

"THE DARKEST ABODE OF MAN"

Black Miners in the First Southern Coal Field, 1780-1865

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ON JUNE 20, 1796, the French nobleman Duc de La Rochefoucauld left Richmond, Virginia, for Monticello to visit Thomas Jefferson. On the way, he stopped to examine several coal mines at Dover, and while the traveler remained unimpressed by their management, he was struck by the fact that "Messrs. Graham and Havans employ about five hundred negroes in this mine, and the business of the farm."¹ Although La Rochefoucauld may have exaggerated the case, he nevertheless touched on the most striking characteristic of southern coal mining. From the very beginning mines in the South depended upon the sinew and sweat of black bondsmen.

Located about thirteen miles west of Richmond, the eastern Virginia coal field provided the first commercial source of domestic coal in the United States. While other states, such as Pennsylvania, had more extensive supplies, Virginia possessed the only coal easily accessible to coastal vessels through the port of Richmond. Consequently, even before the American Revolution, Virginia supplied Philadelphia, New York, and Boston with bituminous coal for home and industry. Not until the 1840s and 1850s, when Pennsylvania was tied together by a network of railroads, did coal from that state become available in the East Coast markets and force Virginia to relinquish its dominance over the trade. Between the American Revolution and the mid-nineteenth century, however, Virginia remained the major supplier of domestic coal on the Atlantic Coast.²

Among the earliest mines along the James River were the Black Heath Pits in Chesterfield County near the town of Manchester.³ Opened in 1788, and operated for the next three decades by Henry (Harry) Heth (1760?-

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¹ Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, *Travels Through the United States of North America, the Country of the Iroquois, and Upper Canada, in the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797* (London, 1799), III, 122-125.

² Victor S. Clark, *History of Manufactures in the United States* (New York, 1929), I, 331-332, 520; Samuel Harries Daddow and Benjamin Bannan, *Coal, Iron, and Oil: or, the Practical American Miner* (Philadelphia, 1866), p. 108; Frederick Moore Binder, *Coal Age Empire: Pennsylvania Coal and Its Utilization to 1860* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1974), pp. 34-35.

³ "An Account of the Coal Mines in the Vicinity of Richmond, Virginia, Communicated to the Editor in a Letter from Mr. John Grammar Jun.," *American Journal of Science*, I (1819), 126-127. Manchester has since been incorporated into the city of Richmond.

1821), a Revolutionary army officer and enterprising businessman, Black Heath became synonymous with high-quality coal.⁴ Although he owned as many as 114 hands in 1812, the number varied substantially between 1800 and 1820, but averaged about 56 per year.⁵ Heth hired a large number of slave pit-men as well. Thus, in March 1810, he advertised for "30 or 40 able bodied Negro Men, for whom a liberal price will be given."⁶ Bondsmen also constituted the vast majority of the 170 full- and part-time workmen employed at Heth's coal yards during the summer of 1813.⁷

Not only did Heth employ a large number of slaves as miners, he also worked them in every occupation associated with the business, including the most highly skilled. When the collier leased his Stonehenge coal property in 1819, for example, he agreed to furnish the company with "fifty Negroe Men, a Smith & Striker, with Obey the Cork Maker, with Billy Griffen & Gilbert to attend the Engines."⁸ Heth had been ill for several years by 1819 and apparently contemplated giving up the business, when he drew up a "List of Negroes which the proprietor will sell all together."⁹ Heth enumerated 52 men and women, among whom he included Phill Cox, "a tolerable cooper," as well as a blacksmith, a striker, a carpenter, a bricklayer, and ten laborers.⁹ At the time of his death in 1821, Harry Heth owned 41 slaves which had been hired to the company and upon which the remaining partners paid to the estate hiring fees which totaled \$11,855.¹⁰ In his memoirs the Confederate general, Henry Heth, grandson of the mine promoter, recalled his childhood at Blackheath, the family estate. Among the general's earliest recollections were the family coal mines and the childhood curiosity which led him to descend into the pits even though his father John Heth had forbidden it. According to the general's *Memoirs*, with the money he had saved for several weeks, along with some cake from his mother's storeroom, young Heth "bribed a foreman of the mine, an old 'darkey,'" to guide him through the underground chambers.¹¹ Whether

