

Abdication and Acceptance: Slave-Trading in Antebellum Lynchburg

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(Editor's note: This paper by John Marks is the winner of the Kendall North Award for the best paper in the 2007 issue of the Agora.)

After the United States Congress banned the importation of African slaves, the domestic slave trade increased significantly. As the demand for labor grew in the cotton-producing states of the Deep South, slave sales occurred in almost every Southern city as a part of a growing internal slave trading system. Across the South, towns and cities established slave markets to accommodate the growing demand for slave labor. Even non-cotton producing regions in the Upper South and Chesapeake witnessed the effects of the vast internal slave trade, and as a consequence, many cities in these regions established centralized slave markets.

In the domestic slave trade, thousands of slave sales occurred, transferring the ownership of slaves between traders and planters, and instilling in most slaves a fear of relocation. Former slave and prominent abolitionist Frederick Douglass described instances in which slaveowners used the domestic slave trade as a punishment. When a slave professed dissatisfaction with his treatment, Douglass described how

the poor man was then informed by his overseer that, for having found fault with his master, he was now to be sold to a Georgia trader. He was immediately chained and handcuffed; and thus, without a moment's warning, he was snatched away, and forever sundered, from his family and friends, by a hand more unrelenting than death.¹

Douglass also described other experiences marking the slave trade as an evil practice, stating,

If a slave was convicted of any high misdemeanor, became unmanageable, or evinced a determination to run away, he was brought immediately here, severely whipped, put on board the sloop, carried to Baltimore, and sold to Austin Woolfolk, or some other slave-trader, as a warning to the slaves remaining.²

Given Douglass' descriptions of the slave trade, one can begin to understand its inhumanity, and in turn, understand why it repelled many individuals.

In Richmond, the slave market was one of the biggest in the country, consisting of a trader's office, show room, and fifteen foot brick walls enclosing an outdoor yard.³ Traders often sold slaves from auction blocks at the center of a city or town, such as in Petersburg, Charlottesville, Emporia, and Norfolk—one slave described the auction block in Norfolk as representing “all the devilment and cruelty that was done to the negro in the days of slavery.”⁴ The city of Lynchburg, Virginia, located just south of the James River and east of the Blue Ridge Mountains, felt the effects of this growing trade but did not develop a centralized slave trading location in response. Visitors to the city could not avoid this slave trade, as many of Lynchburg's most prominent citizens participated in it very actively, and at locations literally all across the city. The reluctance of many individuals to participate directly in the trade indicates that some perceived actively buying and selling humans as objectionable, but the prominence of those willing to participate in the trade and the acceptance of slavery's presence establishes that the people of Lynchburg considered slavery an unavoidable and well-grounded element of their society.

Slavery was extremely visible in Lynchburg. During the decades just before the start of the Civil War, almost forty percent of the white households in Lynchburg owned or hired at least one slave.⁵ Most slaveowners in Lynchburg did not use slaves as plantation hands, like in many other parts of Virginia. Rather, the majority of slaves in Lynchburg worked in the tobacco factories, because by 1860, almost fifty tobacco factories operated in Lynchburg, and they employed over fifteen percent of the city's total population.⁶ Slaveowners bought female slaves, as well as some young males, for household service.⁷ Unlike slaves in other parts of Virginia,

and in other regions of the South, most slaves in Lynchburg did not work in agriculture, but rather worked indoors in industrial or domestic settings.

Ultimately, however, slavery functioned as more than a source of labor for many individuals in Lynchburg, as slave trading in some way impacted a large number of relationships. The sites that accommodated Lynchburg's major social gatherings often accommodated slave sales as well, and as such the purpose of slave trading expanded from securing and providing labor to establishing ties with other members of the community. Individuals who frequently participated in the trade gained recognition and prominence in the city, emphasizing the fact that the purchase or sale of slaves had implications that extended beyond supplying the need for labor. Given this inclusion of the slave trade in almost all aspects of social life, one must evaluate the places and people who comprised it to understand the influence and perception of the slave trade.

