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Magnolia plantation house, Washington County, eastern North Carolina, built ca. 1830 (photograph, 1940); house no longer standing

CORRESPONDENCE OF WILLIAM PETTIGREW

PLANTATION & SLAVE OWNER
NORTH CAROLINA

AND

MOSES & HENRY

BLACK DRIVERS ON THE PETTIGREW
PLANTATIONS

1856~1857 SELECTIONS

William Shepard Pettigrew (1818-1900) inherited two plantations from his father, an influential landowner in eastern North Carolina. As did many small plantation owners. Instead of hiring white

overseers, who had to be paid wages and often exercised harsher control than owners would tolerate, Pettigrew chose men from his own slaves to supervise the plantation work. For twelve years the enslaved men Moses and Henry served as the supervisors — “slave drivers” — at Pettigrew’s plantations, each man supervising about forty slaves (fifteen men, fifteen women, and their children).

In the 1850s Pettigrew spent June to October vacationing in the Virginia mountains, leaving Moses and Henry to manage his plantations alone. Pettigrew expected them to report regularly on the progress of the plantation’s crops and maintenance, and on the slaves’ behavior, through letters dictated to a neighbor farmer. A selection of their correspondence is presented here.

From WILLIAM PETTIGREW, plantation owner, to MOSES, driver at Belgrade

*Healing Springs, Bath C. Va.
June 24, 1856*

Moses:

Thinking you would be glad to hear from me, I have concluded to write you a few lines and will enclose them to Mr. White who will read them to you. I have frequently thought of you since having left home, and have been anxious that your business might go on well & that the health of your people might continue good. Should any of them be sic, he sure not to neglect them. You must do all in your power to promote the welfare and credit of Belgrade during my absence. The people promised me to be industrious and obedient to you, you must remind them of this promise should any of them be disposed to forget it. I am anxious for your credit as well as my own that all things should go on well & it would be distressing & mortifying to me to hear the contrary on my return home.

I have placed much reliance in your management, industry & honesty by thus leaving the plantation & all on it in your charge, nor have I any fear that you will fall short of the confidence I have placed in you. I suppose harvest has commenced and hope the weather is such as to enable you to go on well with it.

You & Henry must endeavor to manage to the best advantage & occasionally you should talk together on the subject of what should be done. You must not be unfriendly to each other, as it would injure both places & yourselves, as well as myself. You may give them [slaves] such time on Saturdays as you think proper. Mr. Johnston’s health has been very much improved, I am glad to say. I am as usual well. Remember me to all the people — particularly to your Uncle Charles, Gillie & Lizzie, and believe me,

*Your friend,
William S. Pettigrew*

P.S. I hope your Uncle Charles’ feet are improving.

Malachi White:
a white farmer
and Pettigrew
neighbor who
wrote the letters
as dictated
by Moses
and Henry

Mr. Johnston:
James Cathcart
Johnston of
Hayes plantation
near Edenton,
NC; a longtime
friend and
business
associate of the
Pettigrew family

July 5, 1856

I was happy to hear from master an am thankful to receive the lines witch master sent to me. I am in good health master an hope I shall remain in the same good health. I looked A long time to hear from master an was happy to receive the lines master sent. I hope that master is in the same good health an remain so. I take a great pleasure of sending a few lines back to master an hope it may be a great comfort to master in reading of them. Dear master I commenced laying by the corn the 7 of June an got two hundred an seventy acres don before harvest. I commenced in the harvest the 25 of June an completed it safe to the barn the 5 day of July.

The people has been faithful and dutiful to mee an to thare work and all have agreed together sence master left home. I am glad that tha have helt out so well in thare health all saving oncle charles and he has bin treated with the greates respects that could be required. nothing but his time moved him away from us.

