

Commodity Exchange Between Slaves and Free Whites in Virginia and Georgia in the 18th century

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Introduction

When examining eighteenth century economics historians overlook an important commodity exchange between slaves and free whites.[1]An examination of the trade between slaves and free whites in the eighteenth century Chesapeake and Georgia area reveals that slaves and free whites exchanged commodities more frequently than anticipated. This essay shows the importance of commodity exchange between these two groups. For free whites, the exchange provided access to specific goods at a reduced price. For slaves, the exchange provided not only a source of revenue, but more importantly it gave slave merchants some level of autonomy and independence in a dehumanizing system. Free whites paid in money or goods and in many cases chose to obtain specific goods from slaves rather than white merchants.

This essay focuses on trade between slaves and free whites in the Chesapeake and Georgia area during the eighteenth century, in particular the free whites' options of trading for goods like chickens, corn, rice, vegetables, honey, leather etc. with slaves. This topic is an important issue because it shows that despite their legal status as their masters' property, slaves did have access to money or possessions of their own to trade. It is also important to note that masters allowed their slaves to participate in trade because it suited their own interest.[2] Historians have analyzed documents of free whites trading with slaves,[3] laws written to keep slaves and free whites from trading,[4]and slaves' opinions on their rights to the goods of their labor.[5]

The thesis of this research is that slaves and free whites both achieved financial benefits from commodity exchange with one another. This served as a crucial component in their daily lives that enriched the experience of slaves and free whites. In this essay, I examine first the significance of livestock, corn, and other commodities exchanged between slaves and free whites. Secondly, I analyze the reasons why free whites traded with slaves. Third, I analyze how laws framed the exchange of goods between slaves and free whites. At what point did slaves and free whites openly ignore the legal code and why? In a final analysis, I also consider how trade in Georgia and the Chesapeake during the eighteenth century shaped racial relations between slaves and free whites.

To prove slaves and free whites both achieved financial benefits from commodity exchange with one another I use the primary sources of Charles Ball's *Fifty Years in Chains: The Life of an American Slave* as well as the *Historical Statics of the United States*, Volume 4, containing of the Acts of South Carolina from 1682 to 1838. My secondary sources include the use of the written works of Joseph Douglas Deal, Philip D. Morgan, Michael Mullin,

Mary Beth Norton, Carole Shammas, and Lorena S. Walsh. All of these sources will prove the point that slaves and free whites both achieved financial benefits from commodity exchange with one another. The primary sources (excluding Charles Ball, who was born a slave and was later freed and educated) generally represent a white perspective. Slaves' voices are accessible primarily through white records because of the laws that prohibited the literacy of slaves.

Significance in Commodities Exchanged

There were multiple items that slaves traded with free whites and they all had benefits. Masters permitted slaves to own and cultivate goods with the exception tobacco.[6] For example, chickens were a major commodity that slaves traded with free whites. In fact, slaves had a monopoly in the chicken industry. James Mercer states that, "Negroes ... are the general Chicken Merchants." [7] Norton also claims that, "Black women established themselves as the "general Chicken Merchants." [8] Shammas also describes slave women as being "chicken merchants" .[9] In fact, Mullin, Morgan, Norton, and Shammas all wrote explicitly about the slaves having a firm hold over the chicken industry. Chickens as a livestock were easier for the slaves to maintain because the chickens could eat the excess corn. As Morgan stated, "Chesapeake slaves not only raised chickens extensively but also dominated the poultry trade." [10] Slaves held the monopoly for poultry in the Chesapeake area and also in Georgia. Slaves attained knowledge of customs and average prices of goods and had an understanding of the worth of money. [11]

Rice and corn were important staples. Corn, being easy to grow and easy to cultivate was an important staple for slaves to exchange with others. While the Chesapeake slaves favored corn, Lowcountry and Southern slaves preferred rice. [12] Masters allowed their slaves to grow their own crops in their spare time. In fact, Thomas Jefferson said, "There is no other way of drawing a line between what is theirs and mine." [13] In 1781, when an overseer tried to take the slaves' corn, the slaves responded by almost killing him. [14] Morgan stated multiple times how whites traded with slaves for corn or rice showing that the two items were essential for colonial living. Masters marketed slave-grown rice for sale calling the rice "Negro Rice" . [15] In Georgia specifically an overseer purchased corn from slaves. [16]

While chickens, corn and rice held important significance, they were not the only items traded by slaves. Also recorded trade items include honey, leather, and vegetables. [17] Trade items varied by location. In the Chesapeake slave trade items could also include vegetables, milk, or fish. [18] The Lowcountry's

most popular exchanges consisted of fish, poultry, small livestock.[19] Unlike the Chesapeake, however, the Lowcountry did not stop trade at just edible goods. Lowcountry trade also included canoes and Spanish moss.[20]

