

Reading for the Enslaved, Writing for the Free: Reflections on Liberty and Literacy

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Is 'Reading for the Enslaved' but 'Writing for the Free,' as my title suggests? Many Americans in colonial America and the early antebellum South apparently thought that it was. I shall be suggesting here that throughout the colonial period, and even in the post-Revolutionary United States up to very roughly 1820, reading was usually viewed as a tool that was entirely compatible with the institution of slavery. Writing, on the other hand, was almost invariably perceived by southern slaveholders as intrinsically dangerous. I am going to explore why this was so, and why, from about 1820 on, reading became increasingly redefined in the slaveholding South as a seditious skill. In doing so, I also hope to shed light on our own definitions of reading and writing.

Indeed, our own experience is where I wish to start. We are accustomed to equating literacy with liberty. Literacy, we say, empowers, because it is the foundation of knowledge, which of

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course empowers. In fact, we conventionally regard the right to an education as an essential human right; and education is based to an enormous extent upon the successful acquisition of literacy. If, then, literacy offers personal liberation, it is also a prerequisite to political freedom. Indeed, as the historian Carl Kaestle warns us in his *Literacy in the United States*, the continuing disparity between the literacy abilities of different social, racial, and ethnic groups poses a danger to American democracy.¹

But it is also true, from the perspective of history, that governments promoting literacy through campaigns—or even just through universal education—have not necessarily done so with the view of promoting individual freedom. Rather, they have wished to inculcate their own political or religious agenda and promote social control. There have also been what Robert Arnove and Harvey Graff have called ‘triggering events’: crucial changes in the culture that have touched off a government’s or a group’s campaign for literacy. (As I shall suggest later, there have also been triggering events that touched off a campaign against literacy.)²

I believe that we can clear up the discrepancies between these views—between literacy as empowering, on the one hand, and literacy as a means of social control on the other—if we make sharper distinctions between which literacy skill we are talking

1. Carl F. Kaestle, Helen Damon-Moore, Lawrence C. Stedman, Katherine Tinsley, and William Vance Trollinger, Jr., *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading since 1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 293. The equation of liberty with knowledge is an oft-repeated theme. See, for example, Dana Nelson Salvino, ‘The Word in Black and White: Ideologies of Race and Literacy in Antebellum America,’ in *Reading in America: Literature and Social History*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 140–41.

2. For examples of literacy campaigns, see Robert A. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff, eds., *National Literacy Campaigns and Comparative Perspectives* (New York: Plenum Press, 1987); ‘triggering events,’ 4. Harvey J. Graff, in particular, has argued that the effects of literacy are not all they have been touted to be in *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City* (New York: Academic Press, 1979); *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); and Salvino, ‘Word in Black and White,’ 141–42. For a more general overview of discussions of what writing has done to and for us, see Naomi S. Baron, ‘Thinking, Learning and the Written Word,’ *Visible Language* 31 (1997): 6–35.

about, and how each skill, at any given moment, has been defined.³

I propose that, as we examine the relationship between literacy and liberty, we should ask different questions of each literacy skill. Of reading, we need to ask, what is being read? Of writing, we need to know, who is doing the writing? Of both, we should pose the question, for whom is this an advantage? Whom does this particular literacy skill benefit, emotionally, socially, culturally, spiritually, politically, legally, financially, or in any other way? Once we have answered these questions, the relationship between literacy and liberty, or literacy and any other topic, becomes greatly clarified. Here I look first at literacy in general in the colonial period; next at literacy for the enslaved at that time; I then fast forward into the antebellum era. At each time period, I shall reexamine legislation that related to literacy and the enslaved, following the footsteps of Janet Duitsman Cornelius, the first scholar to examine closely the relationships among literacy, slavery, and religion in the antebellum South.⁴

READING AND WRITING IN COLONIAL AMERICA

We begin with colonial America, where the distinctions between reading and writing were so much sharper than they are today. The two literacy skills differed in the timing of their instruction;

3. For modern definitions of literacy, see Richard L. Venezky, Daniel A. Wagner, and Barrie S. Ciliberti, eds., *Toward Defining Literacy* (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1990); E. Jennifer Monaghan and E. Wendy Saul, 'The Reader, the Scribe, the Thinker: A Critical Look at the History of American Reading and Writing Instruction,' in *The Formation of School Subjects: The Struggle for Creating an American Institution*, ed. Thomas S. Popkewitz (Philadelphia: Falmer, 1987), 87-91.

4. Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 32-34, 37-42, 63-64. Most discussions of legislation and slavery have not noted the presence or absence of literacy legislation: e.g., Barnett Hollander, *Slavery in America; Its Legal History* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964); Paul Finkelman, ed., *Slavery and the Law* (Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 1997); Philip J. Schwarz, *Slave Laws in Virginia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); William E. Wiethoff, *A Peculiar Humanism: The Judicial Advocacy of Slavery in High Courts of the Old South, 1820-1850* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996). But see, Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 347-48.

with the presumed ease of such instruction; with the gender of the instructor; in the equipment needed for each one; in the motivations for instruction that undergirded each (and therefore in the legislation enacted for each); and even in the gender of the instructed.

First, the two skills of reading and writing were taught at different times in the child's life. The 'three R's' were offered in the order implied in the traditional 'reading, writing, and 'rithmetic.' Reading was always the first to be taught, beginning when the child was as young as three years old. Learning to read was, to a degree that is hard for us to appreciate, an entirely oral activity. Children learned to recognize the letters of the alphabet and spell aloud the letters of each syllable in order to pronounce the entire word. (One consequence of this approach was that children learning to read were, unlike modern children, never exposed to the alphabet in a manuscript form. This, in turn, made 'reading writing' a new set of skills that had to be acquired later, if at all.) Second, it was considered very easy to teach reading. Even women could teach it. In fact, they were the preferred sex for teaching it. Moreover, the equipment was simple. In addition to the teacher and the pupil, all that was needed was a book.⁵

Writing instruction, in contrast, was taught only after reading was well in hand. Children were sent to a writing instructor at the age of about seven to be 'perfected' in reading and to learn to write. Children had to learn that script was very different in appearance and formation from type. From the instructional perspective, writing was regarded as difficult. It required real skill on the part of the teacher: it needed a trained professional. So naturally it was entrusted to men—to young men who had received their training from a skilled writing master to whom they had been apprentices, or 'ushers.' Not for nothing is the art called *penmanship*. Third, the equipment for writing was multiple. You

5. E. Jennifer Monaghan, 'Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England,' in *Reading in America*, ed. Davidson, 58–59.

needed paper, and a quill pen, which had to be sharpened frequently (so you needed a penknife), and ink. (Ink, contrary to one of the most enduring myths of colonial America, did not always have to be made from scratch; packets of ink were available in stores from at least 1743 on. But you still had to turn the powder into ink by adding water.)⁶ Then you needed pounce, the fine powder used for blotting; and a rule and a pencil, to get your lines straight. The entire enterprise, up until the invention of metal nibs around 1830, was a big deal.⁷

But more important than all these distinctions were the differences in motivation. The single most powerful motive for reading instruction, at a time when the vast majority of people were religious, was religion. As David D. Hall has shown us, in the minds of Puritans in both Old and New England in the seventeenth century, reading and Christianity were so intertwined that they could hardly be disentangled.⁸ In colonial America, at least until spelling books were added to the reading instructional sequence in the 1730s, the texts of reading instruction were entirely Christian in nature. Children began with the hornbook (which

6. Advertisement, *Boston Weekly News-Letter*, Dec. 29, 1743. Powdered ink was no doubt available earlier, although briefer advertisements on March 4, 1731, and April 29, 1736, do not give details of stationery.

7. For the writing curriculum in eighteenth-century Boston, see E. Jennifer Monaghan, 'Readers Writing: The Curriculum of the Writing Schools of Eighteenth-Century Boston,' *Visible Language* 21 (1987): 167-213. For texts and writing masters, see Ray Nash, *American Writing Masters and Copybooks: History and Bibliography Through Colonial Times* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1959); Ray Nash, *American Penmanship, 1800-1850: A History of Writing and a Bibliography of Copybooks from Jenkins to Spencer* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1969); Ray Nash, 'A Colonial Writing Master's Collections of English Copybooks,' *Harvard Library Bulletin* 14 (1960): 12-19; Ray Nash, 'Abiah Holbrook and his "Writing Master's Amusement,"' *Harvard Library Bulletin* 7 (1953): 88-104. See also Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 3-41. Apart from a rise in self-instructional manuals on penmanship, the content and methodology of writing instruction in the early Republic and antebellum United States differed little from its colonial predecessor. For inkmaking, see Harry B. Weiss, 'The Writing Masters and Ink Manufacturers of New York City, 1737-1820,' *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 56 (1952): 383-94.

