

SLAVE LIFE AT OXMOOR

AMY L. YOUNG AND J. BLAINE HUDSON



Introduction

How was life different for slaves in Kentucky compared to the cotton region of Mississippi, the Louisiana sugar-growing area, or the rice region of South Carolina? Can we accurately interpret differences in the number of overseers or slaves, crop types and agricultural chores, and climate as evidence of better lives for Kentucky slaves? Do differences in crops, climate, and overseers translate into more humane masters? We explore these differences and their meaning, especially the value-laden interpretation that slavery in Kentucky was less brutal. We are not the first to do so. J. Winston Coleman examined the issue of differences in *Slavery Times in Kentucky* and

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concluded that Kentucky slaves were generally happier, more carefree, and, above all, better cared for than slaves in the deep South.¹ Coleman's paradigm is decidedly from the view of literate white males, and it bolsters the image of African-Americans as dependent or childlike and irresponsible. More recently, scholars Marion Lucas² and George Wright³ addressed the issue of black life in Kentucky at a state- or city-wide level and provided interpretations from the African-American rather than the Anglo-American perspective.

We also attempt to adopt an African-American perspective, but rather than using a state-wide approach, we examine the issue from a single plantation, Oxmoor, near Louisville, Kentucky. Furthermore, we use three separate but related sources: a published memoir, *My Life at Oxmoor: Life on a Farm in Kentucky Before the War*, written by the son and grandson of the Oxmoor planters; the Bullitt Family Papers; and secondary historical interpretations, including Coleman's, in order to evaluate whether differences really meant that slave life in Kentucky was better. Using three sources helps to deconstruct the biases within the data that may contribute to inaccuracies in interpretation. *My Life At Oxmoor* is biased in that it is a description of life in the big house that was ultimately meant for public consumption and therefore filtered through white cultural values. The Bullitt Family Papers are biased because the Bullitts were probably not concerned with the same aspects of life as their slaves, and they obviously believed in the institution of slavery. The family letters and other records were not meant for general consumption, however. Secondary sources are biased because of their broad scope and must, at times, overgeneralize. All of the sources have been filtered through the minds of people who were not slaves. Employing multiple lines of evidence from several sources, however, results in a clearer and more accurate interpretation of what life was like for Kentucky slaves at Oxmoor and across the state.

My Life at Oxmoor was privately printed in 1911 and updated in 1995. It is a remembrance of antebellum times written in 1906 by Thomas Walker Bullitt (1838-1910), grandson of Alexander Scott Bullitt (1762-1816), founder of

¹ J. Winston Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 51-56.

² Marion B. Lucas, *From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891*, vol. 1 of *A History of Blacks in Kentucky* (Frankfort, Kentucky: The Kentucky Historical Society, 1992).

³ George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).

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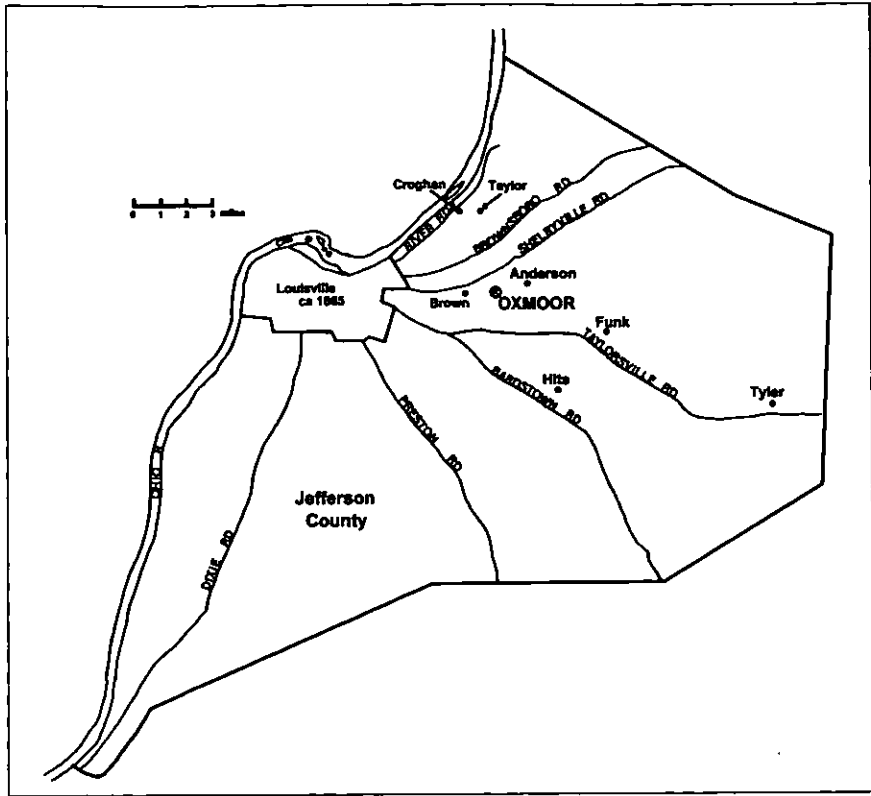


Figure 1 Oxmoor and Surroundings
Amy Young

Oxmoor and son of William Christian Bullitt (1793-1877), second Oxmoor planter. As remembered from his boyhood, Thomas Walker Bullitt described many aspects of everyday life at his father and grandfather's hemp plantation, located on Beargrass Creek in Jefferson County, Kentucky (figure 1). Through his memories the reader gains an understanding of life in the big house with his family and some of the favored family slaves. In fact, a significant portion of the book is concerned with the African-American slaves who labored at Oxmoor, and it is obvious that the slaves played integral roles in Thomas Walker Bullitt's life.

Many of the people and some of the incidents described in *My Life at Oxmoor* were verified by a recent examination of the Bullitt Family Papers

housed at The Filson Club Historical Society in Louisville,⁴ as well as public records like tax lists, censuses, and wills. For example, Thomas Walker Bullitt mentioned many slaves, including “Uncle” Jack, Titus, Rose, Caroline, “Mammy” Teush (also known as Louisa), Jim, Susie (also known as Samuel), “Aunt” Betsy, and blind Frank. Each of these people was mentioned in letters to various family members. Letters written by Thomas Walker Bullitt’s mother, Mrs. Matilda Ann Fry Bullitt (1798-1879), were particularly useful and full of information as well as anecdotes concerning the slaves.

My Life at Oxmoor is more than just a description of incidents or “facts” of everyday life, such as that Titus had a broadwife (i.e., he married a woman who lived off the plantation) whom he visited on weekends, or that Caroline and “Aunt” Betsy cooked. Thomas Walker Bullitt also discussed how he believed the enslaved African-Americans at Oxmoor felt about their lives, masters, and conditions. The book is a statement about the institution of slavery in Kentucky as perceived by a member of a prominent, slaveholding family. For example, Thomas Walker Bullitt stated:

According to my best impression the negro in Kentucky—at least on my father’s place—having been born in slavery, knowing for himself or his race no other condition, did not repine: did not aspire to anything beyond it.⁵

Attitudes and interpretations of how slaves were thought to perceive their world pervade Bullitt’s memoir. Elsewhere in the book he states that “Mammies love their charges more than their own children.”⁶ Concerning religion and superstition, according to Bullitt, slaves had a “firm belief in ghosts” and:

⁴ Several weeks were spent at The Filson Club Historical Society during the summer of 1996 examining the Bullitt Family Papers. The examination we conducted was preliminary, but it is clear that there is much to be learned about this prominent Kentucky family and their slaves from the Bullitt Family Papers. Because the research was conducted to coincide with archaeological testing at Oxmoor, the focus of the research primarily concerned material culture, such as housing.

⁵ Thomas Walker Bullitt, *My Life at Oxmoor: Life on a Farm in Kentucky Before the War* (privately printed, 1911; updated 1995), 40. All material, whether from printed sources or the family papers, is quoted as written.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

Of course they [the slaves] were emotional; they were not well instructed in religious views, and "getting religion" was a very sensational thing with them at times.⁷

These quotes illustrate that *My Life at Oxmoor* goes beyond a description of what life was like for the son of a wealthy planter. It is a testament to how wealthy planters viewed their slaves and the manner in which they were meant to treat, house, feed, punish, and, sometimes, indulge their property. It is also a statement of how slave owners believed African-Americans should react to such benign, paternal treatment. Clearly, the slaves were expected to be cheerful, contented, hardworking, and grateful, as well as childlike in their dependence on the master. According to Thomas Walker Bullitt, the slaves "loved to dance without music 'patting' their hands on knees, . . . shuck corn, and eat corn and sweet potatoes and possum."⁸ In many ways, *My Life at Oxmoor* presents an ideal, rather than a real, version of planter life in Kentucky. Even when Bullitt mentioned the necessity for patrols,⁹ the existence of miscegenation (though not at Oxmoor¹⁰), the presence of whips and slave traders,¹¹ and the terror that Kentucky slaves expressed of being sold "down the river"¹² to sugar and cotton plantations in Louisiana and Mississippi, he was making a comparison between Oxmoor and other Kentucky farms as a way of indicating that slave life was easier and better at Oxmoor.

