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Constructing Identities on the Frontier of Slavery,

Natchez Mississippi, 1760-1860

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Constructing Identities on the Frontier of Slavery,

Natchez, Mississippi, 1760-1860

by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2005

Dedication

For Kristie and Nathaniel

Acknowledgements

While I do not dispute the notion that writing a dissertation is solitary and lonely work, I never would have been able to finish without the support, encouragement, and friendship of many. My decision to switch my major to history was based on the examples of Glenn Eskew and Charles Steffen at Georgia State University. Eskew was an especially honest mentor, cautioning me as recently as two years ago not to assign too much thanks to him given the tight job market. Thankfully I landed one, but even if I had not, meeting him changed the way I thought about the world around me. In a cosmic sense, that is at least as important as paying the bills. Sally Hadden at Florida State University taught me much about the amount of work and dedication required in this profession as well as offering candid advice on its unwritten rules and secret codes. She has remained a constant friend and advisor since my graduation from FSU. Jonathan Grant probably inadvertently gave me the most important words of wisdom in my graduate career over a game of pool in Tallahassee when he told me that it was possible to have a "normal" life while earning a PhD. Many might have a different concept of what normal means, but those words encouraged me to seek a doctorate and to leave good teaching job behind.

Several members of the history department at the University of Texas have earned my gratitude. My interest in the weirdness of Mississippi began in a research seminar by Bob Olwell. The more I dug, the more I found and Bob has always been supportive of both the search and the results. Mark Smith and Neil Kamil agreed to serve on my

dissertation committee very late in the process thereby saving me from weeks of waiting to defend and possibly thousands of dollars of tuition. Their advice has helped me think of my own work in new ways, which I know will prove valuable in the future. A scheduling conflict prevented Steven Hoelscher from attending the defense, but his own work on Natchez shaped this dissertation in important ways. Jim Sidbury has been a patient and careful advisor. He has the amazing ability to gauge how particular graduate students work and then shape his own role of advisor to fit that. He also is a walking encyclopedic historiographic essay. His knowledge and editorial skills have helped this dissertation and my own development as a historian immensely.

I count many of the graduate students that I have met at Texas among my very best friends. Ken Aslakson, Lissa Bollentino, and Sara Fanning took time away from their own work to read portions of this dissertation as well as other projects. I will miss meeting them for margaritas and discussions about race, gender, and slavery. I especially appreciate Ken's deep understanding of the role of college football to the well being of the universe. I was fortunate to meet Kevin Roberts as he rocketed through the program. I have sought to mimic his work ethic and admire his dedication to several of the right sports teams, but I am often puzzled by his politics. Both this study and I have benefited from knowing Peter Caster. He fights evil daily. I think he is winning.

My friends and family in Atlanta and elsewhere have offered much needed support and distraction from this project. Though my parents did not really understand what I was doing in the initial stages, I am grateful that they never suggested that I do something more practical. They have been helpful in ways they will never know. The

list of friends would be too long to record here and I know someone would be left out and thus I offer a blanket thank you.

My deepest thanks are reserved for my wife Kristie and my son Nathaniel. Kristie has lived with this project for as long as I have and has suffered through my wild mood swings with more patience and good cheer than I could ever ask for. Nathan has had to contend with this project his entire life and he did as much as any infant could to help me finish. The dedication of this dissertation to them can never repay all they have given me.

Constructing Identities on the Frontier of Slavery:

Natchez, Mississippi, 1760-1860

Publication No. _____

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2005

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This study recognizes that abstract social forces like western expansion and slavery as well as legal changes brought about by shifting national boundaries affected those living in Natchez, but extends analysis beyond these forces by exploring how day-to-day interactions helped to create racial, class, and gender identities. This work examines the creation of a slave society in Natchez not as a simple transfer from the Chesapeake or the Lowcountry, but rather as created out of specific borderlands conditions resulting from competing imperial powers, Native American nations, and the influence of enslaved Africans. Those whites who established themselves and their fortunes in Natchez became anxious to change this borderland into a bordered land and the importation of African and African American slaves became the means by which these borders were closed.

As the economy of Natchez was changed by the cotton boom, so too were the lives of the enslaved. By using the various narratives of Abd Al-Rahman Ibrahima, the famous African "Prince," I trace processes through which Africans joined and influenced

a specifically African American culture. Enslaved Africans like Ibrahima formed links to one another and to American born slaves from the Upper South, thus entering into and helping to shape a rapidly creolizing culture, one that sank increasingly deep roots into Mississippi. As Natchez became a center for cotton production and the domestic slave trade, like other cities across the South, it became a hub for people of various classes and ethnicities to interact in ways that were unavailable in the countryside. This urban space created a forum for black men to assert their place in the town's community of men. This forum resulted in "cultural frontiers" dividing the town, and agreements and conflicts across these frontiers shaped the daily lives of men and women in ways that often defied legal precedents, class affiliation, or even the notion of white supremacy. The crossing of these cultural frontiers enabled Africans and African Americans to negotiate within the boundaries imposed upon them by white hegemony and construct identities tied to the communities they formed on the frontier of slavery.

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Introduction
Constructing Identities on the Frontier of Slavery, Natchez, Mississippi, 1760-1860

Some historians have argued that Natchez represented the quintessential American frontier town. Carved out of a rough wilderness by enterprising pioneers over the objections of local Native American groups, Natchez went from a community of loose morals and violence to one with a respectable elite class situated on a commercially strategic bluff on the Mississippi. Natchez did, of course, develop on the Old Southwest frontier, but this study examines something other than the well-studied shift from a frontier to a "civilized" community.[1] The frontier was in fact more than the western edge of European settlement; it was also the forward edge of expanding plantation agriculture -- the frontier of slavery. My dissertation "Constructing Identities on the Frontier of Slavery, Natchez, Mississippi 1760-1860" recognizes that abstract social forces like western expansion and slavery as well as legal changes brought about by shifting national boundaries affected those living in Natchez, and extends analysis beyond these forces by exploring how day-to-day interactions helped to create and reinterpret racial, class, and gender identities.

Beginning as a part of West Florida, Natchez shifted among imperial powers three times between the 1760s and the 1790s. Natchez's status as a place in-between colonial powers and Native American nations not only made it especially attractive to Euro-Americans with ambiguous political allegiances, but also had a profound effect on the

[1] Clayton D. James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968); Thomas D. Clark and John D.W. Guice, *Frontiers In Conflict: The Old Southwest, 1795-1830* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989); J.F.H. Claiborne, *Mississippi as a Province, Territory, and State* (Jackson: Power & Barksdale, 1880).

development of slavery in the region. Natchez would not be created out of a simple transfer of slave societies from eastern colonies like tidewater Virginia or the South Carolina lowcountry; rather, slavery in Natchez was constructed out of the specific circumstances surrounding this region lying between competing imperial powers and out of settlers' shared pursuit of wealth through slavery. Still, those who established themselves and their fortunes in Natchez became anxious to change the region from a "borderland" to a bordered land.[2] By the Spanish period, slavery became the "cultural currency" that enabled some to secure land grants, wealth, and eventually, the political power to control local issues.

From its position on the Mississippi River, Natchez, like many cities throughout the Atlantic World, provided opportunities for non-landowning whites, yeoman farmers, planters, slaves, and free people of color to interact in a variety of ways that were unavailable in the countryside. Within these cities men and women of various races, ethnicities, and classes did business, drank, gambled, fought, and had sex. Consequently, "cultural frontiers" developed between town and countryside, between insiders and outsiders, and most especially between black and white, slave and free. Agreements and conflicts across these frontiers shaped the daily lives of men and women in ways that often defied legal precedents, class affiliation, or even the notion of white supremacy. In

[2] This study borrows the interpretation of borderlands and bordered lands from Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History," *American Historical Review* 104 (June, 1999): 814-841. Borderlands are defined as "contested boundaries between colonial domains" (816). This clearly differs from a *frontier* in which "geographic and cultural borders were not clearly defined" (815). Bordered lands, then, represent the incorporation of these places into a larger polity, or in this case more accurately, ending the period of social and cultural flux.

some cases, racial boundaries were crossed by community consent. Occasionally, some people of European descent lost the protections of whiteness and were subjected to injustices normally reserved for black people; similarly, some blacks acquired freedom. In one extraordinary case involving the murder of the free black barber William Johnson, a man previously labeled black by the Natchez community escaped punishment by using the strict racial code to become legally "white."

Furthermore, in spite of the legalized system of slavery and slaveholders' insistence that slaves were merely extensions of their owners' will, African Americans shaped their worlds and molded the development of the Natchez District. Before the ending of US participation in the slave trade, many of the men and women enslaved in Natchez came directly from the west coast of Africa via New Orleans. Through processes of selective adaptation and cultural retention, blacks developed a particularly African American identity as Natchez became home and they used the room they had within white hegemony to construct their own lives.

Several excellent social histories have been written on similar Southern and "frontier" towns over the past two decades dealing with the daily lives of white and black people within slave societies.[3] These studies show that men and women rarely lived their

[3] Among these are Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: Norton , 1984); J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterlands* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1985); Christopher Morris, *Becoming Southern: The Evolution of a Way of Life, Warren County and Vicksburg Mississippi, 1770-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Timothy Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001); Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves & Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Lowcountry* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998);

lives based only on theoretical concepts, but rather responded to complicated social environments linked to specific local conditions and relationships as well as wider dealings with the southern region, national issues, and world events. Most works on Mississippi, however, tend to deal with later time periods and some read the antebellum period into the past; suggesting that Mississippi was always a slave society or that this society developed as a transplant of tidewater Virginia or the South Carolina Lowcountry. As a result, much of the attention paid to Natchez and its surrounding areas has been focused on the region's sizeable planter class and how it perceived its world.[4] While many works have shifted the way that historians perceive Mississippi prior to the Civil War, many of them continue to couch their arguments within the paternalist vs. profit maximizer mold.[5] This study moves away from this line of argument and modifies

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Kimberly Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*: *Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

[4] See for example Joan Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) which argues that while paternalism may have existed in the eastern regions of the South like South Carolina, Georgia and Virginia, it did not in the Old Southwest states of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, because the men who moved to this region were only concerned with gaining wealth, not with the "antiquated" ideas of their fathers. Michael Tadman's *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) contends that the sheer volume of the domestic trade to the region proves that these planters mainly wanted slaves to further their cotton ambitions. Also Martha Jane Brazy, "An American Planter: Slavery, Entrepreneurship, and Identity in the Life of Stephen Duncan, 1787-1867," PhD Diss. Duke University 1998; James, *Antebellum Natchez*. Two exceptions are Christopher Morris, *Becoming Southern* and David Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi, 1720-1835* (Jackson, University of Mississippi Press, 2004).

[5] The idea of paternalism originated with the work of U. B. Phillips, a southern apologist for slavery, who argued that slavery actually was a benevolent institution whose image had been warped by abolitionists. Charles Sydnor's *Slavery in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1933) applies Phillips notion of slavery as benign and unprofitable to Mississippi. This view remained the standard until Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution: Negro Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Knopf, 1956) reintroduced the ideas that slavery was brutal and that slaveowners made decisions to better their own financial positions, not because they felt a bond with the men and women they enslaved.

Eugene Genovese waded into the debate on slavery by not only accepting that slaves had agency, but also by reinterpreting the meanings of paternalism. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, Vintage, 1974) uses a Marxist framework to argue that the nineteenth century American South

the literature on the South and slavery by focusing on how events on the plantation, throughout the region, and across the Atlantic World shaped the ways masters and slaves viewed themselves and each other. This work places Natchez into the context of studies on borderlands and the Atlantic World by drawing from a wide array of sources including French, English, and Spanish official records, court cases from the nineteenth century, plantation records, and several exceptional literary sources produced by Africans and African Americans living in Natchez.

Chapter 1 "Building a Slave Society in the Borderlands of the Old Southwest" begins with initial European settlement and explains the ultimate success of the Spanish at creating a society in which status for free people rested on slave ownership. The profitability of the location on the river and the relative distance from older societies drew settlers to Natchez during the French (1720-1763), British (1763-1783), and

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that was pre-capitalist. This does not suggest planters were not acquisitive, but rather that it was not their purpose to acquire capital simply to acquire more capital. Instead, what emerged was a semi-feudal South based not on free labor, but on paternalism--a system of mutual obligations between master and slave. Slavery rested on the assumption that these men and women were property, but also recognized their humanity. This is not to suggest that the relationship between the two was an equal one. Plainly, the master exerted hegemony over the enslaved, but even though this was a relation of dominance, room for resistance existed. Within this room the slaves were able to make their own "world." To Genovese, and others, slave culture (language, religion, art, families, etc.) represents resistance to this hegemony. This represents a difference from the paternalism of Phillips who argued that it was a necessity for African Americans who did not possess their own culture. Genovese's paternalism does not present slavery as a benevolent institution. The inherent inequality in the master/slave relationship meant that these mutual obligations were not voluntary on the part of the slave, nor were they without cruelty.

The most vocal critic of Genovese's paternalism thesis has been James Oakes who has argued that slaveowners only were motivated by profit. Since his first work *The Ruling Race A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Knopf, 1982) Oakes has modified his position somewhat: see *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (New York: Knopf, 1990) recognizing that he and Genovese were speaking of two different groups of slave holders, Oakes of the middling to smaller slaveholders, Genovese only of the largest.

More recent criticisms of the paternalism thesis include William Dusinberre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) and Norrece Jones, *Born a Child of Freedom Yet a Slave: Mechanisms of Control and Strategies of Resistance in Antebellum South Carolina* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1990).

Spanish (1783-1795) periods, but by the Spanish period, those who had established themselves as plantation and slave owners were able to control the social, economic, and political circumstances in the town.

The "borderlands" position of the town resulted in both opportunities and problems for the Europeans who came to Natchez. The first French settlers established the closest thing to a plantation society in French North America by the 1720s, but the resentment by the Natchez Indians over encroachments on their identities resulted in warfare and the destruction of the settlement.[6] The French did not attempt to create a new settlement at the same location, but by the end of the Seven Years War when the region was transferred to British West Florida, others had begun to create a profitable community at Natchez. Rather than starting a new colony, individual British boosters offered generous land grants to people within the Empire willing to move to Natchez. Those who moved could set up plantations on these large land grants but found that the isolated position far from the center of British authority in Pensacola or a marketing center hindered their ability to make a profit. These settlers traded legally with Native American nations like the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Yazoo, but also pursued illegal, trans-imperial trade with the Spanish in Louisiana. The American Revolution brought additional problems to the British crown, if only in the sense that these settlers who held

[6] David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*: *Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 19-40. Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: Norton, 1968); Gary Nash, *Red, White, and Black: the Peoples of Early America* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974); Usner, *Indians, Settlers, & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

questionable political loyalty already, now were faced with the choice of remaining within the British Empire or siding with either the United States or the Spanish. Several upheavals in the town reflected the fact that residents of Natchez primary loyalties were to their own pocketbooks. The settlement changed hands several times in the course of the war and was finally ceded to the Spanish in the Treaty of Paris. The most successful inhabitants, namely those who had established plantations worked by enslaved Africans, used the political actions of their neighbors to seize or purchase property at drastic discounts furthering their own causes while professing loyalty to whoever was in charge at the time. By 1783, a small number of families had established themselves by connecting their fortunes to the new Spanish establishment.

As this small set of families built their affluence and reputations along the Mississippi, they worked with Spanish authorities to restrict who would be allowed to settle within the region. The new regime made a deal with local planters to purchase tobacco at higher-than-market prices and to allow duty free importation of Africans from the Caribbean, while also creating an unofficial *cabildo*, or town council, made up of the towns' largest slaveowners. With this newly-institutionalized power, these men began closing the borders to potential settlers arriving without slaves or families. Well before the cotton boom of the nineteenth century, the ownership of slaves had become a "cultural currency" required to gain full-fledged membership in the Natchez white community. The town's *cabildo* used its influence to determine the social structure of Natchez by controlling the new geography of the growing town, thus imposing borders

on the former borderland. This *cabildo*, with the help of Spanish authorities, would create the structural basis of a community for planters.

Chapter 2, "Creating an African American Community on the Frontier of Slavery," shifts the focus away from slaveowners and toward the emerging African American community that developed in Natchez between 1783 and 1828. Though the Spanish officially defined the political borders of Natchez, cultural borders remained open, specifically borders between slaves and free people, but also between the Africans and African Americans brought into the region. Most studies of "creolization" in the Lower Mississippi Valley have centered on New Orleans and its surrounding hinterland and occasionally on Louisiana as a whole, but histories of slavery in Mississippi concentrate on the antebellum period.[7] These studies imply that slavery developed in Mississippi as enslaved men and women were brought into the territory from heavily creolized slave societies in the east. In reality, well before the domestic trade had begun moving slaves from the upper South to the Old Southwest, a substantial African community had made Natchez its home.

This chapter uses the life of Abd-Al Rahman Ibrahima as a lens through which to examine slavery in Natchez. As a young man, Ibrahima was taken prisoner during a raid

[7] Among these are Daniel Usner, *Indians, Settlers, & Slaves*; Noel Polk, ed., *Natchez Before 1830* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989)*;* D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez*; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992). Ann Patton Malone arguably makes the best case for the variations and importance of African American families in *Sweet Chariot: Slave Family & Household Structure in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). Malone's work is influenced by earlier works on the slave family most especially, Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976) and Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross*: *The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974). Kevin D Roberts, "Slaves and Slavery in Louisiana: The Evolution of Atlantic World Identities, 1791-1831," PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2003.

on a community near his home in Futa Jallon. He was then sold to British slavers and transported first to the Caribbean and then to Natchez. Ibrahima's capture and experience in the slave trade were similar to those of most Africans brought to Natchez in the late eighteenth century; however, scholars have treated his story as exceptionable since he presented himself to his new owner as a prince in an attempt to gain his freedom. Inconsistencies make his claim to royalty impossible to prove, but his forty years in Natchez offer an important example of the movement of an identity tied to African ethnicity toward one rooted in a new sense of kinship established in the Americas.

Surviving sources stress Ibrahima's exemplary education, demeanor, intelligence, and the perception of racial difference from other Africans to present him as exceptional and thus not "a common slave." Each of these sources had direct ties to the American Colonization Society which used Ibrahima to garner publicity and support for colonizing Africa with Americanized men and women of African ancestry. In considering both Ibrahima's life in Natchez and his selection by the American Colonization Society for "resettlement" in Africa, it is clear that Ibrahima maintained ties to his old life in some ways, but also that he had developed new ties to his American family and to the broader slave community in Natchez. His agreement to be part of the ACS venture had as much to do with the prospects of securing freedom for his American family as with reestablishing ties to his African past.

Historians of slavery have used Ibrahima's story in various contexts, but almost universally, they have privileged his Muslim identity over the new one he created while

in Natchez.[8] The narratives of Ibrahima, just as other narratives written by people with crosscutting senses of identity, offer historians the possibility to move beyond evidence of "cultural survival" under slavery toward a greater understanding of the usage of this survival. Rereading the sources on Ibrahima's life focusing less on evidence of the survival of his religious identity than on his experience in bondage and his acquisition of freedom allows for a deeper understanding of slavery. Rather than treating Ibrahima as separate from the emerging black community of Natchez, this study focuses on how he used his various identities to set himself apart from other blacks only when it served his purpose, which ultimately led to freedom for three generations of his American born family.

In Chapter 3, " Cultural Frontiers on the Frontier of Slavery: Racial Control, Vice, and Natchez Under-the-Hill," I argue that residents of Natchez sought to differentiate Natchez Under-the-Hill, a neighborhood infamous throughout the United States as a place of loose morality, from the town Over-the-Hill. Respectable townsmen attributed the problems of Under-the-hill to transient "frontier" men who traveled along the river, when in reality planters were just as complicit in these vices as boatmen. Despite the apparent distaste for these vices by townspeople, only very rarely were professional

[8] Charles Syndor, "The Biography of a Slave," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 37, (January 1937), 59-73; Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1977); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Old South, " *The American Historical Review*, 93 (Dec., 1988), 1228-1252 ; Allan D. Austin, ed., *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook* (New York: Garland, 1984); Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 71-73; Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

gamblers, prostitutes, or drunkards subject to reprisal. Clearly, the availability of taverns and brothels made Natchez an attractive stop on the Mississippi River, which was crucial for drawing the boatmen who transported planters' cotton to New Orleans for sale. Along with this economic role, gambling, drinking, and illicit sex served important cultural functions for planters as well, specifically the opportunity to prove masculinity. When planters took part in these activities they usually characterized them as behaviors associated with a culture of honor. The implicit acceptance of vice allowed space for slaves and free people of color to take part in the same masculine behaviors as planters especially at Under-the-Hill. Since these vices were important both economically and culturally to planters, a legal crackdown would not have been feasible. A fictive cultural frontier was created that applied different class and racial characteristics to Under-the-Hill than the town above the bluff allowing elite whites to distance themselves from their own vices, but also inadvertently giving black men greater access to a broader culture of masculinity.

Chapter 4, "The Politics of Manumission: (Re) Defining Slavery and Freedom in the Day-to-Day World of Natchez Slaves and Slaveowners," recognizes that Natchez was one of the most repressive environments for slaves in he United States, but that slaveowners could not, and did not forget that slaves were people as well as property. [9]

[9] Edward E. Baptist has made a compelling case that traders in the domestic slave trade managed to "forget" the humanity of the commodities they sold, especially "fancy maids" designated for sexual exploitation. He also notes that white men used the ability to sell and exploit slaves as a way of crafting their own identities as white men. See Edward Baptist," 'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States," *The American Historical Review* 106, (December 2001): 1619-1650. This study argues that slaveowners did not forget that slaves

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the slave market at Natchez was second in volume only to New Orleans. The cotton boom had made the town and its surrounding area a final destination for many of slaves forced to move either with slaveowners or via the domestic trade from Virginia and Maryland. Interestingly, during the height of the cotton boom when the number and value of slaves in Mississippi were steadily rising, so too were the number of manumissions. From the 1820s through 1850, Mississippi, and Natchez in particular, became the destination for thousands of enslaved men, women, and children sold away from states like Maryland and Virginia. Natchez, and the rest of Adams County, had a majority black population from the 1790s through the Civil War and with each census the commitment to slavery became deeper. By 1850, 77% of Adams' total population was enslaved. At the same time, more slaveholders were choosing to release the men and women they owned as property from slavery based not on value, but rather on "character."

What separated "good" character from "bad" could vary from slaveowner to slaveowner, but whatever the requirements notions of character would shape understandings of slavery and freedom. In this region that had an ever growing black majority, concerns over the Haitian Revolution and domestic slave rebellions led the state legislature to require slave traders to submit certificates of good character for slaves brought into the state by non-owners, then a total ban on the interstate slave trade for a

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were human, but rather used specific aspects of this humanity to define themselves as benevolent masters, and occasionally, to publicly identify their own political stances.

period of eight years. The ban on trade was not intended as a means of cutting down on the number of slaves, but instead a way of controlling them. Many slaveowners worried that planters in Virginia sought to remove dangerous slaves from their own midst by sending them to the Old Southwest. Natchez slaveowners took their own steps to ensure good character by promising freedom in return. Generally, these were not benevolent acts of slaveowners, but rather attempts to exert racial control. Men and women freed as a result of these agreements, usually in the wills of their owners, were required by law to leave the state, usually bound for Liberia via the Mississippi or American Colonization Society. By the late 1830s and 1840s, attacks on slavery from outside of the South and perceived dangers from within brought this practice to an end. By the 1840s, the Mississippi Supreme Court determined that freeing slaves, even in a will and even if those freed left the country, was in conflict with the continuation of a slave society.

Chapter 5, "Free People of Color on the Frontier of Slavery," discusses how the free people of color found spaces within the strict legal code to create a small, but active, community in Natchez. While certainly more restricted both in law and in custom than similar communities in New Orleans, free blacks found ways to hold onto and improve their status throughout the antebellum period. Several free blacks secured their status through the patronage of white relatives or associates. Others discovered that through shrewd maneuvering the restrictive legal system could be circumvented. Still others used indeterminate racial status could lead to claim the privileges of whiteness.

Though much of this chapter focuses on the extraordinary life of William Johnson, a free black barber, and his family, in many ways it is the circumstances

surrounding his death that explain the most about how whites and blacks in Natchez presented themselves to the larger community. In 1851, while visiting his farm near Natchez, Johnson was murdered by his neighbor, Baylor Winn. Most people in Natchez categorized Winn was a free black man, but when he was put on trial for the murder he presented himself as white. Winn understood if he legally established his whiteness the charges against him could not stand, because the witnesses to the shooting -- a boy enslaved by Johnson, one of his sons, and a free black boy apprenticed to Johnson to learn the barber's trade – were all legally black and thus could not testify against a white man in a court of law. Winn was acquitted. By proving that he was white, Winn had inverted his position within the community. Though Johnson's white associates supported a conviction against a black Baylor Winn, they legally could not convict a white Baylor Winn. The murder of Johnson and its transforming effect on the racial categorization of his murderer, Winn, illuminates issues of representation and identity among free people of color in the South, an unforeseen consequence of Mississippi's racist legal system, and it presents a more intricate picture of the construction of race in a slave society.

Natchez was the home to two of the most famous black people in the antebellum South--Ibrahima and William Johnson--yet most studies have neglected what the rich documentation surrounding their lives tells us about the communities (black and white) in which they lived. This study recognizes that the rise of Natchez from a colonial afterthought to a major producer of cotton and a major consumer of slaves in the Atlantic market certainly led to vast changes, but despite these global shifts, day-to-day

interactions between various groups shaped individual identities. The narratives of Ibrahima and Johnson bear out the malleable nature of identities. Without a doubt, the institution of slavery not only shaped perceptions of racial identities within Natchez, but also those of class and gender. Ownership of slaves determined status within Natchez, not just in the economic sense, but also in terms of social cache. Nevertheless, in spite of the legal and cultural restrictions placed on African and African Americans, these men and women constructed their own identities, tied to family and community. The enslaved and free people of color further took advantage of the importance of slavery in determining white status to improve their own lives.

Chapter 1

Building a Slave Society in the Borderlands of the Old Southwest

William Dunbar left his native Scotland and moved to America in 1771. Though apparently Dunbar moved to America for health reasons, he was also motivated by economic promise. After sailing into Philadelphia, Dunbar moved westward and set up a trading post near Fort Pitt. Apparently his stay in western Pennsylvania so improved his physical condition that he decided to make the long and dangerous drip down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers in order to secure a tract of land in the much disputed territory between Spanish Louisiana and British West Florida. He secured ownership of land between Baton Rouge and the settlement at Natchez from the British and then headed to Jamaica in order to purchase Africans. The men and women he enslaved cleared the land, made staves and barrelheads for sugar and molasses grown in the Caribbean, and produced crops for sale into the Atlantic market.[1]

Some historians have compared Dunbar to William Faulkner's character Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* .[2] While on the surface, the comparison seems apt, in many ways it also represents a large problem in the historiography of Mississippi, namely, the tendency to project the understandings of cultural and social practices of the antebellum

[1] Morton Rothstein, "The Remotest Corner: Natchez on the American Frontier," in Noel Polk ed. *Natchez Before 1830* (Jackson and London: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), 96-97.
[2] Rothstein, "The Remotest Corner," 96-97. Bernard Bailyn compares Dunbar to Thomas Sutpen, the central character of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage, 1986) in *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York, Knopf, 1986), 488-492. Bailyn and Rothstein suggest that Dunbar was a more "cultured" and complex man than Faulkner's Sutpen, and that this made him less of a brutal master than the fictional character. Dunbar could be as brutal or as benevolent as any slave master across the Atlantic World.

period back into the eighteenth century. Like Sutpen, Dunbar moved to Mississippi and used African slaves from the Caribbean to carve out a plantation. Unlike Sutpen though, Dunbar did not move to Mississippi during the height of the cotton boom and not with the intention of establishing himself as an "Old South" aristocrat. The Old South of so many of Faulkner's novels did not yet exist in Mississippi. The Mississippi that Dunbar encountered in the last quarter of the eighteenth century was very different from these fictional accounts of the antebellum period.[3]

[3] The majority of historians who have written on Mississippi tend to deal with the 19th and 20th centuries and, particularly, on the antebellum period and Jim Crow. The most complete study of Natchez to date is D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), but it, like others, only marginally considers the eighteenth century and treats the creation of a slave society as a transplant of earlier British colonies to the east. Though less openly racist, Charles Sydnor's *Slavery in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1933) clearly borrows heavily from U. B. Phillips' *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York: D. Appleton, 1918). Like Phillips, Sydnor was convinced that the master/slave relationship was one of benevolence and obligation. Furthermore, Sydnor goes to great lengths to explain that slavery was not a profitable institution. As with James, Sydnor's analysis relies almost completely upon the antebellum period.

This is not to suggest that no historians have dealt with Mississippi and Natchez in particular, in the eighteenth century, but even among these, the focus is not the creation of a slave society. These studies include: William Cash, "European Colonization of Mississippi," in Barbara Carpenter, ed. *Ethnic Heritage in Mississippi* (Jackson: University Presses of Mississippi, 1992); Thomas D. Clark and John D. W. Guice, *Frontiers In Conflict: The Old Southwest, 1795-1830* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989); Robert V. Hayes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution* (Jackson: University Presses of Mississippi, 1976); Jack D. L. Holmes, *Gayoso: The Life of a Spanish Governor in the Mississippi Valley, 1789-1799.* Two unpublished accounts of eighteenth century Natchez fall into this category: Light T. Cummins, "National Identity and English Speaking Immigrants into Spanish Louisiana: The Natchez District and the Felicianas, 1770-1819," presented at the American Historical Association Annual Meeting, Washington D.C., January 9, 2004 and Todd Ashley Herring, "Natchez 1795-1830: Life and Death on the Slavery Frontier," PhD Dissertation, Mississippi State University, December 2000. The one study that does not assume the inevitability of antebellum Mississippi or incorrectly project that image onto the eighteenth century is Christopher Morris, *Becoming Southern: The Evolution of A Way of Life, Warren County and Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1770-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Others that make note of Natchez, but focus primarily on Louisiana include Daniel H. Usner, Jr., *Indians Settlers, and Slaves In a Frontier Exchange Economy* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) and Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: the Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

In fact, the Mississippi that Dunbar encountered was a place of changing imperial loyalty, shifting nominally from French control in the early eighteenth century, to the British in 1763, and to the Spanish in 1781 before it officially joined the United States in 1798. The French found the region well suited in terms of climate and soil for plantation agriculture, but a lack of funding by the Company of the Indies and a tense relationship with the Natchez Indians led to the end of the venture. When the British took control of the Natchez District at the conclusion of the Seven Years War they had less trouble providing settlers to the region, but no less difficulty in supporting the inhabitants. Residents of Spanish Louisiana were similarly neglected by their mother country and struck deals with traders and planters in British Natchez, creating an economic bond that would foster another political change in 1781.

While each empire sought to create a plantation society, it was not until the Spanish took over in the 1780s with guaranteed prices for crops and additional powers for slaveowners that a society dominated by a planter class emerged. These planters (large-scale farmers and slaveholders) had already gained affluence through slavery, but the Spanish offered them a chance to use slave ownership as a cultural currency which could buy them additional wealth and power. Just as the Spanish had done in Louisiana, they struck a deal with a set of locals to guarantee loyalty from a group of people that were not ethnically Spanish. In Louisiana, the Spanish made this deal with slaves and free people of color as a way of controlling potentially rebellious white French slaveowners. In Natchez, planters secured this position then used it to their advantage seizing legal power,

exerting control over who could enter the territory, and giving land grants only to those who owned slaves.

By this period, over a decade before the cotton boom, planters dominated Natchez. Planter power in Natchez came not only from the wealth provided by enslaved Africans, but also from the cultural currency which slave ownership offered, allowing whites to prove that they belonged in Natchez. Masters obviously benefited from the wealth produced by the labor of slaves, but they could also spend this cultural currency with Spanish authorities anxious over potentially losing the district to the expansionist United States. The Spanish, who never sent troops or large numbers of officials to Natchez, came to rely on planters to act in association with local commandants in order to handle day-to-day operations of the town. Rather than attempt to fill the town with ethnic Spanish residents, the imperial authority and the local *cabildo* negotiated a arrangement giving slaveowners power over quotidian operation; imposing stability based on a homogeneity of class. In some ways the planter *cabildo*, or town assembly, spent its cultural currency to close some of the borders in Natchez. By the 1780s, the district was no longer a place where non-slaveholding whites could expect to attain land and status. Planters like Dunbar who had come to Natchez because of the attractiveness of the borderlands sought to close these borders to non-slaveholders, changing this borderland into a bordered land.[4]

[4] Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *American Historical Review* 104 (June, 1999): 814-841.

The Failure of French Natchez

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the Natchez District was little more than a peripheral backwater of French Colonial settlement. As a part of French Louisiana, initial settlers found themselves struggling to survive and Louis XIV placed low priority on supplying the colony. As a result, these colonists, primarily soldiers and sailors, found themselves on their own. Like settlers of early Virginia they turned to local Indian groups for food, which they acquired through trade and by forcing enslaving captives taken among the Chittamache to work in the fields. While using enslaved Indians as laborers provided for the basic needs of the French, it did not create a viable labor base for the production of cash crops because Indians found it fairly easy to escape bondage.[5]

French settlers argued that African slaves were needed to make this a viable and productive colony. By 1717, the Company of the Indies began transporting Africans into Louisiana in large numbers.[6] While the free population outnumbered the enslaved, the potential for a cross-racial alliance between these groups against the free inhabitants remained a constant fear. In order to control this perceived threat, French settlers created

[5] Dunbar Rowland, Albert Godfrey Sanders, and Patricia Galloway eds., *Mississippi Provincial Archives French Dominion* 5 vols. (Jackson: Press of the Mississippi Historical Society, 1929-1932 and Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), II 32-34, 38-39, 115-116 (hereafter cited as MPAFD). The close parallel between the early colonial experience in the lower Mississippi Valley and other colonies, especially Virginia, is made in Daniel H. Usner, Jr., *Indians Settlers, and Slaves,* 13-25. See also Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975); Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*.
[6] Usner, 32.

racial resentment between Africans and Indians by paying Native Americans for capturing runaway African slaves and arming Africans who took part in raids of Indian villages.[7]

Maintaining this racial boundary took on additional importance considering the less than desirable position of French settlers compared with other colonial ventures. In the Great Lakes region, the fur trade sustained French settlement. These settlements were much more interested in profit than in establishing territorial dominance, which led to a political economy that Richard White has labeled "the middle ground." In this middle ground, no one group had total control over territory, rather, local interests of Indian nations and French traders meshed, including economic exchanges and also cultural blending though intermarriage and cohabitation. This did not happen in the Lower Mississippi Valley since the French had a very different colonial plan for Louisiana and because of variation in relationships between the settlers and Indian nations of the region. Some of these nations, like the Natchez and the Yazoo, lived on the fringes of European settlements and engaged in limited trade with the French. Others like the Chittamache consistently fought the colonists and were often enslaved. The Choctaw and Chickasaw, the most powerful nations in the region pursued diplomatic relations with the French and were able to play the French off against the British, often securing more favorable trade terms or "gifts" from both by playing one European power off of the other. [8]

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[7] Ibid., 56-60.

[8] Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Usner, *Indians, Settlers, & Slaves*, 13-46. Given the multitude of competing Indian nations in the vicinity of the Lower Mississippi Valley and the varying

In spite of the hardships facing the region, Natchez became the most productive region of the colony. The population of Natchez in 1726 included 105 free men, women and children as well as 65 African slaves, 9 enslaved Indians and 45 indentured servants. Notwithstanding the hardships faced by these early settlers, the Company of the Indies continued to demand a return on their investment. M. Périer, Commandant of the Province of Louisiana, asked the company for patience and stressed that once the inhabitants had gained experience, "more will be produced in one year than we could otherwise produce in nearly ten." He insisted that they would produce silk and indigo as well as tobacco and cotton for sale into the Atlantic market. Périer was overly optimistic for the settlement, which never produced silk or cotton (during the French period) and did not grow either the quality or quantity of tobacco or indigo to please the company. [9]

Unfortunately for the settlers, their problems were not limited to an impatient employer. The Natchez Indians, for whom the region was named, were angered by continued French incursions. As one tribal elder contended, "before the French came among us we were men content with what we had. But now . . . we walk like slaves, which we soon shall be, since the French already treat us as such."[10] The French held similar concerns about how they were viewed by the Native Americans. Tired of giving gifts to secure favor, M. Périer complained, "we are the dupes of these Indians." He suggested that the Indians viewed the French as less than manly and contended, "their

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degrees of power they held both over each other and the French, Usner's description of this region as a "frontier exchange economy" is a more valid label than "middle ground" in the early eighteenth century.

[9] Périer to Ory, December 18, 1730, MPFAD Vol IV. P.44.

[10] Usner, 71; the elder's words recorded by Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz, in Joesph G. Tregle ed., *History of Louisiana* (London, T. Becket, 1774), 78-81.

insolence has been allowed to increase to such an extent that one part of them despises us as a people who are not accustomed to war." In an even more pejorative letter to Sieur Ory, Counselor of State and member of the Royal Council, Périer wrote that "the Indians have always regarded the French of Louisiana as women, those are their own expressions, while they themselves are generally the most cowardly of all men." Périer, argued that the French must demonstrate that "we are obstinate people who will not tolerate anything."[11]

Tensions between French settlers and the Natchez finally boiled over and the Natchez raided the French settlement in November 1729 killing 200 French men. The Natchez resented not only French encroachment on their lands, but also the cultural encroachments that their proximity created. Clearly, the Natchez felt that the French intended to reduce them to servility either through force or trade. Though the majority of the French men at Fort Rosalie were killed, women and children, along with close to 300 African slaves were captured. The plan of dividing Indians and Africans clearly did not succeed, as many of these Africans almost immediately sided with the Natchez against the French. [12]

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[11] Périer to Maurepas; Périer to Ory, MPAFD Vol. IV p. 31-32, 43. As David Roediger has observed in other contexts, Native Americans did not provide a suitable "other" for European settlers; if anything, Indians represented a model of manliness rather than a negative referent. The Native American men of the Lower Mississippi Valley shunned farming as "woman's work" and chose instead to hunt and fight. Some European men no doubt found this lifestyle intriguing see *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1999) 19-40; Joyce Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500-1676* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: Norton, 1968); Gary Nash, *Red, White, and Black: the Peoples of Early America* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974).

[12] Julie Sass, "Chronology of Natchez," in Noel Polk ed. *Natchez Before 1830* (Jackson and London: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), 3. Usner, 72-73. During his travels nearly 50 years later to Point

The Yazoo joined with the Natchez in a general uprising against the French throughout the Lower Mississippi Valley. The French feared was that this attack was only the beginning and that other tribes might join in. The Choctaw and the Chickasaw had proved more numerous and dangerous to French Louisiana. Though he had no evidence of it, Périer was convinced that the English had encouraged the raid on the settlers and that they would next incite the Choctaw and Chickasaw to follow suit. Périer was directed to show the power of the French and set out to destroy the Natchez entirely, but to do so, "in such a way as not to use the Choctaws, in order to show them that we do not need them." Notwithstanding the perceived necessity of doing this without Indian help, the French looked to the Chickasaw for aid in the conflict with the understanding that once the Natchez and Yazoo were defeated it might be necessary to annihilate their current allies.[13]

The French destroyed the Natchez as a people as an example of French power to other Native American nations in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Fighting between the two groups was especially brutal. The French frequently pitted black soldiers against Native Americans in order to further separate these two groups. The few remaining Natchez who escaped death or capture fled to other nearby Indian nations and were incorporated into those societies. Those caught faced especially cruel treatment. At least four men and two women were burned to death in captivity. Others were imprisoned in

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Coupé, William Bartram encountered a man identified in his journal as "a French gentleman, an ancient man and wealthy planter" who claimed to have lived at the village in Natchez during the attack. This man blamed the attack on behavior of the military at the fort rather than the settlers or the Natchez themselves. Mark Van Doren, ed., *Travels of William Bartram* (New York: Dover Publications, 1928), 345-346.

[13] Périer to Ory; Ory to Périer MPAFD Vol. IV, 39-47.

New Orleans and eventually sold as slaves to Saint Domingue.[14] The war also marked the end of an organized French presence in Natchez. The war may have succeeded in convincing Native Americans of French resolve to maintain their presence in the area, but it did not further their goal of creating a plantation community in the region. Control over Louisiana (of which the Natchez District was a part) reverted from the Company of the Indies back to the French government, which viewed the Lower Mississippi Valley in strategic, rather than economic, terms. As a result, maintaining control of the Mississippi at New Orleans became the focus, rather than building a plantation society at Natchez.

The Lower Mississippi Valley and British West Florida

By the end of the Seven Years War, France had lost even strategic concern with the region, ceding it to the British. Incorporated into the Province of West Florida, Natchez once again gained the attention of an imperial power seeking to exploit the area's fertile soil and position on the Mississippi.[15] Still, strict borders designating Natchez as separate from other settlements, particularly the Spanish in Louisiana had not yet been imposed. This partially resulted from a lack of concern by British authorities, but also from the desires of planters like William Dunbar to gain access to available land and the Atlantic market offered by Spanish and French control of sugar production in the Caribbean.

While early British boosters found Natchez promising, others expressed concern about its isolated position and the threat of Indian attack. Despite the danger, speculators

[14]Périer to Maurepas, MPAFD Vol. IV, 36-37; Sass, 4.
[15] Usner, 76; Sass, 4.

and settlers were drawn by the promise of fertile land and exceptionally large land grants. Perhaps most importantly for British subjects in North America, the Proclamation of 1763 did not prohibit them from moving into this region. In fact, as it was the only region with a sizeable amount of land west of the Appalachians under British authority, it seemed a logical choice for expansion. However, as the French had discovered decades earlier, maintaining settlers or a new colony in the region would draw heavily on an imperial treasury that already found itself deeply in the red.[16]

Two entrepreneurs, Montfort Browne and Phineas Lyman, sought to convince the British government that a new colony in Mississippi would benefit the Empire. Building on the reports of surveyors and visitors to the Natchez District describing the region as "the most beautiful, healthy, and variegated lands in this province, or perhaps the whole continent of America," Browne claimed that this area could actually solve some of the empire's financial problems. Browne argued that settlers would grow tobacco and indigo, which could easily be brought down the Mississippi and sold into the Atlantic market. He proposed that immigrants could be recruited from the Mediterranean to produce wine, silk, and olive oil, which Great Britain imported at great expense. Of course, these new settlers would create a new market for British finished goods as well.[17]

By the mid 1770s, Browne argued that Mississippi would serve as a safety valve for American colonists. At the westernmost part of the British Empire, West Florida was truly a frontier community and thus perfect for those in search of less imperial control as

[16] Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West*, 488.
[17] Quote from Caleb Carpenter in W. M. Carpenter, ed., "The Mississippi River in the Olden Time. . .," *DeBow's Review* III (January 1847): 123; Robin F.A. Fabel, "An Eighteenth Colony: Dreams for the Mississippi on the Eve of the Revolution," *Journal of Southern History* 59 (November 1993): 647-663.

well as new economic opportunities after the Proclamation of 1763 eliminated the Ohio River Valley as a place for expansion. Also, as this part of North America was exempt from the Proclamation, it could serve as a place for loyalists to retreat and yet remain within the Empire. Mississippi, and particularly the Natchez District, did come to serve this function as migrants from eastern colonies began migrating to West Florida, particularly from land-poor colonies like Connecticut.[18]

If Browne's proposal to the British Parliament seemed a bit too optimistic, Phineas Lyman's sounded positively utopian. Lyman recognized the promise of Mississippi for new settlement and the desire of many Americans for a new start in the backcountry. His vision of the economy for this new colony was similar to those of British colonies in the Caribbean and the Southern mainland colonies; it was to be dominated by plantations worked with enslaved African labor. While this might have been grounded in the historical reality of the Atlantic Market, his position on Indian matters certainly differed from conventional English colonial policy. He proposed that prior to settlement he would secure the consent of local Native American tribes. He planned a public college, which would welcome not only British subjects, but also the French and Indians with a curriculum focused on agriculture. The willingness of Lyman to include British rivals and Indians as participants within the colony, but to exclude Africans, recognized that these Africans were involuntary participants and demonstrates the importance of African slavery in his proposal. Lyman's proposal acknowledged the

[18] Fabel, "An Eighteenth Colony," 663-669; Mathew Phelps, *Memoirs and Adventures of Captain Mathew Phelps. . .* (Bennington, Vt., 1802), 60-62; Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 103-105; Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West*, 488.

French experience in Mississippi, particularly the importance of gaining the support of the Choctaw, Creek, and Chickasaw.[19]

Regardless of the benefits associated with the creation of a new colony in both of these plans, the British decided that this would be cost prohibitive and rejected the idea. Instead, the Natchez District and the "Florida Parishes" of Louisiana were incorporated into British West Florida. The lack of a separate colony did not deter settlers from the region; by the end of the 1760s, almost 4000 British colonists had made their way to the Natchez District. In spite of the growing population, the British offered little in the way of military or commercial support to the settlers.[20]

Probably because of this lack of assistance, the settlers turned to the Spanish for support. In spite of the mercantilist policies that officially forbade trade with other nations, the settlers in Natchez and the rest of British West Florida found it even easier than their eastern seaboard neighbors to engage in illegal trade. The ease, of course, was a result of the Spanish presence in Louisiana. The trade that occurred across the river, and also across the two Empires, became crucial for both groups of settlers who found themselves neglected by their mother countries, especially in the realms of manufactured goods and food. Even before the Seven Years War, British merchants had recognized the market available to them in New Orleans. Given the condition of this city in the 1750s,

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[19] Phineas Lyman's "Reasons for Settlement on the Mississippi, 1766," appears in Clarence Walworth Alvord and Clarence Edwin Carter, eds, *The New Regime, 1765-1767* (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Historical Library, 1916), 272; Fabel, "An Eighteenth Colony," 665-666.

[20] Many of these settlers came from Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, see Fabel, "An Eighteenth Colony," 265-66; Cummins, "National Identity," 9-11; and Clinton Howard, *The British Development of West Florida* , *1763-1769* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1947), 84-92.

the French colonists were open to any trade available, even with the British. Merchants in Natchez and throughout British West Florida stepped into this role in the 1760s, providing Spanish Louisiana, which inherited the problems of supporting the colony after the French defeat in the Seven Years War, with products purchased elsewhere and shipped via the Ohio River down the Mississippi or through Gulf of Mexico. When Alexander O'Reilly became governor of Spanish Louisiana in 1769 he remarked, "I found the English entirely in possession of the commerce of this colony . . .and I can assure you that they got nine-tenths of all the ready money spent there." One estimate contends that by 1776, of the $600,000 produced annually by Spanish Louisiana, 98 percent found its way into English coffers.[21] The economic relationship between settlers at Natchez and those in Spanish Louisiana tied financial well being to trade forbidden by British mercantile restrictions, which would foster a political bond with the Spanish by 1781.

The American Revolution and Natchez

William Dunbar kept a detailed record of his daily life and clearly was interested in politics, but never mentioned the American Revolution until it reached the Natchez

[21] Alexandro (Alexander) O'Reilly to Bailio Frey Don Julian de Arriaga. October 17, 1769 in Lawrence Kinnard ed., "Spain in the Mississippi Valley: The Revolutionary Period, 1765-1794," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1945* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949) Vols II-IV pt. I, 104-105 (hereafter cited as *AHA*); Margaret Fisher Dalrymple ed., *The Merchant of Manchac: The Letterbooks of John Fitzpatrick, 1768-1790* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) 7-9; Abraham P. Nasatir and James R. Mills, *Commerce and Contraband in New Orleans During the French and Indian War: A Documentary Study of the Texel and Three Brothers Affairs* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1968) 6-7, 166-167. The estimate of 98% can be found in James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 19-20.

District in 1778. In many ways, he represents how most residents of the Natchez District felt about the Revolution: they did not care until it affected them directly. Dunbar, like many planters in Natchez, remained most concerned with his own interests, and also like many other planters, his interests did not all lie only on the British side of the river. He owned a plantation in Spanish Louisiana and divided his time and workforce between his two holdings. These trans-imperial dealings would come to mark the behavior of most in Natchez, which switched hands from the English, to the newly independent United States, to the Spanish, and then back to the United States between 1778 and 1795. Most residents lacked strong political loyalties and embraced the economic benefits of trading partners outside of the British Empire made possible by the town's borderland status. By the end of the American Revolution planters like Dunbar would embrace the new Spanish authority and would use the cultural currency of slaveowning to further their own ambitions by closing the borders to nonslaveholders. Additionally, this currency would allow planters to negotiate with the new imperial authority in order to become wealthier by seizing the land and slaves of those who had chosen to remain loyal to the British or flee to Native American nations.[22]

The war itself came to Natchez in 1778 when James Willing, one of the early merchants involved with the illicit trade to the Spanish, led an assault on the British along the Mississippi. Willing's mercantile venture had taken a turn for the worse as the Spanish under the new governor of Louisiana, Bernardo de Gálvez, favored trade with

[22] Eron Rowland ed., *Life, Letters, and Papers of William Dunbar of Elgin, Morayshire, Scotland, and Natchez, Mississippi: Pioneer Scientist of the Southern United States* (Jackson: Press of the Mississippi Historical Society, 1930), 26-60. Dalrymple ed., *The Merchant of Manchac,* 24-25; John Walton Caughey, *Bernardo de Gálvez in Louisiana 1776- 1783* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934), 91-92.

