

JOHN BRECKINRIDGE'S BLUEGRASS PLANTATION AGREEMENT TO OPERATE, 1806

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John Breckinridge is best remembered today for his political activities, especially for his connection with the Kentucky Resolutions of 1798 and 1799, his years of service in the United States Senate, 1801-1805, where he was floor leader for the Jefferson forces, and his year as Attorney-General of the United States, 1805-1806. Yet he never allowed political considerations to overshadow his love for the fertile acres of "Cabell's Dale," his Fayette County plantation. During his sojourns in Washington his appetite for home news was insatiable. He would be happier, he declared wistfully, hunting rabbits in his Bluegrass fields with his sons than participating in the most important debates which the Senate could afford.¹

Breckinridge selected the site for his future home during a trip to Kentucky in 1789. Shortly after his return home to Virginia he purchased 600 acres of land lying on the North Elkhorn watercourse, only six miles from Lexington.² Three years later he and Reverend John Todd divided a joint purchase of 2,000 acres which lay adjacent to the first tract.³ These 1,600 acres of well-drained, rolling land formed one of the finest plantations in the Bluegrass. It was the key to Breckinridge's dreams of the future.

He knew what use he intended to make of his land even before he and his family moved to Kentucky in 1793, and once there he pursued his goal diligently. His operations reveal a dependence upon diversified farming and stock-raising that was unusual for his time and section. Having witnessed the effects of poor agricultural methods, especially intensive one-crop cultivation, in his native Virginia, he was determined that his new acres should never be so blighted. Cabell's Dale produced rich crops of corn, wheat, rye, oats, barley, grass seed, hemp, hay, and fruit during the years that Breckinridge operated it. The crop conspicuous by its absence was tobacco. Breckinridge had seen the ravages which tobacco cultivation had brought to parts of Virginia, and he refused to allow a single stalk to be grown at Cabell's Dale.⁴ Ultimately, Cabell's Dale was intended to be devoted primarily to horse breeding. In 1806, the year of his death, Breckinridge listed 128 head in his horse herd, and his dream of a great horse farm was rapidly materializing.⁵

With farm and stock operations on such a large scale and with fifty-seven slaves in his labor force by 1806,⁶ adequate supervision of the plantation was a chronic problem. The need was especially acute after 1800 when his five years of service in the Senate and one as Attorney-General forced him to be away from home a great deal of the time. It was a problem which Breckinridge never solved to his complete satisfaction, but he had evolved a fairly adequate scheme by 1806. A trusted friend in whose judgment Breckinridge had confidence was selected to act as his agent in the more important matters which necessitated immediate attention. The main plantation was placed under the care of an overseer, while dependable white tenants lived on outlying parts of Breckinridge's holdings. Before his departures Breckinridge drew up lists of detailed instructions which reveal a great deal about the day-to-day operations of a Bluegrass plantation. The ones drawn up in October, 1806, are typical and are the most complete for any particular year.

A new overseer, John Payne, was employed that fall, and the terms of his agreement with Breckinridge illustrate the duties of that position:

THE BRECKINRIDGE-PAYNE AGREEMENT

It is agreed this 26th day of Augt 1806 between John Breckinridge of the one part and John Payne of the other as follows:

The said Payne has undertaken to manage the said Breckinridge's two plantations where he lives as an overseer during & for the year 1807. The *sd* Breckinridge is to put under his care & management 14 Hands certainly; & will also add one or two hands more if he finds it proper & the said Payne when he comes to examine the plantations shall think them necessary; the said Payne is to be furnished with a sufficiency of tools & work Horses; & with 700 lb. of salt pork, & a sufficiency of milk for the use of his family. He is to be governed by the said Breckinridge, or his agent in his absence in all his lawful orders & instructions respecting the management of the said farms & is to conduct himself as a faithful industrious overseer ought to do. In consideration thereof the said Payne is to be allowed one share for every 6 hands put under him; that is, if 15 hands are put under him he will get two & a half parts out of 15 of every thing which he shall raise in the year 1807; the Corn to be divided in the Heap, the Hay in the Stack, & the wheat, rye, hemp, flax, &c when the same is ready for Market. The said Payne is to get the same proportion of sugar made by him; and is allowed to keep during the said year two mares to be supported however by him at his own expense, except for their pasturage. The said Payne may also if he choses put gratis his mares

af d to the said Breckinridge Stud or Jack; which ever of the same may stand at his farm. The *sd* Payne is to be furnished with a small Negro for a nurse to his Children. If the said Breckinridge or his overseer Enos Rust shall pay the *sd* Payne the same sum, which he will receive from H. Taylor Esq., from the 12 of Oct. till Xmas next, in that case, the *sd* Payne agrees and binds himself to remove & take possession of the said farms, the *sd* 12th day of Oct., but if they do not pay the *sd* Payne, the *sd* wages (to wit at the rate of £45 a year) then the said Paynes time shall not commence 'till the 25. day of Decr next. Witness our Hands the day and year of *d*

.Test.

