

## **“...plucked of his borrowed plumage...”: Firearms, Labor, and Antebellum North Carolinians' Constructions of Black Manhood**

One Sunday in February, 1844, in Wilmington, North Carolina, a fifteen year old slave named Charles loaded a pistol with two balls and then fatally shot his older brother, Adonis, in the back. Adonis was dead within minutes and when a third brother tried to catch Charles, the fratricidal teen tried to shoot him as well. When the authorities captured him, Charles declared that he “could not help” but shoot Adonis because his nearly thirty year old brother “had beat him...” the previous day. The newspapers added that during the ensuing investigation the authorities discovered that “a number of small black boys about town had pistols in their possession...” which the youths had “been in the habit of sporting with, firing at marks, &c, in retired places....”<sup>i</sup>

In the Antebellum South, firearms were tools that black and white Southerners used for a variety of legal or illegal purposes. Firearms also carried a great deal of social and cultural weight. White men carried arms in their militia companies; for self-defense; for work on their farms and plantations; to subjugate indigenous and black Southerners; to hunt for food, sport, or for socializing; and to duel each other over affairs of honor. Firearms were the “decisive symbol of white masculinity...” and the “talisman of white manhood....”<sup>ii</sup> These white men did not, however, project these arms-based gender constructions onto their slaves or the free people of color in their communities. In this paper, I argue that white men understood black men’s firearm use very differently than their own. They did not see African-descended peoples’ firearm use as a manifestation of black manhood or independence but merely as a mode of labor that white people could harness for their own benefit.

White men held dominant socio-political positions and they claimed the dual mantle of masculinity and citizenship for themselves. In this they were bolstered by the slave society’s legal, political, and social institutions. They could provide for their families and kin; protect and control their households with “necessary” violence; maintain their personal honor and independence; vote; and defend their state. Free and enslaved black people struggled to obtain similar masculinity markers, and their claims were an inherent challenge to the slave society’s status quo. These aspirations were elusive but black men’s firearm use could make all the difference in their efforts. Firearms provided them with a means to resist the racist and invasive society in which they lived. They could feed themselves. Runaways and maroons could keep

law enforcement at bay. Their weapons gave them leverage that was otherwise difficult to come by. Essentially, armed slaves could use their firearms as a counterweight to white North Carolinians' oppressive and state-legitimated authority.

Now of course, mastery's power was alluring. Some scholars argue that many African-descended men in the South viewed their "white captor as the standard of manhood to which they aspired...." Those who did so were not simply rejecting their forefathers' traditions but they were aspiring toward the privileges that white Southern men enjoyed and selfishly guarded. Additionally, the cultural contexts in which West African manhoods existed were shattered when black men were kidnapped, commodified, and forcibly relocated to the Americas.<sup>iii</sup> After a few generations away from their ancestral homeland "the enslaved African had become the enslaved African American..." and most of them "grew to accept the notion that slavery set the parameters for their life-time possibilities...."<sup>iv</sup> They continuously resisted slavery but mostly to create space for themselves within the system, not challenge it outright.

Further, many white men put high value on maintaining their personal honor, a construction which they did not believe black men could access.<sup>v</sup> White men from a variety of socio-economic groups embraced the concept of manly honor even though they expressed it in different ways, ranging from the elites' ritualistic duels to the "Tennessee hog-drivers'" eye-gouging brawls.<sup>vi</sup> Men who wished to be seen as honorable wore self-fashioned personas, or "masks," which had to be maintained beyond reproach.<sup>vii</sup> A man's power was intimately connected to his honor and it dictated how he related to other men. In Southern society:

...the difference between having and not having honor was the difference between having and not having power. The man of honor was the man who had the power to prevent his being unmasked... For those who aspired to honor, what you wore mattered less than whether you could and would risk your life to repel any man who tried to remove what you wore.<sup>viii</sup>

White people believed that enslaved black men lacked honor and therefore expected them to unflinchingly bear all of the slights and insults that came their way. Free black men did not fare much better, as the North Carolina Supreme Court declared that while they could strike a white man to protect themselves from "great bodily harm..." they could *not* "return blow for blow, and engage in a fight..." as white men could.<sup>ix</sup> Free and enslaved black men could be unmasked

because individual white people and the state were committed to ensuring that black men could not defend their honor and manhood from white people's slights.

