

“I have yet much to say about the Negroes”:
Catharine Flood McCall’s Slave Enterprises in Early Republican Virginia

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Bachelor of Arts, St. Olaf College, 2012

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia
in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of History

University of Virginia
May 2016

Popular historians of slavery in early nineteenth-century Virginia depict a society composed of large plantations as places of work and residence over which wealthy men presided as planters, masters, and patriarchs. But in the first two decades of the century in Virginia, an especially well-documented slave-based business departs from this stereotype. In 1800, the wealthy and unmarried Catharine Flood McCall owned twenty-nine slaves. These slaves did not toil in any field; instead, they labored as skilled blacksmiths in McCall's nail-making factories located in the bustling cities of Richmond and Alexandria. She also profited from hiring out blacksmiths to white men who rented rather than purchased forced labor. As a female master who owned two nail manufactories and profited from allowing white men temporarily to utilize her slaves' skills in an urban setting, McCall presents an alternative model of proprietor and slave master. Analyzing her commercial decisions offers a window into the lesser-known world of antebellum slavery that was urban rather than rural, featured a mobile and skilled slave work force rather than field labor, and included many female masters.¹

While some historians have studied slave renting and manufacturing in urban settings, few have examined women's roles in these enterprises during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, a period of industrialization in Virginia. McCall's enterprise sheds light on women's commercial investment in the slave system. The voluminous court record generated by a lawsuit involving McCall contains personal letters, depositions, and business ledgers that span the years 1800-1826. These documents, as well as a case in which McCall sued a man who hired one of her slaves, reveal that while female urban slaveholders may have paid men to do the daily

¹ McCall owned 29 slaves in 1790 and 1800. Her slave holdings dropped to 16 in 1810, increased to 19 in 1820, and then decreased back to 16 in 1830 (Essex County Personal Property Tax Records, Essex County, VA 1782-1819 [Microfilm, Reel 103, Library of Virginia] and Essex County Personal Property Tax Records, Essex County, VA 1820-1846 [Microfilm, Reel 104, Library of Virginia]).

work of slave management for them, they did not retreat behind the cover of male managers. McCall's managers did not replace her authority over her own slaves. Women like McCall made every decision that affected their human property. This study offers a test case for analyzing female mastery, and provides a window into the world of expanding urban slave enterprises in early national Virginia. The myth of the rural plantation owner, accompanied by a mistress who governed the interior spaces of the "big house," does not fully reflect the many different kinds of slaveries and masteries that emerged in light of a growing market and urban economy in Richmond and Alexandria.²

The cache of legal documents describe McCall's enterprises and reveal that she was the legal owner of slaves, made the financial decisions involving them, knew them personally, and took action to recount her losses when renters violated their agreements or when slaves ran away. McCall's mastery was physically distanced and urban in nature, however, and her case can help us consider how distance related to slave mastery. Women like McCall could serve as masters over their urban slaves, even while living far away from the sites of slave labor, because of their social dependence on men. Far from owing their success to individual wealth or power alone, both male and female white slave owners in early Republican Virginia heavily depended on middling men—managers, merchants, agents, and overseers—to preserve their class and racial hegemony as well as the enslavement of blacks.

² Historians who have studied urban slave renting include, but are not limited to: Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860* (1964), Claudia D. Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820-1860* (1976), Charles B. Dew, *Ironmaker to the Confederacy: Joseph R. Anderson and the Tredegar Iron Works* (1999), Midori Takagi, "Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction": *Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782-1865* (1999), Gregg D. Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond* (2003), Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (2004), and John J. Zaborney, *Slaves for Hire: Renting Enslaved Laborers in Antebellum Virginia* (2012).

Born on Christmas Day, 1766 in Essex County, Virginia, Catharine Flood McCall was the youngest daughter of Archibald McCall, a wealthy Scottish merchant and landowner who settled in Essex County in 1752. Catharine's mother, wealthy Richmond County, Virginia native Catharine Flood, died while giving birth to her namesake child. Catharine's older sister, Elizabeth, died of a fever when Catharine was 11 years old. Catharine and her father lived at the Clydsede Estate, a plantation in Tappahannock, Virginia. A Loyalist during the American Revolution, Archibald McCall sent Catharine to England in 1772 before joining her a few years later. Catharine's grandmother on her mother's side, Elizabeth Flood, remained in Virginia and in 1782 petitioned the General Assembly to allow the then sixteen-year-old Catharine and her father to return to their stateside family.³

In her petition on her son-in-law's behalf, Elizabeth Flood insisted that Archibald “manifest[ed] the warmest attachment to this Country,” and earnestly “desire[d] to return with his Daughter, and become a citizen” of Virginia and the new United States. She begged the Assembly to let both return home, lest Catharine forfeit her rightful inheritance. The “sole Heiress” of her recently-deceased grandfather on her mother's side—as well as the “Heiress apparent to her father” and his numerous “slaves, and a Tract of Land”—Catharine stood to lose

