

Silenced by a Pistol

John Hampden Pleasants, Slavery and the
Disappearance of Dissent in Virginia

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On the wet and dreary morning of Wednesday, February 25, 1846 John Hampden Pleasants, the former editor of the Richmond *Whig*, and Thomas Ritchie, Jr., the co-editor of the Richmond *Enquirer*, met on the canal tow path in Manchester City, just across the James River from Richmond. Armed with pistols, swords and bowie knives, both men faced one another squarely, separated by a few hundred feet while their seconds attempted to negotiate an amicable resolution to the conflict. When they failed, Pleasants initiated the duel by calmly walking directly toward Ritchie. Initially, both men refrained from discharging their weapons, but once Pleasants was within range, Ritchie opened fire “throwing down his pistols as fast as he fired.” Certainly several of his shots hit their mark, but Pleasants marched forward “without falling in the least,” refusing to fire “his first pistol” until he was within ten feet of his opponent. Pleasants then closed in on Ritchie, “struck him with his pistol in the mouth” and lunged forward with his sword cane, intent on running him through. “Ritchie, in the meantime, was constantly firing, until at last he drew his sword” and the men “were parted.” Pleasants then fell to the ground, struck by six bullets and wounded in the hand, arm, chest and leg. Thomas Dean and Jefferson Archer placed the mortally wounded Pleasants in a carriage and transported him back to his room in the city. Ritchie, “scarcely hurt,” raced to an awaiting carriage and along with his seconds took flight for Washington, where they evaded the law until he could secure his father’s advice.¹

How did John Hampden Pleasants and Thomas Ritchie, Jr. end up on the field of honor that cold February morning? Eyewitnesses described Pleasants’ behavior during the days immediately before the confrontation as erratic, enraged, and frantic. On Saturday, February 21st, Pleasants marched back and forth in front of the *Enquirer* office brandishing a sword cane, determined to confront Ritchie. Frustrated when he did not find his foe, Pleasants stopped in Vial’s store for a drink and then returned to the street and continued wandering about town, trailed by a growing crowd of spectators hopeful they might witness a fight. On Monday the 23rd he retraced his steps by pacing once again in front of the *Enquirer* office. From there he marched to the town green and pushed through the crowd

assembled to celebrate George Washington's birthday. When Ritchie failed to materialize, Pleasants returned to his rival's office. He repeated the cycle several times, pausing only occasionally for a drink in a local bar. As the hours passed, his anger and frustration intensified; his friends tried to calm him, but they failed. He simply grew more resolute the longer Ritchie eluded him. By all accounts, then, Pleasants was in a desperate emotional state, exasperated by his failure to confront his antagonist.² It should hardly be surprising, then, that to Pleasants a formal challenge seemed to be the only path to satisfaction.

Also contributing to his state of mind that February was a more general feeling of unhappiness. In fact, John Hampden Pleasants was in a pretty cheerless place that winter. His political friends had begun to see him as a liability to the Whig Party. With growing disapproval of his cantankerous and controversial editorial tone, they speculated openly that perhaps the party would fare better in Virginia with a different editor at the helm of the *Whig*.³ Embarrassed and hurt by this loss of confidence, Pleasants abruptly stepped down from the editorship just weeks before the duel. He contemplated leading a new paper, called the *News and Star*, but few expected him to succeed. Abandoned by his friends and weighed down with professional uncertainty, Pleasants turned to an old flame for comfort. Two years earlier he had tried to persuade his cousin, Caroline Garland, to accept his proposal of marriage. She refused his offer, he thought unjustly, even cruelly, but he loved her still. And so in early February 1846 he renewed his offer of marriage only to be rejected again.⁴ By the winter of 1846 John Hampden Pleasants was a lost and unsettled man with few ready friends and slim professional prospects.

Despite these circumstances, the Pleasants-Ritchie duel has most often been explained as the predictable end to a rude and mordant editor's twenty-year career fomenting trouble and antagonizing readers.⁵ As early as 1823 Thomas Higginbotham, then Director of the Farmer's Bank in Lynchburg, rebuked Pleasants for his harsh and mocking editorial style. Six years later, little had changed. From

everything he “heard & read in the public papers” William Massie, a wealthy planter from Nelson County, could only disapprove of Pleasants and strongly discouraged his niece, Mary, from accepting the editor’s proposal of marriage. She did not take that advice and married Pleasants on December 15, 1829 and the two of them enjoyed a happy family life that included two children, James (or Jim as his family affectionately called him) and Anne Elizabeth.⁶ Although his private life settled into a pleasant routine (at least until his wife’s untimely death in 1836), his public life remained contentious. Indeed, the 1846 duel was not his first affair of honor. In 1823, 1828, 1839 and again in 1843, Pleasants angered political foes so thoroughly that the disagreements escalated into formal challenges. Each confrontation, however, was resolved by friends before any shots were fired.⁷ There is little doubt that John Hampden Pleasants was a controversial figure, a man whose biting sarcasm and harsh criticism (not to mention his violent temperament) had earned him a reputation among friend and foe alike as a political force to be reckoned with.

But why did the dispute in 1846 end on the field of honor when so many of his previous conflicts had terminated more peacefully? What made the situation in 1846 different? The answer, I suspect, lay in the nature of the initial insult, delivered on January 19, 1846 when the editors of the *Richmond Enquirer* published a letter from their Washington correspondent declaring that Pleasants “intend[ed] with his new paper, . . . to take the lead . . . in exciting Abolitionism” in the state. A few days later, an outraged Pleasants published a letter he had received from a friend confirming the damage this rumor had done to his reputation. “It is extensively, almost universally, believed,” reported his friend, “that you are going to establish an Abolition Paper in Richmond” modeled after the newspaper Cassius M. Clay edited in Lexington, Kentucky.⁸ This last element of the accusation was particularly alarming. Six months earlier, Clay had ignited a firestorm of controversy when he published an editorial in his antislavery paper, *True American*, declaring that justice for the slave could not long be deferred. He warned his readers that “the strong arms and fiery hearts” of the enslaved would soon claim their “day

of retribution” and “*the masses will be avenged.*” An angry committee of proslavery Kentuckians promptly shut down his press, claiming that the rights and safety of the community outweighed those of the individual.⁹ Pleasants, and all of the most prominent editors in Virginia, immediately joined the chorus of outrage expressed across the South and condemned Clay and his paper. “We feel no sympathy for Mr. Clay, a member of that family of fanatics,” wrote Pleasants, “who, pernicious ever to society and its peace, are more especially pernicious to the cause which they undertook to promote.”¹⁰ For this reason, and many more, Pleasants insisted that the Ritchie brothers should have refused “to disseminate what they certainly must have known as men, was unfounded in fact.” He demanded a retraction but none came. The editors continued their verbal assaults on one another over the next several weeks until, on February 21st, Thomas Ritchie, Jr called Pleasants “a coward.” The calm reserve Pleasants had struggled to maintain throughout the controversy gave way to outrage. After three days of failed attempts to confront him in the streets of Richmond, Pleasants instructed his brother Hugh to deliver his challenge to Ritchie. The note revealed that he would be “on the Chesterfield side of the James River tomorrow morning at sun rise, armed with side arms.” A duel, it would seem, offered the only means of preserving his standing in society.¹¹

This episode raises a variety of questions, not least of which involves the strange mechanics of the duel itself, but for the moment I want to focus on one question in particular: How did “abolitionist” become an insult worthy of a duel? Certainly by the mid-1840s most southerners understood the term abolitionism to be synonymous with radical fanaticism and defined abolitionists as an enemy, a foreigner, an outsider; in short, an abolitionist was a person unworthy of inclusion in the southern community. In the Old Dominion, this understanding emerged during the 1830s as Virginians responded to a series of crises involving the slavery issue. The appearance of David Walker’s *Appeal* in 1829, followed by Nat Turner’s Insurrection and the subsequent abolition debate between 1831 and 1832, as well as the American Antislavery Society’s 1835 mailing campaign and later controversies involving

fugitive slaves all led Southerners – and Virginians in particular - to assume a defensive posture that celebrated sectional unity and demanded conformity in the face of an unrelenting foreign enemy – the northern abolitionist. Along the way, Virginians became increasingly intolerant of dissent and the public space for a man like Pleasants to challenge the status quo and defend the merits of a free press gradually disappeared.

