

## “A VERY SERIOUS BUSINESS”: MANAGERIAL RELATIONSHIPS ON THE BALL PLANTATIONS, 1800-1835

Mark S. Schantz\*

Throughout the antebellum period, slaveholders carried on a spirited debate as to the ideal in plantation management.<sup>1</sup> Despite some differences, slaveholders agreed that plantation life ought to run smoothly. Agricultural periodicals even awarded prizes to planters who set forth model managerial philosophies. An Alabama essayist stressed the importance of a “regular and systematic plan of operation on the plantation.”<sup>2</sup> A Georgia contributor held that “all well regulated plantations will have a code of laws.”<sup>3</sup> Echoing Ecclesiastes, a Mississippi planter declared that “there shall be a place for everything and everything shall be kept in its place.”<sup>4</sup> Composed in the 1850s, these pronouncements articulate the culmination of decades of planter reflection on the model plantation.

\*A graduate student in history at Emory University, Atlanta, Mr. Schantz holds a B.A. in history from George Washington University and a Master of Divinity degree from Yale University.

<sup>1</sup>For a good summary of the literature on plantation management in the antebellum era see James O. Breeden, ed., *Advice Among Masters, The Ideal in Slave Management in the Old South* (Westport, Conn., 1980). An analysis of such literature is provided in James Oakes, *The Ruling Race, A History of American Slaveholders* (New York, 1983), pp. 153-91. An excellent treatment of how a single planter wrestled with management issues is Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South, A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge, 1982), pp. 105-34.

Modern scholars have perpetuated the debate on plantation management begun by the slaveholders themselves. Among a vast body of literature, important discussions include Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1918), pp. 261-91; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution, Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1956), pp. 34-85; and R. Keith Aufhauser, “Slavery and Scientific Management,” *Journal of Economic History* 33 (1973): 811-24. Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engermann, in *Time on the Cross, The Economics of Negro Slavery* (Boston, 1974), accord management issues a place of critical importance in their discussion of profitability; see esp. pp. 67-78, and pp. 204-09. Comprehensive critiques of Fogel and Engermann’s controversial analysis are Paul A. David and Peter Temin, *Reckoning With Slavery: A Critical Study in the Quantitative History of American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1976), esp. pp. 33-54; and Herbert G. Gutman, *Slavery and the Numbers Game, A Critique of Time on the Cross* (Urbana, 1975), pp. 14-88.

<sup>2</sup>“Management of Slaves,” *DeBow’s Review* 18 (1855): 718.

<sup>3</sup>Cited in Breeden, ed., *Advice Among Masters*, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup>“Rules and Regulations for the Government of a Southern Plantation,” *The Soil of the South* 1 (1851): 1.

Idealized visions of plantation order, however, were not easily translated into day-to-day reality. Fluctuations in weather and in the prices of crops could alter the most carefully constructed business strategy. Beyond these forces, a web of personal relationships shaped the nature and character of plantation life. More precisely, the triangle of relationships between master and overseer, overseer and slave, and master and slave, provided the framework within which notions of plantation order were put into practice. The highly personal nature of plantation life made it a "very serious business" indeed.<sup>5</sup>

This essay explores the triangle of managerial relationships on the Ball family plantations between roughly 1800 and 1835 and focuses on some rather obvious questions. How did John Ball, Jr., and Isaac Ball manage? What role did overseers play in mediating their masters' commands? How did slaves respond to masters and overseers? By probing these relationships, I hope to illuminate some of the complexities of plantation life. For it is, more than anything, the relational character of the plantation system that accounts for the gap between the managerial ideal and daily practice.

At first glance, the Balls' economic success suggests that their plantations were manifestations of the planter ideal. In 1698, the first Elias Ball founded Comingtee plantation at the fork of South Carolina's Cooper River, about twenty miles north of Charleston.<sup>6</sup> From this base, the family began to accumulate lands along the eastern branch of the river. Perhaps the most important of these acquisitions was Limerick, an estate purchased in 1764 from Daniel Huger III. By 1806, Limerick was worked by no less than 252 slaves and boasted its own rice mill.<sup>7</sup> In 1810, John Ball, Sr., and his brother Elias operated seven plantations (the additional holdings known as Kensington, Hyde Park, Midway, Quinby, and Jericho or Backriver) with a labor force of at

<sup>5</sup>John Ball, Jr., to Stephen Herren (overseer at Limerick plantation), May 25, 1831, Ball Family Papers, South Carolina Historical Society. The same phrase is also quoted in the title of this essay.

<sup>6</sup>For useful background information on the Ball family see Anne Simons Deas, *Recollections of the Ball Family of South Carolina and the Comingtee Plantation* (Charleston, 1978); Richard Beale Davis, "The Ball Papers, A Pattern of Life in the Low Country," this *Magazine* 65 (1964): 1-15; and William B. Lees, "The Historical Development of Limerick Plantation, A Tidewater Rice Plantation in Berkeley County, South Carolina, 1683-1945," this *Magazine* 82 (1981): 44-62. For a detailed analysis of the Ball family's slave population see Cheryll Ann Cody, "Slave Demography and Family Formation: A Community Study of the Ball Family Plantations, 1720-1896" (Ph.D. Diss., Univ. of Minn., 1982).

<sup>7</sup>Lees, "Historical Development of Limerick Plantation," p. 53; see also "List of slaves on Limerick November 1806," Ball Family Papers.

least 625 slaves.<sup>8</sup> By the mid-1820s, John Ball, Jr., owned 528 slaves, while his brother Isaac held 571.<sup>9</sup> Even by the opulent standards of the Charleston and Georgetown districts, the Balls were extraordinarily wealthy planters.<sup>10</sup>

Economic success paradoxically accentuated managerial problems. As the family's holdings in land and slaves increased, careful provisions had to be made for the orderly transfer of property from one generation to the next. Such transitions were difficult. Sons, accustomed to the commands of their fathers, often assumed their plantation duties with reticence.<sup>11</sup> John Ball, Sr., was acutely aware of the necessity of training his sons to be planters. Having assumed responsibility for the Kensington plantation at the age of sixteen, he devoted relentless energy to preparing his sons for their managerial duties.<sup>12</sup> By his death in 1817, both Isaac and John, Jr., possessed considerable experience as planters.

The younger of the two sons, Isaac Ball, handled some plantation business as early as the summer of 1802.<sup>13</sup> By October of the following year, an English business acquaintance observed that Isaac was "Imperator" at Midway plantation and anticipated word that he would

<sup>8</sup>The manuscript federal census schedules for 1810 list John Ball, Sr., as owner of 432 slaves. This figure, however, probably does not include the slaves owned by Elias Ball at Limerick. The Ball Family Papers reveal a total of 283 at Limerick in 1809, but show John Ball, Sr., as holding 342 slaves. Accepting the family papers at face value would yield a total of 625 slaves held between the brothers in 1809. If the 1810 census figure for John Ball, Sr., is correct, however, the brothers may have owned as many as 715 slaves. Cody's figure for the total Ball slave population in 1810 is 718. ("Slave Demography and Family Formation," table 1.4, p. 56). For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen the more conservative estimate of the Ball slave population.

