

AN EXAMPLE OF AN ELEGANTLY WRITTEN “A” PAPER

*Sometimes—too rarely—a paper achieves literary distinction as well as displaying historical insight **and** using primary sources with stunning effectiveness. As my original comment states, the prose is “lyrica[l]—but good writing alone is not sufficient to earn an “A.” The author has mined the relevant primary source extremely carefully, supplemented that evidence with apt citations to secondary sources, and practiced a kind of historical empathy that demonstrates historical thinking at a very high level. When I tell students that I want to feel the earth move when I read their essays, I have something like this paper in mind.*

*The text retains the corrections I made on the original. ~~Strikeouts~~ indicate words or phrases to be eliminated, **boldface** words or phrases that should be inserted, and **[bracketed text in red]** marginal comments (usually on the essay's contents). The final paragraph in *courier new type* is the comment I appended to the original.*

Landon Carter: Patriarch in Winter

In 1681, thirty years before Landon Carter was born, William Fitzhugh would direct his agents to buy human beings in the same spirit he asked them to sell his tobacco or to send a shipment of linen and nails: **[nice sentence]**

I desire you to buy me five or six, whereof three or four to be boys, a man & women or men & women, the boys from eight to seventeen or eighteen, the rest as young as can procure them, for a price I cannot direct therein, because boys according to their age and growth are valued in price (Fitzhugh, 104).

[move to margin; continue paragraph] His stated considerations **were** sex, age, and the state of the market. (Presumably health counted, too.) Fitzhugh took no interest in personal characteristics (nor, unlike planters in the lower South, did he take an interest in the regions from which they came) (Cohen, lecture). There **is** no hint that he recognized that those characteristics might exist or that these individuals might **be** linked by ties of family or friendship. The people on the dock **were** at the most extreme moment of what Philip Morgan calls natal alienation **[explain]** (Morgan, 261). Fitzhugh **was** talking about nonpersons. **In his letter of December 3,** **[T]here is** a strong suggestion that he didn't **[avoid contractions in formal writing; did not]** even recognize **an** African language as language when he asks a seller for a rebate on a “dumb Negro” who was “bad at work and worse at talking.” **[or, that he ws frustrated that the slave did not speak better English]** It's **[contraction]** hard to imagine that Fitzhugh expected to have personal relationships with these commodities, let alone intense and complicated ones in which he **was** forced to negotiate and compromise. Yet a hundred years later[,] that would **be** where master-slave relations in the Chesapeake stood. **[very good]**

Roughly 2,000 Africans **a-year** were taken forcibly to Virginia **in during** the **entire** 1680s. By the 1730s, that number had risen to an average of 2,000 a year. It **[what?]** **was** a huge change in the landscape:

Men and women with filed teeth, plaited hair, and ritual scarification . . . were everywhere to be seen. An Anglican missionary stationed in Delaware found “difficulty in conversing with the Majority of Negroes” because they have “a language peculiar to themselves . . .” (Berlin, 111).

This was the world in which Landon Carter came of age. **[too many passive verbs: is/are/be etc.]**

By 1766, the year of the diary entries addressed in this essay, Carter was a mature man with a grandchild, and the slave population outside his windows was very different **[from...?]**. These were Creoles, fluent in his language and his ways, familiar with the land and culture. They

had English names—Simon, Bart, Gabriel, Betty, Johnny—and dressed in petticoats and waistcoats (Carter, 299). They were a familiar cast of men, women, and children—“his people,” his hands, his household—including not only married people with children but extended families. Carter was aware of these connections and, as with the case of the runaway Simon, saw them as a network of alliances (Carter 291). The black population of the Chesapeake had become self-sustaining, and one gets a sense of those demographics when Carter refers to one overseer’s having “five people and six children” (lecture; Carter, 299). One quarter is called “Jamy’s,” suggesting that black families had patriarchs of their own (Carter, 287; Berlin, 132) [interesting. I don’t think that Carter would have thought of Jamy as a patriarch, though.]. Carter had the power to sell these people, but there’s [contraction] no talk of doing so.