Enos Rust

John Payne

John Breckinridge

A SUPPLEMENT WAS ADDED LATER

Oct. 18.1806. The said Payne has agreed to overlook for the ensuing year, the Plantation the said Breckinridge has lately purchased of Wm and Thomas Stephenson; on the same terms & conditions contained in the within agreement; to wit: the said Breckinridge puts under the said Payne 6 Hands, and a sufficiency of tools, Horses &c, & the said Payne is to get the one seventh part of the crop raised at said place. No additional allowance of provisions is given to the said Payne; except that said Breckinridge is to furnish him with fresh meet [sic] for his family 'till Christmas next. Nevertheless anything in the *afores d* agreement of the 26 of Augt last, about paying the said Payne for his time between the 12th instant and the 25 of Decr next it is now agreed, that the said Payne is to make no demand on the *sd* Breckinridge for his services during the said time; but that his year is to commence from the 25. day of Decr; betweenist this & which time the said Payne makes no charge for his services.⁷

Test

Enos Rust

John Breckinridge

John Payne

LIST OF INSTRUCTIONS

Instructions for John Payne in my absence—Oct. 18. 1806.

You are to keep good authority among my negroes, & keep them close at home. They are not to leave my plantation without your leave. Visit their houses frequently at unseasonable Hours of the night, & punish all strange negroes that you find on my plantation after sunset, unless they are sent on business.

You are to take special care of my stock. I leave in your care 123 head of horses including 30 spring Colts. These do not include the 5 old

plough Horses. I leave also 70 head of Cattle including my yoke of old oxen which are now stalling; & the three other Yoke of oxen.

It is the special Business of Johnny to take care of my Jack; & of my Stallion when he comes home; & to do such other Business as his Mistress may order him; & see that he discharges these several duties.⁸

I leave 5 old plough Horses; also the 4 young plough Horses which were broke last spring & plowed last summer. I leave also to put in the plough the Bourbon mares 3 year old pantaloon which Stephens broke this summer; and you are to break this winter and put in the plough next spring, 7 Speculators, if you will stand in need of as many.⁹ The following are the Speculators I allow you to break for the Plough: viz: The Hopkin's mare two sorrel horse colts, one which will be 4 years old next spring the other three years old.—Bonney's 3 year old; a grey horse Colt—Woods sway back's 3 year old, a bay horse Colt—Sanders riding mares filly, 3 year old, a bay horse Colt—Woods handsome sorrell mares 3 year old, a sorrell horse colt, and the Bourbon mares 3 year old next spring, a sorrel horse colt with a blaze face.

If the winter is hard, my rye must be fed out in such manner to my stock, as upon consultation with Mr. Young, he shall direct. I expect it will be best to grind it, & mix it with cut rye straw. I think it ought to be tread out immediately. Secure all my shucks with the greatest care, & in the best manner.

If there should be any rye left in the spring, exchange it with Col/ Robt Russell for whisky.

After the Corn is pulled, my spring colts & yearlings are to be kept constantly on my rye fields, untill next spring, & all my other wild horses when the weather is hard & when they will not injure it by heading it. Don't spare the Rye fields.

Put Locks on my Corn Houses & let no corn be delivered out for any purpose except in your presence. Endeavour to ascertain by measuring the Cart & Wagon Body, how much corn there is. You cannot be too careful of the Corn & let not a barrell of it be injudiciously fed away. My wild Horses, if they are kept on the rye fields will require very little corn.

Fodder my cattle for at least a month at the sink hole I shewed you.

I have shewn you so particularly how to run the new fence from my Big Gate to the upper corner of my quarter field, that it is unnecessary for me to repeat those directions. If I did not tell you, I now do, to

clear up & plant in Corn that corner of ground, at the upper corner of the quarter field, where the new fence will end.

I have also shewn you where to move the partition fence, between the Corn & stubble field at the quarter; as also where to widen the lane by the Corn House at the quarter.

