

**A Spoonful of Sugar Helps the Medicine Go Down: Poison Use by
Slaves in Antebellum Virginia.**

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Introduction

While living in Richmond, Virginia in the early 1850s, one slave, a certain Jane Williams, realized that there was more than one way to skin a cat, or, in this case, more than one way to subvert or utterly destroy the people supporting a degrading and exploitive institution. In her bid for liberation, Jane decided to massacre, with an axe, the wife and infant daughter of her employer.¹ This, quite understandably, aroused horror and indignation in both the community and media, but it was Jane's earlier crime that should have horrified them all. Almost two years prior to her rampage, Jane had, unnoticed, fatally poisoned her master's baby.²

Although Jane's covert infanticide seems like, and very well could have been, a wanton act of violence, careful consideration reveals the larger significance of her actions. While the existing written records from Virginia's antebellum period are heavily biased towards giving the perspective of wealthy white people, the essential facet of blacks' feelings towards slavery can be seen in how they behaved within, and against, the institution. Herein lies the significance of Jane's crimes: slave resistance. While slaves may not have written much, their actions serve as a text to reveal their feelings towards their condition. Although previous scholarship has examined openly violent slave resistance such as rebellions and covert actions such as arson, the use of poison by slaves against masters has largely gone ignored. In order to fully comprehend the intensity and scope of slave resistance in antebellum Virginia, one must look beyond

¹ *Particulars of the Dreadful Tragedy in Richmond on the Morning of the 19th July, 1852: Being a Full Account of the Awful Murder of the Winston Family : Embracing All the Particulars of the Discovery of the Bloody Victims, the Testimony Before the Coroner's Jury, and the Evidence on the Final Trials of The Murderess and Murderer, Jane and John Williams : Their Sentence, Confessions, and Execution Upon the Gallows, Together with the Funeral Sermon of the Rev. Mr. Moore on the Death of Mrs. Winston and Daughter, and the Sermon of the Rev. Robert Ryland on the Subject of the Murders* (Richmond: John D. Hammersley, 1852), 5.

² "Further Confession of Jane Williams," *Richmond Enquirer*, Sep. 17, 1852. <http://virginiachronicle.com/cgi-bin/virginia?a=d&d=RE18520917.1.4&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

conventional crime records and physically harmless behaviors to consider the possibility of many undetected assassinations of slave owners via poison.

Antebellum Virginia is a prime case study for slave poisonings as the state had its own peculiar ideology. Following the Revolution, Virginians in particular had a hard time reconciling their ideas of liberty and their desire to own people; this moral contradiction "...could only be resolved with self-deception on the grandest scales."³ According to Pulitzer Prize winning historian Alan Taylor, Virginians formed a paternalistic system in an attempt to convince themselves that slavery was a mutually beneficial institution.⁴ This self-deception was a poisoner's dream as slave owners lacked the caution necessary to be suspicious of their supposedly content slaves. Further, although Virginia was overwhelmingly rural and plantation based, it "...was probably unique in the South in the extent of its manufacturing and the use of slaves in industry."⁵ Over time, Virginia switched to growing grains such as wheat instead of tobacco; because grains were less labor intensive Virginia's slave holders found themselves with a surplus of human property.⁶ With this shift in the economy there also came a shift in slave owning habits. Slaves who were not sold South could find themselves rented out. This is what is referred to as the hiring out system. This created a new, ambiguous group of slave "owners" as they only had slaves on a temporary, contractual basis. This led to a sometimes permissive form of slavery that emboldened slaves to take control of their own lives.⁷ If a slave moved to the city

³ Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27.

⁴ Alan Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia: 1772-1832* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2013), 107.

⁵ Herbert S. Klein, *Slavery in the Americas: A Comparative Study of Virginia and Cuba* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 187.

⁶ John J. Zaborney, *Slaves for Hire: Renting Enslaved Laborers in Antebellum Virginia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 11.

⁷ Midori Takagi, *Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction: Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782-1865* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 36.

and lived apart from whites, he “...might not have his freedom, but he lost a considerable part of his bondage.”⁸ Slaves working in Richmond could even earn wages which, beyond the very literal objects they could now afford, also bought them “...some human dignity, pride, independence, manhood, and self-esteem...”⁹ It is under this weak form of semi-freedom that resentment and plots to poison could flourish.

The scholarship on slave resistance has always been something of a battleground. While any number of scholars could have any number of definitions for it, Eugene Genovese defined slave resistance, quite simply, as “a struggle for freedom.”¹⁰ Despite the broadness of his definition, Genovese does make a distinction between different levels of resistance. For him, “...resistance and violence in daily affairs usually represented the settling of personal or local scores rather than a collective attempt to overthrow an overwhelming white power.”¹¹ Large scale resistance, those attempts through rebellion and insurrection that rattle the entirety of the slave holding system, has gotten the lion’s share of scholars’ attention.

Often, when people think of slave revolts, they think of organized, violent, very public actions¹² such as the ever popular, ever controversial, Nat Turner’s Rebellion. According to Leslie Howard Owens, in the past, historians had a limited view of resistance, believing that “...if the slave was not a Nat Turner...then he was submissive—a typical slave type (Sambo).”¹³ For scholars and the public alike, “...Nat Turner’s uprising represents a shining moment in the

⁸ Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 115.

⁹ Zaborney, *Slaves for Hire*, 134.

¹⁰ Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹² Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943).

¹³ Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 71.

otherwise dark history of American slavery. It was an example of slaves challenging an oppressive and brutalizing regime in North America...blacks have come to regard this slave uprising as a moment of resistance, empowerment, and justice in historical memory.”¹⁴ Due to this desire to hear stories of heroics, scholars like Eric R. Taylor have written expansive books on slave revolts including those that occurred at sea. Just like Turner’s Rebellion, ship revolts tended to be bloody and courageous such as the famous *Amistad* case and the daring and successful *Creole* case, both of which had male leads in Sengbe and Madison Washington, respectively.¹⁵ Everybody loves a good story so the appeal of these dramatic revolts is clear.

While these large revolts certainly caught public attention and shook the feeling of security slave owners possessed, such occurrences were relatively rare and should not be held as representative of resistance. Also, from a strategic standpoint, when slaves “...openly and violently attacked their enemies...” they ran the risk of being caught and severely punished or executed.¹⁶ So, even if slaves did wish their masters harm, they did not necessarily openly act on it. Just because a majority of slaves did not go on massacres does not mean they accepted their condition though. The scholarly focus on violent revolt has led to the erasure of smaller forms of resistance and has particularly been neglectful of representing women in the narrative of resistance. To the dismay of historians like Veta Smith Tucker, when resistance is studied the focus is usually on “methods used by men, which include displays of violence, physical prowess, or intellectual decisiveness, while the crafty tactics that black women used to resist slavery have

¹⁴ Bryan Rommel-Ruiz, “Vindictive Ferocity: Virginia’s Response to the Nat Turner Rebellion” in *Enemies of Humanity: The Nineteenth-Century War on Terrorism*, ed. Isaac Land. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 65.

¹⁵ Eric Robert Taylor, *If We Must Die: Shipboard Insurrections in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 156.

¹⁶ Philip J. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 95.

been understudied and generally mischaracterized as either impulsive or mystical.”¹⁷ Of all the women who fought against their bondage, a scholarly favorite can be found in Margaret Garner. Garner was a slave who unsuccessfully ran away and, instead of being recaptured, killed one of her children and then attempted to kill the rest.¹⁸ Garner’s plight transcended history and academia and became culturally significant as the inspiration for Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.¹⁹ Despite the popularity of Garner’s story, the way her plight is recounted tends to fall into the previous mentioned trap of female resistance being presented as “impulsive,” which muffles the fact that slave women could be just as calculating and rational as their male counterparts.

To try to expand the understanding of slave resistance, historians such as Stephanie Camp brought forth forms of “everyday resistance,”²⁰ whereby slaves showed their discontent through small actions, such as breaking tools or temporarily hiding away. Although this was a much needed addition to the scholarship, as it brought more women into the picture and showed that not all resistance needed to be large in scale or violent, the research on slave resistance still has a wide gap. Violent slave revolts and “everyday resistance” represent the two extremes of slave resistance; on the one hand, violent open revolt, on the other, non-violent resistance that was more of a nuisance than a threat. Surely, there has to be a middle ground?

¹⁷ Veta Smith Tucker, “Secret Agents: Black Women Insurgents on Abolitionist Battlegrounds,” in *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, ed. Mary E. Frederickson and Delores M. Walters (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 78.

¹⁸ Nikki Marie Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati’s Black Community, 1802-1868* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 159.

¹⁹ Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, “Coerced but Not Subdued: The Gendered Resistance of Women Escaping Slavery,” in *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, ed. Mary E. Frederickson and Delores M. Walters (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 51.

²⁰ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Indeed, there is; slaves using poison as a form of resistance. Of all murder weapons available to the weak, poison is the most fearsome of all as it is "...hard to predict, hard to control, and hard to prove..."²¹ Slaves were often employed in positions of trust, such as cooks, nannies, and housemaids.²² Whites realized the vulnerability created by relying on the oppressed for such intimate tasks, as revealed in their passing laws to try to keep slaves from acquiring poison, but that did not stop them from employing slaves in their homes anyway. Some slaves certainly took advantage of this trust as evidenced by a long and disturbing court record. The use of poison marks a much needed middle ground on the spectrum of slave resistance as it is both a violent way of revolt but also hidden. To clarify, poison is defined in this paper as any substance secretly given to another with the intent to harm or kill, encompassing everything from ground up glass to laudanum. While some focus has been given to poisoning cases in the eighteenth century, as can be found in Phillip Schwarz's *Twice Condemned*,²³ the nineteenth century has been almost wholly neglected as fewer trials for poisoning were held, leading historians like Schwarz to conclude that poison use was no longer significant;²⁴ the aim of this paper is to refute this viewpoint. The seeming disparity in poison cases between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can possibly be attributed to the difference in poison detection technologies, the difference in working environments, and the difference in the mentalities of slavers towards their slaves. This paper seeks to answer the question: To what extent was poison used as a form of resistance by slaves in Antebellum Virginia and how did the white population respond to the perceived threat?

²¹ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 94.

²² Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 160.

²³ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

Sources have been drawn from various contemporary newspapers, law books, letters, and topical publications from the period. Although most of the sources are drawn from and specific to Virginia, sources from other locations are used as supplements when appropriate. While the primary sources used offer a wealth of information about slave activity and white reactions to it, due to the hidden nature of poisoning it must be acknowledged that these sources most likely fail to capture the full extent of poisoning activity, and, as such, some anecdotal evidence is used to form hypotheses as well.

The first chapter of this paper explores poisoning in the eighteenth century as it was understood by both contemporaries and modern scholars. This chapter seeks to answer how poisoning practices by slaves has previously been understood. The second chapter explores poisoning in the nineteenth century placed within the context of social, cultural, and technological changes. This chapter seeks to answer why poisoning was different in the nineteenth century and how these differences came about. The third chapter explores how the practice of poisoning affected society, both locally and beyond, in the antebellum period. This chapter seeks to reveal how whites reacted to their perception of poisonings by blacks. The concluding section will synthesize the previous chapters to make the argument that slaves using poison to harm or kill their masters was more prevalent in antebellum Virginia than is currently acknowledged by historians and acknowledging this is important to gain a full understanding of the extent of slave resistance.

Chapter 1: Manumissions through Magic and Mayhem—Poison in Eighteenth-Century

Virginia

If asked to imagine what a slave who could make and utilize poison would look like, some people would likely imagine a voodoo man or an ancient crone, possessing mysterious ingredients and even more mysterious knowledge. The shadowy workings of slaves went by many names, whether it be obeah in the British Caribbean, quimbois in Martinique, or conjuring in the United States,²⁵ it all labeled the white fear of enigmatic black power. While it would be rational to think that such mystical activity was rare, the record seems to confirm the contrary. With the exception of stealing, Schwarz's research reveals that more slaves stood trial for poisoning than any other crime between 1740-1785.²⁶ Of all of the techniques that slaves could have used, why did they seem to use poison so much? Beyond being a practical weapon, Igbo focused historian Douglas B. Chambers believes that, "...the significance of poison is that it points to the hidden historical reality of the non-Christian religious system of the vast majority of slaves."²⁷ While it is true that Africans brought spiritually charged poisoning traditions from Africa to the Americas during the Diaspora,²⁸ and that this would in some ways explain their seeming affinity for this technique, it is a mistake to place all poisonings by slaves in such a context. While ritual poison practices were very real in the minds of both slaves and masters,²⁹ these practices were far from far spread. For one, the occult knowledge necessary to prepare deadly plant based concoctions belonged to a small subsection of the slave population.

²⁵ Diana Paton, "Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2012): 237-238.

²⁶ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 95.

²⁷ Douglas B. Chambers, *Murder at Montpelier: Igbo Africans in Virginia* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 67.

²⁸ Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 73.

²⁹ Fett, *Working Cures*, 162.

According to scholar of African-American religion Albert J. Raboteau, in the South, these practitioners were often known as conjurers and they were seen as exceptional even within their own communities.³⁰ Conjurers "...were viewed as healers of illnesses which white doctors couldn't touch with their medicines, and as perpetrators of sicknesses on any person they wished—all through 'spells.'"³¹ In North America, conjure was typically associated with slaves of Akan, Igbo, or Gambian origins.³² For slave communities, conjurers were a source of awe as well as fear and there are plenty of instances of intraracial poisonings to show why that fear seemed valid.³³ Further, plant medicine and poison use was not the exclusive territory of blacks. Although whites often admired black ability in botany,³⁴ whites had plenty of their own plant practices as well.³⁵ Finally, many slaves used household poisons that were readily available such as arsenic,³⁶ casting doubt on the need for generational plant knowledge and the spiritual ties usually associated with it. In reality, slaves were more likely to use household substances than the "... 'plant poisons' with which they were supposed to be familiar."³⁷ In short, one does not need to be a masterful botanist to place rat poison in someone's coffee.