In many ways the description of the slaves and their surroundings, their duties and some anecdotes related in *My Life at Oxmoor* fits with Coleman's view that slavery in Kentucky was particularly benign. In fact, Coleman refers to Oxmoor and uses *My Life at Oxmoor* as historical documentation to justify the view that Kentucky slaves were happy, carefree, and treated as members of the slaveholding family. This essentially perpetuated the belief that slavery in Kentucky was benign. The degree of bias is clarified by examination of the attitudes about slavery adopted by the masters of Oxmoor. The reader must remember that both *Slavery Times in Kentucky* and *My Life at Oxmoor* were

⁷ Ibid., 41.

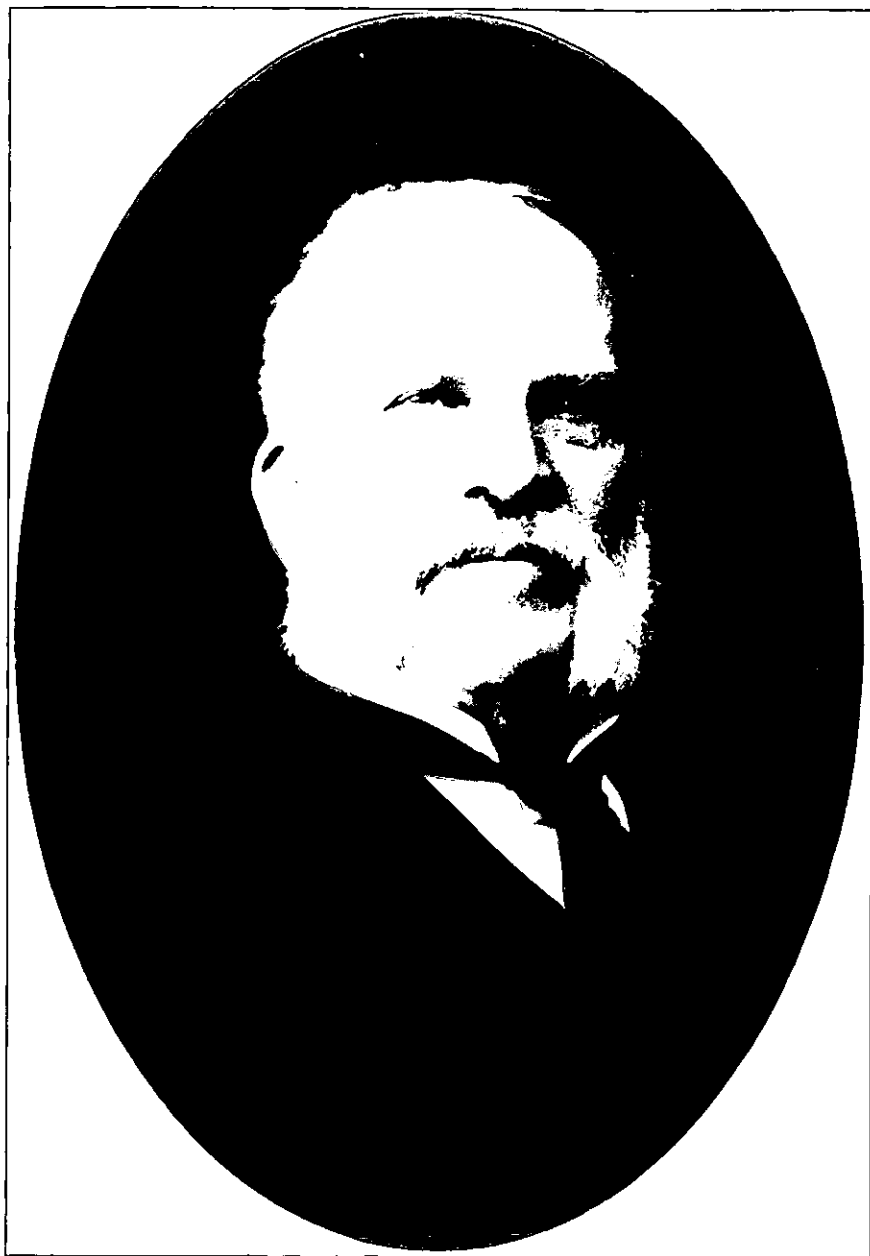
⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁹ Ibid., 48.

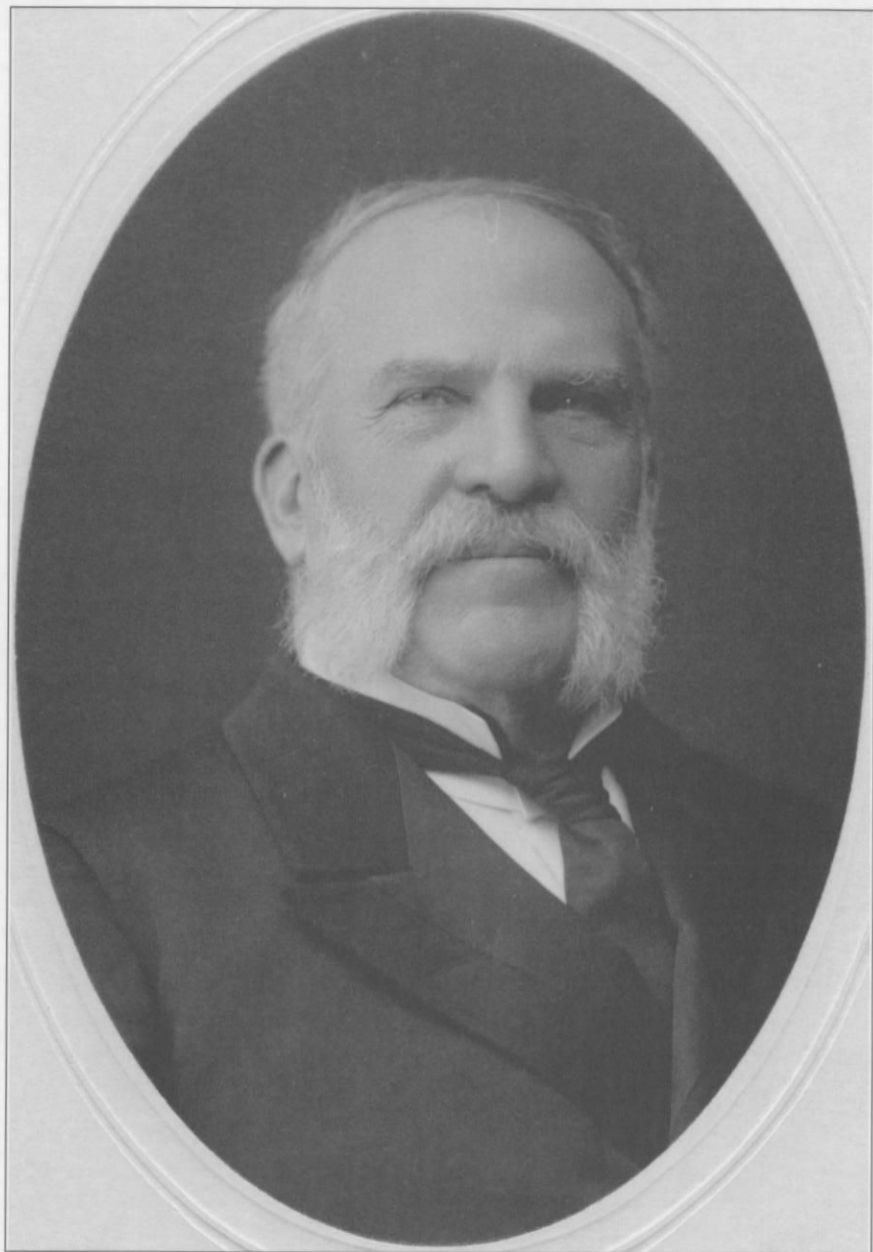
¹⁰ Ibid., 57.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 50.



Thomas W. Bullitt
The Filson Club Historical Society



Thomas W. Bullitt
The Filson Club Historical Society

meant for eventual public consumption and were therefore filtered rather carefully, although unconsciously.

