

### Notes and Documents

#### IN NAT TURNER'S SHADOW: Reflections on the Norfolk Dry Dock Affair of 1830-1831

by  
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All American historians know something of the Turner Rebellion. In a period of approximately 15 hours, beginning just after midnight on August 22nd 1831, Nat Turner and his confederates killed 55 whites living in a remote corner of Southeastern Virginia within a 12 mile radius to the South and West of the Southampton County seat of Jerusalem. Over the next week most of the rebels were themselves killed or captured, and in excess of 120 blacks butchered in reprisals by marauding parties of whites. Turner himself was finally caught some weeks later, tried and hung.<sup>1</sup>

The Turner Rebellion caused hysteria throughout much of Virginia and touched the lives of a generation of Southerners, black and white. Indeed, white society was so convulsed by the events as to launch into unprecedented public discussion of statewide manumission: "For two weeks, early in January, 1832, legislators debated, with open doors, the future of slavery in Virginia. The debate touched the very foundations of Virginia's political, economic and social order."<sup>2</sup>

\*I am very grateful to Daniel W. Crofts of Trenton State College, NJ, and Tommy Lee Bogger of Norfolk State University, VA, for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay. I am particularly indebted to Professor Bogger for his generosity in sharing with me material from his forthcoming study, *The Darker Side of Freedom: Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1790-1860*, prior to its publication.

<sup>1</sup>For details of the Turner rebellion, see Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York, 1975); Terry Bisson, *Nat Turner: Prophet and Slave Revolt Leader* (Los Angeles, 1989).

<sup>2</sup>Alison Goodyear Freehling, *Drift Toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832* (Baton Rouge, 1982), xi.

Accounts of the Virginia slavery debate have stressed the multiplicity and complexity of the divisions underpinning the positions of the various protagonists, and also the contradictions and ambiguities left unresolved at its end. No closed proslavery society, at the time of the manumission debate antebellum Virginia was "a 'house divided'."<sup>3</sup> The most obvious divisions were sectional, between the aristocratic slaveholding Tidewater, whose dominant position in the legislature brought with it control of Virginia's government, and the restless and under-represented yeomanry of the Valley and Trans-Allegheny West. But historians have also argued that economic and social tensions festering within Eastern Virginia were as important to the course of the manumission debate as the more often remarked sectional cleavages. The Tidewater and Piedmont region in the early 1830s, it is said, was "a complex, discordant society" beset by "deep-rooted class rifts between democratic white artisans and aristocratic white planters."<sup>4</sup>

The argument that the Turner Rebellion and its aftermath stoked deep class divisions in eastern Virginia and that these may be found revealed in the 1831-32 slavery debate is intriguing. It has, however, lacked comprehensive illustration. The only detailed evidence of artisanal antipathy to slavery and slaveowners to surface during the debate, for example, comes in the form of petitions to exclude slavery from the mechanic trades submitted to the Virginia legislature by non-slaveholding artisans and mechanics from Culpepper county and from the towns of Petersburg, Charles City and New Kent.<sup>5</sup> Other areas with larger mechanic populations remained silent. In Norfolk, for example, two decades were to pass before artisans followed the example of their Petersburg brethren by petitioning the Virginia legislature to give "white men the exclusive privilege of the mechanic arts."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 174-76; Henry I. Tragle, editor, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst, 1971), 380-1.

<sup>6</sup>As a result of the relative paucity of evidence, when Alison Freehling sought to draw conclusions about the extent of white laborers' and artisans' antagonism to slavery's economic expansion beyond agriculture, and to proceed on that basis to a judgment on the force of social constraints upon a slave-driven industrialization of the Southern economy, she was forced into speculation. "[A]ssumptions of 1831-32 Virginia conservatives as to the long-run incompatibility of slavery and industrialization might well have been valid, not because slaves would prove unprofitable in nonplantation pursuits, as conservatives believed, but because nonslaveholders would not tolerate large-scale transfer of blacks from country to city. Burgeoning reliance on slaves, as the slave-hiring system allowed, perhaps would have so antagonized Tidewater and Piedmont non-slaveholding white laborers as to realize [Valley representative] Chapman Johnson's foreseen coalition of eastern and western abolitionists determined to oust slaveholders, slavery and slaves." Freehling 243, 244-45. See also, generally, Claudia Dale Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South: A Quantitative History* (Chicago, 1976), 28-33; Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1978), 123, 127.

Happily, concrete documentary evidence shedding new light on artisanal attitudes toward slavery in Eastern Virginia is available. Among the papers of Loammi Baldwin, the younger, of Boston—the early republic's leading civil engineer<sup>7</sup>—there exists a lengthy and densely detailed correspondence which charts a protracted dispute over Baldwin's hiring of slaves for employment on the construction of a U.S. Navy dry dock in Gosport, Virginia.<sup>8</sup> Varying in intensity, the dispute nevertheless occupied the neighboring towns of Norfolk and Portsmouth for most of the eighteen months preceding the Turner Rebellion.

Analysis of the Norfolk dry dock affair offers general support for the argument that the Turner Rebellion occurred in an environment already riddled with latent tensions of class and authority. Starting with a conflict over the use of slaves between the managers of the dry dock project and migrant artisans (mostly Northern but some evidently foreign-born) who had moved to Portsmouth with their families for employment on public works, the dispute reached out to envelop relations between local mechanics and the project managers; between local political factions (Jacksonian and anti-Jacksonian); and between the district's mechanic and slave-owning populations. At the same time, the dispute shows that at least prior to the Turner Rebellion white Virginians were really quite complacent in regard to the employment of slave labor in urban industrial settings. Only after the galvanic impact of the Rebellion did native Virginian artisans make serious common cause with their non-native cousins in opposition to the use of slave labor. That opposition appears then to have become a permanent feature of artisanal ideology.<sup>9</sup> Even then, however, slaveholders in the community seem to have retained sufficient authority to shape the com-

<sup>7</sup>Baldwin was in fact denominated by his biographer as "the Father of Civil Engineering in America." George L. Vose, *A Sketch of the Life and Works of Loammi Baldwin, Civil Engineer* (Boston, 1885), 3.

<sup>8</sup>*Papers of Loammi Baldwin, Jr.*, in *Baldwin Collection*, Boxes 8, 17–23, Baker Library (Division of Historical Collections, Harvard Business School. Hereinafter referred to as *Baldwin Papers*). I should point out that I came upon the Norfolk dry dock affair by chance while researching working conditions on early 19th century construction projects in Boston and Charlestown. The subject of this essay is not one upon which I have conducted original research beyond what is represented here. For that reason I have, for the most part, elected to reproduce the main elements of the documentary record and leave the interpretive task to those better equipped to deal with it.

<sup>9</sup>In his forthcoming study *The Darker Side of Freedom: Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1790–1860*, Tommy L. Bogger indicates that the 1830s saw increasing competition between blacks and whites for both skilled and unskilled manual employment in Norfolk, and that the most important single factor accounting for this competition was the steady influx of foreign-born migrants. Professor Bogger also shows that white mechanics and laborers agitated generally against black urban employment during the 1830s and 1840s, and contrasts this hostility with more ambiguous evidence from the turn of the century which indicates that white artisans and laborers were not uniformly antagonistic to black employment. The course of the dry dock affair appears strongly to support Bogger's contention that increasing white

munity's response to the issue and, eventually, to overcome the effects of artisanal hostility. In short, while the impact of the Rebellion in focussing latent divisions, in polarizing local attitudes and disrupting historic allegiances<sup>10</sup> seems to have been profound, real change in the industrial use of slave labor could only have occurred as a consequence of shifts in white power away from slaveholders. Nothing of this nature took place. The result was the reassertion of the status quo, amid deepening class division between mechanics and slaveholders.

