
Disciplining Slave Ironworkers in the Antebellum South: Coercion, Conciliation, and Accommodation

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WHEN JOHN C. CALHOUN learned in 1845 that his son-in-law, Thomas Clemson, was planning to break up his plantation and rent out his slave force, Calhoun promptly reminded him of the probable human consequences of such a move. The hirer of the slaves would have no incentive to "take good care of them," Calhoun warned. "The object of him who hires, is generally to make the most he can out of them, without regard to their comfort or health," he continued, and Calhoun was so convinced of the evils of slave hiring that he offered to buy the slaves himself if Clemson could not find other decent masters who would purchase them.¹

Several historians of American slavery who have commented recently on slave hiring, and particularly on the hiring of slaves for industrial purposes, share Calhoun's bleak assessment of this phase of the South's peculiar institution. "The overwork of hired slaves by employers with only a temporary interest in their welfare was as notorious as the harsh practices of overseers," notes Kenneth M. Stampp. "Slaves hired to mine owners or railroad contractors were fortunate if they were not driven to the point where their health was impaired."² In the view of Stampp and a number of other scholars, slave hiring and industrial slavery were among the most brutal and exploitive aspects of the American slave system; these historians tend to see hiring out and industrial employment, like slave trading, as

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¹ J. C. Calhoun to T. G. Clemson, Oct. 27, 1845, John C. Calhoun Papers, Clemson University Library, Clemson, S. C.

² Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1956), 84.

areas where the business aspects of the institution were most highly developed and where the humanity of the slaves was most likely to be ignored.³

Other recent students of slavery, particularly Clement Eaton and Richard B. Morris, have suggested a somewhat different picture. "Court records . . . contain rather frequent references to cruel treatment, overwork, and neglect of hired slaves," writes Professor Eaton. "Yet considerable evidence . . . indicates that many of the plantation slaves of the Upper South desired to be hired in the cities and in industries to secure the privileges, social opportunities, rewards, and freedoms which they could not enjoy on the plantation."⁴ Both Eaton and Morris see slave hiring and industrial work contributing to the development of improved living conditions for slave laborers and argue, in Morris's words, that these improvements represented a "trend toward upgrading slaves into a shadowland of quasi-freedom" in the late antebellum era.⁵ Although there is considerable doubt about some of the implications of the Eaton-Morris analysis, particularly their suggestion that this trend toward greater freedom posed a threat to the continued existence of slavery itself, they would seem to be on the right track. A close examination of one phase of Southern industrial slavery that used large numbers of hired bondsmen—the manufacture of iron—reveals a complex relationship between master and slave that rested more on a subtle process of mutual compromise and accommodation than on excessive use of physical force and coercion. This is not by any means intended to suggest that force was not used, for it clearly was, or to suggest that the slave iron worker lived and labored as a free person; he or she was still a slave, and in Southern industrial slavery, as in all slave systems, the master ultimately possessed far superior weapons if a test of wills threatened to go beyond what the master considered reasonable bounds. But unless an outright threat to the master's authority or a direct challenge to the slave system itself occurred, the Southern iron men examined for this article proved, for a number of reasons, to be willing to meet their slave hands in a rather vague and nebulous middle ground where black and white could live with and work alongside each other and where the slave had considerable influence over his working conditions, his family arrangements, and the course of his everyday life.

In order to present this thesis in as clear and brief a fashion as possible, this article concentrates on the operations of William Weaver and several

³ Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York, 1970), especially chs. 3 and 4, and his article, "Disciplining Industrial Slaves in the Old South," *Journal of Negro History*, 53 (1968): 111–28; Samuel Sydney Bradford, "The Ante-Bellum Charcoal Iron Industry of Virginia" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1958), especially chs. 4 and 5, and his article, "The Negro Ironworker in Ante Bellum Virginia," *Journal of Southern History*, 25 (1959): 194–206.

⁴ Clement Eaton, "Slave-Hiring in the Upper South: A Step toward Freedom," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 46 (1960): 668–69; Richard B. Morris, "The Measure of Bondage in the Slave States," *ibid.*, 41 (1954): 231–39.

⁵ Morris, "Measure of Bondage," 239.

other ironmasters whose furnaces and forges lay in the Valley of Virginia. More detailed evidence is available on the antebellum Virginia iron industry than for any other Southern state, but research in the surviving records of iron establishments that were located in other areas of the South indicates that Virginia's labor practices were characteristic of the industry throughout the slave states.⁶ The emphasis on a specific group of men in a specific area also reflects a conviction that only through close and detailed case studies of the ways in which slavery functioned on a day-to-day basis can we begin to understand what it meant to be a slave in any phase of the American slave system, industrial or agricultural, urban or rural. One of my purposes is to suggest that the material for studies in microcosm of this sort is available and that records generated in the daily functioning of the system can give us some insight into the slave's own reaction to his or her bondage. Perhaps an imaginative use of primary sources of this kind can free historians from an almost exclusive dependence on published fugitive accounts or the Slave Narrative Collection of the Library of Congress in our renewed efforts to get inside the most peculiar of American institutions.⁷

WILLIAM WEAVER was something of a legend in his own lifetime. Although born in Pennsylvania, he spent most of his adult life in the valley region of Virginia where he amassed, for his day, a sizable fortune from his iron, farming, and milling operations. In 1860 Weaver, then seventy-nine years old, estimated to the federal census taker that his real and personal property was worth over \$130,000, a figure that was probably reasonably accurate since Weaver owned thousands of acres of land and held sixty-six slaves in 1860—thirty-one adult men, fifteen adult women, and twenty children.⁸ Weaver's scientific farming experiments on the steep slopes of the North

⁶ The employment of slave labor at iron works outside Virginia is discussed in detail in the Louisa Furnace Account Books, which deal with the operations of a Tennessee blast furnace, in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.; the Shelby Iron Works Collection, which describes the operations of a major Alabama iron complex, in the University of Alabama Library, University, Ala.; and the Lucy Wortham James Collection, which contains most of the extensive records of the Maramec Iron Works of Missouri, in the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia, Mo. On the use of slave ironworkers in Georgia, see the *Augusta Daily Constitutionalist*, Oct. 29, 1859, and the material relating to the Etowah Iron Works in "Confederate Papers Relating to Citizens or Business Firms," War Department Collection of Confederate Records, Record Group 109, National Archives, Washington, D.C. See also Starobin, *Industrial Slavery*, 100-01; Lester J. Cappon, "Iron-Making—A Forgotten Industry of North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review*, 9 (1932): 340-41; and Ernest M. Lander, Jr., "The Iron Industry in Ante-Bellum South Carolina," *Journal of Southern History*, 20 (1954): 350-51. I wish to thank Dr. Robert H. McKenzie of the University of Alabama for kindly providing information on the slave labor practices of the Shelby Iron Works.

⁷ Two suggestive studies that rely heavily on the Slave Narrative Collection and fugitive accounts have recently appeared. See George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn., 1972); and John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1972).

⁸ Manuscript Population and Slave Schedules, Rockbridge County, Virginia, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, National Archives Microfilm Publications, M653.

River and Buffalo Creek in his home county of Rockbridge gained wide notoriety and earned him a reputation as an innovating and successful farmer.⁹ But it was in the iron trade that Weaver concentrated his energies, his financial resources, and the bulk of his slave labor force.

