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THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF SLAVE TRADING IN ANTEBELLUM SOUTH CAROLINA: JOHN SPRINGS III AND OTHER “GENTLEMEN DEALING IN SLAVES”

MICHAEL TADMAN*

THE INTERNAL SLAVE TRADE HAS ALWAYS POSED AWKWARD questions about the nature of slavery in the antebellum South. It was central to the proslavery argument that slaveowners were benevolent and that they fostered and protected slave families. In contrast, abolitionists argued that owners in the longer-settled sections of the South routinely broke up the families of their slaves in selling to professional slave traders, with the traders then carrying their purchases to customers in the expanding regions of the slave South. Indeed, abolitionists went on to argue that the “selling states” bred slaves for sale and argued that the traffic in slaves was vital for the economic survival of slavery in the selling area. Such questions — slave selling, family separations, slave breeding — must be addressed in any serious investigation into the nature of antebellum slavery and into the character of relations between masters and slaves. What has happened, however, is that for South Carolina and the South generally much of the slave trade is missing from the historical record.¹

This article has several interrelated purposes. First, I want to comment on why the trade has been so deemphasized in southern history. Second, I want to summarize my own work on the trade — which argues that slave traders were intensely active in virtually every district of South Carolina (and of the antebellum South generally).² Third, I want to develop case studies of several South Carolina traders, and especially of John Springs III. Springs for much of the antebellum period was one of the wealthiest, most

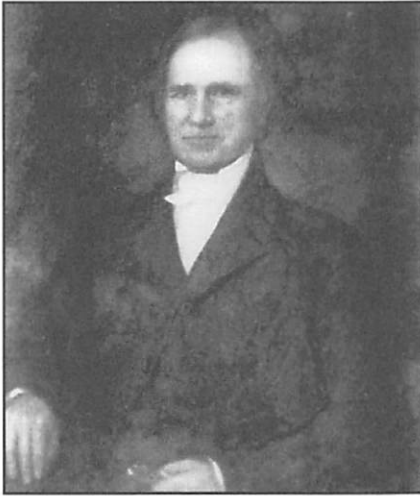
*Department of Economic and Social History, University of Liverpool

¹The author is working on a study which will try to document large numbers of South Carolina slave traders across the period c.1780-1865. He would like to know of any relevant materials, including those in private possession, to which he might be able to gain access. Please write care of the *South Carolina Historical Magazine*.

²Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). By the domestic (or interstate, or interregional) slave trade, I mean the long-distance traffic in slaves, overwhelmingly those who were born in America. I do not include as “traders” those (like Alonzo J. White and Louis D. DeSaussure of Charleston) who essentially acted as auctioneers rather than as buyers and sellers in their own right. See Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, p. 55.

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John Springs III (1782-1853), entrepreneur, planter, politician, and slave trader. Photo courtesy of South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina.

prominent, best respected, and most politically significant citizens of York District. He was also for at least thirty years (1806-1836) an active long-distance slave trader, and even in his late sixties he continued to associate with major slave traders and to invest in their enterprises. Indeed, his long slave-trading career spanned some of the most active years of South Carolina's slave importation from other states; it extended from the mid-1830s into South Carolina's phase of slave exportation to newer cotton states. From at least 1806, when he was still in his early twenties, Springs began making regular treks from South Carolina to the Eastern Shore of Maryland, where he bargained with local farmers and owners and assembled his coffles of slaves. From Maryland (and sometimes Virginia), he marched his slave gangs, mostly in chains and ropes, to South Carolina, where he found local farmers willing to pay high prices. In buying his slaves, Springs would have broken slave families routinely, but his South Carolina clients often would have seen him as a saviour, bringing the labor that they felt was essential for their economic success.

The Springs case is of wide importance because it forms part of a general pattern. Despite his very extensive activity as a slave trader, a late-nineteenth-century biographical directory, *Cyclopedia of Eminent and Representative Men of the Carolinas in the Nineteenth Century*, chose to ignore this fundamentally important facet of his career as entrepreneur, planter, politician, and father of a major political family. As a young man, Springs already had substantial family wealth, and his capital and social connections would have made possible his extensive slave-trading investments. In turn, the profits from the trade would have lifted him to his status as one of the state's wealthiest and most influential citizens. Nowhere, however, is his slave trading acknowledged.

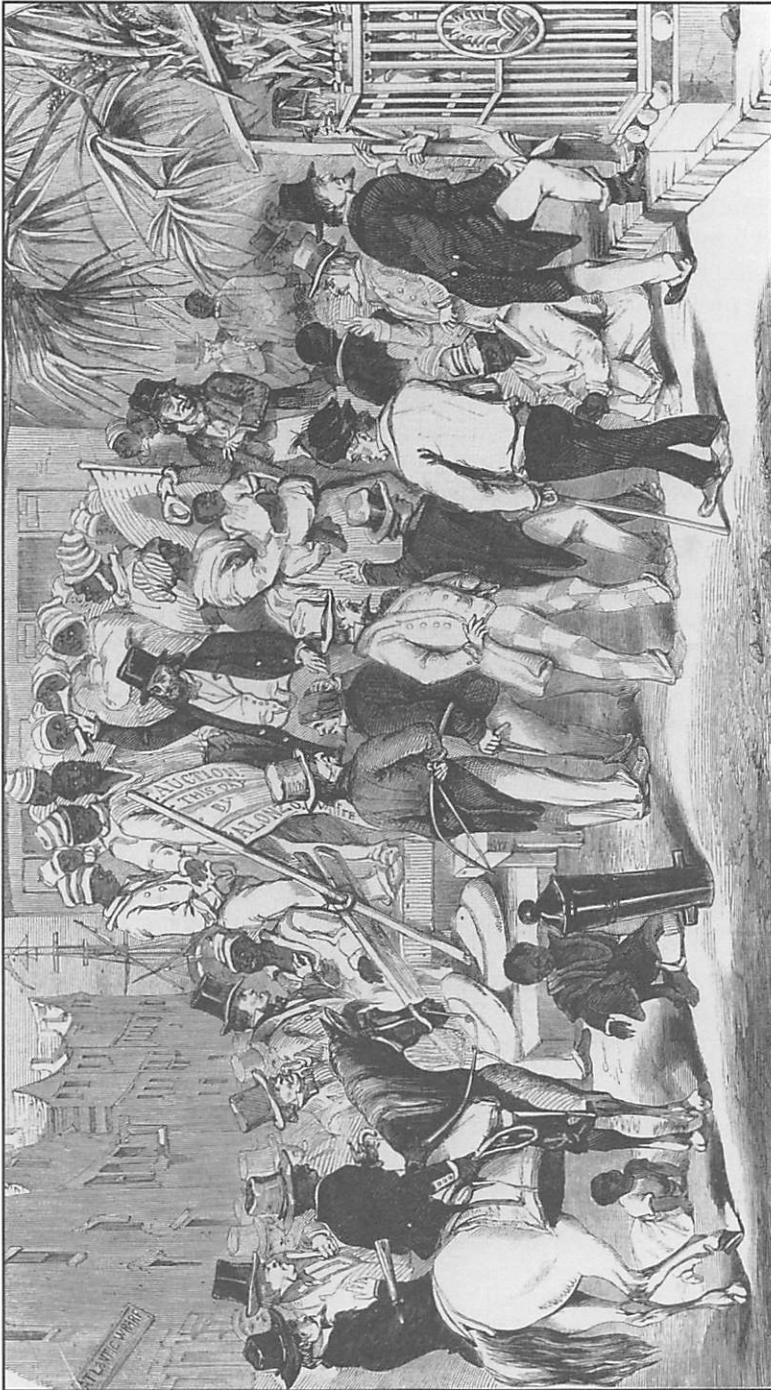
This neglect turns out to be a persistent pattern in nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century obituaries of former traders and in biographical directories and county histories of the period. Antebellum whites were sensitive to the charge that as slaveholders they acted callously toward slave families and, as we shall see, they played down the role of the trade. For many decades afterwards, white Southerners continued to hide and marginalize the trade. We shall see that other factors also contributed to the deemphasis of the trade, practical matters concerning the survival of traders' manuscript records and the difficulties of reconstructing collective biographies from available primary sources.

