"THEY ARE SUPPOSED TO BE LURKING ABOUT THE CITY": ENSLAVED WOMEN RUNAWAYS IN ANTEBELLUM CHARLESTON

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BETWEEN 1851 AND 1862, FOUR ENSLAVED FEMALES REPEATEDLY ran away from William R. Taber in Charleston. Trained as cooks, laundresses, and seamstresses, these women took advantage of the unique opportunities available to them in the city to secure employment and refuge, and they evaded capture for years at a time. Emboldened by the value of their marketable skills in a city dependent upon the work of enslaved women, they took ownership of their labor and used it to lead autonomous lives away from their owner. Their actions shed light on the fact that rather than escaping to the North, some enslaved women found freedom in southern cities, where they could assert control over their bodies and labor while maintaining kinship ties.

A mulatto woman with "black hair rather straight and usually oiled and smooth," Celia first ran away from Taber in January 1851 at the age of twenty-two. Taber assumed that she was "harbored in Coming-street, near Morris-street, by some colored people." A "fine seamstress," Celia doubtlessly obtained work to support herself for the four months she was apart from Taber. She ran away again in December 1852 and was presumably caught a short time later. Although Taber described her in a newspaper advertisement as a "short, fat, clumsy looking Mulatto girl . . . [with a] fat and projecting mouth and nose . . . bad teeth and not a pleasant face," Celia caught the eye of another slave, fell in love, and ran away in May 1853 to be near her husband, "a fellow named John, belonging to Mr. Blum, in St. Philip street." Since she had become "well known by most of the Policemen" during her previous escapes, Celia applied her skills as a "tailoress and seamstress" to create costumes that disguised her identity. Nearly two years after she escaped, Taber got word that Celia wore "men's clothes when she appears in the streets." During the time that Celia was away from Taber, she and John had a child and enjoyed a degree of family life together. On June 15, 1855, after Celia had been gone for more than two years, Taber advertised for her one final time on the front page of the *Charleston Mercury*, offering a reward of one hundred dollars for her capture (see figure 1).

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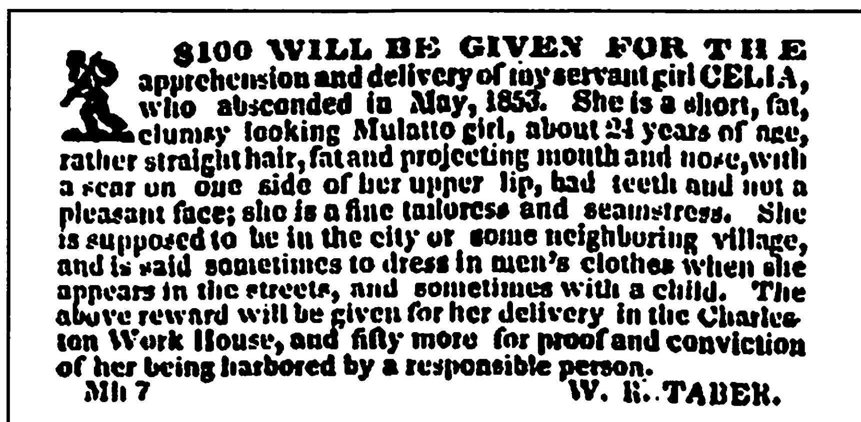

$100 WILL BE GIVEN FOR THE apprehension and delivery of my servant girl CELIA, who absconded in May, 1853. She is a short, fat, clumsy looking Mulatto girl, about 24 years of age, rather straight hair, fat and projecting mouth and nose, with a scar on one side of her upper lip, bad teeth and not a pleasant face; she is a fine tailoress and seamstress. She is supposed to be in the city or some neighboring village, and is said sometimes to dress in men's clothes when she appears in the streets, and sometimes with a child. The above reward will be given for her delivery in the Charleston Work House, and fifty more for proof and conviction of her being harbored by a responsible person.

Mh 7 W. R. TABER.

Figure 1. This is the final advertisement that William R. Taber (1795–1864) placed in the *Charleston Mercury* for Celia. It ran continuously from March 7 to June 15, 1855.

It is impossible to determine whether she was caught shortly thereafter or Taber simply tired of the cost of searching for her.[1]

In December 1854, when Celia had been gone for a year and a half, fourteen-year-old Nelly ran away. In an advertisement that ran for less than a month, Taber described the girl as having an "ugly face" but "good height and figure." Taber had purchased her from a tinner in the city, separating the young girl from her family. She undoubtedly tried to reunite with loved ones during her brief escapes. Nelly ran away a second time in the first days of 1856 and was seen "often about the Market." No matter what punishment Nelly faced upon capture, it was not enough to deter thirteen-year-old Cynthia from running away a few months later. She remained on her own for nearly a month, going "frequently about the Market, King-street, and Half Moon Battery." Taber was particularly unkind in his description of Cynthia, saying in an advertisement that her "lower lip hangs down more than usual" and calling her "a very homely girl." The girl would become a habitual runaway. When she left Taber again three years later, he mentioned her marketable skills and the work experience

[1] On Celia, see *Charleston Courier* (Charleston, S.C.), January 13, 1851. A new ad for Celia appeared on January 28, 1851, and another, first published on February 18, 1851, ran until April 30, 1851. Ibid., December 29, 1852, May 31, 1853. New ads for Celia were printed in the *Courier* on June 24, 1853, and the *Charleston Mercury* (Charleston, S.C.) on December 5, 1853. A new notice ran continuously in the *Mercury* from May 29 to September 18, 1854. Yet another appeared in the *Mercury* on March 7, 1855, and ran through June 15, 1855.

that would enable her to stay out for the next eight months: "She is a good washer and is supposed to be about Hampstead, or somewhere else in the upper part of the city, and most probably engaged in the yard of some washer, as she has been before." Cynthia ran away again around the age of nineteen and by then had become a "very good Seamstress, Washer and Cook." Employing her extensive artisanal skills to find a job and a place to live, she avoided capture for several months, despite being "seen almost every day about the streets wearing a jockey hat."[2]

Taber owned another cook, washer, and seamstress named Frances who was ten years older than Cynthia. Taber described her as a "mustee" and said that her speech was "slow and much like the negroes of North Carolina where she originally came from." Her "very humble manner" was deceptive, an act of dissemblance to hide her desire to resist whenever the chance presented itself. Frances left Taber in December 1856 and was able to elude capture for nearly three years, regardless of being "seen often about the city." She was finally apprehended "at the disorderly house in Tradd-street . . . by one of our Police officers," but only after Taber offered a three hundred-dollar reward for her apprehension. Frances left again in June 1860 and once more in July 1862. During this last episode, she stayed out in the city for over eight months, even though she was by that time "well known by many of the guardsmen and police officers." It seems likely that Frances convinced these men to let her go in exchange for sexual favors. A "very good looking" woman with a "full figure," Frances wore her hair tucked up full in the front. Her good looks, which made her more vulnerable to the sexual advances of white men, may have served as a blessing in disguise during her escapes. Working at the "disorderly house," she may well have had police officers among her clientele. In this way, Frances claimed her body, which legally did not belong to her, and used it as a bartering tool. By wielding control over her person and asserting her humanity in dealing with white authority figures, she protected her precarious freedom.[3]

Taber's physical descriptions of his female servants were notably different from those of his male servants. When a thirty-year-old house servant named Richard escaped for the second time in July 1861, Taber noted his

[2] On Nelly, see *Charleston Mercury*, December 29, 1854, January 7, 1856. On Cynthia, see ibid., May 12, 1856. A notice about Cynthia's second escape ran continuously in the *Mercury* from June 28, 1859, to February 7, 1860. Ibid., June 28, 1862.

