Andrew Jackson: Chivalric Slave Master
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Contributors

Book Reviews

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1839 Andrew Jackson engaged in a surprising legal battle. During a Christmas party, several of his slaves were involved in a brawl that resulted in the death of a bondsman from another plantation. When the man’s owner pressed for an indictment, four of Jackson’s slaves were arrested and jailed in Nashville. On trial for a capital offense, the men would have suffered hanging if found guilty. Tennessee law stipulated free legal counsel for slaves, yet Jackson hired three top defense attorneys, placing himself in debt to raise the legal expenses. In going to such lengths, Jackson saved the lives of his bondsmen. Why would a slaveholder, let alone the iron-willed general, engage in such actions? Jackson certainly never questioned the morality of slavery. He firmly believed in the peculiar institution, he supported the institution’s constitutionality, and he had harsh words for those who attempted to incite revolt through abolitionist publications. The seventh president viewed slavery as a means of economic enrichment and a way to establish himself in the aristocratic planter class. Surprisingly, historians have engaged in little systematic investigation of Jackson as slaveholder, even though he owned upwards of one hundred and fifty slaves, making him one of the state’s largest slave owners. Archeologists have plumbed the depths of Jackson’s plantation, the Hermitage, to unearth the story of material conditions among the slaves. More than a dozen years of digs have revealed over a million artifacts, giving scholars an amazing albeit still limited understanding of plantation slave life.

The question of Jackson as slave master, however, remains unanswered. What kind of master was the indomitable Jackson? His notions of loyalty and duty, his legendary temper, and his willingness to punish those who crossed him make one wonder how slaves at the Hermitage fared. The question of Jackson as slave master is of particular interest considering a renewed study of American presidents and slavery, beginning with the founding fathers George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. A recent work on James K. Polk as slave master found that Young Hickory focused more on the economic self-interest of slavery than on questions of morality. Slavery on his plantation was often brutal and deadly. Polk’s will noted that he “hoped” for his slaves’ freedom, though this never occurred.

This recent research makes the question of Andrew Jackson as slaveholder all the more intriguing. He never achieved the degree of introspection that Jefferson and Washington entertained, nor did he consider emancipation. Jackson did join earlier slaveholding presidents in attracting the rumor that he fathered a mulatto child, though it does not appear that the charge surfaced during his lifetime. It remained a feature of oral history among Hermitage slave descendants and has yet to be confirmed.

The available evidence indicates that Jackson as slave master epitomizes the story of southern paternalism. Indeed, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, in their latest work, The Mind of the Master Class, recently included Jackson within a chapter entitled “Chivalric Slave Master.”

Historians have engaged in little systematic investigation of Andrew Jackson as slaveholder. What kind of master was the indomitable Jackson? Part of the answer lies in the accounts of his slaves such as Hannah and Aaron Jackson. (The Hermitage: Home of President Andrew Jackson, Nashville, TN)
Masters,” describing him as a “model,” and explaining the traits of such a master: “While managing the work of his slaves, supervising their lives, paying bills, and getting the crop out, he was simultaneously to be genteel, forbearing, and kind— but stern, even severe, when duty, dignity, and preservation of authority required.” Jackson epitomized such a master. Viewing Hermitage slaves as his black “family,” he expressed a degree of concern, made sure slaves had adequate medical attention, counseled overseers on good treatment, and exacted punishment only when “necessary.” Some of this can be explained in terms of economics and social control. As an asset, healthy slaves who were treated humanely worked harder, posed fewer problems, and were less apt to revolt. Within this framework all interactions between slaves and masters were about good business. The only reason a slaveholder might reveal feeling for a slave was to maximize profit and control. Yet the issue of good treatment also orbits the larger complexity of human bondage. The fact that the issue of good treatment also orbits the larger complexity of human bondage. The fact that a slave was to maximize profit and control was due to an inheritance from the father of his wife, Rachel Donelson Jackson. This number of slaves placed Jackson in the upper percentile of owners in Tennessee. Even by the 1850s the largest group of slave masters in the state held four or less slaves, and just under 70 percent owned less than ten. Jackson had not yet achieved the status of “planter,” which, according to one Tennessee historian, required thirty or more slaves. Records also indicate that during these early frontier years Jackson acquired and at times delivered slaves as commodities to settle debts and purchased slaves on behalf of friends. Slave owners separated this common practice from the occupation of “slave trader,” a position that was, with no irony, held in abhorrence. Even Jackson showed disgust for such men, denouncing Charles Dickinson, who Jackson killed in a duel, as one who made “a fortune off speculating on human flesh.” In later years Jackson too was charged by a political opponent with slave trading. The charge was true to the extent that on one occasion he acted as a silent partner in a transaction involving the sale of slaves, but untrue in the sense that he would not have fit the definition of the time as one who made his living from slave trading.

By 1804, Jackson experienced the same problem encountered by many slave owners: runaways. The remedy was posting an advertisement in local papers offering a reward and going a step further when he promised additional money for punishment. (The Hermitage: Home of President Andrew Jackson, Nashville, TN)
Though it is unclear if the sentence was carried out, advertising payment for punishment was brutal and inhumane; three hundred lashes were tantamount to a death sentence. Acts such as this are one reason that some historians believe Jackson to have been vengeful and mean spirited. Jackson, however, was hardly alone in reacting harshly to runaways. George Washington sentenced three of his slaves who had runaway to a virtual certain death on a West Indian sugar plantation. There is little question that Jackson advocated the punishment of slaves, but there exists no records that parallel the shocking nature of this 1804 advertisement.