This article will argue that slave trading and the forcible separation of slave families were pervasive in South Carolina and in the South generally and will maintain that traders tended to be men of considerable wealth and status. The trade, however, was awkward to fit with southern white claims of benevolence and tended therefore to be hidden. This article suggests that the pervasive character of the internal slave trade should be recognized so that a more realistic and less romantic history of slavery can be developed.

LET US TURN FIRST TO PROBLEMS OF EVIDENCE. IN THE ANTEBELLUM period defenders of slavery claimed that traders were generally shunned and that the only slaves they picked up were those sold either because of their own faults or because of their masters' debts.³ A sampling of antebellum white propaganda on the trade is provided by the series of fifteen or more proslavery novels which were published speedily in response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In Stowe's 1852 novel, the slave trade and family separations had been a major linking theme. Several novels written in reply simply ignored the awkward question of the trade. In the remaining proslavery replies, the trade was presented as being marginal to the life of the South and the trader was depicted as an outcast. Typical of these novels was J. Thornton Randolph's *The Cabin and the Parlor* (1852). There, the trader appeared because "Messrs. Skin and Flint, factors and merchants of New York," had, by charging excessive commissions and interest, forced their southern client, Mr. Courtney, to make a sale of his slaves. The sentiments of the community in the South on such occasions were, however, represented as having been such that:

The slaves ... were all purchased to remain in the district.
Even among those planters who showed little concern for the

³For a typical denial of the trade, see J. Blanchard and N. L. Rice, *A Debate on Slavery Held in the City of Cincinnati on the First, Second and Sixth Days of October 1845, upon the Question Is Slaveholding in Itself Sinful, and the Relation between Masters and Slave, a Sinful Relation?* (Cincinnati, Ohio: W.H. Moore and Co., 1846; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 28.



"Slave Sale, Charleston, South Carolina," *The Illustrated London News*, November 29, 1856. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society. Because most slave traders approached their customers directly rather than through advertised sales, most transactions took place on a one-to-one basis rather than through scenes like this one.

ruined Courtneys there was a sentiment of honour on this point.... A trader who had made his appearance was hustled away rather rudely by one or two present, so that, after making a few ineffectual bids, he thought it prudent to retire.⁴

The South's denial and marginalization of the slave trade continued in the postbellum years. There is, for example, a striking contrast between the near invisibility of the trade in most white reminiscences of slavery and its very high profile in the narratives of ex-slaves.⁵ In addition, in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, obituaries, biographical directories, and county histories — with an eye to preserving the benign "plantation legend" — typically would tuck slave-trading activity comfortably away from view and confine themselves to the former trader's other business activities. Thus, the trader Thomas C. Weatherly appeared in *A History of Marlboro County* (1897) in the following terms:

T.C. Weatherly, so prominent in Marlboro affairs, and for so long one of its most popular citizens, began his business career in Clio as a salesman with Mr. McDaniel, but soon formed a partnership with Mr. J.L. McColl.... He served the people in the State Legislature for several terms. A man of quick mind, ready action, public spirit, good judgment and generous impulses, he exercised a large influence.⁶

Similarly, the 1903 obituary of Charles Logan, a high-profile slave trader, referred only to his wealth having been accumulated "through speculative

⁴J. Thornton Randolph, *The Cabin and the Parlor; or, Slaves and Masters* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, 1852), pp. 31, 42. For similar depictions, see also, for example, John W. Page, *Uncle Robin in his Cabin and Tom Without One in Boston* (Richmond: J.W. Randolph, 1853); Mary H. Eastman, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin, or Southern Life as It Is* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and Co., 1852); Baynard R. Hall, *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop; A Tale* (New York: C. Scribner, 1852); and Thomas Bangs Thorpe, *The Master's House; A Tale of Southern Life* (New York: T.L. McElrath and Co., 1854).

⁵Contrast, for example, the white reminiscence of J.G. Clinkscales, *On the Old Plantation: Reminiscences of his Childhood* (Spartanburg, S.C: Band and White, 1916) with the dominant tone in John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), or with the testimony of ex-slaves in George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1972), Vols. 1 and 2 (South Carolina).

⁶J.A.W. Thomas, *A History of Marlboro County, With Traditions and Sketches of Numerous Families* (Atlanta: self-published, 1897; repr., Baltimore: Regional Publishing Company, 1971), p. 146.

| <h2 style="text-align: center;">UNDER DECREE IN EQUITY.</h2> <p style="text-align: center;">WILL BE SOLD ON TUESDAY, THE 10TH INSTANT, AT ELEVEN O'CLOCK, AT THE MART, IN CHALMERS STREET, UNDER THE DIRECTION OF JAMES TUPPER, Master in Equity, SIXTY-FIVE VALUABLE NEGROES.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">TERMS.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">One-third Cash; balance in one and two years, secured by bond, mortgage, and two approved sureties.</p> | | | |
|--|---------------------|------|---------------|
| No. | NAMES. | No. | NAMES. |
| 420 | Nickey, 35 | 965 | Tena, 27 |
| | Affy, 40 | | Joan, 30 |
| | Sharlow, 25 | | Betsy, 45 |
| 5 | Hetty, 30 | 425 | Mikel, 7 |
| | Little Flora, 14 | | Eady, 6 |
| | London, 25 | 4 | Jim, 1 |
| 415 | Silvy, 27 | | Lavanda, 35 |
| | Linda, 27 | | Celia, 36 |
| 5 | Infant, 9 m | 577 | Monday, 20 |
| | Polly, 7 | | Nat, 13 |
| | Taffy, 30 | | Dick, 14 |
| 775 | Buckey, 28 | | Nicholas, 8 |
| | Daniel, 3 | 7 | Ellen, 2 |
| | Celia, 30 | X | Katy, 27 |
| 3 | Jim, 3 m | 720 | John, 20 |
| | Prince (Driver), 24 | | Moses, 27 |
| 2 | Camilla, 20 | 5 | Davy, 60 |
| 680 | Betsy (Nurse), 45 | | Joan, 50 |
| 540 | Absalom, 32 | | Cornel, 40 |
| | Joan, 34 | 588 | Jennie, 50 |
| | Peter, 47 | | Edward, 15 |
| | Amaritta, 46 | | Mary, 30 |
| 580 | Alfred, 14 | 6 | Betsy, 7 |
| | Sampson, 12 | | Infant, 1 |
| | Chloe, 32 | 565 | Primus, 30 |
| 740 | Flora, 45 | | Charlotte, 26 |
| | Harry, 55 | 703 | Affy, 30 |
| 690 | Tena, 30 | | John, 7 |
| | Luisa, 9 m | 1103 | Sike, 28 |
| 4 | Nancy, 26 | | Judy, 30 |
| | Affy, 65 | 491 | Harriet, 23 |
| 90 | Abby, 35 | | Elizabeth, 6 |
| | | 1205 | 65 Negroes. |

Walker, Evans & Co., Printers, 3 Broad Street, Charleston, S. C.

