

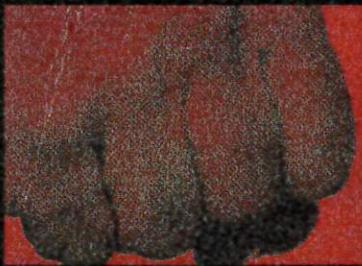


LETHAL IMAGINATION



violence
AND

brutality
in american history



edited by

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Colonial and Revolutionary Era Slave Patrols of Virginia

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The initial thoughts of most people, when considering white-on-black violence in the colonial world, naturally gravitate toward masters and slaves. Scholarship about colonial bondmen has grown exponentially in the past thirty years, breaking new ground concerning labor practices, slave family size and structure, slave fugitives, the Caribbean connection and importation rates, relations between slaves and Native Americans, and much more.¹ This recent research has refined the traditional story of slavery in America, which in the twentieth century had previously focused far too much on slavery in the antebellum period.

Colonial or antebellum, at the root of slavery lay violence, the compulsion to serve under duress—yet what we know regarding white violence toward bondmen in the colonial era has changed very little in the past quarter century compared with other aspects of early American slavery. Perhaps this is because there seem to be few elements of white violence left to explain or clarify beyond the obvious: masters used torture, whippings, deprivation, and any other form of coercion available to get their reluctant “property” to work and obey. Although all this is true, it only partly describes the violence done by whites against blacks in colonial America. Surrounding the bipolar world of master and slave were agents appointed by the community who could also use force against blacks. These agents were called slave patrollers, and their work in Virginia began in 1727 and continued well beyond the American Revolution.²

Slave patrols in Virginia developed as weaknesses in other areas of slave control became evident. If masters had had perfect command of their bondmen, there would have been no need for patrols. Threats or actual punishments inflicted by the master would have been enough to keep disobedient slaves in check. Similarly, other civil authorities, such as the sheriff, could not stop slaves from running away, selling stolen goods for whiskey, or doing any other act that undermined the mastery of whites over blacks. One man alone—neither master nor sheriff—could not stop them. When communities in England experienced thefts or other crimes, they invoked the *posse comitatus*, a call for all able-bodied men to pursue the felon until he or she was captured. In America, this “hue and cry” system might have succeeded, but the solution poorly suited many parts of

thinly settled colonial Virginia and was quickly abandoned. Profit-minded individuals might attempt to curb slaves' illicit behavior, as some Dutch slave catchers did in the mid-seventeenth century, but Virginians wanted more vigorous controls put into place. The colonial assembly experimented with various incentives to capture runaway slaves, offering rewards in tobacco or money to urge whites to be more vigilant about bondmen, but these offers still did not do enough in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.³

Disturbing events in the 1720s caused white Virginians to create slave patrols. A slave revolt in 1721 and prodding from colonial lieutenant-governor Hugh Drysdale about the militia's inadequacies in terminating the revolt finally persuaded the Virginia House of Burgesses to take decisive action. Instead of simply reacting to slave revolts after they were already happening, why not prevent them from starting in the first place? If slaves plotted insurrections when they gathered during holidays, then a portion of the militia should prevent those meetings. The legislators instructed militia captains in 1727 to call out patrols during the holidays of Christmas, Easter, and Whitsuntide to break up slave meetings and disperse slaves who congregated during the festive celebrations. Initially, patrollers could not whip slaves; captured slaves had to be taken to a constable or justice of the peace, who might order that they be whipped. In 1738, the assembly considered slave patrols such a valuable deterrent that it expanded patrol duties to make them year-round, and enjoined patrollers not only to scatter slave meetings but also to visit slave quarters and take up slaves found "strolling about" without passes. A few years later, the assembly permitted patrollers themselves to whip slaves.⁴

Slave patrols also had the authority to go onto land owned by other white men and search their slaves' cabins. No warrant was needed, save the appointment slip given a patroller when his term of service began (which varied from three months to one year). Even after the Revolution and the creation of both state and national Bills of Rights, white Virginians did not question the legitimacy of slave patrols' entry into their lands and their slaves' cabins without duly issued search warrants. If patrollers encountered a slave away from the master's home, the slave had to present them a proper pass from the master, giving permission to be absent from the plantation, listing the slave's destination, and noting the time and date. Without the pass, the slave was particularly vulnerable to the patrols' violent form of summary justice—a whipping, followed by being tied up and returned to the master's home. Patroller activities in Virginia paralleled those of patrols that South Carolina's assembly had instituted in 1704, with an important exception: Virginians who served in a patrol were exempted from public, county, and parish levies during their term of service. This financial incentive provided by the colony was augmented by some Virginia counties, which chose to pay additional sums to their patrollers, fees that can be traced in annual county tax reports. As counties grew, their slave populations also expanded, and those populations required more diligent oversight.⁵

Three Virginia counties—Southampton, Sussex, and Chesterfield—saw their populations increase rapidly and the need for slave patrols increase likewise. In

the half century preceding the Revolutionary War, each of these counties gained so much in population that it was subdivided from a larger "parent" county and given independent existence as a legal entity. The three counties lie south of the James River, in an area roughly known as "Southside" Virginia. Southampton's story is the same one shared by more than ten other Virginia counties in the years preceding the Revolution: extensive population growth resulting in county subdivision and further subdivision, coupled with increasingly large slave communities. Sprawling settlement of Isle of Wight County meant that some residents traveled five days to reach the county courthouse. The legislature divided Isle of Wight in 1749 and created Southampton County, which lies along the southeastern border of Sussex County.

