CHAPTER 6

The Gendered Nature of Atlantic World Marketplaces: Female Entrepreneurs in the Nineteenth-Century American Lowcountry

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During the nineteenth century, entrepreneurial women were active in the trade of local foodstuffs in port cities throughout the Atlantic World.[1] Borrowing from African traditions, elite and enslaved women in the

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[1] Bessie House-Midamba and Felix K. Ekechi (eds), *African Market Women and Economic Power: The Role of Women in African Economic Development* (London: Greenwood Press, 1995); Hilary McDonald Beckles, *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society*. (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1999), pp. 140–55; Betty Wood, *Women's Work,*

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American Lowcountry profited from the gendered nature of the provincial food trade.[2] Flora, Elsey and Mary Ann Cowper were three businesswomen whose experiences illustrate how economic relationships among women of different social statuses allowed them all to benefit from local commerce in the southern United States. Flora and Elsey participated in small-scale food trade in and around the urban centre of Savannah, Georgia, with the support of their elite mistress, Mary Ann Cowper. Although Flora and Elsey were legally enslaved, they made enough profit from their business ventures in food production and butter making to maintain some independence from their mistress. Similar to their counterparts in West Africa, enslaved women throughout the American South engaged in business partnerships with their female owners, which enabled these bondswomen to exercise customary rights to buy and sell goods on their own behalf.[3] With the support of their mistresses, entrepreneurial enslaved women in the American Lowcountry developed relatively privileged positions, acculturated from African economic practices, that enabled them to benefit from their own labour in local marketplaces.

The business relationships among Flora, Elsey and Mary Ann provide historians with a case study to examine how both enslaved and elite entrepreneurial women accumulated wealth and maintained financial independence within the slave societies of the Atlantic World. As debates rage between historians, some of whom contend that capitalism ushered in a loss of female economic power, and others who emphasise the continuation of patriarchal control over women in business, this case study offers a new analysis that outlines how enslaved and elite businesswomen in the

Men's Work: The Informal Slave Economies of Lowcountry Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

[2] For this chapter, the American Lowcountry refers to the coastal areas of both South Carolina and Georgia, including the city of Savannah; Philip Morgan (ed.), *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry: The Atlantic World and the Gullah Geechee* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

[3] Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, 'Women's Importance in the African Slave Systems', in Robertson and Klein (eds), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983): pp. 2–28; David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 92; Robert Olwell, '"Loose, Idle and Disorderly": Slave Women in the Eighteenth-Century Charleston Marketplace', in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clarke Hine (eds), *More Than Chattel*: *Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996): pp. 97–110, pp. 99–103; Wood, *Women's Work, Men's Work*, p. 101.

American South were culturally oppressed yet economically successful.[4] A cultural dialectic played out in this region that allowed women to use their specific gender roles to conform to the expectations of slave society, while also challenging its very foundations through their participation in commercial ventures. A more nuanced understanding of slavery that connects the American Lowcountry to the Atlantic World can be reached by exploring how urban women used traditional African ideas of women's work to profit from their specific societal positions.

To establish a new interpretation of the economic lives of enslaved women, historians need to include the urban American South as an integral part of the Atlantic World. Scholars of the American South have long emphasised the rural plantation as the locus of interactions between free and enslaved individuals.[5] The scholarly discussion of female relationships between these two groups has recently shifted from focusing on mutual trust based on common oppression as women to emphasising the violence perpetuated by mistresses on their female workers.[6] While such brutality undoubtedly occurred on rural plantations, different economic relationships were prevalent between elite and enslaved individuals in the urban environment due to gendered expectations of women's work. Scholars have also shown little interest in how enslaved African and African American women influenced the economic culture of the American South. This chapter addresses this deficiency through the case studies of Flora and

[4] Nicola Phillips, *Women in Business, 1700–1850* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2006), p. 9; Pamela Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism: Working Women in the English Economy, 1700–1850* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), pp. 17–18; Bridget Hill, 'Women's History: A Study in Change, Continuity or Standing Still', *Women's History Review* 1 (1993): pp. 5–19; Judith Bennett, 'Women's History: A Study in Continuity and Change', *Women's History Review* 2 (1993): pp. 173–84; Linda J. Nicholson, *Gender and History: The Limits of Social Theory in the Age of Family* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 17–42.

[5] Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South, Revised Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

[6] Stephanie Jones-Rogers, 'Rethinking Sexual Violence and the Marketplace of Slavery: White Women, the Slave Market, and Enslaved People's Sexualized Bodies in the Nineteenth Century South', in Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris (eds), *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018): pp. 109–23.

Elsey. By exploring their relationships with Mary Ann, this analysis offers a more nuanced history than that of recent scholarship, which primarily emphasises violence and resistance. This chapter investigates how women used their differing social statuses to maintain a continuity of women's labour from previous generations, while also challenging the patriarchal structure of southern slave society.

Historians are still grappling with the reality that enslaved people, especially women, were economic participants in urban southern markets. This hesitation comes from precedents established in American historiography of slavery during the early twentieth century. Some scholars suggested that enslaved Africans did not have business traditions to draw upon or replicate in their new environments and asserted that this deficiency caused modern African American businesses to be less successful than their Euro American counterparts.[7] This idea, initially espoused by E. Franklin Frazier in 1957, endured until challenged by Juliet Walker in her 2009 study, *The History of Black Business in America*.[8] Walker outlined the rich cultural heritage of Africans in business, contending that the racist economic policies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, combined with skewed methodologies, prevented a complex understanding of contemporary African American businesses.[9] Walker argued that selling 'produce enabled African American slave women not only to participate in the economy, but also to pass their valuable marketing skills from one generation to the next'.[10] Walker's evidence from newspapers, court cases and travellers' accounts suggests that enslaved and free women of African descent actively participated in American commerce, transferring knowledge about how to conduct business from female-oriented marketplaces in West Africa.

Many women and girls caught in the slave trade could not bring material objects with them across the Atlantic, but the way that enslaved women created economic relationships with their elite mistresses survived the Middle Passage.[11] In 1840, 5158 of Savannah's residents were of African

[7] E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), pp. 17, 129–39.

[8] Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1963), pp. 30–33.

[9] Juliet E.K. Walker, *The History of Black Businesses in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. xxiv.

[10] Walker, *The History of Black Businesses in America*, p. 90.