⁴ Ida J. Lee, "The Heth Family," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XLII (1934), 277. Henry Heth used the name "Harry" both officially and unofficially. Some idea of his pioneering leadership in coal mining may be inferred from his proposal to establish an institute to train American youths in the technical aspects of mining ("Coal Mines Seminary," in Harry Heth's hand, October 10, 1819, Heth Family Papers, University of Virginia, hereafter cited as Heth Papers, U. Va.).

⁵ Personal Property Tax Books for Chesterfield County, 1800-1821, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia, hereafter cited as VSL.

⁶ *Richmond Enquirer*, March 2, 1810.

⁷ William Pennock to Harry Heth, July 10, 1813, Heth Papers, U. Va.

⁸ Agreement, Harry Heth with James and John Bavid, December 8, 1818, *ibid.*

⁹ "List of Negroes which the proprietor will sell all together," n.d., 1819, *ibid.*

¹⁰ "Accounts & Receipts," 1821, *ibid.*

¹¹ James L. Morrison, Jr., editor, *The Memoirs of Henry Heth* (Westport, Connecticut, 1974), p. 11.

slave or free, this black foreman must have possessed considerable experience in coal mining to acquire the knowledge mandatory for underground supervision. Moreover, his presence in such a sensitive position further underscored the commitment of the Heth family specifically, and Virginia coal operators generally, to black labor.

Organized in 1822 by John Heth and Robert Beverley Randolph, the Black Heath Company of colliers sank several shafts varying from 150 to 700 feet. After an explosion which killed 45 blacks and two white overseers in 1836, the company was reorganized into the Maidenhead Pits.¹² The mine never recovered the losses sustained from the explosion, however, and in 1840 sold all of its stock to a group of English capitalists organized into the Chesterfield Coal and Iron Mining Company.¹³ Unlike most coal mines in the region, the Chesterfield Company deliberately employed 130 free blacks rather than slaves. It remains unclear why the company followed this policy, whether out of moral compulsion, or the real possibility that owners refused to hire their slaves to the company fearing a loss of their property in another explosion.

By the late 1830s and early 1840s, numerous coal companies operated in the eastern Virginia field. One of the largest of them was the famous Midlothian Mining Company, chartered in 1835.¹⁴ By 1843 the Midlothian mines employed in all their operations "some 150 negroes,"¹⁵ most of whom were slaves.¹⁶ Midlothian did hire some free blacks in addition to slaves. An 1846 advertisement for slave workers notified owners that "The Company have in their employment several free coloured men," but assured squeamish owners that the free blacks were well disciplined.¹⁷

During the 1850s the Midlothian Company continued to rely on hired slave labor. The 1850 census recorded 123 male bondsmen at the mines, only seven of whom the company owned.¹⁸ By 1860, however, the Midlothian had increased its labor force to 200 workers, at least 100 of whom

¹² Richmond *Enquirer*, March 23, 1839.

¹³ Howard N. Eavenson, *The First Century and a Quarter of American Coal Industry* (Pittsburgh, 1942), p. 107; Oswald J. Heinrich, "The Midlothian, Virginia, Colliery in 1876," American Institute of Mining Engineers, *Transactions*, IV (May 1875-February 1876), 309.

¹⁴ A. S. Wooldridge, "Geological and Statistical Notice of the Coal Mines in the Vicinity of Richmond, Va.," *American Journal of Science and Arts*, XLII (October 1842), 6, 8.

¹⁵ Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of Virginia; Containing a Collection of the Most Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, etc., Relating to its History and Antiquities* (Charleston, S. C., 1845), p. 232.