John Hampden Pleasants arrived in Richmond in the winter of 1824 and established the Richmond *Whig* as an opposition newspaper dedicated to challenging the political supremacy of Thomas Ritchie and the Richmond *Enquirer*.¹² Just over six months before he moved to the capitol city, Pleasants proclaimed in the pages of the Lynchburg *Virginian* (where he cut his editorial teeth) that there was a “body of men” in Richmond “who, on all great questions, and particularly such as grow out of national politics, are accustomed to exercise a powerful . . . influence over public opinion.” He vowed to challenge their dominance in public affairs.¹³ In his proposal for the *Whig*, Pleasants complained that there was “but one paper . . . to utter the various and conflicting opinions of the old as well as the new parties,” a circumstance he thought shameful for a city and state of such national political prominence. His “new Political Newspaper,” he proclaimed, would provide the public access “to [a] difference of opinion” and, as one supporter declared, “emancipate the press from any real or imaginary shackles” constraining free and open public debate.¹⁴

So began a decades-long rivalry between Pleasants and Ritchie and their respective newspapers. For more than twenty years, these two men occupied opposite sides of nearly every political question. On the one hand, Ritchie and the *Enquirer* championed Virginia’s state’s rights doctrine, represented the interests of the eastern tidewater elite and called on Virginians to beware of the consolidation of power at the national level. He was one of several powerful state political leaders who became known as the Richmond Junto and, with these men, exerted considerable control over state politics. After 1828, Ritchie and the *Enquirer* became the primary political voice of the Democratic Party in the South. On the

other hand, Pleasants used the editorial pages of the *Whig* to attack the political power of the state's planter elite, routinely challenged the state legislature to pay attention the needs of the Virginia's western residents and championed a nationalist perspective that encouraged Virginians to endorse internal improvements, strong banks, and a commercial economy. He resented the influence of the Richmond Junto and fashioned himself a gadfly of sorts whose primary role was to challenge the status quo and prevent Ritchie and the *Enquirer* from monopolizing the political conversation in the state.¹⁵

A brief look at the presidential elections of 1824 and 1828 reveals the intensely personal nature of their political rivalry. During the 1824 contest, Pleasants accused Ritchie of being a slave to the caucus system when he stubbornly clung to the candidacy of William H. Crawford despite growing evidence that he could not win the presidency.¹⁶ In his view, Ritchie's actions proved the editor's lack of independence and unwillingness to pursue a policy that put the people before partisan interest. In an editorial entitled "The Death of Thomas Ritchie," Pleasants described his political adversary as "so good a Republican that he refused to express any opinion, to advocate any measure, before he had clearly discovered on whose side of the question public opinion was. His own sentiments," Pleasants scornfully declared, "were cheerfully sacrifice to those of the majority."¹⁷ Four years later, Pleasants ridiculed Ritchie for supporting Andrew Jackson, a man he had described as unfit for the office of the presidency in the previous election. Once again, Pleasants spied in Ritchie's actions the partisan and self-interested work of the Richmond Junto. From his perspective, Ritchie had traded principle for the promise of patronage and nothing proved this charge more than Ritchie's "flip-flop" on Jackson.¹⁸

During the initial years of their rivalry, Ritchie generally ignored Pleasants, greeting his attacks with a "profound silence." Even on those rare occasions when Pleasants succeeded in drawing out the editor of the *Enquirer*, Ritchie condescendingly pledged "never again to notice the attacks of the *Whig*."¹⁹ From Ritchie's perspective, the *Whig* hardly deserved his time and energy. It was an unimpressive newspaper with limited local appeal. Moreover, it promoted an unpopular political

perspective that was made even less palatable by the annoyingly prickly editor at the helm. But Ritchie could not ignore Pleasants and the *Whig* for long. After 1828 the popularity of the *Whig* soared and the paper moved from a bi-weekly to a daily publication. In 1830, Pleasants added a country edition to serve growing rural demand for the paper. By 1834, Pleasants claimed subscribers in every county of the state and had become the primary organ of the newly established Whig Party. Indeed, by the early 1840s, the *Whig* claimed the largest subscription list in the state.²⁰

This surge in popularity can be explained in part by the rise of partisan politics, but Pleasants' editorial style certainly contributed.²¹ Ritchie's strategy of silence, for example, only led Pleasants to intensify his attacks and over the course of the 1830s and 40s the editor of the *Whig* grew ever more caustic and personal in his criticisms. The tensions between the editors finally erupted in the winter 1843, when Ritchie called Pleasants the "Prince of Hoaxers" and warned his readers that "you can never be certain whether he is speaking truth or perpetuating a hoax." Pleasants responded by calling his rival a "common slanderer of all who happen to dissent from his political objects" and essentially accused Ritchie of being a coward, a man who "gives no redress" to those "injured" by his editorial attacks and who was prone to plead age and infirmity to avoid an honorable resolution to any conflict. William F. Ritchie, the *Enquirer* editor's eldest son, took great offense at this charge and challenged Pleasants to a duel.²² Although this affair of honor was resolved before the combatants came to blows, it was one of the many dramatic episodes fueling the political rivalry between the two men and the residents of the city happily turned the pages of these public prints hoping to catch a glimpse of the latest verbal tirade.

As much as they sparred with one another on Virginia's political battlefield, Pleasants and Ritchie tended to occupy the same ground when it came to the slavery issue. This can be seen most clearly in the months after Nat Turner's 1831 insurrection when both men welcomed the unprecedented exploration of slavery and emancipation that winter. "In a free land with a free press one subject was prohibited and guarded from free discussion with Turkish jealousy. Nat Turner and the

blood of his innocent victims” declared Pleasants, “have conquered the silence of fifty years. Exposed to the danger of having the throats of their wives and children cut any night in the year, men have broken the chain which morbid sensibility imposed upon their tongues and hands.” Ritchie echoed his rival editor’s assessment of the situation. “The seals are broken, which have been put for fifty years upon the most delicate and difficult subject of state concernment. . . . the press fearlessly speaks its own sentiments – unawed by the tocsin of denunciation or the menaces of proscription.”²³