Cut no green timber for any purpose. You will find plenty of dead timber for rails either inside of my fields, or outside in the woods.

Rectify such of my fences either at the Home house or quarter, which you think may require it.

Clean all my meadows next spring, & plough up this fall as much of the meadow before my door, (beginning next the lane) as you may want for hemp next year.

See that the Rabbits do not bark my apple orchard. If they attempt it have something rolled around the trees.

Be careful to keep other peoples stock of every kind out of my inclosures. As soon as possible examine into my stock, & get acquainted with them. My pastures are now full of strange Hogs.

When you shuck the small corn field near my Brother William, you are to deliver to him thirty Barrells of corn & crib it for him. You are also to deliver to him any time between this & Christmas he may ask for it; a four year old black Steer with a white face & white line down his back.

Mr. David Flourny owns the small bay colt, with a ball face & white legs, & which was cut this fall. He is the Logan filly's colt. Request Mr. Flourny to send for him soon.

I have sold six mules to Capt. James Martain. He will apply for them next week, & Johnny is to help him Home with them.

If any of my mares should be in season before my return next spring, put them all to my Jack.

See that my Carpenters keep close at their work. I have left with them a memorandum in writing of what they are to do; which you can examine at your leisure. If they do not attend to their Business, punish them.

Avoid having any intercourse whatever with George Hamilton. You must not send to his grist mill, nor his saw mill, nor his Hemp mill, nor in short have any thing to do with him. Have your grinding done at Colo R. Russells mill.

If within one month from this time my Brother Robert should send here for sheep let him have as many as he wants. If he does not in that time send for any, and Mr. Rob. Harrison should want any, let him have if he wants them as many as 60. But the flock is not to be picked, and the good and bad are to be taken together. Mr. Young and Mr. Harrison are to agree on the price; and they are to be delivered by the middle of November at farthest.

Buy some tar & mix it with the salt you give to my sheep this winter.

DIRECTIONS FOR STEPHENSONS PLACE

The negroes I allow for this place are Jack, Isaac, Betty, Edmund, Valetia, & Quincy. Quincy is hired in Lexington, and must be brought home when his time is out.

Send those 3 milch Cows with young calves—& 4 good sows heavy with pig.

Take as many plough horses there as may be necessary.

What ploughs & axes may be wanted, must be made at the blacksmiths shop. The iron you must get at McCours Store.

Have the wheels & axletree of a heavy strong ox cart made for me. Jim and George will make the tongue & body. The man who makes the wheels & axletree, must have them Ironed & find the iron himself. Your best way is consult Mr. Young on the subject, & make as good a bargain as you can. Mrs. Breckinridge will furnish the money by Christmas.

I intend use of the ox cart and a yoke of oxen for this place of Stephenson's.

I have shewn you where I wish you to clear ground this Winter. Endeavor to clear 20 or 25 acres. If you should not be pinched at Home you could send hands occasionally to help them to clear ground here.

All the ground on the East side of the lane, is to be put in corn next year. Clear out a small skirt of woods in the subtle [stubble?] field before old Mr. Stephenson's Door & put it in corn with the rest of the field.

Make the lane I directed you to run, 100 feet wide, & direct Jim and George make a strong pair of Shuttles for it.

I have shewed you in what manner to stop up the present lane, & to make a lot around the lane, & the Houses.

In clearing ground, cut enough of good logs of lasting timber to make a corn house 24 feet by 12; & 10 feet pitch. Have the bark taken of [sic] the logs & the House neatly raised near Mr. Stephensons present Corn House. Raise it on three large locust logs, & have the bottom made close with puncheonis. In your clearing you will find some good oak shingle trees. Have them sawed off at the proper length, & I will make my carpenters split them into joist shingles and cover the corn house when I return.

Such of the negroes as choose to do it, had better while they are clearing, save small logs enough to make cabbins for themselves. As I do not intend to let them live in the brick House, there will not probably be house room enough for them; and they do not like to be crowded together. However if they will be satisfied with what there are, I shall. Keep the brick house locked up & nail boards on the windows where the glass is broken; as the rains will beat in & injure the floors.

I inclose you an Extract of Mr. Stephensons agreement with me, about the delivery of possession and other matters; all of which you will see that they are complied with.

The stud yearling Colt now among my yearlings belongs to Capt. Wm. Stephenson & must be taken away in the course of this month.