The weat crop is only comon. the corn crop is very likely with good seasons an the help of god it is the best we have had for many years. as soon as master can make it convenant I should like to hear from him again. nothing more master at present only your servant Moses

nothing but his time, i.e., Charles died primarily of old age

convenant, i.e., convenient



July 5, 1856

Dear master. I return my respects to you. I was glad to hear from master. I have don all day in my power towards your benefit. I was glad to hear that master is in good health and Master Jonston also hoping it may remain so getting better. your corn is very much improved. I got through two hundred an 10 acres before harvest then spared all the hands to Moses at Belgrade. the hands has bin faithful to their duty an all has agreed well together. I wish to indulge all in my power. all is well at present master. Jack is

the hands, i.e., the slave laborers

in the same state as when you left. Arry is Well only distressed over her Brother Charles at Belgrade is ded. Ary an effy our respects to master wanting to see you very bad. Polly respects to master thanking him for my going to norfolk. I was sick two days after master left. I returned home to day fortnit lingered 2 or 3 days after my return in good health-at present, Mary is doing veary well at present so that she can do her work.

fortnit, i.e., fortnight (14 days): he returned fourteen days previously

Your Servant henry

July 5, 1856

My dear master. I was glad to hear from you. I am in good health at present and I hope that theas few lines may find master in the same good health. I shall be glad to see master come home when maybe to his convenance. ef I never should see master no more I hope we shall meat in hevan.

Your servant Lizzy

From WILLIAM PETTIGREW, plantation owner, to MOSES, driver at Belgrade

White Sulphur Springs,
Greenbrier Co. Va.
July 12, 1856

Moses:

I was very glad to receive your letter of the 5th of July, which came to hand yesterday. I left home, I presume, on Monday the 7th, and, having reached here on Friday afternoon, was but five days on the way, which was expeditious for so long a journey.

came
to hand:
arrived

It grieved me sincerely to learn of the death of your poor Uncle Charles, although I could not say it surprised me, for I had for some time lost all hope of the ulcers on his



M. Wason
Pettigrew family cemetery near Lake Phelps and Belgrade plantation, North Carolina, 19th century; Pettigrew slaves were not buried in the family cemetery (photograph, 2007)

legs & feet being cured, and thought it more than probable that we would never again meet on this earth. Yet I am sorry it so happened that I could not be at home at the time of his death, as it is ever a comfort to me to be present when my people make their departure for the land of Spirits. Our lot having been cast together here, & feeling that I am a friend & well wisher both for time & eternity to every one of them, it is my wish to see the last of them and to accompany their lifeless bodies to the grave, that final

Our lot
having
been cast
together,
i.e., fate
having
placed us
together as
slaveowner
and slave

resting place for us all. You inform me that he had every attention; which I am satisfied of, & would be much pained if there was reason to think otherwise.

every
attention,
i.e., medical
attention

As you succeed so well as a letter-writer, I must trouble you with writing more frequently. I wish you to send me a letter every other week & Henry every other week — which will enable me to hear from home every week. Perhaps Mr. White, who will be good enough to write for you, would prefer writing Saturdays; it will be immaterial to me on what day the letter is written so that one is sent every week. . . .

After having read your letter myself, I handed it to my very good friend, Mr. Johnston, who read it with much interest & pleasure. . . . He hopes he may continue to receive good news from Belgrade; but he says, if he should hear bad reports, he would have to write you himself. You see from this, Moses, how much interest Mr. Johnston takes in you and your people, and that should things take an unfavorable turn, in consequence of my long absence, not only would I be distressed, but he would also; and you & all your people would not only be disgraced in my estimation but also in his. . . .

You will give the people what rest and time may in your judgment appear proper. You know I wish time given them frequently at this season. Remember your gardens are to be made. Tell your Aunt Gilly & Lizzy that I hope they are well. I hope the Fall will be as healthy as could be expected for our climate. Remember me very kindly to all the people, both at Belgrade & Magnolia, and say to Henry that I will write him, in answer to his letter, the last of next week, which would be better than replying to both at this time. Say to him also that I am glad your Master Charles permitted him to purchase those

hogs of Mr. Alexander. Your Master Charles' letter came to hand yesterday. Give my love to your Master Charles, and believe me,

Your friend,
William S. Pettigrew

P.S. Mr. Johnston's health is quite good and my own is as usual. You must remember me to your father & Aunt Airy. W.S.P.