They also agreed that slavery was an evil that produced more harm than good in Virginia and encouraged the public and the state’s political leaders to pursue emancipation. As early as December 16, 1831, Pleasants congratulated the members of the General Assembly for discussing “the question of remote and gradual emancipation.” He found no reason to limit “the question of abolition” to the members of the legislature and encouraged the public to explore “the practicability of ridding ourselves of an evil which all men confess to be the sorest which any nation groaned under.” Less than a month later, Ritchie challenged the state’s political leaders to expand their discussion beyond riding the state of its free black population. “Is this all that can be done? Are we forever to suffer the greatest evil, which can scourge our land, not only to remain, but to increase in its dimensions?” Ritchie concluded his editorial by proclaiming: “Something ought to be done – Means sure, but gradual, systemic, but discreet, ought to be adopted, for reducing the mass of evil, which is pressing upon the South, and will still more press upon her, the longer it is put off. – We ought not to shut our eyes, nor avert our faces.”²⁴ These editors were not alone in this view. Governor John Floyd, many of the members of the state legislature, numerous petitioners from across the state, and countless residents expressed support for emancipation. Although the legislature ultimately declined to act, freedom of the press reigned and Virginians engaged in an extraordinarily open debate about the expediency of abolishing slavery.²⁵

As he reflected on the debates of that winter, William and Mary College President Thomas Dew, an early architect of a positive defense of slavery, registered his disapproval of the public nature of the

discussion and called for a return to silence on such a delicate issue. Yet, in his *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832* (1832) he acknowledged that “the abolitionists in the Virginia legislature” were not motivated by “any settled malevolent design to overturn or convulse the fabric of society.” Instead, they were young and inexperienced men who “were acting conscientiously for the best.” As “it often happens with frail, imperfect men,” he observed, their “ardent and confident pursuit of an imaginary good” ultimately threatened to produce more harm than good. He was pleased, therefore, that the legislature chose to defer acting on a question so central to Virginia’s security and prosperity.²⁶ Despite calls for the suppression of any additional public discussion of the issue, Pleasants continued to publish editorials and endorse pamphlets on slavery and emancipation. In fact, Pleasants arranged for Jesse Burton Harrison’s 1833 essay *Review of the Slave Question*, a tract he deemed “more worthy” of circulation than Dew’s treatise, to be published and sold as a pamphlet. Not only did Harrison argue that slavery was an economic liability, he also claimed “that no human being has an abstract right to hold another in a state of perpetual involuntary bondage. . . . It is quite impossible to conceive,” he continued, that “any rational being” could hold “the contrary of this proposition.” In both economic and abstract terms, then, he claimed that slavery was wrong and insisted that the citizens of the state “were deeply impressed with the conviction that something must be done.”²⁷ In the early 1830s, Virginia had abolitionists within its community and, as Dew described them, they were good, though misguided and blindly idealistic, men who pursued an impracticable and improbable goal – gradual emancipation. Certainly, outspoken southern abolitionists were a minority, but they were members of the Southern community and the label “abolitionists” had not yet acquired the insulting implication it possessed in 1846 when Pleasants fought a duel with Thomas Ritchie, Jr.

All of this changed radically in the summer of 1835 when the American Antislavery Society launched a mailing campaign that distributed antislavery pamphlets and newspapers throughout the South. In an effort to expand their influence and raise more funds, the American Antislavery Society

created a mailing list that included a wide variety of southern political and community leaders and arranged to send roughly one hundred and seventy five thousand copies of four newspapers to them through the postal service.²⁸ This provoked an immediate and violent response from the southern communities receiving the publications. Anti-abolition mobs raided post offices, confiscated the offensive mailings and burned the publications in huge bon fires attended by crowds of local residents. Reports of these events filled local and national newspapers. President Andrew Jackson and Amos Kendall, the Post Master General, were pulled into the crisis and both men expressed sympathy for the southern response.²⁹ As more and more local communities formed vigilance committees, held public meetings, and ritualistically burned mail and assailed the effigies of William Lloyd Garrison and other prominent northern abolitionists, southerners united socially and political behind the institution of slavery. As they enforced white unity and imposed racial control, they also abandoned any tolerance of dissent. The message was clear, unite in defense of the southern way of life or risk the utter destruction of the community.³⁰

The mailing campaign proved to be particularly disturbing to Richmond's residents. Over the previous ten years, the landscape of the city had changed dramatically. In many ways, Richmond shared several of the dynamic and modern qualities displayed in the nation's northern cities. City leaders and commercial merchants championed the development of a strong infrastructure and nurtured the growth of industrial manufacturing. The city directory contained entries for cotton, tobacco and iron manufacturing businesses as well as information for numerous merchant firms and small-scale factories and milling enterprises that produced shoes, clothing, sundries and other necessities. An increasingly complex network of trade relationships with both the countryside and northern cities like New York increasingly provided the raw materials and consumer goods that fueled the expansion of a commercial economy. Indeed, the population of the city was relatively fluid, ebbing and flowing as delegates came and went with each legislative session, traders carried crops and merchandise to and from customers,

and laborers came and went in search of work. By mid-century, Richmond was the most dynamic, cosmopolitan and diverse city in the Upper South. Yet, despite Richmond's embrace of the market revolution and the cultural and economic changes that accompanied that transformation, the city's residents continued to occupy a decidedly southern social world.³¹

Slavery remained the backbone of the labor force in Richmond. Property tax records for the 1830s indicate that there were anywhere between four and five thousand enslaved men and women living in the city, but the real number of enslaved laborers was significantly higher. The demand for labor produced a flourishing market for hiring slaves. Urban factory owners employed thousands of slave laborers each year. Rural slaveholders looked to the city to find work for enslaved men and women left idle on their plantations. Most planters relied on factors in the city to broker work contracts for their excess labor and many slaves exploited the buyer's market to hire themselves out to willing employers. Philip M. Tabb, for example, managed the hiring contracts for the Taliaferro family, securing employment for as many as twenty-seven slaves annually. Warner Taliaferro and his father earned as much as \$1600 a year in this way.³² The growth of this market raised questions about discipline and social control in a fluid urban environment. In 1831 Tabb confessed that he had reached the end of his patience with Taliaferro's man Jimmie. "He is strolling about town, doing nothing. I have made many efforts to get him employed at the shoe making business," he reported, but he was finding it "impossible . . . to do anything with him." Indeed, the Mayor, who adjudicated most disciplinary and criminal offenses involving slaves, recorded a steady business in his docket throughout the 1830s and 40s.³³

Tales of slaves stowing away in the holds of schooners set to depart for New York were fairly common and contributed to the growing concern among white residents that they did not have sufficient control of the city's black population. Lewis D. Crenshaw, who worked as a clerk in a mercantile firm in the city, wrote letters home to his parents littered with news of fugitive slaves. In July

1833, for example, he described how the discovery of four black men in the coal section of one ship's hold came about because the heat and lack of water almost killed them before the ship sailed more than twenty miles from Rocket's Wharf. Two months later Crenshaw reported that "Slaves are continually running away [and] Colo. Yancey is suspected of giving them free papers of his own make." Anxious to keep hold of their slave property, Richmonders established the Society for the Prevention of the Absconding and Abduction of Slaves in 1833. It raised funds through membership fees and then distributed monetary rewards to traders who captured and returned runaway slaves. In December 1836, for example, the Society paid William B. Chamberlayne one hundred and fifty dollars for the return "to this city of sundry slaves who had absconded and gone to the city of New York." The group also worked with local authorities to reduce the loss of slave property. In the spring of 1836, the society treasurer paid "two [city] Watchmen who detected nine slaves on board the Schooner Chariot . . . twenty five dollars each." The city police regularly arrested and recorded in the City Sergeant Register any black whose movements raised suspicion. In 1841 the city sergeant recorded an equal number of individuals detained for "want of free papers" as for suspicion of running away. Within two years, however, the only individuals appearing in the docket were runaways and the number of blacks arrested for this infraction increased with each year. Most of the offenders were transported to the slave jails on Wall Street, the location of the South's second largest slave-trading market.³⁴