In the past, researchers have used records from urban areas, like this broadside for a slave sale in Charleston, to understand the nature of slave trading. By studying the private and business papers of slave traders, especially of those who operated in rural areas, the author has determined that the internal slave trade was much more extensive than suggested by previous estimates. Lee Family Papers, Collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

deals of all sorts." There was no reference to slave trading. In Logan's case, however, we learn of bequests to a school, a hospital, a church, and to the care of animals. Logan, we find, was a "kind" man for, as the editor of *The State* added, "next to the care of children, kindness to dumb animals is the mark of a kind heart."⁷

For much of the first half of this century, the dominant white agenda — twinning closely with historian Ulrich B. Phillips's ideas — projected notions of a "benevolent" white supremacy and ignored slave trading and exploitation of blacks. Reflecting the antebellum proslavery tradition, Phillips depicted slavery as a benign institution in which there was little place for slave trading or for the forcible separation of slave families. By the 1930s Frederic Bancroft, in *Slave Trading in the Old South*, began to turn the tide by revealing — at least for the towns and cities of the South — active slave trading, and often by men of very high status. But because he concentrated so heavily on urban centers (where he mainly used traders' advertisements in newspapers), we still did not know how deeply the trade reached into the great mass of the rural South.⁸

However the antebellum newspaper advertisements which were Bancroft's principal source of evidence, in fact, vastly underrepresent the scale of the traffic in slaves. This becomes clear when we find that even traders like Ziba Oakes of Charleston (who bought and sold several hundred slaves each year) almost never used newspaper advertisements in their business. For itinerant rural traders, newspapers often did not circulate quickly enough to be of great value either in achieving sales or in making purchases. Most traders found it better to approach their customers directly rather than through advertisements.⁹

When we turn to the records of slaveholders generally, the diaries and letters of planters and of smaller slaveholders are rarely comprehensive enough to give more than an incomplete insight into their buying and

⁷Quoted in John Hammond Moore, *Columbia and Richland County: A South Carolina Community, 1740-1990* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), p. 120. On Logan see Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (Baltimore: J.H. Furst and Co., 1931; repr., Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 240-241.

⁸Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1918), pp. 187-204; Bancroft, *Slave Trading*. The two landmark studies in recent slavery historiography have deemphasized the trade. See Robert W. Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1974) and Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974).

⁹Comments on newspapers are based on a survey of all 1850s South Carolina newspapers held at the South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C. (hereafter SCL).

selling of slaves. Indeed, in such manuscripts, reference to individual named slaves is nearly always confined to especially favored or important "key slaves" (like drivers, drivers' wives, and senior domestics).¹⁰ Sometimes bills of sale survive and provide an important supplement to a slaveowners' diaries and correspondence — as in the case of South Carolina's prominent planter-politician-writer James H. Hammond. In a letter of 1846, Hammond made a calculatedly low (and unsuccessful) bid for a neighbor's gang of fifty-nine slaves and included the note that:

I rated them at 10 per cent under the negro trader's prices and at 10 per cent less than they would bring I think if sold separately as the trader sells. But this of course you would not think of doing nor would anyone who was not a monster — or a negro trader.

But many of Hammond's bills of sale survive, and they clearly show him buying scores of slaves in broken families from traders, including S.F. Slatter, Joseph Woods, Ansley Davis, H.N. Templeman (and Templeman, Omohundro & Co.), John W. Forward, Solomon Davis, J. Hull, Thomas Ryan, and Thomas Norman Gadsden.¹¹

The federal census is valuable in revealing the identity of some traders, but here too there are problems. Traders outside of the major towns and cities were often planter-entrepreneurs involved in planting or in running a general store, as well as in slave trading. We find then in many cases — like Col. Thomas C. Weatherly, Col. E.S. Irvine, and Major George Seaborn (comprehensively documented slave traders who are discussed later in this study) — that the census gives occupations such as "planter," "merchant," or "farmer," rather than "slave trader."¹²

The private and business papers of slave traders, where they have survived and have been publicly deposited, can — as we shall see in the case of the Ziba Oakes Papers — suddenly open up new worlds bursting with slave trading which otherwise would have gone undetected. My own study of the trade used the Oakes Papers extensively, and Edmund L. Drago has

¹⁰For a discussion of "key slaves" and the neglect of others (by historians and in slaveholders' records) see Tadman, Introduction to paperback edition of *Speculators and Slaves* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp. xix-xxxvii.

¹¹On Hammond's letter of 1846, see Hammond to Hodgson, Nov. 16, 1846, and Jan. 24, 1847, James H. Hammond Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C. On Hammond's purchases, see James H. Hammond Collection of Bills of Sale, SCL; Hammond Diaries, especially April 1843 and January 1844, SCL; and Thomas N. Gadsden correspondence with Hammond (April-October 1843), James H. Hammond Papers, SCL.

¹²See manuscript census returns for Marlboro, Greenville, and Anderson districts, S.C., 1850 and 1860.

published (with a valuable introductory essay) more than a hundred of these letters. The letters chosen by Drago are those of A.J. McElveen, one of the slave-buying agents of Oakes. Making his purchases in and around Sumter District in the 1850s, McElveen sent slaves on to Oakes at Charleston. From there, the latter resold the slaves, mainly to the long-distance slave trade.¹³

My study *Speculators and Slaves* was concerned with the South generally, but gave considerable attention to South Carolina. Using a combination of sources, I identified for South Carolina in the 1850s (by which time South Carolina had become a net exporter of slaves) at least ninety-seven firms of interstate traders (and a further sixty probable firms) which exported slaves from South Carolina to the expanding slave areas to the south and west. For South Carolina, and for the South as a whole, I argued that the trade had a pervasive influence on the lives of slaves, on the economy of slavery, and on the nature of slaveholding. In order to try to go beyond Bancroft's problem of concentrating mainly on the urban centers of the trade, and in order to combat the problem of the unevenness of surviving primary documentation, my study took two main approaches. First, I used the survival-rate technique (which focuses on the age structure of the interstate movement of slaves), and, second, I made a detailed case study of one state (South Carolina in the 1850s).¹⁴

The survival-rate calculations tried to break down the interstate movement of slaves into its two essential elements — the slave trade and planter migration. In classic planter migrations, a slave owner from, say, South Carolina disposed of his land in that state and took his gang of slaves to establish a new plantation in, perhaps, Alabama. Such migrations should not have been age selective so far as the slaves were concerned, and should,

¹³The Ziba Oakes Papers are deposited at the Boston Public Library. Edmund L. Drago, ed., *Broke by the War: Letters of a Slave Trader* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

¹⁴The survival-rate technique is useful for studying the scale and demographic composition of internal migrations and the federal census provides necessary raw data. The basic assumption on which this technique relies is that, across a population generally, those of the same age and sex should, on average, experience the same rate of mortality (and hence the same "survival rate"). Thus, if we find (say, from 1850 to 1860) that in the southern slave population as a whole males of a particular age had a 90 percent survival rate, we should expect in that decade the same 90 percent rate for such slaves in both the older slave states and in the newer states. In practice, newer states like Mississippi showed dramatically above-average notional rates of "survival" (sometimes, because of heavy importation, "survival rates" of 200 or 300 percent) for the teenage and young-adult age groups in which the slave trade specialized and displayed for older slaves survival rates which were much closer to the typical southern rates for slaves of those ages. From this sort of basis, detailed calculations can be developed (state by state, or district by district) to show approximate levels of age-specific and sex-specific importation and exportation.

on balance, have taken west a more or less representative sample of South Carolina's slave population. (In practice, planters sometimes supplemented their gang by some selective slave purchasing before departure). Since slave trading was highly age-selective, concentrating heavily on teenagers and young adults, it was possible to estimate the relative contributions of slave trading and planter migration to the total interstate movement of slaves. The conclusion was that between 1820 and 1860 at least some 60 to 70 percent of interregional slave movements (between the net-importing and the net-exporting regions of the South) were produced by the trade rather than by planter migration.¹⁵

