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# Revolutionary Principles and Family Loyalties: Slavery's Transformation in the St. George Tucker Household of Early National Virginia

Phillip Hamilton

IN the winter of 1820–1821, Virginia's prominent jurist St. George Tucker attempted to complete the Revolution he and his generation had begun many decades before. In his Williamsburg study, Tucker penned a series of revisions to an emancipation proposal he had published twenty-five years earlier.<sup>1</sup> While the Missouri crisis raged to the west, the sixty-seven-year-old judge revisited his plan in the hope that the nation could still wipe the stain of slavery from the land. Only then, he felt, could the United States truly fulfill the principles for which he and so many others had fought. For Tucker, an emigré from Bermuda, the American Revolution represented the supreme achievement of a free and enlightened people, the triumph of reason and natural rights over superstition and oppression. Yet before this magnificent triumph could be complete, slavery had to go.

As Tucker struggled over the years to realize these revolutionary goals, he also educated his two beloved sons, Henry St. George and Nathaniel Beverley, known to family members by his middle name, about the rebellion's larger meaning. Yet Tucker's abiding love for his children raised the thorny—and ultimately conflicting—issue of family interest. As the eighteenth century passed into the nineteenth, many Virginia planters realized that the Tidewater's tobacco-based economy had grown dangerously unstable. In these uncertain circumstances, family love and devotion meant preserving familial property, including human property, for future generations. Thus, from the end of the Revolution until the Missouri crisis, St. George Tucker, like many members of the Revolutionary gentry, faced conflicting loyalties: he wished to eliminate slavery to fulfill the Revolution's ideological promise, but he also wanted to safeguard his family's property to preserve its wealth, power, and prestige.

Phillip Hamilton is an assistant professor of history at Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Missouri. He wishes especially to thank Peter H. Griffin, Michael Jarvis, David T. Konig, Ray Scupin, James Sidbury, Daniel Blake Smith, and an anonymous reader for the *William and Mary Quarterly* for their incisive comments and criticisms on various drafts of this article.

<sup>1</sup> St. George Tucker, *A Dissertation on Slavery: with a Proposal for the Gradual Abolition of it, in the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia, 1796).

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The relationship of slavery to the founding fathers and the broader problem of human bondage during the Age of Revolution have aroused much scholarly interest in recent decades.<sup>2</sup> Debates have been lively and frequently contentious, yet historians almost universally have praised St. George Tucker as a patriot who, unlike Virginia's other founders, possessed the courage to challenge slavery.<sup>3</sup> Though admirable and praiseworthy, Tucker's beliefs about slavery are more complex than scholars have realized. In fact, over the course of the Revolution and early national period, his attitudes and those in his family underwent a considerable transformation, linked to the many changes that swept the United States following 1776.

Beyond deepening our understanding of Tucker's place in history, his family's experiences also illuminate why many leading slaveowners, at one time in favor of abolition, gradually reconciled themselves to slavery. Although some historians have sharply criticized the founders for their failure to live up to the enlightened principles they so brilliantly articulated, these attention-getting attacks oversimplify the age.<sup>4</sup> Initially committed to slavery's demise, St. George Tucker's family also lived in a rapidly changing society out of which emerged new circumstances, new uncertainties, and new pressures. Confronted by such fluidity, the Tuckers, and probably other slaveowners, struck compromises—unavoidable to them, incriminating to many present-day commentators—that perpetuated and strengthened slavery throughout the Old Dominion. The Tuckers' experiences explain the complex interrelationship among slavery, ideology, family responsibilities, and

<sup>2</sup> These two historiographical traditions are related and overlap in many areas. Major works concerning slavery in the age of the American Revolution include David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966), and *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, 1975); William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York, 1990), and *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War* (New York, 1994); Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968), esp. parts 3–5; Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution* (New York, 1990); Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York, 1989), chaps. 7–8; Duncan J. MacLeod, *Slavery, Race, and the American Revolution* (London, 1974); Robert McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia*, 2d ed. (Urbana, Ill., 1973); and Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, 1991). The literature dealing specifically with slavery and the founders is extensive and growing, particularly regarding Thomas Jefferson.

<sup>3</sup> Freehling has called Tucker "Virginia's most thoroughgoing abolitionist in the Age of Jefferson"; *Road to Disunion*, 484. He labels most other founders "skittish abolitionists, chary of pouncing on antislavery opportunity"; *Reintegration of American History*, 12. Two even more recent examples of praise for Tucker's antislavery sentiments are in Paul Finkelman, "Thomas Jefferson and Antislavery: The Myth Goes On," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 102 (1994), 212, and Jan Lewis, "The Problem of Slavery in Southern Political Discourse," in David Thomas Konig, ed., *Devising Liberty: Preserving and Creating Freedom in the New American Republic* (Stanford, Calif., 1995), 267.

<sup>4</sup> Finkelman's attacks on Jefferson have led the way; see, for instance, "Jefferson and Slavery: Treason Against the Hopes of the World," in Peter S. Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies* (Charlottesville, 1993), 181–221. Joseph J. Ellis calls Finkelman the "chief prosecutor" of the slaveowning and freedom-loving Jefferson for the crime of "hypocrisy"; see *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1997), 17–18.

money in early national Virginia. Indeed, the dynamic interplay of these issues not only transformed the institution but also ultimately convinced Virginians to abandon their Revolutionary ideals and sowed in them the first seeds of southern nationalism and American disunion.

In 1772, nineteen-year-old St. George Tucker arrived in Virginia from Bermuda. Born into a politically powerful yet financially strained merchant-shiping family, he came to Williamsburg to read law at the College of William and Mary. The congenial young man rose swiftly in Virginia society, making friends easily and working his way into the colony's highest circles. When the Revolution came, Tucker's climb up the Old Dominion's social ladder continued. His 1778 marriage to a beautiful, well-connected widow, Frances Bland Randolph, propelled him into the ranks of two powerful families. His new bride, moreover, brought three large plantations and more than one hundred slaves to the marriage, immediately making Tucker a substantial member of the state's planter elite.<sup>5</sup>

Although his rapid rise in Virginia won him land, prestige, and influence, Tucker risked everything in the American Revolution. When the war broke out, he and his Bermudian kin participated in a smuggling operation in the Caribbean and the Atlantic Ocean, transporting desperately needed goods and weapons from Europe and the West Indies into Virginia. Later, Tucker enlisted in the state militia, rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel. Late in the war, he served briefly on the Virginia governor's council before retiring to his family, plantations, and slaves at the cessation of hostilities.<sup>6</sup>

For Tucker and his kin and friends in the gentry, the Revolution against Great Britain was no mere struggle for home rule. Rather, they believed they stood on the brink of a new epoch in human history. Raised on the optimistic principles of the Enlightenment, Tucker and his circle thought that they and other Revolutionaries had truly created a country based on reason and liberty.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in Tucker's opinion, they had put into "practice, what,

<sup>5</sup> Frances Bland had previously been married to John Randolph, Sr. (1742–1775). The 3 plantations she brought to her marriage with St. George were Roanoke in Charlotte County, Bizarre in Cumberland County, and Matoax in Chesterfield County near Petersburg. In 1778, Tucker moved into the great house at Matoax with Frances and her 3 children, Richard (1770–1796), Theodorick (1771–1792), and John (1773–1833).

<sup>6</sup> No adequate biography of St. George Tucker exists. The only published one is Mary Haldane Coleman, *St. George Tucker: Citizen of No Mean City* (Richmond, 1938). For additional information on Tucker's rise in Virginia in the 1770s and his experiences in the Revolution see Charles T. Cullen, *St. George Tucker and Law in Virginia, 1772–1804* (New York, 1987), chap. 1; Phillip Forrest Hamilton, "The Tucker Family and the Dynamics of Generational Change in Jeffersonian Virginia, 1775–1830" (Ph. D. diss., Washington University, 1995), chaps. 1, 2; and Robert Morton Scott, "St. George Tucker and the Development of American Culture in Early Federal Virginia, 1790–1824" (Ph. D. diss., George Washington University, 1991), chap. 1. For more on Bermuda and the Tucker family in the Revolutionary era see Wilfred Kerr, *Bermuda and the American Revolution* (Princeton, 1936), and Robert Dennard Tucker, *The Descendants of William Tucker of Throwleigh, Devon* (Spartanburg, S. C., 1991).

<sup>7</sup> The nebulous term "circle" here refers to white males within Tucker's sphere of activity, including affinal kin in both the Bland and Randolph families as well as his friends in the Tidewater gentry.

before, had been supposed to exist only in the visionary speculations of theoretical writers.”<sup>8</sup> So momentous was their struggle that Tucker’s close friend John Page insisted it “well deserves the Laborer [Laboring?] Pen of a Livy or Polybus.”<sup>9</sup> St. George agreed. During the war, he wrote a lengthy ode, “Liberty: A Poem on the Independence of America,” that reveals his great confidence in both the potential of human reason and the republic’s bright prospects. Believing that America would soon become a great empire of liberty, Tucker concluded:

If Liberty thy Board shall deign to grace / And smiling peace adorn  
thine humble Cot, / Columbia, thus, shall live to deathless Fame, /  
Unrivall’d or by Rome, or Britain’s vaunted name!<sup>10</sup>

Tucker and his circle held that, above all, the Revolution confirmed the self-evident principle “that *all men* are by nature *equally free* and *independent*.” This tenet, Tucker wrote, not only received its “most solemn sanction in the United States of America” but was also “the first article in the foundation of [our] government.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout his life, Tucker’s commitment to the natural rights ideology of the Revolution shaped his social and political attitudes and forced him to confront the shortcomings of his society. In particular, his loyalty to these principles compelled him to challenge their greatest contradiction—chattel slavery.

Like many Virginia leaders, Tucker recognized slavery’s injustice. Embarrassed by its existence, he confessed, “Whilst America hath been the land of promise to Europeans, and their descendants, it hath been the vale of death to millions of the wretched sons of Africa.”<sup>12</sup> Slavery’s utter incompatibility with the liberal principles for which he had fought disturbed him even more. That all men are created equal, he lamented, “is, indeed, no more than a recognition of the first principles of the law of nature.” In the name of compassion and consistency, he urged white Virginians to “regard [African Americans] as our fellow men.”<sup>13</sup>

Convinced of the fundamental humanity of slaves, Tucker saw much that both encouraged and disheartened him in the years after the Revolution.