In the same year, Jackson purchased a four hundred and twenty-acre parcel of land with two cabins that he named the Hermitage. In ensuing years he slowly added property until it reached some twelve hundred acres, built a new mansion, and ultimately owned upwards of one hundred and fifty slaves. Jackson's rise to the status of one of the largest slaveholders in Tennessee occurred steadily. A tax list for 1812 noted that he owned twenty taxable slaves, which meant that he may have had at least sixty-two slaves at the time. The tax list also indicates that there existed a large number of slave families at the Hermitage. Most entries include a male slave by first name, followed by "wife" and the number of children. From 1810 into the 1820s, a variety of correspondence about Jackson's slaves reveals the reliance upon coercive violence that characterized the peculiar institution. In two letters Jackson expressed personal concern for slaves. The first came in 1814 and is surprising not so much because of what Jackson said, but, rather, due to the circumstances in which he was writing. Camped in the middle of the southern frontier while battling the Creek Indians, Jackson wrote to his wife Rachel telling her of the campaign's many hardships, and briefly concluded, "I have only time to add that I should wish you to permit Fields [the overseer] to abuse clum. The general expressed similar sentiments in an 1823 letter, writing, "I do not wish my hands laboured too hard — and if you think they are, I know when you name it to him [the overseer] he will moderate—I wish them well fed, and warmly clothed and they will be contented & happy This is my wish—I do not want them in any way oppressed and if they behave well I am sure Mr Parsons knowing my wishes, will treat them well." One might conclude from such brief comments that the general was merely following accepted ideas about slavery economics and social control. This could certainly be accepted for the second letter, which remarks on the "contented & happy" slaves. The previous letter is more puzzling. Why did Jackson single out the welfare of one slave, and why did he do so in the midst of fighting on the southern frontier?

Clear answers are not easily found. The same is true regarding Jackson's views towards slave families. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the slave system, the separation of families was fairly common. Whether such sales were forced due to a slave owner's debts or the result of maximizing profits, the threat of sale always loomed and Jackson was no different than other slave owners in confronting these issues. Typically, Jackson was on the buying end of such transactions. In November 1819, for example, he made arrangements with James Houston to purchase the family of a Hermitage slave named Old Peter. Houston owned Peter's daughter, Betsy, who was about twenty-years old, her three children ages four, five, and six, and Peter's son, Bob, who was about eighteen. Jackson agreed to purchase the entire family for $1,800, and although Houston felt the price low, he agreed "for the sake of accomodating [sic] the family." In this case it may very well have been that Jackson saw an economic opportunity to acquire a number of slaves for below market value and that it was actually Houston who deserves credit for maintaining the family. Yet it is not unfair to surmise that Jackson also looked to their welfare, making specific arrangements to purchase the children and grandchildren of a slave he already owned. Circumstances such as this potentially merge the pecuniary and human motivations of slave owners.

On another occasion, Jackson again purchased a slave in an apparent attempt to accommodate a slave he already owned. During the Indian campaigns of 1813, Jackson captured a runaway slave named Polydore from St. Augustine, and placed him in army service until arrangements could be made for his return. For some reason this took several years and during the interim Polydore married one of Jackson's slaves, Sally. Rather than separate them, Jackson pur chased Polydore in 1822 for $500.19 Such a price remained within market value, thus the only economic incentive for Jackson was the possible production of slave offspring. Although this certainly may have been a consideration, it is also likely that Jackson made his decision based on the desires of the slaves in question, as evidence in another case indicates.

In 1830, now President Jackson learned of a domestic disturbance between two of his slaves, Charles and Charlotte. Charlotte had approached Robert J. Chester, Jackson's nephew through marriage, and requested that Chester purchase her. Jackson wrote Chester to make the arrangements, explaining, "I bought her [Charlotte] being the wife of Charles at his request," but noted "he appears now desirous that she with her children be sold. I have therefore come to the resolution to part with her." Jackson sold Charlotte and her three children for $800, and the evidence indicates that he was motivated, in both the purchase and sale of Charlotte, directly in relation to her and

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Jackson on occasion made significant efforts to keep families together. His daughter-in-law Sarah Yorke Jackson (here circa 1833) asked Jackson to purchase Gracey while they were in the White House. Jackson purchased not only Gracey but her two sisters, a brother, and their mother. (The Hermitage: Home of President Andrew Jackson, Nashville, TN)

Jackson's desires. Jackson wrote that Charlotte's sale would leave him short-handed, but concluded, "I think I have placed Charlotte and her children as low as they could be bought now here…but I do so that she may be contented.”

On another occasion President Jackson was again disposed towards maintaining a slave family. Sarah Yorke Jackson, the president's daughter-in-law and acting first lady, was approached by a free black woman who worked as the White House pastry chef. She explained that her sister Gracey was owned by a Colonel Hebb of Virginia who, experiencing financial difficulty, was forced to sell his slaves and encouraged them to suggest

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potential owners. Sarah Jackson met with Gracey and later approached the president to request that she be purchased as a seamstress and personal maid. Jackson purchased not only Gracey, but all of her relatives owned by Hebb, which included two sisters, a brother, and their mother. It is unclear how much Jackson paid for the family; moreover, the story comes from a less than critical source. Still, such a humanitarian purchase is possible considering Jackson’s other attempts to preserve slave families. Even a former slave, Hannah, when interviewed in 1880, commented on Jackson’s unwillingness to split families, noting, “they used to pick us up and sell us in those days, even little children not higher than your cane; but old master never did.”

One might dismiss Jackson’s consideration of slave families as little more than another attempt at social control — the idea that “contented & happy” slaves produced more and caused less trouble. It is difficult to accept this factor as the only basis because doing so denies the possibility that slaves and masters managed to forge a relationship, no matter how unequal, in which slaves could request and masters grant certain accommodations. If Jackson did provide his slaves with such accommodations, whether solely as social control or as mild acts of humanity towards his slave “family,” he also engaged the more draconian measures of plantation rule. Often away from home due to military or political duty, Jackson nevertheless remained updated on the Hermitage.

In 1814, Rachel Jackson complained that she was having “a great Deal of trouble with” some of the slaves. In the early 1820s, while serving as governor of the Florida territory, Jackson learned that Rachel’s maid, Betty, was “putting on airs, and been guilty of a great deal of impudence.” Jackson thus instructed his overseer that “the first impertinence she uses, or the first disobedience of orders, that she be publicly whipped.” The overseer is “to take her to the public whipping post and give her fifty lashes, and that she may save herself of this disgrace you may assure her of her danger, for I have ordered and am determined that she shall in all things behave herself well or receive exemplary punishment. It is humiliating to me to have to resort to this.... I am determined to cure her.” In another letter, Jackson again demanded that Betty and all of his slaves behave, noting that the overseer “must use the cowhide whenever any of them depart from proper conduct.”