¹⁶ Richmond *Whig and Public Advertiser*, July 15, 1846.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, January 2, 1846.

¹⁸ Manuscript Industrial and Slave Schedules, Chesterfield County, Virginia, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, National Archives Microfilm Publications.

belonged to the company.¹⁹ Following the Civil War, the company continued to employ blacks, for in 1871 the superintending engineer observed that "most of our labor here is colored labor, although we have a few good white miners amongst us. The men have faced great danger and undergone much hardship bravely."²⁰

Ranked among the earliest mines in the eastern Virginia field, from their inception Dover Pits depended on slave miners. While journeying to Monticello, La Rochefoucauld stopped at Dover Pits in 1796 and noted that "about five hundred negroes" worked at the pits and the attached farm.²¹ Little else is known about the Dover Pits during the ensuing decades, but apparently they continued to utilize bonded labor in every capacity. Edmund Ruffin, editor of the *Farmers' Register*, visited Dover in 1837 and remarked that

Graham's mining operations had been superintended and directed entirely by a confidential slave of his own, (whom he afterwards emancipated, and then paid \$200 a year wages,) and the laborers were also slaves; and they, only, knew anything of the condition of the coal.²²

During the 1850s, Christopher Quarles Tompkins, a United States and then Confederate colonel and experienced coal operator, began to organize a number of mines, including the original works, into what became known as the Dover Coal Mining Company.²³ Like most mine operators in the district, Tompkins employed numerous slaves in his coal pits. A Richmond newspaper reported an 1855 excursion by "a number of ladies and gentlemen" who descended into the mine "1030 feet deep." The sojourn through these workings fascinated the visitors, one of whom aptly characterized the subterranean maze as "the darkest abode of man." The spectators found that Tompkins employed slaves in these pits as well, forty of whom were

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860.

²⁰ Oswald J. Heinrich, "The Midlothian Colliery, Virginia," *A.I.M.E., Transactions*, I (May 1871–February 1873), 356.

²¹ La Rochefoucauld, *Travels Through the United States*, III, 123. Traditionally, Dover had been regarded as the oldest commercial coal mine in the South (Kathleen Bruce, *Virginia Iron Manufacture in the Slave Era* [New York, 1960, originally 1930], p. 88). This does not appear to be accurate for the *New York Mercury*, July 22, 1765, carried an advertisement by Garrard Ellyson for the sale of coal from his "bank of COAL in Chesterfield county" (*VMHB*, LXVI [1958], 203).

²² Edmund Ruffin, "Visit to Graham's Coal Pits," *Farmers' Register*, V (1837), 315.

²³ *Ibid.*; William M. E. Rachal, editor, "The Occupation of Richmond, April 1865: The Memorandum of Events of Colonel Christopher Q. Tompkins," *VMHB*, LXXIII (1965), 189; Ellen Wilkins Tompkins, editor, "The Colonel's Lady: Some Letters of Ellen Wilkins Tompkins, July–December 1861," *ibid.*, LXIX (1961), 387.

hard at work as the party toured the chambers.²⁴

In 1863-1864, the Dover, and the Tuckahoe Pits, which now fell under Tompkins's supervision,²⁵ employed about 150 blacks, of whom a large majority were hired. Of these hands, Dover utilized 103 and Tuckahoe 38, while nine hands labored on the farm connected with the mines. Table I identifies their occupations and hiring prices.

TABLE I
NUMBER AND OCCUPATIONS OF SLAVES AT
DOVER AND TUCKAHOE PITS, 1863-1864

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Approximate Hiring Price Each</i>
Teamster	3	\$ 345 per year
Trainer †	5	300
Fireman	3	250
Coal Digger	8	700
Carpenter	3	625
Laborer	28	325
Top Hands	24	325
Miner	10	350
Bricklayer	1	500
Engineer	7	350
Wood Chopper	1	300*
Boy	4	150
Blacksmith	2	1,000*
Slater	3	125
Farmer	6	275
Miller	5	150
Bottom Hand	2	350
Totals	115	\$40,485

Source: "Commonplace Book of Christopher Quarles Tompkins, 1863-1867," Tompkins Family Papers, VHS. Compiled and arranged by the author.

