

# Dear Master

## LETTERS OF A SLAVE FAMILY



EDITED BY RANDALL M. MILLER

# **“DEAR MASTER”**

## **Letters of a Slave Family**

EDITED BY

**RANDALL M. MILLER**

God gives the desolate  
a home to dwell in;  
he leads out the prisoners  
to prosperity;  
but the rebellious dwell  
in a parched land.

—Psalms 68:6

Brown Thrasher Books

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# FOR MY LINDA

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# Contents

Preface to the Brown Thrasher edition	5
Preface	11
The Cocke and Skipwith Families	19
Introduction	23

## **PART I. LETTERS FROM LIBERIA, 1834–1861**

The Emigrés	39
Letters from Peyton Skipwith	58
Letters from Diana Skipwith	87
Letters from Nash Skipwith	96
Letters from Matilda Skipwith	100
Letters from James Skipwith	123

## **PART II. LETTERS FROM ALABAMA, 1847–1865**

The Driver	139
Letters from George Skipwith	153
The House Servant	183
Letters from Lucy Skipwith	196

## **PART III. MORE LETTERS FROM LIBERIA**

Introduction	266
The Letters	269
 Bibliographical Essay	 281
Index	287

## Illustrations

Portrait of John Hartwell Cocke, 1820s, by Edward Troye	24
Miniature of John Hartwell Cocke, 1830s	26
Bremo, Cocke's home in Fluvanna County, Virginia	28
Bremo, ground floor plan	29
Daguerreotype of John Hartwell Cocke, 1850s	30
Slave cottage at Bremo	31
Ashmun Street, Monrovia, in the late nineteenth century	40
Monrovia, Liberia, 1850s	44
Joseph Jenkins Roberts, first president of the Republic of Liberia	46
Monrovia, 1860s	51
Peyton Skipwith's letter to John Hartwell Cocke, Monrovia, May 9, 1838	65
Matilda Skipwith Lomax's letter to John Hartwell Cocke, Monrovia, May 19, 1852	108
Cotton picking, 1898, in Alabama, similar to practices in the mid-nineteenth century	141
George Skipwith's letter to John Hartwell Cocke, Hopewell, December 26, 1847	167
Church near Greensboro, Alabama	186
Lucy Skipwith's letter to John Hartwell Cocke, Hopewell, May 16, 1857	212

## Maps

Liberia, 1845	38
Portion of Greene County, Alabama, 1855–1856, with Hopewell and New Hope plantations	138

# Preface to the Brown Thrasher Edition

Reading one's own book after ten years is somewhat akin to meeting a child who has gone out into the world. You long ago yielded, however reluctantly, real control over the book's (or child's) destiny, for your progeny has assumed a life of its own. Now distance and autonomy allow you to reflect on the book's meaning with a degree of detachment unthinkable when it was newly born, and the promise of a new edition offers a rare chance to put such thoughts into print.

*"Dear Master"* was published when writing about slavery and the Old South had turned from a preoccupation with the mechanics of labor and crop production to a concern about the interior lives of the slaves and to a lesser degree of the planters themselves. At the same time, historians were beginning to move away from the panoramic views of slavery that had dominated so much scholarship since the days of U. B. Phillips, instead to focus intensively on particular communities. The study of slavery was shifting from the synoptic to the microscopic. *"Dear Master"* shared the new vision.

*"Dear Master"* also appeared at a time when the discovery and use of new sources (e.g., material culture, folklore, linguistic evidence, works of art) were enlarging the historian's view of the world(s) the slaves made. But that same increase in sources made many historians cautious in venturing sweeping generalizations about slavery across the South, for they realized that no single model of slavery and no monolithic slave or slaveholder personality ruled human relations. Slavery was a tangle of contradictions. The slaves' and slaveholders' experiences with human bondage hinged on local climate, crops, demography, personality, and so many other factors.