In 1821, Rachel Jackson complained to her husband that her maid Betty was guilty of impudence while the family was staying in Pensacola. Jackson ordered that Betty be publicly whipped if she continued the impertinence. Many years later she posed with her great-grandchildren. (The Hermitage: Home of President Andrew Jackson, Nashville, TN)
ent when Jackson arrived and the Indian agent was later removed from his post. Jackson's actions fit neatly into his larger conception of social hierarchy and the belief that Dinsmore had overstepped his station.30

Numerous examples of Jackson's views regarding hierarchy and duty abound within his role as military commander. Jackson had soldiers arrested, court martialed, punished, and even executed for failure to obey orders, impudence towards officers, mutiny and desertion. One of the most extreme instances was the execution of a militiaman named John Woods for mutiny, disobedience of orders, and disrespect to a commanding officer. Writing of the matter in a similar tone to that of punishing his slave, Betty, Jackson insisted on "order & subordination.…observed with the most punctilious exactness," noted Wood's "disobedience to orders," and though the general "may deplore your unhappy situation," "punishment" must be carried out. Even Jackson's military aide John Reid described the general's feelings about his decision as "painful" but "essential to the preservation of good order."31 Thus Jackson's expectations and demands for obedience and control were not tied to slavery alone. He held the same views towards whites, especially soldiers, who failed to remain within carefully proscribed duties. Additional similarities exist regarding Jackson's sense of paternalism; consider how he applied fatherly, albeit condescendingly protective, views to Native Americans and even some South Carolinians in the midst of the Nullification Crisis.32

One aspect of Jackson's belief in duty involved remaining at one's post. Whether it was soldiers who deserted or a slave who ran away, the iron-willed general bristled at disloyalty. Clearly, service in the military was hardly akin to the per

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One aspect of Jackson's belief in duty involved remaining at one's post. Whether it was soldiers who deserted or a slave who ran away, the iron-willed general bristled at disloyalty. Clearly, service in the military was hardly akin to the perpetuity and subservience of slavery, yet Jackson viewed the duty of each on similar terms. And to be sure, he was faced with runaways on numerous occasions. In 1822, seven slaves ran away from Jackson's Alabama plantation, Big Spring. Four of the slaves ran away at the same time and Jackson lamented that his corn crop would be poor as a result. In a letter to his nephew, Andrew Jackson Donelson, the general related, "[I] was fortunate in regaining my negroes, and although I hate chains, was compelled to place two of them in irons, for safe-keeping until an opportunity offers to sell or exchange them."33

One of the Big Springs slaves who caused Jackson considerable trouble was Gilbert, who ran away on at least three occasions. The first was in April 1822. Writing from the Hermitage, Jackson penned a letter to overseer Egbert Harris requesting that notice of the escape be posted in the Florence Gazette. The general added, "If he can be got, I wish him well secured with irons, until an opportunity may offer to send him down the river, as I will not keep a negro in the habit of running away." Jackson's statement was apparently bluster, for Gilbert was recaptured and, along with other slaves, moved to the Hermitage in late 1822 or early 1823.34

Gilbert found the conditions in Tennessee no more hospitable than in Alabama and made another unsuccessful escape in 1824, and again in 1827.35 On the run for some two months during the final attempt, he was once again captured and returned. This time, however, actions followed resulting in Gilbert's death, a criminal investigation, and some testifying actions on Jackson's part. Tired of such misbehavior Jackson apparently considered having Gilbert whipped but instead opted to sell him. This information comes from an affidavit in which overseer Iza Walton swore "on all previous occasions Gen. Jackson had forgiven him [Gilbert] for all these offences, without chastisement, upon his promises of better behaviour, which so far from reforming him, had made him much worse and more difficult to be controlled." Walton disagreed with Jackson's decision, explaining, "I gave as my opinion, that this would not do, for several of his negroes had been injured by indulgence, and that if some example were not made I could not control them—that Gilbert was...
the boy succeeded in passing the dirk to Walton, who thrust it into Gilbert's back. Walton then attempted to make several additional stabs but found that the dirk was nearly bent over. He managed to pull a smaller knife from his pocket and explained, "I then threw my arm around his neck and tried to cut the great artery; and, without touching it, did cut a deep gash in the back and side of his neck," Walton testified that Gilbert rose, walked a distance, "gave me a most horrible look," and then lay down. Upon learning of the incident, Jackson ordered Walton to summon the physician and though the overseer said it would do no good, was told by the general, "whilst life remains there is hope." Dr. Miles McCorkle arrived shortly thereafter, but Gilbert died from his wounds."36

On the same day the death occurred, August 28, Jackson contacted William Faulkner, a justice of the peace for Davidson County, and requested a coroner's inquest. A seven member jury was quickly assembled, several of whom were Jackson's relatives by marriage, and the matter was ruled self-defense by the jury after testimony from Walton, the inspection of numerous bruises on his body, and corroborations from the slave boy who witnessed the battle. Jackson nevertheless remained concerned. Walton was summarily dismissed as overseer and, as required by state law in order for the case to move forward.40

Hays replied the next day, suggesting that Jackson seek an indictment of murder against Walton: "My opinion is, from the full consideration of the evidence, that there exists a considerable doubt as to the absolute necessity of killing the slave Gilbert, at the time that he received the mortal blow." Hays believed that Gilbert was stabbed in the back whilst running" and that his hands remained tied. "I have no hesitation in saying," continued Hays, "that I think public justice, as well as your duty as a master and guardian of your slaves, requires that you should have Mr. Walton before the circuit court to answer a bill of indictment for the death of Gilbert." Jackson subsequently signed a bill to indict Walton for murder, but a grand jury returned a verdict of "Not a True Bill" and Walton was released from further prosecution."

It might seem odd that the district attorney and Jackson engaged in such strict legal proceedings in the case of a slave. Slaves were, after all, property with severely restricted rights in a whites-dominated society. Yet histories of southern courts insist that both slaves and free blacks were accorded a rather striking degree of formality and fairness. Still, the key to the grand jury hearing was Jackson. He could have let the matter rest with the coroner's inquest, but instead chose to pursue the matter by signing a bill of indictment as required by law in order for the case to move forward.41

The question is why did Jackson execute the indictment? There are numerous possible answers. As the district attorney noted, Jackson had a "duty" as "master and guardian" to protect his slaves' rights. This was another institutional paradox. At the same time that masters could steal a slave's freedom, force service, and utilize barbarous methods to exact obedience, the slave system's paternalism necessitated certain guidelines, including protection from murder. It is also possible that Jackson indicted Walton as a means of maintaining social control among his slaves, showing that they would be protected from vengeful overseers. Jackson may also have had a more calculating, political motivation. Since his loss due to the alleged Corrupt Bargain during the 1824 election, Jackson had worked feverishly in preparation for the 1828 contest. With every scrap of intrigue capitalized on by opponents, Jackson may have thought it prudent to treat Gilbert's death very carefully. As it turned out, Andrew Erwin published an article in the National Banner and Nashville Whig in August 1828 entitled "Gen. Jackson's Negro Speculation, and His Traffic in Human Flesh..." in which he discussed Gilbert's death. The Nashville Republican quickly came to the general's defense, but the knowledge that exactly this type of polemics could feed from Jackson's treatment of slaves may have convinced him to proceed with caution.