There is, however, an additional historiographical lesson here. For the protesting artisans this dispute was clearly defined in racial as well as class terms, and as historians like David Roediger have insisted, race resists reduction.<sup>11</sup> We cannot write histories of class formation and conflict in which the "other" of race is treated as a dependent variable: an occasion for conflict, a vehicle, an arena in which conflict occurs but not an independently existing irreducible social relation which sets conditions on the kind of conflict that takes place. Like gender—which, as we shall see, also has a clear cultural presence in this record—race in the Norfolk dry dock affair (as in the many disputes documented by Roediger) constituted a distinct social structural site which demonstrably set conditions on the knowledge which the protagonists in this dispute constructed about their situation. Their identification of themselves in languages of class, as working artisans and project managers and slaveholders is indisputable. They reacted to each other in ways which spoke of their consciousness of class—ways of deference, ways of conflict, ways of authority. But in defining why they were aggrieved in this affair, the artisans did not neglect to speak of the importance of their maleness.<sup>12</sup> And ever more clearly as the dispute progressed they demonstrated the irreducible significance of their whiteness.

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migration from outside the locality was a key factor in eroding whatever white artisanal toleration for the employment of blacks, whether free or enslaved, had existed in Norfolk prior to the 1830s. On race and competition in the consciousness of antebellum white workers, see also David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991). With its focus on Virginia, this essay is a "southern" complement to Roediger's book, which concentrates largely on race and working class formation in the North.

<sup>10</sup>On the development of such allegiances during the eighteenth century, see, generally, Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1976), 293–387.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 3–17. For a similar discussion with respect to the irreducibility of gender, see Alice Kessler-Harris, "A New Agenda for American Labor History: A Gendered Analysis and the Question of Class," in J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris, editors, *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problems of Synthesis* (DeKalb, 1989), 217–34.

<sup>12</sup>As their own words will show, the stone cutters sought the justice and equality due them as men: skilled men, free men, white men, "men of families."

The Norfolk dry dock project was one of the most important feats of engineering to be undertaken in America during the pre-railroad era. Located on the southern branch of the Elizabeth River adjoining that part of the town of Portsmouth known as Gosport, the dock was begun in November 1827 and was completed, at a cost of \$950,000, in March 1834. It was in fact one of two dry docks undergoing simultaneous construction as part of the same Navy project, the other sited at the Charlestown navy yard in Boston. Each was built according to the design and under the direct supervision of Loammi Baldwin the younger. Baldwin regarded the docks as "the two great works of his life."<sup>13</sup>

Identical in conception and appearance, the docks were both constructed of finely hammered granite. The cost of the Norfolk dock, however, exceeded that of Charlestown by almost \$300,000, the excess being due, according to Baldwin's biographer, "to the extra price of both stone and labor, the stone having been sent from the North as well as most of the skilled labor."<sup>14</sup> These cost pressures early led Baldwin into extensive experimentation with the use of slave labor in both rough and fine stone hammering in the hopes of restraining expenditure.

The first hint of the troubles this would cause him came in a letter dated January 23, 1830 from Commodore John Rodgers, president of the Navy Board in Washington. Rodgers informed Baldwin that the Secretary of the Navy had received protests "from a number of persons, complaining of their being excluded from all participation in stone work upon the dock building under your direction," and had asked Rodgers to investigate. Copies of letters received by the Secretary were enclosed. The most detailed, signed by nine men, read as follows:

We the undersigned stone masons and residents of the Town of Portsmouth, sent on from Pennsylvania expressly for the U.S. Hospital at this place, and recently discharged in consequence of orders from your department, with every *necessary* recommendation from our late architect as competent and *skillful* workmen, beg leave respectfully to represent the *existence* of a practice at the Dry Dock at this place of which we are sure you have no intimation and which if not timely checked must ultimately *subserve* the mechanical interest of this place. On application severally by us for employment we were refused, in consequence of the subordinate officers hiring negroes by the year under the immediate cognizance of the chief engineer, and placing them at stone cutting for which they are entirely incompetent, to the injury of *we the undersigned* who are men of families — and placed in the peculiar circumstances in which we stand,

<sup>13</sup>Vose, *Loammi Baldwin*, 16-17.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

we view it as a most grievous imposition, detrimental to the labouring interest of the community, and subversive to every principal of equality. We respectfully ask your interposition.<sup>15</sup>

Baldwin took the complaints seriously and replied at considerable length. His reply, however, concentrated almost entirely on the economics of the project. To Baldwin, labor was a homogenous commodity. Its price was what mattered, not whether the labor bought came enslaved or free (or, for that matter, with dependents). Not surprisingly in view of this, Baldwin dismissed the white artisans' petition as a self-serving attempt to restrict labor market competition. Indeed, proud of the savings he was effecting he suggested that his management of the project offered Virginians (and the federal government) a valuable object lesson in the productive capacities and comparative advantages of slave labor.

[T]he whole sin I have committed against these "men of families" . . . is nothing more nor less than that I have allowed blacks to be employed at hammering stone, to the exclusion of these "stone masons" from Pennsylvania. The "subordinate officers" alluded to, I presume, are Mr. Singleton and Mr. Johnson. I am responsible for whatever they do, and they have not only hired blacks under my immediate cognizance but by my express directions. They are not however hired "by the year", but by the day, as all other blacks employed on the Dock are and have been hired, and we can dismiss them whenever we are dissatisfied with them, and they may be taken away whenever their masters please.

Mr. Singleton is too well known by the Board to require any particular character from me. He is a native of this place, is well known and respected by all classes of society, and has frequently been employed by Government, during many years. To him I gave on this occasion, as I often have in other branches of the work, particular instructions to engage a few good blacks for hammering stones, to be put to work under Mr. Johnsons immediate inspection and controul. I also directed them to confer together, as to the proper age, &c for this kind of new labour; to make the agreements with the masters &c.

Mr. Johnson is a most excellent workman in his business and has been regularly brought up to the trade of hammering and working granite . . . He has been employed for 14 years by the Government of Massachusetts in superintending the department of hammering Granite in the State Prison at Charlestown . . . While there he learned from long experience the value of negro labour in his trade. There were generally from 100 to 130 convicts constantly employed in the Granite department of the Prison, of whom about 30 were negroes. This last class of prisoners had always been

<sup>15</sup>Jefferies Wilkinson and eight others to the Honorable John Branch, Jan. 6, 1830, *Baldwin Papers* (emphasis in original).

considered totally unfit for any mechanical employment, and when Mr. Johnson first took charge of this branch of prison labour, he proposed putting them to work on stone hammering, but the warden objected to it as a futile attempt. He however obtained at last, their consent to make the trial, and the result was attended with the most complete success. He found them equally as good as the white convicts, and owing to the strong muscular force of their arms and wrists, they can sooner get into a familiar use of the hammer.