<sup>8</sup> Tucker, *Blackstone’s Commentaries: with Notes of Reference, to the Constitution and Laws, of the Federal government of the United States and of the Commonwealth of Virginia*, 5 vols. (South Hackensack, N. J., 1969; orig. pub. 1803), Note A, 1:4–5.

<sup>9</sup> Page to Tucker, Sept. 28, 1776, Tucker-Coleman Collection, Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Va. For more information on the influence of the Enlightenment on Revolutionary leaders see Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992), part 2.

<sup>10</sup> Tucker’s poem, “Liberty,” was published in Richmond in 1788. Evidence indicates that he began it during the Revolution. It is reprinted in its entirety in Scott, “Tucker and the Development of American Culture,” 220–28, quotation on 228.

<sup>11</sup> Tucker, *Dissertation on Slavery*, 30; Tucker, *Blackstone’s Commentaries*, Note B, “Of the Several forms of Government,” 1:12–13. The words “That all men are by nature *equally free* and *independent*” were taken directly from Virginia’s 1776 Declaration of Rights.

<sup>12</sup> Tucker, *Dissertation on Slavery*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 48–49.

He witnessed state after state in the North put the institution on the path toward extinction. At home in Virginia, the General Assembly liberalized the Old Dominion's manumission laws.<sup>14</sup> Concurrently, some prominent Virginians proposed serious emancipation plans. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, drafted two proposals, one in 1776 and the other in 1783. Seven years later, Ferdinando Fairfax, a protégé of George Washington, published an emancipation and colonization scheme that he hoped would be carried out under the auspices of the new federal government.<sup>15</sup> In addition, many Virginia evangelicals maintained their commitment to slavery's eradication.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, the judge witnessed hardening attitudes in many corners of the state. In 1784–1785, when many white Virginians were still reeling from the British evacuation of thousands of their slaves, more than twelve hundred ordinary citizens signed petitions to the Virginia Assembly asserting that African Americans were nothing more than chattel.<sup>17</sup> After 1788, moreover, the three-fifths clause of the Constitution significantly augmented Virginia's political power at the national level and convinced some not to challenge the institution, regardless of the injustice to blacks. Finally, as manumissions increased, white Virginians saw the state's free black population, which many whites feared would spread dissent and discord among those still in bondage, multiply at an alarming rate.

Tucker, still dedicated to the Revolution's natural rights principles and convinced that success was possible, decided in the mid-1790s to draft a serious proposal to abolish Virginia slavery. Believing that the slave revolution in St. Domingue made immediate action essential and persuaded that still "a large majority of slave-holders among us would cheerfully concur in any feasible plan for the [institution's] abolition," Tucker looked to the North for solutions and precedents.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, he corresponded with Jeremy Belknap in 1795 to learn how Massachusetts had freed and integrated African Americans into the general population.<sup>19</sup>

Published in late 1796 under the title *A Dissertation on Slavery*, Tucker sought a middle ground on which to reconcile liberalism's twin beliefs in

<sup>14</sup> On emancipation in the North see Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago, 1967); Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 131–34; and MacLeod, *Slavery, Race, and the American Revolution*, 98–99. On the importance of manumissions in Virginia in the 1780s see Nash, *Race and Revolution*, 17–18.

<sup>15</sup> Nash, *Race and Revolution*, 11–12, 42–43.

<sup>16</sup> James D. Essig, *The Bonds of Wickedness: American Evangelicals against Slavery, 1770–1808* (Philadelphia, 1982), 67.

<sup>17</sup> Fredrika Teute Schmidt and Barbara Ripel Wilhelm, "Early Proslavery Petitions in Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 30 (1973), 133–46. Tucker was appointed to the General Court in 1788.

<sup>18</sup> Tucker to Jeremy Belknap, June 29, 1795, quoted in Nash, *Race and Revolution*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> "Letters and Documents Relating to Slavery in Massachusetts," *Belknap Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections*, 5th Ser., 3 (1877), 373–431; Belknap, "Queries Respecting the Slavery and the Emancipation of Negroes in Massachusetts," Jan. 24, 1795, *ibid.*, 1st Ser., 4 (1795), 191–211; see also Robert M. Cover, *Justice Accused: Antislavery and the Judicial Process* (New Haven, 1975), 38.

basic human equality and the sanctity of all property.<sup>20</sup> He wished to eliminate slavery while not infringing the property rights of his fellow slaveowners. In his plan, he soothingly explained, "The abolition of slavery may be effected without the *emancipation* of a single slave; without depriving any man of the *property* which he *possesses*, and without defrauding a creditor who has trusted him on the faith of that property."<sup>21</sup> To achieve these multiple ends, Tucker proposed that Virginia adopt many elements of Pennsylvania's 1780 plan for gradual emancipation.<sup>22</sup> All existing slaves would continue in bondage for the remainder of their lives, and all African-American males born to the current generation would be enslaved for life. Those females born after the plan's adoption would be free, although in servitude until their twenty-eighth birthday. These second generation females would then transmit their "free" status to all their subsequent children, both male and female.<sup>23</sup>

Like many in his society, Tucker assumed slavery had so debased African Americans that, once freed, they would not work unless compelled by force. Therefore, because "the earth cannot want cultivators," he proposed that all freedmen subsequently be coerced into laboring for the white ruling class if they did not do so voluntarily.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, believing that whites would never accept black participation in society on terms of equality, Tucker proposed excluding blacks from most civil and political rights, hoping that over time they would voluntarily migrate to western lands beyond the United States. While admitting that the plan "savoured strongly of prejudice," Tucker confessed that he chose to "accommodate" racism in order to "avoid as many obstacles as possible to the completion of so desirable a work, as the abolition of slavery."<sup>25</sup> From the date of its inception, the plan would take 105 years before Virginia's last slave would be freed.<sup>26</sup>

After Philadelphia printer Mathew Carey published the *Dissertation on Slavery*, Tucker confidently submitted it to the state legislature for consideration. To the speaker of the house of delegates he solemnly wrote, "The Representatives of a free people, who . . . have declared that all Men are by nature equally free and independent, can not disapprove an attempt to carry so incontestible a moral Truth into practical Effect."<sup>27</sup> The reception in the

<sup>20</sup> Tucker's *Dissertation on Slavery* has been frequently discussed by scholars; see especially Jordan, *White over Black*, 55–61; Davis, *Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 335–36; Cover, *Justice Accused*, 37–39; Nash, *Race and Revolution*, 43–47; and Lewis, "Problem of Slavery in Southern Political Discourse," 267.

<sup>21</sup> Tucker, *Dissertation on Slavery*, 81; see also 79.

<sup>22</sup> Tucker wrote admiringly of Pennsylvania's plan; *ibid.*, 80–81. For the details of the plan see Zilversmit, *First Emancipation*, 124–37.

<sup>23</sup> Tucker, *Dissertation on Slavery*, 89–92.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 74–78, 99–101. With regard to the obvious injustice of this provision, Tucker pleaded that the "laws of nature" also had to protect "the interests of the society" as a whole; *ibid.*, 66, 104.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 92, 94.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 102n.

<sup>27</sup> Tucker to the Virginia Speaker of the House of Delegates, Nov. 30, 1796, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

General Assembly proved disastrous. Despite Tucker's many concessions to white racism, most delegates refused even to consider his proposal. "Such is the force of prejudice," one sympathetic member wrote, "that in the house of delegates, characters were found who voted against the letter and its enclosure lying on the table."<sup>28</sup> Stunned by the virulent reaction, Tucker indignantly told Belknap, "Nobody was prepared to meet the blind fury of the enemies of freedom."<sup>29</sup> Disgusted with his fellow Virginians, Tucker shelved the *Dissertation on Slavery* and despaired over whether the nation's Revolutionary principles would ever be fulfilled.

On December 2, 1796, two days after submitting his plan to the Virginia legislature and still sanguine about its chances for implementation, Tucker wrote William Haxall, a Petersburg slave trader, that he wanted to sell four slaves—a mother and her three daughters—all of whom Tucker had previously hired out in the city. Confident in this merchant's "adroitness and punctuality," Tucker demanded no less than £200 for the family, explaining "the high price of negroes at present encourages me to hope that you will dispose of those for more than [that] sum."<sup>30</sup> Contrary to Tucker's high expectations, the foursome attracted no offers. Nor could Haxall hire them out. Experienced in the ways of the world, the trader suspected that no whites wanted the slaves because they "have so long hired their own time and lived without controul." Instead, he urged Tucker to sell them separately at public auction, a course the judge resisted, not wishing to break up the family. In March 1797, after "much plague and trouble," Haxall at last sold them to a neighbor. Although Tucker received less than he had originally hoped, the transaction greatly pleased him, and he utilized Haxall's services often during the next four years.<sup>31</sup>

Though at first glance a sad and typically hypocritical act for the Revolutionary generation, Tucker saw no insincerity in his actions. In his mind, the sale had nothing to do with his commitment to freedom for African Americans and everything to do with his growing alarm at the financial health of many great Tidewater families. During and after the war with Great Britain, Tucker saw momentous economic changes in the Chesapeake that led him to doubt the stability of Virginia's ruling elite. By the time of the Revolution, a number of great planters, particularly those living south of the James River, stood heavily in debt. Many had spent exorbitant amounts of money on mansions, carriages, clothes, slaves, china, and furniture, in part to prove their financial strength and independence. By the 1770s, their liabilities were staggering.<sup>32</sup> Wartime destruction in the Tidewater deepened

<sup>28</sup> George Taylor to Tucker, Dec. 8, 1796, *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Cover, "Review of St. George Tucker, *Blackstone's Commentaries*," *Columbia Law Review*, 70 (1970), 1492–93.