There is also the possibility that Jackson was genuinely troubled by Gilbert's death. As subsequent letters and a later judicial proceeding reveal, Jackson expressed what some would view as genuine concern for the treatment and rights of his slaves. A member of his Hermitage family had died under horrid circumstances and, at the very least, Jackson wanted to ensure that such occurrences would not happen again or go unpunished. He fired Walton and pursued judicial proceedings. It is also not beyond the realm of reason that a component of all the aforementioned motivations spurred Jackson to action, but it does seem clear from correspondence in the aftermath of Gilbert's death that Jackson was affected by what had happened.

Finding a responsible overseer was always a problem and became even more of a concern once Gilbert died and Jackson left the Hermitage to serve as president. In June 1829 he wrote his brother-in-law John Donelson, Jr., requesting that the new overseer, Graves Steel, write often about the stock at the plantation "and of the health of my negroes. I learn old Ned and Jack are both dead. Jack was a fine boy, but if he was well attended to, I lament not, he has gone the way of the earth."37 Subsequent letters the next month revealed a deeper concern over the death of another slave, Jim. "I pray you my son," Jackson wrote to Andrew Jackson, Jr., "to examine minutely into this matter, and if the death was produced by the cruelty of Mr. Steel, have him forthwith discharged....My negroes shall be treated humanely. When I employed Mr. Steel, I charged him upon this subject, and had expressed in our agreement that he was to treat them with great humanity. feed and cloath them well, and work them in moderation, if he has deviated from this rule, he must be discharged." Jackson continued:
This letter is the longest to date in which Jackson wrote about the treatment of Hermitage slaves. There is clearly a tone of urgency and apprehension for the welfare of his "family." Jackson also revealed his continued distress by eliciting information from friends who visited the plantation. Only two weeks after sending the first letter to his son, Jackson penned another and advised Andrew, Jr., to look into Steel's conduct:

I have recd. since you left me a letter from Col Charles J Love informing me of my negro man James death. I was fearful that his death might have been produced by the illtreatment of the overseer and wrote you immediately on the subject to enter upon an enquiry and if you found it did, to remove him. This letter you will have recd. before this reaches you, and as I have received another letter from Col Love which speaks of Mr Steel in warm terms, I wish you to consult with him and Dr. Hogg upon this subject. I hope Mr. Steel will treat my negroes with humanity as I have requested him. I have confidence in him, have no wish to remove him, if he will only treat my slaves with humanity.40

Andrew, Jr., did as his father requested and found no cause for concern. A relieved Jackson expressed satisfaction that the overseer "has treated my negroes humanely. So long as he treats my negroes well, I have no wish to remove him." Jackson continued, "The death of Jim was a mortifying circumstance to me, and if it had proceeded from the cruel treatment of the overseer, he must have been discharged." Though Jackson seemed pacified regarding Steel, he by no means forgot the matter of treating his slaves, as he continued to put it, with "humanity." In November he penned a letter to Steel explaining that the overseer was accountable for all neglect that resulted in losses at the plantation, both in stock and negroes. Jackson noted that he was renewing Steel's contract "on the express conditions that you treat my negroes with humanity, and attention when sick; and not work them too hard, when well—that you feed and cloath them well." Fixated on the slaves' proper treatment, Jackson then wrote another letter, this time to his friend Charles Love, imploring him to keep watch over Steel. "I will turn him away unless he pays more attention to their health, by sending for Doctor Hogg in due time after they are taken sick, and my Dr Sir I authorize you to assure him of this fact." Love did as Jackson requested, writing, "at first he [Steel] was somewhat offended with me, I told him I should do my duty and he must go agreeably to your Orders." As these various letters reveal, it seems that Jackson looked to the welfare of his slaves with a new urgency in the aftermath of Gilbert's death. Far from the Hermitage, the president experienced anxiety over the slaves' well-being and was ready at an instant to dismiss Steel. One might conclude that Jackson's motives were mainly economic, but the tone of the letters and Jackson's recurrent theme of "humanity" points to more than a purely business interest.

While in Washington serving as president, Jackson continued the practice of slavery. Gracey and her sister Louisa remained in the nation's capital to serve Sarah Jackson. Another slave, Charles, was greatly favored by Jackson and served as the president's carriage driver as early as 1814. Jackson also had great affection for George, who served as a personal servant. Jackson's granddaughter Rachel noted that George always slept in the general's room. When Jackson was reinvigorating his national political career in 1823 as a senator in preparation for the 1824 presidential race, he realized that George needed to look the part of servant to a future president and requested a tailor named Martin to clothe George accordingly. For Jackson, there also existed a significant level of trust for Charles, George, and at least one other slave named John Fulton. All three served as couriers for Jackson and had a significant degree of autonomy in traveling. George periodically journeyed alone from Washington to the Hermitage.41

Although busy with presidential duties, Jackson continued to thirst for news of his farm while in office. In 1833, his new overseer Burnard Hotzclaw informed the president, "I Git alongue With you Negrows Verer will indeede," and Jackson hoped that the overall conditions at the Hermitage would steadily improve. His nephew Andrew Jackson Donelson reported shortly thereafter, "I found your farm in excellent order and well superintended, Your manager a good one, although several of the negroes complain of great severity, which mr [sic] William Donelson and Stockly [Donelson] says is not the case."42

Since I left home I have lost three of my family. Old Ned, I expected to die, but I am fearful the death of Jack, and Jim, has been produced by exposure and bad treatment. Your Uncle John Donelson writes, that Steel has ruled with a rod of iron. This is so inconsistent to what I expected, that I cannot bear the inhumanity that he has exercised towards my poor negroes, contrary to his promise and has impaired my confidence in him. Unless he changes his conduct, dismiss him, and employ another.43