³ Greg Crawford, “A Guide to the William Stewart, Jr., Letters, 1800-1818 (A Collection in the Library of Virginia Chancery Records Index Number: Arlington County Chancery Cause 1827-036),” *Virginiaheritage.org for the Library of Virginia* (Catharine birth date); Jim Ambuske, “The McCall Family and the Problem of Identity and Property in Revolutionary Virginia,” 2, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Society Eighteenth Century Studies, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, March 31, 2016 (Essex County in 1752); Archibald McCall, George McCall, and Joseph S. Ewing, 1965, “The Correspondence of Archibald McCall and George McCall, 1777-1783,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 73 (3), Virginia Historical Society, 313 and 323 (Richmond County and Elizabeth's death); “The Deposition of John Daingerfield,” August 1824, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 331/1118 (“Clydsede”); “Flood, Elizabeth & McCaul, George: Petition,” Essex County, Legislative Petitions of the General Assembly, 1776-1865, Accession Number 36121, Box 67, Folder 7, *Library of Virginia Digital Collections* (1782 petition).

her birthright if the Assembly did not put “a stop to the further operation of the Laws of Escheat and forfeiture.” The Virginia Assembly granted Elizabeth her wishes, as Catharine and Archibald returned to Virginia in 1783 to repossess their property. Growing up to own two nail manufactories as well as over “Twenty Two negro blacksmiths and nailors, and one negro carpenter, and one Negro woman” by the time she turned forty years old, Catharine owed her later wealth in part to her grandmother’s timely petition. Catharine’s financial success revealed that Elizabeth Flood’s request certainly did “ward off” any future “destruction and ruin, which [had hung] over Archibald McCall and his daughter” during their decade-long exile in England. Archibald McCall died in 1814. Single and childless, Catharine would die a decade later on March 9, 1828, in Georgetown.⁴

With her father’s investment and guidance, Catharine Flood McCall founded a nail factory and blacksmith shop in Alexandria, Virginia in 1798. She hired Thomas Dashiell to manage the Alexandria enterprise, but replaced him with William Stewart in 1800. Stewart had worked as a clerk for the McCalls in Tappahannock when he was younger and eagerly accepted a promotion within the family business to become a manager of a factory with slaves. Stewart managed the Alexandria enterprise as McCall’s agent until January 1, 1815, when McCall allowed “Stewart [to] purchas[e] out the stock machinery” in order to own the business jointly with two business partners, John Creighton and William Gilham (of “John Creighton and Company”). In 1816 Stewart sold his share of the Alexandria factory to John Creighton and

⁴ “Flood, Elizabeth & McCaul, George: Petition” (“manifested... forfeiture” and “ward off... daughter”); Ambuske, “The McCall Family and the Problem of Identity and Property in Revolutionary Virginia,” p. 8 (Virginia in 1783); McCall’s deposition, December 1819, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 1077/1118 (“Twenty Two”); Crawford, “A Guide to the William Stewart, Jr., Letters, 1800-1818” (Archibald and Catharine death dates).

Company because of mounting debt. After divesting herself of direct ownership of this business, McCall focused on slave renting and on her second nail manufactory.⁵

McCall and her father started a second factory in Richmond in 1806 and supplied it with many slaves and “very large supplies of Iron and other articles” from the Alexandria enterprise. Stewart did not manage this factory, and it is unclear who did. Father and daughter moved to Richmond soon after but retained residences in both Richmond and Tappahannock. By 1808 they had expanded their Richmond enterprise with new machinery, new slaves, and new capacity for production as demand for nails and ironwork surged. Two years after establishing the manufactory at Richmond, Archibald McCall boasted to Richmond residents in *The Enquirer* that “McCall’s Manufactory on the Basin of the Canal” had purchased “one of the truest, best and most expeditious Nail-Cutting Machines that has ever been introduced into this state, but which much superior nails are made.” He invited anyone “who is desirous of purchasing such a machine” to come by, for he would sell it “at the same price that” that was given to him. He would even consider letting the purchaser “possess an exclusive right of working” the machine “within any such district as may be agreed on.” He then listed the prices of wrought nails: twelve

⁵ As Jim Ambuske has found, Archibald’s estate on the onset of the Revolutionary War was valued at an estimated £46,000 (Jim Ambuske, “The McCall Family and the Problem of Identity and Property in Revolutionary Virginia,” 3). As John Daingerfield [*sic*], one of Catharine’s neighbors, confirmed when interviewed during the chancery court case, Catharine “heir[ed] a very large estate from her Grand Father Flood” (“The Deposition of John Daingerfield,” August 1824, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 331/1118); Commissioner Moore’s summary, October 1821, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 1115/1118 (Dashiell and “Stewart...machinery”); McCall’s deposition, December 1819, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 1077/1118 (clerk and Creighton); McCall’s deposition, December 1819, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 1078/1118 (January 1, 1815 date, Gilham, and “John Creighton and Company”); Crawford, “A Guide to the William Stewart, Jr., Letters, 1800-1818” (Creighton and Gilham, and debt).

cents per pound for “Spikes, 40, 30” or “20 nails.” If a buyer desired “24, 20, 12 and 10 brads” instead, then it would cost him 11 cents per pound.⁶

