

The Master-Slave Relationship at Poplar Forest Plantation  
During the Antebellum Period

Research Week Symposium Proposal

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In 1828 Poplar Forest Plantation, the former retreat home of Thomas Jefferson, was sold by his grandson, Francis Eppes, to William Cobbs. When his daughter, Emma, also known as Emily, married Edward Sixtus Hutter, from Pennsylvania, Cobbs requested that Hutter and Emma live with him and his wife, Emma's mother, Marion at Poplar Forest. Cobbs intended for Hutter to manage the plantation. Hutter obliged and soon found himself in an interdependent relationship with the Poplar Forest slaves, as implied by the language of farm journal entries, account books, and letters. Therefore, the Poplar Forest Plantation is an impressive display of the relationship of reciprocity between master and slave in the patriarchal society of the Antebellum South.

Slavery was not an uncommon institution. Through the centuries people have practiced subjugating others to work for their master's economic gain. However, American slavery was unique in that it subjugated an entire race of people, their children, and descendants. This created a complex situation that demanded some type of relationship between master and slave. This demand gave rise to the patriarchal society in the Old South, in which the masters viewed themselves as the slaves' caretakers and providers, since, in their minds, the African slaves were cognitively inferior to the European Americans. However, because paternalism insisted upon a mutual obligation of duties, and responsibilities, it forced the master to recognize the slaves' humanity.<sup>1</sup> By recognizing that humanity, the master acknowledged his slave's talents, abilities, and that his slave had a free will. This recognition laid the foundation for the reciprocal relationship between a master and his slaves.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1976: 5

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Hutter's move to Poplar Forest Plantation created a peculiar patriarchal situation. With Cobb's living there, and being the owner of the plantation, a dual patriarchy must have existed. Although Edward managed the details of the plantation, Cobb's authority had been recognized, as in the situation involving the overseer, Edmund Mills, and a slave, Smith. Smith responded to Mill's reprimand with harsh words, to which Mills slapped Smith. Smith proceeded to grab Mills and throw him down, then ran away. In a letter to Hutter, Emma explains the situation then stated that, "Mr. Mills didn't whip him but asked father what to do. He rode out but Smith ran away."<sup>3</sup>

Albeit, Edward was away, but it still appears that the labor force continued to recognize Cobb's authority even after Edward became manager.

There was also another powerful influence in the Cobbs/Hutter family. Marion Cobbs had some control over the plantation affairs as well. In a letter to Edward she notes that,

"The wheat has been thrashed out and but nothing else to do to it. I put your man Red out to work with Mills until you get home he would not obey me, I thought it best not to have anything to do with him but put him out to work."<sup>4</sup>

Even though Marion had trouble with this slave, she still had the authority to send him to Mills. It seems that not only did Hutter have to share his authority with his father-in-law, but his mother-in-law as well.

Like most plantation patriarchs in the Antebellum South, Hutter provided housing for his slaves. The slave quarters were not far from the main house, yet they were worlds apart in design. This idea of "race and space," as a factor in understanding plantation relationships, was

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<sup>3</sup> Emily Williams Cobbs Hutter to Edward Sixtus Hutter, September 1, 1841, Hutter Letters Collection, The Corporation for Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, Forest, VA.

<sup>4</sup> Marion Scott Cobbs to Edward Sixtus Hutter, September 14, 1841, Hutter Letters Collection, The Corporation for Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, Forest, VA.

first noted by archaeologist John Solomon Otto.<sup>5</sup> The plantation master kept a distinction between class and race in the landscape design by the architectural differences between the main house, the overseer's house, and slave cabins.<sup>6</sup>

Near the main house at Poplar Forest are two brick houses, known since 1884 as "tenant houses." These structures are very similar, however, the north tenant house has a "more refined exterior with brick corbelling forming a masonry cornice along the west façade of the structure, gabled chimneys and more refined interior trim," than the south tenant house.<sup>7</sup> Even though there is only thirty-two feet of space between the houses, by the design of each, it is most likely that the north tenant house was occupied by an overseer, while a slave family occupied the south, as well as an excavated log cabin near the latter, implying the possibility of other log cabins in that area.<sup>8</sup> Through the subtle differences between the two houses, and obvious difference between them and the log cabin, Hutter maintained the patriarchal society's distinction of inequality between classes and race on the Poplar Forest Plantation.

