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Shackles and Servitude: Jails and the Enslaved in Antebellum Savannah

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in History.

By
Haley Elizabeth Osborne

Under the mentorship of Professor Lisa Denmark

ABSTRACT

My research centers around the use of jails in relation to the African American community in Savannah. I will describe the evolution of the publicly funded jail system and explain how it was used to sustain the institution of slavery.

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Shackles and Servitude: Jails and the Enslaved in Antebellum Savannah

In 1751, when the colony of Georgia began the process of introducing slavery, Savannah, like other towns, quickly became reliant on slave labor. As Savannah transformed from a small town to a major port city, enslaved men and women worked in many different professions from carpenters to cooks and from drivers to housekeepers. They had more autonomy in their daily lives, though at times they faced greater public scrutiny. The population density in urban areas forced blacks and whites to cohabitate. Though slaves were considered private property, slavery itself was a public institution. This was especially true in urban areas such as Savannah where policing the behavior of enslaved men and women became a community effort. Institutions such as the city's watch kept Savannah's slaves in line and out of trouble. More importantly, the jail, funded by taxpayer money, was essential in upholding this "peculiar institution." Slaveowners from Savannah and the surrounding areas made use of this publicly funded institution for private purposes. They housed their enslaved workers in the jail both as a means of punishment and for safekeeping while they traveled away from the Savannah area. They also relied on the city's jailor to administer punishment to their slaves in the form of whippings. This paper will address the way in which slavery was maintained in Savannah through the use of a publicly funded jail.

While not as widely researched as rural or plantation slavery, urban slavery has been a major topic of study for historians. One of the most influential works on this topic is Richard C. Wade's *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860*. Written in 1964, this work, though dated, provides a comprehensive survey of urban slavery. It explores aspects such as working and living conditions, the process of hiring out, runaways, and

punishment. Wade demonstrates that while urban slaves had more individual autonomy relative to their rural counterparts, they found it more difficult to form communities of their own because they lived in such close proximity to whites.¹

Barbara Jeanne Fields addresses this forced cohabitation in her book *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century*. Maryland, a border state, occupied "both the geographic and the political middle ground" between slavery and freedom.² She also discusses the misconception that slavery in that border state was more "benign and mild" than slavery further south, explaining that the structure of slavery in Maryland was different but no less harsh than slavery in the Deep South.³ While Fields focuses on the line between slavery and freedom in Maryland, her extensive research on the social relationships between enslaved and free blacks can be applied elsewhere. For example, Fields explores how enslaved men were required to work alongside free persons of color and white men. This blurred line between slavery and freedom is something that other historians have discussed as well.⁴

Field also dissects the lives of enslaved men and women who were owned by small scale slaveholders. In early nineteenth-century Maryland, whites owned a median of three slaves, and less than one percent of citizens owned more than twenty slaves. As a result, family slaves experienced a greater degree of separation. She discusses the hardships that husbands and wives, mothers and children, and brothers and sisters owned

¹ Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1967).

² Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), xii.

³ Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground*, 24.

⁴ Timothy Lockley, "Slaveholders and Slave in Savannah's 1869 Census," *Urban History* 41, no. 4 (November 2014): 647-663.

separately faced as they were rarely permitted to see one another. This was the case with Frederick Douglas, who lived separately from his mother and was unable to form a close connection with her.⁵

The threat of family separation through slave sales was also more pressing for those owned by small slaveholders since these men and women were less financially stable than those who owned large numbers of slaves. Fields also explains that the separation of families increased the risk of enslaved men and women running away to reunite with their loved ones. When slaves ran away, the slaveowners often had some clue regarding their destinations and posted those locations in runaway slave advertisements in local newspapers. For instance, Dr. Thomas G. Turton advertised that one of his enslaved women, Margaret “might have gone either to Brandywine, where her mother’s owner lived, or to Page’s Chapel, where her father’s owner lived.”⁶ These sorts of advertisements can be found in local newspapers throughout the South during this time period.

Runaways caught were often taken to the city’s jail. Though there has not been a comprehensive work written on the jails of Savannah, scholars have compiled data on the antebellum prison system in general. These works approach the topic in one of two ways. The first is as a chronological study of the prison system in the United States, such as Stephen E. Tillotson and Jennifer A. Colanese’s “Jails in the Early American Republic: Transcarceration, Decarceration, and Rabble Management.” In this article, the authors discuss the role of jails in early American society, particularly the evolution in the purpose of jails over time. In colonial America, jails primarily served as temporary

⁵ Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground*, 25-28.

⁶ Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground*, 26.

holding places for criminals before their trials. But as the urban populations increased, jails became places where people could be incarcerated for longer periods of time.

Tillotson and Colanese also discuss the decentralization of the jails and the shift of their administration from a few national and state-governed jails, to many individual county jails. The jails of antebellum Savannah fall into this latter category as they were funded and managed by the city government.⁷

Keith Michael Green's *Bound to Respect: Antebellum Narratives of Black Imprisonment, Servitude, and Bondage, 1816-1861* takes a different approach to the study of antebellum jails. In this award-winning book, Green organizes each chapter around a different slave narrative to paint an image of the larger society and give a wider view of imprisonment and servitude in the lives of African Americans. Unlike Tillotson and Colanese, Green organizes his work thematically. He criticizes those who try to explain imprisonment and servitude in the United States as an evolving institution, stating that "periodization of black subjugation imposes too regular an order on the history of African American subjugation."⁸ This variation in methodology can be attributed to the authors' objectives. While Colanese and Tillotson seek to explain how the evolving prison system of early America has led to the current issues with America's jails such as discrimination and mass incarceration, Green is more interested in the historical themes of African American imprisonment. Most interestingly, he discusses how the threat of imprisonment was, in many ways, a stronger deterrent than imprisonment itself. He also consistently

⁷ Stephen E. Tillotson and Jennifer A. Colanese, "Jails in the Early American Republic: Transcarceration, Decarceration, and Rabble Management," *The Prison Journal* 97, no. 1 (December 2016): 118-139.