Americans rather than with the British.[23] The occupation of Natchez went relatively smoothly, mainly because of a deal struck between Willing and a group of local planters. Shortly after his arrival in February 1778, Willing forced them to pledge that they would not "in any wise take up arms against the United States of America or aid, abet, or in any wise give assistance to the enemies of the said States." Willing assured them that their "persons, Slaves, and other property of what kind soever [sic] shall remain safe & unmolested during our neutrality" and sent "a Flag of Truce to the Choctaw Indians to give out a talk with a Belt, to prevent the Indians falling on the Defenceless [sic] Inhabitants."[24] Willing's experience in Natchez convinced him that planters were most interested in protecting their wealth and status. By securing both he expected the town's leading citizens to remain neutral.

As of the mid-1770s, settlers in the town were much more concerned with their own financial safety, which depended much more on the Spanish than on the British or the United States.[25] For Dunbar and the planters in and around Natchez, the "invasion" was personal. Rather than seeing the attack as motivated by the United States, Dunbar and others viewed this as Willing's assault on those who had accumulated wealth in Natchez. To achieve that end, instead of employing soldiers he "recruited & collected on

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[23] Dalrymple ed., *The Merchant of Manchac* 24-25; Caughey, *Bernardo de Gálvez in Louisiana 1776-1783,* 91-92.

[24] Pledge of the Natchez committee quoted in James, 22-23. See also Phelps, *Memoirs and Adventures*. 111-112. The planters of the committee were Isaac Johnson, Luke Collins, William Hiern, Joseph Thomson, Charles Percy, and Richard Ellis. On trade and the relationship between the Choctaw and the British and United States see Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East From Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 170, 210-211, 220-221, 232-233; Colin G. Galloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)-46-64.

[25] Rowland ed., *Life, Letters, and Papers of William Dunbar*, 60; Dalyrmple ed., 26; James, 23.

his way down all the vagabonds and rascalls [sic] he met with, of which kind the river is always full." To Dunbar, Willing launched this attack out of bitterness and greed rather than political motivation. To escape Willing, Dunbar and several of his slaves moved across the river to Spanish Louisiana. Dunbar contended the reason for the attack was "he had by his folly squandered a fortune upon the river & twas there he ought to repair it."[26] In other words, Willing's business had failed and his attack was against planters who had become successful.

Dunbar and his fellow planters shared this purported disdain for political loyalties. Rather than supporting the cause of the British crown, they either pledged that they would not interfere with Willing's expedition or they fled to the safety of the Spanish. For the settlers who remained in Natchez, even those who had been British loyalists, there was outrage not just against Willing and the United States, but also against the British authorities in Pensacola who had not provided for their defense and seemed unwilling to do so in the future.[27]

The real revolution in Natchez occurred in 1781. The illicit trade with across the Mississippi had opened up relations between the settlers of Natchez and the Spanish, but the Willing revolt also led the Spanish to realize that men like Dunbar might be interested in Spanish annexation of the district. In 1779, the Spanish joined the French war against the British. The Spanish authorities in New Orleans dispatched a military force "to drive [the English] from the Gulf of Mexico and the banks of the Mississippi, where their

[26] Rowland ed., *Life and Letters*, 61-62.
[27] James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 23-24; James Dallas to Colonel John McGillivray, July 3, 1778, *AHA,* vol. II, 291-292.

settlements are so prejudicial to our commerce, as well as to the security of our richest possessions." Spanish forces occupied Natchez in September of 1779. While many of the settlers at Natchez at least nominally considered themselves to be British subjects, for the most part they put up little resistance to the occupation once they realized that the occupiers did not intend to take property from them.[28]

Still, the British authorities at Pensacola recognized the strategic importance of Natchez. Major General John Campbell, commander of the British forces in West Florida, ordered Jacob Winfree a merchant in Natchez, to enlist a group of volunteers who preferred "the British Government to Tyrannick despotism," to take the town back for England.[29] On April 22, 1781, around 200 volunteers raised by Winfree and led by local merchant, John Blommart, attacked Fort Panmure at Natchez, which housed the Spanish authorities. Of these volunteers, only about 50 had been settlers at Natchez; the remaining 150 were members of various Native American civilizations friendly to the British including the Choctaw and Creek. The siege of the fort lasted until May 4, at which point the Spanish surrendered and left. The revolt, however, would be short lived. The Spanish, in the process of conquering Pensacola, dispatched a force to retake the fort at Natchez from Winfree's rebels. The threat of a Spanish reprisal led the rebels to abandon the Fort, which was retaken on June 23 with no resistance. [30]

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[28] Galvez to Navarro August 29, 1779 in *AHA* ,vol. II, pt. 1, 355-357; Ethan A. Grant, "The Natchez Revolt of 1781: A Reconsideration," *The Journal of Mississippi History* 57 (November, 1994): 309-311.
[29] Major General John Campbell to Jacob Winfree in *AHA* , vol II., 424.
[30] Grant, "The Natchez Revolt of 1781," 309-312. The rebels had taken the fort by convincing the Spanish that the fort had been rigged with explosives, which it had not.

When given the opportunity to remain a part of the British Empire or to ally with Spain, only a small minority of Natchez settlers chose to remain with the British. The majority, and particularly the planters, determined that the Spanish offered a better chance for wealth and status. In order to further their status, planters and Spanish officials insisted that the town become more insular. The Spanish were most interested in holding the Natchez District for its profit potential and to use it as a buffer against United States incursions on Mexico and Central America. Local planters were most interested in protecting and expanding their wealth. The two found themselves to be excellent partners. To maintain order, and particularly to prevent another revolt like Winfree's, the Spanish began making deals that would give local planters access to additional land, slaves, and legal power.

Fearing that the Spanish would attempt to punish them, several of Winfree's rebels sought refuge with nearby Indian nations. Many of them fled to the Chittimache Indians where they hoped to escape punishment from Spanish authorities and their local agents. As a result of their running away, others absorbed the families and property they left behind. For example, John Alston fled the district to the Chittimache Nation taking with him much of his movable property along with several slaves, but he left behind his wife and children. Shortly thereafter, his wife Elizabeth died. Alexander McIntosh, planter and former British magistrate, was appointed guardian of the six Alston children and the remaining property including slaves left behind by their father. Two months after becoming the guardian of these children and their father's estate, he complained that wards were "continually in the company of evil disposed persons," probably other family

members who were giving them "bad advice." In order to prevent the children from rejoining their father he insisted on sending the two daughters to a convent and apprenticing the three boys in New Orleans. Conveniently, this also gave him complete control of the Alston estate.[31]

In another case, Joseph Smith was arrested and confined in the Fort of Natchez for planning to leave the district and flee to the Chittimache. Smith was released from captivity in the fort only after two men, David Mitchell and Reuben Alexander "bound themselves and their estates" to assure that Smith would remain a "good subject." Requiring two respected men to testify to Smith's character suggests that Smith himself could no longer be considered respectable and loyal to the new authority in Natchez. Smith had in fact taken part in the rebellion, but the court records mention his crime not as taking part in the revolt, but as planning to run away to Indian Territory, which cast suspicions on his loyalty that could only be removed by having two loyal men vouch for his future good behavior.[32]

If those who fled to the Chittamache lost their status after the revolt, others who took part in the revolt, but did not flee could have their status within Natchez fully restored. John Smith, another participant in Winfree's revolt, did not flee and was captured by the Spanish and taken to New Orleans. During his captivity his property legally reverted to his wife, Mary. Mary then gave the majority of the property she had "inherited" including the plantation and several slaves to Alexander McIntosh for

[31] May Wilson McBee ed., *The Natchez Court Records, 1767-1805: Abstracts of Early Records,* vol. 2. (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1953), 2 (hereafter refered to as *NCR*).
[32] Ibid., 11.

"surety." After serving his time in captivity, John returned to Natchez with no further penalty, apparently regaining his property from McIntosh and actually received additional land grants from the Spanish. More than likely, it was his relationship to McIntosh, trusted by the Spanish, which enabled him to remain without punishment. [33]

Jacob Winfree, the man authorized by the British at Pensacola to raise a company of volunteers, also was captured and sent to New Orleans for confinement. During the period of "rebellion," Winfree had sold an enslaved man named Benjamin to William Haussy for a gold watch and several cattle, horses, and hogs. With the restoration of Spanish authority, the sale was rendered invalid. The animals given as payment to Haussy were seized. Despite the negation of the sale, the watch and Benjamin remained in the possession of Haussy, as punishment to Winfree. Though the transaction that took place during the rebellion was nullified and Winfree lost property, he was still allowed to return to his lands and, as such, did not lose standing within the community in the same manner as those who fled, although he had actually instigated the revolt. Unlike his co-conspirator John Blommart, Winfree was a planter and was not the creditor of other large slaveowners in the district.[34]

The seizure of John Blommart's estate after absconding to the Chittamache represents the most outstanding case of wealth redistribution. Blommart might have been the wealthiest man in Natchez prior to the revolt. He had been granted 2000 acres in Natchez by the British government of West Florida in the late 1760s. Moreover,

[33] Grant, "The Natchez Revolt of 1781," 320; McBee *NCR*, 10, 556, 557, 574.
[34] Campbell to Winfree, *AHA,* vol. II, 424: McBee, *NCR*, 8. When Winfree was released from prison is unclear, but he is mentioned as a landowner in Natchez as early as May 20, 1783, *NCR,* 16.

Blommart operated a mercantile establishment on the landing along the river that would come to be known as Natchez-Under-the Hill and had recently opened a tavern known as "Mount Locust." As a result, Blommart had been one of the central figures of commerce in early Natchez and several of the town's leading planters had amassed debts to him.[35] After the revolt of 1781, planters loyal to the Spanish government seized Blommart's property and these debts were cancelled. Blommart's land and dwellings were initially held for "the use of the King" in December of 1781. By the next year, these lands and properties would be divided and sold to local planters for extraordinarily low prices. Stephen Minor purchased 100 acres along with Blommart's home, several "negro cabins," and a barn for $120, which he sold a year later for $300. Adam Bingaman purchased Blommart's home in the town of Natchez at public auction and then sold it to merchant Alexander Moore for $600. [36] Canceling Blommart's debts and redistributing his property allowed Spanish authorities to reward planters who had remained loyal.

Planters like Minor and Bingaman not only increased their wealth by dealing with the Spanish, they also consolidated their power within Natchez. Most large-scale slaveowners who had become wealthy during the British period found that slavery was more than a means to wealth, but also a type of cultural currency they could spend with anyone. Willing approached the town's slaveholders while seeking a pledge of neutrality realizing that these men had the most to lose from war. Once the Spanish had assumed control of the district, planters found that slaveowning gave them standing with the new

[35] McBee, *NCR*, 3-7; James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 15, 19, 188; Grant, " The Natchez Revolt of 1781," 317.
[36] Minor sold the land to John Woods for $300, *NCR,* 14, 20, 164-165 and Minor Family Papers, The University of Texas at Austin, The Center for American History, Natchez Trace Collection (hereafter cited as NTC), Bingaman to Moore, *NCR*, 23.

imperial authority as well. Recognizing the Spanish desire to tighten control over the region, slaveowners used the cultural currency of slaveownership to buy additional influence.

Stephen Minor used his growing power and that of other planters with the Spanish to turn the legal system to his advantage. William Dewitt had accumulated a sizable debt to Minor in the mid-1780s. Rumors swirling around the town suggested that Dewitt intended to flee the district in order to escape repayment. Based on the rumor, Minor had Dewitt locked in the jail of the town at Fort Panmure and the entire Dewitt estate was seized. Dewitt was released from jail, but six of his slaves were given to Minor to replay the debt. Catherine Dewitt, William's wife, filed suit against Minor claiming that the slaves seized actually belonged to her independently from her husband's property. Though she had the legal documentation to prove her assertion, Minor contended that her deed was a forgery. Witnesses on both sides were called, but those on Minor's side were among the town's most wealthy and powerful planters and as such, despite her written proof, Minor prevailed. The disputed slaves were sold at auction with the profits going to Minor. William's imprisonment and the confiscation of these slaves had been based upon nothing more than the rumor that he might leave Natchez, and though it seems Catherine's deed to the slaves was valid, the influence of Minor had led the Spanish authorities to rule in his favor.[37] Despite the proof that Catherine Dewitt produced, Minor and those he called as witnesses were of higher status, and as such, held more significance for Spanish authorities.

[37] McBee, *NCR*, 162-164.

Along with granting additional legal power to planters, the Spanish determined to regulate those who sought to settle in the Natchez District. Carlos Grande-Pré, the commandant at Fort Panmure, made attempts to block some American settlers while welcoming others. To obstruct undesirable "vagabonds" from entering Natchez, Grande-Pré made overtures to the Yazoo Indians, deemed valuable allies of the town because they provided a buffer against the expansionist United States. In a letter to Esteban Miró, Governor of Spanish Louisiana, Grande-Pré wrote, "the chief with the great metal, Atachapale, with his nation, is coming this year to establish himself on the river Yazoo which will be to our convenience, as it will close the road to the Chickasaws as well as to vagabonds to this district. It is imperative that the presents for him . . . and the other three chiefs . . . of the same village be sent to this post." [38] The commandant hoped to secure the allegiance of the Yazoo and close the land route available to Americans heading to Natchez.

Grande-Pré appeared more confident in his own ability to regulate who tried to enter Natchez from the river and his records indicate whom he considered "vagabonds." These records carefully monitored trade in and out of the town, identifying traders who were in the city to do business, but especially those who wanted to relocate. Single men attempting to relocate to Natchez were carefully scrutinized and often noted in the records separately from those bringing families or substantial amounts of property with them. Generally, those allowed to settle either brought slaves with them or were related to planters already living in Natchez. Bringing slaves into the region seemed to satisfy

[38] Grande-Pré to Miró April 2, 1782, May 6, 1782, *AHA*, vol. III pt. II, 6, 13.

Spanish authorities and their local deputies that these settlers would be loyal subjects and that they would fit into the type of society that was being constructed, one in which the ownership of slaves would determine an individual's worth.[39]

Those who arrived in town with slaves possessed a currency that could earn them access and land grants from the Spanish, but even they endured a number of questions revealing the concerns of Natchez residents. When a group of would-be settlers including Thomas Etridge, his family, and several slaves arrived in Natchez in 1782, two local planters posed several questions to him, including:

> who are the people who came down with him; what their conduct was; whether they were Americans or English; if they had been in the service of the United States; what motives impelled them to abandon their own country and countrymen to come and settle in this province; if their intentions are good; if the property they brought with them, consisting of slaves is their own; if they owned them in America; if they had brought with them arms, such as carbines, guns, artillery, munitions, and if they had cached anything of this kind near the post; if they had encountered, seen or spoken to a certain Phillip Mulkey [associated with the 1781 revolt]. . . along the Cumberland River or on the Cherokee; if it is true that this Mulkey proposed to return next autumn with many people, that is, with families, or armed men without servants or slaves. . .[40]

[39] Grande-Pré made frequent reports to Miró listing those who had entered the town and for what purpose. Only rarely were families without slaves allowed to settle, and in most of those cases it appears that they were relatives of people already living in Natchez. *AHA* ,vol. III pt.II , 257-258, 264-265,299-301,323-331,342-344.

[40] Grande-Pré to Miró, May 26, 1782, *AHA,* vol. III pt. II, 16. Grande-Pré did not ask these questions himself of Etridge, rather they were asked by "zealous and faithful subjects of His Majesty" Daniel Perry and another man listed as [Jean] St. Germain. Perry was a local planter who had remained loyal to the Spanish during the Winfree revolt in 1781 and had been deemed worthy by Grande-Pré to be placed in charge of Blommart's plantation after he absconded. Jean St. Germain also had remained loyal and had purchased an undisclosed amount of the Alston estate. He also took part in the seizure of the Blommart estate, see *NCR*, 1-6.

Etridge, and the enslaved men and women with him, gave answers that convinced locals they were vagabonds who had stolen these slaves in order to gain access to the town. Not surprisingly, they were turned away.[41]

In the same month as the Etridge affair, thirteen American families were allowed to settle in Natchez, consisting of 72 white people with 88 enslaved men and women. That these people came as families and with a substantial number of slaves among them assured the commandant and the planters of Natchez that these new migrants were the type of settlers, namely slaveowners, that would be loyal to the Spanish authority and the community. These settlers were crucial since there were very few ethnic Spanish residents and social stability demanded a homogeneity if not of ethnicity then of class. By the summer of 1785, the new commandant, Francisco Bouligny remarked that "the greater part of the inhabitants of this town are from North America, others are English royalists, a few are French and very rarely is there a Spaniard." While the Spanish would actively encourage American settlement of their colonies, including Natchez, by the middle of the 1780s, they and the established planters would be very selective about who they wanted to become their neighbors and would take additional steps to keep out those deemed undesirable. The diverse nationality of the population would lead the Spanish to adjust their usual means of operating colonies in order to fit specific conditions in Natchez.[42]

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[41] Grande-Pré to Miró, May 26, 1782, *AHA,* vol. III pt. II, 16-17. Etridge and the slaves in the party told Perry and St. Germain that they were thieves and hoped that the United States would take over Natchez. It seems that Etridge had been captured by the rest of the group and was trying to foil their plan and escape.
[42] Bouligny to Miró, *AHA,* vol. III pt. II, 136; Jack D. L. Holmes, *Gayoso*, 19; James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 34.

Establishing a Planter *Cabildo*

When the Spanish took over, the plan to establish and maintain authority in Natchez differed significantly from that of other Spanish settlements and conquests in the Americas. Despite the similarities between Natchez and Louisiana, the lack of a constant French presence on the eastern side of the river substantially changed how the Spanish would incorporate the town into the Empire. Settlers in Natchez primarily were Americans or from other parts of the British Empire, yet the Spanish who officially gained control of the territory of West Florida in September 1783, made no attempt to impose changes on the fledgling community to make it similar to other American regions under their control. The boundary between the United States and Spanish territory would be disputed for the next twelve years, but all outward opposition to the Spanish in Natchez ceased following Winfree's rebellion.[43] After the revolt of 1781, Spanish authorities in New Orleans appointed Anglo Americans already living in the town to positions of authority in Natchez. Slavery and the plantation structure remained completely in the hands of the local planters and once the Spanish guaranteed a market

[43] Determining the boundary between Spanish West Florida and the United States not only frustrated policy makers of each nation, but also historians of the region since. The problem results from the treaties ending hostilities after the American Revolution. The Anglo-American treaty placed the southern boundary of the United States at the 31st parallel, notwithstanding the fact that the Spanish actually possessed this land and as far north as the Yazoo River. The Anglo-Spanish treaty allowed the Spanish to "retain" all of West Florida, but the boundaries of this territory were not defined. As a result of the two conflicting treaties the Spanish contended that since the English had granted the Americans territory that was not theirs, the Spanish would recognize neither the northern boundary of West Florida at the 31st parallel, nor American rights to navigate the Mississippi River. See James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 28-29 and Samuel F. Bemis, *Pinckney's Treaty: A Study of America's Advantage from Europe's Distress, 1783-1800* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1926) 44-65.

and high prices those with access to land and labor could make a fortune.[44] The agreement between planters and the Spanish created economic stability for the district and political authority for the town's slaveholders.

Unlike Natchez, New Orleans demographically resembled other Spanish areas in the Americas. Limited numbers of French settlers and a high ratio of people of African descent led to a large community of free blacks in New Orleans by the time the Spanish took over. Those of African heritage both free and enslaved in New Orleans and across Louisiana, held a much larger degree of legal power under the *Code Noir* than in the British Empire. Men and women released from bondage under the *Code Noir* were granted all of the rights and privileges of freeborn people. When the Spanish assumed control of Louisiana they did not simply accept the *Code Noir*; instead they reshaped Louisiana's laws to fit more closely with the other colonies they controlled. Nevertheless, the Spanish recognized that the French living in the region held dubious allegiance to their new imperial authority and in, some cases, were overtly hostile. Scholars of Louisiana have persuasively argued that the Spanish used the law to gain the approval of the enslaved as a wedge between the power of French planters and Spanish officials. Under the Spanish Louisiana codes, usually referred to as "O'Reilly Laws" (named for the Spanish governor who implemented them), slaves were offered greater chances to attain freedom than under the *Code Noir*. The assumption was that the enslaved would seek freedom from the Spanish authorities through legal channels rather

[44] James, *Antebellum Natchez,* 28, 31-33; Rothstein, " The Remotest Corner" in Polk ed., *Natchez Before 1830*, 92-98.

than through violence or running away. This would serve as a form of social control for both the free and enslaved populations; by linking the possibility of freedom to Spanish control, the enslaved would be loyal, the newly freed would be grateful, and the slaveowners would have to negotiate issues of treatment and manumission carefully lest they incur resistance from the imperial authority and the men and women they enslaved.[45]

In Natchez, the French settlement had been destroyed by the war with the Natchez Indians and never recovered. The vast majority of those living in the town and the region were British or recent migrants from the newly created United States. As a result, the Spanish adopted a different policy toward Natchez, focusing on preventing a reoccurrence of the 1781 revolt. In order to secure loyalty across his new possessions, King Joseph de Gálvez granted new commercial privileges to Louisiana and West Florida in January of 1782. Trade between these colonies and the French Caribbean was declared legal for ten years, opening new markets for cash crops produced, but especially opening the trade in enslaved Africans. To further this end, the King also declared that "for the same space of ten years [he granted] an absolute exemption from the duties on Negroes introduced into these provinces, and I permit the inhabitants of these same provinces to go and obtain them in friendly or neutral colonies in exchange for their

[45] The best explanation of the switch of imperial control from the French and the Spanish in dealing with race and slavery is found in Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 18-54. Hanger and others have refuted the work of earlier historians, and some more recent ones, that the Spanish simply adopted the *Code Noir*, an interpretation rooted in the work of Judge François-Xavier Martin, *History of Louisiana* (New Orleans: Lyman and Beardslee, 1827); See also Thomas Ingersoll, "Free Blacks in a Slave Society, 1718-1812," *William and Mary* Quarterly, 3rd series, 48, (April 1991): 173-200; Hans W. Baade, "The Law of Slavery in Spanish Luisiana, 1769-1803," in Edward F. Haas ed., *Louisiana's Legal Heritage* (Pensacola: Perdido Bay Press for the Louisiana State Museum, 1983); *Édit du Roi, Touchant la Police des Isles de l'Amérique Française* (Paris, 1687), 28–58.

goods or cash." The production of staves for barrels and casks used to contain molasses produced in the sugar islands, a major export for those living in and around Natchez, would also be exempt from export duties creating a cheap source of slaves and a market for the district's products.[46]

The Spanish Empire also subsidized the production of tobacco and indigo in Natchez. While indigo would fail as a cash crop, tobacco succeeded if only because the Spanish promised to purchase two million pounds of it per year at ten dollars per one hundred pounds.[47] Along with this guaranteed market, the Spanish found the most effective way to secure loyalty from planters was to increase stability. English speaking immigrants mainly from the United States, and especially those involved in secessionist movements in places like Kentucky and the Ohio River Valley, were encouraged to come to the region through generous land grants. By 1785, Esteban Miró, determined that land grants given to settlers by the British would be honored under Spanish law, on the condition that they became Spanish subjects.[48]

In contrast with other Spanish holdings in the Americas, these new subjects were not required to convert to Catholicism. The French had established the Catholic Church in New Orleans, and throughout Louisiana, but not in Natchez. Again, the lack of a constant French presence on the eastern side of the Mississippi along with the hostility of the British toward Catholics created a different environment in Natchez. A royal decree

[46] "Royal Cedula Granting new favors to encourage the commerce of Louisiana, 1782. By Order of His Majesty." *AHA,* vol. III pt. II, 2-3.
[47] James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 31-33; Rothstein, "The Remotest Corner," in Polk ed., *Natchez Before 1830,* 92-98.
[48] Light T. Cummins, "National Identity and English Speaking Immigrants," 12-13.

in 1788 guaranteed religious toleration on the condition that worship take place in private homes and that no attempt be made to convert Catholics. A Catholic Church was established in Natchez in 1785, and at least according to one visitor "even the Protestants themselves attend church to hear the divine word and send their young children to catechism." Four Irish priests served in Natchez from the late 1780s until 1795 apparently were well liked by the townspeople. Still, even English-speaking priests won few converts. In reality, there was little Protestant activity either. An early Protestant church had been established about fifteen miles to the southeast at the "Jersey Settlement around 1774, but after the minister Samuel Swayzey died so did his church. Other attempts at establishing Presbyterian and Episcopal congregations also failed, not because of hostility from the Spanish, but because of the settlers' hostility to Spanish laws regulating their practices and to a general disinterest of the populace to religion of any sort. For both Spanish authorities and planters in Natchez, material and secular concerns took precedent over the sacred.[49]

Governmental administration also changed very little, placing a Spanish official in charge of the fort, but allowing local planters who had been involved in the leadership of the town since the British period to hold important positions. The Spanish appointed a

[49] Francis Baily, *Journal of a Tour in Unsettled Parts of North America, in 1796-1797* (London: Baily Brothers, 1856), 283; James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 38-41; Holmes, *Gayoso*, 68-81. The most stringent requirement placed upon Protestants during the Spanish period required that a Catholic priest perform all marriages if the couple intended to live in Natchez. Though no evidence survives to corroborate it, allegedly Andrew Jackson and Rachel Donaldson Robards were married in Natchez in a civil ceremony performed by Thomas Green. As Green was not a Catholic priest, the marriage was invalid. This excuse would be used as a defense against a charge that Rachel had actually been married to two men at the same time. For a romantic, though completely fictional, account of their nuptials see Harnett T. Kane, N*atchez on the Mississippi* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1947), 22-28.

military officer as commandant of the fort at Natchez who was to act as land registrar, judge, notary public, sheriff, justice of the peace, and commander of the garrison at the fort.[50] Of course, these duties were too much for any one person. In order to perform these various governmental tasks, the commandant could appoint citizens to assist him as magistrates. Stephen Minor was appointed "town-major" of Natchez by the Spanish authorities once the district had been transferred from British to Spanish control in 1783. Minor, like the vast majority of white migrants to the region, was American. Much of the governmental and commercial activity in Natchez, court cases, land grants, the sale of slaves, were recorded in both Spanish and English recognizing the differences between the authorities and the populace of the town. Men like Minor who became involved in the Spanish administration often referred to themselves in the documents using Spanish first names; Stephen often signed his name "Esteban." Through this participation in the Spanish administration, men like Minor were able to secure the favor of the imperial power and thus protect and further their economic interests.[51]

Control of the town officially passed from a military to a civilian authority in 1789. In that year, Estaban Miró, as Governor of Louisiana, appointed Manuel Gayoso de Lemos Governor of the Natchez District. Gayoso established his connection to the planter class of Natchez as soon as he arrived, as a group of the region's planters had made the trip to New Orleans to greet him in hopes that having a Governor would

[50] James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 31-32.
[51] Obituary of Stephen Minor in *The American* [month missing] 6, 1815 in William J. Minor and Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, in Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Louisiana State University [hereafter referred to as LSU].

improve their status and lead the Spanish to continue purchasing their tobacco.[52] Once he arrived in Natchez, Gayoso convened an unofficial meeting of local planters who would serve as his lieutenants and later would be formalized as a *cabildo*, or council of townsmen, who would sit at the "government-house" and "administer justice." Though the *cabildo* would not be formalized until the early 1790s, these men would be instrumental in the development of the town's social and political development. Among those formally recognized as *cabildo* leaders were Bernard Lintot, William Dunbar, Joseph Vidal, Joseph Bernard, and Stephen Minor. Of these, only Vidal was from Spain, but all of them were large land and slave owners who had remained loyal to the Spanish and had already received favored status from the authorities either in New Orleans or at the fort. [53]

Gayoso, in consultation with the *cabildo*, would determine who would be allowed into the region and how much land would be granted. As had been the case before Gayoso arrived, those who arrived in Natchez with enslaved Africans would be granted more favorable and larger tracts of land. One example is Peter (Pedro) Bryan Bruin who arrived with his family and others including twenty-three men, five women, seven children, and thirty-one enslaved Africans and was granted a total of nearly 3200 acres including an especially valuable 680 acre section between Bayou Pierre and the Mississippi. Family connections helped potential settlers as well. Samuel S. Forman

[52] Ibid.; James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 32.
[53]Holmes, *Gayoso* , 3-51. By the late 1780s, the members of the cablido not only had been long-time neighbors, but also in some cases, had linked their families together by marriage. Stephen Minor married Bernard Lintot's daughter Katherine. Gayoso himself married a woman named Elizabeth Watts in 1792, the daughter of a planter in the district. See the Minor Family Papers, LSU.

came to Natchez in 1790 from New Jersey and received around 800 acres for a $60 survey fee. Forman himself was not a large slaveowner, but his uncle Ezekiel was an influential planter and owner of 76 slaves.[54] In both cases, slaveowning granted the cultural currency to purchase preferential treatment.

Gayoso and the *cabildo* recognized that despite the preferable financial position the planters occupied, there remained several problems involving "vagabonds" that resulted from the town's borderlands location. In 1792, the Governor of Louisiana dealing with similar issues wrote to Gayoso, "I have resolved to tell you not to admit, in the future, any vagabond, or any Americans other than those who are landholders or who present themselves with negroes or who are recognized by men of integrity."[55] The ownership of slaves, then, had come to mark men in Natchez as worthy members of society even before the cotton boom or an abolitionist movement had led Southerners to suspect other whites of disloyalty. In order to curb the perceived threat of whites who did not own land or slaves, the *cabildo*, in consultation with Gayoso, took steps to punish those who did not or could not control land and labor in the same ways as planters. Establishing a plan for the town itself would take this problem into consideration.

[54] Holmes, *Gayoso*, 37; William S. Coker, "The Bruins and the Formation of Spanish Immigration Policy in the Old Southwest, 1787-88," in John Francis McDermott ed., *The Spanish in the Mississippi Valley, 1762-1804* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 61-71

[55] Baron de Carondelet to Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, May 12 1792 in James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 35; Jack D. L. Holmes, "Law and Order in Spanish Natchez, 1871-1798," *Journal of Mississippi History* 25 (July 1963): 200-201.

The Geography of Planter Power

During the Spanish period, to move up in Natchez was not just a metaphor, but also a geographic reality for those wishing to acquire wealth and power. Until the 1780s the town of Natchez had actually existed on the banks of the Mississippi River. By the Spanish period, however, the authorities in New Orleans as well as the local planter *cabildo* had determined that the elevated bluff above the river offered a better location for an expanding town with a growing planter class. The idea of moving the center of the Natchez District was rooted in both historical conventions governing Spanish cities in the Americas as well as a deep concern for maintaining productive and loyal subjects.

Following Columbus' voyage and the beginnings of Spanish conquest in the New World, city planning became an important means of structuring power among both settlers and native inhabitants. In 1573, Phillip II issued *Ordenanzas de Descubrimiento, Nueva Población y Pacificación de las Indias* (hereafter referred to as the Ordinances), which was to serve as the basis for urban planning throughout all of Spain's American holdings. The Ordinances specified preferred physical locations for settlements as well as incorporating elements that would be familiar and useful to the inhabitants, specifically, plazas and a reserved location for a cathedral. Ordinance 111 offers some explanation for the move of the town to the bluff, in that it suggests an appropriate location should have "an elevated and healthy location; with means of fortification; fertile soil. . .; timber, and resources; fresh water, a native population, ease of transport, access

and exit; open to the north wind."[56] This ordinance in particular and the ordinances in general sought to impose a common geographical order to new world towns.

Certainly, the location upon the bluff offered all of these requirements, but more importantly, it offered a much better location for expansion. The early village set up by the French was bounded on the west by the River and could only expand eastward to the bluff itself. This possibility for expansion satisfied at once the Ordinances and the increasing population of Natchez who recognized the need for more land. Ordinance 129 required that "within the town, a common shall be delineated, large enough that although the population may experience a rapid expansion, there will always be sufficient space where the people may go for recreation and take their cattle to pasture. . ." Though this was the official position of the Spanish, in Natchez the entire population would not be allowed to pasture their cattle within the city. Rather, under the recommendation of the *cabildo*, cattle allowed in the town required brands. New residents first had to register cattle with "two men of the county," ostensibly to avoid copying brands, but also to determine who attempted to pen livestock in the town common. [57] While the ordinances called for a common area, the *cabildo* imposed their own requirements, controlling the ability of non-landowning residents to live in the town.

The planning of the town itself also was regulated as much by local planters as by the Ordinances. For instance, after the Spanish had officially taken possession of

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[56] Quote of Ordinance 111 in Jack D. Elliot, "City and Empire: The Spanish Origins of Natchez," *Journal of Mississippi History* 59 (1997): 275. See also Dora P. Crouch, Daniel J. Carr, and Axel I. Mundigo, *Spanish City Planning in North America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1982) 1-3, 23-26.
[57] Quoted in Elliot, 276. Regulations for livestock can be found in NTC, Provincial and Territorial Records, Folder 3 1791-1793.

Natchez from the British in 1783, the most valuable land--that around the fort--was given as grants to some of the most wealthy and influential men of the town. Pedro Piernas was the only person of Spanish descent to receive one of these land grants and he was commandant of the fort. Richard Harrison, a local militia leader and a merchant, received the most valuable and largest of these grants, which extended along the river and above the bluff for over a mile. In 1784, Harrison sold the majority of this tract of land, about 240 acres, to Stephen Minor for $564.[58] Minor, not coincidentally, was a member of the *cabildo* and thus knew where the new plan for the town above the bluff would be located. By making this purchase, Minor now owned the future site of the city of Natchez, which necessarily would be of far greater value than the $564 he had given to Harrison for this land. Four years later, Minor sold this land back to the Spanish commandant for $2000, which the government expected to recover by selling off the land as town lots to new settlers.[59] Minor would later purchase the remainder of the lot granted to Harrison and sold it as the site for the Government House for the Spanish authorities.[60] Minor's status not only allowed him to negotiate for political power, but it also enabled he and the other members of the *cabildo* to profit directly from the town's design.

Once Minor's plot had been chosen as the town's primary location, the Spanish found that additional land would be needed in order to further expand. Not surprisingly, William Vousdan, a local planter, would conduct the survey. The commandant remained

[58] Elliot, 281-282; *NCR*, 26.
[59] *NCR*, 51; Elliot, 283.
[60] *NCR*, 51, Elliot, 284.

concerned about having the town comply with the Ordinances, but he also recognized that in order to assure the loyalty of those living in the region, it made sense to use planters from the region for these crucial tasks. As with the plan to acquire the Minor land grant, the Vousdan survey had moved the town away from the landing on the river and focused upon building on the bluff. The town plan did not rely completely upon the program set out in the Ordinances, but also upon the recognition of who both the Spanish and the planter *cabildo* wanted to live in Natchez. The town above the bluff, in theory, was to be the residence of artisans and merchants. Farmers were not expected to reside in town, though it became apparent, especially after the arrival of Gayoso, that it would be the residence for the region's most wealthy planters as well. These planters acquired huge town lots from Spanish authorities upon which, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, they would construct mansions as outward symbols of their wealth and power. As one visitor to the town remarked, "there is so much ground between most of the houses, that it appears as if each dwelling was furnished with a plantation."[61] The landing under the bluff, which by the late 1790s came to be known as Natchez-Under-the-Hill, was not to be abandoned, and in fact would remain the main economic center for the town and the region through the nineteenth century. Under-the-Hill would come to represent a differing sort of neighborhood from the one above the bluff, one that was intended to separate workers along the river, as well as their vices, from planters above the bluff. Of course, this barrier never truly worked, not because of a flaw in the design

[61] Baily, *Journal*, 150.

of the town, but rather because the sorted activities that occurred Under-the-Hill attracted the "respectable" men of the town just as it did the disreputable.[62]

Beyond moving the town to the bluff, the building of roads in the countryside would benefit the planter class to the exclusion of others. Roads were created not from set points outside of town to service high traffic, but rather were built from individual plantations into town. Locals were required to provide labor on these roads, but those selected as overseers on the road gained exemptions from work. Roadwork overseers were selected from the district's leading men who not only would not have to work themselves, but whose slaves would also be exempted. Those planters who were not overseers would be required to provide labor "in proportion to the lands he holds in the district." Of course, the owners of these lands would send enslaved workers to the road overseers rather than going themselves. Landowners not owning slaves would be required to work on the roads themselves.[63]

If the roadwork provisions encouraged landowners to own slaves, other laws discouraged those who did not own land to leave or face arrest or expulsion. A regulation passed by Gayoso and local planters in February 1793 required that all livestock be branded and "that no person, who is not a settled inhabitant of this government shall presume, upon any pretense whatsoever, to take up a stray." In addition, anyone found living in the woods and claiming to be a hunter would need a

[62] Gayoso; Elliot. Natchez-Under-the-Hill and the cultural implications of the neighborhood will be dealt with in detail in chapter 3.
[63] For example, one road was slated "to begin at Mr. William McIntosh's." Most of the roads planed are described in similar ways. Details of roadwork can be found in NTC, Provincial and Territorial Records, Folder 3, 1791-1793.

permit granted by the town *alcalde*. As was the case with road overseers, alcaldes were chosen and approved by the *cabildo* and were also planters. By law, the *alcalde* could "grant such permit to hunt for no longer or shorter time having regard to the person's character who may apply." This placed a vast amount of power in the hands of the alcaldes, allowing them to remove non-landowners and non-slaveowners who attempted to live off the land in the vicinity of the town and controlling access to common land, further solidifying who was permitted to live in Natchez.[64]

Conclusion

Studies that deal with the antebellum period in the region from Maryland through Georgia recognize that the colonial history of each of these territories shaped the later development of slavery. [65] With Mississippi, most studies begin with the antebellum period or later and assume that slaveowners from the east coast settled the Natchez District and brought their conceptions of slave societies with them, just as Thomas Sutpen had.[66] In fact, slavery in Natchez developed for similar reasons, but with different cultural meanings. Slaveowning became a cultural currency in Natchez that could be

[64] Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, February 1, 1793, Provincial and Territorial Records, NTC Folder 3 1791-1793.

[65]The historiography of slavery in these colonies is vast, for examples see the following: Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975); Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); T.H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of The Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Knopf, 1974); Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia, 1730-1775* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984).

[66] Faulkner, *Absolom, Absolom;* Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, James, *Antebellum Natchez;* Moore, *Agriculture in Ante-bellum Mississippi*; the most notable exception is Christopher Morris, *Becoming Southern.*

spent with the various political authorities that claimed the district in the second half of the eighteenth century. While each empire sought to create a plantation society in Natchez, it was not until the Spanish took over in the 1780s with guaranteed prices for crops and additional powers for slaveowners that a society dominated by a planter class emerged. The economic stability of Natchez created a political alliance between planters and the Spanish, allowing slaveowners who remained committed to the imperial authority to control the day-to-day operations of the town. These planters used this power to make the town more insular, in effect, ending the borderlands period in Natchez. Some borders, however, would remain open, specifically those dealing with Africans and African American brought into the town against their wills.

Chapter 2
Creating an African American Community on the Frontier of Slavery

If Natchez had moved from a "border land" to a bordered land by the end of the Spanish period, then the closing of that border did not equal the closing of the frontier, for cultural borders remained open after political borders were settled. These cultural borders, however, had less to do with the slaveowners of the town than they did with the enslaved community of Natchez. Certainly by the peak of the cotton boom in the antebellum period, most of the enslaved population of Natchez was comprised of African Americans, largely creoles transported to Mississippi from older slave societies in the east. But prior to this, in the late eighteenth century, the ethnicities of the enslaved were incredibly varied as a result of importations both from the Caribbean and directly from Africa. These various ethnic divisions would give way to an African American identity by the late eighteenth century. This process of "creolization" was not only based on generations born in Natchez, but also on choices made by those of African birth to adopt African American ways. Just as whites would form identities in Natchez based less on their ethnic allegiances or political loyalties than the construction of on a shared race, so too would members of the enslaved community.

Many excellent studies deal with the emergence of African American communities along the eastern seaboard, but few consider the Lower Mississippi Valley. Those that have dealt with the Old Southwest have focused primarily on New Orleans, and occasionally have offered broad studies of Louisiana. For the most part, the historical literature suggests that African American communities were formed in Louisiana because

of New Orleans, but that they did not form in other parts of the region until the influx of settlers and slaves were drawn by the cotton boom of the nineteenth century. Those enslaved people brought to the region against their will had already formed a distinct racial identity as a result of generations of creolization in other southern slave societies.[1] In the 1790s, Natchez shifted from Spanish to United States control and from tobacco and indigo to cotton production. These political and economic changes also created a cultural change by bringing an influx of slaves who, despite their ethnic differences, created a community held together by kinship, commerce, religion, and ultimately, a shared sense of racial identity.

Among those Africans who took part in these changes was Abd-Al Rahaman Ibrahima. Historians have used his story in various contexts, either to present a remarkable story or to argue that this man was more than just a "common" slave. As a young man Rahaman, more commonly known as Ibrahima or "Prince" in the United States, had been captured from his home in Futa Jallon and transported to Natchez, Mississippi on board a slave ship. This, of course, would not make him unique as approximately 500,000 other people had experienced a similar history prior to the end of US participation in the African slave trade. What makes his story different is that he described himself and was described by others as a Muslim and as a prince. Several

[1] See Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Kimberly Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Charles Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1933); Daniel Usner, *Indians, Settlers, & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783* (Chapel Hill : Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

inconsistent accounts of his early life make the truth of this latter claim somewhat dubious, but what is less questionable and of considerable importance is what his life can tell us about the nature of slavery in Natchez, and more generally, about the movement from an identity tied to African ethnicities toward one rooted in a new sense of kinship established in the Americas. Most studies dealing with Ibrahima stress his exceptional status and set him apart from the rest of the enslaved community of Natchez, but in reality most of his experiences were shared by thousands of others across the Atlantic World. In considering both Ibrahima's life in Natchez and his resettlement in Africa, it is clear that Ibrahima maintained ties to his old life in Futa Jallon in some ways, but also that he adopted new ties to his family and the slave community in Natchez.[2]

Natchez and the Atlantic Slave Trade

The guaranteed market for tobacco grown in Spanish Natchez created an enormous demand for labor, but the economic conditions of the district and the realities of the Atlantic slave trade slowed the growth of an enslaved community. Though demand was virtually unlimited and nascent planters were willing to go into debt to acquire slaves, human-consuming sugar islands and the port at New Orleans restricted

[2] For these various usages see Charles Syndor, "The Biography of a Slave," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 37 (January 1937): 59-73; Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1977); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Old South, " *The American Historical Review*, 93 (Dec., 1988): 1228-1252 ; Allan D. Austin, ed., *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook* (New York: Garland, 1984) and Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 71-73; Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

their availability. These competing markets separated ethnicities before slave ships reached Natchez. Isolated plantations around Natchez and the preference of some planters for specific African ethnicities worked against the creation of an enslaved community as well. When Ibrahima arrived in Natchez in 1788, he did not find a creolized black population, but rather a place where people of various African ethnicities lived separated by cultural frontiers, especially languages and religions, from their owners and from each other.

Spanish officials shared planters' fears that a lack of enslaved labor would lead to the downfall of the entire area. Martin Navarro, Intendant in Spanish New Orleans, observed, "this colony which promises to become one of the most considerable in America [will] soon [. . .] be the poorest and most miserable" unless enslaved Africans were brought in to work. Recognizing the demand of this market, slave traders like Thomas Irwin went beyond even the generous terms afforded to Spanish subjects in the Lower Mississippi Valley by trading with British slavers. On a journey to Dominica in 1788, Irwin purchased a shipment of Africans including Ibrahima, which he offered for sale in New Orleans and Natchez. Understanding his market, seventy-five percent of Irwin's purchases were men for work on the region's indigo, tobacco, and sugar plantations. [3]

[3] Spanish subjects were allowed to purchase slaves without duties from the French via the Cédula of 1782, but not the British. Alford, 33-34, Navarro quoted on page 37; "Royal Cédula Granting new favors to encourage the commerce of Louisiana, 1782. By Order of His Majesty." in Lawrence Kinnard ed., "Spain in the Mississippi Valley: The Revolutionary Period, 1765-1794," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1945* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949), vol. III pt. II, 2-3 (hereafter referred to as *AHA*).

Purchasing Africans in the Caribbean contributed to the lack of community among slaves in the Natchez District. Even in those cases in which people of the same nation or language group were confined to the same slave ship in Africa they were likely to be separated before they reached Natchez. Sugar islands drew the majority of slaves from the trade, but the Caribbean also offered the closest, and thereby cheapest, market for traders in Spanish Louisiana and West Florida. The captives onboard Ibrahima's ship traveling from the mouth of the Gambia River were divided in Dominica, and then again once they reached New Orleans. By the time that Irwin reached Natchez, only 25 slaves remained from his initial purchase. Most of those taken prisoner with Ibrahima in Africa, some of whom were probably in his war party, had been distributed across the Atlantic World by the time he reached Natchez. Allegedly, at least one soldier named Samba remained with Ibrahima throughout the journey.[4]

Those slaves remaining onboard Irwin's ship when it arrived in town in August 1788 were dispersed throughout the Natchez District. The tobacco harvest would begin soon and Irwin's shipment represented the first that the town had seen in two months.[5] "Negroes Brutos," or "New Negroes," were in high demand; in fact, during the Spanish period, the majority of slaves purchased in the town and its surrounding countryside were

[4] Alford, 34-35. Irwin's voyage from Dominica to New Orleans had a mortality rate of 24.5%, much higher than the 12.5% average for the slave trade in the eighteenth century. He had purchased 54 Africans while in Dominica. David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, Herbert H. Klein eds., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD ROM* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Samba may not have actually been a member of the war party. None of the surviving sources produced by or on Ibrahima give any sense of a relationship between the two after their purchase.
[5] Alford, 41-42.

African born.[6] As was the case across the Atlantic World, planters in Natchez preferred certain ethnicities to others. While dealing with slave traders, one planter advised, "the Iboa [sic] nation lies under a prejudice here & may be excluded . . . there are certain nations from the interior of Africa, the individuals of which I have always found more civilized." In contrast, William Dunbar, a planter in Natchez, seems to have preferred natives of Jamaica, perhaps because of the "seasoning" process that they had already undergone while on that island.[7] Irwin's shipment was greeted with a flurry of purchases; twenty-one of the twenty-five men and women he brought to Natchez were sold between August 18 and September 27.[8]

The ethnic diversity separating slaves from one another increased during the 1780s as Thomas Irwin and others continued to import Africans. Between 1786 and 1789 almost three-fourths of the 157 recorded sales of slaves were African. By December 1788, Irwin purchased another group of fifty newly imported Africans from Oliver Pollock in New Orleans for $14,500 and sold the entire cargo in the Natchez slave market. David Ross and Daniel Clark of New Orleans also continually supplied the

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[6] David Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi, 1720-1835* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 33.

[7] Dunbar to Tunno and Price, 1 February 1807 in Eron Rowland ed., *Life, Letters, and Papers of William Dunbar of Elgin, Morayshire, Scotland, and Natchez, Mississippi: Pioneer Scientist of the Southern United States* (Jackson: Press of the Mississippi Historical Society, 1930), 350. Of the recorded slave purchases in Natchez from traders during the 1780s, where nationality is listed, it is most often listed as "Guinea" or "Jamaican." Slave sales dealing with "native born" (within the province) or those from "Carolina" or other places in the United States were between planters. That is to say, these men and women were not brought in by traders during the Spanish period, but rather moved to Natchez with settlers, see May Wilson McBee ed., *The Natchez Court Records, 1767-1805: Abstracts of Early Records* vol. 2. (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1953) Books A and B, 1-88 (hereafter listed as *NCR*).

[8] *NCR*, 57-58.

Natchez market with slaves born in the Caribbean or Africa during the late 1780s.[9] Some planters acquired slaves from British ports along the Gulf Coast including Mobile, Biloxi, and Pensacola. Others, like William Dunbar, ventured to New Orleans themselves to acquire slaves, not only for use on their plantations, but also to sell to others. Dunbar's trips often involved transporting enslaved Africans up the river in small canoes to Baton Rouge, and then making the overland journey north to Natchez. Still others could acquire slaves illegally from British slavers who sailed to Lake Pontchartrain and then took their human cargoes up the Amite River.[10]

Along with the diverse ethnic characteristics of the enslaved population, other factors would slow the formation of a community. During the Spanish period few slaves were purchased as families and most were men. Of 800 recorded slave purchases between 1780-1795, ninety-eight percent of the adults brought to Natchez were aged 13 to 30, which meant that the purchasers were looking for men, and sometimes women, in their prime. Most of these men and women purchased and taken to Natchez were enslaved on plantations in one of eight rural "neighborhoods" around the town, separated

[9] Oliver Pollock to Thomas Irwin December 11, 1788 and Irwin's sales to planters in Natchez, *NCR,* 60-63; Ross's sales *NCR*, 60; Daniel Clark's activities in Alford, 35-36 and *NCR*, 40-41. Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 344.