Master Charles:
William's brother,
owner of two
Pettigrew family
plantations, Lake
Scuppernong and
Bonarva, the latter
near Magnolia
plantation where
Henry was driver

From MOSES and HENRY, drivers, to WILLIAM PETTIGREW (as dictated to Malachi White)

August the 2 1856

Dear master. I was glad to receive your letter wich came to hand the 30 of July.

My love to master an to master Jonston. all the people are well an wishes thare love to master. Molly is pleged with the rumatism. Mary child is sick witch I sent for the Doc today but he could not go for the present but will go as soon as he can. the corn has stood veary well at Magnolia, very which I would not believed how it has stood the drouth altho I was looking at it but we had a very good rain the first day of August wich has improved it very much. When we rote master befor we thought we would clean out the

pleged:
plagued

drouth:
drought

Bee tree canal:
large drainage
canal from
Lake Phelps

Library of Congress



Belgrade plantation house, Washington County, eastern North Carolina, built ca. 1800 (photograph, 1940); house no longer standing

Bee tree canal but we saw master Charles and he told us to not clean it out yet an so we held hol-ladays 3 days master an I went in the ten foot ditch to cleaning that out . the people has been veary well behaved since master left as could be expected master to me an has

worked well. Nelson named to me that master wishes me to white wash Magnolia an Belgrade an I will white wash magnolia. master will pleas to wright me whether nellson will white wash Belgrade or no as I need him very bad among my small people. I made 75 bags out of the twilling an it gave out. master Polly wishes her love to master. she has bin sick about a fortnight but is getting better. ef master will pass all of my letters to master Jonston to read I have some secrets to tell master but I will keep them untill master comes home you will excuse this master

small people:
meaning
unidentified
(perhaps the
children)

twilling: fabric
with diagonal
parallel ribs

Your Servant henry

it is my wishes master ef you pleas sir for some carful person to stay at Belgrade of nights when thoes work-mons are there at work, ef master pleases

your servant
Moses

work-mons:
workmen

August the 9 1856

Dear master. I receved no letter from you as I expected of the last week and I thought as it was your wishes to hear from home every week I would wright as tha might be

missplaced. I take a delight in writing to master my love an to master Jonston also an all the people wishes thare love to master hoping master is well. the people is all ingeneraly well some little complant but nomore than could be expected for the season. I am very sorry to inform master that the crops on Belgrade is cut of so bad as I rote master befor that it was fel short by the drouth but I think master we shall be cut off one half at Belgrade by the drouth. we are geting along with the work veary well. since I sent master the last letter I have cleaned out the main road an cleaned out all the leading ditches except the poppolar nec ditches them I shall not clean them now. the next gob will be the swamp mud master. the carpernters commenced geting of timba for the quarter houses I augs tha have got all of the timber but the sils an got them at the house I shall start the saws on the 11 of august. your servant Moses

poppolar nec:
Poplar Neck,
area north of
Lake Phelps;
plantation near
Edenton

timba: timber

1 augs:
1 August

the people is all wel behaved to me master

my love to master and to master Jonston. also. I have not got through with my leading ditches an the others I shall go to work on the coal the next I think. the people is quite well master an veary well behaved an wishes thare love to master hoping that master is well. the crop at magnolia is veary good master.

your servant henry

June the 6 1857

Dear master. I was glad to hear from you hoping that you are receeving good health an Mast. Johnson also. I shall get through with the corn on the 9 an shall get a hundred an 30 acres of peas sown by the 10. it will take after that 2 days to break the other peaground an sowit. the 15 I want to go to laying by the corn as master wishes to. sompthin on the subject of these weavers I have enquired of gilly an lizzy an tha think that tha canot give the instruction. thinking if thare be any person to hire I have understood that miss White is a veary good weaver undeed an can give good instructions an master can inform me as he wishes. I have not seen Mr. Sawyer since I heard from you to make the enquiry of him conserning the other partes of Mr. furlough, but will do so as soon as I see him. the people are all in good health an veary well behaved up to this time present. hoping that tha may hold out to the end

your servant Moses

From WILLIAM PETTIGREW, plantation owner, to MOSES, driver at Belgrade

*Healing Springs, Va.
July 6, 1857*

Moses:

On Saturday, the 4th, I wrote Henry; but omitted to enclose to him a pass which I had promised, on leaving home, to send, granting permission to him & Polly Price to visit Mrs. Beasley in Plymouth during the holidays after corn is laid by & wheat thrashed. You will also find a pass for America, who will be permitted to go to the neighborhood of Plymouth at the same time, for the purpose of visiting her family. You will also find a pass for Affy to visit Mr. Jordan Davenport's. These papers you can hand to Henry, who can deliver them to the persons for whom they are intended. Mr. White will please read them, in order that you may distinguish for whom they are intended. Henry will carry a mule & cart. As some money will be required, I enclose \$5. for Henry, which you will hand him.

Plymouth: town
in Washington
County near
the Pettigrew
plantations

neighborhood:
region

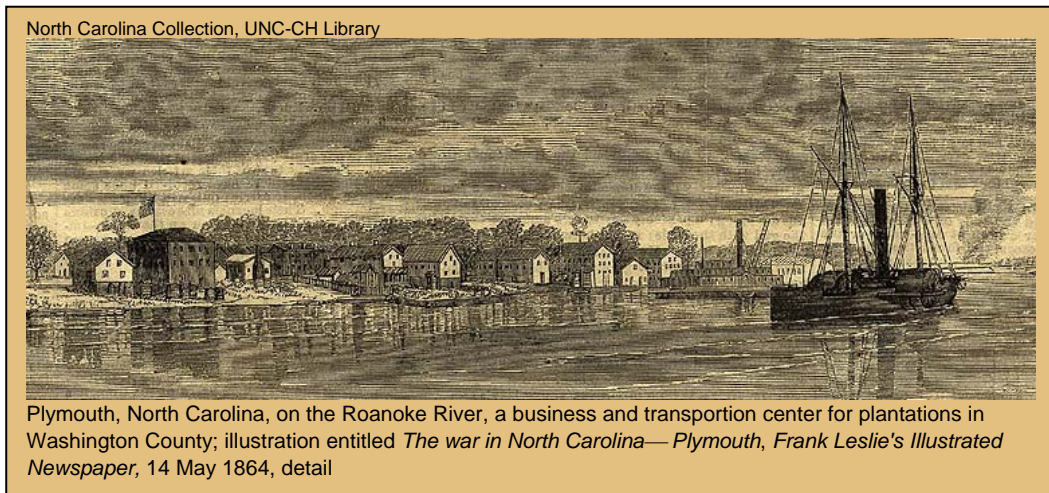
Jordan
Davenport:
white resident
of the region,
perhaps the
brother of
Doctrine
Davenport,
overseer at
Bonarva
plantation

The people on both plantations will have the usual length of holiday after the corn is laid-by & wheat thrashed, which is about three days. I shall wish the outside of the houses whitewashed this summer.

The first work at which Henry will commence after the holidays are passed will be the cleaning out the old part of the Creek. This will be a heavy undertaking, and I think it probable he will require the men on both places to work to advantage. If you & he should think so, you may let him have the Belgrade force to assist him. I leave it, however, to be decided by yourselves. After the work has been commenced you will be better able to decide as to what would be the better course to adopt. Let Aaron examine the machine ropes, in order to determine whether there will be such, and as many as will be required. Should there be more wanting, Henry may purchase them, when he is in Plymouth, from Mr. Willis. Within you will find a note from me to Mr. Willis for that purpose, which he may use if required. If it is not required, he will not use it, but will hand it to me on my return. Henry will not pay for the ropes, if he purchase them, but Mr. Willis will charge them to my account, to be settled when I see him.

Should there be more wanting: should you need more machine ropes

Within you will find a note: in this envelope you will an IOU (or similar written arrangement) from me to Willis



North Carolina Collection, UNC-CH Library

Plymouth, North Carolina, on the Roanoke River, a business and transportation center for plantations in Washington County; illustration entitled *The war in North Carolina—Plymouth*, Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper*, 14 May 1864, detail

Will you examine the lime-house before another letter is sent me from home, and inform me how much lime you think would be required to fill it. Will you inform me whether your Master Charles has shipped a cargo of wheat before your next letter is written, also whether he intends shipping a second cargo when the *Lady Whidbee* returns, & when she probably will return. I merely ask these questions, perhaps you can answer them readily.