[3] On Frances, see *Charleston Courier*, January 29 and April 3, 1857. A new ad for Frances, which raised the reward from twenty-five to three hundred dollars, ran continuously in the *Charleston Mercury* from January 5, 1859, to August 31, 1859. Ibid., June 14, 1860. Taber waited until January 24, 1863, to advertise Frances's final escape in the *Mercury*. The notice ran through March 14, 1863. See also Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (1994; repr., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 37–47.

"very dark" complexion. Advertising for a "short" eighteen-year-old man named Cyrus in June 1862, Taber said that he "does not look to be over 14 or 15." Taber added that Cyrus was "well known to many of the City Guard, he having been in the Guard House several times in the last two months."[4] Taber's depictions of the men remained objective, simply referring to age, complexion, and height. Conversely, with the exception of Frances, his descriptions of his female servants were laden with negative assessments of their physical beauty (even when compared to runaway advertisements placed by his contemporaries). According to Taber, Celia was "clumsy looking" with "not a pleasant face," Nelly had "ugly features," and Cynthia was "extremely homely." If he described these women in such terms in a newspaper, then one can imagine how he spoke to them. Despite these assaults on their femininity and womanhood, Taber's female slaves do not seem to have internalized his negativity. The reason for this lies in Taber's final advertisement for Celia. After disparaging her physical appearance, he remarked that "she is a fine tailoress and seamstress."[5] Taber's words reveal the sharp contrast between his view of Celia as a woman and his view of her as a worker. He referred to the twenty-four-year-old as a homely "girl," attacking her beauty, femininity, and womanhood, and juxtaposed this with his complimentary assessment of her work. While Taber valued his bondservant's labor simply in terms of her service and the profits she could earn for him, Celia would have taken pride in her identity as a "fine tailoress and seamstress." She was highly skilled in a profession dominated by free women in Charleston, both black and white, and understood how these rare and valuable skills could afford her autonomy and freedom in the city. By rejecting her assigned role as Taber's "servant girl" and running away, she claimed ownership of her labor, body, and womanhood while affirming her identity as a working wife and mother.

The distinctive nature of slavery in Charleston provided hundreds of women runaways like Celia, Cynthia, and Frances with the opportunity to resist their abuse and exploitation and enjoy autonomous lives as workingwomen. Of the 517 women runaways who were the subjects of advertisements in Charleston newspapers between 1820 and 1865, 24 percent were assumed by their owners to have been seeking refuge in the city.[6] For runaways in the Lower South, Charleston was the most popular

[4] On Richard, see *Charleston Mercury*, August 28, 1860, March 27, July 27, and August 30, 1861. On Cyrus, see ibid., June 20, 1862.

[5] *Charleston Mercury*, April 6, 1855.

[6] The data for this study come from the author's Runaway Slave Database (hereinafter cited as RSDB), compiled from 2,145 ads printed in Charleston newspapers, including the *Courier* and the *Mercury*, between 1820 and 1865. Of the 1,628 men runaways who were the subjects of ads during this period, 18 percent were said to be headed for Charleston. As Philip D. Morgan notes, the advertised runaways

urban destination along the Atlantic seaboard. The city attracted women from Georgia and up-country South Carolina as well as from plantations along the South Santee, Ashepoo, and Cooper Rivers and on the sea islands.[7] In May 1857, three women left Paul Remley's plantation in Christ Church Parish—twenty-five-year-old Anne, twenty-three-year-old Susy (with her eight-month-old baby), and Susy's twenty-year-old sister Hannah. Three "dark" women and an infant would have attracted a great deal of attention traveling through the countryside, yet Remley believed they had no trouble hiding in Charleston. In an advertisement in the *Charleston Courier*, he stated that they "are supposed to be lurking about the city, where every facility of concealment is offered to them."[8] In the city, runaways could blend in among the crowds of black women in the streets and at the market, seek refuge with family and friends, and secure casual employment to support themselves, enabling many to evade capture for months or years.

Enslaved blacks and free people of color outnumbered Charleston's white residents until 1860. One northern visitor remarked, "How strange the aspect of this city! Every street corner, and door-sill filled with blacks; blacks driving t[he] drays & carriages, blacks carrying burdens, blacks tending children & vending articles on t[he] sidewalks; blacks doing all."[9] Urban bondpeople worked as sailors, boat hands, fishermen, craftsmen, draymen, shop clerks, barbers, tailors, seamstresses, laundresses, hucksters, and unskilled laborers. However, the majority—73 percent, according to the city census of 1848—were domestic servants in private homes, hotels, and almshouses. Because Charlestonians relied on slaves primarily for domestic service, which was seen as women's work, enslaved women outnumbered

"represent only the most visible tip of an otherwise indeterminate iceberg." This holds true even more so for women, as gendered notions of slave resistance prevented owners from advertising for them as readily as they did for men. Assuming that absent women would either return voluntarily or be captured easily, owners advertised less frequently for female runaways and tended to wait longer before advertising, up to an entire year. See Morgan, "Colonial South Carolina Runaways: Their Significance for Slave Culture," *Slavery and Abolition* 6 (December 1985): 58; Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 241; Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,1997), 41; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 71.

[7] John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 127; *Charleston Mercury*, June 24, 1856, June 10 and December 7, 1859; *Charleston Courier*, April 19, 1853, December 15, 1857; Exeter Plantation Work Book, July–December 1856, Motte Family Papers, 1791–1892, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

[8] On Anne, Susy, and Hannah, see *Charleston Courier*, June 1, 1857.

[9] Quoted in Maurie D. McInnis, *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 67–68.

every other group in the city and represented between 25 and 29 percent of the population from 1820 to 1850. Women's gender-specific skills were always in high demand, opening the door for enslaved females to earn wages, live away from their owners, and support themselves and their families.[10]

Women runaways seeking employment in Charleston as cooks, laundresses, and seamstresses would have competed with the city's free workingwomen, black as well as white, who dominated these professions. The 1848 city census listed ninety-one laundresses—forty-five "free colored," thirty-three enslaved, and thirteen white. Another thirty-six women were employed as cooks, pastry cooks, and confectioners. Eighteen of these were "free colored," twelve were enslaved, and six were white. The most popular field for Charleston's free workingwomen was the garment industry, where they found jobs as seamstresses, mantua makers, tailors, and milliners. Of the 401 women working in the sewing trades in 1848, free women of color made up 50 percent, while white women were 44 percent and enslaved women, just 6 percent. Clearly, race and class determined women's access to the sewing trade, as only four of the mantua makers were enslaved and all of the milliners were white. Because of the racial and gender dynamics shaping their employment options, a tiny fraction of the city's enslaved women worked in these industries. The 1848 city census enumerated thirty-three enslaved laundresses, twenty enslaved seamstresses, four enslaved mantua makers, eleven enslaved cooks, and one enslaved pastry cook, who together represented less than 2 percent of the city's 3,859 bondwomen. Enslaved women possessing these rare skills figured prominently among the runaways. Of those whose jobs were listed, 40 percent labored in these positions. Working in the same occupations as free women, skilled bondwomen were empowered to reject their enslaved status.[11]