Settlers flooded into Sussex County between 1715 and 1735, many of them drawn by the colony's sale of lands designated for the use of the College of William and Mary. Bridges had replaced ferries, and the Nottoway Indians had retreated to the western edges of the county by the 1750s. Between 1740 and 1776, more than 350 residents patented new land claims in Sussex, carving out plots between Seacock Swamp and Blackwater River. Sussex received so many settlers that in 1754 the colonial assembly made it a separate county, subdivided from Surry County. By 1787, more than 1,200 white residents made their home in Sussex County.⁶

Chesterfield County had an earlier development, different from either Southampton's or Sussex's. It began as part of Henrico County, on the James River, and was one of the earliest settled parts of Virginia. By 1650, its eastern quadrant had been heavily settled, although the more remote western reaches were still home to Native Americans. Around 1700, the colony's assembly encouraged the settlement of Huguenot refugees, and by 1730, many of them had settled in the central region of Chesterfield County—their French names in the deed books (Du Puy, Faure, Michaux) are plentiful. In 1749, enough settlers had filled Henrico that the General Assembly created Chesterfield County as a separate entity.⁷

Precise population figures for all three counties are difficult to calculate because no elaborate statewide population tallies exist before 1787. Prior to that time, the best information about county settlement sizes is derived from extant tithe lists, taken by county officials as a means of allocating county expenses on a proportional basis. However, tithe lists included only adult white men and slave men and women over the age of sixteen, omitting white women and all children from their calculus. Tithe lists for Southampton in 1755 indicate a probable population of about 4,000 whites and approximately 2,000 slaves.⁸ The 1787 tax lists for Sussex and Chesterfield suggest that both counties had the reverse situation: slaves outnumbered whites by nearly 2 to 1. After the Revolution, Chesterfield's white population hovered near 3,000. With a black majority in these two counties, white officials may have authorized the use of greater force against slaves by paying slave patrols and ordering out greater numbers of patrols in the pre-Revolutionary period. Certainly, all three counties had sizable slave populations by the mid-1750s, which very likely prompted greater concern about their control. And the steadily rising white population may have made it

reasonable for county courts to consider paying the slave patrollers because their work required more and more visits to slave quarters and suspected gathering places.⁹

The policy of payment or financial abatement led to the creation of detailed records by patrols, who justified their violent nocturnal activities to courts in order to collect their fees. Itemized patrol journals exist for Southampton County in the 1750s and 1760s, and for Sussex and Chesterfield Counties in the 1760s and 1770s. There are additional sources about patrols, though not nightly patrol reports, in Amelia, Loudoun, Norfolk, and Surry Counties for the same period. These patrol records, or journals, are unique historical resources from which we can learn more about how Virginia communities enforced limits on slave movement and created barriers to illicit slave meetings. Patrol records, even in the period after the Revolution, are rarely so detailed as these itemized journals that list specific plantations visited and the exact evenings that slave patrols went on duty.¹⁰

Although an argument premised upon the absence, then appearance, of a certain type of document is vulnerable to contradiction (the missing documents might have been destroyed or lost in the intervening years), the existence of extremely detailed patrol records in the 1750s, 1760s, and 1770s when none can be found in earlier periods strongly suggests that a new policy prompted the creation of a new document type. Virginia counties had the option to pay slave patrollers in this era, and these patrol journals were notarized by militia captains or court clerks and then preserved among the county court papers. The existence of slave patrol records among court papers (when patrollers served under the authority of the local militia) indicates that patrollers presented these journals as evidence of patrol work completed for payment due. In 1769, court clerk J. Grant of Southampton noted that "Ben Griffin master of the patrol" had presented his patrol journal "in order to be accounted in the county levy." County clerks preserved the slave patrol reports among other court documents that indicated to whom county funds had been paid and for what purposes.¹¹

The appearance and then subsequent disappearance of these extremely detailed records after a few years in each county, coupled with the continuing payment of patrollers year after year, has further implications. Slave patrols continued to receive modest fees for their work even in later years for which detailed patrol journals do not exist. Annual reckonings of county bills and taxes levied can be found in court minute books, which list the obligations owing and the money to be collected for each county; slave patrollers routinely appear in the county levy lists, although the names change from year to year. But the journals of their nightly work simply disappear, after a brief period in each county. Apparently, county court justices stopped requiring patrols to document their nightly rounds prior to payment by the court. Whether their work seemed onerous enough not to demand written confirmation or justices saw the patrollers at work firsthand (as they must have done, when slave patrols visited the slave quarters of local JPs), after the first few years in each county, court justices

no longer needed documentation before they paid slave patrols for their work corralling wayward slaves. Thus, the extant patrol journals we have form a rare source base from which to examine the work that community members performed disciplining the slaves of their neighbors.¹²

From these patrol-created files we can learn much about the pattern of violence that slaves experienced in colonial Virginia at the hands of whites who were not necessarily their owners. The earliest extant notes recording patrol activity come from Southampton County in 1754. Three patrol groups submitted extensive accounts in that year, listing the days and times they rode and giving details of the slaves they captured. A comparison of the names of patrollers with the names of the plantations visited suggests that the three patrol groups worked as distinct units in different parts of the county and submitted separate reports of their activities. Multiple patrol groups would have been a necessity in the large and growing counties of Virginia. Even though Southampton had more white residents than slaves by the mid-1750s, the fact that whites outnumbered blacks did not ease the fears of many Virginia colonists; attempted slave revolts in 1729 and 1730, and rumors of insurrections later in the 1730s must have frightened many whites. The knowledge that runaway slaves had repeatedly tried, and failed, to establish maroon communities along the northern, western, and southern margins of Virginia must have been unsettling, and that knowledge provided a strong rationale for the activities and payment of county slave patrols.¹³