Lynchburg's Franklin Hotel, a typical Virginian brick building with a cone-shaped roof, commonly held many slave sales during the early nineteenth century.⁸ Positioned in the center of town on the corner of Main and Eleventh Streets across from a local theater, the Franklin Hotel was purchased by Charles Hoyle in November of 1818; owners and auctioneers began to sell slaves at the hotel within two months.⁹ Those trying to sell slaves regularly took out advertisements in the local newspaper, providing the public with a description of the slaves and the location of the sale. Two Lynchburg slave brokers took out one of the first advertisements for a slave sale to take place at the Franklin Hotel, advertising "18 to 20 likely negroes, consisting of men, women, boys and girls, some of which are in families; one a very valuable family."¹⁰ Some people selling slaves did not do so inside the hotel, but instead sold them on the sidewalk outside the front door. Auctioneers George Whitlocke and William Richardson

frequently auctioned slaves off in front of the hotel, advertising them as “likely” or “well recommended.”¹¹ One slave trader, most likely an employee or friend of the Hotel, advertised that:

a constant supply every month of young Negroes from eight to sixteen years old (as to males, and from eight to twenty, as to females,) will be kept for sale at the Franklin Hotel. They will be purchased below by a good judge, and sold as reasonable as the present prices of Slaves will allow, enquire at the Bar of the Hotel, and of the Printer hereof.¹²

Slave owners and traders chose the Franklin Hotel for slave sales, because before a new person bought and transformed it into the Norvell House in 1826, it served as the center of social life for the city of Lynchburg.

A large portion of the meetings and social gatherings that occurred in Lynchburg in the early 1800's took place at the Franklin Hotel. In February 1824, when the well-to-do of Lynchburg decided to provide financial assistance to Greece in their fight for independence, this hotel served as the site of the organizational meeting.¹³ Similarly, when the people of Lynchburg learned that Thomas Jefferson's home and property were to be sold to pay off his debts, they met at the Franklin Hotel to determine how they could help solve the problem.¹⁴ Lynchburg also used the site to plan for a visit from Revolutionary War hero General Lafayette, though in the end Lafayette decided to skip the Southern city.¹⁵ In September 1828, Lynchburg enthusiastically received the most famous visitor in the city's short history: speaker of the house and former presidential candidate Henry Clay. Many Lynchburg residents rode on horseback to meet Clay as he traveled to town from New London, in what would later become Bedford County. Upon his arrival, the people saluted him and led a procession through the city: one that ended at the Franklin Hotel.¹⁶ The people of Lynchburg frequently held important meetings and

conversations simultaneously with slave purchases at the Franklin Hotel, which indicated their perception of slavery as inextricably ingrained into the framework of the city.

Though smaller in scale and popularity, other hotels and taverns in town all functioned similarly to the Franklin, especially after its close in 1826. One example is the Indian Queen Tavern, located just three blocks from the Franklin Hotel, on Main Street between Seventh and Eighth Streets. Developing into one of the primary sites for slave sales after the Franklin Hotel closed, the Indian Queen Tavern featured a life-sized statue of an Indian woman and was the only slave sale site in Lynchburg that featured an auction-block.¹⁷ Former slave Robert Williams described witnessing the auction of a slave-woman at the Indian Queen:

De block was a big rock that slaves would stand on so dey would be up over de crowd. De seller would cry bids just like dey sell tobacco, ‘\$150, who will make it a \$160,’ an’ so on. Some of de bids would start as high as \$400, ‘cordin to de condition of de person. De women would have just a piece around her waist (something like tights); her breast an’ thighs would be bare. De seller would have her turn around and plump her to show how fat she was and her general condition. Dey would also take her by her breast and pull dem to show how good she was built for raisin chillun’. Dey would have dem examined to show dey was in good health. De young women would bring good money such as \$1000 or more ‘cause dey could have plenty chillum an’ dat whar dey profit would come in.¹⁸

The Indian Queen Tavern served a purpose completely unrelated to the slave trade. However, by utilizing the tavern as a primary slave sale site, the people of Lynchburg clearly indicated that they had no qualms about simultaneously participating in normal social discourse and the racially-fueled degradation of other human beings.

The people of Lynchburg also constructed other hotels very close to the site of the Franklin Hotel. People sold slaves at the Union Hotel, on the corner of Main and Sixth Streets.¹⁹ They also sold them at the Central Hotel, Richard Thurmon’s Tavern on the corner of Ninth and Fourth Streets, Ms. Hatcher’s Tavern, and, though with greater rarity, at any of the number of

taverns that appeared on nearly every block in town.²⁰ Those who constructed the hotels and taverns in Lynchburg did not do so with the slave market in mind, and with the exception of the Indian Queen, none made significant accommodations for slave sales. In a town the size of Lynchburg, everyone utilized these places for any kind of social activity, from playing cards, to discussing politics, to drinking alcohol. The inclusion of the slave trade amongst all other forms of social interaction reinforces its complete acceptance by the community.