White people denied that black men could be honorable. They saw black people's firearm use as either a threat or another way to extract black labor but not as a shared masculine expression. That did not preclude men of color from maintaining their own moral codes or from borrowing from the dominant society's codes. They were also deeply influenced by their own communities. Abolitionist writers like North Carolina-born David Walker, embraced a brand of manliness that was rooted in resistance and which inherently put them at odds with the white power structure. Consider however that some black North Carolinians benefited from this extraction of armed labor.

Hunting was one of the most useful ways slaveholders could use their slaves' armed labor and it could also be very useful for the slaves themselves. Further, hunting had even greater psychological benefits for the slaves. Alex Woods explained that his father, Major Woods, hunted with a firearm on Jim Woods' Orange County plantation. He proudly explained that his father had been "a good hunter an' he brought a lot o' game to de plantation..."<sup>x</sup> Major's quarry was cooked in the "great house" and was then divided among all of the slaves and perhaps their master's family as well. Even though he was hunting at his master's pleasure and his efforts ultimately saved his master money and livestock, Major's prowess was important to the slave community. Major's skill with a firearm allowed him to assume the "patriarchal mantle of provider..." and affirmed his manhood, which slavery and his master had circumscribed in other ways, like by selling Major's first wife away.<sup>xi</sup> Under these challenging circumstances, being a skilled hunter could be worth far more than just the meat it provided.

In these instances where armed black laborers were directly employed to assist white people their firearm use was understood to be subordinate. Consider the free man of color who went by the name "Free Willis" and who was employed by a white farmer to kill agricultural pests in the 1830s and 1840s. This labor was mutually beneficial. Willis lived adjacent to the farmer's property and ate the animals that he killed. After an 1840 licensing law mandated that free people of color apply to their county court for a license before they could carry a firearm, the farmer wrote a letter of support for Willis. This was at least in part because of the personal benefits that the white man gained from the arrangement and perhaps also because his family had owned Willis until he bought his freedom almost twenty years earlier.<sup>xii</sup> In the white farmer's

view Willis' firearm use allowed the former slave to maintain an independent lifestyle but it was also labor that the farmer could harness for himself. Importantly, Willis recognized that his firearm use was at white people's pleasure. Even before the Assembly passed the licensing law Willis voluntarily surrendered his firearm to another white neighbor during a "Negro rising." The white man held onto the weapon until the trouble subsided.<sup>xiii</sup> Willis' armed labor allowed him to feed himself and helped him to maintain a white benefactor but it did not mitigate his position as a racial subordinate in a slave society whose labor benefited his white employer.

White people's appropriation of black men's armed labor sometimes approximated an endorsement of a black masculine expression that was similar to that which white men embraced. When Captain William H. Tripp left his Beaufort County home during the Civil War he left the plantation's day to day operations to his slave, Roden. In addition to agricultural decisions Tripp trusted Roden to use a firearm in order to protect the plantation where Tripp's wife, Araminta, and their young children remained. In one of his letters to Araminta, Tripp wrote, "I could not sleep last night for thinking about those cursed negroes coming down to steal... I wish Roden had of had my gun loaded with big shot and killed one or two they would not have disturbed you again in a hurry...."<sup>xiv</sup> Roden essentially became the *de facto* male leader on the plantation, if only as far as labor was concerned, and he managed its daily operations. That did not diminish that this relationship between master and slave was fundamentally rooted in an imbalance of power and Tripp saw Roden as nothing more than a subordinate.<sup>xv</sup> An important subordinate, but a subordinate nonetheless.