*No price was given for the hire of the blacksmiths or the wood chopper. The figures given are conservative estimates.

†A "trainer" pulled a basket-like vehicle with iron runners, called a "corve," filled with coal from the working face section to the main drift where it was hauled to the bottom of the shaft and then to the surface. He was probably being trained by the miner, or the workman who actually dug coal. This was a skilled and sensitive occupation which required highly specialized knowledge and experience.

²⁴ Lease of John James Flournoy, May 28, 1847, Tompkins Family Papers, VHS, represented the first notice of his use of slave miners; *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, January 11, 1855.

²⁵ Charles B. Dew, *Ironmaker to the Confederacy: Joseph R. Anderson and the Tredegar Iron Works* (New Haven, 1966), pp. 34, 99, 149-150; "Corporate Holdings, 1866," and *Tredegar Journals*, December 1826, in the *Tredegar Company Records*, VSL; Bruce, *Virginia Iron Manufacture*, p. 88; Rachal, "The Occupation of Richmond," *VMHB*, LXXIII, 189-193; the *Commonplace Book of Christopher Quarles Tompkins, 1863-1867*, hereafter cited as *Tompkins Commonplace Book*, VHS.

Of the 150 black hands working at the Dover and Tuckahoe Pits in 1863-1864, free blacks comprised 24 of the total. Their occupations and rate of pay, where it was possible to determine, are recapitulated in Table II. Between 1864 and 1865, whites constituted only 21 of the total number of

TABLE II

FREE BLACK OCCUPATIONS AT DOVER AND TUCKAHOE PITS 1863-1864		
Occupation	Number	Rate of Pay
Trainer	4	—
Laborer	1	—
Driver	1	—
Engineer	3	\$3.00 per day
Sinker	1	\$3.00 per day + Bd.
Miner	5	\$3-4.00 per day + Bd.
Bottom Hands	2	"By the day on Trial"
Top Hands	3	\$2-3.00 per day
Blacksmith	1	—
Bricklayer	1	\$500 per year
Unspecified	2	—
Total	24	

Source: "Commonplace Book of Christopher Quarles Tompkins, 1863-1867," Tompkins Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

workmen at Dover and Tuckahoe. Since only two of them were "boss men," and a force that large, working in two-shift relays, probably required six or eight supervisors, it is highly likely that blacks filled some of those positions as well.²⁶

The figures presented in Tables I and II provide some valuable clues to prevailing labor patterns at slave-operated coal mines, and represent perhaps the only actual analysis of exactly what jobs slaves, free blacks, and whites held at these pits, and the percentage of the total constituted by each. If the Dover and Tuckahoe Pits provide a reasonably accurate picture of employment patterns in the field, as they probably do, whites comprised only about 12 percent, free blacks about 14 percent, and slaves about 67 percent of the total labor force at these early Virginia mines. The status of about 7 percent of the workmen remains unverifiable. The above tables also reflect the long tradition of reliance on slave labor without restriction by race from

²⁶ "List of White Persons at Dover Pits—1864," and "List of White Hands at Trent's Pits—1865," in Tompkins Commonplace Book, VHS.

occupation or place of work. Thus, bondsmen toiled not only in the dangerous underground operations, they also worked on the surface where it was relatively safe, and practiced the skilled trades as well as unskilled. These patterns prevailed throughout the industry until, by 1861, the 22 leading Virginia coal companies employed 1,847 slave miners.²⁷ Most Virginia mine operators would have agreed in principle with one Alabama miner who observed in 1859 that "Every day's experience confirms my opinion that it is next to impossible to prosecute my mining interest successfully with free labor. . . . No reliance whatever can be placed upon it. . . . I must have a negro force or give up my business."²⁸