To further examine some scholars', such as Yvonne P. Chireau and Walter C. Rucker, belief that slaves' use of poison pointed to their ties back to culture and religion in Africa, some discrepancies must be briefly addressed. Although there is undeniably truth to this statement, which will be explained shortly, it is not wholly accurate. Poison was not then, nor had it ever

³⁰ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South: Updated Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 276.

³¹ Todd L. Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 174.

³² Walter C. Rucker, *The River Flows on: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 110.

³³ Chireau, *Black Magic*, 71.

³⁴ Rucker, *The River Flows on*, 150.

³⁵ Fett, *Working Cures*, 61-62.

³⁶ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 205.

³⁷ Oscar Reiss, *Blacks in Colonial America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1997), 195.

been, the exclusive territory of Africans. Poison has been used around the globe to kill since time immemorial, taking out everyone from Socrates³⁸ to Imam Musa al-Kadhim.³⁹ Even a casual look at laws in the Mother Country reveals that the threat of poison murder was well ingrained in the English psyche. In 1531, a cook named Richard Roose poisoned seventeen people in the household of the Bishop of Rochester, resulting in two deaths.⁴⁰ That same year, Henry VIII pushed the House of Lords to upgrade poisoning from murder to treason; poison murder was deemed so uniquely horrible that the prescribed penalty was to be boiled to death.⁴¹ According to Sir William Blackstone, of all the methods used in murder, poison was the “most detestable” as “it can of all others be the least prevented either by manhood or forethought.”⁴² Once in North America, the anxiety around poison continued. In 1621, the English settlers at Jamestown were put completely on edge for several months after a plot by Opechancanough to poison them all was foiled.⁴³ The English retaliated in like fashion in 1623 when, at a fake peace conference, they poisoned Opechancanough’s and many other Native American attendees’ wine.⁴⁴ These examples clearly show that the Englishmen settling America were no naïfs to poison and its dangers, especially in the hands of servants and the otherwise oppressed. Also, not only was

³⁸ Bettany Hughes, *The Hemlock Cup: Socrates, Athens and the Search for the Good Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 342.

³⁹ Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mun* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80.

⁴⁰ Miranda Wilson, *Poison's Dark Works in Renaissance England* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2014), XVII.

⁴¹ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 97. This penalty was not even technically allowed under Common Law and was abolished by Henry VIII’s successor, Edward VI. See: Blackstone Volume 4, 196.

⁴² St. George Tucker, *Blackstone's Commentaries: With Notes of Reference, to the Constitution and Laws, of the Federal Government of the United States; and of the Commonwealth of Virginia. In Five Volumes. With an Appendix to Each Volume, Containing Short Tracts Upon Such Subjects as Appeared Necessary to Form a Connected View of the Laws of Virginia, as a Member of the Federal Union*, Vol. 4 (Philadelphia: William Young Birch and Abraham Small, 1803), 196.

⁴³ Helen C. Rountree, *Pocahontas's People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia Through Four Centuries* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 71.

⁴⁴ Alfred A. Cave, *Lethal Encounters: Englishmen and Indians in Colonial Virginia* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 126.

poison known to whites, it was certainly known to the Christian religion as well. Poison use is mentioned in the Bible as can be seen in verses like 2 Kings 4: 38-41, where a hapless servant accidentally puts a poisonous gourd into soup and serves it to a group of students who shriek in horror as there was “death in the pot.”⁴⁵ Although this poisoning was unintentional, it once again highlights the risks associated with not preparing one’s own food and the vulnerability of those who rely on servants. While these brief sketches give insight into how poison was understood in both an English and Christian context, there is some distinction to be made in African poisoning practices.

Statistically, regions with more African born slaves had more trials for poisoning during the eighteenth century.⁴⁶ But, this is somewhat conjectural as historians of these regions, including Philip D. Morgan, concede that there is no definitive proof that the slaves put on trial for poison offenses in these areas were actually African.⁴⁷ Further, just because slaves from these areas were tried more does not mean they were actually a credible threat; ironically, it was perhaps when the African roots to their actions were clearest that their efforts were the weakest. Although conjuring could take the form of deadly plant based concoctions, it could take more spiritual but less dangerous forms as well. While many slaves utilized poisons that were meant to be ingested, others made traditional African “poisons” that were to act in more mysterious ways in the form of charms. Just like poison, charms were not a distinctly African phenomenon. In his intercultural study, Mechal Sobel shows that even by the mid-eighteenth century Virginians still

⁴⁵ *The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments; Translated Out of the Original Tongues; and with the Former Translations Diligently Compared and Revised, by the Special Command of King James I of England* (Walpole, NH: Anson Whipple, 1815), 2 Kings 4: 38-41. Luckily, the prophet Elisha worked a miracle and made the soup harmless.

⁴⁶ Chambers, *Murder at Montpelier*, 68.

⁴⁷ Philip D. Morgan, “Slave Life in Piedmont Virginia: 1720-1800.” in *Colonial Chesapeake Society*, ed. Lois Green Carr et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 441.

believed in charms, curses, and the supernatural, even if they were cautious about bringing them up as a legal issue.⁴⁸ While the Age of Enlightenment saw Europeans increasingly questioning superstitions, most considered European witchcraft distinct from Obeah so even when witchcraft was discredited African magic could still be believed in and feared.⁴⁹ But this white fear of black magic was not always warranted. In eighteenth-century Virginia, a slave named Dick living in Mecklenburg was charged with conspiracy to kill his owner after he “...[beat] up leaves with snake heads, and [left] the combination at the door of his master.”⁵⁰ Although in his head and heart Dick most likely believed this to be an effective way to harm his master, the desired results did not become manifest. Dick’s master, John Gregory, was unharmed but Dick was still “convicted of conspiring to poison his master to death.”⁵¹ Although Dick’s intent was malicious, because his technique did not render the desired results it was argued that he should be spared his life and be transported. Being pardoned for such a botched crime would have been reasonable if it were not for the threat of violent retaliation on the part of the white neighbors.⁵² Dick’s case shows how African understanding of poison and white understanding of poison could simultaneously converge and disconnect, as although whites saw his poison as ineffective, they still tried him for poisoning anyway. Although whites had different techniques and perceptions of the natural world, they did still believe in the power of natural ingredients.⁵³

Just as much as anyone else in the pre-industrial world, white Americans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries looked towards nature to cure what ailed them. “Southern

⁴⁸ Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 84.

⁴⁹ Paton, “Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery,” 237.

⁵⁰ Chireau, *Black Magic*, 74.

⁵¹ Joseph Cephas Carroll, *Slave Insurrections in the United States, 1800-1865* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 2004), 63.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ John M. Holmes, *Thomas Jefferson Treats Himself: Herbs, Physicke, & Nutrition in Early America* (Fort Valley, VA: Loft Press, Inc., 1997), 16.

herbal medicine was characterized by a high degree of exchange across lines of race, ethnicity, class, and region...” leading everyone in the community to try their hand at doctoring with blended techniques.⁵⁴ Blacks and whites, despite some basic differences, fully believed in the power of root work to do both good and harm.⁵⁵ One major point of divide between white and black root work is while blacks viewed it with mysticism, whites tried to place it in the field of science.⁵⁶ Everybody from school principals to the local shoemaker could be considered a doctor and prescribe herbal cures.⁵⁷ According to medical historian Sharla M. Fett, “...plant medicines, whether in the form of food, teas, or poultices, formed the core of rural American household health care.”⁵⁸ Medicine was practiced by most laymen, with popular pamphlets, such as *Everyman His Own Doctor* and *The Compleat Housewife*,⁵⁹ giving curious recipes for many common ailments that were readily understood by common people. So, whites were practicing plant medicine, blacks were practicing plant medicine, and there was a blending of the two; despite that, whites still feared black root work and for good reason.

Although whites were using herbal medicines, there did seem to be a certain reverence held by whites and blacks alike for slave doctors. While whites had their own long held practices, “enslaved African Americans significantly influenced the herbal repertoire of southern white households...”⁶⁰ Whites, including Virginia’s Lieutenant Governor, Sir William Gooch, recognized that black doctors could be talented and contain knowledge they lacked; this led even

⁵⁴ Fett, *Working Cures*, 62.

⁵⁵ Sobel, *The World They Made Together*, 98.

⁵⁶ Fett, *Working Cures*, 46.

⁵⁷ Bruce Chadwick, *I Am Murdered: George Wythe, Thomas Jefferson, and the Killing That Shocked a New Nation* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009), 174.

⁵⁸ Fett, *Working Cures*, 60.

⁵⁹ “Resource Toolbox. Becoming American: The British Atlantic Colonies, 1690-1763: Every Man His Own Doctor,” National Humanities Center, 2009.
<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/ideas/text7/homemedicalguides.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Fett, *Working Cures*, 60.

prominent whites to visit enslaved doctors for recipes and medicine.⁶¹ African doctors could find success in healing where white doctors failed, and white slave owners trusted their slaves to the care of these healers.⁶² This was not always well advised though, as Thomas Jefferson found out in 1799. He lost Jupiter, one of his most valued slaves, to “the poisons of the Buckingham Negroe conjurer...” whose poisons were so powerful that they had “...the most astonishing effect in producing melancholy and despair...”⁶³ One of the big mysteries of black doctors is how they were able to make such potent poisons. Religious historian Yvonne P. Chireau explains that, miraculously, even though the plants in Africa were often different from those found in the New World, slaves seemed “uniquely adept at extracting lethal substances from local vegetation.”⁶⁴ This eerie and innate ability was cause for much concern on the part of whites.

Due to blacks seemingly possessing unnatural knowledge, in some ways it felt that no one was safe. It is alleged that in 1732, with the help of a local conjure man named Pompey, that Ambrose Madison (grandfather to future President James Madison) was poisoned by his own slaves at the plantation that would become Montpelier.⁶⁵ This case was particularly shocking as it was, if true, the first known instance of slaves successfully murdering a planter.⁶⁶ In 1745 in another Orange County case, a female slave named Eve poisoned her master by putting an unknown substance in his milk. Her master, Peter Montague, languished for an excruciating four months.⁶⁷ Because this was petite treason, as defined by English common law and mentioned earlier, she was burned alive at the stake.⁶⁸ In the cases of both Madison and Montague, their

⁶¹ Sobel, *The World They Made Together*, 99.

⁶² Fett, *Working Cures*, 61.

⁶³ Alison Games, *Witchcraft in Early North America* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 159.

⁶⁴ Chireau, *Black Magic*, 72.

⁶⁵ Chambers, *Murder at Montpelier*, 71.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁷ Rucker, *The River Flows on*, 149.

⁶⁸ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 93.

deaths were drawn out. The poisons used by slaves at the time tended to have a gradual effect, making them all the more terrifying.⁶⁹ Although whites were frightened, what could they do to protect themselves?

The white perception of black ability in poisoning led to many laws that attempted to weaken the threat of poisoning. In 1748, Virginia passed a law that would have devastating results:

And whereas many negroes, under pretence of practising physic, have prepared and exhibited poisonous medicines, by which many persons have been murdered, and others have languished under long and tedious indispositions, and it will be difficult to detect such pernicious and dangerous practices, if they should be permitted to exhibit any sort of medicine, Be it therefore further enacted, by the authority aforesaid, That if any negroe, or other slave, shall prepare, exhibit, or administer any medicine whatsoever, he, or she so offending, shall be adjudged of felony, and suffer death without benefit of clergy.⁷⁰

With the passing of this law, the long held tradition of slave doctors was threatened. Although it was common for states to pass laws regarding slaves and poisoning, Virginia is somewhat unusual in that it eventually made the administration of medicine by blacks, free or enslaved, a capital offense.⁷¹ Following the passage of the 1748 law, there was a marked increase in slaves prosecuted for poisoning.⁷² An overwhelming majority of slaves (ninety-five out of 119) tried for poisoning between 1748 and 1784 were accused of “administering medicine with ill intent,” not

⁶⁹ Chambers, *Murder at Montpelier*, 68.

⁷⁰ William Waller Hening. *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619; Published Pursuant to an Act of the General Assembly of Virginia, Passed on the Fifth Day of February, One Thousand Eight Hundred and Eight*. Vol. 6 (Richmond: The Franklin Press, 1819), 105.

⁷¹ Fett, *Working Cures*, 160.

⁷² Chambers, *Murder at Montpelier*, 67.

outright using poison.⁷³ This law did, however, make provisions to receive benefit of clergy if it was adjudged that the poison was not given with ill intent.⁷⁴ It could be argued that the number of poison incidents on the trial record in the eighteenth century are elevated because of this practice of trying people who administered medicine with no “ill intent” or “bad consequences,” such as Quash in Cumberland County in 1759.⁷⁵ People such as Quash, who gave a harmless substance, with harmless intentions, with no harm coming of it, can hardly be called poisoners at all, regardless of what the laws at the time dictated. Such excessive charges strengthen the argument that the number of poison trials held in the eighteenth century reflect more on white anxiety than actual black threat.

There is a real possibility that the perceived threat of poisoning in the eighteenth century far exceeded the actual threat. When it comes to slave rebellion, anytime a plot or revolt was publicized, there was widespread terror and according to Herbert Aptheker “there is also evidence that this fear existed quite independent of any connection with an actual outbreak.”⁷⁶ These forces of paranoia were quite possibly in play in Brunswick, Alexandria, and Cumberland counties in the 1760s. Brunswick saw prosecutions for slaves poisoning whites in 1758 and 1760, which led to more convictions overtime with “prosecutions reflect[ing] suspicion.”⁷⁷ In Alexandria in 1767, slaves poisoned and killed several overseers in what was supposed to be the start of a larger rebellion that was ultimately foiled.⁷⁸ This incident caused great paranoia about other potential poison attacks. Local whites were so thoroughly frightened that they cut the executed slaves’ heads off and put them on the chimneys of the courthouse to serve as a macabre

⁷³ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 99.

⁷⁴ Hening, Vol. 6, 105.

⁷⁵ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 108.

⁷⁶ Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 19.

⁷⁷ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 105.