[11] Walker, *The History of Black Businesses in America*, p. 89.

descent, and 3370 of them were women.[12] African and African American women constituted 30 per cent of Savannah's population, and the domestic work they performed, like cooking and meal preparation, undoubtedly enabled them to influence the culture of the city marketplaces to reflect their African heritage.[13] The movement of women from specific regions in West Africa to the American Lowcountry can be visualised through digital mapping. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade database lists sixteen voyages to Charleston and Savannah between 1753 and 1807. More than 20 per cent of the captives were female (Fig. 6.1). Market forces in the principal ports of landing might have influenced the decisions of vessel captains, who were bringing cargoes that would yield premium prices. Due to the gendered nature of domestic work, enslaved women were essential in daily food commerce, which allowed them to establish commercial relationships based on African ideals with elite women, merchants and other enslaved individuals.

The labour organisation Mary Ann Cowper instituted for her market women Flora and Elsey was similar to the economic associations between elite and enslaved women in West and West-Central Africa. For example, nineteenth-century Hausa peoples, who resided in what is currently northern Nigeria, kept enslaved people to work as domestics and farm labourers in a similar vein as Lowcountry planters.[14] Slave-owning Hausa women were akin to their slave-owning American counterparts in the ways they organised enslaved labour to remain financially independent from their male kin. The religious practice of Purdah, or *Kulle*, kept married women tied to the home and secluded from the public sphere; thus, women in West Africa were thought by early British anthropologists to have little

[12] Joseph Bancroft, *Census of the City of Savannah* (Savannah: Edward J. Purse, Printer, 1848), p. 7.

[13] Timothy Lockley, 'Slaveholders and Slaves in Savannah's 1860 Census', *Urban History* 41, no. 4 (2014): pp. 647–63, pp. 653–55; Jacqueline Jones, '"My Mother Was Much of a Woman": Black Women, Work, and the Family Under Slavery', *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 2 (1982): pp. 235–69, pp. 236–37.

[14] Paul E. Lovejoy, 'The Characteristics of Plantations in the Nineteenth-Century Sokoto Caliphate', *American Historical Review* 84, no. 5 (1979): pp. 1267–92; Polly Hill, 'From Slavery to Freedom: The Case of Farm-Slavery in Nigerian Hausaland', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 18, no. 3 (1976): pp. 395–426, p. 420; Ahmed Beita Yusuf, 'Capital Formation and Management among the Muslim Hausa Traders of Kano, Nigeria', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 45, no. 2 (1975): pp. 167–82.

Fig. 6.1 Map showing + 20 per cent female captives West Africa to American Lowcountry, 1753–1807. (Source: Alisha M. Cromwell)

power in their households. Recent studies have challenged that analysis.[15] Scholars have found that households in modern Hausaland have 'evolved through centuries of complex interaction between Islam and African models' and that women in precolonial Africa might not have been marginalised to the extent reported by colonial British observers.[16] Through enslaved surrogates, Hausa women in *Kulle* conducted business transactions and trade that provided economic autonomy. By developing economic relationships with their enslaved domestics, Hausa women had bought, sold and controlled agricultural surpluses from the rural areas to the city markets for generations. Elite southern women in the United States, who also did not travel to food markets due to social restrictions, conducted business in a similar fashion through enslaved surrogates.[17]

Along with the Muslim Hausa, several other African cultural groups had strong female participation in commerce. European travellers referred to African businesswomen such as '*nharas* in the Guinea-Bissau region, *signares* in Senegal and *senoras* along the Gambia River'.[18] The most successful women in the Angolan city of Luanda owned slaves, ships and land.[19] Known as *donas*, these women had considerable wealth and power as they conducted the trans-Atlantic trade for slaves, salt, gold and metals with European powers like the Portuguese and British.[20] Much like Mary Ann Cowper, women in West and West-Central Africa worked within the existing slave trade, which was largely based on male merchants engaging in trans-Atlantic trade. However, women subverted this patriarchal system

[15] Britta Frede and Joseph Hill, 'Introduction: En-gendering Islamic Authority in West Africa', *Islamic Africa* 5, no. 2 (2014): pp. 131–65; Barbara J. Callaway, 'Ambiguous Consequences of the Socialisation and Seclusion of Hausa Women', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 22, no. 3 (1984): pp. 429–50, p. 431.

[16] *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Culture, Vol. II: Family, Law and Politics* (Boston: Brill, 2005), p. 258.

[17] Kelley Fanto Deetz, *Bound to the Fire: How Virginia's Enslaved Cooks Helped Invent America's Cuisine* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2017), pp. 101–03; Kirsten E. Wood, *Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution Through the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 84–85; Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social & Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 47–48.

[18] George E. Brooks, 'A Nhara of Guinea-Bissau: Mae Aurelia Correia', in Claire Robertson and Martin A. Klein (eds), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983): pp. 295–319, p. 295.

[19] Vanessa S. Oliveira, 'Gender, Foodstuff Production and Trade in Late Eighteenth-Century Luanda', *African Economic History* 43 (2015): pp. 51–81, p. 59.

[20] See Chap. 9 by Oliveira in this volume.

by making independent economic decisions about how they organised their enslaved agricultural workers, their skilled labourers and their long-distance trade operations. Although they lived an ocean apart, nineteenth-century West African and southern American slaveholding women maintained their economic sovereignty by manoeuvring around patriarchal restrictions in business. Enslaved women also benefited from these relationships as they were integrated into commercial economies.

Mary Ann Cowper was a savvy businesswoman who, like many Muslim women in Africa, initially gained her wealth through inheritances from several family members.[21] She was raised by plantation owners and merchants who had connections to businessmen and women throughout the Atlantic World. Mary Ann owned people, property and stock in England, Jamaica, New York, South Carolina and Georgia[22] (Fig. 6.2). She also travelled extensively to each of these places[23] (Fig. 6.3). In 1818, at the age of 42, Mary Ann made her permanent home in Savannah, where her familial roots had been planted. By 1819, she was managing her global affairs from her house on the corner of Abercorn and W. Bay streets[24] (Fig. 6.4). By the time of her death in 1856, she was living with a widowed cousin and had amassed a fortune of about US$85,000, which amounts to over US$2,000,000 in modern currency.[25] These connections to both people and places permitted her access to an emerging capitalist economy

[21] Hafiz Nazeem Goolam, 'Gender Equality in Islamic Family Law', in Hisham M. Ramadan (ed.), *Understanding Islamic Law: From Classical to Contemporary* (AltaMira Press, 2006): pp. 117–34, p. 129; Richard Kimber, 'The Qur'anic Law of Inheritance', *Islamic Law and Society* 5, no. 3 (1998): pp. 291–325, p. 291.