8. David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 18, 22-23.

moved briskly from the alphabet into the Lord's Prayer) and then graduated to a primer—most often the famous *New England Primer*.⁹

Used in the southern colonies as well as New England, the *New England Primer* immediately explained the connection between reading and Christian redemption. In its alphabet verses, the letter *A* teaches the child about original sin.

In *Adam's* Fall / We Sinned all.

How can fallen man be saved? The letter *B* offers the child hope:

Thy Life to Mend / This *Book* Attend.

Should the child be in any doubt as to *which* book was intended, the word 'BIBLE' is written across its open pages.¹⁰ After mastering the primer, children confronted completely scriptural texts: the psalter (the Book of Psalms), the New Testament, and finally the apex of the reading sequence, the entire Bible. Reading instruction, in short, was largely motivated by the desire to save the child's soul.

In contrast, the motivations for writing instruction seem not to have been religious at all. Writing's usefulness for taking notes for sermons was rarely mentioned. It was defined not as self-expression but as penmanship: the medium was the message. It was regarded as a commercial tool: as a necessity for keeping records and the prerequisite of mathematics—which involved the endless writing of mathematical rules and examples—and so of book-keeping.¹¹ Occasionally, writing masters, in their odes to the pen, also noted its ability to transcend space and time. But there was minimal emphasis upon what it did for the person who was doing the writing. The task of the young writer was to learn how to

9. Monaghan, 'Literacy Instruction and Gender,' 54–58. The authority on the hornbook remains Andrew W. Tuer, *History of the Horn Book* (1897; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1979).

10. Reproduced in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The New-England Primer: A Reprint of the Earliest Known Edition, With Many Facsimiles and Reproductions, and an Historical Introduction* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1909), n.p. See also Gillian Avery, 'Origins and English Predecessors of the *New England Primer*,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 108 (1998): 33–61.

11. Patricia Cline Cohen, *A Calculating People: The Spread of Numeracy in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 120–22.

replicate different scripts and to use those scripts to reproduce the maxims and poems of others. In fact, textbooks for writing instruction were known as copybooks—books that provided copies. Far from being for the free, in this context writing was a tool of authority and used by underlings.¹² Not until letter writing became the object of scrutiny and a topic for instruction did the role of writing change significantly.

It is also important to look at the role played by gender in all this. Because writing was regarded as a commercial skill and as the hallmark of the well educated, and because women were not permitted to take part in the broader world of commerce, college, or ministry, it was for many decades not considered essential for girls to acquire it. However, writing instruction even for poor girls became increasingly acceptable from about 1740 on, and girls also benefited from the publication of contemporary letter-writing manuals, which included them as correspondents.¹³

Here our question, 'for whom is this'—in this case, writing instruction—'an advantage?' comes into play. Eager to double their clientele by teaching girls as well as boys, writing masters became the biggest boosters of penmanship for the female sex, touting it as a genteel feminine accomplishment.¹⁴

12. For an extreme example of a view of penmanship as control, see Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford: California University Press, 1990).

13. Monaghan, 'Literacy Instruction and Gender,' 62–63. For changes in the role of letter writing, see Bruce Redford, *The Converse of the Pen: Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and Konstantin Dierks' 'Letter Writing, Gender, and Class in America, 1750–1800,' Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1999. For the writing instruction of poor girls in charity schools in the 1740s, see E. Jennifer Monaghan, 'Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America,' book-length manuscript in preparation, chs. 6 and 9.

14. See, for example, Samuel Vaux's exhortation to young women: 'Then let the Fingers, whose unrivall'd Skill / Exalts the Needle, grace the Noble Quill. / An artless Scrawl ye blushing Scribler shames; / All shou'd be fair that Beauteous Woman frames'; Samuel Vaux, 'The Penman's Advice . . . To Young Ladies,' dated 1734, in George Bickham, *The Universal Penman, Engraved by George Bickham, London 1743*, intro. Philip Hofer (New York: Dover Publications, 1968), 29. Bickham's compilation was extensively used in the three public writing schools of Boston in the eighteenth century: Monaghan, 'Readers Writing,' 174.

LITERACY FOR THE ENSLAVED IN COLONIAL AMERICA

The differences in the way reading and writing were conceptualized by colonials are crucial to our understanding of colonial attitudes toward the literacy of the enslaved. By the first decade of the eighteenth century, slavery was legally defined and sanctioned in all the American colonies.¹⁵ But those who were devout Christians believed the enslaved had immortal souls. From across the Atlantic Ocean, the official position of the Anglican Church was that slaves should be converted to Christianity. When slaveholders objected that their slaves believed that baptism conferred freedom, Christians were among those who were most eager to get legislation passed that explicitly denied any relationship between the two.¹⁶ Because of the tight link between Christianity and reading, conversion implied reading instruction. It did not, however, imply writing instruction.

The gulf between the two literacy skills is illuminated by the only laws that were passed in the colonial period that related to slave literacy. The colonies involved were South Carolina and Georgia. The South Carolina Slave Code of 1740 was spurred, as repressive legislation so often was, by a triggering event—the most serious slave revolt of the entire colonial period, the Stono Rebellion of the year before. The death toll at the end of the uprising was forty-four enslaved Africans and twenty-one whites.

15. William M. Wiecek, 'The Statutory Law of Slavery and Race in the Thirteen Mainland Colonies of British America,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, ser. 3, 34 (1977): 258–80; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966), 248–51.

16. Between 1664 and 1706, Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, New York, and New Jersey passed laws affirming that baptism did not confer emancipation; Marcus W. Jernegan, 'Slavery and Conversion in the American Colonies,' in Paul Finkelman, ed., *Articles on American Slavery*, Vol. 16, *Religion and Slavery* (New York: Garland, 1989), 504–27. See, for example, the South Carolina law of June 2, 1712: 'that no persons may neglect to baptize their negroes, or slaves, or suffer them to be baptized, for fear that thereby they should be manumitted and set free,' baptism was reaffirmed to be legal without setting the baptized free; David J. McCord, ed., *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina; Edited under Authority of the Legislature. Volume Seventh, Containing the Acts Relating to Charleston, Courts, Slaves, and Rivers* (Columbia, S.C.: A. S. Johnston, 1840), 364–65; also reproduced in John D. Cushing, comp., *The First Laws of the State of South Carolina*, 2 Parts (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1981), 1:18.

The resultant act was a comprehensive effort designed for 'the better Ordering and Governing Negroes and other Slaves in this Province.' It mandated restrictions against the slaves' owning canoes, breeding and selling horses (vehicles of escape), and against beating drums (used in the Stono Rebellion to summon other slaves to revolt). And for the first time it enacted prohibitions against teaching literacy, imposing a substantial £100 fine on the instructors. But only one of the two literacy skills was prohibited: the law was aimed at anyone who taught or caused a slave to be taught to write, or used him 'as a scribe.' The preamble explained why: 'the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences[.]' At this point we should ask, for whom was this inconvenient? The answer, of course, was that it was most inconvenient for the slaveholders because the ability to write enabled slaves to forge their own passes with a view to escaping.¹⁷

Georgia, the only colony created by Britain that had ever prohibited slavery, adopted South Carolina's slave code in 1755, three years after it became a royal province, and it incorporated the provision that outlawed the teaching of slaves to write. In a revision of the act in 1770, Georgia now declared that a £20 fine should be levied on anyone who taught or caused his slaves 'to be taught to write or read writing.'¹⁸ Yet while this new restriction

17. Cushing, *First Laws of the State of South Carolina*, 1: 174. (Restrictions against horse ownership had been passed in 1714 and 1722; McCord, *Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 7: 368, 382.) It is worth noting that most modern scholars who discuss the South Carolina law of 1740 have interpreted it as a law that prohibits reading as well as writing. The wording of the law, however, is crystal clear: only writing was prohibited. For passes and 'passing,' see David Waldstreicher, "'Reading the Runaways': Self-Fashioning, Print Culture and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 56 (1999): 261-64.