Food provision was another obligation of the plantation patriarch. Pork, corn, and other vegetables were the common provision in the Antebellum South.<sup>9</sup> Neither Hutter's Farm Journal nor his Account Book list any type of food provision for the slaves, except for a pork purchase totaling \$213.50, in 1856, which would have provided for the whole plantation.<sup>10</sup> Hutter did allow his slaves to grow their own gardens, called patches, and gave them time off, now and

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Heath and Lori Lee, "Memory, Race, and Place," *History Compass* 8,12 (2010): 1353.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Heath and Lori Lee, "Memory, Race, and Place," *History Compass* 8,12 (2010): 1353.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1357.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1356.

<sup>9</sup> Lori Lee, "Consumerism Social Practice and Slavery: Consumer Practices Among Enslaved Laborers at Poplar Forest Plantation (1828-1861)" (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 2016), 131.

<sup>10</sup> Hutter Account Book 1856-1861, Hutter Documents Collection, The Corporation for Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, Forest, VA.

then, to tend to them.<sup>11</sup> Archaeological evidence of a slave quarter site, and the sub-floor pit of a cabin on the site, shows that most slaves grew their own corn. Hutter would sell the slave's corn at the market for them. For those unable to grow corn, Hutter possibly provided them with the staple.<sup>12</sup> Other remains, such as a starchy substance, likely a potato, were also found at the site indicating that the slaves possibly grew those as well.<sup>13</sup>

However, wheat was provided for the slaves, as they were restricted from growing it in their quarters due to its economic value. Wheat provisions were limited, in order to deter the slaves from claiming they grew it and attempt to sell it at the market.<sup>14</sup>

Pork and beef were provided to the slaves by Hutter. The enslaved at Poplar Forest supplemented their meat provision with eggs from chickens they raised themselves.

Archaeological evidence from the slave quarter site show pig as the most consumed of domestic meat, yet the percentage of wild meat that was consumed was higher.<sup>15</sup> The enslaved at Poplar Forest were adept at hunting for other forms of meat.

In the Antebellum South, hard work, producing economic gain, was performed by the slaves as reciprocity for their masters' care. (Reciprocity is a reversible term, in that the master also reciprocates for the income he receives for his slaves' labor.) Hutter was no different. His slaves worked Monday through Saturday, with Sundays and holidays off, as was common in the antebellum period. Field laborers performed multiple labor intensive tasks that varied by season. Clear Spring days would find them planting corn, wheat, and sweet potatoes. Orchards were

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<sup>11</sup> Hutter Farm Journal, Hutter Documents Collection, The Corporation for Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, Forest, VA.

<sup>12</sup> Lori Lee, "Consumerism Social Practice and Slavery: Consumer Practices Among Enslaved Laborers at Poplar Forest Plantation (1828-1861)" (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 2016), 131.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 137.

tended to as well as hauling rocks, and digging ditches.<sup>16</sup> This is just a few of the multiple Spring tasks. Summer days were filled with cultivating and weeding corn, and cutting wheat. Also, clearing land, and digging more ditches.<sup>17</sup> Again, these are only a few of all the tasks performed. Fall was harvest and market time, then clean up.<sup>18</sup> Odd jobs were done in the Winter.<sup>19</sup>

These plantation details, and more, are recorded in Hutter's Farm Journal. From 1844-1854 Hutter recorded the details of daily activity performed by the slaves. With the amount of work performed by the slaves, it would seem that they had no time for other jobs, yet they built or repaired slave cabins, tend to livestock, and take produce to the market.<sup>20</sup>