## 6 PREFACE TO THE BROWN THRASHER EDITION

Place seemed to matter most of all. In order to recover the “total history” of a place, scholars cast down their buckets in one spot, picking over the artifacts, stories, and songs a particular people left behind. In this regard, such seminal works as Charles Joyner’s *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (1984), demonstrated the need for anthropological concepts to direct historical inquiries. Teasing meaning from different sources, listening to many black voices, students of slavery have come to appreciate that every community has its own history and that variegated subregional cultures took root within the larger South.

In the rice region along the coast of Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas, for example, the institution of slavery remained insular and the slaves bound to place. There the South’s most African, least “acculturated” slaves for generations lived confined to a low-country area that extended no more than sixty miles inland. On the large plantations they had little or no white presence for much of the year and thus were able to cultivate a vibrant African-American culture that survives today in speech, craft, and folklore.

Elsewhere in the South farmers grew such “democratic” crops as tobacco and cotton, crops that required relatively low levels of financial or human capital to get started and that moved westward as new land opened for development. Slaves in the tobacco and cotton South had less opportunity to order their own world than did their counterparts in the rice and sugar regions. They lived among whites. On farms and small plantations, where in fact the majority of southern slaves worked, white intrusion into black lives was constant. Yet even under such circumstances, the degrees and kinds of master-slave interaction varied widely. On Hopewell, John Hartwell Cocke’s absentee plantation in Alabama that is the setting for half the Skipwith letters, amid a largely settled cotton culture, the interaction simultaneously mirrored both the low-country and the tobacco-cotton “models.”

That sense of particularity informs “*Dear Master*.” Indeed, the importance of place—the contours of the land, the mix of people, the force of nature—appears everywhere in the Skipwith letters. So, too, does the slaves’ sense of “ownership” of their home place. The slaves and ex-slaves laid their claim by referring to their home places in letters, by asking after kinfolk

and the health of the master's family there, and by recounting tales and experiences peculiar to local inhabitants. Although "*Dear Master*" lacks an anthropological dimension and relies little on the tools of folklore, linguistics, or archaeology, it does employ oral accounts left by blacks in Alabama and Mississippi, where some of the descendants of the Hopewell slave community still live, to track the Skipwiths and other slaves after their emancipation. But by having the Skipwiths' letters, we can now reclaim much of the slaves' history.

"*Dear Master*" is a story by slaves and ex-slaves more than a study of slavery. Its true authors are the Skipwith family of slaves—some freed to settle in Liberia, while others remained enslaved first in Virginia and then in Alabama. The theme of family unity resounds in the Skipwiths' correspondence, making it an epistolary chorus of sorts, with echoes of the polyrhythmic, call-and-response singing so characteristic of the slave quarters and Afro-American church.

The book also is about masters. The presence of John Hartwell Cocke pervades the letters, all of which were addressed to members of the Cocke family. Cocke represented a type of planter, born of the Revolutionary generation, who remained ambivalent about slavery but unwilling to end it outright. Cocke and his generation first sought the caution of African colonization and then satisfied themselves with amelioration rather than liberation as the way Christian and humane masters would give slaves their due. Cocke's assumptions from an earlier age were tested and ultimately tempered in the new era of nineteenth-century cotton expansion and robust proslavery apologies.

The westward surge of slavery allowed Cocke to experiment at Hopewell. There the slaves' "failure" to fulfill Cocke's expectations of moral uplift eroded whatever Revolutionary sentiment he once had for manumission and colonization, but he remained convinced that he had an obligation to his slaves that included trying to know his people. Cocke was not alone in this kind of "paternalism," as any close student of early nineteenth-century manufacturers and planters will attest. Be that as it may, the Cocke whom the Skipwiths knew was no distant plantation patriarch. Although his communications with the Skipwiths have not survived, his voice and character echo in the Skipwith letters. This was so as much because the Skipwiths "trusted" Cocke not to betray their common "family" interest



## 8 PREFACE TO THE BROWN THRASHER EDITION

as it was due to the practical need to curry favor with the master.