It was found too that the blacks under Mr. Johnson could cut and hammer this granite into fine and ornamental work as well as the whites, and he could find no difference between them, except only that arising from the blacks not being able to read. This made it a little more troublesome to explain the plans as the negroes could not read the figures and descriptions on the drawings . . .

. . . Before we left Boston, Mr. Johnson told me that the blacks could be employed to great profit in hammering stone for the Dock at Norfolk, which I did not then believe, thinking that all our hammering and dressing of stone must be done by whites. On my arrival here I was determined to try the experiment, and gave directions accordingly. The result promises to be highly satisfactory, and so far from feeling any doubts, I fully believe, that for the rough hammering we can have it done for less than one half of what it costs by whites. A few good white stone hammerers we have, and shall engage more, when stone enough are delivered to justify increasing the number, and when the length of the days, will render their labour more profitable. We have today 33 blacks and 11 whites. The blacks receive 72 cents a day and the whites, \$2 for three of the best who came from the North by special agreement; six at \$1.75 and two at \$1.50. The negroes get for their masters \$0.62 and 10 cents for themselves and this bounty has produced an astonishing effect upon them. They work with as much steadiness and cheerfulness as the whites and the fear of loosing their 10 cents, if they are lazy or inattentive, saves all the expense of Overseers.

The physical power of the blacks, who have been accustomed to hard work from infancy, especially in their wrists and arms, qualify them for coming immediately into the use of the heavy stone hammer, without suffering much fatigue, while a white man requires several weeks of practice before he can work without fatiguing his arms or making his hands sore. Two white men were employed several days ago, for the first time here. One of them could not work yesterday his hands were so sore and the other complains a good deal today of its hurting his wrists. He does not work so well as some of the blacks and he will probably be dismissed in a few days as incompetent. These two men are stone masons and have last been at work at the Hospital!

Wishing to know what is the real relative value of the labour of the blacks and whites, I gave Mr. Johnson directions last week, to keep an account of the time that 8 or 10 blacks and some of the whites, were em-

ployed each on the respective stone he worked. The result will be known in a few days.<sup>16</sup>

. . . It was from an extreme desire to lessen the great expense of this branch of the work, that I adopted the plan of employing the blacks. The experiment is now going on, and I really feel great pride in the prospect and belief that the result will be a very considerable saving to the Government.

So much for my sin in having employed blacks. I can easily imagine that the complainants should feel mortified to see the blacks of Virginia employed as handicraft men, at about one third the price they would demand; but I think it quite as important to this State, where slaves constitute so great a portion of the labourers, that Virginians should learn how the blacks may be made so much more valuable than has been hitherto thought, as it is to Pennsylvania, that some dozen of her citizens who happen to be left adrift here, should try, in the manner these "Stone masons" have done, to force themselves into a work where they are not yet wanted.<sup>17</sup>

After considering Baldwin's lengthy justification of his employment practices, the Navy Department wrote to the complainant stone cutters indicating that an inquiry had been held and that the employment of slaves by the chief engineer had been approved. The complainants' response was to establish a committee "on behalf of the stone cutters and other mechanicks residing in this vicinity" through which the original protest was restated in slightly different terms. Disclaiming any intention to challenge either Baldwin's management of the dry dock project or the general propriety of slave labor, the committee—Jefferies Wilkinson, William Jackson, John A. Metz, and F. Bernard—now focussed their opposition on alleged corrupt slave hiring practices on the part of Baldwin's subordinates. By charging that the dry dock project's subordinate officers were enriching themselves at public expense, the stone cutters were able to restate their more general cultural complaint—that the use of slave labor on the dock degraded white craftsmen by giving the work of citizens to inferiors who were neither white nor free—but without directly challenging Baldwin.

The first subject we propose to submit for consideration is the course pursued by the clerks & others in the dry dock, which is so extremely hard and unfair in its operation upon us . . . it is one, it is true, that is somewhat connected with the subject of slave labour, the propriety of which we disclaim knowing or saying any thing about, further than justice to ourselves as men, seem to require; yet it is that character of labour that

<sup>16</sup>See below, Loammi Baldwin, Jr. to Commodore James Barron, April 27, 1830, *Baldwin Papers*.

<sup>17</sup>Loammi Baldwin, Jr. to Commodore John Rogers, Jan. 29, 1830, *Baldwin Papers*.

has excluded us from employment and made places for others, not our equals, because they are not white men, or free men. This circumstance from a sense of justice, and that sense of duty to our families which they require at our hands, constrain us to complain, and to charge distinctly and specifically, that our removal and subsequent refusal of reinstatement, is at the instance of Henry Singleton, and Johnson master stone cutter, who monopolize the work of our trade and calling as stone cutters, and acquire to themselves exclusively the profits of that part of our labour on the public work to which we refer: in a manner which we are sure the department will not tolerate; Thus: at the beginning of the present year, and often times since, they have attended, some times themselves, and some times by agents at the different public hirings of slaves that always take place in this section of country about the commencement of the year, and have hired a number of negro men, who cannot be supposed to be as skilful in this business as we are, or able to do as much, and have put them to work for Government in dressing stone, in the place of regular stone cutters, and are receiving (as I suppose the pay roll will show) full wages for their daily labour.

. . . if it should be ascertained, that worthy and able bodied mechanics are turned out of employment, that these two persons may engross the public work in this way, to which we have served a regular and faithful apprenticeship, and thereby accumulate to themselves fortunes out of the Government, whilst we are in a state of want, then we believe, that the fixed purpose of the department to do justice between man and man where it can interpose its authority, and to secure the poor man from the oppression of those in authority and affluence will be exercised in their behalf, so far as it comports with the duties and dignity of your station; and that you will unhesitatingly eject from office over which you have controul, the men who shall thus abuse the confidence which the department has heretofore reposed in them.

. . . We are aware that the character of an informer is odious in the eyes of all good men, and we feel as much contempt as men can do, for the character of a tatter, or news bearer, and as men of honor, we disdain to do an act that may be construed into a likeness of such men; yet there are circumstances that excuse and throw off these injunctions that bind men to attend to their own affairs and let the affairs of other men alone; we are citizens, and feel a pride in believing ourselves to be good citizens, and trust our country will so consider us until the contrary appears, better citizens and better friends to our country (although we are in humble life) than Henry Singleton, who has avowed, that he wishes and intends that the public works with which he has to do, shall go on slow whilst he is making money. . . .