Like most planters of the Chesapeake (lecture), Carter lived not in some remote city [i.e., Virginians were not absentee masters as were Carolinians] but on his land. Master and slave had daily contact, and **the** sheer number of references to blacks in Carter’s diary is striking. Like Fitzhugh, Carter grew tobacco, but he also grew corn, wheat, oats, flax, hemp, rye, oats, and barley, and **he** was interested enough in finding other crops to experiment when he came across new plants (Carter, 288). His slaves reflect the skills and opportunities mixed agriculture could afford. Jammy could do brick work. Rit was a miller., Simon was an ox carter., and Jimmy was a gardener and had **who** passed this skill on to his son Sam. Old Jack Lubbar, however drunk and vexatious, was acting as an overseer. These blacks were not as isolated as their parents would have been. Carter rented Jammy out to his son in town (Carter, 295). Groups moved from field to field. “All hands abroad this day,” he wrote in May, “and leave me alone” (Carter, 296). Some slaves, like Johnny, went to church (Carter, 292). Certain slaves supervised others. Carter even entrusted slaves with guns (289).

Carter’s need to trust his slaves is at war with his belief they can’t [contraction] be trusted. Contradictions abound: Talbot shoots a fellow slave in April, then colludes in robbing the corn house in October (329); Tom helps capture the runaway Simon but lies to Carter about the circumstances (Carter, 289, 290).

Carter’s dominant attitude toward these people is **one of** suspicion and frustration. Slaves are called lazy, easy, neglectful, dishonest, indolent, and ungrateful. “My people can’t be back with my wheat, so Hugely ungrateful are they,” he writes in a typical passage. Hands work “indifferently” (Carter, 318). They fail to follow orders. Sent to get seedlings, they abandon many on the ground (Carter, 312). They are conniving. When corn is missing[,] Jack “pretends the Cattle and sheep eat it.” Jack knows too much: he has “been too long in my business” (Carter, 312). “The more particular we are in our charges and the fonder we show ourselves of anything the more careless will our slaves be. Even the most aged, whilst their lives are made most pleasant for them, are the most ungratefully neglectful” (Carter, 295). Religion gives but sham virtue, as slaves can’t be honest (Carter, 292). (No evangelical he.) Carter notes but one honest slave and one principled hand (Carter, 312, 308). The rest are out to defraud him.

But things are not so simple. His overseers are also liars and rogues, just as bad as the slaves (Carter, 302, 307). His own daughter is ungovernable and obstinate (Carter, 321). His daughter-in-law is violent, sulky, and proud. His son is ungrateful (Carter, 316). [✓] Oxen are sullen, and horses indifferent (Carter, 289, 318). He appears beset by difficulties—drought, rain, flies, birds, weeds, wind, wild boars, webworm, and, above all, all sorts of uncooperative people. By his own account, Carter had an “unhappy temper” (Carter, 315). But one gets the sense that his short fuse has to do not just with the challenges of running his plantation but also with contradictions inherent in his view of himself and a world that won’t cooperate.

Carter's views were patriarchal. In Biblical fashion, he talks of "my people," of "my man Bart" and "my girl Liddy" (Carter, 290, 309). He administers governance, justice, punishment, and protection to those below him with the severity of an Old Testament God, expecting obedience and loyalty in return. "I shall punish him accordingly," Carter notes when the runaway Simon is brought in. Bart was whipped, and Johnny and Tom are locked up for collusion (Carter, 290, 291). A patriarch's authority had limits. Carter can't [contraction] hang Bart, although (at that moment at least) he'd [contraction] like to, unless Bart's "mate in roguery can be tempted to turn evidence against him." Bart himself used an accusation of unjust punishment to justify his truancy, and the fact Carter notes this, and notes the general opinion of the plantation in his own favor, shows he recognizes his obligation to be just (Carter, 291).