The second technique, a detailed case study of South Carolina in the 1850s, supported the results from the calculations which were based on age structure. In the case study, I used newspapers and court records (equity court and court of common pleas) for all districts in which such documentation survives; and I searched certain sales records (sales by masters in equity, the Sumter sheriff, probate records, and the South Carolina Department of Archives and History's collection of miscellaneous bills of sale). I also used slave narratives and other commentaries, the census, city directories, and manifests of the coastwise shipping of slaves. In addition, I drew on certain slave holders' papers and various collections of slave traders' letters; and I used secondary sources. The records just listed in this paragraph ("core" records), in combination, produced a picture of substantial slave trading in all but one or two South Carolina districts. But the incompleteness of this combination of "core" sources as a guide to the true scale of the state's slave trading is dramatically revealed by the addition of the Ziba Oakes letters. The Oakes Papers (several hundred business letters) relate mainly to Charleston and Sumter districts. While "core" records revealed only fourteen or fifteen trading firms for Charleston District, the Oakes Papers lifted that total to at least thirty-two. Even more striking, in Sumter nearly all of the eleven or more documented trading firms were identified solely as a result of the chance survival of the Oakes Papers. The conclusion must be that "core" sources provide only a basic skeleton of a much more substantial trade.¹⁶

The survival-rate technique (based on age structures), supplemented by the South Carolina case study, allowed calculations about the scale of family separations. In the exporting states, about one in five slave marriages was broken by the interregional trade and about one in three children in those states was separated by the trade from one or more of his or her parents. These calculations were based on the units in which slaves were sold to traders. (Typical units included a mother sold with her infant or with

¹⁵Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, pp. 11-46.

¹⁶On the South Carolina case study and on the Oakes Papers, see *ibid.*, pp. 31-41, 248-276.

young children or comprised children sold without either parent. There were virtually no cases in the long-distance trade of husband and wife being sold together.) It seems clear, too, that these sales and separations stemmed not from pressures of debt but simply from a desire to make extra profits from slaves. These estimates of the trade, together with testimony from slave narratives and other sources, suggest that the threat of sale hung constantly over slave families. I did not, however, find evidence to support the claim that systematic slave breeding was commonplace. It is significant, moreover, that more families stayed intact than were broken, that new families were made when slaves were separated, and that nearly all slaves must have had substantial years of family life. Because of this very real base of family experience, slaves seem to have been strongly attached to family, so that the threat of sale and the knowledge of separation are likely to have put great emotional distance between most slaves and their masters.¹⁷

IF WE TURN TO DEVELOPING PROFILES OF INDIVIDUAL SOUTH Carolina slave traders, it is clear that across the state highly visible slave trading (buying slaves, driving them west in coffles, and selling them there) was no bar to the highest social and political standing. Indeed, except for some paid assistants and for occasional petty traders who might sell just a few slaves a year, slave traders had to be men of considerable wealth (or at the least they had to be respected by the very wealthy in order to command funds). This is because — in a region where long credit of two, three, or four years was the dominant pattern — traders paid in cash (or in “good casheable paper”) in nearly all of their transactions. A coffle of forty slaves might well call for more than \$30,000 in cash. Major traders, then, nearly always came from wealthy (usually planter) families and, as was the case with John Springs III, got wealthier still by trading. Often, too, traders, especially in predominantly rural areas, were involved in other speculations, including running general stores. Again, we shall see that John Springs III fit this pattern. This entrepreneurial diversity was made possible because the trade was seasonal — the most important buying period for a trader being late summer and fall, and the most important selling period being from December to the end of March. Only a few months therefore needed to be spent out of state, and slave trading and other business activities (usually in partnerships) could cross-subsidize each other.¹⁸

¹⁷On the issues relating to family separations which are discussed in this paragraph, see *ibid.*, pp. 133-178, 111-132, 211-221.

¹⁸Traders' advertisements and correspondence persistently emphasize cash purchases. On the mixing of slave trading with the running of general stores, and with other business activities, see entries for scores of South Carolina traders (including T.C. Weatherly, E.S. Irvine, and George Seaborn) in the South Carolina volumes of the R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration, Cambridge, Mass.

Col. Thomas C. Weatherly of Marlboro District is an example of a prominent trader with great wealth, diversified business interests (including his general store), and a major career in South Carolina state politics. In the 1840s and 1850s, Colonel Weatherly (together with his partner Joseph A. Weatherly) traded extensively in slaves. T.C. Weatherly made trips to buy slaves in Richmond, Virginia, as well as buying in Charleston and elsewhere in South Carolina, and made frequent trips to Alabama and Mississippi to sell slaves. In roughly the same period he served as a member of the South Carolina House of Representatives and later in the South Carolina Senate.¹⁹ The credit agency R.G. Dun & Co. described him in the early 1850s as being in partnership with [J.L.] McColl, and noted that Weatherly was:

quite a bold speculator. Besides merchandise he deals in slaves, Kentucky horses, mules and swine[;] in his business he is apt to make money by his adventures and has I have no doubt made money of late years. he is decidedly a man of bus[iness] talents, act[ive] habits, needing perhaps the excitement of speculating.

In 1856 Dun reported that he was no longer linked to McColl and that Weatherly was “looked upon here as among our rich men.... Deals in slaves and plants cotton, is in vy gd cr [very good credit], is not engaged in any other trade.” The 1860 census (describing him as “farmer”) reported his combined real and personal estate as being \$175,000 — putting him in the top 0.1 percent of American wealth holders, and making him a millionaire by modern standards.²⁰

In Greenville District in the 1840s and 1850s, O.B. Irvine and Col. E.S. Irvine (probably brothers) were not quite as prominent politically as Weatherly was in Marlboro, but they had similar wealth and similarly mixed entrepreneurial activities. The 1860 census reported E.S. Irvine as “farmer” (the census having described him as “merchant” in 1850), and gave his combined personal and real estate as \$132,000. In 1860 O.B. Irvine appeared as “physician,” with an estate of \$134,000. As Dun’s registers show, Col. E.S. Irvine (probably with O.B. Irvine) did indeed have a drug store in Greenville. In various Dun reports in the 1850s, E.S. Irvine appeared as “honourable and worthy,” “a highly respectable gentleman,” “a gentleman,” a “man of integrity,” and as “a man of property.” In 1855 he was reported in Dun as being “absent on a travel in Ala[bama]” and no

¹⁹On T.C. and J.A. Weatherly, see Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, pp. 94, 267, 194-195. The Weatherlys may have been brothers.