The Bullitts of Oxmoor

Oxmoor was founded by Alexander Scott Bullitt and his wife Pricilla Christian Bullitt (1770-1806) in 1784; they came into the Outer Bluegrass region from Virginia. Personal and public records, as well as his grandson's account, all suggest that hemp was the primary money-making crop. According to Jefferson County tax records, Alexander Scott Bullitt owned twenty-three slaves and about one thousand acres on Beargrass Creek at Oxmoor in 1789. The following year he was taxed on forty slaves, and by 1795 he owed seventy. Tax records from 1795 to 1814 indicate that the slave population fluctuated between sixty-five and eighty.¹³ It is not known if most of the increase in the slave population occurred from purchases, inheritance, or births. Nevertheless, this was a very large population for this early period in Kentucky history. For example, the nearby plantation of Locust Grove, owned by Major William Croghan, had forty slaves in 1819.¹⁴

In 1810 Alexander Scott Bullitt was the second largest slave owner in Jefferson County.¹⁵ Thus in the early era of Kentucky statehood, he was master of a showplace plantation and a member of the economic and political elite. Politically, he was among the leaders of the effort to counter opposition to slavery at the 1792 Kentucky Constitutional Convention; he served as speaker of the Kentucky Senate (1792-1800) and as president of the 1799 Kentucky Constitutional Convention, and he became the first lieutenant governor of Kentucky (1800-1804).¹⁶

¹³ Jefferson County Tax lists, 1795-1814, microfilm, The Filson Club Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky.

¹⁴ Amy L. Young, "Risk and Material Conditions of African-American Slaves at Locust Grove: An Archaeological Perspective" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tennessee, 1995), 32-34. Also Young, "Risk Management Strategies Among African-American Slaves at Locust Grove Plantation," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 1 (1997): 5-37 and Young, "Task and Gang Labor: Work Patterns at a Kentucky Plantation," *North American Archaeologist* 18 (1997): 41-66.

¹⁵ Young, "Risk and Material Conditions," 71.

¹⁶ Thomas D. Clark, *A History of Kentucky* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1937), 91; Joan W. Coward, *Kentucky in the New Republic: The Process of Constitution Making* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 23.

The will of Alexander Scott Bullitt in 1816 mentions ninety-eight slaves by their first names. The slaves were divided among his heirs, including his second wife Mary Churchill Bullitt (1770-1817) who inherited the fewest slaves (nine). Children William Christian, Ann, Cuthbert, Thomas James, and Mary each inherited between seventeen and eighteen slaves. The slaves of Mrs. Mary Churchill Bullitt, Cuthbert Bullitt, Mary Bullitt, and William Christian Bullitt may have remained at Oxmoor.¹⁷

William Christian Bullitt and his wife Matilda Ann Fry Bullitt (1798-1879) were master and mistress of Oxmoor from the time of his inheritance in 1816 until 1863 when they moved to Louisville during the Civil War. Like his father, William Christian Bullitt raised hemp, corn, and garden produce, kept cattle, and maintained horses for transportation and probably as draft animals. There is some question as to the number of slaves that William Christian Bullitt owned. Thomas Walker Bullitt in his memoir suggested that there were about one hundred slaves at Oxmoor.¹⁸ However, Jefferson County tax records and census data suggest that there were actually closer to fifty. The discrepancy may be attributable to William Christian Bullitt's purchase of another plantation in Union County in 1858 where some twenty slaves, who had formerly lived at Oxmoor, were working.¹⁹ Also, there were a number of slaves from Alexander Scott Bullitt's estate who remained at Oxmoor but who were not owned by William Christian Bullitt.

William Christian Bullitt was "a firm believer in slavery" and "although considerate of and kind to his negroes[,] was of stern and resolute temper, and required implicit obedience from the negroes . . ."²⁰ Continuing the family tradition established by his father, Bullitt was a staunch pro-slavery advocate in the debates before and during the 1849 Kentucky Constitutional Convention. Because of the inroads made by the abolitionist movement, the emancipation of slaves in the British Empire in 1834 and in much of the Caribbean and Spanish America, by this time Kentucky (and all Southern) slave owners were anxious. This anxiety was complicated by deepening fears of slave escapes and revolts and by the growing population of free people of color in Kentucky.

¹⁷ Jefferson County Will Book 2, pp. 37-40, microfilm, The Filson Club Historical Society.

¹⁸ Bullitt, *My Life*, 31.

¹⁹ Ibid., 31 and Bullitt Family Papers, Department of Special Collections, The Filson Club Historical Society.

²⁰ Bullitt, *My Life*, 5, 18.

Consequently, the debate over whether to strengthen the legal protection extended to slavery or to favor gradual emancipation followed by colonization in Africa was central to the convention.²¹

While serving on the committee charged with considering slavery, Bullitt elaborated his views with memorable clarity. Concerning proposals for gradual emancipation, Bullitt argued that the state did not have the right to abolish slavery unless every slave owner consented. He also believed that free people of color were not citizens and that the federal constitution guaranteed them nothing. During the 1849 constitutional convention, he stated that:

I am firmly persuaded that the negro slave of Kentucky is in a more happy condition than he ever has been, or can be placed in, in any part of the world. We all know that he is far better off than he was when serving as a slave, in the country whence he came. He is in a much better condition than the free negro now in this country; in a far better condition than the emancipated negro in Jamaica and St. Domingo.²²

Given the attitudes of Thomas Walker Bullitt's father and grandfather, it is no surprise that he would choose to portray slave life at Oxmoor as he did. The Bullitt family, like most families of antebellum slave owners, has a wealth of anecdotes attesting to their being "good" masters and mistresses and to the happiness and contentment of their slaves. Thomas Walker Bullitt's fond recollections of his early life at Oxmoor are replete with such images.

The Bullitts were probably no worse than most Kentucky slave owners, and they may have been better than many in the treatment of their slaves. That distinction may have meant a great deal to whites, but, as volumes of slave narratives reflect, it meant comparatively little to African-Americans. But what of the differences that separated slave conditions in Kentucky from those of the deep South?

To gain a more balanced picture of the slaves at Oxmoor, numerous Bullitt family documents were examined for information regarding aspects of their

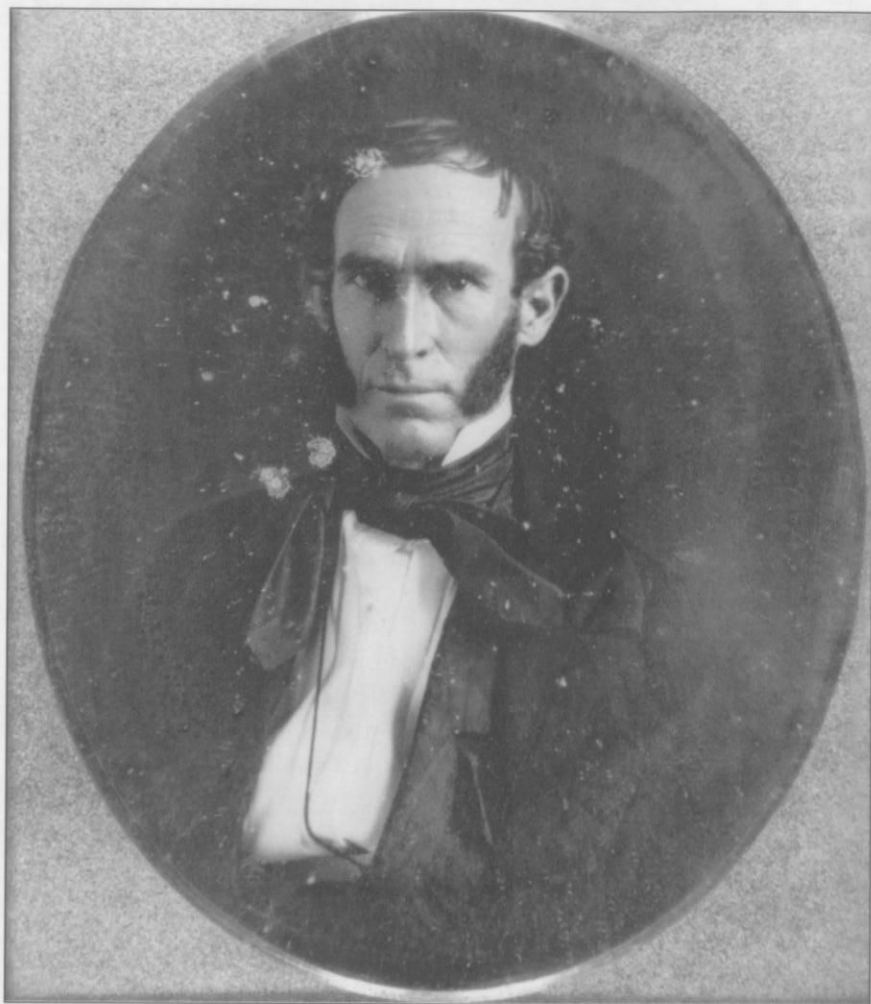
²¹ C.R. Fields, "Kentucky's Third Constitution" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1951); G. Pettus, "The Issues in the Kentucky Constitutional Convention, 1849-1850" (MA thesis, University of Louisville, 1941). See also James P. Gregory, "The Question of Slavery in the Kentucky Constitutional Convention of 1849," *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 23 (1949): 23, 2, 100, 105-106.