<sup>9</sup>Tax returns for John Ball, 1819-1825, and tax return for Isaac Ball, 1824, in Ball Family Papers.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside, A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana, Ill., 1984), p. 19. For a comment on the Ball family wealth, see William W. Freehling, *Prelude to the Civil War, The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836* (New York, 1965), p. 29, n. 10. Although debate endures on the profitability of slavery in general, it seems safe to conclude that large rice plantations brought their masters impressive incomes. See here particularly Dale Swan, *The Structure and Profitability of the Antebellum Rice Industry 1859* (New York, 1975).

<sup>11</sup>For a more comprehensive analysis of father and son relationships see Michael P. Johnson, "Planters and Patriarchy: Charleston, 1800-1860," *Journal of Southern History* 46 (1980): 45-72.

<sup>12</sup>Deas, *Ball Family*, p. 128. John Ball, Sr., did have a third son, William James, who attended medical school in Edinburgh and died in 1808. See Davis, "Ball Papers," p. 2.

<sup>13</sup>Keating Simons to Isaac Ball, July 9, 1802, Ball Family Papers.

soon be “invested with the supreme command at Limerick.”<sup>14</sup> During the winter of 1805, John Ball, Sr., entrusted Isaac with hiring an overseer for the upcoming season at Midway.<sup>15</sup> By November, 1812, Isaac had taken on the additional responsibility of managing his relative John Moultrie’s estate in the Georgetown District. No small task, the Moultrie plantation was comprised of 339 acres of prime rice fields worked by 119 slaves.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike his younger brother, Isaac, who seems to have entered directly into plantation affairs, John Ball, Jr., completed a degree at Harvard College before returning to South Carolina. Although he entered Harvard in 1797 with notions of a church career, his father clearly had other plans for the future.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, John Ball, Sr.’s, letters to his son in Massachusetts comprise an informal, but extended, course in plantation management. From the outset, his father maintained that “a Knowledge of mankind is at least as useful, if not more so than a Knowledge of Books.”<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the elder Ball warmly encouraged courses on anatomy. After all, a planter’s knowledge of medicine might “afford some assistance to negroes until he can procure better aid.”<sup>19</sup> Although declaring that “our first charitable intentions are due to our slaves,” he warned of “the impropriety of too much indulgence to slaves.”<sup>20</sup> Such indulgence, wrote the senior Ball, had resulted in the murder of one slave by another on a neighboring plantation.<sup>21</sup> Lessons on overseers, too, formed part of the corpus of John Ball, Jr.’s, instruction. Lamenting the scarcity of good help, his father had confided that “I have not an overseer that is intrinsically worth the hominy he eats.”<sup>22</sup> Yet, competent overseers were vital to the functioning of the plantation. Without them, “the whole planning and executing business of my plantations desolves on myself, by which I mean I am almost fretted out of my life.”<sup>23</sup> Above all, however, John

<sup>14</sup>Benjamin Slade to Isaac Ball, Oct. 2, 1803, Ball Papers, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, (cited as Ball Papers to distinguish them from the South Carolina Historical Society collection).

<sup>15</sup>William James Ball to Isaac Ball, Jan. 25, 1805, Ball Papers.

<sup>16</sup>Charles Simpson to Isaac Ball, Nov. 5, 1813, Ball Papers. Tax return for John Moultrie, Georgetown District, 1816, South Caroliniana Library. The return shows Moultrie was taxed on: “119 Negroes, 339 acres of Tide Swamp on PeeDee, 880 acres of Pine land adjoining.”

<sup>17</sup>John Ball, Sr., to John Ball, Jr., Jan. 7, 1802, Ball Family Papers.

<sup>18</sup>John Ball, Sr., to John Ball, Jr., Sept. 24, 1799, *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>John Ball, Sr., to John Ball, Jr., Oct. 21, 1801, *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>John Ball, Sr., to John Ball, Jr., Oct. 8, 1801, May 22, 1801, *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>John Ball, Sr., to John Ball, Jr., May 22, 1801, *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>John Ball, Sr., to John Ball, Jr., May 5, 1800, *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>John Ball, Sr., to John Ball, Jr., May 5, 1800, *ibid.*

Ball, Sr., urged his son to remember that "by economy and good management you may enjoy the good things of this world."<sup>24</sup>

The precise moment at which John Ball, Jr., attempted to put his father's advice into practice is difficult to determine. By 1813 he was managing the plantation at Backriver, hiring the overseer John E. Moreton.<sup>25</sup> On the scale of the other Ball holdings, Backriver was a modest estate consisting of 200 acres of improved rice land worked by 78 slaves.<sup>26</sup> Within two years, John Ball, Jr.'s, duties had grown to include the original family estate at Comingtee. In 1815, he was negotiating with overseer James Wallace to "take charge of my planting interest at Comingtee, Stoke, and Backriver."<sup>27</sup> Such a scope of activity may have reflected John Ball Sr.'s, confidence in his son's ability. Moreover, the scholarly younger Ball understood the role for which he was being groomed. In 1813, he referred to himself as the "employer" in the overseer agreement with Moreton.<sup>28</sup> After his father's death, John Ball, Jr., described himself differently: in the 1818 overseer agreement with Arthur M. McFarlane, he was now clearly a "Planter."<sup>29</sup>

With a remarkable degree of success, then, John Ball, Sr., had orchestrated the tricky business of preparing his sons for plantation management. Even the market place seemed to support his efforts. Between 1812 and 1818 rice prices increased steadily in Charleston, reaching an antebellum high of seven cents per pound in 1818.<sup>30</sup> As John Ball, Jr., and Isaac Ball inherited land and slaves of their own, prospects for the future prosperity of the family estates appeared secure.

Yet not even an orderly transition of power, high prices, and sound business philosophy could ensure the continuing success of the Ball plantations.<sup>31</sup> Rice planting was a risky enterprise which required the

<sup>24</sup>John Ball, Sr., to John Ball, Jr., Oct. 8, 1801, *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>Overseer Contract, Jan. 18, 1813, *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>"List of Lands and negroes owned by John Ball Jun. in Parish of St. James' Goose Creek . . ." April 1, 1815, *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>John Ball, Jr., to James Wallace, Sept. 18, 1815, Ball Papers.

<sup>28</sup>Overseer Contract, Jan. 18, 1813, Ball Family Papers.

<sup>29</sup>Overseer Contract, Feb. 18, 1818, *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup>Alfred Glaze Smith, Jr., *Economic Readjustment of an Old Cotton State, South Carolina, 1820-1860* (Columbia, 1958), pp. 224-27. See also Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern States to 1860* (2 vols., Washington, 1933), 2:1030.