When the poor man is oppressed, and his rights are withheld from him by those in higher stations, he naturally looks round for an asylum, where he can expect to receive that justice which is denied to him at the hand of others, he looks in vain to all other resources, save that of God, and

his Country, to preserve his rights and redress his wrongs, — hence we beg you not to pass us by in silence.<sup>18</sup>

This second letter was referred by the Secretary of the Navy to Commodore James Barron, the commander of the Gosport navy yard, together with instructions to hold a further investigation. On April 24th the committee of mechanics wrote to Barron, supplying some 28 affidavits supporting various aspects of their complaint and protesting also that their efforts to substantiate the accusations had been frustrated by the determined non-cooperation of the dry dock's officers. The affidavits indicated that the Pennsylvanians had had at least some success in involving other local white laborers in their protest. One John Foster, for example — not one of the original complainants — certified that he “was raised in the town of Ports & that I have lived in the County of Norf, nearly all my life, that I have been employed at the DD nearly three years, & been regular & attentive to my duties.” He continued:

that it comes within my personal knowledge that Mr. Johnson has seven negro men engaged in cutting stone, if not more at work at the DD; that Mr. Singl. has several the exact number I do not know, & that they were so engaged about the 8th of March, when I was discharged from there, & I do further declare that at the time I was discharged, five negro men were taken in. . . .<sup>19</sup>

Following his receipt of the mechanics' evidence, Barron invited Baldwin to respond. Baldwin's answer, transmitted on April 27th, was lengthy and, like the mechanics' charges, voluminously documented. Much was devoted to a line-by-line refutation of the charges of unjust dismissal and unfair treatment, which he dismissed as “for the most part ridiculous, fake & malicious.” As in his response to the original complaint, however, the guts of Baldwin's answer consisted of a broad-ranging and emphatic defense of the economic efficiency of slave labor. “I must make a statement concerning slave labour,” Baldwin told Barron “for upon that point hinges the whole matter.”

Sometime last winter I directed Mr. Johnson to keep an account of the time spent in hammering the same kind of stone by the whites and blacks, in order to show the difference between the value of white & black labour in this new trade. This was begun before I knew of any complaint existing any where about blacks being employed. It was intended solely for my own gratification & the following little table exhibits the result. The *first* column shows the names of the workmen; the *second* shows by similar

<sup>18</sup>William Jackson and two others to the Honorable John Branch, April 3, 1830, *Baldwin Papers*.

<sup>19</sup>Given under the hand of John Foster, April 20, 1830, *Baldwin Papers*.

letters that the stones hammered are similar. The *third* the length of the stone; the *fourth* the square feet of face or fine hammering; the *fifth* the square feet of rough hammering; the *sixth* the number of days work on each stone; the *seventh* the wages per day; and the *eighth* column shows the actual cost of hammering.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
						\$	\$
<b>WHITES</b>							
J. Tinney	b	4.0	8.4	52.2	6.	2.00	12.00
C. Allen	a	4.9	13.	55.5	8.	do.	16.00
S. Walker	b	4.	8.4	52.2	6.5	do.	13.00
E. Richardson	g	2.3	7.3	32.1	6.	do.	12.00
C. Shattuck	f	4.7	9.6	57.2	7.5	do.	15.00
E. Curtis	b	4.	8.4	52.2	6.	do.	12.00
T. Kingman	a	4.9	13.	55.5	10.	do.	20.00
C. Allen	e	4.3	8.10	54.1	6.5	do.	13.00
R. Doll	f	4.7	9.6	57.2	7.	do.	14.00
R. Powers	g	2.3	7.3	31.2	13.	1.75	22.75
F. Kirk	c	6.	12.6	70.8	41.25	1.50	61.87
W. Frederick	c	6.	12.6	70.8)			
do.	c	6.	12.6	70.8)	43.	2.00	86.00
do.	e	4.3	8.11	54.1)			
do.	d	2.9	8.10	25.6)			
E. Colburn	g	2.3	7.3	32.1	6.5	2.00	13.00
<b>BLACKS</b>							
W. Brooks	b	4.	8.4	52.2	10.	.72	7.20
I. Wilson	a	4.9	13.	57.2	12.	do.	8.64
B. Sparrow	d	2.10	9.	37.11	12.	do.	8.64
J. Sparrow	e	4.3	8.10	54.1	10.5	do.	7.56
C. Portlash	b	4.	8.4	52.2	13.	do.	9.36
W. Cooper	f	4.7	9.6	52.2	16.	do.	11.52
D. Carr	e	4.3	8.10	54.1	15.	do.	10.80

The great economy of employing slaves is clearly exhibited in the foregoing table, & it shows too how soon they may be made to work well under an attentive & skillful master. Compare the two stones marked "a" hammered by Whites, at an average cost of \$18, with that hammered by the slave Wilson, which cost only \$8.64. The average cost then of three "b"s hammered by White men is \$12.33 while that of similar stones hammered by blacks is \$8.28. The White man, Allen, hammered a stone "e" at a cost of \$13. When the negro James Sparrow, worked one for \$7.56. So the cost of white labour on "f" was \$14 and \$15 and that of the blacks, upon a similar stone \$11.52. No account of the cost of tools is taken, in that would probably be the same, whether used by blacks or whites.

No comment can be necessary upon the conviction which will arise in the mind of any man, upon a simple inspection of the foregoing table. The advantage of adopting slaves for this kind of work far exceeds my expectations, and I think I shall neglect my duty to Government, if after

this evidence, *almost as strong as a geometric demonstration*, I do not adhere to my first plan of employing blacks. Indeed, I intend to hire no more whites, than are necessary, at hammering stone, & increase the number of slaves.<sup>20</sup>

Baldwin's defense of the economic rationality of industrial slavery was accompanied by a series of supporting documents. Most of these were responses from the subordinate officials of the dry dock who had been attacked by the mechanics, together with testimonials from others attesting to their honesty. The responses of the subordinates tended to be more defensive than Baldwin's tone of lofty contempt for the complainants, probably because they did not enjoy his social authority and had to live in closer proximity than he to the mechanics. Samuel Johnson, for example, wrote that the decision to employ blacks had in fact been taken by Baldwin well before he had become involved in the project and that he had merely been responsible for hiring. In this he had been directed to consult with Singleton, "as Mr. Singleton lived here and was better acquainted with hiring and employing black labourers."<sup>21</sup>

Henry Singleton likewise wrote a rejoinder. First, he claimed—somewhat disingenuously—that slaves had never been employed in the place of white mechanics. "They have been merely employed as labourers, and have received only the labourers pay. Some of them have been put to rough hammering of stone, which is a work to which almost all labourers, whether stone cutters or not are competent. Some white labourers are engaged in the same work, and both classes of labourers agreeably to the direction of Col. Baldwin." Second, Singleton described at some length how local residents had pressed an initially reluctant Baldwin to use slaves on the works, how there existed in the navy yard slave hiring practices long antedating the dry dock project, and how local artisans, far from opposing the employment of slaves, in many cases themselves used slaves in the navy yard in "helper" roles:

... When we first commenced the work of the Dock in Dec. 1827 Conl. Baldwin thought it best to employ no blacks, but to confine all our labour to whites, and it was not until we began the excavation that any consider-

<sup>20</sup>Loammi Baldwin, Jr. to Commodore James Barron, April 27, 1830, *Baldwin Papers* (emphasis supplied).

At the time Baldwin wrote there were on the dry dock's rolls 58 adult male black labourers and 8 juveniles, and 42 white adult male labourers. All of the black workers were enslaved. Of the adult males, 16 were owned by whites employed on the works and 42 by persons "not of the yard." Of the juveniles only one is clearly listed as owned by a white employee. The black men all received 72 cents (62 cents of which went to the owner), the juveniles 36 cents, and the white labourers \$1 per day.

<sup>21</sup>Samuel Johnson to Commodore James Barron, April 28, 1830, *Baldwin Papers*.

able number of blacks were employed. During that part of the work we had from 100 to 200 and I employed them by Conl. Baldwin's special direction. Before Conl. Baldwin consented to engage blacks, I had often heard the resolution of his not to employ blacks, complained of by the citizens in Portsmouth, though no one ever thought of finding fault with his independent management of the works under his directions.