[22] Mary Ann Cowper, 'Estate Records, 1816–1850', Mackay-Stiles Papers, #00470, Vol. 44, Series E.6, Folder 118 (Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; hereinafter cited as SHC).

[23] Walter Charlton Hartridge (ed.), *The Letters of Don Juan McQueen to His Family* (Savannah: Georgia Society of the Colonial Dames of America, 1943), p. 27. Walter Charlton Hartridge (ed.), *The Letters of Robert Mackay to His Wife* (Savannah: Georgia Society of the Colonial Dames of America, 1949), pp. 254–55, 274.

[24] Mary Ann Cowper, 'Estate Records, 1816–1850' (SHC).

[25] Georgia Court of Ordinary, Chatham County, GA., *Wills Vol 1, 1852–1862*, Last Will & Testament of Mary Anna Cowper, 23 April 1856, 201–206. Ancestry.com. *Georgia, Wills and Probate Records, 1742–1992.* Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015; Cowper listed a total of US$8000 in cash as gifts and named a total of sixty-seven individuals, who were worth at least US$57,000 https://www.measuringworth.com/slavery.php, as well as her properties in Georgia, South Carolina and New York. A currency calculator was used to convert currency from 1856 into 2015 money https://www.historicalstatistics.org/Currencyconverter.html

Fig. 6.2 Map showing Mary Ann Cowper's properties, 1800–1856. (Source: Alisha M. Cromwell)

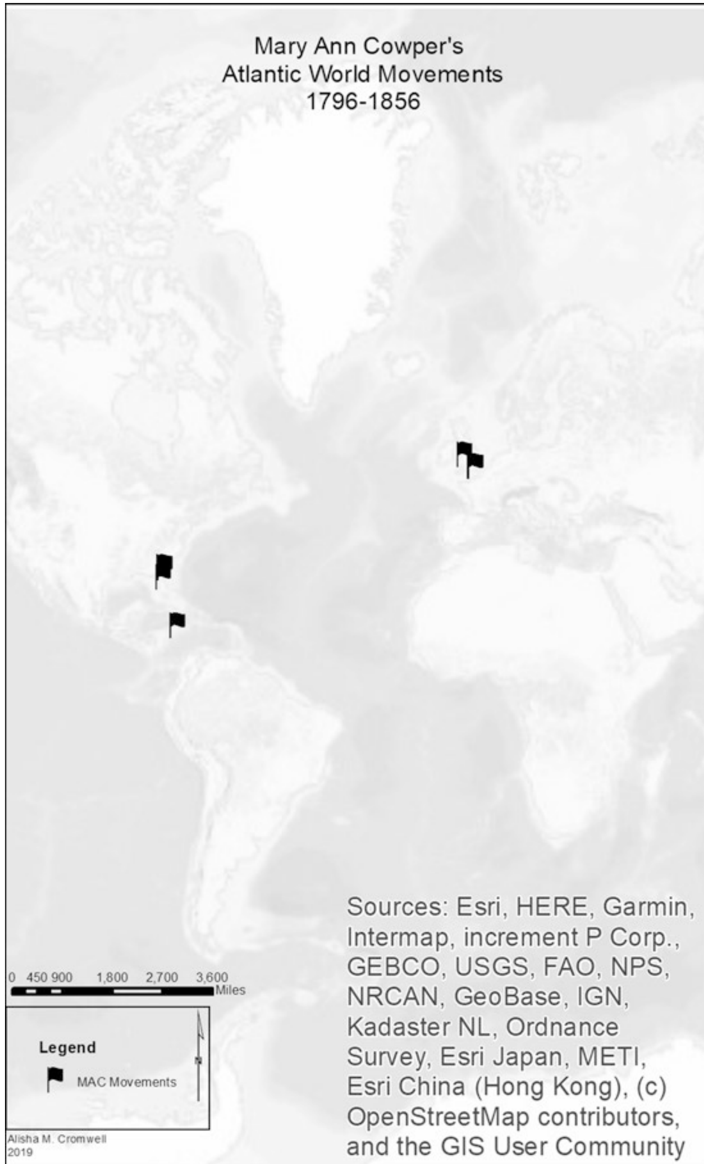

Fig. 6.3 Map showing Mary Ann Cowper's Atlantic World Movements, 1796–1856. (Source: Alisha M. Cromwell)

Fig. 6.4 Map showing Mary Ann Cowper's Savannah properties, 1800–1856. (Source: Alisha M. Cromwell)

as she exploited the labour of all of her enslaved workers, including her urban workforce in Savannah.

In the American South, widowed and single women like Mary Ann hired out enslaved workers to city governments and/or private industries for cash wages. Usually at the beginning of each year, enslaved carpenters, mechanics, longshoremen and domestics would enter into contracts or agreements with third parties to work for a specific amount of time in return for wages.[26] Some money was given to their owners, and enslaved people used their remaining cash for living expenses like rent, clothing and food. One advantage for owners was that they no longer had to house, clothe and feed their enslaved workers. However, this form of labour organisation contradicted a basic tenet of slavery because hiring out enslaved people allowed them to participate in elements of free-wage labour. Eugene Genovese estimated that between '5 and 10 percent of the slaves of the South could expect to be hired out during any given year in the late antebellum period'.[27] This created a class of workers who did not fit into the plantation system as they participated in the labour market independently from their masters, acquired their own capital and made their own decisions, at least to some extent, in the marketplace.[28] This quasi-free labour system allowed elite women like Mary Ann to earn an income, while also permitting women like Flora and Elsey a modicum of freedom in a slave society. Monetary transactions between mistresses and enslaved workers fuelled an internal economy that functioned alongside the emerging global capitalist market of the nineteenth century.[29]

Enslaved men and women who worked for wages were a necessary part of the urban labour force, and they could not be as easily restricted in their decisions and movements as their counterparts on plantations. By 1800,

[26] Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820–1860,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964); Claudia Dale Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820–1860: A Quantitative History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

[27] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. 390.

[28] Loren Schweninger, 'Slave Independence and Enterprise in South Carolina, 1780–1865', *South Carolina Historical Magazine* (1992): pp. 101–25.