²⁰Dun & Co. Collection, South Carolina, Vol. 11a, pp. 34, 42; Federal census, Marlboro, S.C., 1860.

doubt there were many such absences.²¹ An 1847 court case reported Col. E.S. Irvine as "being at that time engaged in the purchase and sale of slaves on speculation" and about to carry slaves out of state; and in the 1840s and 1850s he, with O.B. Irvine, regularly advertised that he would pay "the highest cash prices for likely Negroes." Col. E.S. Irvine was clearly a close friend of Benjamin F. Perry, state legislator from Greenville District. "Mrs Col. Irvine," as her friend Mrs. Perry called her, often came to tea at the Perrys; and Mrs. Perry, in letters to her own absent husband, repeatedly referred to Colonel Irvine buying a "drove of Negroes for sale," or having "gone to the West to sell a drove of Negroes."²²

Major George Seaborn of Anderson District was a slave trader and a gentleman of high standing. In 1850 R.G. Dun & Co. reported that he was "a planter aged 50 v[ery] fine char[acter] and w[orth] in land negroes etc some \$20[000]." At that time, as well as being a planter and a slave trader, he was also joint editor and publisher of the *Farmers' and Planters' Magazine* and an agent for the sale of "agricultural implements machinery seeds Books etc on commission."²³ From at least the mid-1830s until the late 1850s, his involvement as an interstate slave trader was very active. In 1837 Thomas Harrison expressed anxiety that Seaborn's slave-trading partnership with his young nephews, the Cobbs, and with a certain Daniels would ruin him financially. Harrison wrote:

Maj Seaborn has just returned from Alabama. He took negroes to sell, and had to bring them back to Georgia [where he had for a long time traded, and] where he disposed of most of them. It is getting to be an uncertain business. I am afraid the Cobbs and Daniels will break Seaborn. They have been trading in negroes for several years together, Seaborn furnishing the means and they pocketing the profits. I understand all his debts are still hanging over him and he has nothing to show for the negro trade.²⁴

²¹Federal census, Greenville District, 1840, 1850; Dun & Co., South Carolina, Vol. 10, pp. 137, 140.

²²*E.S. Irvine vs. Chaney Stroud*, Greenville District (S.C.) Equity Court (Roll 160), 1847, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia (hereafter SCDAH); advertisements in *Greenville Mountaineer*, March 1849-January 1851; Elizabeth F. Perry to Benjamin F. Perry, Dec. 6, 1846, and many other such references, Benjamin F. Perry Papers, SCL.

²³Dun & Co., South Carolina, Vol. 2, pp. 49, 65, 72F; and George Seaborn to M. Bryan, Nov. 18, 1852, George Seaborn Papers, SCL.

²⁴Thomas Harrison to James Harrison, Mar. 6, 1837, James Thomas Harrison Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (hereafter SHC).

Harrison need not have worried. In 1852, as a court case shows, Seaborn and the Cobbs were still “partners in the traffic in slaves” and in 1853 “Jesse Cobb went with slaves westward ... [and] E[dwin] M. Cobb and Seaborn had 15 or 20 negroes there at the time.” And by 1860, according to the census, Seaborn’s combined estate had grown to a figure of some \$91,000.²⁵

Not all traders had wealth on the scale of Weatherly, the Irvines, and Seaborn, but a few, (like Allen Vance of Abbeville District and J.W. Ford of Kershaw), had more.²⁶ Most traders in the late-antebellum period probably had assets running well into the tens of thousands of dollars. In order to spread work loads and risks, and often to allow for diversified entrepreneurial activity, very wealthy slave traders often had trading partnerships. Sometimes smaller men found partnerships to be a way into the trade. James H. Charles, for example, put in \$10,000 when he entered a “partnership with Richard M. Owens [Owings] and [Judge] A.P. Robertson in purchasing and selling negro slaves” from their base in Edgefield District.²⁷ And a small percentage of the trade was accounted for by men like John Bell, who sought advice from John Springs III in investing a modest \$2,000 in “Negro speculation.” But everywhere men of wealth and standing were the backbone of the trade. Charleston, where old families and traditions counted especially heavily in society, was no exception. There, in the 1845-1865 period, the city’s aldermen included the wealthy and extremely active interregional slave traders Alexander McDonald, John S. Riggs, Thomas Ryan, Ziba Oakes, and A.J. Salinas.²⁸

THE WEALTH (AND ALMOST CERTAINLY, TOO, THE PRESTIGE) of Weatherly, the Irvines, Seaborn, and the Charleston traders was greatly overshadowed by that of John Springs III (1782-1853) of York District. An excellent recent work by Lacy K. Ford, Jr., shows that Springs was the planter-entrepreneur *par excellence*. At his death in 1853, Springs left an estate worth about \$500,000, making him a multi-millionaire by modern standards and putting him high in the elite of South Carolina wealth holders of his day. As well as maintaining his Springfield plantation near Fort Mill, Springs for many years was the major partner in a very successful general

²⁵C. Campbell and A.S. Gibbes vs Jesse Cobb, E.M. Cobb, George Seaborn, A.C. Campbell, Anderson District Equity Court, 1854, Bill 202, SCDAH; Federal census, Anderson District, 1860.

²⁶Manuscript census returns for Abbeville and Kershaw districts, S.C., 1860.

²⁷Israel Charles admin. vs Richard M. Owings and A.P. Robertson, Anderson Equity Court, 1861, Bill 325, SCDAH.

²⁸See H.P. Walker, ed., *Ordinances of the City of Charleston from the 19 August 1844 to the 14 September 1854* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1854); W.R. Horsey ed., *Ordinances of the City of Charleston 14 September 1854 to 1 December 1859* (Charleston: Walker, Evans, and Co., 1859); and D.T. Corbin, ed., *Ordinances of the City of Charleston from December 1 1859 to September 6 1870* (Charleston: Charleston Courier Presses, 1871).

store at Charlotte, North Carolina. He invested heavily in numerous banks and railroad projects in South Carolina and its hinterland (investments running to some \$200,000 in combination), and was a pioneer investor (\$15,000) in the South's largest cotton mill of its time, at Graniteville, South Carolina. His significance in the community was reflected in his election to three consecutive terms (1828-1834) in the South Carolina House of Representatives. (His sons A. Baxter Springs and Richard Austin Springs each served for two terms as well).²⁹

Like an earlier writer, Katherine Wooten Springs, Ford was aware that John Springs made many trips to Maryland and Virginia in order to buy large numbers of slaves, but both writers assumed, not unreasonably, that this extensive slave buying was simply to stock his Springfield plantation.³⁰ As well as the scattered nature of relevant primary sources, deliberate omission of evidence in the nineteenth century seems to have hidden the slave trading of Springs from the historical record. In the *Cyclopedia of Eminent and Representative Men of the Carolinas in the Nineteenth Century* (1892), we find that John Springs III had "vast and varied agricultural and other business interests" as a financier, planter, and investor in industry. The slave trade was not mentioned, and this omission (either by the editor of the volume or by the Springs family) is not likely to have been accidental.³¹ The example of Springs surely can be multiplied a great many times in important hidden histories across the state and across the South generally, and it opens up new layers of insight into the pervasiveness of slave trading and into the nature of slavery in the South.

In the case of John Springs, York District's newspapers (which were searched for traders' advertisements) and manuscript records of the district's court cases do not provide the vital link of evidence to the trade. Nor does the census help. However, the link of evidence back to Springs's career as a slave trader can be found in the various sets of private papers — scattered and incomplete as they are — which have passed, via several of his

²⁹Lacy K. Ford, Jr., "A Tale of Two Entrepreneurs in the Old South: John Springs III and Hiram Hutchison of the South Carolina Upcountry," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 95 (July 1994), pp. 198-224. See also Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). These studies provide much more detail on his banking, railroad, and political activities than is given in the present article.

³⁰Ford writes that "During this era [c.1806-1820s], Springs travelled up and down the South Atlantic coast looking to buy slaves to expand his cotton production." Ford, "A Tale," p. 204. Katherine W. Springs writes that "keeping the 'little village of brick Negro cabins' populated became a prime problem of [Springs's] plantation life"; she reports on various of his slave-buying trips. See Katherine Wooten Springs, *The Squires of Springfield* (Charlotte, N.C.: William Lofton, 1965), p. 23.

³¹Edward McCrady et al, eds., *Cyclopedia* (Madison, Wis.: Brant and Fuller, 1892), pp. 458-461.

descendants, into different archive collections.

