

## THE ROOTS OF ENTERPRISE: Black-Owned Businesses in Virginia, 1830-1880

By: Loren Schweninger\*

[Schweninger, L.](#) "The Roots of Enterprise: Black Owned Businesses in Virginia, 1830-1880," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 100 (October 1992):515-542.

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Guiding his carriage along the dusty streets of Lynchburg, attending to the various needs of his customers, and caring for his horses while making necessary repairs on his rig had not been easy, but over the years, as a slave and free black, Archy Carey built up a lucrative hack-driving business. Indeed, by the early 1830s, he and his family lived in a comfortable home near the center of town, and he had purchased several investment properties, including a choice lot adjoining the brick factory. Carey also had achieved an enviable reputation. "[He] is a Person of Good character, honest deportment, and without exception in his behaviour," a group of leading whites declared in 1833. "He is regarded by all who know him as a respectable Worthy man."<sup>1</sup>

Archy Carey, of course, was highly unusual, a slave who gained his freedom and became a successful entrepreneur. Considering the substantial growth of black-owned companies and enterprises during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, it might be useful to examine this earlier period, what might be termed the "roots of enterprise," to see who established businesses, how they got started, what types of enterprises they owned, and how their profile changed over time.<sup>2</sup> What proportion were men or women, blacks or mulattoes, young or old, rural or urban? How much land and other property did they accumulate? How did they view material success? Who were their customers? And what was their relationship with dominant whites?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Petition of the citizens of Amherst County to the Virginia General Assembly, 27 Dec. 1833, Legislative Records, Virginia State Library and Archives, Richmond (hereafter cited as Vi). The petition was signed by 135 residents.

<sup>2</sup> This study excludes the business activities of slaves, on which see Loren Schweninger, "The Underside of Slavery: The Internal Economy, Self-Hire, and Quasi-Freedom in Virginia, 1785-1865," *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Comparative Studies* 12 (Sept. 1991): 1-22. By 1900, Virginia led all southern states in black ownership of farms, homes, and property and was among the leaders in business development. See Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana, 1990), pp. 172, 174, 180; William Edward Spriggs, "Afro-American Wealth Accumulation: Virginia, 1900-1914" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1984), p. 130.

<sup>3</sup> The scholarly literature on Virginia blacks during the middle period is rich and varied. See James Curtis Ballagh, *A History of Slavery in Virginia* (Baltimore, 1902); John H. Russell, *The Free Negro in Virginia, 1619-1865* (Baltimore, 1913); Alruthus Ambush Taylor, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia* (Washington, D.C., 1926); James Hugo Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South, 1776-1860* (Amherst, Mass., 1970); Luther Porter Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830-1860* (New York and London, 1942); Robert Francis Engs, *Freedom's First Generation: Black Hampton, Virginia, 1861-1890* (Philadelphia, 1979); Peter J. Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South: Richmond, Virginia, 1865-1890* (Philadelphia,

In the three decades before the Civil War, even the most resourceful free blacks confronted formidable obstacles in seeking to establish a business. Often illiterate, lacking skills, and mired in poverty, they struggled merely to survive. Some had spent their most productive years in bondage; others had expended their small earnings to purchase loved ones out of slavery; most found it nearly impossible to obtain credit, acquire capital, or borrow money.<sup>4</sup> During the period 1830 to 1845, they faced not only unfavorable economic conditions—a depression (1837-43), soil exhaustion, inadequate currency, poor transportation, and slow industrial growth—but also a web of legal restrictions. Free blacks were forbidden to travel without a pass, sell their crops without written permission, trade or barter with slaves, retail liquor in certain locations, acquire slaves except by descent, or testify in court against whites. This latter statute meant that they could not "prove their accounts," or use the judicial system to challenge whites for payment of debts. Even as the state's economy turned upward during the late 1840s and 1850s, free blacks continued to confront laws and institutions designed to keep them in a subordinate economic position.<sup>5</sup>

Precise statistical data for the 1830s and 1840s are not available, but most free blacks who established businesses during this period, like Archy Carey, began their careers as slaves. Some of them learned how to keep ledgers, order merchandise, and maintain inventories while working in their masters' storerooms or in mercantile firms. Others had been placed in charge of their owners' business affairs. Still others, usually skilled craftsmen, had been hired out, or had hired their own time, before acquiring their freedom and establishing their own shops or stores. This latter group included former slave barbers, draymen, shoemakers, retailers, laundresses, fruit vendors, confectioners, grocers, restaurateurs, blacksmiths, and livery owners.<sup>6</sup>

The careers of several slave entrepreneurs were typical in this regard. Peter Strange, a slave blacksmith in Richmond, managed a highly successful shop and built up a large clientele during the 1830s. One of his customers said that no black man in the city was "more uniformly employed" in the trade. Eventually obtaining his freedom, Strange continued to operate his shop as a free Negro.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, livery owners Albert Brooks of Richmond and Stephen Bias of Charlottesville started out as hired bondsmen and expanded their operations after gaining their

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1984); Suzanne Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York and Toronto, 1984); Philip J. Schwarz, "Emancipators, Protectors, and Anomalies: Free Black Slaveowners in Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (hereafter cited as *VMHB*) 95 (1987): 317-38. See also Tommy Lee Bogger, "The Slave and Free Black Community in Norfolk, 1775-1865" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1976); Marie Tyler-McGraw and Gregg D. Kimball, *In Bondage and Freedom: Antebellum Black Life in Richmond, Virginia* (Richmond, 1988); James D. Watkinson, "William Washington Browne and the True Reformers of Richmond, Virginia," *VMHB* 97 (1989): 375-98.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, p. 203. Some of the most talented free blacks emigrated from the state. See William Colson to Joseph Gales, 24 July, 16 Sept. 1834, American Colonization Society Papers, reel 21, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>5</sup> *The Revised Code of the Laws of Virginia* (Richmond, 1819), 1:434-35, 438-44. See also Joseph Tate, *Digest of the Laws of Virginia . . .* (Richmond, 1841), pp. 842-77; *Supplement to the Revised Code of the Laws of Virginia* (Richmond, 1833), pp. 246-48; *The Code of Virginia* (Richmond, 1849), pp. 747-48; James M. Matthews, *Digest of the Laws of Virginia of a Civil Nature* (Richmond, 1857), 2:205-11.

<sup>6</sup> Petition of Robert Dickeson to the Virginia General Assembly, Russell County, 21 Dec. 1825, Legislative Records; Petition of Thomas W. Betts et al. to the Virginia General Assembly, Richmond County, 18 Feb. 1843, *ibid.*; Petition of the citizens of Nansemond County to the Virginia General Assembly, 1 Mar. 1843, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Petition of Peter Strange to the Virginia General Assembly, Richmond, 25 Jan. 1844, Legislative Records; Testimonial of Walter D. Blair to the Virginia General Assembly, 23 Jan. 1844, with *ibid.*

freedom.<sup>8</sup> In Lynchburg, Archy Carey ran his hack-driving business for many years before his emancipation. Powhatan County bondsman Abraham Depp managed his owner's blacksmith shop. He served customers, arranged for payments, advanced credit, and traveled to Richmond to purchase iron, steel, leather, and other supplies. Diligent, hardworking, and astute, "whenever it happened that the day did not allow sufficient time to accomplish the work before him," the wife of his owner observed of Depp, "the night supplied the deficiency." After a number of years (and following his master's death), Depp gained his freedom and secured legal title to the enterprise he had managed so successfully as a slave.<sup>9</sup>

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Only a tiny number of highly privileged and proficient slaves were able to make the transition from slavery to business ownership during these early years. Most slaveholders who possessed extraordinarily talented blacks were primarily concerned with obtaining a profitable return on their investment. Even benevolent masters who were inclined to assist their slaves found it difficult to free them without also forcing them, as the law required, to emigrate from Virginia.<sup>10</sup> At the same time skilled blacks who belonged to charitable masters sometimes opted to remain in bondage with their families rather than face the uncertainties of petitioning the state legislature or, after 1837, the county courts for special permission to remain in the Old Dominion.<sup>11</sup>

By the 1850s, however, a number of complex and interrelated factors created a more favorable environment for the entry of free blacks into the entrepreneurial class. Some were able to take advantage of the general upswing in the state's economy: improved trade and transportation, industrial expansion, replenishment of the land, higher wages, and rising property values. Free African-American artisans benefited from

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<sup>8</sup> Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, pp. 77n, 179n; Petition of Stephen Bias to the Virginia General Assembly, Albemarle County, 14 Feb. 1839, Legislative Records.