I forgot to mention in the proper place, that I wish all the small growth cut down, & the old logs rolled together and burnt, in the woodland which will be included within the new fence you are to run from Mike's House down to my big gate. Clear up also the old logs also along the new fence which Rust made last winter & where he sowed blue grass. Clean up a strip about 100 yards deep, which is as much as is taken with grass.

I leave Mr. Leonard Young my agent in my absence; whose directions you will be governed by in all things in which he may think fit to give them.

Bald Eagle (my Stud Horse) is to stand at Home next season; & I will write to you next spring upon what terms he is to stand.

All my Speculator fillies as well as the three year olds [and] as the 4 year olds are to be put to my Jack next spring; except the 3 following: viz: The Gardiner mares bay filly which was broke this Summer, & which Mr. Meredith had in training—The sway back brown filly which came of Sanders riding mare; and the brown filly which came of Fanny Bullock. Shederick knows all these fillies, as well as the 7 Speculator horse colts which I have directed you to put in the Plough.

Take great care you do not cut down the corner and line trees which I shewed you opposite to your House. It is the old corner & lines of Todds land as well as mine.

My brother William is to winter his own horses & cattle having plenty of hay for them all.

Don't put up the fattening Hogs for two or 3 weeks.

Clear out my apple orchard early in the Spring, as I aim to plant 120 trees in it.

I have sold to Mr. Rust the Cladius mare; the Plough Horse called Dick.

In about 10 days take all my Horses that are now in the upper meadow & put them in the big pasture where the Colts are, & put the spring colts in the Rye field. After this big pasture is eat down, then turn the mares in the woods pasture.

I leave the Horse book with you, that in case any of them should be lost you may know what their marks and brands are.¹⁰

Special instructions were also left for Jim and George, two skilled slave carpenters who were occasionally hired out at wages when work was lacking on the plantation:

DIRECTIONS FOR JIM & GEORGE—OCT. 18, 1806

The first thing after my departure which you are to do, is to finish the stable which you were to build adjoining the Corn House at the Quarter. Make the Stable the length of the Corn House, & you need not make any granary as I at first intended.

You are then to get the shingles, Plank, Scantling and all the other Materials for a brick house which is to be 16 feet square.

You [are] then to get weatherboards enough to weatherboard the Kitchen & put it on.

See that there is no plank, window frames, or stuff of any kind whatsoever wanting, kiln dried to complete the wings of my House when I return. I dont wish you to do any thing on the Wings 'till my return; but I wish all the flooring plank & weatherboards plained [sic], & everything of that sort which can be done made ready; I [sic] as I

intended to get Mr Cooper or some other good carpenter to assist you as soon as I return.

You are to cut down & saw up the cherry tree near the lane in front of the House.

In the spring plant handsome locust trees in the lane in the room of all that are dead. Plant them deep, & ram them well.

You are to make a Body for a new ox Cart, which the overseer is to procure.

Next spring you are to take a Horse and packsaddle and go down to Mr Joutts in Woodford, and he will direct you the way either to Mr Lightfoots or to Mr Darnebys, where you will get 125 apple trees. bring them Home & plant them in the orchard at the places where I directed you. If you cannot [get] apple trees of the Hughes' Crab kind, get other trees of latter fruit, and of the best kind he has. The trees will cost one shilling a piece, and your Mistress will give you the money to pay for them. Get trees of 2 summers growth.

I desire you will be industrious & mind your Business. If you do not Mr Payne will punish you; for I have directed him to attend to you.

Your Mistress will give you an order on Mr McCours store, for any plain Bits or nails you may want in my absence.¹¹

Finally, Breckinridge left a briefer memorandum with his wife:

MEMO for MRS. B-DGE—OCT. 18, 1806

I have sold to Capt. James Martain 6 mules; two of which are two years old years old [sic] last spring, & 4 one year old last spring. He is to come for them next week, & I promised to let Johnny help him to take them Home.

I leave you Arch Logans note for £14.2.0 due next Christmas, which you will please to make the overseer collect when it is due.

I have directed Jim a memorandum which I left for him, (& which you will please to read before you deliver him) to go to Woodford for apple trees next spring. Give him the money to pay for them. They will cost one shilling a piece.

I have directed the overseer to get me a sett of Cart wheels made & Ironed; you will give him also money to pay for them. I expect that Logan's debt will pay for the cart & trees.

I have directed the overseer to let my Brother William have the Steer I shewed you; also 30 Barrells of Corn. He informs me that I need not furnish him with any pork, as he will have hogs enough of his own.

I leave John Payne's agreement, with you, for the inspection of Mr. Young.