Slave sales also frequently occurred in front of the Lynchburg market house, the center of commerce in the city. Originally built in 1804 on a block on Ninth Street (then known as Water Street), the city of Lynchburg moved the market house a short distance towards Main Street and expanded it in 1814.²¹ Similar to the hotels and taverns, those hoping to sell slaves would purchase advertisements in the newspapers, announcing the sale or auction that would take place. Samuel Bransford advertised a sale in 1819, stating:

I will sell, on Thursday next, the 16th, before the Market house in the town of Lynchburg, for Cash, THREE NEGROES, viz—Arthur and his wife June, and a Negro Girl named Rachael. Rachael is said to be a most excellent house servant. The Sale will commence at 11 o'clock precisely.²²

Eventually, the second Lynchburg market house also fell into disrepair. Only a few decades after its construction, people described it as “an intolerable old sore,” and “an old shanty that blocked the street.” One citizen expressed particular disdain for the market, describing it as:

a disgrace to humanity, to society, to civilization. It is ugly, dark, small, filthy, inconvenient, in the way, out of place, and in all respects a humbug and a nuisance. The law imposing a fine of five dollars upon every white person passing the market without holding his nose has not been repealed. On the contrary, the exigency of the times, and the flavor of the locality, demand a doubling of the fines. Such are the conditions that even the hogs die rather than be dissected there.²³

The market declined so greatly that many of the city's stray dogs roamed through it—so much so that in 1826, the city established a law allowing the police to execute any dogs found wandering on the property.²⁴ These descriptions of Lynchburg's community market reveal that people in Lynchburg were very negative towards and unsettled by the market, although they did not allow these feelings to deter them from purchasing the goods available there. Clearly, some looked unfavorably upon the slave markets in Lynchburg, but the institution's notable visibility in the city implies that despite some disdain for the places that held slave sales, Lynchburg largely accepted slavery into the fabric of the city.

Nonetheless, slave sales thrived at the market, even on the eve of the Civil War. On April 12, 1861—the day of the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter—traders sold four slaves at the community market: a woman for \$910, a seventeen year old boy for \$1130, a twelve year old boy \$640, and an eighteen year old girl for \$1100.²⁵ The people of Lynchburg's willingness to conduct business involving slave sales in conjunction with all other commerce resulted in an extremely reliable slave market; this reliability stems from the people of Lynchburg's perception of the slave trade as a necessary component of everyday life.

Though people more commonly used certain places for slave sales than others, slaves could have been—and were—sold almost everywhere in Lynchburg. Don Stokely advertised his slave sale in the *Lynchburg Virginian* in 1820, stating that it would occur “at the river, near Couch's stone home.”²⁶ Slave brokers Chiswell Dabney and William Norvell sold slaves Solomon, Fleming, Juda, Celia, Tom, Abraham and Ambrose at “an old shop on the road” that shared a property line with the estate of Jesse Irvine, the slaves' owner.²⁷ Other times, traders would set up a sale on an unused lot, especially if trying to sell the lot itself as well. William Rives auctioned off a group of slaves belonging to Reuben and Anne Perry at a lot “lying on 8th

street and the conjunction of third alley with said street,”—as well as auctioning off for the couple “three horses, sundry valuable House Furniture, Carpenter’s Tools” and even the lot where the sale occurred.²⁸ In 1823, another advertisement appeared in the *Lynchburg Virginian* for the sale of “two negro boys,” one of whom was “an excellent house servant.” The advertiser boasted that “such valuable property is not often found in the market,” but failed to place any name on the advertisement. The man who purchased the ad also worked for the newspaper in which the advertisement appeared, and as such instructed readers to ask about the slaves directly at the office of the *Virginian*.²⁹ Full-time auctioneers, such as Richard Pollard, bargained with buyers on the sidewalk outside of the auction store.³⁰ Occasionally, buyers could purchase slaves before even arriving in town, as people sometimes sold slaves “on the Turnpike, one mile from Lynchburg.”³¹ Slave sales extended to a large number of establishments in town, and this extension highlights slavery’s existence as expected and tolerable amongst the people of Lynchburg.