<sup>30</sup> Tucker to Haxall, Dec. 2, 1796, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

<sup>31</sup> Haxall to Tucker, Dec. 20, 1796, Feb. 10, June 28, 1797, *ibid.* For correspondence regarding further slave transactions see Haxall to Tucker, Aug. 31, 1797, Apr. 15, 1798, and Tucker to Haxall, Feb. 17, 1801, all *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, 1982), chap. 6. For information on the indebtedness of Virginians south of the James River see Emory Evans,



the crisis. During Benedict Arnold's raid across the James River valley in 1780–1781, the British looted numerous plantations, burned tobacco warehouses, and freed thousands of slaves.<sup>33</sup> The depressed economic climate of the 1780s aggravated an already bad situation. Throughout the decade, planters had to learn to operate outside the protective walls of the British empire as well as to cope with European markets that were not fully open to American produce. Low tobacco prices and soil exhaustion throughout eastern Virginia added to the uncertainty.<sup>34</sup>

Amid the difficulties of these years, Tucker saw firsthand the straitened circumstances of many important families and individuals. Not only did his relative and fellow planter John Banister lose most of his land and slaves to excessive debts, but Tucker also witnessed the financial collapse of his earliest patrons in Virginia, members of the once-powerful Nelson family.<sup>35</sup> After the failure of a speculative land investment in South Carolina, St. George's own brother, Thomas Tudor Tucker, saw his status in postwar society decline. Unable to pay a vast array of obligations, Thomas confessed that he was being steadily reduced to "the Condition of a Beggar."<sup>36</sup>

In these precarious years, St. George Tucker confronted his family's possible financial ruin. Although Frances Bland Randolph had brought land and slaves to her marriage, she also conveyed great debts incurred by her first husband, John Randolph, Sr.<sup>37</sup> Such liabilities were ignored during the war,

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"Private Indebtedness and the Revolution in Virginia, 1776 to 1796," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 28 (1971), 363, 368–69.

<sup>33</sup> Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 210–11. During British raids in 1781, many of the Tuckers' slaves at Matoax escaped to the enemy. After two unfortunates were recaptured, Tucker ordered them sold, probably as an example to his remaining bondmen; see William Withers to Tucker, May 20, Aug. 10, 1781, Jan. 24, Mar. 11, 1782, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

<sup>34</sup> On the economic difficulties of the Tidewater see Lorena S. Walsh, "Work and Resistance in the New Republic: The Case of the Chesapeake, 1790–1820," in Mary Turner, ed., *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: The Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas* (Kingston, Jam., 1995), 97–98, 105–06; Richard S. Dunn, "Black Society in the Chesapeake, 1776–1810," in Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville, 1986), 50–52; and Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill, 1986), 157–58. On the soil exhaustion of the Chesapeake see Avery Odelle Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606–1860* (Urbana, Ill., 1925), and Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, 2 vols. (Gloucester, Mass., 1958; orig. pub. 1933).

<sup>35</sup> Banister, a former Revolutionary officer and onetime delegate to the Continental Congress, was married to Frances Randolph Tucker's sister, Elizabeth Bland. For information on the collapse of his estate see Banister to Tucker, Aug. 1786 [1787?], and Neill Buchanan to Tucker, Apr. 27, 1789, Tucker-Coleman Coll. The fall of the Nelson family is detailed in Evans, *Thomas Nelson of Yorktown: Revolutionary Virginian* (Williamsburg, Va., 1975), 124–38. Tucker's patronage relationship with the Nelson family is discussed in Hamilton, "Education in the St. George Tucker Household: Change and Continuity in Jeffersonian Virginia," *VMHB*, 102 (1994), 174–75.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Tudor Tucker to Tucker, Feb. 9, 1783, Tucker-Coleman Coll. For information about Thomas Tudor's land speculations in South Carolina see Rachel N. Klein, *Unification of a Slave State: The Rise of the Planter Class in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1760–1808* (Chapel Hill, 1990), 191–92.

<sup>37</sup> For information about these debts and their impact on members of the Randolph family see William Ewart Stokes, "Randolph of Roanoke: A Virginia Portrait—The Early Career of John Randolph, 1773–1805" (Ph. D. diss., University of Virginia, 1955), and Robert Dawidoff, *The Education of John Randolph* (New York, 1979).

but Tucker had to deal with them afterward. Well-known for his great “dread” of “poverty” and knowing that he needed additional income to preserve his family’s economic viability, Tucker reluctantly returned to the bar as a county court lawyer in 1782.<sup>38</sup> Although highly successful and truly interested in the law, he detested his new situation. One friend, Robert Innes, sympathized: “You complain of your being oblig’d to turn County Court Lawyer. It is true the fall from a gentleman of ease and pleasure to one Laborious occupation is disagreeable.”<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, continued economic instability throughout the decade convinced Tucker to persevere, and, despite professional success, economic worries plagued him. Uncertain markets for his family’s crops, the frequent inability of clients to pay for services, and John Randolph, Sr.’s outstanding debts weighed on his mind. In 1784, his father, Henry Tucker, Sr., noted: “You complain much of your Finances.”<sup>40</sup> So great had his money problems become that St. George periodically had to call on fellow planters for outstanding debts, a task that “much embarrassed” and “pained” him.<sup>41</sup> To his wife, he confessed that he felt overwhelmed by “all my perplexities” and simply wished for “ease and independence.”<sup>42</sup> Several months after Frances’s untimely death in January 1788, Tucker once more complained, this time to his brother, that he felt “[much] straighten’d in [his] pecuniary Circumstances.”<sup>43</sup>

Virginia’s economy improved in the 1790s. In particular, a number of Tidewater planters and other Virginians reached for new opportunities in the Piedmont. St. George Tucker took advantage of this growing westward migration. Recognizing the need for reliable credit in newly settled lands, he invested heavily in state bank stocks.<sup>44</sup> Despite the general recovery, Tucker remained wary about both his own and the ruling gentry’s futures. He continued to see great Tidewater estates crumble, including that of his friend John Page.<sup>45</sup> Because of this ongoing instability, Tucker reluctantly concluded that land itself—that bulwark of the old gentry’s status and power—was now a dismal, dead-end investment. In his notes to *Blackstone’s Commentaries*, drafted in the 1790s while he was law professor at William and Mary, Tucker explained that, in the “country below the mountains in

<sup>38</sup> St. George Tucker, Jr., to Tucker, Mar. 2, 1790, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Innes to Tucker, Mar. 25, 1783, *ibid.* For more information on Tucker’s early legal career see Cullen, *St. George Tucker and Law in Virginia*.

<sup>40</sup> Henry Tucker to Tucker, Aug. 21, 1784, Tucker-Coleman Coll. For information on the difficulties Tucker had in getting paid by clients see Thomas Tudor Tucker to Tucker, Apr. 21, 1785, *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Tucker to Banister, Dec. 24, 1786, *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Tucker to Frances Randolph Tucker, Apr. 7, 1787, *ibid.*, Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca, 1980), 161–62.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Tudor Tucker to Tucker, Apr. 17, 1788, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

<sup>44</sup> For instance, during this decade, Tucker invested \$10,000 in the Bank of Alexandria; Robert Sanders to Tucker, Sept. 11, 1797; James Brown to Tucker, Oct. 23, 1797; William Wilson to Tucker, Feb. 6, 1798, Jan. 24, 1799; Tucker to Page, Feb. 24, 1798; Tucker to Wilson, Dec. 1, 1800, all *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Page to Tucker, June 28, 1792, June 27, 1793, Dec. 3, 1795, Feb. 24, Mar. 23, 1798, *ibid.*

Virginia," all the best lands had long been cleared and cultivated, largely "without improvement, till they are not more productive than fresh lands of far inferior quality." He estimated that, in the state's "middle and lower country," barely one planter in twenty made enough "for the support of himself and his family."<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Tucker sold off in these years several plantations he had purchased during his marriage to Frances.<sup>47</sup> He later told one son that, instead of promising security and independence, his landholdings had brought him only "continual losses."<sup>48</sup>

As the gentry's prospects for a full recovery dimmed, Tucker's duty as father to an ever-growing family led him to adopt new strategies to preserve the family's strength and status into the next generation.<sup>49</sup> He educated his children to rely on their talents and abilities rather than on patrons and connections with the declining landowning elite. He also drilled into them the importance of professional training, preferably in the law, as a way to support a family free from dependence on the land. In the late 1790s, Tucker even urged his children to leave the Tidewater entirely, recognizing that the region's economic vitality was probably gone forever.<sup>50</sup>

In this setting, St. George Tucker's human property presented him with an unresolvable dilemma. The sale of slaves through William Haxall in 1796–1797 demonstrates that Tucker still regarded African Americans as key to his family's financial health. Because so much of their capital was human, he had to make the most effective use of this "property" as possible. Love for and loyalty to his children demanded no less. As a member of the economic elite, Tucker also understood that slaves equaled prosperity and status. To

<sup>46</sup> Tucker, *Blackstone's Commentaries*, Note F, "Concerning Usury," 2:104.

<sup>47</sup> In 1796, Tucker sold a 1,200-acre Cumberland County plantation, "Bermuda Forest," that one friend called Tucker's "Bad luck estate"; Creed Taylor to Tucker, Dec. 8, 1796, Tucker-Coleman Coll. Beginning in 1793, Tucker tried to divest himself of 500 acres in Lunenburg County that he had purchased in the previous decade; William Cowan to Tucker, Jan. 11, 1793, *ibid.* After much trouble, he finally sold this land in 1804; Deed of Agreement between Tucker and Gilbert Ricks, Nov. 15, 1804, *ibid.* In 1802, he disposed of several town lots located in Blandford, near Petersburg, giving them to his daughter Frances and her new husband, John Coalter, on their marriage; "Indenture concerning the Marriage of Frances Tucker and John Coalter, June 5, 1802," Feb. 21, 1802, *ibid.* Thus, by the early 1800s, Tucker owned only a house in Williamsburg, which he had purchased in 1788 after the death of Frances.

<sup>48</sup> Tucker to Henry St. George Tucker, Mar. 10, 1816, *ibid.* Tucker's personal distaste for landed property should not be taken to mean that he envisioned or wished America to be anything but a great agricultural empire. As a good Jeffersonian Republican, Tucker believed that the country should and could remain an agricultural society "for ages," peopled by a "hardy, independent yeomanry" that worked the land and remained free from corruption. He held that this was possible because of the "great abundance" of "low price[d] . . . lands" available both in western Virginia and the Old Dominion's "neighbouring states"; Tucker, *Blackstone's Commentaries*, 1:xiv-xv, 322, 2:104. But the declining productivity of lands in eastern Virginia convinced Tucker that landed property could no longer serve as the foundation of the elite's power.