[29] Inge Dornan, 'Masterful Women: Colonial Women Slaveholders in the Urban Low Country', *Journal of American Studies* 39, no. 3 (2005): pp. 383–402; Jeff Forret, 'Slaves, Poor Whites, and the Underground Economy of the Rural Carolinas', *The Journal Of Southern History* LXX, no. 4 (2004): pp. 783–824; Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South,* 2nd ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), pp. 159–67.

city governments had created slave badges, which were a type of physical ornament, to control urban enslaved labourers throughout the American South. These badges, however, also gave the wearer a certain freedom to move about unmolested in a slave society.[30] Bondsmen who were hired out became 'both labour and capital', which enabled them to manipulate the dualism of being both people and property.[31] For example, South Carolina mechanics petitioned the State Assembly in 1858 to pass laws preventing 'slaves from hiring their own time', but they did not get the outcome they desired.[32] The Committee on Colored Populations responded that to 'carry out the provisions of the Acts of 1822 & 1849 to the full, would be to drive away all slave labor from any employment in the towns & villages of the state--there must be inevitably an exception to the Rule which prohibits the slave from working out'.[33] Slave badges became the catalyst for enslaved peoples' dualism by allowing them to conduct financial transactions, to purchase goods and to determine the cost of their labour. Through the need for contributions to the market and a strong labour force, a specific type of urban economy developed in the Lowcountry among female slave owners, the municipality, merchants and enslaved people that allowed for hired-out slaves to become direct participants in the market through the buying and selling of both labour power and market goods.[34]

[30] Harlan Greene, Harry S. Hutchins Jr. and Brian E. Hutchins, S*lave Badges and the Slave-Hire System in Charleston*, *South Carolina, 1783–1865,* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004), p. 6; Bruce Smith, 'Badges Give a Glimpse into Slavery', C*harleston Post & Courier,* 24 February 2003; 'A Special Note About Slave Tags', Price Guide, 8th Edition, *North-South Trader* (1999), p. 151.

[31] Jonathan Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 30.

[32] South Carolina General Assembly Petitions, *The Committee on Colored Populations to the House of Representatives, December 7th, 1858* (South Carolina Archives and History, to be further abbreviated as SCDAH).

[33] South Carolina General Assembly Petitions, *The Committee on Colored Populations to the House of Representatives, December 7th, 1858* (SCDAH).

[34] For further analysis of enslaved Southerners' willingness to contribute to a larger market economy, see Philip D. Morgan, 'The Ownership of Property by Slaves in the Mid-Nineteenth Century Low Country', *Journal of Southern History* 49 (1983): pp. 399–420; Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (eds), *The Slave's Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas* (London: Frank Cass & Co. LTD, 1991); Dylan Penningroth, *Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Kathleen M. Hilliard, *Masters, Slaves, and*

Due to their sheer numbers, their shifting positions from domestic to market seller and the important service that they provided for the local food market, enslaved businesswomen were much harder for municipalities to manage. Hired-out enslaved male workers were regulated through slave badges more often than their female counterparts. Mary Ann made sure that she followed the city laws and that her workers were always employed under legal conditions by purchasing badges for her skilled workers like Mulatto George, Young Jack and Maurice.[35] She was not required to purchase a Fruiter, Huckster or even Servant badge for her enslaved domestics like Flora and Elsey because they were not viewed as moving outside of their allotted positions.[36] The fact that city governments fined owners for men working without a badge more frequently than women highlights enslaved women's importance to the local food economy.[37]

Nonetheless, the presence of enslaved women peddling their wares at the marketplace was not universally approved. Southern newspapers described the chaos of early American marketplaces. Mobile enslaved women like Flora and Elsey were often labelled 'loose, idle and disorderly' as they became increasingly more dominant in the sales and distribution of foodstuffs; by contrast, enslaved men were very rarely referred to in these terms.[38] A Presentment of the Grand Jury of the Charleston District in 1768 protested that the 'many idle Negro Wenches, selling dry goods, cakes, rice, etc. in the markets' were becoming a nuisance. One Charleston resident noted that 'I have known those black women to be so insolent as even to wrest things out of the hands of white people, pretending they had been bought before, for their masters or mistresses, yet expose *the same* for sale again within an hour after, for their own benefit'.[39] Wealthier Charlestonians soon abandoned going to the market altogether to avoid dealing with enslaved women during financial transactions, preferring,

Exchange: Power's Purchase in the Old South (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[35] Cowper, 'Estate Records, 1816–1850' (GHS), p. 79.

[36] Cowper, 'Estate Records, 1816–1850' (SHC), pp. 82, 89.

[37] City of Savannah, 'Fine Docket Book', 5600CM-10, Research Library and Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

[38] Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740–1790* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 97–110.

[39] *South Carolina Gazette*, 24 September, p. 1772.

instead, to send their own enslaved people to handle these matters.[40] As a result, the marketplace was largely controlled by both free and enslaved African and African Americans. 'The Laws of Market' were colour-blind, so 'property and price' rather than 'deference and duty' determined the relationships between people of many different social statuses.[41] These attitudes reflected a class structure that put enslaved women working for their mistresses in a special category that poorer people had to accept, regardless of the colour codes in southern slave society.

Through the gendered labour organisation of her male workers participating in trades and her female workers participating in domestic work and at the market, Mary Ann was able to use her enslaved workers in ways that made them extremely productive for her. Mary Ann Cowper was living with her widowed cousin Eliza McQueen Mackay on Broughton Street in Savannah from at least as early as 1848.[42] The two women had been incredibly close, frequently writing letters to each other in previous years. Mary Ann probably lived with her cousin to maintain some form of companionship with her kin as she had no other close relatives other than Eliza's family by this time. Mary Ann contributed things like coffee, molasses and butter to her cousin's household for daily use.[43] Like many others of her class, she depended on a network of enslaved workers to obtain these things from the market. Flora and Elsey also brought Mary Ann cash and items for the household. Although Mary Ann retained mastery over her urban enslaved workforce by law, she could not influence how they spent their money once the coins shifted hands. Through her use of hired-out enslaved workers, she helped to legitimise elements of free-wage labour for her male workers and encouraged her entrepreneurial women to participate in marketplace commerce.

By 1830, Flora and Elsey resided on Mary Ann Cowper's small plantation, Oatlands Island, about four miles south of the city centre on the Savannah River[44] (Fig. 6.5). Prior to the Revolutionary War, this plantation had been owned by Mary Ann's uncle, Don Juan McQueen. His wife, Anne McQueen, gifted Oatlands Island to her son, John McQueen Jr.,

[40] Olwell, *Masters, Slaves and Subjects*, pp. 166–78.

[41] Olwell, 'Loose, Idle and Disorderly', pp. 178–81.

[42] 1850 US Census, Savannah, Chatham County, Georgia, M-19, Roll 16 (Savannah: Bull Street Library), p. 55.

[43] Cowper, 'Estate Records, 1816–1850'(SHC), pp. 12–17.

[44] Cowper, 'Estate Records, 1816–1850' (SHC), p. 79.