Mr. McCall ran an advertisement in 1811 for the Richmond nailery, located “on the basin, where all kinds of cut and hammered Nails, of superior quality may be had.” He alerted Richmond buyers to the “large assortments of all sizes” of “fine malleable BAR IRON, & Mill Spindles, Axletrees, etc.” that the factory produced. He offered to sell these materials, plus “Nail Rods and Hoop Iron” in “wholesale or retail” and “on moderate terms.” He also offered to his potential buyers his daughter’s slaves’ labor: “Smiths work done of every kind.” He finished the advertisement by reminding Richmond residents that he continued to sell “Loaf Sugar, Scotch Snuff Apple Brandy” from the shop (and not the smith’s station). Finally, Archibald McCall disguised his last advertisement in 1811 as a “NOTICE”: that “in consequence of the Penitentiary having reduced the price of their NAILS one cent in the pound,” the McCall Manufactory—“with an avowed intention to beat down all its competitors”—also dropped their prices to “one cent in the pound” so “that the difference between the price of my and their nails may be the same as formerly.” By lowering his prices in the face of competition, Archibald sought “a continuance of [his] customers and public’s favors.”⁷

These advertisements reflect how quickly the ironworks industry grew in Richmond during the early nineteenth century. Richmond became the capital of Virginia in 1780, and the city’s remarkable growth from 1800 to 1810 was tied to the milling industry. Grain milling

⁶ McCall’s deposition, December 1819, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 1078/1118 (1806 factory and Stewart); Commissioner Moore’s summary, October 1821, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 1115/1118 (“very”); Crawford, “A Guide to the William Stewart, Jr., Letters, 1800-1818” (residences); *The Enquirer*, Feb. 13, 1808, No Headline, Advertisement, *America’s Historical Newspapers*.

⁷ *The Enquirer*, Jan .5 1811, No Headline, Advertisement, *America’s Historical Newspapers*; *The Enquirer*, Sept. 17, 1811, No Headline, Advertisement, *America’s Historical Newspapers*.

expanded the need for associated industries such as cooperages, tanneries, naileries, foundries, as well as cotton and woolen manufactories. Foreign-born merchants and entrepreneurs proved crucial to promoting Richmond's industrial development after the Revolution. Tired of serving as junior partners of European mercantile houses, these men began to trade independently with local Virginian merchants, purchase land in the state, and marry local women. Archibald McCall sought to create a family fortune in Virginia through land purchases, a prudent marriage, and by taking advantage of new manufacturing opportunities made possible by Richmond's growing industrial economy. Perhaps the McCalls had found some financial success as proprietors of one of the few naileries in the city twenty years before the iron surge (and associated commercial competition) in Richmond took hold.⁸

Alexandria, too, rapidly industrialized at the turn of the century. Exports fueled the city's economic growth as cargo ships from around the world sailed into and out of Alexandria's port, which was the largest on the Potomac River by 1790. Alexandria was the third largest flour exporter by 1796, and by 1800, around 1,000 vessels docked annually on the city's wharves. Alexandria's population grew by 41%, to 2,000 people, between 1790 and 1798 (the year when the McCalls founded their first nail factory in the city). By 1800, Richmond's population dwarfed Alexandria's by only 766 people: Richmond boasted 5,737 residents while Alexandria claimed 4,971. The McCalls most likely founded their nail factories in these cities to seize the

⁸ Gregg D. Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 16, 160. Greg Crawford, Local Records Program Manager at the Library of Virginia, processed the chancery court case. Crawford confirms Kimball's findings by noting, "it was unusual to find slaves working in a factory setting at the beginning of the 19th century" (Crawford, "Death of a Factory Manager," *Recordatur* 6 (2), Fall 2002, The Library of Virginia [in-house newsletter]: 3-4). For more on Richmond's grain milling industry and slavery, see Daniel Rood, "Bogs of Death: Slavery, the Brazilian Flour Trade, and the Mystery of the Vanishing Millpond in Antebellum Virginia," *Journal of American History* (June 2014): 19-43.

chance to profit from their growth. Rapid population increases created a greater need for housing and other buildings, which generated a greater demand for the nails with which to build these structures. The success of the McCalls' naileries in both Alexandria and Richmond would have been impossible without skilled slaves, whose ironworking produced vast quantities of cheap nails for Archibald and his daughter's profit.⁹

Regarding southern slave-owning women of the early Republic, some historians believe married women served as slave owners in paper form only. Historians Carole Shammas and Marylynn Salmon suggest that, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, women held property in title as a way for families to evade creditors. As the market economy grew during this era, Americans increasingly experienced debt and depression because of the economic fluctuations associated with intensifying capitalism. A man's wife or children lost their personal property to creditors, even if that property had originally belonged to that wife, because personalty was liable to cover a man's debts. Salmon argues that with volatile capitalism came insolvency, which created more socially lenient attitudes towards debtors, which in turn encouraged lawmakers to guard married women's property from their husbands' creditors. By passing married women's property acts, lawmakers defended owners' personalty against creditors' claims rather than acting to encourage female economic independence. Families held

⁹ "Discovering the Decades: 1790s," Discovering the Decades, City of Alexandria, Virginia, *Alexandriava.gov* (exports, Potomac River by 1790, flour exporter by 1796, vessels by 1800, growth by 41%); "Table 3. Population of the 33 Urban Places: 1800," United States Census Bureau, *Census.gov* (Richmond and Alexandria population estimates for 1800).

slaves in the wife's name to avoid creditors, but the husband, sons, or other male family members actually managed their human property.¹⁰