<sup>49</sup> In addition to 3 stepsons that Frances Randolph Tucker brought to the marriage in 1778, by the time of her death early in 1788 Frances had borne 5 more children, 3 of whom survived to adulthood: Anne Frances Bland Tucker (1779–1813), Henry St. George Tucker (1780–1848), and Nathaniel Beverley Tucker (1784–1851).

<sup>50</sup> Hamilton, "Education in the St. George Tucker Household," 175–80.

deprive the next generation of such assets through manumission might undermine its future rank and power—something he, a devoted father, could not do. Even so, Tucker's allegiance to the natural rights ideology of the American Revolution remained undiminished. Despite the inherent contradiction in liberal thought, Tucker maintained the dual notion that blacks, by nature, deserved freedom and that all property rights were intrinsically sacred. The *Dissertation on Slavery* should be viewed primarily as an attempt to reconcile these two dimensions of Lockean thought. The proposal permitted Tucker, perhaps unconsciously, to walk a middle line between his responsibilities as a father and his convictions as an American Revolutionary. If adopted according to his extended timeline, both loyalties could be served: his family's human property would be protected well into the next generation while Virginia would fulfill its Revolutionary promise.

Following the General Assembly's rejection of his plan, attitudes about slavery began to shift both in the Tucker family and among the state's white population. After Tucker's *Dissertation on Slavery* was tabled, "it was almost as if a line had been crossed and even the tentative moves toward reform ended."<sup>51</sup> Proponents of slavery's continuation began to win the debate, because white Virginians in general reconciled themselves to the institution's permanence. The reasons behind this shift are several: first, from the Revolution's conclusion to 1810, slaveowners saw the number of African Americans throughout the Tidewater nearly double.<sup>52</sup> Although such growth undoubtedly added to estate valuations, it also fueled fears that one day whites would become a distinct minority in the state. If that occurred, many concluded, discipline could be maintained and insurrections avoided only through the creation of a garrison state.<sup>53</sup> Amid this demographic explosion, Tucker's apprehensions mounted. During the Quasi-War of 1798, Tucker feared that France was preparing to land "an Army of Negroes, from St. D[omingue]" led by "military Officers of the same Complexion" somewhere along America's southern coast. If this occurred, he bleakly predicted, it would likely "produce a general Insurrection of Slaves," resulting in "the separation of the [United] States, and perhaps in the Subjugation of the Southern part of the Union."<sup>54</sup>

Two years later, Tucker and other Virginia planters discovered the slave Gabriel's massive conspiracy to overthrow the institution. The passionate

<sup>51</sup> Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill, 1993), 14–15.

<sup>52</sup> Dunn, "Black Society in the Chesapeake," 58–59. In addition to demographic expansion, slavery spread into Virginia's developing regions. During the 1790s, for example, African-American populations were rapidly growing in the Northern Neck as well as in the Piedmont; see Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 218.

<sup>53</sup> McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia*, 117.

<sup>54</sup> Tucker, "Reflection," Unnumbered Notebook (1), 60, Tucker-Coleman Coll. Tucker expressed these concerns publicly, which led to a minor controversy against him; see Daniel Brent to John Tyler, Feb. 17, 1798, and Lawrence Brook, "Recollection of a Conversation," May 17, 1798, *ibid.* Tucker may have heard rumors circulating throughout the North in early 1798 that French agents were planning to land St. Domingue blacks in America; see Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens, Ga., 1987), 199–200.

expressions of slaves captured and heading for the gibbet revealed with exceptional force that African Americans had imbibed the Revolution's ideology and were keenly aware of the injustices perpetrated against them.<sup>55</sup> John Randolph, Jr., St. George's youngest stepson, attended some of the interrogations and was aghast. The slaves, he wrote, "exhibited a spirit, which, if it becomes general, must deluge the Southern country in blood. They manifested a sense of their rights, and contempt of danger, and a thirst for revenge which portend the most unhappy consequences."<sup>56</sup>

The larger context in which Gabriel's conspiracy came to light is important. The plot occurred at the end of a long, bitter, and factious national debate about the overall direction of American society. Although St. George Tucker remained in Virginia throughout the 1790s, he participated in the political conflicts between Hamiltonian Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans.<sup>57</sup> In Tucker's mind, Washington's secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, and his cohorts intended to overturn the republican thrust of the Revolution, wishing instead to recreate Robert Walpole's corrupt system of bribery, dependence, and manipulation.<sup>58</sup> To the north, moreover, where Federalism prospered, Tucker saw the beginnings of a financial and manufacturing colossus, which seemed little concerned with traditional ideals of balance, order, and independence. This Federalist order, Tucker feared, would one day overwhelm Virginia's agrarian society and crush those republican virtues that working the land supposedly inspired.<sup>59</sup>

Tucker witnessed other equally disturbing trends in the Old Dominion. Ambitious men from the state's lower and middling ranks, infused with the Revolutionary ideology of popular sovereignty, increasingly challenged the planter elite's economic and political hegemony. Regarded by the Tuckers as ill-bred upstarts, these men lacked the birth, education, and disinterestedness needed to govern their society responsibly. St. George bitterly lamented the growing presence of "men who court popularity, in preference to the prosperity of their Country." The politicking of such men "at Elections, at

<sup>55</sup> Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, chap. 6.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia*, 108–09; see also George Tucker to Tucker, Sept. 1, Nov. 2, 1800, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

<sup>57</sup> During this decade, Tucker kept in touch, in particular, with Page, who served several terms in the House of Representatives in Philadelphia. Moreover, in 1793, with Page's encouragement, Tucker wrote a collection of satirical poems entitled "The Probationary Odes of Jonathan Pindar." They were aimed primarily at the person and schemes of Washington's secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, and all first appeared in Philip Freneau's *National Gazette*. They are reprinted in William S. Prince, *The Poems of St. George Tucker of Williamsburg, Virginia, 1752–1827* (New York, 1977), 82–107.

<sup>58</sup> Tucker wrote several poems specifically likening Hamilton to the 18th-century British minister; see "Ode II: To Atlas," *National Gazette*, June 5, 1793, and "Ode XI: To Atlas, Being the Second Part of Ode II," *ibid.*, Aug. 28, 1793.

<sup>59</sup> Tucker realized that the United States would stay a stable republic only if Americans remained "an agricultural people, dispersed over an immense territory"; Tucker, *Blackstone's Commentaries*, Note B, 1:31. In the 1790s, he told his law students that "Our cities are few," a circumstance that would, at present, "probably defeat any attempt to establish an undue influence in any part of the union." By no means was Tucker confident that this situation would continue in the future; see Tucker, *Blackstone's Commentaries*, Note D, 1:322.

Musters, and other public Occasions,” he complained, “tend[s] to beget & encourage a spirit of idleness, dissipation, and extravagance in the poorer class of people, and less to generate & promote the practice of Servility.”<sup>60</sup> Yet such individuals were gaining influence and power at the expense of the old gentry.

Thus, by 1800, the Tuckers and other members of the elite believed that Virginia and their place in it were imperiled. Despite the previous decade’s improvement, the Tidewater economy remained largely stagnant. Virginia’s agrarian way of life and republican government seemed under assault from corrupt politicians to the north and lowborn social climbers from within. Worst of all, the state’s slaves were increasingly numerous, ill disciplined, and rebellious. Amid such potential chaos, many concluded that emancipation, or even its open discussion, would only cause further dislocation.<sup>61</sup> Around the turn of the century, therefore, the Tucker family made its peace with slavery. Even as members continued vaguely to hope for emancipation, they resigned themselves to its permanence. By 1803, St. George had come to label his *Dissertation on Slavery* a “Utopian idea” and to confess that he was “without any sanguine hope, that it will receive countenance.”<sup>62</sup>

Resigned to slavery’s continuation, Tucker still had to contend with the institution on a daily basis both as a slaveowner and as a judge on Virginia’s Court of Appeals, the state’s highest judicial body.<sup>63</sup> And, during the first decade of the nineteenth century, Tucker’s passive resignation became open complicity. With freedom for African Americans more and more remote and the potential for social chaos apparently growing, Tucker retreated on all fronts. The famous case *Hudgins v. Wright* (1806) reveals in particular how quickly and substantially the now-aging Revolutionary gave up the fight. The lawsuit involved members of an Indian family who sued for their freedom before being transported out of the state. In Virginia’s Court of Chancery, Tucker’s mentor and former law professor George Wythe had decided in favor of the Indian servants on remarkably broad grounds. Ignoring issues of property, Wythe had seized on the free and equal clause in Virginia’s 1776 Declaration of Rights, which the chancellor declared to be “the first article of our ‘political catechism.’” As a result, “whenever one person claims to hold another in slavery the *onus probandi* lies on the claimant.” In short, because the Declaration of Rights stated that “all men are by nature

<sup>60</sup> Tucker, “Some Thoughts on the Improvement of the police &c. in Virginia [1797],” Unnumbered Notebook (1), 7–8, Tucker-Coleman Coll. On the political challenges posed by the state’s yeomanry see Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 300–12, and Daniel P. Jordan, *Political Leadership in Jefferson’s Virginia* (Charlottesville, 1983).

<sup>61</sup> Because of these fears, the Virginia legislature began tightening controls over slaves and freed African Americans; see Egerton, *Gabriel’s Rebellion*, 163–68; McColley, *Slavery and Jefferson’s Virginia*, 159–61; and Helen Tunnickliff Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, 5 vols. (Washington, D. C., 1926), 1:73.

<sup>62</sup> [Tucker], *Reflections on the Cession of Louisiana to the United States* (Washington, D. C., 1803), reprinted in Scott, “St. George Tucker and the Development of American Culture,” 258–81, quotation on 279.