<sup>9</sup> Petition of the citizens of Amherst County to the Virginia General Assembly, 27 Dec. 1833, Legislative Records; John H. Crockett to Archy Carey, 11 Dec. 1831, and Thomas Higginbotham to Richard Harrison, 17 Dec. 1833, with *ibid.*; Petition of Abraham Depp to the Virginia General Assembly, Powhatan County, 20 Dec. 1831, Legislative Records; Testimonial of Elizabeth Depp to the Virginia General Assembly, 14 July 1831, with *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Petition of David Ward to the Virginia General Assembly, Pittsylvania County, 29 July 1827, Legislative Records; Petition of Robert Smith to the Virginia General Assembly, Wythe County, 4 Dec. 1834, *ibid.*; Petition of Patty Daniel to the Virginia General Assembly, Halifax County, 30 Nov. 1842, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Tate, Digest of the Laws of Virginia, 1841*, p. 864; Memorial of the Loudoun County Court to the Virginia General Assembly, 17 Dec. 1836, Legislative Records.

**TABLE 1**  
**Real Estate Holdings among Rural Black Entrepreneurs, 1850–1860**

| Category      | Mean<br>Real Property |              | Cases     |           |
|---------------|-----------------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|
|               | 1850                  | 1860         | 1850      | 1860      |
| Artisan–1     | \$ 476                | \$ 593       | 21        | 41        |
| Manufacturing | 833                   | 1,483        | 3         | 6         |
| Service–1     | 569                   | 792          | 13        | 39        |
| Retail        | 767                   | 691          | 3         | 11        |
| Artisan–2     | 1,036                 | 989          | 11        | 27        |
| Service–2     | 3,100                 | 973          | 2         | 15        |
| Farmer        | <u>2,487</u>          | <u>3,180</u> | <u>23</u> | <u>49</u> |
|               | \$1,276               | \$1,430      | 76        | 188       |

*Source:* Computed from U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Virginia, 1850, 1860.

the migration of skilled slaves to the lower Mississippi River valley, which increased the demand in Virginia for skilled workers. Still others were able to exploit the attitudes of whites who believed that blacks were uniquely suited for certain trades, including barbering, draying, and blacksmithing. In addition, increasing numbers of free persons of color had been born in freedom. They had more experience with a market economy and in circumventing restrictive laws. This circumstance, coupled with the slow growth in the free black population (which lessened competition in certain occupations), gave ambitious free blacks opportunities to enter the field of business.

As a result, the free black entrepreneurial class expanded rapidly. At mid-century—when the census provides the first profile of this group—seventy-six free Negroes in rural areas operated businesses. Scattered in forty-three counties, a majority among these free blacks worked as barbers, blacksmiths, bricklayers, builders, coopers, or draymen. Fewer than one out of three were commercial farmers. The average real estate holdings among rural skilled artisans who usually engaged in business stood at about \$500. Among those engaged in service enterprises the mean was slightly less than \$600, and among farmers and planters, it was approximately \$2,500.<sup>12</sup>

During the next decade, the number of rural entrepreneurs rose 147 percent (from 76 to 188). Scattered in sixty-eight counties, a majority of them still worked as skilled artisans or in the service trades, but the proportion of small manufacturers (brick makers, a pump maker, a

<sup>12</sup> Computed from U.S. Census Bureau, Seventh Census, Manuscript Population Schedules, Virginia, 1850; Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, pp. 68-69. In census citations, the numbers in the upper right-hand corner of the right-hand page have been used to designate both the right-hand page and the unnumbered facing page.

boilermaker) and retailers (confectioners, butchers, grocers) expanded. At the same time, although the rural free black population remained virtually unchanged, the number of large farmers and planters—with real estate worth at least \$1,400 in 1850 and total estates of at least \$2,000 in 1860—more than doubled (from twenty-three to forty-nine).<sup>13</sup>

In part because of these numerical increases, the average real estate holdings among rural entrepreneurs rose only 12 percent (\$1,276 in 1850, compared with \$1,430 a decade later), but a few large farmers greatly improved their economic position. Between 1849 and 1859, Alfred Anderson, a mulatto slaveowner in Amelia County, increased his tobacco production from 7,000 to 12,000 pounds and enhanced the cash value of his farm from \$2,000 to \$5,600. His brother, Francis Anderson, of the same county, added 225 acres to his original 500-acre plantation and increased the value of his holdings from \$3,000 to \$7,500. The Andersons also built up their livestock herds—horses, mules, cattle, sheep, and hogs—and by 1857 owned a total of eleven horses and mules and 148 head of other livestock. William Epps, a nonslaveowning planter in Halifax County, quadrupled the size of his tobacco crop (from 2,000 to 8,000 pounds) and nearly tripled the size of his acreage under cultivation (from 120 to 342 acres), while marketing honey, bacon, sweet potatoes, corn, oats, and other products. In other sections, a few landowners similarly acquired new lands, increased crop acreage, and expanded production.<sup>14</sup>

There was also significant growth in urban areas. At mid-century, seventy-five free persons of color owned various business concerns in

TABLE 2  
Real Estate Holdings among Urban Black Entrepreneurs, 1850-1860

| Category      | Mean<br>Real Property |         | Cases |      |
|---------------|-----------------------|---------|-------|------|
|               | 1850                  | 1860    | 1850  | 1860 |
| Artisan-1     | \$1,468               | \$1,275 | 22    | 12   |
| Manufacturing | 1,300                 | 5,000   | 3     | 1    |
| Service-1     | 1,413                 | 1,742   | 31    | 43   |
| Retail        | 925                   | 860     | 4     | 10   |
| Artisan-2     | 1,286                 | 1,589   | 7     | 19   |

<sup>13</sup> Computed from U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Virginia, 1850, 1860.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Agricultural Schedules, Amelia County, 1850, pp. 154-57 (Andersons); *ibid.*, Mecklenburg County, 1850, pp. 37-38 (Priscilla Ivey); *ibid.*, Louisa County, 1850, pp. 346-47 (Joseph Powell); *ibid.*, Powhatan County, 1850, pp. 507-8 (John Lipscomb); *ibid.*, Halifax County, 1850, pp. 633-34 (Epps); *ibid.*, Amelia County, 1860, pp. 143-46 (Andersons); *ibid.*, Amherst County, 1860, pp. 217-18 (Samuel Beverly); *ibid.*, Campbell County, 1860, pp. 562-63 (Richard Parsons); *ibid.*, Cumberland County, 1860, pp. 139-40 (Frank Lipscomb); *ibid.*, Louisa County, 1860, pp. 411-12 (Robert Kinney); Records of the State Auditor, Personal Property Tax, Amelia County, 1857, pp. 27-28, Vi (Andersons); U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Agricultural Schedules, Mecklenburg County, 1860, pp. 567-68 (William Mitchell); *ibid.*, Powhatan County, 1860, pp. 451-52 (John Lipscomb); *ibid.*, Halifax County, 1860, pp. 756-57 (Epps). This expansion should be considered in light of inflation, which, in some sections, increased the value of land and other property several percentage points a year.

|           |                |                |    |            |
|-----------|----------------|----------------|----|------------|
| Service-2 | 2,180          | 1,377          | 5  | 26         |
| Farmer*   | 7,333          | 3,733          | 3  | 3          |
|           | <u>\$1,675</u> | <u>\$1,588</u> | 75 | <u>114</u> |

\*Town residents who were primarily farmers

Source: Computed from U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Virginia, 1850, 1860.

eleven towns and cities. The most popular enterprise was barbering, but blacksmithing, draying, gardening, and shoemaking constituted another segment of the urban business group. The average real estate holdings among urban skilled artisans who usually engaged in business was three times that of rural blacks in the same category (\$1,500, compared with \$500), while in the service occupations the average for city dwellers was more than twice that of their rural counterparts (\$1,400, compared with \$600). As a group, urban entrepreneurs controlled \$126,000 worth of real estate, one-fifth of the total realty owned by free blacks in Virginia.

During the 1850s, the number of urban free blacks operating businesses rose 52 percent (from 75 to 114), an increase significantly greater than the growth of free persons of color in the urban population. By 1860, the business owners were located in thirteen towns and cities, including Alexandria, Fredericksburg, Lynchburg, Norfolk, Petersburg, Richmond, Staunton, Wheeling, and Winchester. Barbering continued to be the most common pursuit, but contracting, building, dressmaking, and laundering surpassed blacksmithing, hauling, and shoemaking as leading occupations. The infusion of younger men, and women with limited capital, into the business group resulted in a small decline in average realty holdings among all urban business owners during the decade (\$1,700 to \$1,600), but these city dwellers still controlled \$181,000 worth of real estate (a 44 percent rise) and boasted more realty on average than their rural counterparts.