In the absence of a husband, genteel single and widowed women rented out slaves to a make a profit or be able to send their children to school. Widows and single women benefitted from the hiring out of slaves because of their *feme sole* legal status. Before states legislated married women's property acts during the mid-nineteenth century, women fell under the common law of *feme covert* upon marriage. *Feme covert* or coverture status meant that women relinquished ownership of all personalty (generally, moveable goods) to their husbands. While women retained ownership of any realty (generally, unmovable "goods" such as land) they possessed before marriage, their husbands managed their real estate. Legally, then, husbands controlled what happened to a wives' entire property after marriage. But, if a woman like McCall remained unmarried, or became a widow, she fell under *feme sole* status. While she lacked the power to vote or serve on a jury, she retained the same property rights as a man: she could own property, sue or be sued in court, and sign contracts. McCall belonged to the minority 10 percent of women in early nineteenth century America who retained *feme sole* status when she was alive. Shammass and Salmon agree that only when wives turned into widows, or when women remained single, could they exercise legally explicit economic power. As a woman legally free from the

¹⁰ Married women's property acts stipulated that all of a woman's property, whether real or personal, remained legally under the woman's control after marriage. Neither her husband nor his creditors could exercise claims to it. Virginia did not pass its married women's property act until 1877 ("Reshaping Virginia [1877 to 1901]," Chronology by Period, *Virginia Memory: Library of Virginia*).

economic and legal bonds of marriage, McCall exercised this economic, legal, and personal power in the form of mastery over her own enslaved labor.¹¹

White women and men served as urban slave masters in antebellum Virginia, but in different ways. A woman may have selected which of her slaves to hire out, and to whom, but a male friend or relative typically handled the logistical details of the rental agreement. By avoiding trading slaves in the public eye, women retained claims to ladyhood. Allowing others to manage their slaves relieved widows and single women of the socially degrading work of mastery by allowing men to perform brutal duties, such as overseeing and whipping. Social norms deemed it offensive to witness women lose their tempers, and thus their “virtue,” by brutalizing their slaves.¹²

McCall’s distance from her slaves made it necessary to hire a man to manage them. Both John J. Zaborney and Inge Dornan highlight at least one key difference between plantation-style and urban female mastery: unlike plantation mistresses who oversaw slaves within the “big house,” women like McCall hired men to oversee slaves at urban sites of production. The men served as masters-by-proxy, which relieved women from having to travel to their factories and engage in direct oversight of their operations. McCall followed this pattern of Virginia women’s urban slave-renting habits: she paid Stewart to manage the slaves in her nail manufactories and

¹¹ John J. Zaborney, *Slaves for Hire: Renting Enslaved Laborers in Antebellum Virginia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 100-103; Carole Shammas, “Early American Women and Control over Capital,” in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 141-142; Joyce W. Warren, *Women, Money, and the Law: Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Gender, and the Courts* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 46; Marylynn Salmon, “Republican Sentiment, Economic Change, and the Property Rights of Women in American Law,” in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 447-9, 453-6, 465.

¹² Zaborney, *Slaves for Hire*, 100-103; Inge Dornan, “Masterful Women: Colonial Women Slaveholders in the Urban Low Country,” *Journal of American Studies* 39.3 (Dec. 2005), 399.

to make deals with renters of her slaves. McCall certainly sought a profit in renting out her slaves, and perhaps wished to avoid the most brutal duties of slave management. But she remained an engaged and active master over them because she refused to relinquish financial decisions about their lives and labor, she knew her slaves personally, and she took steps to retrieve runaways.¹³

McCall was a wealthy slave-owner who lived in a county particularly ripe with female slave-owners. A snapshot of Essex County, Virginia, in 1800 reveals that of 77 taxpaying women, 71 of them owned at least one slave. In other words, 92 percent of all taxpaying women in Essex County could call themselves slave owners. In comparison, 341 men owned slaves out of 597 male taxpayers, meaning only 57 percent of all men who held taxable property owned at least one slave. Female slave owners made up 10.5 percent of all taxpayers in Essex County during this year. McCall's holding of 29 slaves made her the largest female slave-owner in the county, and the ninth largest slave-owner among men and women. Because her large number of slaves skews the mean number of slaves held per women in this county, the median reveals more representative slaveholding patterns. The median number of slaves held per women was four, meaning on average women owned four times as many slaves than men. However, most women only held one slave in their name and more men than women held no slaves at all. Men overwhelmingly held the majority of slaves in Essex County in 1800, as there were 7.8 times as

¹³ Zaborney, *Slaves for Hire* (2012); Dornan, "Masterful Women" (2005). For evidence of white plantation mistresses' cruel behavior towards slaves, see Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

many male property owners than female. Women only owned 14 percent of Essex County's total slave property in 1800. Slaves outnumbered both female and male masters four to one.¹⁴

After examining female slave owners in this county in ten-year increments from 1790 to 1830, more women held slaves as time went on, although the median number of slaves held per women slightly decreased. This pattern of property holding reveals that slaveholding became more evenly distributed among women over a forty-year span, and that women inherited or invested in slaves more than men in each year studied. By 1830 (two years after her death), McCall's estate owed tax for 16 slaves. Although her estate no longer boasted the largest number of slaves in the county, McCall and two others tied for fifth place.¹⁵