<sup>63</sup> Tucker was appointed to the state’s high court by the General Assembly in 1804.

equally free and independent," a slave no longer had to prove his right to freedom; instead, a master had to prove his right to hold a fellow human being in bondage.<sup>64</sup> Immediately after Wythe's death, the case came before the Court of Appeals.<sup>65</sup> Although Tucker deeply respected Wythe, he had no sympathy for Wythe's effort to end slavery by judicial fiat. Rather, Tucker stuck to issues of property, pointedly insisting, "I do not concur with the Chancellor in his reasoning on the operation of the first clause of the [Virginia] Bill of Rights." Tucker assured fellow slaveholders that the Declaration of Rights had been "notoriously framed with a cautious eye to this subject."<sup>66</sup> Even though ten years earlier he had bemoaned the frequent setting aside of the "laws of nature" "in favour of institutions, . . . prejudice, usurpation, and tyranny," Tucker and the other members of the court were now "entirely disapproving" of the "principles" Wythe had set forth.<sup>67</sup> As if to underscore his point, Tucker concluded that the Declaration "was not by a side wind to overturn the rights of property."<sup>68</sup>

As Tucker disavowed the "laws of nature" from the bench, he increasingly focused on making efficient use of his own slave property. For instance, he experienced few pangs of guilt in 1808, nor for fifteen years thereafter, when he employed a cruel overseer at Corotoman, a large Lancaster County estate owned by his second wife, Lelia Carter Tucker. Although this brutish man introduced a harsh work regime, which once spawned a "Mutiny" in the slave quarters, Tucker rehired him year after year, pragmatically realizing that in difficult times such heartless men kept tobacco, corn, and wheat flowing to market.<sup>69</sup> Additionally, the Tuckers continued to buy attractively priced slaves, to sell those deemed troublesome or unnecessary or both, and to hire out still others for cash.<sup>70</sup> At times, the family assisted fellow owners in capturing fugitive slaves, an obligation they probably expected other whites to reciprocate when necessary. In 1818, Tucker's oldest son, Henry St. George, asked his father to "tell Cabell it gave me great plea-

<sup>64</sup> Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases concerning Slavery*, 1:112. Wythe's decision precisely mirrored the 1783 Quok Walker decision in Massachusetts, which declared slavery to be unconstitutional in that state; Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 12–13.

<sup>65</sup> For information on Wythe's death see Julian P. Boyd, "The Murder of George Wythe," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 12 (1955), 513–42.

<sup>66</sup> Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases concerning Slavery*, 1:112.

<sup>67</sup> Tucker, *Dissertation on Slavery*, 66; Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases concerning Slavery*, 1:112.

<sup>68</sup> Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases concerning Slavery*, 1:112. See also Cover, "Review of St. George Tucker, *Blackstone's Commentaries*," 1493; Cover, *Justice Accused*, 50–53, 61; and McColey, *Slavery and Jefferson's Virginia*, 136–37.

<sup>69</sup> Tucker to Joseph C. Cabell, Feb. 12, 1808, Bryan Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

<sup>70</sup> For examples of the Tuckers selling slaves see Henry St. George Tucker to Tucker, Oct. 10, 1803; Ellyson Currie to Tucker, Aug. 25, 1808; Tucker to Henry St. George Tucker, Mar. 10, 1816, all in Tucker-Coleman Coll.; and Tucker to Cabell, Feb. 8, 1808, Bryan Papers. For instances of the Tuckers' purchasing slaves see John Minor to Tucker, Jan. 6, 1804, Tucker-Coleman Coll.; Tucker to Cabell, Apr. 8, 1808, Bryan Papers; and Tucker to John Coalter, Dec. 4, 1808, Brown-Coalter-Tucker Collection, Swem Library. For an example of the Tuckers' hiring slaves out see Tucker to Cabell, Oct. 18, 1808, Bryan Papers.

sure to be of Service to his overseer. He had great good fortune in getting his Slave."<sup>71</sup> Thus, by the early nineteenth century, with slavery's fate apparently decided, the Tuckers openly collaborated with an institution that not only preserved the family's property but also ensured their profit and gain.

Before the Revolution, slavery's character in the household and on the plantation lacked "sentiment [and] sentimentality." Most planters took little pride in and gave meager attention to the living arrangements and physical needs of their bondpeople.<sup>72</sup> In short, slavery was not domesticated. The Tuckers and their kin were not harsh masters, at least by contemporary standards, but they felt little concern for the emotions and sentiments of their slaves, placing them on the far periphery of the family's collective experience. In letters to one another, the Tuckers almost never mention their African-American slaves apart from their duties or their acts of disobedience.<sup>73</sup>

Domestication and sentimentalism began to spread soon after most Virginians retreated from reform. When the Tuckers started to consider their property rights and labor efficiency, they had to explain (to themselves and to the outside world) why natural rights and freedom no longer applied to African Americans. They tried to do it in a way that would allow them to escape the obvious charge of hypocrisy. In short, the Tuckers sought rationalizations to justify chattel slavery. Like many southern planters unwilling to sacrifice their interests, the Tuckers redefined blacks downward on the scale of humanity, portraying them as beings inherently unfit for freedom. They came to consider African Americans inferior souls who needed white benevolence to survive. And, as white benevolence became a key component of slavery, the institution was sentimentalized and domesticated—further justifying its continuation. In the home, slaves (especially favored household servants) could be treated better in hopes of making them more submissive and obedient. At the same time, white owners could congratulate themselves on their increased compassion for the poor helpless creatures.

With the Tuckers, such attitudes emerged soon after St. George's children married, scattering new households across the state. In 1802, Tucker's daughter Frances wed a rising young lawyer, John Coalter, and the couple

<sup>71</sup> Henry St. George Tucker to Tucker, Aug. 9, 1818, Tucker-Coleman Coll.; see also Henry St. George Tucker to John Leslie, Sept. 1, 1818, Tucker-Coalter Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N. C.

<sup>72</sup> Willie Lee Rose, "The Domestication of Domestic Slavery," in Freehling, ed., *Slavery and Freedom* (New York, 1982), 22–23.

<sup>73</sup> Even if slaves performed well, they received only vague and cursory notices in letters between white masters. In Mar. 1781, while campaigning in North Carolina with General Nathanael Greene's army, Tucker gave only a passing mention to his loyal servant Syphax, and this was alongside a remark he made about his horse Hob; Tucker to Frances Randolph Tucker, Mar. 13, 1781, Tucker-Coleman Coll. Although highly pleased with her slaves during the Tucker family's dramatic escape from British raiders in the summer of 1781, Frances Randolph Tucker managed only a brief mention of them to her husband: "My faithful Servants are every thing I cou'd wish them, and are willing to follow my fortune"; Frances Randolph Tucker to Tucker, July 14, 1781, *ibid.* Nothing else was said about them.



settled on a farm near Staunton in western Virginia. The Coalters began their marriage during a period of great change in family life in the South. As many historians have noted, beginning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries white southern families adopted more affectionate patterns of behavior in their homes. While patriarchalism by no means ended, it assumed a softer and gentler hue. Familial harmony and domestic stability were the key goals.<sup>74</sup> Sensitive, nurturing women significantly shaped the home's new emotional and moral tone.<sup>75</sup> Frances Tucker Coalter embodied this developing trend. A compassionate and warm wife, she made her husband very happy during their eleven-year marriage.<sup>76</sup> She also domesticated slavery in her family by insisting that certain slaves be brought into the family circle. Undoubtedly affected by the sentimentalism of the age, she also responded to more immediate circumstances. Frances had received six slaves from the Williamsburg household as a wedding gift from her father.<sup>77</sup> Thus, African Americans she had likely grown up with accompanied her to Staunton. Almost immediately, she began to mention them affectionately in letters to her parents so that black slaves back at the Tidewater house would have news of their kin in western Virginia. Moreover, Frances asked to be remembered to certain slaves she had left behind. In January 1804, for instance, she wrote, "Do give my love to all the servants my good old Granny particularly. Tell Isabel her Child is very well."<sup>78</sup> By the following year, news about household slaves took up the better part of some of her letters.<sup>79</sup> At roughly the same time, other women in the family began to include in their notes and letters similar expressions of fondness for their servants.<sup>80</sup>

When Frances Coalter and other women drew slaves into the family circle, their menfolk did not protest. Adjusting to the failure of the idea of emancipation and increasingly committed to retaining slavery, the Tucker men embraced the idea that some slaves could and should be regarded as

<sup>74</sup> Tucker to John Coalter, "Indenture concerning Marriage of John Coalter to Ann Frances Tucker." Smith, *Inside the Great House*; Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson's Virginia* (Cambridge, 1983); Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge, 1984); and Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore, 1987), examine changing patterns of behavior in southern families during the Revolutionary and early national periods.

<sup>75</sup> Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 51.

<sup>76</sup> Frances Coalter's nature is revealed very clearly in letters between her and her husband from 1802 to 1813, when John Coalter was first a traveling lawyer and then a circuit judge. The couple's correspondence is in the Brown-Coalter-Tucker Coll.

<sup>77</sup> Tucker to John Coalter, Feb. 21, 1802, "Indenture concerning Marriage of John Coalter to Ann Frances Tucker."

<sup>78</sup> Frances Tucker Coalter to Tucker, Jan. 27, 1804, Brown-Coalter-Tucker Coll.; see also Frances Tucker Coalter to Frances Davenport, Feb. 28, 1803, Bryan Papers, and Frances Tucker Coalter to Tucker, June 1, Aug. 10, 1803, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

<sup>79</sup> Frances Tucker Coalter to Lelia Carter Tucker, Apr. 11, 1805, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

<sup>80</sup> Lelia Carter Tucker to Frances Tucker Coalter, Dec. 12, 1808 [?], Brown-Coalter-Tucker Coll.; Polly Coalter Tucker to Tucker, Mar. 1811, Tucker-Coleman Coll. For an example of a child speaking sentimentally about slaves in the household see Frances Lelia Coalter to Frances and John Coalter, July 10, 31, 1813, Brown-Coalter-Tucker Coll.

affectionate (yet distinctly inferior) friends. In 1804, St. George Tucker began granting his “Kind Love & Service” to selected African Americans in his letters.<sup>81</sup> Henry St. George, for his part, eventually referred to Tucker slaves as members of “our own family.”<sup>82</sup> Beverley Tucker once explained to his father that he tried “to feel and to act toward these poor creatures as to humble and dependent friends.”<sup>83</sup>

In addition to sentimentalism before the hearth, the Tuckers began to recognize and respect the formation of families in the African-American quarters—both as a way to rationalize slavery’s continuation and a way to induce blacks to accept the permanence of their condition. Before about 1800, the Tuckers did not acknowledge and perhaps only dimly understood black kin networks.<sup>84</sup> Afterward, they closely followed, discussed, and monitored their slaves’ family connections. In the 1810s, St. George’s stepson, John Randolph, Jr., enumerated in his commonplace book more than one hundred slaves at Roanoke, his plantation in southern Virginia. In this inventory, Randolph demonstrated an intimate awareness of African-American families, carefully noting their relationships to one another, their children’s names, and their ultimate fates. The lists are organized, not by sex, occupation, or monetary value, but by the specific familial ties the slaves had to each other.<sup>85</sup> The Tuckers’ correspondence throughout the early nineteenth century also shows a keen knowledge of their slaves’ connections to one another. At one level, the Tuckers respected these bonds, possibly because they concluded that in any well-ordered society all human beings belong in domesticated family units. But the Tuckers must also have realized—once they had made their peace with slavery—that these accommodations improved their control by making their human chattel fearful that loved ones could be sold away.