During the 1850s Weaver operated two iron manufacturing installations, both of which employed slave labor extensively and both of which were typical of the slave-manned furnaces and forges that dotted upland areas in Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Missouri prior to the Civil War. Weaver centered his operations at Buffalo Forge, near Lexington, Virginia, where a picked group of slave operatives worked four fires and two water-powered hammers that annually produced about one hundred tons of bar iron for the Lynchburg and Richmond markets. The pig iron to sustain the operations at Buffalo Forge came from Weaver's Etna Furnace, a charcoal blast furnace located in an adjoining county, which produced some seven hundred tons of pig iron per year. The Etna pig iron not consumed at Weaver's forge was sent by boat down the James River and Kanawah Canal and offered for sale by commission merchants in Lynchburg and Richmond.¹⁰

Iron manufacturing in the antebellum South was a labor-intensive industry. Since Weaver's Etna Furnace, like practically all Southern blast furnaces, used charcoal for fuel, dozens of workers were needed to chop wood, man charcoal pits, and haul the charcoal frequently long distances to the furnace site. At the ore banks, which might also be several miles from the furnace, miners dug iron ore, while other miners were needed to extract limestone to use as flux in the manufacturing process. When an adequate supply of what furnace men referred to as "stock"—ore, charcoal, and limestone—had been assembled, a process that often required two or three months, the furnace was "blown in" and the production of pig iron begun. Once in operation, workers fed measured amounts of iron ore, charcoal, and limestone into the blast furnace day and night until the blast was completed. Since blasts frequently lasted four to five months, and sometimes longer, and since farming operations were also conducted at most Southern iron works, including Weaver's installations, a constant interchange of slave labor between industrial and agricultural tasks took place at furnaces and forges throughout the South and allowed ironmasters to employ their extensive labor force year round.

At most Southern blast furnaces slave labor played a large role in almost all phases of pig iron production. As founders, colliers, miners, teamsters, wood choppers, and general furnace hands, slaves constituted the bulk of the laboring force. An average charcoal blast furnace required some sixty or

⁹ "Farming of Mr. William Weaver, of Rockbridge County, Virginia," *Farmers' Register*, 10 (1842): 411-13.

¹⁰ For a description of Weaver's iron properties, see J. P. Lesley, *The Iron Manufacturer's Guide to the Furnaces, Forges, and Rolling Mills of the United States* (New York, 1859), 73, 181.



Fig. 1. William Weaver (1781–1863). From a daguerreotype made in the late 1850s by an unknown photographer. Photograph courtesy the Rockbridge County Historical Society, Lexington, Virginia.

seventy slave workers, in addition to a white manager and a handful of skilled laborers, usually but not always white, who were responsible for supervising various stages of production. Since Weaver owned only thirty-one adult male slaves in 1860 and many of these worked at his forge he, like most Southern iron men, was forced to hire a considerable number of slaves each year—as many as ninety or a hundred hands—in order to sustain both of his iron-making enterprises and his farming operations.¹¹

The labor demands at Buffalo Forge were less than those at Weaver's blast furnace. At the forge a force of slave heaters and hammermen turned Weaver's pig iron into "merchant bars," the term used in the nineteenth century to describe refined iron that had been hammered or rolled into

¹¹ William Weaver to James D. Davidson, Jan. 10, 1855, James D. Davidson Papers, McCormick Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis.

standard-size bars. A number of slave hands at Buffalo Forge were highly skilled artisans owned by Weaver: Henry Mathews, who was proficient as a blacksmith, rough carpenter, forge hand, and farmworker; Jim Garland and a slave named Tooler who operated Weaver's chafery and refinery forges and there worked the iron prior to its being wrought into bars; two heaters, Henry Towles and Henry Hunt, Jr., the son of one of Weaver's older slaves of the same name who had evidently been brought up in the iron trade at Buffalo Forge; Sam Williams, an exceptionally skilled ironworker who apparently hammered out finished bars; and Mark, Charles, Garland, and Warder who each had responsibility for a six-mule team and wagon. Weaver's select group of forge hands and teamsters was supplemented by an additional force of slave workers hired by the year to work in less skilled forge operations, in Weaver's flour mill at Buffalo Forge, and as agricultural laborers on Weaver's extensive and scattered farm properties.¹²

The necessity for an accommodation between William Weaver and his slaves, both those he owned and those he hired, lay ultimately in Weaver's dependence on these men for the success of his operations. First of all, to carry on his various manufacturing and farming activities he needed large numbers of slave hands, not all of whom could he afford to purchase. As mentioned previously, he annually sought as many as ninety to a hundred slaves, and the process of hiring so many hands was by no means routine or automatic. A number of difficulties were involved, and these difficulties were compounded in the late antebellum period by the fact that slave labor was becoming increasingly scarce and expensive in Virginia. In the 1820s Weaver normally paid \$45 or \$50 per year to hire slave hands, with the \$50 hire representing Weaver's upper limit for superior workers.¹³ By the mid-1850s, however, the price had risen well above those levels, as Weaver's hiring agent reported to him in December 1855:

They [the owners] are asking \$135 to \$150 for good hands, no one can tell what the price will be, untill new years day. . . . you have no idea of the trouble there is in hiring hands here, at this day, there is all sorts of trickery and management, I don't expect to be able to hire more than thirty or forty hands, we may get fifty; but I can assure you, the prospect is very glomy.¹⁴

One of Weaver's nephews, James C. Davis of nearby Gibraltar Forge, seeking hands in the same neighborhood, a few days later reported similar difficulties and explained the reason for the troublesome situation. "Hands are hiring a little higher this year than last; the cause of it is the high price of

¹² See entries in Buffalo Forge Negro Books, 1850-58 and 1865-72, Weaver-Brady Records, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va.

¹³ James C. Dickinson to Weaver, Jan. 2, 1828, William Weaver Papers, *ibid.* (hereafter these papers will be cited as Weaver Papers, Virginia).

¹⁴ Henry A. McCormick to Weaver, Dec. 29, 1855, *ibid.*

the produce of farms & the consequent demand for their labor in that direction."¹⁵ "There are not so many Iron & no more railroad men in the field," he wrote two days later, "but the farmers make a formidable phalanx of opposition. Some of them are giving \$140 & \$150 for men, & \$70 to \$90 for women," he added. "Women are higher than ever known before."¹⁶

As these letters indicate, the competition among various industrial and agricultural groups for slave labor was stiff in Virginia in the mid-1850s, but this was by no means a novel situation. In the 1820s and 1830s canal-building and gold-mining interests had offered strong hiring competition, and bursts of railroad construction in Virginia in the 1840s and 1850s brought another major employer into the field. Throughout the late antebellum decades agents for the urban tobacco factories and the Richmond area coal mines, cotton mills, and iron works also sought large numbers of slave hands each year.¹⁷

Given the increased problems involved in hiring an adequate labor force, it was imperative that Weaver and the other ironmasters avoid the reputation that they abused slaves in their employ. If slaves returned home to their owners with stories of hard driving and excessive punishment, an iron man like Weaver could be seriously handicapped in his efforts to hire in subsequent years. That ironmasters were sensitive to any suggestion that they abused slaves and that they sought to avoid excessive physical punishment if at all possible is indicated by an exchange of correspondence in 1849 between the manager of an iron furnace in Rockbridge County and the owner of a hired slave who claimed the manager had mistreated him. First, the letter from the slaveholder to the ironmaster, Francis T. Anderson of Glenwood Furnace:

My boy Edmond that I hired to . . . you got here the eight of this month [November 1849], he says that your overseer is so cruel that he could not stand him. I have hired him out for the three last years and the Gentleman was very much pleased with him. I know he will do his work as well as any negroe unless the person that overlooks him is barbourse I write this to let you know that I have given him a pass and started him back to you, this morning, if you thrash him do not be two rough and I know he will do his work as well as any other negroe at your furnice.¹⁸

¹⁵ James C. Davis to William W. Davis, Jan. 5, 1856, William W. Davis Papers, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va.