At the time slaves were first engaged Conl. Baldwin requested me to find some and put them upon the rolls at the ordinary wages saying he left that department exclusively to me because I lived here, knew the people well, had often employed great numbers at the several works in which I have been engaged and because I was better acquainted with the customs & practice relative to slave labour. In the Navy Yard it has been the custom ever since my acquaintance with that establishment to hire negroes in great numbers & it has always been considered preferable to take such blacks as were either owned, or hired annually by the master workmen and other white men regularly employed on the work, because the slaves would be better servants, work better and make better time when they were immediately under the eyes of their masters as well as their overseers.

When therefore I engaged blacks, I followed the practice I knew had been established in the public works in this part of the country with out ever supposing it necessary to inform Conl. Baldwin whether they were hired from people out of the Yard or whether they were owned or hired by me or any other officer or white men engaged on the Dock & whether Conl. Baldwin were acquainted with the fact of the number employed in the manner complained of before this inquiry was instituted, I do not know, but Conl. Baldwin did know however that I as well as Mr. Wm. P. Young had blacks, and perhaps one or two others had negroes at work who were either owned by or hired by us.<sup>22</sup>

Baldwin's package of supporting documents also contained testimonials from a number of leading figures in the local community. One in particular — a Portsmouth slaveowner, John W. Murdaugh — went to some lengths both to defend the officials in charge of the dry dock project and to discredit the mechanics.

Being well acquainted with Mr. Singleton and knowing the character of his accusers, I beg to offer to you my testimony on his behalf. Mr. Singleton is universally esteemed in the society of this town, as a gentleman of great probity, honesty & industry, & his appointment by Colonel Baldwin to the situation he now holds was considered judicious and received the approbation of all who knew him; I have frequently visited the Dry Dock, and have often remarked that the works appeared to be well conducted, and that a good discipline was observed by the labourers; and when I heard that charges of misconduct had been preferred against

<sup>22</sup>Henry Singleton to Commodore James Barron, April 27, 1830, *Baldwin Papers*.

him, I was much surprised I assure you, for I had considered that if the Government had a faithful officer, Henry Singleton was such . . . The letter containing the charges against Mr. Singleton breathes the most ardent inspiration of patriotism; and one of those self same patriots, Mr. Bernard, so far from possessing the feelings of an American, has not yet become entitled to the rights of citizenship, and at this time owes allegiance to his most Christian Majesty the King of France, He having been a resident of this state only about six months. He arrived here from France in November last and reported himself to the Court of Norfolk County, in conformity with the laws of Congress on the subject of naturalization. I suppose he has as good a right to report an American officer, as a Court of France would have to decide on the case. The other two signers of that letter are known to me as poor, ignorant, creatures, willing tools in the hands of an unprincipled attorney.

Murdaugh also dismissed John Foster's evidence as that of "a worthless & infamous scoundrel," while Holt Wilson, a Norfolk County JP, wrote that he had formed "a very unfavourable opinion" of Foster. "From the appearance he has made . . . I would not think his credit worth a cent." His evidence in the matter should be received "with great caution and distrust." Another Portsmouth citizen, a merchant named Patlock, offered a similar opinion of the same Foster, stating that he could not be trusted "for an amount exceeding 6¼ cents on his own responsibility."<sup>23</sup>

Baldwin's rejoinder appears to have satisfied Commodore Barron, and there is no indication in the record that his investigation went any further. Nevertheless, accusations of bias against white workers continued to circulate, being taken up during the course of the next few months by other migrant stone masons who had been brought from New England to work on the dock.<sup>24</sup> The lack of any response to these intermittent complaints eventually resulted the following summer in the revival of the Pennsylvania stone cutters' original accusations, this time in the form of an anonymous letter directed to President Andrew Jackson.

Dear Sir

I have been restrained from writing you, knowing my incapability being an humble Mechanic, working in public employment in the Dry Dock at Gosport but am compeled from the purest of motives to inform you of the abuses practised by all in authority at that work and needs reform in all the head men and overseers &c.

<sup>23</sup>John W. Murdaugh to Commander James Barron, April 28, 1830; Affidavit of Holt Wilson, April 29, 1830; Affidavit of J. Patlock, April 29, 1830; all in *Baldwin Papers*.

<sup>24</sup>See Patrick Gilday to Loammi Baldwin, Jr., May 24, 1830; Charles Brownell to Loammi Baldwin, Jr., Jan. 20, 1831; both in *Baldwin Papers*.

Baldwin the principal Inginer has gone to Boston, and soon after he left here he sent a man on here in his place by the name of Paris, he Mr Paris is at this time about to return to Boston what could he have sent him here for he done nothing here but to walk about and go to the Dock when he pleased and received his traveling expenses &c. I hope such as that will be stopped. Mr. Henry Singleton is here to attend to all business in his absence he is calld. 2d. to Baldwin. Mr. S. was a good house carpenter in the town of Portsmouth he was taken in the Dock as Masr. Joiner at \$1200 per year which is a good salary for him but not satisfied with that he has two horses and carts steadily employed by the day in dock throughout the year and not satisfied with horses and carts he hires negroes by the year and puts them in there by the day to exclusion of individuals owing of them &c. his horse and carts go out when they please and do as they please, and you will find by the acts rendered that they only get \$1.50 per day for horse and Cart and hands but in truth they get more for the hand that drives the Cart answers to his name on the roll and receives an extra pay of 72/100 which brings it up to \$2.22 when other individuals that has had there Horse, Carts and hands halling do only get \$1.50 per day and and there hands dont answer to there names but the time kept in another way. Mr. Young the Clerk has a horse and Cart in the same way employed by day the throughout the whole year if they can make money at it; why not the Government save by having there own team these mens horse are shod at the expense of the Government besides always carry out wood or chips when they go home to feed at night and always do as they please work or play the government is charged for there time these horses always look like they are Kept for the carriage than work horses for when they come out they dont look like they have been at work, they are hardly made to swet under the collar it is time it was stopped there is a Mr. Johnson Master stone cutter that get his six dollars per day through favour of Baldwin as Jonson is a man that he brought from Boston: Jonson goes to the hirings at the beginning of the year and hires negroes by the year put them in the dock at work and he attend more to seeing that his hands are at work than he does to the interest of government and it is hard to find out how many they have hired for they always answer to the name of their owners &c. there is not any man there who has any office but what hires negroes in that way and I believe the most of the overseers hire I say not one with the exception of Mr. Browne Masr. Stone Cutter sent from Washington he attends to his business that he is paid for by the Government and wont have any thing to do with hiring of negroes &c. these other are for making all they can and are shaving government out of all they can when Singleton went there he was in debt he has paid up some debts but not all and has bought five or six thousand dollars worth of property not in his own name in others names so to Keep from paying his debts it is not reasonable that he can make all of that money off \$1200 per year and support a large family as genteel as he does &c. there is something not rite; as to his politics he is opposed to you and

was once very hard towards you and your friends; but the pap he is receiving has closed his mouth &c. Baldwin has three Students here under pay from government they do nothing and his students are all allowed to hire negroes also: at any rate Mr. Sanger and Cleveland does as to Mr. Pratt I cant say he does &c. this thing was once made known to Mr. Branch late Secretary and an investigation was ordered by him through Commodore Barron, but Commodore Barron did not try to find out any thing. But these are facts and they ought to be curtailed in their goings on and a naval officer put there to see that these men should not have things in there power to play on government as they please. It has since there was nothing done with them when that investigation was ordered by Mr. Branch they have been carrying on much worse because the poor mechanic that is at work there is now afraid to say anything if he opens his mouth about the misconduct and they hear of it his services is no longer wanted so we are compelled to hush our mouths or have our families to want I hope you will have thing better arranged and have them more curtailed in their hiring of negroes and there horses and Carts &c.