Skilled bondwomen's sense of self-worth and confidence was fostered in their youth during job training. Unlike on plantations, where enslaved girls learned their skills by shadowing bondwomen working in the big house, enslaved girls in the city learned in the same way that enslaved boys did—through apprenticeships to free artisans regarded as masters of their

[10] J. L. Dawson and H. W. DeSaussure, eds., *Census of the City of Charleston, South Carolina, for the Year 1848, Exhibiting the Condition and Prospects of the City, Illustrated by Many Statistical Details, Prepared under the Authority of the City Council* (Charleston, S.C.: Printed by J. B. Nixon, 1849), 30, 34; Cynthia M. Kennedy, *Braided Relations, Entwined Lives: The Women of Charleston's Urban Slave Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 3–4; Virginia Meacham Gould, " 'If I Can't Have My Rights, I Can Have My Pleasures, and if They Won't Give Me Wages, I Can Take Them': Gender and Slave Labor in Antebellum New Orleans," in *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*, ed. Patricia Morton (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 181.

[11] Dawson and DeSaussure, *Census of the City of Charleston*, 30–35; RSDB.

professions. A significant difference in these apprenticeships, however, was that while enslaved boys were generally apprenticed to white male craftsmen, enslaved girls were placed with free women of color for instruction.[12] Historian Cynthia M. Kennedy explains that fears of slave rebellions and a general distrust of African Americans encouraged Charleston's white women to distance themselves from black women and instead apprentice white orphans.[13] For free black workingwomen building their businesses, taking on enslaved apprentices allowed them to secure unpaid labor and earn compensation from slave owners for their services.

In May 1835, John Berkley Grimball "placed a girl named Amy with Camilla Dunstan," a free black pastry cook living on Nassau Street in the Hampstead section of Charleston. Grimball agreed to compensate Dunstan with "a Bbl. of Rice every year and $20 at the conclusion of her course." Amy was only seven years old at the start of her apprenticeship. Over the years, her skill set expanded and by the time she was thirty-five, Grimball regarded her highly as both a pastry cook and a seamstress. Although washing clothes was a common skill, possessed by most working-class women who had to wash for their own families, slaveholders valued the work enough to apprentice enslaved girls to professional washers. Jacob Ford placed thirteen-year-old Daphne "with *Betty Mathews* a free mulatto woman to learn to *wash*" and carefully negotiated the terms of the apprenticeship: "The agreement, is, that Daphne is to stay with her not *less* than *one* & not *more* than *two* years, but if completed *before* two years, then she may be taken home. I am to clothe & pay taxes for her & give Betty one Barrel of Rice which is to be all her compensation & she is to feed Daphne herself."[14]

Ford placed a girl named Adel in various apprenticeships with free women of color who taught her not only how to sew but also how to read. While it was illegal to teach black people to read and write in Charleston, many slaveholders flouted the law and provided education for bondservants working in skilled trades where literacy would make them more efficient and profitable laborers. In 1822 four free "colored" women worked as teachers in the city, instructing free children of color. Ford sent Adel

[12] For more on apprenticeships of enslaved boys in Charleston, see Bernard E. Powers Jr., *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822–1885* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 11, 42–43.

[13] Kennedy, *Braided Relations*, 130, 141.

[14] John Berkley Grimball Diaries (1832–1883), May 13, 1835, March 18, 1863, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Free Persons of Color, Charleston South Carolina City Directory, 1820–1841 Database, available online at http://www.africanaheritage.com/uploads/2077/CharlestonFPC.xls (accessed May 10, 2015) (hereinafter cited as FPCDB); Jacob Ford Almanacs (1797–1831), April 28, 1812, Ford Family Papers, 1809–1968, South Caroliniana Library (emphasis in original) (hereinafter cited as JFA).

"to School" with two of them, Maria Michael and Maria Nell.[15] In August 1827, Ford "put Adel to School at Maria Michael's a free black woman living with her Father a free black man called Joe Martin in Zig Zag Alley to learn to sew." Adel's instruction probably also involved reading lessons. The following February, Ford "put Adel to Mrs. Harrison in Beaufain St. to learn the art of Mantua Making." In May 1829, he "placed Adel at School at Mrs. Nell's to learn to sew & to read." Adel's industrial-arts education under Nancy Nell consisted of sewing with Nancy and reading lessons with Nancy's daughter Maria. After spending four years with Nancy and Maria Nell, Ford apprenticed Adel to Louisa Richardson "to learn the business of a Tayloress."[16] With so much care given to Adel's education, one cannot help but wonder if she might not have been Ford's daughter in addition to his slave.

Having been trained in a profession dominated by free women and taught by two of the same teachers who instructed the city's free children of color, Adel would have come away from these apprenticeships with knowledge and corresponding self-confidence that belied her enslaved status. Close interactions with free black women at an early age affected the way enslaved women viewed themselves. Without sources, one can only speculate as to the nature of the relationships between enslaved women and free women of color. Possibly free black women treated enslaved women as any other woman of means would treat a slave. Or perhaps they shared a common bond with them as black women. While this bond would not necessarily have transcended the sharp boundary of class that separated them, it may have influenced free women of color at least to treat enslaved women as people rather than chattel property. Their shared work no doubt brought them together as well. One can imagine the conversations that took place over needlework, a hot stove, or a laundry tub in which women shared news, gossip, or relationship advice. At times free black women may have even shared stories with their enslaved counterparts of how they gained their freedom.

Even if enslaved women did not receive better treatment or encouragement from free women of color, then their day-to-day contact with women who were black and free would have been enough to inspire them. Free black property-owning women were living contradictions of the dominant society's gendered and racist stereotypes of black women that shaped female slaves' lives and opinions of themselves. Enslaved women's interactions with black women who were not enslaved, poor, or degraded would

[15] Claudia Dale Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820–1860: A Quantitative History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 46; Kennedy, *Braided Relations*, 147.

[16] JFA, August 15, 1827, February 18, 1828, May 7, 1829, May 27, 1833; FPCDB.

have irrevocably shattered the negative images of black women that their owners impressed upon them, instilling in them instead a more positive definition of black womanhood. Living and working in the homes of free women of color, enslaved women would have been privy to their private lives. They would have witnessed female entrepreneurs conduct business with elite white residents, style themselves in fine attire for church and social events, and host leisurely gatherings of women from their unique social class. Enslaved women would have readily understood that their free counterparts' freedoms derived from their labor. Their skills as seamstresses, washerwomen, and pastry cooks enabled them to interact self-assuredly with whites, conduct business for themselves, maintain comfortable homes, support their children, dress nicely, and have a modicum of leisure time. Armed with the same set of marketable skills, enslaved women left these apprenticeships confident enough to assert the same ownership over their lives and labors as their free counterparts.