⁷⁸ Rucker, *The River Flows on*, 149.

warning.⁷⁹ In this particular case, locals seemed desperate to censor mentions of this event in the local newspapers, perhaps in fear of giving other slaves similar ideas.⁸⁰ Many more slaves were tried in the area over the next two years for alleged poisonings.⁸¹ Whether these charges were valid or not can never be known, but whites had abundant reasons to be fearful so it is understandable if they overestimated the danger they were in.

During the eighteenth century, of the thirty-nine slaves with misdemeanors for poisoning, half might have only had medicine on them without actually distributing it.⁸² In the period of 1706-1784, ninety slaves were tried for poison offenses against whites. Of those ninety, twenty-eight were found not guilty and twenty-three were sentenced to hang. Even of those sentenced to hang, two were pardoned by the governor and his council. The other thirty-nine slaves received benefit of clergy, which entailed being branded on the hand,⁸³ or were convicted for misdemeanors and therefore did not face capital punishment.⁸⁴ Keeping in mind that these statistics also include unauthorized distribution of non-harmful medicines and the numbers do not seem so stark. While eighteenth century slaves certainly poisoned their masters, slave owners in the eighteenth century possibly overestimated the threat and convicted slaves to excess; their nineteenth century counterparts, to their peril, underestimated the threat of slave poisoning.

⁷⁹ Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 199.

⁸⁰ Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 612.

⁸¹ Rucker, *The River Flows on*, 149.

⁸² Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 103.

⁸³ Stephanos Bibas, *The Machinery of Criminal Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8.

⁸⁴ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 96.

Chapter 2: A World in Transition: Poison and the New Century

While the large number of slaves tried for poisoning in the eighteenth century is impressive and seems to point to a unique and unusual time, this is not necessarily the case. Although the nineteenth century saw fewer poisoning trials, this is possibly due to changes in culture and technology, not changes in actions by slaves. By the nineteenth century, people were starting to understand that arsenic and other poisons existed in dangerous amounts as part of their daily life. As doctors and scientists started to create and refine methods of testing for poison, doubts began to rise on what previously seemed like malevolent acts. Further, a gentler, more naïve understanding of slavery and its effects on slaves possibly blinded many masters to the danger lurking within their households. Similarly, the shift from outright slave ownership to a hiring out system most likely only served to further agitate and embolden slaves. Combined, all of these factors could contribute to why there are fewer trials but not necessarily fewer occurrences of masters being poisoned by slaves.

Everyday Poison

While poisoning was, of necessity, usually a hidden action, there is another complication to consider when trying to determine how many masters were felled by their wily slaves: the fact that poison was essentially everywhere in the nineteenth-century home. In an 1860 edition of *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, one contributor lamented that “the use of arsenic is now obtaining so dangerous an extension in manufactures, that the public have a right to ask for protection by legislative enactment...”⁸⁵ Just how widespread was arsenic’s use in manufacturing? The answer is truly gut wrenching. Arsenic was in wallpaper, and carpeting, and

⁸⁵ Carey Lea, “On the Poisonous Effects resulting from the Employment of Arsenical Preparations in the Arts,” *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 40, no. 79 (1860): 110.

candles, and candy, and dance tickets, and ball gowns, and even children's paint sets.⁸⁶ It was in the air, in the water, coating household surfaces, in a word, it was inescapable. Realizing the prevalence and danger of arsenic in everyday living, even the notorious P.T. Barnum (perhaps it takes a quack to expose a quack) had sense enough to warn readers to "...never buy any confectionery that is colored or painted..."⁸⁷ as the methods used to achieve the coloring tended to be poisonous. Arsenic was even used, to modern day horror, intentionally as a beauty aid.⁸⁸ This prevalence of use not only proved hazardous to the health of the populace, but also proved a challenge in proving cases of intentional poisoning.

As forensic testing expanded and public health became a routine topic, people started to scrutinize their surroundings and did not like what they found. Oddly enough, one of the deadliest things in most people's homes was the color green. Yes, the color green. A color that most associate with verdant fields and the awakening of new life in springtime was actually an agent of death. Green was a greatly popular and greatly poisonous color and wreaked devastation on numerous families in the 1800s. At first, many felt they only had one shade, Scheele's green, to fear. Scheele's green, also known as arsenite of copper, was invented in 1775 by the Swedish chemist Karl Wilhelm Scheele.⁸⁹ Scheele gave his first public presentation of his new shade in 1778 to the Academy of Sciences in Stockholm. This shade is notable as it was the brightest green pigment achievable at the time.⁹⁰ Scheele's green, due to its vivid color and cheap

⁸⁶ H. Cooper Rose, "On a Case of Poisoning by the Arsenite of Copper, In an Infant," *The Lancet*, Mar. 5, 1859, 237-238.

⁸⁷ P. T. Barnum, *The Humbugs of the World: An Account of Humbugs, Delusions, Impositions, Quackeries, Deceits and Deceivers Generally, In All Ages* (New York: Carleton, 1866), 156.

⁸⁸ John Parascandola, *King of Poisons: A History of Arsenic* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, Inc., 2012), 135.

⁸⁹ Katrien Keune et al., "Degradation of Emerald Green in Oil Paint and Its Contribution to the Rapid Change in Colour of the Descente des Vaches (1834–1835) Painted by Théodore Rousseau." *Studies in Conservation* 58, no. 3 (2013): 200.

⁹⁰ S.P. Sharples, "Scheele's Green, Its Composition as Usually Prepared, and Some Experiments Upon Arsenite of Copper," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 12, (1876): 11.

production cost, was produced in enormous quantities and found its way into countless goods.⁹¹ Although there are various ways to achieve Scheele's green, the most popular formula seems to have been 42.37 percent copper oxide, 52.83 percent arsenic trioxide, and 4.80 percent water.⁹² According to Scheele's notes, even the water used to make the shade should contain some arsenic, and, noting that the water should not be disposed of near cattle, hints at the toxic nature of the product.⁹³ Although people slowly started to catch on to the dangers of Scheele's green, further testing proved that there were actually many shades of green that proved fatal.⁹⁴ Although a pair of green candles seemed like a cute and fashionable decoration, every time they were lit they released arsenic into the air.⁹⁵ Although a green dress seemed lovely and festive for the spring season, as wearers danced about the arsenic in their green dye detached itself from their finery and poisoned the air around them.⁹⁶ Even an action as simple as dusting the floor in a green walled room could lead to nearly fatal episodes. A case from Boston in 1863 shows just how rapidly arsenic could destroy someone. A woman named Olivia, after mere days in her new house, started exhibiting anorexia, trembling, and burning sensations. Upon the simple action of dusting her room, which was covered in green wallpaper, she developed brown fur on her tongue and experienced violent vomiting as well as a host of other concerning maladies. These symptoms were greatly aggravated every time she cleaned her room, with her attending physician finding no other solution than to remove the green wallpaper or move house entirely.⁹⁷

⁹¹ P. W. J. Bartrip, "How Green Was My Valance? Environmental Arsenic Poisoning and the Victorian Domestic Ideal," *The English Historical Review* 109, no. 433 (1994): 895.

⁹² Sharples, "Scheele's Green," 12.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹⁴ Carey Lea, "On the Poisonous Effects resulting from the Employment of Arsenical Preparations in the Arts," *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 40, no. 79 (1860): 110.

⁹⁵ Arthur Hill Hassall, "Observations on the Employment in the Arts of Scheele's Green or Arsenite of Copper and Other Metallic Pigments," *The Lancet*, Feb 21, 1863, 204-205.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁹⁷ William E. Rice, "Case of Poisoning by Arsenic in Wallpaper," *American Druggists' Circular and Chemical Gazette* 7, no. 12 (1863): 188.

In a stern warning to mothers to avoid green wallpaper, Dr. Pye Henry Chavasse declared that “there is frequently enough poison on the walls of a room to destroy a whole neighbourhood.”⁹⁸ Although this statement seems to be an exaggeration, it is possible that it only takes three or four grains of arsenic to terminate grown women,⁹⁹ so this statement was frightfully true. Even if a person avoided green wallpaper, even the most mundane of items could cause a tragedy. In 1861 there was a report of a child being poisoned by placing a concert ticket in his mouth. Upon examination, it was found that the concert ticket contained almost a grain and a half of Scheele’s green, a quantity sufficient to kill a child.¹⁰⁰ But, even if a person was diligent and kept green away from their dwellings, they were far from safe from accidental poisoning.

Although it flies in the face of common sense, people often neglected to label what contained arsenic in their house, which led to the disturbingly common problem of people mistaking arsenic for other white powders like flour. Arsenic was abundant in most households as it was casually used for the destruction of vermin. Poison could find its way into victims in strange and unintended ways. In 1853, a black woman in Richmond named Sarah Hamilton killed two of her children through accidental poisoning. Previously, she had loaned a white neighbor, Margaret Hayes, a teapot. When she went to retrieve her teapot, Sarah found a white powder in it which she thought was arrowroot as she had purchased some previously; when asked to confirm this, Margaret actually tasted the powder and agreed it was the harmless plant. It was not. Sarah took her teapot home, placed water in it, and served what she thought was arrowroot tea to her children, leading to their deaths. Upon questioning, Margaret recalled having

⁹⁸ Pye Henry Chavasse, *Advice to a Mother, on the Management of Her Children, and on the Treatment on the Moment of Some of Their More Pressing Illnesses and Accidents* (Toronto: Willing and Williamson, 1880), 116.

⁹⁹ Alfred Swaine Taylor, *Medical Jurisprudence*, ed. R. Eggesfield Griffith (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845), 122.

¹⁰⁰ “Poison in Wall Paper,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Mar. 25, 1861.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1861-03-25/ed-1/seq-4/>

purchased poison for vermin and that "...by some accident it was thrown into the tea pot..."¹⁰¹

Unfortunately, such baffling ignorance was not uncommon. Just a year later, in Amherst County, a Mr. William Lavender took out four members of his family by the careless use of poison. In an attempt to kill some troublesome dogs who had been poking about his property, Mr. Lavender put some strychnine in milk, leaving it for the dogs and then leaving his home without informing anyone of the milk's deadly content. His family discovered the milk and consumed it, leading to death for some and illness for the rest.¹⁰² But even if a citizen was diligent and stored and labeled their powders correctly, they could still find themselves poisoned as even the druggists they purchased from sometimes made mistakes, giving people the wrong, and fatal, white powder.¹⁰³ And, in more extreme cases, people were poisoned even when given the correct white powder. In 1857, British residents of Hong Kong had been poisoned by arsenic in bread. This caused a huge conspiracy with accusations of intentional poisoning, but it turns out that the flour used to bake the bread had been shipped in barrels from America that previously contained arsenic, leading to the mass poisoning to be deemed accidental.¹⁰⁴

Even for cases of suspected poisoning where arsenic was found upon autopsy, lawyers could and did argue, sometimes successfully, that the arsenic found in the deceased was not from criminal poisoning but from practices as seemingly harmless as their beauty routine. Among the fashionable, the ever competitive chase to achieve the ultimate beauty led many to take up a very curious habit: arsenic eating.¹⁰⁵ For many people, arsenic was believed to have a beautifying

¹⁰¹ "Local Matters," *The Daily Dispatch*, Jul. 28, 1853. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1853-07-28/ed-1/seq-2/>

¹⁰² "Tragic Result from the Want of Care in the Use of Poison," *The Daily Dispatch*, Sep. 30, 1854. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1854-09-30/ed-1/seq-3/>

¹⁰³ James Whorton. *The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain was Poisoned at Home, Work, and Play*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 118.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 273.

effect and was used cosmetically by both men and women. Arsenic found its way into pills, tonics, soaps and every conceivable commercial beauty good.¹⁰⁶ One popular arsenic containing medicinal solution known as Fowler's Solution was actually still prescribed by doctors all the way until the 1930s.¹⁰⁷ So, what happened when an arsenic eater died? If a fashionista died on mysterious terms and their autopsy revealed arsenic, the one accused of ending their life could get off if they had a competent lawyer. In what became known as the Styrian defense, lawyers presented to the jury the possibility that the arsenic found in the remains of the deceased was placed there by the vain habits of none other than the departed.¹⁰⁸ This could lead to acquittals, but, sadly, it is also possible that if someone died of non-murderous arsenic consumption, an innocent slave could be convicted anyway.

Autopsies and Forensic Investigations

With poison everywhere and potential poisoners quite possibly in similar abundance, how was society to protect itself? Enter the rise of the forensic investigator. By the nineteenth century post mortem autopsies were really nothing new, having existed in some form for a couple thousand years.¹⁰⁹ For the Western world, the first modern autopsy performed specifically to determine whether arsenic had been used for a murder occurred in 1590 at Freiburg University in Germany.¹¹⁰ During the 1800s, England entered a poison panic which led to a push to develop better ways to detect poison's presence. In 1836, a scientist named Marsh developed a new test for arsenic that was celebrated by all.¹¹¹ This test was deemed so important that the Society of

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹⁰⁷ Sandra Hempel, "James Marsh and the Poison Panic," *The Lancet* 381, no. 9885 (2013): 2247.

¹⁰⁸ Whorton, *The Arsenic Century*, 276.

¹⁰⁹ Chadwick, *I Am Murdered*, 168.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 203.

Arts awarded Marsh its highest honor. As a testament to the usefulness of this test, Marsh's technique was actually in use, with some modifications, all the way until the 1970s.¹¹² Marsh's test was absolutely revolutionary and held the potential to deter poisoners. It was able to reveal even tiny amounts of poison, being able to detect "two parts of arsenic per million in a solution" in organic matter such as food or vomit.¹¹³ Not only was this test able to detect such minute amounts of poison, it also worked on old remains, even those being decades old.¹¹⁴ Although this test was very accurate, it was not easily administered. If the investigators performing the test were unskilled, they could produce less than reliable results.¹¹⁵ They could also end up killing themselves, as happened in eight recorded cases, by inhaling the toxins released during the test.¹¹⁶ Inaccurate results obtained by unskilled scientists could have resulted in convictions of innocents and the freeing of guilty parties. Luckily, the Marsh test was not the only new resource investigators had at their disposal. In 1845, Professor Robert Christion of Edinburgh University wrote a toxicology book that dedicated 100 pages to describing arsenic and how to test for it.¹¹⁷ But, even with the invention of better autopsy techniques and better information on the poison becoming available, there were still challenges to overcome. It seems rather silly to say, but in order for an autopsy to be requested, surviving family members had to suspect that the death was unnatural and required testing. This is actually a fairly substantial obstacle. As Bruce Chadwick points out, even for cases of intentional poisoning, if the amount of poison was given in small doses over a long period, the gradual deterioration of the victim could mimic any number of all

¹¹² Hempel, "James Marsh and the Poison Panic," 2247-2248.