Although virtually every town and city in the state, including places where white competition was fierce—Alexandria, Fredericksburg, Norfolk, and Portsmouth—witnessed a growth in the number of black entrepreneurs, the largest expansion occurred in Petersburg and Richmond. In both cities, free blacks were able to take advantage of rapidly growing local economies—increased trade, improved transportation, industrial expansion, and enlarged merchandising. Some who had previously worked in semiskilled or unskilled jobs discovered new opportunities in business, while others who had earlier established small shops, stores, and service enterprises benefited from the general prosperity. As a result, by 1860, while containing only 10 percent of the state's free black population (5,820 of 58,042), the two cities boasted sixty-six black-owned businesses, or 22 percent of the total. Although the numerical expansion had resulted in a slight decline of average property holdings during the decade, the mean real estate among Petersburg's businessmen and women in 1860 stood at \$1,100, and among Richmond's at \$2,000. In both cities, several entrepreneurs—barbers Reuben West and George Ruffin, seamstress Elizabeth Beatty, and grocer Matilda Thacker in Richmond and livery owner Robert Clarke, seamstress Ann Dabney, and finisher James Mathews in Petersburg—achieved a measure of prosperity equal to that of their white neighbors.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, pp. 150-51; U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Henrico County, Richmond, 1st Ward, 1860, p. 44 (West); *ibid.*, 2d Ward, 1860, p. 210 (Ruffin); Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, p. 158n (Beatty); U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Henrico County, Richmond, 1st Ward, 1860, p. 171 (Thacker); *ibid.*, Dinwiddie County, Petersburg, East Ward, 1860, p. 199 (Clarke); *ibid.*, West Ward, 1860, p. 362 (Dabney); *ibid.*, South Ward, 1860, p. 333 (Mathews).

Among the growing number of urban businesses, none was more popular nor profitable than barbering. Although the comment of British traveler William Howard Russell that "the trade of barber is almost the birthright of the free negro or coloured man in the United States" was not accurate for a number of states in the South, it did apply to Virginia. Nearly every town had its free black barber—Thaddeus Harris in Abingdon, George Henry in Alexandria, Thomas Pierce in Fredericksburg, Jacob Riddick in Norfolk, James Penn in Lexington, and Robert Campbell in Staunton.<sup>16</sup> In the larger urban centers black barbers

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competed against one another for the lucrative white clientele: Royall Morgan, Armstead Pride, and Henry Sydnor in Lynchburg; John Berry, Henry Elebeck, and Edward Locket in Petersburg; Joseph Ferguson, George Gray, Richard C. Hobson, William B. Lyons, George Ruffin, and Reuben West in Richmond. One prominent white gentleman, a lifetime resident of the capital, recalled that he had never had his hair cut nor his beard trimmed by a white barber. In 1860 among the nineteen urban barbers who owned their own shops, the mean realty was valued at about \$2,400; among the six in Richmond, the average was \$3,800. Except for the holdings of a single tanner and three livery owners, these were the highest urban averages for any occupational group. Representing 17 percent of the urban business class (19 of 114 people), barbers controlled 25 percent of the urban business realty (\$44,800 of \$181,000).<sup>17</sup>

If barbering remained the most lucrative enterprise during the 1850s, the greatest urban business expansion occurred among free women of color. In rural areas, men outnumbered women in the entrepreneurial class in 1850 nearly forty to one and in 1860 nearly twenty to one, but in urban areas the portion of black women operating businesses rose from 5 percent in 1850 to 24 percent

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<sup>16</sup> Sir William Howard Russell, *My Diary North and South* (London, 1863), p. 74; U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Washington County, Western District, 1860, p. 547 (Harris); *ibid.*, Spotsylvania County, Southern District, 1860, p. 477 (Pierce); *ibid.*, Norfolk County, Norfolk, 1860, p. 378 (Riddick); *ibid.*, Rockbridge County, 1850, p. 403 (Penn); *ibid.*, Augusta County, 1850, p. 296 (Campbell); *ibid.*, Augusta County, Staunton, 1860, p. 757 (Campbell).

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Campbell County, Lynchburg, 1860, p. 392 (Morgan); *ibid.*, Lynchburg, 1850, p. 100 (Pride); Petition of Henry and Lucy Sydnor to the Virginia General Assembly, Lynchburg, 6 Jan. 1842, Legislative Records; Petition of C. L. Mosby to the Virginia General Assembly, 6 Jan. 1842, *ibid.*; U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Lynchburg, 1860, p. 386 (Sydnor); *ibid.*, Dinwiddie County, Petersburg, South Ward, 1860, p. 289 (Berry); *ibid.*, Dinwiddie County, Petersburg, 1850, p. 340 (Elebeck); *ibid.*, Petersburg, East Ward, 1860, p. 199 (Elebeck); *ibid.*, Petersburg, South Ward, 1860, p. 293 (Locket); *ibid.*, Henrico County, Richmond, 1850, p. 246 (John E. Ferguson); Tyler-McGraw and Kimball, *In Bondage and Freedom*, pp. 28-29 (Joseph Ferguson). In the 1850 census, Ferguson was listed under the given name John, but in 1845 he advertised as "JOSEPH FERGUSON, HAIR CUTTER, DRESSER, &c." U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Henrico County, Richmond, 1850, p. 283 (Gray); *ibid.*, Richmond, Eastern Division, 1860, p. 656 (Gray); *ibid.*, 2d Ward, 1860, p. 427 (Hobson); *ibid.*, 2d Ward, 1860, p. 419 (Lyons); *ibid.*, 1850, p. 248 (Ruffin); *ibid.*, 2d Ward, 1860, p. 210 (Ruffin); *ibid.*, 1850, p. 448 (West); *ibid.*, 1st Ward, 1860, p. 44 (West); Russell, *The Free Negro in Virginia*, p. 151 (West). See also Robert Smith to the Virginia General Assembly, Wythe County, 4 Dec. 1834, Legislative Records. Barbers in hamlets (Abingdon in Washington County, Fairfax in Culpeper County), or whose shops were located outside city limits, have been designated as rural in the wealth statistics (U.S. Census Bureau, *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*, vol. 1: *Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* [Washington, D.C., 1864], pp. 518-20).

in 1860. Although this disparity was in part a reflection of mid-century census takers sometimes failing to list occupations among free women of color, the proportional increase was too great to be explained by this factor alone. During the 1850s, increasing numbers of women were able to establish businesses as seamstresses, laundresses, nurses, midwives, retailers, and prostitutes. In Alexandria Mary Savoy owned a grocery store; in Portsmouth Mary Scott became a fish dealer, and Elizabeth Smith owned a laundry; in Petersburg Eliza Gallie ran a well-patronized bathhouse; and in Lynchburg madam Harriett Rouse managed a highly successful brothel. One of Rouse's prostitutes, Elizabeth Langley, a slaveowner, accumulated an estate worth \$5,000. Like their male contemporaries, free African-American women were able to take advantage of the prosperous times, but the increases represented more than favorable economic conditions. Industrious, with limited choices of husbands—women outnumbered men in the urban free Negro population—this small group of women struggled to improve their economic position.<sup>18</sup>

In both rural and urban areas, among both men and women, blacks who engaged in business had often spent many years as unskilled or semiskilled workers before entering the business class. Some of them had passed their formative years in bondage; others had worked as free black laborers or farmhands; still others had served as apprentice shoemakers, blacksmiths, or joiners. The years of toil endured before establishing a business are borne out by the first relatively accurate age data on free black entrepreneurs: at mid-century, almost one out of two was fifty years of age or older, one out of four was age sixty or more, and one of twelve was at least threescore years and ten. Not only were they old—with an average age of more than forty-nine years—but they were also nearly four times more likely to be over age forty than other free blacks in the South. In 1860 one out of three black entrepreneurs was fifty years of age or older, and one of six was age sixty or more. Although black business owners were younger than in 1850, their average age of forty-five years was still old by the standards of the day.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, while the free black population of Virginia increased less than 7 percent during the 1850s, the number of black-owned businesses jumped exactly 100 percent (from 151 to 302). This growth occurred not only in the more traditional types of black-owned businesses but in other kinds of enterprises as well, including fish retailing, painting, plastering, grocering, gardening, wheelwrighting, and harness making. By 1860, there was a pump maker, restaurateur, tailor, tanner, merchant, and undertaker. Thirty-seven-year-old Robert Butts founded his undertaking business in Norfolk County during the 1855 yellow fever epidemic; within a few years, he had become a person of substantial means. "He made plenty of money and lived well," one former

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<sup>18</sup> Computed from U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Virginia, 1850, 1860; *ibid.*, Alexandria County, Alexandria, 1860, p. 889 (Savoy); *ibid.*, Norfolk County, Portsmouth, Jefferson Ward, 1860, p. 196 (Scott); *ibid.*, 1860, p. 213 (Smith); *ibid.*, Campbell County, Lynchburg, 1860, p. 329 (Rouse); Records of the State Auditor, Personal Property Tax, Campbell County, Lynchburg, 1847, 1849, 1851 (Langley); Lebsock, *Free Women of Petersburg*, pp. 87-88 (Gallie); U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Dinwiddie County, Petersburg, East Ward, 1860, p. 238 (Gallie).