Cynthia Kennedy explains that in Charleston's slave society, "women knew who they were precisely because they mingled daily in explosive intimacy and observed constantly who they were not."[17] While living and working with free women of color, however, enslaved girls likely envisioned who they could become. The enslaved seamstress could not save her earnings and purchase her freedom in the same way that her free counterpart had prior to 1820, when the state legislature prohibited personal manumissions. Yet through their work with free women of color and gossip in the larger black community, enslaved women doubtlessly realized that many of those who lived as free women in Charleston were in fact legally enslaved. In 1826 Plowden Weston illegally granted Lydia Weston her freedom in his will, directing "that she be permitted to act for herself in such a way as she may think will promote her own well being." Although her freedom was not legal, Lydia Weston was able to conduct herself as a free woman, becoming one in the process. She identified herself as a free woman of color to federal census takers in 1830 and 1840 and paid free Negro capitation taxes in 1846. She even acquired three bondwomen. Observing freedom performed in this way, enslaved apprentices recognized that their artisanal skills could one day enable them to be as free as the city's de facto free women.[18]

[17] Kennedy, *Braided Relations*, 2.

[18] Larry Koger, *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790–1860* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1985), 35–37, 69, 73–74; Amani Marshall, " 'They Will Endeavor to Pass for Free': Enslaved Runaways' Performances of Freedom in Antebellum South Carolina," *Slavery and Abolition* 31 (June 2010): 164–165.

Skilled bondwomen also recognized that the significant distinction between themselves and their free counterparts was the right to control their wages. This difference was highlighted at the conclusion of their apprenticeships when enslaved women were hired out to generate profits for their owners. Charleston slaveholders often allowed bondservants who were not needed in their households to work independently in the city under a system known as "hiring out." Rather than hire their slaves to employers directly, urban slave owners gave skilled bondservants tickets to seek employers and negotiate the terms of their employment on their own. They expected their bondservants to return at the end of each week or month to pay an agreed upon set of wages. An integral part of Charleston's economy, slave hiring provided owners additional income without the hassle of negotiating contracts and offered other residents an affordable means to meet seasonal labor demands. The labor arrangement benefitted bondwomen as well, allowing them to make their own terms, earn wages, travel freely in and around the city, and live away from their owners.[19]

In 1827 six skilled bondservants provided Jacob Ford with wages totaling $158.37. Their positions with various white and black employers lasted anywhere from a few weeks to several months. Over an eighteen-month period, Ford hired a bondwoman named Willoughby to six different men. While she earned wages ranging from $2.50 to four dollars a month, her yearly earnings were considerably lower than those of the other women routinely hired out by Ford. In 1827 Willoughby brought Ford only sixteen dollars, while Charlotte, Mosley, and Mary returned wages averaging $38.39. The difference was not due to Willoughby's skills, but her attitude. The defiant woman spent the spring of 1826 in the Work House and another two months there the following winter.[20]

Despite her rebelliousness, Ford saw promise in Willoughby as a skilled laborer, and in September 1827, he paid Eliza Lee thirty dollars and a barrel of rice to train her in "the art of a Pastry Cook." Arguably the most famous pastry cook in Charleston, Lee learned the culinary arts from her formerly enslaved mother, Sally Seymour. After receiving her freedom in 1795 from Thomas Martin, who was in all likelihood the father of her three mulatto children, the industrious Seymour eventually opened a pastry shop, where she employed the labor of a number of bondservants. The successful entrepreneur passed her business down to her daughter Eliza, giving her two bondservants, Flora and George, for the nominal fee of five dollars and leaving her the bulk of her estate, which was worth nearly $1,650 at

[19] Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 12; Kennedy, *Braided Relations*, 148–149; Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway* Slaves, 135.

[20] JFA, March 20, June 20, October 1, November 20, and December 4, 1826, February 5, 1827.

her death in 1824. An ambitious entrepreneur herself, Eliza Lee went from selling pastries to running a boardinghouse and eventually owning two of the city's finest hotels, the Mansion House and the Jones' Hotel. Catering to the city's elite, Lee earned a reputation for her excellent management and culinary skills and became one of the most influential free women of color in Charleston.[21]

While Ford negotiated the apprenticeship with an eye toward Willoughby's future earning potential, placing this already defiant woman with an enterprising free woman of color was clearly a bad idea. The apprenticeship was supposed to last for a year, but Lee cut it short at the beginning of January, after only four months, presumably due to Willoughby's job performance and defiant behavior. Willoughby was unable or unwilling to keep up with the demanding workload required to fill increased orders for cakes and pastries during the holiday season. After Lee dismissed Willoughby from the position, Ford sent Diana in her place. Two days later, he "sent Willoughby into the Country to Mr. Dawson's Plantation Mitten," where she stayed until May. For a woman who had enjoyed mobility, social networks, and relative privilege for years while living and working in the city, transfer to the country would have seemed like an awful punishment. The following January, Ford again hired out Willoughby in the city, this time to a Mr. Taylor at five dollars per month. Four months on the plantation failed to produce the desired effect, however, and three weeks after being hired to Taylor, Willoughby ran away. During the week she remained out, she likely found refuge with another of Ford's bondservants, a woman named Rachel, who had left him at the beginning of December. When the women were captured on February 7, Ford punished Rachel by committing her to the Work House for five months. Acknowledging that no amount of punishment would quell Willoughby's rebellious spirit, he sold her two days later.[22]

Willoughby's story was not uncommon. Skilled slave women routinely attempted to claim more control over their labor, leading to clashes with their owners. In the January 19, 1832, issue of the *Charleston Mercury*, Ben Leefe advertised the upcoming sale of a thirty-three-year-old "tailoress" who also was a "good nurse and understands the use of medicine." He admitted that "the only reason for selling her is her unwillingness to live with her present employer," which she presumably expressed by running away. Occasionally, skilled women's discontent erupted into physical al-

[21] Koger, *Black Slaveowners*, 38–39; Amrita Chakrabarti Myers, *Forging Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 99.