⁸ Keith Michael Green, *Bound to Respect: Antebellum Narratives of Black Imprisonment, Servitude, and Bondage, 1816-1861* (Tuscaloosa AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2015), 18-19.

refers to “unfreedom” as a way of explaining how African Americans were often bound in ways that were not legalized slavery, thus contributing to the dialogue regarding the blurred lines between slavery and freedom.⁹

Any discussion about enslaved men and women’s relationships to the jails must begin with the relationship between African Americans and the antebellum legal system. Black men and women faced numerous challenges in the antebellum courts. In many places in the South, Savannah included, even free African Americans required a white male sponsor to take white men or women to court. Furthermore, southern states, excluding Louisiana, prohibited blacks from testifying against whites. This did not bar them from being defendants, however, and when blacks were summoned to a courtroom, they faced white judges with all white juries.¹⁰

Exploring a different aspect of black presence in the courts is Kimberly M. Welch’s *Black Litigants in the Antebellum South*. Welch analyzes over a thousand court cases from early nineteenth century Louisiana and Mississippi in which both free and enslaved blacks pressed charges against other people of color and whites. In exploring the legal strategies of black litigants, Welch focuses primarily on how they framed their cases in relation to property rights and largely ignored the issues of race. Welch claims, “when left with the awkward choice between treating black people as legal persons and securing their own property rights, white southerners chose to protect their property rights, over and over again.”¹¹ The litigants used these strategies to sue white men and women to

⁹ Green, *Bound to Respect*, 28.

¹⁰ Kimberly M. Welch, *Black Litigants in the Antebellum American South* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 18.

¹¹ Welch, *Black Litigants in the Antebellum American South*, 14.

enforce legal contracts, recover unpaid debts, claim damages for assault, settle conflicts over property, and even in some cases, sue for their freedom.¹²

While Welch's research in Louisiana and Mississippi complicates the narrative of the legal prerogatives allowed to slaves, the Negro Seaman Acts did the same for free blacks. Southern states enacted these laws to restrict the movement of free blacks in southern harbors. Between 1822 and 1857 free black seamen were prohibited from entering port cities in the South such as Charleston, Mobile, and Savannah. Unwilling to allow free blacks to intermingle with the city slaves, city officers boarded both American and foreign vessels, arrested, and quarantined black crewmen while their ships were docked in local harbors.

Michael A. Schoeppner provides a comprehensive history of the Seamen Acts in his book *Moral Contagion: Black Atlantic Sailors, Citizenship, and Diplomacy in Antebellum America*. He explains the evolution of these acts, discusses the events which shaped them, and explores their political, commercial, and racial effects. He also describes the various challenges that those enforcing the acts faced both from the federal government and foreign powers. For instance, the Seamen Acts directly challenged the Commerce Clause, which empowered the federal government to regulate trade with foreign powers.

Schoeppner focuses on the word choice used by the proponents of these acts, in particular, the comparison of abolitionist ideas to a contagious disease. As his title suggests, supporters of these acts justified the imprisonment of free blacks in the same way that they justified quarantining sick men who came into their harbors. For instance,

¹² Welch, *Black Litigants in the Antebellum American South*, 10.

South Carolina lawyer Benjamin F. Hunt defended his state's Seamen Acts by arguing that, if New York could quarantine sick sailors in hospitals, then South Carolina should be able to quarantine black men and women because both actions were done with the "interest and safety" of the states in question.¹³

In response to the Negro Seamen Acts, the scope of local southern jails expanded from incarcerating criminals and 'unruly' slaves into quarantining free persons of color, who were thought to be at risk of spreading abolitionist ideals among southern slaves. Southern whites quarantined free blacks to prevent abolitionist messages from being spread to enslaved people. For whites, it had the added benefit of eliminating black freedom and mobility. Yet they placed these free black seamen in the same jails that housed enslaved men and women. Therefore, despite the claims of the proponents of these acts, the jailing of free black men merely demonstrated to local citizens and slaves that Southern law could control even these "free" men of color.

Historians have conducted studies of urban slavery in cities across the South. Of these, Donnie D. Bellamy's "Macon, Georgia, 1823-1860: A Study in Urban Slavery" stands out. Bellamy challenges Richard Wade's *Slavery in the Cities*, insisting that "urban slavery, like the South itself, resists sweeping generalizations such as those made by Wade."¹⁴ Contradicting Wade's assertion that slavery was a dwindling institution, Bellamy argues that the slave population in Macon continued to grow until 1860, demonstrating that the institution of slavery in Macon thrived right up until the Civil

¹³ Michael A Schoeppner, *Moral Contagion: Black Atlantic Sailors, Citizenship, and Diplomacy in Antebellum America* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 42.

¹⁴ Donnie D. Bellamy, "Macon, Georgia, 1823-1860: A Study in Urban Slavery," *Phylon* 45, no. 4 (4th Qtr. 1960): 298.

War. Paralleling Field's research in Maryland, Bellamy discovered that small scale slaveholders owned most slaves in Macon. Of the total population of Bibb County, seventy-five percent owned fewer than ten slaves. Unlike in Baltimore, however, the enslaved population of Bibb County was fairly evenly distributed between rural and urban areas. City slaves made up a total of forty percent of the enslaved population, which was much higher than other counties at this time.¹⁵

Whittington B. Johnson's *Black Savannah: 1788–1864* gives a more detailed account of slavery in Savannah specifically. He also focuses on Savannah's free blacks, explaining that these individuals faced the same scrutiny as their enslaved peers. Johnson also draws from the experiences of several "nominal slaves," to show how, in some cases, the differences between free and enslaved people were very slim. Nominal slaves were enslaved men and women who were allowed to have independent jobs and living arrangements from their masters in exchange for regular payments of fixed sums. Johnson does an excellent job at providing sources for these nominal slaves to convey the freedom that they experienced such as verbal accounts from the enslaved people that were recorded over time. Echoing Barbara Fields, Johnson states that these individuals were caught in "a middle ground between slavery and freedom."¹⁶

Also focusing on slavery in Savannah are Leslie M. Harris and Daina Ramey Berry, who edited *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*. This anthology consists of nine individual works written by various historians. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of African American life in Savannah from the introduction of slavery into Georgia to the

¹⁵Bellamy, "Macon, Georgia, 1823-1860: A Study in Urban Slavery," 299-304.