Lady Whidbee: merchant schooner (which sank off the North Carolina coast in 1860)

Allen may carry his mother to Mr. Davenport's in a cart. He will then return himself. Affy expressed a wish to carry one of her grandchildren with her; but, after reflection, I am of the opinion it would be best for her not to do so, as the child might be sick, or might give trouble in some way. I hope you have gone on well with harvest & that both corn & wheat are good. Remember me to the people and say to them I hope they are conducting themselves well.

Your friend,
William S. Pettigrew

We are well & leave for the White Sulphur, in Greenbrier County [Virginia], tomorrow morning. To which place Mr. White will please direct your letters in future.

P.S. Say to Henry, he will require a Fall for removing the stumps from the Creek. It will also be servicable in removing them from the ditch at Belgrade, they being left until a general business may be made of removing them from the ditch. It will be well for him therefore to purchase one from Mr. Willis of Plymouth. The paper enclosed will enable him to do so. Henry will permit Nelson to do some plastering for Dr. Hardison, when the Dr. applies for him. W. S. P.

Fall: part of a pulley system to move heavy objects such as tree stumps

Sept the 12 1857

My love to master and to master Jonston also. I was glad to receive your letter of the 5 of Sept. on the 12. I began to think thar ware something the matter not hearing no sooner from you. I have commenced fodder on the 8. I got the hands on the 9 of the month. after I get fodder I shall be ready for ditching. it will take about 3 more days in the new ditch. the health of the people is veary good for the season an are conducting themselves well up to this time an all wishes to be remembered to master

fodder: feed for livestock, usually from straw or hay

Your servant moses an your friend.

October the 10 1857

my love to master. ef master pleases to send 1 1 Brass preserving cittle holding about half bushel 1 cake pan, ef you please. A few cake cutters ef. 1 ice cream freazer an the taile attach to it also if master pleases to do so

cittle:
kettle

Your Servant Polly

Sarah at Magnolia wishes 2 spiders with the tops to them also, ef master pleases.

spider:
cast-iron
skillet

August the 7 1858

My love to master an to master Johnston also. Since we have finished the canals an kept hollydays we have thrashed the wheat an has got it in order an I tended to the thrashing of the wheat at Belgrade. I did not tend to the fanning of it. I left it to Dick lake. of the small Bingham wheat 100 Bushels an of the white wheat 80 Bushels at Magnolia an I am sorrow that the wheat did not hold out as well as master expected. I thank master I have taken my visit an I saw in plymouth some of master Johnston wheat an expect that I have not seen no wheat looks as well as the Bingham wheat. the white wheat is not as good as it is in at Belgrade an the rats is so veary bad I would like for master to send me word what to do with the wheat at magnolia. if any one wants any seed tha had better get it away. I could not start the mud mashean while the thrashing of wheat. the dust was veary bad. I had no hands to spare for 5 days. the hands will begin on the mud mashean today. we have not had any rain since the week you left home an at this time the corn is suffering veary bad at magnolia all of it. the hands is all well and doing well. all wishes to be remembered to master an Polly wishes her love also. I do not wish to keep any more wheat at magnolia than required for seed wheat on account of the rats. 18 hats an 18 blankets for men at magnolia. 13 hats an 13 Blankets for the womens. 9 hats an 9 Blankets for Boys and girls. 17 childrens Blankets. no hats nor shoes.

Your servant Henry an your friend.

The length an width of the house top at magnolia 20 feet 9 inches the width 22 feet 4 inches the leanth the seames running the 22 feet 4 inch way. that is the neat measurement. the lowance I leave to master to make himself. shoes for magnolia 1 pare No 12 double soled. 4 pare No 11 3 double soled 1 single soled. 5 pair No 10 double soled. 9 pair No. 9 double soled. 4 pare No 8 double soled. 4 pare No. 7 double soled. 1 pare No. 10 single soled. 2 pare No 9 single soled. 2 pare No 8 single soled. 1 pare No. 7 single soled. 2 pare No 6 single soled. 3 pare No 5 single soled. 1 pare No 4 single soled. 1 pare No 3 single soled.