Reasons to Trade

Whites traded with slaves for multiple reasons, the first being that food could be hard to come by. While whites might have viewed slaves in a negative way, a lack of food or provisions could force interactions between the two races. In the eighteenth century the population density in the colonies was high, which made the need to trade with slaves high also.[21] Having a large population meant that resources were harder to come by and that meant that there was a certain necessity to trade with slaves, since slaves had goods that otherwise may not have been accessible and traded them for a lower price. Goods owned and sold by white merchants were more costly for whites, so the ability to trade with slaves gave free whites a break in terms of their expenses.

As shown in Tables 1 and 2 below, Georgia and Virginia populations from 1750-1780 show a significant increase of population in the thirty years that it covers. Georgia’s population had an even larger increase between each decade than Virginia. Between 1760 and 1770 the population increased by 144.04% further emphasizing the need to trade with slaves. Virginia’s population, while significantly larger than Georgia’s, did not increase as drastically through the decades. Virginia’s population increased on average 31.82% per decade, while Georgia’s population increased on average 122.70% during the same time period. Table 2 also shows that there was a significant increase in both white and black populations during this time period. Maintaining supplies was a difficult task for all of the citizens when the population more than doubled in ten years in Georgia’s case. The population increase being substantial in both states made resources slimmer and would have driven prices up drastically. These reasons are prime examples documenting why it was important for free whites to participate in trading with slaves.

Table 1: Total Population in Virginia and Georgia Showing Population Increase Through Decades

Year	Virginia Total Population	Virginia Population Increase	Georgia Total Population	Georgia Population Increase
1750	236,681		5,200	
1760	339,726	43.54%	9,578	84.19%

1770	447,016	31.58%	23,375	144.04%
1780	538,004	20.35%	56,071	139.87%

Sources: Includes both black and white population. John J. McCusker. *Historical Statics of the United States*. **Table Eg1-59 – Population, by race and by colony or locality: 1610–1780.**

Table 2: Virginia and Georgia Populations of Whites and Blacks

Year	Virginia		Georgia	
	White	Black	White	Black
1750	129,581	107,100	4,200	1000
1760	199,156	140,570	6,000	3578
1770	259,411	187,605	12,750	10,625
1780	317,422	220,582	35,240	20,831

Source: Ibid.

Free whites also traded with slaves because it gave them the chance to acquire commodities that they previously did not have or did not want to raise themselves. For example, the wives of white planters would buy chickens so that they would not have to bother raising the poultry themselves.[22] Nathaniel Burwell’s household records “show the trade between Carter’s Grove slaves and others... with the plantation mistress in poultry, eggs, fish, and shellfish, fruits, and vegetables.”[23] Some free whites exchanged items that the slaves had no access to for other goods. One such instance is the allegation that George Fisher sold slaves rum.[24] Fisher also accused John Greenhow of “trafficking with Negroes in wine...”[25] Slaves also received monetary compensation in exchange for goods. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson may be the most notable people who paid slaves in exchange for goods. George Washington had to pay his own slave Juniper and his neighbor’s slaves for sweet potatoes when he ran out.[26] Thomas Jefferson had a ledger recording all of the payments he made to slaves for goods and even borrowed a “few coins” from his personal slaves Jupiter and Jamey.[27] Thomas Jefferson also said that slaves “earned from eighty to one hundred dollars a year this way. [28] Another person that recorded the transactions would be Nathaniel Burwell who “between 1775 and 1776 ... recorded cash transactions with thirty-four of his own bondsmen and women.”[29] Burwell also borrowed money from his slaves “Nelly, Old Nanny, and Billy to cover small, unexpected household purchases.”[30] This shows

that on multiple occasions slave owners recorded their own money transactions with slaves as well as being okay with borrowing some cash from their own slaves. The ability to pay slaves for goods was considered a win-win situation. Free whites could save money and spend very little for goods that they needed, while slaves received money so that they had a chance to buy goods at stores later or build their economic equity. In fact, slaves were so obsessed with trading that one Virginia master told his manager to “tell the overseer to keep the keys of the folks’ corn-house or else they will sell it, and starve themselves.”[31]

Laws Framing Exchange

Laws framed the exchange of goods between slaves and free whites by making the trade between the two races illegal.[32] However, having laws that prohibited trade between the two races did little good because people still traded with one another. For example, some masters in 1714 observed “peddlers and hawkers” selling rum, sugar, and other wares for the slaves’ pigs, chickens, and other goods.[33] Free whites overlooked the legal penalties for trade and focused on the benefits that they could achieve through the exchange of goods. Some free whites disregarded the law because the need outweighed the potential legal trouble. Poor free whites in particular might have ignored the law because they would not have been able to have enough food for their families otherwise. On the other hand, wealthy free whites traded with slaves for optional luxury items that they wanted, but not necessarily needed.