¹⁶Whittington B. Johnson, *Black Savannah: 1788-1864* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1996), 102.

resistance against Jim Crow laws. Harris and Berry's work is part of a larger movement in twenty-first century Savannah. Spearheaded by the Owens-Thomas House and Slave Quarters, historians like Harris and Berry have attempted to expand the history of the city to include the lives of enslaved men and women.¹⁷

In "Slave Life in Savannah: Geographies of Autonomy and Control," Harris and Berry discuss the relationship between African Americans and the larger community and explore how these individuals gave meaning to their autonomy within the restrictive expectations of Savannah's slaveholders. The authors explain how irregular enforcement of the city's slave codes gave enslaved people more autonomy in their day-to-day lives. They also focus on the formation and dual nature of Savannah's First African Baptist Church; while this institution fostered a sense of community for Savannah's black population, whites believed the new religious privileges would serve as a means of control. They briefly discuss the use of the city jail as a method of controlling slave labor and note that the Owens family did this on several occasions. They jailed enslaved individuals for safekeeping or to punish them for running away or for "improper conduct." Most of these periods of imprisonment were fairly short, ranging from one night to a week; however, an enslaved man named Osburn was jailed for thirty-four days.¹⁸

In "Prisons, Workhouses, and the control of Slave Labour in Low Country Georgia, 1763-1815," Betty Wood takes a more focused approach to Georgia's jails, Savannah's in particular, and explores how they were used to control enslaved men and

¹⁷ Leslie M Harris and Daina Ramey Berry, *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2014).

¹⁸ Harris and Berry, *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, 103.

women in early America. Wood outlines the evolution of the jail system in Savannah, explaining that in the eighteenth century, the city had both a jail and a workhouse. The jail housed criminals prior to their trials, while in the separate workhouse, runaway and unruly slaves were put to work and punished in a controlled setting. Due to the poor conditions of both facilities, Savannah built a new jail to serve both purposes at the turn of the century.¹⁹

At this jail, runaway slaves were held with the other prisoners while their owners were located. Wood focuses on the importance of newspaper advertisements in identifying and reclaiming runaway slaves. To do this, the jailer placed advertisements in the *Georgia Gazette*, or other local papers. These usually provided the runaway's name, appearance, and any information the enslaved person was willing to give about his or her master. In the rare case that the slaveowner failed to come forward to reclaim their property, the jailor sold the enslaved man or woman to recoup the jail's fees.²⁰

Because Savannah's jail was funded by taxpayer money, it provides an example of how the institution of slavery was financially sustained by the entire urban community. The community also supported slavery by delegating the task of watching over the city's slave population to the Savannah city watch. Savannah relied on its citizens for the city's security. Starting in 1793, all men exempt from militia duty were assigned to patrol committees led by the city's mayor and aldermen. Each night, ten of these individuals patrolled the city in the evening beginning at nine o'clock. Each man provided his own

¹⁹ Betty Wood, "Prisons, Workhouses, and the control of Slave Labour in Low Country Georgia, 1763-1815," *Slavery and Abolition* 8, no. 3 (December 1987): 258-259.

²⁰ Wood, "Prisons, Workhouses, and the Control of Slave Labour in Low Country Georgia, 1763-1815," 247-271.

gun, powder, and ammunition and was not formally trained in law enforcement.²¹ The watchmen received twenty-five dollars a month for their service but were given no other incentive to excel in their jobs. These men often held daytime jobs, which left them tired and inattentive by nightfall.²² The administration of the city watch was also inadequate. At times the citizens could not be compelled to take up watch shifts, and the role of city watchman was often neglected such as in the fall of 1802, where for three months, from September to November, the watch only patrolled two nights a week.²³

By 1854, even though over one hundred men constituted the city watch, they “seldom seemed to be in the right place at the right time.” As Savannah’s population increased so too did criminal activity. The civilian night watch became ineffective. In response the city council under Mayor James E. Ward inaugurated a major change, and the city council reduced the city watch to only fifty members and hired twenty mounted policemen. While watch members continued to receive twenty-five dollars a month, the “special police” earned an annual salary of five hundred dollars.²⁴ Because they were expected to be “completely dedicated to the city,” the city prohibited these men from holding a second job. By 1859, the mayor and alderman of the city completely disbanded the watch and replaced it with these new professional police.²⁵

Criminals apprehended by both the early city watch and the later police force were housed in the Savannah jail. Between 1733 and 1861, there were three of these

²¹ Thomas Gamble, *History of the City Government of Savannah, Ga., from 1790 to 1901*. (Savannah: n.p., 1900), 58.

²²Richard H. Haunton, “Law and Order in Savannah, 1850-1860,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (Spring 1972): 14.

²³ Gamble, *History of the City Government of Savannah, Ga.*, 66.

²⁴ *The Savannah Daily Georgia*, July 6, 1854.

²⁵ Haunton, “Law and Order in Savannah,” 14.

establishments. The first jail was a hastily constructed wooden structure at the corner of Bull and Bay streets, not far from the Savannah River.²⁶ In 1757, Lieutenant-governor of Georgia, Henry Ellis, described this building as “barely fifteen square feet” and overcrowded with prisoners who were “exposed to the sun.” Ellis’s remark indicates that there was likely no roof on the jail.²⁷ This establishment experienced frequent jailbreaks, likely due to the aforementioned condition, and it had to be reconstructed on several occasions because the wood quickly rotted.²⁸

By 1794, the poorly built jail proved inadequate for housing Savannah’s prisoners, and the city council funded the construction of a new jail. This significantly larger jail, completed in 1802, was constructed of brick and stone and surrounded by a tall brick wall.²⁹ It was located at the corner of Abercorn and Charlton Streets, overlooking Lafayette Square, where the Andrew Low house sits today (See Figure 1).³⁰ It was three stories, with two above ground and one below, and it was sixty by sixty-six feet, constructed with the “health and comfort” of the prisoners in mind.³¹ Savannah paid for the jail’s construction with city funds, with the promise that the state would reimburse it in the future.³² The jail cost the city government \$9,342.³³ Savannah took on a

²⁶ F. D. Lee and J. L. Agnew, *Historical Record of the City of Savannah*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1869), 166.

²⁷ Walter J. Fraser Jr., *Savannah in the Old South*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 48.

²⁸ Lee and Agnew, *Historical Record of the City of Savannah*, 166.

²⁹ Adelaide Wilson, *Historic and Picturesque Savannah*, (HardPress Publishing, 2013), 148.

³⁰ Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 161.

³¹ *Savannah Republican*, Feb 22, 1817.

³² Thomas Gamble, *History of the City Government of Savannah, Ga., from 1790 to 1901*. (Savannah: n.p., 1900), 58, 66.

³³ *Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser*, March 28, 1800.

significant financial burden to build a new jail, demonstrating their willingness to contribute to supporting slavery.