[22] JFA, September 18, 1827, January 9 and 11, May 3, and December 5, 1828, January 10 and 31, February 7, 1829; Kennedy, *Braided Relations*, 138.

tercations with their owners. A twenty-year-old servant named Charlotte ran away after committing "a most violent assault and outrage upon . . . her young mistress" during her owner's absence. Whatever punishment Charlotte received after being apprehended was not enough to deter her from running away again five years later.[23]

Another example of an enslaved woman who asserted her dominion within her workspace was Clory, a "mulatta with beautiful hair she could sit on." Clory worked as a laundress for the family of Edward Fuller, president of the First National Bank of Charleston. A fellow bondwoman recalled that Clory was "very high-tempered" and "didn't take foolishness frum [*sic*] anybody." As she was washing clothes one day, Mrs. Fuller entered the laundry room to criticize Clory's work. Vexed by her mistress's attempts to supervise her labor, Clory promptly threw Mrs. Fuller out of the laundry room. The family had to send for a doctor, as Mrs. Fuller was pregnant and delivered her baby "less than two hours" later. Anticipating a terrible punishment for her hostile insubordination, Clory begged to be sold. Instead, she received a "brutal" beating. Another of Fuller's bondwomen recalled that it was the worst beating she had ever seen, and she thought Clory would die. However, the beating only made Clory "meaner," and her owner did not trust her to continue working in her home. Fuller decided to hire Clory out, which probably afforded her the chance to claim greater authority over not only her work but also her living quarters.[24]

In August 1833, an enslaved Charlestonian named Maria worked out under the condition that she "clothe & feed herself & bring in $3 per month wages." At this time, bondwomen generally earned between five and seven dollars per month, depending on their occupation, and were responsible for their own food, clothing, and lodging.[25] They could live in outbuildings in their employers' yards, the homes of friends and relations, or rented rooms. "In the habit for several years of selling about the streets," fifty-five-year-old Sylvia possessed a measure of independence living on her own "in the yard Number 9 George street, where she hired a room." Charleston's 1740 slave codes prohibited bondservants from living away from their owner or their owner's representative, yet the practice prevailed. An 1806 ordinance declared, "No slave or slaves within the city shall have, hold, occupy, reside or sleep in any house, out-house, building or enclosure, other than his or her owners', or his or her owners' representative, without first obtaining

[23] On Ben Leefe's servant, see *Charleston Mercury*, January 19, 1832. On Charlotte, see *Charleston Courier*, May 19, 1820, November 17, 1825.

[24] Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of South Carolina, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, vol. 14, *South Carolina Narratives* (Washington, D.C.: Works Progress Administration, 1941), pt. 2, pp. 233–236.

[25] JFA, August 11 and 13, 1833.

a ticket." This ticket was to specify where the enslaved person would live and for how long. For breaking this law, bondservants were subject to confinement in the Work House and up to twenty lashes, while their owners could receive a five-dollar fine. Despite these laws, bondservants continued to hire their time and live out, benefiting from opportunities to earn more money, form relationships, and create autonomous lives, almost as though they were free. Gathering with family and friends in public spaces like markets, street corners, grogshops, groceries, and churches as well as in their rented rooms, bondwomen had rich, if still limited, social lives.[26]

Maurie D. McInnis estimates that more than 10 percent of Charleston's 19,500 bondservants lived in rented rooms in 1861. Although the accommodations were usually worse, enslaved laborers relished the freedom of living apart from their owners, where they could come and go of their own accord, choose their own company, and maintain private lives that were separate from their work. Many moved to the low-rent suburb that developed on Charleston Neck, the area north of Boundary (later Calhoun) Street. Here, back-alley rooms, flimsy shacks, and lightless garrets offered housing to fit their meager budgets. Rental houses typically accommodated a diverse mix of tenants, including working-class whites, free people of color, and bondservants living out. However, African American enclaves existed in the neighborhood, which allowed bondservants to avoid the prying eyes of whites. The residents of Thompson's Court in Ward 5, for example, were entirely African American, twenty-nine free and ten enslaved. Similarly, on Grove Street, near the Washington Race Course, just two white residents lived among forty-eight enslaved neighbors.[27] In 1856 the Grand Jury of Charleston District addressed the issue of slave housing on Charleston Neck, where "as many as fifty to one hundred negroes, or persons of color, are sometimes residing, shut out from the public street by a gate, all the buildings having a common yard, and not a single white person on the premises."[28] Laxly patrolled by the City Guard, the Neck afforded bondservants greater freedoms and provided a perfect refuge for runaways. "Accustomed to selling breakfast in the market," forty-year-old Mary Cart lived for several years "on the Neck in the vicinity of

[26] On Sylvia, see *Charleston Mercury*, July 9, 1840. George B. Eckhard, ed., *A Digest of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston, from the Year 1783 to October 1844* (Charleston, S.C.: Walker and Burke, 1844), 169; McInnis, *Politics of Taste*, 70; Midori Takagi, *"Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction": Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782–1865* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 47; Myers, *Forging Freedom*, 98.

[27] Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 67–70, 74; McInnis, *Politics of Taste*, 189–190; Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 25; Takagi, *Rearing Wolves*, 41; Myers, *Forging Freedom*, 24.

[28] Quoted in Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 25.

Flynn's Church." When she left her owner, he assumed that she would be harbored there, as she had "a good many relatives" in the area. Relying on her marketable skills and family connections, Mary evaded her owner for at least five months.[29]

In addition to making possible private lives away from their owners, the self-hire system gave bondwomen the opportunity to balance work and motherhood. Urban residents preferred hiring women who were not mothers, so those with children had to make outside arrangements for childcare. An enslaved mother named Hannah, who belonged to a woman on King Street, paid a ten-year-old slave boy named George two dollars a month to watch her child while she worked out. Many mothers had no choice but to leave their children in the street, where they depended on others to keep an eye on them. Anna, for example, "had a little girl about six years old, which she left in the street" while huckstering vegetables. The ability to earn enough profits to pay for childcare would have given women added peace of mind, knowing that their children were being looked after in their absence. Just as freedwomen negotiated labor terms after Emancipation to ensure that they would be able to care for their children, Hannah hired a babysitter and balanced her childcare duties with her work responsibilities in a way that enslaved women ordinarily could not. Asserting her role as a mother and negotiating a slave-hiring contract with a white male slaveholder, Hannah acted as a free woman.[30]

Midori Takagi argues that these privileges "sowed the seeds for future resistance by enabling certain slaves to gain skills and nurture beliefs that would threaten the ideological foundations of slavery." The ability to hire their time, choose their employer, and live out encouraged enslaved women to evaluate their employment situations based on wages, labor assignments, and working conditions. Thus, they could refuse jobs and assert certain rights, giving them a small degree of leverage in negotiating with employers, shopkeepers, and landlords.[31] Cynthia Kennedy demonstrates that "slave hiring yielded to slave women (and men) the psychological and economic power that slavery daily eroded."[32] Negotiating employment and

[29] McInnis, *Politics of Taste*, 57. On Mary Cart, see *Charleston Courier*, September 26, 1849. This ad ran until December 18, 1849.

[30] On Hannah, see JFA, November 7, 1832. Goldin, *Urban Slavery*, 63; Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 62. On Anna, see *Charleston Mercury*, July 22, 1834. On freedwomen's work after Emancipation, see Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*, 210; Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 28; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 47–49, 51.

[31] Takagi, *Rearing Wolves*, 52.

[32] Kennedy, *Braided Relations*, 153.

providing for themselves and their children helped bondwomen to see themselves as free workingwomen, which led them to demand rights and privileges as such.

