

Counting the Costs: Southern Planters and the Problem of Runaway Slaves, 1790-1860

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In our recent book *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*, John Hope Franklin and I seek to answer a number of questions about runaways: how, when, and why they ran away, where they went, how successful they were in remaining at large. We also examine the efforts of slave owners to control their human property, and the effect of runaways on the peculiar institution [Franklin and Schweninger, xiii-xv].

In several sections we mention the economic effect of runaways on the plantation system. In this essay, I would like to bring these sections into sharper focus. In particular, considering the plantation as business, what impact did runaways have on the balance sheet? Did the loss of labor, cost of recovery, or loss of capital create economic hardships for plantation owners? It should be noted at the outset that some historians view the Old South as a "noncapitalist society increasingly antagonistic to, but inseparable from, the bourgeois world that sired it" [Genovese and Genovese, p. 5]. This interpretation, however, ignores the determination of the vast majority of planters and others to buy more land, acquire more slaves, compete successfully in the marketplace, and reap greater profits.

To examine these questions it is first necessary to comment on the extent of the problem. It was a unusual planter who could boast that none of his slaves had absconded during a given year. In fact, the vast majority admitted just the opposite, and some complained about "habitual" runaways, or those who ran off two, three, and four times each year. Travelling through the southern states during the 1850s, Frederick Law Olmsted noted that at virtually every plantation he visited masters complained about runaways. Even in sections of the deep South where blacks had "no prospect of finding shelter within hundreds of miles, or of long avoiding recapture and severe punishment, many slaves had a habit of frequently making efforts to escape temporarily from their ordinary condition of subjection" [Olmsted, 476].

¹ The author wishes to thank William Scarborough for providing him with data on Morville Plantation in Mississippi. The petitions and many of the legislative and county court records cited below are part of the Race and Slavery Petitions Project at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. For their generous support of this project the author thanks the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, National Endowment for the Humanities, and Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

Many plantation owners confirmed Olmsted's observations. Runaways became so common in some sections that planters attributed the cause to a peculiar mental illness.² Little Charles of Louisiana, who repeatedly stole away despite severe punishments, suffered from "mental alienation" and "fits of insanity."³ The "mental alienation" theory was given scientific authority by Dr. Samuel Cartwright, a prominent New Orleans physician. In an article in 1851, Cartwright explained the many slaves suffered from "DRAPETOMANIA, OR THE DISEASE CAUSING NEGROES TO RUN AWAY." The name was derived from the Greek, *δραπέτης*, or a runaway slave, and *μανιά*, mad or crazy. Absconding from service was "as much a disease of the mind as any other species of mental alienation," Cartwright wrote. It was as well understood by planters and overseers as it had been by the ancient Greeks more than two millennia ago. To cure the disease, Cartwright proposed that owners provide slaves with adequate food, housing, and fuel [food]. If the disease persisted, owners should whip those afflicted until they fell "into that submissive state which it was intended for them to occupy in all after-time" [Cartwright, pp. 331-33].

While it is not possible to know exactly how many slaves absconded at any given time, various primary sources—estate inventories, planters' journals, diaries, correspondence, court proceedings, legislative petitions—support the observations of Olmsted and others. It was a rare planter who was immune from the problem. And on some plantations it seemed as if overseers dealt with little else. Such was certainly the case on Morville Plantation, in Concordia Parish, Louisiana. During a three month stretch in 1854, among forty-six slaves, overseer William J. Rowe recorded eight slaves who ran away at least once— Albert, Anthony, Jerry, George, David, Lewis, Edmund, and Elick Stallian; and three slaves who ran away twice, including Martha, Elisha, and Sam King. The next year, among sixty-four slaves, the new overseer, T. D. Clement, listed eighteen slaves in thirty-six separate runaway incidents. George absconded nine times during the year; Edmund four times; Ellick Stallian, Elisha, and Butler three times each. Sam King remained out nearly six months, Ellick Stallian was gone for 55 days, and Elisha stayed away for 43 days. The average absence was fifteen days. In all, a total of 543 "Man-Days" were lost on Morville in a single year.⁴

