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 37–79.

5 Elizabeth Anthony Dexter, *Colonial Women of Affairs: Women in Business and the Professions in America Before 1776* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, second edn., 1931); Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies – With an Introduction by Anne Firor Scott* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, third edn., 1998); Betty Wood, *Gender, Race and Rank in a Revolutionary Age: The Georgia Lowcountry, 1750–1820* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000); Cara Anzilotti, *In the Affairs of the World: Women, Patriarchy and Power in Colonial South Carolina* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002); Cynthia A. Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700–1835* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

desperate messages to have their runaway slaves returned to them, dead or alive. Some pleaded with the public not to provide their slaves with illegal passes, allow them to roam the town and country at pleasure or feed them liquor when they were supposed to be working hard for their mistress. How and why these women entered the realm of business and slaveholding is quite clear but nonetheless requires a brief explanation given the restrictions that common law (adopted in both Georgia and South Carolina) placed on women's ownership of property.

According to common-law precepts a woman's identity was subsumed in her husband's. A single woman was legally free to own property, engage in contracts and write a will, but as soon as she entered the marital state she became a *feme covert* and lost all individual legal identity that she had otherwise possessed as an unmarried woman. In the words of Suzanne Lebsock, the impact of common law on married women's property rights was nothing less than "civil death."[6] As such, according to the letter of the law, only unmarried women, whether single or widowed, could own property and trade independently of men.

But of course there was an exception to this rule. A married woman could, with the permission of her husband, choose to reinvent herself as a *feme sole* in order to trade and own property independently of her husband. In 1763 Mrs. Susannah Sheets advertised the opening of her very own 'public house of entertainment' on Church Street, just opposite St. Michael's church in Charles Town. As she informed the public, she had received her husband's agreement to her *feme sole* activities. "In order to carry on business on her own proper account, as sole dealer and separate trader, exclusive of her husband, *Christopher Sheets*, by advice of council learned in law … she and her said husband have interchangeably set their hands and seals to an instrument of writing for that purpose," the advertisement stated.[7] Mrs. Sheets offered no reason in the newspaper why she had chosen to set herself up in business, but whatever her motives the consequences of her actions are plain to see: by embracing *feme sole* procedures Mrs. Sheets gave herself the chance to obtain a greater measure of economic and social freedom than many of her married counterparts. But despite examples such as Susannah Sheets, *feme sole* traders were not common in the colonial Low Country. Perhaps married women exerted more influence and performed a more direct role in the running of the family business than historians

[6] Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784–1860* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 23.

[7] *South Carolina Gazette*, 3–10 Dec. 1763.

have generally acknowledged, thus eliminating the desire or necessity to establish *feme sole* status. Alternatively many may not have wished to shoulder the financial responsibilities that accompanied independent trading. It is also possible that despite transferring economic power to their wives in widowhood, Low Country husbands were not so eager to do so during marriage and generally refused to consent to their wives' independent economic endeavours. The reasons why the vast majority of married women did not greet the law of *feme sole* with open arms is ultimately a matter of conjecture; what is indisputable, however, is that those women who did engage in business and slaveholding were overwhelmingly, like Abigail Minis, drawn from the ranks of the widowed female population.[8]

One such widowed businesswoman and slaveholder who occupied a prominent role in Charles Town society was Elizabeth Timothy, the printer of the *South Carolina Gazette*. Like many of her female contemporaries, she took charge of the family business upon the death of her husband because their eldest son, Peter, was still too young at the time to assume headship of the family. In 1739, shortly after her husband had died, Elizabeth, with six young children to provide for "and another hourly expected," posted the following notice in the newspaper:

> Whereas the late Printer of this Gazette hath been deprived of his Life … I take this Opportunity of informing the Publick, that I shall continue the said Paper as usual; and hope, by the Assistance of my Friends, to make it as entertaining and correct as may be reasonably expected. Wherefore I flatter my self, that all those Persons, who, by Subscription or otherwise, assisted my late Husband, in the Prosecution of the said Undertaking, will be kindly pleased to continue their Favours and good Offices to his poor afflicted Widow and six small Children …[9]

Widow Timothy thus announced that everything would continue with the *Gazette* "as usual." By emphasizing her position as a mother, her tragic status as a "poor afflicted widow," and her need for the public's assistance, Elizabeth Timothy deliberately drew on Low Country gender perceptions and expectations of women's role in widowhood in order to drum up support and encouragement for her endeavours. She understood, just as her fellow townsmen and -women knew, that the only way to provide for herself and her children now and in the future was to set herself up in

[8] For a detailed analysis of the ways in which common law and equity were established in America see, Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); also on South Carolina see Marylynn Salmon, "Women and Property in South Carolina: The Evidence from Marriage Settlements, 1730–1830," in *Colonial Women and Domesticity*, ed. Peter Charles Hoffer, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 238–68.