Fig. 6.5 Map showing Oatlands Plantation, 1822–1856. (Source: Alisha M. Cromwell)

when she died in 1809.[45] When John Jr. died in 1822, he bequeathed the property to his wife, Margaret Cowper McQueen, who was Mary Ann's younger sister.[46] After John's death, Margaret lived in England until she died in 1841.[47] Although she owned many enslaved people in Savannah, Margaret preferred to be an absentee slaveholder. Mary Ann probably ran Oatlands Island while her sister was living in England and officially took over management when Margaret died.

John Jr. first tried his hand at planting Sea Island cotton at Oatlands Island in 1810, and he was not very successful. Oatlands Island then became an agricultural centre for growing staple crops, like corn and cabbages, to supply the family's surrounding plantations, including The Grange (Fig. 6.6). According to family history, 'the McQueen and Smith families spent much time in the comfortable dwelling on Oatlands, and took pride in their extensive Kitchen garden'.[48] The fresh vegetables and livestock at Oatlands supplied the families with food, but its importance diminished as family members died and plantations were sold. By the 1840s, the surpluses that once went to places like The Grange were now left to the discretion of the enslaved workers who still resided on Oatlands Island.

Mary Ann kept careful records about her household expenses, but she very rarely mentioned what was happening at Oatlands Island. She would occasionally request Flora bring her some cabbages from the garden; however, she did not record further directives about what to plant, when to harvest or which market to sell in.[49] Since there was no overseer and Oatlands Island plantation was very small, Mary Ann seems to have given control of the day-to-day operations directly to her enslaved labourers who had worked the land for over a decade. As Philip Morgan pointed out, the task system left enslaved workers with free time to cultivate their own crops to dispose of as they wished, and this appears to have been the case at

[45] *The Letters of Don Juan McQueen*, p. 27.

[46] *The Letters of Don Juan McQueen*, p. xxxi.

[47] Commissioner of Records, Surrogates' Court, County of New York, 'Administration Bonds, 1753–1866', Box 8-28,975, Vol 0042–0044, 1842–1844. Ancestry.com. *New York, Wills and Probate Records, 1659–1999*. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015.

[48] *The Letters of Robert Mackay*, p. 268.

[49] Cowper 'Estate Records, 1816–1850' (SHC), 19.

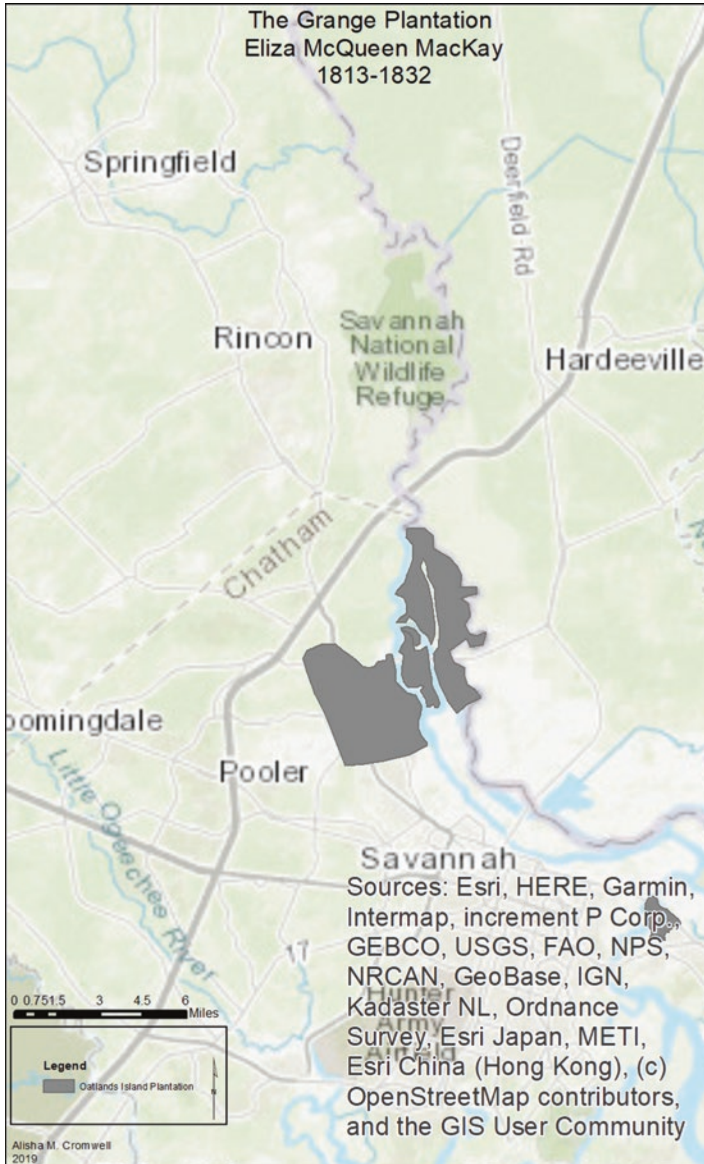

Fig. 6.6 Map showing the Grange Plantation, Eliza McQueen MacKay, 1813–1832. (Source: Alisha M. Cromwell)

Oatlands Island when the need for large food crops ceased.[50] Flora and Elsey probably used the resources at Oatlands Island to maintain financial independence through selling crops and butter in the local provision economy.

By 1847, Oatlands Island had become a summer retreat for Mary Ann and her nieces. As she aged further, Mary Ann visited less frequently until she stopped going altogether. When she died in 1857, her will stated that 'These four I desire shall be permitted to remain at Oatlands and have comfortable homes there as long as they live. Flora, Stephan, Elsey and Lucinda, … I desire earnestly they shall be permitted all such privileges and indulgences and freedom as use not inconsistent with the laws of the state of Georgia'.[51] While some sentiment might have guided her decision, Mary Ann also strategically passed her revenue stream to her nieces, Catherine and Sarah McQueen, who inherited both Oatlands Island and its enslaved people. The enslaved people on this plantation had been growing their own crops, tending their own cattle and living in their own houses for over twenty years when Mary Ann died. They would have hoped that Catherine and Sarah would follow the same cultural customs as both Margaret and Mary Ann to retain their economic independence.[52] The records go quiet after Mary Ann's death, and there is no guarantee that Catherine and Sarah allowed Flora and Elsey to remain on Oatlands Island. However, the skills and knowledge that these entrepreneurial women had acquired over their lifetimes defined a specific type of marketing system based on the gendered nature of domestic work that emerged in the American Lowcountry.