¹⁶ J. C. Davis to William W. Davis, Jan. 7, 1856, Jordan & Davis Papers, McCormick Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis.

¹⁷ See John Chew to Weaver, Dec. 5, 1830; and James Coleman to Weaver, Feb. 5, 19, 1856, both in William Weaver Papers, Duke University Library, Durham, N.C. (hereafter these papers will be cited as Weaver Papers, Duke); Tuyman Wayt to Jordan & Irvine, Jan. 6, 1830; and Pallison Boxley to Jordan & Irvine, Jan. 13, 1831, both in Jordan & Irvine Papers, McCormick Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis.; see also advertisements of companies seeking to hire slave hands in Richmond *Daily Dispatch*, Jan. 5, Dec. 18, 31, 1853; Dec. 22, 1856; Jan. 1, 1857; Jan. 7, Dec. 10, 31, 1858; and Apr. 6, 1859.

¹⁸ John T. Day to Shanks, Anderson & Anderson, Nov. 9, 1849, Anderson Family Papers, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va.

After receiving this letter, the furnace owner had his manager draft a statement concerning the conduct of this worker and the circumstances surrounding his punishment and subsequent departure from the furnace:

Your letter under date of 9th Nov. is before me and contents noticed, in answer I must inform you that your man Edmund has behaved very badly & told you lies.

I have never struck him one lick on account of his work, the place he lived at last year Mr. Stevens is in the neighbourhood of our Furnace, where he had some 2 or 3 wives and would be there nearly every night in the week and Mr. Stevens complained to me that Edmund kept a continual uproar and fighting with other negroes, and that he could not stand it. I then told Edmund not to go there, and I also told Mr. Stevens if it hapened again to take Edmund and bring him to me which he did and I gave him a good dressing and have not seen him since, which was the early part of the summer. Since that time he has been plundering the neighbourhood & steeling & lying in peoples barns and robing their spring houses &c.

You will please inquire of the negroes which came from the same neighbourhood namely—Ben Swan, Randle Swan, Fister, Burbage, and Beverly Beasley all of them will prove the correctness of my statement.¹⁹

There are a number of significant points in this exchange, but two elements deserve special mention: first, that Edmond, the slave, knew he could get the ear of his master by pleading, in effect, “ironmaster brutality,” and although his owner sent him back to the furnace, he did so with the admonition that Edmond not be severely punished; and second, that the owner of the furnace kept a copy of his manager’s explanation in his files to protect himself and his enterprise from the charge that slaves were abused at his iron works.

A runaway incident that occurred at Weaver’s Etna Furnace in the 1850s led to a similar revealing exchange of correspondence. A hiring agent who had secured several slave wood choppers to work at the furnace had just learned some disturbing information, as he noted in a letter to Weaver dated November 11, 1857:

I received a letter from some one with no name to it saying that Robert had left you and the reason assigned was that your [furnace] manager wished him to work in the Ore Bank and it was so dangerous that all your white hands had quit on that account. if so I am surprised for I had always thought you a different man and had always represented you as being one of the safest men to hire to as regards the treatment in the Vallie and besides I have always hired Robt William & Prince as wood choppers and I have no doubt it was done without your knowledge. if Robt has left please let me hear from you immediately as I dont want the Boy to give either of us any trouble.²⁰

Weaver immediately asked his furnace managers for an explanation and received a full account of the difficulty concerning Robert:

¹⁹ T. H. Burns, agent for Shanks & Anderson, to John T. Day, Dec. 18, 1849, *ibid.*

²⁰ Thomas R. Towles to Weaver, Nov. 11, 1857, Weaver Papers, Duke.



Fig. 2. Glenwood Furnace, Rockbridge County, Virginia, as it appears today. This stack, thirty-eight feet high, was erected in 1849 and is typical of the charcoal blast furnaces built and manned largely by slave labor in Virginia during the late antebellum decades. Photograph courtesy Mr. T. T. Brady, Richmond, Virginia.

On inquiry I find there is something in relation to Bob from which a tale could be manufactured, to wit. On Tuesday a week William [W. Rex] requested Bob to go to the Bank (he picking him out on a/c of being near his wife's) William thinking all [was] right left, but afterwards finding that he did not go up, saw him again on Tuesday last at which time Bob said very imputantly that you had a letter at the forge to the effect that a particular understanding was made that he (Bob) was not to work in the Bank. If that is the case (says William) I dont expect you to work there. He William at the same time requesting him (Bob) to come [to the] Furnace stating to Bob that he would write to you & if it was not in your hands he bob might expect a punishment. That was all that was said & the last & Bob is now away. Of course there is not one word of truth in regard to white hands in [the] Bank & *no danger there either*.²¹

²¹ Charles K. Gorgas to Weaver, Nov. 17, 1857, *ibid.* William W. Rex, a nephew of Weaver's, was one of the managers at Etna Furnace.

Once again, the ironmaster's inquiry and the manager's detailed explanation of the incident indicate that employers were well aware that they could not afford to ignore charges that they neglected owners' instructions about working conditions or that they dealt too severely with slave laborers.

Although ironmasters apparently tried to avoid excessive reliance on harsh physical punishment, there is ample evidence that the whip was employed at antebellum iron works in Virginia. The point seems to have been not to overuse the lash, to employ it to the extent that the slaves became recalcitrant or demoralized and owners became apprehensive over the health and safety of their hired bondsmen. One letter in particular touches on the entire question of discipline and coercion in such a revealing way that it deserves to be quoted at some length. The letter describes the trials of James C. Davis who was attempting to rehire a specific group of slave workers in eastern Virginia for another year's labor at his Gibraltar Forge near Lexington. His problem was not only to convince the master that they should go back to the forge but also to persuade the slaves, and one slave in particular, to return. He described his difficulties with this group of hands in a detailed letter addressed to his father, William Weaver Davis, at the forge, dated January 5, 1856:

There is some difficulty about Dickinson's hands & I hardly know how to act. When they came from over the mountain they wished to go back: & under the impression that they still wished so I hired them of Dickinson at the Ct House tuesday. Shortly after I hired them he came & told me that Elick did not wish to go, that a railroad man had offered him five dollars cash in his hands to go with him & that tickled his fancy.

But the owner thought that Elick would "get over that & be willing to go with you." If the slave's reluctance to return continued, however, Dickinson said that he would not force him to go but he promised at the same time to send the other hands. "But yesterday I received a letter from him saying that his boys had come to him & avowed they would not go, & if they did go they would run off after they got there," Davis continued. "Now I believe that this is nothing but an empty threat for the purpose of scaring their master & that it only requires decisive measures to bring them straight." If the slaves actually carried out their runaway attempt, "they would be apt to run before they got there [Gibraltar Forge] & not after they crossed the blue Ridge [Mountains], for they know that they dont understand the country well enough to start when so far from home." And if they ran away before they reached the mountains, "they will come down in Dickinson's neighborhood & he will be perfectly willing to take them back & so no harm will result in that case." Davis was reasonably certain the hands would not try to flee after they reached the forge, because in addition to their "not being used to the country," they were not "skilled in the wiles of running away," and thus would be recaptured before they

could get very far. "All this is on the hypothesis that Elick goes with them," Davis noted. "If he is cooled down & kept in Jail until I choose to let him off & the others sent on I dont apprehend any difficulty whatever: because he is the ringleader and has persuaded the other's . . . who were willing to go back up to last Monday when I saw them at the Ct House." Davis could not surrender his claim to these men because "the hands through the country are hired," and, in addition, he had gotten the slaves "cheaper than I could get hands again even if I could find any for hire." He then outlined his scheme for dealing with this difficult situation:

I wrote to Mr Dickinson by this morning's mail that I could not let them off, but for him to take them to the Ct House monday morning, put Elick in Jail before the eyes of the others without saying a word as to the meaning of it, then take the others & send them on the [railroad] cars for Staunton with a pass to Gibraltar [Forge]: and after they are gone to take Elick out of Jail & hire him out there at the Ct House by the day, letting on to him that he (Dickinson) will hire him where he wishes to go when he finds a place, which he might do if I found I could make it suit to let him off; if not, I would take him over when I went. I think this plan will work.