In the early nineteenth century, the Tuckers, particularly the younger generation, also embraced evangelical religion, which further helped them rationalize slavery. Like a growing number of slaveowners, the Tuckers

<sup>81</sup> Tucker to Frances Tucker Coalter, Feb. 6, [1804?], Brown-Coalter-Tucker Coll.; see also Tucker to John Coalter, Sept. 21, 1808, *ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Henry St. George Tucker to Tucker, May 9, 1819, Tucker-Coleman Coll.; see also Henry St. George Tucker to Tucker, Jan. 16, Mar. 8, 1820, *ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Beverley Tucker to Tucker, Feb. 23, 1812, *ibid.* See also Beverley Tucker to Tucker, July 24, 1814, July 13, 1817, June 25, 1825, and Beverley Tucker to Elizabeth Tucker Coalter, Aug. 14, 1828, all *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> In 1784, for instance, while looking for a runaway slave named John Braxton, Ry Randolph, a kinsman of the Tuckers, had to explain to an apparently unaware St. George that this slave had many children and a wife living on Tucker’s Matoax plantation. Because of this, Randolph suspected the slave was hiding among the estate’s African Americans; Ry Randolph to Tucker, Oct. 27, 1784, *ibid.* On the creation of these kinship bonds throughout 18th-century Chesapeake society see Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 364–65, and Mary Beth Norton et al., “The Afro-American Family in the Age of Revolution,” in Berlin and Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*, 175–92. Philip D. Morgan has found that whites’ growing awareness of black kin networks began in South Carolina during the Revolutionary period; see Morgan, “Black Society in the Lowcountry, 1760–1810,” *ibid.*, 83–141.

<sup>85</sup> John Randolph’s Commonplace Book, [1810s?], Tucker-Coleman Coll.

hoped that Christian principles, properly articulated, would make their slaves more obedient and inculcate in them the justness of their condition. At the same time, teaching religion to slaves permitted family members and all whites to applaud their benevolence for spreading the word of God.<sup>86</sup> In the 1820s, Randolph, Jr., took a direct role in regulating his slaves' spiritual lives by going into the quarters at Roanoke to deliver sermons.<sup>87</sup> After moving to southern Virginia in 1808, Beverley Tucker freely allowed his slaves to attend Sunday services near his home. "The old plough horses are robbed of their one day's rest," he once wrote his father, "and each carries two or more to hear the preaching of some sober presbyterian or factious baptist or ranting methodist."<sup>88</sup> While the younger Tucker did not always approve of the specific sermons his slaves heard, he was convinced that Christianity did not harm and indeed may have improved his control over his bondpeople. Otherwise, he would have halted their attendance.

Even literacy advanced slavery's domestication. In the early 1800s, Tucker taught several of his slaves to read and write. Probably influenced by his Bermuda background, where slave literacy was common, Tucker especially depended on two literate bondmen to manage his Williamsburg home during his and Lelia's frequent absences. These men, Phill Anthony and Robert Edmundson, oversaw the dozen or so servants in the Tidewater house and, on the surface, seemed obedient, content, and eager to please. Anthony once wrote to Warminster in Nelson County, the estate where the Tuckers annually summered, "God almighty grant.—but my dear Master! what availeth my wishes.—it remains with you to bless us all."<sup>89</sup> Edmundson, the other house manager, pledged his "Love and duty" to St. George whenever he wrote.<sup>90</sup> Whether these men truly felt such sentiments is unknowable, but literacy likely bolstered their status with whites in the household and perhaps encouraged their acquiescence to their inferior position.

Thus, in the years following 1796, a great deal changed in the Tucker family's households regarding slavery. Domesticated bondage seemingly brought order, harmony, and compassion to an institution previously known primarily for its injustice and exploitation. From the family's self-serving point of view, favored African Americans had become cherished family members, black kin networks were more respected, Christianity imparted obedience and resignation, and literacy persuaded some slaves to accept an

<sup>86</sup> Lewis, "Problem of Slavery in Southern Political Discourse," 286–87; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 266–67.

<sup>87</sup> John Randolph to John Brockenbrough, Sept. 25, 1818, in Hugh A. Garland, *The Life of John Randolph of Roanoke*, 2 vols. (New York, 1969; orig. pub. 1850), 2:100–01; see also McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia*, 63.

<sup>88</sup> Beverley Tucker to Tucker, Feb. 9, 1812, Tucker-Coleman Coll.; see also Henry St. George Tucker to Tucker, Oct. 13, 1799, *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Phill Anthony to Cabell, July 24, 1807, Bryan Papers. I thank Michael Jarvis for information on slave literacy in Bermuda.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Edmundson to Tucker, July 7, Sept. 22, 1824, Tucker-Coleman Coll. See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 562–63, on African-American literacy in the antebellum South.

institution that, by common sense, they should have resisted. No wonder St. George Tucker declared in 1814 that no longer was slavery the vale of death it had once been; rather, in his mind, “the treatment of Slaves in such Cases is infinitely more humane [now] than before the revolution.”<sup>91</sup>

The Tuckers now prided themselves on the role they played as “good” masters. As talk of emancipation faded, family members came to view themselves, not so much as masters, but as compassionate teachers who nurtured their “dependent friends” toward proper behavior through persuasion and not the whip. Beverley Tucker told his father how he had brought one formerly difficult slave into line: “Jemmy with the help of good example, has proved himself hitherto very expert and industrious, and seems possessed of an ambition to acquit himself with credit in every thing he undertakes. I have set him as a model one of Essex’s children, who is a second edition of his father, and you may therefore conceive well calculated to excite emulation without inspiring envy or ill-will.”<sup>92</sup> From Louisiana, Lelia Tucker’s kinsman, Fulwar Skipwith, boasted that he motivated his “gang” of twenty slaves using only the gentlest of means. Although his people were initially “stiff labourers” and “awkward pickers,” Skipwith explained, “I have succeeded in bringing them to a sense of duty and subordination, surpassed by none, and with less severity, than I have ever witnessed elsewhere.”<sup>93</sup> Here were the paternalistic masters of the post-Revolutionary era at work—men who put “an emphasis on education, on affection, on maintaining order through a minimum of punishment and a maximum of persuasion.”<sup>94</sup>

<sup>91</sup> “Philanthropus” [Tucker], “The Old Batchellor Essays, No. 26,” Tucker-Coleman Coll. The belief that slavery was becoming milder was widespread in the early 19th-century South. For more information see Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 49–70; James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholding* (New York, 1982), 135–36; Rose, “Domestication of Domestic Slavery”; Lewis, “Problem of Slavery in Southern Political Discourse,” 289–90; and Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 279–80.

<sup>92</sup> Beverley Tucker to Tucker, Apr. 21, 1808, Feb. 23, 1812 (“dependent friends”), Tucker-Coleman Coll.; see also Beverley Tucker to Tucker, Jan. 30, 1814, *ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Skipwith to Tucker, Nov. 12, 1817, *ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 60. Like many 19th-century slaveowners, the Tuckers looked to their bondpeople for confirmation that they were “good” masters. Beverley Tucker’s long relationship with a slave named Granny Phillis particularly reveals this phenomenon. In 1804, Beverley relished the lavish attention this servant repeatedly bestowed on him. Writing to his father, he tried to explain his feelings, which obviously puzzled him: “I must suppose that it is on account of my being the youngest . . . that she loves me more than any of the rest. . . . I feel more grateful for her affection, and a greater pleasure in possessing it, than in many other things which may probably be of more service to me”; Beverley Tucker to Tucker, Nov. 7, 1804, Tucker-Coleman Coll.; see also Beverley Tucker to Tucker, Nov. 16, 1817, Jan. 5, 1818, *ibid.* The trauma of having to sell favored slaves and lose their affection also illustrates changing emotional needs in the white ruling class. In 1803–1804, for instance, Tucker advised a recently widowed friend, Elizabeth McCroskey, to sell a number of slaves to satisfy her late husband’s liabilities. The sale, however, overwhelmed the woman: “Since the sale there is a great change in them *poor souls* they have got there [sic] minds a good deal injured at the *sale* . . . and my *selling* has made them not *love* me as *they did*. . . . I have made myself more *unhappy* than I have made them”; McCroskey to Tucker, Dec. 23, 1803, Jan. 16, 1804, *ibid.* See Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, and Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 232–33, 243–83, on the emergence of paternalism among southern slaveowners.