<sup>19</sup> Computed from U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Virginia, 1850, 1860; Tyler-McGraw and Kimball, *In Bondage and Freedom*, pp. 20-33; Lebsock, *Free Women of Petersburg*, chap. 4; Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia*, p. 58.



slave recalled. "Had no white undertakers to compete with him." Others, including a number of women, became root doctors, "coppers and leechers," and market stall operators.<sup>20</sup>

With rare exception, free black entrepreneurs during the antebellum period catered exclusively to a white clientele. In rural areas, blacksmiths, wagoners, and shoemakers provided services to white farmers and planters. In towns and cities, livery operators, draymen, tavern keepers, confectioners, boat owners, and barbers counted among their customers white businessmen, merchants, lawyers, and physicians. In Goochland County, tavern owner Jacob Sampson entertained white plantation owners as well as travelers passing through on business.

Sampson and other free black entrepreneurs occasionally catered to some of the most prominent whites in their communities. Those who patronized the Lynchburg barber shop of Frederick Williams, for instance, included aldermen Martin W. Davenport and F. S. Miller, physician James T. Stevens, and Mayor Henry M. Deadlock. Those who frequented the shoemaking establishment of James Major, ate at the restaurant of John Brewer, or contracted for the services of caterer Jack McCrae in Petersburg were similarly among the "most prominent people of town," as were customers at black-owned shops in Richmond, Alexandria, Fredericksburg, and Norfolk. One group of white merchants in Norfolk explained how valuable these businessmen were in their community: "[T]he business of a drayman is an indispensable employment requiring fidelity integrity industry and experience." Neither whites nor slaves possessed those qualities to the same extent as did "Ackey [White] and a few other free Negroes."<sup>21</sup>

Serving a white clientele, however, was a delicate matter. The slightest miscalculation—an ill-chosen word, improper remark, or inappropriate gesture—could result in economic disaster or worse. Consequently, free blacks were cautious in their dealings with whites, avoiding debates on politics, especially the abolitionist crusade, waiting on their customers with care and consideration, and remaining forthright in their business transactions. Outside their establishments, they stepped aside for whites in doorways or on walkways, addressed their customers as "Mister," "Missus," or "Sir," and avoided being seen alone with white women. These were extremely sensitive matters, but black entrepreneurs realized that their success in business depended not only on favorable economic conditions but also on tact, prudence, diplomacy, and deference when dealing with whites.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Population of the United States in 1860*, p. 519; Tyler-McGraw and Kimball, *In Bondage and Freedom*, pp. 26-30; Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (1976; Bloomington, Ind., 1980), pp. 255, 258.

<sup>21</sup> Petition of Frederick Williams to the Virginia General Assembly, Lynchburg, 13 Dec. 1834, Legislative Records; Petition of Joseph E. Royall et al. to the Virginia General Assembly, [Dec.] 1834, *ibid.*; Petition of Wilson Morris to the Virginia General Assembly, Richmond, 16 Mar. 1838, *ibid.*; Petition of Peter Strange to the Virginia General Assembly, Richmond, 25 Jan. 1844, *ibid.*; Testimonial of Walter D. Blair to the Virginia General Assembly, Richmond, 23 Jan. 1844, with *ibid.*; Petition of Edmund Kean to the Virginia General Assembly, Winchester, 6 Dec. 1849, *ibid.*; Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, p. 81; Petition of Ackey White to the Virginia General Assembly, Norfolk County, 28 Dec. 1836, Legislative Records; Testimonial of Martha Parks to the Virginia General Assembly, Norfolk, [Dec. 1836], with *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Testimonial of Thomas J. West et al. to the Virginia General Assembly, Henrico County, [Jan. 1837], Legislative Records; Petition of Robin Brown to the Virginia General Assembly, Henrico County, 16 Jan. 1837, *ibid.*; Petition of Henry Lewis to the Virginia General Assembly, Stafford County, 6 Dec. 1833, *ibid.*; Tyler-McGraw and Kimball, *In Bondage and Freedom*, p. 30; Luther Porter Jackson, "Free Negroes of Petersburg, Virginia," *Journal of Negro*

For their part, white patrons offered protection to blacks in business whom they deemed "inoffensive" and "harmless." In the midst of the anti-free black, pro-emigration violence of the 1830s, free Negro blacksmith Dennis Comer of Fairfax County was forced to flee for his life on one occasion, but when a group of his neighbors explained that Comer was "extremely useful" and a "man of extraordinary good Character," the legislature granted him special permission to return and remain in Virginia.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, when a local court denied Henry Sydnor, a self-purchased Lynchburg barber, the right to remain in the state in 1842, a group of his customers, including Thomas Stabler, S. H. Davis, Thomas McKinney, and his former master C. L. Mosby, successfully petitioned the legislature in his behalf. "Henry is a barber by trade, and in that vocation is a very useful member of society," they attested. Both Sydnor and his wife Lucy were "persons of the most irreproachable character—industrious, careful, [and] modest in their deportment." In a number of other instances, white customers presented petitions in behalf of black entrepreneurs, describing them as "useful," "prudent," "courteous," "respectful," "upright," "trustworthy," "conscientious," "loyal," and "peaceful."<sup>24</sup>

Yet even the most vigorous defense was not enough to shield blacks in business. Hack driver Archy Carey and blacksmith Abraham Depp, despite glowing praise from local whites, were forced to emigrate from the state. Innkeeper Jacob Sampson, even with similar support from whites, was obliged to relinquish his liquor license and turn to farming. Richmond cooper Wilson Morris, described as an extremely valuable asset to his community, was required to send his emancipated wife and children to another state. Falmouth carpenter and wheelwright Henry Lewis, extolled by more than fifty whites as honest, sober, hardworking, and peaceful, was not permitted by the General Assembly to remain in Virginia. Others were compelled to close their stores, send loved ones away, or emigrate themselves, despite assistance from whites in their communities.<sup>25</sup>

However tenuous their status, most blacks in business could nonetheless count on support from whites. Such patronage was forthcoming in large measure because these entrepreneurs had accepted some of the values and attitudes of the master class—especially their ownership of

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*History* 12 (1927): 380-85; Testimonial of Martha Parks to the Virginia General Assembly, Norfolk, [Dec. 1836], Legislative Records; Petition of Edmund Kean to the Virginia General Assembly, Winchester, 6 Dec. 1849, *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Petition of the citizens of Fairfax County to the Virginia General Assembly, 30 Jan. 1838, Legislative Records.

<sup>24</sup> Petition of Thomas Stabler et al. to the Virginia General Assembly, Lynchburg, [Jan. 1842], *ibid.*; Petition of Henry and Lucy Sydnor to the Virginia General Assembly, 6 Jan. 1842, *ibid.*; Petition of C. L. Mosby to the Virginia General Assembly, 6 Jan. 1842, *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Testimonial of Thomas Higginbotham et al. to the Virginia General Assembly, Amherst County, 17 Sept. 1833, *ibid.*; Petition of Abraham Depp to the Virginia General Assembly, Powhatan County, 20 Dec. 1831, *ibid.*; Petition of Thomas Stabler et al. to the Virginia General Assembly, Lynchburg, [Jan. 1842], *ibid.*; Petition of Henry and Lucy Sydnor to the Virginia General Assembly, Lynchburg, 6 Jan. 1842, *ibid.*; Testimonial of Herbert A. Claiborne et al. to the Virginia General Assembly, Richmond, [1838], *ibid.*; Herbert A. Claiborne et al. to the Virginia General Assembly, with *ibid.*; Petition of Wilson Morris to the Virginia General Assembly, Richmond, 16 Mar. 1838, *ibid.*; Petition of Henry Lewis to the Virginia General Assembly, Stafford County, 10 Dec. 1832, *ibid.*; Testimonial of William C. Beale et al. to the Virginia General Assembly, 29 Oct. 1832, with *ibid.*; Petition of Robert Smith to the Virginia General Assembly, Wythe County, 4 Dec. 1834, *ibid.*; Testimonial of Walter D. Blair to the Virginia General Assembly, Richmond, 23 Jan. 1844, *ibid.*; Petition of Peter Strange to the Virginia General Assembly, Richmond, 24 Jan. 1844, *ibid.*; Petition of C. L. Mosby to the Virginia General Assembly, Lynchburg, 6 Jan. 1842, *ibid.*

slaves. Although the ownership of slaves by blacks in the Old Dominion never reached the extent it did in the Lower South, and though, after 1832, Virginia law prohibited free blacks from acquiring slaves except by descent, more than one out of eight antebellum black businessmen and women acquired slaves for profit. In rural areas, some of the largest farmers and planters, including the Anderson brothers in Amelia County, Frank Lipscomb in Cumberland County, Priscilla Ivey in Mecklenburg, and Jacob Sampson in Goochland, owned small gangs of field hands. In 1849 farmer Rebecca Tinsley Mathews of Prince George County owned twenty-eight blacks, slaves she had inherited from her free black mother, who had received them from a white planter named Walter Gilliam. In towns and cities, black barbers, blacksmiths, builders, coopers, draymen, shoemakers, and livery owners acquired slave "strikers," tanners, drivers, laborers, helpers, and apprentices. By 1860, every free Negro drayman in Norfolk was a slaveholder. In other cities, business people who achieved the greatest economic success often did so by relying on slave labor. Winchester livery owner Edmund Kean, Petersburg liveryman Robert Clarke, Washington County builder Washington Beatie, and Richmond seamstress Virginia Cunningham, all among the wealthiest African-Americans in their communities, were profit-minded slaveholders.<sup>26</sup>