Individual white families benefited from African-descended people's armed labor but North Carolina's town's also harnessed black people's armed labor for dirty and undesirable work. This labor was dramatically different from white men's armed labor for the state, which was primarily rooted in defense. Militia units had varying levels of effectiveness but still held some prestige. Free black men were barred from militia service in the early 1800s and were disenfranchised in 1835.<sup>xvi</sup> They could not wear the full mantle of citizenship and were limited to menial and less prestigious public armed labor. Consider the work performed by Claiborne Wiggins in Raleigh. The constable hired Wiggins, a "colored man", in 1828 to assist him in keeping the town's dog population in check.<sup>xvii</sup> Moore and Wiggins' job was straightforward—find the unlicensed dogs that roamed capital city's street and shoot them.<sup>xviii</sup>

Wiggins' employment shooting stray dogs was certainly useful in keeping the dog population and "hydrophobia" under control but it paled in comparison to the militia's symbolic and practical importance or its honorable status. The *Newbern Sentinel* commented that killing stray dogs was "a duty that few like to undertake..."<sup>xxix</sup> Wiggins' armed labor was completely subordinate to Raleigh's constable but further, it was undesirable to those who had better employment options.

Many white people believed that armed black laborers needed to be kept securely under white people's supervision in order to mitigate any threat to public safety- this premise undergirded North Carolina's legislative and judicial efforts to regulate black people's weapon use from the 1720s through to the Civil War.<sup>xx</sup> Relatedly, some white people believed that the manner in which slaveholders treated their slaves could have a strong influence on the slaves' gendered self-expressions. To return to the 1844 fratricide, Charles explained to the Wilmington authorities that he "could not help..." but kill his brother because of a beating. I suspect that this punishment was related to Charles' involvement with a gang that had been robbing stores and houses in town. Both brothers belonged to wealthy slaveholder Platt K. Dickinson, who testified that he and his family had never harshly disciplined Charles.<sup>xxi</sup> The teenager clearly rejected his older brother's claim to the authority to do so.

P. K. Dickinson believed that the teenager's "unnatural" crime was the result of the slaveholding family's "improper management, and mistaken kindness..."<sup>xxii</sup> After Charles was sentenced to hang, Dickinson petitioned Governor John Motley Morehead for clemency and explained that his family had raised both Charles and his brother "as domestics" who they "treated with great tenderness, and care..." He added that they had been treated, not as slaves but as "humble friends, and dependants[sic]..."<sup>xxiii</sup> He suggested that this treatment had failed to check Charles' "extremely[sic] violent and vindictive disposition..." and implored the governor to banish the slave instead of allowing him to hang.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Charles' youth was also an important factor in his resistance to authority much as it was for other young enslaved men, like Chowan County slave Harriet Jacobs' brothers William and Benjamin. Charles was only about fifteen years old and, like the Jacobs brothers, he probably struggled to define himself against slavery's harshness, the legal and illegal opportunities that Wilmington offered, the overindulgent Dickinsons, and his own family's expectations. P. K. Dickinson saw Charles as "a boy of tender years, and extreme youth..." but this sat at odds with

Charles' self-identity. Like Dickinson, the town commissioners and the magistrate of police also believed that black manhood could be controlled and shaped by well-intentioned white people though they were far less sympathetic toward Charles.<sup>xxv</sup> The municipal officials wrote to the governor and pleaded with him to let the "hardened and desperate..." slave hang. They believed that the town had to execute him to prevent others from similar masculine expressions. Consider that this punishment stood in stark contrast with white men's own aggressive yet socially acceptable responses to perceived insults. Dueling had been outlawed in North Carolina since 1802 but the practice continued until at least the 1850s.<sup>xxvi</sup> Charles sought to maintain his manhood within slavery and killed his brother in the effort. In the end, the state of North Carolina hanged him for his crimes despite his master's efforts.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Charles saw himself as an honorable man. He saw himself and Adonis as equals and therefore refused to submit to a disciplinary beating. We can understand his attack on Adonis as a duel of sorts. Some historians argue for an expanded view of dueling that includes any formulaic effort on the part of a dishonored party to risk injury to force an offender to admit that they were equals. This applies to this fratricide, regardless of the slave society's insistence that slaves could not undertake contests of honor.<sup>xxviii</sup> As Bertram Wyatt-Brown pointed out, "just as lesser folk spoke ungrammatically, so too they fought ungrammatically, but their actions were expressions of the same desire for prestige...."<sup>xxix</sup> Dueling was the most visible ritual associated with the antebellum culture of male honor and even white youths were eager to embrace it, often to their families' delight. Charles was not so different.<sup>xxx</sup>