As paternalism became idealized and as the Tuckers abandoned their belief in universal freedom, they found it essential to dehumanize those African Americans they now professed to love. In 1804, Henry St. George Tucker wrote a letter about a ten-year-old slave named Bob that illustrates how and why blacks came to be reclassified as lesser humans. Earlier in that year, the Tuckers had separated Bob from his mother, who worked in the Williamsburg household, and sent him to Henry's home in Winchester in the northwestern part of the state. Although Bob worked dutifully, the separation tortured the young boy, giving him repeated nightmares. Henry tried to be sympathetic, telling his father that he had at first regarded "this child as insensible when compared with those of our complexion." But Bob's pitiful lamentations led him to question this assumption. Nonetheless, after briefly pondering the issue, Henry concluded that he would not and could not recognize this young child as his "fellow man." To do so would force him to admit the gross injustices he and his family had perpetrated on African Americans—something none of the Tuckers was now willing to do. He resolved his dilemma simply by determining that inherent differences must exist between "the American and African"—differences that he likened as being between "the civilized and savage . . . nay the man and the brute!"<sup>95</sup> Thus, because of Bob's inborn inferiority, he would have to cope with the loss of his mother. Henry likely comforted himself that his servant's pain would be fleeting and wear off soon. In a later letter, Henry stressed that Bob possessed an inordinate "simplicity and affectionate temper" and was generally "very docile." Surely such a creature could not feel emotions as deeply and intensely as whites.<sup>96</sup>

Other family members adopted similar views, disclosing not only their growing belief in the innate inferiority of blacks, but also how willing they were to sacrifice sentiment when it was inconvenient. In 1809, Frances Coalter urged her husband to part with a "very deficient" slave named Sam in order "to pay some of yo[u]r debts." Although the sale meant Sam's wife would forever lose her mate, "she would," Frances assumed, "be happier after the first struggle was over."<sup>97</sup> Frances's stepmother, Lelia Tucker, dehumanized African Americans to the point where she comfortably referred to them as "*living things*" that "must eat and must be clad."<sup>98</sup> Beverley Tucker's genuine affection for a slave known as Granny Phillis did not prevent him from viewing this elderly woman as "insensible" when compared to whites. In 1812, a complicated dispute between Tucker and his half-brother, John Randolph, Jr., led the two men to separate Granny Phillis from her children who labored at Roanoke. Beverley tried to be sympathetic: "Poor old Soul she has been much afflicted at parting from her children." Nonetheless, he

<sup>95</sup> Henry St. George Tucker to Tucker, Feb. 17, 1804, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

<sup>96</sup> Henry St. George Tucker to Tucker, Mar. 1, 1804, *ibid.* For a very different interpretation of this incident see Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton, 1987), 143–44.

<sup>97</sup> Frances Tucker Coalter to John Coalter, Sept. 12, 1809, Brown-Coalter-Tucker Coll.

<sup>98</sup> Lelia Carter Tucker to Frances Tucker Coalter, Mar. 23, 1812, *ibid.*

refused seriously to be troubled by her despair, claiming that it stemmed “not, as she said at their going from her so much as at their change of masters.” Beverley’s true apprehension, though, was less sentimental; he lamented “parting from \$5000 worth of property.”<sup>99</sup>

By the early nineteenth century, the alleged natural inferiority of African Americans combined with slavery’s domestication made emancipation a moot issue. The Tuckers, like other Virginians, believed that blacks obviously lacked the necessary skills to survive in a difficult and competitive world. They could prosper only in the institution where white masters would provide them with faithful assistance. Thus, even when limited opportunities for manumission became possible, the Tuckers now rejected them. Particularly revealing is St. George’s successful effort to derail an emancipation plan that would have freed a significant number of his wife’s slaves. In 1812, Tucker’s stepson Charles Carter desired to free those slaves he would eventually inherit. St. George opposed the scheme, claiming that the slaves would be incapable of survival on their own. Tucker’s close friend Doctor Philip Barraud promised to set the youth straight, noting that, whereas Carter’s sympathies were among “the best feelings of Humanity, . . . I think it may be proved to Him that He can do much more for these people than they can do for themselves.” Such conclusions, Barraud stressed, were not based on some romantic “Doctrine” but on “Sound Experience.”<sup>100</sup>

The following year, Carter again formally proposed to manumit those slaves who one day would come to him. This time, Tucker dissuaded his wife from accepting the plan. In an extended “memo” to her, he explained that he was thinking only of the “poor ignorant Creatures” involved. If they knew that their emancipation depended on the death of their mistress, they might be led “by the vicious Counsels of others” to poison her. On gaining their liberty, moreover, they would be banished from all “friends and Connexions” and possibly subjected to the worst kinds of exploitation. Once free, Tucker speculated, they would “encounter every hardship that poverty, ignorance, [and] a want of friends” could inflict. Freedom offered blacks nothing but a life a “hundred times harder than that to which they have been . . . accustomed.” Their continued enslavement thus was not only realistic but benevolent.<sup>101</sup>

As the Tuckers reformulated their attitudes about slavery and African Americans, they also significantly altered their ideological memories of the Revolution. While family loyalty compelled them to champion slavery more as each year passed, their devotion to the American Revolution had hardly diminished. Nevertheless, their commitment to its fundamental principles did change. The Tuckers found it necessary to recast those ideals for which they and others had fought. Concluding that slavery had become not only a

<sup>99</sup> Beverley Tucker to Tucker, Feb. 23, 1812, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

<sup>100</sup> Barraud to Tucker, [May 1812], *ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Charles Carter to Lelia Carter Tucker, Jan. 18, 1813, Tucker-Coleman Coll.; Tucker, “Memo for Mrs. Tucker,” Jan. 19, 1813, *ibid.*

permanent but also a benevolent institution, they abandoned their liberal commitment to natural rights and moved toward a much more conservative interpretation of the break with Great Britain—an interpretation that would start Virginia (and the nation) down the path toward disunion and civil war.

The Tuckers' attitudes about slavery, family, and the American Revolution merged in the early nineteenth century amid rapid change. Confronting many serious challenges to their position, the family collectively began to doubt not only the wisdom of emancipation but also the merit of the Revolution's most fundamental principles. In their minds, natural rights and enlightened freedom had come to be interpreted wrongly as liberty from all restraints, including the traditional responsibility to defer to men of breeding, rank, and education. Surely, the Tuckers thought, the founders had not intended their liberal ideals to unbalance and destroy society's equilibrium, yet social disorder seemed only to be growing worse. In 1806, soon after George Wythe's murder, St. George bemoaned, "We have refined upon the words philosophy, philanthropy and the Rights of Man, until we are in real danger of that system of Anarchy with which the adversaries of a republican government reproach it."<sup>102</sup> Four years later, Henry St. George wrote in a similar vein, "The spirit of innovation will be the rock in which we shall split. As Church says, 'Tis the germ of mischief and first spawn of hell."<sup>103</sup>

Thus family members, especially the younger ones, reinterpreted the Revolution, concluding that it was not the ultimate embodiment of the Enlightenment. Rather, the war with Great Britain became in their minds profoundly conservative, designed to preserve and protect Virginia's traditional and increasingly idealized order of land, family, and hierarchy. In 1810, Henry St. George wrote to his father, "Since I have grown up . . . I have been induced to think the greatest praise of the American patriots (particularly Virginian) was their aversion to change: and the avoiding of all alteration in the system of things in existences at the commencement of the revolution."<sup>104</sup> In short, the younger Tuckers now viewed the Revolution as a noble struggle to uphold Virginia's ancient social order, over which the old landed gentry had once supposedly held complete sway. They simultaneously lost faith in reason, liberal freedom, and natural rights, viewing such ideas as abstract principles that had been dangerously manipulated by those below the gentry. In 1809, a time when he thought "every man is at sea without chart or star, or compass," Henry St. George told his father, "I do not admire the discussion of speculative opinion."<sup>105</sup> Instead, he and his brothers harkened back to more traditional and, they thought, more pragmatic values through which to comprehend both the Revolution and their present situation. Becoming increasingly conservative as time passed and embracing such philosophers as Edmund Burke, members now concluded, as John

<sup>102</sup> Tucker to Page, July 18, 1806, John Page Papers, Perkins Library.

<sup>103</sup> Henry St. George Tucker to Tucker, Mar. 1, 1810, Tucker-Coleman Coll. Henry probably referred to Thomas Church (1707–1756), an English divine and author of *An Analysis of the Philosophical Works of the Late Viscount Bolingbroke* (London, 1755).

<sup>104</sup> Henry St. George Tucker to Tucker, Mar. 1, 1810, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

<sup>105</sup> Henry St. George Tucker to Tucker, Jan. 14, 1809, *ibid.*

Randolph once insisted, in this new world “success depends upon the *discovery* of no *new principle* of human affairs, but upon the *application* of such as are familiar to all.”<sup>106</sup>

Even more alarming, the Tuckers saw the Revolution’s original tenets generating deep discontent among African Americans. In 1821, after witnessing “our Churches fill’d with Negroes listening to Preachers of their Colour,” Philip Barraud wrote to St. George from nearby Norfolk, “Doctrines were utter’d in the pulpit . . . which are in the Teeth of our Laws and Policies: and if in the Abstract may be admitted must be denied in practice.” As in 1800 during Gabriel’s Rebellion, blacks were embracing the most fundamental of revolutionary principles—the basic equality of all humans. If such doctrines continued to be “set afloat” among the slaves, Barraud concluded, they “will make expedient, for Self Defence, that a course of Rigorous measures, of the stronger party, must be adopted to keep the Weaker down.”<sup>107</sup>

The elder Tucker saw talk of equality having a direct, negative effect on his family. In 1822, the judge’s son-in-law Joseph C. Cabell wrote, “A girl that disappeared [from Corotoman] last June has probably gone off by water. This is a growing and alarming evil on that estate.” Like other planters, both Cabell and Tucker saw meddling outsiders as the primary source of this “evil.” Cabell continued, “The colonization society, the Missouri question, &c. have greatly increased the difficulty of holding and managing estates on our tidewater.”<sup>108</sup> By continuing to articulate the nation’s founding principles in relation to slavery, outsiders were compelling southerners to hold more tightly to the institution simply to keep their estates functioning.

