Before I address the experiences of the Hermitage enslaved, consider some data about the plantation’s slave community. Jackson purchased his first slave, a woman named Nancy, shortly after moving to Tennessee in 1788. By the early 1790s, he owned at least seven slaves, a number that grew to fifteen by 1798. A tax assessment in 1812 listed only twenty slaves at the Hermitage, but two years later, Jackson acknowledged to a business partner that he was willing to sell him forty slaves as part of a prospective transaction. The 1820s witnessed the tremendous growth of Jackson’s slave community at the Hermitage, from forty-four in 1820 to eighty in 1825. By 1829, Jackson owned ninety-five slaves. That number grew to 111 in 1840 and remained steady, with ownership of 110 slaves at the time of his death in 1845. Jackson bought individuals, couples, and families alike, with no discernible preference. The data show upticks in transactions shortly after Jackson moved to Nashville, before and after the War of 1812, in the early 1820s, during Jackson’s first two years as president (1829-30), and during his retirement years (1837-1845). The data demonstrate that Jackson understood early on the importance of slave labor, both to his social status as well as financial success.\footnote{Warshauer, “Chivalric Slave Master,” 204-206; List of taxable property, [c1792-1797], Tax assessment, 1 October 1798, Andrew Jackson to James Jackson, 19 September 1814, Memorandum of slaves and land in Davidson County, Tennessee, [1 January 1825], Inventory of Hermitage slaves and property, 5 January 1829, in PAJ, 1:34, 210-211, 3:141-142, 6:3-5, 7:8-11; List of taxable property, 1 January 1812, in CAJ, 1:212; Fourth Census of the United States: 1820 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1821); Arda}
Not only was Jackson a large slave owner, he was also an active slave trader. A preliminary assessment of his slave transactions indicates that he bought and sold 125 slaves in sixty-five separate transactions over the course of his lifetime, with the transactions involving slaves in Tennessee, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, South Carolina, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. Jackson would have disagreed with Steven Deyle’s argument that “essentially, every [slave] owner was a trader in slaves.” Jackson did not consider himself a slave trader, as demonstrated by his use of the term against his enemies. As early as 1806, for example, he condemned Charles Dickinson, the only man he ever killed in a duel, for “making a fortune of speculating on human flesh” by transporting slaves from Maryland to Natchez and Louisiana. This same charge he leveled against Andrew Erwin, a Tennessee political opponent, in 1819 when James Monroe was considering appointing Erwin the marshall for West Tennessee. Jackson argued that Erwin was part of a group that engaged in “inhuman & illegal traffic” by buying slaves on Amelia Island, located off of the east coast of Spanish Florida, and smuggling them into the United States. Despite his anger at opponents who used the slave-trading charge against him during the 1828 presidential campaign, Jackson clearly

S. Walker, “Andrew Jackson: Planter,” ETHSP 15 (1943): 19-34; Sixth Census of the United States: 1840; Inventory of AJ’s estate, 4 August 1845, JSR.

The data on Jackson’s Hermitage slave community are based on an analysis of extant bills of sales and personal correspondence in the PAJ, JLC, and JSR. It is important to recognize, however, that they almost certainly do not constitute the totality of Jackson’s slave transactions.
bought and sold slaves for economic reasons, even if his immediate objective was not
making a profit from the transactions.²

Hearing the voices of the people enslaved by Jackson is difficult and not an
uncommon problem when studying this aspect of southern history. One of the best ways
is by examining their challenges to Jackson’s authority, either directly or indirectly. As
historians have acknowledged, Jackson, like many southern slave owners, used violence
to force the submission of his enslaved people. For example, in June 1804, one of his
male slaves, Tom Gid, ran away. Jackson took out a newspaper advertisement offering a
$50 reward for Tom’s return. Jackson described the man as a “Mulatto . . . about thirty
years old” who “talks sensible.” In addition to the $50 reward, Jackson offered “ten
dollars extra, for every hundred lashes any person will give him, to the amount of three
hundred” if Tom was caught outside of Tennessee. Despite the threat of punishment, at
least ten male slaves ran away from plantations owned by or under Jackson’s control
between 1804 and 1827. While their reasons for leaving go undocumented, concluding
that violence prompted their flight is not unthinkable given what awaited their return. In
one notable instance, Gilbert, a male slave who ran away frequently, died as a result of
deciding to fight Jackson’s overseer instead of suffering a public whipping at his hands.³