Trained as a dressmaker, Amelia would become an inveterate runaway. She first ran away in 1853 at the age of eighteen with her mother, Maria, after they were transferred from a Mrs. Bruin on Saint Philip Street to a Mr. Touhy on Queen Street. While searching for the pair, Touhy learned that "they say they are free." When Amelia left again nearly four years later, her owner warned people against hiring her, noting that she had been "employed by many families in this city, and by some of the Millinery establishments on King street." By age twenty-four, she had gained additional skills as a mantua maker that would open up further employment options. When she ran away a final time in February 1858, Amelia asserted her identity as a free workingwoman for at least two and a half years, during which time her owner learned that "she works for respectable families about the city and says she is free."[33]

Perhaps the most autonomous group of enslaved women in Charleston was those who, like their counterparts in New Orleans, the Caribbean, and West Africa, dominated the trade in the city's marketplace. From their booths on Market Street, women sold fruits, vegetables, oysters, milk, coffee, spruce beer, candies, cakes, peanuts, popcorn, clothing, and handmade crafts. From wide baskets perched atop their turbaned heads, others hawked their wares throughout the city streets and along the wharves. By custom, enslaved market women negotiated the right to keep any profits above six dollars. Additionally, in their transactions with travelers, sailors, and city residents, they acquired international and local news, which they shared with one another as well as other bondservants in the city and on nearby plantations. Free to travel around Charleston and even to the countryside, where they purchased produce raised by plantation bondservants on their garden plots, market women possessed extraordinary mobility, but their economic independence was incomplete.[34]

Robert A. Olwell shows how women's roles as marketers granted them economic and political power. Through trade, women who were property in the eyes of the law used market relations to create distance between themselves and the goods they sold, thereby achieving a sense of freedom and humanity. Charleston residents routinely complained about the women wielding too much power, both in controlling the prices of the food sup-

[33] On Amelia, see *Charleston Courier*, February 8 and March 21, 1853, December 17, 1856. See also *Charleston Mercury*, February 16 and July 19, 1860.

[34] Myers, *Forging Freedom*, 95; Kennedy, *Braided Relations*, 138–139; Gould, "If I Can't Have My Rights," 190–191.

ply and in their assertive interactions with white customers.[35] Similarly, Ellen Call Long, a visitor to antebellum New Orleans, remarked upon the apparent freedom of the enslaved women who dominated that city's marketing trade. Dressed "in bright bandanas," these women "presided over tables" and were seen "laughing and chatting, and apparently as free as the customer who ordered his omelet or fruit." Long observed women selling "beer, cakes and fruit at street corners, or with baskets of fancy goods which they carried to the houses of patrons; and a more free, frolicking set of creatures I never saw—slavery at least with them had little significance." She then highlighted the limitations of this freedom, acknowledging that the hucksters worked for the benefit of their owners and stating that the revenue from their sales could support entire slaveholding families.[36] The glaring discrepancy between enslaved market women's freedom of mobility and their economic exploitation led many to seek control over their wages.

While hucksters and market sellers accounted for fewer than half of 1 percent of the working enslaved women enumerated in the 1848 Charleston census, they represented nearly 15 percent of the women runaways whose job skills were listed. Their numbers among the runaway population indicate the autonomy provided by this line of work as well as the ease with which they could blend in among the crowds in the market and along the wharves. Dolly was "well known on the Neck, particularly Butchertown," having "been in the habit of selling sausages for Mrs. Happoldt." After the death of her owner, she took advantage of the temporary break in oversight to remain out for at least a month, during which time she was "often seen in the market." When she ran away, Tibb, who had carried milk in Charleston for several years, also went every day to the market, where she relied on acquaintances to support her in seeking employment. After she had been gone for two weeks, her owner advertised that "she is pretending to look for an owner, and has a ticket from a person in this city to look for one." Likewise, a habitual runaway named Anna sold vegetables prior to leaving her owner in the summer of 1834. When she left again four years later, she was "seen in the market and up to the farms" on Charleston Neck, where she doubtlessly purchased produce to sell. Finally, a "tall, fine looking brown girl, twenty years old," Sarah Washington had been "in the habit of going to Summerville to buy vegetables, which she sold in the streets

[35] Robert A. Olwell, " 'Loose, Idle, and Disorderly': Slave Women in the Eighteenth-Century Charleston Marketplace," in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 98–102, 105–106.

[36] Quoted in Gould, "If I Can't Have My Rights," 189.

of Charleston." Relying on her business contacts, Washington supported herself and evaded capture for over a year.[37]

Because black women did not pose physical threats to the safety of the white community, the state tolerated their independent movement and economic enterprise, while simultaneously repressing the autonomy of black men. In the wake of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, South Carolina officials recognized a link between slave resistance and autonomous labor in the city and passed a series of laws in December 1822 aimed at limiting the mobility and employment opportunities of skilled men. Because the plot included at least five hired bondmen among its leaders, the legislature made it "altogether unlawful for any person or persons to hire to any male slave or slaves, his or their time." Those caught transgressing the law would be "liable to seizure and forfeiture."[38] Linking independent movement and employment to resistance, state legislators sought not only to limit black men's mobility but also to "seize" those whom they perceived as having too much freedom. The law did not change to include women until 1850.[39] It seems, then, that black women's gender gave them more mobility and autonomy in the city than black men.

Around the turn of the nineteenth century, in an effort to limit the freedom of bondservants, the Charleston City Council began requiring slaveholders to purchase badges for slaves who would be working out in the city. The city sold thousands each year, generating fourteen thousand dollar in fees in 1848 and twenty-six thousand dollars in 1859. Cut in the shape of an octagon, square, or diamond, these metal badges were stamped with a number, the person's occupation, and the year. A hole punched at the top permitted the wearer to pin the badge to her dress or wear it around her neck on a string (see figure 2). The city forced bondservants to wear the badges conspicuously on their person, unless they were employed in the homes of white residents, in which case the employer held onto the badge. Clearly, the badges were more than a means of generating revenue for the city. Requiring bondservants to wear the badges allowed residents to determine at a glance whether a bondwoman had her owners' permission to hire out.[40] Moreover, reflecting the fact that hired bondservants acted in ways that belied their enslaved status, slave badges were reminders for them

[37] RSDB. On Dolly, see *Charleston Mercury*, July 17 and August 5, 1843. On Tibb, see *Charleston Courier*, March 14, 1826. On Anna, see *Charleston Mercury*, July 22, 1834, October 6, 1838. On Sarah Washington, see ibid., August 28, 1862.

[38] Quoted in Harlan Greene, Harry S. Hutchins Jr., and Brian E. Hutchins, *Slave Badges and the Slave-Hire System in Charleston, South Carolina, 1783–1865* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, 2004), 40–41.

[39] Ibid., 52.

[40] Ibid., 8, 36, 45, 64, 108, 119, 133; McInnis, *Politics of Taste*, 69; Goldin, *Urban Slavery*, 38.

Figure 2. An enslaved domestic servant wore this badge in 1811. White Charleston silversmith John J. Lafar (1781–1849) won the city's badge contract every year from 1810 to 1831. His shop stamped the small copper plates with the name of the city, the year, the slave's occupation, and the abbreviation "No." Only the individual badge number, in this case 256, was engraved. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston.

to stay in their proscribed social place. While the badges were designed in part to be degrading markers of slavery, the women who wore them did not necessarily view them as such. Interviewing a former slave in Charleston in 1903, author John Bennett asked her whether enslaved people felt shame in wearing the badges. "Shame' fo' wear badge?" the woman responded in Gullah. "No," she said, "ain't shame' fo' mek money—ain't 'shame' fo' wuk—why dey bin 'shame' fo' wear badge fo'?"[41] Equating badges with financial gain, this woman regarded them as a means to economic empowerment.