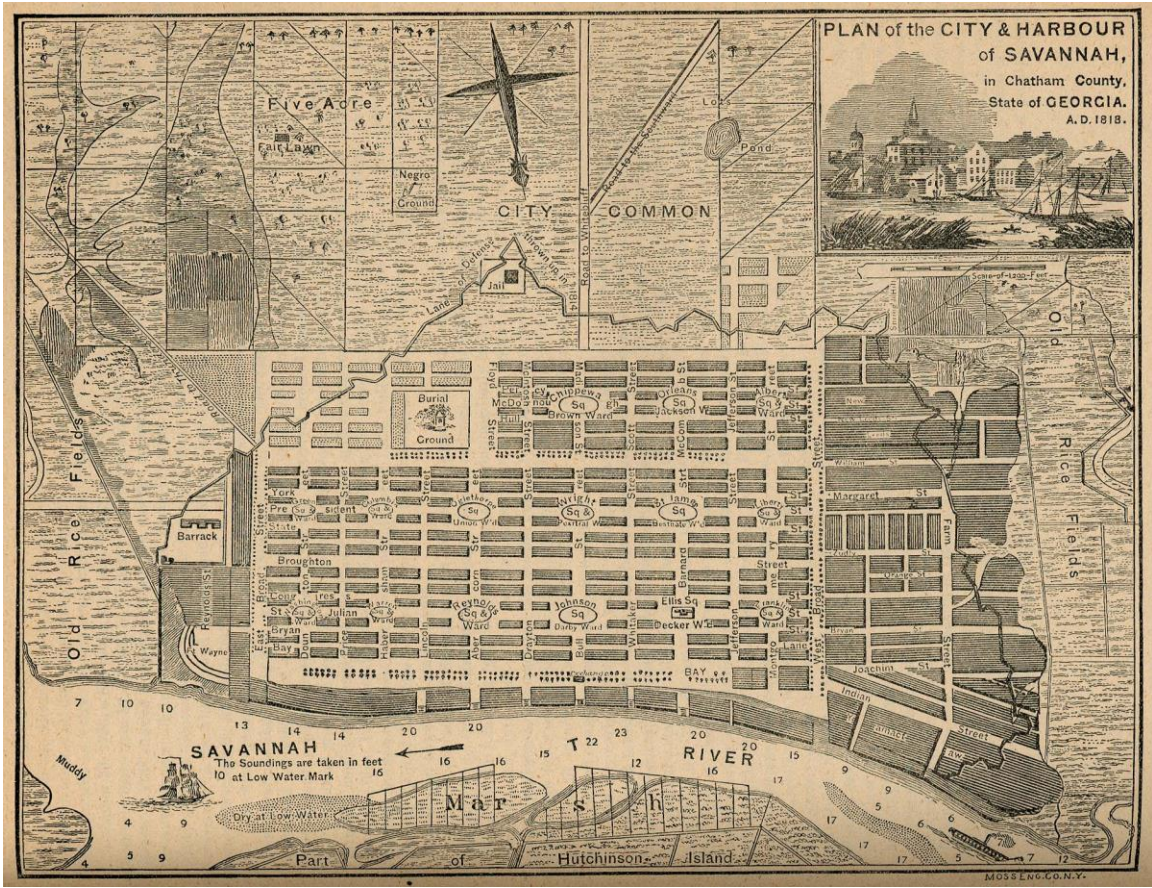


Figure 1 Houston, Plan of the City & Harbour of Savannah in Chatham County, State of Georgia, A.D. 1818, [map]. Scale not given. Savannah, Ga. 1818.

This jail also suffered from jailbreaks and escape attempts. In April 1821, an enslaved man jailed for “riotous conduct” tried to escape. A ward stabbed the prisoner during his escape attempt. Mayor James Morrison directed Hugh McCall, the jailor to discharge the prisoner as soon as possible and without costs. Morrison’s actions likely reflected his worry that a city employee damaged the property of Mr. Hopkins.³⁴

³⁴ City of Savannah Mayor’s Office Letter Books, 5600MY-010, Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Ga. Mr. Hopkin’s first name is not mentioned in this letter.

The jail lasted forty-four years before being replaced once the city began expanding southward. This third jail was completed in 1846. Built of brick and stucco, it was located at the southernmost edge of the city at the South-East corner of Whitaker and Hall streets.³⁵ The cost of this jail, however, “exhausted the funds of the county,” and “exceeded the means of payment.” To compensate for this financial strain, the city government sold the land in Lafayette square that the previous jail had occupied.³⁶ Despite being a “forbidding two-story structure,” which looked like a “medieval fortress,” this jail too experienced severe overcrowding, and inhabitants were subject to cruel conditions.³⁷

Savannah’s jails were unique because all three of these establishments housed whites, slaves, and free persons of color of both genders. There was no segregation by type of crime or race. This meant that those who had committed nonviolent crimes such as staying out past curfew were housed with dangerous criminals. This type of arrangement was uncommon, specifically in Georgia where other towns had separate housing areas for white and blacks. For instance, Macon’s jail, built in 1831, consisted of four separate holding areas, where prisoners could be held based on their race and gender.³⁸ In Savannah, the jail was one of the few places where both white people and people of color could be found together in the same inhuman conditions.³⁹

³⁵ Today, this lot is a residential area across the street from Forsyth Park

³⁶ *Savannah Daily Republican*, September 23, 1846.

³⁷ Jaqueline Jones, *Saving Savannah: The City and the Civil War*, (New York: Random House Publishing, 2008), 20.

³⁸ Bellamy, “Macon, Georgia, 1823-1860” 308.

³⁹ Johnson, *Black Savannah*, 50-51.

Conditions in the jails were incredibly rough in the early nineteenth century, so much so that they have been described as “shocking to humanity.”⁴⁰ The buildings were both poorly ventilated and insulated, making for very hot and humid summers and freezing winters. Despite the cold of the cells, the jailor was not required to provide prisoners blankets or other supplies to keep warm.⁴¹

There are few first-hand accounts of the conditions in any of Savannah’s jails. In his autobiography, William Grimes is one of the few who describes life inside of the jail. Grimes was born a slave in King George County, Virginia in 1784. His father was Benjamin Grymes, a wealthy slaveowner; his mother was an enslaved woman owned by Gryme’s neighbor, Dr. Steward. William Grimes was ten years old when Steward sold him to William Thorton. This separated Grimes from his mother and was the first sale in a series of many over the course of his life. Throughout his time as a slave, Grimes worked in many different positions including as a house servant, a field hand, and a carriage driver. Eventually, Grimes was sold to a man from Savannah and lived most of his enslaved life there.⁴² It was not until 1815 when his final master, Francis Harvey Welman, traveled to Bermuda and left Grimes in Savannah that he finally made bid for freedom. He escaped from Savannah by hiding aboard a ship headed to New England. Years later, after Grimes made a life for himself working as a barber, his owner found him and demanded that Grimes buy his freedom. To do so, Grimes sold his house and all that he owned. He wrote his autobiography *The Life of William Grimes: The Runaway Slave* to recoup the money that he lost. Despite the importance of Grime’s life to the

⁴⁰ Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 70.