Sensitive to the unpredictable nature of an urban environment that offered few of the traditional modes of controlling their black population, Richmonders greeted the arrival of antislavery materials with alarm. John Hampden Pleasants warned his readers in typically bombastic language: "The South reposes on a bed of gunpowder, and there are renegades and apostates among her sons, lighting the match and handing it to her most deadly enemies." He also published the American Antislavery Society's *Address to the Auxiliaries* as proof that the danger was real. The Richmond Mayor immediately instructed the post master to hold all suspicious mail and prevent the circulation of the

“incendiary pamphlets” arriving from the north. The most prominent residents of the city held a public meeting in early August and pledged to adopt a variety of strategies to thwart the “vicious measures” pursued by the “deluded fanatics” who have sent “incendiary publications” into the city in order “to produce or encourage an insubordinate or insurrectionary spirit among the slaves.” By the end of September, Richmond established a vigilance committee charged with monitoring the circulation of published material in the city. The members also reminded residents that the abolitionist literature threatened the peace and security of their community and that, therefore, they were empowered to censor the mails and deploy extralegal measures to impose order.³⁵

Pleasants published countless editorials and essays in the late summer and early fall of 1835 condemning abolitionists and their mailing campaign. Echoing similar characterizations of abolitionism disseminated in newspapers across the south, Pleasants consistently described northern abolitionists as deluded, fanatical and referred to them as violent invaders and foreign enemies whose vicious and poisonous publications were intended to destroy the peace and tranquility of the South by provoking slave insurrections. He painted the scene in stark oppositional terms, insinuating that his readers were either on the side of order, peace and security – that of the defenders of the southern social order, or the side of anarchy, violence, and aggression – that of the northern abolitionists.³⁶ And when the northern press dared to criticize southerners for destroying the offending publications, Pleasants was quick to justify the actions of his fellow-Richmonders. He informed the editors of the *New York American*, for example, that Richmond’s Post Office Committee had every right to publicly burn the “incendiary publications” in their possession. “The authority . . . of the Sovereign People – the *whole* people,” had every right to protect themselves from danger. “[N]o people will sit down and have their throats cut,” he continued, “when it may be prevented by a temporary supercession of the ordinary law.” Virginians, then, had every legal right to protect their lives and their interests by suppressing the circulation of dangerous publications.³⁷

The Virginia legislature heeded the calls of many of the Old Dominion's citizens and passed a series of resolutions in response to the mailing campaign. The members of the state legislature called on the governments of the northern states to pass laws punishing abolition societies for printing, publishing, or distributing "newspapers, pamphlets or other publications calculated, or having a tendency to excite the slaves of the Southern States to insurrection and revolt." They also recommended that "the slaveholding States enact such laws and regulations as may be necessary to suppress and prevent the circulation of any incendiary publication within their respective limits." Virginia followed its own advice and, in March 1836, passed a law codifying severe punishments for any member or agent of an antislavery society caught promoting "the abolition of slavery" within the state. The law also made it a felony to print or circulate any books, pamphlets or newspapers denying the right to hold slaves or encouraging enslaved men and women to resist their condition. To enforce the provision, the legislature empowered post masters and justices of the peace to search the mail and arrest any white person suspected of violating the law.³⁸

By the time the outrage over the 1835 mailing campaign died down, the meaning of "abolitionist" had been permanently transformed. Indeed, it had become so anathema that George Harrison confessed that he "hate[d] the word so much I can hardly write it."³⁹ By the second half of the 1830s, the phrase "southern abolitionist," which Thomas Dew and Beverly Tucker deployed without insult, became an oxymoron. Moreover, freedom of speech and the press became formally circumscribed in law and custom. Southerners expected their friends and neighbors to come together to protect their endangered way of life. Slavery "is so peculiarly our own sectional subject," Henry A. Wise proclaimed to the audience assembled at Louisa Court House, "that I thought all . . . would be united, as one family, by a firm and indissoluble bond of safety and of interest, in protecting this sensitive institution of domestic slavery."⁴⁰ Only by uniting to defend the institution could the south withstand the assault and secure a prosperous future. As the editor of the Richmond *Whig*, John

Hampden Pleasants played a crucial role in facilitating this transformation and although he lamented the accompanying damage to his cherished freedom of the press he saw himself as a man just as devoted to the war against abolition as any of his southern peers.

By the early 1840s, public figures could no longer declare slavery to be an evil and remain seen as a true southerner much less a friend of the south. The controversies over slavery, particularly the American Antislavery Society's 1835 mailing campaign and growing concern over fugitive slaves led southerners to associate even the most moderate of antislavery views with radical abolitionism. Reflecting on the influence of abolitionists on southern public opinion in early 1840, Thomas Ritchie observed: "Certainly the fanatics at the North have taken the most effective means not to leave a single friend of emancipation in the Southern states."⁴¹ John Hampden Pleasants' mistake was in stubbornly clinging to and publically declaring the conviction that slavery was an evil that should be eradicated. As he defended himself in the weeks before that fateful encounter in February 1846, Pleasants emphasized again and again his pragmatic approach to the problem of slavery. "I am not opposed to it [slavery] because I think it morally wrong, for I know that multitude of slaves to be better off than the white. I am against it for the *sake of the whites*, my own race." As he gazed upon Virginia's neighboring states, he continued, "I see . . . [that] while we carry the burthen of slavery we can never contend in power, and yet with whom we must prepare to contend with equal arms, or consent to be their serfs and vassals – we or our children!"⁴² But it mattered little to the delicate egos of his fellow Virginians that he claimed to oppose slavery for the sake of "my own race." Acknowledging slavery to be an evil rather than a positive good was enough to give credence to the charge that he was an abolitionist and to justify the conclusion that he was a traitor to rather than a member of the southern community. So, in his final attempts to defend himself, Pleasants failed to recognize that even his moderate antislavery views violated his community's demand for conformity, and for committing that sin he was silenced by a pistol.