The details in patrolling journals vary dramatically, depending upon the individual recordkeeper, but broad similarities can be found in all. Colonial Virginia slave patrols typically rode in groups of four or five, and their journals commence by listing the individuals' names. "John Brantly & Philip Bran[t]ly & Will[ia]m Grimmer & William Joyner Junr have Rode in the patrole servis the 28th of Septem[ber]" runs a standard patrol entry.¹⁴

Virtually every patrol report gives specifics about the number of hours worked, with a few presenting precise information about the exact number of hours worked by each man in the group. In Southampton, John Seuter, Jacob Turner, Simon Harris, Robert Bittle, and William Kirby worked precisely 50, 32, 126, 108, and 126 hours, respectively, in an eight-month span. The patrol reports usually carry the signature of the militia captain, justice of the peace, or court clerk who vouched that the work had been completed faithfully. Patrols most often worked from sundown to sunup, during the "Negro's day"—when slaves left their cabins to attend meetings or to travel after their workday ended. As they patrolled, they encountered both slave men and women. After an evening's work in October 1754, patroller Bennet Hilsman wrote, "We Patrollers did ketch a negroe man slave belonging to Joshua Barnes & a Negro woman slave and Childe . . . and she was a Runaway she said." By examining the ads placed about runaway slaves in newspapers, historians have determined that young men were more likely than any other kind of slave to flee their masters, and patroller records confirm that they more frequently encountered male slaves on their

rounds. Each of the Southampton reports for 1754-1755, and another detailed Southampton journal for 1769, mentions the capture of men; only one indicates the apprehension of a female slave.¹⁵

When caught by patrols, slaves might be turned over to the county sheriff or returned directly to their owners or overseers. In either case, they risked multiple beatings, one at the hands of the patrol and another when turned over to the next authority. On October 5, 1754, Southampton patrols caught two slaves without passes, whipped them both, and then returned them to their owners. Some patrols simply returned a captured bondman without administering any punishment, as one group did when it found a slave "belonging to William Cooper." Whether the temperament of the master or the slave's circumstances at the time of capture made any difference to the patrol is hard to gauge (and undoubtedly varied from case to case), but perhaps Cooper's slave was thought to have a master who would inflict a punishment that would have rendered a whipping by patrollers unnecessary.

One thing would not save a slave from a beating, however: the social status of his owner. Contrary to what we might expect about social deference in the colonial world, an owner's economic or political status would not deter the whips of patrollers. When patrollers caught a "Negro Man belonging to Etheldred Taylor," they whipped him and then took him back to Taylor's plantation. The slave's punishment was administered despite the patrollers' knowledge that Taylor was part of the Southampton elite (he served as a member of the House of Burgesses). Likewise, Sussex patrollers caught and whipped slaves belonging to William Lightfoot, Nicholas Massenburg, and John Cargill despite their high social status as justices of the peace and officers in the county militia.¹⁶

Slaves who traveled great distances before capture merited special mention in patrol records, such as the slave caught in Southampton County whose owner lived "over Blackwater," a swampy river separating Southampton from nearby Isle of Wight and Nansemond Counties. Slaves who belonged on plantations beyond Southampton's boundaries were surrendered to the Southampton sheriff for a whipping, as were those owned by "Matthew Holland living in Nansemond county." Runaways being transported back to their owners would be whipped by the sheriff of each county passed through; the further the journey, the more the beatings.

Some slaves fled to nearby cities or to swampy areas. Both destinations held promise: a city could provide anonymity among the abundant urban slave population, and a swamp might mask human presence as well as discourage hunters from entering. The proximity of towns like Richmond and Petersburg at the edges of Chesterfield County must have been a lure, as were Harry's Swamp, Joseph Swamp, and marshes along the Nottoway River in Sussex County. Several Virginia patrols attempted to interdict these "attractive nuisances" by means of vigilant reconnaissance of their perimeters, in a vain effort to prevent runaways from ever reaching sanctuary within them. Every so often, patrols would have to enter towns and swamps to search for slaves who had managed to slip through the cordon. When found, such bondmen could expect a vicious beating.

Patrollers carried no special equipment on their rounds, although they relied upon the tools of intimidation available to slave owners. Colonial slave patrols worked almost exclusively on horseback, which gave them great mobility. They could scour large areas in a few hours and visit as many as six slave quarters in a single evening, even though the plantations might be widely separated. Relying upon horses increased range of movement but decreased the element of surprise. Runaway slaves might conceal themselves from a group of galloping horsemen they could hear from a distance, if there were places to hide. Mounted patrollers could cow frightened slaves, especially in the late evening; figures looming in the darkness on animals five and six feet tall could appear like giants or monsters of black folklore. Patrollers played upon these fears and myths by dressing in dark clothing to conceal their appearance and, on occasion, by costuming themselves as ghosts. For some slaves recently arrived from Africa, the patrols may have been reminiscent of the slave catchers who had carried them off into bondage. If horses and dark clothing could make patrols appear supernatural, the whips patrollers wielded must have seemed all too familiar. Most slave owners had whips at their disposal, and these scourges could cut a slave until blood ran and bones showed.¹⁷

Although patrollers had the authority to punish runaways and truants, they had to keep some of their violent urges in check. Slaves beaten by patrols too severely at night were of little use to their masters as laborers the next day. Even though masters recognized the volition of their slaves as independent beings, in the end, slaves were still property, pieces of merchandise. Slave "property" flogged to excess was less valuable to the master. The actions of patrollers were exempt from prosecution because colonial law empowered them to catch and whip slaves, but the law could not prevent irritated slave owners from finding ways to take subtle revenge on a too-brutal patroller. A patroller who "excessively corrected" the bondman of a neighbor could be refused a loan, omitted from a party, snubbed at church, or passed over for selection to a county office like sheriff or constable. That patroller might find his own slaves given extreme beatings as retaliation the next time they ventured off his plantation, too. The interdependence of colonial Virginia communities meant that white citizens had a variety of opportunities to register their dislike of a patroller who beat a neighbor's slave too harshly. In this sense, community norms placed limits on a patroller's discretion; unless he was oblivious to community censure, no patroller could afford (literally or figuratively) to discipline another man's slave too cruelly.