I shall see by there movements if this is taken any notice of &c.<sup>25</sup>

The anonymous letter was referred by the President to Levi Woodbury, Secretary of the Navy, who in turn referred it to Commodore Lewis Warrington, newly in command of the Norfolk navy yard, with instructions that a further investigation be held. Warrington wrote to Baldwin on the 11th August to inform him of the new investigation. Two days later Singleton also wrote to tell Baldwin that, as he put it, "there has been more writing about the dock," and that as a result "We have had a little more of the old work to do."<sup>26</sup>

As before, the main defense to the charge of bias against white workers was one of efficiency. Thus in reply to Warrington's enquiries about his role, Samuel Johnson stated that the blacks he had hired had been "good faithful hands" and that the policy of using blacks to hammer stone had resulted in a considerable saving to the Government. "I have kept an account, by the request of Col. Baldwin, of the white and black men's work and have ascertained there is a saving of more than 50% by employing blacks to hammer stone. After 2 or 3 months practice they will average nearly as much work as the white men, particularly the rough heavy work, and their wages is not half as much as is paid to the White Stone Cutters."<sup>27</sup>

Simultaneously, Singleton produced a series of testimonials from leading local figures to answer the charge of political partisanship.

<sup>25</sup>"A true Jackson man" to President Andrew Jackson, July 30, 1831, *Baldwin Papers*.

<sup>26</sup>Henry Singleton to Loammi Baldwin, Jr., Aug. 13, 1831, *Baldwin Papers*.

<sup>27</sup>Samuel Johnson to Commodore L. Warrington, Aug. 11, 1831, *Baldwin Papers*.



Among them was one from John Murdaugh denying that Singleton had ever "used the influence of his station for political or electioneering purposes" or attempted "to influence the vote of any individual," and denouncing Singleton's "base, envious and malignant accusers."<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, Baldwin himself wrote to Secretary of the Navy Woodbury protesting the new harassment and referring him to the previous investigations. "I do not fear, but rather court, a strict & impartial investigation, by competent persons," Baldwin concluded, "to answer minutely the abusive, malicious, anonymous accusations, such as are now before you."<sup>29</sup>

It was at this point that the Norfolk dry dock affair was overtaken by the greater convulsion of the Turner Rebellion. The first intimation came in a letter from Singleton to Baldwin on August 26th, informing him that an insurrection had occurred among the blacks in Southampton County and that a number of whites had been murdered. Singleton betrayed some anxiety that the dry dock controversy would now get completely out of hand, adding a postscript indicating that he was "anxious that you should know our situation as respects the blacks." Baldwin wrote back a few days later that all Boston was "much interested in the frightful insurrection among the negroes in Southampton County. I hope that it is all silenced by this time, and that the murderers are in good keeping."<sup>30</sup>

The following week, Singleton sent better news. The alarm was subsiding "and I hope you will not be afraid to come among this blackish community again. We are healthy and have no pestilential fevers among us, and was it not for the envious scribblers we should have nothing to call our attention from the progress of this great work and its speedy completion." Baldwin was reassured. "I am happy to learn that tranquility is restored among the blacks. From your last letter and one from Mr. Campbell of the 4th I was extremely anxious about the conduct of the negroes. Though you as well as Mr. Campbell expressed little or no apprehension, still the fact of several of Mr. Drummond's men having been apprehended, and others strongly suspected, I feared some dreadful operations might have been commenced. Your letter relieves me entirely."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup>John W. Murdaugh to Commodore Lewis Warrington, Aug. 13, 1830. See also William Soyall et al. and Samuel Watts et al. all to Commodore Lewis Warrington, Aug. 12, 1831, *Baldwin Papers*.

<sup>29</sup>Loammi Baldwin, Jr. to the Honorable Levi Woodbury, Aug. 19, 1831, *Baldwin Papers*.

<sup>30</sup>Henry Singleton to Loammi Baldwin, Jr., Aug. 26, 1831, and Loammi Baldwin, Jr. to Henry Singleton, Aug. 29, 1831, both in *Baldwin Papers*.

<sup>31</sup>Henry Singleton to Loammi Baldwin, Jr., Sept. 7, 1831, and Loammi Baldwin, Jr. to Henry Singleton, Sept. 12, 1831, both in *Baldwin Papers*. Baldwin's letter apparently refers to the

Relief, however, was premature. By the middle of September the long and acrimonious dispute over the use of slave labor in the dry dock had become central to Norfolk's response to the Turner Rebellion.

Baldwin received notice of the merger of the dry dock issue with the aftermath of the Turner Rebellion in a letter from Singleton dated September 21st. Singleton warned that the mechanics and labourers of the dry dock had joined forces with those of the navy yard to present a petition to the Secretary of the Navy to have all slave laborers discharged from public works. "I have thought it best to provide for the change so that in case of the removal of the black hammerers, we should have white men to do the rough work, and in view of this I have placed as hammerers 9 men at 1.\$ per day as above stated, which I hope will meet your approbation." Singleton blamed "a few low and noisy characters" for keeping up "the negro excitement."<sup>32</sup> Three days later, however, a further letter brought considerable evidence that the mechanics' campaign had in fact finally attracted very widespread support. First, the petition had circulated widely beyond the immediate mechanic and laborer population: 492 persons had signed it, including numbers of "persons owning slaves or hiring them in the public works as well as non-slave owners and other citizens." Second, on the 17th of September the petition had been overwhelmingly endorsed by a "large and respectable" gathering of Portsmouth residents. Such "general approbation" lent considerable weight to the mechanics' request that "the wishes of the people" be effected and all black labor discharged from the dry dock.<sup>33</sup> Finally, among those taking a prominent role in the 17th September meeting were not a few of the local notables — in particular John Murdaugh — who had previously spoken in condemnation of the very mechanics in whose support they were now arrayed. Their desertion was a sign that the mechanics had at last gained the initiative.<sup>34</sup>

The mechanics' petition read as follows:

The Petition of the Inhabitants of Portsmouth and Persons employed in the Navy Yard & Dry Dock, respectfully sheweth

That about 200 white labourers are generally in public employ here and about 300 Blacks, one half of whom do not belong to this place, but

detection of slaves employed on the dry dock. Unfortunately, the letter from "Campbell" from which Baldwin seems to have gained this information does not appear to have been preserved in Baldwin's correspondence.

<sup>32</sup>Henry Singleton to Loammi Baldwin, Jr., Sept. 21, 1831, *Baldwin Papers*.

<sup>33</sup>J. W. Wilson to Henry Singleton, Sept. 23, 1831, and Henry Singleton to Loammi Baldwin, Jr., Sept. 24, 1831, both in *Baldwin Papers*.