² Deyle, Carry Me Back, 7; John Overton to Andrew Jackson, 8 March 1795,
Andrew Jackson to Thomas Eastin, [cJune 1806], Andrew Jackson to James Monroe, 29

In the letter to Eastin, Jackson calls Dickinson’s slave trading a “humane persuit,”
but the context clearly indicates that he meant “inhumane.”

Two transactions involved the transfer of fifteen slaves between Donelson kin
during an estate sale for which Jackson acted as an agent. In this instance, I counted the
slaves once but included both transactions in the total.

³ Memo, [1804-06], Daniel Sayre to Andrew Jackson, 30 November 1805, Bill, 8
May 1812, Andrew Jackson to Robert Sprigg, 4 October 1812, Robert Sprigg to Andrew
Female slaves who rebelled found themselves at the end of the whip as well.

Robert Hays, Jackson’s brother-in-law, wrote him in December 1814 that the Hermitage overseer “canot command the negro women,” who were working too slowly in the field.

The following year, one of Jackson’s nephews informed him that “Your wenches as usual commenced open war” against the same overseer, but he reported that “they have been brought to order by Hickory oil,” a reference to whipping. The most famous instance of female slave rebellion occurred in 1821, while the Jacksons were living in Florida.

Rachel wrote her absent husband that her slave, Betty, “has been putting on some airs,
and been guilty of a great deal of impudence.” Betty seems to have made a practice of
defying her owner during her nearly thirty years of enslavement, as Jackson told his
doctor, James C. Bronaugh, that she was “capable of being a good & valluable servant,
but to have her so, she must be ruled with the cowhide.” He instructed Bronaugh, his
nephew, Andrew J. Donelson, and his steward, Ephraim Blaine, that if Betty stepped out
of line, then they were to punish her with fifty lashes at “the public whipping post.” The
sin that precipitated this harsh response was Rachel’s displeasure at Betty washing
clothes for individuals outside of the Jackson household without her “express
permission.”

Historians familiar with the Robert Remini’s oeuvre or the Papers of Andrew
Jackson volumes will recognize some of these incidents, but the dearth of scholarly
attention to the Hermitage slave community becomes most apparent once Jackson
becomes president. John Spencer Bassett’s edited volumes actually contain quite a lot of
information about the enslaved people working on Jackson’s Nashville plantation.
Sussing out their information is something on which I am still working, but let me give
you one example of the potential possibilities.

During his retirement years, Jackson contributed significant time and financial
resources to defending four of his slaves accused of murder. During a neighborhood
holiday party held in December 1838, a group of between forty and one hundred slaves,
including some of Jackson’s, had gathered at a neighborhood holiday party. As a result of

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4 Robert Hays to Andrew Jackson, 20 December 1814, Robert Butler to Andrew
Jackson, 2 November 1815, Andrew Jackson to James C. Bronaugh, 3 July 1821, in PAJ,
Southern Slave Plantations (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002),
37; Andrew Jackson to Andrew J. Donelson, 3 July 1821, DLC.
the drunken revelry, a fight broke out, leading to the death of a male slave, Frank, owned by Jackson’s nephew, Stockley Donelson. Stockley had not even waited to hear the testimony of the slave witnesses before swearing out the warrant against four of Jackson’s slaves: Squire, Alfred, George, and Jack (or Jacob). Adding to Jackson’s irritation was the complicity of William Donelson, another nephew, in encouraging Stockley’s decision. Jackson hired three prominent Nashville lawyers as his slaves’ advocates. A jury acquitted Squire, Alfred, and Jack “in two minutes,” according to Jackson. (The charges against George were dismissed by the grand jury.) “The ransaked, the drunken hords of Negroes, worthless Whig Scamps, & worthless fishermen” had “swore too much—contradicted each other, and their credit was blown sky high,” he reported to James K. Polk.⁵