<sup>31</sup>An orderly transition of power within the planter elite could bring about considerable disruption within the slave community itself. The legal settlement of John Ball, Sr.'s, estate in February, 1819, resulted in the sale of some 366 of the family's slaves. Although John, Jr., and Isaac were major purchasers, the settlement brought about a large scale reorganization in the Ball family's slave labor force. For more details see Cody, "Slave Demography and Family Formation," pp. 349-57.

year round attention of the planter.<sup>32</sup> As J. Motte Alston, a Georgetown rice planter, recalled, "cultivation is an expensive one, and therefore mistakes are very serious."<sup>33</sup> Although the goal of planters—to produce the largest amount of high quality rice as possible—was relatively clear, the methods employed to reach the desired end were complex. At the center of these complexities stood a series of personal relationships—master and overseer, overseer and slave, master and slave — upon which plantation life depended.

Despite Eugene Genovese's contention that "a particularly respected class of overseers" operated on the South Carolina coast, the Balls were plagued by difficulties in retaining competent managers.<sup>34</sup> As Isaac Ball learned in 1805, "Sobriety, Honesty, and Industry" were "very rare qualities among the common run of Overseers."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, as the size of the Ball land holdings and slave population increased,

<sup>32</sup>Rice fields were prepared for cultivation in February and March. Before planting seed, the land was hoed and dikes and irrigation canals were repaired from the previous season's wear and tear. Seed was normally planted during the end of March and early April. During the growing season, from April to August, the fields were repeatedly flooded and drained to protect the rice from birds and the encroachment of weeds. The timing involved in flooding and draining was crucial to the health of the crop. During this procedure, "volunteer rice" (spotted by its red grains) had to be carefully removed from the fields. Even a small portion of this inferior rice could damage the overall value of the crop. Harvesting began in August and stretched through the early weeks of September. Accomplished by slaves using only rice hooks, harvest time was a period of frenzied activity. See overseer Thomas Finklea's letters to John Ball, Jr., Aug. 2, 9, 13, 16, 28, Sept. 6, 13, 1833, Ball Family Papers. Once removed from the fields, the rice was pounded, milled, and put into barrels for shipment to Charleston between September and March. See, for example, 14 bills of sale from Isaac Ball's plantations, 1821-22, Ball Papers. By then, however, attention had to be focused on the next season's work.

I have relied heavily on the following sources for descriptions of rice planting: Gray, *History of Agriculture*, 2:726-30; Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*, pp. 41-89; Arney R. Childs, ed., *Rice Planter and Sportsman, The Recollections of J. Motte Alston, 1821-1909* (Columbia, 1953), pp. 41-47; J.H. Easterby, ed., *The South Carolina Rice Plantation, As Revealed in the Papers of Robert F.W. Allston* (Chicago, 1945); and James M. Clifton, ed., *Life and Labor on Argyle Island, Letters and Documents of a Savannah River Rice Plantation, 1833-1867* (Savannah, 1978). On the role Africans played in teaching Europeans the techniques of rice growing see also Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves, Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Baton Rouge, 1981), pp. 74-114; and Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority, Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 Through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974), pp. 35-62.

<sup>33</sup>Childs, ed., *Rice Planter and Sportsman*, p. 44.

<sup>34</sup>Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll, The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1976), p. 12. For a similar comment on South Carolina's overseers see William Kauffman Scarborough, *The Overseer, Plantation Management in the Old South* (Athens, Ga., 1984), p. 56.

<sup>35</sup>William James Ball to Isaac Ball, Jan. 25, 1805, Ball Papers.

the overseer problem became more pronounced. In attempting to solve one labor problem, the control of slaves, John Ball, Jr., and Isaac Ball stumbled into another dilemma. How does a planter control his managers? Rather than freeing the Balls from the problems of day-to-day plantation life, troublesome overseers drew them into countless managerial decisions.

In broad terms, the Ball planters attempted to deal with overseers by outlining their privileges and duties in the form of written contracts. Eight overseer agreements, dating from 1813 to 1825, indicate that John, Jr., and Isaac made efforts toward standardizing the obligations of their managers.<sup>36</sup> Although differing in particulars, such as yearly salary, the overseer contracts are remarkably similar. The initial article normally stated the wages of the overseer and indicated the specific plantation on which he was to serve.<sup>37</sup> Stipulations then followed which detailed the overseer's privileges: rights to livestock, provisioning of the horses, a "wench" to perform cooking duties, and rights to a certain portion of the plantation foodstuffs. The final article normally stated that the planter could discharge the overseer "at any time" he thought the latter's conduct "deserving of such treatment."<sup>38</sup>

Subtle changes in the contracts themselves provide clues as to some of the difficulties encountered in managing overseers. The

<sup>36</sup>The contracts discussed here are:

1813, agreement between John Ball, Jr., and John E. Moreton, Ball Family Papers; 1814, agreement between Isaac Ball and Hugh McCauley, Ball Papers; 1817, agreement between Isaac Ball and James Hales, *ibid*; 1818, agreement between Isaac Ball and William White, *ibid*; 1818, agreement between John Ball, Jr., and Arthur McFarlane, Ball Family Papers; 1820, agreement between Isaac Ball and Benjamin Aims, Ball Papers; 1821, agreement between Isaac Ball and Daniel Pipkin, *ibid*; 1825, agreement between Isaac Ball and John Cox, *ibid*.

<sup>37</sup>The yearly salary of Ball overseers ranged between Moreton's \$220 and Hugh McCauley's \$600. Scarborough's analysis reveals that "peak salaries were commanded by managers of the large rice and sugar estates of South Carolina and Louisiana." *The Overseer*, p. 29. By the 1820s overseers in these regions were paid between \$500 and \$700 per year for operating plantations with fewer than one hundred slaves. Such rates suggest that the Balls were not exceedingly generous employers. Recent research on the Georgia coast, however, has shown overseers' wages to average \$283.40 for the period 1844 to 1853. See John Solomon Otto, *Canon's Point Plantation, 1794-1860, Living Conditions and Status Patterns in the Old South* (New York, 1984), p. 98. On the Manigault plantations at Gowrie, overseer salaries ranged between \$300 and \$500 for the period 1833 to 1839. Clifton, ed., *Life and Labor on Argyle Island*, p. 1. These later statistics indicate that the Balls at least conformed to community practice with regard to overseer salaries. Thus, the problems the family experienced with its overseers cannot be reduced to fiscal frugality.

<sup>38</sup>1818 agreement between John Ball, Jr., and Arthur McFarlane, article 6, Ball Family Papers.

earliest agreement, between John Ball, Jr., and John E. Moreton, curiously provided no rules pertaining to the treatment of slaves.<sup>39</sup> Moreton's employment, however, was extraordinarily brief. Within a month he was sent packing, along with three months' severance pay and John Ball's comment that even that "was more than he deserved."<sup>40</sup> An 1818 agreement on the same plantation suggests the reason for Moreton's short tenure. Here, John Ball, Jr., specifically included the provision that Arthur McFarlane was to care for sick "negroes," treat all slaves with "moderation and humanity," and was "on no occasion to beat them with sticks."<sup>41</sup> It may also be significant that after 1818, Isaac Ball added regulations in his agreements calling for "humanity" in the treatment of slaves.<sup>42</sup> So, the Balls' outlines for plantation conduct changed to meet concrete conditions of slavery.