[9] *South Carolina Gazette*, 4 Jan. 1739.

business with the full support and approval of the public. But instead of presenting herself as a headstrong woman entering a man's world of business, she cast herself as the vulnerable, fragile widow in need of support. As Benjamin Franklin, once her husband's business partner, observed, all her efforts were for "the lasting Advantage and enrichment of the Family."[10] Like Franklin, Low Country husbands, too, reconciled their widows' activities in the realm of business with their obligation to provide for present and future heirs. As Cara Anzilotti's study of women planters confirms, far from undermining the patriarchal order by transferring property over to women, Low Country society understood that women were vital conduits for the preservation of family wealth when there was no adult male heir to assume control.[11] This duty, however, also brought many widows, like Elizabeth Timothy, in direct contact with slaves and slaveholding (I estimate that women slaveholders comprised between 7 and 10 percent of all slaveholders), an activity and experience that compelled them to shed the image of the "poor afflicted widow" who was at the mercy of a cruel world, and instead cultivate attributes of mastery and power: authority, discipline and control.[12]

[10] Leonard W. Labaree, Ralph L. Ketcham, Helen C. Boatfield and Helene H. Fineman, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1964), 166–67.

[11] Anzilotti, Chapter 2.

[12] This is a cautious estimate due to the lack of census data available for the colonial Low Country. I have based this figure on only two surviving censuses from South Carolina, one from St. George's Parish taken in 1726 and one from St. John's Parish taken in the 1760s and 1770s. At the time these censuses were taken both parishes had a large black majority, which means that slaveholdings, and therefore the numbers of women who managed slaves, may not be representative of other Low Country parishes. For figures on the numbers of slaves in St. George and St. John Parishes see Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 96–97. A second point worth noting is that it is not clear whether the estimate I have given would equally apply to women slaveholders in Georgia. See the analysis of Reverend Francis Varnod's list of household heads in St. George's Parish, recorded in Jan. 1726, by Peter Wood. This reveals that of the 108 heads of households listed, eleven were women (10 percent). If women comprised 10 percent of household heads in this parish, then it is likely that 10 percent of slaveholding households were also headed by women. See Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through to the Stono Rebellion* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, second edn., 1996), 157. The second source derives from a census of slaveholdings in St. John's Parish, Berkeley County, for slaves to work on public roads. I have looked at the years 1763 through 1770, 1773 and 1776. If we include those female slaveholders who were listed jointly with men, then the average number of slaveholding women over an eight-year period in St. John's Parish is 8.6 per cent (62 out of 723). "Records of the Commissioners of the High Roads of St. John's Parish, Berkeley County, 1760–1853," 3 vols., 1, 26–76, 98–110, (34/406/1–6) South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina (hereafter SCHS).

Urban women slaveholders deployed their slaves in a variety of ways: sometimes in the household, sometimes in their businesses, and sometimes in the service of others. Elizabeth Timothy's slave Piero delivered the *South Carolina Gazette* around Charles Town, whilst another two of her slaves, Molly and Flora, were put to work in her household, undertaking domestic chores and probably assisting in the care of her many children. When Elizabeth Giradeau offered to board victims of the smallpox, she also advertised to "hire by the month, a negro man, that is a very good boatman, and a well grown boy, who has been used to wait in a house, and attend on a chair."[13] Martha Logan, who figured frequently in the *South Carolina Gazette*, offered, "any person having occasion to hire a good pair of sawyers, a cooper, carpenter, a patroon of a boat, a main-cook, or a handy boy that shaves and dresses wigs may be supplied by Martha Logan in Charles Town: who has a very good large cypress canow, and a chair or cart horse to sell."[14]

Not all urban women slaveholders relied on the newspapers to hire out their slaves; some advertised by word of mouth. Hannah Caesar, for instance, used to hire out her slave woman Juda to different people, to wash and iron, but there is no evidence that she advertised in the newspaper.[15] Many of the women who placed advertisements for runaway slaves and who noted that their slave had worked in Charles Town or Savannah cannot be traced among those who advertised to hire out their slaves.

Rather than place a notice in the newspapers, or hire out their slaves privately, urban slaveholders could also send their slaves to the Market House or the Exchange House, where they would be collected each morning and employed for the rest of the day. According to this method of hiring out,

> the slaves would make their way to the Market House "by the break of day" and stay there until employed. If they refused to work at the rates and times specified, they were punished severely. They were to be "whipped for each Offence on the Bare Back and receive any Number of Lashes not exceeding Thirty by the Warden of the Work House."[16]

There is no evidence to suggest that female owners either condoned or condemned this treatment of their slaves, but presumably if they felt that the punishment meted out was too harsh, then they could hire out their slave elsewhere. The main duties carried out by the slaves were fetching, carrying and delivering provisions to the market and businesses in and about the

13 *South Carolina Gazette*, 11–18 June 1763.