Enslaved women recognized that their badges could expand their horizons, allowing them to earn wages with which they could establish independent lives away from their owners. In their study of slave badges, Harlan Greene and Harry S. Hutchins Jr. argue that "although these [slave]

[41] Quoted in Greene, Hutchins, and Hutchins, *Slave Badges*, 6.

tags could not literally transport their wearers to geographic freedom, they could nevertheless unleash the power of metaphor and simile. Those wearing them could act *as if* they were free. For if a slave put on a tag, he or she could often act as his or her own master, act *as if* he or she had control of his or her own destiny."[42] Conversely, the badges also constantly reminded the slave that his or her labor was not his or her own, and thus, the wearer was not truly free. The ritual of reporting to their owners and offering up a significant portion of their earnings highlighted in women's minds the distinct contrast between their legal status as enslaved property and their lived reality as free wage laborers. Some women resisted this economic exploitation by leaving their owners completely.

Skilled bondwomen relied on their badges to challenge their owner's authority over their bodies and labors. A tall, slim woman named Eve used profits earned through self-hire to adorn herself with the trappings of femininity. "Dressed in black," she wore "small gold bead rings in her ears, and a string of gold and coral around her neck." Asserting full claim to her wages, she took "advantage of a badge, to absent herself" for at least four months. Similarly, Ms. C. M. Perry acknowledged the desire of an enslaved woman named Catey to work for herself as a free woman. She "has been hiring her time in the city," Perry stated in an advertisement, adding that Catey "has a badge to work out, and is lurking about the city to avoid paying her wages." Finally, after Bess left the service of a Ms. Miller in the fall of 1840, her owner, John Stuart, noted in the newspaper that she was "accustomed to housework, washing, &c. She may have in her possession an old City Badge, but none for the present year." Bess's badge expired a few months after her escape, yet she got employment and avoided capture at least until April 1841.[43]

Without badges, women runaways depended on their intellect and language skills to convince potential employers that they indeed had their master's permission to work out. Penny's owner believed "she is probably harbored about the city" and warned people against hiring her, giving notice that she was "so plausible as to deceive most persons unacquainted with her." In the same way, a twenty-five-year-old seamstress named Dolly was "very plausible when spoken to, and likely to deceive." Utilizing her skill as a seamstress, talent for communication, and "connections at Mr. Carl's, in Bull street," she avoided capture for an entire year, despite being "seen repeatedly . . . about the city." Lucy likewise had both the language skills and the confidence to seek refuge among other servants. "Being extremely

[42] Ibid. (original emphasis).

[43] On Eve, see *Charleston Courier*, September 20, 1828. On Catey, see *Charleston Mercury*, October 9, 1855. On Bess, see ibid., January 18, 1841. This ad ran continuously through April 12, 1841.

plausible and insinuating in her conversation and manners, with a sufficient degree of assurance to impose on the unsuspecting," her owner supposed that she "is accommodated or secreted by the domestics in some family." In devising stories to explain their situations, women sometimes created new identities as well. When Mariann ran away in October 1823, her owner, A. B. Wilson, thought she "may assume fictitious names, and hire herself out as Nurse or Ladies Maid," as she was "remarkably artful" and "very plausible when spoken to." Mariann's strategy must have worked fairly well because when she ran away for a second time four and a half years later, Wilson was convinced she would make use of it again, noting that she "is a complete house servant and seamstress—in either of which capacity she may hire herself."[44]

Whites' ideas about gender and slave resistance seem to have created better economic opportunities for skilled female runaways than their male counterparts. Charleston runaway advertisements reflect slaveholders' recognition of women's greater chances of finding employment. While a larger percentage of male runaways were skilled (36 percent of men compared to 24 percent of women), slaveholders believed that women were more given to supporting themselves with their job skills during escapes. Acknowledging the repression of black men's independent economic enterprise following the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, runaway advertisements from the 1820s describe women as being almost twice as likely as men to hire their time (19 percent to 10 percent). The numbers eventually evened out as the fear of revolt subsided, but over the course of the antebellum period, 14 percent of women, compared to 8 percent of men, were thought by their owners to be hiring their time in the city. Even after the law changed in 1850 to prohibit the self-hire of women as well as men, women may have had an easier time in finding work, though their positions paid less than those available to men.[45]

There was a constant demand in the city for women's gender-specific job skills. In a letter written to the *Charleston Courier* on September 12, 1850, a Charleston resident explained that the recently passed law against hiring slaves (both male and female) was ineffective because "nothing is more *difficult* than getting any servant, and nothing more impossible than getting *a good one*."[46] Throughout the antebellum period, Charleston newspapers

[44] On Penny, see *Charleston Mercury*, November 6, 1833. On Dolly, see ibid., August 6, 1833. On Lucy, see *Charleston Courier*, January 16, 1824. On Mariann, see ibid., October 22, 1823, May 27, 1828.

[45] RSDB; Myers, *Forging Freedom*, 90.

[46] Quoted in Greene, Hutchins, and Hutchins, *Slave Badges*, 52–53 (original emphasis).

ran a steady stream of advertisements seeking cooks, maids, laundresses, seamstresses, and children's nurses. Because of the consistent demand for servants in the city, skilled women runaways found people willing to hire them, despite laws prohibiting the practice.[47] Although an enslaved woman named Nance did not have a badge to work out, her owner suspected that she was "harbored by some person washing clothes, as she is a remarkable good washerwoman." A similar advertisement for a "very pleasant looking" teenage girl named Molly noted that "she is a seamstress, and probably harbored for that purpose." In this way, Molly avoided capture for at least four months. Another example is Tenah, who was sold in Charleston after the death of her owner and "taken into the country as a nurse for the summer season." Within three months, however, Tenah had made her way back to the city, where she found a domestic position that enabled her to be with her husband, a free man of color named William Lewy. Tenah's owner advertised that "she has been (perhaps unknowingly) employed by a white person as a washerwoman" and her husband had been "seen in her company, at the person's house in which she is harbored."[48]

Residents of the city were willing to chance illegally hiring women who worked in the backlots behind their houses, away from public view. Charleston's residential compounds, consisting of a mansion house fronting the street and outbuildings in the back, functioned as urban plantations. The backlot was designed to support residents' lives of refinement and regulate bondservants' movements and interactions. A typical nineteenth-century urban yard included two large, two-story brick outbuildings—the kitchen and laundry on one side of the lot, and the stable and carriage house on the other. In the work yard between the main house and the kitchen building, enslaved women butchered chickens, scaled fish, and washed and hung laundry. They prepared meals on the first floor of the kitchen building and slept in dormitory-style rooms on the second floor above their workspaces. Early in the century, fear of slave rebellions led Charleston residents to surround their backlots with high brick walls, essentially cutting off their bondservants from their surroundings in an attempt to focus their attention on the tasks at hand (see figures 3 and 4).[49]

The architecture of Charleston's residential compounds made them perfect places of refuge. Preparing meals or laundering clothes in the yards

[47] For advertised positions, see *Charleston Courier*, February 4 and 26, 1823, September 20, 1856. See also *Charleston Mercury*, May 12, 1849, October 14, 1863.