In the treatment of their slaves, free black entrepreneurs differed little from their white neighbors. While some were benevolent, others bought, sold, willed, mortgaged, and transferred blacks, required long hours in

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the shops and fields, and disciplined unruly workers. One of the best-known incidents concerning punishment of a black-owned slave involved the housekeeper of Reuben West, a prosperous barber in Richmond. When one of his slaves displayed a "spirit of insubordination," she was quickly sold. Indeed, most slaveowning business people were not averse to buying and selling bondspeople, and according to one authority, the 1832 law prohibiting free persons of color from acquiring blacks except by descent went unenforced during the 1840s and 1850s, as free Negroes in business purchased human chattel in the market or from brokers. A few not only used these slaves themselves, but when the demand for skilled workers rose during the 1850s, they also hired them out in the same manner as white slaveholders. A few others, including Louisa County farmer Joseph Powell, although legally slaves themselves, "owned" field hands to work their land.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> U.S. Manuscript Slave Census, Amelia County, 1850, p. 511 (Alfred and Francis Anderson); *ibid.*, 1860, p. 148 (Alfred and Francis Anderson); *ibid.*, 1850, p. 559 (William Anderson); *ibid.*, 1850, p. 575 (James P. Anderson); *ibid.*, 1860, p. 172 (James P. Anderson); *ibid.*, 1860, p. 175 (Franky Miles); *ibid.*, Alexandria County, Alexandria, 1850, p. 462 (Moses Hepburn); U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Alexandria County, Alexandria, 1850, p. 382 (Moses Hepburn); Helen Tunnicliff Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro* (5 vols., 1926; New York, 1968), 1:241-42, 251-52; U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Frederick County, Winchester, 1860, p. 394 (Kean); *ibid.*, Dinwiddie County, Petersburg, East Ward, 1860, p. 199 (Clarke); *ibid.*, Washington County, Western District, 1860, p. 571 (Beatie); *ibid.*, Henrico County, Richmond, 1850, p. 144 (Cunningham).

<sup>27</sup> Russell, *The Free Negro in Virginia*, p. 95n; R. Halliburton, Jr., "Free Black Owners of Slaves: A Reappraisal of the Woodson Thesis," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 76 (1975): 134; Schwarz, "Emancipators, Protectors, and Anomalies," p. 319; William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek, *John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1829-1865* (Urbana, 1989), pp. 14, 26 (Powell was Langston's uncle); U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript

The social and cultural values of free black entrepreneurs were also revealed in their belief that property ownership held the key to a better life. They exerted remarkable efforts to accumulate land and personal possessions that their children and loved ones would be able to inherit. They believed that owning land and other property would help them protect their families, assert their rights in court, and gain the goodwill of whites. Their wealth would certify that they were productive, responsible members of their communities and that they were not lazy, indolent, and vicious, as some whites contended. "Your Petitioner also represents that he is by trade a blacksmith," one shop owner explained, "that he is the owner of a fixed and settled residence, and in a pecuniary situation which places him far beyond the reach of those vile temptations to theft and other vices to which too many of the free people of colour are exposed."<sup>28</sup>

Yet their values were more complex than a simple boast about pecuniary success. Despite their dealings with whites and their ownership of slaves, free black businessmen and women maintained social ties with a wide array of other blacks, slave and free. Even during the late antebellum era, most business people were former slaves themselves, were the children of slaves, or had relatives, friends, or loved ones in bondage. Their connections with these groups could be seen in their willingness to support black organizations whose membership included city slaves, plantation blacks, and propertyless free Negroes. In the 1850s, for example, Richmond plasterer John Adams and barber Richard Hobson and Petersburg contractor C. B. Stevens contributed significant sums to the First African Baptist Church and the Gillfield Baptist Church in their respective communities. In Lynchburg, Fredericksburg, Staunton, and Williamsburg prosperous black businessmen helped finance the construction of Baptist and African churches, while donating funds to mutual aid societies and benevolent associations.<sup>29</sup>

Their connections with slaves and less prosperous free blacks, however, did not mean that they were antagonistic toward whites. Indeed, blacks in business remained cautious about their dealings with family members and friends in bondage, and their contributions to church and self-help organizations were usually made with the knowledge and acquiescence of whites in their communities. Although diverse in their attitudes toward the South and slavery, as the political conflict intensified, some of them openly supported the Confederacy. In 1861 Petersburg coachman Richard Kinnard reportedly donated \$100 to the Confederate cause. Other businessmen and women agreed with the declaration of free black Charles Tinsley, who avowed, "We are willing to aid Virginia's cause to the utmost extent of our ability."<sup>30</sup>

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Population Schedules, Louisa County, 1850, p. 389; U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Agricultural Schedules, Louisa County, 1850, pp. 346-47.

<sup>28</sup> Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, pp. 147-58; Petition of the residents of Alleghany County to the Virginia General Assembly, 1835, in Russell, *The Free Negro in Virginia*, p. 170; Petition of Abraham Depp to the Virginia General Assembly, Powhatan County, 20 Dec. 1831, Legislative Records.

<sup>29</sup> Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*, Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, 36 (1979; Princeton, 1988), pp. 206-7; W. Harrison Daniel, "Virginia Baptists and the Negro in the Antebellum Era," *Journal of Negro History* 56 (1971): 1-16; Luther Porter Jackson, "Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia From 1760 to 1860," *ibid.* 16 (1931): 193-98, 221, 227, 236-37; Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, pp. 160-62.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Dinwiddie County, Petersburg, East Ward, 1860, p. 198 (Kinnard); Petersburg *Daily Express*, 26 Apr. 1861, quoted in Jackson, "Free Negroes of Petersburg," pp. 387-88.

Just as the Civil War profoundly altered the condition of former slaves, it also created a new environment for black business activity. Some free Negroes, like their white neighbors, suffered losses at the hands of Union soldiers. In Amelia County, Alfred and Francis Anderson watched helplessly as their livestock and crops were carried off by Union troops. Over a period of three days in 1865 they lost nearly everything—horses, mules, sheep, 1,500 pounds of bacon, 1,200 pounds of fodder, wheat, corn, and twenty hogs. An inventory shortly after the war indicated that the two brothers, who had previously owned 159 head of livestock, possessed three horses, nine cattle, ten sheep, and twelve hogs. Another member of the family, James P. Anderson, recalled how even as peace was being negotiated a cavalry detachment and wagon train under the command of Philip H. Sheridan carried off his horses, crops, and other property. A neighbor, Frankey Miles, lost not only nineteen slaves during the war, but nearly everything else on her 1,100-acre plantation as well, including livestock, tobacco, and 2,000 pounds of bacon. In 1866 she was left with four horses, five head of cattle, and greatly diminished herds of sheep and hogs.<sup>31</sup>

In towns and cities, free black businessmen and women also suffered during the war years. They found it difficult to procure supplies, obtain credit, and collect debts. When they did secure payment for their services, it was usually in inflated Confederate currency. As did their rural counterparts, they witnessed the destruction of their buildings and property at the hands of Union soldiers. During the siege of Petersburg, bricklayer Henry Mason, bathhouse owner Eliza Gallie, prostitute Sarah F. Taylor, and drayman Sandy Walker lost most of their holdings. A short time later, during the Confederate evacuation of Richmond, black shop owners saw their establishments go up in flames as southern troops blew up the arsenal and set fire to the central business district.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, blacks were not alone among those experiencing economic difficulties in Virginia during and immediately after the Civil War. In the 1860s, land values fell 27 percent, manufacturing and industry (iron, lumber, textile, tobacco) dropped below their antebellum levels, and trade and transportation slowed considerably. Besides the devastation caused by the war—the burned towns and farmhouses, blown up bridges and rail lines, blocked rivers and canals—postwar Virginians suffered from a lack of currency, scarcity of credit, general indebtedness, and three years of drought.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Records of the State Auditor, Personal Property Tax, Amelia County, 1857, 1866, 1867; Alfred Anderson, Amelia County, ca. 1877, Claim #16,011, Records of the Treasury Department, Records of the Southern Claims Commission, reel 9, RG 56, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Francis Anderson, Amelia County, ca. 1877, Claim #16,012, *ibid.*; James Anderson, Amelia County, ca. 1877, Claim #16,297, *ibid.*; Henry F. Harrison, administrator for Frankey Miles, ca. 1877, Claim #18,049, *ibid.*; U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Amelia County, 1860, pp. 169, 171, 212; U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Agricultural Schedules, Amelia County, Leigh Township, 1870, pp. 5-6, 7-8 (Alfred and William Anderson); *ibid.*, King and Queen County, Buena Vista Township, 1870, pp. 3-4 (Ransom Harris).