Psychologically, the overseer could function to insulate planters from the harsh discipline carried out in the fields. Yet, even here the day-to-day reality was often different. As one contributor to *DeBows' Review* argued, "Let the master recollect, too, that he cannot relieve himself from the odium of cruel treatment to his slaves by attempting to throw the odium on his overseer."<sup>43</sup> In fact, on the Ball plantations, it was the issue of slave treatment which frustrated planter efforts to delegate managerial responsibility. The correspondence of the Ball overseers during this period is rife with requests for instructions regarding the treatment of slaves in specific situations.

Upon assuming his duties as overseer on PeeDee plantation (the estate of John Moultrie), Hugh McCauley wrote to Isaac Ball requesting a meeting. Perhaps the most capable of Ball's overseers, it was McCauley's policy "to see the employer some short time after I am settled on a new place that we can fix plans we wish to persue."<sup>44</sup> On McCauley's agenda was a proposal to change drivers on the plantation.

<sup>39</sup>In general, overseer contracts included rules governing slave management. For example, see South Carolina rice planter Plowden C.J. Weston's model agreement in John Spencer Bassett, *The Southern Plantation Overseer, As Revealed in His Letters* (Northampton, Mass., 1925), p. 24ff. See also Scarborough, *The Overseer*, pp. 67-101. The most encyclopedic list of overseer rules can probably be found in James Henry Hammond's contract which listed some 29 discrete duties; see Willie Lee Rose, *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America* (New York, 1976), pp. 345-54.

<sup>40</sup>Quoted in Scarborough, *The Overseer*, p. 114.

<sup>41</sup>1818 agreement between John Ball, Jr., and Arthur McFarlane, article 5, Ball Family Papers.

<sup>42</sup>See especially:

1820, agreement between Isaac Ball and Benjamin Aims, article 4, Ball Papers, and 1821, agreement between Isaac Ball and Daniel Pipkins, article 4, *ibid*.

<sup>43</sup>"Management of Slaves," *DeBow's Review* 18 (1855): 716.

<sup>44</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, April 25, 1814, Ball Papers.



The current driver, Jacob, McCauley found to be "a grate Rascal in the first place," and that "truth of the business is he carries no authority and by that cause he can have nothing done only what pleases the negroes."<sup>45</sup> Yet, McCauley's plan to replace Jacob with "Old Tarter" required Ball's approval. Even a skilled overseer did not relieve Isaac Ball from making decisions regarding individual slaves.

Within two months, Isaac Ball was recalled to PeeDee under more stressful circumstances. An outbreak of "pretended Religion" among the slaves impinged upon the routine of labor on the plantation.<sup>46</sup> Ball's presence was required to put an end to the unrest. Later, McCauley wrote to Ball that, "I can with propriety say since you left us things has gon on much to my satisfaction all those strifes and contentions have dyed away and we all seem to live in peace and quietness."<sup>47</sup> Peace, however, proved temporary. Throughout the summer and fall of 1814, McCauley wrote to Ball of the runaway man "Cork," slave complaints about diet, and the procedures to be used to ready rice for the market.<sup>48</sup> With the onset of the new planting season in the spring of 1815, slave unrest surfaced again. McCauley did not chronicle specifics when he wrote to Ball of "violent cases" which demanded the planter's presence.<sup>49</sup> But again, Isaac Ball's intervention proved successful. "I have had no tryals since you left me," wrote a relieved McCauley, "the negroes those too that we had in hand when you was up have behaved well."<sup>50</sup>

In the fall of 1815, however, it was McCauley and not rebellious slaves who called for decisive action on the part of Isaac Ball. On November 16, the overseer sent a letter of resignation to his employer. "Circumstances," he explained, "have put it out of my power to remain another year on the Moultrie plantation."<sup>51</sup> Particular "circumstances" were not cited, however. To the contrary, McCauley maintained that "as I leave have not with me the smallest discontent whatsoever and shall carry with me best wishes for the prosperity of the plantation."<sup>52</sup> Despite episodes of slave discontent, McCauley had been a competent overseer, whom Ball could scarcely afford to lose. Although no record of a conversation exists, evidence suggests that Isaac Ball visited

<sup>45</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, April 25, 1814, *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, June 2, 1814, *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, June 2, 1814, *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, July 5, Aug. 3, Oct. 20, 1814, *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, May 31, 1815, *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, May 31, 1815, *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, Nov. 16, 1815, *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, Nov. 16, 1815, *ibid.*

PeeDee and induced McCauley to remain in his employ. Four days after he sent his letter of resignation, McCauley wrote to Ball that “on due Reflection I have again altared my mind” and “will Retrace my steps and stay where I am.”<sup>53</sup> McCauley remained in Ball’s service until early 1817, when he died of fever. Even while ill, he supervised the repair of “brakes in our banks” caused by heavy rains.<sup>54</sup> Such efforts earned McCauley Ball’s respect. Upon the overseer’s death, Ball wrote to Moultrie that it was “a great loss to your plantation as such Overseers are not often to be met with.”<sup>55</sup>

John Ball, Jr., does not appear to have shared his brother’s good fortune in hiring an employee of such high caliber. John E. Moreton’s tenure as an overseer was approximately one month. In 1819, John Ball terminated another overseer’s employment. Damning the overseer with faint praise, Ball composed a letter of “recommendation” for his former employee.

The bearer Mr. John Cox has been in my service for the space of five years; during which time he has behaved as well as most Overseers; but found he was inadequate to the whole of my business.<sup>56</sup>

The average length of employment for overseers on the South Carolina coast, however, was slightly more than three and one half years.<sup>57</sup> Hence, Cox’s service with Ball exceeded considerably community norms. What Cox had done to deserve dismissal is not clear. Ironically, he was retained by Isaac Ball in 1825 to preside over the plantation at Limerick.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps the fact that Cox was at least a known quantity made him a more attractive candidate for Isaac than other competitors for the position. From the planter’s perspective, reliable overseers were rare indeed.

When John Ball, Jr., visited Quinby in the winter of 1826, his overseer was not even on the plantation.<sup>59</sup> An overseer’s absence from the fields was an extremely serious offense, which some planters prohibited explicitly in their contracts.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the overseer’s princi-

<sup>53</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, Nov. 20, 1815, *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, Oct. 5, 1816, *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>Isaac Ball to John Moultrie, undated letter, *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup>Copy of letter to Mr. John Cox from John Ball, Jr., Dec. 14, 1819, *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup>Scarborough, *The Overseer*, p. 39.

<sup>58</sup>Agreement between Isaac Ball and John Cox, Feb. 19, 1825, Ball Papers.

<sup>59</sup>John Ball, Jr., to Tyson Pipkin, Dec. 20, 1826, Ball Family Papers.

<sup>60</sup>See for example James Henry Hammond’s model contract, articles two and three, which held: 2. “The Overseer will never be expected to work in the fields, but he must always be with the hands when not otherwise engaged in the Employer’s business, . . .” and 3. “The Overseer must never be absent a single night nor an entire day, without permission previously obtained.” See Rose, ed., *Documentary History of Slavery*, p. 346.

pal responsibility was to direct the daily work of the slave force. Without supervision, plantation order could rapidly degenerate into chaos.