The men who served as patrollers came from most ranks of society in Sussex, Southampton, and Chesterfield, and slaveholders could be found among them. Of the Sussex patrollers in 1763, John Sturdivant owned three slaves in 1777 and John Wynne owned eleven slaves in 1787. And the men chosen for work as patrollers sometimes experienced great increases in the number of slaves they owned; patrols included men whose fortunes were on the rise, like William Hatcher, who owned one slave in 1762, later became constable, and owned seven slaves in 1787. Patrolling could provide an introduction for young men to the

practice of slave discipline and to acting as a community authority figure. Brothers William and Matthew Turner lived with their father, who owned no slaves in 1762; they served together as patrollers in Chesterfield County in 1777, and by 1787 had between them a total of eight slaves.¹⁸

Patrol duty did not fall exclusively upon slaveholders, however; at least half the whites who lived in Southside Virginia did not own slaves in the period before the Revolution. In colonial Virginia, owners and nonowners rode together on patrol in roughly fifty-fifty proportions. Counties like Chesterfield, Sussex, and Southampton repeatedly chose patrols along the same patterns as had Amelia and Norfolk Counties in previous decades. A longitudinal study of patrols appointed between 1750 and 1780 found that slightly more than half of all Amelia County and Norfolk County patrollers owned slaves, usually one to five. "The men appointed in both counties appear to fit into the middle status groups of their respective counties as well, and included some of the biggest land owners and slave owners in the county." The choice of slave owners to work on patrols with men who did not own slaves makes sense when considered in the context of violence against slaves. Bondmen were too valuable to be left solely to the violent urges of the latter; slave owners would make sure that slaves as property did not suffer excessively at the hands of patrollers who might not care if a victim could not work in the fields the next day.¹⁹

A balanced patrol could ensure other important elements. Owners might be more keen on making certain that a patrol did its duty; after all, a runaway slave meant one less set of productive hands on an owner's farm, a circumstance that a nonowner might dismiss as trivial. Owners might also be more aware of relationships between slaves on different plantations: whose bondmen might attend a religious service at a central plantation on a given night, or which slave men might be courting slave women on farms distant from their own. The intimate knowledge that proceeded from actually owning slaves (gained from overheard conversations or changes in slave behavior from day to day) could be valuable for a patrol group to be effective. Slave owner patrollers could also pressure the patrol group to avoid becoming predictable in its outings, that is, to vary the times of operations.

Many patrols deliberately varied the nights of their work, so as to be less predictable in their movements. Southampton patrols in 1755 recorded that they worked on two Thursdays and a Wednesday in March, April, and May. Location as well as frequency varied not only by day of the week but also by time of day. If patrols became too predictable, slaves could slip through the vigilance of white Virginians. Patrols might work during the daytime, although that was less common than nightly rounds. Records for Southampton, Chesterfield, and Sussex all indicate that patrols could work an entire evening and sometimes continue until the following afternoon. Simon Harris, John Seuter, and William Kirby rode for more than twelve hours, returning home "about two o'clock in the afternoon." But despite attempts to mislead slaves about when they might be operating, patrols still worked repeatedly on Saturday and Sunday evenings, as the patrollers of one Southampton district did in 1754: they worked, successively, on a

Saturday, Sunday, Sunday, Saturday, and Saturday during one two-month period. The repetitive patrolling on some weekends was not by chance. After all, more slaves had permission to travel on weekends than at any other time. But virtually every set of patrol records extant for Virginia demonstrates that patrols had no set pattern.²⁰

The locations patrollers searched also had to be not easily guessed at or slaves might avoid capture. Patrols could not go only to slave quarters or their discipline would be ineffective; they had to search out the hidden gathering spots and meeting places slaves used after dark. Truants as well as runaways used these secret locations to congregate with other slaves, away from the prying eyes of their masters and other whites. Scholars who have studied slave truancy disagree about whether it revealed political consciousness among bondmen or was a form of direct slave resistance comparable to arson and rebellion. In any case, truancy, or "lying out," became a capital offense in colonial Virginia—an indication of how slaves had frustratingly remained beyond the total control of white masters. Patrols had to search not just slave cabins but also wooded areas, riverbanks, deserted buildings, and woodland paths—wherever they thought slaves might be likely to congregate.²¹

If patrollers intended to accomplish much work on their farms during the day and end their nightly travels in their own beds, they would work in the areas nearest their homes. Indeed, they could not help doing so, for patrollers were drawn from each captain's district of the county militia, each district representing a different county area. Like Sussex and Chesterfield patrollers, in 1754 Southampton patrollers worked in the areas of the county nearest their homes. For Robert Bittle, Simon Harris, Jacob Turner, and William Kirby, this meant the eastern area, roughly one-quarter of the county. Sussex County patrollers in 1763 went to the lands of their near neighbors, for their names are intermixed with those of the slave owners they watched in the tax lists of the period.