Finally, the book is about (and for) those who came after the Skipwiths and Cockes. As Alice Walker reminds us (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*), for the sake of their children, every people must collect "bone by bone" the genius of their past. Family stories, memories, give order to and continuity in a swirling social universe.

Although in no way an oral history, "*Dear Master*" has entered an oral tradition. Descendants of the Hopewell slave families in Alabama and Mississippi, including distant relatives of the Skipwiths, have read the letters and remembered. Over the past few years, those descendants have been searching through deed books, court records, newspapers, and other materials in an effort to trace their genealogies to the Hopewell people and to find out what happened to Lucy Skipwith after the Civil War. Local tradition places her in Alabama, and at least one story is told of a spiritually strong, physically diminutive woman named Lucy carried to safety on the back of another black person during a flood in the late nineteenth century. Was it the same Lucy? The "documentable" Lucy Skipwith disappears after her last letter of 1865, but her memory grows yet in Greene and Hale counties, Alabama. Likewise, seven additional Skipwith letters from Liberia (edited and included as an addendum to this new edition) were discovered because white people in Virginia remembered how the pasts of black and white were bound together, that all the bones needed to be collected.

In rereading "*Dear Master*" what strikes me most is what first attracted me to the research more than ten years ago—namely, I like the people in it. The letters tell a remarkable story of blacks and whites seeking communication and finding common interest even as slavery, migrations, and civil war pulled the races apart. More than that, the letters bespeak the resiliency and quiet courage of slaves and ex-slaves. In the correspondence of Peyton, James, and Lucy Skipwith, especially, one sees people who believed they had a future because they were not imprisoned by their past. Whether it was their Christian conviction, their personal character, or some other quality that encouraged them, the Skipwiths emerge as more than mere survivors.

In locating "*Dear Master*" in the historiography of slavery, it is worth noting that several subjects treated in the book still beg for

fuller description and analysis. Interest in settler society in Liberia quickened in the late 1970s. Although Bell Wiley's *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia, 1833–1869* (1980) borrowed heavily from “*Dear Master*” to bring together virtually all the extant letters from ex-slaves in Liberia, it lacked any interpretive thrust. Only the important book *Behold the Promised Land* (1980) by Tom Shick and a dissertation by Debra Newman have approached the history and sociology of ex-slave and free-born American settlers with an eye to looking closely at the large but sometimes intractable American correspondence.

Regarding slavery, the so-called privileged bondsmen of driver and house servant await a major treatment. William Van Deburg's *The Slave Drivers* (1979) filled a huge gap in our understanding about the myths and realities surrounding the slave who planter James Henry Hammond insisted was “the most important man” on the southern plantation. Viewing the drivers from the perspectives of historians' accounts, slave narratives and autobiographies, planters' records, and contemporary travelers' depictions, Van Deburg concluded that the driver was more the master's man than the slave's friend. Because he found the driver's history riddled with ambiguity and contradiction, a longitudinal and comparative study of drivers in different times and places now invites attention. Even more so, the house servant stands in the shadows. Deborah Gray White, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and several others have taken us inside the female slaves' world, and Catherine Clinton, Drew Faust, and others have opened the “big house” to examination, but no major work specifically about house servants has yet appeared.

Neither Lucy Skipwith (the house servant) nor George Skipwith (the driver) in “*Dear Master*”—real people—fit the stereotype of slave elites as fussing mammies and shuffling Toms. No typology has yet been devised to classify the values and character of slave “elites,” and no such typology likely could be credible anyway. As the Skipwiths' portraits show, the tugs and tensions felt by “privileged bondsmen” caught in the middle ground between master and slaves demanded of the “elites” many public poses, and also concealment and alertness, for no one could be wholly trusted. The Skipwiths' letters, like those of other slave “elites,” are veiled in part by that almost instinctual sense of wariness necessary for any “privileged bondsman” to survive. In that way, they also reveal why those “elites” re-

main elusive in histories of the South's "peculiar institution."