[10] Ronald L.F. Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez 1720-1880* (Natchez: National Historic Park, 1993), 11-13. The majority of Africans imported directly from Africa in the eighteenth century to New Orleans, Biloxi, or the Mississippi delta were purchased in Senegal, Goree, and one voyage from Angola, Eltis et al. eds., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*.

from one another by considerable distances and dense forests. This separation worked against family and community formation.[11]

Ibrahima's experience in reaching Natchez, then, was one shared by hundreds of other Africans in 1780s, as were the circumstances of his purchase. Thomas Foster arrived at the Natchez-Under-the-Hill, the neighborhood on the Mississippi River where most slave sales occurred prior to the nineteenth century, seeking to acquire labor for the upcoming tobacco harvest on the same day that Ibrahima and the other captives were put on sale. The Foster family had moved to Natchez from South Carolina in 1784. Thomas's mother Mary was granted a 574-acre tract six miles from the Fort where she and her sons operated a modest tobacco farm and tended cattle. By 1788, James, John, and William had acquired their own lands and established their own households, but Thomas, the youngest, had remained behind on their mother's land and had started a family of his own. He, like his two of his brothers, had married a daughter of Zachariah Smith, a local farmer. Thomas and his wife Sarah were expecting their third child in the summer that Ibrahima arrived in Natchez.[12]

No doubt these familial pressures made the arrival of Irwin's shipment unusually important for Thomas. His growing family would have additional needs and require additional income. To this end, he bought an additional 425-acres and a fifteen year old creole slave named Jesse from James Elliot, a new settler from Kentucky. In order to profit from his land and service his $200 debt to Elliot for the purchase of Jesse, Foster

[11] These neighborhoods were St. Catherine's Creek, Second Creek, Homochitto, Buffalo Creek, Coles Creek, Bayou Pierre, Hutchins Landing, and White Apple Village, Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez,* 11-12; *NCR* Books A-D, 1-159 and *AHA,* vol. III pt. II p. 301.
[12] Alford, 39-41.

went to the slave market seeking to add to his labor force and fortune. Foster bought Ibrahima and Samba from Irwin on three installments, paying $150 up front, with $250 due in January 1789 and $530 due in January 1790.[13]

Ibrahima's purchase, like his journey to Natchez, was similar to most other slaves arriving in Natchez at the end of the 1790s. Foster, like most of the district's farmers, was anxious to benefit from the high profits and guaranteed market offered by the Spanish leading him to go into debt. His farm was a considerable distance from the town, leaving it isolated from others. Though most studies of Ibrahima draw on his Muslim identity to set him apart from other slaves in Natchez, in reality the diverse ethnic composition of the enslaved population and the isolated plantations of the region in the 1780s meant that most newly-arriving Africans faced situations similar to Ibrahima's.

Identity and the Isolated Plantations of Spanish Natchez

Foster mortgaged his future success by buying these men, but of course, the transaction was transformative for all three, shaping the way they each viewed the changing economic, social, and cultural environments of Natchez. Foster's purchase of three slaves on credit demonstrated that he believed he belonged in the planter class and that he could successfully bend these men to his will and extract a profit that would enable him to pay off his debts. Ibrahima would also become part of a community in Natchez, but his transition would be far more fundamental. Like men and women across the Atlantic World who were captured in Africa and forced into slavery in America,

[13] Ibid., 42-43; Thomas Irwin to Thomas Foster, *NCR*, 57.

Ibrahima attempted to make sense of his new surroundings by examining them through the lens of his native (Fulani) culture.

Faced with a life of slavery Ibrahima, like many newly captured Africans, sought ways to escape his predicament. Not long after arriving on Foster's farm, Ibrahima communicated that he was a member of the royal family of Futa Jallon and promised Foster a substantial reward for freeing him. Foster doubted the story and mockingly renamed Ibrahima "Prince."[14] Soon afterward Foster had Ibrahima bound and had his long plaits of hair cut, giving Ibrahima what would have been understood in Fulani culture to have been the haircut of a child. While it is doubtful that Foster had intended this meaning, he almost certainly meant it as an initiation to Ibrahima's new life as property.[15]

These humiliations marked the beginning of Ibrahima's torment. After being taken to Foster's farm, Ibrahima refused to work. The pastoral Fulani disdained farming as work for the Jalunke, whom they had conquered and enslaved. As punishment for his resistance, Ibrahima was thoroughly whipped. Faced with the choice to continue to

[14] Wyatt-Brown, "Mask of Obedience," 1228-1229; Alford, 44. Michael Gomez notes that appeals to royal blood in Africa were used within enslaved communities throughout the United States, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 71-73, 239-240. For similar examples on Muslims in the US South, John Franklin Jameson, ed., " Autobiography of Omar ibn Said," and Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America*. Maybe the most famous claim of royal heritage was that of Venture Smith; see *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa, but Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America* (New-London: C. Holt, 1798).

[15] Wyatt-Brown, "Mask of Obedience," 1228-1229; Alford, *Prince Among Slaves*, 44. Head shaving was a common practice in most slaveholding societies and usually marked a public transition in premodern societies. In the Americas, though, this was less common. Usually a shaved head marked one as a slave, but ideas about racial justification for slavery in the Americas made it less frequent for two reasons: first there was less need for this since masters were, in general, white, while slaves were black, but also because hair type became a crucial mark of race in these societies, Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 61-62.

endure beatings or to perform work he believed to be beneath him, Ibrahima, like many other enslaved men and women throughout the Americas, ran away from the plantation into the forest. There were few options for runaways in eighteenth century Natchez. Native Americans surrounding the town did not offer a reliable haven. The relationships that the Spanish had with the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Yazoo, and the Chittamache might have resulted either in being returned or resold to another slaveowner. The Mississippi River did not offer a viable means of escape either, though it seems some tried. Although Natchez did not have newspapers in which to post runaway ads, owners did post notices along the riverfront to alert boat captains.[16]

Like other runaways in Natchez, Ibrahima stayed close to his purchaser's residence; but even so, he found himself alone in the woods and facing starvation. The isolation of plantations created similar problems for other slaves. In July 1776, Dunbar noted in his diary that two women whom he had enslaved had run away after being "corrected" the night before. Ketty returned the next day "finding it uncomfortable lodging in the woods," but apparently did not receive any punishment. Bessy did not return for almost a week and was punished with 25 lashes.[17] When two "new negroes" named Solomon and Murray went missing, Dunbar supposed that they had gotten lost. When a neighbor found them, Dunbar attributed this to good fortune and did not have the men punished.[18] Throughout his diary Dunbar expressed amazement when slaves ran

[16] Alford, 47-48; Daniel Usner Jr. has estimated the Native population of Mississippi to have been around 30,000 in "American Indians on the Cotton Frontier: Changing Economic Relations with Citizens and Slaves in the Mississippi Territory," *The Journal of American History* 72 (September 1985): 298.
[17] Rowland, ed., *Life, Letters, and Papers of William Dunbar,* 29 & 30 July 1776, p.29.
[18] Ibid., 53-54.

away from his plantations if they had not been whipped immediately prior. Solomon and Murray may have gotten lost, but it is just as likely that they, like Ibrahima, were trying to escape slavery. The lack of viable alternatives in this isolated region likely led the majority of runaways to return. Perhaps for some suicide might have served as a final escape, but since the Koran forbade it, this would not have been an acceptable option to Ibrahima. According to Natchez legend, after spending weeks in the wilderness near the plantation, Ibrahima arrived at the door of the Foster's house. Apparently, Sarah Foster did not recoil from his arrival, but instead offered her hand in greeting to him, at which point Ibrahima took it, knelt before her, and placed her foot on his neck.[19]

While this might have signified his acceptance of slavery, it did not necessarily signify slavery as the Fosters or other whites in Natchez understood it. Futa Jallon, like other African societies, recognized slavery, but to be enslaved in Futa Jallon was not the same thing as being enslaved in the Americas. Scholars have viewed Ibrahima's action as either acquiescence to a life of slavery or as a way of demonstrating subservience without internalizing a change in his own sense of self worth.[20] Either explanation is possible, but is also likely that Ibrahima interpreted his situation in Natchez in the same way that slavery functioned in Futa Jallon. Slavery in Fulani culture did not rely on racial exclusion, but rather on a sense of being an outsider to a community. Slaves in

[19] Wyatt-Brown, 1229; Alford, 47; the account of Ibrahima's interaction with Sarah Foster was first recorded in Steve Power, *The Memento: Old and New Natchez 1700-1897* (Natchez, 1897), 13-14.
[20] Terry Alford seems to have accepted Power's interpretation that Ibrahima simply realized he had no alternative than to submit to living as a slave on the Foster plantation and that putting Sarah Foster's foot on his neck was an act of "absolute surrender to the power of [her] smile and [her] touch." Alford, 47. Wyatt-Brown's interpretation of the act is much more nuanced, arguing that the action allowed him to demonstrate "shame" externally while maintaining a sense of "honor" within himself. Wyatt-Brown, 1229-1252.

Futa Jallon were usually taken prisoner in warfare and their status was based upon being an "outsider" or stranger without kin. This status did not have to be permanent. As Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff have argued, outsiders might begin as dependants or servants, but could become more by "bonding" to the enslaving community while also being "in bondage" to it. "Insiders" were not individuals, but rather those who belonged to a kinship group.[21]

Rather than accepting slavery by offering his life to Sarah Foster, Ibrahima was probably attempting to establish a type of kinship within Natchez. Later, when a Natchez newspaper editor asked Ibrahima to compare slavery in his native land to that of Mississippi, "I tell you, man own slaves—he join the religion—he very good—he make his slaves work till noon—go to church—then till [t] he sun go down they work for themselves—they raise cotton, sheep, cattle, plenty, plenty."[22] Slavery, as Ibrahima understood it, did not have to be a permanently debased position. In Futa Jallon, by converting to Islam enslaved men could gain wealth for themselves and their families while sharing the common bond of religion with their masters. By submitting to Sarah Foster, Ibrahima sought to create a bond with the Fosters, offering his life to them and

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[21] A discussion of differing foundations of slavery can be found in Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death;* David B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), and Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977). For specifics on Fulani culture, two anthropological studies of modern Fulani by Paul Riesman are helpful, see *Freedom in Fulani Social Life: An Introspective Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), especially chapters 3 & 7 and *First Find Your Child a Good Mother: The Construction of Self in Two African Communities* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992). Slaves made up a majority of the population in Futa Jallon during Ibrahima's time in his native land; see Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Characteristics of Plantations in the Nineteenth-Century Sokoto Caliphate," *American Historical Review* 84 (December 1979): 1273.

[22] Cyrus Griffin, in Natchez *Southern Galaxy*, 5 July 1828.

thereby removing, at least as he understood it, some of the stigma associated with slavery.

Though the Fosters probably interpreted this act differently, they appear to have recognized Ibrahima's effort, and his status on the plantation was elevated accordingly. Apparently, Ibrahima dutifully performed whatever work was assigned him. While he may not have been familiar with agricultural labor, he did recognize several crops, including tobacco, indigo and cotton, all also grown in Futa Jallon. The Spanish subsidy encouraged planters to produce as much tobacco as possible, putting a heavy burden on enslaved men and women. [23] The year after Ibrahima's purchase, Foster and his three slaves produced 8000 pounds of tobacco at ten silver dollars per one hundred pounds. While this was about average for tobacco growers in the district, the number of pounds produced per worker was far greater than most in Natchez and almost twice the amount produced per slave working in tobacco in Virginia and Maryland in the 1780s. By way of comparison, Peter (Pedro) Bruin moved to Natchez in July of 1788 with 20 slaves, yet produced only 7,000 pounds of tobacco in 1789. Thomas Foster's ambition exceeded that of his older brothers as well; James, William, and John produced 5,000, 6,000, and 2,000 pounds respectively. Thomas had debts to discharge and new family responsibilities, but based on the production of his farm, it seems that he also was anxious to become one of the town's leading planters.[24] Ibrahima's knowledge of

[23] "Royal Cedula Granting new favors to encourage the commerce of Louisiana, 1782. By Order of His Majesty." *AHA,* vol. III pt. II, 2-3.
[24] "Statement of the Tobacco Produced by the Growers of Natchez in the Year 1789," *AHA,* vol. III pt. II , 310-311. Even assuming that Foster worked as hard as the men he enslaved, each man produced 2,000 pounds per year. By way of comparison, slaves in the Virginia piedmont in the 1780s only averaged 1,338

tobacco, in addition to his labor, may have contributed to the plantation's drastic growth in productivity.

By attempting to create kinship bonds, Ibrahima, like Africans throughout the Americas, used his own cultural experience to make sense of his new surroundings in Natchez. When Ibrahima arrived in Natchez in 1788, enslaved Africans of various ethnicities, not African Americans, worked on the region's isolated plantations. Ibrahima's religious identity did not make him appreciably different from other Africans imported into Spanish Natchez. The spaces between plantations, the amount of work required by masters to take advantage of the Spanish tobacco subsidy, and the diverse ethnicities of slaves in the late eighteenth century worked against creolization and prevented an enslaved community from forming. This meant that like Ibrahima, other enslaved Africans had to interpret their surroundings based upon their own cultures, which conflicted with those of slaveowners. The end of the subsidy, the switch to cotton production, and final political shift that placed Natchez within the United States would lead to an end to this isolation and the beginnings of creolization.

The Cotton Economy: Americanization and Becoming Creole

The guaranteed high prices of the Spanish subsidy led to enormous speculation in both land and human property, but also a flood of tobacco into Spanish markets. This glut led authorities to slash subsidies, leading to debt and fear of bankruptcy across the

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pounds per year, see Lorena Walsh, "Plantation Management in the Chesapeake, 1620-1820," *The Journal of Economic History* 49 (June, 1989): 395.

Natchez District. The change in policy resulted partly from a desire to increase the price of tobacco and partly from an attempt to buy from growers in Kentucky, offering these planters the same tobacco subsidy that had been promised to those in Natchez.[25] Foster and many others caught in debt from the purchase of slaves managed to stave off bankruptcy through a debt moratorium. Thomas Foster, along with his brother William, overcame the financial crisis by becoming among the first in the district to replace tobacco with cotton.[26] Cotton production had the intended consequence of preserving the fortunes of many of the region's planters, but it also had the unintended result of creating a slave community in Natchez. Ira Berlin has noted that the development of slavery in the Lower Mississippi Valley took the reverse track of those along the Atlantic coast. Virginia and South Carolina had evolved from places where slavery grew from a marginal source of labor to the dominant social institution. In the early eighteenth century Berlin argues a "devolution" occurred in Natchez as it moved from a slave society to a society with slaves after the Natchez revolt destroyed the French attempt to create a plantation society. The Spanish succeeded in rebuilding a society with slaves in

[25] James, 48; "Statement of the Tobacco Produced by the Growers of Natchez in the Year 1789," *AHA,* vol. III pt. II , 306-311. These fears would be exacerbated in 1790 when the Spanish Crown determined to cut the annual tobacco purchase from a guaranteed 2,000,000 pounds to 40,000; an amount that two Natchez planters exceeded individually in 1789; these two planters were Adam Bingaman and David Williams who grew 40,000 and 50,000 pounds respectively.

[26] *AHA,* vol III. Pt. II, xxvi-xxvii; Thomas Foster's plantation produced 16,000 pounds of cotton in 1791, Alford, 52. This made Foster one of the largest producers of cotton in Natchez that year, but this would be no where near the amounts produced after the introduction of the cotton gin to the region. Charles Sydnor placed the average number of pounds per worker per day to be about 150 in the antebellum period, or by his account, about the same as those who picked cotton in the 1930s. As with the rest of his work, Sydnor's primary argument in dealing with work was to downplay the harshness and profitability of slavery; *Slavery in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1933), 15-18. Picking generally ran from August to December, and assuming Sundays were taken off, Foster's slaves averaged about 102 pounds per worker per day; however, during the pre-gin period, the seeds had to be removed as well.

Natchez by the end of the 1780s, but this too contrasted with what was happening in eastern societies. Whereas the American Revolution fostered a sense of egalitarianism that led to an increase in manumission in some places and a movement toward abolition in others, slavery in Natchez and Louisiana, like in South Carolina, hardened as manumissions declined and the number of slaves increased. After the development of the cotton gin, cotton production created a massive new market for slaves and a new locale for eastern whites to make their fortunes from the labor of enslaved Africans and African Americans.[27]

Cotton production enabled Foster to survive and add to his holdings. The collapse of the tobacco market had prevented him from paying the installments he owed to Thomas Irwin for his purchase of Ibrahima and Samba; however, the debt moratorium allowed Foster to complete the transaction by the end of 1790. By 1791, Foster used the last of his tobacco crop to purchase a man named Dublin from the slave trader David Ross.[28] Foster again was taking a serious financial gamble. While the tobacco likely would not have garnered much profit, there was no guarantee that his cotton crop would either. Still, in order to produce cotton, he would need more labor. Prior to 1795, there were no modern cotton gins in the region and only inefficient roller gins were used. Nearly as much labor went into "cleaning" cotton as in planting or picking it. By 1795,

[27] Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 77-92, 195-215.
[28] 8 November 1791 David Ross to [Thomas] Foster, "a negro man, 'Dublin,' aged 25 for 5000 pounds of tobacco in hand" *NCR*, 89. The transcriber of these records erroneously recorded John Foster as Dublin's buyer, but corrected the mistake in the index; also Alford, 52, 236.

news of Eli Whitney's gin made it to Natchez and local mechanics began constructing them for planters.[29]

William Dunbar, who had witnessed the changes in the district since the 1770s, contended that cotton was "by far the most profitable crop we have ever undertaken in this country. The climate and soil suit it exactly, and I am of the opinion that the fibre, already of so fine in [sic] quality, will be still better when our lands are well cleared and the soil properly triturated."[30] Dunbar was correct and the farms and plantations of the Natchez District were producing an average of 1500-2000 pounds and an average of $385 for each acre planted in cotton in 1799. This amounted to far more money than could be made growing tobacco even when the Spanish were subsidizing the crop. Natchez tobacco planters earned a total of approximately $140,000 from the harvest of 1789. The 1801 cotton crop earned around $700,000, a five-fold increase.[31]

Many scholars have discussed the interstate slave trade in the years leading up to and following the end of US participation in the Atlantic slave trade, but most focus on the effect of forced migration on the slave societies of the upper South. Recognizing the great demand for slave labor, planters in Virginia and Maryland sold their slaves westward, or moved with them to Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. These relocations and sales separated families and disrupted longstanding African American communities. The majority of slaves probably faced the same situation as

[29] John Hebron Moore, *Agriculture in Ante-Bellum Mississippi* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1958), 21-22; James, 51; Libby, 37.
[30] William Dunbar to John Ross, May 23, 1799 quoted in Moore, *Agriculture in Ante-Bellum Mississippi*, 25.
[31] "Statement of the Tobacco Produced by the Growers of Natchez in the Year 1789," *AHA,* vol. III pt. II, 306-311; cotton production and prices from Moore, 25-26.

those owned by Leonard Covington of Prince George County, Maryland when he made the decision to move to Mississippi. Prior to the move, Covington sought reassurance from his brother Alexander living in Natchez on conditions of slave life. He asked if "the negroes in the country generally looked as happy and contented as with us, and do they as universally take husbands and wives and as easily rear their young as in Maryland?" This concern was especially important to Covington as he divided his slaves before the move, taking 31 of the 57 with him. While at least one family moved with him, it seems clear that several families were split by the move; mothers and children separated from husbands and older children from their parents. Covington's question points to the neglected side of the interstate slave trade of the early nineteenth century, namely, the creation of new kinship structures and new communities in the old Southwest. Just as Covington intended to make a new life in Mississippi, those he enslaved would do their best to make their own.[32]

Similar movements of blacks from the east to the Old Southwest would change the lives of the Foster family and Ibrahima. The switch to cotton production not only allowed Thomas Foster to profit from farming in Natchez, but it also led him to acquire more slaves, thus furthering his own status and inadvertently elevating that of Ibrahima.

[32] Some of Leonard Covington's letters are reprinted in Ulrich B. Phillips, ed., *Plantation and Frontier* 2 vols. (Cleveland: A.H. Clark, 1909) 2: 210-218; Allan Kulikoff, "Uprooted Peoples: Black Migrants in the Age of the American Revolution, 1790-1820," in Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983), 143-171. Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); William Robert Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1989), chapters 5-6. Tadman's study argues that slaveowners of the upper South willingly split up families for economic interests and were not motivated by any sense of paternalism. That slave families were destroyed by the interstate slave trade is not disputed, but Tadman does not deal with new families that were formed in the Old Southwest.

In seeking to produce more cotton, Foster purchased four slaves in 1794 who were "natives of the U.S." brought to the district from South Carolina. Included in this purchase were Isabella aged 25 as well as three children ranging in age from two to ten. While it is unclear whether all of these children were Isabella's, the youngest, Limerick, was her own.[33] Bringing an enslaved woman to the plantation clearly fit in with Foster's ambition to of secure a fortune in cotton and to increase his human property by providing a marriage partner for one of his male slaves.

Shortly after Isabella's arrival on the plantation, Thomas Foster performed the ceremony linking Isabella and Ibrahima in marriage. While slave marriages were not recognized under law in Natchez, this did not make the relationship any less legitimate on the plantation. By all accounts, Isabella was Christian and did not covert to Islam, nor did Ibrahima make any attempt to alter his own faith or protest the ceremony Foster performed. Despite the reservations that Ibrahima might have had in Futa Jallon of marrying a non-Muslim, he went forward with this interfaith union in Natchez. Perhaps Foster forced the two to marry. Regardless, it is clear that Isabella and Ibrahima developed a relationship over the decades that the two lived together in Natchez.[34]

This relationship also allowed Ibrahima to create a new identity for himself as a husband and thereafter as a father. Establishing and providing for a family was a crucial mark of manhood within Fulani culture. As one scholar of the modern Fulani has noted,

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[33] Robert Stark to Thos. Foster, 23 April 1794, *NCR,* 101; Alford, 53-55. Given their ages, it is possible that all of these children might have been Isabella's, but if they were it is unclear if they were raised in the household she later made with Ibrahima. By 1794, Foster owned nine slaves, but his purchase of Isabella suggests that he was looking for reproduction as well as production.

[34] Alford, 56-58; "Letter from a Gentleman of Natchez to a Lady of Cincinnati," 7 April 1828 in Allan D. Austin, ed., *African Muslims in Antebellum America,* 150.

"for men in the prime of life, the three most important assets to have are health, children, and a certain level of wealth."[35] By becoming the head of a family, Ibrahima created kinship connections within Natchez and may have begun thinking of the Foster plantation as his home as he began to craft a life for himself that met at least most of the criteria for a successful man in terms of his culture. Ibrahima's relationship with Isabella, who was African American, no doubt made the transition easier. By 1828 at least two of their sons, Prince and Simon, had married women on Foster's or neighboring plantations and fathered eight children. After 40 years, Ibrahima had multiple generations of relatives in Natchez.[36]

Just as the change to cotton production brought in additional slaves, so too would the final political shift of the eighteenth century for Natchez, the creation of the Mississippi Territory and its entry into the United States. Despite this fourth official transfer of political sovereignty in less than sixty years, very little changed in the day-to-day lives of whites living in Natchez; however, this would not be true for those of African heritage. The cotton economy created a population boom and with the Spanish authority gone, there were no restrictions on Americans moving into the region. In 1798, the Natchez District had a population of approximately 4,500 people, black and white. Two years later, after the District had been separated into Adams and Pickering (later Jefferson) counties, the population had grown to 4,446 whites and 2,995 slaves. By

[35] Riesman, *First Find Your Child a Good Mother,* 44-53.
[36] Alford, 60-61; *Freedom's Journal* 20 June 1828.

1810, the Mississippi Territory included 17,088 slaves, an increase of almost 390 percent from 1800.[37]

Opening the territory to Americans and the growth of the town altered the relationship of enslaved people to work, to the market, and to each other. Shortly after his arrival in Natchez, Winthrop Sargent, the first territorial governor of Mississippi remarked, "Natchez from the perverseness of some the people, the Ebriety [sic] of Indians and Negroes on Sundays, has become a most abominable place." He noted with disdain that "the Law for regulating Slaves within the Territory, is most Shamefully violated, particularly on Sundays . . .and the preceding day, and in a very notorious manner." During these days the enslaved not only committed "great excesses," but also carried on "an Illicit traffic with the aid and Connivance of the ill disposed." This "illicit traffic" included slaves selling cotton, which deeply concerned Sargent and many planters. The issue was that cotton had been the way to wealth and independence for planters in Natchez. Allowing slaves to raise and sell their own cotton would potentially open this avenue to the black community. Also, and more directly, it was believed that permitting slaves to market cotton would encourage theft and undermine both the wealth and authority of planters. In an address to the territorial judges, Sargent explained that they had been "requested to prohibit by Law, the slaves within the Territory from raising or Vending of Cotton, which is permitted by some Planters to the probable injury of most of them: for it is urged . . .that this kind of Property, will necessarily always be exposed to theft, which if slaves shall become dealers in Cotton, it will be impossible to guard

[37] Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, 186n.

against."[38] If slaves could market cotton not only would it create a danger of theft, but it also would threaten slavery itself, allowing slaves to purchase their freedom or secure means of escape.

The wholesale switch to cotton production required more work for slaves on plantations, but it did not end the practice of visiting town on the weekends. Joseph Holt Ingraham, a northern visitor to Natchez in 1835, noted that while the upper city was a place of calm on the Sabbath, the landing on the river separated from the rest of the town by a bluff and known as Under-the-Hill was a place of vibrant activity for the black community. By his account, the planters of the town and its surrounding countryside considered it customary to "give their slaves a small piece of land to cultivate for their own use, by which, those who are industrious, generally make enough to keep themselves an their wives in extra finery and spending money throughout the year." During market weekends, a flurry of activity occurred from "wrestling" and "some fighting" to "foot-races" and the selling of produce. Ingraham noted, "the various avenues into the city are consequently . . . filled with crowds of chatting, laughing negroes, arrayed in their Sunday best, and adroitly balancing heavily loaded baskets on their heads."[39] Not only

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[38] Winthrop Sargent "Address to Territorial Judges" 5 May 1800 in Dunbar Rowland ed., *The Mississippi Territorial Archives 1798-1803* (Nashville: Brandon Printing, 1905), 232 (hereafter referred to as *MTA*).

[39] Joseph Holt Ingraham,*The South-West. By a Yankee* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835) 2:53-54. Writing in the 1930s, J. F. H. Claiborne suggested that the tradition of slaves congregating in town dated back to the French and Spanish periods in which after mass the rest of the day on Sunday would be used for visiting, picnics, and the like. The religious explanation is less than likely given the relative lack of Catholics (especially French) in Natchez, but it is true that slaves made their way to down during the Spanish period and interacted with others, black and white in a variety of ways. The roots of this behavior might have been in the task system applied to tobacco and indigo production in addition to other non-Catholic religious services. Winthrop Sargent to James Wilkerson, 14 November 1798 in Dunbar Rowland ed., *MTA,* 82. J.F.H. Claiborne, *Mississippi as a Province, Territory, and State; with Biographical Notices of Eminent Citizens* vol .I (Jackson: Power & Barksdale, 1880), 208. Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, 82.

did Sundays involve trade, but also interactions in and among the larger black and white communities. At the landing on the river, the enslaved from plantations surrounding the town would encounter people from other plantations, as well as from around the Southwest and potentially around the world.

Ibrahima, like others, took advantage of the availability of the town market. Shortly after the transition to massive cotton production and the shift of Natchez from Spanish to United States control, Ibrahima became Foster's driver, directing the pace of work in the fields. This altered Ibrahima's relationship to work on the plantation, but by all accounts, did not alienate him from the larger enslaved community or the Foster family. Because of this position and his growing family, Ibrahima and Isabella were allowed to use some of Foster's land to plant a garden, and they used their own time to plant vegetables both to feed their family and to take to the market in Natchez and to the nearby town of Washington. As was the case on many plantations in the district by the early nineteenth century, the Fosters released or shortened the workday for the men and women they enslaved on Saturdays. Sundays became market days for the slave community of Natchez not just in the trade of produce, but also the trading of information. Enslaved men and women could interact with those from other plantations. This allowed Ibrahima and other African-born slaves access to news of their former homes. As an important stop on the Mississippi River, Natchez became even more varied with people of a wide range of ethnicities making stops on the way to New Orleans.

Ibrahima was fluent in several West African languages and could speak and write Arabic, which helped him move among the diverse groups that gathered in Natchez on these weekends. Apparently on one of these trips to the market he encountered a man who knew of his "royal heritage" and bowed before Ibrahima out of respect. Though this might be legend rather than fact, it illustrates the nature of these market days and the transfer of information from various parts of the world. When interviewed in 1828, Ibrahima appeared to have some knowledge of what had transpired in Futa Jallon after his capture in 1788.[40]

These market days, then, offered a space beyond the watchful eyes of whites allowing the formation of a community that was separate from, but related to, white Natchez. However, even if whites did not closely watch this space, they did carefully restrict time. At four o'clock on Sunday afternoons the courthouse bell was rung as a warning for those who did not live in Natchez to make their way back home. After the bell rang, Ingraham observed "then commences a ludicrous scene of hurrying and scampering, from the four corners of the town; for wo be to the unlucky straggler, who is found after a limited period within the forbidden grounds!" The penalty for those caught within the city after the allotted time was 39 lashes, the same punishment reserved for

[40] Alford 60-61; The story of the enslaved man recognizing Ibrahima in Natchez appears in the Louisiana *Advertiser* 4 November 1828 though it, like many of the references to his royal heritage, seem to be more the creation of later authors than actual eyewitnesses. The report that Ibrahima knew what had transpired in Futa Jallon in his absence is recorded in Edward Teas, Julia Ideson, and Sanford Higginbotham eds., "A Trading Trip to New Orleans, 1822: Diary of Thomas S. Teas," *Journal of Southern History* 7 (August, 1941): 387. Ibrahima's knowledge of the world beyond Natchez works against the claim that those in the area were isolated made in Winthrop D. Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

slaves found by patrols wondering off plantations across the South in the nineteenth century.[41]

By 1800, these market Sundays were viewed with even more suspicion because of news of Gabriel's conspiracy and the potential connections to the Haitian Revolution that this plan implied. Governor Winthrop Sargent expressed his fears in a letter to several Natchez planters:

> I believe it is a Duty to Communicate to the Officers of the Territory, and Slave-holders within the *same*, that an *intended* Insurrection amongst the Negroes of Virginia, (in which fifty thousand were to have rose in Arms) is said to have been lately discovered, and that six of the *Principal Blacks* are already Executed at *Richmond*—but my Correspondent observes, that this alarming Business *probably* had its origin in *foreign* influence, and was intended to extend throughout the United States—to reiterate the horrid scenes of Rapine and Murders, which have been Practised [sic] in the French Islands—though the Chief and Villanous [sic] agents had not been detected at the time of this writing.[42]

Recognizing that slaves had come to Natchez both from the Caribbean and Virginia, Sargent warned that perhaps some of the "fifty thousand" involved in Gabriel's conspiracy or perhaps even the Haitian Revolution might foster insurrection plans in Natchez. Natchez planters worried that any of the men or women that they enslaved could be involved in this conspiracy. A considerable number of slaves imported into Natchez during the Spanish period were from the Caribbean, but as Sargent noted, by the nineteenth century, an increasing number were coming from other parts of the United States, including Virginia. Blacks gathering in town could spread a contagion of revolt. In a letter circulated to local planters Sargent admonished slave owners to "remember

[41] Ingraham, *The South-West*, 72; Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi,* 82.
[42] Circular Letter to Slave-holders from Governor Winthrop Sargent 16 November 1800, *MTA*, 311.

that upon Saturday Evenings and Sundays when the Negroes of different plantations assemble . . . and frequently mixing with *such* as have of late been introduced amongst us (some of whom, it is more than probable have been actors in the Bloody scenes that have devastated whole Countries) . . . we should take extraordinary care."[43]

Even if slaves in Natchez had not been directly involved with these conspiracies, the Mississippi was as much a pathway for information as for cotton and people. These gatherings on Saturdays and Sundays allowed slaves to interact both with those throughout the region and those who lived well beyond it. Boatmen moving to and from New Orleans stopped at Natchez carrying with them news of the outside world. Given this interaction, if whites in Natchez knew of the Gabriel's revolt and the Haitian Revolution, so too would blacks.[44]

In response to this danger, Sargent called for vigilance among slaveowners but asked them to remain careful not to alarm the slaves themselves. In the aftermath of Gabriel's conspiracy, most Southern states imposed greater legal restraints upon the enslaved; slaveowners were encouraged to crack down harder on resistance to authority. Sargent, though, recommended that Natchez's planters adopt "mild and wise treatment" in order to prevent a similar revolt in Mississippi. Sargent did not call for leniency in the face of a slave rebellion, but rather he believed that any change in the behavior would tip off slaves that slaveowners did indeed fear insurrection. The circular letter that Sargent

[43] Ibid., 312.
[44] Ibid., Gerald M. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), esp. ch. 5; Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 & 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

sent to the planters of Natchez in November of 1800 urged special attention to the coming of the holiday season and the additional time off this would afford slaves. He warned that the militia and patrols should carefully monitor gatherings during this anxious time.[45]

During one of these market days, Ibrahima established or perhaps reestablished a relationship with a white man that eventually would lead to freedom. It seems that on a trip to the small village of Washington a few miles Northeast of Natchez to sell some of the produce he and Isabella had grown, Ibrahima encountered a local physician named John Coates Cox. Allegedly, Ibrahima and Cox recognized one another from an earlier meeting, not in Mississippi, but rather in the city of Timbo in 1781.[46] According to the story, Cox, a surgeon on board a British ship off the coast of West Africa, wandered inland. After getting lost he was captured and taken on the roughly 200-mile journey to Timbo where he was brought before Ibrahima's father, Ibrahima Sori. Cox reportedly spent around six months as Ibrahima Sori's guest. When Cox wished to return to his own country, Sori provided an escort back to the coast. Ibrahima would have been nineteen or twenty at their first meeting, and the two supposedly instantly recognized one another when they met twenty years later. Cox attempted to buy Ibrahima's freedom from Foster, but Foster refused to part with him. Cox's attempt to raise money and support for Ibrahima's freedom thereafter led to both local and national campaigns to release him

[45] Circular Letter to Slave-holders, 16 November 1800, *MTA*, 311-312.
[46] Ibrahima, not Isabella, sold produce for the family. In most towns, women controlled this trade.

from bondage.[47] Still, even if the two had not met in Timbo, it was Ibrahima's participation in the market that enabled him to make this connection with Cox. This type of relationship between a slave merchant and a white patron reflected the type of dangers that could be associated with market days: nonslaveholding whites might ally with slaves, disrupting the master/slave relationship.[48]

Regardless of the warnings, suggestions for caution, and supervision of the enslaved during market days, the town authorities did not attempt to end slaves' participation in the market. The market allowed slaves to sell products and earn money, which could be potentially dangerous, but could also release slaveowners from some of the expense of clothing and feeding slaves. Additionally, white residents of the town could buy this produce, eliminating the need to grow food themselves. The enslaved community of Natchez had seized upon this time and activity as their own. The growing slave population after the turn of the nineteenth century and shift to the United States'

[47] The extraordinary story which led to Ibrahima's freedom was reported by Cyrus Griffin in the Natchez *Southern Galaxy* 29 May, 5 and 12 June, 5 July 1828 and also appeared as "The Unfortunate Moor," *African Repository,* 3 (February, 1828) 364-67; see also Thomas Gallaudet, *A Statement with Regard to the Moorish Prince, Abduhl Rahhaman* (New York, 1828) 3-4. Charles S. Sydnor retold the story in "The Biography of a Slave," *South Atlantic Quarterly,* 36 (January 1937): 59-73. Alford's careful analysis can be found in *Prince Among Slaves*, 17-19, 70-72. Alford has made the most exhaustive effort to confirm the truth of this story; however, the remarkable nature of Cox's journey remains impossible to corroborate by the historical record. The reason Alford gives for Cox being taken to Timbo was that the Fulani who discovered him had never seen a European before and neither had Ibrahima Sori who was intrigued by reports of Cox's appearance. While it might have been the case that these individuals had not encountered Europeans directly, the Fulani of Futa Jallon certainly knew of them after almost three centuries of West African experience with the Atlantic Slave Trade and particularly British traders along the coast of neighboring Sierra Leone, which would be colonized by the British six years after this alleged encounter. Based on Alford's research, there is reason to believe that Cox was employed as a surgeon on British ships in the late 18th century, but nothing to confirm this story beyond legend. Despite the apparent clear memory that Cox had of his time in Timbo, he either did not recall, or chose not to mention, the name of the ship that he was a surgeon on, making this story impossible to verify.

[48] Most of the slave rebellions in the United States were rumored to have whites as conspirators. Interaction between whites and blacks in Natchez Under-the-Hill will be discussed in Chapter 3.

control made for increased anxiety among planters, but did not effect this market. Sargent expressed the concerns of white Natchezians when he reminded militia officers that "'tis more than probable, that in the lapse of another year, there will be more Blacks than Whites within the Mississippi Territory—that we deprive them of the sacred Boon of Liberty is a Crime they can never forgive—Mild and humane treatment may for a Time Continue them quiet, but can never fully Reconcile them to their situation . . ."[49] Sargent's warnings proved correct as the slave population drawn by the cotton boom had begun to outstrip the white.

Religion and Community

In addition to the degree to which commerce fostered the development of a community, religion also played an important role. From 1763 through the 1810s religion seems to have been a secondary concern for most whites in Natchez. As late as 1803 it was reported that "there were not three Christians in the town, either white or black," that Natchez was the center of "irreligion and every form of vice." When Methodist minister Jacob Young moved to the town in 1807, he contended that while he had been exposed to "rough people," what he observed in Natchez "surpassed any thing that I had ever seen or thought of." He was also astonished to find that "Americans, French, Spaniards, English, Irish, Dutch, negroes and mulattoes—all mingling 'as fellows well met.'" Of course, these comments exaggerated the lack of religion in Natchez, but evangelical Christianity clearly had not arrived in the old Southwest in the same ways

[49] Address to Militia Officers, 12 January 1801, *MTA*, 324-325

that it had more easterly parts of the United States by the turn of the century. As African Americans from southern states moved into Natchez they brought religion with them, which had been crucial in forming creolized communities along the eastern seaboard.[50]

On the whole, Christianity had not penetrated the black community of Natchez any more than it had the white by the end of the eighteenth century. Unlike in Louisiana where the French and Spanish presence had founded and maintained the Catholic Church, no established faith existed in Natchez. Though the slave trade separated enslaved Africans from their families and communities, it did not separate them from their beliefs. Slaves taken from diverse African cultures often shared core beliefs, but unlike slave societies on the eastern seaboard, the "charter generation" of Africans in the Natchez district often were isolated from one another either on farms with few slaves or on larger plantations that were separated by vast spaces and dense forests. Practicing religion in isolation can be extremely difficult since for many, the practice is as much about belonging to a community as it is about worshipping a deity.[51]

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[50] Lorenzo Dow (1803) and Jacob Young (1807) quoted in Randy J. Sparks, *On Jordan's Stormy Banks: Evangelicalism in Mississippi, 1773-1876* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 11; David T. Bailey, *Shadow on the Church: Southwestern Evangelical Religion and Slavery, 1783-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). The effect of evangelical Christianity in establishing an African American community has been discussed in Sylvia R. Frey, *Water From the Rock Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991); John B. Boles, *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South 1740-1870* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988), Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: the "Invisible Insitution" of the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[51] An excellent discussion of the religion of enslaved Africans and African American in North America and the British Caribbean is available in Betty Wood and Sylvia Frey, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); the term "charter generation" is borrowed from Ira Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African American Society in Mainland North America," *The William and Mary Quarterly,* 3rd series, 53 (April 1996): 251-288 and *Many Thousands Gone*, 1-92.

The malleable nature of Ibrahima's religious identity illustrates this difficulty. Some scholars have contended that Ibrahima continued to practice Islam in secret on the Foster plantation though no evidence suggests that he did so.[52] Given his understanding of slavery in Timbo and his later statements to Natchez's newspapers he may well have seen religious conversion as a means of establishing a kinship connection that would enable him to move from the position of outsider to that of insider. Though the Spanish exerted pressure on most of their colonies to convert to Catholicism, the almost total lack of a Spanish presence in the Natchez District led to a tacit acceptance of various religions.[53] To some degree, a similar situation existed between slaveowners and slaves, which continued after Mississippi became a territory of the United States. No evidence suggests that Foster forced Ibrahima to convert to Christianity, but Ibrahima seems to have realized that the appearance of conversion might be useful for making connections with both blacks and whites.

Ibrahima criticized the lack of piety among whites and he was not alone in his disapproval. In an interview with a local newspaper, Ibrahima conceded that "the Testament" was "very good law," but said that the whites of Natchez "no [sic] follow it; you no pray often enough; you greedy after money . . . you want more land, more

[52] Michael Gomez contends that Ibrahima devoutly maintained his faith while in Natchez in *Exchanging Our Country Marks,* 71-73, as does Terry Alford, 79-81, but both of these works assert this rather than offering any concrete evidence. From Ibrahima's own words it is clear that he had serious problems with the way Christianity was practiced in Natchez, but attended a local Baptist church after 1818 (again, Alford 79-81). Ibrahima's actual position on religion during his years in Natchez cannot be determined from available sources mainly because he used this indeterminate status to his advantage, especially in his dealings with the American Colonization Society.

[53] Francis Baily, *Journal of a Tour in Unsettled Parts of North America, in 1796-1797* (London: Baily Brothers, 1856), 283; James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 38-41; Holmes, *Gayoso*, 68-81.

neegurs, you make neegurs work hard, make more cotton . . . where you find dat in your law?"[54] Ministers who came to Natchez shared Ibrahima's view. Southern evangelicals had dropped their antislavery views by the early nineteenth century, but some planters remained reluctant to have their slaves present at sermons. Daniel de Vinne, a Methodist minister, complained that no matter the wealth of planters he could not "get them to feel rich enough to let their poor servants come to preaching." Even when he did preach to slaves, he noted that there might be a dozen in attendance but that "the sound of the horn might summon 250 to 300 to meeting . . . these poor creatures I never see & some never hear the gospel."[55] Ministers like de Vinne believed that slaves would be open to the message of Christianity, but that planters were keeping it from them.

Despite planter resistance, de Vinne's suspicions about blacks and attending services proved correct. Blacks were involved heavily in the creation of the first Methodist church in the territory in 1799. White evangelicals welcomed blacks into their church and ministered to them in the same way, even referring to black members as "brother" and "sister," but this does not mean that equality between races was accepted outside, or even inside, the church. Henry Watson, an enslaved man in Mississippi, noted that sermons tended to hold messages similar to the first one that he was exposed to in the Methodist church: "suppose you were masters and mistresses [. . .]would you not desire

[54] Cyrus Griffin interview in Natchez *Southern Galaxy* 5 July, 1828. Though Griffin tried to portray Ibrahima as different in terms of intelligence, education, and race, he still recorded the interview in this dialect. As with other writers Griffin insisted upon spelling words differently in dialect even if they would be pronounced in the same way had they been spelled correctly, i.e. "neegurs."
[55] Daniel de Vinne to Benjamin Drake, 22 August 1823 as quoted in Sparks, *On Jordan's Stormy Banks*, 60-61. For more on planter opposition see Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 180-193; Raboteau, *Slave Religion,* 98-103, 107-8.

that your servants should do their business faithfully and honestly, as well when your back was turned as while you were looking over them? Would you not expect that they should take notice of what you said to them; that they should behave themselves with respect towards you and yours?" Generally, white preachers instructed slaves to "be good and humble servants" and promised that their burdens would be lifted once this life was over. Slaveowners occasionally employed preachers to come to their plantations to preach to slaves rather than permitting slaves to journey into town. Sometimes owners would attend these meetings, but more often they would not. [56] By the late 1810s, blacks created their own independent "African" churches. The lack of records makes it difficult to determine the actual number of independent black churches, but at least one African church belonged to the Mississippi Baptist Association, and others were part of the Pearl River and Union Baptist Associations.[57]

For Ibrahima, his family, and other blacks in the region, the forced migration of blacks to Natchez as a result of the cotton boom would alter religious practices while creating conditions conducive to the formation of a black community. As more Americans were drawn to the old Southwest, the evangelical religion that had infiltrated the South since the American Revolution came with them. By the second decade of the nineteenth century, cotton production began to shift the center of slavery westward. In that decade, approximately 124,000 slaves left the Chesapeake states, and 51,000 of them were taken to Alabama and Mississippi. Nearly sixty percent of the slaves who left

[56] Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson, Fugitive Slave* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848), 28-31; Blake Touchstone, "Planters and Slave Religion in the Deep South," in John B. Boles, ed., *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord*, 112-113, 121.
[57] Sparks, 62-63.

Virginia and Maryland were taken to Mississippi. These states represented the most creolized slave societies in the Atlantic world. For the most part, these men and women had converted to Christianity, which for many slaves was not the religion of their ancestors. Though the trip to Natchez would disrupt the former kinship networks and communities of African Americans, they would establish new ones when they arrived.[58]

Isabella was among those who came to Natchez as part of this movement, and one of thousands who would create new bonds within their new community. Isabella was Baptist, and Ibrahima attended services with her. The five sons the couple had together were raised within Isabella's faith, not Ibrahima's. One son, Simon, became a Baptist preacher. It is doubtful given his education that Ibrahima felt he did not have the ability to raise his family in Islam. It is more likely with his understanding of slavery in Natchez that Ibrahima hoped raising his sons as Christians would make it easier for them to become a part of the developing African American community. [59]

While Ibrahima may never have truly converted, he understood the growing cultural importance of Christianity to whites and blacks in Natchez by the 1810s and 1820s. His experience in religion mirrors what other Africans went through as Natchez was opened to black and white Americans. Creolization is more than simply having generations born in America rather than Africa; it also is selective retentions of old cultures and adaptations to new ones. Ibrahima did not remain an isolated individual in Natchez; he embraced the emerging African American community. However, as

[58] Kulikoff, "Uprooted Peoples," 151-161.
[59] Alford, 79-80; Natchez *Southern Galaxy,* 29 May, 5 and 12 June, 5 July 1828.

Ibrahima's life makes clear, the insistence by scholars on either total adaptation or the persistence of African ways is too simplistic.

The Usage of Identity: Ibrahima's Return to Africa

Ibrahima intentionally used the confusion over his religious identity to gain support for the freedom of his family. Ibrahima gained widespread attention throughout United States beginning in the late 1820s when Cyrus Griffin, editor of the Natchez *Southern Galaxy*, published the story of "the Unfortunate Moor." The article chronicled Ibrahima's royal birth, his capture, and his time in Natchez as "a common slave."[60] This story was printed in slightly different versions in papers such as *The African Repository* and *Freedom's Journal*, drawing the attention of Northerners, including members of the American Colonization Society. Working through another local editor named Andrew Marschalk, the ACS convinced Foster to free Ibrahima and contributed $200 for "the purpose of clothing him, if necessary, and defraying the cost of travel." Upon making arrangements to remove Ibrahima from Natchez, however, Marschalk found the "Prince" unwilling to leave without Isabella. Rather than split the couple, Marschalk purchased Isabella for $200. The only condition Foster insisted upon was that the two be transported to Liberia and never possess their freedom while in the United States, but the

[60] Cyrus Griffin in the Natchez *Southern Galaxy* 29 May, 5 and 12 June, 5 July 1828; "The Unfortunate Moor," *African Repository,* 3 (February, 1828): 364-67; Thomas Gallaudet, *A Statement with Regard to the Moorish Prince, Abduhl Rahhaman* (New York, 1828), 3-4. Charles S. Sydnor, "The Biography of a Slave," 59-73.

couple made it clear to the ACS that they could never be happy in Liberia while their children and grandchildren remained enslaved in Natchez.[61]

While authors in the 1820s and some modern historians have argued that Ibrahima's only desire was to return to Futa Jallon and his place in the royal family, the couple made it clear that they would not journey to Africa while leaving their children and grandchildren behind. In order to raise money for purchasing the freedom of their extended family, Ibrahima determined that along with having his story told in print, he and members of the ACS would go on a tour of Northern cities. To draw further attention to his cause he fused two of his identities: he dressed in "Moorish garb," but presented himself as a Christian missionary to Africa. This served two functions; first it created a spectacle bringing additional attention to his tour and thereby more money. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the appearance of conversion while maintaining his "Moorish" cultural connection fit well into the mission of the ACS, bringing the gift of Christianity to Africa.

Ibrahima played on the desires of the ACS by overstating both his willingness to be a missionary and the expected level of acceptance by his people in Futa Jallon. He asked for a Bible translated into Arabic and promised that once in Liberia, he would actively spread the gospel to Futa Jallon. Ibrahima also intentionally misled his benefactors, at one point stating, "if I find things at home in the same way I left, I think they will become Christians. When I left my country almost all the young people

[61] "Letter from a Gentleman of Natchez to a Lady of Cincinnati," in Austin, 149-150; letter from Marschalk in Austin, 151-154.

followed the Christian religion. Every nation I go to, I will try to teach the same. I go to give them light, I will show them the way of the Christian religion."[62] As Ibrahima's later actions would prove, he had no intention of serving as a missionary, but it convinced the ACS to continue its support.