<sup>32</sup> Michael B. Chesson, *Richmond After the War, 1865-1890* (Richmond, 1981), pp. 57-59; Records of the State Auditor, Personal Property Tax, Petersburg, 1855, 1857, 1868 (Mason); U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Dinwiddie County, Petersburg, East Ward, 1860, p. 238 (Gallie); *ibid.*, Petersburg, East Ward, 1860, p. 189 (Taylor); *ibid.*, 1860, p. 231 (Walker).

<sup>33</sup> Lynda Joyce Morgan, "Emancipation in the Virginia Tobacco Belt, 1850-1870" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1986), pp. 310, 311, 322, 323, 324n; U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Report of the Commissioner for 1867* (Washington, D.C., 1868), pp. 104-7, 119.

Black business people not only confronted the economic exigencies caused by the war but also faced hostile former Confederates who were determined to push them into a subordinate economic position. In several counties, an official of the Freedmen's Bureau reported in 1865, white landowners refused to sell land to blacks, adopted covenants not to employ their neighbors' former slaves, and formed vigilante groups to coerce both the new freedmen and women and those blacks who had been free before 1861. With the entry of freedmen into the political arena in 1867, white intimidation intensified.<sup>34</sup>

How these problems affected antebellum free blacks in business can be seen in the changes in the new entry and persistence rates among black entrepreneurs.<sup>35</sup> Among those listed in at least two census returns,

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the new entry rate went from sixty-four individuals in 1850, to eighty-one in 1860, down to forty-three in 1870. Thus, slightly more than half as many prewar free blacks in 1870, as free blacks in 1860, entered the business group for the first time, at least as revealed in the population censuses. The average total estate holdings of new entrants also dropped off, from \$2,400 in 1860 to \$1,600 in 1870, with a significantly larger portion of the latter group concentrated in the service trades.

Similarly, the persistence rate among those engaged in business before and after the war points to a decline among blacks who had secured their freedom before the Civil War. Excluding counties that later became part of West Virginia, among the 322 free persons of color who owned businesses in 1850 or 1860, only about fifty survived as business people in 1870. There were approximately eighteen free blacks who experienced downward mobility—who maintained businesses before the war but who were forced to engage in unskilled or nonbusiness occupations in its aftermath. Several others—barber James Taliaferro, liveryman Horace Page, painter William Walker—moved to the District of Columbia. Even the most liberal interpretation of these figures—nearly one in five antebellum black business people survived the war as property owners—offers a ratio that was significantly less than that for white property owners in other sections of the South where persistence data are available.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Claude F. Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Land Ownership* (Baton Rouge, 1978), p. 25; Ulysses S. Grant to John W. Turner, 27 Apr. 1866 (telegram), in John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* (16 vols. to date; Carbondale, Ill., 1967- ), 16:498.

<sup>35</sup> The difficulties in tracing individuals from one census to the next are obvious. To gain an estimate of postwar business people who owned enterprises before the war, the census lists of blacks in business in 1850, 1860, and 1870 were alphabetized according to surnames, then given names, then counties. These directories were then checked and cross-checked by hand. Black entrepreneurs appearing more than once were then put into six categories: "entry" or year of entry into the business class; "same" or the continuation in the same business in the next census; "differ" or a change in business category; "exit" or leaving business; "prior" or occupation before entering business; and "moved" or left the state. Entrepreneurs were then traced forward and backward in time, and comparisons were made of wealth holdings, residency patterns, color, and gender.

<sup>36</sup> <sup>36</sup> The persistence rate has been calculated as follows: the number of individual business people in 1850 and 1860 (139 plus 280 minus 97 who appeared in both census returns, or 322) was divided by the 50 listed in 1870 who also appeared in 1850 or 1860. Thus, 322 divided by 50 yields roughly one out of six, or 16 percent. Counties that later became part of West Virginia were excluded from this comparison. This decline should be put in the context of age patterns. Because the mean age of business people before the war was mid- to late forties, a significant portion of the

The postwar fate of free black barbers—next to commercial farmers the most prosperous antebellum group—reveals the difficulties confronting free persons of color in the aftermath of the Civil War. Again excluding West Virginia counties, among the barbers listed as businessmen in the 1850 or 1860 census returns, fewer than one in five maintained their economic and occupational position in 1870. Although three of them—Lynchburg's Thomas Gladman, Richmond's Richard Hobson, and Staunton's Thomas Campbell—improved their economic fortunes, Washington County's Thaddeus Harris and Richmond's Lomax Smith and Reuben West experienced economic decline. Once the richest black businessman in the state, West saw the value of his realty drop 65 percent during the 1860s, while his personal fortune declined even more precipitously. Moreover, the significant growth in the number of barbers during the 1850s (from fifteen to twenty-six) came to a halt. Between 1860 and 1870, the number of black barbers remained at twenty-six, while their average total estate declined from \$3,800 to an estimated \$2,900.<sup>37</sup>

It was not surprising that blacks in business experienced losses or found it difficult to maintain their operations during and after the war. What is surprising is that despite the economic and social problems during the war decade, the rapid expansion of the 1850s continued unabated. Ironically, some wartime problems created new business opportunities. In 1861 white mechanic John Lenahan, a resident of Lynchburg, observed that black "Carpenters Bricklayers Stone masons, & Blacksmiths" occupied jobs formerly held by whites who were off fighting in the Confederate army. In 1862 William Triplett, president of an iron company in Richmond, made the same observation. James Robinson, a free black wagoner, was the last public drayman left in the city; without his services Triplett would have been "compelled to close the Works." As the war progressed, skilled blacks—slave and free—found their expertise in increasingly greater demand and were able to extract good compensation for their services.<sup>38</sup>

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business group would have died of natural causes during the 1860s. Even so, the average age of forty-seven in 1870 suggests that if age were important, the decline was primarily the result of various other factors. For a discussion of white persistence rates, see Jonathan M. Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge, 1978). See also U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Spotsylvania County, Fredericksburg, 1850, p. 368 (Taliaferro); *ibid.*, District of Columbia, 7th Ward, 1860, p. 799 (Taliaferro); *ibid.*, Fauquier County, Northeast Warrenton, 1860, p. 80 (Page); *ibid.*, District of Columbia, 5th Ward, 1870, p. 88 (Page); *ibid.*, Spotsylvania County, Fredericksburg, 1860, p. 324 (Walker); *ibid.*, District of Columbia, 1st Ward, 1870, p. 24 (Walker).

<sup>37</sup> Although listed in the 1860 population census with only \$100 in personal property, barber Thomas Gladman owned three slaves before the Civil War. I have therefore conservatively estimated his prewar holdings at \$1,500. See Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, p. 220; U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Campbell County, Lynchburg, 1870, p. 536 (Gladman increased his total estate from about \$1,500 to \$8,000); *ibid.*, Henrico County, Richmond, 2d Ward, 1860, p. 427; *ibid.*, Richmond, Madison Ward, 1870, p. 52 (Hobson from \$3,650 to \$5,000); *ibid.*, Augusta County, Staunton, 1860, p. 751; *ibid.*, Staunton, 1870, p. 214 (Campbell from \$1,900 to \$7,000); *ibid.*, Henrico County, Richmond, 2d Ward, 1860, p. 512; *ibid.*, Richmond, Monroe Ward, 1870, p. 321 (Smith dropped from \$3,000 to \$2,500); *ibid.*, Washington County, Western District, 1860, p. 547; *ibid.*, Abingdon, 1870, p. 4 (Harris from \$4,000 to \$3,400); *ibid.*, Henrico County, Richmond, 1st Ward, 1860, p. 44; *ibid.*, Jefferson Ward, 1870, p. 511 (West from \$32,000 to \$4,300).

<sup>38</sup> John Lenahan to Jefferson Davis, 15 July 1861, in Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, ser. 1, vol. 1: *The Destruction of Slavery* (Cambridge, London, and Melbourne, 1985), p. 760; William S. Triplett to George W. Randolph, 23 Apr. 1862, in *ibid.*, p. 761; John Kane to James Dinwiddie, 15 Oct. 1864, in *ibid.*, pp. 767-68.