Although regulations in South Carolina prohibited a patrol's "beat" from being larger than a few square miles, no such regulations limited the Virginia militia or its patrols. In the eastern portion of Southampton County, Bittle, Harris, Turner, and Kirby had responsibility for the area between the towns of Jerusalem and Franklin (stretching from the county's center to the southeast and the North Carolina border, a distance of some five miles) and then running some fifteen miles north along the Blackwater River toward Vicksville and Seacock Swamp. Indeed, just as the Blackwater River defines the eastern boundary of Southampton County, the swamp dominates the county's eastern landscape. Characterizing the swamp are numerous streams and marshlands like Jack's Branch and Black Creek, Burk and Cypress Swamps. The Blackwater could be crossed only at selected bridges and fords, and the area patrolled by the four men was crisscrossed by little roads connecting farms tucked among the moors. Riding the four miles from Judkin's Mill to the town of Franklin, they would pass at least fifteen farms, certainly an efficient means to search numerous slave quarters. But slave quarters were not the only place patrollers hunted their human quarry. Venturing into swamps and along rivers was also part of the job. How else could

they find the slaves who avoided main roads and trails? The patrols of Chesterfield in 1760 worked north, along the James River in the region known as Bermuda, visiting various plantations (Howlett, Parker, Markham) as they neared the northeast corner of the county. Matthew Branch presented his report of the patrol's work to the militia captain John Howlett, whose house they visited last and who notarized their journal. Given that their patrolling had ended at daybreak, Howlett may have signed the document as he ate his breakfast.

The roads of a county could define much of the repetitive quality of patrol work. As they plied their rounds, patrollers would go to plantations in a sequence dictated by the road. The Sussex County patrol journal of 1763 indicates this pattern most clearly. Almost every evening they went on duty between April 30 and November 6, 1763, slave patrols went to four homes in succession: those of Benjamin Cocke, John Chambliss, Heartwell Marrable, and "Colonel" Massenburg. The four slave owners lived on adjacent holdings connected by either trails or roads that made it convenient for patrollers to go from farm to farm in a set sequence. The pattern can be confirmed from tax lists made in 1782; the Massenburg and Marrable homes on the list are separated by only a few other names. This same patrolling pattern can be discerned almost a century later in North Carolina. Wake County patrols of 1857 went to slave quarters in a set order each night, and roads determined the order. Patrollers could not alter a county's geography, nor the proximity of one farm to the next. Logically, then, they took advantage of the roads that led from one plantation to another.²²

Because patrollers worked in or near their homes, it is not surprising that they sometimes worked in family groups. In an area thickly latticed by family relationships, patrolling did not have to be carried out in the presence of strangers. Although the slaves captured might not know the white men who held them captive and beat them so deliberately, the white men almost always knew one another, and were not infrequently related. The 1763 Sussex patrollers Charles and John Sturdivant were brothers and members of the numerous Sturdivant clan resident in the county. The 1769 Southampton patrollers were Benjamin, Thomas, and Micajah Griffin. Tax lists suggest that Thomas and Micajah were brothers or near cousins because their lands lay so close together. The same pattern prevailed in Chesterfield, when William Turner and Blackman Turner rode side by side in the 1770s, as did the two William Hatchers. Fathers and sons, cousins, uncles, and nephews joined in patrols, enforcing the regulations on slave behavior. The only family members not clearly required to participate were women. Unlike South Carolina, Virginia did not obligate females who owned slaves to provide a substitute to serve on patrol duty.²³

Just as patrols worked in family groups, the farms they visited were often connected by family ties, among both owners and slaves. When the Chesterfield patrols rode in 1777, they worked the central portion of the county, from the base of Newby Bridge Road up to the Hundred Road and then east toward the courthouse. On March 29, patrols went to the plantations of Henry Winfree, Harry Winfree, and Major Winfree. They began at the home of Francis Farmer, a likely relation of patroller "B. Farmer" and concluded at the home of James

Farmer, probably another relation of his. Likewise, the 1763 Sussex county patrollers, Stith and John Wynne, and John and Charles Sturdivant regularly began their rounds at William Wynne's farm or concluded their rounds at William Sturdivant's home. The Sturdivant brothers, when on patrol at the home of Stith Parham on May 18, 1763, would have been visiting their future brother-in-law; Stith later married their sister Lucretia. Patrolling typically began or ended at the home of a patroller's relatives, who provided food and a comfortable resting place at the beginning or end of a long night. After ten, twelve, or more hours in the saddle, a warm fire and refreshing drink might be especially welcome, particularly if the patrollers' quarry had eluded them.²⁴

When patrols knew of a slave who refused to curb his wandering ways, they could make special efforts to restrain him. In 1769, patrols in Southampton captured the same slave twice within six weeks. Arthur Washington's boatman, Jim, repeatedly went off his owner's plantation without a pass. Slaves who worked as boatmen enjoyed greater autonomy than many other bondmen; their knowledge of rivers enhanced their responsibilities, rendering them both more valuable and more difficult to control. Their quasi freedom made them much more likely to rebel against their masters, as they did in the abortive 1802 Easter rebellion that flourished in the network of rivers and creeks of eastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina. Perhaps his work gave Washington's Jim a taste for freedom that he could not resist, and the patrollers knew it. But when he was captured the second time in July 1769, Jim surely received a beating for his renewed challenge to the mastery of whites.²⁵