Not only was labor lost—although Morville is admittedly an extreme example—but the time and expenses for retrieving runaways could be considerable. When slaves remained out over extended periods, traveled to distant locations, or had a good head start, it sometimes cost planters substantial amounts to pay for slave catchers, dogs, transportation, advertisements, meals, rooms, horse rentals, jail fees, medical expenses, and rewards. Perhaps the worst scenario from an owner's perspective (excluding the death of a slave on the run) was to hire a slave catcher, and then, months later, discover the runaway in a distant jail. It was then necessary to

² Testimony of William Butler, ca. 1821, in Records of the Circuit Court, Barren County, Kentucky, Equity Judgments, Henry Dickerson vs. John Butler, 9 July 1821, Case #192, reel #209,794, Kentucky Division for Libraries and Archives, Frankfort, Kentucky [hereafter KDLA]; Records of the First Judicial District Court, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, Case Records, Adelaide DuVigneau vs. Louis Lanoix, 20 January 1820, #2,839, reel 5, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library.

³ Records of the Third Judicial District Court, East Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Philip Hicky vs. Isham P. Fox, 24 December 1836, #2,258, East Baton Rouge Parish Archives, Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Testimony of T. G. Morgan, filed 13 January 1841, with *ibid*.

⁴ Daily Journal, 1854-1855, Morville Plantation, Concordia Parish Louisiana, Surget Family Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi [hereafter MDAH].

pay the slave catcher, jail fees, court costs, transportation expenses, and sometimes a reward. Costs, of course, varied during different time periods in different parts of the South, but retrieval expenditures occasionally constituted a large percentage of a slave's value. When this happened, owners complained bitterly about their substantial costs.⁵ One Louisiana planter noted how he had been "obliged to lay out and expend several large sums of money to differe[nt] persons in making search and inquiry" after his slave named Christmas, who should have been easy to spot since he left shackled and branded. Not only did the owner pay for slave-catchers, but sent along several slaves who "lost a great number of days work."⁶

There were also slaves who disappeared entirely, finding refuge with friends or relatives who were free, posing as self-hired slaves in towns and cities, or making it to the North or Canada. Slaves hid aboard sailing vessels and steamboats, stowed away in wagons, or travelled at night following the North Star. Occasionally they were assisted by fellow slaves, conductors of the Underground Railroad, Quakers, or anti-slavery whites. Those who made it to the North were often among the most ingenious, persistent, and intelligent runaways. About twenty-five years old, quick spoken and clever, the Tennessee slave Jim Lace set out in June 1839, for a free state. "This fellow has once before attempted to make his escape into a free State and was taken in Kentucky making his way to Illinois," Asa Jackson, a planter who lived a few miles west of Lebanon, explained. "I am apprehensive that he will again make a similar attempt and probably aim for the same State."⁷

Costs for paying rewards could mount up, especially for slaves with special skills, or who were especially intelligent, or industrious. For a runaway married couple from Hinds County, Mississippi, the owner promised \$100 each for the husband and wife if lodged in any jail within the state, and if brought to him at Baldwin's Ferry from out-of-state, "all expenses will be paid, besides reasonable compensation in addition to the above reward."⁸ I have reason to believe that the said Negro is harbored in my neighborhood, and if any person or persons will give me information of the same, he or they shall be liberally rewarded," J. J. Frierson, a planter on the Santee River, in South Carolina, wrote. He offered \$100 for the apprehension and delivery of his slave Solomon to his plantation, twenty-five dollars for proof of his being harbored by a white person, and one-hundred and fifty dollars for "proof his being taken out of the State by any white or free persons."⁹ Samuel Ragland wrote from his plantation in Madison County, Alabama, to the editor of a Nashville newspaper offering "\$250 REWARD, For the apprehension and confinement in Jail of my negro man ISHAM, so that I get him again." If captured in Alabama the owner promised \$100, but out of state the larger reward. The thirty-five year old Isham was a highly prized blacksmith and a man of many talents.¹⁰

⁵ For examples see Petition of John T. Rawlins to the Virginia General Assembly, 6 January 1824, Carolina County, Virginia State Archives, Richmond; Petition of William Cassels to the Virginia General Assembly, 17 December 1817, Amelia County, *ibid.*

⁶ Records of the Parish Court, Iberville Parish, Louisiana, Old Parish Court, Andre Langlois vs. Vincent Tenant, 19 May 1807, #1, Parish Court House, Plaquemine, Louisiana.