⁴¹ Johnson, *Black Savannah*, 50.

⁴² William Grimes does not state the name of the man who took him to Savannah. In his memoir, Grimes only refers to this man as “Mr. A.”

study of urban slavery, it is important to consider that while his story is a valuable source, it must be examined skeptically. Grimes wrote this book years after the events took place and so the errors of human memory may have altered his accounts. As he also wrote this book with the purpose of making money, it is possible he embellished details.⁴³

Grimes describes the conditions in the jail as “so foul and full of vermin, it was almost insupportable,” and tells of having to deal with the many very large lice.⁴⁴ When jailed for an extended period of time, prisoners risked becoming malnourished. Usually the prisoners received corn. Sometimes they were allowed salt for their meals but never meat.⁴⁵ Grimes was incarcerated in the 1802 jail beside Lafayette Square. The jail remained in poor condition until October of 1858, when renovations were made, providing a cleaner and safer jail.⁴⁶

In the early nineteenth century, slavery was thriving in Savannah. In 1830, enslaved individuals made up nearly forty percent of the city’s total population.⁴⁷ In 1848, 5,685 enslaved men and women were living in Savannah, making up forty-four percent of the city’s population. Eighty-three of these individuals worked as skilled workmen; a few hundred more worked in manufacturing, commerce, and transportation, while most served as domestic servants.⁴⁸ Enslaved individuals were responsible for the upkeep of their master’s homes: cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children. Others worked for their masters in skilled professions such as carpenters or wagon drivers.

⁴³ William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, The Runaway Slave* (Oxford, UK: University of Oxford Press, 1825).

⁴⁴ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 48.

⁴⁵ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 35.

⁴⁶ City of Savannah Mayor’s Report, 1858, 28.

⁴⁷ Harris and Berry, *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, 104.

⁴⁸ Joseph Bancroft, *Census of the City of Savannah*, (Savannah: E. J. Purse, 1848) 8,13.

Others still, spent very little time with their masters at all. They were permitted to live and work separately from their slaveholders, taking on professions such as tailors, barbers, bakers, butchers, mechanics, fishermen, and hucksters. This variation in work was unique to slaves in urban environments and was especially useful in cities due to the “shifting needs and increasing complexities of urban economies.”⁴⁹ Slaves who worked separately from their owners were often required to give all or a portion of their earnings to their masters. These enslaved individuals were known as “nominal slaves” and their lives occupied a space between slavery and freedom.⁵⁰ This was the case for individuals such as Margaret Dawson, an enslaved woman who hired her own time as a nurse. Dawson lived and worked separately from her master, who often neglected to collect her wages, giving her the opportunity to make money for herself and live her life unimpeded by her direct owner.⁵¹

Despite the relative autonomy experienced by nominal slaves, men and women working separately from their slaveholders were still highly regulated. One law, outlined by the City Ordinances of 1858, prohibited enslaved people from working within the city limits without their owner’s supervision unless said owner purchased them a work badge from the Clerk of Council.⁵² The enslaved people were required to wear this badge on their shirts so that it would be visible to the public. Slaves found working without badges were fined three dollars. If their owner failed to pay, they were subject to thirty-nine

⁴⁹ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 28.

⁵⁰ Johnson, *Black Savannah*, 86-87.

⁵¹ Johnson, *Black Savannah*, 102.

⁵² Edward G. Wilson, *A Digest of All the Ordinances of the City of Savannah, and Various Laws of the State of Georgia, Relative to Said City, Which Were of Force on the 1st January, 1858, Together with an Appendix and Index* (Savannah, GA: J.M. Cooper, 1858), 25 (hereafter cited as Savannah City Ordinances).

lashes.⁵³ This demonstrates another way in which slaveowners controlled their workers. If an enslaved person were not in good standing with his or her owner, the owner could refuse to pay the three-dollar fine, resulting in physical punishment. White men who made counterfeit money received a fine of forty dollars while a free black man who provided slaves with counterfeit badges was charged forty dollars and whipped up to fifty times at the discretion of the mayor or another city official.⁵⁴

Other laws restricted both free and enslaved African Americans and subjected them to cruel punishments. For instance, African Americans were prohibited from keeping “any dog in the City of Savannah.” The punishment for violating the law was a fine of five dollars. The mayor could add to this punishment a whipping “not exceeding twenty lashes.” There was also a law forbidding any horse or carriage within the limits of Savannah to exceed a certain speed. White offenders received a five-dollar fine; a slave on the other hand, was jailed until his or her owner paid the fine. Laws required all nominal male slaves between the ages of sixteen and sixty to report to the Fire Company of Savannah to help extinguish fires during emergencies. They could also be called at random to participate in practice drills at the Fire Company’s discretion. Those who failed to show when called upon could lose their work badges. Slaves were also whipped for other minor crimes such as breaking a street lamp, disrupting a religious service, riding on horseback on a Sunday without their owner's permission, and being taught to read or write.⁵⁵ With so many minor restrictions on everyday life, violent crimes

⁵³ Savannah City Ordinances, October 30, 1852.

⁵⁴ Savannah City Ordinances, October 30, 1852.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

committed by enslaved people were rare. When they did occur, more often than not they were against other slaves rather than white citizens.⁵⁶

African Americans were also subject to a city-wide curfew. This law, enacted in 1757, dictated that all enslaved people be off the streets of Savannah by ten o'clock at night unless they carried a permission slip signed by their owner.⁵⁷ Prior to 1854, enforcement of this curfew was lax, and lighter skinned slaves were able to avoid punishment by passing for white citizens in the dark.⁵⁸ Despite these inconsistencies, failure to retire before curfew was still the most common crime committed by enslaved people between the years of 1833 to 1864.⁵⁹ The city's night watchmen sent African Americans found out after ten o'clock without a ticket to the jailhouse where they were held until morning. The mayor would then meet the prisoners and determine whether or not they should be released. This was referred to as the Mayor's trial. In the event of a guilty verdict, the mayor also determined the punishment. This small-scale justice system was not unique to Savannah, Georgia. Throughout early America, city mayors held this power to deal with minor cases quickly and efficiently.⁶⁰

The Mayor's trial was only one instance in which a black person could be put on trial before being sentenced to prison. For more serious crimes, such as theft or violence, enslaved people might be brought to a trial before a judge or jury.⁶¹ For these offenders, a jury of their peers was never an option. When African Americans were put on trial, an

⁵⁶ William A. Byrne, "Slave Crime in Savannah," *The Journal of Negro History* 79, no. 4 (Autumn 1994): 356. Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 172.