In May 1831, John Ball, Jr., visited overseer Stephen Herren at Limerick plantation to “put into execution the arrangement I had expected of dividing the hands and having two drivers.”<sup>61</sup> Herren, however, was absent from the plantation. In a scalding letter, Ball informed Herren that he was “not a little suprised and displeased” at the situation he discovered. Rice planting had not been completed (a critical situation by the end of May), and fences to protect the crops were in disrepair. Moreover, Ball learned that he had been deceived. “I found you had old Simon at work in your yard, when you told me he was in the field.”<sup>62</sup> Incredibly, Herren was not fired on the spot. Perhaps good overseers were in especially short supply during the planting season. Regardless of the reason for Herren’s absence, it is clear that his actions complicated, rather than simplified, John Ball’s managerial duties. Indeed, overseers were as difficult to control as the slaves themselves.

Like his brother, John Ball, Jr., was also required to respond to overseer requests regarding the treatment of slaves. In the spring of 1830, William A. Turner, at Quinby plantation, wrote a panicky letter to his employer.<sup>63</sup> In unusually shaky handwriting, he related the following tale. In attempting to punish a slave by placing her in “medlongs clauset,” his efforts were interdicted by four field hands who appeared in the barn. The hands removed the female slave from the barn “by violents” and “sayed they would dye before she should go in the clauset.”<sup>64</sup> Open defiance of his authority left Turner at a loss as to how to proceed. “I beg the favour of you to come to Quinby tomorrow evening,” he wrote, “and help me put them to rites.”<sup>65</sup> Perhaps wishing to assure Ball of his good intentions, Turner added, “when you come I wish you to tell me where in I am to blame.”<sup>66</sup>

Although remarkable in many respects, the Turner incident illustrates the extremely vulnerable position of the overseer on a large rice plantation. Lacking the planter’s authority and clearly outnumbered, overseers were nonetheless expected to maintain plantation

<sup>61</sup>John Ball, Jr., to Stephen Herren, May 25, 1831, Ball Family Papers.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>William A. Turner to John Ball, Jr., March 28, 1830, *ibid.*

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

order.<sup>67</sup> Such expectations proved unrealistic. As a result, in potentially explosive situations, overseers had to rely on planters to reinforce their position. In a vicious circle, then, the Balls attempted to delegate authority for slave treatment, and in turn were called upon to bolster the lesser authority of their managers.

In sum, rather than freeing them from responsibility, overseers presented Isaac and John Ball, Jr., with a new set of problems. The incompetence and cruelty of some overseers, the death of a good overseer, and episodic slave resistance all combined to enmesh the Balls in the daily operations of their plantations. At the center of this cluster of problems stood the issue of authority. Planters, after all, could only invest their overseers with limited authority. At the same time, the curtailed authority of the overseer ensured the continuing involvement of the planter in managerial affairs. Yet, despite their shallow authority, incompetence, and occasional cruelty, overseers were essential to the maintenance of the Ball plantations. Indeed, one may speculate here as to why the Balls' comments on overseers have such a sharp edge. Perhaps the function of the overseer served to remind the Balls (and other planters) of a reality they might otherwise have chosen to forget: that even mastery was contingent on the will of others.

According to the terms of their contracts, the Ball overseers were to treat slaves with "moderation and humanity."<sup>68</sup> Although the precise wording varied, this injunction was typical of overseer agreements made on South Carolina's rice coast.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the Ball overseers distributed blankets to the slaves (generally every three years), took measurements for new shoes, and provided lumber for the construction of slave cabins.<sup>70</sup> Such behavior might suggest that the typical Ball overseer lived up to the ideal, as expressed in Plowden C.J. Weston's contract, "that his first object is to be, under all circumstances, the care and well being of the negroes."<sup>71</sup>

<sup>67</sup>For a probing analysis of the ambiguous status of the overseer in general see Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 7-25; and Scarborough, *The Overseer*, pp. 3-19.

<sup>68</sup>See, for example, 1818 agreement between John Ball, Jr., and Arthur McFarlane, article 5, Ball Family Papers, and other previously cited Ball contracts.

<sup>69</sup>See Plowden C.J. Weston's model contract in Bassett, *The Plantation Overseer*, p. 24; Charles Manigault's contract in Clifton, ed., *Life and Labor on Argyle Island*, pp. 135-37; and an 1822 contract in the Allston papers, Easterby, ed., *The South Carolina Rice Plantation*, p. 245.

<sup>70</sup>See "Blanket Books," Ball Family Papers, and James Hales to Isaac Ball, Oct. 13, 1817, and Hugh McCauley to Isaac Ball, July 29, 1814, both in Ball Papers.

<sup>71</sup>Weston agreement in Bassett, *The Plantation Overseer*, p. 24.

In practice, however, the Ball overseers carried out their duties with a less than charitable spirit. As Thomas Finklea, overseer at Stoke plantation summed up, "I trust no negro there is none but will Lie and steal."<sup>72</sup> When overseers expressed concern over slave health, it was generally because widespread illness slowed the harvest.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, as John E. Moreton's dismissal and the Turner incident suggest, the Ball overseers were quick to resort to the beating and confinement of slaves in order to carry out their obligations. The disparity between the maxim of "moderation and humanity" and the routine of the rice fields was very great indeed.

Slaves responded to overseer brutality along a continuum which embraced sabotage, running away, and open confrontation with the overseers themselves. The dynamic of overseer brutality and slave resistance was cyclical in nature. For example, a slave fearing punishment might take to "the woods" as a means of avoiding the beating.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, the very act of leaving the plantation would render slaves open to punishment upon their return. Equipment might be damaged on the plantation as a response to perceived overwork. Yet, acts of sabotage were liable to be met with retaliation.<sup>75</sup> In many cases, then, it is difficult to ascertain whether slave resistance provoked punishment or if overseer brutality sparked resistance.

Acts of sabotage represented the most subtle form of slave resistance. Sometimes those actions appear to have been taken against the overseer personally. Hugh McCauley discovered that the plantation storehouse had been vandalized, including "some small articles of mine."<sup>76</sup> On another occasion, the destruction of equipment seems to have been related to the rigors of the rice harvest. On September 6, 1817, possibly at the height of the harvest season, overseer James Hales found "on Examining the Negroes Rice hooks that there is a bout a Dosen with out hooks."<sup>77</sup> Hales went on to detail "the Misfortune of Loosing the Grindstone of the plantation," which the slaves had "by Some Means or an other have let it git Stolen."<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the widespread destruction of plantation equipment made it virtually impossible for Hales to identify an individual culprit.

<sup>72</sup>Finklea to John Ball, Jr., March 8, 1832, Ball Family Papers.

<sup>73</sup>See Finklea's letters to John Ball, Jr., Aug. 2, 9, 13, 16, 28, 1833, *ibid*.

<sup>74</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, Aug. 26, 1814, Ball Papers. See also Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 649; Wood, *Black Majority*, p. 247.