⁷ *Tennessee Republican Banner*, 24 June 1839.

⁸ *New Orleans Picayune*, 23 June 1840.

⁹ *Charleston Mercury*, 25 February 1831.

¹⁰ *Tennessee Republican Banner*, 21 February 1838.

As was the case with Samuel Ragland, some planters paid additional rewards for out-of-state capture, or raised the amount when the original offering did not bring results. The owner of two mulatto slaves who absconded from the west side of the Mississippi River near New Orleans offered a \$25 reward during the summer of 1832, but in mid-September raised it to one hundred dollars.¹¹ The master of Harriet, an eighteen-year-old hired hand, doubled the reward when she could not be found after several months.¹² Seeking the return of "a yellow slave girl," a Crescent City owner increased her reward threefold when the girl was not discovered after some time.¹³ A Lafayette, Louisiana woman said she would pay \$35 for the return of her fifteen-year-old personal servant. When she learned that Caroline, the slave in question, was going to see her mother in Huntsville, Alabama, the owner increased the offer to \$150.¹⁴

There were also costs involved with reclaiming captured runaways. In most states, planters were required to pay rewards, jail fees, per diem expenses, and court costs for captured runaways. During the 1850s, sheriffs in Claiborne County, Mississippi, used printed, fill-in-the-blank forms to indicate various costs and fees for docketing, magistrates, constables, rewards, mileage, advertisements, clothing, food, and medical expenses.¹⁵ While such costs were not burdensome, neither were inconsequential.¹⁶ If slaves remained in jail for extended periods, or refused to divulge the name of their owner, jail costs could mount up to equal the value of the slave. This was almost certainly the case for the Pleasants who took her four children—Billey, Catey, Joe, and James—when she set out in 1807. Captured and jailed in Surry County, Virginia, the jailer explained that "their naked condition" rendered clothes and blankets necessary, and the woman, "whilst in jail, was delivered of a child, consequently gave much trouble and additional Expense." They were "regularly advertised & at the proper period offered for hire," but no one wanted them, and even after Pleasant's owner—a planter in a neighboring county—sent an agent to identify her and the children they remained in jail. In all, when the owner finally arrived to retrieve his slaves in January 1809, the expenses stood at \$422, a large percentage of the market value of the slaves.¹⁷

Thus, loss of labor, loss of capital, payment for rewards and retrieval, and jail expenses could be significant. For small planters such outlays could cut into profits and make expansion difficult. Like many other small slaveholders, Basil Kiger periodically made payments that he could well have used in other ways. Between September 1849 and October 1851, he made six payments

¹¹ New Orleans *Bee*, 15 June 1832. The notice ran continuously through 18 October 1832. The one hundred dollars reward began with the 15 September 1832 issue.

¹² New Orleans *Bee*, 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21 December 1832. The reward was increased 15 December 1832.

¹³ New Orleans *Bee*, 26 April 1833.

¹⁴ New Orleans *Picayune*, 14-28 June 1840. The increase occurred on 23 June 1840.

¹⁵ Runaway Form for Slave John, 17 June 1855, Roach (Benjamin) Family Papers, Box 2E524, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁶ In Mississippi, for example, planters were required by law to pay Indian agents thirty dollars for each runaway they captured or secured in the Indian nations. *Acts Passed at the First Session Second General Assembly of the State of Mississippi* (Natchez, 1819), p. 70. Also see *Laws of the State of Mississippi, Passed at the Eleventh Session of the General Assembly, Held in the Town of Jackson* (Jackson, 1828), p. 96; *Laws of the State of Mississippi, Passed at the Twelfth Session of the General Assembly, Held in the Town of Jackson* (Jackson, 1829), 41-2; *Laws of the State of Mississippi, Passed at a Regular Session of the Mississippi Legislature, Held in the City of Jackson, January, February, and March, 1850* (Jackson, 1850), p. 229.