Shoes for Belgrade

1 pare No 12 double soled. 6 pare No 11 double soled. 3 pare No 10 double soled. 5 pare No 9 double soled. 5 pare No 8 double soled. 2 pare No 7 double soled. 1 pare No 9 single soled. 1 pare No 8 single soled. 1 pare No 7 single soled. 1 pare No 6 single soled. 2 pare No 5 single soled. all the shoes are taken down. the Boots master can make allowance for them Moses No 12 henry No 10

From WILLIAM PETTIGREW, plantation owner, to MOSES & HENRY, drivers

Scuppernong, Washington Co. N.C.
Nov. 13, 1857

Moses & Henry:

As I am yet quietly here, I will write you again, notwithstanding the fact of my having written you several times already. My writing will show the interest I take in my plantations notwithstanding my absence. You perceive my letters are written to both Moses & Henry. This is because I wish to hear from both of you every week. Write particularly about your business as I am anxious about it — more so than I have ever been at any previous absence. The misconduct of some of the people, whilst I was with you, has much impaired my confidence & renders me apprehensive of a renewal of misconduct in some shape or other. Should there be any outbreak requiring my attention, be assured I will be with you within a few days after you have informed me of the fact, in order to adopt such course as circumstances may require.

No molasses is to be given to any one who is confined in the penitentiary; that is to Frank, Jack or Patience — Nor is Venus to have molasses given her unless she requires it in consequence of sickness. She is not in the penitentiary, I am aware, in consequence of her condition. Do not allow Patience's children to be neglected while she is in the penitentiary. Does Frank make any further confessions as to the money stolen? I have no idea Patience has much of it. During my absence, it is my wish that the people go from home as little as possible. if I were they, I would be ashamed to be seen away from home after the plantation has been so disgraced by those criminals, Jack, Venus, Frank, Patience & Bill. It is painful to me, even now & at this distance from home, to think of such wicked creatures & such crimes. I do not give a positive order, but I think that people had better stay at home during Christmas holidays; no good can result from their going to the Lake, & it might be that some evil would. If no more, it might bring about a quarrel among my people & some of those at the Lake respecting the money stolen by Frank. I wish yourselves & the people at Dr. Hardison's & Dr. Murphy's to keep apart. This, I fear, has not been done, heretofore, as I would wish; and as long as there is a mingling-up of people on different places there must ever be trouble. My idea is, Stay at home & mind your business & let other people mind theirs. . . . [ellipsis in Starobin]

Mr. Johnston & myself are well, and will leave for Charleston after Christmas, where I hope to find letters from home. Yours etc. William S. Pettigrew

\$100. Reward

Runaway from the subscribed on the night of 6th Nov. negro man, Frank. He is about 5 ft. 9 inches I height, 37 years of age, weighing about 140, of a *dark mulatto color*, not fleshy, some of his teeth rotten in front, with a small scar on his forehead, over one eye, caused by a kick from a horse when a child, and very polite in his manners when an end it to be gained. He is a carpenter. I am informed he has in several instances, since making his escape from my plantation, informed persons whom he has met on the road that he, himself, had been sent by me in search of a runaway. This is mentioned that persons may be on their guard against his art & cunning. Previously to having made his escape, he, by means of false keys, robbed my house of \$160. in gold & silver — most of which was of gold.

Any one delivering said man to me, or depositing him in jail, or elsewhere, so that I can obtain possession of him shall have the above reward.

William S. Pettigrew

Scuppernong: probably the Lake Scuppernong plantation (near Magnolia plantation), owned by William's brother Charles

misconduct of some of the people: While Pettigrew was at the plantation earlier in the autumn of 1857, several of his slaves stole \$160 in gold and silver before running away. They were captured, whipped, and placed in the plantation jail. Pettigrew lists other punishments and consequences in his letter.

some of those at the Lake: likely referring to the slaves of William's brother Charles at Bonarva plantation on Lake Phelps

Dr. Hardison: physician to the Pettigrew family

Dr. Murphy: unidentified

Apparently Pettigrew included the text for the runaway ad in his letter.