²² *Report of the Debates and Proceedings of the Convention for the Revision of the Constitution of the State of Kentucky* (1849), 118.



William Christian Bullitt
The Filson Club Historical Society

everyday circumstances and happenings. The areas which constituted the focus of this research are: housing, diet, labor, treatment, and the social relations between slaves and masters. Other potential areas of interest could have been added, such as clothing and personal possessions, but little information was located in the documents regarding these aspects of everyday life. With the available data, comparisons are made between what is commonly reported by scholars regarding slavery, what Thomas Walker Bullitt remembered about



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Oxmoor specifically, and the information found in the Bullitt Family Papers. Even though the letters were written by the Bullitts and there are some recognizable biases in them, we decided to take many of their interpretations at face value. For instance, there was some belief that an insurrection was being planned among slaves at Oxmoor and in Louisville, but this could have been the Bullitts' misinterpretation of events. While the Bullitts may have been mistaken about an insurrection, however, the consequences of their belief were very likely quite real.

Slave Housing

According to Coleman, slaves in Kentucky were particularly well-housed, especially compared to slaves in other regions.²³ Coleman did not consider this surprising since it was reasonable to expect planters to take good care of the property who produced their wealth. Coleman assumed that Kentucky planters were rational and logical. Another logical reason that housing was assumed to be good is that the upland South is characterized by longer, cooler winters than the deep South. Additionally, according to the scientific management of plantations that was popular during the nineteenth century, slave houses in Kentucky (and in many parts of the South) were to be widely spaced, placed on high piers for ventilation under the house, and have brick or stone chimneys. Additionally, they were to be sufficiently large to avoid crowding slave families.²⁴ Lucas in his more recent study of Kentucky slavery suggests that slave housing reflected the wealth of the planters. Some of the better-built cabins on wealthier farms and plantations have survived into the late twentieth century; however, not all Kentucky slaves were so fortunate.²⁵ He states:

Most slave cabins were built of logs, were properly chinked, and had brick or stone fireplaces, though chimneys were sometimes constructed of sticks and clay. Wood slabs usually enclosed the gables. Slaveholders occasionally constructed brick cabins, but natural stone gathered from the countryside provided a more

²³ Coleman, *Slavery Times*, 51-54.

²⁴ James O. Breeden, *Advice Among Masters: The Ideal in Slave Management in the Old South* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), 114-39.

²⁵ Lucas, *From Slavery to Segregation*, 12.

common building material. Roofs usually consisted of wooden shingles. . . . Not enough windows existed, even in the better-quality cabins, but usually there was at least one. Cabin floors were almost always dirt.²⁶

Slave families throughout the South, including Kentucky, were often housed in a single room or pen,²⁷ with the most commodious measuring four hundred square feet (twenty by twenty feet).²⁸ The ideal in the South with regard to housing, especially during the antebellum period, was that the dwelling was to function as the cradle of the black family but be humble enough to remind the occupants of their station.²⁹

At Oxmoor, the documents concerning slave housing are somewhat tantalizing. Only a few pertinent references are found in letters and contracts. Apparently, there were two consecutive types or phases of slave housing at Oxmoor. The first was associated with Alexander Scott Bullitt and lasted from 1787 until his death in 1816. The second is associated with William Christian Bullitt and dates somewhere between 1816 and 1863.

The clearest references to slave houses at Oxmoor during the first phase are found in several letters and contracts written by Alexander Scott Bullitt. In a letter to his son-in-law Henry Massie on 16 January 1811, Alexander Scott Bullitt describes the slave houses he had built on Massie's place, which were similar to those built for his own slaves:

. . . I wrote to you about four weeks ago that Part of your People were settled upon your Place & that I was building a second Cabbin for the rest of them[.] since that both Cabbins have been finished and all your Hands are now comfortably fixed upon your farm in the two new Cabbins one Sixteen Feet by Fourteen and the Other Eighteen by Fourteen; Although Old Haywood has contrived to play the Sharper a little with me in the price of them in my hand I wrote you that the two Cabbins would not

²⁶ Ibid., 13.

²⁷ John W. Blasingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (second edition; New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 254; John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 153-69.

²⁸ Vlach, *Back of the Big House*, 157.

²⁹ Larry McKee, "The Ideals and Realities Behind the Design and Use of 19th Century Virginia Slave Cabins," in Anne E. Yentsch and Mary C. Beaudry, eds., *The Art and Mystery of Historical Archaeology: Essays in Honor of James Deetz* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1992), 195-213.

cost more than twenty Dollars and such was my bargain with Old Haywood before he began. Then he was to build two fourteen Foot Cabbins with Dirt Floors which are the kind I build for my own People for the Twenty Dollars but I was induced afterwards by the solicitations of Luce Juba to tell Haywood that if he would add A Little to the Size of them and haul slabs from the Mill to lay the Floors & Laufts I would Satisfy him for his additional trouble not supposing it would be more than four or five Dollars but for this Extra Work he has had the Modesty to Charge (including the Price of the Slabs) of \$15 and I could not get him to settle upon any other terms.³⁰

A letter that Alexander Scott Bullitt had written to Massie prior to this, on 18 December 1810, describes the price and kind of houses being built on the Massie place:

... I have had One very Good Cabbin Sixteen by Fourteen built upon your Farm which will not cost you quite Ten Dollars and have settled Luce Juba and her Family in it.³¹

The houses at Oxmoor, like those at Massie's place, were most likely log with dirt floors. No glazed windows were mentioned for the Massie houses, and the price listed for construction would probably not have been sufficient to order glass for windows, a rather expensive item in that era.³² The size and shape of the houses described in the letters are typical of the period.

More evidence of slave housing comes from a contract where Alexander Scott Bullitt hired out seven slaves (six adult males and one adult female). In the contract, he requires the person hiring the slaves to:

Erect immediately and keep in good repair during the Said term of two years a double Cabbin, Twenty Eight by fourteen feet in the Clear and a single Cabbin sixteen feet Square in the Clear for Shelter and accomodation of the said negroes (and none others).³³

³⁰ Bullitt Family Papers.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Randall Moir, "Socioeconomic and Chronometric Patterning of Window Glass" in David H. Journey and Randall W. Moir, eds., *Historic Buildings, Material Culture, and the People of the Prairie Margin* (Richland Creek Technical Series, Volume V; Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1987), 73-81.

In the second phase, as mentioned above, the slave housing was updated, which was during the period from 1816 until the Civil War when William Christian Bullitt was the master of Oxmoor. Thomas Walker Bullitt recalled that, "Quarters [were] erected on either side of the pasture in front of the house. . . . They were built of brick, and were warm and dry."³⁴

Standing on the property today, located on the edge of the pasture along the west side of the lane leading to the mansion, are a number of the quarters that are described in *My Life at Oxmoor* (figure 2). Two are double-pen (two-room) brick structures with central chimneys; one is a double-pen stone house with a central chimney, and another is a brick single-pen house with an end chimney. Each room measures approximately eighteen and a half by twenty feet. A recent examination of these structures shows that, although each of the standing slave houses was built at a slightly different time, some were probably built in 1842 as suggested in the documents.³⁵ Matilda Fry Bullitt in a letter to her son John C. Bullitt, dated 15 May 1842, stated that, "We have workmen building our negro houses, which makes it somewhat inconvenient for me to have company."³⁶

The slave houses backed up against agricultural fields, and those standing today still do. Matilda Fry Bullitt in a letter to John C. Bullitt, dated 28 April 1846, stated that, "The field back of Lucinda's house is in preparation for hemp, part of which is sown."³⁷

The construction materials, size, floors, and windows of the slave houses at Oxmoor seem to be typical of the periods they represent. Houses constructed before 1816 were wooden, probably log, sixteen by sixteen feet, with dirt floors, no glazed windows, and they probably had stone chimneys. The houses of the later period, around 1840, are brick or stone, larger (eighteen by twenty feet) with dirt floors and one glazed window per room.