<sup>75</sup>Finklea to John Ball, Jr., Oct. 26, 1827, Ball Family Papers.

<sup>76</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, Aug. 26, 1814, Ball Papers.

<sup>77</sup>Hales to Isaac Ball, Sept. 6, 1817, *ibid*.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid*.

Killing plantation livestock, however, was a more dangerous form of slave resistance. On a Monday morning in October, 1827, Thomas Finklea discovered that "sum person" on the plantation had been "cilling sheep."<sup>79</sup> The overseer then searched the slave cabins and garden plots for evidence. Upon finding bones in one of the slave gardens, Finklea "took young Daniel and had him flogged he confest he ciled a sheep."<sup>80</sup> Despite the beating, Daniel refused to identify other slaves who might have assisted him in the killing. In order to obtain a more detailed confession, the overseer reported to John Ball that he "had Daniel in limbo since monday morning and have him floged day and night to make him tell hue assisted in the butchery."<sup>81</sup> More than matching the overseer's conviction, however, Daniel remained silent. Daniel's refusal to implicate others in the "butchery" suggests the depth of commitment some slaves felt to their community.

Not all slaves shared Daniel's sense of community interest. The slave Sipion actually reported to Finklea that he "had missed one of the calves."<sup>82</sup> With Sipion's help, Finklea located two of the calves' feet in Jerry's garden. Jerry's punishment, a "switching" followed by a period of confinement, was similar to that given to young Daniel.<sup>83</sup> Significantly, Finklea planned to "confine him for som time of Sundays, put him up of Saturday nights and so let him out monday mornings."<sup>84</sup> If the slaves gathered for any sort of amusement on Saturday night or religious purpose Sunday, Jerry was to be excluded. In this way, perhaps, overseers may have attempted to undercut solidarity in the slave community. Thus, the two incidents taken together suggest the conflict of interest within the community itself. Even under systematic beating, Daniel did not give Finklea the information he wanted. Sipion, on the other hand, led Finklea directly to Jerry. The responses of individual slaves, then, varied greatly in remarkably similar circumstances.

Polarities of interest in the slave community are also indicated within the act of running away. In some cases, slaves attempted to run away together or to join others who had gone to the woods. In late August, 1814, "Old Tarter" and "Sambo the fisherman" ran away from Hugh McCauley's PeeDee plantation.<sup>85</sup> Old Tarter had been complain-

<sup>79</sup>Finklea to John Ball, Jr., Oct. 26, 1827, Ball Family Papers.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

<sup>82</sup>Finklea to John Ball, Jr., March 8, 1832, *ibid.*

<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid.

<sup>85</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, Aug. 26, 1814, Ball Papers.

ing of a "lame hand," but a physical examination revealed no injury. McCauley "ordered the Driver to put him back to work and if he did not do it to flog him."<sup>86</sup> Rather than face a flogging, Old Tarter removed himself from the plantation. The two slaves remained absent for nearly two months. In mid-October, McCauley noted that "Tarter hus cum home and at work his hand is quite well."<sup>87</sup> Sambo, too, returned, but for a brief moment. McCauley sarcastically remarked to Sambo that "he best go back from whence he came for he was only an expense if he did not earn the corn he eate."<sup>88</sup> Sambo took McCauley quite seriously. He ran away again.

As Sambo's return to the woods demonstrates, some slaves ran away alone. In August 1817, the slave Lonnon "Tuck him Self of the plantation with out provocation what Ever."<sup>89</sup> The overseer, James Hales, suspected that "he tried to git Some of the others to go with him and that Every Negro New Perfectly well that he was going a way."<sup>90</sup> Without leaving the plantation, then, slaves could support the action of a runaway. To remedy the problem, Hales proposed to "offer a Reward for him as it Might Induce Some of the nigers to take him."<sup>91</sup> Thus, the overseer probed the contours of community and self interest. Conveniently, Lonnon remained in the woods until the harvest had been completed. On October 13, McCauley reported to Isaac Ball that Lonnon had been captured near Georgetown "with a pausel of Runaway negroes that had been out for some time."<sup>92</sup> Indeed, runaways themselves sometimes established communities in the woods, beyond the reach of overseers and masters.

Not all slaves, of course, supported the actions of runaways. Some, perhaps responding to Hales' proposed system of "Rewards," even worked with overseers in tracking down their missing co-workers. Upon hearing that a group of runaways might be in the neighborhood, Thomas Finklea organized a patrol. Informed that the runaways were armed with "baonets and one or two guns," Finklea took armed slaves with him on the search.<sup>93</sup> Ironically, slaves prepared for an armed showdown with one another, supervised by the overseer. The ensuing confrontation was brief but violent. "Ned shot the fellow as I had

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

<sup>87</sup>McCauley to Isaac Ball, Oct. 13, 1814, *ibid.*

<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

<sup>89</sup>Hales to Isaac Ball, Aug. 10, 1817, *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

<sup>92</sup>Hales to Isaac Ball, Oct. 13, 1817, *ibid.*

<sup>93</sup>Finklea to John Ball, Jr., July 26, 1833, Ball Family Papers.

ordered,” wrote Finklea, “for the runaway would not stand but resisted and tried to cill Sipicio with a sword.”<sup>94</sup> Although Ned shot the runaway, he evidently did not shoot to kill. Finklea reported that the runaway “calls himself Morris” and “has bin out 4 months.”<sup>95</sup> Finklea concluded his account of the capture by expressing “hope there may be a good Reward offered for those Runaways.”<sup>96</sup> Whether Finklea intended to divide the reward with the slaves on the patrol is not entirely clear. Regardless of the money involved, the incident illustrates the extent to which slaves could be induced to cooperate with overseers in suppressing the rebellious activities of other slaves.

Although the Balls experienced continuing problems with runaways, in some rare instances slaves openly defied their overseers in the fields. In October 1827, overseer John Page at Quinby had to cope with the challenge of a work slowdown. According to Page, a gang of “six or seven” slaves was “standing still” in the fields.<sup>97</sup> Page commanded the driver to put them back to work. The slaves did not respond. As Page advanced on the group of idle slaves, one of the hands, Gibby, threatened openly to “go in the woods.”<sup>98</sup> Apparently Page’s harsh language provoked Gibby’s response. Not recording his own comments, Page wrote to John Ball, “it seems he don’t want to be spoken to, he says again he could take a thousand lashes from his master but no body else.”<sup>99</sup> Gibby appealed directly to his master, bypassing the authority of the overseer. Sensing the limits of his power, Page did not punish Gibby, claiming that the slave was usually “a good hand in the field.”<sup>100</sup> Page may also have feared that he had been pushing the slaves too hard and a visit from the planter might confirm his error. As a result, Page tried to focus Ball’s attention on Gibby’s threat to run away. Not mentioning how the incident was resolved, Page wrote, “I don’t think he aught to talk as he did about going in the woods.”<sup>101</sup> Within the context of the same episode, then, overseer and slave appealed to the master to legitimate their behavior.