<sup>34</sup>"Resolutions Passed at a Meeting of the Citizens of the Town of Portsmouth, Held at the Masonic Hall on Saturday Evening, September 17th 1831." *Baldwin Papers*.

have been hired in the country around — some of them from a distance — for the purpose of putting them in the Dry Dock or Navy Yard. Thus adding to the pestiferous part of our population while we are anxious it should be diminished, and imposing a task on the whites to guard against those identical Blacks at night, who are suffered to work as companions with them in the day! This state of things has been long & loud & justly complained of amongst the poor whites in town, and after giving to it the most deliberate consideration we are truly desirous of alteration. We deprecate the bad effects of bringing the Black people, conspicuously in large bodies, into competition with white people — it produces too much prejudice on the one hand & too much encroachment on the other. We therefore recommend the discharge of the Blacks.

The preference of Black labourers has arisen from an idea that they are *better* to labour than the whites, but this is contradicted by the fact that white Mechanics, labouring here, are as efficient in standing fatigue, as those perhaps of any other place, & for the same reason white labourers are equally adequate to labour.

It is believed that much of the heavy labour of the Blacks might be performed as advantageously by team & machinery, & as to Black labour being thought cheapest to the government from the per diem allowance — there is no knowing what is the cost from embezzlement; there is no knowing what may be the actual cost to the government by continuing the employment of Blacks.

If there are any slave owners who would be driven from town by this change which is solicited, it is more than we believe, but here is the advantage that would be gained, we should rid the precincts of the Magazine & the immense amounts of public property here, of the country Blacks; we should interrupt the maturity of incendiary projects. We should gain 300 effective whites. Now it must be obvious we presume that the public property would be infinitely more safe by it, as well as the town, which by its increase would be rendered a much greater convenience to the government.

Finally we are firmly of opinion, that if the government would give due notice in the public papers, of employing none but white labourers, there would be then more room for emulation amongst them in working, & such a choice might be subsequently made as to manifest the policy of the change recommended.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to endorsing the petition and calling for its transmittal to the officer in command of the Norfolk station, the superintendent of the dry dock and the Secretary of the Navy, the 17th September meeting also explicitly extended the scope of the campaign to the em-

<sup>35</sup>"Petition of the Inhabitants of Portsmouth and Persons Employed in the Navy Yard and Dry Dock, Presented to a Meeting of the Citizens of Portsmouth, Sept. 17, 1831." *Baldwin Papers* (emphasis in original).

ployment of free blacks, resolving that, no less than slaves, "the employment of . . . free negroes upon the public works in this neighbourhood, to the exclusion of many worthy and industrious white citizens, is unjust & impolitic and ought not to be tolerated."<sup>36</sup>

The new turn of events in Norfolk — in particular, perhaps, the appearance on the side of their enemies of some of those whom the project's managers had previously regarded as political allies — added a note of resignation to Baldwin's voice. Initially he responded to the reports of renewed petitioning with his usual stubborn defense of the dry dock project's management. Thus, in a letter of September 27th to Secretary of the Navy Levi Woodbury he warned of the serious consequences of acceding to the mechanics' demands that blacks be removed from employment on the dry dock.

From an early period of our business, blacks were employed on the Dock. We had great numbers in the excavation & from the plan we adopted towards them, they have performed most capable service, & indeed, at ordinary labour they equalled, & even, surpassed the white labourers, in the amount of their work at \$0.72 a day, when the whites had \$1. We have ever since employed from 100 to 150 blacks. In August last we had 111 on the rolls including common labourers, work[ing] as tenders whom the masons, & stone cutters, & others occupied in various departments of labour. Of the above number 55 were at work in hammering stone, & Mr. Singleton informs me to day, that there are now 40 black labourers tending masons, making mortar &c & 52 hammering stone. These blacks have all become very useful, more especially those in the stone sheds, some of them have acquired an uncommon degree of skill in hammering granite. Indeed a few have become excellent workmen, & are equal to some of the whites who receive more than double their wages. To supply their place by teaching white men to perform the same work would occasion great delay & to supply good white hammerers, would not only cause delay, but a great additional expense . . .

When I first went to Norfolk, I had strong prejudices against the blacks as labourers, & from what I had previously seen of their habits & work, I could not consent to employ them. I however soon saw enough of the whites & the black labourers to be convinced the latter could be most usefully employed. From the little gratuity of 10 cents a day allowed for themselves, they labour as cheerfully, & generally do more work than the white labourers. In the hot summer months, their employment is almost indispensable, as they endure the heat & preserve their health much better than whites.

The question of dismissing the blacks from the Navy Yard & Dock involves great interests, whether we consider the character of this species of labour in the South, or the wants of Government in public works of every kind, in the slave states. A similar application may be made to the war department,

<sup>36</sup>"Resolutions Passed at a Meeting . . ." *Baldwin Papers*.

for a dismissal of blacks employed at Old Point, & other fortifications where blacks are employed. I am ignorant of the reasons upon which the petition is founded, but I presume that similar ones might be assigned for the dismissal of the blacks in all other Government works throughout the Southern states. What may be the consequence, if these petitioners are gratified, it does not seem necessary for me to predict.<sup>37</sup>

In a letter written to Singleton the same day, Baldwin expressed the hope that the government would ignore the petition. "So important are our blacks to us now, especially the stone hammerers, that it would be almost folly to discharge them & I do not believe the Secretary will pay any attention to it. I thought it of so much consequence, that I immediately wrote a letter to the Secretary . . ." Yet Baldwin could not conceal his fears that the situation was beyond rescue. "I regret to hear the excitement about the negroes is still kept up. I have no doubt there are bad spirits enough at work in Portsmouth & vicinity to turn the blacks against the whites in the Dock & Navy Yards, if they cannot get them turned out of the work."<sup>38</sup> By the beginning of October, indeed, he appeared resigned to the likelihood that the petitioners, this time, would be heeded. Thus in answer to Singleton's account of how Portsmouth's respectables had finally swung behind the mechanics on the 17th, Baldwin wrote that he was "sorry to hear that such a step is taken" and wondered why "your Virginians, who are generally so loud about the principles of *free trade* . . . make such a stir about any man or public officer, employing whom they please to work for them." However, he "perceive[d] the meeting was a very respectable one," and therefore wished it to be known, should anything further transpire, that "I care very little about the continuance of the slaves on the Dock." Baldwin, though, laced his resignation with anger. "I do wish . . . people would mind their own business & let us attend to ours. This is the fourth attempt to incroach upon our affairs, & we have had more vexation and trouble by the muddling interference of others, then in all the business I have ever done. God grant I may get out of it this coming year."<sup>39</sup>

Baldwin's last word on the subject came in a letter sent to Singleton on October 17th. At this time there still had been no final decision on the employment of slaves in the dry dock.<sup>40</sup> Tensions were clearly still acute in Norfolk, and Baldwin's letter — particularly its revelation that

<sup>37</sup>Loammi Baldwin, Jr. to the Honorable Levi Woodbury, Sept. 27, 1831, *Baldwin Papers*.

<sup>38</sup>Loammi Baldwin, Jr. to Henry Singleton, Sept. 27, 1831, *Baldwin Papers*.

<sup>39</sup>Loammi Baldwin, Jr. to Henry Singleton, Oct. 1, 1831, *Baldwin Papers* (emphasis in original).