¹⁷ Legislative Petitions, Petition of Benjamin Browne to the Virginia General Assembly, 16 December 1809, Surry County, Virginia State Archives, Richmond, Virginia. The owner refused to pay and the sheriff petitioned the General Assembly for reimbursement.

totalling \$72 for the capture or retrieval from jail of Ezekiel, Archy, Isham, and other "runaway Negroes."¹⁸ During a period when laborers earned a dollar or two a day, such a sum represented many weeks of work. Such payments during a bad harvest, or at a time when a note was due, or following an illness could be significant.

In most cases, especially for large planters, however, the costs associated with runaways were marked off as a business expense. The great majority of runaways remained out only a few weeks or months and the loss to planters was primarily a loss of labor. In the deep South, virtually all runaways were caught, returned, and punished, and thus did not represent a capital loss. A few died in the woods or swamps, or languished and died in jails or were killed while on the run by slave catchers or patrollers, but they represented a tiny minority. Even in the Upper South the chances a making it to freedom were slim, and most runaways were captured and returned. Planters who were plagued with runaways found the lost labor irritating but not threatening to the profit margin. Production could actually go up if slaves were driven hard enough, even as the number of runaways rose over time. Working half-days Saturday, with Sundays and one holiday each year off, planters could produce good results. In the case of Morville Plantation, between 1854 and 1856, there was a 300 percent increase the number of bales of cotton sent to market (60 compared with 250 bales) despite what an outsider might consider severe labor unrest.¹⁹

The confidence planters demonstrated that their runaways did not pose a possible capital loss was revealed in the small average rewards they offered for their return. An examination of runaway notices for more than two thousand slaves from five states (Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Louisiana) during two time periods (early, 1790-1816; and late, 1838-1860) shows that a significant minority—24 percent and 21 percent—offered no specified reward. The average reward during the early period was only fifteen dollars, and in South Carolina it was only ten dollars. Even with the substantial increase in the price of slaves in subsequent years, reward averages did not increase proportionally. The averages during the late period ranged from \$19 in South Carolina to \$32 in Virginia.

¹⁸ Plantation Record Book, 1848-1851, Kiger Family Papers, Accession #2E636, Natchez Trace Slaves and Slavery Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas Austin.

¹⁹ This exceeded by a significant margin the approximately 50 percent increase in the slave labor force.

Table 1: Average Rewards Offered for Slaves Advertised in Five States Early (1790-1816) Late (1838-1860) Periods

	Number Advertised		Number Offering Reward		Average Reward	
	early	late	early	late	early	late
Virginia	95	195	84	162	\$18	\$32
North Carolina	100	132	77	113	\$14	\$27
Tennessee	138	168	116	121	\$20	\$23
South Carolina	240	458	157	298	\$9	\$19
Louisiana	122	363	95	340	\$17	\$28
	695	1,316	529	1,034	\$15	\$25

Source: Franklin and Schweningen, 177.

A comparison of average rewards with average slave prices reveals that generally owners offered 5 percent or less of the value of the runaway as a reward.²⁰ Indeed, as prices for slaves rose, the average rewards actually declined in relation to what slaves were bringing on the auction block. This occurred because owners were able to rely on an increasingly sophisticated system to recover their property. The number of advertisements for runaways rose dramatically during the 1840s and 1850s. Meanwhile, one gets the clear impression that the number of runaways for whom there was no advertisement rose even more. Absconders were so common that it was indeed impossible to advertise for even a small percentage of those who made off. Considering the various means at their disposal for recovering runaways—patrols, slave catchers, hiring agents, communication with other planters, black spies, white reward seekers—it is not surprising that planters and others offered modest rewards.

Nor did planters find burdensome the payments state governments required to any person who captured a runaway. Tennessee stipulated that slaveholders pay the "taker up" of a runaway five dollars if captured in state, and twenty-five dollars if out of state.²¹ In Mississippi the amount was six dollars in state with the admonition that persons who caught runaways were required by law to turn them over to the owner, agent, overseer, or jailer.²² While also offering a small reward for the return of runaways, Virginia promised fifty dollars for slaves captured in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana, and one hundred and twenty dollars in New York, New England, and the British provinces, plus twenty cents per mile travel allowance.²³ Thus, the reward structure for slaves thought to have made it to freedom reflected the market value of the slave to a far

²⁰ Some of those who offered no specific reward said they would pay expenses, or promised an unspecified reward. Even if all those who offered no specific reward offered a sum equal to the average reward, however, the generalizations above would remain the same.