Extra income was earned for Hutter by hiring out his slaves to industries or local farmers. Slaves at Poplar Forest had a small bit of control in their leasing. It was possibly used as incentive to keep the slaves under control and prevent their running away.<sup>21</sup> In 1852, Hutter intended to lease out his slave, Peter, to his brother at the Sandusky Plantation in Lynchburg. Peter refused and Hutter did not force him to go.<sup>22</sup>

Hutter leased out domestic servants as well. He notes in a letter, to a potential leaser, the qualities of his domestic servants:

“Eliza, 14 good for nurse.  
\$500.00 for good cook.  
Peggy, 9- let go for her victuals and clothes.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 122

<sup>17</sup> Lori Lee, “Consumerism Social Practice and Slavery: Consumer Practices Among Enslaved Laborers at Poplar Forest Plantation (1828-1861)” (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 2016), 122.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Hutter Farm Journal, HutterDocuments Collection, Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, Forest, VA.

<sup>21</sup> Lori Lee, “Social Practices of African Americans at Poplar Forest” (paper presented at the Society for Archaeology Annual Conference, Baltimore, MD, January 7, 2012), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.,1

Concerning Peggy, he continued with, “her uniform and proper behavior and the demand for her cause me to give her a choice in the selection of a home.”<sup>24</sup>

As with Peter, Hutter allowed Peggy a say in the matter of where she will go.

The two slaves that brought in the most income for Hutter were Ned and Tom. They were field laborers who were young, healthy, and strong.<sup>25</sup> Ned and Tom were often hired out by Hutter for large amounts. January 2, 1858, Hutter hired out Ned for \$225.00. To compare, two days prior, December 31, 1857, a slave, Washington, was hired out for only \$135.00. <sup>26</sup> Grant it, factors may have been different for each situation, but it still appears that Ned is valuable to Hutter.

To keep record of the income earned from his slaves Hutter created an account book from the years 1856-1861. The income from his crops, hiring out, and other means were recorded monthly and totaled to discern a profit or deficit for that month and year-to-date, then again at the end of the year. Three of the years, 1856, 1857, and 1859 had a deficit averaging \$2,232.50.<sup>27</sup> The three remaining years averaged a profit of \$2,596.42.<sup>28</sup> Even though there is a small difference it seems that the plantation system, at least for Hutter during these years, was a profitable industry.

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<sup>24</sup> Lori Lee, “Social Practices of African Americans at Poplar Forest” (paper presented at the Society for Archaeology Annual Conference, Baltimore, MD, January 7, 2012), 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>26</sup> Hutter Account Book, Hutter Documents Collection, The Corporation for Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest, Forest, VA.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

A note of interdependence between Hutter and his slaves sounds throughout their relationship. Without his slaves, Hutter would not have his income and the slaves depended on Hutter for food, shelter, and other provisions. Within this interdependent relationship Hutter and his slaves had to live and work together daily, except times when Edward was away. The atmosphere created, in each, an affection for the other. In a letter to Emma, Edward asked about Ned, Aunt Lucy, and Letitia. He commented, “I presume that they have forgotten me entirely.”<sup>29</sup>

Another letter, from Emma to Edward, notes that John Echols, a slave, had been banging on Emma’s door, calling out, “Where’s maste Sixtus?”<sup>30</sup>

Concerning the death of Hutter’s and Emma’s infant daughter, Emma commented that, “at least Lishy (Letitia) was there.”<sup>31</sup> It appears that Hutter and Emma had a fondness for, at least, some of their slaves.

Illness and death among the slaves tended to plague Poplar Forest from time to time. This can cause a problem for the reciprocal relationship. Without the manpower to work, production would decrease, and income would fall. This was a concern for plantation masters, Hutter not excluded. His father, Christian Hutter noted concern, in 1846, of the deaths of five slaves between March and August:<sup>32</sup>

“You certainly have had uncommon bad luck with your blackies since I left you- however as neither mismanagement or neglect on your part can be attributed to yourself.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Edward Sixtus Hutter to Emily Williams Cobbs Hutter, May 6, 1840, Hutter Letters Collection, The Corporation for Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest, Forest, VA.