Eastern Virginia coal pits justified the old refrain about mines being "dark as a dungeon and damp as the dew, where the dangers are double and the pleasures are few." In fact, miners conducted a perennial courtship with danger and accidents plagued masters and slaves alike, although in obviously different ways. Rock falls represented one of the most persistent threats to life and limb. In 1812 Heth's foreman informed the operator that several of the hands had been hurt. Toby had recovered since the visit of Dr. Turpin and should be able to work soon. Shadrack and Chester, however, were "hurt with a piece of coal that fell from the roof" and were laid up for a somewhat longer period of time.²⁹ Others were not so fortunate. For example, Ned was "Nearly Killed" and had been incapacitated since his accident.³⁰ And another slave's owner dunned Heth for compensation "for the . . . man who was killed by accident in your coal pits."³¹

Flooding provided another constant irritant to miners, and contributed to making their work, according to one contemporary, a "gloomy avocation."³² More than an unpleasant working condition, however, flooding represented a source of grave danger. One Friday afternoon in 1856, for example, Midlothian miners found the water rising rapidly in the "deep shaft," which acted as a sump. Upon investigation, an overseer found that the water had risen about forty feet above the bottom of the shaft. He and the general supervisors attempted to reach the men trapped below by descending the "rise shaft," by which the coal was brought to the surface, but found that

²⁷ Clement Eaton, *The Growth of Southern Civilization, 1790-1860* (New York, 1961), p. 231.

²⁸ W. P. Browne to A. Saltmarsh, September 24, 1859, Browne Papers, Alabama Archives, cited in Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York, 1970), p. 23.

²⁹ N. Sanders to Harry Heth, September 16, 1812, Heth Papers, U. Va.

³⁰ Robert Brooke to Harry Heth, February 22, 1810, *ibid.*

³¹ W. B. Pillsborough to Harry Heth, February 6, 1819, *ibid.*

³² John Holland, *The History and Description of Fossil Fuel, the Collieries, and the Coal Trade of Great Britain* (London, 1841), p. 247.

the water had cut all communications in the passage which connected the two shafts. The next morning the relief party rescued two unconscious whites, but the remainder did not share such good fortune; the list of dead included one white man, three company slaves, and four hired bondsmen.³³

The frequency of devastating fires in the eastern Virginia coal field earned these pits a “well-founded bad reputation.” The heat generated from the constant downward pressure, along with the presence of gas, and the loose coal and slate which littered the floors, rendered spontaneous combustion an ever present possibility.³⁴ As early as 1788 fire forced the closing of some sections of Black Heath Pits. Although sealed off, that initial fire continued to smolder for at least thirty years.³⁵ Thereafter, fire periodically ravaged Black Heath Pits. Heth’s partner, Beverley Randolph, wrote on the morning of August 24, 1810, that “the day before yesterday they [the hands] were driven out by the smoke, which was very abundant all day,” and the smoke had turned one of the shafts into a huge chimney.³⁶ The following day, Randolph informed his partner that conditions had worsened:

This morning I went again into the pit after receiving your letter to see if anything could possibly be done and took three or four of the hands with me, but had not been down five minutes before the hands began to stagger & fall from the effects of the Sulphur, which is intolerably strong. It was with great difficulty that we could get Jim Warren out, and I was very doubtful for some considerable time whether he would recover.³⁷

Most frightening of all mine disasters is the explosion, but it also engenders a certain fascination because of its unpredictability and awesome destructive power. Normally caused by improper ventilation, methane gas explosions rocked the eastern Virginia coal field with alarming regularity. The first recorded explosion shook Black Heath Pits in 1817, although it remains unknown how many men died in that mishap.³⁸ Throughout its existence, the Black Heath Pits periodically suffered explosions. In 1839 a combustion of methane gas resulted in the death of “forty-five negroes and

³³ Richmond *Daily Dispatch*, December 15, 16, 1856.