Following the war, land prices in rural areas dropped from \$15 and \$20 an acre to only a few dollars per acre in some sections. Although even at such depressed values few blacks could acquire a stake large enough to become landowners, some were able to take advantage of these lower prices. In addition, nearly one out of five white male southerners aged thirteen to forty-three died during the conflict, and tens of thousands of others in Virginia and other states returned home physically disabled or mentally impaired. Though antebellum free blacks and former slaves also suffered during the war, the death rates, at least from what we know, were minimal in comparison. Moreover, while some parts of the economy were slow to recover following the war, there were increasing demands for skilled and semiskilled workers to rebuild homes and businesses, a situation some blacks used to their advantage. There was also a gradual expansion of the black property-owning class,

TABLE 3  
Average Total Estates of Black Entrepreneurs, 1860–1870

| Category      | Mean<br>Total Estate |              | Cases     |            |
|---------------|----------------------|--------------|-----------|------------|
|               | 1860                 | 1870         | 1860      | 1870       |
| Artisan-1     | \$1,230              | \$1,299      | 53        | 142        |
| Manufacturing | 2,743                | 1,307        | 7         | 28         |
| Service-1     | 2,267                | 1,608        | 82        | 142        |
| Retail        | 1,238                | 2,281        | 21        | 48         |
| Artisan-2     | 1,815                | 2,115        | 46        | 47         |
| Service-2     | 1,693                | 1,985        | 41        | 33         |
| Farmer        | <u>5,027</u>         | <u>3,798</u> | <u>52</u> | <u>101</u> |
|               | \$2,353              | \$2,047      | 302       | 541        |

Source: Computed from U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Virginia, 1860, 1870. Entrepreneurs with a total estate between \$500 and \$900 in 1870 were taken from a sample of sixty-one black Virginia property owners.

a group that could, and in some cases did, become a new clientele for black entrepreneurs.<sup>39</sup>

As a consequence, the number of black-owned businesses rose from 302 to approximately 541 (79 percent) between 1860 and 1870, and the different types of enterprises grew from 50 to 61. The number of artisans usually engaged in business rose from 53 to 142, and their total wealth increased 283 percent, from \$65,200 to \$184,500; the number in service enterprises grew from 82 to 142, and their total wealth from \$185,900 to \$228,300; and the number of commercial farmers rose from 52 to 101, with their property increasing from \$261,400 to \$383,600. The mean total estates among all businessmen and women dropped only slightly, from \$2,353 in

<sup>39</sup> Maris A. Vinovskis, "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations," *Journal of American History* 76 (1989-90): 38-39; Chesson, *Richmond After the War*, pp. 138-46.



1860 to \$2,047 in 1870, a relatively small decline considering the fluctuating economic conditions, white coercion, and, in many sections, the drop in land and property values.<sup>40</sup>

Although most prewar free black business people did not sustain their enterprises after the Civil War, those who did were often quite successful. In rural areas, despite a decline among those African-Americans who had been slaveholders, a few antebellum free blacks maintained their high economic standing or expanded their business activities following the war. Judging from the limited amount of personal property listed in their names in 1860, most of them had not in fact owned slaves. They did, however, take advantage of depressed land values to add to their holdings. Walker Jackson of Amelia County, Jesse Harris of Fairfax County, John Douglass of Nansemond County, James Robinson of Prince William County, and James Scott of Albemarle County were among the antebellum farmers and planters who maintained or improved their economic position. During the 1860s, Scott established a plaster contracting business in Charlottesville and increased the value of his realty from \$6,000 to \$8,000.<sup>41</sup>

In towns and cities, too, a few blacks who had been free and had prospered in business before the war and who maintained their enterprises in its aftermath enhanced their economic position. Despite wartime destruction, Richmond contractor John Adams, barber Richard Hobson, boilermaker James Woodson, gardener Primus Lumpkin (a carpenter in 1860), and seamstress Ann Wallace emerged as thriving business people after the war, as did Petersburg livery owner Robert Clarke, Lexington cooper James Holly, Alexandria butcher William Gray and brickmaker James Piper, Accomack County baker Rachel Gaskins, and Lynchburg barber Thomas Gladman, who saw his property holdings rise from about \$1,500 before the war to \$8,000 a decade later. Royall Morgan, a prewar barber, opened a grocery store in Campbell County during the 1860s and increased his wealth from \$1,500 to \$6,000.<sup>42</sup> The most impressive member of this group

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<sup>40</sup> Computed from U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Virginia, 1870. The huge increase in the free black population following emancipation required a sampling procedure for businessmen and women during the postbellum era. Blacks who controlled estates worth between \$500 and \$900 were drawn from every twentieth page and its facing page in the census. This sample of sixty-one black property owners uncovered nine individuals who were engaged in business (with one of them having owned an antebellum enterprise). In the statistical tables for 1870, then, these nine were multiplied by a factor of twenty (the sample size was 5 percent). Thus, 180 of the 541 black business people in the state in 1870 came from the sampled data.

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Amelia County, 2d District, 1860, p. 172 (Jackson); *ibid.*, Amelia County, 1870, p. 272 (Jackson); *ibid.*, Fairfax County, 1850, p. 138 (Harris); *ibid.*, 1870, p. 245 (Harris); *ibid.*, Nansemond County, Suffolk, 1860, p. 564 (Douglass); *ibid.*, 1870, p. 308 (Douglass); *ibid.*, Prince William County, 1850, p. 110 (Robinson); *ibid.*, 1860, p. 427 (listed as James Robertson); *ibid.*, 1870, p. 443 (Robinson); *ibid.*, Albemarle County, Fredericksville, 1860, p. 357 (Scott); *ibid.*, 1870, p. 288 (Scott).

<sup>42</sup> <sup>42</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Henrico County, Richmond, 1850, p. 277 (Adams); *ibid.*, Monroe Ward, 1870, p. 302 (Adams); *ibid.*, Richmond, 2d Ward, 1860, p. 427 (Hobson); *ibid.*, Madison Ward, 1870, p. 52 (Hobson); *ibid.*, Henrico County, Eastern Division, 1860, p. 845 (Woodson); *ibid.*, Richmond, Jefferson Ward, 1870, p. 422 (Woodson); *ibid.*, Richmond, 1850, p. 245 (Lumpkin); *ibid.*, Jefferson Ward, 1870, p. 509 (Lumpkin); *ibid.*, Richmond, 3d Ward, 1860, p. 522 (Wallace); *ibid.*, Richmond, Monroe Ward, 1870, p. 339 (listed as Walker); *ibid.*, Dinwiddie County, Petersburg, East Ward, 1860, p. 199 (Clarke); *ibid.*, Petersburg, 2d Ward, 1870, p. 225 (Clarke); Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, p. 220 (Clarke and Gladman); U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Rock-bridge County, Lexington, 1860, p. 39 (Holly); *ibid.*, Rockbridge County, 1870, p. 472 (Holly); *ibid.*, Alexandria County, Alexandria, 1860, p. 831 (Gray); *ibid.*, Alexandria, 4th Ward, 1870, p. 134 (Gray); *ibid.*, Alexandria County, Alexandria, 1860, p. 772 (Piper); *ibid.*, Alexandria, 2d Ward, 1870, p. 59 (Piper); *ibid.*, Accomack County, St. George's Parish, 1860, p. 247 (Gaskins); *ibid.*, 1870, p. 213 (Gaskins); *ibid.*, Campbell County, Lynchburg, 1870, p. 536 (Gladman); *ibid.*, Lynchburg, 1860, p. 392 (Morgan); *ibid.*, Lynchburg, 1870, p. 533 (Morgan).

was Alexandria builder and contractor George Seaton, who, through various investments and opening a grocery store, expanded his total estate from \$4,500 to \$16,200, or 360 percent. By 1870, Seaton was one of the wealthiest black businessmen in the state.<sup>43</sup>

The changing profile of African-Americans engaged in business following the war indicates that some postwar business people had only five years before been considered a "species of property" themselves. Although color—black versus mulatto—is not a precise indicator of former status, the vast majority of slaves before the war (about 86 percent) were listed in the census returns as black; at the same time about 40.5 percent of the free Negro class was of mixed racial origin. Thus, the rise in the proportion of postwar entrepreneurs who were listed as black, from 36 percent to 47 percent, suggests that former slaves were entering the business group in increasing numbers. At the same time, the illiteracy rate among those engaged in business increased from 30 percent in 1860 to 53 percent a decade later, and another 6 percent could read but not write. The occupations most often pursued by antebellum slaves witnessed the sharpest numerical growth in the postbellum business class: blacksmiths increased from thirty-two in 1860 to an estimated fifty-three in 1870, draymen from fifteen to forty-nine, and shoemakers from sixteen to fifty-six. The proportion of women operating businesses dropped in half, from 12 to 6 percent, and the number of business people living in stable, monogamous families, at least as roughly judged by the census listings of household members, rose from 65 percent to 80 percent. In other sections of the South, these latter two developments reflected the determination of freedmen and women to live in fixed families as well as their wider choice of partners in the wake of freedom.<sup>44</sup>