McCall resembled historian Suzanne Lebsack's Mary Marshall Bolling, who in 1790 owned thirty-eight slaves and the majority of land in the city of Petersburg, Virginia. She also resembled Inge Dornan's Abigail Minis, who owned twenty slaves and 2,500 acres of land in Savannah, Georgia. Unlike Bolling or Minis, however, McCall never married. Most studies of slave-owning women focus on widows who continued to amass fortunes through enterprising efforts after the deaths of their husbands. Historians tend to lump widows and single women together as they both fell under the legal category of *feme sole*. Questions remain about the experiential differences and commercial decisions of those elite *feme soles* who lost and regained

¹⁴ McCall was the largest female slave owner by almost double compared to the second-largest female slave-owner, Mary Brown, who held 11 slaves. Total male slave owners: 341. Total male taxable property owners: 597. Total female slave owners: 71. Total female taxable property owners: 77. Total property-holding population of Essex County in 1800 was 674; total slave population was 2636 (Essex County Personal Property Tax Records, Essex County, VA 1782-1819 [Microfilm, Reel 103, Library of Virginia]).

¹⁵ 87.5% of female property holders held slaves in 1790, which grew to 95% in 1830. In 1790 and 1800 the median was 4 slaves, but in 1810, 1820, and 1830, the median was 3 slaves (Essex County Personal Property Tax Records, Essex County, VA 1782-1819 [Microfilm, Reel 103, Library of Virginia] and Essex County Personal Property Tax Records, Essex County, VA 1820-1846 [Microfilm, Reel 104, Library of Virginia]).

legal independence with the marriage to and subsequent loss of a husband, and those landowning *feme soles* who never relinquished that independence.¹⁶

McCall's records reveal that she supervised her enterprises directly and required Stewart to update her about the Alexandria factory frequently. Stewart reported to McCall about the slaves working in the shop and about those he hired out, the orders he placed and filled, the equipment he purchased, the deliveries he scheduled, and the account books he kept. For example, Stewart wrote to McCall in December of 1800 to affirm a delivery of goods he sent to her in Tappahannock: he was quite "glad" to hear that "the things from Fredericksburg were acceptable" to her. He was disappointed that the pair of shoes that he bought her did not fit, so he advised her to send them back to him by one of her slaves named Sam. Stewart affirmed that the seller had promised to refund the amount for the shoes.¹⁷

In the very same letter, Stewart lamented the some one hundred-mile expanse between them: he wrote, "I wish since we are separated, the distance was not so great," so that he could more frequently convey to her "any little matters" such as the shoe blunder. Rather dramatically, Stewart swore that "the word separation" was to him "like death," but promised McCall he could comfort himself knowing that he was "engaged in [McCall's] well being" as her manager. Stewart promised he would attempt to "drive off the time" of their separation by devoting himself "doubly to business," and to furnish his employer "with the necessary articles of

¹⁶ Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985), 7; Dornan, "Masterful Women," 383.

¹⁷ Crawford, "A Guide to the William Stewart, Jr., Letters, 1800-1818" (Stewart reported); Letter from Stewart to McCall, December 1800, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 340/1118.

bringing all your schemes to bear.” Stewart acknowledged McCall as the real authority behind the Alexandria nail manufactory’s business strategy.¹⁸

This letter demonstrates the type of meticulous details that McCall required in her manager’s frequent reports. It also reveals how production sites like a nail manufactory enabled slave owners to transport their human capital to sites where their labor would provide strong returns on investments. While physical distance between manager and master may have slowed their communication, it enabled the geographical spread of slavery. McCall’s personal investment in each dollar or pound sterling spent on the Alexandria and Richmond nail factories contradicts notions that women only owned property (whether in slaves, land, or business) for the purpose of protecting their family assets from creditors. McCall owned her factories for personal profit. McCall had to understand the details of Stewart’s business transactions because her livelihood depended on it.¹⁹

¹⁸ Letter from Stewart to McCall, December 1800, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 340/1118. In many of Stewart’s letters to McCall, he uses love-struck language when writing about his affection for her. It is clear that he was madly in love with the woman. There is no indication in her letters to him that she loved him as more than a family friend and manager. Crawford notes that Stewart died of illness and depression, and implies that both Stewart’s financial woes and broken heart fueled his depression (Crawford, “A Guide to the William Stewart, Jr., Letters, 1800-1818” and Crawford, “Death of a Factory Manager”).

¹⁹ It is difficult to tell how much of Stewart’s grieving about the physical distance between him and his employer proved the exaggerated cries of a lonely heart, or how much the separation actually affected the Alexandria business. Stewart and McCall could communicate frequently enough through letters to keep each other updated on events in a timely manner. The distance no doubt proved at least an annoyance to Stewart, who had to write McCall in order to ask her questions, rather than being able to ask in person. While writing to McCall to ask her to “spare me a bed” in order to “prevent the purchase of one” in Alexandria may have felt tedious or awkward to Stewart, such requests proved the norm between manager and owner who lived one hundred miles apart (Letter from Stewart to McCall, September 1812, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 816/1118). McCall and Stewart’s communication reveals no strong evidence to conclude that the physical distance greatly hampered the Alexandria factory’s efficiency or profitability.