Rather than being in any way extraordinary, slave housing at Oxmoor likely falls close to the norm for slave quarters throughout the South. We

³³ Bullitt Family Papers.

³⁴ Bullitt, *My Life*, 31.

³⁵ During the summer of 1996, one of the authors was conducting archaeological testing at Oxmoor and had the opportunity to examine the standing slave houses closely. These houses have been modified, and some have been modernized. However, the original windows and doors are still visible. Today retired Oxmoor employees live in two of the houses.

³⁶ Bullitt Family Papers.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

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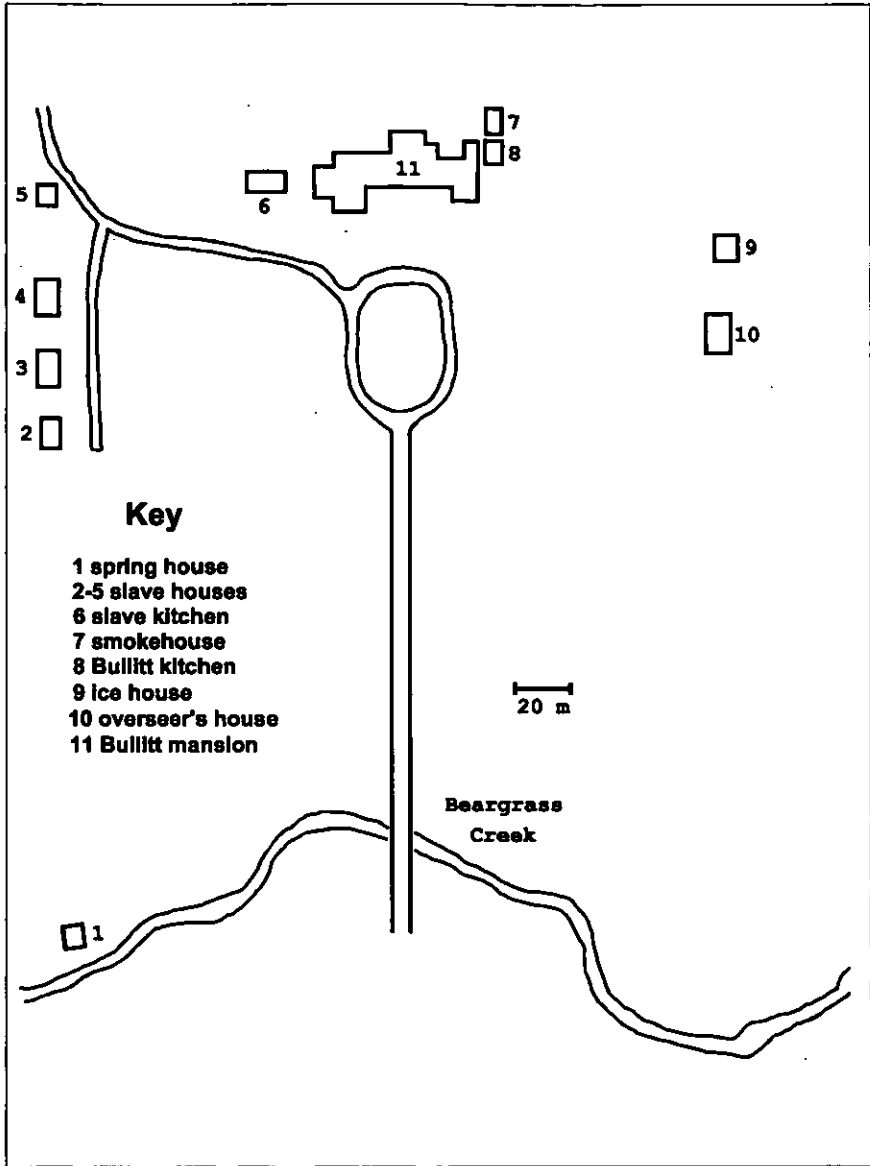


Figure 2 Oxmoor and Outbuildings
Amy Young

cannot, however, label this housing “adequate” because we do not know how many houses existed during the early phase at Oxmoor or how many persons

each room sheltered. In 1860, during the second phase, the slave schedule for Jefferson County shows that William Christian Bullitt owned fifty slaves and nine slave houses, which would have been adequate.³⁸ However, if there were one hundred slaves at Oxmoor in 1860 as his son suggested in his memoir, then overcrowding would have been a problem. Therefore, the use of such descriptors as "well-lodged" or "adequate" should be discarded until better data can substantiate such claims. Archaeological investigations could yield pertinent information by revealing the size and number of the houses that are no longer standing and whether these had wood floors (based on the nails recovered) or glazed windows (based on the presence and dates of window glass).³⁹

Slave Diet

According to Thomas Walker Bullitt, the African-American slaves at Oxmoor were "fed abundantly . . . Corn and sweet potatoes they loved beyond anything, and 'possum' was the greatest of delicacies. They loved chicken but it was not part of their ordinary diet."⁴⁰ Coleman also believed that African-American slaves in Kentucky were supplied abundantly with nutritious foods.⁴¹ As with adequate housing, keeping slaves well fed was thought to be in the planter's best economic interest. In addition to rations of pork, meal, and molasses, Coleman suggested that Kentucky slave families had nearly unlimited access to chickens, eggs, and produce from their own small kitchen gardens.

In general, the slave diet across the South usually consisted of pork and cornmeal rations, and, depending on the region and labor requirements on the plantation, rations were supplemented with hunting, fishing, and slave gardens.⁴² Occasionally slaves in the South raised their own small livestock (chickens and pigs).⁴³ Sometimes, however, masters insisted that all slaves take their

³⁸ U.S. Census of Jefferson County, Kentucky, slave schedule for 1860, microfilm, The Filson Club Historical Society.

³⁹ For example, see Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 63-82 and Theresa A. Singleton, "The Archaeology of Slavery in North America," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 119-40.

⁴⁰ Bullitt, *My Life*, 44.

⁴¹ Coleman, *Slavery Times*, 53.

meals in central kitchens so that all available time could be devoted to profitable activities.⁴⁴

Between 1816 and 1863 when William Christian Bullitt was master of Oxmoor, there was a single garden devoted to growing vegetables for the slaves and a separate, smaller garden for the Bullitt family. The single common slave garden at Oxmoor included cabbages, onions, turnips, sweet potatoes, and Irish potatoes.⁴⁵ Bullitt's remark about chicken not being a regular part of the slave diet at Oxmoor seems good evidence that the slaves did not have their own small livestock. It appears that the slaves actually had little control over their subsistence because of the existence of the "negro" kitchen and the inferred heavy dependence on rations.

Surviving Bullitt family documents indicate that during the first phase of the plantation when Alexander Scott Bullitt was planter, Oxmoor slave diets were typical of those all over the South. Food was specified in contracts in which Bullitt hired out his slaves. In a contract to hire nine slaves between Alexander Scott Bullitt and Allen Campbell on behalf of the firm of Lowman, Ormsby and Campbell, dated 24 September 1802, Campbell was to:

provide for and allow each of them at least three quarters of a pound of Bacon or one pound of fresh meat per day together with an adequate quantity of good bread or good sound meal to make bread and in the case of the said Bullitt . . . shall chuse to furnish the said negroes with two milch cows he or they shall have the right to do so, and the said Campbell . . . shall be bound to feed them, as his or their cattle of the like kind are fed.⁴⁶

The foods available to the slaves of William Christian Bullitt seem remarkably similar to the diet of his father's slaves. Food for the slaves at Cottonwood

⁴² Samuel B. Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoecake: Food Supply in the Old South, 1840-1860* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 56-62, 182-83; Young, "Risk Management Strategies," 16-20.

⁴³ Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, "Introduction," in Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 23-24.

⁴⁴ Berlin and Morgan, "Introduction," 23; Young, "Risk Management Strategies," 17. This also seems to have been the case at Oxmoor. There was a central "negro" kitchen and a single slave garden so that slave families did not prepare their meals in their homes.

⁴⁵ Bullitt, *My Life*, 32.

⁴⁶ Bullitt Family Papers.