In closing this letter the much-troubled ironmaster vented his anger and frustration with a verbal blast at Elick, the "ringleader":

This negro's perversity is but another instance of the assimilation of the negro to the dog. Inorder to make a dog like and follow you, you must whip him occasionally & be sparing of favors, or he will turn at last & bite the hand that feeds him. So with this boy. Of all those five negroes he was the only one that escaped the lash: & frequently received favors that I would have denied the others. Now he not only turns from me but tries to lead them away likewise.²²

Several things in this letter deserve comment. First, although five of the six slaves involved had been whipped by their employer, they initially expressed a willingness to return to the same man for another year's work. Since hands were scarce at this time, their master could have hired them out elsewhere with no difficulty and clearly would have done so if the men had objected earlier about going back to the forge. Even more significant, it would seem, is the psychological game the hiring agent was forced to play with Elick and the other slaves who looked to him for leadership. The ironmaster wanted and needed these hands, but he could not simply assemble them into a coffle and drive them over the mountains. Because the master did not want to force his slaves to work where they were unwilling to reside, the hirer planned a rather elaborate charade to isolate Elick, get the other men ("who are not skilled in the wiles of running away") on a train, and place them in unfamiliar country where they would probably be unable to find their way back home if Elick failed to follow them or if, after rejoining the group at the forge, he continued to create dis-

²² James C. Davis to William W. Davis, Jan. 5, 1856, Davis Papers.

satisfaction among the other hands. The entire incident suggests a rather complex give-and-take between master, slave, and employer that rested not on brute force but on a series of adjustments and accommodations in which the slaves did anything but sit passively by while their fate was decided. Four days later Davis reported that the owner had indeed hired the men to another party, and young Davis urged his father to insist that the hands be delivered up to them as originally promised or that a damage suit be brought against the slaves' master; "there being no hands for hire I cannot hire others in [their] place," Davis told his father, and "consequently we cannot prosecute our business."²³

This incident illustrates another key point: a vital factor in any industrialist's ability to hire slave labor was the willingness of the slave to reside at his work site for the year. Owners of slaves were reluctant to send their bondsmen to locations where the slaves did not want to go, as one master told Weaver in 1828:

Our agreement was, if Brandus was not willing to go to you, I should not force him and on seeing Mr. Brawly, who says the boy is anxious to remain with him therefore I cannot think of compelling him to go any where it is not his wish, as that has always been my rule.²⁴

This master expressed his position in exceptionally strong language, but the position itself was by no means exceptional, as a hiring agent in eastern Virginia informed Weaver in 1854 when Weaver asked the agent to secure slaves for his iron works. "I am willing to hire hands for you," the man replied, and added that he would also be hiring for another Rockbridge County ironmaster, "but that will make no in[ter]ference as persons let their [hands] go pretty much where they please," he assured Weaver.²⁵

In addition to any humanitarian considerations, owners worried that a dissatisfied slave might run away, and there was no guarantee that a valuable slave hand would run back to the protection of his master when he left a furnace or forge. As a result owners, like Elick's master in the long letter cited above, frequently respected the wishes of their slaves and refused to hire them to places where they feared the slaves might be dissatisfied, as one slaveowner wrote Weaver in 1830:

I am sorry to inform you that one of the men I hired you (Isaac) has expressed such an unwillingness to return to you, that I feared should I send him over he would run away, and perhaps be of little or no service to you during the year—I therefore thought it best to hire him in Amherst [County] where he is willing to stay, for the same you were to give—I return your bond for him in this letter. I am very sorry this has happened as perhaps it may put you to some in-

²³ James C. Davis to William W. Davis, Jan. 9, 1856, Cyrus H. McCormick Papers, McCormick Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis.

²⁴ C. Wigglesworth to Weaver, Dec. 31, 1828, Weaver Papers, Duke.

²⁵ T. R. Towles to Weaver, Nov. 27, 1854, *ibid.*

convenience, but I hope not much. When I hired him I was under the impression he would be willing to serve you,—but I find he is not.

Another slave belonging to this same owner was also reluctant to return to Weaver's employ but agreed to do so under certain circumstances:

Sam has requested me to ask the favor of you, to permit him to stay at the establishment at which you live; he says he greatly prefers it. He also was unwilling to return; but says he would have no objection, provided, he could live at your own establishment. I hope, if it will not put you to much inconvenience, you will grant his request.²⁶

The slaves' wishes obviously counted for something, and the industrial employer who was unwilling to meet the basic requests of his laboring men was risking present difficulties with his work force and future problems with his hiring.

EVEN AFTER an ironmaster secured an adequate slave force, he faced other serious problems. Key factors in the success of any manufacturing concern were the efficiency, skill, and productivity of the workers; industrialists employing slave labor on a large scale faced a formidable task in attempting to discipline and, even more important, motivate unfree labor. Weaver, of course, had the power to inflict physical punishment on any recalcitrant or troublesome slave worker, but excessive dependence on force could easily backfire and lead to even greater evils: further demoralization among his slaves, a rash of runaways, an unsavory reputation among slaveowners, slave abuse of draft animals, theft, arson, or acts of industrial sabotage carried out by skilled artisans, any of which could seriously disrupt normal furnace and forge operations. The slaves, in short, were in a position to do considerable physical and financial damage to Weaver's interests, even if they limited their activities to passive forms of resistance like work slowdowns or slipshod performance of their duties. In an effort to deal with the closely related problems of discipline and motivation, Weaver very early in his career as an iron manufacturer (at least as early as the 1820s when surviving records begin) instituted an incentive system to encourage slaves to meet and exceed their tasks. Men who did more than their required amount of work were rewarded with payment, in either cash or goods, for their extra labor, or "overwork" as it was called. In adopting this incentive system Weaver was instituting a technique that had been used in Southern iron works as early as the 1790s and that continued to be used until the end of the Civil War.²⁷ The object of the overwork system was to make

²⁶ William Staples to Weaver, Jan. 4, 1830, Weaver Papers, Virginia.

²⁷ Starobin, *Industrial Slavery*, 101; see also Charles B. Dew, "David Ross and the Oxford Iron Works: A Study of Industrial Slavery in the Early Nineteenth-Century South," scheduled for publication in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, April 1974.

the industrial slave a disciplined and productive worker without having to rely heavily on physical coercion.