14 Ibid., 25 Dec.–1 Jan. 1750.

15 Ibid., 14 Nov.–1 Dec. 1750.

16 Charles Colcock Jones, Jr., ed., *Acts Passed by the General Assembly of the Colony of Georgia, 1755–1774* (Wormsloe, GA: privately printed, 1881), 416–17.

town. "For Work and Labour as a Porter" in Savannah from dawn until dusk a slave received "One Shilling for half a day and six pence for the fourth part of the day." In addition, they were given two short breaks: half an hour at breakfast and an hour at dinner. Those slaves who were put to work on ships or vessels were given two shillings a day. Their owners had to furnish them with food and clothing. Slaves who carried provisions to and from the harbour to local businesses were also subject to wage regulations. In Savannah, for instance, slaves working on Broughton Street were given a shilling a day, while those working on King Street received one shilling and three pence per day.[17] This system of daily payment gave women slaveholders much greater flexibility to choose the terms of their slaves' employment and the wages that they would receive from this.

Other women slaveholders preferred to hire out their slaves on a more permanent basis, which is what Rachel Laurence (or Lawrence) chose to do. In 1762 she applied for a license to open a tavern with a billiard table in Charles Town.[18] Perhaps struggling to make ends meet (when she died she owned no more than a few bare essential goods and two slaves, amounting to little more than three hundred pounds),[19] she turned to her two slaves, Cuffee and March, to provide her with an additional income. Like many other women in her position, she chose to hire them out. Rather than send them to the Exchange House, however, she decided to hire them out privately. In 1766, from 10 November to 10 May, March was hired out for six months, at £3 per month. Cuffee, too, was hired out to an unnamed slaveholder for an unspecified period of time for sundry duties, earning Mrs. Laurence a total of sixteen pounds.[20] By hiring her slaves out on a more permanent basis, Rachel Laurence avoided the task of constant, daily management of her slaves. She also ensured that she herself was in charge of collecting their wages.

For female slaveholders living in the towns, the benefits of hiring out their slaves was quite obvious. It enabled them to receive money from their slaves' work at the same time as it extricated them from a great deal of the practical side of slave management. Unlike women who employed their slaves in their businesses, or female planters who put their slaves to work in their households and fields, urban women slaveholders who hired out their slaves did not have to supervise their slaves' work. If they hired out their slaves to

[17] Ibid., 417.

[18] Rachel Laurence (or Lawrence) was among the thirty-nine women who applied for a tavern license in Charles Town in 1762, *South Carolina Gazette*, 24 April–1 May 1762.

[19] Inventory of Rachel Laurence, 16 April 1767, South Carolina Inventories, Vol. W (South Carolina Department of Archives and History, hereafter SCDAH).

[20] Ibid.

another slaveholder, they avoided having to keep a close watch over their slaves' conduct. It enabled them to duck the responsibility of administering discipline, which would have been a key issue for women slaveholders. Asserting authority over male slaves might have proved problematic for some women, who were likely to find themselves both psychologically and physically disadvantaged when confronting an adult male slave. The majority of slaves were accustomed to taking orders from men and would have found it an easier task to physically overwhelm a woman. Although there is no firm evidence to suggest that women slaveholders had a hard time when it came to controlling male slaves, it is possible that they may have been more inclined to hire out bondsmen as one way of resolving this potential problem.

Issues of slave discipline, order and punishment preoccupied Low Country society, and women slaveholders were targeted just as much as male slaveholders in the laws regarding the hiring out of slaves. These laws required that they obtain a license and provide their slaves with a badge or ticket giving them permission to be hired out. If a slave were discovered working without a ticket, then his or her owner would be fined. Those who employed a slave without a ticket were also fined. In Georgia, the laws were clear and precise on the hiring out of slaves in the towns, for instance:

> every Owner or person having care or charge of any Slave who shall be desirous to let out or hire such Slave as a Labourer or Porter for any Space less than Six days at any one time in the Town of Savannah … shall not let out on hire … until he or *she* shall have obtained a License for so doing from the Commissioners …[21] (emphasis added)

> no Owner Master or *Mistress* of any slave … shall permit and Suffer any of his her or their Slaves to go and Work out of their respective houses or Familys without a Tickett in writing under pain of forfeiting the sum of One pound Ten Shillings Sterling …[22] (emphasis added)

Low Country society thus understood that the system of hiring out slaves was just as common amongst women slaveholders as men, if not more so, enough to merit their specific inclusion in the laws on this form of slave employment. Overall, the laws on urban slaveholding were designed to maintain order by ensuring that slaves were closely supervised by their owners or employers. Yet the urban environment often conspired against this.

For those women slaveholders who sought to balance the duties of raising children, running a business and managing slaves, asserting their authority

[21] Jones, Jr., ed., 416. [22] Ibid., 89.

and disciplining their slaves could prove to be extremely troublesome. Widow Elizabeth Timothy experienced no end of strife with the management of her slaves. On Friday 13 June 1740 Piero (aka Peter) dodged his duty to deliver the *South Carolina Gazette* and instead determined to make his escape. The following day Elizabeth Timothy, like many of her slave-holding peers, inserted an advertisement in her newspaper calling for his recapture and explaining the details of his escape. "He was pursued on Friday Night last, at the house of Mr. Benj: Mazick, up the Path. In making his Escape he left his Breeches and Hat in the House, so that it is uncertain whether he had any on, he having been since seen without them in the swamp there." Once captured, Piero was to be delivered directly to her or, rather ominously, to the workhouse in Charles Town.[23] Exactly what prompted Piero suddenly to escape we do not know. Perhaps, quite simply, he desired his freedom or perhaps his mistress was unreasonable and over-bearing. As far as the records show he was never returned, recaptured and subsequently sold, or died in her charge. He was not counted among the six slaves listed in Elizabeth Timothy's inventory in 1757.[24]