<sup>40</sup>Early in October Woodbury had replied to the petition to indicate that the matter was under consideration and that "the interest of the Government will be duly weighed as well as the rights of individuals considered." Quoted in Henry Singleton to Loammi Baldwin, Jr., Oct. 7, 1831, *Baldwin Papers*.

Singleton had himself been forced to sign the petition calling for removal of slave labor from the public works — underscores the pressures at work within the white community in the weeks prior to the great manumission debate. He was "extremely sorry," he wrote, "to learn that such an unhappy temper exists among the white population, relative to the blacks. Your signing the petition was certainly judicious, under the circumstances in which you were placed." The whole affair had been "trouble and vexation enough," and in the short term, at least, "the best way is to list & yield with the best grace we can, to the temper & pressure of the times, over which we can have no controul." Yet Baldwin was also hopeful that control of the issue would eventually be taken back from the mechanics, that Portsmouth's slaveholders would regain the initiative in local politics, and that all, ultimately, would be well.

I cannot but think, however, the great excitement is only temporary, & your sensible, discreet, & honest neighbours, ought to be careful how they lend their aid & countenance to the wild, & malevolent passion of their more thoughtless, scheming, fellow citizens. Whether the blacks are dismissed or not, I care not; But I would ask anyone who owns slaves & receives in any way the profit of his toil, if it would not be quite rational that he should give up all his own blacks & discharge them, before he asks the Government, & his neighbour, to discharge those they employ. Why should not 20, 50, or 100 blacks be employed in the Navy Yard, as well as in the manufactory of a private citizen? Why should not Mr Herron, Mr Drummond, Mr Murray &c be required to discharge their 10 or 20 blacks employed in their manufactories, as well as Com. Warrington, those in the Navy Yard? Besides what is to be the future condition of the slaves? For my own part, I believe, that in case the blacks are now dismissed, in the course of two or three years, complaints will be made by the very petitioners to have negroes employed again.<sup>41</sup>

At this point the manuscript record on the Norfolk dry dock affair ends. Pay rolls and incidental correspondence suggest, however, that Baldwin's confidence that the petitioners' demands for an end to the employment of slave labor would be countermanded in a resurgence of slaveholder authority was well founded. In the immediate aftermath of the Turner Rebellion, Norfolk's representatives in the Virginia legislature might join in calls for condemnation of the "evil" of slavery and endorse a declaration of eventual emancipation.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the employment of slaves as hammerers and laborers on the dry dock was

<sup>41</sup>Loammi Baldwin, Jr. to Henry Singleton, Oct. 17, 1831, *Baldwin Papers*.

<sup>42</sup>Freehling, *Drift Toward Dissolution*, 160.

to continue throughout the following year, and at levels comparable to those prevailing in 1831.

	May '30	May '31	Sep '31	Nov '31	Feb '32	May '32	Aug '32	Oct '32
Black labor	56	136	98	92	87	87	89	78
Total labor	212	397	352	359	357	341	319	261
% Black labor	26	34	28	26	24	26	28	30

Ten years after the dry dock affair, the alienated voices of white mechanics could still be heard in the Norfolk navy yard complaining about the employment of blacks. Fifteen years after, in 1847, it was the turn of white journeymen house carpenters, bitter at the use of black labor to break their strike. Twenty years after, in 1851, we find Norfolk and Portsmouth's white artisans mounting another appeal, this to their fellows "throughout Virginia," for concerted action to protect free white labor from encroachment.<sup>43</sup>

As in the early 1830s, however, in 1851 mechanic interests collided "with those of wealthy, influential slaveholders" opposed to attempts to restrict black employment. And again as in the early 1830s, the slaveholders' authority was decisive. The only difference, perhaps, was that in the immediate aftermath of the Turner Rebellion slaveholders had of necessity been extremely circumspect in the manner in which they went about defending their interests against local antislavery and negrophobia. Twenty years later they were less constrained. When Norfolk and Portsmouth artisans petitioned the General Assembly to give whites "the exclusive privilege of the mechanic arts," their petition this time was not listened to with respect and with a show of support. It was rejected out of hand, and with contempt.<sup>44</sup>

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Each of us will derive particular knowledge from documents such as these, for abstractly they are susceptible to as many readings as there are readers. As legatees of the post-modern sensibility, we are properly suspicious of claims to foundational knowledge, or metanarratives of "truth." Yet neither authors nor readers are free agents. Knowledge is transitive, constructed in discourse, but discourse is not autonomous

<sup>43</sup>The details included in this paragraph and the next rely heavily on Bogger, *The Darker Side of Freedom*.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*

of social structure: irreducible social relations set limits to what may be invented by authors and readers alike.<sup>45</sup>

The particular knowledge that I derive from my reading of the Norfolk dry dock affair is knowledge of the relationship between social structure and consciousness. Placed on the large stage of Virginia's politics at the time of the emancipation debate, the affair does indeed support Alison Freehling's general contention for class division and tension. In microcosm, however, the affair also tells us something about the construction of identity. In the case of the protesters, what I find most striking is the apparent dawning of awareness that their identity as artisans was relatively worthless and their consequent reformulation of their sense of self-worth and identity during the course of the dispute increasingly to stress their "whiteness." This culminates in the petition of 17 September 1831, in which it was not thought relevant to present any other characteristic differentiating the petitioners as a source of labor from the slaves employed on the dock.<sup>46</sup> Earlier claims of respect due them variously as "men of families" or as tradesmen have vanished.

As to Loammi Baldwin, Jr., the person through whom the artisans' unhappy conflict is transmitted to us, his is an altogether more self-assured presentation of identity. Apparently untroubled by the racial fears of a slaveholding culture of which he was not a part, unchallenged in social standing (no status anxiety fuelled by creeping "encroachment" here), possessed of a professional's intellectual authority — for all these reasons Baldwin could speak from a position of considerable security. What I find interesting is that from that position of class and racial security there issued so strong an endorsement of slavery — economically sensible, in certain respects wholly superior to free labor, quite feasibly applied to southern industrialization. No doubt Baldwin's motivation was in large part simple expediency: the engineer wanted to defend his management of the project and to get on with the construction of his dock as quickly and as efficiently as he knew how. Yet expediency even

<sup>45</sup>See, generally, Maureen Cain, "Realism, Feminism, Methodology, and Law," *International Journal of the Sociology of Law*, 14 (1986), 255-67.

<sup>46</sup>As we have seen, rather than restate the mechanics' earlier complaints that slave laborers were incompetent to do what skillful tradesmen "who had served a regular and faithful apprenticeship" did, the petition of 17 September instead claimed that the white mechanics should get the work because blacks should not be in competition with white people. No skill claim was made. Indeed, the petition effectively advertised the eagerness of the white workers to be exploited. They were "as efficient in standing fatigue" as anyone, it claimed, not least the slaves currently employed.

in the face of his little local difficulty does not quite explain the energy with which Baldwin so assiduously applied himself to an exposition of industrial slavery's economic rationality. For me, Baldwin's amoral "geometry" of enslavement drowns out even the querulous voices of southerners impaled on the horns of their exquisite dilemma. It is not the normal voice of the upper class New Englander in the literature of slavery and I will not soon forget it. After all, even George Fitzhugh left some room for doubt.

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