Firearms helped black people, especially slaves, in their quest for gendered expressions that approximated those which white men enjoyed. Black men's manly aspirations overlapped with white men's constructions but, as people of color who lived in a white dominated society, they were often struggling for the virtually unattainable. As runaway Lewis Clarke lamented in 1842, "a slave can't be a man!" Much in the spirit of black abolitionists like David Walker and Frederick Douglass, Clarke advocated for a "heroic masculinity" that was rooted in resisting enslavement and mistreatment.<sup>xxxi</sup> This was a difficult, because the state and white citizens would swiftly check any challenge with disproportional brutality. Despite these disconnects with white folks, both free enslaved North Carolinians could use their firearms to both materially and psychologically improve their lives and mitigate the slave society's oppression.

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<sup>i</sup> 1840 U.S. Census, population schedule, Wilmington, New Hanover County, North Carolina, page 7, image 20, P. K. Dickinson, digital image, via ancestry.com, accessed June 9, 2015, . 1840 U.S. Census, population schedule, Wilmington, New Hanover County, North Carolina, page 25, P. K. Dickinson, digital image, via ancestry.com, accessed July 9, 2015, . *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina State Gazette* (Raleigh, NC) February 13, 1844. Wilmington Town Commissioners' Resolution, May 16, 1844; and Platt K. Dickinson to Governor John M. Morehead, May 10, 1844; both in folder- Correspondence, Petitions, etc., May 1, 1844-May 30, 1844, John M. Morehead Papers, North Carolina Department of Archives and History (hereafter NCDAH).

<sup>ii</sup> Nicholas Proctor, *Bathed in Blood: Hunting and Mastery in the Old South* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 2002), 44.

<sup>iii</sup> Daniel P. Black, *Dismantling Black Manhood: An Historical and Literary Analysis of the Legacy of Slavery* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), 99-100. *Ibid.*, 92-93.

<sup>iv</sup> Black, *Dismantling Black Manhood*, 99.

<sup>v</sup> Sylvia D. Hoffert, *A History of Gender in America* (Upper Saddle, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc, 2003), 169-170.

<sup>vi</sup> Betram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 350.

<sup>vii</sup> Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 25.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>ix</sup> John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina University Press, 1943), 93-94. Hamilton C. Jones, *Reports of Cases at Law Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of North Carolina From December Term, 1859, to August Term, 1860, Inclusive*. Vol. VII (Salisbury, NC: J. J. Bruner, 1860), 53.

<sup>x</sup> Interview with Alex Woods. "Ex-Slave Story." *The Library of Congress Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938*. North Carolina Narratives, Vol. XI, Part 2., 418.

<sup>xi</sup> Proctor, *Bathed in Blood*, 157. Alex Woods, *Born in Slavery*, 418.

<sup>xii</sup> Benajah Herring's petition (April Term 1823) via the DLAS, Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series II, Part D [Greensboro, NC: University Libraries, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1993], PAR: 11382014, accessed June 30, 2015. ).

<sup>xiii</sup> Wayne County Records, Records of Slaves and Free People of Color, no date, 1783-1869, NCDAH. Sixth Census of the United States, 1840: Newhope District, Wayne County, North Carolina; via ancestry.com.

<sup>xiv</sup> William Tripp to Araminta Tripp, January 5, 1863, Tripp Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (hereafter SHC).

<sup>xv</sup> William Henry Tripp and Araminta Guilford Tripp Papers, SHC.