And what of the master? Since the publication of Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery & Freedom, 1750–1925* (1976), it has become commonplace among historians to argue that slaveholders were unaware of, if not indifferent to, the kinship patterns established by their own slaves. Indeed, much recent scholarship simply assumes that the masters did not know their slaves at all and that the slaves created an almost wholly autonomous world in the quarters. Such arguments seem to imply that the slaves lived in some "golden age" free of the master's influence and interference. "Dear Master" tells another story. Cocke's careful genealogies of slave families (in the Cocke Papers at the University of Virginia Library) and the regular inquiries about their kin directed to him by his slave correspondents dispute such a generalization. Moreover, an examination of the plantation records of other tidewater and low-country slaveholders suggests that Cocke was not alone in his effort to chart slave family relationships and to know "his people."

In the end, the significance of "Dear Master" rests with its readers. No doubt they will find many and different uses for the book. But, for me, the book's importance resides in the Skipwiths (and the Cockes) themselves. In all the historiographical jousting about slavery, historians inevitably risk distorting the real lives of real people in order to draw the collective portraits of slaves and masters necessary for purposes of generalization. As a result, too many histories of slavery teach much about the institution but leave readers knowing little about individual masters and even less about individual slaves and ex-slaves. The Skipwiths' letters reveal the daily realities and personal concerns of one family. The letters form no part of the anti-slavery canon, as did so many antebellum fugitive slave narratives, nor are they products of modern "memory," as were reminiscences former slaves told to Works Progress Administration interviewers in the 1930s. Written without any apparent political purpose and written contemporaneously by the Skipwiths themselves, the letters, in their very simplicity and prosaic qualities, remind us that we will have to get to know the slaves and ex-slaves on their terms, or we will never get to know them at all.

Randall M. Miller

## Preface

This book relates the story of an American slave family, the Skipwiths, a family separated by time, place, and circumstance from their Virginia home. Some members of the family were freed to emigrate to Liberia, a frontier society in Africa; others were settled on an absentee-owned plantation in Alabama, then the frontier of the cotton South. In time, different circumstances led to different interests, values, and personalities among the family members. But the family survived, for a common folk tradition and a deep commitment to family unity bound the Skipwiths together. Ironically, the slave owner who separated them also joined them: he established a correspondence with two generations of Skipwiths, and through him the family bridged the two continents of their residence. This correspondence—probably the largest and fullest epistolary record left by an American slave family—traces the history of the planter, the freedmen, and the slaves. It is the substance of this book.

Students of black slavery in America have long lamented the lack of adequate sources. True, we have learned much of the South's peculiar institution from planters' personal papers and business records, from government documents such as manuscript census schedules and court records, from travelers' accounts of the South and contemporary periodicals, but such sources have serious limitations. While valuable for understanding the white community's attitudes toward slaves and slavery and for discerning the mechanics of slavery and race relations, they present a distorted picture of bondage. They all refract slavery and the Afro-American experience through a white lens. The American slave remains elusive. This situation is especially vexing when we seek answers to questions of slave values, slave behavior, slave relationships with the master class and with one another, the dynamics of the slave quarters, the

nature of slave religion and family life, and slave self-perception and personality development.

To learn of black perceptions, of what it meant to be chattel and to be free, scholars must consult the surviving testimony of the slaves and the freedmen. Few historians have done so. The prevailing opinion among historians writing on slavery has been that direct evidence from the slaves themselves is hopelessly inadequate. Kenneth Stampp, a leading authority on slavery, recently reminded us that well over 90 percent of the slaves were illiterate and even the small literate minority rarely spoke or wrote with candor. Stampp, like many others, discounts the value and breadth of the former slaves' testimony to slavery's travail. For him the "ubiquitous white man, as master, editor, traveler, politician, and amanuensis," intrudes at every level to stand between historian and slave. He concludes that however inventive the historian might be, "he will always have trouble breaking through the barrier, and he will always be handicapped by the paucity of firsthand testimony from the slaves themselves." Perhaps.