Certain plantations and specific slave gathering places received greater scrutiny by patrols. Planters who owned many slaves could expect repeated visits, in contrast to small slaveholders. For example, in Sussex, patrols went again and again to the plantations of Heartwell Marrable, Benjamin Cocke, and "Colonel" Massenburg in 1763. During a year that included twenty patrol outings, the slave quarters on those plantations were examined thirteen, fifteen, and fifteen times, respectively. Marrable owned twenty-three slaves in 1782; even if he had owned fewer in 1763, he was still among the largest slave owners of Sussex County. Information about Cocke's slaveholdings is elusive. Massenburg had to be fairly wealthy; he was a justice of the county court several times in the 1750s and 1760s, a strong indicator of high economic status in that era. His two sons, William and John, paid taxes after the Revolution on thirteen and twenty-one adult slaves, respectively. Few other residents in Sussex County owned comparable numbers of slaves. It is possible that large slave owners demanded more patrolling on or near their plantations as a return on the monies they paid in county taxes for their slaves.²⁶

Chesterfield County patrollers' accounts for 1776 and 1777 give the names of the plantations visited. In May 1777 patrollers went to the plantations of Nicholas Shearer, Thomas Bridgewater, John Fowler, and Thomas Branch. Possibly the patrols started with Shearer and Bridgewater because they owned five and seven slaves, respectively, and then proceeded to Branch's home because he owned sixteen slaves; such a sequence would be based on the theory that a larger slave

community might be a better place to look for illegal gatherings and contraband materials. Whatever their motivation, the last stop turned out to be the "jackpot": the patrollers "took up and whipt 35." With so many slaves apprehended by so few men, there may have been even more slaves at Branch's plantation who successfully eluded capture.²⁷

The presence of thirty-five slaves, well beyond the sixteen normally present in Branch's slave quarters, suggests either a secret religious meeting or the massing of slaves for some other reason, such as flight to the British. An evangelical revival spirit inflamed Southside Virginia in the 1770s. Religious groups, such as Baptists and Methodists, regularly attracted patrollers' attentions because their meetings drew large crowds of slaves for prayer and conversion.²⁸

Ministers intent on the saving of souls, white or black, could do nothing to prevent patrollers from attacking their black parishioners. And whites themselves were not always safe from patrols. Shortly after the Revolutionary War, the captain of a patrol group in King William County wrote the governor asking for authority to punish slaves gathering with Methodists and Baptists and additional power to prosecute the whites who led the evening prayer meetings. Such meetings made the slaves unfit for work, and the whites who led the prayer groups undermined the authority of masters in the neighborhood. "[T]hey preten[d] to preach & pray with a sett of the greatest Rog[ue]s of Negroes in this County & they never break up Till about two or three o'clock in the morning & those Negroes who stay with them goes through the neighborhood and steels everything they can lay there hands on & our Negroes are not to be found when we are in want of them, but are at such meetings. . . ." Some whites made bold to threaten patrols with physical violence if they interfered with either the slaves or the religious meetings. When a patrol group entered a religious meeting "Mr. Charles Neal [threw] one of them out of the doore & said that they should not take up one Negroe that was there, upon which the Paterolers finding themselves over Powered [were] obliged to leave the place & went home. . . ." Obviously, not every white Virginian shared the belief that patrols operated for the good of the community when they attacked slaves in religious gatherings. Not even the slaves of dutiful Anglicans were exempt from the watchful gaze of patrollers; patrol groups visited the plantation of John Cargill, son of the rector of Southwark parish in Sussex, six times in 1763. No matter what their religious persuasion, slaves and their masters became accustomed to patroller intrusions onto plantations in the years before the Revolution.²⁹

Breaking up evening religious meetings held by slaves was routine for patrols, but slave escapes to the British during the Revolutionary War appeared to be a far greater hazard. Following the proclamation of Lord Dunmore, who offered safe haven and freedom to any slaves belonging to rebel sympathizers in 1775, male and female slaves made their way to liberty behind the British lines. Virginia's new governor Patrick Henry warned every county militia commander in the state about this possibility in November 1775, declaring that "[c]onstant, and well directed Patrols, seem indispensably necessary" to stop slaves from absconding. His words may have spurred some counties, such as Chesterfield, to

greater efforts. Chesterfield patrol journals for 1776 and 1777 describe much more activity, which cost the county far more than had been the case in the years preceding the war. However, the number of men assigned to patrol duty dropped during the year because the army and militia were making increasing demands upon the manpower of the county. On February 22, March 29, April 20, and May 4, 1777, the patrol in the Chesterfield's central region was composed of only two men.³⁰

Repetitive patrolling became common during the Revolution, although political allegiance seems to have had little effect on whose slave quarters were visited more frequently. The records reveal no systematic surveillance of the homes of British sympathizers—in fact, a quite different pattern is described: men on the side of independence had their plantations visited just as often as the loyalists. William Ashbrook and Jeremiah Franklyn's slave cabins were searched over and over, even though the two men gave supplies to the rebel militia and Continental Army forces many times during the Revolutionary War. John Fowler, Henry Winfree, and Thomas Branch served in the Chesterfield militia, but patrollers regularly came to their slaves' quarters in 1777. Given that active military duty could call militia men from their homes, the patrollers may have actually increased their scrutiny of patriots' plantations to substitute for the loss of direct supervision by a white master fighting at the front.³¹

Although the Chesterfield County patrol records are the only ones that give direct clues about patrol work done during the Revolution, a clear pattern emerges from those pages. Chesterfield's patrollers made more visits, indeed many more, than patrollers did in the 1790s in the same part of the county. In the 1770s, groups of individual patrols visited a minimum of five plantations in a single night; more frequently, six, and sometimes seven or eight. In the 1790s, patrols rarely went to as many as six; more commonly, three or four. The routes had not become longer in the intervening years; if anything, the county was more thickly settled with whites and slaves. What prompted the Revolutionary era patrollers to such vigilance? Anxieties about the war and Dunmore's message to the slaves, compounded by the absence of men away fighting in the war, resulted in more recurrent surveillance by patrols. Perhaps patrolling came to be viewed as a home-front activity that would bolster the morale of noncombatants and give assurance to the men whose duties had called them from home that their families and properties were being protected.