Piero was not the only slave belonging to Elizabeth Timothy who chose to run away. She experienced more problems with her slaves in 1748. This time Flora, a "tall Angola Negro Wench, about 40 Years old," absconded. The following year Molly also made her escape. In 1756 Elizabeth Timothy advertised for the last time; once again she gave notice that Flora had run away. By the time of her death both Molly and Flora had been returned to her.[25] Unfortunately we do not know what reception they received upon their return.

Elizabeth Timothy's experience with her slaves was not at all uncommon. Indeed the nature of urban slaveholding meant that slave management would rarely be a simple task. Towns like Charles Town and Savannah boasted numerous ships and vessels offering tempting routes to freedom. They were packed with taverns and liquor stores that invited drinking and gambling and the squandering of wages. Their inhabitants included a mixture of free whites, servants, slaves, free blacks, Indians, traders and travellers who were willing to shelter, aid and abet runaway slaves. All manner of opportunities arose for slave "misconduct" and escape.

[23] *South Carolina Gazette*, 7–14 June 1740.

[24] Inventory of Elizabeth Timothy, 2 July 1757, South Carolina Inventories, Vol. S (SCDAH).

[25] *South Carolina Gazette*, 14–31 Oct. 1748 (Flora); ibid., 1–8 May 1749 (Molly); ibid., 1–8 July 1756 (Flora). Both Flora and Molly were included in Elizabeth Timothy's inventory; see note 24 above.

As early as 1712, long before the problem had reached its height, the South Carolina legislature demonstrated its concern regarding slave discipline in the towns:

> Several owners of slaves are used to suffer their said slaves to do what and go whither they will and work where they please … which practice hath been observed to occasion such slaves to spend their time aforesaid, in looking for opportunities to steal, in order to raise money for their masters, as well as maintain themselves, and other slaves their companions, in drunkeness & other evil courses.[26]

The Georgia legislature presented a similar view in the 1755 act "For the better Ordering and Governing Of Negroes," in which they observed that slaves "pilfer and Steal to raise money for their Owners as well as maintain themselves in Drunkeness and evil Courses."[27]

Elizabeth Smith would probably have agreed with this. In 1741 she placed the following notice in the *South Carolina Gazette*, warning people not to employ her escaped slave Lancaster, who "imposed upon his employers, and defrauded me of his wages."[28] Nine months later Widow Smith once again warned the public not to employ Lancaster, labelling him a gambler, drinker and runaway.[29] There is no evidence to suggest whether Lancaster ever returned to his mistress. Yet as this case illustrates, the particular problem of slave dissidence and desertion in an urban setting brought women slaveholders into direct, personal involvement with the management of their slaves.

As much as the taverns were notorious hot spots for leading slaves away from the watchful eyes of their mistresses, so too were the markets. Slaves from both the towns and the countryside converged at the markets to sell goods and produce and, according to the authorities, to get up to mischief. In the eyes of the white community the markets offered a prime opportunity for slaves "to plot and confederate together and form conspiracies dangerous to the peace and Safety of the whole Province."[30] To keep a watch over trading and to deter 'evil courses' of behaviour, patrols were set up in some of the markets. In the fish market in Charles Town, which was situated opposite Queen Street, there was an additional, threatening warning for the slaves who did business there: the stocks. Disorderly slaves could be

[26] Leila Sellers, *Charleston Business on the Eve of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 1934), 99–100.

[27] Jones, Jr., ed., 89.

[28] *South Carolina Gazette*, 1–8 Jan. 1741.

[29] Ibid., 10–17 Oct. 1741. The following year Elizabeth Smith also advertised for her runaway slave man Hercules; ibid., 27 Dec. 1742.

[30] Jones, Jr., ed., 90.

confined in the stocks for up to two hours. If they re-offended, they were publicly whipped.[31]

Hannah Bullock was one of many slaves who made her way to the market at sunrise each morning. She waited for the bells to signal the beginning of business, then commenced her day's work selling cakes in the Charles Town market. In December 1751 her mistress, Elizabeth Bullock, inserted an advertisement in the *South Carolina Gazette* to inform the public that Hannah had run away. Exactly when and why Hannah Bullock chose to run away is not known. Nor is it clear how and when she returned. But fifteen years later, in 1766, she reappeared once again in the newspapers, this time as a slave belonging to Eliza Johnson. Once again, she had run away.[32] Working in the market provided slaves such as Hannah Bullock with the chance to forge contacts, obtain money and, ultimately, plan and execute their escape. The marketplaces presented a challenging environment to urban women slaveholders, who had few means of maintaining control or watching over their slaves' activities. Not surprisingly, many slaves took advantage of this.