There is no warmth or friendliness in Carter's attitude toward his black laborers. When the "wench Mary" falls down and dies[,] **the he notes the** event is noted with curiosity, not emotion [might that response be conventional?] (Carter, 326). Yet he feels responsible for his slaves. [✓] He clothes them and worries that he might not have enough to feed them (though when he has moldy wheat it's the slaves who get to eat it) (Carter, 299, 314). When the boy Ambrose falls sick, Carter doctors him (Carter, 307-309). **Philip** Morgan notes that Carter felt his responsibilities to his slaves so heavily that he went riding to "unbend his mind" (Morgan, 280-281) and recounts Carter's description of the scene following a lightning strike in which he stood calmly with "poor slaves crowding round and following their master, as if protection only came from him," and saw seeing in the event God's personal endorsement (Morgan, 280). Morgan argues that crabby Landon Carter anticipated a more enlightened patriarchalism. He recognized slaves as "fellow creatures," sentimentalized his own role as the "forgiving" father, operating out of "humanity, religion, and every virtuous duty" (Morgan, 293). When Carter says "God have mercy or we perish for bread" he is recognizing that he and his slaves are the same kind of creatures (Carter, 322).

But enlightened or no, the patriarchal relationship was to be reciprocal. Here Carter was bitterly disappointed, and it is to this note that he returns most often. His account suggests the emergence of what **Ira** Berlin calls a culture that enabled slaves to "challenge their owners from a position of knowledge" (Berlin, 126).

Most revealing are the runaways. Five are mentioned in the course of 1766, and much suggests brazen behavior and aggressive confidence—the new kind [explain] of flight noted in Berlin (Berlin, 140). All stayed in the area and were supported by other slaves. Simon was hidden in Carter's own kitchen while the militia was out looking for him, and Simon's sister-in-law impudently denied having seen him to the master's face. Later Simon and another runaway were seen coming along "my lane" at dusk, "talking loudly as if secure they should be concealed" (Carter, 289). Simon bought his safety with goods stolen from his master (Carter, 291, 292). Runaways escape as regularly as they are locked up. Slaves continually steal the master's grain, in at least one instance in collusion with a white indentured servant (Carter, 330).

Carter appears by turns outraged and ineffectual—almost helpless—faced with people who wouldn't [contraction] give him his due. He doesn't [contraction] make appeals to his slaves (that we hear about, at least), but he is clearly dependent on their behavior. This supposedly all-powerful patriarch can't [contraction] control his dependents. He can't [contraction] even punish people for things he's quite sure they've [contraction] done, because he's [contraction] been outmaneuvered. There's [contraction] a sense of injury all this—a sense of being right in a wrong world. Carter thinks of himself as an old man at sixty-one (Morgan, 293), and perhaps he was right. His own son wouldn't [contraction] tolerate his whipping his grandson (Carter, 310).

Musing about weather and the moon, Carter said that observation should trump philosophy when the two disagree. But the diary reveals a man whose own ideals failed to accommodate realities around him.

This is superb paper, beautifully—even lyrically—written and wonderfully attentive to all the nuances in the sources. You evoke a finely realized portrait of a slaveholder “by turns outraged and ineffectual,” someone “whose own ideals failed [to] accommodate realities around him” (5). Besides making exemplary use of the primary sources, you bring in Philip Morgan and Ira Berlin at just the right moments, substantiating Morgan’s argument about patriarchy by demonstrating Carter’s efforts to run his plantation in a “humanitarian” manner while also explicating the deference and cooperation he expected everyone—his daughter included—to bestow upon him. You seize upon the smallest detail; the five runaways evince, you state, the “new kind of flight” (4) Berlin notes (though you should clarify what that “new kind” was), and you indicate that a slave might cooperate with Carter in capturing a fellow slave at one point only to steal some of Carter’s corn at another; “Contradictions” do indeed “abound” (2). You portray slavery’s contradictions simultaneously as the personal trials of one aging man and as historical phenomena, thereby merging human drama and analytic acumen in a way historians might well envy.

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