(Bullitt's Union County plantation) is listed in instructions to his overseer. Cabbages, Irish potatoes, watermelons, corn, and onions were raised for food for the slaves and the overseer's family at Cottonwood, and:

1. pound of midlin, or 1 ¼ of other parts of Bacon a Day to each man___In the same proportion to women and children, with the above vegetables [cabbage, Irish potatoes, watermelons, corn, onions] and what milk can be spared.⁴⁷

Lucas suggests that for the most part, "Kentucky slaves enjoyed an adequate, though sometimes repetitious, diet."⁴⁸ This diet consisted of cornmeal, pork, and molasses, and was supplemented with potatoes, beans, and other vegetables. From what little data are available in the Bullitt Family Papers, it appears that Oxmoor slaves were typical of Kentucky slaves. Their diets may, in fact, have been adequate, especially using mid-nineteenth-century standards. Of course, the physical requirements of slave labor are not considered, and thus the food may have fallen short of being completely adequate. Archaeological investigations at Oxmoor could provide more specific data concerning domestic and wild species that constituted the diet of the slaves.⁴⁹

Labor

Intense, physical labor was central to the African-American experience under slavery. The institution evolved in colonial America to address labor shortages on Virginia tobacco plantations and later on rice and indigo plantations in the Carolinas, especially when it became difficult to keep white indentured servants in sufficient quantity to raise lucrative money crops.⁵⁰ Plantations are typically associated with staple crops like tobacco, cotton, rice, sugar, indigo, or hemp. Each crop requires different cycles of intense labor interspersed with periods of relatively more leisure.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid. The page is entitled "Instructions to my Manager at Cottonwood Crop for 1854."

⁴⁸ Lucas, *From Slavery to Segregation*, 14-15.

⁴⁹ Diana C. Crader, "Slave Diet at Monticello," *American Antiquity* 55 (1990): 690-717; Elizabeth Reitz, Tyson Gibbs, and Ted A. Rathbun, "Archaeological Evidence for Subsistence on Coastal Plantations" in Theresa A. Singleton, ed., *The Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1985), 163-64; Young, "Risk Management Strategies," 17-20.

⁵⁰ Berlin and Morgan, *Cultivation and Culture*, 9.

⁵¹ Ibid., 4, 9-10.

Two basic types of labor organization were used by planters in the South. Task labor meant that slaves were given daily assignments (tasks) that were usually quite standard and when that was accomplished, the remainder of the day could be used as the slaves pleased.⁵² It was not uncommon for slaves to complete their tasks by one or two o'clock in the afternoon. This type of labor organization was most often employed with rice agriculture, and these slaves were largely responsible for their own subsistence. Gang labor is typically associated with cotton agriculture. Under this system, large groups of slaves were under the direction of a driver or overseer and worked from sunup to sundown. These slaves had little free time except on Sundays. Usually slaves had to rely heavily on rations under the gang system because of the limited time available for hunting, gardening, or fishing. The type of labor organization adopted by a particular planter depended on personal preferences as well as the labor requirements of the plantation crop. Planters and overseers argued the merits and costs of each of these systems in agricultural journals.⁵³

It is difficult to determine which labor system was typical for Kentucky because the crop requirements were quite different from deep South plantations that concentrated on cotton, rice, or sugar.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Kentucky tobacco plantations also produced marketable quantities of corn or pork so that adopting a strict task or gang system was not economical. Hemp is a cash crop that is sometimes associated with plantation-style agriculture, but most slaveholdings in Kentucky were involved in a more diversified agriculture of grains and livestock. These agricultural products (wheat, corn, pigs, cattle) also dictated how, when, and how much slaves were required to work.

Usually, labor on Kentucky farms and plantations was not as intense as cotton agriculture or as dangerous as sugar processing but was likely to be as relentless as rice cultivation. There were always chores of plowing, weeding, harvesting, sowing, repairing barns, roads, hedges, tending livestock, and gardening which were mixed with waiting on the white family, nursing the sick and injured, running errands to town, cooking, cleaning, laundry, and other household chores. Cutting hemp was backbreaking and intense but only for a short period. Furthermore, because diversified plantations like Oxmoor were

⁵² Philip Morgan, "Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700-1880," *William and Mary History Quarterly*, 39 (1982): 563-99.

⁵³ Breeden, *Advice Among Masters*, 61-77.

⁵⁴ Berlin and Morgan, *Cultivation and Culture*, 9-10.

probably not as profitable as cotton or rice plantations, there was an extra incentive to get even more labor from the Kentucky slaves.

The kinds of labor that slaves at Oxmoor were expected to do and the hours they were expected to work are detailed in some of the family papers. For example, William Christian Bullitt described labor at Cottonwood for his overseer in 1858:

During the entire year, all hands must eat their breakfast before going out of their Cabbins . . . At all times, during the year, they will remain in their Cabbins at dinner - half an hour, except that in excessive heats of summer they may remain longer at the discretion of the Overseer [struck out] Manager [.] From the first day of June to the first day of October, they will not leave their houses untill sunrise in the morning when the signal, will be given by the tap of the Bell__during the ballance of the year they will eat their breakfasts before day so as to go out to their work at day light__Not to work in rain or in the night__nor on Sundays except in cases of necessity [.] In cases of Sunday work__an account will be kept of the same & I will pay them for it at the rate of 75 cents a Day for such work . . . Women never to plow nor use the Axe.⁵⁵

These instructions indicate that a gang system of labor was probably used, since slaves worked from sunup to sundown.

Hemp was critical at Oxmoor and is frequently mentioned in personal letters. In a letter from Matilda Fry Bullitt to her son John C. Bullitt, 7 August 1841, she wrote:

Your Father says fifty acres of hemp are cut, & considering the season is very good. Nathan is delighted at being among the very best cutters[.] Daniel Massie Louis & co keep together. Poor Daniel tries his very best.⁵⁶

On 9 February 1842 she wrote John again about hemp production at Oxmoor:

The hemp exceeds your father[']s expectations, & he says Jim is going to astonish the natives as a breaker. Harry beats all the

⁵⁵ "Instructions to My Manager," Bullitt Family Papers.

⁵⁶ Bullitt Family Papers.

men this year, & I think Nathan comes next. Jim is a long way before the other boys.⁵⁷

Other crops were also important and are described in family letters. Susan P. Bullitt wrote to her brother John C. Bullitt (undated, but probably March 1849):

I rode out to the wheatfield this morning and saw them all sowing clover seed - John Gordon was teaching Milton how to sow it and all the rest were laughing at him.

Bullitt family records illustrate that the slaves at Oxmoor were not only employed in the fields but also in the house and kitchens. House slaves were constantly at the beck and call of the mistress and master. Matilda Fry Bullitt wrote of housework and slaves to her son John C. Bullitt on 23 September 1846: "I asked Carity [Charity?] to day if she cleaned all the litter from under mas' John's windows, & ordered your carpet to be put down."⁵⁸ A letter from Matilda Fry Bullitt to John C. Bullitt, dated 10 January 1847, reported:

Cold as it was this morning Tom [Thomas Walker Bullitt aged about eleven] went out without his hat & worked manfully (voluntarily too) with Washington and Charles till the snow was cleared from all pavements, styles & steps.⁵⁹

Martha B. Bullitt in a letter to John C. Bullitt on 13 September 1846 stated that, "By dint of scolding Sue & Beck laughing with Miss Sallie, quilting a very pretty quilt and overseeing Rose and Charity."⁶⁰ A letter from Matilda Fry Bullitt to John C. Bullitt written 3 April 1851 stated that:

It is a sore disappointment when the boy [slave "Uncle" Billy aged about ninety] comes from the [post] office day after day as he frequently does, without a line . . . I made Lucinda paint the porch floor yesterday, & it looks very nice.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Slaves everywhere worked. Many chores required great skill; most were physically demanding and some were dangerous. Occasionally there were periods on plantations when African-Americans spent time taking care of their own subsistence, working in their own gardens, or tending their own livestock. Sometimes slaves could produce sufficient surplus to sell in town or to their master, earning money for luxuries otherwise not available. This was especially true for slaves in the task-oriented rice region of South Carolina.⁶² More often, however, African-American slaves were required to devote their labor to others and were unable to profit directly from their own hard work. Sometimes the labor was intense at Oxmoor (breaking hemp), but this work was interspersed with less demanding jobs at other times during the yearly agricultural cycle. One consequence of the gang system was that slaves were forced to rely on rations (rather than their own labor in their gardens) and were also fed from a central kitchen at Oxmoor. No doubt labor requirements at Oxmoor directly affected many other aspects of the daily lives of slaves, including health, spending money, and access to luxuries.

Slave Treatment and Relations Between Slaves and Masters

Thomas Walker Bullitt conveyed his belief that the Oxmoor slaves were happy and comfortable.⁶³ The same sentiment was expressed by Coleman:

That Kentucky slaves, under ordinary circumstances, were well fed, well clothed, happy and contented, is further substantiated by the number of newspaper accounts of runaway slaves, who, after experiencing "a spell of freedom" in Northern territory, often in Canada, were glad to return to their old homes and masters.⁶⁴

It is somewhat ironic that runaway accounts, which indicate trouble at "home," are used to show how happy slaves were "*under ordinary circumstances*" in Kentucky.