Following his first marriage in 1806, we find important evidence in letters sent back from Virginia and Maryland to his wife and later to his children. Several main points emerge. First, mainly from these letters, we know with certainty that he made slave-buying trips (usually to Maryland's Eastern Shore) in 1806 (twice), 1807, 1808, 1812, 1816, 1820, 1823, 1824, 1830, and 1836 — and it seems likely that many trips also were made for which letters have not survived. Second, we know that, like other traders, he paid in cash — a major undertaking. Third, we know that sometimes at least he bought with his brother and business partner Eli (who seems to have had no interest in buying slaves for his own use). Fourth, it is clear that, apart from traveling time, he expected to devote several weeks per trip to buying slaves, and a typical week saw significant numbers of slaves bought. Fifth, where letters offer sufficient detail, it looks likely that he aimed to buy some forty slaves per trip. Sixth, on buying trips he frequently reported great anxiety about his business — and the anxiety is likely to have been about profit margins on purchases, rather than on the much more straightforward question of whether or not he would be able to buy slaves at more or less reasonable prices. Seventh, as we shall see, he bought on such a scale and for so many years that he could have kept for his and his family's use only a small percentage of his purchases. This is particularly so when we consider the impact of natural increase on his purchases (with a typical natural increase among antebellum slaves of some 25 percent per decade, and with higher natural increase among the young-adult age groups of "likely young Negroes" on which he focused his buying).³² Eighth, we have some direct evidence of his selling slaves (but this activity, in his own locality, was not something which he needed to write about to his wife and children, who were close by). Finally, we have evidence of his investing at least some \$7,000 in the "Negro speculation" of the Georgia traders A.J. and D.W. Orr (originally from the Charlotte area of North Carolina, to which Springs had close links). It is clear that Springs was entirely comfortable with the fact that the Orrs were major slave traders. And as the Orrs noted in their letters to him, Springs knew the "Negro trade" well. Further, Springs had links with others who traded at least on a small scale.

THE FIRST SURVIVING LETTER FROM ONE OF SPRINGS'S SLAVE-buying trips is that of March 25, 1806, just a few weeks after his marriage. He wrote from Princess Anne, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland — a place to which he would return on most of his trips. In his letters, he hinted at his "sensations of pleasure not to be expressed on paper" on reading his wife's letter, and emphasized "the anxiety and uneasiness of mind, as well as that Fatigue of Body, that I have endured [on the trip] and have yet to go

³²On rates of natural increase, see Bancroft, *Slave Trading*, pp. 384-386.

through." Some six months later, on September 23, 1806, Springs was back at Princess Anne, making another buying trip. He had just arrived and had bought four slaves, and expected to be there for several weeks more in his business of slave buying. His horse Dolphin was "much fatigued" and Dolphin's "sides is a good deal hurt with the saddle bags to bring my specie on" (so that Springs could pay in cash). He found that there had been "a great many purchasers here this summer and are still several in this place."³³

The following September Springs again was buying slaves on the Eastern Shore (and a partner, probably his brother Eli, seems to have been with him). As usual, John found slave prices to be high and competition active. He declared himself anxious "as to the prospects of my business." Two or three weeks later he was still in the area, and was upset at the death of "a brother traveller, a gentleman from the state of Georgia with whom I contracted a small acquaintance. He was in purchasing Negroes." Rixon, a slave probably bought on this Springs trip, appears in a Charlotte runaway advertisement of May 7, 1822. The advertisement notes that "He was brought [age 20] from the eastern shore in Maryland, by Mr Springs, 15 years ago, and sold to J. Harris." And in mid-September 1807, Mary Craig of York District gave Lizzy Craig "a certain Negroe Woman slave Jenny which I purchased from John Springs." This slave could well have been from an 1806 buying trip, but there might have been an earlier Springs expedition from which she came. In June 1808 Springs was again buying on the Eastern Shore and wrote that he "did not expect to find a single purchaser here but to my surprise there are three or four." The "purchasers" were almost certainly traders. From records in private possession (not seen by the present writer) we know that Springs made buying excursions in 1812 and 1816. Indeed, it seems likely that he missed very few slave-buying seasons in the years between about 1806 and 1836.³⁴

The available letters suggest that, in addition to perhaps two months spent in long-distance travel, Springs expected to stay each trip for some six or eight weeks in his buying area. His weekly rate of buying suggests that he considered perhaps forty slaves to be a suitable number of purchases for a particular trip. Evidence for 1820 fits with this. On October 2, 1820, John Springs was at Princess Anne, Maryland, and his brother (and partner) Eli was at Snow Hill (twenty miles away); Eli "seemed to have prospects of

³³John Springs III to Mary Springs, Mar. 25 and Sept. 23, 1806, Springs Family Papers, SHC.

³⁴John Springs III to Mary Springs, Sept. 5, 1807, Springs Family Papers, SHC; 1807 letter (from private collection?) cited in Springs, *The Squires of Springfield*, p. 24; advertisement, May 7, 1822, *Western Carolinian*; Mary Craig to Lizzy [Craig?], Hutchison Family Papers, SCL; John Springs III to Mary Springs, June 8, 1808, Springs Family Papers, SHC; entries of Jan. 12, 1812 and Apr. 12, 1816, in John Springs III Plantation Book (original in private possession; cited by Ford, "A Tale," p. 204, n.14).

making purchases." They had been testing the market for two weeks and John "found it a very dull prospect indeed of succeeding in our business in any reasonable time." By October 24, 1820, John had bought twelve slaves, was on the point of buying others, and Eli was buying (around Snow Hill and Drummondtown), no doubt, on a similar scale. But John explained that they had much buying still to do, and found it "the most tedious, difficult, doing business of this sort that I ever experienced." Probably they were holding on until they got forty or so slaves — and got them within their budget of available cash.³⁵

For September 19, 1823, another letter from Springs survives (this time sent from Norfolk, Virginia, while he was on his way to the Eastern Shore). Again, Eli was with him; and not for the first time, John was anxious because "Negroes are likely to cost considerably higher than I counted [expected]." For 1824 no relevant letters survive at either the Southern Historical Collection or the South Caroliniana Library, but historian Katherine Springs reproduced extracts from a letter in which Springs, again at Princess Anne, told his wife that he had "bargained for ten Negroes since ... [he] wrote home last week," and added that he had five others "in possession." Clearly, this letter represents only an early progress report on his 1824 buying trip. Historian Lacy K. Ford, Jr., found (from evidence in private possession) that on December 9, 1824, Springs returned to York District with "41 likely Negroes." Having paid \$10,200 for them, he then (two weeks after arriving home) sold all forty-one at a profit of \$5,225 to U.S. Senator William Smith. For 1830 a letter of April 10 survives from Springs to his daughter. This time he was buying slaves at Richmond, Virginia, and after just two weeks he had bought twenty-one slaves. We learn that his son Austin wished to leave his studies at the University of Virginia in order to join him, but the father advised against this. In his letter to his daughter Springs wrote: "I expect to remain here [Richmond] to do my business, have purchased 21 though at high prices, and want yet to purchase a good many more." He wished his daughter well in her examinations, urged her to acquit herself "with honour to yourself and do credit to the institution [college]," but added "I dont much expect I can call on you as I go home." No doubt his slave coffle would have been awkward to manage during such a college visit. An 1836 letter to Baxter, a son who was studying at South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina), shows that in that year, too, Springs had been buying slaves at Richmond. Prices at Richmond would have been higher than on the Eastern Shore (because at Richmond the slaves would have been

³⁵John Springs III to Mary Springs, Oct. 2, and Oct. 24, 1820, Springs Family Papers, SHC.

bought from dealers who also wanted their profits), but much time and inconvenience could be saved.³⁶

IF WE NOW PUT TOGETHER THREE ELEMENTS, WE CAN UNDER-line the fact that John Springs operated as a slave trader, buying mainly to sell for profit rather than buying for his own use. First, we need to know how many slaves Springs actually possessed (including those he gave to his children). Second, we need to make some rough calculation of the total number of slaves he bought from his numerous trips. And third (allowing for at least a rate of natural increase of some 25 percent per decade in antebellum slave populations), we need to calculate what number his slaves should have reached, through natural increase, by his death in 1853. Clearly, Springs kept for his own and his family's use only a very small percentage of his slave purchases.