Payment of wood choppers for overwork illustrates the way the system operated for almost all slaves at Weaver's installations. The normal task for a wood chopper in the Virginia iron region was $1\frac{1}{2}$ cords per day, working a six-day week—Sunday was a traditional day of rest. Both employer and slave seem to have recognized the $1\frac{1}{2}$ cord requirement as the standard task, and any ironmaster who attempted to increase the customary amount of work would be engaging in a risky enterprise that might well result in extra trouble instead of extra wood. For any wood that a slave chopped over and above his $1\frac{1}{2}$ cord task, he was given credit on the company's books at the rate of 40 cents per cord, the same rate at which white wood choppers were paid. The same general system operated for every job at Weaver's furnace and forge: skilled slave ironworkers could earn overwork payments for producing more than their required quota of iron, ore-bank hands could mine and wash extra ore, colliers could tend the charcoal pits in their time off, shoemakers could make additional shoes, and even unskilled hands could earn credit, at the rate of 50 cents per day, for working at night, on Sundays, and over the traditional Christmas holidays. Other means of earning credit included weaving coal baskets; raising hogs, chickens, and eggs; packing pork; and growing corn on individual plots. Emergency situations also provided the slaves with the opportunity to earn money: if a mine had to be emptied of water, a road needed to be repaired after a storm, or a dam had to be rebuilt after a freshet.²⁸ Finally, some slaves were credited with a small "allowance," in effect a regular wage for, evidently, assuming responsibility for various phases of the furnace or forge operation. The highest allowance paid by Weaver, \$5 a month for twelve months, went to a hired slave named Joshua Crews who worked at Etna Furnace. The exact nature of Crews's duties is unclear, but since another slave was credited for "5 Sundays at Furnace under Joshua" and since Crews's compensation was exceptionally high, \$60 for the year, it seems certain that he held an important supervisory post at the furnace, perhaps a job similar to that performed by a black driver on a large plantation.²⁹ Other slave hands who were paid allowances of lesser amounts whose duties can be determined include Washington Coleman, a collier, who probably received his \$8 "coaling allowance" in 1857 for supervising one or more charcoal pits, and Bill Jones, who was paid \$1 a month for "ore carts" and was evidently in charge of the mule-drawn ore train at Etna Furnace that brought ore to the furnace site from a bank some ten miles distant.³⁰

²⁸ See entries in *Etna Furnace Negro Books*, 1854–61 and 1857–60, and *Buffalo Forge Negro Book*, 1850–58, both in *Weaver-Brady Records*, Virginia.

²⁹ See entries for Joshua Crews and Tom Duecen, *Etna Furnace Negro Books*, 1854–61 and 1857–60.

³⁰ *Etna Furnace Negro Book*, 1857–60.

Entries in the Buffalo Forge and Etna Furnace “Negro Books,” as these ledgers were called, indicate that most of the slave hands, both skilled and unskilled, used the overwork system to earn their own money. The most significant thing about these entries is the way in which they suggest how a sizable number of blacks took advantage of the system to carve out something of a private and individual life for themselves. Admittedly, in the process of earning overwork compensation the slaves were in one sense doing the ironmaster’s bidding; they finished their required tasks before they began working for themselves and thus responded positively to the employer’s attempt to motivate them. But on another level the slaves were, it seems fair to say, being their own men. They could do extra work if they wished, or they could take their time off as leisure. Even in the simple act of accepting or rejecting the overwork system, they were achieving, in at least one small phase of their existence, some measure of self-choice. If they did choose to do additional labor, the sums they earned were theirs to control, and they gained an even greater measure of personal initiative. An examination of several individual accounts will perhaps indicate what is being suggested here.

In 1858 one of Weaver’s hiring agents secured four hands—Jack, Jim, Bill, and Dabney Willoughby—from a family in eastern Virginia to work for the year. The four men were assigned to Etna Furnace where they labored as wood choppers and miners. During the year the four built up overwork credits on Weaver’s books for sums ranging from \$10.50 to \$13.50. They drew against their credit at the company store for small “luxury” items like coffee and sugar, but in June three of the men decided to use part of their money to buy themselves vacation time at home. Their request for leave was granted, and they left the furnace. While they were away they were debited at the standard overwork rate of 50 cents per day for their time off—ten days for two of the men and two weeks for the third. They returned to Etna at the end of their stay at home and served out the balance of the year. The fourth member of this group, Jim Willoughby, evidently decided not to spend his money in this fashion in order to draw as much cash as possible at the end of the year. In December, just before the four men returned home for Christmas, he drew his remaining credit in cash, which amounted to \$10.³¹

Husbanding of cash was characteristic of a number of slave hands; men like Mat Robinson, a miner, earned \$5.00 in overwork in one year, spent a carefully allotted 50 cents of it for tobacco, and then drew \$4.50 in cash in December; Elec the Collier, as he was listed in the books, earned \$13.75 for extra coaling and by raising a hog in 1857 and collected \$10.00 in cash at the Christmas break. At the other end of the spectrum was a slave like John Sims, a furnace laborer, who spent his overwork faster than he could

³¹ *Ibid.*



Fig. 3. A late nineteenth-century photograph of Buffalo Forge, Virginia, showing many of the buildings in existence during the antebellum period. In the foreground are the grist mill (center), the blacksmith shop (right), and the carpenter shop (extreme left). The harness shop is the square building in the right center, visible between the grist mill and the blacksmith shop. Immediately behind and to the left of the grist mill is the Buffalo Forge store, where slaves drew on their overwork accounts for food, tobacco, cloth, and other merchandise. The flour mill can be seen in the left background, and the mule stable stands between this building and the carpenter shop. The guest cottage and Weaver's home are on the hill overlooking these structures (right background). Photograph courtesy Mr. T. T. Brady, Richmond, Virginia.

earn it on tobacco, coffee, and clothing. Sims ended the year 1858 owing the company store \$6.84 but was able to work off his debt the following year by Sunday labor and ore washing, and he made enough additional compensation to continue his purchases of coffee and tobacco on a fairly regular basis.³²

Sims's case illustrates a second major intent of the overwork system. In addition to motivating the slaves to become efficient and productive workers, it could be used by the employer as a disciplinary tool. Sims had a taste for consumer goods that outran his ability to pay for them, and the furnace manager allowed him to indulge himself to the point where Sims was forced to do extra work in order to pay off his debt. The ledgers also show that slaves who failed to meet their normal task could have the value of their unfinished work deducted from whatever credit they had built up. Two hired slaves, Reubin and Dudley Camack, were, respectively, five and

³² *Ibid.*



Fig. 4. Black and white colliers atop a charcoal pile in the upper South during the nineteenth century (probably the 1870s). Note the chopped wood stacked and ready for coaling in the left background. Photograph courtesy Mr. William T. Turner, University of Kentucky, Hopkinsville Community College.

seven cords of wood short when a check of wood choppers was made in August 1858. As a result, they were debited for their shortages at the rate of 40 cents per cord, the same amount paid for cutting extra wood. Several other slaves suffered similar deductions for unfinished tasks as miners and wood choppers. In all of these cases, however, the slaves were able to work off their debt and build up additional credit in their favor, usually by turning to some alternative form of labor for which they received payment. The two Camack slaves, for example, removed their debt for unfinished wood chopping by Sunday labor. In fact it may be that these two men purposely came in short on their wood cutting, intending to make up their deficiency by working together on Sundays. This is suggested by the fact that most of the slave choppers met the $1\frac{1}{2}$ cords per day task with relative ease, and, in this particular case, both of the men worked the same number of Sundays, twenty. They drew on their accounts for flour, coffee, sugar, and tobacco during the year and ended their term of service in December with cash coming to them.³³ Wood choppers were not highly skilled workers in the charcoal iron industry, but they still could amass consider-

³³ *Ibid.*

able amounts of overwork credit if they chose to do so. To cite one example, over a two year period a black chopper named Daniel Henry working at Glenwood Furnace in Rockbridge County cut 248½ cords over his required task, worked 36 Sundays, and made 36 standard-size charcoal measuring baskets in his spare time. His overwork earnings for the two years totaled \$127.66, which he drew mainly in coffee and other store purchases during the year, but he had enough credit remaining at the end of each year to make fairly substantial Christmas purchases—\$22.58 in 1847 and \$13.50 in 1848.³⁴