³⁴ Heinrich, “The Midlothian Colliery, Virginia,” *A.I.M.E., Transactions*, I, 346-349, 356, 360, 364.

³⁵ “An Account of the Coal Mines in the Vicinity of Richmond,” *American Journal of Science*, I, 126-128; David Street to Harry Heth, August 10, 1810, Heth Papers, U. Va.

³⁶ Beverley Randolph to Harry Heth, August 24, 1810, Heth Papers, U. Va. Randolph was Heth’s son-in-law as well as business partner.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, August 25, 1810.

³⁸ “An Account of the Coal Mines in the Vicinity of Richmond,” *American Journal of Science*, I, 129.

two white overseers.”³⁹ According to one interested contemporary:

Some years since, when ventilation was less understood than at present, an explosion took place . . . of the most fearful character. Of the fifty-four men in the mine, only two, who happened to be in some crevices near the mouth of the shaft, escaped with life. Nearly all the internal works of the mine were blown to atoms. Such was the force of the explosion, that a basket then descending, containing three men, was blown nearly one hundred feet into the air. Two fell out, and were crushed to death, and the third remained in, and with the basket was thrown some seventy or eighty feet from the shaft, breaking both his legs and arms.⁴⁰

Even though the “most approved methods of ventilating the mines had been introduced” in the interim, another explosion occurred in 1844 at the same pits which resulted from “the leaking out of gas from some deserted works which had been ineffectually dammed off from the new galleries.”⁴¹ That explosion claimed the life of eleven men.⁴² Still another explosion killed three slaves in 1855.⁴³ The Midlothian Company, perhaps the most professionally operated mine in the field, had its share of similar disasters. In 1842 the Maidenhead Pits suffered a tremendous concussion. A. S. Wooldridge, company president, described the disaster as follows:

A terrific explosion occurred . . . by which thirty-four persons were instantly killed, and a number of others so badly burned that little or no hopes are entertained of their recovery. . . . Some of the dead men, the flesh charred on their bones, held their shovels in their hands. . . . and Samuel Hunt, a small boy, who had been deprived of reason for the time, by the concussion, was calling loudly to the mule he had been driving to go along. Those who were not dead . . . begged earnestly not to be left, and then prayed loudly for a few drops of cold water to quench their burning thirsts.⁴⁴

Another serious explosion killed about 55 of the slave force at Midlothian in 1855, and before the pits were closed in the 1870s, several additional eruptions took the lives of an unspecified number of black miners.⁴⁵

Because of the dangerous working conditions in antebellum coal pits,

³⁹ Charles Lyell, “On the Structure and Probable Age of the Coal-Field of the James River,” *Quarterly Journal of the Geographical Society of London*, III (1847), 270; *Richmond Enquirer*, March 23, 1839.

⁴⁰ Howe, *Historical Collections of Virginia*, pp. 231-232.

⁴¹ Lyell, “On the Structure of the Coal-Field of the James River,” *Quarterly Journal of the Geographical Society*, III, 270.

⁴² *Richmond Times and Compiler*, November 21, 1844.

⁴³ *Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser*, November 28, 30, 1855.

⁴⁴ Wooldridge, “Notice of the Coal Mines in the Vicinity of Richmond,” *American Journal of Science and Arts*, XLII, 2; see also *Mining Magazine*, IV (1855), 316-317.