¹¹³ Whorton, *The Arsenic Century*, 86.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹¹⁷ Chadwick, *I Am Murdered*, 204.

too common ailments of the nineteenth century.¹¹⁸ Even if larger doses were given over a shorter time period, a victim could be weakened to the point that another, natural cause ultimately killed them, further complicating the chances of a murder investigation. Even in cases of suspected poisoning, some families held taboos about having autopsies performed on their loved one's body, leading to American authorities having some reluctance to proceed.¹¹⁹ A typical nineteenth-century "arsenic investigation would call for removing the liver and parts of the intestines, plus examining the entire stomach, especially its inner walls, and the fluid in it."¹²⁰ But, even if an investigation turned up poison in the system, as mentioned earlier, poison was everywhere so this was hardly definitive proof of a murder. Even if the accused was found with poison in their possession this was a weak accusation, as, due to its helpfulness in killing rats and other pests, most people had some arsenic at hand.¹²¹

The complicated intersection of poison in abundance and disgruntled slaves was on display in 1858. A family in Prince William County alleged that they had almost been poisoned by their slave Lucy. In what will soon become a common theme, Lucy had previously had angry outbursts and made it known that she did not want to be with them, yet her masters still continued to let her cook.¹²² On the surface, this appears to be an easy to solve case, however, the heightened awareness of just how much arsenic was lying about led to skepticism. The white family had, as everyone else did, previously purchased arsenic to kill rats.¹²³ Because there was so much arsenic readily available within the home, the neighbors defended Lucy by arguing that

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 188.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 169.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 183.

¹²¹ Ibid., 197.

¹²² William A. Link, *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 54.

¹²³ Ibid., 53.

the arsenic was accessible to anyone so it was impossible to definitively blame Lucy; this led to a successful petition that earned Lucy a reduced sentence of transportation¹²⁴ or possibly hard labor.¹²⁵

Having more accurate autopsy techniques could also explain why fewer slaves were convicted of poisoning in the nineteenth century than the eighteenth century. Douglas Chambers rightly notes that “the accusation of poisoning of course did not mean that [ones] death actually came from poison, especially in the eighteenth century, when ‘poison’ could have been a catchall explanation for any unexpected (or drawn-out) death.”¹²⁶ In Richmond in 1861, the family of a Mr. Robert M. Allen suddenly took ill after eating supper. Due to the uniform nature of the illness and its proximity to a meal, suspicion immediately fell on a hired slave girl named Elsa (or in other instances Elezy). But, before she went to trial, Mayor Joseph Mayo stopped the case to give the family physician, Dr. Dean, a chance to analyze the allegedly poisoned food.¹²⁷ This analysis must have turned up nothing, as just a few days later Elsa was very apologetically released from custody, with the paper declaring her ever having been suspected of “such a heinous crime” to be “a singular mistake all round.”¹²⁸ Were it not for the new scrutiny given to poison accusations and new tools to give definitive answers, this case could have ended tragically for Elsa. Another case in Richmond, this time in 1864, confirmed the power of forensics.

¹²⁴ Ronald Ray Turner, “A List of Free Negroes and Slave Convicts. Richmond Va., June 25, 1860. Box #3, Folder 5, Accession # 36710, Virginia Governors Executive Papers – Letcher,” *Prince William County Virginia*, <http://www.pwcvirginia.com/documents/GovernorJohnLetcher2.pdf>.

¹²⁵ Link, *Roots of Secession*, 54.

¹²⁶ Chambers, *Murder at Montpelier*, 5-6.

¹²⁷ “Attempt to Poison a Family,” *Richmond Enquirer*, Nov. 19, 1861.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024735/1861-11-19/ed-1/seq-2/>

¹²⁸ “Not Poisoned,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Nov. 21, 1861. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1861-11-21/ed-1/seq-2/>

In what was deemed “The School-Girl Poisoning Case,” Amanda, a slave belonging to Samuel Overton and working for a Mrs. Clarke, was accused of the heinous crime of poisoning several little girls. Amanda acted as the Clarke family cook. One morning, she voluntarily made a shortcake for Mrs. Clarke’s daughter, Betty, to take to school. Betty left some of the cake home for her sisters and took the rest with her to school to share with her friends. To Mrs. Clarke’s horror, her daughters started to violently vomit and experienced bodily pains. Betty was brought home sick before Mrs. Clarke could call for her. The children remained sick for the rest of the night despite doctors attending to them as none of the usual remedies worked. The only antidote that seemed to have any success was one typically used to treat arsenic poisoning. Due to the severity of the reactions despite the small quantity of cake eaten, doctors were sure that “the dough had been charged with some poisonous drug.”¹²⁹ This apparent poisoning came as a complete shock to Mrs. Clarke as she “never imagined any unpleasant feelings between her children and Amanda; always thought they were on the best of terms.”¹³⁰ Was this a telling case of a slave owner placing too much faith in the people they were oppressing by allowing them access to their food? Perhaps not.

Dr. J.P. Little was given, among other things including papers of powders, a thimble sized piece of the shortcake to examine. One of the papers contained sulfate of zinc, and upon testing it, Dr. Little discovered the cake also contained the sulfate. Typically, the zinc was used as a very powerful emetic and in its powder form “resembles soda, as a great many other poisons do.”¹³¹ But, the testing did not reveal any arsenic. Dr. Thomas Pollard, the doctor who gave

¹²⁹ “The School-Girl Poisoning Case,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Oct. 29, 1864.
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1864-10-29/ed-1/seq-1/>

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

Amanda the zinc sulfate, insisted it was not a poison. Amanda's lawyers argued that Amanda put the emetic in the shortcake by accident, mistaking it for harmless bread soda. Although this was a compelling argument, Amanda's case was sent on to Hustings Court as, even though the sulfate was not poisonous, there was reason to doubt that its use was accidental.¹³² Although it will never be known if Amanda had dark intentions or made a simple mistake, the court ultimately sided with her and she was acquitted.¹³³

Despite these breakthroughs in medical knowledge and scientific expertise, doctors could not always help slaves facing accusations of poisoning. An 1806 case in Pittsylvania County, Virginia, shows a community in transition, displaying both eighteenth century attitudes and the beginnings of a new mentality. Two slaves, Tom and Amy, were convicted of illegally administering medicine which resulted in the death of two white children in Amy's care.¹³⁴ James Patton, a local white physician, examined the medicine and found it to contain no poison and declared that the children died of croup, not by the hands of vengeful slaves. Despite this expert testimony, both slaves were still convicted with their only hope lying in having their sentences commuted.¹³⁵

The cases illustrated here show just how much forensics changed trials for slaves accused of poisoning. Whereas eighteenth-century trials had to rely on physical evidence, such as the inflammation of organs, which, due to the abundance of poison in everyday life could often be misleading, nineteenth-century courts increasingly relied on science backed forensic investigation. Medical and scientific experts heavily scrutinized evidence, rejecting as proof

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ "Hustings Court," *The Daily Dispatch*, Nov. 19, 1864. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1864-11-19/ed-1/seq-1/>

¹³⁴ Fett, *Working Cures*, 142.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 143.

anything that could rationally be attributed to causes besides poisoning. Slaves who were accused of poisoning, such as Elsa, could even be spared a court trial if forensics showed that the suspect food was unadulterated. But, knowing that test results are only as good as the tester, it is possible that in some cases poison was used, even if it was not detected and vice versa. But, the accuracy of testing is something of a moot point if masters did not suspect anything of needing testing.

Paternalism

When, and if, a slave decided to violently rebel, how did she go about choosing her weapon? According to Aptheker, fire was the weapon of choice because it was easy to make a fire and slaves “generally would have had difficulty in getting hold of guns or knives, or poison...”¹³⁶ Schwarz echoes this view; he points out that during the nineteenth century, poison cases declined and more visibly violent crimes, such as arson and violent murders, went up in the trial record.¹³⁷ Although this appears to affirm that poison was not a large risk to the nineteenth-century slaver, the raw statistics do not necessarily tell the whole story. While there is certainly truth to the first half of Aptheker’s statement, it seems unreasonable to lump poison under the same heading as guns and knives. While any smart master would keep their guns secured and perhaps even their knives, as mentioned previously, poison was essentially everywhere in the nineteenth-century home. Poison left out for rats could just as easily be appropriated to kill masters. Although there were fewer trials for poisoning, that does not mean that there were actually fewer occurrences. First, as has been noted elsewhere, the ability to test for poison through forensics exonerated some Virginia slaves before a trial could take place. On a more

¹³⁶ Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 144.

¹³⁷ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 113.

theoretical level, the differences between mindsets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries should also be taken into account. Slave owners of the eighteenth century were more vocal about their distrust of their slaves, so there is a possibility that more slaves were accused and convicted of poisoning due more so to their owner's suspicion than any actual act. Even in the nineteenth century with the new ability to test for poison, one must remember that in order for tests to be carried out someone must be suspicious enough of the circumstances surrounding the death to request an investigation. If, as their rhetoric implies, nineteenth-century slave owners lived in ignorance of the animosity their slaves felt towards them, they might not have had a sufficient level of distrust in their slaves to question slow poison deaths that resembled natural illnesses. So, this difference in mindset, with eighteenth-century owners acknowledging slavery for the evil that it was and the nineteenth-century view that tried to present slavery as a positive good could be essential to understanding the difference between the frequency of poison charges in court.

In a work aptly titled *Fatal Self-Deception*, Genovese breaks down slave holders' need to blind themselves to the truth of the institution and therefore blind themselves to the dangers inherent in it. "Southern masters—at least a great many – needed to feel loved by their slaves. Some of the clearest expressions came from Virginia."¹³⁸ For the nineteenth-century Virginia slave owner, slaves were no longer expected to simply give obedience, they were now, contrary to life realities, expected to give love. This shift in mentality is shocking in its foolishness.

In February of 1861, the *Alexandria Gazette* ran a piece that captured the sentiments of many Upper South slave owners as the country was right on the edge of civil war. An anxious

¹³⁸ Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Fatal Self-Deception: Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 60.

reader sent a letter which forcefully asked: “Are not the Abolitionists bent on our ruin? Are not their emissaries even now all through the South, inciting our quiet slaves to poison and kill, to introduce anarchy and horrors?”¹³⁹ This quotation is taken from a letter by a man named “Clifton” said to be living in Charleston, South Carolina, with the letter having been allegedly submitted by his friend in Virginia. The newspaper had previously published letters that “Clifton” felt were too conciliatory towards the North and this letter was meant to set the record straight. What is most striking about this quotation is that it allows a view into the thoughts of slaveholders. Significantly, according to the author, slaves were “quiet” and it was at the instigation of outsiders that they were led to poison. This indicates that the author believed that slaves were somewhat content with their lives and could have no possible reasons of their own to want to poison their masters. But, historians such as Walter Johnson doubt the truth of these sentiments. Lacy Ford depicts Johnson’s view of paternalism as “a language developed by slaveholders and their intellectual allies for deployment as a defense against deepening outside criticism of slavery, rather than as a social system rooted in the master-slave relationship.”¹⁴⁰

Of course, there is the possibility that the author of the quoted news piece did not sincerely believe what he wrote and was only using such language as a way to chastise Northerners and their supporters, but this sentiment is not an isolated example and the actual actions of slaveholders reveal the depth of their belief in the system. Going back a few years, two 1857 issues of the *Richmond Enquirer* echo the sentiments of Clifton’s letter. According to the paper, abolitionists posing as traveling salesmen were “laboring to incite discontent among the

¹³⁹ “Communications,” *Alexandria Gazette*, Feb. 14, 1861.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85025007/1861-02-14/ed-1/seq-2/>.

¹⁴⁰ Lacy Ford, “Reconsidering the Internal Slave Trade: Paternalism, Markets, and the Character of the Old South.” In *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, ed. Walter Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 149.

slaves” hoping that slaves would, in turn, revolt and murder their owners. These abolitionists were disrupting the “quiet and good order of Southern society” by “tamper[ing] with our slaves.” And while there was notable agitation in slaves in some locations, the paper tried to assure masters that they need not fear: “The slaves in most places being well contented with their condition, and devotedly attached to their owners” surely had no such maleficent designs. And, even in the places where slaves were stirring, this was not of their own volition, but was attributable “in every instance to the machinations of white men...”¹⁴¹ Here, we once again see an expressed disbelief in any animosity originating from slaves themselves. The later issue of the *Richmond Enquirer* reveals what is possibly at the heart of this belief: paternalism. In the nineteenth century, Genovese argues that “slaveholders saw themselves as the best, the sincerest, indeed, the only friends that American blacks had.”¹⁴² For these masters, slavery was not an institution of exploitation and degradation, it was a practice of protection and beneficence. According to a piece reproduced in the *Richmond Enquirer*, the abolitionists were trying “to break asunder the parental bonds of mutual love and attachment that bind master and slave into one harmonious and endearing union.”¹⁴³ It is exactly this mentality that potentially would have allowed slaves to get away with poisoning their masters as paternalists were too blind to slaves’ discontent to suspect that they might try to kill them. In a sense, slaves could literally get away with murder. To hear the residents of the Upper South tell it, slavery was a great time for all and all would be well if Northerners minded their own business, but this is actually a fairly distinct ideology. Their eighteenth-century counterparts saw slavery for what it was and so did their

¹⁴¹ “Incendiary Visitants and how to Treat Them,” *Richmond Enquirer*, Feb. 17, 1857.
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024735/1857-02-17/ed-1/seq-1/>.