The slaves who were generally in the best position to take advantage of the overwork system, however, were the more skilled artisans. Weaver's own forge hands regularly earned relatively large sums by heating, working, and finishing extra tonnages of iron at Buffalo Forge. Sam Williams, Henry Towles, Jim Garland, Henry Mathews, Tooler, and Henry Hunt, Jr., all slave ironworkers owned by Weaver, were paid from \$3 to \$5 per ton for their overwork, and all of these men used their exceptional position to good advantage. Henry Towles, for example, who was a heater at the forge, was credited with \$31.80 in overwork in 1852, \$36.16 in 1853, \$55.28 in 1855, and \$93.53 in 1856. In 1858, when his account was transferred to a new ledger, he carried a balance of \$102.53 in his favor to the new book. Towles drew most of his overwork in cash, but another of Weaver's forge hands, Henry Hunt, Jr., used the credit he earned primarily to buy quality clothing, like three \$6 coats and a \$4 pair of pants in 1850 and "1 fine suit (coat & pants)" valued at \$18 in 1854.³⁵ The individualism of each slave shows through clearly in these and other accounts: John White, who chopped 43¼ extra cords of wood in 1856, Allen Jackson, who devoted his off hours in 1856 to raising chickens and a hog, and Landis Cartmill, a skilled basket weaver who earned \$17.32 in 1857 by making fifty-two charcoal baskets for Etna Furnace.³⁶

The case of Sam Williams demonstrates the degree to which a skilled industrial slave could use his training and ability to live a life that probably deserves to be called quasi-free, or something like it. Williams worked molten iron into finished merchant bars at Buffalo Forge and received the highest overwork rate paid to any of Weaver's forge hands, \$5 per ton. He, like a number of Weaver's skilled slaves, also had individual plots of land at the forge that were laid off and planted in the spring by the regular force of agricultural workers. These farm hands, including the white overseer, a white agricultural laborer, and several slaves, planted the plots along with Weaver's own fields as part of the spring corn planting.³⁷ Williams and the

³⁴ Glenwood Furnace Negro Book, 1847-49, Anderson Ledgers, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va.

³⁵ Buffalo Forge Negro Book, 1850-58.

³⁶ Etna Furnace Negro Book, 1857-60.

³⁷ Entries for Apr. 23, 27, 1861, Daniel C. E. Brady, *Home Journal*, 1860-65, McCormick Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis.

other forge hands then worked their own lots during the summer, and when they brought in their crops they could either sell them to Weaver or consume them themselves. By working extra tonnages of iron, growing corn, and raising hogs, Williams earned enough cash during the 1850s to supplement his own and his wife's diet with regular purchases of sugar and coffee, buy "3 yds. cotton cloth for Nancy," his wife, to cite one 1855 entry, and, most surprising of all, open a savings account at a Lexington bank.³⁸ Williams, who was forty years of age in 1860, played an important part in establishing the high reputation that Weaver's "W" brand bar iron enjoyed among Virginia blacksmiths and commission merchants, and Williams obviously used his skills to improve materially the quality of the life he and his wife were able to lead under slavery.³⁹

One of the most significant ways in which the overwork system allowed male slaves to achieve some measure of personal dignity and pride was the opportunity it gave men like Sam Williams to provide cash or small luxuries for their wives. Tooler, a skilled slave artisan who had been raised at Buffalo Forge, drew \$5 in cash to send to his wife in 1850, and other entries in his account show that he used part of his overwork credit in 1852 to make three trips to Lynchburg, perhaps to see his wife. Other examples of men using their overwork credit to acquire items for their wives include Bill Jones, the ore cart supervisor at Etna Furnace, "1 pair Brogans for his wife," \$2, and for a slave identified as "Daniel Dumb Boy," several entries for "cash to Louisa."⁴⁰

Additional evidence of slave marriages appears elsewhere in the records of Weaver's enterprises. A number of slaves, both hired and owned by Weaver, who had wives in the vicinity regularly left Buffalo Forge after the work day ended on Saturday to visit their wives and returned in time for work on Monday morning.⁴¹ Slave men whose wives lived longer distances away sometimes tried to deal with this separation in their own way.

³⁸ Buffalo Forge Negro Book, 1850-58; John A. Rex to J. D. Davidson, Feb. 25, 1855, Davidson Papers. The text of the letter from Rex, another one of Weaver's nephews, to Davidson, a Lexington lawyer, reads as follows: "I wish to ask you one question whether Sam Williams can draw his money from the Savings Bank or if he cannot. As Sam and Henry Nash has got a bet for his watch against the said Nash[s] watch. It is my opinion that he can draw his money if he gives the Directors of the Bank 10 days notice. After he receives the money he wishes to show it to Henry Nash, and then he will return the said money back to the Bank again. As I was witness to the said bargain." Davidson noted on the rear of this letter that he had directed Rex "to confer with Wm Weaver" about the matter. Henry Nash was a free black cooper who lived in the vicinity of Buffalo Forge. Manuscript Population Schedules, Rockbridge County, Virginia, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860.

³⁹ Williams's age is given in a "Descriptive List of Negroes at Buffalo Forge, Rockbridge Co., Va.," 1865, Weaver Papers, Duke; he is described as five feet ten inches tall and his color is listed as "yellow." On the quality of Weaver's iron, see William D. Couch to Weaver, Feb. 9, 1859; McCorkle & Co. to Weaver, Feb. 22, 1859; and Thomas G. Godwin to Weaver, Mar. 2, 1859, all *ibid*.

⁴⁰ Buffalo Forge Negro Book, 1850-58, and Etna Furnace Negro Book, 1857-60; Jordan Davis & Co. to Weaver, Oct. 11, 31, 1831, Weaver Papers, Duke.

⁴¹ See entries in Brady, Home Journal.

Booker, a slave chopper at Etna in 1854, was noted in the furnace time-book as having "lost two weeks going to see his wife." Perhaps he had permission to make this trip, however, since his overwork account shows that he was docked only 50 cents, one day's pay, on April 28, 1854, as a "day lost going to see wife."⁴² Even more revealing is a letter from Weaver's manager at Etna Furnace describing his difficulties with two hands in 1862:

You ask about Griffen. I consider him a trifling hand.—He laid up here very often & for long periods—but it was only when we worked him about the Furnace[;] he laid up so often that we had finally to take him away. Par objected to changing so often. tell him that you will put him in the wood chopping when he gets well. & I will guarentee he will soon be out—that is his object now in laying up. I found that he laid up very seldom when he could get a chance to run to his wife.⁴³

The incidence of slave resistance at Weaver's installations is difficult to judge, but if this letter is indicative, the problems of slave motivation and efficiency were not by any means completely solved by the overwork system. In order for the system to work, Weaver's slave hands had to exceed their required tasks voluntarily, and if the slave were a skilled artisan, Weaver and his managers were apparently willing to tolerate a certain amount of neglect of duty in order to avoid difficulty with key black personnel. This point can be illustrated by the work records of several of the Buffalo Forge slaves contained in a daily journal kept by Weaver's nephew-in-law and second in command, Daniel C. E. Brady, from October 1860 to June 1865. Tooler, one of Weaver's heaters, is frequently described by Brady as "loafing," but there is no indication that Tooler was disciplined, physically or otherwise, for his performance; when he was running out iron or drawing bars he regularly earned substantial overtime credit that was not docked for his slipshod work on other occasions. Edgar, a miller who worked at Weaver's flour mill, is another slave who is listed as "loafing" on numerous occasions, again with no record of punishment. Most of the Buffalo Forge slave hands, however, are regularly listed at their jobs with no indication that Weaver or Brady were dissatisfied with their performance. Sam Williams is typical of this larger group; "Sam at work" is the most consistent entry in Brady's journal, perhaps because Williams was putting something away for himself at that bank in Lexington.⁴⁴

Unskilled slave workers had much less leverage with Weaver and his managers, of course, but they did have the power to accept or reject the master's incentives and they had rights set by tradition if not by law—like a reasonable daily task, Christmas holidays, and Sundays off—that they would go considerable lengths to defend. The slaves' insistence on their

⁴² Etna Furnace Time Book, and Etna Furnace Negro Book, 1854–61, Weaver-Brady Records, Virginia.