Several other types of evidence indicate that former slaves were entering the entrepreneurial class. First was the proliferation of saloon keepers and liquor dealers catering to a black clientele. Whether this growth was connected with the widespread buying and selling of whiskey, wine, beer, and other "ardent spirits" among slaves, or between slaves, free blacks, and whites before the war, remains unclear, but most of these businessmen were obviously seeking black customers. John J. Christian, a saloon keeper in Staunton, was described by an R. G. Dun credit agency official as a "Smart intelligent Negro man" and a "big man among the darkies." Nor was Christian unique. Among the 217 black-owned firms in Virginia rated by R. G. Dun and Co. between 1865 and 1880, fully forty-three, or 20 percent, were listed as either "liquor-mercantile," "confection-liquor," or liquor dealers. Moreover, liquor tradesmen whose color could be ascertained were four times more likely in 1870 to be black than mulatto, compared with two blacks for every three mulattoes in the group rated by R. G. Dun as a whole.<sup>45</sup>

Second, the great majority of black firms—four out of five—rated by R. G. Dun and Co. between 1865 and 1880 were in counties in which the proportion of the black population in 1870 exceeded the statewide average of 42 percent by a significant margin. In Pittsylvania County,

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<sup>43</sup> Seaton was listed twice in the 1870 census, once in his home county and once in Richmond, where he was serving as a member of the Virginia General Assembly. For his property estimate, the Alexandria listing, rather than the Richmond estimate of \$50,000, was used. See U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Richmond, Madison Ward, 1870, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> from U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Virginia, 1860, 1870. These are "valid percentages" and exclude a few missing cases where data are not available.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Kenzer, "Black Businessmen in Postbellum Virginia, 1865-1880," unpublished manuscript, p. 5, Table 3. The author is grateful to Professor Kenzer for allowing him to cite this unpublished paper.

with its 14,340 slaves and 659 free blacks in 1860, there were nineteen black businesses, the third highest total in the state. Similarly, Albemarle, York, Elizabeth City, and Charles City counties—with their large prewar slave and postwar black populations (between 54 and 66 percent of the totals)—were among the counties with the highest concentrations of black-owned companies. This circumstance did not necessarily point to a change in clientele; most of the larger black firms still primarily served whites. Even during the years immediately following the conflict, however, some blacksmiths, carpenters, builders, shoemakers, wheelwrights, brick makers, grocers, merchants, and hotel keepers began catering to fellow blacks. It was in the predominately black section of Alexandria's Fourth Ward that draymen Richard Diggs and Daniel Spriggs and blacksmiths William Fields and Strother Morton located their establishments.<sup>46</sup> In 1870 the guest list at the Richmond hotel run by Edward and Milly Davenport included five black members of the Virginia General Assembly—shoemaker Henry Cox, builder George Seaton, storekeeper George L. Fayerman, farm manager Benjamin F. Jones, and Charles E. Hodges—and two black ministers. Although none of these changes proves the infusion of former slaves into the business ranks, taken together they indicate that some postwar entrepreneurs were former slaves seeking to carve out a new market among freedmen and freedwomen.<sup>47</sup>

Still, neither wealth statistics nor changing economic conditions fully reveal the significance of this middle-period expansion of black-owned businesses. The emergence of a small entrepreneurial group in Virginia reflects the changing values and attitudes of free blacks and former slaves as they struggled to improve their economic position in the midst of a racist society. Considering the huge increase in the free population in the wake of emancipation, the number of black-owned businesses remained very small, but the growth in black entrepreneurial activity during the middle period established a precedent for subsequent generations. Indeed, the significant late nineteenth-century expansion of black business and property ownership in the Old Dominion can best be understood by viewing this earlier period, when free blacks and freedmen and women established varied business enterprises despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

## *Appendix 1*

### **A Note on Sources and Historical Method**

Virtually any definition of what constituted a black-owned business has limitations. This essay employs an adjusted occupational wealth model based primarily (though not exclusively) on information derived from the United States population censuses of 1850, 1860, and 1870. During these years, census takers listed the occupations and property holdings (real in 1850-70, real and personal in 1860-70) for each head of household in the state. Under the assumption that most business people were property owners, three directories of blacks in business were created: first, those with occupations of an obvious business nature (barbers, blacksmiths, draymen,

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<sup>46</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Alexandria County, Alexandria, 4th Ward, 1870, p. 152 (Diggs); *ibid.*, p. 168 (Spriggs); *ibid.*, p. 155 (Fields); *ibid.*, p. 174 (Morton).

<sup>47</sup> Kenzer, "Black Businessmen in Postbellum Virginia," Table 1; U.S. Census Bureau, *Population of the United States in 1860*, pp. 504-13; U.S. Secretary of the Interior, *Ninth Census, 1870*, vol. 1: *The Statistics of the Population of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1872), pp. 68-72; U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Population Schedules, Henrico County, Richmond, Madison Ward, 1870, p. 8 (Edward and Milly Davenport); Luther Porter Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders in Virginia, 1865-1895* (Norfolk, 1945), pp. 9, 16, 21, 22, 38. Charles Hodges was listed as Charles Hatcher in the census.

shoemakers) who owned real estate worth at least \$300 in 1850 or total estates of at least \$500 in 1860 or 1870; second, those listed in nonbusiness occupations (carpenters, coopers, mechanics, laundresses, seamstresses) whose property holdings (at least \$600 in 1850 and \$1,000 in the next two censuses) strongly indicate business involvement; and third, farmers and planters who controlled at least \$1,400 in realty in 1850 or at least \$2,000 total estate in 1860 or 1870, suggesting a movement toward commercial farming.

Because the 1850 census did not include personal property, the estimates for the various business categories have been adjusted downward in that year to reflect the percentage of real (63 percent) versus personal property (37 percent) held by blacks in business in 1860. About 15 percent of the business class in 1860 owned realty worth less than \$300 (or none at all); the 1850 data thus provide only rough estimates. The total estate cutoff point of \$500 coincides with the minimum "pecuniary strength" for a business used by the credit rating firm of R. G. Dun and Co. in *The Mercantile Agency Reference Book* (New York, 1865), pp. 1-5. From these directories, seven business categories have been created (see Appendix 2). Despite its obvious limitations, the adjusted occupational wealth model provides at least a crude vehicle for analyzing the changing nature of black-owned businesses.

Besides occupation and wealth, census takers were also instructed to record the location, name, age, color, gender, state of birth, and literacy for every family member. The strength of the censuses is that they connect race, occupation, and wealth. Other sources often omit either one or another of these three variables. Scholars who have dealt with statistical evidence for the nineteenth century, however, recognize the limitations of even the best sources. Census takers sometimes missed individuals, and in 1870 there was a probable undercount of blacks (between 6 and 7 percent in the South as a whole).

## *Appendix 2*

### **Categories of Business Occupations among Blacks in Virginia**

- 1. artisan-1**, usually owned a business: blacksmith, bridge builder, builder, cabinetmaker, contractor, shirtmaker, shoemaker, tailor, tanner-currer, tinsmith, wheelwright
- 2. small-scale manufacturer**: boilermaker, brick maker, fence maker, harness maker, mantua or dressmaker, pump maker, shingle maker, tobacco manufacturer
- 3. service-1**, often engaged in business: baker, barber, bathhouse operator, boatman owning boat, cotton broker, drayman, fisherman who retailed fish, hotel owner, livery keeper, brothel madam, prostitute, oysterman, restaurateur, schooner captain
- 4. retail business**: barkeeper, butcher, coal dealer, confectioner, dairyman, fish dealer, grocer, junk dealer, merchant, miller, oyster dealer, storekeeper, trader, tobacconist, undertaker, wine or liquor dealer
- 5. artisan-2**, sometimes operated a business: bricklayer, carpenter, cooper, mason, mechanic, plasterer, stone and marble cutter; with an estimated realty of \$600 or more in 1850 or a total estate of \$1,000 or more in 1860 or 1870
- 6. service-2**, occasionally engaged in business: coachman, gardener, horse trainer, huckster, laundress, painter, seamstress, varnisher or finisher, waterman; with an estimated realty of \$600 or more in 1850 or a total estate of \$1,000 or more in 1860 or 1870
- 7. farmers and planters**, with an estimated realty of \$1,400 or more in 1850 or a total estate of \$2,000 or more in 1860 or 1870