<sup>xvi</sup> Franklin, *The Free Negro*, 13, 105-113, 120. *Journal of the Convention...to Amend the Constitution of the State, Art. I, Sec. 3, § 3*.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Gazette* (Raleigh, NC), July 29, 1828. The *Raleigh Register* listed his names as "Cooley Wiggins" which was likely a nickname. The census recorded a free man of color named Claiborne Wiggins living with his wife and four young dependents in the area (1830 U.S. Census, population schedule, Bufalloe District, Wake County, North Carolina, page 424, no image number, Claiborne Wiggins, digital image, via ancestry.com, accessed June 9, 2015, ).

<sup>xviii</sup> Killing these unlicensed dogs had been initially permitted by an 1817 state law. The General Assembly believed that "the number of dogs kept in the towns... as well by slaves as by free persons, have so increased as to render them a nuisance, and greatly increase the danger of the dreadful malady Hydrophobia [rabies]..." The Assembly empowered town commissioners to impose an annual tax on dogs and to either sue dog owners who did not pay it or to "order [the dogs'] destruction as they may think fit..." (*Laws of the State of North-Carolina, Enacted in the Year 1817*, [Chap. XXVI. Secs. I and II], 25. *Newbern Sentinel* [New Bern, NC], June 8, 1828).

<sup>xix</sup> *Laws of the State of North-Carolina, Enacted in the Year 1817*, (Chap. XXVI. Secs. I and II), 25. *Newbern Sentinel* (New Bern, NC), June 8, 1828. *Newbern Sentinel* (New Bern, NC) May 31, 1828. Some white men did engage in this work, nonetheless. One "tall, muscular, well formed..." New Bern constable, James A. McCain, used a club to gruesomely kill these unlicensed dogs (Stephen F. Miller, "Recollections of Newbern Fifty

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Years Ago” in *Our Living and Our Dead*, vol. I, ed. S.D. Pool [Raleigh, NC: N.C. Branch of the Southern Historical Society, 1874], 351). My point here is not that only black men undertook this undesirable armed labor but that the white men who did so could also undertake honorable armed labor through militia service and other venues.

<sup>xx</sup> For further reading on colonial and antebellum North Carolina’s racially specific firearm laws, see Antwain K. Hunter’s “‘A Nuisance Requiring Correction...’: Antebellum North Carolina’s Race-Based Firearm Laws, Black Mobility, and White Property”, *North Carolina Historical Review*, 93, no. 4 (October, 2016).

<sup>xxi</sup> Wilmington Town Commissioners’ Resolution, May 16, 1844; and Platt K. Dickinson to Governor John M. Morehead, May 10, 1844; both in folder- Correspondence, Petitions, etc., May 1, 1844-May 30, 1844, Morehead Papers, NCDAH. 1840 U.S. Census, population schedule, Wilmington, New Hanover County, North Carolina, page 7, image 20, P. K. Dickinson, digital image, via ancestry.com, accessed June 9, 2015, .

<sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.* Wilmington Town Commissioners’ Resolution, May 16, 1844. Governor John M. Morehead Papers, NCDAH.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Fayetteville Weekly Observer* (Fayetteville, NC), May 8, 1844. Platt K. Dickinson to Governor John M. Morehead, May 16, 1844; Governor John M. Morehead Papers, NCDAH.

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.* Wilmington Town Commissioners’ Resolution, May 16, 1844. Governor John M. Morehead Papers, NCDAH.

<sup>xxv</sup> Alan D. Watson, *Wilmington, North Carolina, to 1861* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2003), 185-186.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.* Guion Griffis Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 43-46.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Wilmington Chronicle* (Wilmington, NC), June 5, 1844.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35. Slaveholders would not risk incurring financial loss by allowing their slaves to engage in duels, nor would they concede that their slaves had any honor to risk in such activities (*Ibid.*, 34).

<sup>xxix</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 353.

<sup>xxx</sup> Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery*, 162-165, 166-167, and 168.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Rebecca Fraser, “Negotiating Their Manhood: Masculinity Amongst the Enslaved in the Upper South, 1830-1861” in *Black and White Masculinity in the American South, 1800-2000*, eds. Lydia Plath and Sergio Lussana (Newcastle, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 76.