Matters were also complicated by the presence of men and women who were willing to conspire with runaway slaves. Enslaved friends and relations, free black men and women, Indians and whites were often thought to harbour runaway slaves.[33] Anne Matthewes, who was a retailer in Church Street, Charles Town, was one of many slaveholders who took this view. In 1761, when her slave Diana ran away taking her two children with her, Anne Matthewes informed the public that Diana had "a large acquaintance, particularly among the free Negroes, by some of whom she is supposed to be harboured."[34] There is no record to say whether Diana ever returned to her mistress. When Bob, a bricklayer, went missing sometime during 1766, his mistress, Mary Gordon, also believed he was being harboured by another slave.[35] Mary Smith of Savannah, a well known tavern-keeper, had a similar suspicion about the whereabouts of her runaway slave Lovey.[36]

[31] See Leila Sellers, 21–22.

[32] *South Carolina Gazette*, 6 Dec. 1751 (Elizabeth Bullock); *South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal*, 30 Sept. 1766 (Eliza Johnson). For a good discussion on runaway advertisements see David Waldstreicher, "Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, ser. 3 56 (1999), 243–72.

[33] An excellent analysis of the relationship between non-slaveholders and enslaved men and women can be found in Timothy James Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750–1860* (Athens, GA and London, University of Georgia Press, 2001).

[34] *South Carolina Gazette*, 25 July–1 Aug. 1761.

[35] *South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal*, 7 Oct. 1766.

[36] Ibid., 12 Aug. 1766.

The mistresses Matthewes, Gordon and Smith may have had an idea of the company their slaves kept, as well as their possible whereabouts, but none of them was able to prevent their slave from taking advantage of the mobility and contacts which town life afforded and which helped them to escape.

None of these women gave an explanation for her slave's departure. But some of the advertisements provided telling clues. Mary Stokes, a client of the well-known Charles Town merchant Henry Laurens, knew that her slave Betty's parents lived at John Rose's plantation, at Hobcaw. She also had a husband "at Miss. Holibush's plantation on Wando Neck." When Betty disappeared in October, 1768 she thus supposed that she might be at either of those plantations. Had Betty gone to visit her parents or her husband? Mary Stokes was not convinced. In fact she thought it most likely that Betty was still in town because there she was well known and "very artful in concealing herself."[37] Slaves left their owners for a variety of reasons: to visit friends and family from whom they were separated, to extricate themselves from their work, to avoid physical abuse and punishment and to relieve themselves of the terms and conditions of their enslavement, whether for a day or two, or a week or more. And of course there were those who, as one Georgia slaveholder noted, ran away "on account they did not like their master" or, we might add, mistress.[38]

By taking direct action to retrieve their slaves, women slaveholders sought to assert their ownership and authority over their slaves, despite the evident difficulties caused by town life. Like the mistresses Gordon and Smith, some women hoped that providing the public with an idea of their slaves' contacts and whereabouts, as well as a physical description of their slaves, might lead to their speedy recapture. Savannah baker Elizabeth Anderson perhaps thought it prudent to provide the public with a detailed description of her runaway slave, Sidney, because she was 'a new Negroe' and therefore not so well known about the town.[39] When Sidney disappeared in early March of 1765 Elizabeth Anderson described her as having "her country marks on her breast and arms, and a mole under her left eye." In addition, she explained, Sidney spoke no English. She "wore a blue negroe cloth gown and coat, a new onzabrug shirt, a cheque handkerchief on her head and another about her neck."[40] Mary Smith described her slave, Lovey, as a "stout tall negro wench … much pitted with the small pox," who dressed neatly and had several changes of clothing.[41] Mary Smith used the

[37] Ibid., 18 Oct. 1768.
[38] *Georgia Gazette*, 3 May 1764.
[39] Ibid., 21 Dec. 1768 (Elizabeth Anderson announced that she would be taking over the late Mrs. Pagey's house and would continue with her baking business.)
[40] Ibid., 7 March 1765.
[41] *South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal*, 3 Nov. 1772.

term "wench" to describe her female slave, a label that was quite commonly applied by both women and men slaveholders to bondswomen. Women and men slaveholders deployed derogatory labels such as "wench," which, as Betty Wood observes, would "never have been applied, except perhaps in jest, to any white woman, however humble her status."[42] Slaveholders of both sexes described their slaves in the most unflattering physical terms, reflecting prevailing white attitudes about the physiognomy of African men and women in this period, For instance, Eleanor Flamer, who lived in Elliott Street, Charles Town, described her missing slave, Hamlet, a labourer in Charles Town, as "between five or six feet high, [having] large eyes, [a] bluff face, and [a] large upper lip."[43] Unlike many planters, however, urban women slaveholders could furnish very detailed descriptions of their slaves, primarily because they lived in close contact with them. These descriptions also betray the racist and antagonistic attitude that women slaveholders felt towards their slaves.