18. John D. Cushing, ed., *The Earliest Printed Laws of the Province of Georgia, 1755-1770*, 2 vols. (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1978), 2: 31; Oliver H. Prince, *A Digest of the Laws of the State of Georgia* (Athens: by the author, 1837), 785. The 1765 act was a continuance of the act first passed in 1755 and renewed several times thereafter. The 1765 act was disallowed by the British government on technical grounds and rewritten in 1770; Harold E. Davis, *The Fledgling Province: Social and Cultural Life in Colonial Georgia, 1733-1776* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Va., by The University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 128.

would theoretically have prevented slaves from deciphering texts such as letters written by their masters, it did not prohibit their being taught to read printing. Instruction in reading the Bible, therefore, was still not a violation of the law. In sum, such was the power of Christianity in the colonies that no colony throughout the entire colonial period legislated against instruction in the reading of Christian texts.

While there are many examples in the eighteenth century of individuals who gave reading lessons to slaves, particularly in the North,¹⁹ it was two Anglican organizations based in London that made the most sustained attempts to bring reading instruction to the enslaved as part of their missionary efforts: the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (S.P.G), founded in 1701, and the Associates of Dr. Thomas Bray, created in 1723. Each time either organization sponsored a school for slaves, the only literacy skill taught there was reading.

The only one of these schools that can be discussed here in any detail was founded at Charles Town, South Carolina, in 1743. It was the brainchild of the Reverend Alexander Garden, rector of St. Philip's Church, Charles Town. As the Anglican 'commissary' (that is, the representative of the Bishop of London) for both North and South Carolina, as well as the Bahamas, Garden was the leading Anglican clergyman of the South. He wrote to the secretary of the S.P.G. with his ideas about the school in 1740 (the same year as the passage of the slave code). He proposed an unusual experiment: the training of two 'Home-Born' slaves as in-

19. Slaves who were given private reading instruction by whites in the colonial period include, for example, some girls taught by Eliza Lucas Pinckney, of Wappoo, South Carolina (Eliza Lucas Pinckney, *The Letterbook of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, 1739-1762*, ed. Elise Pinckney [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972], 12, 34); Phillis Wheatley of Boston, who was taught to read by Mary Wheatley, the eighteen-year-old daughter of the household (Julian D. Mason, Jr., ed., *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, rev. and enl. ed. [1966; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989], 3); Dennis of Nomini Hall, Virginia, who waited on the table of the Carter family, by Philip Fithian (Hunter Dickinson Farish, ed. with an intro., *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion* [Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg, 1943], 240).

structors for his school. He would have them taught to read the Bible, learn the Anglican Church catechism by heart, and how 'to use the [Book of] Common Prayer.'²⁰

The S.P.G. had no qualms about slave ownership—indeed, the society already owned slaves in Barbados—and readily gave its permission. In 1742 Garden purchased two young slaves, Harry and Andrew, then aged fourteen and fifteen, on the society's behalf. Both had already been baptized and could say the church catechism, but neither had been taught so much as a letter of the alphabet. Garden paid for their instruction himself. By that September, he was able to report that Harry was 'of an excellent Genius, & can now (in the space of 8 months) read the N. Testament exceeding well.' Garden expected him to be ready to serve as a schoolmaster in another six months. He was considerably less enthusiastic about Andrew.²¹

The Charles Town Negro School opened on Monday, September 12, 1743. By October, there were thirty pupils. Harry was the master teacher and Andrew served as his assistant. Garden undertook to support their living costs himself during his lifetime. He thought, optimistically, that the owners of the slave pupils would take up the slack once he was gone. One of his comments reflects the enormous importance that the slave community attributed to this educational experiment. The parents of the enslaved, he remarked, 'woud [sic] gladly do it [pay for the living ex-

20. The Rev. Alexander Garden to Sec., May 6, 1740, S.P.G. Papers, Series B, VII, 235 (Rhodes House, Oxford, England, hereafter designated RH). The existence of this school, sponsored by such a public figure, poses problems for those who have interpreted the 1740 slave code as forbidding all literacy instruction. The legality of the school is explained by the fact that only reading was taught there.

21. The Rev. Alexander Garden to Sec., April 9, 1742, S.P.G. Papers, Series B, X, 138; and Sept. 24, 1742, Series B, X, 140 (RH). The identification of which, Harry or Andrew, was the 'excellent Genius' is made in the Rev. Alexander Garden to Sec., Oct. 18, 1744, S.P.G. Papers, Series B, XII, 119 (RH). For the S.P.G. and the Codrington estate on Barbados, see J. Harry Bennet, Jr., *Bondsmen and Bishops: Slavery and Apprenticeship on the Codrington Plantation of Barbados, 1710-1838* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1958).

penses of the schoolmasters], though they should pinch it off their own Backs & out of their own Bellies.²²

By the summer of 1746, the school had graduated twenty-eight children, judged to have achieved the reading goals set. It now had seventy students, fifteen of whom were adults who came to school at night. Andrew proved a disappointment, and in 1750 he was sold. Harry somehow kept the entire school going on his own. How he managed to teach up to seventy students without keeping written records must forever remain a mystery. The school survived a hurricane in 1752, which knocked its building down and required that it be rebuilt, and even the death of Alexander Garden in 1756. Harry taught there until 1768, when he went mad, was confined to a madhouse, and the school closed.²³

Four other schools were set up in the colonies in the late 1750s and early 1760s to teach young slaves to read, but in this case the sponsor was the Associates of Dr. Thomas Bray rather than the S.P.G. Benjamin Franklin proved to be a key player in these projects: between the autumns of 1758 and 1762, he helped the Associates set up Charity Negro schools at Philadelphia, New York City, Williamsburg, Virginia, and Newport, Rhode Island. He recommended schoolmistresses for all four schools and made the schools more attractive to the slaveholders of girls than boys by encouraging the schoolmistresses to teach sewing, knitting, and embroidery there as well as reading. All schools lasted until the early 1770s, but none survived the Revolution.²⁴

22. The Rev. Alexander Garden to Sec., Oct. 10, 1743, S.P.G. Papers, Series B, XI, 204 (RH).

23. The Rev. Alexander Garden to Sec., Oct. 18, 1744, S.P.G. Papers, Series B, XII, 119 (RH); Frank J. Klingberg, *An Appraisal of the Negro in Colonial South Carolina: A Study in Americanization* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1941), 116-21; Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740-1790* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 121.

24. John C. Van Horne, ed. with an intro., *Religious Philanthropy and Colonial Slavery: The American Correspondence of the Associates of Dr. Bray, 1717-1777* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 125-26. For the gender ratio, see the Philadelphia Negro School: in November 1759, there were 24 girls and 11 boys; in August 1761 there were 22 girls and 14 boys; and in November 1762, 20 girls and 12 boys, *ibid.*, 142, 162-63, 199-200.

WRITING AND POWER

There are several implications to be drawn from these schools for the enslaved. Let us summarize the obvious ones. First, at no school was writing taught, even though only two colonies legally proscribed it before the American Revolution. Second, and a function of the first, no white male taught at any of them. All instruction was provided by the politically disenfranchised—women or slaves. Third, reading instruction was motivated, once again, by the Christian requirement that children be taught to read the Scriptures. Reading was taught purely to inculcate Christianity; Christianity was believed to inculcate docility.

These are the obvious conclusions. But the more significant ones speak to the relationship between writing and power. Here, it seems, the colonials understood the importance of being able to express oneself in visible form better than their surface explanations would suggest. Writing, even when it is just penmanship, is the beginning of self-identity, as Tamara Plakins Thornton has pointed out in her *Handwriting in America*.²⁵ Moreover, they who can write hold power.

Nowhere is the relationship between power and writing demonstrated more clearly than in the restrictions passed by every southern colony—and, later, every slaveholding territory or state—against the movement of the enslaved. In every southern slave code, one of the first sections is devoted to a discussion of the written pass that all slaves had to have in hand in order to leave the premises of their owners. The pass was to include the name of the carrier of the pass, identify the home plantation, and specify the date and time of absence covered by the pass. These passes (also called tickets, letters, or certificates of leave) had to be signed by the owner or a responsible employee, and served as the equivalent, on the local level, of a passport today at the interna-

25. Thornton, *Handwriting in America*, ch. 1.

tional.²⁶ A model format was spelled out in the South Carolina Law of 1740²⁷ (fig. 1).