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In the spring of 1833, Jackson was faced with the death of more slaves. Writing to his nephew Andrew Jackson Hutchings, the president noted, "I sincerely regret the loss of the two Sampson's, as I do the rest, but where it does not arise from neglect, or inhumanity, but from the will of our creator...I submit to it, with an humble resigna-

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McCorckle, who informed Jackson, “there has been more sickness among them [the slaves] for some months, than usual. The cause I can not well imagine.” McCorckle went on to explain the symptoms, noting that Titus had died from what presented as cholera. “I was with him until he died,” reported the doctor, “but our efforts were in vain.” The doctor added that the other slaves were recuperating, claiming, “I think I have been unremitting in my attention.” Finally, McCorckle stated that Hotzclaw was doing a good job: “I think that the Negroes are becoming quite reconciled, and he tells me he finds no difficulty with them, having rarely to chastise.”

Shortly after hearing from McCorckle, Jackson received a lengthy letter from his old friend William B. Lewis, who provided a detailed account of conditions at the Hermitage. He spoke with the overseer about the death of the slaves and informed Jackson of the situation:

I have heard at Nashville that Mr. Hotzclaw was very severe with the negroes, but from my own observation and what the negroes themselves told me while there I think, probably, he is not more so than is necessary. Where there are so many negroes, there must be a pretty rigid police. I told him what I had heard of his severity; but hoped he had given no foundation for such reports about him. I added that you knew the necessity of keeping order on the place and among the negroes, but that I was sure that you did not wish, nor would you permit, your negroes, knowingly, to be treated with cruelty. I hoped therefore that he would not use towards them any unnecessary severity. I assured him that he had not, and would not.

Jackson was gratified by the news, explaining he had experienced “great anxiety and pain” from the rumors of Hotzclaw’s severity. “He has promised me to treat them with kindness and humanity so far as their conduct would permit,” wrote Jackson, “holding them to strict subordination.” Your letter with one just rec’d. from Doctor McCorckle, has relieved me from those apprehensions of cruelty to the negroes.

Jackson also asked Lewis to arrange special medical accommodations for a slave named Hanna, the daughter of Sally, who had injured her hip and needed treatment from Dr. Hogg. The president expressed concern that Betty, the Hermitage cook, had been the source of the injury and requested Lewis to speak to Hotzclaw about her:

I will thank you to say to the overseer to prevent Betty from beating, or cruelly abusing the little negroes, that are under her about the kitchen. A small switch ought to be used, but some times she uses any weapon she can get, and chokes and abuses them, and brings on disease. Give such directions about the negro girl [Hanna], as tho she was your own, and if convenient please visit the Hermitage again before you set out on your return….”

These various letters reveal both the cruelty of the slave system and a seemingly sincere concern for the treatment of Jackson’s slaves. On the one hand, the very idea that a “rigid police” was necessary and permissible, and that Jackson condoned “strict subordination” is anathema to contemporary sensibilities. At the same time, Jackson thirsted for news of his plantation’s and slaves’ prosperity. Away from the Hermitage for long stretches of time, Jackson could rely only on the news from friends and family to ensure that his property, including slaves, was well managed. Although one might be inclined to dismiss Jackson’s desire for “ humane” treatment solely as the words of a business man protecting assets, it is also clear that he was concerned for his slaves’ well-being and human rights. Following Gilbert’s death, Jackson’s commitment to his slaves’ well being can also be seen in a case involving four of his slaves in 1838. As Jackson explained the story, some forty to one hundred slaves had gathered at what may have been a Christmas party. A fight broke out that left one slave dead and four of Jackson’s slaves charged with murder. Jackson went to great effort in their defense. (“The Christmas Week,” Library of Congress)

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state. One sketch of his career noted, “There have been great criminal lawyers in Tennessee, but few have been as equal as his.” The Ewing brothers, who were also partners in the law, held equally impressive credentials. Edwin was noted as “a hard-working, energetic, brilliant lawyer; an untiring investigator, leaving nothing unturned.” Andrew was considered “a speaker of great persuasiveness and force…and was an excellent case lawyer.” “No name in Tennessee,” declared one author, “shines with a more steady radiance than that of the Ewing family.”

With his team in place, Jackson traveled to Nashville to observe the trials. For some reason George was tried separately, in The State vs. George (a man of colour), and appeared only before a grand jury that determined that the indictment was “not a true bill” and ordered “the said defendant to be discharged.” The other three slaves appeared in court on Monday, January 28, 1839, in Alfred, Jacob, & Squire versus the State; men of colour. Indictment for the murder of Frank. Also present were the attorney general, Jackson’s lawyers, and the Honorable James Rucks, judge of the sixth circuit. During this initial court date the three were arraigned, pled “not guilty,” and a jury of twelve was chosen and sworn. As owner, Jackson had the legal right to challenge a number of the jurors during the voir dire, but most certainly left his concerns to his lawyers. Over the next five days jurors heard testimony and lawyers’ arguments. At the end of each court day the defendants were remanded to the county sheriff and the jury sequestered. Finally, on Saturday, February 2, the attorney general and defense attorneys closed their arguments and turned the matter over to the jury, who, after deliberating, “on their oath do say the Defendants are not guilty.”

Alfred, Jacob, and Squire’s defense did not come cheap. John Spencer Basset, editor of Jackson’s correspondence, related a rumor that Jackson spent some $1,500 to save his slaves from their arguments and turned the matter over to the jury sequestered. Finally, on Saturday, February 2, the defendants were remanded to the county sheriff and the jury sequestered. Finally, on Saturday, February 2, the attorney general and defense attorneys closed their arguments and turned the matter over to the jury, who, after deliberating, “on their oath do say the Defendants are not guilty.”