As well as giving the public a description of their slaves, many women slaveholders offered a reward for their capture. Mrs. Pagey placed the following notice in the *Georgia Gazette*:

> [Runaway] … a short thick black negro fellow named Marquis, has part of one of his little fingers cut off and a bump on one of his temples, talks little or no English. Forty Shillings Sterling Reward will be given to any white person or negro who takes said fellow and delivers him to Mrs. Pagey or the Warden of the Work-House in Savannah.[44]

Jane Dutby (or Duthy), who briefly ran a school in the Charles Town district, also offered forty shillings reward for the return of her slave, Abigail, whom she described as "a lusty negro wench … with very thick legs, and scar'd [unclear] on her neck [not] unlike a necklace."[45]

[42] Betty Wood, *Gender, Race and Rank*, 55.

[43] It was during and after the Revolution that the physiognomy of Africans became the subject of intense debate in America. See John C. Greene, "The American Debate on the Negro's Place in Nature, 1780–1815," in *The American Enlightenment*, ed. Frank Shuffleton (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1993),103–15. Also Donald J. D'Elia, "Dr. Benjamin Rush and the Negro," in ibid., 116–25.

[44] *Georgia Gazette*, 23 Aug. 1764. Previously, Anthony Pagey (her son?) had advertised Marquis in ibid., 12 July 1764. Margaret Pagey was nominated to administer the will and estate of Anthony Pagey in 1765; Georgia Estate Records, Loose Papers, Anthony Pagey, 263 (GDAH).

[45] *South Carolina Gazette*, 11–18 March 1751; ibid., 28 April–5 May 1751 (Jane Duthy advertises opening a school). The following year, however, she placed another notice in the newspaper announcing her intention to leave the province. She offered to sell her "several good house wenches, boys, and girls"; ibid., 9–16 Feb. 1760.

Because slaveholders of both sexes frequently suspected that their slaves had been aided in their escape, they commonly published threats of legal action if anyone were found guilty of concealing or employing their runaway slaves. When one of Mary Ellis's slaves went missing in January 1770 she warned the public that "whoever harbours her, may expect to be prosecuted according to Law."[46] When Elizabeth Vardell gave notice that her slave, Sarah, had been absent for six months, she cautioned that "All Persons are hereby warned, not to hire the said Wench without a written Order from me; and any Person harbouring her will be prosecuted with the utmost Rigour of the Law."[47] Eleanor Payne believed that her slave boy, Jack, had either run away or had been "taken away or secreted by JAMES PAYNE, a constable, under pretence of his having a right to the said negro, by his marriage to the subscriber." In order to prevent her slave from being taken out of the province, she warned that "All masters of vessels, and every other person whatsoever, are cautioned from carrying off, or buying the said negro boy, under any pretence whatever."[48]

That these women took aggressive measures to recapture their slaves is, perhaps, not altogether too surprising. A runaway slave not only represented an affront to their authority, but also a severe economic blow. If either of Rachel Laurence's slaves had run off, it would have halved the value of her estate, as well as caused a deep dent in her income. Almost half of the women slaveholders whose estates were inventoried in South Carolina between 1746 and 1780 owned no more than six slaves.[49] Most of these women lived in and around Charles Town and made their living from the labour of their slaves. Thus if their slaves ran away it placed their livelihood in great jeopardy. As such, many urban slaveholders took assertive steps, providing the public with a description of the dress, characteristics, physical features and possible whereabouts of their runaways, as well as offering a reward for their return and threatening legal action to retrieve them.

[46] *South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal*, 23 Jan. 1770.

[47] Lathan A. Windley, comp., *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790*, 4 vols. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 3, 456.

[48] *South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal*, 12 July 1768.

[49] An analysis of 371 inventories of women slaveholders' estates in South Carolina between 1746 and 1780 reveals 48 per cent owned 1–6 slaves, 30 per cent owned 7–15 slaves and 22 per cent owned between 16 and 394 slaves. These figures were derived from the following sources: South Carolina Inventories: Book MM 1746–8; Book R (1) 1751–3; Book R (2) 1753–6; Book S 1756–8; Book T 1758–61; Book V 1761–3; Book W 1763–7; Book X 1768–9; Book Y 1769–71; Book Z 1771–4; Book & 1772–6; Book AA 1774–85; Book BB 1776–84; Book CC 1774–8 (SCDAH).

What is surprising, however, is that many more women did not take such steps. Between 1763 and 1775, 160 slaveholders placed advertisements for 453 runaway slaves in the *Georgia Gazette*. Six of these were women slaveholders.[50] Historians generally agree that the numbers of runaway slave advertisements in the Georgia and South Carolina newspapers are not an accurate reflection of the numbers of runaway slaves. Nor were they representative of the numbers of men and women who owned slaves. As one historian has observed, they "represent little more than the top of an ill-defined iceberg."[51] Why relatively few slaveholders advertised for their runaway slaves is open to speculation; perhaps they spread word of a slave's disappearance in other ways. Some owners might have believed that their slaves were "visiting" friends and relatives and would return of their own accord. Or perhaps they believed that their slaves were long gone and so felt there was little point in appealing for their capture.[52] Whatever the reasons, like their male counterparts, relatively few Low Country female slaveholders used the newspapers as a tool to capture their slaves.