Written passes or tickets were needed by slaves in other transactions. They were supposed to have tickets to buy or sell any goods; in Florida, the only purchases they could make without a ticket were brooms and baskets, which were considered to be items of slave manufacture. The intent was obviously to monitor what went into the plantation as well as who went out of it.²⁸

26. The earliest legislation found describing the requirements for slave owners to issue a signed pass includes the following; some were no doubt passed earlier than the particular laws cited here, which often presuppose a ticket system. South Carolina, 1722: McCord, *Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 7: 371-72; Georgia, 1765: Cushing, *Earliest Printed Laws of the Province of Georgia*, 2: 16; North Carolina, 1791: *Laws of North Carolina . . . 1791*, 716 (unlawful to harbor or trade with slaves, free negroes, or mulattoes between sunset and sunrise or on the sabbath unless they have a pass); Virginia presumably before 1819, but surprisingly *The Revised Code of the Laws of Virginia: Being a Collection of All Such Acts of the General Assembly, of a Public and Permanent Nature, as Are Now in Force . . .*, 2 vols. (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1819) does not mention them; Maryland, before 1796: *Laws of Maryland . . .* (Annapolis: Frederick Green, 1796), n.p. (penalties against anyone giving a pass to a slave in order to help the latter leave the state); Kentucky, 1798: *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Twenty-First General Assembly for the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort, Ky.: Gernard & Berry, 1813), 2: 113; Mississippi by 1799: *Laws of the Mississippi [sic] Territory; Published . . . 1799* (Natchez, Miss.: A. Marschalk, 1799), n.p.; Tennessee by 1803: *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Fifth General Assembly of the State of Tennessee* (Knoxville: George Roulstone, 1803), 50; *Arkansas in 1804*: J. Steele and J. M'Campbell, comps., *Laws of Arkansas Territory* (Little Rock, Ark.: J. Steele, 1835), 520 (violators were to be delivered immediately to a justice of the peace, 528); Louisiana by 1816: *A General Digest of the Acts of the Legislatures of the Late Territory of Orleans and of the State of Louisiana*, 3 vols. (New Orleans: Peter K. Wagner, 1816), 1: 614; Missouri by 1816: *Acts Passed by the General Assembly of the Territory of Missouri; in December and January, One Thousand Eight Hundred and Sixteen and Seventeen* (St. Louis, Mo.: Joseph Charless, 1817), 28; Alabama by 1823, in Harry Toulmin, comp., *A Digest of the Laws of the State of Alabama: Containing the Statutes and Resolutions in Force at the End of the General Assembly in January, 1823* (Cahawba: Ginn & Curtis, 1823), 627; Florida by 1828, in *Acts of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida, Passed at their Seventh Session, 1828* (Tallahassee: William Wilson, 1829), 75 (a \$20 fine for anyone giving a pass to a slave under the control or charge of another); Texas before 1853, in *Laws of the Fourth Legislature of the State of Texas: Extra Session* (Austin: J.W. Hampton, 1853), 4: 15 (punishment for a slave furnishing a pass to another slave without authorization). An example of the restrictiveness of passes from a slave's perspective is provided by the recorded voice of the former slave, Fountain Hughes (American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress), <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/wpa/hughes1.html>>. I am indebted to Bruce Fort's web page for this reference.

27. Cushing, *First Laws of the State of South Carolina*, 1: 164. For another model format, see General Digest . . . of the State of Louisiana [1816], 1: 614.

28. E.g., in Georgia: Prince, *A Digest of the Laws of the State of Georgia, 1772* (a 1765 law); in Mississippi: *The Revised Code of the Laws of Mississippi, in Which are Comprised All Such Acts . . . As Were in Force at the End of the Year 1823* (Natchez: Francis Baker, 824), 371; brooms: Florida, *Acts of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida . . . 1828*, 75.

PERMIT this slave to be absent from Charlestown, (or any other town, or if he lives in the country) from Mr. plantation in parish, for days or hours, dated the day of—or to that purpose or effect; which ticket shall be signed by the master or other person having the care or charge of such slave, or by some other person by his or their order, direction and consent: And every slave who shall be found out of Charlestown, or any other town, if such slaves lives or is usually employed there, or if such slave lives in the country, without a letter or ticket as aforesaid, or without a white person in his company, shall be punished with whipping on the bare back not exceeding 20 lashes.

Slaves found from home without a ticket how to deal be with.

Any person who shall give a ticket to a slave without his master's consent shall forfeit £20 to the owner.

IV. And if any person shall presume to give a ticket or licence to any slave, who is the property or under the care or charge of another without the consent or against the will of the owner, or other person having charge of such slave, shall forfeit to the owner the sum of £20 current money.

V. If

Fig. 1. The information that was to appear in a slave's pass was spelled out in the South Carolina statute of 1740. John D. Cushing, comp., *The First Laws of the State of South Carolina*, pt 1 (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1981), 164.

All the contradictions and tensions between reading and religion, and writing and control, appear in an extraordinary letter written by a slave in 1723. Because of the author's situation, he never reveals his name or residence. Written from somewhere in Virginia, it was addressed to Bishop Edmund Gibson of London and somehow smuggled to him by way of Jamaica. Gibson was the addressee because he had recently become bishop and his pamphlets, which urged that slaves be Christianized, were already circulating in the colonies.

The author's mother was an enslaved African; his father was clearly his former white master because he says that his current master was his own half-brother. His letter is a homemade effort: he has almost certainly made the ink himself, because it is a reddish color. His text shows all the hallmarks of inexperience: the spelling and capitalization are insecure. He did not dare reveal his name or that of his allies, as he says at the end of the letter, 'for feare of our masters for if they knew that wee have Sent home to your honour wee Should goo neare to Swing upon the gallass [gallows] tree.'

It had taken him a long time—five weeks—to snatch enough time at night from his daily toil to finish his letter. Calling himself and those in his position some of the bishop's parishioners, he petitions the bishop to 'Releese us out of this Cruell Bondegg.'

But he couches his arguments in classically Christian terms, asking that slaves be included in the Christian family. In their present condition, he writes, 'wee are in Ignorance of our Salvation,' kept out of the church and denied matrimony. He asks, he says, for only one thing, that 'our childarn may be broatt up in the way of the Christtian faith[.]'

As he brings his letter to a close, this anonymous slave makes two telling references to literacy. His appreciation of the bond between reading and religion is clearly visible in his request, 'wee desire that our Childarn be putt to Scool and Larnd to Reed through the Bybell.' Significantly, he does not ask that they be taught to write. Instead, he apologizes for his own penmanship: 'my Riting is vary bad I whope yr honour will take the will for the deed I am but a poore SLave that writt itt and has no other time butt Sunday and hardly that att Sumtimes[.]'²⁹

He asked, in short, that his children be allowed to learn to read; yet it was only by writing that he could express his deepest longings (fig. 2).

LITERACY AND SLAVERY IN THE ANTEBELLUM ERA

Reading instruction, then, unlike writing instruction, was legally permitted by all the colonies throughout the colonial period in the service of Christianity. The bond between reading and religion still held. Moreover, it was firmly believed by most southerners that the Bible itself sanctioned slavery.³⁰

Nonetheless, there had already been the occasional voice raised that challenged the belief that reading encouraged submission and loyalty to masters, whether earthly or divine. Benjamin Franklin, when he was corresponding with the secretary of the

29. Thomas N. Ingersoll, "Releese us out of this Cruell Bondegg": An Appeal from Virginia in 1723,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 51 (1994): 777-82; quot. 781-82.

30. Slaveholders could appeal to texts such as Ephesians 6:5, 'Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ.' For a review of the arguments on both sides, see Caroline L. Shanks, 'The Biblical Antislavery Argument of the Decade, 1830-1840,' in Finkelman, *Articles on American Slavery*, 16: 616-41.

I am full port to my
 and I am full port to my
 Beg the favour of your Lordship that your honour
 will grant and settell one thing upon us which
 is that our Childrene may be brought up in
 the way of the Christian faith and our prayer
 is that they may be learn the Lord's prayer
 the Creed and the ten Commandments
 and that they may appeare every Lord's day at
 Church before the Curate to see & amonnd
 for our desire is that godliness should abound
 amongst us and we desire that our Childrene
 be putt to school and able to be v-need through
 the Bybell

18
 While it all att present with our
 prayers to god for att good success
 before your honour these from your humbell servants
 in the Lord
 my writing is very bad I whope yr honour
 will take the will for the deede
 I am but a poore slave at that
 write it and has no other more time
 left Sunday and hardly that att Saturday
 September the 8th 1723
 To the Right Reverend father in god
 my Lord arch bishop of
 London
 these with care

Figs. 2A and 2B. In this excerpt from a letter to The Right Reverend Edmund Gibson, archbishop of London, from the unknown slave, he describes his wish for the slave children to learn to read and apologizes for his own writing: '... and Sir wee your humble peticioners do humbly beg the favour of your Lord Ship that your honour will grant and Settell one thing upon us which is that our childarn may be broatt up in the way of the Christian faith and our desire is that they may be Larned the Lords prayer the creed and the ten commandements and that they may appeare Every Lord's day att Church before the Curatt to see Exammond for our desire is that godlines Should abound amongst us and wee desire that our Childarn be putt to Scool and Larned to see through the Bybell which is all att prasnt with our prayers to god for its good Success before your honour these from your humbell Servants in the Lord[.] my riting is vary bad I whope yr honour will take the will for the deede [.] I am but a poore Slave that writt itt and has no other time butt Sunday and hardly that att Sumtimes [.] September the 8th 1723.' Lambeth Palace Archives, Fulham Papers, American Colonial Section, vol. 17 (Bermuda and Jamaica): 117-18. Photographs and transliteration courtesy of Thomas N. Ingersoll (see note 29).