While McCall certainly did not need Stewart's advice to understand that slave renting proved a profitable enterprise, she valued and sought her manager's opinions on the matter. Stewart encouraged McCall to rent out her Alexandria slaves to reduce the costs of feeding and managing them, and to make them yield more revenue than their work producing nails alone could generate. In 1801, Stewart estimated that "the negroes would hire for about 450 or 500" pounds sterling if McCall decided to rent them out. He vaguely calculated that if McCall did rent them out at this price, then the "profits of the shop [would] amount to 1000" pounds and "the expences attending the establishment would reduce it the first year to one thousand dollars or very little more." Stewart anxiously reported in early 1801 that a certain Mr. Johnstone "refused to pay the balance of Lucy's hire" because of his own outstanding debts. Stewart must have felt a personal responsibility for this particular rental, for he felt "much vexed" about the refusal. He vowed to petition Mr. Johnstone "next court."²⁰

Although she sought and followed their advice about how best to profit from slave labor, McCall did not let her managers make every decision. A neighbor's 1824 deposition included in the Chancery case reveals that McCall took her proprietorship seriously. When asked how Stewart typically "enacted business for Miss McCall" as her agent, Ann Coleman responded that she believed Stewart consulted McCall "on all important matters." Coleman then mentioned a time when Stewart had overstepped his bounds with McCall. On one occasion, Coleman heard Stewart "say he once ask'd Miss McCall to let him sell one of her negroes who had behaved much amiss." Though he thought McCall had consented "at the moment," later, "when she found he was sold," she became "very angry and said [Stewart] ought not to have sold without again

²⁰ Letter from Stewart to McCall, undated, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 348/1118 ("450 or 500"); Letter from Stewart to McCall, undated, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 349/1118 ("profits...more"); Letter from Stewart to McCall, January 1801, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, images 345/1118 (Mr. Johnstone).

coming to her for that purpose.” Mrs. Coleman concluded her deposition with the report that she often heard Stewart grumble that McCall “never would suffer him to manage her negroes as he wished, or they never would have been as bad as they were.” As a businesswoman who owned two nail factories by 1806, McCall required constant information about her slaves’ productivity and material requirements, and kept an active correspondence with at least her Alexandria manager. Because she usually lived in Richmond or Tappahannock, both some one hundred miles from the Alexandria factory, McCall allowed Stewart, a man who had grown up in her family and whom she trusted, to manage the nailery and slaves in Alexandria. But she was an owner in action and not simply in name, a role she demonstrated when she scolded her manager for overstepping his authority by making irrevocable decisions about her enslaved property.²¹

Three years after his failed attempt as an independent business owner in Alexandria, Stewart died “totally insolvent” on February 20, 1818 after a brief illness. That McCall gave “no public notice” of “[Stewart’s] agency”—that is, his employment as an agent who made economic decisions on McCall’s behalf—“having ceased” in Alexandria created trouble for McCall after her friend and manager’s death. Stewart owed money to James Sanderson when the former died, and Sanderson sued McCall to obtain payment. A voluminous paper record of these businesses survives because Sanderson filed a chancery suit against McCall. The letters in the chancery suit between McCall and Sanderson, McCall’s friend and business acquaintance, reveal a tense build-up to the actual lawsuit. Because McCall “made no distinct contract” with Stewart “at the time he took upon himself the business,” Sanderson doubted that Stewart ever ceased being McCall’s agent. The suit first appeared as a notice in the *Alexandria Gazette & Daily Advertiser* on January 25, 1819. The court ordered McCall to “enter her appearance to the suit, and give

²¹ “The Deposition of Ann Coleman,” September 1824, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 325/1118.

security for performing the decrees of the court.” The court also ordered “John Creighton & Company” to “not pay away, convey or secrete, the debts by them owing to, or the estate or effects in their hands” that belonged to Catharine, implying that Sanderson believed McCall and John Creighton & Company owed him money on behalf of the late Stewart. Sanderson took depositions from those who had done business with Stewart in Alexandria to prove that Stewart had legally acted as McCall’s agent when he had borrowed money from him. McCall submitted her own account books and correspondence with Stewart to prove Stewart had “hired [her] servants and tools” to carry on “the business solely on his own account” in 1815. She argued this transaction released her from paying “the debts of [her] agent” to Sanderson, a man “from whom [she] derive[d] nothing.” It appears that Sanderson won the case. After Commissioner A. Moore examined the books in 1821, he declared it did “not appear that Stewart ever did business in Alexandria on his own account.” As a property owner, entrepreneur, and slave owner, McCall was not immune from being sued—and from suing others—in court.²²

McCall took swift legal action to recount her losses when renters violated their agreements. In March of 1815, McCall sued a man named George Ingles in the City of Richmond. McCall sought \$150 in damages in a “case for negro hire” relating to four separate slave rental agreements Ingles made with McCall over the hiring of one of McCall’s slaves, a woman named Criss. Ingles agreed to rent Criss from March 1, 1808 to January 1 of the following year, for unspecified work. Ingles promised to return her “Clothed with a good Cloth,”