The “Missouri question,” unlike the African colonization movement, left a lasting impression on the family and indicates the degree to which their values had changed. The crisis began in February 1819 when New York congressman James Tallmadge proposed to prohibit slavery from the Missouri Territory as a condition of statehood. All the Tuckers concluded the measure was constitutionally flawed.<sup>109</sup> The controversy over the Tallmadge amendment and Missouri statehood represented a much greater political and cultural debate in the United States regarding the nation’s future course; thus the tone and pitch of the controversy was partisan, acrimonious, and divisive from the start. Passions among the Tuckers were no less provoked and reveal a growing belief that great, perhaps irreconcilable, differences had emerged between the North and South. Henry St. George, for instance, felt particularly disgusted with the debate and resulting compromise. By allowing Congress a toehold into the issue of slavery, he con-

<sup>106</sup> John Randolph to William Thompson, May 13, 1804, in Garland, *Life of John Randolph of Roanoke*, 1:209. On the influence of Burke on the younger members of the family see Beverley Tucker, “Garland’s *Life of Randolph*,” *Southern Quarterly Review*, 20 (July 1851), 41–61; Russell Kirk, *John Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in American Politics* (Chicago, 1964); Dawidoff, *Education of John Randolph*; and Robert J. Brugger, *Beverley Tucker: Heart over Head in the Old South* (Baltimore, 1978), 29, 41–42, 111.

<sup>107</sup> Barraud to Tucker, Jan. 5, 1820 [1821], Feb. 10, 1821, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

<sup>108</sup> Cabell to Tucker, Dec. 11, 1822, *ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Cabell to Tucker, Feb. 10, 1820, Henry St. George Tucker to Tucker, Mar. 8, 1820, Robert Evans to Tucker, Dec. 13, 1819, all *ibid.*



cluded, "the great, the essential, the permanent interests of the South are sacrificed forever." In essence, by 1819, Henry saw slavery as the sole bulwark of southern agrarianism and republicanism, shielding the region from financial stockjobbing, radical egalitarianism, industrialization, and urbanization, all accelerating trends in the North. In the future, however, slavery would be prohibited from much of the Louisiana Territory. "When I reflect," he continued, "that Virginia has been shorn of her strength by the North Western Cession when I call to mind the probable event of a dissolution of this union before a half a century, I cannot be patient."<sup>110</sup> To Henry, if slavery was excluded from large portions of the West, the South would inevitably stagnate and become an isolated, colonial-like appendage of the financially powerful, more populous, and industrialized North. To prevent this and to preserve republicanism and the union, southern agrarianism, including slavery, had to expand. In short, loyalty to the natural rights philosophy for which his father and the founders had fought would now destroy the very nation they had created.<sup>111</sup>

Although Henry did not openly champion slavery per se during the crisis, his commitment to the institution was now unquestionable. In subsequent years, he constantly sought to undercut the antislavery arguments posited by growing numbers of northern humanitarians. In the early 1820s, Henry wrote and later published a series of law lectures in which he obliquely argued for slavery and against the Revolution's liberal ideology. He claimed that he, like many Americans, revered the "great many admirable and noble principles" on which the country had been founded. Nonetheless, many of these principles "partake too much of abstraction"; thus, while documents such as the Declaration of Independence and Virginia's Declaration of Rights certainly deserve "filial reverence and affection," Virginians must only "make [them] the guide of our conduct, so far as we find it practicable." "[They do] not furnish," he stressed, "that distinct, and definite, and imperative rule of action, which alone can give to it the character or the sanction of a law."<sup>112</sup> With regard to putatively helpless slaves, responsible planters were "compelled to keep that wretched class of men in servitude from a sad necessity." If northerners insisted on bestowing "equal privileges" on the African race, they were insidiously sowing "the seeds of exterminating civil wars."<sup>113</sup>

Beverly Tucker, like his older brother, viewed the Tallmadge amendment and subsequent compromise as signs of an impending sectional crisis. In his opinion, the North was using its economic and political might to isolate and destroy southern agrarianism and force the slaveholding states into permanent subservience. "One thing is certain," he told a friend. "Let this precedent be once established and the power of the southern states is gone

<sup>110</sup> Henry St. George Tucker to Tucker, Mar. 8, 1820, *ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Henry St. George Tucker, then a congressman from Virginia, here expressed views widely shared in the state's delegation. Of the Old Dominion's 28 House members, only 5 supported all parts of the compromise; see John Chester Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (New York, 1977), 246-47.

<sup>112</sup> Henry St. George Tucker, *Commentaries on the Laws of Virginia, Comprising the Substance of a Course of Lectures Delivered to the Winchester Law School*, 2 vols. (Winchester, Va., 1836), 1:10.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:74-75.

forever."<sup>114</sup> Having moved to Missouri several years before the crisis, Beverley engaged in a heated newspaper debate throughout the controversy. Beginning in spring 1819, he crafted five long essays for the *Missouri Gazette & Public Advertiser* and assembled a formidable constitutional case against Tallmadge based largely on his father's states' rights theories.<sup>115</sup>

Although Beverley loudly (but insincerely) announced that he cared little about the issue of slavery and claimed that "if a pledge were demanded [I] would emancipate all I have," he desperately searched for some new coherent basis on which to reconcile the institution with the nation's founding principles.<sup>116</sup> In late April 1819, Tucker found the perfect defense. In the April 28 *Missouri Gazette*, he pointedly addressed himself to abolitionists who argued that "slavery is incompatible with the constitution and the genius of our government." To such people, Tucker smugly declared, "slaves have been found . . . no where in greater numbers than under governments called republican." Just as slavery had once strengthened the ancient republics, it was now strengthening republicanism in the South by preserving the region's agrarian system, by creating an independent class of farmers and gentry planters, and by removing a dependent and exploitable class of men from the political process. "Yankeys," with their calculating values and multiplying hordes of wage slaves, threatened to undermine the Revolution's promise by perverting republicanism's classic principles. Beverley thus concluded that, for the nation to survive, slavery had to expand.<sup>117</sup>

St. George Tucker himself struggled with the ramifications of the Missouri crisis. Like his sons, he opposed congressional bids to exclude slavery from the Louisiana Territory. Not only did the "Congress [have] no right to prohibit it," but, he told one correspondent, the "agricultural interests" of the nation would be "sooner advanced" if slavery expanded westward.<sup>118</sup> Unlike his sons, Tucker resisted open support for slavery and sectional bitterness. Whereas the younger Tuckers had generally made their peace with the institution and were increasingly engaged in sectional polemics against the North, the nearly seventy-year-old judge struggled one final time to resurrect his commitment to the Revolution's natural rights principles.

In the midst of the Missouri crisis, Tucker revisited his quarter-century-old *Dissertation on Slavery*, perhaps to convince himself that he had not abandoned his earlier beliefs. Sometime between late 1819 and early 1821, Tucker drafted an eight-page "Supplement" to his proposal. In this addendum, he reaffirmed his fundamental belief that the states had to address slavery for both ideological and practical reasons. While he changed little of the original plan, he spelled out in considerable detail his hope that, after emancipation, blacks would one day resettle west of the Mississippi.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>114</sup> [Beverley Tucker] to [?], Aug. 4, 1819, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

<sup>115</sup> *Missouri Gazette & Public Advertiser*, esp. Apr. 7, 1819; see also Brugger, *Beverley Tucker*, 52–57.

<sup>116</sup> Beverley Tucker to Thomas Smith, May 15, 1819, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

<sup>117</sup> Brugger, *Beverley Tucker*, 77–78; *Mo. Gaz. & Pub. Advertiser*, Apr. 28, 1819.

<sup>118</sup> Robert Evans to Tucker, Dec. 13, 1819, Tucker-Coleman Coll.

<sup>119</sup> Tucker, "Supplement to Note H, On the State of Slavery in Virginia," *Blackstone's Commentaries*, ms. edition, Tucker-Coleman Coll. "Note H" refers to the 8th appendix in Tucker, *Blackstone's Commentaries*, in which the judge in 1803 reprinted his *Dissertation on Slavery*.

These revisions are important because they show Tucker as an eighteenth-century figure whose time and generation had passed. In the judge's mind, his plan and new supplement were moderate, balanced, rational—everything lacking in the then-raging debate over Missouri. They also demonstrate his continuing hope that the United States would somehow realize the ideological substance of its Revolution through an orderly compromise. Lastly, the supplement reveals an aging Revolutionary who refused to see how his own compromises on behalf of his family not only had led to slavery's expansion but also had condemned future generations of slaves to bondage and misery.

Tucker could neither admit such painful realities to himself nor discuss the matter publicly. In fact, he never told anyone about his supplement. There is no mention of it anywhere in his voluminous correspondence, even in letters to his sons.<sup>120</sup> This reticence is particularly unusual, because throughout his life St. George widely circulated his essays, poems, and plays, and it is a striking contrast to his actions twenty-five years earlier with the *Dissertation on Slavery*. Whatever the specific reason, the elder Tucker's silence is compelling, especially when compared with the very public actions of his sons. Indeed, as the old Revolutionary lost his voice in public affairs, those in the rising generation—increasingly steeped in sectional politics and a proslavery ideology—found theirs. This generational shift signaled that the debate over slavery had taken an ominous turn away from discussions of compromise and natural rights and toward talk of irreconcilable differences, “dissolution,” and “exterminating civil wars.”

The Tuckers' efforts to come to terms with slavery from the Revolution to the Missouri crisis reveal a great deal about early national Virginia. Their story explains how one influential family (and probably others) struggled with the profound tensions and contradictions in the nation's founding ideology. Like many Virginians, the Tuckers understood that slavery and natural rights could not coexist for any length of time. Adjustments had to be made. Once reform had failed, definitions of freedom and liberty needed to be narrowed, especially to protect family interests in difficult economic times. The family's experiences also illustrate the pervasiveness of slavery. The institution touched all aspects of the Tuckers' lives, from politics to social status to economics to family concerns. The interplay of slavery with these issues created powerful pressures not only to accept the institution but also to sentimentalize and domesticate it. Moreover, for bondage to make sense in a land of liberty, family members had to dehumanize African Americans and redefine them as lesser humans—as children—who could never cope in this rapidly changing and bewildering republican society. Finally, this transformation in the Tucker family points to how and why early nineteenth-century southerners discarded the nation's founding principles in favor of a profound conservatism that sought to advance both slavery and agrarian interests. Indeed, the Tuckers' actions and beliefs reveal that the true dynamics of slavery, disunion, and civil war were rooted, not in South Carolinian “reaction,” but rather in Jeffersonian “liberalism.”

<sup>120</sup> Donna Stillman Bryman, “St. George Tucker and the Complexities of Antislavery Advocacy in Jeffersonian Virginia” (M. A. Thesis, College of William and Mary, 1972), 73–74.