<sup>30</sup> Emily Williams Cobbs Hutter to Edward Sixtus Hutter, September 1, 1841, Hutter Letters Collection, The Corporation for Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest, Forest, VA.

<sup>31</sup> Emily Williams Cobbs Hutter to Edward Sixtus Hutter, May 13, 1842, The Hutter Letters Collection, The Corporation for Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest, Forest, VA.

<sup>32</sup> Hutter Farm Journal, Hutter Documents Collection, The Corporation for Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest, Forest, VA.

<sup>33</sup> Christian Jacob Hutter to Edward Sixtus Hutter, June 15, 1846, Hutter Letters Collection, Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest, Forest, VA.

Christian reassures Edward that he has done nothing wrong in the management of his slaves. However, just one and a half months later, on July 31, Christian appears to have had a change of heart towards the institution of slavery, at least on Edward's part:

“You have been truly unfortunate with your black family don't you think that God make use of this (work?) to appize you that he does not approve of the holding of such property?”<sup>34</sup>

When a Poplar Forest slave passed away Hutter was not allowed to bury them in the church cemetery. Hutter belonged to St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Bedford County and took some of his slaves to worship with him and his family. Even though burial was denied for the slaves, church officials conducted funerals for the Hutter slaves. Rector R.H. Wilmer officiated at a funeral for six slaves on July 13, 1856.<sup>35</sup> On a lighter note, some of the Poplar Forest slave marriages were also conducted by church officials at St. Stephens.<sup>36</sup>

Whether the affections the Hutter family and their slaves had for each other was genuine, or forged by a situation that was forced by one party, can only be discerned by the personal reflection of those involved. However, after the Emancipation, Emma was grieved that Matilda, her servant, was leaving. Matilda responded by leaving her daughter, Margaret (13 years old), and her son, Phil (11 years old), until other arrangements to hire a servant could be made. Matilda's niece, Ellen (20 years old), also remained with Emma for a while.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Christian Jacob Hutter to Edward Sixtus Hutter, July 31, 1846, Hutter Letters Collection, The Corporation for Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, Forest, VA.

<sup>35</sup> Helen Strange Patterson, *St. Stephen's Episcopal Church of Bedford County Virginia: Historical Records & Registers Russel Parish 1824 to 1846, Hamner Parish 1846 to 1915, Cemetary Records from 1824 to 1980* (Forest, VA: The Hitorical Records Committee, 1983).

<sup>36</sup> Lori Lee, “Consumerism Social Practice and Slavery: Consumer Practices Among Enslaved Laborers at Poplar Forest Plantation (1828-1861)” (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 2016), 99.

<sup>37</sup> Emily Williams Cobbs Hutter to Fredricka Amalia Hutter Reeder, December 3, 1865, Hutter Letters Collection, The Corporation for Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, Forest, VA.

It was common for slaves to continue to feel a tie to their masters after emancipation. In interviews, a number of slaves spoke well of their masters during interviews. Phrases such as, “Ole Marser was a pretty nice white man,”<sup>38</sup> and “My Marster and Mistress was good to me as well as to de other slaves,”<sup>39</sup> were used. Obviously, these ex-slaves sentiments do not represent all slaves’ feelings towards their masters, but they do acknowledge that there were some close relationships between master and slave in the Antebellum South, the Hutter plantation not excluded.

Edward Sixtus Hutter, a Pennsylvania man who was brought into the plantation world by marriage, performed his obligations to his slaves and demanded the same from them. Although the patriarchal society of the Antebellum South was created to justify subjugation of one class and race over another, it appears that Hutter and his slaves managed to live and work together in that society without too much conflict, and some appreciation for one another. The reciprocity system not only worked well for decades for Hutter, and possibly his slaves, but it also brought two worlds together, on the Poplar Forest Plantation, through a complex relationship that possibly neither group could fully understand.

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<sup>38</sup> Charles L. Perdue, Thomas Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia’s Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1976): 25.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

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