⁵⁷ Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia: 1730-1775* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 123.

⁵⁸ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 41.

⁵⁹ Byrne, "Slave Crime in Savannah," 355.

⁶⁰ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 102.

⁶¹ *Savannah Georgian*, September 3, 1828.

all-white jury with a white judge determined their fate. Interestingly, the court system was one of the few areas in which an enslaved person had an advantage over a free person of color. This was because slaves were more valuable to whites than free African Americans. Imprisoned slaves resulted in lost income for slaveowners.⁶² Therefore, judges rarely incarcerated slaves for extended periods of time. In the rare case when a slave was executed, Savannah's municipal government compensated the owner for the loss of his or her property. This would be done by an official appraisal of the slave's value. In 1754, an owner received no more than fifty dollars for the life of his or her slave.⁶³ The law addressing this was put into place to encourage slaveholders to comply with law enforcement in the event of a crime.⁶⁴

The amount of monetary compensation paid to the owner changed over the years. In the summer of 1855 Bob, a local slave owned by George W. Anderson, got into a "violent collision" with John A. Mayor's slave named Judge. For an unknown reason, Bob threw a brick at the other slave, knocking him off of his horse. The two got into a brief fight. Bob drew a knife, stabbed Judge, and then took flight. By the end of the day, Bob was in police custody, charged with Judge's murder.⁶⁵ Bob was held in jail for four hundred and forty-four days and tried in the Chatham County Superior Court. On the 22nd

⁶² Lockley, "Slaveholders and Slave in Savannah's 1860 Census," 649.

⁶³ Allen D. Candler, ed., *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, (Atlanta, Ga: Franklin Printing and Publishing, 1904), 18: 114.

⁶⁴ Wood, "Prisons, Workhouses, and the Control of Slave Labour in Low Country Georgia," 250.

⁶⁵ *Daily Morning News*, June 07, 1855; *Savannah Daily Georgian*, June 19, 1856; *The Savannah Daily Republican*, June 20, 1856.

of August 1856, city officials hanged Bob for the murder. The city government then paid George Anderson \$209.93 in compensation.⁶⁶

Not all trials involving slaves decided against them. William Grimes also described an incident in which he was brought before a white judge with no attorney and with two witnesses who accused him of a crime that he claimed he did not commit. The judge, believing the evidence insufficient, dropped all of the charges against Grimes and allowed him to return to work.⁶⁷ This seemingly odd ruling by the judge demonstrates how reluctant law enforcement officials were to imprison slaves for length periods of time.

Some owners chose to send their slaves to the jail either for punishment or to mitigate a flight risk.⁶⁸ Jailers charged slaveowners 34 cents to cover the expenses of incarceration. Despite the cost, this practice was incredibly beneficial to slaveowners because it relieved the owner of the responsibility of dealing with an unruly slave. The Owen's family, for example, incarcerated several of their slaves. While most of these men and women were jailed for less than a week, a slave named Osburn remained in jail for thirty-four days. Owens paid the jailor a total of \$11.40 for the latter.⁶⁹ This amount totals to about thirty-four cents a day, making it very cheap for slaveholders to delegate the punishment of their slaves to local authorities.

⁶⁶ Chatham County Jail Register, 1855-1858, 5600PL-010, Volume 2, Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Ga. Hereafter cited as Chatham County Jail Register.

⁶⁷ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 56-57.

⁶⁸ Kelly Westfield, "A Report on the Davenport Bondpeople: A Review of New and Old Sources and a Reconstruction of their Pre-Davenport Lives," (working paper for Davenport Museum. 2017), 102.

⁶⁹ Harris and Berry, *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, 103.

Charles Manigault was another slaveholder who did not administer physical punishments himself. Manigault owned a rice plantation, called Gowrie, at the edge of the Savannah River in Jasper County, South Carolina. Manigault was an absentee owner and left the day to day operations of his business and control of his ninety slaves to the plantation overseers. These were hired individuals responsible for commanding enslaved workers during the master's absence. Manigault provided detailed written instructions to his overseers on how to deal with disobedient slaves. The overseer was to handle most matters at Gowrie himself, but if he wished to "make an example of" a bondsperson, he could send him or her to the Savannah jail to be imprisoned for a period of time which would "obviously [include] flogging."⁷⁰ Manigault gave the overseer permission to leave a slave in "solitary confinement for three weeks" and insisted that after this period of time, the slave would be "glad to get home again." If the slave seemed to not learn their lesson from their time in jail, Manigault sold them from his South Carolinian plantation to New Orleans.⁷¹

Given that Manigault's plantation was in South Carolina and that Manigault was not a citizen of Savannah he was not required to pay taxes to the state or local government. None of his tax dollars went to the upkeep of Savannah's jail, but nevertheless he utilized it in the same way that Savannah's citizens did. Manigault was not the only South Carolinian slaveholder to imprison their slaves in Savannah's jail. In the July of 1810, Charleston resident Mr. Bee had a slave named John committed to Savannah's jail for twenty-five days. That same year, London was incarcerated by his

⁷⁰ William DusiBerre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 126.

⁷¹ DusiBerre, *Them Dark Days*, 126.

master, Mr. Joiner from Beaufort South Carolina, from May 31 to June 10.⁷² The use of Savannah's jail by South Carolinians demonstrates how the publicly funded penal system in Savannah was committed to preserving the institution of slavery.