Associates of Dr. Thomas Bray, alluded to the prejudice of others that 'Reading & Knowledge in a Slave are both useless and dangerous.' Even when reading was restricted to reading the Bible, there were those who had raised questions about the danger of scripture being misconstrued by the enslaved.³¹

After the American Revolution, the new United States split between North and South as the northern states began the slow process of disentangling themselves from slavery.³² Nonetheless, in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, most Christian southerners still considered reading instruction for their slaves to be benign. That, however, was about to change. In fact, the few trickles of suspicion that reading, as well as writing, was actually a dangerous activity would soon swell into a tidal wave of mistrust. From roughly 1820 on, the conviction on the part of slaveholders that reading was a subversive activity would become the dominant one, swelling in importance for the next two decades.

We may perhaps identify four main factors that led, in many southern states, to the passage of laws that attacked the teaching of any kind of literacy, reading as well as writing: first, the fear on the part of southerners of what was called 'illegal assembly'; second, the rise of abolitionism; third, the writings of free African Americans; and fourth, the consequences of revolts led by literate Christian slaves.

The first of the factors that viewed reading as subversive was the constant fear, on the part of slaveholders, of any gathering of

31. Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 124. For an example of doubts expressed about the wisdom of teaching slaves to read the Bible, see the opinion of Francis Le Jau, who was the Anglican clergyman of the South Carolina parish of St. James, in Goose Creek, in 1710; Francis Le Jau to Sec., Feb. 1, 1709/10, S.P.G. Papers, Series A, V, 98 (typescript copy, Library of Congress).

32. William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion, Vol. 1, Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 131-34. A convenient summary of the timing of the northern states' extrication from slavery in relation to the state of slavery worldwide may be found in David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), 23-36. See also Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville: Published for the United States Capitol Historical Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1983).

slaves. This was a fear of long standing. Any congregation of slaves in one place was considered a potential bonfire, and laws had long been passed that legislated against 'unlawful assembly.' As time passed and new 'triggering events' occurred, such as the Gabriel plot in Virginia in 1800, the definition of 'unlawful assembly' was increasingly stretched to include the meeting of pupils in school settings. At first, legislation, such as that of South Carolina in 1800, simply prohibited meetings of slaves for the purpose of 'mental instruction' between sunset and sunrise, and at other times, even accompanied by whites, if they were conducted 'in a confined or secret place.' But this was not yet a blanket prohibition against all meetings for 'mental instruction': it did not prohibit reading instruction as such or schools themselves, provided they were conducted by whites, in unlocked and easily accessible rooms, and during the daytime. (This ensured that the pupils would be young enough for their masters to spare them from their work without much inconvenience.) And in fact part of the legislation was found so onerous that three years later people were forbidden from breaking in upon a meeting of a religious society until after nine o'clock at night, provided that the majority of those assembled were white.³³

The decade of the 1810s, however, saw continued slave disturbances in the South, often involving free blacks, and a burgeoning slave population.³⁴ Virginia's law of 1819 therefore expressed a new and darker vision of the relationship between schooling and sedition: in its revised code of that year, any meeting of the enslaved was to be considered an unlawful assembly. This included meeting at any house 'at any school or schools for teaching them reading or writing, either in the day or night under whatsoever pretext[.]' Moreover, 'free negroes or mulattoes mixing and associating with such slaves' also fell under the prohibition. Blacks

33. McCord, *Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 7: 441, 448. For the Gabriel plot, see Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, new ed. (1943; New York: International Publishers, 1969), 219-23.

34. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, ch. 10.

could still, however, attend church on any day of public worship, provided the minister was white.³⁵ In short, group reading and writing instruction of the enslaved, along with that of any free blacks found at the same site, was now illegal in Virginia, but individual instruction and religious devotions were still permitted if sanctioned by the slaveholders.

The second factor that encouraged more restrictive legislation on reading as well as writing was, of course, the rise of abolitionism. White abolitionists were motivated as much by religious impulses as humanitarian ones: the waves of evangelical fervor that swept the northern states called upon the faithful to abolish evil of all kinds, slavery being high on the list. From the southern perspective, the most dangerous habit of northern abolitionists was the export of inflammatory reading material. An example of the kind of material that might infiltrate the South was George Bourne's *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable*, printed in 1816, that asserted that the Bible could not possibly sanction enslavement.³⁶

Four years later, in 1820, South Carolina became the first state to pass a comprehensive law against anyone, white or black, who either imported into the state or circulated within the state 'any written or printed paper, with intent to disturb the peace or security of the same, in relation to the slaves of the people of this State.' The penalties were severe: a white person found guilty could incur a fine of up to \$1,000 and up to a year's imprisonment.³⁷

Nonetheless, by 1827, when the antislavery writer George Stroud published his *A Sketch of the Laws Relating to Slavery in the Several States of the United States of America*, there was still no state that had a blanket prohibition against teaching slaves to read, provided it was not in a group setting. Reading instruction without

35. *Revised Code of the Laws of Virginia*, 1: 424-25.

36. George Bourne, *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable: With Animadversions Upon Dr. Smith's Philosophy* (Philadelphia: J. M. Sanderson, 1816); John W. Christie and Dwight L. Dumond, *George Bourne and The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable* (Wilmington, Del.: Historical Society of Delaware, 1969).

37. McCord, *Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 7: 460.

school attendance was of course very difficult. As Stroud pointed out, the slave who learned to read 'must be, in most of the states, a prodigy indeed. . . . The laws, as I have already shown, secure to him no portion of time in which he may employ himself at his pleasure[.]' And, he added, there were cities whose restrictions went farther than those of the states: in Savannah, Georgia, an ordinance had been passed in 1818 that imposed a thirty-dollar fine upon any white person convicted of teaching any 'person of colour, slave or free, to read or write'; the penalty for a colored instructor was either a thirty-dollar fine or ten days imprisonment and thirty-nine lashes.³⁸

Savannah's approach would prove to be the harbinger of restrictions to come. For if two of the influences upon southern legislation were the South's fear of 'unlawful assembly' and of abolitionist tracts written by whites—that were augmented by the British abolitionist literature reaching the United States in the 1820s—a third was undoubtedly the writings of free African Americans. Published in the North and disseminated clandestinely throughout the South, the pamphlets and manifestoes of free African Americans presented a terrifying vision to slaveholders of the consequences of their continuing repression of blacks.

The year 1829 saw the appearance of two such tracts. The one that achieved the largest circulation was written by David Walker, born free in 1785 (or 1796) in Wilmington, North Carolina, to a free black mother and, posthumously, a slave father. He left the South when young for Boston, where he learned to read and write, became a devout Methodist, and secured a good living for himself in the secondhand-clothing business. He financed the publication of his *Appeal . . . to the Coloured Citizens of the World* himself, and had it printed in Boston in the fall of 1829. Sixty of his pamphlets found their way into Savannah, Georgia, where the mayor wrote an angry letter to the mayor of Boston to ask him to

38. George M. Stroud, *A Sketch of the Laws Relating to Slavery in the Several States of the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Kimber and Sharpless, 1827), 90.

stop them; others reached New Orleans; Richmond, Virginia; and at least five cities in North Carolina. Addressing his fellow free blacks, Walker issued a clarion call for 'the entire emancipation of your enslaved brethren all over the world.' The work is, in the words of Herbert Aptheker, the 'first sustained written assault on slavery and racism to come from a black man in the United States.'³⁹

Perhaps Walker's most striking contribution, in relation to our discussion of reading and subversion, was his ability to 'deconstruct,' as we would call it today, the texts he had read and to draw his own conclusions from them. He took issue, for instance, with Thomas Jefferson over his *Notes on Virginia* because Jefferson had toyed with the notion that Africans were inherently inferior intellectually. Walker also quoted chapter and verse from Genesis and Exodus to prove that American slaves would be avenged by 'the God of justice' because they were treated worse than the Israelites had been by the Egyptians. And he invoked the Declaration of Independence to declare that all men were created equal.⁴⁰

Above all, Walker believed that men were held in subjection because they were also held in ignorance. '[L]et the aim of your labours among your brethren,' he pleaded with his fellow free blacks, ' . . . be the dissemination of education and religion.'