In sum, overseers and slaves worked out their relationships within certain sets of limitations. Overseers were confined not only by their limited authority, but by the conflict of interests within the slave

<sup>94</sup>Finklea to John Ball, Jr., July 26, 1833, *ibid.*

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup>Page to John Ball, Jr., Oct. 18, 1827, *ibid.*

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*



community itself. By isolating and interrogating slaves on the one hand and simultaneously offering positive incentives (such as rewards for capturing runaways), overseers tested the boundaries of community interest. After all, overseers were dependent not only on the will of the master, but also on the cooperation of members within the slave community. In turn, slaves' responses to overseers were conditioned by the conflict between community interest and self interest. Young Daniel and Gibby resisted the overseers, while the behavior of Sipion and Ned suggests that other slaves (perhaps motivated by a system of rewards) acted in concert with them. Cooperation should not be viewed simply as a means by which slaves betrayed other members of their communities. For slaves, too, were dependent on overseers for blankets, shoes, medical attention, rations, and shelter. Perhaps within the cycle of resistance and punishment, overseers and slaves were trapped not only by their mutual antagonism, but by their mutual dependence as well.

Given the "wilfulness" of their slaves, fear would not have been an unreasonable response on the part of the Ball planters.<sup>102</sup> Even in 1810, the slave population in the Charleston District outnumbered the white population by a ratio of ten to one.<sup>103</sup> Beyond demographics, slaves on the South Carolina coast possessed a tradition which included acts of violence. In 1724, Jemmy, a slave owned by Captain Elias Ball, was sentenced to death "for striking and wounding one Andrew Songster."<sup>104</sup> The Stono Rebellion of 1739, which resulted in the deaths of some sixty people, further reminded whites of their vulnerable position.<sup>105</sup> While John, Jr., was a student at Harvard, John Ball, Sr., wrote that "your Aunt Waring's Alick did cruelly murder your cousin Polly Smith's carpenter fellow John—for which he has been tried, condemned and Executed."<sup>106</sup> Before his death, Alick "confessed" to making three attempts to poison Aunt Waring herself.<sup>107</sup> Although blaming this in part on Aunt Waring's "indulgence to slaves," John Ball, Sr., believed that "many others have richly merited the gallows, but their misdeeds were not brought to light."<sup>108</sup> Emerging planter suspicions were confirmed by the 1822 Denmark Vesey con-

<sup>102</sup>C. Edwards to John Ball, Jr., Feb. 12, 1831, *ibid.*

<sup>103</sup>The 1810 census for the Charleston District, excluding the city of Charleston itself, reveals a population totalling 3,004 whites, 31,404 black slaves, 103 free persons of color, and 34,511 total.

<sup>104</sup>Quoted from Wood, *Black Majority*, p. 286.

<sup>105</sup>Wood, *Black Majority*, pp. 308-26.

<sup>106</sup>John Ball, Sr., to John Ball, Jr., May 22, 1801, Ball Family Papers.

<sup>107</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup>*Ibid.*

spiracy in Charleston. The plot was easily crushed, but Vesey brought planter anxieties about black violence to the "boiling point."<sup>109</sup>

While planter concerns over slave revolt grew and specific incidents of resistance in the Ball rice fields multiplied, what is most remarkable is the *lack* of anxiety articulated by John, Jr., and Isaac Ball. The Ball planters, of course, were not entirely insulated from fear. As early as 1806, Isaac Ball's brother, William James Ball, wrote from Edinburgh, "I hope your fears with respect to the Yankees setting our slaves against us will never be realized."<sup>110</sup> Significantly, William James attributed rebellious motives to the "Yankees" and not to the slaves themselves.<sup>111</sup> For the most part, William James implied, "our slaves" would not be inclined to rebel except for outside agitation. The Denmark Vesey plot, however, suggested that blacks were capable of violence without northern interference. Writing from Liverpool, John Moultrie sent off an anxious letter to Isaac Ball. Moultrie hoped that his PeeDee slaves

were not implicated in the late intended insurrection and of murdering the Whites. In these times of emancipation, freedom and liberality you Gentlemen freeholders in the Southern States will be in constant apprehensions and terror will keep you on the everlasting alert which will take off much of the enjoyment of life.<sup>112</sup>

It is ironic that the most powerful expressions of fear came from William James Ball and John Moultrie, both of whom were living overseas. Perhaps their distance from plantation life allowed them a perspective to see danger where resident planters could not. For, unlike other members of South Carolina's "idle aristocracy," the Ball planters were intimately involved with the details of daily work.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>109</sup>Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War*, p. 53.

<sup>110</sup>William James Ball to Isaac Ball, Nov. 24, 1806, Ball Papers.

<sup>111</sup>For other early illustrations of South Carolinians' fear of northern intervention see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, 1975), p. 132; John Ball, Sr., to John Ball, Jr., Oct. 8, 1801, Ball Family Papers: "consider the probable chance of your rising in the World to eminence—and in point of riches (if revolutionary principles do not prevail to the destruction of Southern property) you will be equal to most young men in America."

<sup>112</sup>John Moultrie to Isaac Ball, March 17, 1823, Ball Papers.

<sup>113</sup>Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War*, pp. 12-15. On the importance of planter residency in conditioning slavery in the United States see especially Genovese, *Roll Jordan, Roll*, p. 56ff; Willie Lee Rose, "The Domestication of Domestic Slavery," in William H. Freehling, ed., *Slavery and Freedom* (New York, 1982), pp. 18-36. The Balls did, however, take occasional trips. See for example Isaac and Elias Ball's trip to Newport, in 1806; Isaac Ball to John Ball, Jr., June 29, July 11, 20, Sept. 3, 13, Oct. 6, 18, 1806, Ball Papers.

Their immersion in plantation affairs and in the lives of their slaves may have mitigated the fears expressed so acutely by other, non-resident planters.

Like other rice planters, however, the Balls held their house slaves in special regard.<sup>114</sup> John Ball, Sr., regarded the loss of "Old Monemia" as "irreparable."<sup>115</sup> More discreetly, William James suggested to Isaac Ball that he "get a plaything" to "amuse you at a leisure hour when sitting by the fireside of an evening."<sup>116</sup> Esteem for house servants and the exploitation of individual slave women, however, does not mean that the Balls had a commensurate knowledge of field hands. Yet, this is precisely the area in which the Ball planters demonstrated expertise.

A list of "Negroes to work on the Road for the Year 1812" shows a careful breakdown of sixty-two slaves, by name, according to their specific duties.<sup>117</sup> Drivers, carpenters, ax men, spade men, and hoe men were gathered under these specific headings. Since work on a rice plantation was based on the "task system," a planter's knowledge of individual slave skills could enhance production.<sup>118</sup> John Ball, Jr., was also well aware that certain groups of slaves worked well together while other groups did not. So, he went to Comingtee plantation with the idea of "dividing the hands and having two drivers."<sup>119</sup> He also found that "Old Simon" was at work in the overseer's yard and not in the fields, as the planter and the overseer had agreed. It is striking that Ball could even recognize "Old Simon" out of a labor force of hundreds of slaves on several plantations. Finally, the frequent references to individual slaves in the overseer's correspondence presupposed at least some knowledge on the planter's part of the individuals involved. At the same time, overseers probably helped to form the Ball's perceptions of individual slaves. As Gibby's defiance illustrates, however, overseers could not blunt entirely the appeals of individual slaves to their masters. The Ball planters, then, possessed knowledge of specific slaves and their skills, and were willing to act upon that knowledge.