In the end, slave patrols used the same weapons of violence against slaves as slave masters did: whips and threats. Yet the actions of (and even the existence of) patrols reveal much more about the values of colonial Virginians. The white community prized discipline and control over slaves to such an extent that it was willing to require patrollers to spend nights in the saddle looking for slaves. And it stood ready to pay for having that work done.

Further, the white community permitted slave patrols to invade the private property of any county resident as they searched for runaways and hidden contraband. At the very time when revolutionaries would soon protest the warrantless searches of British customs officers, the same kind of behavior by patrol-

lers was not seen as anomalous by Virginia slave owners. The disciplining of slaves was so highly valued that masters promoted the use of violence against their own slaves by non-slave-owning patrollers, men who otherwise would have had no right to interfere in the relations between masters and slaves. Although the presence of slave owners in patrol groups and indirect pressure from the community might place invisible limits on how much violence could be inflicted, patrollers who did not own slaves knew that, as whites, their maltreatment and abuse of slaves could not be challenged by the slaves themselves. Any study of violence directed at slaves must therefore encompass not only slave masters and white patrollers but the collective will of white Southern communities that promoted the systematic use of violence against African Americans. Patrolling sustained the environment of brutality for slaves that extended far beyond the boundaries of individual plantations. Whether threatened or applied, patrollers' violence helped sustain a society that dominated slaves through fear and the lash.

NOTES

1. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Black Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993); Philip D. Morgan, "Slave Life in Piedmont Virginia, 1720-1800," in Lois Carr, Philip D. Morgan, and Jean B. Russo, eds., *Colonial Chesapeake Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972); Sylvia Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Norton, 1974); Jack P. Greene, "Colonial South Carolina and the Caribbean Connection," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 88 (1987): 192-210; Daniel Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). For an overview of the growing literature on colonial slavery, see the bibliographic essay in Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 266-73.
2. Patrols continued to be used until the close of the Civil War, when many of their violent ways were adopted by the Ku Klux Klan and other white aggressors. See Sally E. Hadden, *Law Enforcement in a New Nation: Slave Patrols and Public Authority in the Old South, 1700-1865* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, forthcoming), ch. 6 and epilogue.
3. William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a collection of all the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619*, 13 vols. (New York: R. & W. & G. Barton, 1809-1823), 1:539 (1659); 2:187 (1663); 3:12 (1684).
4. *Ibid.*, 5:19 (1738).
5. Original tithable lists and county court minute books stored at the Library of Virginia (LV). Transcribed copies of several Amelia, Chesterfield, and Sussex tithe lists can be found in *The Southside Virginian*, vols. 1982-1988; Norfolk tithable lists for 1730-1765 have been published in three volumes by Elizabeth and W. Bruce Wingo, *Norfolk County, Virginia, Tithables* (Norfolk, Va.: n.p., 1979, 1985).

6. Michael Nicholls, "Origins of the Virginia Southside, 1703-1753: A Social and Economic Study" (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 1972), 4, 6; Writers Program of the Works Project Administration, *Sussex County: A Tale of Three Centuries* (n.p.: n.p., 1942), 24-30.

7. Francis E. Lutz, *Chesterfield: An Old Virginia County* (Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1954), 83-85; Bettie W. Weaver, *Chesterfield County, Virginia: A History 1970* (n.p.: Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors, [1970]), 13-17.

8. Thomas Parramore, *Southampton County, Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 30. In 1787, the Virginia assembly created a tax structure that required local commissioners to list all men of twenty-one years of age and older, and slaves both above and below age sixteen. The tax lists excluded women, the old and infirm, and certain exempt persons (clergymen, governor). The tax lists extant for every county have been published by Netti Schreiner-Yantis and Florene Love as *The Personal Property Tax Lists for the Year 1787* (Springfield, Va.: Genealogical Books in Print, various years). For more on the settlement of Southside counties, see Richard L. Morton, *Colonial Virginia*, vol. 2, *Westward Expansion and Prelude to Revolution, 1710-1763* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 552-64.

9. Calculations based on the Schreiner-Yantis and Love 1787 tax lists reveal 6,070 slaves and 1,092 white males taxed in Chesterfield County. Correcting for white women and children (multiplying by 2.5, which is a minimum figure) slaves still outnumbered whites more than 2 to 1. In Sussex County, 5,200 slaves and 1,265 white males were taxed. Again, correcting for the missing white women and children by a multiplication factor of 2.5, slaves barely outnumbered whites 1.6 to 1. Original calculations drawn from Schreiner-Yantis and Love, *The Personal Property Tax Lists for the Year 1787 for Sussex County, Virginia* (Springfield, Va.: Genealogical Books in Print, 1987), 1098-1113, and Schreiner-Yantis and Love, *The Personal Property Tax Lists for the Year 1787 for Chesterfield County, Virginia* (Springfield, Va.: Genealogical Books in Print, 1987), 1375-91.

10. Originals of Amelia, Norfolk, Loudoun, and Surry tithable lists, LV. Among the post-Revolutionary patrol records that are similarly detailed, those from Wake County, North Carolina, in 1857 are comparable in vivid particulars given about patrols and the slaves they encountered. For an analysis of these documents, see Hadden, *Law Enforcement in a New Nation*, ch. 4.