Abundant literary material from the slaves themselves, in varying degrees of quality and usefulness, has been available for a long time. This evidence consists of several hundred slave narratives (autobiographies) written in the nineteenth century by emancipated or fugitive slaves as well as the rich oral tradition of Afro-Americans recorded by folklorists, particularly the Fisk University and WPA Federal Writers' Project collections from the 1930s.

Still, there are problems. We must treat the narratives with caution, as we do all historical evidence. The products of rebels and resisters rather than accommodators, the narratives constitute a sample of the work of only a limited number of the total slave population. The narrators were largely from the upper South, were male with few exceptions, and were highly skilled, town-oriented slaves rather than rural, plantation-oriented slaves. In addition, the narrators often dictated or recorded their stories many years after successful escapes or manumissions so that experiences of freedom partially blurred memories of servitude. Because many of the fugitives and freedmen were illiterate, white editors and amanuenses helped them to prepare their autobiographies. One result was that the narratives

were sometimes distorted to fit the needs of antislavery polemicists. Although immensely valuable for unraveling the interior world of the slaves, the narratives suffer from the corrosive effects of white intrusion and of time.

Similar problems diminish the worth of the interviews with former slaves conducted by folklorists in the 1930s. Remembrances of antebellum life were taken down so long after slavery that postbellum experiences colored the accounts. Recalling a life in childhood, when bondage was less onerous (or, for many, even less visible), many former slaves evinced few signs of bitterness. To be sure, some mentioned brutal whippings and humiliations, or a spare diet of fatback and cornmeal mush sometimes served in a common trough, or a vermin-infested cabin. But many spoke kindly of their former masters and remained silent on their intimate lives in the quarters. Mary Colbert of Georgia, a former slave who learned to read and write during Reconstruction, summed up the problem nicely for a WPA interviewer: "I have often considered writing the history of my life and finally decided to undertake it, but I found that it was more of a job than I had expected it to be, and then too, I would have to tell too much, so I thought best to leave it alone." Rather than tell too much, many other slaves and freedmen left no written testimony of their lives. They became part of that great mass of the inarticulate—the men and women who leave no records and so seemingly no history.

The unwillingness of many former slaves to speak candidly in the 1930s was largely due to the inhospitable interviewing environment. Blacks were usually excluded from the Federal Writers' Project interviewing lists, and white interviewers had not been trained to establish the kind of rapport with blacks that was necessary to evoke confidence and produce candor. The South of the 1930s was the South of Jim Crow, Scottsboro, and lynch law, of debt peonage, grinding poverty, and physical want exacerbated by a depression, and of careful rules of social etiquette and racial deference. Many informants, chosen for their expected docility, still lived on or near farms of their former masters and depended on the masters' descendants for charity and succor. The white interviewers may have been the former masters' descendants who commanded a deference incompatible with the integrity of the ex-slaves' responses. Some

interviewers, hoping to preserve a plantation idyll or an ancestor's reputation for kindness, consciously suppressed unfavorable accounts or refashioned responses. Thus, the recollections of former slaves recorded in the 1930s, while providing the largest body of firsthand slave testimony available, must also be used with caution.

Some slaves left a more traditional record of bondage and slave values in the form of letters written to their masters, families, friends, or organizations, especially antislavery societies. These documents do not have the limitations of the narratives and interviews with former slaves. Third parties do not intrude to corrupt the language and structure of the letters. The letters also have the advantage of immediacy of time and, more important, of showing change over time. Most slave letters are isolated items, but the Skipwith family letters span two generations. They are personal documents uncorroded by time and are timeless in their revelations. Their worth rests in their casual, almost accidental nature. They are not polemics or arranged interviews. They are, rather, the reflections of a people's day-to-day concerns.