Ibrahima's Northern tour put him in contact with some of the most influential people in the country. Charles and Arthur Tappan helped to raise money for the redemption of Ibrahima's American family and a reunion with his African one. Thomas Gallaudet appealed to the people of Springfield, Massachusetts and raised $114 for this "Moorish Prince" who also happened to be a member of the Christian Church. In a letter back to his family in Natchez, Ibrahima wrote that Secretary of State Henry Clay had given him a pass so that he could travel freely through the United States and that "all of my white friends say I cannot go home till I be able to take my family with me—the vessel is ready now, but they wish me to stay till I be able to take my children with me." Moreover, he was convinced after raising $420 in Washington and Baltimore that he would be able to achieve this goal, but pleaded to his sons, "my dear boys, Simeon and Prince, *for God's sake don't let Lee get a wife* until you hear from me."[63] If Lee married, it would mean an additional family member to take to Liberia and would require more money.

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[62] Ibrahima to Thomas Gallaudet, 7 June 1828, in Austin, 157-158.
[63] Charles Tappan in the *New England Palladium and Commerical Advertiser* 12 August 1828, in Austin, 162 and Arthur Tappan, *Freedom's Journal*, 31 October 1828. Arthur stressed that Ibrahima could also create an economic connection with the interior of Africa, this seems at least partly to be motivated by his desire for Liberia to out perform the British settlement at Sierra Leone. Report on Gallaudet's address in Austin, 168.Extracts from Ibrahima's letters from Austin, 160-161. In the same letter he discussed how nicely he had been treated in Washington by both Clay and President John Quincy Adams whom he called, "the best piece of furniture in the [white] house."

Ibrahima raised $3100 to purchase his sons Lee and Simon as well as Simon's wife Hanna, and this couple's children from the heirs of Thomas Foster. Ibrahima and Isabella's oldest son Prince, his wife Bridget and their children Alfred, Elijah, Edmund and Lee remained in Natchez as the property of the Foster family. This most certainly was a difficult choice for Isabella and Ibrahima to make, but more than likely they recognized that splitting up either Prince's or Simon's families would not be acceptable. Ibrahima and Isabella arrived in Monrovia on March 24, 1829 after almost six weeks at sea. Almost immediately after landing Ibrahima reasserted his faith in Allah and Islam, surely to the chagrin of his benefactors. Monrovia was a terribly unhealthy place for new arrivals, and this proved true for Ibrahima. After several months of sickness, he died on July 6, 1829. [64]

Though Thomas Foster had refused to sell Ibrahima and Isabella's children, it seemed clear that his heirs would be willing to do so. The children joined their mother in Monrovia on December 4, 1830. The census of 1843 lists Isabella, age 80 as a nurse, but in poor health. Three of her grandchildren still lived with her, but what became of their parents, their uncle, and their siblings is unclear.[65] The dominant reading of Ibrahima's story presents his inability to return to Futa Jallon to assume the throne as a tragedy, but

[64] Alford, 165-187.

[65] Isabella and Ibrahima were passengers aboard the ship *Harriet* though they are incorrectly listed as being from Tennessee see *Ship Harriet's company, arrived at Monrovia March 24, 1829* online http://ccharity.com/liberia/shipharriet1829.htm. The children and grandchildren arrived onboard the ship *Carolina* http://ccharity.com/liberia/shipcarolinian1830.htm. The relatives of Ibrahima set free that eventually made their way to Monrovia were: his sons Lee, age 24 and Simon, age 36; Simon's wife Hanna, 38 and their children Simon, 10; Susan, 8; Christina, 5; Nancy, 2; and Hester, under 1 year old. Simon (the younger), Susan, and Nancy still lived with their grandmother in 1843, http://ccharity.com/liberia/monroviacensus5.htm.

based on his manipulation of the ACS and his efforts to secure the freedom of his family, it seems clear that this was not his ultimate goal. Ibrahima's main concern was removing as many of his American-born kin from bondage as possible. Ibrahima's entire claim to royal heritage could have been fictional, but his ability to free three generations of his family is not.

Conclusion

The vast increase in the black and white populations at the beginning of the nineteenth century led to an end of the isolated plantations that had dominated early Natchez. As a result, the black community of Natchez had become creolized not only through generations born into the region, but also through selective adaptations. Identities do not form in a vacuum; they are created out of relationships with others, with the past, the present, and the promise of a future. African born men and women like Ibrahima might have chosen to remain separate from the rest of the enslaved community, but he and other Africans seemed to have embraced their present lives in Natchez and adapted to the emerging African American identity that collectively formed both on and off of plantations. African American ways demonstrated through market days and religious meetings became the common "cultural language" which shifted identities rooted in various African pasts toward one connected to relationships made in Natchez.

Ibrahima, like other enslaved men and women across the Atlantic world constructed new identities to help them make sense of and survive in their new environments, and like others, he did this by interacting within a community. His story

illustrates that these identities could also be used to manipulate and potentially improve, circumstances. While Ibrahima used his various "identities," a Muslim, a prince, a Christian missionary, to set himself apart and make himself exceptional in the minds of whites like the Fosters or the ACS, his personal efforts were less to be apart from than a part of the black community of Natchez. Ibrahima embraced the enslaved community through kinship, through religion, and through commerce. It is clear from his actions that returning to his homeland was a secondary goal. Had this been his only aspiration, he could have boarded a ship shortly after receiving his manumission papers from Foster. While he admitted that his time in Natchez was filled with hardship, it was made far more tolerable through the relationships he created. Even though Ibrahima died without returning to his homeland, he had the knowledge that he and Isabella had done all they could to make certain that his American born family was on its way to freedom.[66]

[66] *African Repository* (August 1830), 182 and reprints in the Natchez *Southern Galaxy* 23 October 1828 and the New Orleans *Louisiana Advertiser* 28 October 1828 in Allan Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America*, 160. Prince remained the property of Sarah Foster. He married a woman named Bridget and their children Alfred, Elijah, Edmund, and Lee remained the property of the Foster's heirs in Mississippi; Alford, 184-187 & Appendix: Genealogies.

Chapter 3
Cultural Frontiers on the Frontier of Slavery: Racial Control, Vice, and Natchez-Under-the-Hill

"Natchy-under-the-hill, where all things destined for the upper region are landed."
-Tyrone Power, 1836.[1]

In 1820, Thomas Foster Jr., the son of Ibrahima's owner, married Susan Carson, the sixteen-year-old daughter of a Methodist preacher, and was given two plantations and several slaves by his father in order to establish a new family. Though Thomas Foster the younger was known to be something of a "dissolute" character given his penchant for drinking and gambling to excess, apparently these were not behaviors that made him any less attractive as a marriage partner to Susan Carson nor would they have made him different from most of the town's eligible bachelors. Perhaps most importantly to Susan and her family, Thomas Jr. seemed to be well on his way to becoming a leading planter and a member of a wealthy family. Evidently their marriage remained untroubled during its first years, but by 1823 when Susan became pregnant with their second child, she noticed a change in Thomas. After spending the late months of her pregnancy at her father's home, Susan returned to the home she had made with Thomas only to find him in the cabin of Susy, one of their slaves, and perhaps, the daughter of Ibrahima.[2]

Thomas Jr. showed some remorse for a few days, but did not end his relationship with Susy. By 1824, Susan contended that Thomas's "intimacies with this base wretch"

[1] Tyrone Power, *Impressions of America During the Years 1833, 1834, and 1835* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1836), 2: 108.
[2] Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1977), 94; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 320-321.

were "undisguised and open." Susan left to live with her father while Susy began wearing the bonnets of her former mistress as well as sleeping in her bed. Susan filed for divorce, prompting the Foster family to attempt to reason with Thomas. It was only after a severe illness that Thomas Jr. agreed to sell Susy. His father chained her and made an arrangement for sale, but Thomas prevented it and ran away with Susy to another of his plantations where the two lived together until 1830. Severe debt led Thomas to sell Susy and the rest of his slaves for half their worth to his brother Levi, thus ending his relationship with Susy.[3]

In a different time and place, Thomas Foster Jr.'s fondness for drinking and gambling might have signaled a warning that he could be an unstable or unsuitable husband, but in Natchez in the early nineteenth century, such behavior was common and even expected among the planter class. As Natchez grew from a minor stopping point on the Mississippi to a marketing center for cotton, the neighborhood known as Natchez-Under-the-Hill became the center not only of commerce, but also the town's center for drinking, gambling, and illicit activity. This neighborhood along the river remained separated from the rest of the town by a bluff, but the actions taking place in Under-The-Hill rarely remained there. Within the taverns and brothels lining the riverfront, men and women of various social statuses mixed with one another. Visitor Tyrone Power probably referred to goods brought into the town when he spoke of "all things destined for the

[3] Thomas Jr. died in 1831, before the divorce requested by Susan could be granted. What happened to Susy after the sale is unclear, Levi owned a plantation in Franklin, Louisiana and thus, if she were part of Ibrahima's family, she had been separated from those who went to Liberia. Alford, 95-96; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor,* 322-323. The Susan who went to Liberia was Ibrahima's granddaughter. Though it is not documented, it could be that this Susan was named after the Susy that Thomas Jr. had the affair with. Ibrahima's son Prince named one his sons "Lee" after his brother.

upper town," but his comment also applies to the types of behaviors that were associated with the landing. Visitors to Natchez often wrote of the "frontier" nature of Under-the-Hill, especially of the lawless attitude of drinkers and gamblers who frequented the neighborhood. Beginning with the Spanish period, residents of Natchez deflected this image by blaming these activities on transient boatmen, "vagabonds," or occasionally on Native Americans and blacks.

In reality, drinking, gambling, and illicit sex occurred just as frequently over the bluff as it did Under-the-Hill, but were viewed differently when they took place in the upper town. These actions, which were seen as lawless and part of a frontier nature when transients or non-whites took part, were characterized as a part of a culture of honor and masculinity when the elite engaged in them. The elite concept of honor was purposely exclusionary, keeping out black men and all women. This resulted partly from the notion that slavery excluded black males from what it meant to be a man, namely, being able to provide for a family and achieve economic independence. Additionally, honor was used as a means of racial control; white men may have been permitted to take part in these activities, but participation by black men was constrained by both the will of the master and the law. The restrictive notions of who could perform honor and manliness in Southern culture, specifically, drinking, gambling, and illicit sex, broke down in Natchez. The urban milieu of the town, and especially Under-the-Hill, offered black men, both enslaved and free, an opportunity for interaction with whites and the ability to assert masculinity. While blacks were not included in the culture of honor, they could participate in the practices elite white men used to assert it. The interracial nature of these

activities caused a sense of unease for slaveowners looking for stricter racial control as the cotton economy shifted the demographics of the town and region to an ever-increasing black majority. Because of the importance of drinking, gambling, and illicit sex to elite white men and to the transients who traded along the Mississippi River, a wholesale legal crackdown against these practices for the purposes of racial control was not an option. To achieve the goal of racial control, it became necessary to create a "cultural frontier" between the genteel upper town, eager to shed its frontier image, and the raucous riverfront of Under-the-Hill.

Alcohol and Racial Control

In Natchez, alcohol had been important since settlement, well before Under-the-Hill had gained its infamous reputation. Alcohol lubricated trade with Native Americans and eventually served as a medium of exchange throughout the Old Southwest. As was the case elsewhere, giving and receiving alcohol could create a relationship of power across racial lines. Brandy and rum became especially important in the exchange between the French and Indians because the English offered a greater variety of non-alcoholic merchandise, forcing the French to trade alcohol. By the middle of the eighteenth century, French officials in Louisiana complained that while liquor enabled them to maintain dealings with Indians, it also "causes a very bad result, since this drink makes them savage and since it is often the cause of fights, not only with themselves, but also with the French who trade it to them and whom they mob when they refuse it to them." The official plan of the French in Louisiana was to gradually end the liquor trade

with Indians, as some found it "regrettable that some of them are perishing every day because of the illness that is caused them by the trade in liquor." Despite the regret, others acknowledged that this trade could not "be suppressed because of the want of merchandise of the quantities [that we have] long asked for without being able to obtain them."[4]

In spite of the recognition that the trade in alcohol was devastating to Native populations, the trade continued and intensified as the Creek and Choctaw traded deerskins for rum. When the English assumed control over Natchez and the rest of West Florida in 1763, this exchange, especially with the Choctaw, intensified. Alcohol was easy for European traders to acquire, making deerskins inexpensive and readily available. Of course, rum and other liquor also made it easier for the English to cheat intoxicated Native Americans. The alcoholism that this trade fostered created a dependency on English traders, leading native groups like the Choctaw to increase their production of deerskins. Choctaw chieftains objected to English trade practices, attributing "all disorder and Quarrelling between us and our white men to" to rum that "pours in upon our nation like a great sea." The displeasure of Southwestern Indian nations did not lead to a pan-Indian revolt, at least not until Tecumseh convinced the Red Sticks to join his cause in 1811. Instead, individuals and groups turned to acts of social banditry, acts of

[4] Governor Vaudreuil and Salmon to Maurepas, July 21, 1743,and Vaudreuil to Rouillé, June 1750, V, 47, in Dunbar Rowland, Albert Godfrey Sanders, and Patricia Galloway eds., *Mississippi Provincial Archives French Dominion* 5 vols. (Jackson: Press of the Mississippi Historical Society, 1929-1932 and Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), IV, 208-209; V, 47. (hereafter cited as MPAFD). Usner, *Indians, Settlers, & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*: *The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 98-99.

protest that were illegal but supported by local populations. In one such case, a group of about thirty Choctaw broke into a storehouse at Natchez, stealing all of the commodities inside. Allegedly the raid occurred because the Choctaw did not receive a promised gift of rum from Natchez settlers. Among the goods taken from the storehouse were fifty to sixty kegs of rum. Most of the rum would be recovered, but it would later be traded to other Indians.[5]

By the Spanish period in the 1780s, Under-the-Hill had become both the center of trade and the center of vice even as the town expanded above the bluff. As was the case along the eastern seaboard, taverns became places where business transactions and public meetings took place.[6] For residents of Natchez, taverns represented the source for news, both local and beyond, since there were no newspapers published in the town. In these taverns, planters learned of slave shipments and prices for their crops, and it was here that they posted notices of runaway slaves. At the same time though, interracial activity in the taverns and grogshops furthered the sense among residents that outsiders posed a threat to the emerging plantation society the Spanish sought to develop. Governor Gayoso ordered a ban on selling liquor to slaves and Indians and imposed curfews on the twelve taverns that operated Under-the-Hill, but this did little to curtail the behavior. In

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[5] Usner, *Frontier Exchange Economy*, 126-129. Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983). On Tecumseh's influence on Native Americans in the Southeast see J. Leitch Wright, *Creeks & Seminoles: The Destruction and Regeneration of the Muscogulge People* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

[6] The best discussions of public function of taverns in Colonial America are Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch & Revolution: Taverngoing & Public Life in the Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1999) and David W. Conroy*, In Public Houses: Drink & The Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia by the University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

the early 1790s, street fighting between racial groups had become such a problem that Gayoso banned knives and other metal weapons from the town. Enterprising business people responded to this ordinance by selling wooden stilettos to would-be combatants.[7]

These restrictions were intended to regulate behavior rather than to close the taverns, and perceived problems associated with interracial drinking continued after Natchez became part of the United States in 1795. The first American Governor, Winthrop Sargent, asked those selling whiskey to Indians insist that their customers "take it out of Town, otherwise they will give me great trouble—*Drunk* a few days past, *they* had almost Committed Murder." In spite of the propensity for whites to become drunk and disorderly in Under-the-Hill, the blame was placed on Indians who drank and became violent. Though regulations were passed, it is clear that neither traders, tavern owners, nor Natives who came to Natchez intended to end the practice. Sargent contended that the behavior of Indians was a part of what made "Natchez . . . an Abominable place" and part of the reason that the capital of the territory was moved six miles away to the village of Washington.[8] Sargent's reactions demonstrate that he believed the problem had less to do with alcohol than it did with who was consuming it; the implication is that this was a racial problem, not a drinking problem.[9]

A number of whites used alcohol as a way to contain the black community, but as was the case with Indians, often this control broke down. Some slaveowners provided

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[7] D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 36.
[8]Winthrop Sargent to James Wilkerson, 14 November 1798, in Dunbar Rowland ed., *The Mississippi Territorial Archives 1798-1803* (Nashville: Brandon Printing, 1905), 82; (herafter referred to as *MTA*). William C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, 14 May 1802, *MTA*, 438; Henry Dearborn to Claiborne, 6 December 1802, *MTA* 579-580.
[9] Winthrop Sargent to James Wilkerson, 14 November 1798, *MTA*, 82.

alcohol on a regular basis, sometimes as a reward to generate loyalty from their unfree workforce, and sometimes as a source of amusement. As Henry Bibb recalled:

> Hence they [slaves] resort to some kind of amusement. Those who make no profession of religion, resort to the woods in large numbers on that day to gamble, fight, get drunk, and break the Sabbath. This is often encouraged by slaveholders. When they wish to have a little sport of that kind, they go among the slaves and give them whiskey, to see them dance, "pat juber," sing and play on the banjo. Then get them to wrestling, fighting, jumping, running foot races, and butting each other like sheep. This is urged on by giving them whiskey; making bets on them; laying chips on one slave's head, and daring another to tip it off with his hand; and if he tipped it off, it be called an insult, and cause a fight.[10]

For some slaveowners, like those described by Bibb, supplying alcohol could be used to pacify a plantation, but drinking without the permission of owners could become problematic.

Across the south, slaves took steps to supply themselves with intoxicants, either through illicit trade with whites, through taking from the master, or by making their own. Persimmon beer became commonplace among enslaved communities from Virginia to Louisiana. West Turner, an enslaved man in Louisiana, recalled "we made persimmon beer, too. Jest stuck our persimmons in a keg with two or three gallons of water and sweet potato peelings and some hunks of corn bread and left it there until it began to work."[11] Christmas was the one time of year in which masters granted slaves the time to consume alcohol in prodigious amounts. Joseph Ingraham, a traveler through Natchez, noted, "negroes are proverbial lovers of whiskey, but few are to be found among them

[10] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written By Himself* (New York: the author. 1847), 23.
[11] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 641-645, quote from West Turner on p. 644.

who get drunk, unless on Christmas holidays, when the sober ones are most easily numbered."[12] The time off from work meant that masters would not have to worry about drunken or hung over laborers cutting into profit.

Access to alcohol for slaves, just as with Native Americans, was a complicated issue for white lawmakers. A law passed in 1809 required all retailers to swear an oath that they would not buy or sell liquor to slaves without written permission from the slaveowner. Several men petitioned the state legislature to amend the law contending that it was "unequal, unnecessary, and unjust." The petitioners had several problems with the law, noting that some retailers of liquor did not obtain licenses to sell alcohol or did not obey the law if they did, while some citizens who were not retailers and thus not bound by the restriction sold to slaves. On the surface it appears that these petitioners sought more careful control over blacks' access to alcohol, but the complaint also made the additional observation that "when slaveholders send their domestic servants to stores without permission slips some merchants refuse to sell the slaves the smallest trifle, while others sell items to the slave without the formality of permission in writing." The petition implies that the law needed to be reformed, not just because some blacks were gaining access to alcohol in violation of the law, but also because slaves with written permission were sometimes turned away, making it more difficult for owners to obtain liquor without showing up in person.[13]

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[12] Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The South-West.By a Yankee* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835), 2: 56.
[13] Petitions to the Mississippi legislature, such as this one, are available online via the Race and Slavery Petitions Project at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro at http://library.uncg.edu/slavery_petitions/. Hereafter, references to this database will be in the following form: SP, PAR # 11000002, Irvin, Munce, Millard, Scranton, Watson, 1809.

Cotton fortunes enabled Natchez's planters to import goods from all over the world to fill their homes and lives, and among the most frequent advertisements that ran in Natchez's newspapers, once the town began printing them, were those offering selections of choice wines and whiskeys for purchase.[14] As early as 1803, the town had licensed 25 taverns and alehouses, and the traffic along the Natchez Trace and the Mississippi created a demand that only encouraged the opening of more. The act of consuming alcohol did not concern whites in Natchez; instead they worried about who drank, where they drank, and the potential for drinking to break down social barriers. Sargent likely realized that closing the taverns simply was not an option. Without these taverns Natchez would be a less attractive landing for the boatmen that shipped planters' cotton down the river. Most of the town's residents blamed the landing's rowdy nature on these transients, but in reality locals frequented the neighborhood. It was the interaction among planters and slaves, overseers and mechanics, boatmen and prostitutes that created Under-the-Hill's reputation. On the landing along the river, people could behave less respectably without fear of public censure. John G. Jones, a Methodist evangelist whose father had owned a tavern Under-the Hill in the 1810s, blamed the neighborhood, and by extension his father, for creating a place for sin. Jones grumbled that Under-the-Hill:

[14] Alcoholism is a physiological illness, but the reasons people drink and the behaviors associated with drinking are determined as much or more by cultural and social expectation as chemical reactions within the body. As one scholar of alcohol consumption has noted, ethanol is probably the most popular drug in world history, but "although it has been known and used in most societies throughout the world, there is no universal use, meaning, or function for alcohol," Dwight B. Heath, "In Other Cultures, They Also Drink," in Edith Gomberg, Helene White, and John Carpenter eds., *Alcohol, Science, and Society Revisited* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), 63. A selection of various Natchez newspapers can be found in the Lemuel Connor Family Papers, LSU.

> celebrated every grade of licentiousness . . .[it was] made up mostly of barrooms, gambling houses, brothels of the vilest class. These haunts of hydra-headed vice were inhabited by the most degraded and lawless men and women, whose sole object seemed to be to beguile, entrap and ruin their heedless victims . . .many a youth went primarily to gratify "the lust of the eye," which led him by an easy and rapid process to the indulgence of "the lust of the flesh," and soon his honor was in the dust, his money in the hands of strangers . . .his feet went down to death, and his steps took hold on hell.[15]

Jones's assertion that the "victims" of these taverns, gambling houses, and brothels were heedless does not explain the popularity of these places for the town's residents.

In addition to its corrupting influence on white youths, the urban space of Natchez-Under-the-Hill offered slaves an opportunity to drink away from the watchful eye of the master or overseer, especially on market Sundays. Joseph Ingraham noticed a distinct gender difference on days when women attended church services while the men collected on the streets. Of the women, he remarked, "the female slaves very generally attend church in this country; but, whether to display their tawdry finery, of which they are fond to a proverb, or for a better purpose, I will not undertake to determine." The men could be seen parading "through the streets from mere listlessness, or gathering around and filling the whiskey shops, spending their little all for the means of intoxication."[16]

Despite the sense that drinking would lead to corruption, in Natchez, as was true elsewhere, drinking away from the masters' control happened frequently and at times was sanctioned by the white community. Throughout the Southern states, whites viewed

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[15] John G. Jones, *A Concise History of the Introduction of Protestantism into Mississippi and the Southwest* (St. Louis, P.M. Pinckard, 1866), 252-254.
[16] Ibid., 55-56.

blacks drinking away from the plantation with suspicion. Frederick Law Olmstead observed that masters believed allowing blacks access to alcohol could "corrupt the negroes, and encourage them to steal." William Johnson, the town's most famous free black resident, noted that whites held what he called "darkey parties" to reward personal servants for good behavior. Often affluent whites held these parties within town, which slaves and free people of color attended. Generally, only those who lived in town or nearby plantations went to these parties. These festivities were held frequently at the Mississippi Hotel's ballroom, regarded by most residents and travelers as one of the best inns in the Natchez. These parties, and those held by free people of color in their own residences, clearly were popular among the town's black community, but Johnson never seemed to attend them. When Robert Lieper, the patriarch of a large free family of color, held a party, Johnson punished his free worker "French" William by refusing to let him attend. Given the popularity of these parties, French William no doubt considered this a substantial punishment.[17]

For those slaves who left their plantations or homes for Under-the-Hill without permission, punishments could be much harsher. Johnson frequently recorded incidents in which his slaves and apprentice barbers interacted with the larger enslaved and free black population of Natchez. It was not unusual for Johnson to let his free black and

[17] Frederick Law Olmstead, *Journey in the Seaboard States* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959), 84-85. Edwin Adams Davis and William Ransom Hogan, *The Barber of Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 56-57 (hereafter cited as *Barber*). Ronald L.F. Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez*,1720-1880 (Natchez: National Historical Parks, 1993),53. French William or French William Johnson was a free black barber employed by the diarist between 1831-1839, it is likely that the two were related, though how closely is up for speculation, [17] William Ransom Hogan and Edwin Adams Davis eds., *William Johnson's Natchez: The Ante-Bellum Diary of a Free Negro* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 67n (hereafter cited as *Diary*).

slave workers attend the circus or theater, but based on his diary, it seems as though they more often left at night without his consent. Occasionally, they would sneak away to "Mr. Parker's Kitchen," the name that the black community had given to the Mississippi Hotel, in order to carouse and meet with women. Rather just than punishing his slaves and apprentices on their return, Johnson enjoyed catching them in the act. In one instance, he found his apprentice William "at Mr. Parker's Kitchen" and whipped him for it. When his workers attracted the interest of the city's slave patrol for being out without permission or being drunk, Johnson had no qualms about supplementing the patrol's punishment with his own.[18]

On occasion, Johnson went Under-the-Hill to find those who drank without his consent. When one of his workers came home drunk and then snuck out, Johnson "went under the Hill to look for him—I intended to mall him well but I could not find him." In another case in which Johnson had hired out his slave Steven to Adam Bingaman, the enslaved man took time to visit Under-the-Hill for a few drinks rather than returning immediately to his owner. When Johnson found him, he "sent Dr. Hogg to see what was the matter with him and the Dr. pronounced him Drunk at first sight."[19] Steven, who might be described as an alcoholic in modern terms, endured beating and lectures, but continued to sneak out to drink. Eventually Johnson determined to sell Steven, recording in his journal, "and what is the Cause of my parting with him, why it is nothing but Liquor, Liquor, His fondness for it. Nothing more, Poor Fellow. There are many worse

[18] Hogan and Davis, *Diary*, 73.
[19] Hogan and Davis, *Diary* , 97-98.

fellows than poor Steven is, God Bless him. Tis his own fault."[20] While it may not have been his fault, Johnson still sold him.

Several court cases from the antebellum period illustrate that controlling access to alcohol away from the plantation or home remained an important issue for slaveholders. The Mississippi Supreme Court declared that laws prohibiting the sale of alcohol to slaves were designed "to prevent the demoralizing influence of drunkenness, and its attendant vices, upon the slaves which constitute so large a portion of our population." Additionally, the Court found that this prohibition was "one of the guards of our security and well-being of society, a traffic in this article [liquor], is prohibited unless with the consent of the master."[21] The Mississippi Supreme Court considered the comparison between drinking and running away in the case of *James v. Kirk* in 1855, ruling that a slave that had never run away before, but did within the first 60 days after being sold was not "addicted to running away," but did so out of a response to new circumstances, just as a slave who had never drank alcohol prior to sale, but got drunk within 60 days had not acquired that "habit" or "vice" prior. The ruling denied the defendant Kirk the chance to recover the value of the slave. While an "addiction" to running away was considered under the law to be grounds for voiding the sale of slaves, the "vice" of drinking was not.[22]

In 1839, the state legislature passed a law to suppress tippling houses and the "odious vice of drunkenness" and especially "to put down the evil practice of retailing

[20] Ibid., 460-461; Davis and Hogan, *Barber*, 64-66.
[21] *Jesse Jolly v. The State of Mississippi*, 16 Miss. 145, 1847.
[22] *James v. Kirk*, 29 Miss. 206, 1855.

liquor to negroes." The act stated "if any person, either with or without license to retail, shall sell any vinous or spirituous liquors to any slave, without the permission of his or her master, mistress, owner or overseer . . .they so offending . . .and upon conviction thereof, shall pay a fine of five hundred dollars, and shall be imprisoned in the common jail of the county for not less than thirty and not more than ninety days." If a person sold liquor to a person that was proven later to be "negro or mulatto, that fact shall be received as prima facie evidence of his or her being a slave."[23] However, the practice continued in spite of the hefty punishment. For those accused of selling liquor to the enslaved, the issue of the master's permission became the difference between determining guilt or innocence. Some of those brought to court for selling to slaves contended that when a slave entered their shop to buy liquor, the possession of money to do so implied that his or her owner had given consent. Under the law, however, owners had to give permission to the seller, not the slave. Technically, it was not illegal for slaves to buy alcohol; it was illegal for free people to sell it to them.[24] Masters could give consent to retailers orally or provide slaves with alcohol themselves; slaves could acquire it through theft, or by having a free companion purchase it for them. As the Court noted this traffic was "hard to detect."[25]

[23] *Noonan v. State*, 9 Miss. 562, 1844.
[24] Ibid.
[25] *Jolly v. State*, 16 Miss. 145. In this case Jesse Jolly was arrested, tried, and found guilty for selling to slaves, but the only slave he actually sold to was owned by Anthony Armstead who had sent the slave in to buy alcohol with the intention of getting Jolly to break the law. This "sting" operation led the Supreme Court to overrule Jolly's conviction by a lower court, and ruled that "it would be singular, if a resort to almost the only means of detection should have the effect to legalize the transaction."

The law forbidding the sale of alcohol to blacks appears to have been routinely ignored in Natchez and across the South. In a letter to the Natchez *Courier* one writer identifying himself only as "Law and Justice" complained that in spite of the law "hundreds of negroes are nightly drunk in consequence of the attention paid to them by the grogshops on the roads leading out of Natchez." These roads also led into Natchez, which seemed to be the larger problem for the writer, who protested the dangerous practice of drunken black men riding "through the streets of Natchez at the rapid rate of 12 miles an hour." This early practice of driving while intoxicated was also blamed on the lax performance of the town's night guard, which "Law and Justice" argued, "was not worth a baubee."[26] The author's complaint, as with others associated with alcohol, was not the act of drinking, but the racial problem that it fostered and the inability or unwillingness of authorities to address the issue.

Of course, within the milieu of Under-the-Hill, interracial drinking occurred, and sometimes led to violence. While drinking together did not level social differences between whites and blacks, it could lower blacks' inhibitions against lashing out at whites. Johnson recorded one incident in which a man he referred to as "Old Guinea John" after becoming drunk entered into an argument with an "Italian by the name of Cariscino." The argument turned to violence when

> [Cariscino] commenced a beating the Old man with a Stick and Continued to do so untill [sic] he was driven Clear over on the opposite Side of the Street, Here the Italian was Just in the act of throwing Him over the wall where the perpendicular fall was I suppose about a hundred feet--Just as John was about to fall, he drew a knife from his bosom and plunged it into Cariscino Just below the navle[sic], Tis

[26] Natchez *Courier*, 13 August 1840 in Hogan and Davis, *Diary,* 309n.

> supposed that the nife [sic] has Cut a Gut—John was taken up a short time afterwards. . .and was committed to Jail.[27]

In another case, after drinking, one of Johnson's slaves attacked another man who was a tenant in one of Johnson's rental properties. Given the legal ramifications, it is doubtful that these men would have been so openly violent with whites while sober.[28]

Under-the-Hill, which had been the center of the town prior to the 1790s, became the locus of interracial drinking by the early nineteenth century. Drinking may have been considered a vice, but townspeople never attempted to ban alcohol, only to regulate access by Indians and blacks. Interracial activity occurred frequently in the neighborhood and while it seems to have done so with tacit acceptance some slaveowners such as Johnson lamented the power of the landing to draw away slaves while others complained that the taverns operating in the town had a corrupting effect on their patrons.

Dividing the Town: The Cultural Meaning of Under-the-Hill

Unlike other Southern towns, Natchez did not develop several neighborhoods divided by race or class. Rather, two developed, the town on the bluff and the Under-the-Hill. The two were divided not only by the bluff, but also within the minds of those who lived in the town. Under-the-Hill was a vice district, but it was also racialized and classed. The drinking, gambling, and crime that happened along the river did not always involve transients nor did the behaviors associated with the neighborhood remain confined to the landing; however, consistently complaints about the frontier nature of

[27] Hogan and Davis, *Barber,* 160-161.
[28] Ibid., 162.

Natchez focused on Under-the-Hill. The town's elite planters also drank and gambled as a means of establishing reputations for manliness and to cultivate honor. Blacks, free and enslaved, were purposely excluded from belonging to the culture of honor, but not necessarily from the practices white men used to establish it. As a result, distinctions were made between drinkers and drunks, and between gambling and professional gamblers.

Cotton fortunes enabled planters to build their mansions over the hill and project an air of gentility, and while regulations were placed on tavern keepers, no attempt was made to bring that gentility to Under-the-Hill. Dominating enslaved men and women enhanced masters' sense of honor and superiority from their slaves while allowing them to display their mastery to others within the community. To own slaves was to cross the social boundary separating man from master.[29] As William J. Grayson, a South Carolina intellectual put it, cursing, gambling, drinking, womanizing, and disobeying the Sabbath "are not incompatible with the character of a man of honor."[30] In fact, it would seem that these were among the behaviors that defined honor and manliness, not just in the Old Southwest, but also across the South in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

While much of the planter class seems to have agreed with Clayton, visitors did not recognize the culture of honor in the deeds they witnessed. Travelers to the town rarely separated the town above the bluff from Under-the-Hill in their writings, labeling

[29] Disputes caused by notions of honor contributed to a higher level of violence in the South than in the north. Evidence can be found in all Southern states, see Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor* and Edward Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
[30] William J. Grayson as quoted in Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor,* 23, 41.

the town a place where "great numbers of poor, dissipated wretches of all nations and all colors" congregated to engage in debauched behavior with "tawdrily arrayed, highly rouged" women.[31] Those walking along the landing complained of the "sounds of bestial revelry" and the violent shouts overheard during drunken brawls, lending credence to the claim that "many a murder had been committed there, of the secret of which the dark tide of the Mississippi is the depository."[32] British traveler, Sir Charles Augustus Murray, probably summed up the views of most travelers when he wrote in 1836 that the town was "the most abandoned sink of iniquity in the whole Western country."[33] The town's citizens saw themselves differently.

Some residents of Natchez resented the appellation of "frontier town." In 1820, the *Mississippi Republican* reported "few persons who are not residents, know, that the landing and the city are separate and distinct places [. . .] the GAMBLING TABLES, the TIPPLING HOUSES, and HOUSES OF ILL FAME, they and they alone are the hotbeds of vice, and infamy and crime, which disgrace the name of Natchez throughout the Union."[34] James Cook, editor of the Natchez *Ariel,* objected to the description offered by most travelers and contended that Natchez had "been represented by many as the very 'hot bed' of disease' and 'emporium of vice.' This, however, is extremely. . . unfair. . .and without foundation in truth. With regard to the morals of the city, there was a time

[31] Michael Beard, "Frontier Port on the Mississippi: A History of the Legend of Natchez-Under-the-Hill, 1800-1900," Unpublished MA Thesis, Louisiana State University, 1981, 43; Edith Wyatt Moore, *Natchez-Under-the-Hill* (Natchez: Southern Historical Publications, 1958), 25-26.
[32] Beard, "Frontier Port," 44-45; Ingraham, *Southwest By a Yankee* 2: 52-61; Tyrone Power, *Impressions of America,* vol. 2, 117.
[33] Charles Augustus Murray, *Travels in North America During the Years 1834, 1835, and 1836* (London: R. Bentley, 1839) 2:177.
[34] *The Mississippi Republican,* 29 February 1820 in Beard, "Frontier Port," 50.

when it deserved all that has been said about it. But thanks to the influence of our free government, that time has passed away."[35] By "free government" it would appear that Cook was talking about that of the United States claiming that Natchez had only lacked morality under the Spanish. Clearly this was untrue as most of the travelers who made these remarks came in the early nineteenth century, and as Natchez grew, so too did the infamy of Under-the-Hill. As a lawyer that Joseph Holt Ingraham encountered a few years prior to this article noted, Under-the-Hill still remained a place without morals, but he also held that "so far from being a part or portion of the city proper, it [Under-the-Hill] was not even a part or portion of the state!"[36]

Several attempts were made by Natchezians to regulate Under-the-Hill, yet they yielded little success. Anthony Campbell, the town's tax collector and county justice of the peace declared in 1816 that he would pursue "vagrants, gamblers, and keepers of houses of ill fame" by enforcing laws against "disorderly inns or ale houses, gaming houses, bawdy houses." Campbell made an effort to "clean up" the landing, but he was unsuccessful. Ten years later, a man named John Irwin, who may have been arrested as a result of the clean up, attacked Campbell on the road to Under-the-Hill. The Natchez *Ariel* reported that during the attack Irwin exclaimed, "by God, I should murder and eat you, you ought to have been killed ten years ago." After this, Irwin allegedly bit off Campbell's ear, chewed it up and swallowed it. The assault demonstrated that not

[35] Natchez *Ariel,* 5 January 1828 as quoted in Beard, "Frontier Port," 49.
[36] Ingraham, 2: 57.

everyone was interested in eliminating vice from the landing, and helps explain why Campbell's effort to do so was unsuccessful.[37]

The Temperance movement, which had been successful in reducing the use of alcohol in Northern towns, found little support in Natchez and throughout the South. Though Southern states contained 44 percent of the nation's population in 1831, they only had 8.5 percent of its temperance pledges. For the most part, scholars have argued that this had to do with the association of temperance with abolition. On some level, white Southerners did equate the two and rejected temperance because of the assumption that anti-slavery messages could be hidden within temperance rhetoric, but many Southern temperance associations took great care to distinguish themselves from their Northern counterparts. The shift in some Northern cities toward industrial production created social differences that furthered temperance. Employers preferred sober workers and could use their influence either to secure conversions to the lifestyle of temperance or to fire them. The industrial revolution did not affect Natchez beyond creating a greater need for cotton. As a result, the economic conditions did not change and temperance remained marginal.[38]

The temperance movement reached Natchez in 1828 when White Turpin established the Natchez Temperance Society. Turpin, the wife of a state senator,

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[37] The Natchez *Ariel* 15 September 1826, this article appears in the Lemuel P. Connor and Family Papers, LSU; Michael F. Beard, "Natchez Under-the-Hill: Reform and Retribution in Early Natchez," *Gulf Coast Historical Review* 4 (Fall 1988): 30.

[38] W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 187-222; Ian R. Tyrrell, "Drink and Temperance in the Antebellum South: An Overview and Interpretation," *The Journal of Southern History* 48 (Nov. 1982): 485-510. Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millenium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978).

attracted a membership of "three score and fifteen persons, most of whom are bachelors." These members promised they would "refuse to put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains." One local opined that Turpin "gathereth them [the members] as a hen gathereth her brood under her wings," but more importantly, that drinking was common "with at least one half" of the Society's members. By 1837, the Society began publishing a temperance journal called *The Cold Water Man*, but it went bankrupt within two years.[39]

Some politicians attempted to legislate against drinking, but found their efforts unpopular. Once elected to the state legislature in 1839, Henry Foote worked to pass an "anti-tippling bill" that would impose fines or imprisonment for those selling liquor in quantities less than one gallon and would make it illegal for candidates to use alcohol to gain votes, a popular means of gaining support. Foote recalled that his idea of proposing the bill stemmed partly from an incident that occurred during the 1833 campaign for the state senate representing the district that included Adams County. The two candidates, Judge Edward Turner and Dick Stewart, treated voters to drink in order to garner votes. Turner indiscriminately called voters assembled at the polls to drink with him. Once Turner's supply of whiskey had expired, Stewart gathered the throng around his own supply and said "Fellow citizens: My venerable opponent, Judge Turner, deemed it prudent to measure out to you his whisky, I shall do nothing of the sort. Here is my jug, and glasses for you all. Come forward one and all and help yourselves." Foote's bill

[39] James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 261.

passed but was immensely unpopular, and in response he was hanged in effigy in the state capital of Jackson. [40]

Though residents of Natchez blamed Under-the-Hill for the vices associated with the city, some travelers found these behaviors equally common among the town's wealthiest residents. C. G. Parsons remarked, "the most prolific source of the drunkenness, licentiousness, and crime, which abound in the South, is in the idleness of the slaveholding class [. . .] the billiard table, the drinking saloon, the horse race, the cock fight, are but so many ways devised to banish *ennui*, and prevent life from being a burden." James S. Buckingham agreed that drinking among wealthy men was commonplace and created an atmosphere of violence. During these gatherings, he commented, "there is hardly a night passes by without furnishing occasion for a duel or a murder at some subsequent time." Mississippian Henry Foote agreed and recalled that in the 1830s and 1840s, "it was almost impossible to enter a house of public entertainment anywhere without encountering men in a state of inebriation," and that "drunkenness had, indeed, become a common vice" among all classes.[41]

As was the case with drinking, gambling was considered a vice, but there was a distinction made between the "professionals" who operated Under-the-Hill and the amateurs who gambled above the bluff. Gambling was more than a recreational

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[40] Henry S. Foote, *Casket of Reminiscences* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968) 264-272. Foote suggested that while using alcohol to get votes did happen frequently, it was not indispensable to secure an election. He wrote that he never resorted to the practice himself while seeking office and called it " worse than the exercise of pecuniary bribery."

[41] Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice,* 99-100; C. G. Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery; or A Tour Among the Planters* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1855), 23; James Silk Buckingham, *The Slave States of America* (London: Fisher, Son, 1842) 1: 286-287; Foote, 264.

diversion for Southern white men. Like drinking, gambling was a way to display masculinity. Just as drinking allowed white men to display traits like stamina or hospitality, gambling gave the opportunity to face someone else in an aggressive manner without resorting to violence. Games of chance demonstrated that a man had faith in his own abilities and skill and, at least as importantly, showed that men did not fear losing money or property, even if the sums were considerable. Gambling offered this opportunity for men, but it did not do so irrespective of class or race; while men of different social standing might have played a game against one another, both participants and observers remained keenly aware of the social standings of players. In other words, the game was not a "closed world," since distinctions between players outside of the game would remain important to the game, even if a player of lower status won.[42]

City "gaming" ordinances, like those against alcohol, were much more concerned with regulating the practice than with ending it. Those forms of gambling like roulette that were popular Under-the-Hill were officially outlawed, while horse racing and the betting that went along with it, fashionable among planters in the upper town, remained legal. In some cases, town magistrates would resort to trickery to catch those at the landing in gambling schemes. Christian Schultz, who visited the city in 1808, witnessed a boat hand arguing with another man over some "trifling dispute." The two decided to

[42] Wyatt-Brown discusses the relationship of gambling and honor in *Southern Honor*, 341-350 as does Greenberg in *Honor & Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 135-145, but both deal with the practice essentially as a sport. A card game certainly has specific rules, but winning a card game requires more than just adhering to the rules of that game. In card games where players compete against one another, the player with the most money, or the willingness to lose the most money, has a decisive strategic advantage over others.

settle the issue by a coin flip and though "the boatman lost his wager fairly . . . what was his surprise when he afterwards found himself arrested upon the information of this very villain and fined either twenty or thirty dollars for gambling."[43]

Clearly, then, the issue of gambling itself was not the problem; instead it was who gambled and to what end that troubled some Natchez officials. Local men, especially planters, had stakes in society and while they might have been viewed as irresponsible for losing large amounts of money or property, they also might be admired for their willingness to take the risk and for their consequential demonstration of manliness. Professional gamblers were viewed as unmanly as those who were unwilling to play games of chance in the sense that they risked nothing but money and would take nothing but profit from a winning game. As one southerner explained to Harriet Martineau, a man "may game, but not keep a gaming house."[44] Planters might gamble as John Nevitt and forty of his friends did when they "sat up all night" playing "brag," but these men were the town's elite and did not have to worry about being fined or jailed.[45] However, town officials complained that vagrants and professional gamblers were brought into the town "with every *fresh* of the Mississippi.[46] Regardless of how much money planters won or lost, they remained bound to Natchez unlike professionals who were described as parasites.

Some complained that professionals sought to corrupt and take advantage of locals and usually did so in bold, and perhaps violent, ways. A person known only as "Z"

[43] James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 88-89; Schultz quoted in James, 89.
[44] Harriet Martineau, *Society in America* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1837), 1: 157.
[45] John B Nevitt Diary, 3 April 1828 as quoted in Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 340.
[46] *Washington Republican and Natchez Intelligencer*, 29 May 1816 quoted in Beard, "Frontier Port," 33.

wrote to the *Mississippi Herald* that "one miscreant had the insolence to fix his table in the open . . . with a pair of loaded pistols to protect it—a fracas ensued between several of these vermin . . . to the great danger of the lives of several citizens."[47] William Hall, a traveler to the town, noted the eagerness of locals to join in with boatmen and professionals in these games. After entering the first open establishment he found in Under-the-Hill one morning, Hall found men and women, both black and white, drinking, dancing, and gambling together despite the early hour. In a back room he noticed several men playing faro, some betting "with silver coin, some with bank notes, and a few of the largest betters, with 'checks' or counters." That some of the men bet with "counters" demonstrates that they were either established gamblers or perhaps locals of well-known means. Those who lost cursed or sat in sullen silence over amounts large and small. Hall noted that one of the men who bet with counters seemed indifferent to the amounts wagered as he won "several large bets in succession without lifting his money from the table . . .The large amount now pending induced the banker to ask the bettor whether he 'went' the whole amount. 'Yes by -----, I'll pile my paralee to the ceiling." Though Hall described this man as a "desperate gambler," in many ways he demonstrated the traits that the elite prized in gambling, even if professionals had taken advantage of him.[48]

Professional gamblers were repeatedly marked as the dregs of society looking for any opportunity to harm or cheat the unwary, and as a result their stories became popular reading material. The exploits of gamblers in Natchez-Under-the-Hill became legendary

[47] *Mississippi Herald and Natchez Gazette*, 20 May 1806 as quoted in Beard, "Frontier Port," 37.
[48] William C. Hall, "Reminiscence of Natchez 'Under-the-Hill, My Grandmother's Trick," in John Frances McDermott ed., *Before Mark Twain, a Sampler of Old, Old, Times on the Mississippi* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1968), 196-198.

throughout the United States and furthered rumors that gamblers operated outside of society's rules. According to these stories, professional gamblers prowled the town looking for unsuspecting marks. William Hall related that he fell victim to one such scheme. While in a tavern, he noticed a man who appeared very drunk offering to wager $500 on any bet that he could take, regardless of the odds. He then took out a deck of cards and bet $500 that he could "name and turn any of the three cards, or he would bet the same amount no one else could do so." A "gentleman" approached Hall and contended that the only charitable thing to do would be to take the bet, beat the drunken man, and then return the money when he sobered up. The gentleman said that he would do this himself, but left his "pocket book" at the hotel because he was afraid of being pick-pocketed Under-the-Hill. After putting up the money, Hall lost to the man who suddenly appeared much more sober and the "gentleman" turned out to be his partner. While Hall sets this story up as a cautionary tale, it also seems as though he expected his readers might secretly admire the gamblers. [49]

James Green, who billed himself as a reformed gambler, offered another instance of how professionals took advantage of the unsuspecting in Under-the-Hill, but he did not suggest these men were estimable adventurers. Green explained the practice of "Spanish Burying" which apparently was common among "the brotherhood" of gamblers in Natchez. Green described this custom as "one of those plays, or exercises, which the gamblers use partly to make their victims afraid to give them further trouble, and partly to gratify their own cruel and hellish passions." It usually involved a group of ten to twenty

[49] Hall in Ibid., 196-200.

men approaching an unsuspecting victim and proposing a simple game with a wager of alcohol that the ringleader promised to buy. After the victim agreed to the seemingly risk-free game, a confusing ceremony was performed in which participants "saluted the dead man" who happened to be the largest and strongest of the crew laying flat on the ground. When the victim approached the dead man, he would be seized and then hit by the rest of the crew with their "handkerchiefs, which have been tied full of knots on purpose, and twisted so as to be almost as hard as cow-skins. In the course of fifteen seconds, five hundred blows will be administered." After the beating, the victim is told that he has won the bet, but that in order to collect he would need to become a member of the group, requiring additional beatings. Green explained to his readers:

> Such is the thirst of gamblers for unnatural excitement, that when tired of cards, they often seek it in such brutal sports as this. In order to kill time, they are ready to sacrifice the last vestige of principle, or of human feeling in their hearts. And when their interest is concerned in the result, as is usually the case, it gives their fiend-like sport a double relish. The reader may like to know to what class of gamblers this applies. I have known those who are upheld as respectable sportsmen, or gentlemanly faro dealers, to engage in such brutalizing scenes; and I warn every inexperienced youth to beware how he comes within the circle of their influence.[50]

Green warned his readers that professionals may appear "respectable" and "gentlemanly," but in fact were only out to swindle and harm the unsuspecting.