Some of the most common places for selling slaves—and part of the reason why the selling of slaves was so visible in Lynchburg—were private residences. A member of the Bernard family once advertised “seven likely negroes,” giving the location of the sale as “the house of Mrs. Bernard.”³² Desiring to sell a lot of nine slaves, Henry Eidson sought the help of a slave broker to place a newspaper advertisement, but allowed the sale to occur at home, “at the house of Jane Eidson, on Otter River.”³³ A large number of advertisements appeared only with a description of the slave or slaves to be sold and the name of the seller; interested parties would have had to contact the seller personally in order to purchase the slaves. Some of these private sales were actually quite substantial. J. Echols advertised a sale of between twenty and thirty “likely” slaves, and planned to sell them from his own property.³⁴ The willingness of many

individuals to accept not only the institution of slavery but the act of buying or selling slaves in their homes suggests that some people in Lynchburg found themselves comfortable with their involvement in a trade that debased other humans.

Though private sales occurred, a substantial number of people in Lynchburg did not want to hold full responsibility for selling their slaves. Many slaveowners in Lynchburg, with no qualms about the legitimacy of slavery's use, found the buying and selling of these slaves questionable. As a consequence, Lynchburg slaveowners often hired slave brokers to control all aspects of the sale except ownership. These brokers would place advertisements, solicit buyers, bargain for a good price or perform the auction, and direct the final buyer to the actual owner of the slave.

Frederick Douglass offered a slave's perspective on slave-traders, when recounting his experience in jail. Douglass stated that,

we had been in jail scarcely 20 minutes, when a swarm of slave-traders, and agents for slave-traders, flocked into the jail to look at us, and to ascertain if we were for sale. Such a set of beings I never saw before! I felt myself surrounded by so many fiends from perdition. A band of pirates never looked more like their father, the devil. They laughed and grinned over us, saying 'Ah, my boys! We have got you, haven't we?' And after taunting us in various ways, they one by one went into an examination of us, with intent to ascertain our value. They would impudently ask us if we would not like to have them for our masters. We would make them no answer, and leave them to find out as best they could. Then they would curse and swear at us, telling us that they could take the devil out of us in just a little while, if we were in their hands.³⁵

In a town as heavily involved in slavery as Lynchburg—slaves composed forty percent of the town at the time of the census in 1860—slave brokers did most of the work, and as a consequence were often very wealthy.³⁶ In addition to wealth, however, most slave brokers held positions of prominence and authority within Lynchburg, despite—and possibly because of—their heavy involvement in an activity in which many did not wish to participate. Slave brokers

were some of the most well respected men in Lynchburg, revealing that most people in Lynchburg did not feel that involvement in the slave trade very much impacted one's character or social standing.

One such individual was William W. Norvell. In 1805, Lynchburg appointed Norvell as the city's court clerk.³⁷ As clerk, he notarized wills and estate appraisals, and also controlled many of the city's deeds and trusts. Norvell also held other leadership positions in the city and served on various committees. In 1811, the city appointed him to the "watering committee," a group of three individuals who first suggested the construction of a system of running water in Lynchburg.³⁸ Shortly after, in Lynchburg's first election, the people of Lynchburg chose Norvell to serve on the township council.³⁹ In addition, the city appointed Norvell to the committee responsible for the construction of a new market house; it appointed him as one of the directors of the exchange bank of Virginia, and he served on the board of Lynchburg's first free school.⁴⁰ One of the most significant roles assumed by Mr. Norvell was as one of the six men who led the procession mourning the deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams—a procession in which nearly the entire city of Lynchburg participated.⁴¹ Norvell would have been equally recognized as a slave trader and a prominent public official.

Similarly, slave broker Chiswell Dabney became very prominent in the city of Lynchburg. Not a full-time broker, Dabney also worked as one of Lynchburg's most distinguished attorneys; Dabney worked with slave broker James Garland to defend J.M. Jones against murder charges in 1828.⁴² Again associating with other Lynchburg slave brokers in significant positions, this time George Whitlocke and William Radford, Dabney served as a member of the collections and arrangements committee, responsible for securing an appropriation of money and a large tract of land to present as a gift to Revolutionary War hero

General Lafayette.⁴³ He served on the committee that established Lynchburg's first Protestant Episcopal church, acted as vice-president of the committee to organize Lynchburg's first public school system, and Samuel Miller, a multi-millionaire and one of the wealthiest men in Lynchburg, named Dabney one of the executors of his estate.⁴⁴ Dabney's involvement in slave sales did not deter the people of Lynchburg from entrusting him with positions of significant power and responsibility. In fact, Dabney may have achieved this prominence through the connections and reputation he established working in Lynchburg's slave trade.