¹⁴² Genovese, *Fatal Self-Deception*, 3.

¹⁴³ “Development of the South,” *Richmond Enquirer*, Jan. 16, 1857.
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024735/1857-01-16/ed-1/seq-1/>.

Deep South nineteenth-century equivalents. The only reason Virginia slave owners stayed in the dark is because that is exactly where they wanted to be.

Paternalism: Divergent Views

To understand poison prosecution in nineteenth-century Virginia, it truly is essential to explore the ideology around slavery. In contrast to the sunnier views mentioned above stands the views of eighteenth-century Virginia slave owners and nineteenth-century Deep South slave owners. In a fearsome and beautiful piece, Thomas Jefferson, the celebrated Founding Father and infamous Virginia slave owner, captures the sentiment of his generation towards slavery well:

The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other [...]. Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest.¹⁴⁴

Here, not only is slavery seen as evil and degrading, it is so bad that God might even have to intervene. This viewpoint was not unique to Jefferson though. In his study of Jeffersonian views of slavery, Robert McColley asserts that during the eighteenth century, "...leading Virginians denounced slavery as a curse upon their land..."¹⁴⁵ The dominant social ideology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was patriarchalism, where masters offered "protection" to

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Boston: Lilly and Wait, 1832), 169-171.

¹⁴⁵ Robert McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 2.

their slaves with the expectation of receiving “obedience” in return.¹⁴⁶ If any slave dared to be disobedient, they could expect the “swift retribution of a wrathful and unforgiving father figure.”¹⁴⁷ Although this system did not call for outright cruelty, it did not condemn it either. It took until 1769 for Virginia lawmakers to realize that casually castrating slaves for running away was “...often disproportioned to the offence, and contrary to the principles of humanity...”¹⁴⁸ In general, slave owners in the eighteenth century saw slavery as a “necessary evil” and were far more concerned with expanding their wealth and status than with convincing anyone of the morality of their actions.¹⁴⁹ “Patriarchs did not expect their slaves to be content or submissive; the myth of the happy and docile slave was not an eighteenth-century invention.”¹⁵⁰ While previously unconcerned with morality, with the post-Revolution rhetoric of liberty and equality making it hard to justify owning people, there was a shift in ideology to make slavery a positive “good.”¹⁵¹ Following the Revolution, “austere patriarchalism slowly gave way to mellow paternalism,”¹⁵² but this did not happen across the entirety of the country. Out of the countless slave owning societies to exist, “...the Old South alone developed a serious positive-good proslavery argument...”¹⁵³ The ideology of paternalism, a seemingly more loving and benevolent system than patriarchalism, “grew out of the necessity to discipline and morally justify a system of exploitation.”¹⁵⁴ In other words, it was a system that attempted to justify the unjustifiable.

¹⁴⁶ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 258.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁴⁸ William Waller Hening. *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619; Published Pursuant to an Act of the General Assembly of Virginia, Passed on the Fifth Day of February, One Thousand Eight Hundred and Eight*. Vol. 8 (Richmond: J. and G. Cochran, 1821), 358.

¹⁴⁹ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 17.

¹⁵⁰ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 278.

¹⁵¹ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 17.

¹⁵² Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 259.

¹⁵³ Eugene D. Genovese. *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 131.

¹⁵⁴ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 4.

Paternalistic slave owners of the nineteenth century provided well for their slaves and expected loyalty in return, even taking seemingly benevolent and unnecessary actions such as throwing parties for their slaves and hosting Easter egg hunts.¹⁵⁵ All of these actions were taken with the hope to render slaves content and loyal, and slave owners, being fully invested in believing their own rationalizations, seemed sincerely shocked when slaves revolted.¹⁵⁶ Opposing this view, due to their awareness of slave discontent, “eighteenth-century masters rarely underestimated their slaves’ capacity to rebel.”¹⁵⁷ While the residents of the Upper South tried to maintain the fantasy of mutual benefit, residents of the Deep South were far more honest about the realities of slavery. According to Robert H. Gudmestad, residents of the Deep South “were more forthright in assuming that slavery was an exploitive relationship and were unconcerned with providing excuses or rationales for it...For them, it was a grim and difficult institution.”¹⁵⁸

This difference in ideology matters a great deal in understanding slaves’ ability to potentially poison undetected. Nineteenth-century Virginia planters viewed the institution as a fair exchange,¹⁵⁹ leading them to believe, often erroneously, that their slaves were happy. Eighteenth-century masters knew and acknowledged that slavery was exploitive and that all men “naturally sought liberty.”¹⁶⁰ With eighteenth-century and Lower South slave owners aware of the evils of slavery, and, by extension, their slaves’ willingness to do what it took to be free, they were likely more suspicious and were therefore abler to protect themselves from attacks by poison. As such, the opposite is likely true for slave owning residents of antebellum Virginia.

¹⁵⁵ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 65.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁵⁷ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 278.

¹⁵⁸ Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 99.

¹⁵⁹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 5.

¹⁶⁰ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 279.

Although the paternalist ideology was present throughout the Upper South, an interesting case study in Virginia's capital fully displays the danger of the paternalist mentality and its relation not only to violence in general but poison in particular. Although when many people hear of American slavery the images that come to mind are wretched souls being forced to work in fields, in Richmond and other industrial cities in the South slaves were actually heavily incorporated into most aspects, both domestic and industrial, of urban life.¹⁶¹ Integral to this was the hiring out system, whereby "some of the largest slaveholders in the country, instead of purchasing plantations and working their slaves themselves, hire them out to others. This practice is very common."¹⁶²

Hiring Out: Living the High Life in Urban Virginia

Under the hiring out system, the lax standards of paternalistic owners led to a breakdown in power as some slaves were allowed to choose their own employers,¹⁶³ live in their own communities,¹⁶⁴ and make and keep extra earnings.¹⁶⁵ By 1860, 11,382 slaves in Virginia were employed in industrial tobacco making, of which half were hired and half were owned by the manufacturer.¹⁶⁶ Slaves working as twistors in tobacco factories who did overtime could earn an extra \$5 to \$9 dollars a week.¹⁶⁷ This led to concern that slaves would "contract habits which were ruinous to their health and destructive to their usefulness."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶¹ Shane White, "'Bring on Da Noise, Bring on Da Funk': The Sounds of Slavery in Richmond Virginia in the 1850s," *Arts: The Proceedings of the Sydney University Arts Association* 26, (2004): 32.

¹⁶² *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: The American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), 136.

¹⁶³ Takagi, *Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction*, 118.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁶⁶ Klein, *Slavery in the Americas*, 188.

¹⁶⁷ "Local Matters: Over Work," *The Daily Dispatch*, Jul. 23, 1856.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1856-07-23/ed-1/seq-1/>

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

In urban slavery, not only were slaves allowed to earn money and maintain their own households, they often also faced weak discipline even while on the job. In his research on urban slavery, Herbert S. Klein noted that factory slaves “worked under an extremely relaxed form of discipline.”¹⁶⁹ Instead of the bloody whippings many associate with masters utilizing to control slaves, city employers often used alcohol and cash incentives and were very hesitant to engage in corporal punishment.¹⁷⁰ “At variance with the basic mores of the plantation system, the tobacco manufacturers were uninterested in slave control and discipline and were primarily concerned with production and efficiency;”¹⁷¹ as such, they were more concerned with keeping slaves content with their jobs than keeping them submissive. So, slaves had money, they had bargaining power, and they were even starting to gain social status. Once, in November 1852, Richmond slaves rented out one of the biggest hotels in Richmond to hold a ball, in full regalia, with the permission of their owners at that.¹⁷² City living in Richmond allowed slaves to become somewhat independent, nurturing a sense of worthiness and, in turn, this made slaves very hard to control.¹⁷³ It is with this background that the story of the previously mentioned Jane Williams is best understood.

Jane Williams was a slave to a young and popular wholesale Richmond grocer named Joseph Pendleton Winston. Mr. Winston lived in Richmond with his wife, Virginia, their infant daughter Virginia Bell, and their house slaves: Jane, John, Nelly, and Anna.¹⁷⁴ Jane Williams was in a trusted position in the house. She acted as a caretaker for the home, a nurse, and was

¹⁶⁹ Klein, *Slavery in the Americas*, 188.

¹⁷⁰ Takagi, *Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction*, 49. Although it is absolutely worth noting that bodily punishment was still used.

¹⁷¹ Klein, *Slavery in the Americas*, 188.

¹⁷² White, “Bring on Da Noise, Bring on Da Funk,” 31.

¹⁷³ Takagi, *Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction*, 72.

¹⁷⁴ *Particulars of the Dreadful Tragedy in Richmond*, 5.

allowed to sleep in the kitchen.¹⁷⁵ They were young, popular, and financially secure; the Winstons seemed to have it all, but this would come to a horrific end that no one in their community could comprehend. One night, Jane participated in “the most shocking murder committed in [Richmond] that I have ever heard of in this place.”¹⁷⁶ The crime was so gruesome that “there never was such an excitement created in this place before as there was yesterday, It is thought, that at least four thousand persons went to see the horrifying spectacle on yesterday.”¹⁷⁷ As the records have it, on July 19th, 1852, Jane entered her master’s chambers and “a more awful scene of butchery and bloodshed was never perhaps presented in one family. Their faces and heads were literally cut and hacked to pieces.”¹⁷⁸ Jane, with an axe as her weapon of choice, had attempted to terminate the entire family. Mr. Winston, by some miracle, managed to survive the attack;¹⁷⁹ his family was not so lucky.

John, Jane’s husband, was also implicated in the crime. John had been hired out to T.J. Glenn and Company the previous year, experiencing many of the freedoms other hired slaves enjoyed including having time away from his owner. Revealing how city slavery changed expectations, John “complained of too much work,” threatened his overseer, and made veiled threats towards Mr. Winston.¹⁸⁰ John was said to be so belligerent that his employer did not discipline him for fear of having his house burned down in retaliation.¹⁸¹ Although slavery was

¹⁷⁵ Harry M. Ward, *Public Executions in Richmond, Virginia: A History, 1782-1907* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2012), 50.

¹⁷⁶ Joseph A West. *Letter to John S. West*. Letter. Richmond, VA. Jul. 20, 1852. Library of Virginia, John S. West Letters 1850-1852. Call number 43952.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Particulars of the Dreadful Tragedy in Richmond*, 5.

¹⁷⁹ Jane would have her revenge in the end as although Mr. Winston survived, his head injuries caused him to have seizures and, in 1880, he experienced one while in the bath and drowned. See: “Sudden Death of a Prominent Citizen and Merchant,” *The Commonwealth*, Jul. 5, 1880. Library of Virginia, System number: 001186223.

¹⁸⁰ *Particulars of the Dreadful Tragedy in Richmond*, 12.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

still slavery, the power dynamic had changed to the point where masters clearly feared the slaves, which shows just how odd relations could become under relaxed ownership. Jane was also known to be very stubborn and insolent towards her position in life. The animosity between the Williamses and Winstons was an ongoing occurrence.¹⁸² Despite having good reason to fear their slaves, the Winstons allowed their slaves some indulgences, including allowing them to read and write. After Nat Turner's Rebellion slaves were, by law, supposed to have their literacy curtailed,¹⁸³ but these laws were clearly not as enforced as authorities could have hoped, as many slave owners saw government orders as meddling in their affairs. John was actually writing letters back and forth to friends in Liberia; one letter, somewhat ominously stating that he “shall use every prudent exertion to see you all again.”¹⁸⁴ Although Jane confessed to the crime and insisted John had nothing to do with it, he was convicted all the same; this created doubt in many as to his guilt and the legitimacy of his conviction.¹⁸⁵ In her confession, Jane admitted she had “been brooding over her bloody revenge for some time.”¹⁸⁶ And, unsurprisingly, the hatred Jane felt for her owners was beyond comprehension to paternalistic slave owners:

It is notorious with all who were acquainted with Mr. Winston and his wife, that John and Jane Williams, and all the negroes of the family of Mr. W, were the most indulged in the city of Richmond. To promote the happiness of John and his wife, he bought him in South Carolina, where he had been sold to traders, and bought him back to Virginia. How

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁸³ Christine Pawley, *Reading Places: Literacy, Democracy, and the Public Library in Cold War America* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 49.

¹⁸⁴ *Particulars of the Dreadful Tragedy in Richmond*, 26.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

the kindness of Mr. W was returned, the murderous conduct of Jane and John testifies
Inhumanely butchering those who had been kind and forgiving to them...¹⁸⁷

But for all of the media attention, the public outrage, and the thousands of spectators who came to witness her awful end, Jane held on to a secret until her grave. Back in 1850, Joseph and Virginia lost another infant daughter named Lavinia Cary.¹⁸⁸ Her death was little noted as infant mortality was a sadly familiar occurrence for the age.¹⁸⁹ After her hanging, Jane's white pastor, Reverend Robert Ryland, revealed that Jane had poisoned the child by administering just a teaspoon of bedbug poison, but she wanted this kept silent until after she was dead so as to be hanged officially and not by a lynch mob.¹⁹⁰ This one case encapsulates many aspects of slavery in antebellum Virginia. Paternalist slave owners tried to treat their slaves with what they thought was kindness and hoped that, in exchange for relaxed treatment, slaves would grant them loyalty. This sunny view of slavery kept the Winstons and others like them from seeing the extent of the disdain their slaves held for them. The fact that Jane was openly antagonistic towards her owners yet was still able to poison their baby, live with them for almost two more years while still being antagonistic, and ultimately axe murder the family, shows that appropriate levels of fear and distrust did not exist within the Winstons. Their illusions about the institution of slavery kept them blind to the danger lurking within their own household and holds the implication that other unnoticed poisonings could have killed other oblivious owners.

Reading Between the Lines

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ "Died," *Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser*, Dec. 27, 1850. Film 2330. Misc., Library of Virginia.

¹⁸⁹ George Alter, "Infant and Child Mortality in the United States and Canada." *In International Studies in Demography: Infant and Child Mortality in the Past*, ed. Alain Bideau et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 97.

¹⁹⁰ "Further Confession of Jane Williams."

