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Evidence for the Accumulation of Both Money and Material Goods

Nancy Sorrells and Susanne Simmons Museum of American Frontier Culture, Staunton, VA

The search for evidence of the involvement of enslaved African Americans in the local economy of Piedmont Virginia led Monticello archaeologist Barbara Heath on a journey into the business papers and ledgers of local white tradesmen, businessmen, and farmers. Our research, sponsored by the Museum of American Frontier Culture in Staunton, Virginia, has led us to the same types of sources in the Shenandoah Valley, a region just west of Heath's study. Although these sources have been examined by historians for years, this particular search looked for answers to different questions.

A careful analysis of these business papers with an eye toward clues about African-American history proved that the information has been there all along, buried among the other entries and descriptions. As one sifts through these clues of African-American history in the Shenandoah Valley, it becomes clear that there were many methods used by hardworking and innovative enslaved African Americans to define their own personality with the material culture around them. The transcribed will of Dangerfield Hunter, a slave of the Pauly family in Augusta County, is one example. In his will, Hunter directed that after his death his debts at a local store be settled and that the debts owed him be collected. He also dispersed personal items such as pots, pans, a table, a chair and chickens. His will indicates that slaves not only had their own possessions, but sometimes had enough money to loan and to act as collateral for credit extended by local businessmen.¹ Other sources soon led us to realize that, rather than being an anomaly, Hunter represented a norm. Many slaves accumulated money and material possessions. Although rarely enough to purchase their freedom, accumulated cash allowed the purchase of material goods that enriched their lives and defined their individuality.

Beyond the physical and spiritual necessities, the rigidity of slavery was flexible enough to allow small gains to be made by hard-working slaves and cooperative masters. Money was often accumulated through overwork, which is defined as labor completed after normal chores were finished or on off days. (For a thorough case study of overwork and slave financial and store accounts at an ironworks in Rockbridge County, see Charles Dew's excellent book, *Bond of Iron*). Sale of garden produce or craft items made during off-hours was another way to acquire a few extra dollars. Local accounts describe Sunday streets as being filled with slaves selling garden produce, while other sources tell of slaves hustling luggage off coaches, boats, and trains in order to earn some tip money.

Henry Boswell Jones, a farmer in Rockbridge County, worked small rewards into the slave system, noting, "It is a good custom to give the hands presents occasionally--say at Christmas and harvest time--or to allow them to cultivate an acre or two of corn, which the master can buy, or give permission to sell elsewhere." The rewards were part of a much larger system designed to maintain orderliness and discipline among the work force he described in the Valley. He included further detail of this system, adding that, "Servants well treated rarely ever run off; but there are bad servants, as well as bad children, and when they need correction it ought always to

be promptly attended to."² Other slave owners in the region subscribed to Jones's recommendations. Joseph Smith, a wealthy farmer in Augusta County, paid "Negro presents" of money to eighteen of his slaves either as Christmas or harvest time gifts. Twelve of his eighteen slaves received one dollar, two received fifty cents, and four, twenty-five cents. Even three of the slaves who were hired out received money.³

Francis McFarland, a Presbyterian minister and farmer in Augusta County, used cash incentives. He paid the slave Charles twelve-and-a-half cents for a basket he made; he tipped a servant working on the stagecoach with a quarter, another fifty cents; he paid his hired slave Rhoda twenty-five cents for an extra day's work; he bought a coat for Jordan in exchange for his chopping wood at Christmas; and he gave Bias \$2.25 for mending shoes.⁴

Slaves not only had their own possessions, probably accumulated through this overwork, reward, and incentive systems, but sometimes had money enough to loan and could be granted credit extended by white businessmen.⁵ That Dangerfield Hunter directed his debts at a local store be settled and that debts owed him be collected after his death indicates these facts. Owners may have seen these incentives as a means of maintaining morale, but the slaves used the bonuses to buy personal goods and to make some financial decisions of their own. Slaves appear, infrequently but with some regularity as customers among the ledgers of area businessmen. In each case, the slave clearly controlled his or her own money and labor and used both to accumulate possessions.

During the 1860s, the slave Henry Johnson performed various tasks for William B. Alexander, a cabinetmaker and wagoner in eastern Augusta County. Using a combination of that labor and cash, Johnson acquired a bedstead for five dollars, and a drop-leaf table for four dollars, hired a buggy for fifty cents, bought a picture frame for thirty-eight cents, and paid twelve cents to have glass cut.⁶

Hard work and initiative only rarely freed enslaved African Americans of the Shenandoah Valley from the pale of slavery. However, historical documents indicate that the money these African Americans managed to acquire for themselves allowed them to make their lives a little more bearable through the acquisition of material goods.

Notes

1. Pauly Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia, Dangerfield Hunter's Will, June 18, 1856, facsimile.
2. Henry Boswell Jones, Report.
3. Folly Farm Papers.
4. McFarland diaries.
5. Pauly Family Papers, Dangerfield Hunter's will.
6. William B. Alexander Papers, 1850-1888. Account book, VSLA Business Records 29658 a, b, Virginia State Library and Archives, Richmond.