If literature is a distillation of a people's history, the Skipwith slave letters are seemingly of limited utility in enabling us fully to comprehend the nuances of slave life and culture. Letters were not a common form of expression among enslaved Afro-Americans, or among freedmen for that matter. Most slaves were illiterate people who relied upon the spoken word to convey the full compass of their emotions and thoughts. The written word cannot fully catch the flavor of the call and response, double entendre, gesture, and rhythms of oral communication. But the Skipwith letters offer rare, if sometimes tantalizingly brief, glimpses into the lives of particular slaves and freedmen over two generations. Insofar as individual lives inform and reflect the lives of many, the Skipwiths remind us of the diversity of slave types and experiences in the South, and out of it. And they echo and refine the central themes of the slave South—family, religion, and the continuity of life.

### *Editorial Method*

In order to preserve the integrity and flavor of the letters and to capture any distinct Afro-American dialect, the letters are

printed as found in the originals, with the few minor exceptions described below. End-mark dashes have been rendered as periods when this seemed to be the writer's intention. When no end mark exists but the sentence is complete, the sentences are separated by extra space. Otherwise, punctuation and spacing follow the practice in the original. Capitalization conforms to the writer's style. When it is impossible to decipher the erratic habits of the writers regarding capitals, the letter in question is rendered in the lower case. The placement of the dateline, salutation, farewell, and signature has been regularized. All editorial emendations and additions are placed inside square brackets. Thus, if the original manuscript is torn or illegible, this fact is so indicated: [torn] or [illegible].

All the letters are from the Cocke Papers. A source note follows each document, indicating the exact location of the manuscript in the Cocke Papers at the Alderman Library of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. Explanatory notes, numbered consecutively by document, briefly identify individuals and significant events mentioned in the text of the document. In order to keep scholarly apparatus as unobtrusive as possible, and, more important, to highlight the central characters in the book, the Skipwith family, I have provided only the barest descriptions of secondary personalities and minor occurrences mentioned in the letters. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from materials in the Cocke Papers. Background sources are described in the Bibliographical Essay.

All of the Skipwith family correspondence known to exist has been collected and printed in this book. None of the Cocke letters to the Skipwith family has survived.

### *Acknowledgments*

Editing historical documents and writing history are simultaneously communal and solitary enterprises. In the course of gathering data about a subject, the editor/historian interacts with many individuals, as my own experience has revealed. They direct him, or her, to sources, they correct his misconceptions and errors, they improve his prose, they provide differing perspectives and arguments with which to judge his material, and, if they are kind, they encourage him and remind him of the importance of his subject. They become active agents in the



editing and writing process. The success that the final product enjoys is owing partly, but significantly, to their participation and cooperation. In the end, however, the editor/historian is left alone with the subject and becomes the final judge of the evidence. He imposes the final order on the material and attempts to draw meaning from it. In so doing, he makes the work “his” work more than “their” work. He is responsible for the accuracy and the common sense of the final product. His name on the title page signifies his recognition of that responsibility. But it should not diminish the role of those others who lighted the way.

And so it is with this book, for it is the product of many hands. In the five years it took me to prepare the manuscript, I learned many different things from many different people, and I thank them for it. Because I did not always heed their advice about editing and writing this book, I can hardly hold them responsible for any of its shortcomings. Because I did listen to them in many instances, I happily acknowledge their assistance in giving this book whatever importance it may come to have.

George H. Reese and Dorothy Twohig nurtured my interest in Cocke and the Skipwiths when I was an intern at the Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents at the University of Virginia. They taught me much about the editorial method and the importance of accuracy, and without realizing that Cocke and the Skipwiths would become my preoccupation thereafter they encouraged me in my work. For three summers Edmund Berkeley, Jr., Gregory Johnson, and the staff of the Manuscripts Division of the Alderman Library, University of Virginia, provided a congenial working environment for me. They patiently assisted me while I sifted through the thousands of items in the Cocke Papers and related collections. They were unfailingly efficient, friendly, and knowledgeable, and so lightened my research tasks and added to my understanding of Cocke, the Skipwiths, and their world.

The staffs at the following institutions also offered me kind and useful assistance: Alabama Department of Archives and History, University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, Auburn University, Balch Institute in Philadelphia, Duke University (manuscripts division), Haverford College, Historical Society of Pennsyl-