²² Summary, no date, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 2/1118 (“totally insolvent” and Stewart death date); Commissioner Moore’s summary, October 1821, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 1115/1118 (“no...ceased”); McCall’s deposition, December 1819, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 1078/1118 (“made...business”); *Alexandria Gazette & Daily Advertiser*, January 25th 1819, No Headline, Advertisement, *America’s Historical Newspapers*; McCall to Sanderson letter, July 1818, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 1054/1118 (“hired...account” and “the debts...nothing”); Commissioner Moore’s summary, October 1821, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 1116/1118 (“not”).

with a “new Jacket & petticoat,” some stockings and shirts, and with “one pair shoes.” Ingles instead returned Criss to McCall “with no shirts, no shoes, & no stockings.” After hiring Criss again for two months later in 1809, Ingles returned her again with no shirts and no stockings. This same pattern happened twice more, in 1810 and 1811. McCall complained that she rented Criss to Ingles “at his special instance and request” for his “use, benefit, and convenience,” and that Ingles had agreed to pay McCall £7 “per year and to furnish said slave with necessary and comfortable clothing.” McCall sued Ingles because he never paid her the stated sum, nor returned Criss with “the clothing aforesaid.” McCall continued to let Ingles rent Criss while his debt kept mounting; perhaps personal connections temporarily trumped business considerations. But whatever connection they may have had, commercial concerns prompted McCall to sue Ingles to get a legal return on her damages.²³

McCall hired managers to run the smiths shops, and reaped a profit from men looking to temporarily hire away part of her labor force. McCall did not need to be physically present at the site of labor, or even in the same city, to seek damages to her property. Renting out her slaves amplified McCall’s concern with potential property damage, as neither she nor her regular managers could control what men like Ingles did with their slaves (no matter what promises they made ahead of time in paper).

McCall depended on men to supervise and discipline her human property. Two months after Stewart’s death, McCall sought advice on what to do with the Alexandria slaves from Stewart’s business partner, John Creighton, who, she admitted, advised her “a lot to do about the Negroes.” Because Stewart did not purchase McCall’s Alexandria slaves in 1815, McCall needed to find a new man to manage her human property after Stewart’s death three years later. The task

²³ “McCall v. George Ingles.” March 1815. Richmond (City) Court Records: Hustings Court. Suit Papers. 1814-1815. Box 24. Library of Virginia Archival and Information Services Division.

naturally (and legally) fell to Sanderson, as Sanderson was Stewart's estate administrator. In 1818 McCall committed her slaves to Sanderson's "especial care" after their lease expired. McCall promised Sanderson that she had "yet much to say about the Negroes" who worked at the Alexandria manufactory. Whatever she wished to tell him, such things made "the subject of a future letter." No letter indicates that McCall often came to the naileries in Richmond or Alexandria to oversee its affairs. With Stewart—and then Sanderson—at the helm of her naileries, McCall did not have to be present to perform mastery over her property as she saw fit.²⁴

McCall also took action to retrieve runaway slaves. On March 25, 1818, McCall warned Sanderson of a particular slave named George who would cause Sanderson trouble down the line. McCall "especially" committed George to Sanderson's care because he was "not to be depended on." While McCall gave no further detail on the matter, her vague prediction about George came true. Five months after McCall's warning, Sanderson placed an advertisement in *The Alexandria Herald* on August 17, and in the *Alexandria Gazette & Daily Advertiser* on August 18. Sanderson offered a fifty-dollar reward for "a Negro Man, named GEORGE, or GEORGE GRIFFIN." The "property of Miss McCall," George had absconded from the nailery on August 15. George, "by trade a nailer," understood "some parts of the blacksmith's business." He was about thirty years old, of average height, and had a "very black complexion." Sanderson described George as a "very artful fellow" who had been "in the habit of obtruding himself as a free man." Sanderson predicted that George would undoubtedly "attempt to pass as such" to seek work in a new nailery. Whether or not McCall or Sanderson ever recovered George Griffin

²⁴ Letter from McCall to Sanderson, March 1818, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 1045/1118 ("a lot" and "especial"); Letter from McCall to Sanderson, March 1818, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 1042/1118 ("yet...letter").

remains unknown. *The Alexandria Herald* reprinted the last advertisement four months later on December 23, 1818. The *Alexandria Gazette & Daily Advertiser* reprinted the last advertisement on January 5, 1819.²⁵

Absconding slaves and the free black population grew in number as Virginia cities industrialized. In her study of slavery and emancipation in early Republican Virginia, Eva Sheppard Wolf notes that between 1790 and 1800, the total free black population in Virginia grew by more than one-third, to nearly two thousand people. Slave owners worried that renting out slaves to non-owners in the city undermined social stability by encouraging an unhealthy sense of independence in their slaves. Hiring out slaves, as well as slaves' own self-hire (which was technically illegal, but occurred frequently with the permission of their masters) afforded skilled slaves some independence and the chance to earn funds to purchase their freedom. In late 1818, George Griffin proved the validity of slave owners' fears that such freedoms within the slave system would undermine the system itself. Possessing the hireable skills of a blacksmith—and perhaps on occasions before having presented “himself as a free man” while being rented out by different masters in Alexandria—George felt confident enough in his skills to abscond from the Alexandria nailery and live on his own account. Having experienced life as a rented slave