²¹ *The Code of Tennessee Enacted by the General Assembly of 1857-'8* (Nashville, 1858), 504. 22

²² *Laws of the State of Mississippi, Passed at a Regular Session of the Mississippi Legislature, Held in the City of Jackson, January, February, and March, 1850* (Jackson, 1850), 229.

²³ *Supplement to the Revised Code of the Laws of Virginia: Being a Collection of all the Acts of the General Assembly of a Public and Permanent Nature, Passed Since the year 1819* (Richmond, 1833), 234-5.

greater extent than the rewards offered for the vast majority of runaways who, it was believed, would be caught and returned within a few weeks or months.

Indeed, it was rare when the cost of retrieval amounted to more than a small percentage of a slave's value. In the early nineteenth century, young able-bodied field hands were valued at \$350 in Richmond, \$500 in Charleston, and \$500 in New Orleans; in 1837, averages ranged from \$900 in Richmond, to \$1,200 in Charleston, and \$1,300 in New Orleans; by 1860, averages in Richmond and Charleston were about \$1,200, and New Orleans, \$1,800. Women, children, the elderly, slaves who were deformed, scarred, diseased, or crippled, and babies without parents, brought less, and the average for all slaves was smaller than the average for field hands [Phillips, 142].

While the costs of slave hunters, helping pay for patrols (usually assumed by the state), sending overseers in pursuit, lost labor, rewards, and jail fees rose over time, the comparative costs remained small compared with the price of slaves. In the 1830s, slaveholders in various states paid a few dollars to print up handbills, or advertise in newspapers, and "18 cts per day each" for "dieting negro men" in jail. It cost planter Franklin H. Elmore of Walterboro and Columbia, South Carolina, for example, \$26.84 to retrieve Isaac and Sancho, jailed as runaways in Charleston in December 1834, and claimed 7 January 1835; this included money for capture, jailing, food, and clothing. Often slaves worth several hundred dollars could be advertised, hunted, captured, jailed, and returned, for similarly small amounts.²⁴

By the 1840s and 1850s, travel costs had gone up, and professional slave hunters often charged \$5 a day plus expenses, while reward offerings and jail expenses and prices for chains and handcuffs increased.²⁵ But there had been a dramatic rise in the price of slaves, and expenditures for retrieval still remained relatively modest. Even though owners complained about "great pecuniary Loss," "inconvenience," and "trouble and expense," some of the most troublesome runaways cost them comparatively small amounts in lost labor and expenses.²⁶ Mississippi slaveholder R Dunbar lost several days labor from his runaway Emily, who was committed to the Adams County jail in 1857, but when he received the bill from the sheriff it included charges for two days sustenance at 40 cents a day, a \$6 reward for the person who brought her in, a magistrates fee of 88 cents, a constable fee of 75 cents, and a committing, releasing, and docketing charge of \$2.25, for a total coast of \$10.68. Similarly, the fees for Maria Cooper's black man Jim, jailed 23 September 1858, in Claiborne County, Mississippi, was only \$11.75.²⁷ In Warren County, one master paid an additional \$5 for a branding iron.²⁸

²⁴ The costs for Isaac and Sancho were with the bill for advertising another slave: "Bill for Advertising Boy Jacob," with E. W. Harrison, agent, to A. R. Porter, 2 May 1838, and Franklin H. Elmore to Daniel Moorer, [1835], Franklin H. Elmore Papers, Library of Congress [hereafter LC].

²⁵ Account Book of E. H. Stokes, 1856, Chase Family Papers, LC.

²⁶ Anne Arundel County Register of Wills (Petitions and Orders) 1840-1851, pp. 179-80, 237-38, Petition of Thomas Brice to the Orphans Court, 23 February 1847, and Petition of James W. Allen to the Orphans Court, 28 April 1848, reel #CR 63,127-2, Maryland State Archives [hereafter MSA]; *ibid.*, pp. 23839, Petition of James B. Stockett to the Orphans Court, 24 July 1855, reel #CR 63,128-1, MSA; Record of Expenses, 21 June 1860, Charles Bruce Family Papers, LC. A Virginia planter, Bruce paid \$10, for "having a negro taken up."