The recovery of runaways was, of course, only one of the responsibilities of the female slave-owner. Slave-owners also maintained discipline, often through punishment. The question of female punishment of slaves presents some intriguing problems for the colonial historian, primarily because the extant sources cast very little light on this subject. Still, this should not persuade us that they performed no role or exerted no influence in this sphere of slave management. Indeed, it is worth drawing attention to Peter Manigault's observation that women were all too often prone to get "in a passion" when dealing with their slaves.[53] Certainly Mary Ellis showed that

[50] Betty Wood calculates that, between 7 April 1763 and the end of 1775, 160 different owners advertised for 453 slave runaways in the *Georgia Gazette*. My own calculations suggest that of these 160 owners six were women; see Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 170.

[51] Peter Wood arrives at this conclusion after examining runaway advertisements placed in the *South Carolina Gazette*; see Peter Wood, *Black Majority*, 240. Betty Wood's analysis of the runaway advertisements in the *Georgia Gazette* leads her to concur with Peter Wood. Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 170–72.

[52] Betty Wood, 170–71.

[53] Studies of the relationship between antebellum mistresses and their slaves, and also antebellum slave narratives, reveal that mistresses certainly inflicted punishment on their slaves. See, for instance, Lucy A. Delaney, "Struggles for freedom," in *Six Women's Slave Narratives, with an Introduction by William L. Andrews* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 27; Houston A. Baker, Jr., ed., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written By Himself* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 77–78, 80; C. W. Larison, *Sylvia Dubois, A Biografy of the Slav Who Whipt Her Mistress and Gand Her Fredom*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 63–6. In the secondary literature see Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985), 41–43; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress:*

she meant business with her runaway slave, Catharina, when, in 1757, she placed this chilling advertisement in the *South Carolina Gazette*:

[Runaway a] Mustee wench Catharina about 30 formerly belonging to Mrs Day. Whoever takes the said wench dead or alive, and delivers her to me, shall have a reward of 10 pounds … Supposed to be harboured by some Negroes who take in washing Mary Ellis.[54]

Her demand to bring back Catharina dead or alive may have been a calculated effort to protect her economic interests by sending her other slaves a clear signal as to what they could expect if they chose to flout their mistress's authority. When Rebecca Massey advertised for her slave runaway in 1739, she was just as explicit:

[Runaway a] Mustee young Wench, named Ruth … Whoever takes her up, gives her 50 good Lashes, and deliver her to me shall have 10. l. reward. Rebeccah Massey.[55]

Both these examples suggest that women slaveholders, like men, may have resorted to extreme and aggressive measures to reprimand their slaves. They also indicate that, in order to punish their slaves, women slaveholders did not necessarily have to directly inflict physical punishment on their slaves themselves. They could either engage someone else to perform the task on their behalf, as Rebecca Massey chose to do, or they could send their slave to the workhouse, as many others, like Elizabeth Timothy, Mrs. Pagey, Elizabeth Bullock, Eliza Johnson and Anne Matthewes, chose to do. By sending their slaves to the workhouse as a form of punishment these women extricated themselves from having to administer physical discipline themselves. As Peter Manigault believed, it was unsightly to see a woman lose her temper or her "virtue" with her slaves. Social conventions may well have dissuaded some women from taking the disciplining of runaways into their own hands and instead encouraged them to turn to the workhouse instead. Whatever their motives for this method of punishment, the implications are clear. In terms of disciplining their slaves, the extant sources imply that women slaveholders embraced rather than deviated from the attitudes and conventions of their society regarding the disciplining of slaves.

Woman's World in the Old South (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 188; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within The Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 22–25, 308–14. The secondary literature tends to emphasize that women's cruelty towards their female slaves was often borne out of jealousy and their sexual relations with masters.

54 *South Carolina Gazette*, 3 Feb. 1757.

55 Ibid., 1 Feb. 1739.

The evidence suggests that women slaveholders generally conformed to contemporary notions regarding the management of slaves and differed little from their male peers in this. Yet two key questions still remain to be addressed regarding Low Country women's relationship to slavery. The first issue is, did women experience more difficulty asserting their authority over their slaves than men, and consequently encounter more episodes of slave resistance and dissidence? Robert Olwell believes this was indeed the case. "White male neighbours," he argues, "often expressed doubts about the authority of female masters, and women slave owners may have faced an increased level of challenge from their slaves." His analysis of slave runaway advertisements in the *South Carolina Gazette* support this contention, because women slaveholders were more likely than men, relatively speaking, to place advertisements calling for the return of their slaves.[56] But of course, women might simply have been more diligent than men in calling for the recapture of their slaves, especially given the fact that women slaveholders generally owned only a handful of slaves and so the loss to their income would have been greater than had they owned a plantation with thirty slaves. Furthermore, because women slaveholders were more likely to reside in the towns than on plantations, and because the towns offered more opportunities to escape, and also to be recaptured, these factors may well have inspired them to advertise more so than male planters.