The Winstons were not the only family to be blissfully unaware that their baby's poisoner was living amongst them. The dangers of slow poisoning and oblivious owners once again showed itself in Chesterfield County in 1857. A man named Edward Gill had, along with his family, been very sick for a month. Within short proximity two of his children died and the rest of the family remained ill. Trying to get to the bottom of this mysterious illness, physicians searched the house and discovered that their cook was in possession of carbonate of lead and sugar of lead, and had been mixing it into their food for an extended period of time.¹⁹¹ The family had suspected nothing.

One can only imagine how many cases of drawn out illness or sudden deaths were incorrectly attributed to nature and not vengeful slaves. For obvious reasons, there can be no definitive answer to the number, but looking at some news stories should reveal the type of rhetoric that merits questioning. In July of 1862, Thomas J. and Mary Frances Winston lost two daughters in under a week. One died of "a lingering illness" the other of "a brief illness of forty-eight hours."¹⁹² Losing two people in the same household in anything other than an epidemic is highly suspicious. Was this just a coincidental family tragedy or something of more malevolent design? In a similar vein, John H. Miller, a Second Lieutenant in the National Guard as well as a fireman met an "untimely end" "after a brief but painful illness."¹⁹³ There are red flags all over that obituary. Perfectly healthy, active men do not typically die sudden, painful, mysterious

¹⁹¹ "Poison of a Whole Family by Slaves," *Richmond Enquirer*, Jun. 26, 1857.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024735/1857-06-26/ed-1/seq-2/>

¹⁹² "Died," *The Daily Dispatch*, Jul. 30, 1862. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1862-07-30/ed-1/seq-2/>

¹⁹³ "Death of a Soldier and Fireman," *The Daily Dispatch*, Feb. 25, 1858.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1858-02-25/ed-1/seq-1/>

deaths. Although there is no way to know what they died of, this language is illustrative of obituaries that should be looked at with more scrutiny.

Killer Nannies

A May 1855 advertisement written by a Mr. E. Goldsmit living on Broad Street is representative of the typical desire for young, black female nannies: “Wanted to Hire—A colored Girl, for the balance of the year, to take care of a child and to make herself generally useful in a small family.”¹⁹⁴ On the surface, this seems like an innocent and familiar request, simply a young girl with babysitting duty. What could possibly go wrong from hiring a person without their consent who has many reasons to resent her position in a racialized caste system and then leaving her alone with your child?

In Caroline County in 1854, a slave named Sally stood accused of poisoning the baby of Mr. and Mrs. Jennings, the family she had been hired out to. Mrs. Jennings left Sally alone with her 7-month-old so that she could go do laundry. When she returned the baby “appeared to be strangled” and had laudanum on its clothing. Sally denied giving the infant anything. The baby did not survive.¹⁹⁵ This case illustrates how slaves could use readily available household poisons against their owners and that even quick discovery of the poisoning was no guarantee for survival.

Likewise, in 1865, a hired out slave in the role of nurse named Eliza stood accused of poisoning her employer’s infant. She had been living with them for two years at the time.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ “Wanted to Hire,” *The Daily Dispatch*, May 02, 1855. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1855-05-02/ed-1/seq-3/>

¹⁹⁵ “Charge of Poisoning,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Mar. 03, 1854. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1854-03-03/ed-1/seq-2/>

¹⁹⁶ “Charged with Poisoning,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Jan. 09, 1865. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1865-01-09/ed-1/seq-4/>

However, as there was no clear evidence of any wrongdoing, Eliza was discharged.¹⁹⁷ Was Eliza's case one where justice prevailed, protecting a slave from paranoid accusations, or was there really something more sinister to it? It is hard to say, but there are many more nannies who stood accused of poisoning children. Perhaps an equally, if not more, dangerous role for slaves to take on was that of cook.

Poison. It's What's for Dinner: Killer Cooks

In 1854 in Hanover County, Mr. Yarbrough and his entire family were almost snuffed out by a single dinner. The family was overtaken by a "violent sickness" with their health in "a most precarious situation." All the while, their slave cook pretended to be sick in bed with the examining doctor aware of her deception.¹⁹⁸ Could the family have ever suspected that they shared their dwellings with their attempted murderer? Most likely not as many people just like them made this potentially fatal mistake.

In another 1854 case, this time in Richmond, a slave named Grace belonging to Mrs. Elizabeth King and hired to Mrs. Eliza Ann Wingfield attempted to kill the entire family of her employer of two months by putting poison into their morning coffee.¹⁹⁹ Nobody noticed anything amiss until everyone started becoming violently ill. In horror, Mrs. Wingfield called for Drs. Lewis and Power and demanded that Grace drink the coffee, which she obliged to. Upping the ante, not only did Grace drink the poisoned coffee herself, she also gave some to her two children. Grace ended up suffering the most as she barely drank any coffee whereas the others

¹⁹⁷ "Hustings Court," *The Daily Dispatch*, Feb. 18, 1865. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1865-02-18/ed-1/seq-4/>

¹⁹⁸ "Whole Family Poisoned," *Richmond Enquirer*, Apr. 28, 1854. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024735/1854-04-28/ed-1/seq-1/>

¹⁹⁹ "Involuntary Self Destruction," *The Daily Dispatch*, Feb. 22, 1854. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1854-02-22/ed-1/seq-2/>

had drunk enough to vomit, purging most of the poison from their systems.²⁰⁰ Grace never recovered and died from her own poison attempt. It is speculated that, in a final show of agency to avoid trial, Grace gave herself another dose of arsenic as she died after having been well on the mend.²⁰¹ Upon examining her items, two large papers of arsenic were found in her clothing. This led to the vexatious question: how did she acquire them? The newspaper ruled out her ability to buy it from an apothecary or to steal it, and implies there was perhaps some shadowy figure at work.²⁰² While dying, Grace claimed a brickyard boy gave her a white powder which he said was “good to clear coffee.” Seeing as she claimed this interaction was only in passing and he gave her but a handful of the substance, this story is almost certainly a fabrication, leaving the terrifying question of how she acquired such a large amount of poison.²⁰³

But, these cases are not unique, there seems to have been a constant flow of slaves poisoning their owners’ food. In Wytheville in 1855, four slaves were arrested for putting arsenic in the bread and coffee of Mrs. John B. George.²⁰⁴ Near Halifax Court House in 1855, a slave employed by Rev. John A. Scott attempted to poison the minister and his family. The slave put strychnine in the beans he served the family for dinner. The bitter taste prevented the family from eating the beans. While rational thought would dictate calling the authorities to investigate, they instead served the beans to a cat who died within the hour.²⁰⁵ They also served the poisoned

²⁰⁰ “Wholesale Poisoning,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Feb. 16, 1854.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1854-02-16/ed-1/seq-2/>

²⁰¹ “Involuntary Self Destruction.”

²⁰² “Retributive Justice,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Mar. 06, 1854.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1854-03-06/ed-1/seq-2/>

²⁰³ “Involuntary Self Destruction.”

²⁰⁴ “Poisoning,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Jul. 09, 1855. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1855-07-09/ed-1/seq-1/>

²⁰⁵ “Attempt to Poison a Minister,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Apr. 28, 1855.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1855-04-28/ed-1/seq-3/>

beans to their dog; the results were not pretty.²⁰⁶ In 1856 in King William County a slave cook named Martha tried to poison the entirety of her master Samuel F. Norment's family. Unlike other slaves mentioned in this paper, Martha was known for being "a valuable and trusty servant." On one occasion, Mr. Norment's five-year-old daughter took deathly ill, with the doctor insisting it was poison but Mr. Norment refusing to accept such charges. So here, we see a medical expert ignored and the appropriate levels of fear and mistrust not adopted. A few days later the family was served a strange tasting breakfast, Mr. Norment took ill but was saved by the doctor. Martha admitted to putting glass and Jamestown weed seed into their food with every intention of killing them. The most shocking bit is they trusted her so much despite her only being with them for two months.²⁰⁷ But it is not only women or domestics who try their hands at poisoning their masters.

Boys will be Boys

Women were often accused of poisoning within households, men, however, hold an almost exclusive right to poisoning activities beyond home boundaries.²⁰⁸ In 1856 in Richmond a bold plot unraveled. Two slaves hired to do factory work, Sam, described as "a small boy" and William Jackson attempted to poison their overseer, William B. Mann. Sam was sent to fetch his overseer's breakfast and had apparently slipped poison into his coffee. Despite vomiting after drinking it and his wife pointing out an unusual white substance in the coffee pot, Mann suspected nothing. A little over a week later Mann sent Sam to fetch his breakfast again, drank the foul coffee, and then discovered a white substance at the bottom that a doctor confirmed to be

²⁰⁶ "Attempt to Poison," *The Daily Express*, vol. 4, no. 104, May 1, 1855. <http://viriniachronicle.com/cgi-bin/virginia?a=d&d=TDE18550501.1.2&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

²⁰⁷ "Local Matters: Daring Attempt to Poison a Family," *The Daily Dispatch*, Dec. 23, 1856. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1856-12-23/ed-1/seq-1/>

²⁰⁸ Fett, *Working Cures*, 164.

arsenic. Sam then admitted to putting the substance in the coffee but said that Jackson had paid him four pence and then threatened his life.²⁰⁹ Jackson's motive seems to have been revenge for the mere threat of being disciplined for some earlier offence.²¹⁰ Here, the poisoned white once again showed an eerie display of ignorance; despite having every logical reason to suspect he had been poisoned, it took two attempts before he took it seriously.

In 1856, after repeatedly being caught and punished by the slave patrol in New Kent, a slave named Pleasant decided to have some revenge. Contrary to his name, Pleasant was described as "...being of a surly disposition, and not feeling disposed to submit to any restraints from his superiors..." The patrol had a habit of resting at the home of Justice Captain Thomas Morris, where, conveniently, Pleasant's daughter Helen was employed. He gave her muriatic acid to put in a decanter the patrol usually drank from, but the plan failed as the patrol did not visit but Justice Morris drank the concoction.²¹¹ Here, it was a non-domestic slave working with a female slave in a household to achieve his goals. Miraculously, Pleasant was acquitted.²¹²

But, men could also poison masters in the domestic sphere. In 1858, just outside of Harrisonburg, a 13-year-old slave boy tried to murder the family he was living with. Showing how easily poison could be obtained he simply took poison that had been placed in the kitchen to kill rats in the coffee pot.²¹³ This points to the non-gendered nature of poisoning as well as major

²⁰⁹ "Local Matters: Poisoning," *The Daily Dispatch*, Jul. 23, 1856.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1856-07-23/ed-1/seq-1/>

²¹⁰ "Local Matters: Daring Attempt to Poison Overseer," *The Daily Dispatch*, Jul. 21, 1856.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1856-07-21/ed-1/seq-1/>

²¹¹ "Local Matters: Attempt to Poison a Patrol," *The Daily Dispatch*, Dec. 31, 1856.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1856-12-31/ed-1/seq-1/>

²¹² "Local Matters," *The Daily Dispatch*, Jan. 13, 1857. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1857-01-13/ed-1/seq-1/>

²¹³ "A Whole Family Poisoned," *Alexandria Gazette*, Dec. 11, 1858.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85025007/1858-12-11/ed-1/seq-3/>

flaws in legislation. Even if whites could stop blacks from purchasing poison, there was enough to be openly had within households for that to hardly matter.

Poisoning could sometimes be a group activity as well. In 1860 in Lunenburg three slaves John, Dick, and Oolin tried to kill a white family by placing “a strong admixture of some poisonous herb or plant” into a milk basin. This made the milk smell strange, so no one drank it.²¹⁴ The three slaves involved actually managed to escape before being hunted down.²¹⁵ They were executed together, with a pastor warning the slaves present of “...the necessity of obedience to their masters.”²¹⁶ This was simply wishful thinking on the part of the pastor.

In Northumberland County in 1861 two mysterious poisonings occurred. In a report on March 5th, a Mr. Charles W. Fallan and a friend were poisoned. Although they survived, the culprits, believed to be slaves, succeeded in killing “...four horses, two mules, twenty head of hogs, and a number of sheep.”²¹⁷ Mere days later in the same county, a Mr. Ormsby faced a similar attack and lost several heads of cattle; the community was understandably outraged. Almost forty slaves were arrested, their motive being “...freedom, through murder first.”²¹⁸ This once again shows the non-gendered and collaborative efforts poisoning could take on.

But, perhaps the case that takes the cake is a slave boy named Anderson who allegedly poisoned a wedding custard in Scott County in 1855. A wealthy lawyer was marrying into a

²¹⁴ “Virginia News,” *Alexandria Gazette*, Oct. 15, 1860. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85025007/1860-10-15/ed-1/seq-2/>

²¹⁵ “Recaptured,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Nov. 05, 1860. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1860-11-05/ed-1/seq-1/>

²¹⁶ “Correspondence of the Richmond Dispatch: Triple Execution in Lunenburg,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Nov. 15, 1860. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1860-11-15/ed-1/seq-1/>

²¹⁷ “Virginia News,” *Alexandria Gazette*, Mar. 05, 1861. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85025007/1861-03-05/ed-1/seq-3/>

²¹⁸ “Virginia News,” *Alexandria Gazette*, Mar. 13, 1861. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85025007/1861-03-13/ed-1/seq-3/>

likewise wealthy family and they were throwing a lavish reception for around 100 guests. Everyone was having a great time until people started to feel sick, "...all of whom were suffering severely from nausea, burning in the stomach, and all other horrible symptoms which manifest themselves when arsenic is swallowed." Doctors were called to the scene and discovered the custard was, in fact, "...strongly impregnated with arsenic." At least twenty-five people were expected to die. Mysteriously, most of the slaves were also sick as they had eaten the custard too.²¹⁹ But, the slave boy Anderson was the one in charge of the custard that day. He was ordered to put the custard in the spring house to keep it cool; he was gone for two hours doing this task despite the spring house only being 100 yards away. When Anderson was sent to fetch it, half the custard was missing. Although Anderson was at the party, he and two other slaves ate food other than the custard. Anderson had apparently been very pushy, insisting that people eat the custard. They suspected someone had furnished Anderson with the arsenic.²²⁰ There were also theories that arsenic had not been used at all and that the poisoning was accidental.²²¹ Regardless, it was never proven conclusively what happened that night and who, if anyone, was involved.