¹ William Cabell Carrington to Henry Carrington, Richmond, February 27, 1846, Carrington Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter VHS). Carrington was the inaugural editor of the Richmond *Times*, a paper he established in April 1845, and a prominent resident of Richmond. His account of the duel is based in large part on his visit with Pleasants immediately after the event. Thomas Dean and Jefferson Archer served as seconds for Pleasants while Washington Greenhow and William Scot did so for Ritchie. Dean and Archer transported Pleasants back to his room in the city where a doctor tended his wounds and a parade of friends and family came to pay their final respects. Pleasants died, possibly of lock jaw, at 2am Friday, February 27. There are quite a few contemporary descriptions of the Pleasants-Ritchie duel in the private papers of various Virginians. See William Field Thompson to George C. Dromgoole, Richmond, February 26, 1846, George C. Dromgoole Papers, VHS; William John Clarke to Edward Stabler, Richmond, February 25, 1846 and William P. Palmer to Dr. John R. Woods, March 9, 1846, D. H. Gordon Papers, VHS; Oliver P. Baldwin to Eliza Lee Baldwin, February 28, 1846, Baldwin Family Papers, VHS. News of the encounter was also reported in newspapers across the country. See late February and early March editorials in New York, Massachusetts, Maine, South Carolina, Maryland, Louisiana, Missouri and, of course, Virginia. Ritchie and Greenhow returned from Washington in late March, turned themselves in to the Chesterfield County police and stood trial for murder. They mounted a successful defense by claiming that the encounter was not really a duel and were acquitted amidst the cheers of the audience. See *A Full Report, Embracing all the Evidence and Arguments in the case of the Commonwealth of Virginia vs. Thomas Ritchie, Jr.* (New York: Burgess, Stringer & Co., 1846). Indeed, the entire affair defied the accepted conventions of dueling, which raises a number of interesting questions – but I leave exploring those for another time. Thomas Ritchie’s two sons, William F. and Thomas, Jr., became editors of the Richmond *Enquirer* in 1843. See Barbara J. Griffin, ed., “Notes and Documents: Thomas Ritchie and the Code Duello,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 92 (1) (January 1984), 78, n 14.

² *Full Report Embracing All the Evidence and Arguments in the case of the Commonwealth of Virginia vs. Thomas Ritchie, Jr.* (New York: Burgess, Stringer and Company, 1846), 15-18; 36-40. See also William P. Palmer to Dr. John Woods, Richmond, March 9, 1846, D. H. Gordon Papers, VHS.

³ William Cabell Carrington to Henry Carrington, Richmond, December 14, 1845 and January 15, 1846. Virginia Whigs had enjoyed unprecedented success between 1836 and 1840, capturing control of the state legislature, electing the governor, and contributing to the national rise of the party. All of this success disappeared in 1844, however, when Democrats regained control of the state and the White House. By 1846, Virginia’s Whig leaders were desperate to regain the position in the state and although Pleasants had played a prominent role in their initial rise, many doubted his usefulness going forward. See William G. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824-1861* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 91-105.

⁴ John Hampden Pleasants to Caroline Matilda Garland, April 2 and May 17, 1844 and February 1, 1846, D. H. Gordon Papers, VHS. For Pleasants’ bitter response to her rejection, see John Hampden Pleasants to Dear Cousin [Caroline Matilda Garland], February 5, 1845 and March 1845, John Hampden Pleasants Letters, Library of Virginia.

⁵ Carl R. Osthaus, *Partisans of the Southern Press: Editorial Spokesmen of the Nineteenth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994); Virginius Dabney, *Pistols and Pointed Pens: The Dueling Editors of Old Virginia* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1987); Carl R. Osthaus, “An Affair of Honor, Not an Honorable Affair: The Ritchie-Pleasants Duel and the Press,” *Virginia Cavalcade* 26 (3) (Winter 1977), 110-123; Jack K. Williams, *Dueling in the Old South: Vignettes of Social History* (College Station, 1980). For an exception to this narrative, see Clement Eaton, *The Freedom of Thought Struggle in the Old South* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 179-80. While he acknowledges elsewhere in the book that Pleasants could be a difficult personality, Eaton attributes the duel directly to the abolitionists accusation and the declining toleration of dissent in the south.

⁶ John Hampden Pleasants to Thomas Higginbotham, July 16, 1823, reprinted in Richmond *Enquirer*, January 3, 1828; William Massey to Capt. Henry Massie, December 11, 1829, Massie Family Papers, 1698-1878, VHS. Her

father likely disapproved as well. See Capt. Henry Massie to Margaret Cochran, November 28, 1829, Massie Family Papers, 1698-1878, VHS. See also Mary L. Preston Massie to William Massie, November 5, 1829. For biographical information, see Lyon Gardiner Tyler, *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography*, Vol. 2 (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1915), 22; R. H. Tomlinson, "The Origins and Editorial Policies of the Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser, 1824-1865," (Ph. D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1971), 1; F. N. Boney, "Rivers of Ink, A Stream of Blood: The Tragic Career of John Hampden Pleasants," *Virginia Cavalcade* 18 (1) (1968-1969), 33.

⁷ In 1823, JHP nearly fought a duel with Thomas Leigh, the brother or cousin of Benjamin Watkins Leigh. See Robert Gamble to Gen. James Breckenridge, Richmond, November 10, 1823, James Breckenridge Papers, VHS. See also John Hampden Pleasants, Petition, December 2, 1823 and Petition, December 17, 1825, Legislative Petitions, Library of Virginia. In 1828, a dispute with William Radford nearly ended in a duel. See John Hampden Pleasants to [unknown], January 3, 1828, George Whythe Munford Papers, Library of Virginia. See also "To the Public," signed William Radford, January 1828, Broad-sides, VHS and "To the Editors of the Enquirer," signed Wm. Radford, Richmond *Enquirer*, January 4, 1828. In 1839, Benjamin Watkins Leigh and James Lyons settled a conflict between Henry Wise and Pleasants before the challenge could be executed. See "A Card," *Alexandria Gazette*, July 4, 1839. In 1843 William F. Ritchie sought to defend his father's honor by challenging Pleasants to a duel. See Barbara J. Griffen, ed., "Notes and Documents: Thomas Ritchie and the Code Duello," *VMHB* 92 (1) (January 1984), 71-95. In 1834, Pleasants was arrested and charged with assault and battery after he brutally attacked Lieut. Gov. Peter V. Daniel in the streets of Richmond. See "More of the 'Figure head' spirit," Hampden *Whig*, September 3, 1834.

⁸ "Washington City, January 16, 1846," signed "Macon," Richmond *Enquirer*, January 19, 1846; "Chestnut Street Philadelphia, January 18, 1846," signed "T.E.M.," *News and Star*, January 23, 1846. See also *Full Report*, 3. Thomas Ritchie, Jr and William F. Ritchie took over the editorship of the Richmond *Enquirer* in May 1845, when their father, Thomas Ritchie, Sr., moved to Washington to become the chief editor of *Washington Union*. See Carl R. Osthaus, *Partisans of the Southern Press: Editorial Spokesmen of the Nineteenth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 31-36 and Virginius Dabney, *Pistols and Pointed Pens: The Dueling Editors of Old Virginia* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1987), 1-17.

⁹ For a full discussion of this episode, see Eaton, *Freedom of Thought Struggle*, 187-190. See also *History and Record of the Proceedings of the People of Lexington and Its Vicinity in the Suppression of the True American* (Lexington, August 25, 1845); "Speech of Thomas F. Marshall, Lexington, August 1845," in W. L. Barre, *Speeches and Writings of T. F. Marshall* (Cincinnati, 1858), 208.. For the offending editorial, see *True American*, August 12, 1845. Proslavery Kentuckians were outraged over the following paragraph: "But remember, you who dwell in marble palaces – that there are strong arms and fiery hearts, and iron pikes in the streets, and panes of glass only between them and the silver plate on the board and smooth skin woman on the ottoman – when you have mocked at virtue and denied the agency of God in the affairs of men and made rapine your honied faith; tremble for the day of retribution is at hand – and *the masses will be avenged.*" On Clay, see H. Edward Richardson, *Cassius Marcello Clay: Firebrand of Freedom* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976). On slavery and emancipation in Kentucky, see Harold D. Tallant, *Evil Necessity: Slavery and Political Culture in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003) and Luke E. Harlow, *Religion, Race and the Making of Confederate Kentucky, 1830-1880* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Editorial, Richmond *Whig*, August 26, 1845. The Ritchies wrote: "We feel that our existence could not be free from danger whilst a fiery fanatic like Cassius M. Clay was allowed to continue an abolition paper, and hurl his incendiary missiles into every corner of the South. Filled with this conviction, the people of Lexington met in solemn council, and resolved to expel from the state the madman, whose wanton attacks periled the lives of themselves and their families." See Richmond *Enquirer*, September 2, 1845. Similarly, the editor of the *Alexandria Gazette* wrote: "the incendiary article wantonly published (and in the case referred to nothing could be grosser) in the midst of a community, situated as the people are in Kentucky, could not with safety to themselves be tolerated." See *Alexandria Gazette*, August 27, 1845. See also Eaton, *Freedom of Thought Struggle*, 188.