39. Herbert Aptheker, 'One Continual Cry': *David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World (1829-1830); Its Setting and Its Meaning* (New York: Humanities Press for A.I.M.S., 1965), 41-43, 45-48; quot., 54; Walker quot., David Walker, *Appeal, in Four Articles, Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, in Aptheker, 'One Continual Cry,' 93-94. Virtually all the biographical details in this account, including Walker's date of birth, have been disputed. For a discussion of the problems, see Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 9-21; circulation, ch. 5; exegesis of the Appeal, ch. 7. The other pamphlet by a free black was Robert Alexander Young's *The Ethiopian Manifesto, Issued in Defence of the Black Man's Rights, in the Scale of Universal Freedom* (New York: for the author, 1829).

40. Walker, *Appeal*, in Aptheker, 'One Continual Cry,' 69-74, 90-91, 142-44. A more recent reproduction is Sean Wilentz, rev. ed. with an introd., *David Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles* (1965; New York: Hill & Wang, 1995). For Jefferson's view of the education of slaves, see Jefferson to Robert Pleasants, August 27, 1796, transcribed by Douglas L. Wilson of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, to whom I am indebted for this reference.

Ignorance, in his view, led to enslavement, and well did slaveholders know it: 'The bare name of educating the coloured people, scares our cruel oppressors almost to death[,] he said.⁴¹

Another of Walker's insights into conceptualizing the different contributions made by the two literacy skills was his understanding of writing. He realized that if writing were defined only as penmanship, as indeed it still was, it was of little value. Writing, he said, involved more than a pretty script: 'young men of colour, who have been to school, and who are considered by the coloured people to have received an excellent education, because, perhaps, some of them can write a good hand,' were almost as ignorant, according to Walker, as a horse—a comparison freighted with meaning. In other words, Walker fully appreciated that writing involved much more than elegant letter formation. His own tract was an eloquent testament to that truth.⁴²

We have now come full circle. From the perspective of David Walker, reading could make you free if you reflected upon what you read; writing, although by no means for the enslaved, was only for the ignorant, if by writing all you meant was mere penmanship. Writing as expression and writing published, on the other hand, would lead, he hoped, to liberation.

The effect of Walker's tract upon the southern states was electric. Many of them introduced new legislation to address the novel problem of vocal free blacks. The laws took a two-pronged approach: in the words of the preamble to Georgia's act, passed in late December 1829, their intention was 'to prevent the circulation of written or printed papers within this State calculated to excite disaffection among the coloured people of this State, and to prevent said people from being taught to read or write.' The first

41. Walker, *Appeal*, in Aptheker, 'One Continual Cry,' 94, 96.

42. *Ibid.*, 97-98. Of the four 'Articles' in Walker's book, the second is devoted to 'Our Wretchedness in Consequence of our Ignorance.' For Walker's death in 1830, soon after he published his third edition, see Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 10-11, 269-70, who dispels the rumors of foul play by citing the Boston Index of Deaths, which listed the cause of Walker's death as consumption.

line of defense was to crack down on freedom of speech: the publication and dissemination of offending material. Within the next year or two, Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and of course Georgia, all issued laws mandating harsh penalties for anyone convicted of being involved with 'disaffecting' materials at any level (writing, printing, or disseminating them). Missouri followed suit a few years later, prohibiting the circulation of 'abolition doctrines' in 1837. South Carolina did not need to; it had passed such legislation as early as 1820.⁴³

43. *Georgia: Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia . . . in November and December, 1829* (Milledgeville: Camak & Ragland, 1830), 168; repr. in Prince, *Digest of the Laws of the State of Georgia*, 802. Alabama passed the death penalty for anyone convicted of involvement with 'seditious papers . . . tending to produce conspiracy or insurrection or rebellion among the slaves or colored population': *Acts Passed at . . . the State of Alabama . . . One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-One* (Tuscaloosa: Wiley, McGuire & Henry, 1832), 17. Florida (death penalty): *Acts of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida, Passed at Their Tenth Session, 1832* (Tallahassee: William Wilson, 1832), 64. Louisiana mandated hard labor for life, or death: *Acts Passed at the Second Session of the Ninth Legislature of the State of Louisiana* (Donaldsonville: U. W. Huby, 1830), 96. Mississippi required from 3 to 12 months imprisonment and a fine from \$100 to \$1,000: *Laws of the State of Mississippi, Passed at the Fourteenth Session of the General Assembly* (Jackson: Peter Isler, 1830), 86-87. North Carolina prescribed a year in jail, the pillory, and a whipping for the first offense and death without benefit of clergy for the second: *Acts Passed by the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina, at the Session of 1830-31* (Raleigh: Lawrence & Lemay, 1831), 10. Tennessee had imposed a ten dollar fine on anyone using verbal incitement to insurrection as early as 1803: *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Fifth General Assembly of the State of Tennessee . . . One Thousand Eight Hundred and Three* (Knoxville: George Roulstone, 1803), 49; now it outlawed the written word as well, requiring 5 to 10 years jail for the first offense; 10 to 20 for the second: *Public Acts Passed at the First Session of the Twenty-First General Assembly of the State of Tennessee, 1835-6* (Nashville: S. Nye & Co., 1836), 146. Virginia (up to 39 stripes for a 'slave, free negro or mulatto' and capital punishment for the second offense; fines from \$100 to \$1,000 for whites): *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia . . . in . . . One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-One* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1832), 21-22; this was modified in the 1835-36 session to transportation for blacks and 2 to 5 years imprisonment for whites: *Acts of the General Assembly of Virginia, Passed at the Session of 1835-36* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1836), 44. Missouri: *Laws of the State of Missouri . . . One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-Six* (City of Jefferson: Calvin Gunn, 1837), 1 (first offense: fine of \$1,000 and jail up to 2 years; third offense: life imprisonment); penalties were reduced to 2 years (first offense) and 5 years (second), in 1845: *The Revised Statutes of the State of Missouri* (St. Louis: for the State, by J. W. Dougherty, 1845), 342. Kentucky prohibited incitement in general, rather than the written word in particular: *Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, Passed at December Session, 1845* (Frankfort: A. G. Hodges, 1846), 21 (5 to 20 years jail for blacks and whites alike). South Carolina: McCord, *Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 7: 460; whites were to be fined up to \$1,000 and up to a year in jail; there were similar penalties for free blacks.

But to several states a second line of defense appeared necessary. It now seemed clear that simply trying to exclude disaffecting material was not enough; given that such material was bound to seep in anyway, they had to prevent blacks from learning how to read them. Georgia, in the 1829 law just cited, therefore also prohibited 'any slave, negro, or free person of colour or any white person' from teaching 'any other slave, negro, or free person of colour, to read or write either written or printed characters[.]' Black teachers would be fined and/or whipped; whites would be fined up to five hundred dollars and could even be imprisoned 'in the common jail at the discretion of the court[.]' That is, for the first time, reading and writing instruction were both totally banned by a state; moreover, not only was the literacy instruction of enslaved blacks banned, but so was that of free blacks.⁴⁴

Louisiana, North Carolina, and Virginia passed similarly motivated laws the following year. Louisiana and North Carolina statutes, in sections immediately following the ones proscribing materials that tended to 'excite disaffection' among blacks, banned literacy instruction—but only for slaves. The Louisiana penalty was one to twelve months in jail. (North Carolina, where historically slavery had been less harsh than in other southern states, still permitted numeric literacy: 'the use of figures' was exempted from punishment. But the new law banned the gift or sale of books and pamphlets to slaves.) Virginia, which eleven years earlier had penalized free blacks for meeting in schools for slaves, now defined any meeting, anywhere, of free blacks and mulattoes to learn reading and writing as unlawful assembly; students could receive twenty lashes and their instructors could be fined up to fifty dollars and be imprisoned up to two months. The state also turned its attention to white instructors: whites teaching slaves to read or write 'for pay' could be fined from ten to a hundred dollars (a restriction that still left open the possibility of voluntary individual instruction). Alabama joined in a year later, mandating

44. Georgia, *Acts* . . . 1829, 171.

finer of up to five hundred dollars for any one 'who shall endeavor or attempt to teach any free person of color, or slave, to spell, read, or write[.]'⁴⁵

The opportunity for literate blacks to read disaffecting material increased markedly upon the 1831 publication of *The Liberator*, by the brothers Arthur and Lewis Tappan and by William Lloyd Garrison. Two years later the three were the principal organizers of the Anti-Slavery Society, itself a source of what the South considered inflammatory material.