All of these cases highlight the vulnerability of a slave owning society, especially one that is in denial of its own brutality. Slave owners in nineteenth-century Virginia tried to convince themselves that slavery was a beneficial institution for the enslaved. By believing their own lies, they reasoned that slaves were happy with their condition. This led them to keep slaves

²¹⁹ "Diabolical Outrage—Attempt to Poison an Entire Wedding Party—Between Forty and Fifty Persons Seriously Ill—Twenty-Five or Thirty Not Expected to Live—the Bride Among the Number," *The Daily Express*, vol. 4, no. 133, Jun. 4, 1855. <http://viriniachronicle.com/cgi-bin/virginia?a=d&d=TDE18550604.1.3&srpos=3&e=--1855---1855--en-20--1--txt-txIN-poison+wedding----->

²²⁰ "The Poisoned Wedding Party in Scott County," *The Daily Express*, vol. 4, no. 158, Jul. 4, 1855. <http://viriniachronicle.com/cgi-bin/virginia?a=d&d=TDE18550704.1.1&srpos=1&e=04-07-1855-----en-20-TDE-1--txt-txIN-poison+wedding-----#>

²²¹ "The Poisoned Wedding Party," *The Daily Dispatch*, Vol. 8, no. 20, Jul. 25, 1855. <http://viriniachronicle.com/cgi-bin/virginia?a=d&d=DD18550725.1.1&e=04-07-1855-----en-20-TDE-1--txt-txIN-poison+wedding----->

in their homes in trusted positions and to relax the harshness of their punishments. By allowing slaves to be and believe themselves to be independent and ignoring signs of hostility, slave owners opened themselves up to being poisoned with themselves being none the wiser.

Chapter 3: Law and Disorder: White Reactions to Poison Threats

Laws

Of the many actions whites took to try to protect themselves, changing laws was probably their least effective. Despite the laws aiming to stop blacks from poisoning, slaves were still able to acquire poison readily. In Norfolk in 1832, a slave named Elizabeth was looking to acquire rat poison to kill two other women in her household. She went to one shop and was refused. She went to a second shop and lied saying that she was getting the order for a slave known for being trusty and was able to acquire the poison which she used to deadly effect.²²² Further weaknesses in legislation are revealed in a proposed amendment in 1842 that wanted corporal punishment for any black or mullato, free or enslaved, who was caught selling medicine. The case that inspired this law involved a black man who got a hold of arsenic and started selling it as a beneficial medicine. This amendment failed as other legislators felt current laws already covered the issue.²²³ This is very revealing in that, despite laws being on the books, they clearly were not acting as the deterrent whites had hoped for. The amendment was useless as they could not even enforce the laws they already had.

Despite the fears around poisoning, the 1840s actually saw a softening of laws. In 1843, only poison and medicine given with intent to kill was deemed a capital offense now. Further, slaves who made or gave harmless medicine without consent would be guilty of a misdemeanor with lashes as punishment.²²⁴ This tells a lot about the change in attitudes between the centuries. While Virginians of the 1740s thought slaves who distributed medicine, even beneficial

²²² "Punishment for Poisoning," *The New England Galaxy and United States Literary Advertiser*, Jan. 14, 1832, 3.

²²³ "Legislature of Virginia," *Richmond Enquirer*, Dec. 28, 1842.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024735/1842-12-28/ed-1/seq-3/>

²²⁴ Fett, *Working Cures*, 167.

medicine, presented enough of a threat to merit death at worst or branding at best, Virginians of the 1840s saw slaves preparing harmless medicine as a minor infraction. This legislation further strengthens the argument that poison trials were over bloated in the eighteenth century and holds the implication that masters did not take slaves using medicine as threatening in the nineteenth century and possibly would have neglected reporting such harmless incidents to the authorities. But, nineteenth-century law makers did still attempt to stop poisonings by slaves, even if they did not go to the extremes of their ancestors.

In 1856, Virginia's Senate passed an act "to prevent the sale of poisonous drugs to free negroes and slaves."²²⁵ Under this law, slaves could still buy poison as long as they had proof that they were sent on behalf of their owner.²²⁶ This law was also one of many to come that made free blacks less free than their white counterparts. However, this law is odd in that it took so long to become codified. The punishment for whites violating this law was not insubstantial, with a fine of \$500 and no less than one year and no more than two in jail.²²⁷ Perhaps this points to a growing sense of distrust not only towards slaves but also white merchants. A newspaper piece later that year called for a similar punishment for whites selling slaves more conventional weapons as "... such weapons are no doubt sold to them by white persons, or they could not get them..."²²⁸ This commentator goes on to show just how little agency whites believed slaves had though as they state that "...negroes have no more business with deadly weapons than children, and know as little how to use them."²²⁹ Here, once again, the ignorance of the slave owning class

²²⁵ "House of Delegates: Senate Bills Passed," *Richmond Enquirer*, Mar. 18, 1856.
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024735/1856-03-18/ed-1/seq-4/>

²²⁶ Fett, *Working Cures*, 166.

²²⁷ *Acts of The General Assembly of Virginia, Passed in 1855-6, in the Eightieth Year of the Commonwealth* (Richmond: William F. Ritchie, 1856), 45.

²²⁸ "Local Matters: Deadly Weapons," *The Daily Dispatch*, Dec. 31, 1856.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1856-12-31/ed-1/seq-1/>

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

is displayed. Much like earlier reports condemning abolitionists as rabble rousers, upsetting an otherwise benign slave population, this writer underestimates blacks and their ability to mobilize their vengeance. Slaves knew how to use weapons, and use them they did.

Despite their harsh language and angry gesturing, the laws whites passed seemed to be completely in vain as slaves were still able to, somehow, acquire poison. In Henrico County in 1859, a slave named Peter gave a free black woman named Nancy Harris arsenic, claiming that it was a medicine that would help cure her alcoholism. When they arrested Peter they found arsenic on his person.²³⁰ Although Peter did not poison a white person in this incident, it still points out some disturbing truths. Despite being a slave, Peter was able to acquire poison, and a lot of it at that. This flouts the laws about not only acquisition of poison but distribution as well. In the case of William Jackson, the slave who tried to poison his overseer mentioned earlier, the mystery remained as to how he got his hands on arsenic in the first place as "...he could not have purchased it of any respectable apothecary without a written order from some white man." While this accusation seems conspiratorial on the surface, there could be some truth to it.

Blacks and Whites Colluding

While legislation aimed to stop the sale of poisons to slaves, this was only addressing one part of the problem. Slaves poisoning their masters was not just the product of neglectful white merchants not taking necessary precautions but also the result of whites actively providing slaves with poison in conspiracies. In Dinwiddie County in 1859, the entire family of Thomas G. Chappell was poisoned. After examination it was discovered that arsenic had been placed in their coffee. "Suspicion rest[ed] upon a certain white party having instigated a negro to the

²³⁰ "Death by Poison," *The Daily Dispatch*, Mar. 22, 1859.
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1859-03-22/ed-1/seq-1/>

commission of the murderous deed.”²³¹ The following year in Caroline County, yet another white man was accused of inducing a “...negro to administer poison to his master.”²³² The white conspirator was the brother-in-law of the victim. He furnished Nelson, the slave, with money and strychnine, with the strychnine being discovered upon an autopsy of the murdered master’s stomach.²³³ This adds a new facet to slave resistance. When they were prevented from acting on their own, they could use and be used by their master’s enemies to meet a common goal. So, with murderous slaves and murderous whites helping said murderous slaves, what was a community to do?

A piece from 1859 shows that authorities still had no luck in tracking down the sellers of illicit poisons and were frustrated by their inability to stop the frightful practice. The writer of the piece laments that “...the facility with which persons of every class obtain poison, and the difficulty of ascertaining from whom and by what means it is obtained, is becoming a matter of serious consideration in our community.”²³⁴ Although blanket legislation was passed against blacks regarding poison, as mentioned earlier, poison was not the exclusive territory of blacks. In 1856 in Pendleton County, a “...respectable citizen...” named Elijah Stonestreet suddenly dropped dead under suspicious circumstances. An investigation discovered that someone poisoned his butter with strychnine. His wife was having an affair and she or her lover were the most likely culprits.²³⁵ In 1858 in Rappahannock County, the wife of Jason H. Johnson was

²³¹ “Poisoned,” *Alexandria Gazette*, Sep. 16, 1859. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85025007/1859-09-16/ed-1/seq-3/>

²³² “Virginia News,” *Alexandria Gazette*, Dec. 05, 1860. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85025007/1860-12-05/ed-1/seq-2/>

²³³ “Virginia News,” *Alexandria Gazette*, Dec. 13, 1860. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85025007/1860-12-13/ed-1/seq-2/>

²³⁴ “Selling Poison,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Aug. 15, 1859. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1859-08-15/ed-1/seq-1/>

²³⁵ “Poisoning,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Mar. 26, 1856. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1856-03-26/ed-1/seq-2/>

poisoned by her own husband when he gave her a glass of poisoned lemonade. When she complained of the taste he lied and said it was a health drink with aloe in it. He had gone shopping for coffins just days before and was discovered to be having an inappropriate relationship with his wife's niece.²³⁶ So, by the 1850s not only was poison still certainly a concern, it seems to have had more users than one would expect. In frustration, the writer goes even further, calling for legislation allowing only chemists and physicians to buy deadly drugs or to stop the sale altogether for both whites and blacks.²³⁷ But even a total ban on poison would not stop the problem.

In another 1859 case, this time in Stafford County, a slave was once again able to acquire poison. One day, Mr. James M. Scott noticed that the water in his glass tasted like acid. He was immediately suspicious and was going to take the water to be analyzed but somehow forgot to follow-up. About a week later, the same happened with his coffee. A slave girl in his household admitted to putting oxalic acid in his drinks which she had obtained from her mother who lived in Fredericksburg who had intended for her to use it as a stain remover.²³⁸ This case works on multiple levels. To once again point out the obliviousness of owners, it was not until the second attempt on his life that Mr. Scott became sufficiently suspicious. This also reveals the movement of slaves and relative freedom as the mother of his slave was able to acquire a dangerous substance and then move freely to give it to her daughter. This case also points out the futility of keeping slaves away from poison as even if they could not acquire arsenic from the chemist, they could still get their hands on household cleaners such as oxalic acid which could be

²³⁶ "Deliberate Murder," *Richmond Enquirer*, Jun. 22, 1858.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024735/1858-06-22/ed-1/seq-1/>

²³⁷ "Selling Poison," *The Daily Dispatch*, Aug. 15, 1859.

²³⁸ "Attempt to Poison," *The Daily Dispatch*, Sep. 19, 1859.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1859-09-19/ed-1/seq-1/>

similarly fatal. Maybe the best solution for the community was to remove any credible threat from its presence.

Transportation

Although fewer slaves were sentenced for poisoning in the nineteenth century, they typically faced a vastly different fate from their eighteenth-century counterparts: transportation. After 1801, Virginia law allowed slaves convicted of capital offences to be sold outside of the state instead of being killed.²³⁹ By allowing slaves to be transported for capital crimes, Virginia noticeably reduced its rate of executions. Between 1785 and 1865, 983 slaves were transported while 626 were hanged after receiving capital convictions.²⁴⁰ In the case of poisonings, granted the victims did not die, slaves convicted of the offense could have their conviction commuted to transportation.²⁴¹ Part of the reasoning behind transportation was to stop “...the spectacle of public hangings.”²⁴² Whereas in the past slave owners used public hangings and gibbetting as a way to deter slaves from undesired behavior, slavers of the nineteenth century started to view this as an absolutely ghastly behavior, once again showing an important difference in mentalities. Another, perhaps more compelling reason, was that hanging slaves cost the state money. Some viewed hanging slaves as “...rather a costly luxury to the people of Virginia.”²⁴³ In opposition, many authorities felt that transportation was no punishment at all.²⁴⁴ Some feared that it was perhaps even a welcome punishment and could encourage slaves to act out as they would only

²³⁹ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 27-28.

²⁴⁰ Ward, *Public Executions in Richmond, Virginia*, 31.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 27.

²⁴³ “Cost of Hanging,” *The Tiffin Tribune*, Sep. 25, 1857. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85026279/1857-09-25/ed-1/seq-1/>

²⁴⁴ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 29.

face the punishment of being sold.²⁴⁵ This disagreement about slave punishment was largely along economic lines.

Class Divisions: Rich Whites Versus Poor Whites

There was a great divide in how wealthy slave owners and the general public reacted to slave poisonings. More often than not, slaves convicted of poisoning had their sentence reduced to transportation, much to the horror of non-elites. Slave owners and the government benefitted from selling slaves as opposed to killing them as they considered "...hanging slaves by law..." to be "...a costly luxury..." because the state was required to compensate the owner.²⁴⁶ Their less wealthy neighbors were enraged, as "...the crime of poisoning is too fearful, too dangerous to the peace of society, to admit of an appeal to mercy in any shape."²⁴⁷ Ultimately, the elites prevailed and slaves convicted of poisoning continued to be sold. All of this begs the question though: who in their right mind would knowingly purchase a homicidal slave with a penchant for poison and where exactly were these slaves going?

With so many transportations the public was understandably left wondering "...to what part of the world the laws of Virginia authorizes the transportation of her criminals..."²⁴⁸ With hundreds of slaves, including poisoners, being regularly sold, where could they possibly be going? The disturbing answer is no one was really sure. Schwarz supposes that destinations for transportation included Cuba, Spanish Florida, and the Dry Tortugas.²⁴⁹ But, by 1857, European colonies were less willing to buy slaves with violent backgrounds.²⁵⁰ To further muddle the

²⁴⁵ Link, *Roots of Secession*, 94.

²⁴⁶ "Cost of Hanging."

²⁴⁷ "Punishment for Poisoning," *The New England Galaxy and United States Literary Advertiser*, Jan. 14, 1832, 3.