This episode reveals something about Jackson’s views of slaves, but for our purposes, it reveals even more about slave life at the Hermitage and the surrounding neighborhood. For example, Jackson’s slaves were allowed to leave the Hermitage and visit a nearby plantation to celebrate with a large group of neighborhood slaves. This


Warshauer uses this incident to open his article, but his argument that the episode demonstrated “Jackson’s commitment to his slaves’ well being” is simplistic, and he never identifies Jackson’s reasoning for defending his slaves in the manner that he did (Warshauer, “Chivalric Slave Master,” 218).
party suggests that Jackson and his neighbors held no overt fear of slave rebellions at this time. One can also identify the claims to masculinity embodied in the braggadocio of Alfred, Jackson’s slave; his proclamation that “he was the best man in the House” precipitated the violence that led to Frank’s death. The subsequent court case is also suggestive. Jackson’s primary motivation for defending his four slaves was almost certainly to exact a measure of revenge on his nephews, who had defied his paternal and political authority for several years. At the same time, however, it also seems clear that Jackson, like many southern planters, viewed his enslaved as “quasi-kin,” or members of the family. While not equal to white family members, slaves were considered part of the plantation community. Undoubtedly, Jackson wanted to protect Squire, Alfred, Jack, and George because it reflected on his paternal authority. He also may have recognized in their actions an attempt to protect their honor; he certainly would have identified with Alfred’s assertion of masculinity.\[6\]

One final area concerning the Hermitage slave community potentially offers an intriguing avenue of research. Following Jackson’s death in 1845, his slave community largely remained intact for several years, then fell apart. (Once the Hermitage was sold in the mid-1850s, Jackson’s son, Junior, moved many of the remaining slaves to plantations in Hancock County, Mississippi, and Delhi, Louisiana.) Some of those remaining at the Hermitage shared their thoughts of Jackson in later years, creating a mythological memory that persists and is given additional weight because of their former status as

enslaved members of the plantation community. For example, in 1882, one reporter visited the Hermitage and found “Aunt Gracie” and “Uncle Alfred” still in residence. The two showed him around the grounds, winding up at the General’s tomb in the garden. “He didn’t have a servant but would ‘a’ died for him,” said Aunt Gracie softly,” the reporter noted. When the Tennessee legislature debated a bill that would help pay off the state’s debt on the Hermitage, “old Alfred got all the negroes within his influence to vote for it ‘for the sake of Gen. Jackson’s home and honor,’” the article concluded. Thirteen years later, Alfred, “an old negro who never tires of telling you that he was born in 1803, and is the only one of the servants left there,” still gave tours of the Hermitage.7

The testimony of Grace, Alfred, and Hannah exposes the complexity of slaves’ relations with their owners and the memory of those relationships. Filtered through white reporters, their memories reflected the Lost Cause nostalgia that predominated during the post-emancipation years. Ignored in their recollections was the violence visited upon the Hermitage slave community, including Alfred’s mother, Betty, in 1821 when Jackson ordered her whipped if she continued to defy his will. If reported accurately, which was not always the case, their fond reminiscences were atypical of the experiences of antebellum slaves and failed to recognize Jackson’s periodic abrogation of his own paternalistic ideals.8

7 Notice, [12 May 1855], LHA; New York Times, 24 September 1882; Commercial Appeal (Memphis, Tenn.), 3 June 1895. According to Marsha Mullin, the 1855 auction of the slaves did not take place. Correspondence with the author, 30 January 2012.