⁶² J. W. Joseph, "Highway 17 Revisited: The Archaeology of Task Labor," *South Carolina Antiquities* 19 (1987): 29-34.

⁶³ Bullitt, *My Life*, 58.

⁶⁴ Coleman, *Slavery Times*, 54.

Examination of the Bullitt Family Papers shows that sometimes the African-Americans were perceived as happy, well fed, and well clothed, but there are also hints of problems. *My Life at Oxmoor* includes the handbill for a runaway slave named Hope, a male slave about twenty-five years old who escaped from Oxmoor in 1822.⁶⁵ Running away was a drastic coping mechanism for slaves because of the punishments that usually occurred after capture. Hope's willingness to take such a huge risk indicates that he perceived a significant threat at Oxmoor that led him to this extreme act of defiance. Other slaves also ran away from Oxmoor. In a handwritten advertisement, dated 18 June 1830, William Christian Bullitt wrote:

Annie (daughter of Akie a wife of Edward belonging to W. Will Pope) about 25 years of age or upwards a likely black woman above the ordinary size particularly in height—Lucinda Dal a likely black woman about 18 years of age both absconded about a week since or 10 days from my Farm. They are supposed to be about Louisville. If committed to the Louisville jail, I will give ten Dollars for the apprehension of each.⁶⁶

Many slaves were punished severely for running away when they returned or were captured, or faced hazards while hiding in the woods or trying to escape to freedom.⁶⁷ Leaving behind family and home was a drastic means of improving personal circumstances, and the chances of recapture were apparently fairly high. The act of running away is usually interpreted as an act of resistance,⁶⁸ and so it must be viewed as evidence that life was not so happy and carefree at Oxmoor.

Running away was not the only way that Oxmoor slaves expressed dissatisfaction with their lives and conditions. Various sorts of behaving—especially if performed in such a way as to appear ignorant rather than openly rebellious or obnoxious—were means that slaves could use to resist their circumstances. This type of resistance may explain the actions of Wallace, who was a carriage driver for the Bullitts. In a letter from Susan P. Bullitt to her brother John C. Bullitt, dated 21 or 26 May 1849, it was related that:

⁶⁵ Bullitt, *My Life*, figure between pages 64 and 65.

⁶⁶ Bullitt Family Papers.

⁶⁷ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 648-57.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 653-57.

and in the morning they had the pleasure of rescuing three distressed damsels from danger. The horses refused to pull up the hill because Wallace had intentionally [emphasis in original] reined them very tight up—they saw the difficulty at once, removed it and they [the horses] went very well. But after church I was going with Puss round to the Judge's and at the corner of Second & Walnut (Wallace had purposely driven the wrong way) he made the horses cut up again. I got out and you never saw such a time. Some negroes were going by from church and they were very kind. They forced the horses round the corner of Second St. and I was about to get in, when one of them said "you better let them drive round the square, miss, and come back for you that you may see whether they will go gently or not." Again they refused to go and I was glad I had not gotten in again. They backed up the carriage by main force up Walnut and then again led them round the corner towards Green. I told Wallace to go to the stable and the horses started off like mad. I walked down to Mr. Balls and staid with Mary—sent a note to mother and she got Conway to accompany us home. You never saw horses go better, but mother had asked Conway to examine the harness and he had again been obliged to loosen the reins. Wallace was evidently determined to do some mischief. I suppose he is tired of driving and wanted to make us believe he could not. Father gave him a whipping.⁶⁹

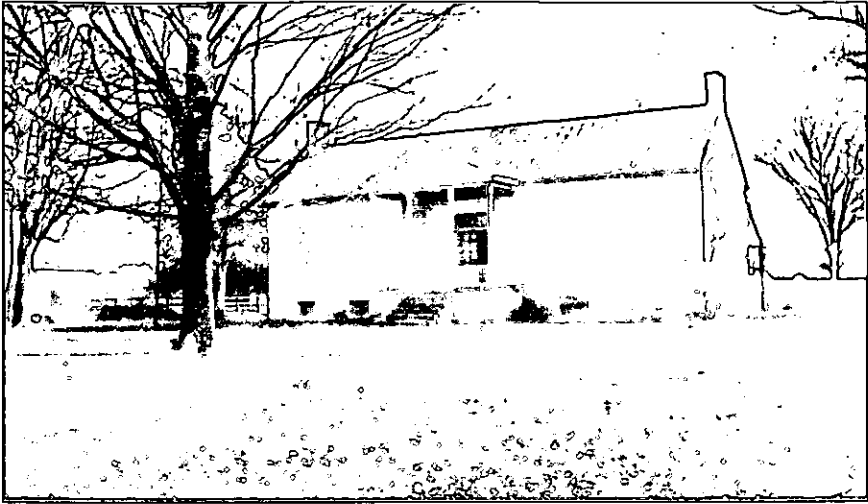
Several years later, Wallace was still driving the carriage and was again in trouble with his master and mistress. Matilda Fry Bullitt wrote to her daughter Helen Massie on 23 June 1851 that:

Wallace drove me to Mr. Jacobs the day dear little Sue was buried, & let the reins loose, while I was getting out the horses started, & I fell, the wheel bruising my hip, & knocking the skin off of my little finger; my bonnet was mashed, my shawl and dress muddled, when I was gathering myself up, & looking daggers at Wallace who was in the box frightened half to death.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Bullitt Family Papers.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

SLAVE LIFE AT OXMOOR



Oxmoor around 1908
The Filson Club Historical Society

Such perceived insolence and misbehavior were often met with swift punishment in the form of whippings. Such prompt punitive action was outlined by William Christian Bullitt in 1854 in instructions to his overseer at Cottonwood in Union County:

Discipline___They [slaves] are to be kept in strict subordination___and in case of insolence, to be promptly punished___In all cases of other offenses, be sparing of punishment, as far as practicable [.] Where it is necessary to tie___never tie the hands or arms above a position horizontal to the body[.] Never whip, so as to leave marks or sears___Any amount of punishment may be inflicted, without such a result, by dividing the lashes over the body, and never striking twice in the same place.⁷¹

The following excerpt from a letter demonstrates that for some slaves in Jefferson County (and one at Oxmoor), life under slavery may have been so intolerable that an insurrection was in the making. While the Bullitts and other slave owners may have misinterpreted the incidents reported in the letter, the consequences were very real indeed. Matilda Fry Bullitt wrote to her sons Josh and John C. Bullitt on 19 May 1840:

⁷¹ "Instructions to my Manager," Bullitt Family Papers.



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⁷¹ "Instructions to my Manager," Bullitt Family Papers.

I expect you both feel anxious to hear all light that has been shed on the subject of the fire. The day you left[,] your Father heard that Billy and Frank could tell him something; on inquiry, they both said Anny [or Amy] told them after the fire, that it was Mr. Kenedy's [Kennedy's] Nelson and Mr. Hike's Jack. That more than a week before they had been at her house & said the next fire was to be at old Bullitt's. This Anny denies but her statements are so contradictory, your Father believes she was an accessory, & I think the servants all believe it too. Your Father says he has never known little Billy to tell an untruth in his life & his oath went a great way in convincing him of their guilt. Louisa said to me she started Friday evening to go in to Anny's house, & heard Anny, Billy, & Frank quareling, & heard Billy say ["well I'll tell Master any how,["] & Anny replied ["well I'll deny it if you do["], & Billy after a while came in to her house, & repeated what Anny had said to him & Frank & now she was'nt going to stand to her word. John knows how thick Mr Jack has been with Anny for the last several years. Sam says he went to see his sweetheart the Sunday night after Jim had received ten lashes for insolence, at Albert's, this Jack is Jim's brother, & we are now told a negro of infamous character, by some of our most respectable neighbors. George Rudy told Mr. Bullitt he had twice fired his dwelling house, & he had tried to shoot him for it. Jack came in & related to the negroes what had passed at Albert's, & said his brother Jim had been whipped, & if he had not been so fleet he would have been too, but he was going to play the fiddle at Tyler's the next night, & he'd pay old Bullitt [a] visit that he'd remember. Sam's intended was sick & he went Tuesday night to see her again, & Jack inquired what his master said about the fire. Sam in his boasting way answered ["my master is a rich man he dont care for what he's lost he sorry for us that our money's all gone["]. Jack then said ["we'll make him change his tune before we are done with him, wont we Harry? ["] to Mr Brown's Harry who was present. Simon says Jack told him two weeks before the fire, they intended to burn our dwelling house, or hemp house, but he took it as a joke. Nelson & Jack were tried at our house the evening after you left, Jack sentenced to further trial[,] Nelson acquitted Jim, & Jack have both been condemned by the grand jury, & their final trial will take place two weeks

from Thursday[.] Mr. Wolf thinks they must be condemned, & every lawyer your father has conversed with, says if they have a good jury they will certainly be condemned. Anny is very much alarmed. Your Father firmly believes she & Nelson too ought to be condemned with them. . . . They determined to try to break Albert's tavern up, take his license away from him, but when he found they would probably succeed, he bound himself to keep all coloured people away from his house, & never sell them spirit again . . . There was a meeting of about fifty farmers week before last & they all were resolved to try and bring about a better state of subordination here.⁷²