The court case occurred during Jackson’s retirement at the Hermitage. He had come home in 1837 after serving two presidential terms.
owners made such attempts at social stratification, archaeologists believe that slaves refused to abide by such notions of social interaction, engaging instead in considerable activity among all “classes” on the plantation.63

Evidence in and around the various slave quarters reveals that the occupants created a life of their own in addition to the one dictated by master and overseer. There exist clearly defined yard spaces signified by hard-packed surfaces, fence lines, and, in one area, a definite back yard. As archeologist Larry McKee put it, these areas are “evidence of the kind of minor but pervasive alterations made by residents to their assigned living areas.”64 In some small way, these additions made the quarters a home. This is where life away from work was spent. Evidence exists of an outdoor cooking area, tobacco pipes, writing slates and slate pencils, eyeglass lenses, gaming pieces made from shards of European pottery, playing dice, stone and clay marbles, some marked with an “x,” as well as china dolls, at least one of which was black. All of this reveals evidence of leisure and play, social activities that were essential to life. There were also, of course, gatherings with slaves from other plantations.65 The Christmas party at which the fight occurred is one example. Slaves also celebrated marriages, though they were not state sanctioned and could be broken on the whim of an owner who sold a spouse. Tax records reveal that many Hermitage slaves were married and had large families. One union in particular was apparently celebrated by both blacks and whites. When Sarah Jackson returned from Washington in early 1837, she brought Gracey, the slave purchased from Colonel Hebb. Alfred, who had been born on the plantation and was the son of Betty the cook, met Gracey and by the fall of that year married her. One account related that Mrs. Jackson “took the greatest interest in the affair. She had the couple stand in the large hall [at the Hermitage] while they were married and gave them a fine wedding supper. These two favorite servants were given a cabin near the house. They reared a family and lived an exemplary married life for over fifty years.”66 Though the source from which this story is derived is not particularly critical, the actual information was gleaned from Alfred himself who lived his entire life at the Hermitage and gave tours of the property long after Jackson’s heirs had left.

In addition to these many social outlets slaves were also active in their own forms of spirituality, many of which may have been influenced by African customs. Numerous items have been found that lead to such conclusions, including three small brass fist-shaped amulets, pierced coins made into medallions, quartz crystals, and numerous glass beads that indicate cultural continuity with West Africa. Archeologists have also found a single polished raccoon openis bone that may have been used as an amulet. Such finds reveal that slaves created their own sense of place. There is also evidence that slaves could choose their own religion. In Hannah’s reminiscence she notes that the Hermitage church was Presbyterian, but she and Alfred were Baptists.67 Hermitage slaves also owned considerable amounts of what might be considered fine goods, including bone handled cutlery and combs, ceramic earthenware vessels made in England, porcelain serving vessels, tea cups, and fancy glass tableware. House slaves had these items in greater quantity than field slaves, but both groups possessed them. There is some speculation regarding how slaves acquired such things. Some were undoubtedly passed down from the main house, but archeologists surmise that slave trade networks stretching across the south may have existed.68 Another possibility is that slaves who had a greater degree of autonomy, couriers such as George, Charles, and John Fulton had the ability to trade or purchase various goods. There is no doubt that slaves had some money to engage in such transactions. A Hermitage farm journal from 1829 notes that some slaves were paid for extra work and excavations have found a considerable number of coins in and around slave quarters.69
Slaves on Jackson’s plantation were also active in supplementing their diets. The main fare included pork and cornmeal, but archeological digs have revealed significant quantities of varying animal remains, including fish, turtle, raccoon, possum, turkey, chicken, goose, and deer. A number of slaves were evidently allowed to possess firearms and to hunt. The remains of various gun parts, lead shot, flints, and even one bullet mold have been unearthed. Tennessee law allowed that, “at the request of the master, the county courts permitted one slave on each plantation to hunt with a gun.” Enough gun parts have been found at the Hermitage to indicate that more than one slave may have possessed a firearm. One question is whether these were guns given to slaves or hidden by them. With so many slaves in residence on the plantation it would have been virtually impossible to police them at all times. Yet by the same token, it is doubtful that even semi-frequent gunfire would have been missed. Property lines and poaching were serious matters and anyone hunting on the plantation without permission would have been noticed.

Perhaps the find that has most intrigued archeologists are the root cellars found in every slave house. Ostensibly used for storage, they may also have been used to hide certain items, hence the nick-name “hidey-hole.” Each has a different design. Some are single chambered and some lined with brick or stone. They are particularly interesting because they are not original to the design of the slave quarters. Rather, they were the slaves’ creations. Archeologists theorize that the root cellars represented the ability of slaves to have some sort of control in an otherwise controlled existence. Larry McKee offers, “Beneath their facades, the cabins hid evidence of less regimented lives, conducted in near secret. The most direct gateway to those secret lives was found under each cabin floor.” These were “places for items that had to be kept hidden from master and overseer.” Though such a theory is possible, the degree to which these were truly “hidden” areas is debatable. McKee acknowledges in another article: “The near constant presence of the cellars suggests that Jackson was aware of these additions, and probably gave at least indirect approval if not outright encouragement for the construction of these utilitarian storage facilities.” As with the use of firearms, there were so many slaves living on the plantation that as long as nothing was overtly amiss there was most likely no special reason for ransacking a slave’s home in search of hidden contraband. Moreover, archeologists have documented the existence of root cellars at numerous white owned sites.

The documentary and archeological evidence indicates that the Hermitage was a bustling, diverse place. It had to be in order to sustain the sizable population, both white and black, that depended upon its resources. Jackson expected the plantation to supply the inhabitants’ material needs and reap a profit as well. And though Jackson suffered financial difficulties throughout his life, this was due to absorbing his adopted son’s debts rather than failed management at the Hermitage.” Jackson’s numerous letters regarding the plantation make clear that he observed the happenings with great care; this included business dealings and the welfare of slaves. Indeed, the two were often intertwined.

The death of Alfred, who had lived on at the Hermitage, occurred on June 8, 1845, his interaction with Hermitage residents depicted the larger complexity that existed in a slave society. The general called his black and white family to his bedside, and with his servant George holding the pillows behind Jackson’s head, he croaked, “God will take care of you for me. I am my God’s. I belong to him, I go but a short time before you, and I want to meet you all in heaven, both white & black.” Hannah remembered, “The doctor said to Mistus Sarah to send the servants out of the room; but we refused to go. One of the servants went on so cryin’ and lamentin’ she had to be carried out of the room….The darkies could not be driven out. Our master, our father was gone. We looked upon him as though we had as much right there as Master Andrew.” At Jackson’s funeral, just two days later, a visitor noted “that there was a thing that struck me very forcibly; he has always been charged with being tyrannical; but if the evidence of his slaves is testimony to the contrary, I am a witness that there was sorrow universal, among what I suppose must have been seventy or eighty slaves.” The funeral-goer continued, “You would see them standing around the Hermitage in groups of fifteen to twenty, (dressed in their Sunday dress,) in silent grief, the tears falling down their dark faces. The house servants were immediately around the foot of the coffin, and when the reverend Mr. Edgar motioned towards them ‘there was one gush of grief’ from the slaves.