²⁴⁸ "To the Editors of the Enquirer," *Richmond Enquirer*, Oct. 09, 1857.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024735/1857-10-09/ed-1/seq-4/>

²⁴⁹ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 29.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

surety of convicted slaves being sold beyond the limits of the United States, there were also fewer places abroad to sell convicted slaves to as slavery in the British and French West Indies was legally over.²⁵¹ This leaves the most likely destination for these slaves with a proven record for destruction being Virginia's sister states in the Deep South; this was a less than thrilling fact for the residents of those states.²⁵²

Virginia was a slave-breeding state and had been providing slaves to the Lower South at great profit in great numbers for some time.²⁵³ Upon observing slaves brought in from Virginia to be sold further South "one Georgian described the slaves found in a trader's coffles as 'incendiaries, poisoners and murderers' who had somehow escaped conviction."²⁵⁴ He was perhaps more right than he would ever hope to be. Slave owners in Virginia tended to sale whichever slaves they deemed "troublesome."²⁵⁵ The Upper South was well aware that they dumped their worse and potentially most dangerous slaves on the Deep South, and, according to Gudmestad, they were not exactly ashamed of this practice.²⁵⁶ Following the Nat Turner Rebellion, there were wild rumors spread that "...speculators would stoop so low as to buy rebellious slaves right out of Virginia jails."²⁵⁷ Coming so quickly after the scare Walker's pamphlet caused, legislators went to work to ease fear of slave rebellions in their states.²⁵⁸ In a knee jerk reaction, several states passed laws to try to regulate or stop the interstate slave trade to

²⁵¹ Ibid., 29.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Lionel D. Lyles and Essie Thibodeaux Lyles, *Historical Developments of Capitalism: In the United States and Its Affects on the American Family: From Colonial Times to 1920* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2003), 86.

²⁵⁴ Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce*, 99.

²⁵⁵ Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 234.

²⁵⁶ Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce*, 99.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 103.

²⁵⁸ Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 451.

prevent dangerous slaves from entering.²⁵⁹ Louisiana tried to thwart slave traders from selling them dangerous convicts by requiring imported slaves to have a certificate declaring their good character and lack of felony convictions, but as Richmond slave trader Bacon Tait showed, these were easily and questionably procured therefore offering little protection.²⁶⁰ Even when the regulatory laws did work, their effectiveness was questionable. In 1840, a Virginia slave trader named William H. Williams attempted to smuggle convict slaves into New Orleans, but the mayor had been warned in advanced so was able to detain Williams upon arrival; ironically, the contraband slaves were auctioned off anyways.²⁶¹

Strangely, although many people were understandably upset by the thought of convict slaves being sold from Virginia further South, others were so desperate for labor that they pushed, successfully, to have many of the restrictive trade laws removed.²⁶² Being disgusted and frustrated by Virginia's seeming lack of regard for the safety of other Southern states, Alabama's Governor John A. Winston wrote to Virginia's Governor Henry A. Wise in September of 1857. Winston alleged that Virginia's convicted slaves who had their sentences commuted and were allegedly sold out of the country "...find their way to the more southern slave states; and that we are thereby made the recipients of the vicious and criminal slaves of the state of Virginia. The evil is one of such apparent magnitude to us, that unless the good neighborship of Virginia correct it, we will be forced to some severe measure of self-protection and self-preservation."²⁶³ Although it is not exactly clear what Winston's threat meant, Governor Wise wisely took it

²⁵⁹ Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce*, 104.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 109-110.

²⁶¹ Phillip J. Schwarz, *Slave Laws in Virginia* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2010), 98.

²⁶² Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce*, 111.

²⁶³ Virginia, *Document Number One: Governor's Message and Reports of the Public Officers of the State, of the Board of Directors, and of the Visitors, Superintendents, and Other Agents of Public Institutions or Interests of Virginia*. (Richmond: William F. Ritchie, 1857), 135.

seriously. Responding in October of the same year, Wise produced a shockingly candid admission:

Our law requires that certain convicts shall be transported beyond the limits of the United States, and the duty is imposed on the executive of this commonwealth to take highly penal bonds, with ample security, to have the law executed. But whilst in no case could I obtain or produce positive proof of the fact, I am obliged to admit that it is probably true the law is in no case really complied with. The state pays for the convicts out of her treasury, and sells them to purchasers, who must, of course, take them to some market, in order to make a profit or sale at all. We know that there is no lawful slave market for such transports out of the limits of the United States. They are, I believe, taken and carried to the states south of Virginia, chiefly to Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas.²⁶⁴

The governor then goes on to declare that actions must be taken to “...remedy the evil...” done to “...her sister states.”²⁶⁵ In 1858, slaves who were convicted of a felony could be used by the state for public works instead of being transported elsewhere.²⁶⁶ While this was a somewhat satisfactory solution, how much damage had already been done?

Alabama’s governor, and many others, feared that Virginia’s transported slaves would continue their crime streaks when sold. But, how real was the threat of repeat poison offenders? Although research has yet to reveal any specific cases, the possibility is not farfetched. In a similar vein, an 1843 issue of the *Vermont Telegraph* recounts a story that, if true, affirms the fear shown by the governor. A Mrs. Chapman, living near Athens, Alabama, was murdered by

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, ccli.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 29.

three of her slaves while her husband was away. The slaves attempted to kill Mr. Chapman upon his return, with two being captured and one escaping. The man who escaped was reported to be a 45-year-old slave from Virginia who maintained he had killed his previous owners back in Virginia.²⁶⁷ Although none of the slaves studied in this paper have been discovered as repeat offenders, the attitudes shown in the accounts to follow imply it would not be a shocking possibility and is a project worthy of further research.

A poison case from Richmond in 1852 threatened to tear Richmond's community apart and showed how even wanton killers could be sent on to other states. Phillis was a slave belonging to the estate of Mr. Phillip T. White and working for Mr. Patrick H. Butler when she attempted to poison Mr. Butler's five-year-old son.²⁶⁸ Just prior to the attempted murder, the Butlers were having great difficulty in controlling Phillis, who was being "...insolent and abusive..." towards Mrs. Butler.²⁶⁹ Apparently, Phillis became so uncontrollable that Mr. Butler whipped her several times and then sent her to jail as a punishment. And then, contrary to nature, common sense, and all that is sane, they brought her back home. "Since her return home, she had been unusually sullen, treating the little boy in particular—whom she had always appeared to dislike—in a harsh manner."²⁷⁰ This once again shows just how oblivious paternal slave owners were. Phillis openly showed her disdain for Mrs. Butler, it was known that she never liked her master's son, she went to jail and came back with a worse attitude than before, yet they somehow saw no problem with trusting the care of their child to her.

²⁶⁷ "The Fruits of the System," *Vermont Telegraph*, Sep. 27, 1843.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025661/1843-09-27/ed-1/seq-4/>

²⁶⁸ "The Boot on the Other Leg," *Richmond Enquirer*, Jun. 22, 1852.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024735/1852-06-22/ed-1/seq-4/>

²⁶⁹ "Local Matters: The Case of Poisoning," *The Daily Dispatch*, Jun. 4, 1852.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1852-06-04/ed-1/seq-1/>

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

If that level of open animosity could occur yet they were still blindsided by her attempting to kill their son, it is a wonder any masters of similar ideology made it out alive. Mrs. Butler had been given a morphine solution by her doctor. She took a bit of it and left the rest of it on the mantelpiece in her son's room. The next morning, she entered the room only to discover an empty vial and a sick child.

A doctor was immediately called for and was able to save the child. Showing how impartial forensics were, when they sent the child's vomit to be tested to try to prove that he had been poisoned, the examiner admitted that it was impossible to tell what, if anything, had been given maliciously and what had been given by the doctor to save the child. They had to rely on circumstantial evidence: the empty vial, the child saying Phillis gave him water that "...tasted sour," Phillis washing the tumbler she used that morning, and the boy's physical symptoms matching those of someone overdosing on morphine or another powerful narcotic. Coming right on the heels of the controversial Jordan Hatcher case, the writer of the paper hoped that there would be "...no more commutations to invite to rebellion and murder our slave population."²⁷¹ His wish would not be granted.

Although she was found guilty, Phillis, due to her young but unstated age, had her sentence commuted to transportation with her value appraised at \$600.²⁷² This sentence sparked outrage as "...poisoning has always been regarded as a crime of singular enormity, for it is a deliberate act, necessarily implying malice."²⁷³ The judges who sat in her case were Whigs, and apparently the same papers which blasted Governor Johnson, a Democrat, for commuting Jordan

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² "Hustings Court," *The Daily Dispatch*, Jun. 17, 1852. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1852-06-17/ed-1/seq-2/>

²⁷³ "The Boot on the Other Leg."

Hatcher's sentence were suddenly quiet when their party members did the same. People feared that "...if nurses, for poisoning children, are only to undergo the punishment of transportation, (which is in most instances a pleasure rather than a punishment,) whose child is not in danger?"²⁷⁴

In a similar tale, an 1859 issue of the *Alexandria Gazette* reported that a slave girl belonging to a Mr. George Crosdale of Accomack County poisoned her master's baby with laudanum. What is more shocking is that this behavior seems to have run in her family. Other family members of the girl poisoned Mr. Crosdale's brother, sister-in-law, and two children. Despite this, the slave girl was, admittedly, sold South.²⁷⁵ This is a very interesting case as it does not appear that the slave girl went to trial, which would suggest she was very young, perhaps seven or younger.²⁷⁶ Despite being demonstrably dangerous with a pedigree to poison, Virginians sold her to people less aware of her history and the danger she posed.

Cases involving young, poisonous nannies appear to be shockingly common. In yet another instance, a case from 1860 showed that slave owners placed far more faith in their human property than was prudent. Fanny, an "...ill-mannered, gruff-looking..."²⁷⁷ slave girl belonging to Mrs. Elizabeth Meredith, was hired by a Mr. R.F. Luck. Mrs. Luck had reprimanded Fanny "...in a mild manner..." for behaving badly. This made Fanny incredibly angry and she acted out by refusing to eat supper. For reasons beyond rational thinking, the next morning, the Lucks left Fanny alone with their seven-month-old baby. When Mrs. Luck returned

²⁷⁴ "A Terrible Broad-Side," *Richmond Enquirer*, Jun. 22, 1852.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024735/1852-06-22/ed-1/seq-4/>

²⁷⁵ "News of the Day," *Alexandria Gazette*, Jul. 28, 1859. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85025007/1859-07-28/ed-1/seq-2/>

²⁷⁶ *Dialogue on Youth and Justice* (Chicago: American Bar Association Division for Public Education, 2007), 4.

²⁷⁷ "Local Matters: Poisoning A Child," *The Daily Dispatch*, Jan. 21, 1860.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1860-01-21/ed-1/seq-1/>

to check on the baby, she found a pill in its bed, asked Fanny if she knew what it was, Fanny answered no so Mrs. Luck just threw it into the fire. It was only after Mrs. Luck went to feed the child that she noticed that it was sick and had a dark substance in its mouth. Finally, Mrs. Luck decided to call authorities. The poison was actually blister salve that had been kept around the house. Doctors were called in and they were able to save the baby.²⁷⁸ Fanny was taken to jail and her actions there speak loudly for her feelings towards her actions: “After the arrest of the prisoner, a gentleman who saw her, told her that...he had been sent down to hang her...With as much indifference as a dog could have exhibited, she bared her neck for the halter, and remarking that she had done nothing, told him to hang her as soon as he pleased.”²⁷⁹ The writer for the paper was disgusted by Fanny’s actions and declared that she would “...no doubt be punished, as [she] should be, by hanging.”

Once again, how very wrong he was. Upon trial, despite Fanny’s attorney, Mr. James R. Crenshaw, making “...an able argument in her behalf,” Fanny was found guilty of attempting to kill her employer’s baby. But, once again, a dangerous nanny would not hang for her crime. Fanny was valued at the hefty sum of \$1,000 and sentenced to transportation “...beyond the limits of the United States.”²⁸⁰ As noted earlier, it is highly doubtful that Fanny was actually sold outside of the United States. So, the Deep South most likely once again had a murderous, poisonous, indifferent young woman sold into their midst with a new and frightening anonymity.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ “Local Matters: The Poisoning Case,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Jan. 23, 1860.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1860-01-23/ed-1/seq-1/>

²⁸⁰ “Local Matters: Poisoning,” *The Daily Dispatch*, Feb. 16, 1860.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1860-02-16/ed-1/seq-1/>

Conclusion

Slave resistance has always been a hot topic for historians. While the majority of attention has been granted to large, bloody, daring displays of rebellion, more recent scholarship has tried to focus on more day-to-day occurrences. While mild forms of resistance are more inclusive, they still miss the desperation slaves held for freedom. A gap in the scholarship is how slaves could be both murderous and undetected by using poison. While Schwarz's work is an amazing resource for slave crime in Virginia,²⁸¹ his conclusion about slave poisoning is questionable. As Schwarz's work is seen as definitive, most scholars have taken his view at face value and left nineteenth-century poison cases largely unexplored.

Through examining newspapers and court recordings, a wealth of poisoning cases appears. By examining both the private actions and public writings of slave owners, their fervent belief that their slaves were content is also apparent. Although on their own these sources are insignificant, when combined they paint a picture of frustrated slaves, willing to kill to free themselves and owners who stayed blissfully unaware. Due to the rise of the hiring out system, forensic testing before trials, and the shift to a more trusting ideology, perceptions of slave poisoning was fundamentally different in the nineteenth century. Slaves were now more often living with people they did not know and did not respect or fear. Doctors were now able to dismiss claims of poisoning with science before trials could occur. Masters were now less likely to accuse a slave of poisoning as they were so caught up in their fantasies that they could miss vital and subtle signs that would indicate to their more astute counterparts that something was amiss. As long as slave owners believed in the benevolence of their institution, they could not

²⁸¹ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*.

believe in slaves' deadly efforts to leave it. And so, masters in antebellum Virginia continued to live their lives, unaware that the cake they were eating was possibly their just deserts.

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