Free whites understood the repercussions of getting caught trading with slaves. If caught, they tended to shift the blame on to others. For example, George Fisher, who had allegedly sold slaves rum, averted blame onto Mayor John Holt and also accused John Greenhow of “trafficking with Negroes in wine...”[34] Fisher successfully averted blame away from himself and managed not to get into any trouble with all of the charges against him dismissed.

Conclusion

In this essay, I propose that slaves and free whites achieved financial benefits from commodity exchange with one another. My research shows that trade in Georgia and Chesapeake during the eighteenth century shaped racial relations between slaves and free whites by having the two races meet in an economic setting where trade, not racial issues or prejudices, was the focus. Not all free whites thought that trade with slaves was a good thing. In fact, some whites

believed that other free whites who traded with slaves were “ill disposed persons”.[35] However, free whites who were viewed with distain for trading with slaves were always poor. Rich white men who traded with slaves had no judgment placed upon them. For example, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington did not see their reputation tainted at all. The stigma of trading with slaves derived from the idea that only poor whites had to trade with slaves because they did not have the necessary money to buy goods from white vendors. In reality, however, free whites of all economic status traded with slaves because it was convenient.

My research also shows that livestock, corn, and other commodities held significance for trade between slaves and free whites. Trading for these goods was a way for free whites to make sure that they had the commodities that they wanted and or needed, for slaves it was a way to gain some economic independence. Morgan, Mullin, Norton, Shammas, and Walsh document this point by showing the monopoly that slaves had in chickens and other livestock.[36] The same can be said for corn and rice in particular, since slaves had a firm hold over these markets. The important thing to learn from this paper is that trading between slaves and free whites was an important element of the economy in eighteenth-century Georgia and Virginia. This shows that while there certainly were strict rules for slaves to follow, there was room within these rules for slaves to carve out some economic autonomy.

Works Cited

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Bibliography:

[1] This essay refers to blacks taken from Africa as "slaves" instead of "the enslaved" because all of the sources refer to them as so, and by referring them as such follows the sources.

[2] Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press), 358

[3] Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831*(Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press)

[4] Cooper and McCord, *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina ... vol. 4 containing Acts of South Carolina from 1682 to 1838 both inclusive*(Columbia, SC: A.S. Johnston)

[5] Charles Ball, *Fifty years in Chains: the life of an American slave*,(USA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform)

[6] Morgan,*Slave Counterpoint*, 360

[7] Ibid.

[8] Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*. 1st ed. 1980., 32

[9] Carole Shammas, "Black Women's Work and the Evolution of Plantation Society in Virginia." *Labor History* 26 (1985), 16

[10] Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 359

[11] Lorena S. Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community*. *Colonial Williamsburg Studies in Chesapeake History and Culture*. Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1997., 186

[12] Morgan,*Slave Counterpoint*,362

[13] Morgan,*Slave Counterpoint*,360, Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 32

[14]Morgan,*Slave Counterpoint*,368

[15] Morgan,*Slave Counterpoint*,363

[16] Ibid.

[17] Morgan,*Slave Counterpoint*, 360 &362

[18] Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831*(Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press), 139

[19] Morgan,*Slave Counterpoint*,361

[20] Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 362

[21]See Table 1

[22] Shammas, *Blacks Women's Work*, 16

[23] Walsh,*From Calabar to Carter's Grove*,185

- [24] Morgan,*Slave Counterpoint*, 369
- [25] Morgan,*Slave Counterpoint*,Ibid.
- [26] Morgan,*Slave Counterpoint*,360
- [27] Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831*(Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press), 150
- [28] Morgan,*Slave Counterpoint*,360
- [29] Walsh,*From Calabar to Carter's Grove*, Ibid.
- [30] Walsh,*From Calabar to Carters Grove*, Ibid.
- [31] J. Douglas Deal, *Race and Class in Colonial Virginia: Indians, Englishmen, and Africans on the Eastern Shore during the Seventeenth Century* pg. 181-182
- [32] Cooper and McCord, *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina ... vol. 4 containing Acts of South Carolina from 1682 to 1838 both inclusive*(Columbia, SC: A.S. Johnston), 395-396
- [33] Cooper and McCord, *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, Ibid.
- [34] Morgan,*Slave Counterpoint*,369
- [35] Morgan,*Slave Counterpoint*,366
- [36] Mullin, *Africa in America*, 359