I have left a memo with Mr. Payne about letting Mr. Harrison have sheep.

You had better read over the instructions I have left with John Payne, before they are given to him. I would [be] glad if Mr. Grayson would copy them, and leave the copy with you for the inspection of Mr. Young.

Inclosed is an order for a waggon load. I have written to Mr. Taylor to write to you by the post when the Salt is ready. As soon as you receive that letter & not before give the order to Mr. Tho. Stephenson; but he must promise to go immediately for it.

I leave you 25\$ to pay Fisher as soon as my brick kiln is burnt, but not sooner.

I have given Mr. Rust £7.7.0 to pay the Blacksmith, & he is to bring you a *Rect* for it in a day or two.

If you can sell my whisky for a pretty good price (such as Mr. Young may approve of) dispose of it, & if any part of the price is paid in hand pay Mr. Jordan sixty dollars, & take his *rect* for so much. I have an unsettled a/c with him, and after a demand I have *agst* Seitz is deducted, expect that sum will be about the balance, Save one double barrell of whisky for my Harvrest next summer.

I got from Jacob Keizer £ 4.8.6 worth of Leather, which he is to [get] credit for on his bond for the hire of Quincy. I leave you his account.¹²

Breckinridge certainly never felt that these arrangements compensated for his long absences, but it must be admitted that Cabell's Dale enjoyed steady growth even during the years that its master was so frequently gone from home. As he drew up his instructions in October, 1806, he would have been justified in being satisfied with what he had accomplished since his arrival in the Bluegrass in 1793.

He was never to know how successful his latest arrangements would be. Illness had plagued him during the summer and prevented his leaving for Washington at an earlier date. Four days after he had penned his instructions, his horse was brought to the door for the long ride eastward. But as he said good-bye to his family, he was racked by pain and had to be helped into the house. As the weeks passed his friends and relatives watched for an improvement which never came. At eight o'clock on Sunday morning, December 14, 1806, John Breckinridge died. Two days later, in cold, raw weather, he was buried at his beloved Cabell's Dale.¹³

FOOTNOTES

¹ Hundreds of items in the Breckinridge Manuscripts, Library of Congress, testify to his intense interest in his plantation. Referred to hereafter as B. MSS.

² Fayette County Court Deed Book L, 296-97.

³ *Ibid.*, Book A, 134-39; Fayette County Tax List for 1793, in Kentucky State Library, Frankfort.

⁴ John Breckinridge to Polly Breckinridge, January 18, February 20, 1806, B. MSS.

⁵ Instructions of Breckinridge to John Payne, October 18, 1806, B. MSS.

⁶ Fayette County Tax List, 1806. In 1810 only four persons or business firms held more slaves than Breckinridge's widow. A. C. Quisenberry (ed.), "'Heads of Families' in Fayette County Census of 1810," in *Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society*, XX (May, 1922), 145-69.

⁷ Agreement between John Breckinridge and John Payne, October 18, 1806, B. MSS.

⁸ Johnny was an expert hostler whom Breckinridge purchased for \$250 in Virginia in February, 1806. If no one could be found who was going to Kentucky, Breckinridge was willing to give Johnny a pass and allow him to make the journey alone. John Breckinridge to Polly Breckinridge, March 7, April 7, 1806, B. MSS.

⁹ In 1801 Breckinridge reached an agreement with Captain George Banks of Virginia which gave him the use of Bank's stud "Speculator" for the next year. Speculator was then a handsome seven-year-old bay, nearly sixteen hands high, English bred by the Duke of Bedford. Speculator had compiled a fine racing record as a four-year-old before being retired to stud. The agreement was either extended or the horse purchased from Banks. At any rate, Breckinridge and Hubbard Taylor advertised his season in both 1803 and 1804. By this time Breckinridge had secured "Bald Eagle," also from Virginia. Speculator's papers in 1801 collection; agreement between Breckinridge and Banks, June 1801; Robert Barr to Breckinridge, November 22, 1803; Hubbard Taylor to Breckinridge, February 19, 1804, B. MSS.; *Kentucky Gazette*, August 30, 1803, April 17, 1804, February 19, 1805.

¹⁰ Instructions for John Payne, October 18, 1806, B. MSS.

¹¹ Directions for Jim and George, October 18, 1806, B. MSS.

¹² Memorandum for Mrs. Breckinridge, October 18, 1806, B. MSS.

¹³ *Kentucky Gazette*, December 15, 1806; *Frankfort Western World*, December 18, 1806.