<sup>114</sup>See John Ball, Sr., to John Ball, Jr., June 1, 1801, Ball Family Papers; Stamp, *Peculiar Institution*, p. 326; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 329.

<sup>115</sup>John Ball, Sr., to John Ball, Jr., June 1, 1801, Ball Family Papers.

<sup>116</sup>William James Ball to Isaac Ball, Jan. 25, 1805, Ball Papers.

<sup>117</sup>"Negroes to work on the Road for the Year 1812," Ball Family Papers. It is not clear whether John Ball, Sr., John Ball, Jr., or Isaac Ball made this particular list. Similar lists for other years are available in the Ball Family Papers.

<sup>118</sup>For more on the variety of slave occupations under the task system see Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*, pp. 43-89.

<sup>119</sup>John Ball, Jr., to Stephen Herren, May 25, 1831, Ball Family Papers.

The Balls appear to have been neither excessively harsh nor excessively lenient masters. Although family legend maintains that, upon his return from a trip, Isaac Ball's slaves "took him from the carriage and carried him home on their shoulders," incidents of violence in the rice fields certify that slaves were not always pleased with their masters.<sup>120</sup> The stipulations for the Christmas holiday of 1826 provided for beef and extra rice rations for the slaves, but allowed them only two days of vacation. "On Wednesday," wrote John Ball, Jr., "they are to go to Work and have potatoe allowance again."<sup>121</sup> The Balls were also concerned to give medical attention to their slaves, particularly in light of the health hazards involved in rice planting. Fever, snake bites, and the effect of the heat could wreck havoc on the plantation labor force. In 1815, the medical bill owed Dr. James Ravenell for attending slaves at Comingtee amounted to \$427.81.<sup>122</sup> This was a major expense, as the total tax on John Ball, Jr.'s, land and slaves in 1819 came to only slightly more, \$431.07.<sup>123</sup> A careful examination of the medical bill reveals that most of the patients receiving care were women, occasionally with "in labor" marked after their names. Clearly, John Ball, Jr., was concerned not only with the health of his existing slave force, but with the size of his future slave population. Even features of paternalistic behavior made sound economic sense.

So, the master-slave relationship on the Ball plantations defies neat description. In the midst of planter paranoia over slave rebellion, the Balls seem to have displayed suprisingly little fear of their own slaves. Unlike some of their elite neighbors who travelled widely, the Balls normally remained at home to manage their affairs.<sup>124</sup> Despite their impressive holdings, John Ball, Jr., and Isaac Ball possessed at least some degree of knowledge of individual slaves. Although the evidence is slim, some slaves, such as Gibby, evidently felt they knew their masters. Overseers mediated the master-slave relationship, but they did not supplant it. If traces of the master-slave relationship are evident on the Ball plantations, with hundreds of slaves scattered over a half dozen estates, this may hint at the strength the relationship had elsewhere in the antebellum South.<sup>125</sup>

The management of the Ball plantations was not a neat and tidy process. Although John Ball's library contained the "Latest and most

<sup>120</sup>Deas, *Ball Family*, p. 138.

<sup>121</sup>John Ball, Jr., to Tyson Pipkin, Dec. 20, 1826, Ball Family Papers.

<sup>122</sup>Medical Bill for Dr. James Ravenell, Comingtee, 1815, *ibid.*

<sup>123</sup>Tax Return for John Ball, Jr., 1819, *ibid.*

<sup>124</sup>See Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War*, p. 34.

<sup>125</sup>Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 3-158.

approved Publications on Agriculture,” plantation management could not be reduced to a precise set of rules.<sup>126</sup> Even the Ball’s own guidelines for conduct, as articulated in overseer contracts, changed to meet the realities of life in the rice fields. Rather than rules, relationships shaped the day-to-day functioning of the plantations. As they emerge from glimpses of behavior on the plantations of John Ball, Jr., and Isaac Ball, these relationships were extraordinarily complex.

Instead of lightening the weight of managerial responsibility, overseers functioned to embroil masters in the daily operations of planting. Negligent and cruel overseers, such as John E. Moreton, had to be replaced. Even a skilled and resourceful overseer, like Hugh McCauley, called upon his employer for constant advice. Ironically, the limited authority of the overseers themselves impinged on the freedom of the planters.

Despite bringing planters to the fields, overseers were primarily responsible for slave treatment on a daily basis. Slave resistance and the punishments inflicted by overseers formed a dangerous counterpoint to the daily routine of work. Further complicating the overseer-slave relationship was the seasonal nature of planting itself. Incidents of sabotage and running away appear to have been clustered around the seasons of most intense work—the planting in the spring and the harvest in the fall. Thus, the relationship between overseer and slave was conditioned, to some extent, by forces beyond the control of either.

Overseers also probed the tension between community interest and self interest with the slave community. Some slaves cooperated with the overseers’ efforts to control the labor force, while others offered sustained resistance. The slave community’s solidarity, then, was dependent on the responses of its individual members. At the same time, overseers were dependent on the cooperation of slaves for the smooth functioning of the plantation. Beneath the cycle of punishment and resistance, then, one can begin to detect the mutual dependence of overseer and slave on the Ball plantations.

The centrality of overseers in the triangle of plantation relationships suggests, paradoxically, that the master-slave relationship was of secondary importance in the daily routine of rice planting. William Scarborough has estimated that there were nearly 26,000 overseers in the leading plantation states by 1860.<sup>127</sup> So, on many plantations overseers mediated the relationship between master and slave. Evidence from the Ball plantations combined with Scarborough’s statis-

<sup>126</sup>List of Books in John Ball’s Library, Ball Family Papers.

<sup>127</sup>Scarborough, *The Overseer*, p. 10.

tics implies that Genovese's argument that the South was "a special civilization built on the relationship of master to slave" is, indeed, an oversimplification.<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless, the direct involvement of John Ball, Jr., and Isaac Ball with their labor force, and the slave Gibby's response, hints that the master and slave relationship survived. Ironically, by drawing masters into the fields, the overseers may have even strengthened the bond between the Balls and their slaves. Evidence from the Ball plantations, then, simultaneously calls into question and supports Genovese's conviction that the master-slave relationship was of paramount importance in the antebellum South.

Regardless of the relative importance of any single relationship, however, the triangle of relationships between master and overseer, overseer and slave, and master and slave, shaped life on the Ball plantations. In some respects, the relational character of plantation life bore little resemblance to the orderly dictates planters discussed in agricultural periodicals. And the astonishing economic success of John Ball, Jr., and Isaac Ball suggests a final paradox: despite the highly personal and unpredictable character of plantation life, it worked.

<sup>128</sup>Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery, Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York, 1967), p. 35.