The fourth factor to influence southern legislation on literacy was slave revolts, in which the southerners' worst fears about the effects of literacy all came to fruition. And now a new feature figured in the equation: religion itself. In the words of Janet Duitsman Cornelius, what was distinctive about the southern reaction in these years was not repressive legislation per se, which had always been the response of governments to rebellion, but, as she puts it, 'the stress on religion and literacy as a major cause for the revolts.' Now even Bible reading and Christianity came under attack.⁴⁶

The revolt led by Nat Turner in Virginia in August 1831 (also called the Southampton Slave Revolt) was the triggering event. Turner, born a slave in 1800, was much impressed by his parents' predictions when he was three or four that he was intended by the Lord for some great purpose. He learned to read and write 'with

45. Louisiana: *Acts* [1830], 96; this was a new departure for Louisiana: until Louisiana became a Spanish possession in 1763, slavery laws were less harsh there than elsewhere in North America; Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994). North Carolina: *Acts . . . State of North Carolina . . . 1830-31*, 11; penalties were, for the free, either a fine from \$100 to \$200, or imprisonment; for the enslaved, 39 lashes. For the generally milder form of slavery in North Carolina, see John Hope Franklin, 'Slaves Virtually Free in Ante-Bellum North Carolina,' in Paul Finkelman, ed., *Articles on American Slavery*, Vol. 17, *Free Blacks in a Slave Society* (New York: Garland, 1989), 134-160. Virginia: *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia . . . in the Year of Our Lord, One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1831), 107-8. Alabama: there were no earlier laws prohibiting slave literacy: there are none in Toulmin, *Digest of the Laws of the State of Alabama . . . January, 1823*; but in 1831 they were in place; teachers were to be fined from \$250 to \$500: *Acts Passed at . . . the State of Alabama . . . One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-One*, 16.

46. Cornelius, 'When I Can Read My Title Clear,' 33.

the most perfect ease,' he recalled, 'so much so, that I have no recollection whatever of learning the alphabet[.]' A deeply devout Christian, he devoted his spare time to fasting and prayer. One day, while he was plowing, he had a vision that a spirit spoke to him with Jesus's injunction, 'Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you.' His response later translated into a conspiracy with fellow slaves and a murderous rampage that, beginning with his master's family, within two days left fifty-five whites, including schoolchildren, dead.⁴⁷

Spurred by this evidence of the rotten fruits of Bible literacy, South Carolina belatedly followed the path already trodden by passing massively restrictive legislation against the education of blacks. In 1834 the state imposed stiff penalties upon anyone, white or black, who taught slaves to read or write individually or kept a school; it, too, took the extreme step of prohibiting the literacy instruction of free blacks by anyone of any color. The South Carolina law also encouraged informers to tell the authorities about schools for slaves by promising them half the fine as a reward; informers would also be compensated for identifying anyone who employed a black as a clerk or salesman in a store.⁴⁸

By 1834, then, five southern states (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and both North and South Carolina) had laws on the books that prohibited the teaching of reading and writing to enslaved African Americans under any circumstances. Three of them (Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina) also penalized anyone offering literacy instruction to African Americans who were

47. Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion* (New York: Humanities Press for A.I.M.S., 1966), 133-34, 151; Henry Irving Tragle, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), 306-7; Matthew 6.33. See also Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Justice: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

48. South Carolina (1834) provided penalties of up to six months imprisonment and a \$100 fine for teachers who were white; whippings of up to fifty lashes for free blacks, along with a fine of up to \$50; and whippings up to fifty lashes for slave teachers: *Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina . . . December, 1834* (Columbia, S.C.: E. F. Branthwaite, 1831 [sic]), 13-14; McCord, *Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 7: 468. For the controversies surrounding this law, see Cornelius, 'When I Can Read My Title Clear,' ch. 2.

legally free. A sixth state, Virginia, defined all schools where slaves or free blacks met as unlawful assemblies and forbade whites to teach slaves for pay.

The rationale behind all these laws is well expressed by a famous speech on the relationships among knowledge, slavery, and humanity made to the Virginia lower house by one of its members in 1832. It was well reported in the abolitionist press: 'We have, as far as possible, closed every avenue by which light might enter their [the slaves'] minds. If we could extinguish the capacity to see the light, our work would be completed; they would then be on a level with the beasts of the field, and we should be safe!⁴⁹ Denying education to an entire race was indeed an attempt to reduce its members to 'a level with the beasts of the field.'

Even in the absence of anti-literacy legislation, some states were clearly reluctant to educate free blacks, let alone enslaved ones. As in most states, Missouri's apprenticeship legislation required that apprentices be taught to read, write, and figure to the rule of three. But the state exempted masters of negroes and mulattoes from this provision, instructing that such apprentices be allowed 'a sum of money in lieu of education' at the end of their term. As late as 1866, a similar provision was passed by Kentucky.⁵⁰

Other antebellum legislation and record-keeping practices demonstrated the continuing importance of the written and printed word in the exercise of control. The keeping of lists has always been a tool of control; indeed, writing itself began from the need to note down what and how many pots and oxen were changing hands.⁵¹ Written records were kept by many slavehold-

49. Quoted in William Goodell, *The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice: Its Distinctive Features Shown by Its Statutes, Judicial Decisions, and Illustrative Facts* (New York: American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1853), 323.

50. *Revised Statutes of the State of Missouri* (1844 and 1845), 117; *Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort, Ky.: George D. Prentice, 1866), 49-50; literacy instruction of black apprentices was not, however, outlawed in Kentucky.

51. Denise Schmandt-Besserat, *Before Writing: How Writing Came About*, 1st abr. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

ers of their slaves. Official records of transactions such as slave trades or auctions were carefully maintained. Print had long been used to extend the reach of the dominant race: some states, such as Missouri, legally required that a notice be placed in a newspaper for ninety days to advertise that slaves without passes had been 'taken up' by the authorities. Private advertisements for runaways further extended the geographical reach of slaveholders.⁵²

Conversely, the written word was absolutely essential to the continuing freedom of free African Americans. Numbered lists of emancipated blacks, according to an 1806 Tennessee law, had to be maintained in every county 'in a book to be kept for that purpose'; free African Americans were required to carry a copy of their registration if they traveled outside the county where they were living. Writing, in short, served a gatekeeper function; it certified freedom as well as enslavement.⁵³

SLAVE LITERACY IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

Enacting legislation does not, of course, ensure that it is enforced; indeed, it may sometimes be more revelatory of the ideology of the culture than of actual practice. Few white persons, in fact, were brought to trial for teaching slaves or free blacks to read.⁵⁴

52. For advertisements for runaways, see Farley Grubb, *Runaway Servants, Convicts, and Apprentices Advertised in the Pennsylvania Gazette, 1728-1796* (Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing, 1992); Freddie L. Parker, *Slave Runaways in North Carolina, 1775-1840* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993); Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, eds., *'Pretends to be Free': Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994); Lathan A. Windley, *A Profile of Runaway Slaves in Virginia and South Carolina from 1730 through 1787* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995); Maureen A. Taylor, *Runaways, Deserters, and Notorious Villains From Rhode Island Newspapers. Volume 1: The Providence Gazette, 1762-1800* (Camden, Me.: Picton Press, 1995); Daniel Meaders, *Advertisements for Runaway Slaves in Virginia, 1801-1820* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997).

53. Tennessee, *Acts Passed at the Second Sixth General Assembly* (Knoxville: Elizabeth Roulstone, 1806), 83. Virginia, *Acts . . .* (1831), 107; Missouri, *Acts* (1817), 29. I am indebted to Phillip Troutman for the 'gatekeeper' concept.

54. The best known example of someone brought to trial for teaching blacks literacy is that of Margaret Douglass, convicted in Richmond under the Virginia Code of August 1849 for employing her daughter in teaching free African Americans. The Code prescribed a fine of up to \$100 and imprisonment of up to six months. The jury fined her one dollar; the judge gave her a month. Margaret Douglass, *Educational Laws of Virginia: The Personal Narrative of Mrs. Margaret Douglass* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1854), 61.