Labeling professional gamblers as outsiders and devoid of humanity made it far easier for people in Natchez to distance themselves from their own vices. Though the assembly outlawed gambling in taverns, inns, other "public houses," and in the streets,

[50] Jonathan H. Green, "Gambling Unmasked! Or the Personal Experience of Jonathan H. Green, the Reformed Gambler . . . Written by Himself," in McDermont ed., *Before Mark Twain*, 200-204.

these laws were never consistently enforced. This partly resulted from the desires of planters to use the Under-the-Hill as a public venue for displaying manliness, and also because of the riverfront's crucial economic function. Though Under-the-Hill was the center of vice, it was also the town's main access to trade. The entertainment and lodging offered at the landing ensured that boatmen would stop. These men acquired bad reputations for their rowdy behavior in Natchez, but they also brought in manufactured goods from the North and took locally grown cotton to New Orleans for sale in England.[51]

Ordinances against gambling did little to curb the gambling habits of Natchezians, nor did they change the tendency to view professional gamblers as a specific group. The first gambler caught breaking the law in 1806 promptly escaped the jailhouse and took his gaming table, which inexplicably had not been destroyed, with him. It was believed that he was bound for New Orleans, where he could continue to ply his trade and was described as having "a downcast, uninviting look." When several of the town's most respected citizens gathered at a place called Steele's Spring Under-the-Hill to celebrate the Fourth of July with dinner and toasts, a collection of "gamblers" crashed the party, allegedly angry that they had not been invited to the festivities. These uninvited guests "armed with clubs and poniards . . . assailed the company with threats and insulting language," and were repulsed only after "attempting to assassinate several gentlemen."

[51] Beard, "Frontier Port,"40-41; Todd Ashley Herring, "Natchez. 1795-1830: Life and Death on the Slavery Frontier," PhD Diss. Mississippi State University, 2000, 117-138.

Most were jailed, but it is likely that many among the revelers also styled themselves as capable, if amateur, gamblers.[52]

What is critical to understand is that responses against professional gamblers only occurred when conditions suggested that they were attempting to subvert the racial order. The first real attempt to remove professionals from Mississippi occurred in Vicksburg in 1835, when an Independence Day fight and a rumored slave revolt led citizens to believe gamblers might be involved. Allegedly, the revolt was organized by white "steam doctors" whose strange remedies and close relationship with slaves made them suspicious to local slaveholders. Professional gamblers had similar relationships with blacks and when one of these professionals started a fight a July Fourth barbeque, citizens at Vicksburg became convinced professionals might incite a slave revolt as well. Professional gamblers were ordered to leave the town of Vicksburg by July 6 or face serious consequences. While most did leave, six professionals remained barricaded in a house. When a mob attempted to remove them forcibly, a shootout occurred, resulting in two deaths and ultimately the public execution of five gamblers.[53] In defense of the

[52] Beard, "Frontier Port," 40-41.

[53] There is no direct connection between the rumored revolt and the crackdown on Vicksburg's gamblers in except in terms of the heightened levels of anxiety and suspicion of whites on the fringes of the slave society. Several historians have investigated the insurrection plot in Madison see Christopher Morris, "An Event in Community Organization: The Mississippi Slave Insurrection Scare of 1835," *Journal of Social History* 22 (Fall 1988): 93-111; Laurence Shore "Making Mississippi Safe For Slavery: The Insurrectionary Panic of 1835," in Paul Finkleman ed., *Rebellions, Resistance, and Runaways Within the Slave South* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989), 101; David Libby, *Slavery in Mississippi* 103-118; The most complete primary source on the execution of the gamblers and the conspiracy is Thomas Shakelford, ed., *Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, Mississippi, at Livingston, in July, 1835, In Relation to the Trial and Punishment of Several Individuals Implicated in a Contemplated Insurrection in This State* (Jackson, 1836) the copy used in this paper (hereafter referred to as the Livingston pamphlet) is reprinted in H. R. Howard, *The History of Virgil A. Stewart and his Adventure in Capturing and Exposing the Great "Western Land Pirate" and his Gang, in Connection with the Evidence; Also of the Trials, Confessions,*

extralegal punishment meted out to these professional gamblers, the Vicksburg *Register* declared, "we are proud of the public spirit and indignation against offenders displayed by the citizens, and congratulate them on having at length banished a class of individuals, whose shameless vices and daring outrages long poisoned the springs of morality, and interrupted the relations of society." These professionals were described as "destitute of all sense of moral obligation—unconnected with society by any of its ordinary ties, and intent only on the gratification of their avarice."[54] While the alleged slave insurrection plot in nearby Livingston did not directly involve the professional gamblers executed at Vicksburg, one local man, Thomas Shackelford, made a connection between the two events, suggesting they were related in the sense of "the state of high excitement that pervaded the whole southern country at that time, which had led the citizens to deal more rigorously with all offenders; and more especially with those of an abandoned and dissolute character as all professional gamblers are."[55]

Horace S. Fulkerson, a native of Kentucky who moved to Mississippi in the 1830s, supported the actions of Vicksburg's citizens against the gamblers. Fulkerson presented professionals as "reckless and desperate characters" and distinguished the "better class" as being in awe of them. The awe derived not only from the actions of gamblers, but also from the fact that they and their patrons were numerous and dispersed throughout the town. He believed that the extralegal measures taken by citizens were

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and Executions of Murrell's Associates in the State of Mississippi During the Summer of 1835, and the Execution of Five Professional Gamblers by the Citizens of Vicksburg, on the 6th of July, 1835. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836), 223-225; William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion Vol. I: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 110-111.

[54] Livingston Pamphlet, 264.

[55] Ibid., 263.

justified, as the law was unable to address the problem. The legal impotence resulted from both the delay that a jury trial would bring and the ability these violators had to purchase a capable defense. Fulkerson suggested that the very life of the community was endangered by the actions of the gamblers, and Vicksburg's citizens took the law into their own hands out of self-preservation, using the language of Madison County's committee of safety. Because survival was at stake, he proposed, "though it may be an evil, may not a community, under an inexorable necessity, make a choice of evils? Every community which holds this right in reserve, has served notice upon evil doers, and notice often acts as an once of prevention, and saves the resort to the pound of cure."[56] Shortly after this incident, Henry Watson, an enslaved man in Vicksburg, saw two men placing a bet on whether a slave who collapsed in the street had dropped dead, "'He is dead!' exclaimed one. 'He'll come to,' replied the other. "Dead, for five hundred!" 'Done!' retorted the other. The noise of the fall and the confusion which followed, brought up to the owner, who called for a doctor. 'No! no! we must have no interference; there's a bet depending!'"[57] Watson's observation demonstrated that while professional gamblers had been forced out of the town, gambling had not. This incident also reveals that gambling that reinforced racial distinction was far more tolerable than gambling that challenged it.

Some of the professionals who fled Vicksburg made their way to Natchez. In response to these transplanted gamblers, John Quitman founded the Adams County Anti-

[56] H. S. Fulkerson, *Random Recollections of Early Days in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Otto Claitor, 1937), 95-96.
[57] Henry Watson, *Narrative of a Fugitive Slave* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848), 27-28.

Gambling Society and formed a Committee of Vigilance, which literally whipped these men and forced them to leave town. Still, expelling these men and creating the Anti-Gambling society did not solve the problem of professionals as five years later a citizens meeting at the courthouse provoked a resolution against "the pickpockets, gamblers & loafers who have no ostensible mode of making a living be allowed forty-eight hours to leave the city, & all those remaining after that time may expect to receive their just dues."[58] The reaction demonstrates that professionals were viewed as both parasites and dangerous to the community. In this instance, gamblers were associated with petty criminals, but the reference to giving those who did not leave their "just dues" recalled the Vicksburg incident, which even in Natchez, would be a punishment totally out of proportion to loafing.

The Anti-Gambling Society had little effect. Politicians and doctors, lawyers and planters, slaves and free people of color in Natchez continued to gamble. Sargent S. Prentiss, a lawyer and politician in Natchez, garnered as much respect from his ability at playing cards and treating his friends with liquor as he did from his profession. In writing of his own experiences in Mississippi, Joseph Baldwin recalled, "even in the vices of Prentiss, there were magnificence and brilliancy imposing in a high degree. When he treated, it was a mass entertainment." Though professional gamblers were viewed with disdain, men like Prentiss were admired.[59]

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[58] James, 259-260.
[59] Joseph G. Baldwin, *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi: A Series of Sketches* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1853), 199.

If Natchezians in general had a problem with professional gamblers, they certainly did not have a problem with those who gambled on horseracing. The Pharsalia Course, located just outside the town at St. Catherine's creek, became the primary non-farming focus of the elite from the territorial period through the Civil War. The Mississippi Jockey Club owned and operated the track and included among its members some of the wealthiest families in Natchez, including the Bingamans, Minors, Duncans, and Surgets. The latter two may have been the largest slave holding families in the United States. David Burney, one of the founding members of the Jockey Club, is attributed as "the first breeder of fast horses and game cocks in the Territory and a great patron of the turf." Those who had the means did not purchase their horses locally; instead, they looked abroad for the world's finest horses. For some planters, like William Minor (the son of Stephen Minor), horseracing seems to have been at least as important as maintaining his plantation; his letters and notebooks often contain references to horse breeding, contests, and bets. Some planters maintained private racetracks on their plantations. As one visitor to the town testified, "the horsemen appeared to me more skillful than those at New Orleans and in [other] parts of America I have seen.[60]

The main competitors in Lower Mississippi Valley horseracing between the 1820s and the 1850s were two planters in Natchez, William Minor and Adam Bingaman. These men were horse breeders and also major sponsors of races from Natchez to New Orleans. Bets made on racing dwarfed those made on card games either Under-the-Hill or in

[60] James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 254; William J. Minor and Family Papers, LSU; Edouard de Montulé, *Travels in America, 1816-1817* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1951), 96.

private games. The Minors and Bingamans were known to bet sums up to $10,000 on races. However, by the 1850s, both families had become disenchanted with horseracing in Natchez. Bingaman left the town for New Orleans, as the track at Metarie had become more popular and commanded higher prize money. William Minor's problem stemmed from a different source: "I consider that the 'Pharsalia Course' has been desecrated by this mule race. If the Club . . .[survives] it is immortal." The reference is to the practice that the track had begun in the 1840s of allowing less well-to-do whites and free blacks to race horses and mules. While these groups had been allowed to place bets at Pharsalia and at the quarter track Under-the-Hill, this more prestigious track had only catered to the wealthiest of owners prior to this. Minor, like Bingaman, chose to relocate his horses and interests to Louisiana, where his thoroughbreds would only compete against others and only whites could take part.[61]

The interest of planters in gambling reveals an important explanation of the differences between those who gambled and professional gamblers. Prentiss betting thousands of dollars without demonstrating outward concern over winning or losing is described with admiration, not the sense that he was "desperate" or morally bereft. The differences between men like Prentiss or planters like John Nevitt had to do with the unspoken code separating professionals from amateurs. Professionals were labeled as transient, suspicious characters who cared only about profiting from the unsuspecting and causing disorder. For amateurs, particularly those of high status, gambling served as a

[61] William J. Minor Papers, LSU; James, 255.

means of displaying masculinity and a lack of attachment to things material as a way of cultivating a reputation. Since professionals were seen as outsiders to the community at Natchez, even though the professionals enabled the elite to gamble, they were not viewed in the same way. The potential dangers that professional gamblers brought to Natchez were outweighed by the cultural needs of planters and the economic needs of the entire town. Planters used Under-the-Hill to display masculinity and without the taverns and brothels, the boatmen who operated trade on the Mississippi would be less inclined to stop at Natchez. By imposing a difference between professionals gamblers and those who gambled, elite white men in Natchez separated themselves from the vice and could blame the problems associated with this vice on the "frontier" nature of these professionals who traveled the Mississippi River.

Gambling and Masculinity in William Johnson's Natchez

The separation created between the town above the bluff and between professional gamblers and those who gambled created a space allowing African American men to assert masculinity in ways not available in rural areas. Blacks across the South were excluded purposely by the white definition of manliness. At its core, the power behind enslaving men was not just that of racial exclusion, but also the power to deny masculinity. Though slaves could be fathers and husbands, their children and wives were legally the property of the owner. Even on plantations in the Natchez district that allowed slaves to grow their own crops and participate in the market on Sundays, the primary provider for enslaved families was the slaveowner, co-opting one of the most

important roles of manhood in both western and African traditions. In addition, families only remained together at the whim of the master; market conditions, the death of the owner, or simple vindictiveness could split a family. These factors limited black men's ability to control their lives and those of their families without the possibility of punishment from the master.[62] Slavery, then, necessarily limited several of the behaviors that marked men in the minds of Southern whites. Nevertheless, manliness could be exerted in any number of ways within the black community. [63]

Gambling and the permissive attitude toward non-professionals offered blacks more than just a diversion from their day-to-day lives; it offered the chance for profit. Professionals may have gained a reputation for being dangerous, but for some blacks, connections with professional gamblers could be beneficial. Israel Campbell, an enslaved man often hired out by his master, noted that working with gamblers gave him "an excellent chance to make money, making almost as much a month as master got for my wages."[64]

Few black men had the opportunity to take part in gambling on the same level as William Johnson. Johnson and other blacks in Natchez viewed gambling in similar way as whites: it offered a way to establish manliness, bravery, boldness, and belonging in a

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[62] John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 149-322; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 482-494.

[63] The exertion of manliness within slavery can be found throughout Nineteenth century slave narratives, most famously in Venture Smith*, A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture: A Native of Africa, but Resident Above Sixty Years in the United States of America. Related byHimself* (New London, Connecticut: C. Holt, 1798) and David W. Blight, ed., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (Boston and New York: Bedford Books, 1993).

[64] Israel Campbell*, Israel Campbell, An Autobiography. Bond and Free or, Yearnings for Freedom, from Green Briar House. Being the Story of My Life in Bondage, and My Life in Freedom* (Philadelphia, the Author, 1861), 75.

society deeply concerned with individuals knowing their places.[65] Historians have treated Johnson, like Ibrahima, as exceptional, and as such the rich source that his diary offers for understanding the cultural dimensions of the black experience in Natchez has not been examined fully. That Johnson interacted with the white elite as well as the black community is a well-known part of his story, but the meanings of gambling that found expression in Johnson's diary have been less carefully explored.

As Johnson grew to adulthood in the 1820s, his interest in gambling grew as well. Johnson competed regularly with his friends, with his sons, the men he enslaved, and with whites in hunting and fishing. These activities were competitive tests of manliness, and bets often intensified the competition. He recalled one incident at "Minor's Pasture" where he "took several shots with a Pistol and then we Shot for Liquor and I made a tolerable Shot. I then Shot for Mr. Thayer and Caused him to Loose the Liquor." Johnson and his free black friends often competed against white associates like Thayer. Johnson frequently entered contests with another white man named John Jacquemine. In one such game, he challenged Jaquemine "to shoot 25 yards with a Riffle [sic], 3 best in five for One Qtr. Box of Segars and I lost the Cegars—I shot afterward with him and Mc [Bob McCary, another free black barber] and Beat them both—they both shot with my Riffle." This points to his willingness to compete and lose, but also to his pride that later he beat his competitors and that his companions seemed to appreciate the quality of his rifle. In a later contest with Jacquemine, he "Shot a Mach [sic]. . .the 3 best in five, for

[65] Davis and Hogan, *The Barber of Natchez*, 202; Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: New Press, 1974), 250-283.

One Barrell [sic] of Oysters—I won them with Ease." The men also pitched "quoits" and dollars for similar wagers.[66]

Johnson, like many men in Natchez, seemed most passionate about risking his money on events in which not his skills but the attributes of animals would be put to the test. Again, this is not terribly surprising; the animals owned by men, be they dogs, fighting cocks, or racehorses represented their owners when pitted against those of others. Owners took as much pride in the characteristics of animals as they did in their own personal characteristics. On a trip to buy supplies in 1837, Johnson spent five dollars on a "game Cock," but afterward was disappointed when he "put him down in the yard and the Frizeling chicken whipped him So I find he is not much." Apparently, after this experiment, he determined not to use the bird in an actual match, because not only would it be killed, it would reflect poorly on Johnson. He does mention attending a cock fight in 1849, but wrote, "I wrode [sic] out this Evening To the Tract to See a fight of Chickens and I saw 3 fights and Lost 2.50 and it is a Sport that is to me Disgusting in the Exstream [sic], I shall not go to see any more I promise."[67] There is no evidence that Johnson ever attended another, but it is telling that despite how disgusting he found the practice, he was willing to take part, both through betting and the attempt to raise a bird for fighting. The act of participating in the "sport" was an act of participation in a culture of manliness.

[66] Hogan and Davis, *Barber*, 73-75.
[67] Ibid., 74.

Horseracing was the ultimate combination of an animal's and an owner's traits, and not surprisingly, the races in Natchez became places of intense interest. Johnson attended races at the Pharsailia track and noted that despite the "genteel" nature of the place, men often became violent over the races. The sums of money exchanged in side bets occasionally reached between $5,000-$10,000. After one race between the horses Fanny Kemble and Red Maria, Johnson witnessed a fight between "Rouland & a Mr. Lupton" in which the two wrestled and resulted in a broken leg for Rouland. The fight between Rouland and Lupton was over a side bet, but owners of horses were just as likely to fight if they felt they were being cheated. John Perry, the owner of Red Maria, became enraged after having what he believed to be a victory declared a tie. Perry "abused Mr Lee Clabourn for all sorts of D---rascals and Dm thieves, rouges and Every thing else that he Could Lay his tongue to—he shoved Mr Os Clabourne Back 3 times and struck him once." Though money was certainly a part of Perry's interest in the race, it was not his only concern. After he won a $5000 purse against one of William Minor's horses, he promptly issued a challenge to "the world in general, and Mississippi in particular" suggesting a sense of invulnerability as a result of his horse's success.[68]

As was true of card games or any other type of gambling in Natchez, horseracing did not level social distinctions. Joseph Rocheleau learned this lesson at the Pharsalia Track. Rocheleau had owned a horse called Hard Heart that had dominated racing in Natchez in the 1830s prior to the involvement of Bingaman and Minor. As these planters began investing their far more considerable resources in racing, Rocheleau found he

[68] Hogan and Davis, *Barber*, 205-206.

could not compete with their thoroughbreds. Rather than recognizing this, Rocheleau continued to bet with these men, eventually losing not only all of his money to Bingaman, but also his horses and his slaves. Once he had squandered all of his property he had lost his ties to the community and was labeled as a professional gambler, despite the fact that the was clearly terrible at it, and was indicted by the Adams County Circuit Court twice for being a professional.[69]

Johnson became very involved in horseracing, both as a spectator and an owner. Although he had a relatively close relationship with "Colonel" Adam Bingaman, Johnson did not bet on races with him; instead he bet with Samuel Gossin, Bingaman's farm manager. It is possible that Gossin was just a go-between for Bingaman and that the Colonel did not believe that he and Johnson should gamble because of the differences in their status. Either way, Johnson followed Bingaman's horses with interest, betting with various white men on their races. The opening of the Pharsalia track to the non-elite, which William Minor complained of as a "desecration" of the track," allowed Johnson and other free men of color like William Winston to bet on races involving planter thoroughbreds. Over the course of four days in November of 1847, Johnson made several bets with Winston and others, losing $105 dollars without showing concern.[70]

Johnson also raced his own horses. In December of 1835, Johnson mentions taking two of his horses out for a race, presumably at the quarter track Under-the-Hill. He noted, "John rode the sorrel Horse and Bill Nix wrode [sic] the Bay horse, Paginini—

[69] Ibid., 206; *Diary*, 82; *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine,* V (1834), 635-37, VI (1835), 479, 521.
[70] Hogan and Davis, *Barber*, 206; *Diary,*592.

They won two heats a piece." Just as other slaveowners did, Johnson used enslaved jockeys rather than riding himself. After the Pharsalia course opened to general participation, his horses ran there as well in events that followed the higher stake races involving horses of the elite. The purse for these lower-stake races remained below $50, but small purses did not lessen the opportunity for Johnson to compete with his white associates like John Jaquemine, as well as against other free men of color.[71]

Gambling, then, offered Johnson a means through which he could interact with the wider black community of Natchez in a way that both proved his manliness and demonstrated his higher socioeconomic level. Despite the tendency to view Johnson as a unique anomaly in an otherwise biracial structure, he and other men of color participated with whites in gambling and did so for the same reasons-- to prove that they were men within their communities. In Johnson's case, he did this to prove his manliness to the white community.

Sex and Racial Control

Along with drinking and gambling, Natchez Under-the-Hill became famous as a place of illicit sexual activity, particularly of the interracial variety, but as was true of other vices, suggesting that this happened only on the landing was an artificial construction. By the early nineteenth century, Under-the-Hill became one of the most popular stops for boatmen on the Mississippi because of the dozen brothels located on "Maiden Lane." Within these "bawdy houses," men mingled with the African American,

[71] Hogan and Davis, *Barber,* 207.

Indian, and white women who plied their trade there. Visiting the town in 1801, Henry Ker observed, "here is the bold-faced strumpet, full of blasphemies, who looks upon the virtuous part of her sex with contempt and hatred; every house is a grocery, containing gambling, music and fornicators."[72] A few years later, Christian Schultz noted after an evening in Natchez,

> when I went on board . . . my boat, I discovered that my visit was as unwelcome as it was unexpected. I was so unfortunate as to disturb the morning slumbers of exactly one quarter of a dozen of the copper-coloured votaries of the Cyprian Queen, who it seems had undertaken to enliven the idle hours of our Canadian crew. The *ladies* really seemed ashamed, but whether from a conviction of their being intruders, or considering me as such, I am unable to say.[73]

William Hall found himself in a similarly uncomfortable situation when he entered an establishment Under-the-Hill where drinking, gambling, and prostitution apparently occurred on a nightly basis. After entering the saloon he noticed, "two gaily dressed sylph-like forms" who were "whirling in the waltz." Surrounding these dancers were a group of spectators that he identified as "Kentucky boatmen" and a band led by "a black boy of some 12 or 13 years of age dressed *á la Turk*, who flourished and beat a tamboureen [sic] in the most fantastic manner, producing sounds that would in all probability, have slept until the Day of Judgment." In establishments such as this one, it was not uncommon for owners to hire blacks to play music to attract a clientele. As the waltz became a reel, Hall was approached by a women and invited to dance; when he

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[72] Henry Ker, *Travels Through the Western Interior of the United States from the Year 1808 to the Year 1816. . .*(Elizabethtown, New Jersey: the author, 1816), 6.

[73] Christian Schultz, *Travels on an Inland Voyage Through the States of New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee, and Through the Territories of Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, and New Orleans; Performed in the Years 1807 and 1808; Including a Tour of Nearly Six Thousand Miles . . .* (New York: Isaac Riley, 1810),134-136.

declined, she responded "Then d—n you, treat me" which he did, and then found his way to another part of the establishment. The interracial and interclass nature of the tavern and the aggressive behavior of the women intimidated Hall.[74]

The circumstances that led these women to Under-the-Hill varied as much as their racial categorization. Ads for the sale of slaves insinuated that African American women might be used as prostitutes. Jeremiah Routh placed this cryptic ad in one local newspaper in 1804, "for sale or hire. Eleven young Negro girls, all capable of business . . ." The "copper-coloured" women that Schultz encountered may have been Native Americans or women of mixed race, though whether they were free or enslaved is impossible to determine. In another situation that Schultz observed about four years later, two drunken boatmen engaged in a long-winded argument that included boasts of physical prowess comparable to horses and alligators, which ultimately devolved into a fight. The object of the dispute was a Choctaw woman and likely a prostitute. As Victoria Bynum has noted in her study of antebellum North Carolina, many women who turned to prostitution did so because they lacked a kinship network in their communities and had been shunned from society. This appears to have been the case for a white woman named Molly, a tenant on a local plantation, who found herself in a dire economic situation and being "misused." In response she left without telling anyone and "moved all in to the landing at Natchez" with the apparent notion of becoming a prostitute. Given the geographic mobility afforded by the Mississippi, as well as the

[74] Hall, "Reminisecence of Natchez," in McDermott ed., 196-197.

disruption of extended kinship networks of those who moved to the West, it Molly's case likely resembled that of many of the white women who became prostitutes in Natchez.[75]

Attempts were made to ferret out the illicit sex trade Under-the-Hill, but as was the case with similar efforts regarding gambling and drinking, they were unsuccessful. A poem published in a local newspaper mockingly mourned the attempt of justice of the peace Anthony Campbell to "clean up" the landing:

> Fair Poll, adieu. With thee sweet Jenny goes, and Moll, and Bet, and Nell, and Rach, and Rose. Lost o'er the watry way compelled to roam . . . Concordia's banks receive their wandering feet, Concordia's crops supply them beds' of rest, Concordia's bachelors are supremely bless'd.[76]

The author's lament at losing these women to the men across the river in Louisiana apparently was shared by a considerable number of others. It seems that more of the town's voters wanted to keep this "blessing" for themselves and voted Campbell out of office.

Interracial sex, while usually associated with Under-the Hill, was common above the bluff as well. Even if, as one historian has noted, "attitudes toward male fornication were permissive" and "male lust was simply a recognized fact of life," for men in the United States, slavery and slave codes altered what was considered "permissible."[77] Since slave codes considered enslaved women property and because they could not testify against whites in court in Mississippi, sexual relations between white men and

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[75] *Mississippi Herald and Natchez Gazette* 5 October 1804 and Bisland Family papers quoted in Beard, "Natchez-Under-the-Hill,"36-37; Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 94.
[76] Anthony Haslett's poem from the *Washington Republican and Natchez Intelligencer,* 18 December 1816 and reprinted in Davis, *A Way Through the Wilderness*, 247.
[77] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 295.

black women were implicitly sanctioned, whether they were consensual or not. Of course, the difference in power between whites and blacks, between master and slave, brings into question whether any relationship between an enslaved person and a free person could ever be consensual. At least among men, interracial sexual relations--even longstanding ones--between white men and black women seem to have been accepted tacitly as long as the white man treated the relationship as "casual," remaining sufficiently superior in it so that no one could question who controlled the relationship.

Nevertheless, notions of racial propriety could lead to social condemnation for sexual relationships between whites and blacks. Like Thomas Foster Jr., who was condemned by his family for his liaison with Susy, Adam Bingaman was denounced when he entered into a similar association. Bingaman, known as "the Napoleon of the track" for his success at horseracing, had been a substantial planter in Natchez, a member of the state legislature, and connected by blood or marriage to many of the wealthiest families in Mississippi and Louisiana, but was rejected by the community when he left Natchez to live with Mary E. Williams, a free woman of color, in New Orleans. After taking up residence in New Orleans, Mary Williams assumed the surname Bingaman, as did their children Charlotte and Elena. By living with Mary Williams as husband and wife, this no longer was a "casual" relationship between a white man and a black woman; he elevated her status and lowered his own.[78]

[78] Hogan and Davis, *Barber*, 233-240; Virginia Meacham Gould ed., *Chained to the Rock of Adversity: To be Free, Black & Female in the Old South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 36n.

Limiting sexual activity was a method through which masters could exert further control over the men and women they enslaved, and while many owners had difficulties doing this on the plantation, the urban space of Natchez complicated matters further. William Johnson frequently mentioned his slaves and apprentices interacting with women in ways that he did not find appropriate. These men, free and unfree, took serious risks to meet with women. Johnson recalled finding "William at Mr. Parkers kitchen with his girls. Struck him with the whip 1st and then with the stick. He ran home and I followed him there and whipped him well for it, having often told him about going down there." Despite the punishment, the enslaved William and others still took their opportunities to defy their masters. After briefly leaving his barbershop, Johnson recalled that upon his return he found that "Bill and Charles had a Black Girl at the Shop Door" and disparagingly remarked "oh what pupys [sic]. Fondling—beneath a Levell, Low minded creatures. I look on them as Soft." Of course, Johnson, being free and married and providing for a family might not have shared the perspectives of Bill and Charles, and while he may have understood their competition for this black girl's attention, he did not condone it.[79] Most likely, Johnson was disturbed that Bill and Charles, both of whom were free apprentices, rather than slaves, were cavorting with a woman who was both "black" and unfree.

Johnson listed similar instances in his diary in which he lashes out at the "boys'" choice of female companionship. When Bill, Charles, and Wellington went to a party thrown by "a servant of the Missis Evans out there at the Residence," Johnson

[79] Davis and Hogan, *Diary*, 3 November 1835, p. 73, 18 June 1839, p. 257.

condescendingly wrote, "butter, butter will run in suitable weather," in other words, expressing his resignation in the face of their desires. His apprentice Antony's attendance at one of these parties caused Johnson to contend that he and those who attended were "birds of a feather," unlike himself. Bill Nix, the apprentice Johnson most often took to task for being with "black women" despite his own "light complexion," finished his indenture, married a free woman of mixed race, and set up his own barbershop in the town of Rodney. Still, Johnson was not surprised to find that Nix's wife had "been made use of" by a white man.[80]

Other free men of color in the town may have shared Johnson's perspective, but few had his connections to white patronage. Legal restrictions on free people of color constrained the lives of those who lived in Natchez, but some, like Johnson, were able to negotiate the spaces allowed by their freedom. Some scholars have rightly contended that connections to important whites enabled free blacks to exist within slave societies, but for free men of color, demonstrating masculinity was crucial for maintaining social standing. Johnson and other free men of color like Nelson Fitzhugh, Robert McCary, and Robert Smith, not only cultivated reputations among whites, but also did so among the black community of Natchez. Creating and providing for a family that lived independently of white households became one if not the primary means by which free black men asserted their belonging to the town's male community. The number of free blacks in Natchez between 1820 and 1860 began small and remained small, but the little growth within this segment can be attributed more to family formation and child bearing

[80] Davis and Hogan, *Barber*, 56-61.

than an increase in manumissions. In fact, the state legislature actively restricted the ability of slaveowners to free the men and women they enslaved in 1831, 1842, and 1857. The small increase from 69 in 1820 to 202 by 1840 would be curtailed after this decade; the free black population only grew to 214 by 1860.[81]

If the free black population's growth was slow, its ability to establish independent households was not. The percentage of free black families living with whites declined each decade between Mississippi's admittance to statehood and the determination to leave the union. Given the low numbers of free blacks being introduced via personal manumission, the increase in numbers can only be attributed to children being born free in Natchez, and what that means is that free men of color, like Johnson, sought free women to be their wives. William Johnson married Ann Battles, a freed slave, in 1835 and the couple had 10 children, all of whom were born free. Similarly, Robert McCary and Nelson Fitzhugh married free women of color and had free children; in fact, one of Fitzhugh's sons married a daughter of McCary, signifying that marrying within the free black community remained important for the last generation of free people of color in Natchez. [82]

On occasion local newspapers found opportunities to laud free men of color for their "good character," but generally editors chose men who had successfully raised a family independent of whites within the town. Robert Smith, who operated a taxi service, merited an obituary in the Natchez *Courier* praising his "industry, probity of life,

[81] Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez, 1720-1880*, 51-62; Charles S. Syndor, "The Free Negro in Mississippi Before the Civil War," *The American Historical Review* 32 (July 1929): 769-788.
[82] Eighty-five percent of free blacks lived with whites and seventy-one percent lived within white households; these percentages decreased to six and five respectively by 1860. See Ronald Davis, 54-60.

correctness of demeanor and Christian-like character," which had won him "the favor and respect of the entire community." The paper explained that his funeral was attended by "a large concourse of his colored friends and relatives."[83] The *Courier* also reported that Nelson Fitzhugh and his family were "of good character and honest deportment" and as such should be allowed to remain within the state, as pressure to remove free blacks escalated in the late 1850s.[84] After his murder in 1851, the *Courier* noted William Johnson's "character, intelligence, and deportment," but also recognized his position as a family man; Johnson, his mother, and one of his daughters were the only people of color buried in the white section by the Natchez Cemetery Association.[85] While slaves were unable to keep their families together except in rare situations like Ibrahima's, free men of color used the spaces they occupied under law and within society to create and protect family bonds in the same ways that white men did.

Conclusion

While the rowdy nature of Natchez Under-the-Hill was publicly lamented, the neighborhood served an important cultural function for men, black and white. Through drinking, gambling and illicit sex with women, men furthered their reputations within their racialized communities and affirmed their belonging to the town's community of men. Until the Civil War, Natchez was a city of slaveowners, slaves, and free blacks who

[83] Natchez *Courier* 2 June 1858 as quoted in Ronald Davis, 61.
[84] Natchez *Courier* 9 November 1859, quoted in Ronald Davis, 63. This movement to expel free people of color occurred throughout the South in the late 1850s, but especially in Mississippi and South Carolina, both of which had black majorities throughout this decade.
[85] Davis and Hogan, *Barber,* 264-266.

largely ignored the temperance movement, restrictions on gambling, and interracial sexual unions as incompatible with notions of masculinity in the South. Even though slavery and the racial order of Mississippi limited the opportunities for black men, the environment of the town and the nature of Under-the-Hill enabled blacks to create spaces in which to resist the notion that they were not as masculine as white men. Free black men used their indeterminate status to maintain and prove that they were as manly as others not just through these behaviors, but also by establishing households and families independent of whites. If the town's elite whites worried about the interracial bonds that were created through gambling, drinking, and sex, they did very little to limit them. Despite the cultural frontier, these practices were not confined to Under-the-Hill, nor were they restricted to one class of people. The fictive division between the upper and lower town allowed planters to publicly display masculinity and, unintentionally, allowed black men the same opportunity.

Chapter 4
The Politics of Manumission: (Re)Defining Slavery and Freedom in the Day-to-Day World of Natchez Slaves and Slaveowners

Natchez Under-the-Hill offered substantial opportunities for black men to display their masculinity, but most aspects of slavery and the cotton economy in Natchez furthered its reputation among blacks and whites as one of the most repressive environments in the nineteenth century South. As one of the premier slave trading depots of the antebellum period as well as the destination for many slaves forced to make the journey to the frontier of the plantation South, Natchez certainly deserved this reputation. Still, even within this region that viewed African Americans first and foremost as commodities, slaveowners could not and did not "forget" that slaves were both property and people.[1] The actions and behaviors of slaves and free people of color on the plantation and within the town, inside the state of Mississippi and across the Atlantic world, shaped the ways in which blacks and whites in Natchez viewed one another and perceived slavery and freedom.

Several recent studies have defined slavery in the Old Southwest as perhaps the most dehumanizing mode of slavery practiced within the United States.[2] There is no doubt that slavery was brutal in this region, with particularly cruel masters and traders seeking profit above all else. Even within this hostile environment, African Americans

[1]The idea of slaveowners and traders negotiating the process of commodifiying human beings and "forgetting" their humanity when it served their purposes is explored in Edward Baptist, "'Cuffy', 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States," *The American Historical Review* 106 (December 2001): 1619-1650.

[2] See Ibid., Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) ; Joan Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

were able to shape the perceptions of their owners, resisting the notion that they were only property, and occasionally, earning their freedom. For their part, slaveowners did not worry only about profit, but also about who the slaves they brought to their plantation were. As cotton production shifted the demographics of Adams County from a simple black majority at the end of the eighteenth century to a region where over 77 percent of the population was enslaved by 1850, masters became increasingly concerned about the "character" of slaves. When discussing character, slaveowners referred to a variety of personality traits and behaviors that would mark slaves as either "good" or "bad." Slaves with "good character" were rarely discussed in the same terms as whites who possessed these qualities. Good character among whites might include such traits as bravery or generosity. Slaves with good character were usually defined by what they were not: if they were not criminals, if they were not violent, if they were not addicted to alcohol or running away, they often times were perceived positively. As cotton began moving the center of slavery in the United States from the eastern seaboard to the Old Southwest, events across the Atlantic World, including rebellions and the Abolition movement, made these traits especially important to a paranoid group of slaveholders in and around Natchez. These same events made owners more convinced that the slaves they brought into their plantations would be of "bad" character, specifically those infected with dangerous intellectual notions of "liberty" from the Haitian Revolution or perhaps with a propensity toward violence from involvement in a slave revolt in Virginia.

With the closing of US participation in the Atlantic Slave Trade in 1808, slaveowners in Natchez became both more concerned that masters in the east, the only

real source for would-be buyers, would try to unload dangerous slaves on them and that these slaves would corrupt those already on their plantations. To counter this, slaveowners in Mississippi not only turned to the legislature, but also entered into deals with the men and women they enslaved as a means of social control; in return for a display of good character, masters would promise freedom. Colonization to Liberia offered one means to freedom for the enslaved and though both the American and the Mississippi Colonization Societies stated their goal as the colonization of free people of color in Africa, increasingly by the late 1820s and 1830s slaves began leaving for the US colony in Africa. Freedom for whites in Natchez was based on the ability to own and release people from bondage, and notions of what "good character" meant to masters became a means to control the growing enslaved population of the region. For blacks, freedom at least partly meant the ability to maintain connections within their community and keep families together. Slavery, of course, limited this ability, restricting time and space for the enslaved, but it did not remove slaves' capacity to manipulate and shape circumstances within the institution. Just as the urban environment of Natchez allowed room for black men to demonstrate masculinity, so too did the social environment of Natchez in the late 1820s through the 1830s allow room for blacks to mold the conditions of slavery and the potential for freedom. The ACS and MCS became important paths for the enslaved to attain freedom by playing on both the assertion of their own characters and the reputations that slaveowners in Natchez sought to cultivate. [3]

[3] Ariela Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

"Sold Down the River:" Black Perceptions of Natchez

Just as the good and bad traits of slaves were critical for slaveowners, the characters of slaveowners would shape slaves' impressions of Natchez. The potential profitability of cotton moved the center of slavery away from the Chesapeake and the Lowcountry and toward Mississippi and Louisiana by the middle of nineteenth century, but the dreams of profit held by whites wanting to move to Natchez were at least equaled by the nightmare of African Americans who could be forced there at the whim of an owner. The number of people living in Natchez and the rest of Adams County grew quickly in the first half of the nineteenth century, but the free population remained nearly static. By 1850, the total number of slaves in the county was 14,395, while the white population was 3,948, actually smaller than it had been in 1820. The huge influx of enslaved African Americans of course resulted from the cotton boom of the early nineteenth century, and while prices for cotton shifted because of vagaries in the textile industry of the Northeast and in England, the crop had effectively become king in Natchez as early as the first decade of the century. As a result, Natchez became second only to New Orleans as a market for human property and therefore the final destination for many brought to the market from other parts of the South.[4]

African American fears of the region came not only from a sense of the "social death" of being removed from kin, but also from the impression that slaveowners in

[4] Census data available from http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/; on the cotton boom see John Hebron Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest* and *Agriculture in Ante-bellum Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

Mississippi were the cruelest in the United States. When asked "why do slaves dread so bad to go to the South—to Mississippi or Louisiana?" Lewis Clarke, a former slave, replied, "because they know slaves are driven very hard there, and worked to death in a few years." Jacob Stroyer claimed that the Old Southwest "was considered by the slaves a place of slaughter, so those who were going there did not expect to see their friends again." The Reverend Josiah Henson held that slaves in the upper South associated the area with "perpetual dread."[5] While growing cotton required huge amounts of labor, which certainly was difficult, the work required to grow the crop paled in comparison to more dangerous work environments such as the malarial rice swamps of the lowcountry or the human-consuming sugar plantations of the Caribbean and Latin America.[6] Yet among slaves in the upper South, it was cotton-growing regions like Natchez that inspired fear and anxiety. The reason for this was not the danger of the work itself, but rather the ways African Americans believed masters viewed slaves in the Old Southwest. The impression that most enslaved men and women had of these slaveowners was that they

[5] Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999), 23; Lewis Clarke, *Narrative of Sufferings of Lewis Clarke During a Captivity of More Than Twenty-Five Years Amongst the Algerines of Kentucky* (Boston: David H. Ela, 1845), 84; Jacob Stroyer, *My Life in the South* (Salem: Salem Observer Book and Job Print, 1890), 40; Josiah Henson, *An Autobiography of the Reverend Josiah Henson* in Robin Winks ed., *Four Fugitive Slave Narratives* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1969), 34.

[6] The historiography of labor on plantations producing these varied commodities is vast. This study draws from works dealing with cotton production in Mississippi: Charles Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1933); John Hebron Moore, *Agriculture in Ante-Bellum Mississippi* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1958); David Libby, *Slavery in Frontier Mississippi, 1720-1835* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004). On rice production in the lowcountry see William Dusinberre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Norrece Jones, *Born A Child of Freedom Yet a Slave: Mechanisms of Control and Strategies of Resistance in Antebellum South Carolina* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1990). On Sugar, Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985); Stuart Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1550-1835* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985).

viewed the bodies of blacks merely as commodities to be bought, sold, and worked to death.

Nineteenth century slave narratives offer rich evidence of the ways that the enslaved viewed both the journey to Mississippi and expectations of treatment from owners once they arrived. Often, these narratives portray slavery in the upper South (Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky) as far gentler by comparison. William Anderson wrote of his experience in Natchez and sale to a cotton planter versus his life in Virginia in biblical terms: "when I remembered old Virginia, the place of my birth, my mother's house, the cabin, the grove, the spring, the associates, the Sabbath enjoyments. I felt that I was like the children of Israel when they were taken down into Babylonian captivity." In the slave pens in Natchez, Anderson described the scenes related by many who experienced sale to the Old Southwest. He specifically noted the behavior of slaveowners themselves "see a large, rough slaveholder, take a poor female slave into a room, make her strip, then feel of and examine her, as though she were a pig, or a hen, or merchandise. O, how can a poor slave husband or father stand and see his wife, daughters and sons thus treated?"[7] Such treatment supported claims that slaveowners in Natchez were among the worst.

It was not only the long journey to the Old Southwest and the separation of families that made these people apprehensive; it also was the type of masters to be

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[7] William Anderson, *The Life and Narrative of William Anderson, Twenty- Four Years a Slave. . .* (Chicago: Daily Tribune and Job Printing Office, 1857), 14-15.

expected. In the biography that she wrote of her father, Josephine Brown noted, "In the cotton districts, the picking season is always the most severe for the bondman, for when they gather in the cotton, the slaves are worked from fifteen to twenty hours out of the twenty-four."[8] William Webb, forced by his master to move from Kentucky to Mississippi, noted a striking contrast between the slaveowners in the two states. While passing through Mississippi on his first journey to the state, he observed, "we passed through many large plantations during our travels, and the same cruelty was going on in every one of them. The whip and whipping post were used as an every day occurrence." This contrasted strongly with Kentucky, which he felt was "better than any state" in terms of how slaves were treated. Still, the commodification of humans as a result of the market made available in the cotton producing Old Southwest struck him powerfully. In Bowling Green, he noticed "something different here, than I had ever seen before. The speculators went round buying colored people--even little children. They had large plantations of them and when they got a large drove of them together, they shipped them down South." Webb described the town as "a sea-port where they raised colored people and shipped them to other States." When his master decided to relocate to Mississippi, it did not take long for Webb to notice a difference in the ways that the enslaved were treated. He observed, "it seemed as though people were free in Kentucky, when

[8] Josephine Brown, *Biography of an American Bondsman by his Daughter* (Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1856), 19, 27.

compared with Mississippi."[9] While clearly slaveholders everywhere could be brutal, slaves sold to Natchez believed that slaveowners in Mississippi were especially harsh.

African American newspapers published in the nineteenth century often used Mississippi, and Natchez in particular, as the evidence of the most barbaric treatment within the slave South. Frederick Douglass reported to his readers that a slave had been burned to death in Natchez, and while the local newspapers disputed the date that this happened, they did not challenge that the act took place.[10] The *North Star* described another instance in which a white man and his wife traveling up the Mississippi to Indiana were separated by authorities in Natchez on this suspicion that the woman was a runaway slave. The woman was then confined to the jail until the husband could produce proof that the woman, suspected to be of mixed ancestry, was legally his wife. The reporter noted "I could not myself detect anything in her countenance or conversation that would condemn her in the North from walking in the highest circles of society."[11] Natchez was represented as the home of especially malicious people who made it difficult even for those who legally could travel freely.

Abolitionist newspapers furthered this image of Natchez as the home of some of the cruelest masters in the South. One Northerner who had relocated to Natchez in the 1820s found that though many of his neighbors suggested that he would "soon wear off [his] northern prejudices, and probably have slaves of [his] own," he could not resolve to

[9] Webb, *The History of William Webb,* 8-9.
[10] *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* Rochester, New York, 22 June 1855.
[11] *The North Star,* 29 December 1848.

"make injustice appear justice."[12] In other instances, runaway slave ads ran in papers stressing the harsh punishment faced by slaves in Natchez. One such ad, published in the Natchez *Courier* and reprinted in *The National Era*, listed a runaway named Mary with a description that highlighted the malicious nature of slaveowners: "has a small scar over her eye; a good many teeth missing. The letter A is branded on her cheek and forehead."[13] The copyeditor assigned the whippings, brandings, and other tortures to the "character of those who direct their labor." For the most part, he spoke of overseers, who were common in Natchez where many of the wealthiest planters owned multiple plantations while living in town, as being "abandoned, brutal, and desperate men." Despite the attack on the character of the overseers, all of the vignettes of cruelty described in the letter place the blame squarely on masters, who while they may have been less abandoned and desperate, appear no less brutal in their descriptions.[14]

For African Americans in the nineteenth century, the fear of being "sold down the river" did not only mean being sold to New Orleans or to sugar plantations, it also meant Natchez. The sundering of upper southern black families brought about by the cotton boom in the Old Southwest removed the foundation of identity for many men and women. Natchez was viewed as the most brutal places that one could be transported via the domestic slave trade largely because, in the minds of blacks, masters lacked the "character" of those in the upper South. Essentially, former slaves and others viewed Natchez as the place in which whites most closely identified black people as property.

[12] Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: The Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), 107.
[13] *The National Era* (Washington, DC) 1 July 1847.
[14] Ibid., 108-109.

As Sidney Mintz has argued in *Sweetness and Power,* slaves were a "false commodity because a human being is not an object, even when treated as one." This too can be argued in relation to the men and women enslaved in Natchez, not only from a moral position created by a removed historical perspective, but also by looking at how the enslaved in this region used opportunities to reject treatment as chattel.[15] Men and women forced into slavery in Natchez found ways to defy this categorization by demonstrating that they too possessed "character" and that their character could improve or worsen the reputation of their owners.

Character and Slavery in the White Mind

These narratives represent only a portion of the African Americans brought from other parts of the United States to Mississippi during the cotton boom, yet these stories are echoed throughout surviving records pertaining to those forced to travel to the Old Southwest. As William C.C. Claiborne, the first governor of the Territory of Mississippi, told James Madison early in the cotton boom, "the fact is that labor here is more valuable than in any other part of the United States, and that the industrial portion of the Citizens are amassing great fortunes."[16] The draw of cotton fortunes led men like John Steele to

[15] Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 43. Edward Baptist uses this quote from Mintz in "'Cuffy', 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men,'" p. 10. Baptist contends that "as a description of historical forces, his flat denial is incomplete" and counters that "commodification is a process that takes place in the eye of the commodifier, not the commodified." (4). Michael Tadman shares a similar view in *Speculators and Slaves*. Both of these excellent works primarily focus on how whites viewed commondification. Walter Johnson offers an important counterbalance to the arguments of Baptist and Tadman in *Soul by Soul.* 111-112.

[16] William C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, Secretary of State, 20 December 1801, in *MTA*; Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi*, 39.

leave Virginia in 1798 for Natchez. At the outset, Steele brought only his personal servant George, leaving both his and George's family behind. In his letters back to his brother, Samuel, Steele asked about the well being of both families, recognizing that "George is impatient to hear from Milly and his children." In addition, after a year in Natchez, Steele wrote "you have never said a word about them in your letters whether they [the slaves] are well or not. And I have been anxious to know [. . .] I must soon make some arrangement to take them into my employ." Steele, it seems, was interested in the well being of his property both in the sense of setting George's mind at ease, and perhaps to know if his investment in human chattel would be effective in cotton production in Natchez. Steele also remarked to his brother, "keeping him [George] so long from them, has been a source of uneasiness to myself—it is what I did not intend or expect when I left home."[17] The unease that Steele felt over George's mindset does not fit with the notion that only the bodies of the enslaved mattered to masters in Natchez, but also did not change the fact that George had no choice in the move.

Leonard Covington, another slaveowner moving from the upper South to Natchez, encountered circumstances similar to those of Steele. Covington's slave Sam expressed apprehension at making the trip to Natchez. Recognizing this, Covington wrote a letter to his brother Alexander already living in Natchez relating, "Sam himself maintains a sullen silence on the subject and yields consent to accompany my people, or to be sold or exchanged." In order to convince Sam that conditions were favorable in Mississippi, Leonard asked Alexander to have some of his slaves in Natchez write to those still in

[17] John Steele to Samuel Steele as quoted in Libby, 38-39.

Maryland and include "a few fine flourishes touching the good things and matters of Natchez [. . .] which Sam has lost by not going." The implication is that Sam and other slaves Covington owned were literate, but whether these letters were written or not, Sam remained unwilling to make the move. Leonard Covington then sold Sam locally in Maryland and purchased a man named Dick whom he took to Natchez.[18] Again, as was the case with Steele and George, Sam's worth was not defined soley by his pecuniary value in Covington's mind, but rather it was his importance as a person.