The emotion displayed on the part of Jackson’s slaves epitomized the paternal, contradictory nature of slavery. Referring to the general as “father,” Hannah revealed both the commanding and familial role that Jackson embodied among the slaves. At the same time that slaves wept for the general’s loss, they may have been weeping for the uncertainty that his death represented. Jackson did not emancipate a single slave and with the economic turmoil at the plantation slaves may very well have been crying at the possibility of being sold to satisfy debts. One Whig newspaper put the point quite clearly: “Jackson did not emancipate a single slave, and we presume they [the slaves] would have felt less grief if their free papers had been presented to them on the occasion.” Yet whistleblowing Hannah’s comments and the reactions of other slaves down to a single motivation removes the larger complexity of slave/master relationships. Hannah had been with Jackson since the age of eight and remained on the Hermitage property until mid-way through the Civil War. Giving her reminiscences in 1880 at the age of eighty-nine, she commented not only on the general’s death but on her childhood memories and the time that Jackson bought her a new red dress. With such a long history on the plantation, indeed her entire life and the lives of many other slaves had been spent there, it is virtually impossible to believe that she and others felt no sense of belonging or affection for Jackson, and he for them. This is not to deny that power roles were wholly lopsided in favor of the master, but much the way that slaves negotiated the material surrogate, degree of autonomy, they appear to have done the same in relating with Jackson. This is shown minimally by Jackson’s willingness to abide by his slaves’ desires in relation to marriage.

There is no denying that Jackson embraced slavery as a moral institution, that he profited from it, and, at times, that he maintained control through barbaric measures. He had no qualms about maintaining order with the “cowhide.” Moreover, his orders to cure Gilbert of running away resulted in that slave’s death. This fact, along with Jackson’s orders to whip Betty, as well as the 1804 runaway advertisement, are all indicative of a brutal, inhumane system of bondage. Yet combined with this brutality, there also existed a paradoxical paternalism. Jackson’s letters indicate that he was unquestionably affected by Gilbert’s death and from that point on attempted to ensure that Hermitage slaves were treated with “humanity.” Jackson’s attempts to keep slave families together, his willingness to act on the requests of slaves, and perhaps most surprisingly, his defense of the slaves in a criminal proceeding, all indicate that slavery was more to Jackson than a pecuniary, labor related matter. There existed between Jackson and his slaves a rather complex, but very real relationship marked by a give and take on both sides.

To be sure, Jackson and all slave holders took more than they gave. A slave’s freedom was something that could not be replaced by any measure of material comfort or paternal care. This is obvious by the sheer fact that slaves ran away. The thirst for liberty is also emphasized by the comments of Alfred, who had lived on at the Hermitage his entire life and was, perhaps more than any other slave, treated with special con-
In 1880, Hannah Jackson spoke fondly of Jackson as a master and described the grief the slaves felt at his death in 1845. Nevertheless, she chose to escape to freedom in 1863. Alfred summed up the experience of Jackson’s slaves when he asked an interviewer, “How would you like to be a slave?” (The Hermitage: Home of President Andrew Jackson, Nashville, TN)

sideration and privilege. Speaking to the family tutor in the 1840s after the president’s death, Alfred responded to a comment that he did not have it so badly and that freedom too had its burdens: “How would you like to be a slave?” he responded. That ended the conversation.”


7. Dorothy Hawkins, the descendent of Hermitage slaves, alleges that Jackson fathered a child with “House Hannah.” The liaison supposedly produced a girl named Charlotte, born in July 1826. Hawkins states, “Charlotte was very adamant about passing down to her children and grandchildren the fact that she indeed was the blood heir to Andrew Jackson.” This information was placed on a website that is no longer functional. Copies of the site are available in the slave files at The Hermitage, Nashville, Tennessee. The author attempted, without success, to reach Hawkins.


10. Record of Slave Sale, in Sam B. Smith, et al., The Papers of Andrew Jackson, vol. 1, (Knoxville, 1980), 15; hereafter Jackson Papers. For Jackson’s early years, see Hendrik Booraem, Young Hickory: The Making of Andrew Jackson (Dallas, 2001), 186.

11. List of Taxable Property, 1792, in Jackson Papers, vol. 1, 34; Tax Assessment, 1798, ibid, 211. Only ten of Jackson’s slaves were between the ages of twelve and fifty, and as such taxables: “Inventory, Appraisal, and Division of John Donelson’s Estate,” 1791, Jackson Papers, vol. 1, 425-7.


13. Power of Attorney from James Buchanan, 8 November 1790, Jackson Papers, vol. 1, 23-4; John Overton to AJ, 8 March 1795, ibid, 54; AJ to Robert Hays, 12 December 1796, ibid, 102; Square Grant to AJ, 25 November 1799, ibid, 224; Samuel Jackson to AJ, 9 June 1802, ibid, 298; Samuel Jackson to AJ, 25 October 1802, ibid, 316; Lemuel Henry to AJ (with enclosure), 14 June 1803, ibid, 332; Agreement with Mark Mitchell, 12 December 1803, ibid, 409.

14. AJ to Thomas Eastin, June 1806, Jackson Papers, vol. 2, 106-7; Andrew Erwin, of Tennesse, published an anonymous letter in the National Banner & Nashville Whig in which he accused Jackson of slave trading. A letter a war ensued. See ibid, 15 July 1827, 25 July 1827; 5 August 1827, and 19 August 1827. Some of these letters were republished in “A Brief Account of General Jackson’s Deals in Negroes,” TSLA. Jackson involved himself in the partnership of Coleman, Green, and Jackson, originally formed in 1831 to purchase and resell cotton and tobacco. Coleman and Green later arranged for the sale and purchase of several slaves. Though not a key figure in the transaction, Jackson fully understood the agreement and was aware that the commodity to be speculated in was slaves. Andrew Burstein notes, “Jackson was more active in the slave trade than most,” but provides no evidence for such an assertion. See, The Passions of Andrew Jackson (New York, 2003), 24.