⁴³ W. W. Rex to Brady, Mar. 22, 1862, Weaver Papers, Virginia.

⁴⁴ Entries in Brady, Home Journal.

annual Christmas vacation is demonstrated in a report Weaver's furnace managers made in November 1830 explaining why they would not be able to keep the furnace in blast during the entire month of December:

We had thought [of] blowing through the Christmas holy days and going on as long as possible, but as our white hands are few and the most part of the blacks will be going home and the few remaining not willing to be closely confined we have concluded to stop up for a short time during Christmas.⁴⁵

Similarly, a potentially explosive altercation at Etna Furnace in 1854 showed the risks one of Weaver's own slaves was willing to take in order to maintain Sunday as a day he alone controlled.

Anthony was told saterday evening to start to [Buffalo] forge this morning [Sunday]—I waited till about 10 oclock and finding that he had not started I asked him the reason[.] he said it was Sunday and that he was not going till tomorrow—with some other impudence to me I collared him and he resisted & struck me—I struck him on the head with a rock. you please will see about the matter.

The irate manager closed his letter with a significant postscript: "He said that this was Sunday and his day and that he was not going [to] take it up in going to your place."⁴⁶ Unfortunately there is no information in surviving records that reveals whether Weaver inflicted further punishment on his bondsman, but the incident shows clearly the determination of one slave to preserve his day of rest and probably speaks for a view that was universally held among Southern slaves, industrial and otherwise.

The most serious labor difficulties at Weaver's installations were caused by slaves running away, but this evidently did not become a major problem until late in the Civil War. Between 1829 and 1861 at least thirteen slaves ran off from Weaver's employ, with the bulk of these flights (ten of the thirteen) occurring during several years in the late 1820s and early 1830s when a manager at one of Weaver's iron works evidently caused a considerable amount of dissatisfaction among the slave force. All but one of these runaways were hired slaves who returned to the counties in eastern Virginia from which they had been secured and there either hid out in the vicinity of their homes until recaptured or, in several instances, came in to their owners with accounts of mistreatment by overseers, sickness, or bad food.⁴⁷ But the runaway problem did not seriously endanger Weaver's furnace and forge operations at any time during the antebellum period, and

⁴⁵ Jordan Davis & Co. to Weaver, Nov. 24, 1830, Weaver Papers, Duke.

⁴⁶ John K. Watkins to Weaver, July 30, 1854, *ibid.*

⁴⁷ William Watson for Joel W. Brown, Jailor, to Post Master, Lexington, Va., Apr. 19, 1829; W. E. Dickinson to Abraham Davis, Apr. 19, 1829; James C. Dickinson to Weaver, May 10, 1829; James Rose to Weaver, Mar. 8, 1830; Elizabeth Mathews to Weaver, Mar. 29, 1830; Lewis Rawlings to Weaver, Aug. 22, 1832; Charles Perrow to Weaver, Sept. 17, Oct. 26, 1833; and John A. Turpim to Weaver, Aug. 28, 1854, all in Weaver Papers, Duke; Henry A. McCormick to Weaver, Dec. 29, 1855, Weaver Papers, Virginia; see also entries under "Lawson," *Etna Furnace Negro Book*, 1857–60.

this was true of the first three years of the war as well.⁴⁸ In June 1864, however, a large scale cavalry raid by Union forces commanded by General David Hunter swept through the valley iron district and provided several of the Buffalo Forge slaves with an opportunity to gain their freedom. "I regret to inform you that your boy Beverly went off with the enemy upon that raid through this country on 12 June," Daniel Brady informed the owner of a hired slave. "I lost three of my own men at the same time," he continued, and "I was fortunate in escaping myself & sustaining no loss of other property."⁴⁹ In all, five Buffalo Forge slaves made it to freedom with Hunter's troopers; and included in the three escaped slaves who had belonged to Weaver was Warder, a skilled teamster who had hauled pig iron and supplies between Etna Furnace and the forge for a number of years. More of the Buffalo Forge hands undoubtedly would have fled had they not been moved to an isolated farm on the day the federals occupied Lexington.⁵⁰ The forge property itself escaped destruction, and Union troops did not reappear in the vicinity for the remainder of the war.

When a reasonably good chance for successful escape presented itself, black ironworkers, like the vast majority of slaves throughout the South, wasted little time in striking for freedom. In the absence of such an opportunity, however, Weaver's black artisans and laborers appear to have learned how to live with, and cope with, industrial slave conditions. Perhaps the most impressive evidence underscoring this point came in the transition from slavery to freedom at the close of the Civil War. Three brief entries in journals kept at Buffalo Forge by Daniel Brady describe events of monumental significance for the black men, women, and children working and living there:

Friday May 26, 1865 Declared free by order of the military authorities.

Saturday May 27, 1865 All hands quit work as they considered themselves free. I made a speech to them, & read the order No 2 of Genl Gregg. J G Updike, Alex Hamilton, Jno D Ewing, W W Rex & Thos Edwards present.

Monday May 29, 1865 Commenced work on free labor.⁵¹

Brady, who assumed ownership and primary direction of all of Weaver's properties when Weaver died in March 1863, did not write down what he said in his address, but subsequent events make clear that he told the newly freed blacks that he intended to keep Buffalo Forge in operation and continue farming on the Weaver lands. Those workers who wished to keep their jobs could do so, and they would be paid on a piecework or wage basis depending on the specific position they held. The general orders that Brady read to the assembled workers had been issued by General J. Irvin Gregg, the

⁴⁸ Two slaves tried to escape in 1863 but were apprehended in Lynchburg. Brady to James D. Davidson, Dec. 9, 1863, Davidson Papers.

⁴⁹ Brady to James Stewart, July 7, 1864, Weaver Papers, Virginia.

⁵⁰ Entries for June 11, 12, 14, 1864, Brady, Home Journal.

⁵¹ Buffalo Forge Journal, 1859-66, Weaver-Brady Records, Virginia; Brady, Home Journal.

federal commander of the military subdistrict of Lynchburg, on May 18, 1865, and they were published in the Lynchburg press five days later. Gregg's orders contained both a declaration of the former slaves' rights and a statement of their responsibilities:

The operation of existing laws is to make them *free*, but not to give them any claim whatever upon, or rights in connection with the property of former owners. They are at liberty to make any contract or agreement concerning themselves that a white man may, and equally bound to abide by it.