Due to her association with Mary Ann and her own knowledge of marketing culture, Flora was able to participate as an independent actor in the local marketplaces of Savannah. On 8 October 1848, Mary Ann gave Flora US$1.50 for 'marketing till Saty 16th', and by 18 October, Flora had paid her back with '1 Doll'r worth br. Sugar'.[53] Mary Ann never logged where the 50 cents went. The records do not tell the whole story, but they do show Mary Ann paid her enslaved workers for their goods, which they spent in the local marketplaces and thereby stimulated the

[50] Philip D. Morgan, 'Work and Culture: The Task System and the Word of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700–1880', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 39 (October 1982), pp. 563–99.

[51] 'Last Will and Testament of Mary Anna Cowper, 1856'.

[52] *The Letters of Don Juan McQueen to His Family*, p. 27.

[53] Cowper, 'Estate Records, 1816–1850', p. 22.

economy. Patriarchal concepts of who was to perform domestic tasks like marketing became the mechanism from which both Mary Ann and Flora constructed an economic arrangement that could remain viable in a slave society. Merchants, poor people, some urban female slave owners and their enslaved property all contributed to the establishment of a common-law system in which they depended on one another.[54]

Flora provided Mary Ann with a portion of her proceeds; in return, she was granted a type of autonomy that existed specifically for skilled enslaved workers who made their own money. Mary Ann frequently recorded her economic interactions with Flora in her Common Place Book. From 1846 to 1847, Mary Ann kept records of the amount of money that she paid to Flora for food items that she brought into the household. On 16 February 1847, Mary Ann subtracted a dollar from her Common Place Book for 'Marketing- Seasoning & Onions pd by Flora while in town'.[55] Similar transactions occurred frequently, and Mary Ann's Common Place Book features careful notes about Flora's purchases. Flora was an adept market woman, entering shops and participating in the food trade. Flora clearly understood math and could competently participate in a monetary exchange. Mary Ann was confident in Flora's ability to purchase different items, including red flannel cloth, fruits, sugar and bread because Flora could make her own decisions in the marketplace and was not just following instructions. Rather than being given cash by Mary Ann to buy goods, Flora had enough money already in her possession to purchase them and expected to be reimbursed.[56] The relationship that developed between these two women was based on a mutual economic understanding that required Flora to participate in the market in order to live independently from Mary Ann. This link provided Flora with a degree of freedom and mobility.

Alongside her connection with Mary Ann, Flora was also enmeshed in the networks of enslaved people at the family's many properties around Savannah. Flora was born on the Cowper's Jamaican pimento plantation, Barron Hill, in 1814[57] (Fig. 6.7). Due to the instability of plantation life,

[54] Timothy J. Lockley, 'Trading Encounters Between Non-Elite Whites and African Americans in Savannah, 1790–1860', *The Journal of Southern History* 66, no. 1 (2000): pp. 25–48; Jeff Forret, 'Slaves, Poor Whites, and the Underground Economy of the Rural Carolinas', *The Journal of Southern History* 70, no. 4 (2004): pp. 783–824.

[55] Cowper, 'Estate Records, 1816–1850', p. 13.

[56] Cowper, 'Estate Records, 1816–1850', pp. 12–17.

[57] Probate Records, Trelawney Parish, Anno 1804, 'Basil Cowper Inventory' No. 101 (Jamaican National Archives, Spanish Town hereinafter cited as JNA), pp. 22–25.

Fig. 6.7 Map showing Baron Hill Plantation, 1798–1818. (Source: Alisha M. Cromwell)

enslaved people developed communities through 'Fictive Kin' or familial relationships that were not predicated on blood connections.[58] By designating non-related people into kinship groups, enslaved Africans established 'friendships which are regarded in kinship terms' that 'undergo an intensification of the bonds of mutual obligation'.[59] Creating a fictive kinship network allowed enslaved individuals to recreate their lost communities.[60] Flora was born into a place that had developed a fictive kinship network through naming practices, and she was instantly connected to it through her first name. In the 1804 inventory of Barron Hill, two women named Flora appeared, one worth US$60 and the other worth US$40.[61] The next mention of Flora occurred when Parliament required the Jamaican colony to carry out a census of enslaved people. J.P. Utten took the Return of Slaves at Barron Hill on 28 June 1817.[62] The Return segregated enslaved people by sex and registered their 'colour, age, African or Creole' status. Utten also listed their mother's name in a familial order.[63] Three different Floras were now present: a sixty-nine-year-old woman, a twenty-one-year-old mother and a three-year-old child. These Floras became part of a barely visible fictive kinship network that gave enslaved people familial roots even though they were not related by blood.

Naming children after people they respected or, alternatively, keeping traditional naming practices from Africa alive were ways that enslaved people created community relationships at Barron Hill.[64] The first genera-

[58] Daina Remy Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 53; Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

[59] Linda M. Chatters, Robert Joseph Taylor and Rumalie Jayakody, 'Fictive Kinship Relations in Black Extended Families', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 25, no. 3 (1994): pp. 297–312.

[60] James Sweet, 'Defying Social Death: The Multiple Configurations of African Slave Family in the Atlantic World', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2013): pp. 251–72; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1982).

[61] *Journals of the Council*, October 1792–December 1793, Vol. 1B, Folder 5/4/18 (JNA).

[62] Office of the Registry of Colonial Slaves and Slave Compensation Commission, Records Class 771, '1817 Return of Slaves for Mary Cowper in the Parish of Trelawney, Jamaica' (The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, Surrey, England hereinafter cited as NAUK), 227; Ancestry.com. *Slave Registers of former British Colonial Dependencies, 1813–1834.* Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2007.

[63] 'A Return of Slaves, 1817' (NAUK), 227–31.

[64] Michael Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom in the Caribbean* (United Kingdom: James Currey Publishers, 1997), p. 243.

tion of African men and women who arrived at the plantation had names that were either taken from antiquity or popularised in England. These new names were forced upon them somewhere along the way, perhaps on the African coast, in a slave ship, at a port in the New World or on a plantation. The types of names were picked by slavers from 'a desire to identify slaves uniquely' so that they could conduct business on the plantation without confusion, yet monikers like Caesar, Cato, Belle and Flora were passed down to a younger generation at Barron Hill.[65] This pattern suggests that a group of people established relationships with one another, developed a community and perpetuated it by naming their children for other community members. Not all enslaved workers chose to perpetuate names given by their captors. Some of these people gave their children traditional West African day names, such as Quasheba, Mimba, Cudjoe and Quaco. These names were direct references back to West African Akon cultures like the Ashanti and Fanti peoples, who resided on the coast of present-day Ghana.[66] Names not only reflected how enslaved women connected their children to Africa but also how they linked their offspring to other enslaved individuals to maintain some familial stability.