11. Patrol returns and lists, 1754-1861, Free Negroes, Slaves and Indians records, Southampton County, LV.

12. An alternative explanation is possible for Southampton's patrol records in 1754. The initial stages of the French and Indian War may have exposed parts of that county to violence at the hands of Native Americans, and patrols may have been initiated to prevent slaves from running away to join the Indians. The first patrol journal in Southampton County may thus owe its existence to conflict with an external enemy; the court wished to document the work of patrols who restricted an internal threat.

13. Population estimate based on "A List of Tithables in the Dominion of Virginia, 1755," Southampton Historical Society, *Bulletin*, no. 3 (Winter 1967): 22, cited in Parramore, *Southampton County, Virginia*, 30. Runaway communities: on the Maryland frontier, Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 328-29; in the western mountains, William Gooch to the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations, PRO C.O. 5/1322 ff.10-13, Virginia Colonial Records Project, reel 42; southern community in the Great Dismal Swamp, Tommy Bogger, "Maroons and Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp," in Jane H. Kobelski, ed., *Readings in Black and White: Lower Tidewater Virginia*

(Portsmouth: Portsmouth Public Library, 1982), 1-8; Hugo Leaming, "Hidden Americans: Maroons of Virginia and the Carolinas" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1979).

14. Patrol returns and lists, 1754-1861, Free Negroes, Slaves and Indians records, Southampton County, LV.

15. Ibid. The gender of two slaves captured was not recorded in the reports. For an analysis based upon collected runaway advertisements, see Lathan A. Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983).

16. Parramore, *Southampton County, Virginia*, 31; Sussex County court papers, 1763-64, positive reel 49, LV.

17. For more on the connection between slave patrols and figures of myth or folklore, see Gladys-Marie Fry, *Night Riders in Black Folk History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991). The proportion of slaves born in Africa relative to slaves born in Virginia was gradually shifting during the eighteenth century. For an excellent discussion of the decline of imported African slaves in the years following 1740 and the impact that had on slave life, see Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 335-39.

18. Sussex and Chesterfield County tithable lists, 1762, 1777, LV, transcribed in *Southside Virginian* 3 (1985): 79, 5 (1987): 88, 113; Schreiner-Yantis and Love, *Personal Property Tax Lists for the Year 1787 for Sussex County*, 1104; Schreiner-Yantis and Love, *Personal Property Tax Lists for the Year 1788 for Chesterfield County*, 1389, 1392.

19. Hadden, "Law Enforcement in a New Nation: Slave Patrols and Public Authority in the Old South, 1700-1865" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1993), 190. The statistics and analysis of the longitudinal study can be found at 179-91.

20. Patrol returns and lists, 1754-1861, Free Negroes, Slaves and Indians records, Southampton County, LV.

21. See Stephanie Camp's synopsis of the historiographic disagreement on this point in her paper "'I Could Not Stay There': Slave Women and the Somatics of Everyday Resistance in the Old South" (paper presented at the 1997 Southern Historical Association annual meeting). Her work on this topic will ultimately be presented as a dissertation in the Department of History of the University of Pennsylvania.

22. Sussex County, Virginia Personal Property Tax Lists of 1782 taken by John Mason, LV, trans. Pollyanna Creekmore, *Southside Virginian* 6 (1988): 114-16; Hadden, *Law Enforcement in a New Nation*, chs. 3-4.

23. Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., "The Mathew Sturdivant Line," *Southside Virginian* 6 (1988): 79; Schreiner-Yantis and Love, *Personal Property Tax Lists for the Year 1787 for Southampton County*.

24. Patrollers' Accounts, Free Negro and Slave Records, Chesterfield County, LV; "A Journal of Patrolling," 1763, Sussex County court papers, 1763-1764, positive reel 49, LV; Smith, "The Mathew Sturdivant Line," 79.

25. Patrol returns and lists, 1754-1861, Free Negroes, Slaves and Indians records, Southampton County, LV. On the 1800 and 1802 revolts, see Douglas Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

26. "A Journal of Patrolling," 1763; Sussex County tax list of 1782, trans. Creekmore, 114-16; Works Project Administration, *Sussex County*, 244; Janice Abercrombie, comp., *Virginia Publick Claims: Sussex County* (Athens, Ga.: Iberian, n.d.), 9; Schreiner-Yantis and Love, *Personal Property Tax Lists for the Year 1787 for Sussex County*, 1098, 1102.

27. Chesterfield County tithable lists, 1762, LV; 1786 property tax list, transcribed in

Schreiner-Yantis and Love, *Personal Property Tax Lists for the Year 1787 for Chesterfield County, 1377, 1394*.

28. Works Project Administration, *Sussex County*, 40. For more on how patrols attacked slaves' religious gatherings in the early nineteenth century, see Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), 169-72.

29. Holt Richardson to the governor, September 5, 1789, Executive Papers, Letters received, LV, cited in James Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South, 1776-1860* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), 97-98; Works Project Administration, *Sussex County*, 38.

30. Broadside, 1775, sent to 'The County Lieutenant of Westmoreland,' William Augustine Washington papers, Duke University; Patrollers' Accounts, Free Negro and Slave Records, 1776-1777, Chesterfield County, LV.

31. Janice Abercrombie and Richard Slatten, comps., *Virginia Publick Claims: Chesterfield County* (Athens, Ga.: Iberian, 1991), 1, 17-18; Chesterfield County order book 6, October 1777, 147, described by Marshall Boshier, comp., *Chesterfield County Virginia: A Collection of Notes Pertaining to Its Early History* (Chesterfield: n.p., 1989), 8-9.