Other slave traders also made important contributions to the city of Lynchburg, though few were as distinguished as William Norvell and Chiswell Dabney. The city appointed auctioneer Richard Pollard to the committee responsible for soliciting financial donations to assist the Greeks' struggle for liberty. Along with fellow slave trader Henry Langhorne and a number of other individuals, Pollard helped to organize a presentation of the play "The Rivals," and a ball at the Franklin Hotel to raise money for the cause.⁴⁵ Slave brokers George Whitlocke and John H. Tyree were important tobacconists, a profession seemingly ideal for a slave trader in Lynchburg because it put them in contact with a large number of slaves and Lynchburg residents.⁴⁶ A number of brokers, acted almost as land speculators--frequently purchasing, selling, and leasing pieces of land—a demonstration of their significant wealth. Ultimately, slave brokers seemed to have treated all property under their control similarly, regardless of whether selling land, manufactured goods, or human beings. Hence, their general abilities in trading probably contributed to the success of their occupation in Lynchburg's slave trade.

Later, during the twenty years prior to the start of the Civil War, slave brokers began to control more of the slave market in Lynchburg. As the nation expanded to the southwest, generally in an effort to expand the space available for the cultivation of cotton, the demand for

slaves increased considerably. This new market for slaves contributed greatly to the success of the Lynchburg slave market. To meet the continually growing need for labor, slave brokers in Lynchburg began to increase their efforts. Men like Henry Davis and M. Hart began to offer cash for slaves that they could sell for a better price later, in the Deep South.⁴⁷

One individual who assumed a role of particular importance during the final fifteen years of the slave trade in Lynchburg was Seth Woodruff, who recognized Lynchburg's need for an establishment that could board slaves. Slaveowners frequently sent many of the slaves bought in Lynchburg elsewhere in the country, and alternately, people also sent slaves to Lynchburg for others to sell. Given this situation, in 1852 Woodruff constructed a building on Lynch Street, between Ninth and Tenth Streets, to serve as a boarding house for slaves before their owners sent them to other parts of the country. Soon known as "Woodruff's Jail," this establishment was extremely popular among slave traders in Lynchburg until the beginning of the Civil War.⁴⁸

The slave market had a very large effect on the city of Lynchburg and the relationships of the people who lived there. Like other cities that played significant roles in the domestic slave trade, Lynchburg's slave market impacted the actions and thoughts of slave traders, slave owners, and the slaves themselves. Slave buyers would have discussed slave purchases with friends or strangers, as sales often occurred at social gatherings. Traders would have sought ways to maximize the success and profit of their sales, something that could have only been accomplished with a complete understanding of the city's market and the desires of the people purchasing the slaves. For most slaves, the fear of their owners selling them to another region of the country would have grown as the United States drew nearer to civil war, so they would have done anything within their means to avoid sale into an even less desirable situation.

The wealth and prominence of many Lynchburg slave traders and the visibility of slavery in Lynchburg also imply that, for the most part, most of the citizens considered slavery completely acceptable, but questioned the trade that sustained it. Slaveowners in Lynchburg frequently looked to third parties for slave trading, and no confusion existed in regard to which individuals played significant roles in the slave trade. The people of Lynchburg elected these slave brokers to city council and appointed them to committees that dealt with issues like education, public services, banking, religion, local government, and foreign affairs. People chose them to greet diplomats and prominent government officials and even trusted them with legal services. Slave traders in Lynchburg also lived as some of the city's wealthiest and most recognizable citizens and had the ability and means to impact its administration and development in significant ways. Not only did slave brokers live this way despite their involvement in the slave trade, but also the recognition and reputability which resulted from this involvement is likely to have directly contributed to their prominence in Lynchburg.

A person walking through the city would have found it nearly impossible not to witness some aspect of the slave trade: slaves would have been seen walking between the home of their master and the Franklin Hotel or Lynchburg Market; the voices of auctioneers would have been heard from within the Pollard Auction House or the Indian Queen Tavern; those merely walking by a slave sale or auction on the sidewalk may have been solicited by a trader; advertisements for sales would have been seen in the local newspaper, in addition to elsewhere around town. The people of Lynchburg's abdication of their involvement in the slave trade highlights their dislike and uneasiness towards it. On the other hand, their acceptance of the realities of slavery in their every day social interactions and their acceptance of slave brokers in positions of social

prominence indicate that Lynchburg, though harboring objections to direct participation in the slave trade, considered slavery an acceptable and legitimate aspect of life.

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