It seems that in 1800 John Springs probably had less than ten slaves, a number which apparently grew to forty-four by 1820. In 1831 he gave the 1,000-acre Springstein plantation (west of the Catawba River) and the use of (but not the title for) nineteen slaves to his eldest son, R. Austin Springs.³⁷ A few years later, in 1839, Springs was concerned about the number of working hands on his own Springfield plantation (on the opposite side of the river from Austin's Springstein), and wrote: "four of my best field hands are confined [too ill to work], a great drawback on the small force [of slaves] that I work."³⁸ The following year, 1840, a tax collector's statement indicated that Springs had forty-seven slaves.³⁹ And ten years later, the 1850 census for York District accurately recorded zero slaves for John Springs, but thirty-three slaves for his son Richard (on Springstein) and thirty-six slaves for his

³⁶John Springs III to Mary Springs, Sept. 19, 1823, *ibid.*; Springs, *The Squires*, p. 30; Ford, citing John Springs III Plantation Book (original in private possession), in "A Tale," p. 204; John Springs III to Mary Springs, Apr. 10, 1830, Springs Family Papers, SCL; John Springs III to Baxter Springs, Oct. 21, 1836, Springs Family Papers, SHC.

³⁷These 1800 and 1820 references are taken from Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism*, p. 8, and Ford, "A Tale," p. 205. On the 1831 gift, with John (as in other such gifts) retaining the title until "some future time at my discretion," see Springs, *The Squires*, pp. 40-41.

³⁸John Springs III to Baxter Springs, Apr. 9, 1839, Springs Family Papers, SHC.

³⁹"No. of slaves in the Indian land, York District, South Carolina, 1840," tax collector's statement in Hutchison Family Papers, SCL. All of Springs's South Carolina land had been leased from the Catawba Indians. He gained full title to it in 1841. See Springs, *The Squires*, p. 68.

son Baxter (who was then operating Springfield plantation).⁴⁰ John's will, made a few months before he died in 1853, confirmed the earlier gifts of slaves to his sons Richard and Baxter; left two slaves and much commercial and real estate in Charlotte to his son Leroy; confirmed earlier gifts of land and slaves to his two daughters (the combined number of slaves given to his daughters being not more than forty); and gave one slave to his wife.⁴¹ This evidence suggests that the total number of John Springs's slaves (owned by Springs himself or given to his family) was about 125 at the time of his death. And these slaves would have been the product not just of purchasing, but also, over the course of several decades, of something like a doubling as a result of natural increase.

The data on Springs's slave buying is incomplete, and most of the surviving letters were written as very early progress reports, made soon after his arrival on the Eastern Shore. An extremely conservative lower-bound estimate of his buying might start with the cautious assumption that the eleven slave-buying trips which have been documented above for the period 1806 to 1836 were the only such expeditions that he ever made. We could then note that in 1824 he bought forty-one slaves, and that in 1820 he probably bought a similar number; and we could (again conservatively) suggest that on each of the other nine trips he bought only twenty slaves. Even this highly conservative estimate would produce 262 slaves purchased, and would indicate much selling by Springs. (If we then add the cumulative effect of natural increase — at 25 percent per decade — even this calculation would mean that, instead of some 125 slaves owned in 1853 he should have had something like 570 slaves at that date.) A reasonable upper estimate of Springs's slave buying might be that he had made an average of one trip per season throughout the period 1806 to 1836, buying forty slaves per trip. This would have represented 1,240 slaves purchased (and, with cumulative

⁴⁰"Slave Inhabitants in York District, South Carolina, 1850," 1850 Federal census (schedule 2). In 1847 Springs had turned over Springfield and twenty-three slaves to Baxter (although, as usual, he kept this property's legal title for himself). Springs had another thirteen slaves, who were used mainly by Baxter at Springfield. See Springs, *The Squires*, pp. 89-90; and John Springs III to Baxter Springs, Dec. 30, 1850, Springs Family Papers, SHC.

⁴¹For his will, see York District Office of Probate Judge, Will Book 1840-1862, p. 262, reprinted in Pauline Young, comp., *A Genealogical Collection of South Carolina Wills and Records, Vol. I* (self-published, 1955; repr., Vidalia: Georgia Genealogical Reprints, 1969), pp. 52-57. The gift to his daughter Mary Laura dated to her marriage in 1836 and included twenty slaves. The gift to Sophia (again at marriage, in this case about 1846), judged by its stated value, included not more than twenty slaves. John's own marriage arrangements with his second and third wives were designed to prevent his children from losing to the families of these wives any of their inheritance. His third wife was, therefore, left only one slave. See on these issues Springs, *The Squires*, pp. 91, 50-51, 58.

natural increase, and without slave selling by Springs, he should on this basis have owned 2,500 slaves by 1853). The actual total of slaves purchased might well have been between the two purchasing estimates just given (262 and 1,240 slaves), at about 750 slaves (with nearly 700 of them being resold by Springs for profit). Given the rate of profit that he made on his buying in 1824 (profits noted earlier), Springs's slave trading could well have been the mainspring of his wider entrepreneurial activity.⁴²

Some time in the 1830s, York went through the transition from being a net-importing district to being a net exporter of slaves.⁴³ This fall in demand for slaves in York District, together with the rigors and inconveniences of slave-buying expeditions to the Eastern Shore (and later to Richmond) probably led to a phasing out of Springs's slave importation into the York area. His money could now be invested heavily in banks and railroads. Clearly, however, by the 1840s and possibly earlier, Springs made at least occasional investments in the phase of the trade which took slaves from Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas to Georgia and the southwestern states. For 1845 there is a series of letters to Springs from A.J. and D.W. Orr. The Orrs were originally from the Mecklenberg area of North Carolina (adjacent to York District) and, as well as running general stores at Macon and at Columbus in Georgia, were major slave traders. The 1845 letters show Springs investing \$2,200 with the Orrs. In the winter of 1846-1847, the Orrs arranged for Springs to lend them \$5,000 at high interest for their slave trading. D.W. Orr explained:

[M]y brother has charge of the mercantile business at home and I have been engaged the majority of my time for twelve mos [months] in the purchase and sale of Negroes. It is my business here [Richmond, Virginia] at present. I have purchased nearly all I want and will leave for Macon in a few days.

He wanted a loan to extend over two years, because:

We can borrow money at home or in NCa at a much lower rate of interest at six mos but in the business in which I am engaged you are aware that their [sic] is times that Negroes are slow sale and I dont want to be placed in a situation to have to force sales to meet our notes.... I think you know our general character to[o] well to have any fears on the subject

⁴²On profit rates in the trade generally, see also Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, pp. 204-209.