¹¹ Editorial, Richmond *Enquirer*, January 21, 1846; John Hampden Pleasants to Charles Maurice Smith, February 4, 1846, *New and Star*, February 16, 1846. For the challenge, and Ritchie's response, see Thomas Ritchie, Jr. to Jefferson Archer, February 24, 1846, Carrington Family Papers, VHS. See also *Full Report*, 5-7.

¹² James Hampden Pleasants was born in Goochland County in 1797. He was one of eight children and the son of James Pleasants, state legislator (1797-1802), congressman (1811-1819), U.S. senator (1819-1822), and governor of Virginia (1822-1825). He graduated from the College of William and Mary in 1817 and studied the law before moving to Lynchburg, Virginia. After discovering that he had little talent for the law he joined the staff of the Lynchburg *Virginian* and, by 1823, he rose to the editorship. See F. Thornton Miller, "Pleasants, John Hampden," <http://www.anb.org/articles/03/03-00387.html>; *American national Biography Online*. Lyon Gardiner Tyler, *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography*, Vol. 2 (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1915), ??; R. H. Tomlinson, "The Origins and Editorial Policies of the Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser, 1824-1865," (Ph. D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1971), 1; F. N. Boney, "Rivers of Ink, A Stream of Blood: The Tragic Career of John Hampden Pleasants," *Virginia Cavalcade* 18 (1) (1968-1969), 33.

¹³ Editorial, Lynchburg *Virginian*, April 29, 1823. Thomas Ritchie, among the purported leaders of this cabal, denied the existence of any party organization in Richmond. See Editorial, Richmond *Enquirer*, May 6, 1823. For the original accusation of a junto, see *Letters on the Richmond Party. By a Virginian* (Washington, 1823); Editorials [by John Hampton Pleasants], Lynchburg *Virginian*, April 15 and 29, 1823. On the existence and operations of "The Richmond Junto," see F. Thornton Miller, "The Richmond Junto: The Secret All-Powerful Club: Or Myth," *VMHB* 99 (1) (Jan. 1991), 63-80; Joseph H. Harrison, Jr., "Oligarchs and Democrats: the Richmond Junto," *VMHB* 78 (2) (Apr. 1970), 184-198; Harry Ammon, "The Richmond Junto, 1800-1824," *VMHB* 61 (1953), 395-418; and Rex Beach, "Spencer Roane and the Richmond Party," *William and Mary Quarterly* 2nd ser., 22 (1942), 1-17. See also William G. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824-1861* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 60-61.

¹⁴ Proposal, January 27, 1824. See also "Essay by Archibald Stuart, 1824," Stuart Family Papers, 1785-1881, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter VHS). Stuart complained that the as editor of the *Enquirer* Thomas Ritchie "occupied the whole ground" and had become a "dictator of the Press; no essays could obtain circulation without his permission." He accused Ritchie of refusing to or only reluctantly (and buried on the fourth page) publishing "opinions on public questions contrary to his own." See also R. H. Tomlinson, "The Origins and Editorial Policies of the Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser, 1824-1861," (Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1971), 1-2.

¹⁵ F. Thornton Miller, "Pleasants, John Hampden," <http://www.anb.org/articles/03/03-00387.html>; *American national Biography Online*; R. H. Tomlinson, "The Origins and Editorial Policies of the Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser, 1824-1865," (Ph. D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1971), 1; F. N. Boney, "Rivers of Ink, A Stream of Blood: The Tragic Career of John Hampden Pleasants," *Virginia Cavalcade* 18 (1) (1968-1969), 33. See also Ambler, *Thomas Ritchie*. See also, Joel H. Silbey, "Ritchie, Thomas," <http://www.anb.org/articles/03/03-00419.html>, *American National Biography Online*.

¹⁶ John Hampden Pleasants, "Address before a Meeting in Richmond," Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, August 17, 1824. On Ritchie's political perspective, see Charles Henry Ambler, *Thomas Ritchie: A Study in Virginia Politics* (Richmond: Bell Book & Stationary, Co., 1913), 85-97. See also Thomas Ritchie to Archibald Ritchie, January 11, 1825, "Unpublished Letters of Thomas Ritchie," *John P. Branch Historical Papers of Randolph-Macon College* 3 (3) (June 1911), 203. After the election was thrown into the House of Representatives, Ritchie confessed: "I fear Crawford's cause is almost hopeless. . . . C. has many friends in the Western Delegation, but . . . they cannot think of going for him. . . . I have lost much of my interest in the election since C's chance has decreased."

¹⁷ "The Death of Thomas Ritchie," Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, February ??, 1825 reprinted in Ambler, *Thomas Ritchie*, 96-96. See also Tomlinson, "The Origins and Editorial Policies," 15-16.

¹⁸ On the election of 1828 in Virginia, see Wade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, 89-90. On the rivalry between Pleasants and Ritchie, see Osthaus, *Partisans of the Southern Press*, 12-45; Dabney, *Pistols and Pointed Pens*, 1-36;

Tomlinson, *The Origins and Editorial Policies of the Richmond Whig*,” 1-35; and Ambler, *Thomas Ritchie*, especially chapters 4 and 5. Pleasants and Ritchie were also on opposite sides of the 1829-1830 constitutional convention question as well. Pleasants promoted the proposals of the state’s western reformers and demanded representative reapportionment. Ritchie leaned toward supporting the eastern tidewater conservatives, although he did recommend some concessions to the reformers. See Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, 54-77. See also Christopher M. Curtis, “Reconsidering Suffrage Reform in the 1829-1830 Virginia Constitutional Convention,” *The Journal of Southern History* 74 (1) (February 2008), 89-124; Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *The Rhetoric of Conservatism: The Virginia Convention of 1829-30 and the Conservative Tradition in the South* (San Marino, CA, 1982); Alison Goodyear Freehling, *Drift Toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debates of 1831-1832* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

¹⁹ “To the Public,” signed Thomas Ritchie, *Richmond Enquirer*, January 4, 1828.

²⁰ Tomlinson, “The Origins and Editorial Policies,” 2.

²¹ On the expansion of the press during the political battles of the first half of the nineteenth century, see Thomas C. Leonard, *News for All: America’s Coming-of-Age with the Press* (New York, 1995) and Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). See also Charles G. Steffen, “Newspapers for Free: The Economies of Newspaper Circulation in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 23 (3) (Autumn 2003), 381-419.