⁴⁵ Heinrich, “The Midlothian, Virginia, Colliery in 1876,” *A.I.M.E., Transactions*, IV, 310; Oswald J. Heinrich, “An Account of an Explosion of Fire-Damp at the Midlothian Colliery, Chesterfield County, Virginia,” *A.I.M.E., Transactions*, V (May 1856-February 1877), 148-161.

owners frequently were reluctant to hire their slaves for mine labor. This hesitance was reflected in the colliers' continuous advertising campaign in local newspapers to portray the various mines as reasonably safe places in which to work.⁴⁶ When slaves were hired, owners and employers alike tried to minimize possible losses of their human property by securing life insurance on the slave miners. As early as 1815, one owner wrote to Harry Heth that he had been "informed that you [Heth] are now anxious to hire hands to work in your coal pits and that you will insure them against accidents which might happen."⁴⁷ By the late 1850s, however, insurance companies had become wary of underwriting the lives of slaves who worked in coal pits with a known history of accidents, which further complicated the recruitment of an adequate labor force. In 1858 the manager of Black Heath Pits, where several slaves had recently drowned, observed that "from the impending danger they supposed to exist, slave-owners could not be induced to engage their hands without first effecting an insurance upon them." Yet, because "accidents from similar causes have of late occurred" in which "life had been sacrificed," the insurance companies had become "greatly intimidated" and reluctant to take "risks on hands similarly circumstanced as those who have suffered on previous occasion."⁴⁸

Insurance companies and the owners of hired hands did not represent the only vested interests who resisted the dangers of the mines. Slaves themselves frequently took the initiative on their own behalf. An agent for Harry Heth wrote to the operator in 1813 that slaves refused to work in the pits and had to be forced to obey orders to do so. Both Anderson and Robin had "been twice in danger of losing his life."⁴⁹ Another agent informed Heth a few years later that it would be impossible for him to hire any black miners. An owner had promised him six hands, but changed his mind and now "positively objects to their working in the coal pits . . . & the negroes themselves also positively object to going to the pits."⁵⁰ Numerous other cases could be cited as well.

A wide variety of responses characterized slave reactions to forced labor in coal mines. Like so many other bondsmen throughout the South, slave miners shirked work, abused the draft animals, stole food, and there are

⁴⁶ *Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser*, January 2, 1846; *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, January 11, 29, 1858, December 31, 1859, and January 10, 1860.

⁴⁷ B. Dandridge to Harry Heth, April 1, 1815, Heth Papers, U. Va.

⁴⁸ *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, January 29, 1858. See also Todd L. Savitt, "Slave Life Insurance in Virginia and North Carolina," *Journal of Southern History*, XLIII (1977), 586n.

⁴⁹ Richard Brooke to Harry Heth, January 6, 1813, Heth Papers, U. Va.

⁵⁰ Robert Gaines to Harry Heth, December 20, 1815, *ibid.*

a few cases of possible sabotage. Probably the most frequent direct action taken by pit slaves, however, consisted of running away. Thus in 1800, Sam ran off from Black Heath Pits, and from that incident forward, the Heth manuscripts are littered with references to escapees.⁵¹

Harry Heth also owned a saltworks along the Kanawha River in western Virginia. Since salt furnaces required large quantities of coal, and because few slaves resided in the transmontane region, the collier occasionally sent some of his Black Heath slaves across the mountains to work in the western mines. One of Heth's overseers, David Street, attempted to march a coffe of these pit hands to western Virginia in 1819.⁵² As the coffe progressed into the dense forests of the Blue Ridge Mountains, however, several bondsmen escaped. The incident produced a particularly revelatory series of correspondence from the driver to Harry Heth which reflected the determination of some slave miners to gain their freedom. Just before the escape, Street had informed his employer that none "of my men will have it in their power to give me the slip," for he maintained "a strict watch over them and three of them I chained."⁵³

The driver's confidence proved to be misplaced, however, for six days later Street wrote that he had run into some "very bad luck. The three negroes Billey and the 2 Johns that I had chained together—Escaped the night of the 13 Instant." The three hands pretended to acquiesce to their fate and Street had intended to remove the leg irons the next day. When the coffe bedded down for the night at a farm along the road, the slaves took affairs into their own hands, for at about 2:00 A.M. "old Shadrick" came to the house and informed Street that the three had escaped.⁵⁴ After two days of tracking the fugitives over a distance of sixty miles, Street informed his employer that the three were still traveling together when they were accidentally discovered, and one of the escapees had been captured.