William Hayden, an enslaved man transferred from Virginia to Natchez by a slave trader, contended that his owner valued his character. While on the trip, Hayden described the slave trader, Stone, as "a fiend incarnate, --whose only joy was in the torture of feelings more noble and tender than his own; and whose greatest happiness was in witnessing the tears and supplications of the poor oppressed slave, --especially the female portion." Hayden offered resistance to Stone throughout the voyage and was assured punishment when arriving in Natchez. When threatened with whipping, Hayden took up a weapon. The stand off that ensued was finished when his owner, Phillips, told those brought to subdue Hayden that they would have to face him should they hurt his "favorite slave." While in Natchez, apparently several men attempted to purchase Hayden, but he contended that he did not intend to be sold to them: "when I was asked how I would like to serve, I invariably replied, "I don't know how I would like to *serve any man,* until I am tried.'

[18] Letters from Leonard to Alexander Covington as reprinted in Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, 145-146; see also Ulrich B. Phillips, ed., *Plantation and Frontier* (Cleveland: A.H. Clark, 1909) 2: 210-218.

'Well,' continued they, 'how do you like our looks?'

' *I don't like them at all!'* responded I. This answer generally called for an explanation between Philips and the anxious purchaser."

Phillips responded to such exchanges by defending Hayden as his body servant, again presenting him as his favorite. Hayden felt that his service to his master had created a sense of gratitude in Phillips and the perception of "faithful character."[19]

Covington and Steele, like Hayden's owner and many other slaveowners, conceived of some enslaved men and women, particularly those who served as personal servants, as possessing "character" differentiating them from others. Ariela Gross has noted that slaves held a "double character" under the law across the South, as both people and property. She rightly points out that masters determined a slave's actual "character" or personality traits by observing habits, behaviors, and abilities.[20] "Bad" character in slaves could be determined by habits like drinking or addictions to behaviors such as theft or running away. Samuel Cartwright, a physician in Natchez, argued that these bad traits resulted from biological differences between blacks and whites rooted in polygenesis. Cartwright contended that the disease of "drapetomania" (running away) was inherent in those of African heritages and as a cure, he prescribed a treatment that placed slaves in "that submissive state which it was intended for them to occupy."[21]

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[19] William Hayden, *The Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels, For a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South* (Cincinnati: William Hayden, 1846), 73-77.
[20] Gross, 1-9, 85.
[21] Cartwright as quoted in Gross, 87-88; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage, 1956), 109.

"Good" character was usually cast as the absence of bad traits and in the terms that Steele and Covington applied to their preferred slaves: loyalty, obedience, intelligence and superior service. Steele wrote that he felt "bound from humanity" to maintain George's family, but did not always share this bond when considering others. Steele offered to sell property in Virginia to his brother for "two Negroes" with the intention of transporting them to Natchez for work in cotton, regardless of separation from their kin in Virginia.[22] Some scholars have viewed the actions of Steele and other planters in the upper South who either relocated with slaves or sold their slaves to the Southwest as evidence that any sense of paternalism between masters and slaves was a fiction created either from the largest slaveowners to romanticize their positions or by twentieth century historians searching for a way to distance slavery from capitalism.[23] What tends to be lost in the arguments of historians is how slaves utilized the ways in which planters viewed individual slaves and viewed themselves and how the resultant identities created within this exchange could be used. In other words, even in a place such as Natchez, where humans were commodified and traded to a greater extent than anywhere else in the slave South in the nineteenth century, astute judgments by slaves about how whites viewed slavery and freedom could be used to ameliorate positions within the slave society and on occasion, could lead to freedom.

In spite of the greed driving slaveholding in Natchez, slaveowners were often forced to acknowledge that their human property were not merely commodities that could

[22] Ibid., 38.
[23] For the historiography of the paternalism thesis, see the introduction to this study, p. 4-5n. Tadman's argument contends that paternalism was a fiction, as does Noreece Jones, *Born a Child of Freedom Yet a Slave*; Dusinberre, *Them Dark Days;* and Oakes, *The Ruling Race*.

be packaged in ways that denied humanity. Cases like those of Hayden and George reveal that some slaveowners in Natchez viewed certain slaves as possessing good character, but worried about those on neighboring plantations as well as those from other states brought in via the domestic slave trade. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Governor Winthrop Sargent issued a circular letter warning the white inhabitants of Natchez that those slaves involved in Gabriel's Rebellion had likely been influenced by "foreigners," and also that these same external forces likely were manipulating slaves in Natchez. Sargent had little doubt that some of the "fifty thousand" involved with Gabriel had made their way to Mississippi. Furthermore, the active market created by slaves in Natchez on Saturdays and Sundays offered a chance for slaves off of the plantation to mix and exchange potentially dangerous notions of liberty.[24]

Interestingly, Sargent advocated a different path than that followed by most Southern legislatures after learning of the plans of Gabriel and the Haitian Revolution. Whereas other slave codes across the South became more restrictive, recognized that, at least on some level, those involved in these revolts were justified in their actions: "we deprive them of the sacred Boon of Liberty is a Crime they can never forgive—mild and humane treatment may for a Time Continue them quiet, but can never fully Reconcile them to their situation." In addition, he worried that slaves might be allies to foreign parties, particularly the French, who might wish to retake Natchez, and that the enslaved would be "irresistibly stimulated toward Vengeance." Sargent requested the militia to

[24] Circular Letter to Slave-holders from Governor Winthrop Sargent 16 November 1800, *MTA*, 311-12.

enforce the laws, but "not unnecessarily to harass the Men, but more strongly impress the Negroes that we are never off our guard."[25]

As Sargent's concerns make clear, planters in Natchez had concerns over the character of the enslaved in the same ways that slaves were concerned about the character of masters. With the closing of the Atlantic slave trade and the accompanying decline of profits from tobacco as well as the growing importance of cotton, the center of slavery relocated from the east coast to the Old Southwest. As a result, slaveowners in Natchez became increasingly concerned with the slaves brought into the region via the domestic trade or through owners who moved from elsewhere in the South. Though Gabriel's plans clearly concerned slaveowners in Natchez, they still were willing to purchase large numbers of enslaved men and women from Virginia directly from traders, despite the fact that these people may have been sold because of their suspected involvement in the plot. Traders did not hesitate to advertise "Virginia born" when announcing their arrival in Natchez, even after the conspiracy. In 1810, William Rochel published, "I have upwards of twenty likely Virginia born slaves now in a flat bottomed boat lying in the river at Natchez, for sale cheaper than has been sold here in years."[26] Sixteen years later, the slave trader Austin Woolfolk announced, "Negroes for sale. The subscriber has on hand *seventy-five* likely young Virginia born Negroes, of various descriptions, which he offers to sell for low cash, or good acceptance . . .I will have a constant supply through the

[25] Address to Militia Officers, *MTA*, 324-6; Libby, 49-50.
[26] Ingraham, *Southwest By a Yankee*, (New York: Harper Bros., 1835), 2: 244.

season."[27] Several historians estimate that about two-thirds of the slaves in the state came from Virginia by the 1830s, and while this is based upon less than scientific measures, it would seem that this state did provide most of those brought into Mississippi via the domestic trade.[28]

Gabriel's conspiracy created only a small amount of concern in Natchez over the character of the enslaved being brought into the state, but Nat Turner's insurrection put the issue squarely at the top of white citizen's list of concerns. Shortly after the 1831 revolt, Stephen Duncan, one of the largest slaveholders in the United States, wrote to a friend that he did not "credit the story of the extension of the Virginia insurrection," despite "great apprehension that we will one day have our throats cut in this county. We have here 5 blacks to one white; and within 4 hours march of Natchez there are 2200 able-bodied male slaves. It behooves us to be vigilant, but silent."[29] The *Vicksburg Register*, like most other Mississippi newspapers, agreed with Duncan about silence,

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[27] *Woodville Republican,* 2 December 1826, reprinted in Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, 151.

[28] It seems that the estimate of two-thirds actually comes from Ingraham's assertion that the trading firm of Franklin, Armfield, and Company out of Alexandria, Virginia "supplied this country with two-thirds of the slaves brought into it," *Southwest by a Yankee*, 2: 245. D. Clayton James correctly notes that this was based on Ingraham's speculation by providing the quote in D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 197. Ariela J. Gross states that "by the 1830s, two-thirds of the slaves in the state had originally come from Virginia, with the remainder coming from Kentucky and other states," in *Double Character*, 31, though no source for this estimate is given. Clearly, this statement is meant to reflect those brought into the state via the domestic trade, not the total of those who lived in the state as it would neglect those brought in directly from Africa prior to 1803 and the enslaved children born in Mississippi.

[29] Stephen Duncan to Thomas Butler, Natchez 4 October 1831 as quoted in Winthrop D. Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 1. Census data available from http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/. The total enslaved population of Adams County was 10,942 in 1830.

referring to the situation with the metaphor, "we repose on a volcano" and calling for vigilance to prevent an eruption.[30]

The official "silence," however, was followed by several actions that would redefine slavery and freedom in Natchez. In 1831, the Mississippi legislature passed a law requiring all slaves brought into the state to have a registered "certificate of character." The notion behind this was to prevent slaveowners in Virginia from unloading those slaves involved in Turner's revolt or those who engaged in other acts such as theft or running away from coming into Mississippi. Several local newspapers reported that fifteen or twenty men who had participated in the Southampton insurrection had been brought in chains to New Orleans. The residents of the crescent city refused to allow these men entrance to the city, and as such, these papers reported that slave traders had sold them to unknowing purchasers in Mississippi and Louisiana. These certificates of character were designed to prevent such sales of "dangerous" slaves from occurring again.[31]

Not surprisingly though, the certificates never worked. Traders found ways to circumvent such requirements. Bacon Tait, a slave trader based in Richmond, Virginia, found these certificates to be only minor annoyances. In a letter to some of his associates trading in Mississippi he advised, "the laws of Mississippi demand it and to prevent the possibility of a difficulty I would advise them to take one along," but he also informed

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[30] *Vicksburg Register*, 16 September 1831 in Libby, 96. On Nat Turner's Rebellion: Kenneth S. Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996); Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York : Harper & Row, 1990).
[31] Gross, *Double Character*, 31; Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi,* 158-159; Ingraham, *Southwest by a Yankee,* 2: 259.

them "you can put as many negroes as you please in *one certificate*." Entire coffles could be brought in with based on one certificate, which Tait explained could be obtained by getting "two freeholders to go along and look at your negroes. You then tell them the name of each negro—the freeholders then say they know the negroes and give the certificate accordingly." The wording of these certificates simply offered the names of the enslaved and the testimony of the freeholders "that the above named and described slaves have not been guilty of or convicted of murder, burglary or arson or any felony within our knowledge and belief in the county and state aforesaid." Once the county clerk authenticated that the signers were "respectable freeholders of the county," the certificate became valid. [32] The potential for fraud with these certificates was incredibly high and could range from falsified names of the enslaved on the certificate, to forged signatures, to lying about the background of those named on the document. Still, requiring these documents demonstrated that the Mississippi legislature believed that enslaved men and women possessed character, and apparently, traders did too, as only professional traders were required to attain these certificates.

The Mississippi Supreme Court, it seems, disagreed with the legislature on the character of slave traders. The interstate trade, the Court contended, "was highly dangerous to the moral and orderly condition of our slaves" particularly "the introduction of slaves from abroad of depraved character, which were imposed upon our unsuspecting citizens by the artful and too often unscrupulous negro trader."[33] As one state judge put

[32] Bacon Tait to N. Courier, 4 October 1832, in Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 88.
[33] Mississippi Supreme Court quoted in Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi,* 161.

it, Virginia and Maryland had absorbed the "abolition feeling" of some of their neighboring states; ending the slave trade to Mississippi would cut off the market for the Upper South to remove slaves and thereby "compel these border States to stand firm by the institution of slavery."[34] These problems with the domestic trade shaped the opinions of delegates to the convention held in September of 1832 to revise the state's constitution. Included in the revisions of this document was an amendment stating, "the introduction of slaves into this state as merchandise or for sale, shall be prohibited from and after the first day of May, eighteen hundred and thirty-three." In addition to this was the caveat, "the actual settler or settlers shall not be prohibited from purchasing slaves in any state in this Union, and bringing them into this state for their own individual use, until the year eighteen hundred and forty-five." This amendment, while controversial, did not lead to the massive uproar or governmental overthrow that might otherwise be expected, if only because between 1833 and 1837, the legislature did not establish a penalty for violating this law.[35]

Finally in 1837, the legislature began disciplining those who broke this law. To a degree, this resulted from the financial panic of 1837, which because of lower cotton prices and the massive speculation in slaves that had occurred during the preceding decades brought ruin to many slaveowners. The ban on the interstate slave trade to Mississippi, like those of other Southern states, was only temporary, lasting from 1837 to 1846, but also like other states that banned the trade, it never really banned the trade.

[34] Mitchell *v*. Wells, 37 Miss. 235.
[35] Sydnor, *Slavery In Mississippi,* 163-164.

Slave traders found ways of circumventing the law. Some traders like J. R. and William Long, based out of North Carolina, apparently did not intend to alter their business at all. In a letter written from Mississippi, J.R. directed William to "bring all that you can get and I can sell them. The laws have no hold on me."[36] Other traders brought slaves in from elsewhere and had them work on local plantations until residency had been established, then would sell them within the state. For the planters living at or near Natchez and the traders wishing to tap into that market, there was no need to evade the law; traders could set up just across the river at Vidalia, Louisiana and planters could make the short trip, purchase slaves, and then return to Natchez.[37]

Ibrahima, the Haitian "Conspiracy," and the Politics of Manumission

As the enslaved population continued to outstrip that of the white and rebellions across the Atlantic World exposed the danger that such demographic disparities could create, whites in Mississippi became obsessed with the determining the character of their human property. Even as the cotton boom created fabulous wealth, these men and women who attempted to deal with the enslaved only as commodities found that slaves also possessed humanity that could be either beneficial or dangerous. The enslaved also took note of whites' interest in character and found ways to use this to their advantage.

Perhaps no individual took advantage of the notion of character as a qualification for freedom better than Ibrahima, but after leaving Natchez, whites began questioning

[36] Long to Long, 22 May 1838 in Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 89.
[37] Ibid., 89; Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, 168-169; Gross, *Double Character*, 31.

whether the African had duped them. Ibrahima had been seen throughout Natchez as deserving freedom, yet he became the focus of local anger when some suggested he planned to lead a slave uprising shortly after becoming free. While much of the debate over Ibrahima's freedom involved the two local newspapers and the 1828 presidential election, the published accounts reveal deep-seated concerns, reaching back to the Spanish period, that outsiders would infiltrate Natchez with designs on destroying the town. In other words, the desire to close borders to both "dangerous" whites and potentially rebellious blacks remained a serious concern into the antebellum period. In describing Ibrahima's nature in the local press after leaving Natchez, the same writers who had helped Ibrahima secure his freedom attempted to erase his "good" character and impose a "bad" one. Those traits that had marked Ibrahima as deserving freedom were used to suggest that he posed a danger to slavery.

Andrew Marschalk, editor of several newspapers in Natchez, had been one of the staunchest supporters of Ibrahima's freedom and return to Africa. Marschalk described himself as having "active agency" in Ibrahima's liberation, based on the story of Ibrahima's royal birth and his subsequent captivity, which the editor viewed as "critically correct . . . uniformly told," without even the "suspicion of an untruth." In addition, he described Ibrahima, a man he claimed to have known for 24 years, as "dignified-looking" and "very intelligent," and that he did not see Ibrahima as "a mere biped slave, restored to freedom, but as a dignified captive, a man born to command, unjustly deprived of his liberty, and who had become a victim of a cruel and savage practice (the curse of our land)." Marschalk denied that the American Colonization Society had anything to do with

Ibrahima's freedom; instead, he contended that Thomas Foster's benevolence, Ibrahima's character, and the suggestion of President John Quincy Adams led to his manumission. Secretary of State Henry Clay, who mistakenly believed Ibrahima was from Morocco, had far more to do with securing Ibrahima's freedom than did Adams, but the two were political allies and closely related in the minds of Andrew Jackson supporters.[38]

Marschalk more than likely knew this and as such, his assigning responsibility to Adams must have had a specific purpose. Foster only agreed to release Ibrahima and Isabella on the promise that they would not be allowed to possess their freedom while still within the United States. Once Marschalk ensured that the couple boarded the boat that would take the couple to Washington, they expected this promise to be upheld by those in charge of them, namely, Henry Clay, and by extension, John Quincy Adams. When the couple did not leave immediately for Liberia, but instead began raising money to free their children still enslaved in Natchez, Marschalk used this as an opportunity to attack the Adams administration and Ibrahima himself as advocates not only for the abolition of slavery in the South, but also of a bloody revolution to accomplish this goal.

Marschalk's opinion of Ibrahima, Clay, and Adams apparently changed after he read the account of Ibrahima's dinner with members of the African Masonic Hall in Boston. After the speeches and toasts delivered in Ibrahima's honor were published, Marschalk found both subtle and overt abolitionist messages. In a handbill circulated in

[38] The description of Ibrahima as a "Moor" led to some initial confusion of where he was from. Ibrahima either misled Marschalk or, more likely, the editor misunderstood that there were Muslims in African outside of Morocco. Henry Clay was led to believe that the man enslaved in Natchez was actually a member of the royal family of Morocco, a nation with which Clay and the Adams administration wished to have better relations; Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1977), 98-111.

Mississippi and down the river to New Orleans, Marschalk warned, "there is a large party in what are called the FREE states, resolved to emancipate the slaves of the South *at all hazards*." Marschalk attempted to demonstrate that one of the same newspapers that supported Adams for president also was "exciting slaves to revolt, by the same species of arguments which produced the massacre at St. Domingo."[39] Clearly Marschalk, a Jackson supporter, was doing his best to incite his readers to replace Adams in the White House, but in order to do this he played on the fears of whites living along the Mississippi in counties which, like islands in the Caribbean, had slave majorities. Even one of Marschalk's most vociferous opponents acknowledged that the threat of revolt lurked in "our woods and bayous."[40]

Marschalk found arguments like those that "produced the massacre at St. Domingo" throughout the toasts delivered in Ibrahima's honor and published in *Freedom's Journal.* That Marschalk found the toasts offered to abolitionists like William Wilberforce and Benjamin Lundy offensive is not surprising, but he found additional, subtler, messages within the texts as well. The first of these was a toast delivered by a man named Domingo Williams. Clearly, the editor found that this man's name was no mere coincidence, especially since the toast was delivered with what Marschalk referred to as "real DOMINGO feeling." The transcript of Williams' toast read, "may the slaveholders of the world be like the whales in the ocean, with the thrasher at their BACK and the SWORD*fish at their belly* until they rightly understand the difference between

[39] Andrew Marschalk, *Mr. Adams and the Emancipation of Slaves and the violation of the faith of the Administration*, 16 October 1828, in Allan D. Austin, ed., *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), 196.
[40] Cyrus Griffin, *Southern Galaxy*, 9 October 1828 in Austin, 195.

FREEDOM and slavery."[41] Marschalk believed this to be a plea to enact the same type of revolt that had occurred in San Domingue everywhere where slavery still existed, and since Ibrahima was the guest of honor, Marschalk no doubt viewed this as particularly directed toward Natchez.

The editor uncovered additional threats embedded within other toasts that were even less transparently troubling to the average reader. Among these was the toast offered George B. Holmes which read: "May the spirit of liberty which pervades our northern hemisphere today, be wafted on its gentle influence until it reaches that Southern Point where slavery abounds, and there diffuse its renovating influence till every bondman's soul shall be filled with the knowledge of his Right and be allowed to assert it in conscious rectitude."[42] While this seems to be a fairly gentle wish to end slavery in the United States, Marschalk found within this toast a message of revolution. The line "every bondsman's soul shall be filled with the knowledge of his Right" provoked Marschalk to ask his readers, "was this not the logic, and these threats, which preceded the dreadful massacre of St. Domingo?" The threat in this toast was not as direct as in the other, but the notion that blacks in the South should come to claim the same rights as whites was enough to convince Marschalk even here that the message was slavery's violent overthrow. The message was made even clearer when Marschalk explained that

[41] Marschalk in Austin, 199. Emphasis in the original.
[42] "Public Dinner in Boston" in *Freedom's Journal*, 24 October 1828.

the toasts, including "the prayer for the shedding of Southern blood, *were received with hearty cheering*." [43]

The political message that Marschalk was offering to his readers was that by supporting Ibrahima's freedom in the North, the Adams administration was tacitly authorizing the end of slavery and, potentially, a slave revolt like that which occurred in Haiti. This drew from the fact that Ibrahima was allowed to attend this dinner against Foster's wishes and that the these messages were published by newspapers that supported the re-election of Adams over Andrew Jackson. Marschalk asked his readers to "recollect whose lives you are hazarding by sustaining doctrines so abominable—recollect precisely similar threats and logic, by the illuminati of France, to those now advanced by the illuminati of Boston, in the official journal of Mr. Adams, produced the catastrophe at St. Domingo." Marschalk invited his readers in Mississippi and Louisiana to consider the demographics of their region and the consequences if "our blacks our inoculated with the doctrines contained in the toasts" that Adams condoned. Were the enslaved to be exposed to this, he believed that the men would be killed and "the wives and sisters of the slain" would be "reserved for a fate more horrible than death itself." [44]

Cyrus Griffin, editor of the rival publication the Natchez *Ariel* and supporter of Adams, contended that Marschalk had exaggerated the problem posed by Ibrahima's Northern tour. Griffin rightly pointed out to his readers that Marschalk had been one of the prime supporters of Ibrahima's manumission, even after Griffin revealed that

[43] Marschalk in Austin, 199
[44] Ibid., 200.

Ibrahima was not a native of Morocco and as such, the government would probably be less likely to take action to free Ibrahima. After informing Marschalk of the error, Griffin maintained, "the Colonel [Marschalk] wrote again immediately, urging the emancipation of Prince." When he received no response, Griffin was asked to write as well, which apparently he did not want to do at this point, since Ibrahima was not from one of the "Barbary States" with which the United States wanted to have better relations. It seems that Griffin relented in this and did write a letter, but was surprised to see it reprinted in Marschalk's newspaper without his permission. In addition, Griffin argued that he had suggested that Ibrahima be transported to Washington by sea, but Marschalk held that it would be more beneficial to go by river. Griffin recollected that Marschalk said that going by river would be better for him because "perhaps by so doing, he may raise money enough to purchase his family."[45]

Amidst the political battles between Marschalk and Griffin, both editors took steps to distance themselves from their complicity in securing Ibrahima's release from bondage. Despite their differing politics, it seemed that both men had changed their minds about who Ibrahima was. Prior to his journey North, both men were ardent supporters of Ibrahima's emancipation and viewed him both as "modest, polite, and intelligent" and as " a most extraordinary man . . . [with a] character for honesty and integrity which is almost beyond parallel." [46] After learning of his time in the North, both editors changed their minds about Ibrahima, viewing him as a danger to the institution of

[45] Griffin in *Southern Galaxy*, 23 October 1828 in Austin, 203-205.
[46] Griffin's first autobiographical essay, *Southern Galaxy* reprinted in Austin, 135 and Marschalk, "Letter from a Gentleman of Natchez to a Lady of Cincinnati," in *Freedom's Journal* 16 May 1828.

slavery and to the racial order of the South. While initially both Griffin and Marschalk supported Ibrahima in purchasing his family from the Fosters, they came to view this with suspicion after the dinner in Boston. When Marschalk received a letter in September of 1828 proposing to purchase 15 members of his extended family, the editor viewed this as an attack on slavery. Not only had Ibrahima been allowed to travel the North as a free man, but he also might have been permitted to return to Natchez to redeem his family from bondage. Even if he were not allowed to return, Marschalk was convinced that the slaves on Foster's plantation had been "inoculated with the doctrine of the Boston toasts." In his circular to the men and women living along the Mississippi River, Marschalk explained that he had "written on remonstrating against Prince being permitted to revisit this country, and against his being permitted to traverse this country as a traveling emancipator," but he believed this to be of no avail. Marschalk, who had viewed Ibrahima as a man of such extraordinary character, now seemed to view him as an instigator of a vast conspiracy against slavery.

Griffin, while ostensibly at odds with Ibrahima's freedom in the North and his own role in attaining it, took care to reproach those who suggested that there were plans to lead a revolt. The *Louisiana Advertiser* picked up the story that Marschalk printed and went to even greater lengths to prove that Adams was a "bigot" on the issue of slavery and that Ibrahima was a great danger to whites in the lower Mississippi valley. Two editorials produced by P.K. Wagner in New Orleans described Ibrahima in very different terms than the two Natchez editors. According to Wagner, Foster released Ibrahima with the condition that he not be allowed freedom in the United States because "he well knew

the negro to have an education superior to most white people, he knew him to be savage and cruel in his disposition, ambitious, proud, daring, altogether unfit to go at large in the United States."[47] This description contained just enough truth to incite readers to fear and anger. Ibrahima's education was widely publicized, but the other traits assigned him were patently false; no evidence suggests that Ibrahima was cruel on Foster's plantation, even in his capacity as driver.

Beyond what Wagner clearly believed to be the characteristics of a rebel leader that he found within Ibrahima, he found the political potential of his narrative to be at least as dangerous. Wagner alleged Adams' refusal to abide by Foster's condition (again, this was not necessarily Adams' decision) was for political effect, that everywhere Ibrahima traveled would bring out the "prejudices of the people against slavery and against the slave holders of the South." Wagner believed that there was no doubt that this was the Administration's goal and asked readers to consider the political effect of "a negro who can read and write Arabic with facility, thirty years in slavery among the 'barbarians of Mississippi,' himself a king, liberated by John Q. Adams. What a powerful argument this, in favor of re-electing that *humane man* J. Q. Adams to the presidency, and excluding the slave holder Andrew Jackson." Wagner invited those who favored Adams to consider the toasts that Marschalk had analyzed and to "remember St. Domingo" and "the French men of Hayti."[48]

[47] P.K. Wagner, *Louisiana Advertiser* 25 October 1828 in Austin, 214.
[48] Wagner in Ibid, 214-215.

Despite the distaste for John Quincy Adams expressed in these attacks, none of these editors suggested that Ibrahima was a mere pawn in this political scheme. Each of argued that Ibrahima had misled those involved in securing his freedom and each felt that he had betrayed his supporters. None of these critics were more vocal than Wagner, who found Ibrahima to be an enthusiastic accomplice to Adams's plan. In his editorial, Wagner suggested that Ibrahima was living a life of luxury during his Northern tour traveling in a "splendid carriage, at the expense of the government," all the while writing and sending letters to the South. The Louisiana editor found the letter he had written cautioning his son Lee not to get married as the most suspicious of these. Wagner wrote that this letter, published in the *Southern Galaxy,* "advises certain negroes to form no connections by marriage, and intimates that such connections might stand in the way of SOME GREAT DESIGN he is ere long to reveal to them." The average reader would no doubt notice that the "certain negroes" he addressed in this letter were in fact his sons Prince and Simon for the purpose of advising his third son Lee not to marry, as it would make the cost of emancipating his family that much higher. In looking for evidence of a conspiracy, Wagner seems to have left this part out, suggesting that if "certain negroes" were to marry, it would make them less likely to be good soldiers for the cause.[49]

Wagner used Ibrahima's supposed royal birth against him as well. According to the *Louisiana Advertiser*'s account, while in his homeland, Ibrahima himself "owned 2000 slaves whom he could kill and whip (and did kill, torture, and whip) as he pleased." The author also contended that while looking for support in the North, Ibrahima failed to

[49] Ibid.

mention that as punishment for his slaves, he would have "holes bored through their arms and legs. . . through which holes he would pass ropes. . . and suspend the poor wretches between heaven and earth." In addition to the torture, any slave that did not "hide his face in the earth" at Ibrahima's approach would be put to death. While living on Foster's plantation, Wagner presented that his trips to the town of Natchez were not to sell produce, but rather to gauge the military preparedness of whites for a slave uprising. His alleged tendencies toward violence also were supposedly a part of his daily life in Natchez, as his "African schemes of torture and his bloody disposition caused him to be viewed by the negroes in the neighborhood as a *bug bear or negro devil*." This account held that when discussing the circumstances surrounding his capture in Africa, Ibrahima would force his audience to listen to the details of the brutal killings he had committed while attempting to escape from those who enslaved him. While telling these stories, the author claimed, "he would speak half intoxicated with savage rapture, his red eyes would roll in fury, his long white teeth would gnash together, his muscles would quiver, as if trying to leap for joy, and he would clasp his hands and swear by Alla and Mahomet that for the pleasure of that moment thirty years of slavery was sweet."[50] Of course, all of this was pure fiction, designed to disparage Ibrahima's vaunted character and draw attention to Ibrahima' involvement in a conspiracy against whites in the South.

The about-face on Ibrahima's perceived worthiness for freedom would lead these editors and the slaveholders of Natchez to question the role of the American Colonization Society in the region. In attempting to distance himself from Ibrahima's freedom and

[50] Wagner in Ibid., 216-217.

Marschalk's accusations, Griffin contended that his rival editor actually supported the ACS and wanted it to go further. Griffin claimed that Marschalk had written, "it might not be a bad policy, on the part of the government, to send home the very few Moors in our country, and thus show our love of justice to the trans-Mediterranean nations." The contention that Griffin was making was "the Col. [Marschalk] is verily shocked at our inquiries concerning free negroes, and here publicly proposes that an arm of the Federal Government should manumit all the Moorish slaves in the state!"[51] The battle between the two over the 1828 election became one over manumission, not just in theory, but also as it related to specific black men in the town and the state.

If Ibrahima's freedom and the recognition it received in both the North and South caused controversy in Natchez, the Nat Turner revolt led the regional slaveholders to go to extreme measures to protect the peculiar institution. The toasts made by the members of the African Masonic Hall in Boston to Ibrahima led Marschalk and others to search out hidden threats to slavery, but even the references to Haiti likely were viewed by most readers as a more distant threat. Few slaveowners in Natchez were willing to make direct connections between those who took part in or even witnessed the revolt in San Domingue and those who lived on their own or their neighbors' plantations. Rather, the fear was that Ibrahima himself was abusing the "gift" that Thomas Foster had bestowed upon him by purportedly writing letters filled with the rhetoric of the Haitian Revolution agitating the enslaved in Natchez. This would change by 1831 as word of the Nat Turner revolt made its way to Natchez, and slaveholders began to question the "character" of

[51] *Southern Galaxy* 30 October 1828 in Austin 218-221.

free blacks and those whom they had purchased and continued to purchase from the upper South.

The Mississippi Colonization Society, Black Character and White Reputation

As was the case across the South, proslavery reaction in Natchez against the abolitionist movement of the 1830s after Nat Turner redefined what freedom and slavery would mean. Free people of color became the favorite target of proslavery activists, changing what it meant to be free within a slave society. One local editor contended, "if the free coloured people were removed, the slaves could be treated with more indulgence. Less fear would be entertained, and greater latitude of course allowed . . .in a word, it would make better masters and better slaves." More telling, though, was what the author had to say about granting freedom to enslaved men and women: "from the same cause also results another evil: the check, or rather stop, which has been given to the emancipation of slaves, no matter how meritorious their conduct."[52] In other words, while the editor favored the removal of free blacks from Natchez, he also lamented the fact that slaves who deserved freedom for service or character were being denied it.

The idea of removing the small free black population from the region was not a new one in 1831. As early as 1824 one local newspaper ran a series of ads over twenty issues suggesting that free people of color should move to Haiti.[53] The ads did not convince free blacks to leave, but it might have induced whites to look into the American

[52] *Natchez,* 5 March 1831 in James, 175.
[53] Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, 204.

Colonization Society, both as a means to solve what they believed to be a problem, and also as a way to assert their own reputations as benevolent philanthropists within the white community. Mississippians began contributing to the ACS in the late 1820s, but the founding of a state branch did not occur until June 1831; the first attempt failed as apparently slaves in the Natchez area had the impression that the Society would signal their immediate emancipation.[54]

Slaveowners in Natchez wanted to identify themselves as "good" masters within a community of slaveholders. This meant slaveowners built their reputations and self-images from the men and women they enslaved. The "character" of their slaves and the black community beyond their plantations was very important to this end. This is not to say that slaveowners believed those they enslaved were of equal moral integrity as whites or that they ascribed to blacks the same qualities that they did to whites; the point is that slaveowners recognized character among slaves and used it to bolster their own reputations within a community of masters. The historiography of slavery is rich with arguments over whether slaveowners were pre-modern paternalists or simply nascent capitalists interested in profit maximizing.[55] Certainly the ways planters viewed themselves varied from community to community, region to region, and planter to

[54] Ibid., 205-206; *The African Repository,* V, 182.
[55] The main division in this historiography is between Eugene Genovese and James Oakes (see the introduction of this study, p. 4-5, fn3 &4 for a detailed discussion of these differences. Charles Sydnor argued that slavery was not profitable in Mississippi, using a similar approach as Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York and London: D. Appleton, 1918). No modern historians have shared Sydnor's argument since Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage, 1956) effectively countered the notion that slaveholders remained committed to a labor system that went against their economic interests.

planter. What varied less was the tendency of slaveowners to become obsessed with outward appearances of operating orderly plantations so as to cultivate a reputation within the minds of other planters. Building such a reputation did not require kindness or benevolence of any sort toward the enslaved; rather, it necessitated recognition of the personality of slaves and an appropriate response to those personalities.

Whereas in 1828 men like Griffin and Marschalk publicly debated the viability of emancipation and colonization, by 1831, prominent men in Natchez had created a state affiliate of the ACS for Mississippi. The creation of this organization stemmed at least partly from a desire to remove "dangerous" free people of color in order to prevent a recreation of the Nat Turner revolt near Natchez. In addition, being an officer or contributor to the Mississippi Colonization Society became a signifier of elite status in Natchez. Stephen Duncan, at once the largest planter in the state, a physician, and the president of the Bank of Mississippi, served as the president of the Society from 1831-1840. Duncan personally contributed $50,000 to the MCS by the end of that period. Other large contributors included Dr. John Ker (who, along with Duncan, served as Vice-President of the ACS), David Hunt, and James Green, each a well-established planter. Other officers included governors of the Territory and State, a speaker of the State House, and many of Mississippi's religious leaders.[56] Joining the MCS offered the opportunity to demonstrate a generous Christian nature, as well as the opportunity to interact with some of the most powerful men in the state, and curiously, to display a commitment to the continuation of slavery.

[56] Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, 207-208; James, 175.

The success of the Society was based in part on free blacks's willingness to travel to Liberia. The majority of free people of color in the state lived in Natchez, but the numbers throughout the antebellum period remained small, resulting at least partly from another addition to the legal code in 1831 requiring all newly freed blacks to leave Mississippi. Additionally, it became increasingly difficult for slaveowners to manumit slaves. The law required that the enslaved could only be granted their freedom as a reward for meritorious actions and only if the person in question would not become a public charge.[57] These restrictions placed checks on the growth of free blacks who would have been allowed to participate in the MCS. There were no checks on white participation, however. In the Society's 1832 report it noted that, "the Society is increasing in numbers, some subscriptions have been attained . . .this has had a happy effect; the free people of color in this neighborhood have become awakened to the subject . . . They have called a meeting among themselves, appointed two of their own color to visit Liberia, to examine the country, and, make a report of the state and condition of the colony."[58]

The two selected for this trip were Gloster Simpson and Archy Moore, who visited the colony and reported back to the Methodist Church at Natchez. Simpson and Moore, reported being warmly welcomed in Monrovia and after the local Methodist meeting Simpson declared, "I seem to be born a second time, the heavens appear to open over our heads—everything looks kindly around us—this is indeed the home of the

[57] The Constitution of Mississippi, 1817 and 1832.
[58] The 1832 Annual report of the Mississippi Colonization Society appears in the *Woodville Republican,* 31 March 1832 and Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, 210-211.

colored man!" After touring the town, the two were shown the graves of white missionaries, which moved Simpson to ask, "shall there not come from our *own* ranks, men to take their places and preach to our benighted brethren the gospel of Christ?" Answering his own question Simpson vowed, "For one I am willing and determined to come." After a three week stay the visitor published the following:

> During a residence of nearly three weeks at Liberia, we visited the four principal settlements, in all which we found the settlers healthy, well pleased with their situation, and improving their circumstances very rapidly. A uniform expression of gratification, that they had found a place of freedom and comfort in Africa, was uttered without exception. Such was the impression made on our minds, of the advantages of emigration to this Colony, that we are determined to report favorably of the object, to those who sent us—and as the best testimony of our full persuasion of its great advantages, have determined to settle our business and remove thence, the first opportunity. We see our brethren there, *freemen*, and advanced to the full privilege of unrestrained enterprise and Christian liberty.[59]

Simpson would keep this vow, returning to Monrovia with his wife Abigail and their two daughters in April 1835. Archy Moore's family and that of his brother David would make the trip as well. [60]

Simpson's endorsement likely convinced several free people of color in Mississippi to make the journey to Liberia and 571 people eventually made their way to the colony. Nevertheless, the free black population never appreciably changed in size from the 1820s through 1840 while the MCS and ACS sponsored emigrants from the

[59] Gloster Simpson and Archy Moore in Helen C. Knight, *The New Republic* (Boston: Sabbath School Society, 1850), 116-17. I thank James Sidbury for this reference.

[60] Gloster Simpson appears in the Monrovia Census of 1843 along with Abigail and his daughters Hester Ann and Nancy. See the Roll of Emigrants at http://ccharity.com/liberia/monroviacensus5.htm . Gloster was still living in Monrovia and corresponding with Benjamin Drake, a Methodist minister in Natchez at least through 1845, Benjamin Drake and Family Papers, MDAH. Archy, his brother David, and their families arrived in Monrovia via the same ship, the "Rover," as the Simpson family in 1835, http://ccharity.com/liberia/rover041835.htm; *African Repository,* XI, 153.

state. The reason for this is twofold: many free blacks (the largest community resided in Natchez and will be the focus of chapter 5 of this study) had formed family and community ties that they did not wish to leave, and owners began striking deals with the men and women they enslaved that would send these newly freed people to Liberia. John Ker observed that this was more likely as "laws will probably be made in the slave holding states to prevent emancipation, except on condition of immediate emigration to Liberia." While a law stating that freed people be immediately removed to Africa did not pass in Mississippi, the state did require that free people leave upon release from bondage. Colonization offered one option. Ker asked rhetorically, "will not the hands of slavery be strengthened as to those who shall remain, except from the only ground of hope to the slave, the voluntary act of his master?" Ker felt that colonization would organically shift from the repatriation of free people to the emancipation of slaves for the purpose of strengthening slavery, both by removing the example of free blacks, which he believed "created many evils," and offering an incentive for slaves to behave well in order to secure passage to Liberia.[61]

For slaves to achieve this, they would have to convince their masters that they possessed character, and this did not occur in the smooth way that Ker envisioned. The conflict over freeing the enslaved and sending them to Liberia illustrates the conflicts in Natchez over the values of slaves as commodities and as people. In the 1830s the slave market was moved from Under-the-Hill to a place known as the "Forks of the Road" or

[61] Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, 211; For examples of free blacks required to leave the state and the legal arguments that followed see Chapter 5 of this study.

"Niggerville" just outside of town. This market was second only to that of Algiers at New Orleans in terms of the numbers of enslaved passing thorough it in the antebellum South. Some have argued that the market moved because the townspeople found having the market within town distasteful; perhaps it was moved out of fear that a revolt within the slave pens could get out of control in the rowdy neighborhood of Under-the-Hill. Regardless, the buying and selling of men, women, and children was commonplace and a part of the everyday life of Natchezians. [62]

Slave trading continued to give primacy to the market value of the people bought and sold at the Forks of the Road, but other planters viewed the character of those they owned to be of enough value to purchase freedom. Generally the conflicts between character and pecuniary value were disputed in inheritance cases. One such case occurred in 1832 involving the estate of James Green. Green, a judge, planter, and major contributor to the MCS, made a list of twenty-six slaves that he owned, primarily married couples and families, "be liberated by my executors and trustees "as they shall think proper if in their opinion said negroes" from "their continued good conduct be entitled to their freedom." Clearly, these slaves, who did not represent his entire estate, had established their characters to Green, who set them apart not only for freedom, but also guaranteed in his will that their families not be separated. In addition, he recognized that while he wished them to go to Liberia, they might not share his desire to relocate. To this end, he added a postscript,

[62] Ingraham, *Southwest by a Yankee,* 2:192-193. The roads were St. Catherine's and the ironically named Liberty Road in Gross, 171n.

> And in the event of any or all of said negroes and their children being emancipated as aforesaid and removing to Liberia to reside my desire in that event is that my executors and trustees give each of them so removing a liberal provision and I suggest a sum of not less than two hundred Dollars nor more than five hundred Dollars to each one over twelve years of age and also an outfit to each; and a liberal sum and outfit to each under twelve years of age; to be paid out of my estate by my said acting Executors and trustees. And in the event said negroes or any of them being emancipated and not going to Liberia then the provision out of my estate for any who do not go to be regulated and given by my Executors and trustees as aforesaid according to their best judgments.[63]

James Green, like others who contributed to the MCS, did so as a way both of acknowledging the character of some of those whom he enslaved and as a means of establishing his reputation after his death. The separate settlement created by the MCS known as "Mississippi in Africa" contained the town "Greenville" named in honor of Green's contribution to the effort. [64] He and other slaveholders in Natchez and throughout Mississippi used agreements with slaves as a means of ensuring the "good character" while these people lived on their plantations. Green no doubt used the

[63] Last Will and Testament of James Green, in Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, 221-222.

[64] Ibid., 222-23. The money sent later for the expenses of the ship the "Swift" had nothing to do with the emancipation of the named families in the will as this ship's passengers were set free by William Foster see http://ccharity.com/liberia/schoonerswift71836.htm ; *African Repository,* XI, 251-252; the passengers onboard the "Rover" are available online at http://ccharity.com/liberia/rover041835.htm . Davis, 56-57. Charles Sydnor has used the agreement of Green's heirs to the terms of this will as evidence of the benevolent nature of Mississippi slaveholders, but neglects several facts within this case. Foremost among these omissions is that Green manumitted only twenty-six of the 100 slaves that he owned at his death, the remaining seventy-four were divided among his heirs and remained enslaved. The will stipulated that those slaves not set free were to be sold, without regard to family bonds, and the proceeds "given to some charitable purpose." Moreover, Sydnor contends that the agreement to send these twenty-six to Liberia occurred only because the executors agreed to it and funded the named slaves on their journey. In reality, the will required the executors to comply unless they could demonstrate that the named slaves no longer displayed "good conduct," which could have been difficult. Since the slaves named were not specifically willed to any of the executors, this could have resulted in lengthy legal battles or problematic sales. Sydnor also presents the funding of the former slaves as an indulgence, though in reality, even if the $1000 contributed to chartering the ship, "Rover," is included the executors only pledged $280 to each person over twelve making the trip. While this amount fits into the range that Green suggested, it is only slightly over the low figure of $200 per person over twelve. If those under twelve, including additional family members not directly named in the will are included, bringing the total to 31, the amount drops to $225, considerably less than they could have expected to pay had these families remained in Natchez.

promise of freedom in Liberia to prevent slaves from running away or shirking their duties.

Unfortunately for the enslaved who entered such deals, the heirs of the owner did not always recognized the same terms. Green's sister Eliza determined in her own will years after James' death, "I now declare and make known that but one of all slaves bequeathed to me by my said brother is entitled to his freedom, named Barnet, whom alone I think worthy of my emancipation and entitled to it according to the wish and desire of my brother." When Eliza died, it was up to her son, William G. Conner to determine if Barnet actually should have his freedom, which was granted two decades after he had convinced James Green of his character. [65]

Other slaveowners followed a similar path as James Green, manumitting the slaves they believed worthy of freedom as a means to control others who would be enslaved to their heirs for life. William Foster, brother of Ibrahima's owner Thomas, died in 1834 and provided in his will that four families he enslaved would be released from bondage and sent to Liberia; the other people he owned would be remain enslaved. Forty-two men, women, and children from Foster's estate sailed to Monrovia in July 1836 onboard the schooner the "Swift."[66] James Foster, Thomas' other brother, freed his slave William in his will "in consideration of his faithful service and good character," but with the condition that freedom would only officially be granted after "he pays my executor $500." Isaac Ross, who initially provided that all of the slaves he owned would

[65] Davis, 67.
[66] Syndor, Slavery in Mississippi, 223; passengers onboard the "Swift," http://ccharity.com/liberia/schoonerswift71836.htm.

be granted their freedom as long as they left for Liberia, changed his mind and amended his will to remove seven from this consideration and insisted they be sold by his executors.[67] Elizabeth Whittle provided in her will "that my mulatto girl Eliza serve my daughter Anna Maria Moore two years and at the end of two years she is to have her freedom for her kind and attentive behavior to me." Whittle intended for the rest of the people she enslaved to be sold and the profit divided among her children, regardless of family connections of the enslaved.[68]

Still others, like Green's sister Eliza Wood, changed their minds about the character of those marked for emancipation and removed these enslaved people from consideration of freedom. John Minor had originally set forth in his will to free an enslaved man named Spencer as a means of rewarding his faithful service. Later, he added a codicil to the will that changed these terms: "whereas since making of my last will my said Negro man Spencer has acted unfaithfully and I have sold him, I do hereby revoke my will that Spencer be manumitted and I hereby direct and will that said Negro Spencer be and remain a slave for life as he is now."[69]

Perhaps the best display of the tensions between masters' views of slaves as people and as property came in wills in which the value of slaves outweighed the wishes of the deceased. When James Leech died in March 1836, his will provided that his slave Delia and her four children should be set free with the option of going to Liberia or

[67] Ross v. Vertner, 6 Miss. 305.
[68] James Foster's Will, 5 March 1833, in Davis, 57-58; Elizabeth Whittle's Will, 18 January 1826 in Mary Louise Flowers Hendrix ed., *Mississippi Court Records from the Files of the High Court of Errors and Appeals, 1799-1859* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1950), 363-364.
[69] Will of John Minor, 16 May 1830 quoted in Ronald Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez* (natchez: National Parks, 1993), 57.

Indiana. Moreover, he asked that his entire estate, with the exception of one lot in Woodville, be liquidated and the proceeds to be split among Delia and her children. James' sister, Eleanor Leech, filed suit claiming that the will violated the law of Mississippi requiring legislative permission to free slaves. James probably was the father of Delia's children and perhaps for vengeance, Eleanor wanted to inherit Delia and the children. Eleanor based her case on the order of the words in the will, which were "to set the slaves free and remove them," which suggested that they be released first, and then removed. The court agreed that this sentence was problematic, but ruled that the spirit of the will fit that of the law. Mississippi Supreme Court Justice Clayton ruled, "it is the policy of this state, as evinced by its legislation, to prevent the increase of free persons of color therein," but James' will did not violate this policy. Clayton dismissed the case with the ruling

> the mere collocation of words, if their meaning be the same, cannot vary their construction . . . with this view of the subject, if the executor, in good faith and with strictness, comply with the terms of the will, we see nothing in the law to prevent its execution. The right to freedom under the will is inchoate, and becomes complete, when the subjects of it are removed to another state or country, according to its provisions.[70]

By challenging the semantics of the will, Eleanor Leech's case signaled the beginning of a shift in how colonization was viewed in Mississippi. Whereas colonization was seen as a means of limiting the numbers of free blacks in the state in the late 1820s, by the mid-to-late 1830s, freeing slaves for any reason was seen as an attack on the institution of slavery.

[70] Leech v. Cooley, 14 Miss. 93; Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, 224.

In another instance involving inheritance, Drury W. Brazeale designated in his will that four families from his estate would be set free and funded on a journey to Liberia upon his death. However, it was determined that the slaves mentioned in his will no longer belonged to him at the time of his death. Brazeale had been married to a woman named Salina McCreary, who later married Charles Clarke. The daughter of Salina and Charles, Mary Clarke, claimed that she owned the slaves that Brazeale had willed to be sent to Liberia. The court enjoined the executors of Brazeale's will from freeing and sending the named slaves to Africa as they were not his property, though the arrangement with the ACS had already been made.[71]

The most famous and controversial case involving a dispute between the deceased and executors involved the estate of Isaac Ross. At the time of his death in 1836, Ross owned between 160 and 170 slaves, and his will required that they all be sent to Liberia, upon the death of his daughter, Margaret Reed. Jefferson Davis claimed to know many of the men and women Ross owned and described them as having "no superiors among their cast in good morals, industry, and intelligence." This apparently was how Ross felt about those he enslaved as well, and he placed the following codicil in his will:

> And it is my will and desire then and in that event [that those enslaved would chose to go to Liberia], that the entire balance of my estate, both real, personal and mixed, excepting always Grace and her children, Hannibal, Daphne, Dinah, Rebecca, Enoch and Merrilla and her children, be exposed to sale at public auction, one month's public notice being first given thereof in the papers printed at Port Gibson and Natchez, and the same sold on the following terms, to wit: one half of the purchase money to be paid in cash and the other half in twelve months from the day of sale, bond and unexceptionable security to be required of the

[71] Clarke v. McCreary, 20 Miss. 347; *African Repository,* XI, 36; XII, 235; Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi,* 232.