When a slaveowner sent one of his or her workers to jail, the enslaved man or woman was recorded in the jail records as being there for "safekeeping."⁷³ This is abbreviated as "SK" in many of the city's jail registers

Negroes	Owners	Residence	by whom Committed	Offences & Remarks
Philip	Free	Savah	Guard	SK
Fanny	M ^{rs} Mirer	"	owner	"
Cyrus	B D Williams	"	"	" 1
Emanuel	Thos George	"	Guard	"
Dorothea	H G. Gibbs	"	owner	"
Samuel	M ^r Howard	"	Guard	"
Paul	M ^r Bacon	"	to order	"
Tom	E Gagle	"	"	" 11
William	W Young	"	Guard	"
Jack	J H. Nicholas	"	"	"
Emanuel	J ^r Mc Glendel	Wilks City	Guard	SK 110
Beck	Doct Taylor	Savah	to order	"
Isaac	Solla Garrad	"	Guard	"
Hann lot	M ^{rs} Minip	"	"	"
Fanny	M ^{rs} Rombo	Buzburg	M ^r Rodo	"
John	M ^r Rice	Charburn	M ^{rs} Richardson	"
Constantin	Free	Savah	City Marshall	Protecting 100
Daphne	M ^{rs} Alger	"	Guard	SK 10
Moses	Judge Jones	"	"	"

Figure 2. Chatham County Jail Register, 1808-1815

(Figure 2). While many times

this meant the slave was being punished by the master, it could also indicate that the master was out of town for a period of time. During their travels, slaveholders were often unwilling to trust their bondspeople at home alone, but they also found it inconvenient to travel with these individuals. The Savannah jail offered a solution to this dilemma.⁷⁴ For a set price, the master sent his or her enslaved people to be housed in the jail until their return. This was especially beneficial to owners during the hot and humid summers when the threat of mosquito-borne diseases was greatest. The wealthy citizens of Savannah often left the city and headed north or to Europe. During these uncomfortable months,

⁷² Chatham County Jail Register, 1808-1815, 5600PL-010, Volume 1, Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Ga.

⁷³ Betty Wood, "Prisons, Workhouses, and the Control of Slave Labour in Low Country Georgia, 1763-1815." *Slavery & Abolition* 8, no. 3 (1987): 261.

⁷⁴ Haunton, "Law and Order in Savannah," 5.

safekeeping was the most common reason for slave incarceration. In the May of 1814, over eighty percent of slaves in jail were there for this reason.⁷⁵

Jails also served as holding places for captured runaway slaves. Like most places in the South, Chatham County slaves often thought of escaping from their masters. Given that most of Savannah's slaveholders owned only a few domestic servants, it was rare that entire families were kept together. Because of this, Savannah's slaves would often try to evade their master in an attempt to find or visit family members that had been sold away. This was the case for Nancy, an enslaved woman owned by Isaiah Davenport. Davenport purchased Nancy from a man named George Rentz on January 4, 1812.⁷⁶ She served as a domestic servant for his family for less than three months before running away on March 20, 1812. Davenport assumed that she left in order to return to her sister Peggy, who lived on a plantation on Wilmington Island owned by Rentz.⁷⁷

While some of these enslaved men and women would return to their owners on their own, others would have to be investigated, caught, and arrested. The jailor often played a vital part in this process and he received five dollars for every enslaved runaway apprehended.⁷⁸ Captured runaways were taken to Savannah's jail and kept there until their master could be located. In many cases, the person being held in the jail would give as much information as they could. This often included their name, their owner's name, and the location from which they escaped. The harsh conditions they experienced in the jails gave them incentive to provide such detailed information.

⁷⁵ Chatham County Jail Register, 1808-1815.

⁷⁶ Kelly Westfield, "A Report on the Davenport Bondpeople: A Review of New and Old Sources and a Reconstruction of their Pre-Davenport Lives," (working paper for Davenport Museum. 2017), 10.

⁷⁷ *Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger*, January 23, 1813.

⁷⁸ Haunton, "Law and Order in Savannah," 9.

Once the jailor gathered enough information from the slave, he then took on the task of locating the slave owner. While some masters were found easily, others required more work. The jailor relied on local newspapers to locate these men and women. He placed advertisements in the papers which described the enslaved prisoner (Figure 3). Generally, this focused on their approximate age, height, and any distinguishing features such as the scar on Nancy's neck, the "defect in one eye" of a slave named Adam, or the bald head of a runaway named Jim.⁷⁹ These advertisements called on the owners to come forward, prove, and pay the jail fees.⁸⁰

Interestingly, most of the jailor's advertisements in local newspapers did not indicate that the captured slaves were from Savannah at all. It was more likely for enslaved men and women to flee from nearby plantations or rural areas. Leiah, an enslaved woman from Burke County avoided capture in Savannah for three months before she was finally apprehended.⁸¹ Other runaways flocked to Savannah from counties such as Hancock, Upson, Twiggs, Bulloch, and Liberty.⁸² Some runaways even crossed the

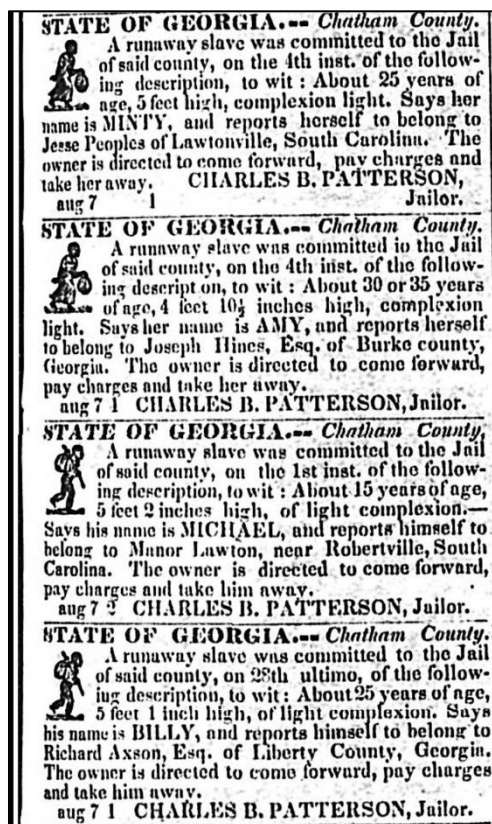


Figure 3. *The Savannah Georgian*, August 7, 1849

⁷⁹ *Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger*, January 23, 1813; *A Friend of the Family*, July 13, 1850; *Daily Savannah Republican*, April 3, 1833.

⁸⁰ *Savannah Georgian*, August 7, 1849.

⁸¹ *A Friend of the Family*, July 13, 1850.