[48] On Nance, see *Charleston Courier*, March 11, 1831. On Molly, see *Charleston Mercury*, January 24, 1860. A new ad for Molly ran continuously from March 5 to May 7, 1860. On Tenah, see *Charleston Courier*, November 7 and December 14, 1829.

[49] Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 61; McInnis, *Politics of Taste*, 178–180, 180–182; Alice R. Huger Smith and D. E. Huger Smith, *The Dwelling Houses of Charleston South Carolina* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1917), 82.

Figure 3. Early-twentieth-century depiction of the yard and carriage gate of the Miles Brewton House. From Alice R. Huger Smith's *Twenty Drawings of the Pringle House on King Street, Charleston, S.C.* (1914).

of their employers, women runaways could hide out in the heart of the city. William Taber's servant Cynthia eluded capture for at least eight months at the age of sixteen while "engaged in the yard of some washer" in the upper part of the city. An advertisement for a fifty-year-old woman named Sukey mentioned that she too was "probably concealed in some yard, as a washer."[50] A woman belonging to Fraser Mathewes used her labor to secure

[50] On Cynthia, see note 2. On Sukey, see *Charleston Courier*, January 29, 1857.

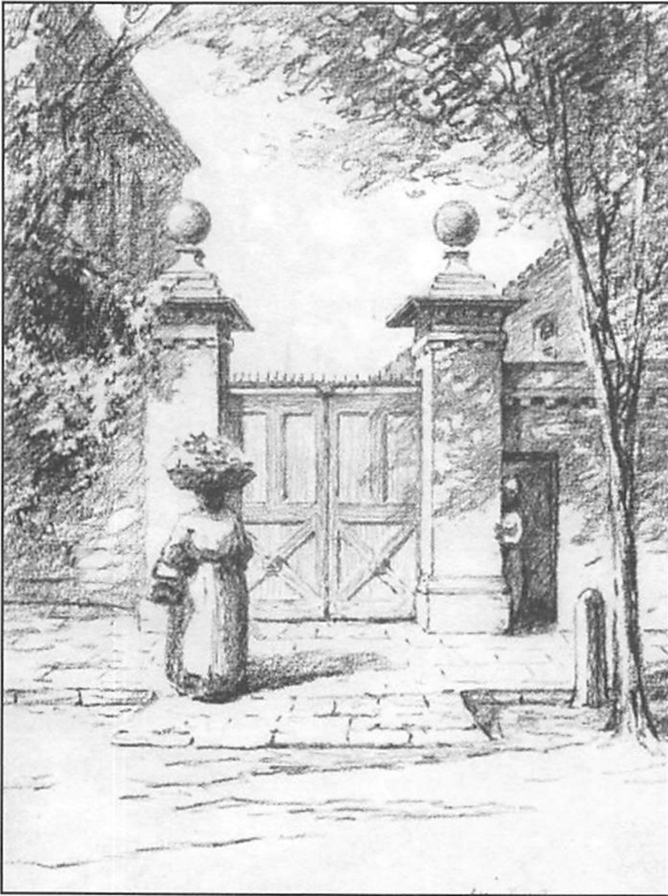

Figure 4. Street view of the same carriage gate. From Smith's *Twenty Drawings of the Pringle House.*

refuge for herself and her two children for a period of three years. When Mathewes finally learned that his slave was "in the yard & employment of a Free Mulatto woman," he needed the assistance of two police officers to enter the premises and capture her. Mathewes pressed charges against the employer, but to no avail: "Judge Elliot, who presided charged the Jury, that unless they were satisfied that the woman knew she was employing a runaway they could not convict her under the Law and accordingly she was acquitted, tho' it was proved that Mr. Mathewes' negro was employed

without a Ticket or Badge."[51] The judge's decision helps to explain how so many women runaways were able to find employment and shelter. The demand for domestic labor was such that urban residents often hired bondwomen without insisting on seeing badges or tickets from their owners.[52] By not asking too many questions and accepting a runaway's story even when they may have doubted it, residents disregarded the law in order to obtain much needed help. If they were later questioned by the runaway's owner or authorities, then they could relate the story given to them by the woman and convince a jury that they had not knowingly harbored a runaway.

Because Charleston's skilled bondwomen behaved in autonomous ways—traveling through the city streets, negotiating employment, and living away from their owners—few potential employers would have questioned their actions. The only thing distinguishing a woman legitimately working out in the city from a runaway was her owner's permission. Thus, slaveholders used newspaper advertisements to label women as runaways. George Cox warned readers of the *Charleston Courier* in October 1830 that Maria would hire herself out using "a ticket from me, authorizing her to engage in a place to work, which she told me she was previously promised," yet "she is using that ticket as an imposition." He ordered that "if she is engaged, or offers her services to anyone . . . she be taken to the Work House, as a runaway." Another slaveholder, a Dr. Rinker, was less subtle in his approach. In July 1855, he ran an advertisement in the *Charleston Mercury* that read, "My mulatto girl Sally is herewith declared runaway, to prevent silly excuses of illegal harboring or employing." In his May 1858 advertisement in the *Courier* for a "freckle-faced mulatto" woman named Molly, John Gilchrist distinguished between her previously authorized work and her now illegal independent activities: "She is an ironer, washer and clear starcher, and has been several months heretofore doing the fine washing at the Mills' House. . . . She is now harbored, or working under false pretences, for those that are highly responsible and fit subjects for a Court House." He offered two hundred dollars for information leading to the conviction of those employing Molly.[53] Acknowledging bondwomen's successful efforts to conduct themselves as free wage laborers, slaveholders used advertisements to publicly revoke runaways' negotiated privileges and reaffirm authority over their labor and ownership of their persons.

[51] Petition of the Agricultural Society of Saint Paul's Parish to the General Assembly, December 7, 1854, item 83, Legislative Papers, 1782–1866, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia.

[52] Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 134–135.

[53] On Maria, see *Charleston Courier*, October 8, 1830. On Sally, see *Charleston Mercury*, July 18, 1855. On Molly, see *Charleston Courier*, May 7, 1858.

Charleston's enslaved women waged a constant battle with their owners over the right to control their labor and their lives. This struggle would continue after the Civil War, when freedwomen renegotiated the terms of their labor to put their families' needs ahead of their employers' demands in an effort to fully realize their newfound freedom. Declaring their rights to reap the fruits of their labor by quitting unsatisfactory jobs and organizing strikes, freedwomen built upon the experiences of urban bondwomen, who had drawn on their labor to assert their dignity and self-worth in a similar fashion.[54] Early apprenticeships with free women of color, skills as seamstresses, laundresses, cooks, and market women, and knowledge of the value of their labor boosted enslaved women's self-esteem and enabled them to resist both psychological and physical bondage by running away. They recognized that freedom was more than simply a legal concept, but rather a lived experience that could be realized in the city through their own resourcefulness and hard work.

[54] On freedwomen's efforts to control their labor after the Civil War, see Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 22, 28, 91, 94–97; Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*, 208–211, 227, 229; Jones, *Labor of Love*, 47–49, 51.