> purchasers, and to be judged of by my executors. It is further my will and desire that the proceeds of the sale, together with any money that may be on hand at the time of my decease, and any that may be owing to me, after deducting the amounts necessary for the payment of the legacies herein bequeathed, and all necessary expenses that may be incurred, be paid over to the American Colonization Society, provided they will agree to appropriate it in the following manner, to wit: First, to pay the expense of transporting my slaves to Africa; and, secondly, to expend the remainder for the support and maintenance of said slaves when there, the same to be done in such manner as the Society in their discretion may deem most to the interest and welfare of said slaves.

Ross expected this act to mark him as a major philanthropist, but little mention is made that those who chose to go would be funded by the sale of those who did not. [72]

In keeping with the interpretation of wills during the 1830s by the State of Mississippi, Ross had no reason to suspect that any legal issue would interfere with the execution of his will. Had the will not been explicit in granting these slaves the choice to go to Liberia only after the death of Reed, there may have been no problem. Several of Ross's executors were displeased with the will, but no legal action would be taken until after Margaret Reed's death in 1838. Prior to her death, and likely understanding the conflict that would arise concerning the emancipation of her father's slaves, Reed bequeathed her father's estate to Zebulon Butler and Stephen Duncan, two men committed to colonization. Jane Ross and Isaac Ross Wade, the surviving heirs, filed suit against Duncan and Butler, who intended to fulfill the wishes of those enslaved by Ross to emigrate to Liberia. The heirs used a similar strategy to the one used in the James Leech case. Isaac Ross Wade and Jane Ross's attorneys claimed that Isaac Ross was attempting to circumvent state law by freeing his slaves without the permission of the

[72] Ross et al. v. Vertner, 6 Miss. 305; James, 176; Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, 225-226, see also James, 176; and Alan Hoffman, *Mississippi in Africa* (New York: Gotham, 2004).

legislature. In addition, Jane Ross's attorney's argued that Ross had willed the slaves to the American Colonization Society, which they contended was illegal since the ACS, by charter, only existed to transport free blacks to Liberia, not to own or emancipate slaves. Finally, they insisted that while Margaret Reed could have sent the slaves to Liberia while she was living, she did not do so, and thus she had left them within Mississippi as slaves, where they must remain slaves since emancipation without legislative approval had not been attained.[73]

In 1840, the Mississippi High Court of Errors and Appeals ruled against the Ross heirs, maintaining that the will did not intend to free the Ross slaves in Mississippi. Justice Trotter ruled that this case was not about "the character" of the slaves involved in the case, but rather resolving the matter of whether colonizing and freeing slaves were in accordance with the laws of the state and the maintenance of slavery. The ruling did not dissuade some from resisting the right of Ross to send these men and women to Liberia. The following year, the state legislature declared that allowing the Ross slaves to leave the state would set a dangerous precedent. By 1842, this sentiment had grown to such a degree that a law was passed forbidding manumission of slaves by will. Isaac Ross Wade also continued to fight, claiming that he had five hundred armed men whot were willing to use force to stop the departure of these slaves. Opinion in Natchez had shifted so strongly against colonization by the end of this case that Stephen Duncan allegedly directed those slaves he had been granted by Reed, men and women then residing on his plantation near Natchez, to run away and hide along the Mississippi River until he could

[73] Ross v. Vertner, 6 Miss. 305.

arrange for a boat to transport them across to Louisiana. From Louisiana he planned to find a ship to transfer the former Ross slaves to Africa.[74]

Duncan never had to enact the plan because of the ruling, yet the Ross/Reed slaves did not leave the United States until 1848. The cost of the litigation contributed to the delay in that the majority of the money left to secure transport to Liberia was used for the court battle. Once the ACS had raised enough money to send the emigrants to Africa, they left on two ships, the first, the "Nehemiah Rich" set sail from New Orleans on January 7, 1848 containing 35 of the former slaves. The majority (141) of those released from bondage by the settlement had to wait another year to leave and in the meantime suffered through an outbreak of cholera while in New Orleans, which killed many on the long journey to Liberia.[75]

By the 1840s notions of what manumission and colonization meant had changed in Natchez. In the late 1820s and 1830s, to set slaves free could mark an owner as a benevolent master, even if not all were set free. By the 1840s, even manumitting slaves in a last will and testament for the purpose of colonizing Africa conflicted with the institution of slavery, at least in the minds of many white Southerners. If the colonization movement had begun in Natchez as a result of recognizing the character of blacks in general and the enslaved in particular, nothing had changed in this regard by the 1840s; what had changed is how whites viewed each other. The proslavery argument that

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[74] Ibid.; Martha Jane Brazy, "An American Planter: Slavery, Entrepreneurship, and Identity in the Life of Stephen Duncan, 1787-1867," PhD Diss. Duke University 1998, 187-188.
[75] Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi,* 229-230; *African Repository,* XXVI, 59-61, 77, 210-211; XXV, 118-121; Bell I. Wiley ed., *Slaves No More: Letters From Liberia, 1833-1869* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980), 155-156.

slavery was a "positive good" for all involved was echoed in Natchez and throughout the state and affected some who had viewed slavery as a "necessary evil" in prior decades. John Quitman, who had once said that slavery was inhumane, had changed his mind by the late 1830s, declaring that the people of Mississippi had chosen "to retain, the institution of domestic slavery" and that "the morality, the expediency, and the duration of the institution of slavery, are questions which belong exclusively to ourselves."[76] Increasingly, from the 1840s through the Civil War, even expressing questions regarding these issues could mark people as unsafe for slavery.

It was in this environment that Robert Lusk attempted to send all of his slaves to Liberia in recognition of their character and as a reward for their service. Since the 1842 law had made it illegal for Lusk to emancipate slaves in by last will, he chose to give all of his slaves to "John H. B. Latrobe, Rev Wm. McLean, and W. W. Seaton in trust for the American Colonization Society." In addition, the will set aside $3500 to send the slaves to Liberia. In prior cases the court had ruled that sending slaves to Africa to become free did not violate the law of Mississippi in that it did not expose the state "to the evils of an increase of the free-colored population in the country." By 1856, the year in which Lusk died, the opinion of the court had drastically changed. In this case, the court ruled that Lusk's will "was calculated strongly to promote emancipation, and it may therefore, be regarded as founded on a principle not consistent with the growth and permanency of the institution of slavery; for it cannot be supposed that an effect so obvious was not intended

[76] Quitman quoted in James, 176. A selection of proslavery writings can be found in Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

as a part of the system."[77] The issue had shifted not to the increase in the number of free people of color in the state, but rather the security of slavery.

Letters from Liberia

Just as blacks who were forced to endure the domestic slave trade left written evidence of how they perceived whites in Natchez, so too did those who left Mississippi in the United States to live in "Mississippi in Africa." The reputations that slaveholders had cultivated by freeing the people they enslaved were short lived in the white community and even shorter among those who left to Liberia. Conditions in the colony were certainly not what many had expected, and seemed even worse when many who had been promised additional support never received what they had been promised. Despite the description that many of the emigrants from Mississippi may have heard from men like Gloster Simpson and Archy Moore as well as those whites involved in colonization, these expatriates endured a depressed economy and violence between residents of the colony and other African nations. The people that had finally been released from the Ross and Reed estates were among those who had determined that both their former master and the members of the American and Mississippi Colonization Societies had misled them.[78]

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[77] Lusk v. Lewis et. al, 32 Miss. 297. For similar rulings against cases which tried to allow slaves to leave Mississippi and become free or to be treated as free within the state see Barksdale v. Elam, 30 Miss. 694 and Weathersby v. Weathersby, 21 Miss. 685. In both of these cases, as in Lusk v. Lewis, the main problem sited by the court is that allowing freedom to slaves, even those believed to have good character by their masters, created a danger to the institution of slavery.

[78] Simpson and Gloster in *The New Republic,* 116-117; On the conditions that former slaves faced in Liberia see, Amos J. Beyan, ed., *The American Colonization Society and the Creation of the Liberian State:*

Several of the people released from slavery in the Ross/Reed case wrote letters back to Mississippi to members of the American Colonization Society and to the surviving family members of Isaac Ross. Peter Ross and Robert Carter wrote the earliest of these shortly after arrival in the town of Greenville to John Ker, vice-president of the ACS, in Natchez. In this letter, the two freedmen complained that they had been lied to throughout the ordeal that eventually led to their journey and specifically that "we were told for the last three years that the avails of our hard labor was to be appropriated to our support in Africa, or to help us establish ourselves in this country, but we find ourselves here without any means to help ourselves." This referred to a stipulation of Isaac Ross' will that would have contributed to the funding of these slaves while in Liberia. Peter Ross and his fellow settlers blamed the lack of payment on the Mississippi and American Colonization Societies and on Isaac Ross Wade, grandson and principal heir of the Ross estate.[79] Ker and other members of the MCS and ACS repeatedly wrote in response to letters such as this one that the litigation establishing the will of Isaac Ross consumed all of the money that was due them in Liberia.

Based on additional letters, it is clear that members of the Ross/Reed group did not believe that Ker was telling them the truth, and they directed letters to others involved in the case looking for what was due them. Pascal Woodson wrote a letter directly to Isaac Ross Wade, who had led the heirs in disputing his grandfather's will. Pascal reminded Wade that "it was understood and was Capt. Rosses will for all of his folke to

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A Historical Perspective, 1822-1900 (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1991); specifics on the Ross/Reed slaves can be found in Wiley, *Slaves No More*, 155-157.

[79] Peter Ross and Robert Carter to John Ker, 23 March 1848, in Wiley, 157; Ross v. Vernter, 6 Miss. 305.

have so much money or Something in one way or the other and we have not Received any thing yet." He explained that a Mr. Cowering had told the would-be emigrants that the cotton that they had spent 1847 growing had not yet been sold and when it was, the money would be sent to Liberia. This, he told Wade, was a "rite Down untruth of Mr. Cowering," and he explained that he was writing to Wade because "I think you is the proper one that you may know how the matter is and what is its color and its unfairness. Please to remember that his is I P. Woodson write unto you with the greatest of effecunation [sic]." Perhaps Woodson believed appealing to Wade and contending that "Cowering," who was probably A. M. Cowan, an agent of the ACS, rather than blaming Wade himself for the lack of funds would help him acquire the money that was promised the emigrants. Clearly, Woodson hoped that Wade would recall him as a man of character. Woodson knew that Wade had prevented the emigrants from getting the promised money.[80]

After being ignored by Wade, several of the members of the Ross/Reed party wrote to the members of the ACS who had helped them secure passage to Liberia. George Jones sent a letter to Ralph Gurley to remind him that "we have Labour and Labour Sence we have Bin out to Liberia and we hav not recive one Sent [sic]." Jones asked Gurley to intercede on the part of the settlers in attaining the money promised them since no one else would. Peter Ross also sent a letter to Gurley asking him as a "good hearted friend" to help them in securing the money that they had been promised and

[80] Pascal Woodson to Isaac R. Wade 21 February 1853, in Wiley, 165; A.M. Cowan visited Liberia in 1858 and wrote *Liberia As I Found It* (Frankfort, Kenucky: A.D. Hodges, 1858) documenting his trip, but not surprisingly, does not mention his role in keeping the former slaves of Ross from getting what was promised them.

pointing out that Mr. McLain and Mr. Chanwich (both men ACS members who were to take care of the emigrants prior to their departure from New Orleans) had promised them the money upon their arrival in Liberia. Ross told Gurley, "Mr. McLain Says that we in Coming out to Africa the Colonization Society spen [sic] more money in Settling the Ross People in Africa then he ever Recived [sic] from old Captan [sic] Ross estate." Ross, however, also hinted that McLain lied, asking Gurley to "consider one thing my Dear Bro., and that is old Captan Ross Leaves one hundred thousand Dollers [sic] for his People. . .and then we can not Get Twenty five Dollars of that money."[81]

Gurley apparently sympathized with the plight of the Ross/Reed emigrants but did not offer any further support. In passing the concerns of Peter Ross on to William McLain, Gurley wrote, "I am in favor of sending this old man something, but you know the case better than I do." After deferring to McLain's judgment, Gurley also noted, "the cruelty and covetousness of the Executor of that Ross business in not to be described." Gurley would write back to Ross after his consultation with McLain, "the property of your old master was taken by his heirs, much of it wasted . . . and none remaining for your benefits." With this letter, Gurley confirmed to the emigrants that the money that they had been promised repeatedly from Isaac Ross, from the state of Mississippi, and from members of the MCS and ACS, would not be coming.[82]

After receiving Gurley's letter, Ross reprimanded the ACS and Wade. Ross confirmed that the ACS had done much for them and the other settlers in Liberia, but

[81] Peter Ross to Ralph Gurley, 15 May 1857, Wiley, 167.
[82] Gurley to McLain, Jan 1859 and Gurley to Peter Ross, 28 October 1859 in Wiley, 326.

insisted that the former Ross/Reed slaves were being cheated. In his letter Peter Ross wrote, "I am well awere [sic] of the mean ness that was in Isaac Wade but not with standing his meanness he could have power [to] Rule you all."[83] By this point, Peter Ross had determined the lack of character of Ross's heirs had kept the members of his party from receiving that which they had earned as a result of their own character.

The members of the Ross/Reed party remained in Liberia and, in spite of their hardships, became influential in the new nation's leadership. Much of the historiography dealing with the case of Isaac Ross's will only deals with the "kindness" of Ross and the battles that his heirs had with the state over the execution of the patriarch's wishes. [84] The character of those they enslaved influenced many Mississippi slaveholders. However, by the 1840s, changing notions of slavery and freedom eventually led to the end of the MCS and the end of personal emancipation in the state. John Ker lamented the decision of the legislature banning the freeing of slaves in wills as an "attempt to legislate away one of the rights most dear to men, and hitherto held sacred, the right to dispose of property by will or otherwise at pleasure."[85] The African Americans released from bondage found that slaveowners did not possess the character that they professed, as was evident from the breaking of promises made to them. The beginning of the colonization movement

[83] Peter Ross to Ralph R. Gurley, 29 January 1859, in Wiley, 171.
[84] Sydnor especially casts the Ross case in these terms in *Slavery in Mississippi*, 224-229; Alan Huffman also asserts this position, probably based on Sydnor's analysis, though his "sources" page offers very little documentation for his claims, in *Mississippi in Africa.*
[85] Letter from Mr. John Ker to the Mississippi State Legislature regarding the wills of Captain Isaac Ross and his daughter Mrs. M. A. Reed, 15 December 1841, available online, http://www.rootsweb.com/~msjeffe2/Kerletter.htm.

had begun with a recognition of slaves' character and ended with a realization by slaves that slaveowners lacked this quality.

Conclusion

Within day-to-day activities, the enslaved asserted "character" that was recognized by slaveowners. Character meant different things depending upon the slaveowner, ranging from especially loyal service to intelligence, morality, and commitment to family. By the late 1820s through the 1830s, just as cotton fortunes and slave populations began increasing at an enormous rate in Natchez, colonization served as a type of "safety valve" for slaveowners as they promised freedom in exchange for loyal service and good character among those they enslaved. For slaveowners, these agreements created a means through which they could further their reputations by displaying benevolence within a community of slaveowners while keeping order on their plantations. By the late 1820s, joining, contributing to, and encouraging African Americans to take part in the Mississippi and American Colonization provided slaveowners and avenue for publicly asserting this identity. As Abolitionist attacks on slavery increased in the 1830s, anxious Mississippi slaveholders attempted to secure the peculiar institution by expecting assertions of good character from slaves on their plantations and by attempting to limit potentially rebellious upper South blacks from entering the state. These same attempts to secure slavery would change the meanings of colonization in Natchez. Whereas in the late 1820s and early 1830s, colonization was

viewed as a way to ensure order and remove free people of color, less than a decade later, the courts ruled that it was inconsistent with maintaining the institution of slavery.

Chapter 5
Challenging the Color Line: The Malleability of Race In Nineteenth Century Natchez

Life in Liberia may have seemed like a viable alternative for many men and women who had negotiated freedom for themselves and their families while still enslaved, but for many free people of color in Natchez, the idea of leaving for Africa remained unappealing. While a persistent French presence and a shift to Spanish dominion had preserved and enhanced the rights of free people of color in Louisiana and especially in New Orleans, from 1763 onward, Natchez retained its legal code from the British period.[1] By the time that Mississippi became a United States territory in 1795, the legislature had taken steps to limit the number of free people of color, and after admission to statehood, several times sought to remove them altogether. Within this environment the small free black community of Natchez created a space for itself, not at the fringes of the town, but at its center.

Historians have looked at free people of color in urban and rural settings throughout the South and some have focused specifically on Natchez. Most of these studies view such people and communities as living on the periphery of slave societies, surviving only through connections with whites.[2] These connections stemmed from

[1] On Louisiana and especially New Orleans see Kimberly Hanger, *Bounded Lives Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Thomas Ingersoll, "Free Blacks in a Slave Society, 1718-1812," *WMQ* 3rd ser. 48 (April 1991): 173-200; Edward F. Haas ed., *Louisiana's Legal Heritage*.

[2] Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York: Norton, 1984); Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places;* Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: New Press, 1974); Charles S. Sydnor, "The Free Negro in Mississippi Before the Civil War," *The American Historical Review* 32 (July 1927): 769-770; Edwin

family ties as well as business and personal interactions that established relationships cultivated in day-to-day activities. Within a slave society such as Natchez, these relationships could help establish and maintain "free" status, but for free people of color, belonging to a community was also critical. White patronage might have led to freedom for many people of color, but being a part of a free black community helped maintain it. Just as Ibrahima has been treated as separate from the black community of Natchez, so too has the town's most famous free black resident, William Johnson. Like Ibrahima, Johnson's life was extraordinary, but his personal history offers a glimpse into the broader community of free blacks with whom he interacted on a daily basis. Despite their small number, the men and women who made up this community found spaces within the social and legal structures of the town to form and maintain identities in spite of white attempts to marginalize or eliminate them. For most, these spaces allowed protection for themselves and their families. Some free people of color found ways to manipulate this racist system, challenging the color line.

"Oh What a Country We Live In:" The Legal Milieu For Free People Of Color

Though Natchez's history resembled New Orleans's, moving from French colonial outpost in the eighteenth century to a major depot for both cash crops and human beings by the nineteenth century, its free black community developed very differently.

Adams Davis and William Ransom Hogan, *The Barber of Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959). Ronald L.F. Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez 1720-1880* (Natchez: National Historic Park, 1993). The work that best deals with free people of color on their own terms is Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: Norton, 1985).

Unlike New Orleans, Natchez lacked a constant French presence from the settlement's founding until 1763. As a result the *Code Noir's* legal provisions for free people of color as a distinct caste never applied to Natchez, nor did the region establish a legal or cultural precedent for acknowledging people of mixed heritage as a separate racial category.[3] Similarly, the establishment of the planter *cabildo* by the Spanish period allowed the immigrants who had come to Natchez during the British period to dominate the social and legal structure of the settlement between 1783 and 1795. In Louisiana, the Spanish had revised the laws of slavery created under the *Code Noir* largely to the benefit of people of African descent. They had implemented the practice of *coartacion*, which allowed the enslaved to purchase their freedom from their owners at an officially determined market value, greatly increasing the size of the free black population. Further, free people of color gained a legal identity when the Spanish regime granted them the right to bring suit against whites in court.[4]

The Natchez District, which followed the same shifts in imperial control as Louisiana, did not experience the same legal changes in regard to free people of color. In fact, the first code of laws for the Mississippi Territory, written in 1789, did not differ substantially from those of other territories controlled by the United States. It declared that all people of African heritage were presumed enslaved unless it could be proved otherwise. The burden of proving freedom in Mississippi rested with the free blacks in

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[3] *Le Code Noir: Ou Edit Roi Servant de Reglement Pou le Gouvernement & l'administration de la Justice, Police, Discipline & la Commerce des Esclaves Negres, Dans la Province ou Colonie de la Louisiana*. (A la Nouvelle-Orleans : De l'Imprimerie du Moniteur, chez L.S. Fontaine, 1803).

[4] Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 24-26.

question, and as such, a lack of documentation could force free people of color into a state of servitude.[5]

Consequently, legal barriers made founding and maintaining a free black community on the eastern side of the Mississippi more difficult than in Louisiana. In Louisiana, a "mulatto" was any person with one-fourth or more "negro blood," but under Mississippi law, mixed parentage was legally the same as being born to two parents of African ancestry. What mattered in Natchez and the rest of the Mississippi territory, at least under the law, was whether a person had legal documentation certifying freedom, not the appearance of mixed ancestry. Free people of color were required to present themselves to the local court and present proof of their freedom, at which point a certified document would be issued. Without the certificate, a free person could be labeled a slave, and as it was the duty of citizens to apprehend runaways, he or she could be seized and sold as a slave.[6]

In addition, unlike Louisiana, Mississippi law bound free blacks in other ways. The certificate of freedom only applied to the county where the applicant lived; therefore free blacks moving out of their home county, even in search of employment, could be treated as vagrants or runaway slaves. In addition, certain occupations were officially closed to free people of color. Even in towns like Natchez, free blacks were forbidden to sell groceries or liquor, or to operate "houses of entertainment." The most serious ban was on participating in the print industry. If white printers used free blacks, the printer

[5] Sydnor, "The Free Negro in Mississippi," 769-770.
[6] Ibid., 669-670.

was subject to a fine of ten dollars per day for each person employed. Any black person caught operating a press was subject to the death penalty as whites feared doing so could foment a slave revolt.[7]

Such restrictions on free people of color outside of Louisiana moved one scholar to label them "slaves without masters." These legal boundaries definitely limited free people of color, but in Natchez, many of these laws were skirted by free blacks and ignored by whites. Though *coartacion*, which allowed slaves to purchase their freedom in Spanish Louisiana, did not apply to Natchez and emancipation was discouraged even prior to the 1822 law, slaveowners found ways to free some of the people they enslaved. One of the more common methods of circumventing law and custom against granting freedom to blacks was to cross the river in order to utilize the more accommodating laws of Louisiana to free slaves. William Johnson crossed the river to Vidalia in February 1814 to free Amy, a woman that he owned and the mother of two of his children. Thereafter conferring with a judge, a notice was posted in both English and French, stating that William intended to free Amy, thus allowing anyone who had legal opposition to the act to come forward within forty days. Not surprisingly, since both owner and slave lived in Natchez, no one came forward and Amy became free. Four years later, Johnson employed an agent to take Amy's mulatto daughter Adelia to

[7] Ibid., 770-771.

Philadelphia to have her emancipated. In Philadelphia, Adelia married a free black man named James Miller, and the couple later returned to Natchez.[8]

After freeing Amy and Adelia, William Johnson sought legislative approval to free his son, also named William. In his petition to the legislature, Johnson asked for permission "to make that disposition of his property most agreeable to his feelings & consonant to humanity," adding that emancipation would "give that Liberty to a human being which all are entitled to as a Birthright, & extend the hand of humanity to a rational creature, on whom Complexion, Custom, & even Law in this Land of Freedom, has conspirated [sic] to rivet the fetters of Slavery."[9] The language of his petition may have been enough to sway the legislature to grant the younger William Johnson his freedom, but it is more likely that the knowledge that his mother and sister had already been freed as well as the evidence that he had been trained as a barber by his brother-in-law, James Miller, that convinced the legal body to make this choice. Others seeking emancipation via the legislature had far less success. In 1823, only three people gained their freedom through the legislature; in 1826, of the twelve petitions for emancipation, none were granted. Jacques Andres of Natchez and those he tried to emancipate illustrate the difficulties. Andres issued a petition in 1822 seeking to emancipate "a female 'mulatto' slave who is the daughter of a Ema, a slave owned by the petitioner." The girl named

[8] William Ransom Hogan and Edwin Adams Davis eds., *William Johnson's Natchez: The Ante-Bellum Diary of a Free Negro* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 15; Virginia Meacham Gould, *Chained to the Rock of Adversity: To Be Free, Black & Female in the Old South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), xxvi-xxvii.

[9] Petitions to the Mississippi legislature, such as this one, are available online via the Race and Slavery Petitions Project at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro at http://library.uncg.edu/slavery_petitions/. Hereafter, references to this database will be in the following form: SP, PAR# 11082002, Johnson, 1820.

Maria Louisa, born in 1820, "was regularly baptized according to the Holy ordinances of the Roman Catholic Church." Appealing to a mixed ancestry and religious devotion might have earned Maria Louisa her freedom in Louisiana, but it was rejected in Mississippi.[10]

After the 1822 law restricting emancipation, it would become much more difficult for slaveholders seeking to mimic Johnson's method of manumitting slaves. In 1826, Elisha Brazealle left Mississippi and moved to Ohio, where he emancipated an enslaved woman and her son. Brazealle acknowledged that he was the father of John Monroe Brazealle and willed all of his property to this child. Later, the family moved back to Mississippi, and the freedom of the mother and child were disputed. This case, brought before the Supreme Court of Mississippi, would pose two questions: was the manumission of John Monroe Brazealle and his mother in Ohio legal in Mississippi, and could he legally inherit his father's estate. The answer to the first question would determine the answer to the second; if John Monroe Brazealle was not free, then he could not own property. The court ruled that the act of emancipation might have been legitimate, but only if John Monroe and his mother had remained in Ohio. Since Elisha Brazealle had not secured the permission of the Mississippi legislature, then the two were still slaves, and as such, John Monroe could not inherit his father's estate.[11]

Slaves who had been promised freedom by owners in other states before moving to Mississippi appear to have been more successful in gaining their freedom. Sam, a free

[10] Sydnor, "The Free Negro," 774; SP, PAR# 11082203, Andres, 1822.
[11] Hinds, et al. v. Brazealle, et al., 3 Miss. 837.

man of color, claimed that Wright Fore, who had purchased him in Kentucky, was holding him in slavery illegally. Sam presented evidence that his original owner, Mary Kennedy, had provided in her Kentucky will enacted on May 7, 1821 that he would be released from bondage in sixteen years, when he reached the age of 31. Sam was then sold and taken by his new owner to Mississippi, then sold again to Wright Fore, who supposedly had full knowledge of the provision in Kennedy's will, yet held him in bondage after his term of servitude had passed. A circuit court initially found in Fore's favor, yet on appeal, with the production of the will, Sam was released and allowed to remain in the state as a free man. Had Mary Kennedy's will been written in Mississippi, it would not have been valid, as Sam had not been freed prior to the death of his owner. [12]

In a similar case, Presley Anderson sold a slave named Nat to a Mr. Duncan in the state of Missouri with the condition that Nat would be released from slavery in fifteen years. Two years later, Duncan sold Nat to a Mr. Chamberlain in Missouri for the remaining thirteen years. Chamberlain then moved to Adams County, taking Nat with him, and sold him to John Roach. Throughout these sales, Nat believed he would be set free under the terms entered into by himself and Presley Anderson, yet Roach did not agree. Nat's attempt at securing freedom was not granted at the outset, as documentary proof could not be found that established his agreement with Anderson. Presley Anderson's son John produced the original contract between his father and Duncan at the appeal, releasing Nat from bondage both because of the expiration of his time as a slave

[12] Sam, colored, v. Fore, 20 Miss. 413.

and also because the sale to Roach was ruled fraudulent.[13] In the cases of Nat and Sam, had they always been enslaved in Mississippi, they would not have been granted their freedom.

Cases like those of Nat and Sam were too rare to augment the state's free black population significantly, but the de facto freedom granted by masters who treated favored slaves like free people constituted a bigger danger to the racial order. While it is impossible to determine how many people acquired such status in Natchez, one contemporary observer supposed that there were "at least fifty negroes and mulattoes now in Adams County who affect to be free."[14] Among these was a woman named Fanny Leiper, who was released from slavery in 1834, though her owner took no actions to ensure that this was legal. In the same year, Fanny purchased a lot in Natchez for $150 and by 1836 she had built a house on the lot valued at $1500. At the time of the purchase and understanding the precarious nature of her status, Leiper had the deed of ownership written such that Joseph Winscott, a white steamboat engineer, would also be listed as an owner in order to protect her property should it be discovered that she was not legally free. Wisely, Leiper never informed Winscott that his name appeared on the deed.[15]

Fanny lived in Natchez, apparently with her status unquestioned, until 1845 when she moved to Cincinnati. Rather than selling her home, Fanny contracted Samuel R. Hammitt to rent the house. Shortly after leaving for Ohio, Leiper's neighbor, Malvina Hoffman, a free woman of color with whom Fanny had a close relationship, leaked the

[13] Roach v. Anderson, 28 Miss. 234.
[14] Letter by "Civis" published in the *Mississippi Free Trader*, 13 May 1841, reprinted in Sydnor, "The Free Negro," 776.
[15] Leiper v. Hoffman et al., 26 Miss. 615l; Sydnor, "The Free Negro," 776-777.

news to Winscott that he legally co-owned the property. Hoffman and Winscott then obtained the keys to the home and began renting it out themselves and splitting the profits between them. When Leiper found that she had been betrayed, she returned to Natchez and filed suit against Hoffman and Winscott in order to regain her property. The defendants did not deny that they had committed this act and even acknowledged that Winscott had never lived in Natchez and did not act as a part owner prior to Leiper's move. Instead, they argued that Leiper was not legally free and thus could not own property. The chancery court of Natchez found against Leiper. On appeal, however, the state Supreme Court reversed the ruling, noting, "if she had gone to Ohio merely for the purpose of establishing her freedom, with the intention of returning here to act as a free person, there would have been force in this objection. But it is not shown that she left this State with the intention of returning." The act of moving to Ohio had made Leiper free and as such capable of holding property, so the court ruled that the property, as well as all profits made from renting the house, be returned to her. Had she remained in Natchez or attempted to return permanently, she would have had no recourse and the home would have reverted to Winscott. Moreover, had Hoffman not been involved, even as a free woman residing in Ohio, Leiper would not have been able to bring the case to court because she was recognized as black by Mississippi law and could not bring suit against whites.[16]

Although the law had always favored limiting the number of free blacks in Mississippi, the state legislature responded to Nat Turner's revolt by labeling free blacks

[16] Ibid.

dangerous and undesirable. It sought to diminish their numbers by limiting manumissions and requiring free people of color to leave the state, effectively strengthening provisions against free blacks that had been enacted in 1822. Free blacks could petition local boards of police to remain within the state if they could find a reputable white citizen to attest to their "worthy characters."[17]

The attack on free black rights came to a head in 1841 after several whites were killed in St. Louis by a group of free black men. Apparently, four free men of color conspired to rob a store and a bank near the Mississippi River, and in the course killed several whites and set fire to the properties. The *Missouri Republican* reported, "every one was shocked at the enormity and boldness of the deed, and felt, that whilst such crimes could be committed in our midst and the guilty escape detection, there was no security to any one." When the news of the crime reached Natchez, whites attempted to impose a sense of security on the town by lashing out at the entire free black community. Public meetings led to demands that black rivermen be banned from landing in the town. Working class whites complained that masters allowed slaves to live in virtual freedom by hiring out their own time and cutting into the wages of whites. Most seriously for free blacks, Natchez whites began what William Johnson described as an "Inquisition." A letter submitted to the *Mississippi Free Trader* complained that local courts had been disregarding the law and defeating the purpose of "the non-accumulation of free negroes

[17] Several examples of free people of color seeking such aid are available in SP and in the Slaves and Slavery Collection, NTC.

in the State."[18] The Natchez *Courier* directly addressed free people of color and the enslaved informing them that a "general meeting of the citizens of Adams County" would be held for the purpose of enforcing laws against slaves hiring their own time and "the propriety of. . .enforcing the 80th section of this same code [the revised code of the laws of Mississippi], requiring free persons of color to remove from the State." The killings in St. Louis led whites in Natchez to look for threats within the town's own free black community.[19]

For several weeks during the summer, free people of color were brought before the police board in order to prove that they were legally permitted to live within the town. Johnson noted that on August 17, 1841, there were "all sorts of Tryals [sic] going on. The different offices has been full all day and they Continue to arrest Still—The Lord Knows how these things will terminate for I have no Conception myself." Johnson had no reason to fear being arrested in that he had been legally manumitted by the legislature and was among the best established free men of color, both socially and economically, in the town; however, many of those he associated with were at risk. On August 18, 1841, Johnson reported that, "the Harrows [horrors] of the Inquisition" were "still going on in this city," but that rumors of "Harriet Cullen or Harriet Johnson" being in jail were not. Like William Johnson, Harriet Johnson (not related, and the same person as Harriet Cullen) had been emancipated legally and was a property holder in the town. When and

[18] *Trials and Confessions of Madison Henderson, Alias Blanchard, Alfred Amos Warrick and Others, Murderers of Jesse Baker and Jacob Weaver, as Given by Themselves* (St. Louis: Chambers and Knapp, 1841); Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 332; "Civis" published in the *Mississippi Free Trader*, 13 May 1841, reprinted in Sydnor, "The Free Negro," 776.
[19] Natchez *Courier*, 7 August 1841, quoted in Gould, xxxi.

why she took the name of Johnson is unclear; perhaps she wished to distance herself from the Cullen family that had enslaved her and wanted to assert her identity as a person of color by taking on the name of one of the most secure free black families in Natchez. In doing so, she may have hoped that establishing a connection to such a family would help her avoid the inquisition. [20]

Several other of Johnson's close associates were put on trial in the coming days, with some ordered to leave the city within 30 or 60 days. Johnson appeared unworried, but confessed to his diary that there was "Something about this Law" he did not understand, "for the Report Seys [sic] that a Bond is required After the Lycences [sic] is obtained. I cannot understand the matter fully." In order to secure their positions as free, Johnson observed, "lotts of F.P.C. are running around Town with Petitions to have the Priveledge [sic] of [remaining] in the state, tis Laug[h]able almost." Among those "running around" was Wellington West, a man who sometimes worked for Johnson. West secured several signatures from leading planters to enable him to stay in Natchez. Johnson, again perhaps with derision, remarked, "those names are enough to make any Common man Proud—Those Names are an Ornament to Any Paper—Those are Gentlemen of the 1st Order of Talents and Standing." While it is impossible to tell of Johnson was actually being ironic in his descriptions, it is true that references to leading white men in his diary changed in tone as he got older and shifted markedly after the inquisition when he began to make stronger criticisms of the Natchez's whites.[21]

[20] Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 332; Hogan and Davis, *Diary,* 18 August 1841, 342.
[21] Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 332; Hogan and Davis, *Diary*, 17, 18, 21, 24 August, 1841, 341-343.

Apparently, white men of similar standing offered their support to Johnson and his family. A man named Major J. Shields, whom Johnson described as "One of Our Noble, Generous and Gentlemanly young men," visited Johnson during the height of the inquisition and offered his protection. However, Johnson told Shields that he would let him know if he needed assistance and added, "such men as he is, is an ornament to Society." How much of this entry represents a genuine expression of thanks to Shields is unclear. Johnson never mentions in his diary that he or any member of his family was in danger of being forced from their home.[22]

Other free blacks who had lived in Natchez without incident for most or all of their lives found themselves under attack. On September 9, Johnson reported that "poor Andrew Leeper was, I understand, ordered off today, and so was Dembo and Maryan Gibson. They are as far as I Know innocent and Harmless People And Have never done a Crime since they have been in this state that I have heard of." Mary Ann Gibson was likely the daughter of Samuel Gibson and a woman named Esther, both of whom were free people of color. When Samuel Gibson died in 1823, he willed his estate to "the issue of my Body begotten on free woman of color named Esther." Dembo worked for the Gibsons after gaining his freedom in Ohio. The Liepers were a large free black family in Natchez, probably including Fanny Lieper. Some of this family gained their freedom from Charles Lynch, former Governor of Mississippi, who freed Robert Leiper Sr., along with his wife and daughter, in 1826. Lynch then entered agreements that would allow

[22] Hogan and Davis, *Diary* 3 September 1841, 344. Given Johnson's personal connections with older and more established men of power in Natchez, it is possible that Johnson found Shields' offer to be either an unwanted intrusion or possibly even a laughable attempt by the young Shields' to put on the airs of respectability. In any case, Johnson seemed confident that he and his family were secure

the Leipers to purchase other family members from his estate. According to Johnson, Andrew Leiper had nothing more than a bill of sale between Mary Leiper (Andrew's mother) and Lynch in order to prove his freedom. Apparently, Lynch had agreed to allow Mary to purchase Andrew for the sum of $200, of which Mary paid all but fifty cents. Of the situation, Johnson observed, "I see very plainly that Lynch Can do as he pleases in the affair—Oh what a country we live in." Unfortunately for these men and women, the patronage network that Johnson had developed was rare among free blacks in Natchez.[23]

The different legal and social networks created during the colonial period made Natchez and New Orleans very different environments for free people of color. Both were oppressive in that they based rights on race; however, the challenges faced by free blacks in Natchez were more severe as a result of Spanish colonial policy and United States' law. While some historians have concluded that even the town's most prosperous free people of color realized that they had to accept without complaint that what whites decreed was legally permissible in order to maintain their own relative privilege, men like Johnson appear to have been, at least privately, quite angry over the increasingly harsh treatment afforded free blacks in the town. Nevertheless, within this constrained environment free people of color in Natchez were able to use the space afforded them to construct a community.

[23] Ibid., 9 September 1841, 345-346 n.20-21.

Creating a Community

Day-to-day activities in Natchez allowed free blacks to establish and maintain identities even in a repressive environment. Free people of color often found ways to defy notions of racial categorization. In Natchez, as was true elsewhere across the South, free blacks did not live on the periphery of society but at its center, taking part not only in occupations that whites would not, but also in the dominant, high status career of whites in nineteenth century Mississippi: cotton planter. This was accomplished not by being "humble" in the face of white hegemony, but rather by taking considerable risk, in order to protect the status of themselves and their families from the conventions of an increasingly hostile slave society.[24]

Fanny Leiper's case demonstrated the vulnerability of people of African heritage living in such a society, but it also shows that many understood how to assert themselves within the legal system. Her unfree status would normally have resulted in a decision against her, ending in a loss of her property at least, a loss of her freedom at worst. In her case, however, the distrust surrounding Winscott and Hoffman's methods as well as Leiper's decision not to remain in Natchez led to an unusual decision in which she was able to triumph despite the letter of the law. Moreover, in spite of the description of free people of color as "slaves without masters," Leiper had manipulated whites in Natchez to accept her freedom by openly purchasing a lot in town, constructing a house, and renting it out--all behaviors usually associated with free people, but certainly not slaves.[25]

[24] Ronald Davis, 60-61
[25] Leiper v. Hoffman et al.

Others found ways to establish themselves at the center of the free black community in Natchez, gaining some protection from white repression. Robert Smith operated a taxi service in town, and while this was a standard job for free people of color in the slave South, his success was anything but typical. By 1851, Smith owned slaves in addition to carriages and lived in his brick townhouse. Historian Ronald Davis has argued that Smith's acceptance in town was based primarily on what his Natchez *Courier* obituary called his "industry, probity of life, correctness of demeanor, and Christian-like character." The article also mentions that his funeral was attended by "a large concourse of his colored friends and family." The first quotation above explains how the white community viewed Smith, but the second indicates that he belonged to a wider free black community that took part in the funeral in "twenty-five carriages and double that number of horsemen." The obituary mentions that Smith had been a sexton in the Presbyterian Church, describing him as "a doorkeeper in the House of God." Davis interprets this as meaning that Smith was little more than a slave, as he essentially worked as a doorman for the church. It is equally likely that Smith and other free people of color viewed holding the office as a distinction held by a free black man.[26]

Davis offers a similar description of Robert McCary, who worked as a barber, depicting him as "but one step removed from that of servant and house slave . . .he cut, primed, shaved, washed, styled, and dusted the bodies of white slaveholders."[27] This was his profession, but unlike a slave, McCary owned his shop and his labor and supported

[26] Smith's obituary from the Natchez *Courier*, 2 July, 1858, quoted in Ronald Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez*, 61.
[27] Ronald Davis, 61.

his family through the income his barbershop generated. McCary, like many members of the free black community, had been born into slavery, and also like many others, was of mixed race. Robert McCary was freed in the will of his owner and father, James, who granted both Robert and his sister Kitty each a town lot. Robert also received $1000 from his father's estate, as well as an enslaved man, who also happened to be his half-brother. His brother may have been too young to be granted his freedom, or his father simply may not have favored him. Furthermore, the will provided that Robert and Kitty be educated, and at least five white tutors were secured for this purpose. At some point in the 1820s, Robert moved into William Johnson's household and probably learned the barber's trade from James Miller, Johnson's brother-in-law, alongside his more famous contemporary.[28]

McCary and Johnson remained lifelong friends and maintained many of the same personal and professional interests, yet the connections these men had with one another have largely been neglected in favor of portraying them as isolated individuals.[29] Like Robert Smith, McCary was active in the Presbyterian Church and apparently acted as a go-between among the white and black members of the church. Like William Johnson, McCary gambled, drank, and hunted with other free people of color. McCary often joined Johnson in these recreational ventures, but at least according to Johnson, they were rarely rivals. Johnson never included McCary among those he chastised for attending

[28] Ibid., 61-62; Davis and Hogan, *The Barber of Natchez,* 243-245; SP, PAR# 11082002, Johnson, 1820.
[29] Though Davis's work is entitled *The Black Experience in Natchez*, the book never hints that there was a community of free blacks, instead it offers the stories of what appear to be isolated individuals hopelessly trapped in a slave society. Hogan and Davis's work on Johnson, in keeping with much of the historiography of the 1950s, is far more interested in using Johnson's life as a means of make sense of the lives of whites in Natchez.

"darky parties" and expressed sympathy when McCary suffered setbacks such as losing horses or having slaves run away. Occasionally, they discussed public issues regarding their status within a slave society.[30]

Johnson and McCary often associated with Winslow Winn, often referred to in Johnson's diary as "Young Winn" or "Little Winn." Winn was the son of a free man of color named George Winn who, upon his death in 1831, left Winslow and his two sisters a cotton plantation of almost 1200 acres as well as twenty-two slaves. Though Johnson has garnered more attention from historians, this inheritance made Winn the largest free black slaveholder in Mississippi. The three men often fished and hunted together, but the older men did not view Winn as their peer. Age played a role, but Winn's taste for alcohol did as well. In one instance, Winn stayed at the Johnson family's residence for several days in order to get over an "illness," but the diarist also wrote, "Poor creature, I Pitty him very much indeed—I am Sorry that he drink So much."[31] A similar penchant for drinking had led Johnson to sell Stephen, but Winn was brought into his household and nursed back to health.

Johnson's diary is the single richest surviving source on a free black community in the antebellum South, yet interpretations of this document have focused on Johnson's psychological relationship to the planter class rather the his place in the free black community. Johnson did mimic white planters in order to establish distance from slaves that he and other masters owned. Still, he was very much a part of a community of free

[30]Ronald Davis, 61-62; Hogan and Davis, *Barber,* 245-246.
[31] Hogan and Davis 247-247.

people of color. Johnson was a barber, but he is usually described in different terms, generally as a member of the small group in cities and towns of the old South that historians have called the "free brown elite." These were men and women of mixed race who saw themselves as racially different from slaves and usually were relatively wealthy as a result of inheritance from their white parents or their skills. The free brown elite were for the most part slaveholders who owned and worked human beings for profit, not as a means of maintaining family connections by holding family members as nominal slaves.[32]

Johnson could be listed as a member of this group, but he did not shun the black communities of Natchez. Much of the assumption that Johnson believed himself separate from other free blacks is derived from entries in his diary in which he criticizes other free people of color and the enslaved. Entries such as "Bill Nix is up to this Day a pure pure Negro at Heart and in action," along with others labeling individuals as "low-minded creatures," and "puppys," have convinced generations of historians that Johnson held himself apart from other blacks in Natchez in favor of cultivating relationships with the town's powerful whites. Other instances in which he chastises his apprentices and slaves for attending "Darky parties" that he apparently never went to have been attributed to his sense of a racial difference between himself and those blacks who frequented the parties at "Mr. Parker's kitchen." Incidentally, William Parker, who ran these parties, was

[32] Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters,* 6-7, 57-58. Hanger offers a good discussion of the attempts of free people of color to separate themselves from the larger black communities in *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places,* 55-87. See also Johnson and Roark, *Black Masters* for a detailed account of the Ellison family, the largest free black slaveholding family outside of Louisiana. Further information on slave ownership by free people of color can be found in Larry Koger, *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985).

himself a free person of color, but married to an enslaved woman whom he held in nominal slavery.[33]

Given Johnson's relationship with other free people of color, a simpler explanation for his remarks can be found in terms of class rather than race. Johnson might criticize his friends, such as McCarey and Winn, but he does not refer to them in racial terms. Those that he does label "Negroes" were either men and boys he enslaved or apprenticed, unfree laborers in his charge. If Johnson were in fact such a racial separatist, it is doubtful that he would have hired apprentices at all. Slavery offered him unfree labor without the burden of teaching the "art and mystery" of the trade. Johnson's barbershop offered free black parents a place to send their sons so that they could learn a trade and become self-supporting, a critical distinction as Mississippi law became increasingly hostile to free blacks. Johnson was selective in choosing his apprentices, rejecting those he thought would not fit into the work environment of his barbershops. Johnson's favorite and most successful apprentice, William Winston, entered into his contract while still enslaved by his father, the Lieutenant Governor Fountain Winston in 1836. Learning the trade enabled William Winston demonstrate that he could support himself and he legally attained his freedom by a special act of the legislature at the age of 21 that permitted him to remain in Natchez.[34]

Johnson also allowed a hired out enslaved man named Charles to operate one of his barbershops. Charles was sent by his owner to work with Johnson at the age of ten or

[33] SP, PAR # 11000008, Parker, no date given, but by the context of the petition it was made after 1822.
[34] Hogan and Davis, *Barber,* 57-59.

eleven, and though the actual intentions of the bargain are not entirely clear, Johnson was to teach Charles "the trade" and "his books" and "to write also." It is unclear whether Charles was the son of his owner, but it seems likely, as his time with Johnson appears to have been a condition to attaining freedom. By the time Charles was a teenager, Johnson was paying his owner $150 a year for the slave's services, and while this was more than the wages he paid to the free journeymen in his shop, it hardly matches the amount of money his owner could have made by hiring Charles out to a cotton planter. Johnson steadily increased Charles's responsibilities in his shops and came to view him as his most capable barber. Later Johnson complained in his diary, "Charles disgraced himself this morning by marrying Mrs. Little[']s Servant Girl Mary Known to the City as being a Buster"-- in other words, a woman of dubious distinction. While this could be seen as a racial issue, more likely it was one of class. Based on Johnson's words, the disgrace was that Charles, a master barber, had married this girl of low reputation in the town, not explicitly that she was a slave. Of course, Charles was also a slave at this point, and his owner reported to Johnson that Charles "should have to give up that wife or remain a slave all of his life." Apparently Charles did give up his wife and in 1851 his master arranged for him to be sent North to become free.[35]

Johnson's shop created a place through which slaves and free blacks could learn the skills to gain or maintain freedom and as such provided a valuable tool for the free black community, but the barber took additional steps to protect this position for himself and his family. Scholars have stressed the relationships that men like Johnson cultivated

[35] Ibid., 61-62.

with whites, but have neglected the important connections made within the free black community and their ability to test the restrictions placed upon them by law and custom. Johnson and his family actually belonged to two such communities; that of Natchez and of New Orleans. William's sister Adelia and her husband, James Miller, left Natchez for New Orleans in 1830 in order to avoid the laws and racial restrictions in Mississippi for the comparatively less threatening environment of the Crescent City. The two families corresponded via letters through the 1830s, but no mention of travel between the two towns is mentioned in Johnson's diary until 1842. Then, following the 1841 inquisition, William sought to arrange for his wife Ann and four of their children to travel via steamboat to New Orleans. Negotiating the passage was difficult in that free people of color could not travel without experiencing the danger of being captured and sold as slaves, as well as the racist limitations that ship captains placed on free blacks who traveled onboard. William met with an agent in Natchez to arrange for a stateroom for Ann and the children rather than have them stay in the "ladies room" on the ship. William found the negotiation difficult in that the ship's captain told him "he could not spare one and that it was against the rules of his boat" to charter staterooms to free people of color. Johnson did not relent, however, and convinced the captain to let him have a stateroom "on Conditions which I told him would answer."[36]

These conditions are unclear, but Johnson secured the stateroom for his family despite the restrictions placed on free blacks, which was important to Johnson given the

[36] Gould, xxxii-xxxiii; Hogan and Davis, *Diary*, 9 July 1842, 391; Thomas C. Buchanan offers a detailed discussion of the "pan-Mississippian" life of African Americans who lived along or worked on the river in *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

type of degrading behavior that could be directed at his family. J.S. Buckingham, a traveler throughout the South, noted that while onboard a steamship, one group of mulatto women were forced to sleep on the floor, despite their fine dress and jewelry. During the day, Buckingham observed that these women could interact with whites onboard the ship, but at mealtime, the social differences between these women and the others were re-asserted. At these meals, free women of color, " had to retire to the pantry, where they took their meals standing; in contrast of their finery in dress and ornament." What disturbed the traveler most was that even if he or anyone else had chosen to speak against this practice, "any such sentiment would undoubtedly injure the very parties for whom his sympathy might be excited, or on whose behalf it might be expressed."[37] Clearly Johnson knew what his family would be exposed to without the privacy of a stateroom and thus took the steps to secure one for the trip.