The former masters had "the right to refuse them anything that he might deny to a perfect stranger," the orders continued, "and is no more bound to feed, clothe, or protect them than if he had never been their master." The freedmen might "remain with him if he and they both desire it, and agree on the terms, in which case each party is equally bound by the contract." The orders concluded by admonishing blacks "that they must work for their support now, the same as before they were free; in some instances, perhaps, even harder" and informed them that "destitute" rations would not be issued to able-bodied laborers unless they could show they had tried but were unable to obtain work. A final paragraph read:

All colored persons living in the country, are informed that it is much better for them to remain there than to come to the already over-stocked city, and that they will not be permitted to come here for work or subsistence, unless they cannot obtain them where they are.⁵²

With Brady offering continued employment and with the military authorities in Lynchburg telling the freedmen in rather blunt language to keep their present jobs, some forty-three men and women, almost the entire black work force at Buffalo Forge when emancipation occurred, accepted labor contracts. Work resumed "on free labor," as Brady described it in his journal on May 29, 1865, three days after the slaves learned officially that they were free.⁵³

The length of time the freedmen remained at Buffalo Forge offers the only real evidence as to their motives for staying on. For some, the military's position seems to have been a deciding factor. Two men who had been hired at the beginning of 1865 left within a matter of days after signing their contracts and two of Weaver's former slaves quit in mid-July. Six men who had been hired from the same household—George, Bob, John, William, Alfred, and Stephen Glasgow—all signed three-month contracts to chop wood, served out the terms of their agreement, and then departed. Perhaps Gregg's General Orders No. 2 had some influence on them and on the remainder of those who did not work beyond 1865; eleven of the

⁵² Lynchburg *Daily Virginian*, May 23, 1865.

⁵³ Buffalo Forge Negro Book, 1865–72.

forty-three who signed initial contracts had left by August 30 and seven more departed by the end of the year. For the twenty-one who can be identified as working into 1866 and beyond, however, the decision to remain seems to have been a choice they themselves made. Included in this number were almost all of the skilled artisans who had drawn and hammered Weaver's iron during the antebellum and Civil War years.⁵⁴

For those freedmen who began working at Buffalo Forge on the morning of May 29, 1865, conversion to a wage basis presented few problems since all the laboring force was familiar with the overwork system. Now the men would be paid for all the work they did, and they would assume the responsibility of providing for themselves and their families. Sam Williams, Henry Towles, Henry Mathews, Henry Hunt, Jr., and Tooler all signed contracts to work for three months at \$4 per ton for all the iron they produced, while they furnished their food and other supplies out of their wages. Sam Williams's wife, Nancy, went to work as a dairymaid at \$4 a month. Williams and his wife were still working at Buffalo Forge in 1872, as were Towles, Mathews, and Hunt, when their accounts were transferred to a new ledger, and they can no longer be traced in surviving records; Tooler's accounts were closed in December 1868. Most of the remaining freedmen at Buffalo Forge who had once belonged to Weaver also accepted initial contracts of three months' duration for work as forge hands, wood choppers, shoemakers, carpenters, teamsters, and farmworkers. As mentioned above, employment was also offered to those men who had been hired at the beginning of 1865 for a year's labor. A number of these men had been employed by Weaver and Brady on a regular basis for a considerable length of time, some since the 1850s, and they formed the bulk of the freedmen who signed on as wood cutters, at the rate of 66 ²/₃ cents per cord. Generally those men who had been hired as slaves stayed for shorter periods of time than the more skilled workers who had previously been owned by Weaver. But a sizable number of the former hired slave hands served out their three-month contracts, others remained until the end of the year, and several worked for two or three years.⁵⁵

LOOKING BACK over the entire black labor experience at Weaver's iron works, the smooth and rapid conversion to a free labor situation in 1865 seems particularly significant. Both skilled and unskilled workers in appreciable numbers made the transition to a wage basis at the jobs they had held as slaves, a pattern that was repeated by slave artisans and laborers at other

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* In the case of four of the forty-three who signed contracts, it is impossible to determine from their accounts how long they remained.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

iron works not only in Virginia but elsewhere in the South.⁵⁶ Even though local military officers might not like it, those workers who did not wish to remain at Buffalo Forge could leave; some did so at once, some left after several weeks or at the expiration of their initial contracts, and some stayed for years. Those who remained for more extended periods did so not because of military compulsion or because slavery had infantilized them or rendered them incapable of making a decision without white guidance; they stayed, it seems clear, simply because they saw an opportunity to use the skills they had acquired under slavery to earn a living for themselves and, for those with wives and children, for their families. Equally important, it seems fair to say that they had not been so mistreated as industrial slaves that they could not continue to work in the same job at the same place after emancipation. This is not meant to suggest that slavery under Weaver, Brady, and their various managers was an institution that lay lightly on the shoulders of the black laborers who worked Weaver's furnace, forge, and fields. Weaver's slaves were sometimes whipped,⁵⁷ black (and white) ironworkers occasionally suffered from the poor quality or inadequate food and clothing available at the blast furnace site,⁵⁸ and Weaver was not above selling several slaves into Louisiana in the late 1850s when he thought their conduct warranted it.⁵⁹ Perhaps most important of all, the black men and women who manned Weaver's operations had to cope psychologically with the prospect that the rest of their lives would in all likelihood be spent in bondage. But at the same time, day in and day out, the central tendency at Weaver's installations was for slavery to function more through mutual accommodation than outright repression. Because Weaver had to go into a tight hiring market year after year and because the success of his various enterprises was, in many ways, controlled by the slaves he employed, measures like compensation for overwork grew into features of

⁵⁶ Records documenting the transition of a large number of black workers from slave to free labor almost identical to that which occurred at Buffalo Forge can be found in the Graham Ledgers and Papers, dealing with the operations of David Graham's iron works in Wythe County in southwestern Virginia, in the University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va.; see especially Ledgers "L" 1857-59, "M" 1859-64, "N" 1864-68, and "E" 1868-71. For the post-war use of a substantial force of former slave workers by the most important Richmond iron manufacturer, see Charles B. Dew, *Ironmaker to the Confederacy: Joseph R. Anderson and the Tredegar Iron Works* (New Haven, 1966), 313-14; for a similar transition of black labor from slavery to freedom at a major Alabama iron works in 1865, see Robert H. McKenzie, "The Shelby Iron Company: A Note on Slave Personality after the Civil War," *Journal of Negro History*, 58 (1973): 341-48.

⁵⁷ At least two instances of hired slaves being whipped can be documented; see Jordan Davis & Co. to Weaver, May 26, 1830; and William W. Rex to Brady, Oct. 26, 1860, both in Weaver Papers, Duke.

⁵⁸ See Jordan Davis & Co. to Weaver, Mar. 25, Aug. 11, 1830; Jordan Davis & Co. to Abraham W. Davis, Aug. 24, 1830; Charles K. Gorgas to Brady, Mar. 11, Apr. 2, 1860; William W. Rex to Brady, May 29, June 29, Sept. 6, 21, 26, Oct. 13, 1860; and Rex to Weaver, Aug. 7, 1860, all *ibid.*; Gorgas to Weaver, Mar. 29, Apr. 6, 1859; and Rex to Brady, Mar. 15, 1861, Weaver Papers, Virginia.

⁵⁹ J. E. Carson to Weaver, Mar. 12, May 30, June 27, 1859; William W. Rex to Weaver, Aug. 15, 1860; and G. W. Johnson to Weaver, Oct. 29, 1860, all in Weaver Papers, Duke.

primary importance in the functioning of his slave system. And because of things like the overwork system, black and white managed to find a way to live together at Weaver's iron works without maltreatment and excessive use of physical force permanently poisoning relations between the two groups. In this instance, industrial slavery did not totally degrade and brutalize the black workers; in fact it seems in some ways to have done something quite different, to have provided these men with an environment in which they could develop some sense of personal dignity and individual initiative in spite of the psychological and physical confines of their bondage. Or at least so it appears. If this analysis is correct, then we clearly need to take a closer look at the industrial phase of the South's peculiar institution. Such an examination may tell us a good deal about the nature of slavery in the American South.