John not being so Expert as the other two they took him. Billey finding that they had took John came back to rescue John with a club and if it had not been that a man hearing the alarm running that way with a gun, Billey would have certainly released John. They are now in the Mountains. . . . I am now waiting for their

⁵¹ See the letters to Harry Heth from Jesse Cole, August 4, 1800; William Kimbrough, June 3, 1801, and June 12, 1801; David Paterson, March 2, 1803; John E. Browne, June 28, 1819; R. Tankersley, August 28, 1819, all in the Heth Papers, U. Va.

⁵² Numerous letters during 1815 refer to Heth's venture into mining and manufacture of salt in western Virginia. See for example, Harry Heth to Beverley Randolph, January 24, 1815, and J. Barhu to Harry Heth, February 15, 1815, Heth Papers, U. Va.

⁵³ David Street to Harry Heth, April 9, 1819, Heth Papers, U. Va.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, April 16, 1819.

return [in order] to fetch me the nurse. . . . John informs me that Billey's intention was to Kill me if he had it in his power.⁵⁵

Street believed that the runaways intended to cross the James River above Richmond and "make their ways" to Fredericksburg and Gloucester where they had friends who would hide them.⁵⁶ What happened to the slaves remains a mystery for all trace of them disappeared from the Heth correspondence. In an ironic turn of events, however, Street also disappeared, and a several-month search apparently failed to locate the driver. The evidence suggests that he probably sold the remainder of the slaves to his brother, who was engaged in the slave trade, pocketed the money, and like so many other scoundrels, vanished into the frontier.⁵⁷

The problem of runaway pit hands was not confined to Black Heath, for contemporary newspapers throughout the antebellum era indicate that running away represented a constant source of aggravation for Virginia mine operators generally.⁵⁸ When the Civil War came, many slave miners took advantage of the chaos to grasp for freedom. As the end drew near the trickle of fugitives turned into a flood. According to the operator of Dover Pits, Christopher Quarles Tompkins, when the Union forces occupied the Confederate capital in April 1865, "All the negroes" went "quick for Richmond" and desertion became the "order of the day." In a remarkably dispassionate diary of the events which surrounded the occupation, Tompkins observed that

Of the 108 slaves hired at these pits only four or five left Monday evening, but the next evening there was 30 or 40, the provisions were not entirely issued & some held back to get their weekly allowance of meat &c. The negroes were slow to realize the fact that they were free. Many disclaimed any disposition to be so, particularly Alfred, Phil &c. &c. But by Tuesday evening the fever was so high that every soul who had legs to walk was running to Richmond.⁵⁹

Although most of the free black miners stayed on the job, desertion among the slaves became so complete that Tompkins finally "concluded to stop the pits."⁶⁰

Employment patterns in these early coal mines reflected the general commitment to black labor in southern industry throughout the slave era.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, April 19, 1819.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ C. L. Stevenson to Harry Heth, November 5, 1819, Heth Papers, U. Va.

⁵⁸ *Richmond Daily Courier*, September 21, 1836; *Richmond Enquirer*, May 23, June 6, 1837, and June 17, 1845; *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, May 5, 1858.

⁵⁹ Rachal, "The Occupation of Richmond," *VMHB*, LXXIII, 192-193.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Hazardous working conditions occasionally rendered it difficult to hire an adequate number of slave miners. Nevertheless, blacks formed the backbone of the labor force. Moreover, bondsmen toiled at every task associated with coal mining, from the least to the most skilled occupations. By the end of the Civil War, the eastern Virginia coal field had become moribund. The economics of mining dictated that capital be channeled into the development of the seemingly limitless reserves of the Appalachian states. Blacks continued to represent a vital source of labor in the expanding southern coal industry, however. In doing so, they followed a tradition with roots extending back to America's first commercial coal field in eighteenth-century Virginia.