CHAPTER 3

“Nothing but Terrors and Punishments”

Slavery and the Law

The most striking section of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer is his ninth letter describing Charles Town, South Carolina. The descriptions he offered in this letter are quite unlike anything else found in the book. He encountered the darkest side of late-eighteenth-century British America in Charles Town, and he was not at all shy in describing what he saw. The title of the letter itself, unlike other titles that address customs or inhabitants, includes the phrases “on physical evil” and “a melancholy scene.” He focused on what he saw as the dominant element of Charles Town’s society and the most important pillar that upheld elite political power—slavery.

Crèvecoeur compared Charles Town to Lima, Peru, writing “both are capitals of the richest provinces of their respective hemispheres.” Both were great seats of luxury, wealth, and commerce. One relied on gold and precious metals (and forced Indian labor), and the other relied on staple crops (and forced African labor). Unlike Josiah Quincy, who also chronicled his experiences and impressions of elite society in Charles Town, Crèvecoeur wrote little about Charles Town’s white society and culture except to contrast the luxury among whites in Charles Town and apparent misery among its slaves. After seeing this contrast and the divergence between the perceived republican, agrarian virtues of the north versus a “decadent plantation society,” Crèvecoeur was disillusioned. South Carolina, where Crèvecoeur saw the full horrors of slavery, seemed more like the Caribbean colony of Jamaica than republican Massachusetts. He asked:

While all is joy, festivity, and happiness in Charles Town, would you imagine that scenes of misery over-spread in the country? Their ears by habit are become deaf, their hearts are hardened; they neither see, hear, nor feel for the woes of their poor slaves, from whose painful labors all their

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2 Christopher Iannini, “The Itinerant Man,” 209.
3 Ibid., 227.
wealth proceeds. Here the horrors of slavery, the hardship of incessant toils, are unseen and no one thinks with compassion of those showers of sweat and of tears which from the bodies of Africans daily drop and moisten the ground they till.4

Crèvecoeur thought slavery had a numbing and corrupting effect on the masters. Slave owners had become so used to seeing slavery around them and so dependent upon slave labor as the source of their wealth that they may not have even recognized the injustice perpetrated on these people.

South Carolina's elite slave owners ruled their province. They were among the wealthiest elites in North America. Plantation slavery was the most important pillar that supported these elites' wealth and power to govern the colony. As such, they most certainly understood the need to strictly control the plantation economy and its captive workforce. While slavery provided great wealth and opportunity for the colony's elite, it also presented the most difficult problems of government and law enforcement in the colony. The majority of South Carolina's population was not there by choice, and these slaves far outnumbered whites in low country parishes. Moreover, slaves constantly demonstrated the will to resist oppression, forcing the planters to grant some concessions to their slaves as a matter of self-interest or self-preservation. The oppressive, even brutal, nature of slavery and the difficulty of suppressing the free will of human beings who were also considered to be property become readily apparent.

Every individual planter faced the challenge of how to govern his slaves in a way that turned a profit on the plantation. Planters did not envision plantation government as "nothing but terror and punishments." Their vision usually entailed working toward some kind of balance between disciplining, caring for, and making concessions (e.g. allowing slaves some kind of private/social life) to the slaves. Planters like Henry Laurens did not see themselves as the inflictors of terror and brutality. Rather, they chose to portray themselves as fatherly monarchs, ruling over and caring for their families and servants. They framed concessions made to slaves as benevolent, just, or a part of their duties as masters. Likewise, it was the natural duty of slaves to serve. Thus, masters framed plantation government in terms of reciprocal duties. The reality was much different. A planter's benevolence was self-serving. Any concessions he made could be revoked at a moment's notice. Slaves had no guaranteed personal, family, or legal rights and were bought and sold as commodities. The constant fear of punishment and the oppressive nature of slavery forced

4 Crèvecoeur, _Letters from an American Farmer_, 168.