In addition, there were many states (such as Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, and even Mississippi) that never passed anti-literacy laws. Nonetheless, whether or not their state legislated against literacy, slaves in any state had so few legal protections that if their masters objected to any kind of instruction, that decision had the force of law. In fact, no matter where slaves lived, they invariably believed, and were encouraged to believe, that literacy acquisition was illegal. Indeed, the belief was so powerful that it has been routinely voiced in contemporary histories.⁵⁵

Nonetheless, in spite of the prohibitions, the misconceptions, the fear of punishment, and the actual punishment, many slaves, as we know, did learn to read. And some of these, with even greater difficulty and ingenuity, then learned to write.⁵⁶ They learned occasionally from devout white masters and more often from devout white mistresses; they learned from white children, either openly or by trickery; they learned from free blacks; and

55. Cornelius was the first to identify the exaggeration of the extent of anti-literacy legislation, 'When I Can Read My Title Clear,' 33; for an account of the longevity of these laws, see also 33-34.

56. For antebellum slaves in the South who knew how to read, see Cornelius, 'When I Can Read My Title Clear,' passim; Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1863), mentions Cooper London, a Methodist preacher: 115, 134, 157-58; others: 260, 261, 271-72; she gave a few reading lessons herself to Aleck, 257, 259. (I am indebted to Madeline Lee for this reference.) For slaves who could write, see, e.g., Franklin, 'Slaves Virtually Free,' 153-58 (they include George M. Horton, who composed poetry and love letters for college students); Loren Schwening, 'John H. Rapiet, Sr.: A Slave and a Freedman in the Ante-Bellum South,' in Finkelman, *Articles on Slavery*, 17: 415-26. Surviving letters by antebellum southern slaves are included in Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York: Citadel Press, 1951), 28, 50-51; Robert S. Starobin, ed., *Letters of American Slaves* (New York: Viewpoints, 1974). See also Carter G. Woodson, ed., *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis, 1800-1860* (Washington, D.C.: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1926), 511-12; Randall M. Miller, ed., 'Dear Master': *Letters of a Slave Family* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978); Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 44-56; Phillip D. Troutman, 'Corresponding with Family: Sentiment and the Slave Market,' paper presented at the American Historical Association Annual Meeting, January 1998. I am indebted to Konstantin Dierks and Phillip D. Troutman for many of these references. See Konstantin Dierks, 'Letter Writing, Gender, and Class in America,' and Phillip D. Troutman, 'Slave Trade and Sentiment in Antebellum Virginia, Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 2000.

they learned from other literate slaves, who passed on the precious knowledge in clandestine schools.⁵⁷

The opportunities for slaves to learn to read were enormously enhanced by the ubiquitous presence of Noah Webster's spelling books at a time when the spelling book was the text used to introduce children to reading. Webster's *American Spelling Book*, first so titled in 1787, and later his revision of 1829, *The Elementary Spelling Book* (fondly dubbed the 'ole blue-back' because of its familiar blue covers), became standard items in every home and little country store, where they were available at a modest cost. Not long after Webster's death in 1843, the blueback speller was being published at the rate of a million copies a year. Together with the Bible, it appears again and again in accounts of how slaves learned to read. (Estimates of slave literacy range from 5 to 10 percent, but must remain a guess at best.)⁵⁸

The experience of Frederick Douglass, the most famous of all literate slaves, illuminates all the issues discussed so far. Douglass's first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, was published in 1845. For Douglass, as for so many other successful runaways, literacy was the high road to freedom.⁵⁹ At the age of eight, he was sent from Wye plantation in Maryland to the Auld household in Baltimore. Listening to his pious and kindly mistress, Sophia Auld, read the Bible aloud awakened in him an interest in learning to read. At his request, Sophia introduced him

57. For the instructors of slaves, see Cornelius, 'When I Can Read My Title Clear,' 75-78.

58. Cornelius, 'When I Can Read My Title Clear,' ch. 3; literacy estimates, 8-9; role of speller, 68-71, 89-90, 93, 108, 109; see also William Jefferson White, who at the age of six 'bought his own Webster's speller for twelve and one-half cents earned from gathering chestnuts' (*ibid.*, illustration between 112-13). For the speller itself, see E. Jennifer Monaghan, *A Common Heritage: Noah Webster's Blue-Back Speller* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1983); estimate of a million copies after 1843 and 70 million copies overall of the speller in all its versions, *ibid.*, 219.

59. The relationship between literacy and running away was strong, but a large number of enslaved African Americans ran away who did not know how to (or whose masters did not know that they could). For instance, of 2,661 slaves advertised as runaways in North Carolina between 1775 and 1840, only 96 men and 3 women (3.7 percent) were identified as being able to write their own passes. Their reading literacy may have been higher. Parker, *Slave Runaways in North Carolina*, 141.

to the art. The outcome of this episode is well known. Her husband found out and was appalled. In the presence of Douglass, he told his wife that 'it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read.' (In fact, there was no anti-literacy law in Maryland.) Teaching a slave to read, he said, 'would forever unfit him to be a slave.' His words were a revelation to Douglass. 'I now understood,' he wrote in his autobiography, 'the white man's power to enslave the black man. . . . From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.' Education and slavery, Douglass realized, were incompatible with each other. Several years later, at the age of twelve or thirteen, he was able to purchase a copy of Caleb Bingham's, *Columbian Orator*. Reading the discussion of slavery in one of its selections, in which a slave demolishes the proslavery arguments of his master—who then emancipates him—further bolstered Douglass's resolve.⁶⁰

Once Sophia Auld's help was no longer available, Douglass turned the hungry little white boys on the street into his accomplices. He exchanged bread for the reading lessons they gave him from a copy of Webster's *American Spelling Book* that he carried in his pocket. Later in his life he taught fellow slaves to read in a clandestine school.⁶¹

Douglass's motivation to learn to write was, like his desire to learn to read, related to his aspirations to be free: he hoped that an occasion would present itself to write his own pass. His self-instruction reveals, once again, the wide gulf that existed between the two literacy skills. As a youth, he first wrote by copying letters written on timbers at a shipyard near the Auld's house, such as L.F. for 'larboard forward.' Then he would challenge any boy he met by boasting that 'I could write as well as he.' The response

60. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, ed. David W. Blight (Boston: Bedford Books, 1993), 54, 57–58, 61; quot. 57, 58; Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 73, 78–79, 84; David W. Blight, ed. and introd., *The Columbian Orator . . . by Caleb Bingham* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 209–12. For Douglass's date of birth in February 1818, see Dickson J. Preston, *Young Frederick Douglass: The Maryland Years* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), ch. 3.

61. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 60, 83–84; Douglass, *Life and Times*, 83, 151–53.

would of course be, 'Let me see you try it.' Douglass would write his precious letters and challenge the boy to beat his effort, so tricking him into being his instructor. Douglass next imitated the slanting italic alphabet demonstrated in Webster's speller, which was similar to script. Finally, when Sophia Auld went out each Monday to her religious meeting, leaving him to take care of the house, he laboriously copied the scripts penned in the discarded copybooks of the young son of the house. Douglass said it took him years to accomplish learning to write.⁶²

It was Douglass's reading that taught him the alternative to slavery. But it was still the writing of others that held him in its thrall. In the end, his escape to freedom was achieved not by a forged pass but by a selfless act of trust on the part of a free black sailor who loaned Douglass his 'sailor's protection'—papers carried by sailors at sea. Douglass actually escaped from Baltimore rather prosaically by train and ferry; but he could not have done so without a 'ticket': not just his train ticket but the papers of the free black that had to pass the inspection of the train guard.⁶³

It was not Douglass's penmanship but his ability to compose that was crucial to his self-formation and self-identity. He found his voice in autobiographies, as did others. Indeed, the relationship between liberty and literacy emerges with greatest clarity in almost a hundred 'slave narratives' that were published before, during, and after the Civil War. So potent were these that they became the foundation of a distinctive African American literary tradition.⁶⁴

Today, literacy—particularly the ability to compose—still marks a boundary between full involvement with one's own humanity and a feeling of exclusion from the human race. In a free society, to be fully literate is also to be fully human.

62. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 63; Douglass, *Life and Times*, 92–93.

63. Douglass, *Life and Times*, 197–201.

64. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. and intro., *The Classic Slave Narratives* (New York: Penguin, 1987), xii; see also Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979); and Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall, 1981).

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