⁴³By the 1830s the growth rate of the district's slave population fell below that of the typical southern rate of the decade.

and I will here remark that you are the only person that we have offered more than common interest.⁴⁴

By January 1848 the Orrs reported to Springs that they had sold their mercantile business some months back "to enable us to give our exclusive attention to the Negro trade, and we have sold this winter about sixty Negroes." They added that "one of our firm will leave in a short time with the intention of purchasing a[nother] gang," and they successfully asked for an extension of Springs's loan. No doubt making reference to Springs's own extensive experience in the trade, they added, "You are aware that it is a cash transaction in purchasing Negroes and it requires a considerable Amount Cash Capital to do business to advantage." A few months later, the Orrs were very optimistic, and found the profits of the trade to be good. In 1849 Springs was still investing in the Orrs' slaving activity, but a problem (amicably resolved so far as the traders were concerned) arose with an unhealthy slave whom they were selling on behalf of or in partnership with Springs. The Orrs were of a younger generation than Springs and continued to trade well after his death in 1853. In 1859 D.W. Orr told a court that he, Orr, "bought and sold negroes, several hundreds; hardly ever made a mistake in the soundness of one." And about the year 1900 a former mayor of Macon, Georgia, recalled that before the Civil War "A.J. and D.W. Orr ... had a slave-trading place on Cotton Avenue [in Macon].... These were big dealers."⁴⁵

Scattered over more than a decade, a few letters survive concerning John Crockett of McDonough, Georgia (and formerly of the York, S.C., area). Crockett was probably a slave trader (as well as a farmer). One of John Springs's letters of 1835 simply noted "Mr Crockett and White both stays with [us] again next year" — and perhaps they visited in order to buy slaves. Ten years later a letter of 1845 indicated that Crockett had stayed at Springs's house, and had bought slaves in that neighborhood as well as in Orangeburg District, South Carolina. A similar letter of 1848 asked Springs for advice about slave prices in York, as well as mentioning more buying in Orangeburg. Several letters of 1848 and 1849 from John Bell (an ambitious

⁴⁴Orr and Orr to John Springs III, July 22, Aug. 18, Aug. 8, Nov. 4, 1845, Dec. 28, 1846, Feb. 13, 1847, Springs Family Papers, SHC.

⁴⁵Orr and Orr to John Springs III, Jan. 15 and Mar. 6, 1848, Jan. 13, Mar. 9, and May 21, 1849, Springs Family Papers, SHC; *Orr vs Huff*, January 1849, in Helen T. Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro* (Washington, D.C: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1926-1937), Vol. 3, p. 70; Bancroft, *Slave Trading*, pp. 246-247. A.J. Orr appeared in the Bibb County, Ga., census of 1850 as "Negro trader," and D.W.H. Orr (aged thirty-four years and North Carolina-born) was listed in the Richmond, Va., census of 1850 as residing with the major slave trader Silas Omohundro. On Omohundro, see Silas & R.F. Omohundro Slave Sales Book, 1857-1862, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

overseer who had moved from the York area to Alabama) show Springs helping Bell to make his way in the world by advising him on a trip to the York area in order to buy a few slaves on speculation. Bell was in a different league from Springs, but, before overseeing for his Alabama employer (General King), he had possibly worked for Springs. "I am of opinion," Bell wrote, "I can make at least 4 hundred dollars in laying out my little all ... [in speculating on] Negroes of good quality."⁴⁶

THE CASE OF JOHN SPRINGS III AS SLAVE TRADER SEEMS TO have a much wider significance than simply adding an awkward note to the biographical profile of a long-dead South Carolinian. It suggests something of the hidden, and critically important, history of slave trading in South Carolina (and in the South generally). The routine traffic in slaves, and the breaking up of slave families by sale, say much about the character of slavery. And the nature of slavery should be looked at realistically in order to build new understandings for the future.

John Springs III was a citizen of the highest repute. He saw the trade as an entirely legitimate and appropriate way to make one's way in the world and to advance one's family. His family, and it seems southern society generally, shared his view. In a letter of April 1831, he wrote to his young daughter Mary:

I trust you will endeavor to improve these your golden Hours in the improvement of your mind and manners, as this will be the finishing of your education. Strive to practice... [virtue] and to shun [the vices of the world].... Remember the fond hope & expectation of a father, who seems in a measure not made and acting on the Theatre of life, for himself but for his Children, who has himself suffered many hardships & privations that he may render his offspring useful and ornamental members of society.⁴⁷

At about this time his son Leroy wrote of his gratitude

to a Father ... whose most ardent wish is the welfare of his children and whose greatest anxiety is to prepare them for useful and able members of society, and whose laborious life has been spent in making and laying up,

⁴⁶ John Springs III to R.A. Springs, Oct. 26, 1835, Crockett to Springs, Feb. 27, 1845, July 11, 1848, and Bell to Springs, Oct. 15, 1848 (and Jan. 2, Jan. 22, July 2, 1848, and July 4, 1849), all in Springs Family Papers, SHC.

⁴⁷ John Springs III to Mary Springs, Apr. 4, 1831, Springs Family Papers, SCL.

not so much for his own happiness but the happiness of his offspring.⁴⁸

Like the Irvines, Weatherly, Seaborn, and a great many others, John Springs III was a citizen of the highest status and respectability. His trading, far from being a barrier to society, was itself based on inherited wealth and position; the profits of his "Negro speculation" allowed him, it seems, to rise even higher. Links of evidence to the trade often have been broken by obituary writers, biographers, and the writers of local history in the decades after slavery (the crucial breaks occurring especially in the late nineteenth century and in the first years of this century). Still today, on plantation tours in the South, one is routinely told that "our family never sold its slaves" or "we never broke up slave families." Cases like John Springs III suggest, however, that the interstate slave trade must have reached into virtually every slaveholding family in the South — and at the cost of enormous suffering to black Southerners. The diverse materials on John Springs III, planter-entrepreneur, when read as evidence on the nature of antebellum slavery, provide an important warning against an unrealistic and overromantic history of the Old South.

⁴⁸Leroy Springs to John Springs III, Apr. 8, 1831, Springs Family Papers, SHC.

THE GREAT CHARLESTOWN SMALLPOX EPIDEMIC OF 1760

SUZANNE KREBSBACH*

IN 1979 THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION DECLARED THAT the smallpox virus had been eradicated. Since then scientific debate on the disease has centered on whether or not the last known bits of virus should be destroyed or saved for further research.¹ Because so few people today have experienced the disease, smallpox inspires little personal concern, conjuring up visions of nothing more terrifying than benign bouts of chickenpox or measles. Our ancestors, including the residents of Charlestown, South Carolina, during the disastrous smallpox epidemic of 1760, had significantly different experiences with the disease.

Smallpox is both endemic and epidemic. As an endemic malady, the disease is peculiar to a particular locality, usually urban areas, where there is a stable host population to keep the disease active. Smallpox is also epidemic; the disease is capable of spreading rapidly and violently in a locality where it is endemic and also in areas where it is not permanently prevalent. In England, where smallpox was endemic, it was viewed as a childhood disease. The annual number of deaths from smallpox in London was rarely under a thousand, but in the small towns and villages of rural England the disease was epidemic.²

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the disease was particularly savage in Europe and in the North American colonies. Colonial urban centers resembled the small towns and villages of England in population density. As in those areas, populations of American towns were not large enough, or stable enough, for the disease to become endemic. The population was scattered over such an extensive territory that some colonists had never even seen the disease, much less developed an immunity to it. The average risk of infection in North America, therefore, was much less than in densely populated English cities. Eighteenth-century England, by contrast, suffered an epidemic every two years.³

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¹Charles Siebert, "Smallpox Is Dead, Long Live Smallpox," *The New York Times Magazine*, Aug. 21, 1994, pp. 21-37 et seq.

²John Duffy, *Epidemics in Colonial America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1953), p. 27.

³Duffy, *Epidemics*, p. 104; William A. Guy, "Two Hundred and Fifty Years of Smallpox in London," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 45 (September 1882), p. 415.