²⁵ Letter from McCall to Sanderson, 1818, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 1042/1118 (“especially...on”); *Alexandria Herald*, Aug. 17, 1818, and Dec. 23, 1818, both No Headline, Advertisement, *America's Historical Newspapers* (“a Negro...as such”); The *Alexandria Gazette & Daily Advertiser*, Aug. 18, 1818, and Jan. 5, 1819, both No Headline, Advertisement, *America's Historical Newspapers*.

under the eyes of someone who was not his direct master, George perhaps sought employment where he could work for his own wages.²⁶

Female masters like McCall asserted authority over their slaves despite the evident difficulties of control and protective anonymity that an urban environment could provide to the enslaved. By running the advertisement in *The Alexandria Herald* twelve times over the course of five months, by providing a detailed description on her escapee, and by offering a reward for his return, McCall obeyed contemporary notions about slave management. Her actions did not greatly differ from her male slave-owning peers. Slaveholders of both sexes frequently published threats of legal action at the end of their runaway advertisements. Masters warned those who were guilty of employing or concealing their runaways that such actions were punishable under law. McCall published this threat at the end of her advertisement: she cautioned any “masters of vessels” against “harboring or carrying off said runaway,” as such offenders would be “dealt with according to law.” Women like McCall took measures to recapture their property to mitigate the economic consequences of lost labor and to reinstate their authority. Treating runaway slaves as an economic loss defies romantic notions that female masters somehow empathized with their property’s enslaved status because of sharing a hegemonic status of being

²⁶ Eva Sheppard Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 36, 111, 128. Slave self-hire was banned in Virginia in 1782 in an attempt to reestablish a sense of order to post-Revolutionary society. Sheppard Wolf argues that the act implied that slave owners had a responsibility to the community, and that the law could penalize irresponsible owners by depriving them of their slaves. Douglas R. Egerton explains that many owners and slaves disobeyed the law because self-hire proved beneficial to both parties. Typically, a slave would contract out his labor, and then pay his owner a share of his earnings. Benefits included cash in the master’s pocket without having to oversee the slave; the slave could essentially choose his own master (Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 & 1802* [Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993], 25).

culturally and legally oppressed. Aggressively advertising for the return of absconding slaves also serves to define McCall's female mastery.²⁷

Did female masters like McCall treat their slaves well because of human property's economic purpose, or did they overwork or mistreat them because property could always be replaced? For lack of evidence, McCall's treatment of her slaves remains unknown in comparison to other female urban slave owners in Richmond and Alexandria. McCall's lawsuit against George Ingles, her advertising of George Griffin, and her anger at Stewart for selling of her slaves fail to reveal any sentimental reasons for her actions. The evidence reveals only that McCall sought to financially recoup her losses.²⁸

McCall proved a true slave master as she made financial decisions about her property, knew her slaves personally, and took steps to retrieve them. While McCall delegated the day-to-day operations of slave management to Stewart, she deeply involved herself in the legal, economic, and personal aspects of slave renting. McCall knew her slaves personally enough to warn Sanderson that he should not depend on a certain blacksmith named George. Based on Stewart's frustration with McCall for failing to let him "manage her negroes as he wished," McCall always had the first and final word on how to discipline her property. Stewart had to ask McCall's permission before making any decision about her slaves or how to spend her money.

²⁷ Dornan, "Masterful Women," 395 and 397; *Alexandria Herald*, Aug. 31, 1818, No Headline, Advertisement, *America's Historical Newspapers*. Historians who romanticize relations between southern white mistresses and their black female slaves include Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988) and Marli F. Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997). Thavolia Glymph's *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (2008) seeks to upend these histories. Glymph argues that "Contrary to most interpretations, violence on the part of white women was integral to the making of slavery...[and] contradicted prevailing conceptions of white womanhood" then and today (5).

²⁸ Dornan, "Masterful Women," 401.

McCall did not let male managers make decisions on her behalf. Finally, by advertising for George Griffin's return, and by suing George Ingles for violating their agreement about returning Criss to McCall with proper clothing, McCall did not serve as a paper owner of slaves. McCall proved a master of slaves who took matters into her own hands.²⁹

A brief glimpse into McCall's life dismantles the image of the autonomous male patriarchal master. As a single female master who lived away from her sites of production, McCall depended on male family members and friends to make her businesses run. Mastery over her slaves depended on McCall's reliance on white male liaisons: her father advertised her nails, Stewart managed her blacksmith slaves, and men like Ingles rented out her slaves. Male masters, too, had to rely on other men to operate their slave enterprises. Even Thomas Jefferson, known for his intensely scrutinizing style of slave management, had to rely on overseers to run his Mulberry Row nailery after his favored acting manager died. Although slavery in early nineteenth-century America seems to rely on the paradigm of patriarchy, with the master-planter at the apex of this social system, McCall's documents help to reveal that social agreements among whites at all levels in this system secured the enslavement of blacks. Because McCall had to depend on various men to perform her mastery, we should examine more closely the ways in which male masters similarly depended on merchants, agents, and overseers.³⁰

²⁹ "The Deposition of Ann Coleman," September 1824, Stewart v. McCall Chancery Index, image 325/1118 ("manage").

³⁰ Lucia C. Stanton, *Those Who Labor for My Happiness': Slavery at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 86.

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