Moreover, despite Olwell's claim that men often expressed doubt about women's abilities to assert their authority over their slaves, the surviving sources indicate that there was very little public or private debate regarding women's ability to manage their slaves. Surveying the dearth of sources on this issue in fact warns against arriving at a definitive answer to this question. It is entirely possible that women slaveholders did indeed experience more problems managing their slaves than men, and hence chose to hire out their slaves, sell those who were persistent runaways and send dissident slaves to the workhouse rather than administer punishment themselves. But in their advertisements to recapture their slaves women slaveholders were extremely assertive, insisting on their return and the prosecution of those who had assisted or harboured their slaves. They provided detailed descriptions of the escapees, even offering rewards for their return and threats of the workhouse when finally recaptured. These demands were not exceptional but rather the rule that defined women's advertisements to retrieve their runaways.

[56] Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740–1790* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 198–99.

And in this they were no different from male slaveholders. The only conclusion that can be drawn on this question is a cautious one; the evidence is simply not extensive enough to decide conclusively if women slaveholders did or did not experience greater difficulties with their slaves than male slaveholders, but without doubt they were determined in their calls for their recapture in the newspapers.

A second issue raised by this analysis is how well urban women slaveholders treated their slaves. Were they kinder to them than their male counterparts? The women slaveholders examined in this study left no surviving accounts of their personal relationship with their slaves, other than their advertisements to hire them out and demands to have their runaways returned to them. From the few advertisements placed by women slaveholders, we may recall their unflattering descriptions of their slaves' physical features, as well as their usage of the term "wench" when referring to their female slaves. Their choice of language demonstrated total conformity to prevailing white attitudes towards slaves, most especially slave women. We may also recollect the examples of Rebecca Massey and Mary Ellis, who both showed a callous disregard for their slaves' humanity, content that they should be returned to them either dead or alive or severely flogged. But these examples are not sufficiently abundant to merit a clear conclusion regarding the way in which slaveholding women in Charles Town or Savannah treated and perceived their slaves. What may be argued, with perhaps some measure of confidence, is that the urban women slaveholders who have appeared here were likely to have been very dependent on the income of their slaves. Overall, these women were not members of the slaveholding elite, but women who had to work, as tavern-keepers, printers, milliners or candlemakers. In addition, they also owned and hired out slaves, in order to maintain themselves and their families and build a legacy for their heirs. The question is, did these women treat their slaves relatively well, knowing their economic value and purpose, or did they feel able to mistreat and overwork them, knowing that they could sell one slave and obtain another quite easily? Although these women left no clear indication of their attitude and behaviour, only faint hints, it is clear that they did not embrace their female slaves as their equals in womanhood or humanity, but instead drew between themselves and their slaves a bold racial and class-determined line. Ultimately, urban women slaveholders did not shy away from disciplining and punishing their slaves, if not by their own hand then by that of the master in the workhouse. And, similarly, enslaved men and women, too, offered their mistresses no leniency or special privileges when it came to dissident behaviour or making their escape to freedom.

In the day-to-day management of their slaves urban women slaveholders found themselves caught between two cross currents, one that depicted them as "poor afflicted" widows, and another that called for them to conduct themselves as female masters. Mastery was by definition shaped by assertiveness, aggressiveness, authority and control. To be "female masters" in the colonial Low Country was not, however, such an oxymoron as might first appear. After all, this was a society in which the chains of patriarchy were rattled and loosened by abysmal, excessively high mortality rates. This encouraged husbands like Abraham Minis and Peter Timothy to rely on their surviving wives for assistance and support for the future of their young children and the preservation of their property. The widows Minis and Timothy thus had to adapt their traditional female role within the household that cast them as economic, social and legal dependents to become instead household heads and business managers. To become "female masters," in theory, was not, therefore, such an enormous ideological leap for these women to take. The reality of their task, of course, might have been far more daunting.

Omitting the lives of women "masters" like Abigail Minis and Elizabeth Timothy from analyses of colonial slavery has led to a distorted picture of the relationship between women and slavery in the colonial era. The impression is that colonial white women were somehow ultimately distant from and untouched by the peculiar institution because they rarely emerge in discussions on colonial slavery. This study has shown, however, that they performed a vital and visible role in colonial Low Country society as slaveholders. Furthermore, current debates on the ways in which race, class and gender interacted, combined and were contested in the colonial era, as well as the significance of religion and ethnicity in shaping family formation and outlook, would greatly benefit from consideration of the position and experience of women slaveholders. A vital first step in redrawing the current portrait of colonial slavery so that it includes women slaveholders is to acknowledge the key role they performed in directly contributing to the continuation of slavery by managing, buying and hiring slaves. Far from offering an alternative regarding the way in which slaves were treated, they appear to have condoned contemporary ideas regarding the management and treatment of slaves. In the process, urban women slaveholders variously negotiated, adapted and conformed to prevailing ideas regarding white women's place and role in colonial slave society as mothers, wives, widows and, ultimately, as masterful women with slaves.