Flora learned just how precarious enslavement was when she was taken from her home at Barron Hill and sent to The Grange Plantation in Georgia (Fig. 6.6). Just prior to the global financial panic of 1819, Mary Ann and her widowed mother had to liquidate some of their plantation holdings. In October 1818, they left England, where they had lived since 1806 as absentee plantation owners, and returned to Savannah, the place of their birth.[67] Polly and Mary Ann sold a majority of their workforce to nearby planters. Joseph Travers, an absentee British planter who owned land in Trelawney Parish, purchased the first- and second-generation Floras and their family units.[68] While some family units were saved, others were ripped apart as Mary Ann and her mother sold off their human investments, which suggested that their sale to neighbours was a result of the need for ready cash rather than an acknowledgement of the deep kin

[65] Cheryll Ann Cody, 'There Was No "Absalom" on the Ball Plantations: Slave-Naming Practices in the South Carolina Low Country, 1720–1865', *The American Historical Review* 92, no. 3 (1987): pp. 563–96.

[66] Philip F.W. Bartle, 'Forty Days: The Akon Calendar', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 49, no. 1 (1978): pp. 80–4.

[67] Cowper 'Estate Records, 1816–1850', pp. 69–75.

[68] Registry of Colonial Slaves and Slave Compensation Commission, Records Class 771, '1820 Return of Slaves for Joseph Travers' (NAUK), p. 230.

ties of their slaves. These transactions made the development of relationships through naming practices important for African people to maintain some connection to their homelands and to each other. Flora was part of a kinship network that was based on her mother's relationship to an elder Flora, and the gift of that name would continue to benefit her by connecting her to other women of the same name, even as she was forced to travel the Atlantic World. As John Inscoe stated, enslaved people 'were able to create a distinct identity through their names', and through an older woman named Flora, the younger Flora was able to develop kinship networks around Savannah based on her name.[69] Through such fictive kinship networks, enslaved people established systems of communication from rural areas to urban spaces.[70] These links also facilitated an informal trade network, which allowed cash money to move through the hands of both free and enslaved individuals as they made decisions about buying and selling.[71]

The Cowper women took four-year-old Flora with them from Jamaica to Savannah in 1819, probably to train her in domestic service.[72] Flora, the Latin name for the Roman goddess of flowers, was a common name for enslaved females in the American South: there were sixteen Floras on the Ball plantations in South Carolina between 1820 and 1839.[73] Probably because of their names, Flora from Jamaica was sent to live with 'Old Flora' at the Cowpers' cousin Eliza's plantation, The Grange, in 1820[74] (Fig. 6.6). In that year, a nameless child is listed in the same household as Old Flora and her partner Forrest. A few months prior, Margaret McQueen had written a letter to her cousin Eliza to inquire about Old Flora purchasing cloth for Little Flora to make her two new suits of clothes, one for

[69] John C. Inscoe, 'Carolina Slave Names: An Index to Acculturation', *The Journal of Southern History* 49, no. 4 (1983): pp. 527–54.

[70] Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 12–34.

[71] Dylan Penningroth, 'The Claims of Slaves and Ex-Slaves to Family and Property: A Transatlantic Comparison', *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (2007): pp. 1039–69; Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

[72] Georgia Court of the Ordinary, Last Will and Testament of Mary Cowper, 1821, Georgia Wills & Probate Records, 1742–1992; *Wills Vol. E-F, 1807–1827*, pp. 135–39. Ancestry.com. *Georgia, Wills and Probate Records, 1742–1992*. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015.

[73] Cody 'There Was No "Absalom" on the Ball Plantations', p. 587.

[74] Cowper 'Estate Records, 1816–1850', p. 12.

winter and one for summer. While it is unclear if Eliza provided her with the cash or whether she already had it, Old Flora must have had access to the marketplace in order to purchase the cloth for the dresses.[75] After 'Old Flora' died in April 1826, 'little' was no longer used to label the Flora from Jamaica in Mary Ann's accounting records.[76] Flora had successfully been integrated into a kinship system.

Like Flora and the many other enslaved women before her, Elsey's life story can also be found in bits and pieces throughout the letters, diaries and account books of the Cowper, McQueen and MacKay families. Elsey was much younger than Flora and also lived at Oatlands Island plantation, where she produced and sold butter in the Savannah area. Oatlands Island plantation had a few cattle, and Mary Ann's account book lists receipts for US$3 in 'rice flour for the cattle at Otlnds'.[77] Rice flour, which consists of the byproducts from rice cultivation, was often used as a cheap feed substitute for cows.[78] Unlike her accounting for the cash she received from Flora's marketing business, Mary Ann recorded in-kind payments of butter from Elsey to pay for the cattle's upkeep. With the knowledge of her absentee mistresses, Margaret McQueen and then Mary Ann Cowper, Elsey had been making and selling butter from the milk cows on Oatlands Island since she was eight years old. This skill was needed throughout the community, and she used her knowledge to provide enough income for her own necessities and to satisfy Mary Ann.

A kinship network for Elsey can also be found in the records of the Cowper, McQueen and MacKay families. Two people named Elsey were listed on the slave rolls of the McQueen family between 1810 and 1822, which suggests that butter making was a skill handed down from one generation to the next.[79] An 'Old Elsey' and an eight-year-old Elsey were listed in a property agreement between Mary Ann and her sister Margaret

[75] Robert and Eliza Mackay, 'The Grange Plantation Journal', *The Records of the Antebellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution to the Civil War* ed. Kenneth Stamp, microfilm: F213.R43 1985 Series J, pt. 4, r 1–7 (University of Georgia Main Library, Athens), p. 25.

[76] Eliza MacKay, 'The Grange Plantation Journal', p. 36.

[77] Cowper, 'Estate Records, 1816–1850', p. 79.