⁸² *Daily Savannah Republican*, August 11, 1832; *Savannah Daily Republican*, January 27, 1820.

river from South Carolina to hide within Savannah's urban confines.⁸³ The city offered unique opportunities for. Given the city's dense population of African Americans, runaway slaves were able to blend in. Some disguised themselves as nominal slaves, hiring their own time with a master's permission. Others even claimed that they were free blacks. While many were content with hiding in an urban setting, others attempted to take advantage of Savannah being a port city and, like William Grimes, attempted to escape aboard ships as stowaways.⁸⁴

If an enslaved person were not in good standing with their owner or if an owner could not be found, the slave would be left in the jails for longer periods, up to eighteen months. After that time, the jailor had the right to sell the enslaved person at auction to "recoup the cost of their imprisonment."⁸⁵ This lengthy period of imprisonment before sale was likely put into place to protect the property rights of white slaveholders. It was also not uncommon for an owner to incarcerate his or her slave with the expectation of selling him or her shortly after. Such was the case of an enslaved person by the name of Ned, who was imprisoned by Mary Wylly for safekeeping on December 27, 1812. Wylly then sold Ned to Isaiah Davenport, releasing him from jail on January 13, 1813. It can be assumed that Ned was kept in jail while his sale was finalized. Though Ned was likely held in jail because he was at risk for running away from Wylly, his skills as a carpenter were beneficial to Davenport, who owned a building company.⁸⁶

⁸³ *The Georgia Gazette*, April 12, 1764; *The Southern Patriot*, February 27, 1806.

⁸⁴ Haunton, "Law and Order in Savannah," 9.

⁸⁵ Wood, "Prisons, Workhouses, and the Control of Slave Labour in Low Country Georgia, 1763-1815," 249.

⁸⁶ Westfield, "A Report on the Davenport Bondpeople: A Review of New and Old Sources and a Reconstruction of their Pre-Davenport Lives," 102-103.

While being kept in the Savannah jail was considered punishment enough for many people, whipping was also a common and effective form of punishment.⁸⁷ For a price of only twenty-five cents, Savannah's slaveowners sent their workers to the jail for a whipping not exceeding twenty lashes.⁸⁸ While slaveowners living in rural areas or in a plantation setting had overseers who could whip without public observance on command, those in the cities led much more public lives. Given that Southern gentlemen were concerned with preserving their image, the way in which one treated their slaves in the city was a crucial social factor.⁸⁹ Slaves in the cities wore clothes of a much higher quality than their rural and plantation counterparts.⁹⁰ This is because slaveowners were concerned that their "neighbors might gossip about a master who dressed his slaves in tattered rags."⁹¹ With many citizens in close proximity to one another, it was easy for neighbors to tell whether a slaveowner was particularly cruel to his or her slaves. Some slaveowners refrained from punishing their slaves personally so that they could "avoid a reputation for harshness" within their community.⁹²

An encounter between William Grimes and one of his many masters Archibald Stobo Bulloch clearly demonstrates this concept of southern honor at work. Bulloch had wrongfully accused Grimes of stealing a bottle of wine. Although someone else admitted to the crime, Bulloch refused to believe it and continued to treat Grimes "very severely"

⁸⁷ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 35.

⁸⁸ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 96.

⁸⁹ Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and 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), xii.

⁹⁰ Johnson, *Black Savannah*, 86.

⁹¹ Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery*, 65.

⁹² Wood, "Prisons, Workhouses, and the Control of Slave Labour in Low Country Georgia, 1763-1815," 250-251.

and more harshly than his other enslaved people.⁹³ Because of this, Grimes sought out another slaveholder and asked him to purchase Grimes from Bulloch.⁹⁴ This man was unwilling to approach Bulloch and instead asked Grimes to ask his master himself if he was willing to sell him. Bulloch became enraged at this and began beating Grimes “unmercifully.”⁹⁵ The slaveowner’s wrathful anger in this situation can be attributed to the fact that Grimes took it upon himself to ask another man to purchase him. This tarnished Bulloch’s honor because Grimes must have told another man that Bulloch was not a good master to him. He tried to throw a chair at Grimes before beating him with his fists. Even when Grimes escaped his master’s home and returned to working in the stables, Bulloch followed Grimes and beat him some more. Bulloch then ordered another slave, Jack, to tie Grimes up and call for a constable to take him away. When the constable arrived, Bulloch ordered Jack to wash the blood off of Grime’s face and give him a hat and coat. He wanted Grimes to look so that the people in the city would not think of him as a cruel master.⁹⁶

Another reason that slaveowners preferred to rely on the jail to administer punishment was because they did not want to anger their enslaved workers. Some slaveholders worried that should they whip their slaves, they would be subject to “the slave’s violent resentment.”⁹⁷ But to the enslaved people, especially those who were used to being punished by their masters, such as William Grimes, who had worked on a plantation in Virginia, it was even more cruel to be sent to prison for whippings. Urban

⁹³ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 45.

⁹⁴ This is another situation in which the name of the man is unknown. As Grimes was never purchased by this stranger, there are no records of this man’s name.

⁹⁵ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 46.

⁹⁶ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 47.

⁹⁷ Dusinberre, *Them Dark Days*, 125.

jails were a place of fear for rural slaves due to the inhuman and often “systematic” whipping that would be administered by a “professional” rather than by the slaveowner themselves.⁹⁸ Grimes tells about a scene that he witnessed while in Savannah’s jail where an “athletic” and strong black man, who had been imprisoned, was forced to whip the other prisoners as hard as he could, lest he “take a severe flogging himself.”⁹⁹ This was psychologically damaging to both the whipped and the whipping slave.

With punishments and conditions such as these, enslaved people in Savannah were willing to do whatever was required of them to stay out of the city’s jail. However, despite their careful efforts, it was nearly impossible for enslaved men and women in Savannah to avoid coming face to face with the legal system in one form or another. Given the vast number of laws restricting the lives of enslaved workers, the threat of imprisonment from their masters, and the overwhelming urge to run away, there were too many ways in which a person of color could find themselves in the city’s jail. Richard C. Wade put it best when he compared life as a city slave to the “modern motorist,” explaining that “no matter how careful the slave might be” he or she was bound to run into trouble at some point.¹⁰⁰ Savannah’s legal system and the use of the city jail provided slaveowners with a means in which to control their enslaved workers. This publicly funded establishment played a vital part in preserving the institution of slavery in Savannah until the end of the American Civil War.

⁹⁸ Damian Alan Pargas, *Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 208.

⁹⁹ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 36.

¹⁰⁰ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 195.

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