15. Advertisement for a Runaway, 26 September 1804, Jackson Papers, vol. 2, 40-1; see also, Robert H. Hay, “And Ten Dollars Extra, For Every Hundred Lashes Any Person Will Give Him, to the Amount of Three Hundred”: A Note on Andrew Jackson’s Runaway Slave Ad of 1804 and on the Historian’s Use of Evidence,” Tennessee Historical Quarterly.
recorded by William G. Terrell, published in the Cincinnati Commercial, 22 June 1880. There exists one additional item related to Jackson and slave families, a short addendum to a letter in which Jackson discusses the sale of "Sampson" and his family. Burstein concludes from this that Jackson was "expressing awareness of the emotional consequences of trading in human beings." Yet the information related to this sale is so sparse that such a conclusion is highly speculative. See, Andrew Jackson to Rachel Jackson, 18 September 1816, Jackson Papers, vol. 4, 62; Burstein, The Passions of Andrew Jackson, 255 note 59.


29. AJ to Andrew J. Donelson, 3 July 1821, Correspondence, vol. 3, 87; James Craine Bronough, 3 July 1821, Jackson Papers, vol. 5, 56; Rachel Jackson apparently experienced additional difficulties with slaves at the Hermitage in 1816. See AJ to Rachel Jackson, 18 September 1816, Jackson Papers, vol. 4, 62.


31. For Jackson and militiae men, see Matthew Warshauer, "The Battle of New Orleans Reconsidered: Andrew Jackson and Martial Law," Louisiana History 39 (Summer 1998): 261-291; for the Woods case, see Remini, Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 211-213, for Jackson's comments, see Andrew Jackson to John Wood, 14 March 1814, Jackson Papers, vol. 3, 48-49; Burstein notes that Jackson's treatment of certain slaves was paternalistic in a sense comparable to his starkly demand ing, occasionally punitive, yet consistently fatherly "paternalism in a sense comparable to his starkly demanding, occasionally punitive, yet consistently fatherly approach to his white soldiers. See Burstein, The Passions of Andrew Jackson, 225.


33. AJ to Andrew Jackson Donelson, 28 June 1822, Jackson Papers, vol. 5, 195; two other runaways were Tom and Ned. See James Jackson to AJ, 28 May 1821, ibid, 50.

34. AJ to Egbert Harris, 13 April 1822, ibid, vol. 3, 158. Also see "Advertisement by John Coffee for AJ's runaway slave Gilberth from the Big Spinning," 24 April 1822, printed in the Nashville Whig, vol. 5, 525; on Jackson's decision to bring his slaves to the Hermitage, see Andrew Jackson to Conrad Donelson, 19 April 1833, ibid, 61. That Jackson mentioned the deaths of the two Sampsons points to the fact that one of the Sampsons, and perhaps his family, was never sold, as indicated by Andrew Burstein. Reardon notes that only two Sampsons lived at the Hermitage. See note 25.

the Archeological Findings," 4-5, 8, 10. Paper presented at
the 1996 Society for Historical Archeology Conference on
Historical and Underwater Archeology, Cincinnati, Ohio,
paper held by the Hermitage, Nashville, Tennessee; Brian
W. Thomas, Community Among Enslaved African-
Americans, 1820-1850s, (PhD dissertation, State
University of New York, Binghamton, 1995); Larry McKee,
"The Earth is Their Witness," 38.

64. Larry McKee, "Consistency and Variation in Slave
Housing at Andrew Jackson's Hermitage Plantation," 10.
Paper presented at the 1996 conference, "Housing Slavery
in the Age of Jackson: Comparative Perspectives,"
Charlottesville, Virginia, paper held by the Hermitage.
67. McKee, "The Earth is Their Witness," 40; Aaron E.
Russell, "Material Culture and African-American Spirituality
68. McKee, "The Earth is Their Witness," 40.
69. Ibid, 39; AJ to Andrew J. Donelson, 3 July 1821,
Correspondence, vol. 3, 87.
70. McKee, "Bread in Captivity," 9-10; Return J.
Meigs and William F. Cooper, eds., The Code of Tennessee.
Enacted by the General Assembly of 1857-8, (Nashville,
1858), 506-7; Patterson, The Negro in Tennessee, 25.
71. McKee, "The Earth is Their Witness," 39; McKee,
Consistency and Variation, 11, 14-15; Kevin E. Smith,
"Bloodline Station: Archeology, History, and the
Interpretation of the Middle Tennessee Frontier, 1770-
72. AJ to William B. Lewis, 28 February 1842, ibid,
73. Lawrence, "Andrew Jackson at Home, 793; Robert
Remini, "The Final Days and Hours in the Life of General
167-77; see also, Remini, The Course of American
Democracy, 524; "Old Hannah: Reminiscences of the
Hermitage;" "General Jackson and His Slaves," Albany
Evening Atlas, 25 June 1845; "Gen. Jackson and His
Slaves," Syracuse Journal, in Madison County Whig (New
York), 9 July 1845; also see ibid, 23 July 1845; Jackson's
Will, Correspondence, vol. 6, 220-223.
74. Hannah noted that Jackson was often very
kind to the slaves, especially children: "Old master was
mighty good to us all. When I was a child ole mistress used
to pin me to her dr ess at her side to learn me to
sew….Sometimes she would fall a nappin', when I would
loosen the pin and steal away from her….When I come
back, she would ask me where I had been. If ole master was
there he would say, 'O, let the little thing go out and play
whenever she wants to.'" There were also special acts of
kindness that Hannah remembered warmly. On one occa-
son she was combing Jackson's hair, "he had a heap of
hair," she explained, and he told her that she would be
rewarded for any "buggers" that she found. Hannah pre-
tended to kill some bugs by clicking her fingernail and
when Jackson asked her to produce the bugs she admitted
that she was "foolin'." Jackson knew that she was "ellin a
story" and said that he would buy her a new dress if she
promised to never tell another: "I promised," said Hannah,
"and he bought me the dress. I remember that it was red."
Hannah ultimately remarked, "Ole Master was gold to us." See
"Old Hannah: Reminiscences of the Hermitage;"
"General Jackson and His Slaves;" Sarah Yorke Jackson wrote in a letter on
11 June 1863, "Hannah and Martha [her daughter] have
gone to the Yankees. Hannah has been very insolent for
some time." Letter on file at the Hermitage.