

University of Delaware Center for Diversity Research  
2014 Research Report

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In the summer of 2014, I received a grant of \$980 dollars from the University of Delaware's Center for Diversity Research to travel to Richmond, Virginia for one week of research in the Library of Virginia. As outlined in my grant proposal, the goal of this trip was to gather enough material in the archives for a chapter of my doctoral dissertation titled "Disrupting Slavery: Physical Confrontations in the Antebellum South." Additionally I sought to contextualize my examination of physical confrontations within a defined time (the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and place (Virginia) in order to track changes in slave violence against whites. As I outlined in the proposal, I conducted this research from June 8, 2014 through June 14, 2014.

The research proved remarkably successful. In my trip in June 2014, I uncovered a host of trial transcripts and petitions within the Executive Papers of Virginia Governors from 1801-1860. Beginning in 1801, Virginia law mandated the Governor and his Executive Council review the details of all cases where slaves were convicted of capital crimes (murder, assault, rape, robbery etc.). As a result, the county clerks of Virginia's court system had to copies of the trial transcripts, including testimony to Richmond. These records were then placed in the Executive Papers—the official records of each Governor—where they have remained since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most importantly for my dissertation, these accounts include detailed testimony from white and black witnesses detailing the circumstances that prompted slave violence against whites—the subject of my dissertation. This find yielded so much research material that I could not complete it all within the allotted week. For my trip in June, I focused on records pardon files and other records that had been well documented by the archive. I quickly realized that there was

much more material in the Executive Papers than I initially suspected that had not been set aside and catalogued. When I got home from Virginia, I set about finding a way to uncover the rest of it.

Using the information accumulated in my first research trip and through the use of Inter-Library Loan, I built my own index to the Executive Papers. I requested the records of the Secretary of the Commonwealth, who recorded every issue discussed at the meetings of the Governor and his Executive Council. I then used these records to find the dates when the Governor and his advisors discussed the trials of condemned slaves. Armed with this information, I returned to Richmond for another week of research in December 2014. I then began digging through the Executive Papers of each governor between 1801 and 1860. This plan proved slightly problematic as the archivists had reorganized the trial transcripts by the trial date at the top of the document and not by the date they had been discussed in council. After some last minute scrambling, I realized that I had recorded the trial dates for these documents (I can't remember why I did that, but I'm thankful I did). In total, between the two weeks of research in June and December 2014, I collected over two hundred and twenty detailed examples of physical confrontations between slaves and whites from 1801-1860.

In my proposal to the Center for Diversity Research, I wrote that I hoped to collect enough material for a chapter of my dissertation. This Virginia research proved so fruitful that I reorganized my dissertation to concentrate solely on slave violence in Virginia, rather than in the whole of the Antebellum South. This narrower geographic focus has allowed me to delve deeper into the role that violence played in the lives of slaves. With over two hundred and twenty cases, I was able to make a number of useful comparisons between different types of confrontations. These included looking at the similarities and differences between men's and women's violence.

Also I analyzed how often certain members of the white population (masters, mistresses, overseers etc.) were involved in physical altercations. After closely examining the documents, I now argue that slave violence against whites reveals the existence of a system of honor amongst Virginia's slave population similar to the honor culture found among white Virginians.

One of the cases that I uncovered using the Center for Diversity Research became the basis for a paper I presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association in November 2014. The case involved a female slave named Peggy who murdered her master John Francis in New Kent County, Virginia in 1830. At Peggy's trial, one of the other slaves revealed that Peggy had killed Francis because he had made repeated attempts to rape her. A lifelong bachelor, Peggy was not the first slave to catch Francis's eye. According the census of 1820, he owned six slaves, all women, four of whom were under fourteen years old. Making the case even more disturbing, slave and free witnesses alike revealed that Francis was Peggy's father. A jury consisting of five white justices of the peace convicted Peggy of murder, but Virginia Governor John Floyd spared Peggy's life. Unwilling to execute a slave woman for resisting attempted incest, Floyd had Peggy transported out of the Commonwealth. The case made for an engaging paper at the conference.

Ultimately, the research grant from the Center for Diversity Research helped transform my dissertation from a broadly defined research project into a more focused and analytical examination of the causes of slave violence. I am currently in the process of revising my dissertation and am on track to graduate from the University of Delaware in the spring of 2016.