²² Editorial, *Richmond Enquirer*, January 14, 1843; Editorial, *Richmond Whig*, January 17, 1843. See also Barbara J. Griffin, ed., “Notes and Documents: Thomas Ritchie and the Code Duello,” *VMHB* 92 (1) (January 1984), 72-78.

²³ Editorial, *Richmond Whig*, January 12, 1832; “The Press,” *Richmond Enquirer*, January 19, 1832. Pleasants claimed that though he had “dared to exercise the freedom of the Press” throughout his career, he “did not, could not, dare to breathe a syllable on” the issue of slavery without risking retaliation. But, now the General Assembly was “actually engaged, with open doors, in the discussion of the evils of slavery, and the propriety and practicability of abolition – we can hardly believe the evidence of our own senses.” See Editorial, *Richmond Whig*, January 13, 1832. Ritchie observed: “We saw the floodgates of discussion for the first time raised. . . . The Press, too, broke the silence of fifty years. And . . . we now see the whole subject ripped up and discussed, with open doors, and in the presence of a crowded gallery and lobby. . . . We might have remained silent” but, instead we have chosen “to throw ourselves upon the liberal” discussion of this issue. “As free and independent Editors,” he declared, “we have expressed our sentiments upon a subject, dearly connected with the prosperity of Virginia” and he vowed not to allow the press “to be cloven down.” See “Proscription of the Press,” *Richmond Enquirer*, January 12, 1832.

²⁴ “Slavery!,” *Richmond Whig*, December 16, 1831; Editorial, *Richmond Enquirer*, January 7, 1832.

²⁵ John Floyd, Executive Communications, December 1831, Library of Virginia; Charles H. Ambler, *The Life and Diary of John Floyd, Governor of Virginia, an Apostle of Secession and the Father of the Oregon Country* (Richmond, 1918), 170-175; Legislative Petitions Digital Database, Library of Virginia. Both Pleasants and Ritchie published the debates in the state legislature in full. See *Richmond Enquirer* and *Whig*, December 1831-February 1832. Thomas W. White published the legislative speeches on abolition and emancipation of Thomas Marshall, John A. Chandler, Charles James Faulkner, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, James McDowell, John Thompson Brown, and William H. Brodnax both individually and bound together. See also Eva Shepard Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner’s Rebellion* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009). A year after the debate, a resident of western Virginia published short tract criticizing slavery as a moral evil that should be removed. He condemned censorship of the slavery issue and insisted that the only way to remove the evil was to have an open and free discussion. See J. D. Paxton, *Letters on Slavery Addressed to the Cumberland Congregation, Virginia* (Lexington, KY, 1833).

²⁶ Thomas R. Dew, *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832* (Richmond: T. W. White, 1832), 4-6. On Dew as a proslavery apologist, see Wolf, *Race and Liberty*, 232-33; Alison Goodyear Freehling, *Drift Toward Dissolution: the Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-32* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 200-205. See also Alfred L. Brophy, "Considering William and Mary's History with Slavery: The Case of President Thomas Roderick Dew," *William and Mary Bill of Rights Journal* 16 (4) (2008), 110-113. Beverly Tucker, a law professor at William and Mary, similarly defended slavery and maintained that it was a domestic institution to be managed by southerners. James E. Heath, the first editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* (which was published in Richmond), agreed with many of the points Tucker and other authors made in the pages of his magazine. Yet, he challenged their claim that slavery was morally and politically beneficial and echoed many antislavery writers who argued that Virginia would only benefit from the eradication of the institution. "We regard it," he wrote, "as a great evil, which society sooner or later will find it not only to its interest to remove or mitigate, but will seek its gradual abolition, or amelioration, under the influence of those high obligations imposed by an enlightened Christian morality." See *Southern Literary Messenger*, 1 (January 1835), 254. See Eaton, *Freedom of Thought Struggle*, 289-291 (quote on 290).

²⁷ *Review of the Slave Question . . . Showing that Slavery is the Essential Hindrance to the Prosperity of the Slaveholding States, by a Virginian* (Richmond: T. W. White, 1833). Not everyone celebrated this open discussion. See "Proscription of the Press!," *Richmond Enquirer*, January 12, 1832 and [Benjamin Watkins Leigh,] *The Letter of Appomattox to the People of Virginia* (Richmond: T. W. White, 1832). Several communities held meetings that produced resolutions condemning both Ritchie and Pleasants for publishing so extensively on this issue. See resolutions quoted in Clement Eaton, "The Freedom of the Press in the Upper South," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 18 (4) (Mar, 1832), 486. For a more general discussion of the circulation of antislavery pamphlets, see David Rawson, "'Considerations of the Utmost Consequence: Publishers and the Antislavery Debate in Early Republic Virginia,'" Conference Paper delivered at Virginia Forum, ??.

²⁸ For a more detailed description of the abolitionists strategy, see *Second Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1835) and "Address to the Auxiliaries and Friends of the American Anti-Slavery Society," June 15, 1835, *The Liberator*, June 20, 1835. These abolitionists intended to increase the organization's publication output to as many as 90,000 publications a month and hoped to use auxiliary societies, traveling agents and peddlers, as well as the postal system to distribute the antislavery literature. This was not the first time an antislavery activist attempted to circulate essays promoting the abolition of slavery in Virginia. Virginia Quaker Samuel Janney, a resident of Loudoun County, routinely published editorials in the *Alexandria Gazette*, arguing that the only way to bring an end to the evil was to promote an open public discussion of the issue. "One of the best methods at present is to insert antislavery pieces in the southern papers and purchase a good many extra numbers of the paper for circulation. They pass better through the post-office than tracts." See *Alexandria Gazette*, April 20, July 18, 1827. John Hampden Pleasants reprinted Janney's "The Yankees in Fairfax County," an collection of essays claiming that free labor was more productive than slave labor. [find issue] See Eaton, *Freedom of Thought Struggle*, 255. On Quaker antislavery efforts in northern Virginia, see A. Glenn Crothers . . .

²⁹ Jackson proposed ostracizing anyone who sympathized with the abolitionists in the suppression of their publications. See Andrew Jackson to Amos Kendall, August 9, 1835 in John Spencer Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson* (Washington, 1931), V, 360-61. For Kendall's response, see Amos Kendall to Alfred Huger, August 4, 1835, republished in the *Richmond Enquirer*, August 11, 1835.

³⁰ Jennifer Rose Mercieca, "The Culture of Honor: How Slaveholders Responded to the Abolitionist Mail Crisis of 1835," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 19 (1) (2007), 51-56; Susan Wyly-Jones, "The 1835 Anti-Abolition Meetings in the South: A New Look at the Controversy over the Abolition Postal Campaign," *Civil War History* 47 (4) (December 2001), 289-309, but especially 293. See also David L. Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), chapters 1 and 4; Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), chapter 7; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Abolitionists' Postal Campaign of 1835," *Journal of Negro History* 50 (October 1965), 227-238. Clement Eaton noted that "Intolerance was undoubtedly generated by the rise of the Northern abolitionists who

were unrelentingly scourging the South for her sins. The need to silence slavery agitation in order to hold a political party together sealed the tongues of some editors. Moreover, Southerners consented to the silencing of the press because slavery was so inextricably intertwined with the fabric of society that radicalism became to an extraordinary degree dangerous and repellant to them." See Eaton, *Freedom of Thought Struggle*, 194.

³¹ Gregg D. Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 3-80.