²⁷ U Jail Fees, Adams County, Mississippi, for slave Emily, 12 July 1857, and Jail Fees, Claiborne County, Mississippi, for slave Jim, 23 September 1858, NTSSC.

²⁸ Bill For Making Branding Iron, To George Hawken for Use by Samuel Edwards, n.d., Warren County, Mississippi, NTSSC.

Although expenditures for advertisements, rewards, slave hunters, jail fees, travel, and other expenses can be easily measured, other "costs" were less obvious. The impact of fugitives on the attitudes of the planter class was profound. At the heart of the slave system was the need to control laborers and produce profits. Both seemed to be jeopardized by the behavior of runaways. Substantial energy and time were devoted to the question of how to control the movement of slaves. Planters prohibited them from leaving plantations without written permission, instructed overseers and managers to watch on over the slave quarters at night, and joined militia and patrol units to keep the peace and capture runaways. They supported city ordinances and state laws designed to regulate and control the movement of slaves. They warned ship captains and steamboat owners about the penalties of harboring escaped slaves.²⁹ Authorities in Baltimore, Wilmington, Charleston, Savannah, New Orleans, and other cities made concerted efforts to prevent slaves from sneaking aboard ocean going vessels.³⁰ They watched harbors and estuaries at night for possible hideaways. They created a system whereby slaves who ran away and were jailed could be returned to their owners at a relatively small cost. They supported a group of professional slave hunters who were willing to travel substantial distances and go to great lengths to recover lost property.

Despite these and other attempts at control, the escapes continued. So prevalent were runaways in some sections that whites became anxious, even fearful. Although the traveler who stopped at a Mississippi plantation and pushed furniture up against the door of his room before going to bed was probably atypical it did point to how some whites remained apprehensive. "He woke me when he came in, by his efforts to barricade the door with our rather limited furniture," a man who shared the room explained. He took two small revolvers out of his pocket and put them "so they could be easily taken up as he lay in bed." "You don't know," said he; "there may be runaways around" [Olmsted, p. 30].

At various times, slave owners and other whites expressed similar anxieties and fears.³¹ They also discovered that no matter what precautions or punishments they undertook slaves continued to run away. Such was the case on James Henry Hammond's Silver Bluff Plantation on the Savannah River in South Carolina. Between 1831 and 1855, there was an average of two escapes per year (a total of fifty-three). The fugitives usually remained out for a few months, and could count on sustenance, support, and encouragement from other Silver Bluff blacks. None of them, however, made it to freedom; after being captured and returned they were severely flogged, or sold. Managing slaves, Hammond ruefully commented, was "like a war without the glory" [Faust, 94, 95, 105].

²⁹ Records of the Circuit Court, Jefferson County, Kentucky, Case Files, Bailey Riley vs. John James, 29 December 1835, Series 2, Case #70, Box 2-2, KDLA; Deposition of Richard Love, 16 April 1836, with *ibid.*; Records of the Circuit Court, Jefferson County, Kentucky, Case Files, Series 2, Ambrose D. Mann vs. Steamboat *Paul Jones*, 13 May 1837, Case #765, Box 2-14, KDLA; Deposition of Stephen Haskell, 18 September 1839, with *ibid.*; New Orleans *Bee*, 3 April 1829, 29 October 1829, 27 March 1830, 30 March 1831, 9, 11 13 August 1831; New Orleans *Picayune*, 2 June 1839, 18 March 1840; Charleston *Mercury*, 16 March 1832; Charleston *Mercury and Morning Advertiser*, 4 April 1822, 25 January 1823.

³⁰ Records of the Equity Court, Charleston District, South Carolina, Petition of Alexander W. Marshall, 31 July 1846, #800, Box 1, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina; Testimony of Moses Levy, 30 July 1846, with *ibid.*

³¹ Legislative Petitions, Petition of Mary Hunt to the Tennessee General Assembly, 7 January 1846, #143-1846, reel 17, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee; Copy of Last Will and Testament of Spencer T. Hunt, 9 December 1843, with *ibid.*

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