Apparently, keeping the slaves "in a state of subordination" was a constant process at Oxmoor. Susan P. Bullitt wrote to her brother John C. Bullitt on 17 November 1845 that, "To begin with home, your father has determined to revolutionize the plantation and & make [emphasis in original] his negroes honest."⁷³

Of course, the ways to keep slaves "honest" and subordinate were not all by force. Sometimes this was accomplished by giving parties, special dinners, and other "gifts" that clearly put slaves in the role of subordinate. Coleman stated that:

In many parts of Kentucky, and especially in the rural districts, slave weddings were important social events among the black people. It was not unusual for the master or mistress to provide an elaborate supper in the kitchen or yard of the big house, invite in all the bride's and groom's friends of the neighborhood and make a gala occasion of the affair.⁷⁴

Such activity tended to stabilize the slave families and probably made them more reluctant to run away or otherwise endanger their spouse or children by making trouble. This kind of treatment also occurred at Oxmoor. In a

⁷² Bullitt Family Papers. Although the Bullitts may have misconstrued the evidence, their suspicions regarding the barn burnings are not unreasonable. There appears to have been enough freedom away from different farms, as well as gatherings in town at Albert's, to make such a conspiracy possible.

⁷³ Ibid. Unfortunately, the remainder of the letter does not provide information about the circumstances that made William Christian Bullitt wish to revolutionize the plantation and *make* the slaves honest.

⁷⁴ Coleman, *Slavery Times*, 57.

postscript by Martha B. Bullitt in a letter to her brother John C. Bullitt, she described the preparations of an upcoming slave wedding:

I have been very busy lately making a wedding dress; Becky is to be married the 27th day of this month. I suspect she will have a very fine wedding; Teush [Becky's mother] wanted me to write invitations to all the company; but I rather thought it would be a burlesque on fashion to be writing invitations to people that couldn't read, so we gave that up. Teush wants you and Brother Josh to be specially invited to the "wedding."⁷⁵

Later, concerning Becky's wedding, Matilda Fry Bullitt wrote to her son John C. Bullitt on 17 January 1842:

Beck was married [to Harry Howard] in the holidays & as they thought looked very beautiful, & had quite a handsome entertainment, & a select company. Cynthia, & Martha presided at the brides toilette, & arranged the table.⁷⁶

Slave owners had other means of encouraging cooperation, including occasional special treatment. For instance, a slave named Samuel belonged to John C. Bullitt. Bullitt attended school away from Oxmoor, then practiced law in Tennessee and Pennsylvania. Samuel, however, lived at Oxmoor. Occasionally, he was given special meals or treatment by John's mother, Matilda Fry Bullitt, possibly to keep Samuel loyal. In a letter dated 19 December 1846, she informed her son, "I give Samuel a good supper for you once in a while."⁷⁷

The slaves at Oxmoor took opportunities to actively ensure their future and that of their children by ingratiating themselves to their master. The system worked both ways, and obligations were incurred both by slave owners and by the slaves. It appears that slaves at Oxmoor may have feared being separated from their home or family and took steps to ensure that their families could remain intact. A letter from Susan P. Bullitt to John C. Bullitt, dated 18 April 1849, relayed information about Samuel:

⁷⁴ Coleman, *Slavery Times*, 57.

⁷⁵ Matilda Fry Bullitt to John C. Bullitt, 20 December 1841, Bullitt Family Papers.

⁷⁶ Bullitt Family Papers.

⁷⁷ Ibid. Statements like this from Mrs. Bullitt to her son John concerning Samuel are fairly frequent.

Samuel sends his love and says he is very anxious that you should come back and he is raising a young dog to hunt coons with you if ever you should come.⁷⁸

The following year Susan P. Bullitt wrote again to her brother John C. Bullitt on 20 January 1850 that:

Samuel is nearly well—Mother told him yesterday that you would be married in the spring—with a doleful countenance and a really pathetic tone, he said, “then Mas’ John wont hunt coons with me no more!”⁷⁹

Sometimes attempts by slaves to maintain some degree of control over their lives or the lives of their children were blatant. Matilda Fry Bullitt wrote to her son John C. Bullitt on 5 June 1846 that:

Beck asked me to let you know she has a fine little waiting maid for you. She insists on it her children must all belong to you. She & Judy are both on the invalid list.⁸⁰

A slave who had achieved the status of “Mammy,” which carried with it certain rights usually associated with mothers, was allowed to speak fairly bluntly. For example, in a letter from Martha B. Bullitt to John C. Bullitt on 25 April 1846, “Mammy” Teush [Louisa] speaks through Martha, “Teush has just been in here, giving me a discourse on various subjects; she says tell Mas’ John to make haste and get married.”⁸¹

Relationships between master and slave, owner and property, at Oxmoor and throughout Kentucky were undoubtedly complex. However, it is clear that despite physical control, African-Americans were sometimes able to manipulate the system in their favor. Although Kentucky slaves may have gained certain freedom and consideration in their relationships with their masters, overall, this seems to have been only transient.

⁷⁸ Ibid. Other similar letters with messages from Samuel to John C. Bullitt contain references to slaves and masters hunting together.

⁷⁹ Ibid. Any change in the status of a slave owner could have consequences for the slaves.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Conclusions

The memoir *My Life at Oxmoor: Life on a Farm in Kentucky Before the War* presents a picture of life from the perspective of the mansion house, not from the perspective of the slave quarters. Secondary sources, especially Coleman, appear to reinforce the white perspective, although the collection of the Bullitt Family Papers appears to contradict some of the attitudes reflected in *My Life at Oxmoor*. A closer inspection of information in the family letters and other documents suggests that life was not always as comfortable for the slaves (and slave owners) as Thomas Walker Bullitt remembered. For slaves, there were dangers of beatings, being sold away from family and home, rigors of labor, threat of disease, and, at times, little control over the aspects of everyday life that contemporary white Americans enjoyed (such as control of the supper table and family meals). The documents provide insight concerning how slaves at Oxmoor coped with the risks of life under a harsh regime. Relationships between African-American slaves and slave owners at Oxmoor were complex and often precariously balanced. African-Americans often used their wits and talents to maintain as much autonomy as possible. Slave owners used force and persuasion to maintain control over their slaves.

It is likely that the slaveholding Bullitts also chose to ignore or minimize the uglier aspects of life all around them and to focus on the positive, comforting, and, at times, idyllic. For example, in a letter that probably dates to March 1849, Susan P. Bullitt relates to her brother John C. Bullitt that:

it would be a pity to attempt any change in the condition of so happy a people. Father is [in] quite an excitement about Mr. Clay's [probably Cassius M. Clay] emancipation.⁸²

Closer to home, Matilda Fry Bullitt wrote to her daughter Helen Massie on 23 June 1851 about the peaceful life at Oxmoor:

Minnie Tracosker & he [Thomas Walker Bullitt] are now playing Drafts together on the platform. I'm sitting at the other end of the passage, hearing the girls & their beaux almost boistrous[,] Minnie & Tom talking in a very subdued tone[.]

⁸² Ibid. This probably relates to family discussions during the 1849 Kentucky Constitutional Convention in which William Christian Bullitt participated.

Charity passing in & out setting the supper table, a whole army of little darkies playing before the kitchen door, Caroline bustling about supper, Eliza bringing in water for Tom, . . . Tinah making ready at the wash house to come in & get lights; the sheep bleating in the stable lot, John Gordon is driving them up to kill a lamb. The hands are cutting wheat in the field back of Beck's house, & your father is with them.⁸³

Thomas Walker Bullitt, his father, and his grandfather believed that they were good masters and that African-Americans were biologically designed for enslavement. They believed, for the most part, that the slaves at Oxmoor were happy with their condition. They felt justified in their views. However, perpetuating the myth today that Kentucky slavery was mild and that Kentucky slaves were content with enslavement diminishes the accomplishments and tenacity of the oppressed African-Americans in the state.

⁸³ Ibid.