³² *Personal Property Tax Books, Richmond City, 1799-1834 & 1835-1850*, microfilm reels 364 & 365, Library of Virginia; Philip M. Tabb to Warner T. Taliaferro, Richmond, February 18, 1830, March 5, 1831, February 28 and August 14, 1840 and August 25, 1841, Taliaferro Family Papers, 1810-1920, VHS. On slave hiring, see John J. Zaborney, *Slaves for Hire: Renting Enslaved Laborers in Antebellum Virginia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2012); Kimball, *American City*, 26-30.

³³ Philip M. Tabb to Warner T. Taliaferro, Richmond, February 18, 1830, Taliaferro Family papers, 1810-1920, VHS. On city disciplinary efforts, included the Mayor's court and city police, see James M. Campbell, *Slavery on Trial, Race, Class, and Criminal Justice in Antebellum Richmond, Virginia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 1-40. Lewis D. Crenshaw worked as a clerk in a mercantile house in Richmond in the 1830s and he frequently encountered blacks who refused to respect him as he thought he deserved. I see Jenn now and then, but she regards me as a *Poor White Boy* and consequently does not speak to me." He noted, as well, that "if I should ask on of them [a black] (civilly) to clean my shoes, as I turn my back they will say something insulting, but so far I have made no reply." See Lewis D. Crenshaw to Mother, Richmond, August 8, 1833, Crenshaw Family Papers, 1807-1977, VHS

³⁴ Lewis D. Crenshaw to Father, July 31 and September 8, 1833, and Lewis D. Crenshaw to Mother, February 25, 1833, Crenshaw Family Papers, 1807-1977, VHS; "Society for the Prevention of the Absconding and Abduction of Slaves," VHS; *Richmond City Sergeant Register*, Rare Books, VHS. On the slave trade in Richmond, see Maurie D. McInnis, "Mapping the Slave Trade in Richmond and New Orleans," *Buildings & Landscapes* 20 (2) (Fall 2013), 102-112. On the domestic slave trade more generally, see Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003) and Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

³⁵ "Abolition and Amalgamation," *Richmond Whig*, July 17, 1835; "Public Meeting at the Capitol," *Richmond Enquirer*, August 7, 1835; "Committee of Vigilance to the City of Richmond and County of Henrico," *Richmond Enquirer*, September 29, 1835. A month earlier, Lewis D. Crenshaw informed his father that "nothing has transpired since you left. No mob has yet disgraced our city. Nor has Judge Lynch commenced his decisions among us yet." See Lewis D. Crenshaw to Father, August 28, 1835, Crenshaw Family Papers, VHS. See also, Wylie, "The 1835 Anti-Abolition Meetings, 301-303.

³⁶ For a representative sample of issues containing editorials using this language, see *Richmond Whig*, July 21, 24 and 31, August 4, 7, 12, 14, and 28, September 8, and October 2, 1835. See also Merceica, "The Culture of Honor," 68-72; Wylie, "The 1835 Anti-Abolition Meetings," 289-309.

³⁷ "From the Richmond Whig," *Richmond Whig*, September 8, 1835. See also "The Times," signed "Anti-Panic," *Richmond Enquirer*, August 14, 1835. This author agrees that the circulation of northern abolition publications should be stopped, but argued that "here in the South, there is no harm in our reading these writings, calling public meetings to discuss them, and even calling in the slaves to hear us!" In this publication Pleasants supported the temporary suppression of free speech. He opposed, however, codifying this kind of censorship. He criticized the legislature, for example, for a passing the 1836 law criminalizing the circulation of antislavery literature. Still, even the qualified or situational support for censorship made him vulnerable to the charge of hypocrisy.

³⁸ *Resolutions of the Legislature of Virginia, adverse to the movements made for the abolition of slavery, etc.*, February 29, 1836; *Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1835-36* (Richmond, 1836), 44. See also, Eaton, *The Freedom of Thought Struggle*, 125-128. The Virginia legislators debated the issue thoroughly in the winter of 1836 and had access to the resolutions and pamphlets generated by residents and politicians throughout the south. See *Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia* (Richmond, 1836), especially Appendix 12. Virginia passed the harshest law, but was not alone in this work Maryland, Georgia, North Carolina as well as many other southern states passed similar laws. See Wylly-Jones, "The 1835 Anti-Abolition Meetings in the South," 306-309.

The first case involving the enforcement of this law in Virginia occurred in 1839 when Lysander Barrett was charged with circulating a pamphlet calling for the abolition of slavery in Washington, D.C. He was ultimately acquitted because the prosecution could not demonstrate that he was an official agent of an abolition society. This case is discussed in Eaton, *The Freedom of Thought Struggle*, 133. He quotes B.W. Leigh, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Court of Appeals and in the General Court of Virginia* (Richmond, 1840), IX, 665. [Is there newspaper coverage of this case? Does JHP comment on it? Are there court documents from the lower court trial and ruling?]. Eaton found little evidence that this law was executed in Virginia (143). I have found several pamphlets or tracts published in Richmond or written by a prominent Virginian that acknowledge slavery to be an evil that should be removed. See George A. Baxter, *An Essay on the Abolition of Slavery* (Richmond, T. W. White, 1836) and George Tucker, *The Laws of Wages, Profits and Rents* (Philadelphia, 1837).

This was not the first time Virginia considered enacting a law suppressing the circulation of antislavery literature. When then Governor William Branch Giles discovered that a copy of David Walker's *Appeal* had been mailed to a local free black with instructions to duplicate and circulate among Richmond's black population he immediately recommended that the legislature consider provisions to address this problem. The House of Delegates passed a law prohibiting the printing, publication and circulation of antislavery literature, but the Senate narrowly defeated the measure. Virginia came close, but ultimately chose not to, legalizing censorship. See William Branch Giles to Linn Banks, Speaker of the House of Delegates, Jan 7, 1830; David Walker to Thomas Lewis, Dec 8, 1829, Executive Papers, Library of Virginia; "Excitement in the South," *Niles Weekly Register*, 38 (March 27, 1830), 87. The Virginia House of Delegates barely passed the law by a vote of 80-81 and the Senate rejected it by a vote of 11 to 7. See also Eaton, *The Freedom of Thought Struggle*, 123-25. Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana and North Carolina successfully passed similar laws and they remained on the books indefinitely.

³⁹ George Harrison to A. H. Byrd, October 21, 1835, Francis Otway Byrd Papers, 1774-1959, VHS.

⁴⁰ [Henry A. Wise,] *Speech of Mr. Wise, at Louisa C.H., November 19, 1839* (Richmond: John S. Gallaher, 1839), Rare Books, VHS. Interestingly, it was during this political campaign cycle that Pleasants nearly fought a duel with Henry A. Wise. It seems that Wise misunderstood the meaning of a "sportive rebuke" Pleasants published in the Whig regarding the senatorial election. See "A Card," *Alexandria Gazette*, July 4, 1839.

⁴¹ Editorial, *Richmond Enquirer*, February 18, 1840, quoted in Eaton, *Freedom of Thought Struggle*, 213.

⁴² "A Statement to the Public," signed John H. Pleasants, *News and Star*, January 23, 1846 reprinted in *A Full Report*, 4. Clement Eaton noted that "on the ground of insuring the public safety, freedom of the press was denied to the mild opponent of slavery, who was often purposely confused with the dangerous fanatic." See Eaton, *Freedom of Thought Struggle*, 194.