[78] Shane Gadberry, 'Alternative Feeds for Beef Cattle', *Agriculture and Natural Resources* (Division of Agriculture, University of Arkansas), https://www.uaex.edu/publications/PDF/FSA-3047.pdf

[79] Family Archive of the Andrew Low House, MS #1624 'The Mackay-McQueen Family Papers', Folders 57–65 (Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA; hereafter cited as GHS).

in 1837.[80] Old Elsey had belonged to Don Juan McQueen, and she was sent up from Spanish Florida when he died in 1807.[81] Old Elsey became answerable to Margaret when Margaret married John McQueen, Jr., in 1810. While on a trip to Asheville, North Carolina, in 1812, Margaret wrote to Eliza to 'Please tell Elsie (sic) to make & Save all the butter she can' in order to make sure they had a supply when they returned.[82] In the winter of 1816, Mary Ann wrote to Eliza that 'Margaret desires me to say she thinks Elsey must have earned some money by disposing of fresh butter thro the summer'.[83] She also advised Eliza to have Elsey 'put some up for winter now' so that the revenue stream would continue through the next year.[84] During a majority of that time, Eliza MacKay took responsibility for the daily management of her brother's enslaved workers until Mary Ann took over after John's death in 1822. By this point, Old Elsey had gone through several owners, and she undoubtedly taught her butter-making skills to the younger Elsey to make sure that she also had a way to take care of herself. While it is unclear if the two were biologically related, their shared name, residence as Oatlands Island and profession illustrate how kinship ties among the enslaved workers in the Cowper/McQueen/MacKay households created a sense of identity for these entrepreneurial enslaved women.

In their more than twenty years of walking the Savannah countryside, Flora and Elsey probably developed economic relationships among many groups of people, including elite women, Savannah merchants and other enslaved or free individuals. Both were tasked with delivering letters, produce, butter and other items from Thunderbolt Cliffs, to Oatlands Island, to the Grange and to Broughton Street (Fig. 6.8). Their names show up repeatedly in quick notes and letters between Eliza and Mary

[80] Commissioner of Records, Surrogates' Court, County of New York, 'Administration Bonds, 1753–1866', Box 8-28,975, Vol 0042–0044, 1842–1844. Ancestry.com. *New York, Wills and Probate Records, 1659–1999*. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015.

[81] Inventory of the Estate of J. McQueen in Florida, 'The Mackay-McQueen Family Papers', Box 7, Folder 60-16, (GHS).

[82] Margaret McQueen to Eliza MacKay, 27 March 1812, 'The Mackay-McQueen Family Papers', Box 7, Folder 63-45B, (GHS).

[83] Mary Ann to Eliza MacKay, 16 Dec 1816, Barron Hill, 'The Mackay-McQueen Family Papers', Box 7, Folder 63-49 (GHS).

[84] Mary Ann to Eliza MacKay, 16 Dec 1816, Barron Hill, 'The Mackay-McQueen Family Papers', Box 7, Folder 63-49 (GHS).

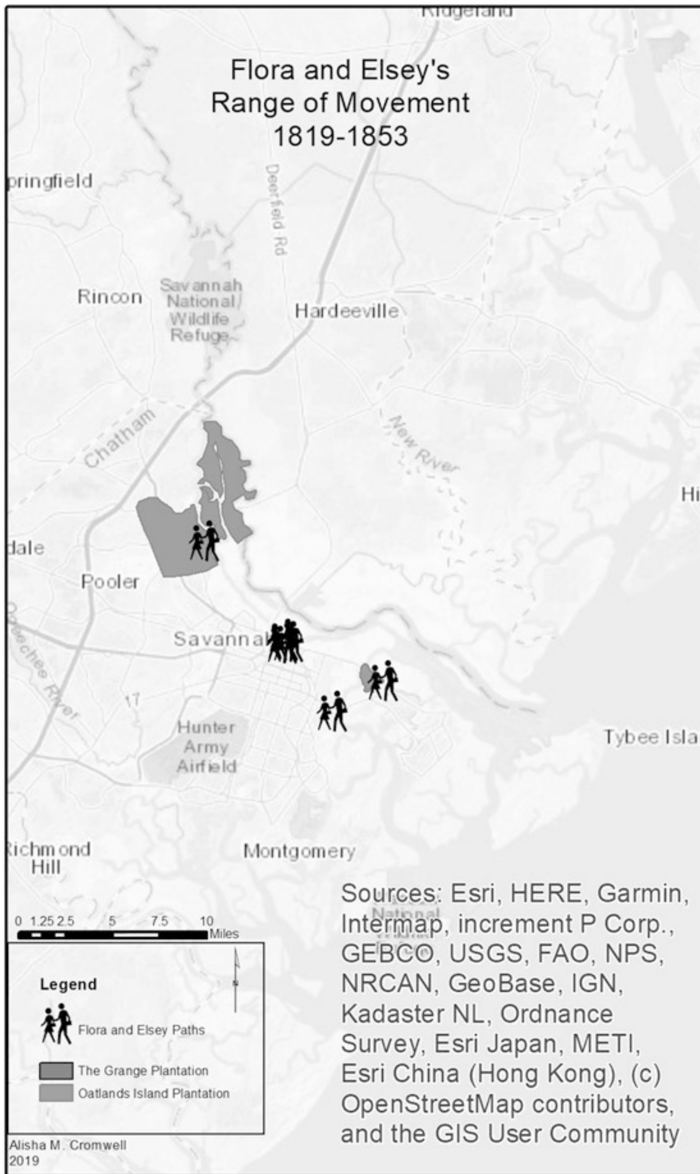

Fig. 6.8 Map showing Flora and Elsey's range of movement, 1819–1853. (Source: Alisha M. Cromwell)

Ann. Enslaved domestics became elite surrogates in the street.[85] Flora and Elsey moved all over the city of Savannah but were 'hidden' in the records because their movements did not seem out of the ordinary for enslaved female marketers. Their gendered position in the domestic sphere allowed them this unique freedom.

Women's work was an important factor in the economic development of the Atlantic World, yet there is a historiographical silence surrounding the business relationships between elite and enslaved entrepreneurial women in the nineteenth century. In order to uncover their commercial enterprises, historians must look beyond the 'silences' that have obscured the voices of these women.[86] Through Mary Ann's economic relationship with Flora and Elsey, scholars can perceive the influence of enslaved domestic workers on the commercial culture of Savannah. These three businesswomen exemplify how gendered domestic work created a type of labour organisation used by elite and enslaved women to remain independent from the patriarchy throughout the Atlantic World. Through female entrepreneurs, historians can view of the Atlantic World as a closely connected space, not one that is an ocean apart.

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[85] Mary Ann Cowper to Eliza Mackay, Reynolds Square 3 March 1833; Thunderbolt Cliffs 6 April 1833; Reynolds Square 23 July 1833; Thunderbolt Cliffs 26 July 1833; Broughton Street, 4 August 1833, 'The Mackay-McQueen Family Papers' (GHS).

[86] Jessica B. Harris, 'Keynote Address- Sea Changes: Culinary Connections in the African Atlantic World', *Atlantic World Foodways Conference*, 30 January 2014.

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