The trip represented the Johnson family's attempt to forge a connection with the much larger community of free people of color in New Orleans. No doubt Ann and the children, William Jr., Byron, Richard, and Anna, stayed with Adelia and James Miller in the city, but visiting was not the goal of this trip. Instead, Ann and William Sr. had the children baptized at the St. Louis Cathedral. Though it seems that most free blacks in Natchez were Presbyterian and there was a Catholic Church in town in which the children could have been baptized, having the children baptized at St. Louis Cathedral would create a separate record that the children were, in fact, free. The St. Louis Cathedral had

[37] Gould, xxxiii; J.S. Buckingham, *The Slave States of America* (London: Fisher, Son & Co., 1842), 479-488.

long served the African and African American communities of New Orleans and Louisiana. Baptizing the Johnson children in New Orleans created a new and important connection between them and the town's free black community that might prove important should something happen to Ann and William, or if conditions changed drastically for free blacks in Natchez. The record of the children's baptism would allow them to fit into this new community. In fact, William Jr., and Byron would move to New Orleans in the 1850s. [38]

Representing free blacks as "slaves without masters" negates the strategies that free people of color used to resist white hegemony within slaves societies. William Johnson and the few other free men and women of color who attained material success have been presented as only being capable of success through the cultivation of relationships with powerful whites. Clearly, Johnson and other elite free blacks within Natchez and across the South developed these relationships with whites, which helped them attain material comfort, but financial gain alone cannot explain how these men and women survived in an environment in which dark skin was supposed to equal slavery. William Johnson especially has been portrayed as a man who held himself aloof from other people of color in Natchez in favor of subscribing to the aspirations of the white planter class while remaining humble and knowing his "place" within society.

[38] Gould, xxxvi. The most complete exploration and usage of the role of the Church for people of African heritage in Louisiana is available in Kevin D Roberts, "Slaves and Slavery in Louisiana: The Evolution of Atlantic World Identities, 1791-1831," PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2003, especially chapter 3. See also letters written to Ann Johnson from New Orleans in Gould, 11, 13. Incidentally, Ann Johnson lied to the priests, claiming that her children had been born in Concordia Parish, across the river from Natchez, in order to qualify them for baptism at St. Louis Cathedral.

Johnson did neither of these things. While he valued wealth and saw a class difference between his family and those he enslaved, he did not abandon the black community. Johnson's barbershop became an important avenue toward freedom for men and boys of color. In at least one instance, a free woman of color approached Johnson to borrow four or five hundred dollars to purchase her sister from slavery.[39] It appears as though the loan was made, but that she would come to him at all suggests that she hoped Johnson would be sympathetic to her cause. Johnson maintained connections with his apprentices and associates and grew angry over the labels and boundaries assigned to them by whites. In order to protect his family from what may have been the next "inquisition" that may have reenslaved all free blacks in the state, Johnson ensured that his children would belong within the much larger and less restrictive community of New Orleans. Rather than quietly accept limitations, Johnson and his fellow free people of color tested the boundaries of the color line in Natchez.

Challenging the Racial Order and the Privileges of Whiteness

On first inspection, a reader might complain that Johnson's diary entries record more of his business dealings than his feelings about living in a slave society as a free man of color.[40] Most entries are brief and deal primarily with his business transactions,

[39] Hogan and Davis, *Diary,* 16 April 1836, 116.
[40] Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez*, 64-65. Davis writes "it is almost as if Johnson's manumission (perhaps by the very nature of its process) had only freed his body," but also that maybe "there is more to the diary than is easily revealed at first glance" (65, 145n). The implication here is that Johnson and his family may have led a life that escaped mention in the diary, which in Davis's estimation is written, "in an intellectual and emotional vacuum" (65, 145n). This author disagrees with that assessment. Throughout his diary, Johnson shares his concerns about his reputation (see ch. 3 of this study), about his family and

but any sense that the diary as a whole is a shallow source results more from the reading of the diary than the writing of it. No writer in nineteenth century Natchez offers a better source for the quotidian interactions of people within the town. He overtly mentions his feelings about slavery and the restrictions placed on free blacks only occasionally, but on a more subtle level, he offers his thoughts on these subjects through his writings and through his actions. Whereas Johnson and other free people of color in Natchez have been portrayed as generally behaving with "humility" in the face of white domination, in fact free blacks took risks on a daily basis, pushing the color line as far as they could, sometimes crossing it altogether.

As has been discussed above, free people like Fanny Leiper understood the law and their limitations within it, yet took advantage of the system for their own benefit, pushing what was considered the "place" of free blacks within Natchez. Several free black families in Natchez were slaveowners, and some like William Parker held family members as slaves in name only, while others like Johnson, McCary, and Winslow Winn owned men and women as chattel. This did not invert any sense of racial order in Natchez, but for many of their white contemporaries, owning slaves as chattel seemed to make free blacks more allied with whites than slaves and as such less dangerous. Perhaps this is the reason why Johnson and other slave owners were rarely targeted by movements to have free blacks removed from the state.[41]

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those he employed, on occasion about those he enslaved, and especially about the "inquisition" against free blacks, which was his own term, not one imposed by historians.

[41] Some free people of color used the fact that they owned slaves as a way of proving both independence and respectability similar to whites in petitioning the legislature for permission to remain in the state during

In some cases, however, slave ownership by free blacks was challenged as whites in Natchez and across the South attempted to make race, rather than slavery or freedom, the most important social division. Robert Leiper, usually referred to as Bob, the patriarch of this large free family of color, became a target of this movement in Natchez in the late 1820s. In 1826, Leiper's owner, Charles Lynch, took Bob along with his wife and daughter across the river to Concordia Parish and freed the family according to Louisiana law. The family then returned to Natchez where they were recognized as free. Prior to 1826, Bob had been allowed to live separately from Lynch and had hired out his own time for profit. While in this state of semi-freedom, Leiper purchased an enslaved woman named Ellen with his own money, but gave the bill of sale to a white merchant named Christopher Kyle. Kyle, himself the father of two free mixed race children, then officially lent Ellen to Bob "to keep as his own until called for by him." It is likely that Bob and Kyle had come to this agreement so that Bob could keep the fact that he had purchased Ellen hidden from Lynch. Ellen resided in Natchez with the Leipers for the most part; Lynch knew this, but he may have believed that Kyle had hired Ellen out to the family. The apparent deception worked until 1829, when an enslaved man owned by Edward Forniquet approached Bob asking for permission to marry Ellen. Bob agreed to the marriage, but only on the condition that the would-be groom's owner buy Ellen and

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the inquisition in 1841and later when an analogous state-wide movement began in 1859. See SP, especially PAR# 11082401, Andrew Barland, 1824.

hold her as a slave "until she was of age when she would become free." Forinquet agreed and purchased Ellen.[42]

In 1830, when Ellen's sale was complete, Lynch claimed that the sale was void, as he, not Bob, actually owned the girl. While Bob was free when he sold Ellen in 1830, he had not been when he purchased her in 1822, and since Mississippi law forbade slaves from owning property, Lynch essentially claimed that whatever purchases Bob had made while enslaved belonged to him, not to Bob. Moreover, Lynch contended he and Bob had entered into an agreement with him to release himself and his family from bondage, but that Bob had not lived up to his side of the arrangement. Lynch filed suit against Forniquet to reacquire Ellen, but the actual target of the suit was Bob Leiper. Lynch may have simply been angry that his slave had purchased a slave illegally. Nevertheless, in purchasing Ellen, Bob had asserted the rights of a free person and denied that Lynch held actual ownership of Ellen, challenging Lynch's authority over Leiper. Making claims to the prerogatives of free people was a dangerous move for one in Bob's position, especially given the legal hostility shown to free people of color in Natchez. Why Bob purchased Ellen is unclear, but it may be the case that he did so to perform domestic duties, allowing his wife to earn money as well.[43] Earning additional money was important for the Leipers, as Lynch continued to own members of their family as slaves. Lynch's obvious animosity toward Bob would be reflected during the inquisition as he

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[42] Ariela Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 63-64; Davis, 59; Winchester Family Papers, 1783-1906, Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin, Box 2E904, Folders 1 & 2.

[43] Buying slaves to ease the burden of household labor is discussed in Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul,* 89-102.

continued to release Leiper family members slowly and without proper documentation, placing their status in question.[44]

If free people of color owning slaves did not always challenge the racial order in the minds of whites, free blacks found other ways to do so. Johnson's success as a barber enabled him to buy and improve upon several town lots. From 1836-1838, Johnson purchased two lots and had two new buildings constructed upon them, which he then rented out. The tenants of these buildings were P. McGetterick, a white man who operated a coffee shop called "The Southern Exchange," and a business called Green & Blake. Johnson also rented out what he called his "Fancy Shop on Main Street," which was housed in the same building as his primary barbershop. The "fancy shop" was rented to several different tenants from its completion in 1839 through Johnson's death in 1851 and included two storekeepers, a druggist, a bootmaker, and a bowling alley. Each of these tenants were white men; some were immigrants newly arrived from Europe. While it is not surprising that Johnson earned money from whites, by becoming a landlord, Johnson essentially had authority over whites, and at least in theory could remove them should they fail to live up to their side of the agreement. In reality, this may have been difficult. As a black man, Johnson could not take whites to court. Apparently, none of his renters chose to test his legal recourse, and they fulfilled their agreements.[45]

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[44] Gross, 64-65; Hogan and Davis, *Diary,* 9 September 1841, 345-346 n.20-21. Gross speculates that Lynch knew that Bob had purchased Ellen while still enslaved and forced the girl to work in his home for a year in order to demonstrate his mastery to Bob. This seems unlikely. Had Lynch known that Bob had purchased her prior to the Forniquet incident, and Lynch had wanted to assert his authority over Bob, he could have taken Ellen into his possession permanently. It seems more likely that Lynch believed that Christopher Kyle was Ellen's owner and that she had been hired out, or loaned to, the Leipers.

[45] Hogan and Davis, *Barber,*41-42.

Johnson also became a moneylender, using his barbershop to attract both free black and white clients. For the most part, the amounts he lent out at any one time were small, usually less than $100, but taken together, they amounted to substantial sums; in one year he lent out a total of $4,700. He charged interest rates ranging from five percent per month to six per cent per year to a diverse clientele ranging from the poor to business owners, as well as wealthy plantation owners such as John B. Nevitt, and George Poindexter, former Governor of Mississippi. In a slave society like Natchez, for a man who was legally recognized as black, free or not, lending money to whites could have serious consequences, the least of which could be forfeiting the loan, the most severe could be bringing violent attention from whites. As was true of his tenants, though, it appears that most of his clients paid him back. On the rare occasions that he was not repaid for loans, Johnson transferred the debts to trusted white men who could put more pressure on debtors for repayment, including going to court if necessary.[46] This white patronage gave Johnson authority to collect debts that otherwise might have been defaulted upon. Perhaps even more importantly, this white patronage prevented debtors from labeling Johnson as dangerous in order to escape their debts. As was true in his role as a landlord, having whites owe him money and not forgiving the debt because of law and custom made this a case in which the color line between whites and blacks was blurred.

[46] Hogan and Davis, *Barber,* 39-40; For instances of his money lending activity, see *Diary*, especially the year 1836.

Free people of color also took up the town's highest profile occupation, cotton planter. Earlier in the century, cotton planters had been warned against letting blacks market cotton, yet several free blacks living in or near Natchez operated sizable cotton farms. Johnson's close associate Winston Winn inherited a large farm and slaves from his white father. Baylor Winn, a man unrelated to Winston but known as a free man of color, purchased a tract of land outside just outside of Natchez. Among Johnson's business ventures, his investment in agriculture best exemplifies his feeling of security as a free black man in a white dominated community. In 1845, Johnson purchased a tract of land near Natchez, known as Hardscrabble, and became a part-time farmer. As most of his interests were in the city, Johnson needed a capable labor force and a supervisor. To this end, Johnson wanted to select a white man who would serve as an overseer and a tenant as well as a full-time worker on the farm. In 1847, Johnson struck a deal with a white man named W. H. Stump to work the land in return for a third of "what is made on the ground" as well as a third of the profit made on timber sales. In the next year, Johnson paid Stump $15 a month and provided housing for him and for his wife. In terms of cash, Johnson was paying considerably less for an overseer than other, larger planters in the area. William Minor usually paid his overseers between $800-$1000 per year, whereas Murden Harrison of Lowndes County paid $500-$600.[47] Neither of these planters offered portions of the crop to their overseers, as they were much larger planters than Johnson. Perhaps Johnson believed tying Stump's compensation to the productivity

[47] See the William Minor Family Papers, LSU and J. Carlyle Sitterson, "The William J. Minor Plantations: A Study In Ante-Bellum Absentee Ownership," *Journal of Southern History* 9 (February, 1943): 63; Charles Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1933), 69.

of the farm would lead to better results from his overseer. If this was the case, Johnson surely was disappointed. The color of his skin did not prevent Johnson from criticizing his white tenant, at least in his diary, or from high expectations of his labor. In August 1847, Johnson noted that Stump was "on the Gallery as usual and the hands at work cutting wood, They have made very Little Head way indeed at wood cutting." However, he made no mention of publicly confronting Stump about his poor job performance.[48]

Stump attempted to negotiate with the barber over his wages, but found himself at a disadvantage. In late December 1847, Johnson traveled to Hardscrabble to make Stump an offer to keep him on for the following year. Johnson wrote, "I offerd him fifteen Dollars per month and he Said that he Could not think of staying for Less than twenty Dollars per month. So I told hem that I could not give it, and remarked at the same time that if he Could get more he was doing very wrong to stay." Though it would appear that Stump would not stay at Hardscrabble, by January 4 he had reconsidered and agreed to stay for another year for the sum of fifteen dollars a month. Why Stump changed his mind is unclear. Perhaps, as Johnson said, finding employment that would pay better was difficult. Stump stayed on the farm until 1849, but the owner's grumblings would continue. In January 1849 Johnson complained, "I find that there is Scarcly anything down thare done when I am not thare, I found Mr Stump and Little Winn going down the Road when I Came down this mor[n]ing." Stump would leave Hardscrabble the following year.[49]

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[48] Hogan and Davis, *Diary*, 36-37, 580.
[49] Ibid., 37, 600, 602, 641.

Johnson could have turned the farm over to one of his workers or possibly another free person of color, but like most Natchez farmers, he continued to hire white men to operate Hardscrabble. After hiring two men as temporary help on the farm, Johnson found a permanent replacement when H. Burke agreed to work for the same wage that Stump had, along with housing and food for himself and his wife. If anything, Johnson was less pleased with Burke than with Stump. Johnson lamented the fact that Burke's avid hunting and fishing took time away from his paid duties. Burke also enjoyed drinking, which led Johnson to chastise him in his diary if not in person. On one trip to Hardscrabble, Johnson found his overseer plowing the potato patch. This would not have been out of the ordinary except for the fact that Burke had reported that he had done this work the day before. Johnson approached Burke and found that he was drunk. Apparently unconcerned about the presence of his employer, Burke decided to take a break. Johnson then decided that since his workers were not doing their work, he would do it himself. The next day while mending fences, Burke was drunk once again. Johnson did not record an angry response to his overseer, but taking over the chores himself attests to his displeasure with Burke's behavior, it also shows that even though he was the one in power as the employer, he took no action against Burke. Johnson felt secure enough to hire white men to work for him, but he understood that it was beyond his legal right to subject them to the corporal punishment that his apprentices or those he enslaved had to endure. Despite local acceptance, Johnson understood that he was limited in how

far he could push the color barrier, particularly in his dealings with his white employees.[50]

Free people of color used white patronage and the ability to own property, particularly human property, to distance themselves from the enslaved and to acquire privileges and power for themselves and their families. Having white patronage enabled Johnson to challenge the racial order more completely than most free blacks and he used that authority to push the racial line as far as possible by serving as a landlord, money lender, and employer of white overseers. His authority, though, was limited when the power of white patronage could not be brought to bear. While he could appeal to white associates to bring pressure on tenants or debtors in order to collect money owed to him, he could not use the same method to compel his white overseers to work more effectively or efficiently. His diary lists many complaints about the work performed, or more often, not performed, by Stump and Burke, yet he never records any public confrontations with these employees. Johnson may have had the legal right to own Hardscrabble and to employee whites, but in a confrontation with one of these men, he did not have the law on his side. Such was the cost and contradiction of blackness in a slave society.

Claiming "Whiteness" and Inverting the Racial Order

Johnson may have pushed the color line as far as it would go in Natchez, but he never attempted to cross that line by claiming to be white. As a result, no matter how he may have challenged notions of racial hierarchy, he could not do those things legally and

[50] Ibid., 37, 731.

socially prohibited by the racist laws of Mississippi: he could not vote, bring suit (directly) against whites, or testify in court against whites. Perhaps, if the surviving Daguerreotype image actually represents his appearance, he could have left Natchez and passed as white, but his family and financial roots ran too deep for him to do so. Other free people of color, who were less well established in reputation and financial standing than Johnson, actively challenged the way that law and custom constructed whiteness. Baylor Winn in particular inverted the spirit of Mississippi's racist laws and his place within it by trying to evade responsibility for murdering the town's most famous black resident.

The earliest of these challenges came in the 1820s as the Mississippi legislature attempted to remove free people of color from the state. Malachi Hagins, known as a free man of color and a resident of Jefferson County, asked the county court not only to remain in the state, but also for additional rights. In his petition to the county court, Hagins contended that he was "descended from several generations of free ancestors" including his grandmother, who he maintained was a white woman. If this were the case, then establishing his freedom would not have been an issue, but petitioning for the additional rights he sought required further evidence. To this end, Hagins reported that his father "died in the American Revolution fighting on behalf of the 'Revolted Colonies,'" but does not mention if his father was black or white. Presumably he presented this information to win sympathy from the court rather than to prove that he was white. He also mentioned that he had lived in Mississippi for over twenty years and had "married a white woman, fathered nine children, and acquired land cattle and nine

slaves." He did not prove that he was white, but he did show that he had behaved in ways usually reserved for white men, especially when marrying a white woman. Hagins only asked that he be granted "'security & protection, such rights and liberties, as the legislature might deem 'humane, politick, and right.'" [51]

Twelve white residents of Jefferson County were more specific in the rights they wanted for Hagins. These dozen residents filed a petition confirming that Hagins had married a white woman and had ten children with her and following the status of their mother, they would be free, but still legally black. They maintained that Hagins had "conducted himself with great propriety" and as "an honest and upright man." Not only did these residents ask the legislature that this family be allowed to remain in the state, they also asked "to extend to Hagins and his children the right to sue and be sued and 'all the rights, privileges, and immunities of a free white person of this state."[52] Malachi Hagins and his children were allowed to remain in the state, but were not granted legal whiteness, which could only be held by those with less than one-eighth African heritage. Still, Hagins's situation demonstrates that some residents in Nineteenth Century Mississippi believed that racial categories could be malleable and that people who were had been categorized as black could have their status changed.

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[51] SP, PAR# 11000016, Malachi Hagins, the exact year is unknown, but the petition was filed with the territorial legislature, making this either in or prior to 1817. Martha Hodes argues that relationships between black men and white women was not as uncommon or controversial in the Old South as the casual observer might believe in *White Women, Black Men*: *Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). Hagins relationship with his wife offers another piece of anecdotal evidence to her argument.

[52] SP, Par #11000024, Durden, Hinds, Duggan, Dunbar, Harrison.

A similar case occurred concerning the children of William Barland. Barland, a wealthy resident of Adams County, secured permission from the state legislature to set a woman he owned named Elizabeth free, along with the twelve children he "had begotten on her." He told the legislature that he had freed her and the couple's first three children from bondage in 1789, but that the records had been destroyed in a fire. In 1814 as he neared death, Barland petitioned the legislature to free his family "in consideration of the general good conduct of the said Elizabeth as a friend and companion during thirty years, and the love and affection your Petitioner bears for these his children." The petition was granted by the legislature, and Barland stipulated that each of his children would receive at least $2000 from his estate in his will and that each child would be "schooled and brought up in the principles of virtue and morality."[53]

Upon reaching adulthood, Barland's children, some collectively, some individually, petitioned the Mississippi legislature to remove the status of "free Negro" from each of them. Andrew Barland's petition offers the most explicit commentary on what made a person "white" in antebellum Mississippi. The petition acknowledges that he was the son of a white man and a woman of mixed race, but also that his father had given him "a decent education and property enough to be independent." Moreover, Barland, like Hagins, claimed that he had "intermarried with a respectable white family" and also had "enjoyed all the privileges of a free white citizen," including serving as a juror, giving testimony in court, and voting. As a result, Barland asserted that he had been "treated and received as well as tho he had been [a] white man of fair character. "

[53] Hogan and Davis, *Barber*, 248.

Barland may never have troubled the legislature but for an altercation with a white man named Joseph Hawk, who questioned Barland's whiteness in order to prevent Barland from testifying in court. Barland sought to convince the legislature that though he was not legally white, he had participated in the community in ways that only white men could. In effect he had performed whiteness in a way that his audience—white Natchez—had found convincing. If his white community accepted him, then in a sense, he argued, he already was white in every way except under the law.[54]

Beyond taking part in the community as a white man, Andrew Barland contended that he held the same interests as whites. The petition included references to "his education, his habits, his principles," all of which he contended were the in line with those of whites serving on the legislature. Furthermore, Barland reminded the legislature that he held slaves, which he argued, meant that he could "know no other interest than that which is common among the white population." As further evidence that he held the same interest as whites, he mentioned that his sisters had all married white men and had "always rec[eived] the same respect shown to white women of the same station in society," and thus his extended family shared his position.[55]

Just as with the Hagins case, several whites concurred that Barland should be considered white. Their close day-to-day interactions with Barland and Hagins convinced them to put their names and reputations on the line to help the cause. The

[54] Ibid., SP, PAR # 11082401, Andrew Barland, 1824. On the performative aspects of racial identity see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); David Roedeiger, *The Wages of Whiteness*: *Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991).
[55] Hogan and Davis, *Barber*, 249-250; Barland Petition.

white men in the legislature, however, were less willing to make the color line so porous. They had no qualms with Barland remaining within the state, testifying in court, serving on juries, or voting, but paradoxically, they would not agree to classify him as white. Andrew Barland's siblings, who also filed petitions seeking to become white, found the same result as their brother. Perhaps by publicly classifying the Barland family as black, the legislature hoped to end the anomaly created by their performance of whiteness.

If the successful performance of whiteness did not make one white, the failure to perform whiteness could sometimes render one a mulatto. In 1830, Antoine Krebs inherited land from his father. He died a few years later, leaving a son named Augustine, a daughter Eugenie, and a dispute over who owned the land. Augustine's racial status soon became the subject of a lawsuit. Shortly after Antoine Krebs's death, Augustine sold the title to his father's land to Ursin Raby. Eugenie's husband Jacob Batiste challenged the sale claiming that Eugenie, not Augustine, was the rightful heir to the land and thus Augustine had no right to sell, because Batiste contended Antoine Krebs had married Augustine's mother after Augustine was born. Batiste claimed that Augustine's biological father was black. To prove this, Batiste demonstrated that Augustine had married an enslaved woman, had never claimed the right to vote, and had never testified against whites in court. In deciding the case, the judge ruled that "though several witnesses testify that he was considered to be a white man," the evidence contradicted this and as such, "the subsequent recognition of him by Antoine as his son, and the marriage of Antoine to his mother, could not render him his legal heir." The court ruled that fraud had been committed and the land was returned to Eugenie, and also that

Augustine would lose the commonly accepted whiteness that he had held prior to the case.[56]

These cases offer rare glimpses into the overt challenges some free people of color posed to the racial order of the South. That Hagins, the Barlands, and Krebs were unsuccessful at changing their racial classification is not surprising, but that some whites would support attempts to classify some blacks as white is astonishing given the increasingly paranoid defenses of slavery and racial differences offered at roughly the same time as these cases. William Johnson, who challenged the limits of what free people of color could do on an almost daily basis, never attempted to reclassify himself as white. Given the support received by Andrew Barland, there is little doubt that Johnson would have garnered at least as much assistance from whites in Natchez, but he did not attempt to do so.

Perhaps this is because none of the attempts by others were successful, but it is equally possible that Johnson was satisfied with his status as a free man of color. While he clearly was interested in politics and it may have angered him that he could not participate, he also seemed content with his position as a member of the free black community in Natchez. It is impossible to know how many people in Johnson's situation left Natchez in order to pass as whites, but Johnson and perhaps Hagins and Barland could have done so elsewhere. Hagins and Barland were able to pass as white in Mississippi by performing whiteness, but when their status was challenged and the sought to official change from black into white, the courts and the legislature condemned

[56] Ursin Raby et al. v. Jacob Batiste et ux. 27 Miss. 731, 1854.

them. Heredity proved itself to matter more than performance to authorities in Mississippi, but these cases show that free blacks contested the boundaries assigned them by law and that to some, racial categories were malleable even in a society where dark skin was equated with slavery. Johnson did not try to do this himself, but his status as a free man of color would become crucial to the one man who was able to successfully invert his standing in the racial order of Natchez.

Becoming White: Baylor Winn and the Murder of William Johnson

Johnson's life presented challenges to Mississippi's notions of racial identity, but his death would place race at the center of a legal controversy. Baylor Winn, known to most as a free man of color, owned a farm near Johnson's Hardscrabble. Johnson's purchase of Hardscrabble actually had been made with Winn's encouragement. The two men were friends from at least 1831 through the 1840s, but the friendship became strained when Winn became involved in a timber business and began cutting down trees irrespective of land boundaries. Johnson sued Winn for trespass, but settled out of court in May of 1851. That Johnson could bring charges in court demonstrated that Winn was legally recognized as a free man of color. Believing the case settled, Johnson rode out to his farm a few days later to inspect operations. On his way back to Natchez with one of his sons, an enslaved man, and a free black apprentice, Johnson was ambushed and shot.

Johnson died the next day, and Baylor Winn was promptly arrested and charged with murder.[57]

The first newspaper report of the incident made no mention of race, reporting that Johnson was "an esteemed Citizen and long known as the proprietor of the Fashionable Barbers' Shop on Main Street." The article also lists Johnson as a plantation owner. Winn was described as a "planter living some seven miles below Natchez." The article noted that because both men were wealthy, "the best Lawyers in Natchez have been arrayed for the prosecution or defense." [58] A reader unfamiliar with Johnson's barbershop could easily have assumed that both men were white. The reporter likely knew who Johnson was and probably expected that most, if not all, of his readers would as well.

After being arrested, Winn was held in jail while an investigation into the murder took place, but he offered no defense against the charge. Though Johnson and much of Natchez had considered Winn a mulatto he claimed that he was in fact white. In January 1852, a special session of the Adams County Circuit Court was held to investigate the murder, and a grand jury returned a bill of indictment against Winn.[59] After determining that Winn had shot Johnson, the prosecution was careful to point out that the charges were against Baylor Winn, "a free man of color." These charges against him were based upon the testimony of Johnson's companions, and enslaved men owned by Winn. If Winn could prove that he was not black, Mississippi law required that all of the testimony against him be ruled inadmissible as no one of African heritage could testify against a

[57]Davis and Hogan, *Barber,* 262-264; Diary, 787-788.
[58]*Natchez Courier* 19 June 1851.
[59] *Mississippi Free Trader* 7, 14, 21 January 1852.

white man. Winn began his defense by asserting that his skin color did result from mixed ancestry, but that it was a mix of white and Indian, not African, blood. In order to convince the jury that he was of Native American rather than African heritage, two witnesses from Virginia who professed to know Winn's family testified that he descended from Indians.[60]

In addition to denying that he was black, Winn recognized that he needed to prove acceptance as a white man in Natchez. He claimed to have participated in the community of Natchez as only a white man could: he had given testimony in a court of law, he had voted, had married a white woman, and also he had served as a road overseer and was listed in the census as white. Furthermore, the tax rolls of Adams County, which specifically listed people of color within households, always listed Winn as white from 1834 through 1852.[61]

As earlier cases had determined, however, it was easier to prove a cultural acceptance of being white than a *de jure* definition of whiteness. The prosecution carried the burden of proof; Winn, faced the problem of convincing whites that he was not black. Winn's first hearing ended in a mistrial as the jury could not determine his race. In trying

[60] Davis and Hogan, *Barber,* 266-267. This had been a successful strategy in at least one instance: Johnson recorded that one woman had been able to remove the label of "free Negro" by proving that she was of white and Native American ancestry.

[61] Ibid., 266-267; Baylor Winn married Elizabeth Becktell of Tennessee on December 31, 1846. This was his second marriage. His first wife was named Gregory whom he married in 1826 before he moved to Mississippi. Her status is also questionable, but since their children are never listed as free people of color, the assumption must be that she was also presumed white. This information can be found courtesy of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints on the World Wide Web at http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/default.asp and Tory's Genealogies and Family Histories at www.rootsweb.com ; Adams County Tax Rolls 1834-1852, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

to discredit the defense witness's knowledge of Winn's ancestry, the prosecution created confusion among the jury. One of the witnesses claimed that Winn's Indian blood came from a tribe known as the Pamunky while the other swore it was "from the Mattapomi or some similar name."[62] Since the jury could not be sure of Winn's race and was not willing to allow black testimony against a potentially white defendant, the case was thrown out of court. A second trial was scheduled in neighboring Jefferson County, because public opinion was thought to have tainted the jury pool of Natchez. Frank Alexander Montgomery, a member of the jury in the second case, recalled that the case made by the prosecutor William T. Martin "was one of the ablest I ever heard, and though it took, as I remember three or more hours in the delivery, the attention of the jury never wavered."[63] Notwithstanding Martin's speech, the prosecution could not convince the jury that Winn was black and thus none of the prosecutor's testimony presented could stand as evidence.[64]

Pressure from locals in Natchez led to a third trial held in Wilkerson County, but this time the charges were brought against Baylor Winn as a white man. This signifies two important things: Winn had convinced the court that he was legally white and once this was established he had become a new legal entity, and in effect had become a different person, thereby allowing the state to try him again for the same crime. This trial, however, would allow Winn to go free as no admissible evidence was presented. Interestingly, the leading newspaper of Wilkerson County, the *Woodville Republican*,

[62] *Mississippi Free Trader* January 28, 1852
[63] Frank A. Montgomery, *Reminiscences of a Mississippian in Peace and War* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke, 1901), p. 50-52.
[64] Ibid., *Mississippi Free Trader*, May 12, 1852.

seemed less concerned with the result of the case than with the disappointment of all present that they were unable to hear the arguments of the lawyers.[65]

The laws of Mississippi that restricted the rights of black people were put in place to protect white hegemony and Baylor Winn had turned this system to his advantage. By casting doubt on his racial categorization during the trial, he not only escaped a murder conviction, but also transformed himself from black to white.[66] Prior to the trial, he had lived alternately as white and black, but afterward he gained the full legal protection of a white man. Winn's acquittal took two years, during which time he was in and out of jail; by proving whiteness, or at least casting doubt on whether he was black, he gained the protection of Mississippi law. This would be especially important when Johnson family attempted to have the charges against Winn reinstated in 1853. Again, Winn was arrested, but this time he was held only for three days. While in school in New Orleans, William Johnson Jr. wrote to his mother "that the excitement was rising again about that trial," and "I hope the excitement ain't died away on our side and I trust to god he wont get clear." Unfortunately for the young man, "excitement" was not enough to convict a white man. The court decided that Winn could not be tried again as the Johnsons were disqualified from bringing the case to court or filing suit against a white Baylor Winn.[67]

While this case demonstrates that racial categories could be transcended, it also points to the importance of local identities. Though Winn had effectively become

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[65] Davis and Hogan, *Barber*, 268-270; *Woodville Republican* June 28, 1853.
[66] The most famous of these studies is Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995). The shift of Winn's status was not a part of a larger social movement, but a result of the unexpected consequences of a racist legal system.
[67] Davis and Hogan, *Barber*, 270-272.

"white" as a result of the trial, the community still recognized that he was a murderer. Baylor Winn disappears from the records of Adams County after his acquittal in 1853. Perhaps he feared retribution from Johnson's family or his white associates. There was a very real possibility that the Natchez community could have subjected Winn to extralegal punishment, as Mississippians were no strangers to vigilante justice. Winn escaped this fate in the same way as many others in search of a new start in the nineteenth century: he and his family moved to Texas. By 1860, Baylor Winn, age 61 of Virginia and his wife Elizabeth, age 29 of Tennessee, as well as several of his adult children appear in the census of Atascosa County, Texas where Winn died on February 9, 1864 as a free white man.[68]

Conclusion

Most free people of color in Natchez never attempted to gain whiteness; instead, they relied upon identities created within their own community. Free blacks in Natchez were not "slaves without masters" living on the fringe of society. These were men and women who carved lives for themselves and their families out of a rigid legal system that sought to marginalize or remove them. This community operated at the very center of Natchez, interacting on a daily basis with whites and slaves in business and personal affairs. Connections made during these dealings created patronage networks between

[68] 1860 Free Population Schedule Atascosa County, Texas available on the World Wide Web at http://www.rootsweb.com/~usgenweb/tx/atascosa/census/1860/ . Mississippi actually set the record for the hanging of white men associated with an insurrection in the South during a panic in 1835, see Laurence Shore, "Making Mississippi Safe for Slavery: The Insurrectionary Panic of 1835," in Paul Finkleman ed., *Rebellions, Resistance, and Runaways within the Slave South* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989).

whites and free blacks, free blacks and slaves, and between free blacks, thus negotiating agency in and through the structures of law and custom. Johnson and other free people of color pushed the legal and social boundaries that constrained them based on skin color, often blurring the line that separated white entitlement from alleged black deference.

The importance of these connections is illustrated by how the Johnson family coped after William's death. Ann Johnson, William's wife, took over the family's finances, operating the barbershop using hired barbers and her sons William, Richard, and Byron, maintaining the relationship between the barbershop and the town's free black community. Ann sold Hardscrabble, which had never turned much of a profit during William's lifetime, making over $4000 on the deal. She also continued to rent out the in-town properties and even continued the money lending business and retaining William's ties to white patrons. Ann, then, took over the roles that William had played during his life, and maintained the family business as well as the connections to the larger community, including her friends and relatives in New Orleans. Several Johnson children would split time between Natchez and the Crescent City prior to the Civil War.[69] The children no doubt benefited from having family members already in New Orleans, but the baptisms of the children in St. Louis Cathedral provided an independent record of their freedom, which would have been crucial if their status had been questioned.

For other free people of color in Natchez, the 1850s would be far more difficult than for the Johnson family. As the argument over the viability of the union came to dominate politics in the South, free people of color faced a far greater challenge to

[69] Gould, xxxv-xlii.

maintain their communities and identities than in prior years. By 1859 a new version of the inquisition had begun, sparked by a new law, which would "exclude from this state all the Free Negroes and mulattoes without any distinction, after the first of July A.D. 1860." The notion that free people of color would be forced out of the state "without any distinction" led many to seek extreme measures to remain in their home state, near their families and communities. Some secured the signatures of white citizens asking for exceptions to the law. Several citizens of Adams County wrote a letter of general protest to the legislature acknowledging that though there were some "vicious and evil disposed" free people of color, there also were those "who have spent a life free from reproval, or even the suspicions of improper conduct." Laws that sought to expel free people of color, these citizens argued, should takes this second group into account and make exceptions, taking care to "discriminate between the loyal and disloyal, and remove only the unworthy."[70]

Some, like the surviving Johnson family, did not seem overly concerned with this new law, having escaped the earlier inquisition; others were prepared to take surprising courses of action to remain. Rather than leave the state, several free people of color petitioned the legislature for permission to become the property of trusted white associates. Typically, these petitions were similar to those of Joe Bird, who, though born free, asked the legislature to "elevate himself from his present condition into Slavery." The perception that becoming a slave was a means of "elevating" his position fit closely

[70] SP, PAR # 11085903 & 11085912, 1859**.** Some South Carolina legislators actually attempted to push through a law that would have enslaved all free people of color who did not leave in 1859, see Johnson and Roark, *Black Masters,* 166.

with the proslavery rhetoric that was so pervasive in the late 1850s. Others, like Agnes Eahart, a free woman of color and resident of Natchez, asked the legislature for a special license to remain free and remain in the state. Eahart's petition listed the names of her eleven children, all born free, perhaps as a means of gaining support. Furthermore, she let it be known that she would be willing to post a $5000 bond to guarantee the good behavior of herself and her family.[71]

The success of Eahart's petition is unclear, but in her case, as had been true of others throughout the nineteenth century, free people of color recognized the limitations and possibilities afforded them within Mississippi law and custom and took advantage of these spaces to protect themselves and their families where possible. Those few with patronage networks like the Johnsons and the Barlands found ways to prosper within the system, even though they did not have all of the privileges of whites. Others like Fanny Lieper found cracks within the legal system that she turned to her advantage. For most, the "inquisition" and similar efforts to limit freedom for free people of color were met by cultivating a reputation for respectability, demonstrating a willingness to return to slavery, or simply capitalizing on luck. All of these efforts were strategies of survival until emancipation changed the meanings of freedom and black skin in Mississippi.

[71] Examples of this include SP, PAR #11085916, Bird, 1859; PAR #11085910, Eahart, 1859.

Conclusion:
Natchez and the Influence of Public Memory

"There is no spot on earth so sweet in sentiment and so romantic and glamorous as the South; there is no spot where all the essence of that glorious past is so concentrated as Natchez—storied Natchez!"[1]

The twentieth century presentation of Natchez as a manifestation of an idealized Old South town has less to do with reality than with the fictionalization of the antebellum period during the years of Jim Crow and the Great Depression. Much like the romanticized version of the South portrayed in the opening sequences of *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*, the first popular historians of the town, the Natchez Garden Club, "recreated" a world of hoop-skirts and mansions for tourists along with content or even jubilant enslaved men and women who served the town's whites.[2] Academic historians reinforced this image through their works. Charles Syndor's contention that masters maintained slavery for reasons of benevolence though it was against their own economic interests led another historian of Mississippi to announce twenty-five years later that *Slavery in Mississippi* "clarified the place of the Negro" to such a degree that no further research on the topic was necessary.[3] In the wake of Sydnor and the public image of Natchez created in the 1930s, others produced psuedo-historical works dedicated "to those brave men and women who came to America and built the houses of their dreams at Natchez, and to their descendants, many of whom still live in

[1] *Clarksville Register*, 16 March 1937 as quoted in Steven Hoelscher, "Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93 (September 2003): 657.
[2] Ibid., 665-666.
[3] Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge*;* Louisiana State Univesity Press, 1933); John Hebron Moore, *Agriculture in Ante-Bellum Mississippi* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1958)*,* 10.

these same homes."[4] Still other historians were themselves descended from the planter aristocracy whose names illustrated the interconnections between old families of fabulous wealth.[5]

The focus of public historians on the antebellum period has led several generations of academic historians to do the same, but the roots of both black and white communities in Natchez are grounded in the ventures of European empires and African slaves a century prior.[6] The borderlands position of Natchez in the eighteenth century between rival imperial powers and Indian Nations appealed to white settlers seeking wealth and power. By the Spanish period, slavery had become the means to reach these goals not just as a way to wealth, but also as a cultural currency, which could be spent with any imperial power. The planter *cabildo*, who spent their cultural currency to gain additional wealth and power, increasingly viewed non-slaveowners with suspicion and prevented issuing them land grants. The *cabildo* recognized Spanish concerns over losing the Natchez District to the expansionist United States and used these fears to seize the land and slaves of their "disloyal" neighbors. Rather than simply adopting the lifestyles of Virginia or South Carolina planters, slaveowners in Natchez manipulated their positions within the Spanish government to increase their own power, essentially changing this borderland into a bordered land.

For the enslaved, the borders that existed between themselves and slaveowners were not political, but cultural. The profits guaranteed by the Spanish on tobacco created

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[4] Catherine Van Court, *In Old Natchez* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, & Company, 1937); see also Nola Nance Oliver, *This Too is Natchez* (New York: Hastings House, 1953).
[5] The best example is Joseph Dunbar Shields, *Natchez: Its Early History* (Louisville: John P. Morton & Company, 1930).
[6] Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*; Moore, *Agriculture in Ante-bellum Mississippi*; D. Clayton James, A*ntebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968).

a huge demand for slaves, the bulk of whom entered the region either directly from Africa or from the Caribbean. Most of those brought into Natchez likely shared the experiences of Abd-Al Rahman Ibrahima, who understood slavery in terms of his native culture, not that of the whites in Natchez. The shock of American chattel slavery led Ibrahima to run away from the Foster plantation, and it is likely both the physical and cultural distance between Mississippi and Futa Jallon led him return. His return and submission to the Foster family likely represented an attempt to form a kinship bond with this white family, to become as much of an "insider" as possible in the same way that slaves in Futa Jallon and most West African societies sought to remove their own outsider status. Though the Fosters thought of slavery in the same ways as other whites in Natchez and the rest of the Americas, it is clear that Ibrahima was able to elevate his status on the plantation not only with hard work, but also through creating actual kinship bonds by becoming a husband and a father. By marrying Isabella and raising his children in the traditions of African Americans rather than those of the Fulani, Ibrahima likely sought to ameliorate the conditions of slavery, which he had been forced to endure as an outsider.

In addition to representing the process of creolization, Ibrahima also witnessed the transition from Spanish to United States control, the switch from tobacco production to cotton, and perhaps most importantly for the enslaved in Natchez, the shift from isolated, individual plantations to an African American community. Market days on weekends offered slaves the ability to sell items they had produced and also permitted the exchange of information among blacks throughout the district and beyond via the Mississippi River. Through these exchanges Ibrahima was able to convince others that he was

royalty and ultimately secured his manumission and an acknowledgement that his American family's freedom was paramount throughout his dealings with the public.

The same urban space that contained the market also allowed for interracial activity particularly through vice--drinking, gambling, and illicit sex--but in general, the town's elite denied these activities took place, or blamed them on the boatmen drawn to the taverns and brothels of Under-the-Hill. By creating the "cultural frontier" that separated the town above the bluff from the landing along the river, whites in Natchez sought to remove themselves from the charges of outsiders that this was a rough frontier town. In reality, the behaviors that took place Under-the-Hill were not restricted to the neighborhood along the river and, for the most part, occurred with tacit acceptance as Southern white men tied these activities into displays of masculinity. Whites separated the act of drinking from being a drunk and divided gambling from being a professional gambler. Being a successful gambler was valued, but being a professional was suspicious and could label a person as dangerous and a criminal. As long as a man generously supplied drink to others while drinking he would not be considered a drunk, no matter his level of dependency. Black men, free and enslaved, drank and gambled for the same reason, to assert manliness, both within their own communities and with whites. Despite the desire of some whites to remove vices like drinking, gambling, and prostitution from the town, a legal prohibition would not have been sanctioned by custom. Not only did elite whites have cultural uses for these vices, but these activities also made Natchez a preferred stop for the boatmen who operated trade on the Mississippi. In order to distance themselves from Under-the-Hill, elite whites created a cultural frontier between the upper town and the neighborhood along the river allowing

for a sense of racial control and an impression that the two sections of the town were segregated from one another.

The ability of black men to use illicit activities to exhibit masculinity worked against slaveowners' attempts to make them unmanly, but of course, in a slave society like Natchez, dark skin generally marked people as property. Upper South slaves and Northern abolitionists viewed Natchez as among the most repressive environments in the United States as the profits made from cotton led slaveowners to treat the enslaved only as commodities, not as people. Though Natchez was the second largest slave market in the South, slaveowners never forgot that slaves were people as well as property. With the escalating sense among masters that slavery was under attack from the outside, slaveowners became increasingly concerned with the "character" of the men and women they enslaved to protect slavery on the inside. Natchez had a similar demographic composition to islands in the Caribbean, and revolts in San Domingue and across the Atlantic World led whites to fear that slaves with revolutionary ideas might enter the region. This led to a requirement that slaves brought into Mississippi have certificates guaranteeing their good character. Economic interests led both traders and buyers to evade this law, but slaveowners were able to require demonstrations of "good" character by those they enslaved as a means of exerting control on their plantations and as a prerequisite to freedom. The American and Mississippi Colonization Societies offered an avenue to freedom for slaves, but also a reward that masters could promise to slaves who had proven good character. Slaves who fulfilled these deals often found that masters and their heirs often were lacking the very traits that marked good character, as those who made their way to Liberia were denied what they had been promised. As arguments over

the place of slavery in the United States became more heated by the late 1830s the ACS and MCS, which had been viewed as an integral part of maintaining slavery in Mississippi, came under attack by slaveowners and the state courts for being in conflict with a slave society. The notion that slaves could be set free, even if they were to leave the state immediately, was viewed as undermining the peculiar institution.

The same set of concerns led to assaults on the limited independence held by free people of color in Natchez. Unlike free blacks in New Orleans, in Natchez there was no separate legal category for people of mixed race, and as such, mulattos were presumed slaves unless they could prove otherwise. Consequently, free blacks, the majority of whom were of mixed race, did not enjoy the same rights and privileges of those in Louisiana. As a result, free people of color found other means to protect their freedom and that of their families. The primary means of securing and maintaining free status in Natchez was white patronage, usually from family members or other day-to-day relationships that emerged from business or other personal interactions. Along with patronage, the small free black community found ways to use the spaces created by the urban milieu of Natchez and within Mississippi law to protect their identities. These men and women were not "slaves without masters," but rather active agents who took serious risks to retain or advance their status. Some free people of color found methods to evade laws restricting freedom, while others used their indeterminate appearance to literally perform whiteness by participating in society in ways limited to whites. Others, like William Johnson, found ways to place themselves in positions of power over whites despite obvious legal and social constraints.

Legal impediments to emancipation as well as campaigns to remove free blacks from the state led to a small but close-knit community of free people of color. For the most part, Johnson has been treated by historians as someone interested only in profit and mimicking the behavior of his white patrons, but he also expressed deep concern for other free blacks in Natchez. His barbershop functioned as a place where mixed race children could learn a trade and thus improve their chances for legal freedom. Johnson's relationship with his peers makes it clear that while he often was in competition with them in recreational pursuits, he valued their companionship. He lamented the "inquisition," which removed other members of his community based only on a lack of legal documentation instead of any evidence of criminal behavior. Johnson apparently did not think he or his family was in danger during the inquisition of 1841; nevertheless, he took steps to have his children baptized in St. Louis Cathedral, creating both a separate record of their free status and potential access to another free black community should the next inquisition lead to the expulsion of all free people of color from Mississippi.

The circumstances surrounding Johnson's murder and the legal "whiteness" Baylor Winn gained as a result of his trial point to the malleability of race and the complicated nature of identity formation in Natchez. Unlike others who attempted to change their racial categorization from black to white, Winn's status would create a potential challenge to laws that protected white privilege in a slave society. Though Barland and Hagins had participated as whites by voting and serving on juries and received support from white neighbors who apparently agreed that whiteness could be bestowed upon someone considered legally black, their cases did not present any real challenge to racial hierarchy. These were isolated cases that the legislature could turn

down without endangering white rights in a slave society. Winn's case had far greater implications. No one disputed that he had murdered Johnson; instead, the only issue was if Winn was black or white. Had the court allowed the testimony of black witnesses to be used against Winn and it was determined that he was white, it would set a precedent in which blacks would be elevated to the same legal stature as whites, disturbing the entire system of "justice" in Mississippi. The inability or unwillingness of three juries to admit black testimony against Winn made it evident that racial identity, not guilt, was the most important issue in the case.

Public historians in Natchez have begun to embrace the town's rich black history, particularly by opening William Johnson's home for tours and discussing Ibrahima's story of freedom and slavery as a means of creating "a bridge, not a barrier," between blacks and whites in modern Natchez.[7] The "histories" of Johnson and Ibrahima have been deployed to create a sense of shared, if different, history between whites and blacks and to bring tourist dollars to Natchez. These are not the same people who created the Natchez of fiction with the message that the Civil War had disrupted the natural order of the South. Still, the histories presented to the public only scratch the surface of the complexity offered by Natchez's history. Ibrahima's story is treated as an oddity created by the slave trade and Johnson simply as an interesting anomaly.[8] In reality, both of these men were at the center of rapidly developing, dynamic communities spanning the period from 1788-1851. Aspects of both of their lives were atypical, but thousands of

[7] See for example http://www.sunherald.com/mld/sunherald/11008358.htm that discusses the importance of opening William Johnson's home. Ibrahima's story as a means of bridging a the gap in public memory between the descendants of slaves and slaveholders can be found at http://www.natchezdemocrat.com/articles/2005/06/03/opinion/kerry%20whipple/kerry95.txt

[8] Ibid.; Ibrahima is also the subject of James Register's fictional *Jallon: Arabic Prince of Old Natchez, 1788-1828* (Shreveport, Louisiana: Mid-South Press, 1968).

slaves and hundreds of free people of color in Natchez shared many of the day-to-day concerns of Johnson and Ibrahima. Using the various sources surrounding the lives of these men within the context of an evolving slave society creates a more complete picture: demonstrating the influence of Africans and African Americans in the creation of Natchez.

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